The Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center at E.A. Ware at the YMCA Leadership & Learning Center Atlanta, Georgia
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1858, the YMCA of Metro Atlanta has served the community, with a continued dedication to providing opportunities for all of Atlanta’s children. After serving as an anchor tenant of a downtown office space for 40 years, in fall 2016 the Y was required to relocate after the building’s owner announced plans to sell. Faced with a unique and exciting opportunity to reimagine what a headquarters could look like for the organization, its leadership developed plans for a one-of-a-kind YMCA Leadership & Learning Center that will allow it to work among its mission and serve as a catalyst for community reinvestment in one of the city’s most underserved and impoverished communities.

Recently opened in May 2019 with plans to welcome its first class of students on September 3, this innovative new facility is already serving as a hub for the Y’s signature programs and as a beacon for community revitalization. In addition to the thousands of educators and Y staff members this facility will host each year, it is also home to a state-of-the-art, research-based, model early learning center.

Through innovative design, strong community engagement, and dedicated partners, this Center will impact hundreds of thousands of individuals each year.
The mission of the YMCA is to put Judeo-Christian principles into action that promote a healthy spirit, mind, and body.

With programs centering around our four strategic priorities—ensuring school readiness, improving academic achievement, inspiring civic leadership, and empowering healthy living—we believe that all people, especially children, deserve an equal chance to reach their full potential and that everyone, regardless of income or background, should have the opportunity to learn, grow, and connect.
SCOPE OF WORK + BUDGET

Location
569 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Vine City Atlanta

Size
55,000 sq ft

Total Cost
$25 million

Individuals impacted through the Center annually
- 90 Early Learners
- Training 4,000 Y staff
- 100 Individuals in Workforce Development Training
- 3000+ Y children & 1000+ children in the community impacted through professional development
The YMCA Leadership & Learning Center is located in the heart of Atlanta and more specifically on Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive at the entrance to the Historic Westside, a group of neighborhoods with rich historical significance but poverty-stricken and abandoned in recent decades.

Recently, a multi-billion-dollar stadium was built on the boundary of these Historic Westside neighborhoods and a block away from the site of the Center. Awareness grew of the issues facing these communities and their residents, including concentrated poverty, abandoned and dilapidated properties, severe unemployment, failing schools, lack of quality education, high crime, and poor public health.

With a presence already on the Westside of Atlanta, the Y knew better than most of the blight facing the residents of the Westside. An assessment of the community revealed a significant shortage of licensed childcare providers in the community—more than 4,350 children require quality childcare in this area. This shortage impacts not only children, but also parents and caregivers. A lack of high-quality, affordable childcare is one of the greatest barriers to long-term job stability.

Acknowledging the significant needs of the Westside and with a desire to support community transformation, the YMCA of Metro Atlanta saw an opportunity to bring about its model of community revitalization and place its headquarters squarely in the blighted community of Vine City. Such a bold symbol of relocating the Y’s association offices and creating a state-of-the-art early learning and training center in this community ensured that the Y was committed to this community and its residents for decades to come.

ATLANTA’S WESTSIDE: A Community with a Promise

Historic Westside is seen as the cradle of the civil rights movement and home to Martin Luther King, Jr. However, in this neighborhood and across the Westside of Atlanta, the target population served by the Y’s new facility:

> 52% of population falls below the poverty line
> Median household income is $24,778
> 22% of residents unemployed (1.7x unemployment rate city-wide)
> 15% of third-graders exceed reading standards (44% across metro Atlanta)
With a vision in mind to create a facility that embodies the Y’s spirit of providing exceptional opportunities to all, while also honoring the heritage of the Historic Westside, the Y worked with partners to design an innovative hub of learning and training that would transform not just the thousands of early learners and educators that would walk through our doors but also transform the landscape for early learning across Atlanta, the region, and ultimately the nation.

Throughout its history of serving Atlanta, the Y has built partnerships to strengthen its collective impact rather than duplicating work. As it embarked on an effort to design a center unlike any other, the Y drew upon these partners to ensure that the Center’s design—and specifically the early learning center—embodies best practices in early education architecture and research-based design for early learners.

Understanding the historical significance of the proposed site (the former location of one of Atlanta’s first elementary school for African Americans and later a building on Morris Brown College’s campus), the Y also intentionally engaged members of the community in our design drawing process. Community input was key as we built out the programming to be delivered onsite at the Center and as we envisioned a facility that complimented that of the Historic Westside.

