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Silicon Valley Donor, Industry Firms and Local Children's Museum Create New Play Area at San Jose Int'l

BY KRISTEN RINDFLEISCH

FACTS&FIGURES

Project: Children's Play Space

Location: Norman Y. Mineta San Jose (CA) Int'l Airport

Project Partner/Exhibit Designer & Builder:
 Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose

Name of Play Area: Zoom Zone

Size: 608 sq. ft.

Cost: \$1.2 million

Funding: Zoom Video Communications Inc. donated \$240,000; Hensel Phelps provided pro bono construction; Fentress Architects provided pro bono design services

Subcontractors Providing Pro Bono or Discounted Services/Materials: A&B Painting Inc.; **Arora Engineers**; B.T. Mancini Co. Inc.; By Design Steel Services; Contractors Electrical Distributors; Critchfield Mechanical Inc.; Lombardo Diamond Core Drilling Co. Inc.; Nevell Group Inc.; Rosendin Electric Inc.; ServiceNow Inc.; The BGR Group; Thornton Tomasetti; Transbay Fire Protection Inc.; Universal Plastics

Construction: Aug. 2020-Oct. 2021

Key Benefits: New play area helps children burn physical & mental energy before boarding aircraft while learning about creatures & objects that fly; provides parents with place & opportunity to rest



Some say it takes a village to raise a child. Sometimes, it takes a village to build an inspiring place for children to play.

Last fall, Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport (SJC) opened a \$1.2 million indoor play area that helps young passengers burn physical and mental energy before boarding their flights. And it was all made possible by a village of generous supporters.

Zoom Video Communications Inc., the ubiquitous video communications company that vaulted from the corporate sector to mainstream popularity during COVID-19 lockdowns, donated \$240,000 to the cause. Hensel Phelps managed construction of the project at no cost and also convinced others to follow suit. Fentress Architects provided pro bono design services, and more than a dozen subcontractors and suppliers donated or discounted their services and materials. Together, they created Zoom Zone, a brightly colored, interactive play space named after the headline sponsor.

Vicki Day, passenger experience manager for SJC, explains that the Silicon Valley

airport had been without a children's play area ever since Terminal C was demolished in 2010 to make way for the updated Terminal B. Day suggested using a small 600-square-foot area that had not been built out for concessions to create a children's area in Terminal B and then ushered the idea to fruition. "The space was not very big, but it was kind of up for grabs," she recalls.

Pieces from the former Terminal C play area were not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and were therefore not reused. Instead, Day contacted the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose for help creating a new play area that would withstand incredible wear and tear. "Our museum serves about 400,000 people a year (pre-pandemic), so we're used to building exhibits that last," says Executive Director Marilee Jennings.



MARILEE JENNINGS

Partnerships and Funding

The museum team raised enough money to create exhibits at the airport, but not enough

for the associated facility improvements. So Jennings and SJC personnel approached Hensel Phelps, a general contractor already working at the airport. "I had no idea they were going to be able to help us get so many pro bono contributions from subcontractors," Jennings recalls. "It was like a barn raising, with everybody in the community coming together." (See opposite page for donor list.)

Jennings notes that the children's museum frequently needs to fundraise, but the project at SJC had a unique appeal. "It's all those people who remember what it was like traveling with kids," she reasons.

When Jennings began assembling a list of potential local donors, she quickly thought about Zoom, due to its strong presence around San Jose—including at the airport. (It's also located just one block from the children's museum.) Theresa Geis, brand advertising manager for Zoom, notes that the company has advertised at SJC on and off since at least 2016. "We like to keep a local brand presence," Geis explains. "San Jose is the headquarters of our company, and our employees and customers love to see the brand out in the community."



TERESA GEIS

Ashwin Ballal, senior vice president and chief information officer at Medallia, personally reached out to one of his contacts, Zoom CEO Eric S. Yuan, about sponsoring a new play space at SJC. Yuan, in turn, connected his company's chief marketing officer and brand team with Jennings, and they immediately wanted to help support the initiative. "It's very important for Zoom to be involved in the local San Jose community, and there's a special spot in our hearts for children," Geis explains.

To help make their vision a reality, SJC and Children's Discovery Museum reached out to Hensel Phelps, which led the airport's \$1.3 billion terminal improvement project that opened in 2010. More recently, the firm has also been involved in adding six more airside gates and building a new economy parking garage and lot. "We've had a very long, good relationship with Hensel Phelps," says Day.

Hensel Phelps not only agreed to perform the project pro bono, but the general contractor also leveraged its wide network of trade partners and recruited 15 subcontractors to participate at no cost or significantly reduced prices. Fentress Architects, who was also the architect for Terminal B at SJC, brought expertise in airports and civic buildings such as courthouses and museums to the table. Emily Finch, a senior associate at Fentress, notes that the design team collaborated on the project remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



EMILY FINCH

While Fentress designed the structure, museum personnel designed the exhibits that would occupy it. "For the design of the walls, ceilings and floors, we wanted to make a home for what the museum was creating for the kids," Finch says. "Their exhibit design ideas inspired what we did with our architecture for the space."

Planning and Execution

The project team focused on creating a space that would simultaneously engage the motor skills and cognitive skills of children under the age of 8. "It's so exciting for young kids to go to the airport



and to ride an airplane, and they're pretty excited when they get to the airport," Jennings explains. "They have a lot of excess energy. At the same time, the parents are exhausted by the time they get through security."

