

# The Ruckus Room

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LIKE many intensely fought-over stretches of turf (parts of Belfast come to mind), the area next to the laundry room at 755 West End Avenue was remarkably nondescript. Dim with tiny windows, it nonetheless was the focus of a pointed territorial dispute among the co-op's residents last year.

The issue was a playroom.

The young families in the building wanted to fix up the 500-square-foot basement space, sporadically used as a playroom, to make it more appealing to children.

A gym contingent objected, arguing that the room should be filled with exercise bikes and weight machines, something that would benefit every adult, not just those with children.

Then a storage contingent weighed in. "One of my neighbors was adamant — 'Get rid of it! It's a waste of money and it's taking up storage space that we need,'" said Robert Hanlon, a board member.

The playroom camp won in the end, but it wasn't easy. "It took a lot of organization and an Obamaesque way of phrasing things," said Maggi Rand, the board member who led the playroom restoration efforts. The room is now cheerily outfitted with new lighting and flooring, dollhouses, tricycles, blocks, a train table, basketball hoop and a wall of chalkboard.

Fall is the season of playrooms, and playroom politics. With the onset of chilly weather — and the corresponding longing to find some convenient way to get the little ones out of the apartment — the focus of a certain demographic turns to coveted pieces of dedicated common space.

But even when the playroom boosters get their way, the happy colors, Elmos and choo-choos often belie an uneasy co-existence between those who benefit from the space, and those who don't.

In one Upper East Side condo building, some users of a small gym find the adjacent playroom for children too close for comfort. "They scream," complained a resident who wished to remain anonymous for reasons of harmony within the building. Once, she said, she spied a child leaving the playroom without cleaning up, and said, "You go back before I call your father. And put that stuff away."

The politics can be touchy even among those who are all for playrooms. Two Upper West Side playroom committee members once raised voices over whether to spend their tight budget on plastic toys instead of wooden ones. And then there is the matter of just who is allowed in the space anyway.

Playrooms became an increasingly desirable extra in the 1990s as families with children became a growing portion of the Manhattan real estate market. Though many older buildings remain opposed to turning over scarce common space to youngsters, most developers now consider the children's playroom to be a standard feature in new construction.

"We built our first children's playroom in 1991 at the Lucerne," said Gary Jacob, the executive vice president of Glenwood Management, speaking of 350 East 79th Street. "It was such a hit, we started retrofitting some previous buildings with playrooms."

Today, Glenwood, builder-owner of many luxury rental apartment buildings in Manhattan, has playrooms in nearly all of its buildings.

This year, several developments have taken the playroom to new levels. The Extell Development Company recently opened playrooms designed by Kidville, an operator of upscale children's gyms, at the Rushmore at **Riverside Boulevard and 64th**, and the **Lucida at Lexington and 85th**.

"They're really modeled after our full-sized gyms," said Andy Stenzler, Kidville's chief executive.

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The room (at **Manhattan House**) has a large talking giraffe that tells children who stand beneath it how tall they are.



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Glenwood's Barclay Tower in TriBeCa has a playroom with a waterfront theme, including a mural of New York Harbor, the Brooklyn Bridge and Coney Island. Children clamber on a replica of a dock at the South Street Seaport and a huge, brightly colored boat.

In Battery Park City, the Visionaire, a green building developed by the Albanese Organization, has a playroom made of sustainable materials and renewable resources, including cork walls, bamboo moldings and a floor of recycled tire rubber. It has a \$10,000 sound system, which on a recent afternoon was piping in Laurie Berkner, rock star to the 5-and-under set.

Toys are restricted to those made through environmentally friendly manufacturing methods. There is also a 12-foot-long saltwater aquarium with vibrantly colored fish like blue hippo tangs and Australian black perculas.

The playroom is on the lobby floor, in part to bring in natural light, said Russell Albanese, the president of the Albanese Organization. But it is “somewhat set off” from the central areas, he said, “so you don’t have strollers going through other residential areas.”

The idea that a building would dedicate money and space to something that can’t be used by all residents doesn’t always sit well.

In the basement of one upper West End Avenue co-op building, there is a room with a rocking horse, a playhouse, wooden trains, a tiny piano, puffy clouds on the ceiling and a padded floor. But, officially, it is not a playroom.

