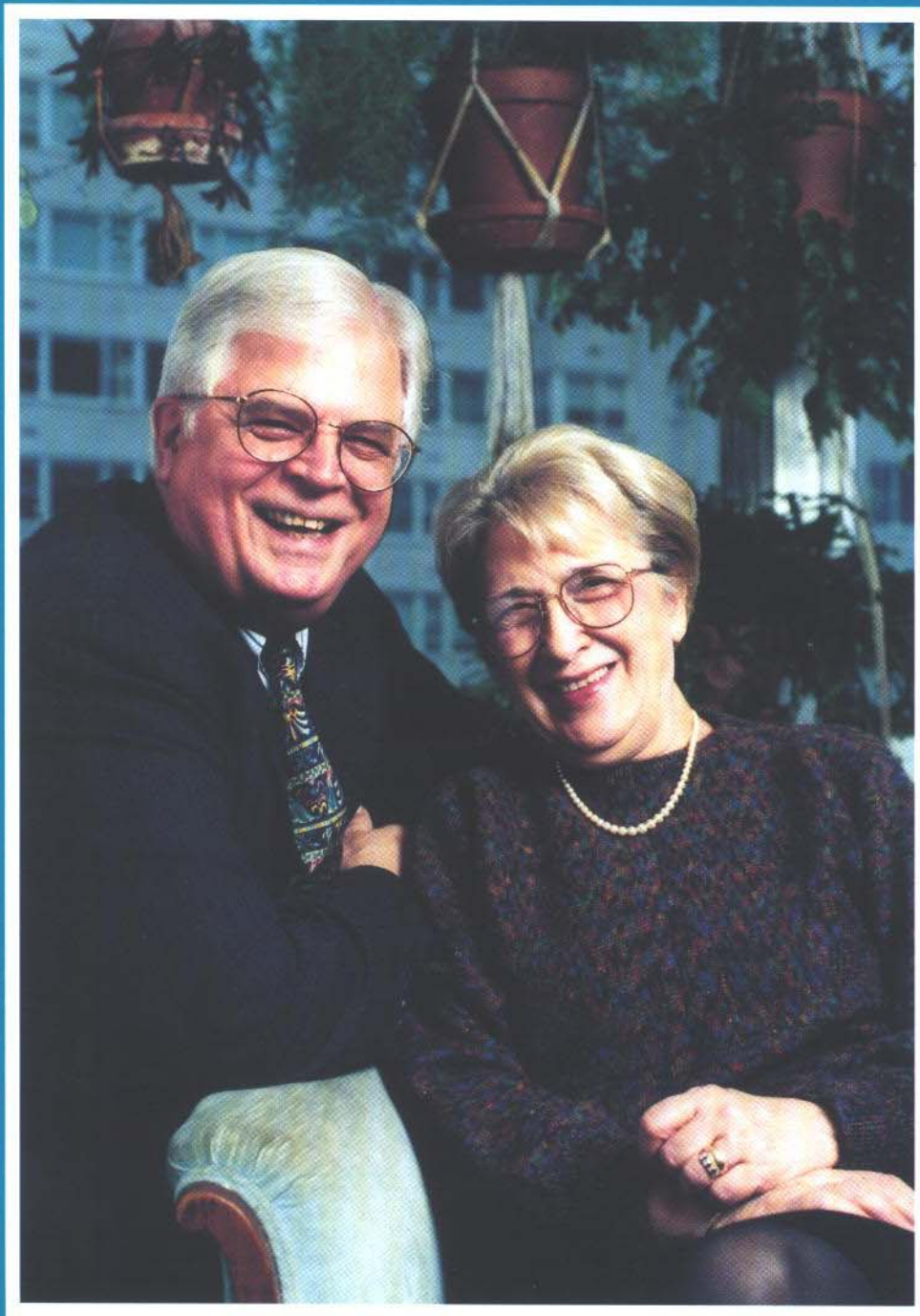


# MONTESSORI LIFE

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New Research Column

# Parents Like to Help: Three School Projects That Worked

## “Growing Room” for The New School

By Jill Staubitz

**L**ike many other Montessori schools, The New School has always regarded itself as a community, formed by the collaboration of staff, children, and parents. That community spirit was a moving force in the extraordinary 5 years of planning, dreaming, fundraising, and building which resulted in the successful completion of our Growing Room project in the spring of 1997. The Growing Room project exemplifies the best efforts of a Montessori school community.

