

Public Places, Public Spaces: Community Places

by Michael Tardif

Sports and fitness centers are increasingly regarded as neighborhood facilities as vital as schools and libraries. A number of such community centers have sprouted recently in the metropolitan area, each tailored to the needs of their communities and responding in imaginatively varied ways to their contexts.

Barcroft Sports and Fitness Center

After evaluating over a dozen sites for a new community recreation center, the **Arlington County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Resources** commissioned **Bowie Gridley Architects** of Georgetown to design a 28,600 square-foot facility on a site in Barcroft Park. Completed in the spring of 2000, the new **Barcroft Sports and Fitness Center** replaced aging and inadequate facilities formerly housed in a nearby middle school.

The architects began by developing a master plan for the entire park in a highly participatory community design process. Local citizens were invited to take part in a three-day design charrette, followed by dozens of community meetings to ensure that park improvements and upgrades would meet community needs. Development will be concentrated in one sector of the park to preserve existing forested and wetland areas.

Completed in 2005, the Sports and Fitness Center is the first component of the master plan to be implemented, which will also include a parking garage, new sports fields, and an array of community recreational amenities. The new facility includes a 7,700 square-foot gymnasium, 7,800 square-foot gymnastics studio, an 1,800 square-foot boxing training facility, a weight training room, and an aerobics studio.

The site along a busy four-lane road is among a gritty mix of industrial, commercial, and low-rise multi-family residential properties. The design uses a series of curving roofs to allow natural light to enter interior spaces and to provide a playful transition between the large gymnasium and the smaller program and support spaces. Curtain walls of glass are used to mark entrances, provide views from interior public spaces and create a welcoming lantern effect and views into the building at night.

Major spaces are organized around a central circulation spine, which provides easy, clearly visible access to the entire facility. An open, raised mezzanine serves as a spectator overlook. Light and views to the sky from the gymnasium are provided through clerestory windows.

The building has already had its intended effect: to become the center of a community that did not previously have one. In addition to sports and fitness activities, the Center is host to concerts, dances, public meetings, and other activities of the South Arlington community.



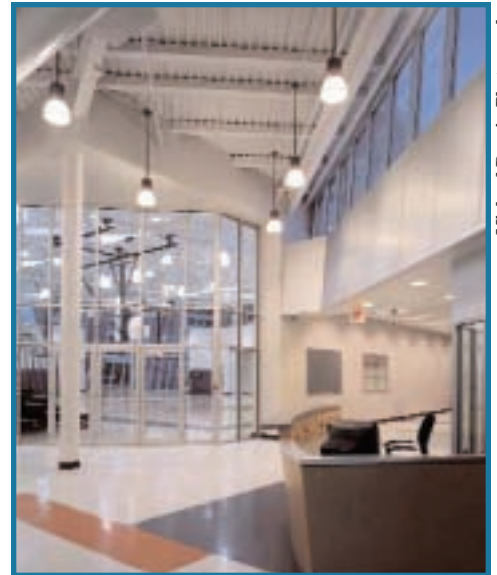
Paul Burk Photography



Paul Burk Photography



Michael Dersin Photography



Michael Dersin Photography

King Greenleaf Recreation Center

In the Capitol South neighborhood of the District, the **DC Department of Parks and Recreation** commissioned **Devroux & Purnell Architects-Planners, PC**, to replace an existing facility with an entirely new **King Greenleaf Recreation Center**, built by **Forrester Construction Company**. The curved and angled forms are a dramatic counterpoint to the boxy, rectangular buildings that were typical in the Southwest urban renewal area in the mid-20th century. Expansive glass walls allow views from the park into the basketball court and other interior spaces, while in the evening the glow from the interior broadcasts the Center's role as a community focal point and gathering place. The substantial parcel on which the Center sits received a number of site improvements, including parking facilities, a new half basketball court, and a play area. New fencing was installed around basketball/tennis courts and ball fields, which also received new lighting for nighttime play.

Kennedy Recreation Center

Across town in the Shaw neighborhood, the **Kennedy Recreation Center**, designed by **Sorg and Associates, PC**, is the centerpiece of the reinvigorated historic neighborhood. Located in the heart of a diverse, multi-generational neighborhood, the design of the Kennedy Rec Center is tailored to serve everyone from infants to the elderly. The variety of indoor and outdoor spaces includes tot lots, tennis courts, basketball courts, a baseball field, and passive, reflective areas safely shielded from sports activity for those who wish to observe and stroll. The building also includes spaces for educational programs and other public social gatherings.

Located directly across O Street, NW, from the O Street Market, the Center is clad in brick of the same color to emphasize their common purpose at the heart of the Shaw community. Like other community centers that seek to advertise their presence, the design of the Kennedy Recreation Center uses large expanses of glass in the gym to establish a lively visual connection to the neighborhood, serve as a nighttime beacon or lantern, and transparently display its constructive purpose in the community.



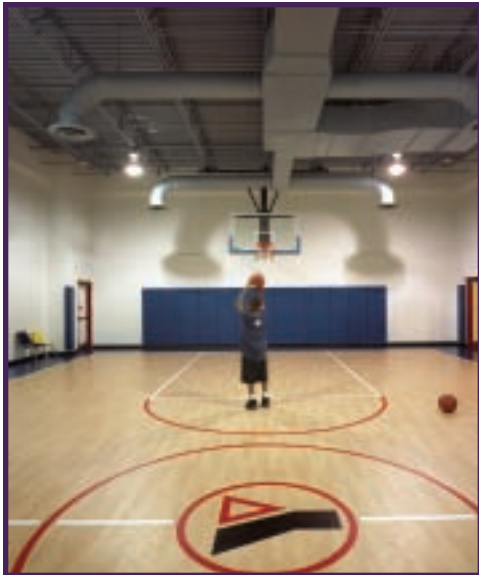
Sorg and Associates, PC



Sorg and Associates, PC



Completed for just over \$3 million, the Kennedy Rec Center is a good model for similar, cost-effective facilities. The design employs standard materials in innovative ways, and uses strong design elements, such as over-scaled roof overhangs, to make a strong design statement, shield the building from direct sun and inclement weather, and reduce heating and cooling costs. The flexible interior can be arranged in any number of sizes and configurations to accommodate sports, classroom instruction, and community support services such as elder care and day care.



Courtesy GTM Architects

YMCA Potomac Overlook

South of the city in Fort Washington, Maryland, **GTM Architects** of Bethesda has transformed the shell of a former supermarket into the vibrant **YMCA Potomac Overlook**, a fitness center and childcare facility that only recently opened. According to lead designer and project manager Diane Taitt, “The design concept is to embody the Y’s mission statement, ‘to build strong kids, strong families, and strong communities,’ as well as support the Y’s desire to update their image.” The new Y includes a gym, spinning room, aerobics studios, a sauna, steam room, and massage rooms. Storefront glass divides the interior spaces as necessary while maintaining a sense of openness. A series of overlapping, organic 30-foot canopies further define open spaces, while a central, oval skylight is artfully placed above an oval window into the heart of the active spaces from the main lobby. The childcare area houses a multipurpose room, a computer room, and three large classrooms. Vibrant graphics animate the main corridor ceiling, culminating in a curved, mosaic-tiled “cone” wall designed to stimulate children, parents, and staff alike. 🏆



Courtesy GTM Architects

