

Playmakers

The Exleys don't take themselves too seriously—but their work is a different story.

By Diana Bitting | Photography by Katrina Wittkamp



VISIONARY VOICES

Sharon and Peter Exley pose on the 12th floor of Louis Sullivan's historic 1904 Carson Pirie Scott building, also home to the architecture and designed objects departments at the SAIC.

When it comes to architecture enthusiasts, it's hard to beat the Exleys. But don't think the colorful couple that is Peter and Sharon are sideline observers. *Au contraire*, as the pair designs, consults and advocates with multiple points of entry: their firm, Architecture Is Fun, known for its playful and educational environments like zoos, museums, schools, parks and public spaces; the American Institute of Architects, where Peter serves as the 2013 Chicago president; the SAIC, where he is also an adjunct professor; Fun Finders, Sharon's sister interiors firm; and various bookstores, which display the Exleys' published works on design. Oh, and the megapopular PechaKucha nights at Martyrs' (where guest presenters give a 20-image slide show at 20 seconds per slide) that the duo help organize every few months—the 27th of which will happen in September. "This thing started in Tokyo as an antidote to the lecture, and we brought it to Chicago," says Peter. "Now, we're generating a culturally relevant evening for 400 people. It's fun; just passionate people talking about things they care about."

Their firm's portfolio includes St. Chrysostom's Day School and Weissbluth Pediatrics office locally, and the Children's Museum in Fond du Lac, Wis. At present, the couple is revamping the Frost Art Museum at FIU in Miami to "infuse the indoor-outdoor gallery with more energy," explains Sharon. "We are trying to elevate the caliber of public spaces and shake things up as much as we can."

Peter shares this sentiment with his wife—whom he met while working at architecture firm SOM—and looks forward to more projects that will allow them to take chances. "Play is not just a domain for childhood, it's for everybody," Sharon agrees. "We're playmakers, and we support this idea of being braver in our education systems in terms of design," she says. "We should put art back into everything."

THE EXLEYS' HOTS

Giving, Denise and Bob, "both," "and," inclusive, public, the city, girls and boys clubs

THE EXLEYS' NOTS

Taking, the Pritzker Prize, "me, myself and I," exclusive, private, the suburbs, old white men's clubs