Located in Cincinnati since 1970, The New School (TNS) is a private Montessori school for children from ages 3 through 12. Initially, a group of parents and educators, aided by Hilda Rothschild, professor of education at Cincinnati’s Xavier University and student of Maria Montessori, established TNS to offer high quality, traditional Montessori education in a homelike, family-centered environment. The school’s location in the 100-year-old Mitchell mansion in one of the city’s historic neighborhoods reinforced Montessori’s original notion of school as a “children’s house.” Acknowledging the needs of working families, TNS has always offered an all-day program running from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. as an important part of its mission.

In the past 10 years, The New School’s growth in enrollment has reflected Cincinnati’s active interest in Montessori education. Although the local educational community has continued to expand its number of public and private Montessori schools, applications and waiting lists for all levels of our program made us painfully aware of our shortage of space. In 1988-89, the purchase and renovation of a former church adjoining the mansion gave us new space in “The Annex” for the growing 9-to-12 class, allowed more room in the mansion for an enlarged 6-to-9 class, and



When the school’s physical space in the 100-year-old Mitchell Mansion became too small, the “Growing Room” (visible at far right) was added to alleviate the problem.

provided for the first time a multipurpose room for all levels.

As early as 1992, TNS’s Board of Trustees could see that the school’s physical spaces were becoming inadequate again and, with projected increases in elementary enrollment, the situation was likely to worsen. Paul Muller, parent, board member, and architect, identified the school’s present and future needs from surveys and meetings with staff and parents, including these:

- additional space for the projected growth in the 9-12 class;
- a separate lunchroom, so classrooms would not have to be rearranged to accommodate lunch every day;
- a larger multipurpose room for assemblies and large-muscle activities;
- a 3-6 nap room to replace the existing one located in an old basement; and
- a space reserved just for the elementary after-school program.

By 1994, Paul Muller had become president of a New School board committed to planning for the school’s future. Foreseeing that an addition to the mansion was the best solution to our “growing pains,” Paul incorporated the

results of his needs study into an initial architectural design—a working plan to meet the expressed needs of the community. At small-group meetings, the board presented the initial design to teachers and many interested parents, enlisting their ideas, enthusiasm, and financial support for the project.

From those meetings, Paul created a final design. His own words best describe his vision.

The design intention was to find an affordable, functional solution to as many of the physical plant needs of the school through an inclusive process which would strengthen the sense of community within the school. The aesthetic intention was to create an environment which in subtle ways expressed the energetic and enthusiastic spirit of the school. The name, “the Growing Room,” came from the fact that we needed space. It also seemed to express what the school is about and connected to the holistic educational approach of the school. With the theme established by the name, the design evolved into a treehouse-like setting in which the surrounding trees form the exterior spatial enclosure.

With fundraising underway, groundbreaking for the Growing Room addition began in the spring of 1996. The two-story structure was to



The Growing Room’s distinctive light fixture “symbolizes the community nature” of the project. Designed by the architect, Paul Muller, the light was created by various school families, who cut the copper designs, bent and shaped the steel, and constructed the steel frame. Assembly of the final product took a little help from everyone.



The Growing Room provides space for lunch, special events, and meetings. Space for napping and elementary extended-day program was also added.

be built with its main multipurpose room on the upper floor, adjoining the kitchen at the rear of the mansion for easy lunchtime access. Two large rooms were planned for the lower level: an activity/nap room for the early childhood program and an extended-day room to house games, art supplies, and other materials for the elementary after-school program. As construction of the addition proceeded into the summer, work also began on enlarging and reconfiguring the 9-12 classroom space in the Annex. To keep the community's attention focused on the Growing Room as a goal, Paul created a "Cut Out and Build Your Own" model Growing Room package for families to work on over the summer.

