New Designs Revealed for Children’s Museum of Manhattan
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After receiving unanimous approval by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, plans for the new Children’s Museum of Manhattan inside the formerly abandoned First Church of Christ Scientist building at 361 Central Park West can now be put into action. The renovation will be led by FXCollaborative with family installations created by Local Projects. This project marks the first time the early 20th-century building will be in use after a decade of neglect and the first expansion for the Children’s Museum in nearly forty-years.

When it first opened in 1903, the First Church of Christ Scientist was praised for its progressive architecture which put the needs of the congregation ahead of traditional ecclesiastical features. Sylvia Smith, FAIA Senior Partner at FXCollaborative and Partner-in-Charge for the Children’s Museum project notes, “It embodied progressive ideals of the turn of the century and associated the new congregation with public authority, respectability, and permanence.” The building has a stately exterior made of Concord white granite, which is matched in grandeur on the interior with a large barrel-vaulted space. “The overtly religious elements were limited,” says Smith, making the adaptive reuse “less about converting a house of worship and more about respecting the logic and spirit of the original architecture as we insert the new and modern. Its ‘good bones’, solidity, and spatial
quality inspire our contemporary insertions.”

FXCollaborative’s plans call for an “interweaving of the old and new.” The architecture firm worked with the Children’s Museum’s board of staff and local Community Board to come up with a design that will best fit the needs of the museum and the community. The stately granite exterior will be restored and given a new, more welcoming, and accessible entranceway. Original walnut doors from the front of the building will be relocated to the interior of the entry vestibule. Inside, guests will get a glimpse of the barrel vault and four floors of interconnected exhibition space.
To bring more light into the museum space, formerly concealed skylights will be uncovered and new windows will be added. Religious iconography will be removed from stained glass windows and replaced with clear glass, while the decorative borders will remain in place.

In a reimagined attic space, FXCollaborative has created a unique workshop space for programming, classes, and performances. This new addition to the top of the building is clad in copper to reference the structure’s original monitor. The sixth-floor programming space will connect to a seventh-floor roof terrace with views of Central Park and the surrounding skyline. A glass elevator housed within a four-sided lantern at the base of the building’s polygonal spire will transport guests to the roof terrace. Smith explains, “The scale and perception of this major building element shifts from a remote symbol of “church” towering over the central building entry to a magical space to be experienced from within and around. Framing expansive views of Central Park West and the city, the tower will represent the array of new possibilities the museum will open for children.”
The Children’s Museum of Manhattan was established in 1973. When the new building opens on the corner of 96th street it will nearly triple the museum’s programming space, bringing an additional 41,300-square-feet. The new museum will add another institution to New York’s “Museum Mile” when it joins neighbors including the American Museum of Natural History and the New-York Historical Society. Until then, visitors can explore the museum’s current location at 212 W 83rd Street. In an architect’s statement, Smith writes, “The building’s spirit and imbedded memory will remain, even as the 117-year old building begins its new life as a vibrant place of wonder and joy.”