Museum personnel designed exhibits that encourage children to "get the wiggles out" before boarding; architects included space for parents to regroup and relax while supervising their children at play.

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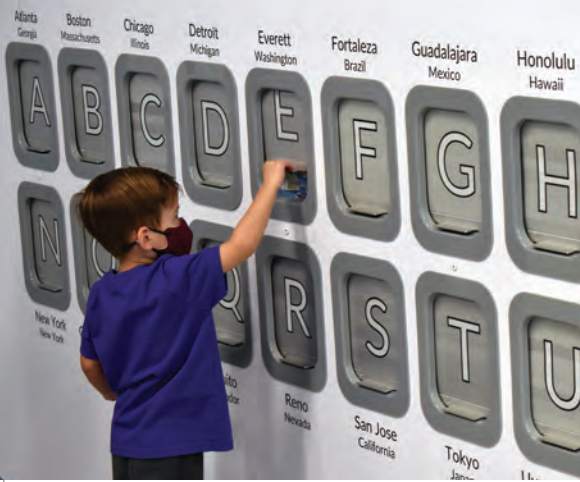
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Museum staff designed exhibits that engage children physically, mentally and culturally.

Without staff on site at the airport to facilitate, it was important for the activities and exhibits to be intuitive, Jennings notes.

Prior to construction, the area now occupied by Zoom Zone included two separate rooms; so designers reconfigured them into one larger space with a small electrical room. To minimize the impact on travelers, Hensel Phelps built a temporary “mall wall” outside the space to separate the public from construction, tools/equipment and exhibit components. Materials were typically delivered overnight to avoid disrupting passenger traffic.

To resonate with local families, Zoom Zone has the same look and feel as Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose, which is located downtown. Fentress Architects created a vibrant purple façade that mirrors the shape of the museum’s logo and angular facility design.

Interior elements establish the airport connection. Flooring in whimsical colors includes the outline of a runway, and the ceiling color and finishes evoke clouds and the sky.

The overall theme for the space and activities is “things that fly.” Exhibit designers focused on kid-friendly butterflies, birds and airplanes to encourage children to explore the idea of flying before they get onto an airplane. “We try to help them realize that all of those different things fly at different altitudes and have different physical components that enable them to fly,” Jennings explains.

With the project complete, she says the team accomplished a lot in just 600 square feet. Instead of using canned airport play equipment, museum personnel adapted popular exhibits from their downtown facility to explore the theme of flight.

Key Zoom Zone exhibits include:

- Pin Screen: A signature museum feature that allows children to create three-dimensional works of art by pushing on plastic pins. “Faceprints” are a perennial favorite but are discouraged during the pandemic.
- Alphabet Airplane: Children lift the window shades of a mock airplane fuselage to discover images that depict 26 destinations they can fly to from SJC. Each image corresponds with the letter printed on its shade. For example, T is for Tokyo.
- Kinetic Butterfly: Youngsters get a hands-on lesson about flight by using a set of gears to activate sculptural butterfly wings.
- Bird Climber: Children gain a 360-degree perspective of flight by climbing on top of a bright blue bird, crawling underneath its wings and sliding down its tail feathers.
- Zoom Plane: Kids can role-play in the cockpit of a sturdy walk-in biplane.

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Jennings notes that many airport play areas only have climbing activities, but SJC's space offers much more. "We're trying to engage kids with their full bodies and give them an experience and information about things that fly," she stresses.

Combining science with arts and culture is another project hallmark. For example, the destination scenes for the alphabet airplane exhibit were created by five visual artists contracted by the museum. As a result, children are exposed to quality artwork while practicing the alphabet and experiencing the physics of how a window shade works.

Personnel from Zoom were engaged in early planning and ideation for the space, including helping to decide which of the early concepts (like the bird climber) would be used. The company's brand team also designed the Zoom Zone logo and consulted on plans.

Rave Reviews

The new play area is proving to be a success on many fronts. During a recent trip, a public relations specialist with Zoom noticed that it is even popular at 6:00 a.m. "Parents were resting on the bench while their young children explored the plane windows and climbed on the bird feature," reports Beth McLaughlin.

When two exhibits teams from the museum came to the airport in December 2021, they received overwhelmingly positive feedback from families using the new play area. The airport has also heard glowing comments—from travelers with *and* without children. Apparently, everyone appreciates young passengers working off energy before they hop on an airplane.

In turn, SJC gives rave reviews to its donors and partners. Day notes that the project would not have been accomplished without Hensel Phelps. "They really brought a lot to the table," she remarks. "I can't say enough about them, as they were wonderful."

Geis, from Zoom, was similarly struck by the way the airport, museum and project partners rallied around the common cause of building a children's play space. "This is a really beautiful example of companies coming together to support a community initiative, and it took cooperation on many levels to make it happen," she reflects.

Hensel Phelps Project Manager Jesse Osburn credits Day at SJC for partnering with Children's Discovery Museum, which specializes in educational play spaces. "That gave the team a huge advantage," he comments.

Jennings advises other airports interested in building a play space, or even just adding a single exhibit, to reach out to children's museums in their communities. "We are the local experts about how to create engaging activities for kids that don't require staff facilitation," she says. "Hopefully it becomes a trend."



JESSE OSBURN

Finally, Day encourages other airports not to let space constraints spoil the fun. With the right team, just 600 square feet can become a big attraction for small children and their families. ✈️

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