By the fall of 1996, work on Growing Room Project Phase I, the Annex, was completed for a 9-12 class of 45 students (original space designed for 35). According to one teacher, the expansion was "like taking off a tight shoe." Students began using a newly installed science lab center and enjoyed the extra light provided by a large new panel of windows made possible by restoring old, discarded windows from the mansion's original pantry.

With the actual Growing Room under construction, however, the fall and winter of 1996-97 called for lots of good humor, patience, and improvising on the part of TNS staff. Without the Annex multipurpose room, many large-group activities had to be reorganized, moved outdoors, squeezed into small spaces, or postponed. When it got too cold to hold elementary music classes outside, one family living next to the school opened their home for the classes. Of course, the positive side to the extended period of construction was its entertainment value for the children, especially the 3-to-6-

year-olds whose outdoor play area adjoins the addition. They had a great time watching backhoes and dump trucks and talking and singing to the work crews, who were overheard joining in a chorus of "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" one afternoon.

Through the entire process, parent donations of professional time and services played a key role. As the Growing Room's architect, Paul Muller worked closely with the general contractor, overseeing every aspect of the project in daily visits to the building site. Paul's unstinting donation of his talents served as an inspiration to other parents who followed his example. With parent contributions of engineering services, hand-crafted wooden doors, stair rails, and installation of insulation, the Growing Room was built with a better quality of materials and workmanship than TNS could have afforded otherwise. The central focus, a beautiful and unique light fixture, was entirely designed and crafted by TNS parent volunteers. Designed by Paul Muller, the 18-by-5-foot light is made of copper, steel, and translucent mica. One parent cut the copper in its pattern of trees, scrolls, water, and moons. Another family bent and shaped the steel at their forging company. A third parent rolled and shaped the copper sheets, while a parent who owns a Volkswagen repair company assembled the steel frame. This extraordinary light really symbolizes the community nature of the entire Growing Room project. It is also a favorite feature for children who enjoy finding squirrels, dogs, birds, and space creatures in its shapes.

By early March, the last-minute installation of outside stairs made the Growing Room addition just barely ready for its first major event: the school's annual auction fundraiser, whose theme was "Celebrating the Growing

Room." In April we held the Growing Room's formal dedication at a gathering of parents, children, alumni, neighbors, and friends. This was a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge the many people whose varied contributions had made the Growing Room possible.

The past two school years have been greatly enhanced by full use of the Growing Room addition. The new multipurpose/lunchroom space has eliminated the need to rearrange classrooms each day and allows lunch to be served in only two sittings (early childhood and elementary), rather than several for each level. Classes in music and dance have appropriate space, as do special in-school performances like Schoolhouse Symphony. The new naproom provides a much nicer and healthier space for the youngest children each day, while the elementary extended-day program has benefitted greatly from having a space all its own.

A number of community programs and gatherings, such as last spring's Senior Project presentations, graduation, parent education nights, and holiday celebrations, can comfortably include more parents and children with the Growing Room. At Thanksgiving in 1997, TNS was able to hold its first-ever, all-school assembly, with all age levels sharing music, expressions of thankfulness, and items collected for a local food bank. We plan to continue these kinds of community-building activities on a regular basis, including a January assembly on a multicultural theme.

The Growing Room has also enabled us to reach out more into the Greater Cincinnati area. One family relocating out of state used the room for a farewell party for their friends from TNS and the larger community. The meeting space has been offered to other community groups, such as the local neighborhood association and the Cincinnati Preservation Association, and we expect to find many more opportunities to use and to share this wonderful facility. Ada Louise Huxtable, the noted architecture critic for the *New York Times*, has said that architecture should enhance the lives of human beings. People who come into our Growing Room, whether they are students from abroad, delivery people, local educators, parents, or children, are all drawn into its welcoming space and comment on the beautiful and useful environment it offers. The Growing Room is truly a New School community achievement.

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