

a customer story

not-for-profit

Thriving center provides hope and inspiration



West Michigan Center for Arts & Technology

Credits:

Steelcase Inc.

Progressive AE Architects

Barnes Management, Inc.

Custer Workplace Interiors



In the fall of 2005 the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT), an education and training facility in Grand Rapids, Michigan, opened its doors for the first time. A small group of local community groups and partners, of which Steelcase played a leading role, worked for seven years to bring the much needed program to the West Michigan area. Modeled after the highly successful Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and Bidwell Training Center in Pittsburgh, the organization's goal is to foster positive social change and economic progress in the lives of individuals and in the community by inspiring at-risk students and training under – and unemployed adults.

Located in a beautifully-restored building in downtown Grand Rapids, the 8,000 sq. ft. facility, WMCAT offers a creative approach

to student achievement and workforce development. "We believe that in order to reach the community's fullest potential, we must nurture the potential of our most vulnerable youth and adults," explains Carl Kelly, Jr., executive director, WMCAT. "The Center itself must demonstrate to these students they are important and we are committed to them. This is the most important message we can make to them. That's why it was so important that the environment we created provided a great experience and reflected this."

Steelcase couldn't agree more. When Jim Hackett, President and CEO, first heard about the work Bill Strickland, founder of the Pittsburgh program, was doing he wanted to replicate the concept in Grand Rapids. He commissioned Brian Cloyd, director of corporate and community relations for Steelcase, to work with Jim Welch, a former Steelcase leader and founding family member, and community

leader Arthur Bailey, to gain community support. Local business leader Alticor soon joined their efforts and the team was able to raise the money necessary to build the Center. It proved relatively easy to build community support around the concept of a learning environment that provides not only education and training program, but also hope.

"We are always looking for ways to improve our community," says Brian Cloyd. "We believe it's important to give back to the communities in which we work and live. And, Steelcase shares common values with WCMAT – it's a natural fit. We all benefit when people in the workforce are better prepared for the 21st century and that's why Steelcase felt so strong about putting our support behind this initiative."

With funding in place, a downtown space was chosen. Using research the company had uncovered while studying educational

facilities, Steelcase worked with Progressive AE to incorporate these findings into the design of WMCAT. This also included an observational visit to the Cincinnati Center for Arts & Technology, where a similar program was run. "The purpose of the observational visit was to identify some patterns of behavior and address them within the design of the space. The observation reconfirmed some of our intuitive thoughts," explains Mr. Kelly. "It showed us what some of the obstacles to learning were and provided insight into more appropriate solutions. At first I thought it would be a silly exercise, but it ended being a key. We learned from other's experiences and it made a huge impact on the final design. As a result we've been able to create a facility which blends the Strickland model with a very effective use of space. We really relied on the Steelcase research and their understanding of educational facilities and learning to create the kind of space that would really inspire and motivate individuals."

"Our goal was to create an environment that felt like an art studio," continues Mr. Kelly. "We wanted a very open space that was welcoming and friendly." The space features a large community area and gallery where students, staff and visitors can meet in a very relaxed and casual café-style environment. The gallery area features both professional and student artists. Large screen projectors and communication boards are also located in the space to facilitate information-sharing and communication.

Visibility into the classrooms and offices was also critical. It was important that everyone could see what goes on in the classrooms and offices. To allow this, all classrooms and offices feature glass walls. Classrooms are built on a Steelcase Underscore low profile raised floor to accommodate technological requirements. PolyVision Walk and Talk technology

products allow interaction within the classroom, and can instantly access files, run applications, highlight key points, and capture new thoughts. Computers are available in front of every seat for individual work.

"These are "first-class" teaching and learning environments. Technology is key to keeping these kids motivated and excited about learning and staying in school," says Mr. Kelly. "It's interesting to watch the students when they enter the space for



the first time. It's like they're entering into a space ship and they're looking around in amazement. As a result students have all reacted very positively to the environment, the staff, the curriculum, and to what we're trying to do in general."

WMCAT is now fully operational running two programs – an after-school program for at-risk youths and a full-time adult training program for under – and unemployed adults. The training program teaches adults medical coding skills that are much needed in the area. The after-school programs offer a traditional black

and white photography class and a digital imaging course. WMCAT also offers a computer-reclamation class where students, in conjunction with their parents, learn to repair and upgrade computers, and learn web skills. At the end of the program they keep the computer.

"We have had a tremendous response from the community," says Mr. Kelly. "We are currently looking at doubling the after-school program next year."

Manchester Bidwell is hoping to replicate its recognized programs in 98 cities. Manchester Bidwell opened in 1972 and began early expansion efforts five years ago. In addition to the center in Grand Rapids, in the past three years centers have opened in San Francisco and Cincinnati. Steelcase has supported each of the centers in achieving its own customized version of Manchester Bidwell. To aid in the national expansion, an advisory board has been created that includes representatives from major corporations such as Steelcase, eBay and Johnson Controls. Through its involvement, Steelcase hopes to continue to be involved supporting the creation of spaces that welcome, inspire and fully support the learning process of those that the centers serve.

www.wmcat.org
www.manchesterguild.org



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Brayton: Enea™ seating.

Metro®: Satellite tables and Bix™ seating.

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