THE PARTNERS: Building on Collective Expertise

EXPERTS IN EDUCATION
Walter S. Gilliam, PhD
Yale University School of Medicine
Comer Yates
Atlanta Speech School

DESIGN CONSULTANTS
Civil/Landscape: Kimley Horn
Structural: Sedki & Russ Engineers
Mechanical/Plumbing: Johnson Spellman
Electrical: Barnett Consulting Engineers
Food Service: Camacho
LEED Consulting: The Dragon Group

ARCHITECTS
Tracy Carusi, AIA | LEED AP  Principal In Charge
Don Whitten, AIA | NCARB  Associate Principal / Design Lead
Collins Cooper Carusi Architects. Inc

PROGRAM MANAGER
Carter USA

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER
SG Contracting

"It was a pivotal moment when Dr. Gilliam got involved in our work. At the recommendation of the Atlanta Speech School, our first conference call together transformed the way we thought about early learning design."

LAUREN KOONTZ, President & CEO, YMCA of Metro Atlanta
**THE PROCESS:**
Solving for Something Bigger

**CHALLENGE 1:**
Adaptive reuse of EA Ware School proved financially unfeasible.

Design solution incorporates a portion of the existing building façade, the existing auditorium has been reimagined as an outdoor classroom and STEAM laboratory for early learners and a Multi-Purpose MP gathering space for training and community functions overlooking the Outdoor Exploration Area.

**CHALLENGE 2:**
Site Topography

Design solution utilizes the Outdoor Exploration area to “bridge” an 8’ elevation difference between the finished floor level of the new early learning center and the existing EA Ware Auditorium / Outdoor Classroom. The elevation change becomes an activated amenity within the outdoor exploration center, providing access to musical exploration areas and a tree house.

**CHALLENGE 3:**
Navigating a culturally rich context and the community’s desire to save the existing building

The YMCA and the design team attended many neighborhood meetings in an effort to gain community support. The design solution sought to pay homage to the history of education on the site. The building is designed to respect the scale and character of the existing building and the context of the historic community.

Sept. 2016: Land Acquired


Dec. 2017: Groundbreaking

Nov. 2017: Demolition Begins

Jan. 2018 – March 2019: Construction

May 2019: Trainings begin on site

April 2019: Soft Opening of the Facility and Relocation of Administrative Offices

Sept. 2019: First Class of Early Learners Arrive

Total cost

$25 million

Public Funding

$7.3 million

Board/Board Designated Supporters

$4.47 million

Private Philanthropy

$13.24 million
The Y is the largest provider of early learning in Atlanta, serving more than 3,000 children. Not only is its reach broad, but its programs are best-in-class. Through partnership with Atlanta Speech School, Georgia State University, and others, the Y delivers exceptional early learning opportunities to some of Atlanta’s most marginalized children; 90% of the children we serve are living at or below the poverty line. It accomplishes this initiative through a flexible, four-pronged approach: Head Start and Early Head Start programming; Georgia Pre-Kindergarten, in partnership with local school systems; traditional fee-for-service preschools, subsidized by scholarships; and Early Learning Readiness, our mobile preschools designed to engage those not served by other more traditional learning models. While it deploys different models for different communities and according to available funding and space, all share a common philosophy of addressing the problem of school readiness with proven, research-based methods.

The early learning programs start working with children at six weeks of age, and its teachers intentionally partner with parents and caregivers to empower them to understand their children’s first teachers and reinforce literacy and language development at home.

As driven by the Y’s strategic plan, its vision for early learning is to ensure school readiness and prepare children to enter kindergarten on a path to read to learn by third grade and develop healthy habits, equipping them for long-term academic success.

The Y’s Leadership & Learning Center on the Westside of Atlanta is the epicenter for research-to-practice early learning work. The Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center at E.A. Ware at the Leadership & Learning Center serves as an incubator to pilot innovative programs to advance language and literacy development, infuse STEAM learning, and empower health and wellness for the youth and families served.

The Y’s early learning program utilizes the Creative curriculum supplemented by Y signature programs—Read Right From the Start, STEAM, and Start For Life—and aligned with Head Start Outcomes Early Learning Outcomes Framework and the state of Georgia standards. Creative Curriculum is flexible, allowing students’ interests to inform how the class learns.
STEAM in Early Learning:

Recognizing that early exposure to Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math (STEAM) is critical to helping children develop skills through experiential learning, the Y is strategically infusing early learning curriculum with STEAM concepts and activities. The Y’s STEAM in early learning program provides teachers with valuable professional development that lays the foundation for children to gain problem-solving and critical-thinking skills they need to be successful in school and life.

Read Right From the Start:

The professional development program created in partnership with the Rollins Center at the Atlanta Speech School, focused on building the language and literacy teaching skills of early learning teachers. The program enriches Y early learning programs with research-based training and practice-based coaching and mentoring.

