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Kidspace hopes Physics Forest will cultivate interest in science

The children's museum's new outdoor playground features interactive exhibits meant to illustrate scientific concepts — and make them more fun for kids.

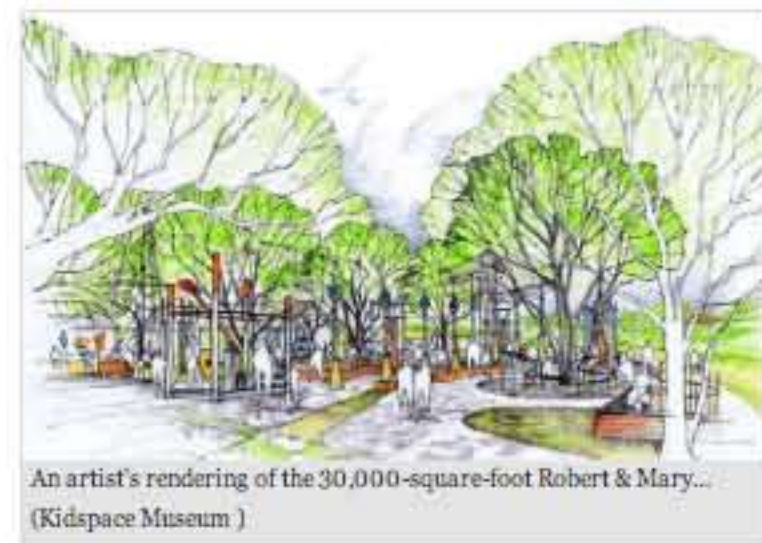
July 08, 2012 | By Joe Piasecki, Los Angeles Times

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The Kidspace Children's Museum in Pasadena on Thursday will open a \$4-million outdoor playground that will feature 13 interactive exhibits designed to illustrate fundamental scientific concepts.

But the main purpose of the 30,000-square-foot Robert & Mary Galvin Physics Forest is to make physics fun, officials said.

For instance, there is a rubber ball firing range to demonstrate velocity and trajectory.



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Another exhibit, designed to illustrate angular momentum, allows participants to adjust weights to control the speed of a rolling wheel. The exhibit is intended to show "why some galaxies spin faster because their mass is closer to the center," said Kidspace Chief Executive Michael Shanklin, a former science teacher.

On Thursday, Shanklin played with some of the museum's new toys, including a "bottle blaster" that shoots its missiles several stories high.

But for Caltech astronomer Mike Brown, a Kidspace board member who helped oversee the design of the playground, the rolling wheel exhibit remains his favorite.

"We hope this makes kids curious about how the world works," said Brown, who famously "killed" Pluto with discoveries that led astronomers to downgrade the former planetto dwarf-planet status. "When they start to ask questions, there are clues to help them figure things out."

The Galvin Physics Forest was laid out in a way to let kids explore on their own, Shanklin said.

"Most schools, especially now because of testing standards, don't have a lot of time or budget to dedicate to hands-on projects," Shanklin said. "Here kids learn that force is a push or a pull: 'I just used that plunger to shoot the ball way down range. That was awesome!' ...They see the application, or, as I like to say, the relevance."

The Galvin Physics Forest is Kidspace's largest capital investment since 2004, when the museum moved to its current location in Brookside Park, adjacent to the Rose Bowl. Founded in 1979, Kidspace was previously housed in the McKinley School gymnasium.

The Physics Forest sprouted from a \$2.5 million donation by the Galvin Family Foundations and a \$1.7 million grant from the California Cultural & Historical Endowment.

Before his death in October, former Motorola Chief Executive Robert Galvin encouraged museums to embrace hands-on science exhibits, said Gail Galvin Ellis, Galvin's eldest daughter and a Kidspace board member.

The Physics Forest, Galvin Ellis said, "will give children the opportunity to be exposed to science in a way that takes away some of the fear about being able to understand it."

joe.piasecki@latimes.com

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