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# circle of one

A holistic design by GTM Architects builds strong kids, strong families, and a strong community at the Potomac Overlook YMCA in Fort Washington, Md.

By Holly Richmond  
Photography by Ken Wyner



Before you start singing the catchy lyrics from the memorable 1978 hit "YMCA" by the Village People, you might want to check out the 21st-century version of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). One new branch, the Potomac Overlook YMCA designed by Bethesda, Md.-based GTM Architects, not only shatters stereotypes about the venerable association, but also makes it a place where adults, children, families, and communities embrace wellness and learning.

"The thing I hear most from our members is, 'This is not my parents' YMCA,'" states Keisha Sitney, the YMCA's district executive director for the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. She explains that during the





planning stage, the association was going through some “soul searching” and trying to redefine itself for the 21st-century. But, as a non-profit, they

In the main lobby (above), the illusion of a large central oval skylight distorts light and floods the space with brightness. The childcare main hallway features interlocking 3-D



design



To literally build on this sense of connection, GTM combined the YMCA's inherent principles with its new vision to create a holistic, open design that is visually communicated through circular accents and the association's branded colors of red, black, and white. Diane Taitt, IIDA, partner at GTM, explains that the big picture design is based in large part on the YMCA's mission statement, which reads: To foster the spiritual, mental and physical development of individuals, families, and communities according to the ideals of inclusiveness, equality, and mutual respect for all. Pun intended, she remarks, "A lot of sweat went into this project. We understood that we needed to create not only a fitness facility for adults, but a place that first and foremost fosters the health and well-being of children and families."

Taitt explains that the site—an old Safeway supermarket—offered pluses and minuses. The 35,000-sq.-ft. shell had the bonus of high ceilings, yet they needed to be entirely gutted, and the urban location offered no outdoor green spaces, which made indoor play areas of utmost priority. Safety, of course, is a huge consideration when creating spaces for children, so GTM designed with visibility and transparency in mind. Storefront glass windows and a series of interior windows and cutouts afford views from

one area in the facility to the next, which not only address the safety but also provide a secondary system of connectedness. "We did not use a turnstile for security, so we set up a bright, open entry desk that is always occupied by one or more staff members," Taitt says.

To brand the space at the entry, GTM used a red-stained wall behind the desk and custom graphics that feature images of members. The main lobby features a central oval skylight that abstractly distorts light in the elliptical window offering a portal view into the wellness area—including a gym, cycling room, aerobic studios, steam room, sauna, and massage rooms—which is the heart of the facility. A juice bar and lounge area on the right invite members to relax, refuel and talk before or after a workout. "The client was adamant about creating warm, comfortable spaces for families to gather," Taitt remarks.

To the left of the entry desk is the childcare zone, which is home to play areas, a multipurpose room, a computer room, pantry, and three large classrooms, as well as staff offices. This component of the facility received a secure separation from the wellness area while sharing the gym and lobby area. GTM maintained the holistic design approach while play





Bright colors, bold custom signage and graphics, abstracted curved and circular shapes, and wall-mounted padding (opposite) create a safe gym for kids—and adults—to be kids. The entrance to the childcare area features a curvilinear wall with large images of children members (below), and it serves as a corridor to the multipurpose room, gym, pantry and administrative wing.