As the sign next to the door proclaims, this is the 801 West End Avenue community room. Though it’s unlikely that anyone over the age of 10 (or more likely, 6) has any interest in congregating in the space, the semantic distinction was critical to winning approval and financing from the co-op board to renovate the room, which had sat empty for a few years.

Of course, approval didn’t happen without considerable discussion over who should pay, a hot-button issue.

Much of the 755 West End debate came down to whether the families that wanted the room should finance its upkeep themselves.

That’s the system at 180 Riverside Drive, a handsome prewar co-op that has one of the most appealing prewar playrooms around (though it’s in a windowless basement room, it has a giant slide and a trapeze). Families pay \$50 a year to use it; residents who want to use it for visiting grandchildren pay \$25.

But at 755 West End, playroom advocates saw no reason that upkeep should not come out of building funds. Spirited debate ensued. Should parents clean the toys themselves? Should a cleaning service come in? (There were insurance issues involved in that one.)

Finally, an agreement was reached: The building's porter would clean the toys thoroughly with Clorox once a month, and his extra work would be paid for out of the building's budget. The monthly cost is about that of an entry-level Thomas the Tank Engine train set.

There are other issues with toys. Sometimes playrooms become dumping grounds for old toys that people don't want anymore. Feelings are hurt if the toys are rejected.

So at the Columbia, a large post-war condo building on West 96th Street known for its family-friendly amenities, there's a rule: No used toys.

"You have to control what's going in," said Doug Milles, the chairman of the building's common area committee. The Columbia, which is renovating a playroom, is also debating whether to allow a video monitor there to show films on building movie nights. Needless to say, there are objections. "People don't want their kids watching TV in the playroom," Mr. Milles said.

Some of the most unfriendly politics have to do with who can use the playroom — especially how many friends from outside the building a child can invite.

All of which often comes down to the tension between stay-at-home mothers and nannies. In a chat board on the Web site UrbanBaby.com, where parents post anonymously and are not known for mincing words, one mother said she hardly ever used her building playroom because she got "bored, and more than a little annoyed, with the nannies in it." She went on to complain that her building's nannies brought in too many friends and their charges as guests.

Another poster chimed in "Agree with this re nannies. Ours was a zoo."

Advised another, "If you do rent or buy in a building with a playroom make sure you nail down what the building's procedures are in terms of guests using the playroom and how well that's enforced."

At 755 West End Avenue, the storage contingent is now happy, having renovated a chaotic old storage space with orderly rows of new storage lockers.

But the gym camp still has its eye on the playroom, having acceded to its upgrading on the condition that if it was not popular, their day might yet come.

Ms. Rand, the leader of the playroom restoration committee, acknowledges: "If at some point the room is not being utilized as we envisioned, we can consider other options."

A wine cellar?

## Play Money

APARTMENT building playrooms can cost anywhere from a few thousand dollars to more than some apartments.

The tab for the playroom at the Visionaire in Battery Park City came to about \$210,000, according to the Albanese Organization, which developed the building. The bill included \$60,000 for furniture, \$55,000 for carpentry and custom millwork, and \$50,000 for a saltwater aquarium.

As steep as that sounds, the total was nearly \$100,000 less than the cost of the new playroom at the Manhattan House on the Upper East Side. That one cost about \$300,000, including the services of a top-notch design firm and custom-made structures.

Really, though, all you need is a room and some toys.

At 755 West End Avenue, an overhaul of the basement playroom cost less than \$3,000. The money went for flooring, lighting, toys, an air purifier and special paint that gave one wall a chalkboard surface.

Flooring can be a big-ticket item. For safety, basic carpeting won't suffice. Floors usually need to be of padded material — the better to cushion tumbling toddlers and crawling babies. The Columbia on West 96th Street is spending \$10,000 to \$12,000 on padded flooring in a playroom renovation that will probably total \$15,000 to \$25,000, said Doug Milles, the chairman of the building's common area committee.

Some buildings opt to hire an architect or an interior designer. The cost of these professionals can easily run to the five figures. Aesthetic details can cheer up a room, but may add thousands to the tab. The murals that Glenwood Management recently commissioned for two playrooms, for example, run \$4,000 apiece.

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