Start For Life:

A research-based wellness program, Start For Life is designed to address the activity levels of preschoolers during planned play time. The program develops gross motor skill movement and teaches children to make healthy choices through positive self-management skills.
INTENTIONAL DESIGN:
A Facility that Develops the Whole Child

**ARTHUR M. BLANK EARLY LEARNING CENTER**
- Up to 90 neighborhood children
- Y signature programs & customized learning spaces

**DEVELOPING YOUNG LEADERS**
- Out-of-school programming for neighborhood youth and teens
- Internships with local schools and universities

**COMMUNITY WELLNESS**
- Kaiser Permanente Community Wellness Center
- Free community wellness programs
- Community Market & Café

**CHICK-FIL-A FOUNDATION TRAINING CENTER**
- CDA training & You are the Promise training
- Ongoing trainings for Y staff and partners
- Space for community meetings
The early learning center was designed in consultation with Dr. Walter Gilliam, Director of the Yale Child Study Center. The design creates advanced spaces that seamlessly infuse curriculum throughout the center and cultivates an environment that inspires innovation and self-expression and allows children to learn through exploration and discovery.

Designing with the growth of an early learner in mind, the overall layout of the early learning center was built to encourage movement, flexibility, and growth. As children develop, the size and layout of the classrooms adjust to accommodate and support growth. Classrooms are larger than typical early learning rooms to allow for a changing learning environment that supports a dynamic curriculum as well as training for teachers. Each classroom has furniture and equipment that is customizable to meet the developmental needs and interests of each age group. This includes a mobile science lab that beginning at age 2 introduces STEAM concepts through hands-on, interactive learning and progresses through age 5 with more complex equipment that promotes discovery and exploration.

Also, classrooms feature multi-functional spaces to support the curriculum—a space where children work on sorting and counting one day can become a reading nook where they look at picture books and make up their own stories the next day.

The early learning center includes a variety of unique and custom spaces that emphasize the following key elements of the Y’s early learning experience:

**Collaboration:** community grows learning

**Biophilia:** connection with the natural world and each other

**Re-invention:** in classroom planning and play

**Free space:** maximizing child movement

**Progression:** learning with developmentally responsive classroom spaces

Simply put, your center is a model in design for how young children best learn in spaces. I wish all children, families, and early childhood staff could learn, work, and play in a space such as what you have envisioned and built for the young children of Atlanta.”

**DR. WALTER S. GILLIAM**
Director, The Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy
Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine
The YMCA Leadership & Learning Center is pursuing LEED Certified certification. The LEED framework pushes project teams to think about sustainability from a holistic perspective. Some of the key sustainability drivers included in this project are listed below.

**Indoor Water Use Reduction**
The project is designed to reduce potable water consumption by 30.73% annually. This will result in saving thousands of gallons annually.

**Energy Conservation**
The project is designed to reduce energy consumption by 35.31%. This was accomplished through high-efficiency HVAC system, lighting & lighting control system and building envelope. The will drastically reduce the long-term operational cost of the facility.

**Waste Diversion**
The project has implemented a construction waste management plan to divert as much waste as possible from landfills. Currently, the project has diverted 78.22% of all construction and demolition debris from landfills. That equals to more than 400 tons of material.

**Indoor Air Quality**
A construction indoor air quality plan during construction has been implemented to ensure that once construction was completed, the indoor air quality was high and free from contamination. The design included low VOC projects and material to enhance indoor air quality as well.
When a community of people demonstrates social accessibility and a common outlook, young learners experience a supportive social order. “[This] supportive community can mitigate the harmful effects of economic disadvantage on student achievement.”

[Bickel, Smith and Eagle 2002]
COLLABORATION

The YMCA’s Vision, “to bring people together to champion communities where everyone belongs,” could not be more relevant to the increased learning by the youngest community members.

The commitment to social connectedness fostered by the YMCA and integrated by design into the YMCA Early Learning Center creates opportunities for measurable learning achievements by the time children start kindergarten.

Throughout the following designed spaces, the Y promotes natural collaboration and community building between students, parents, teachers, and visitors.
A critical part of the Y’s early learning programming is providing parents and families with the resources they need to be successful. This includes training and strategies to support their children’s education. The early learning center offers a parent resource center with books they can read with their children, aligned with the Read Right From the Start program.

As a research-to-practice center, the early learning center pilots innovative programming that can be implemented at additional early learning centers, elevating the educational outcomes of more children in the community. Traditionally, third-party evaluators observe teachers and children in the classroom, creating an inauthentic experience. The early learning center has observation rooms connected to each classroom, which allows learning to occur simultaneously and naturally for teachers, children, evaluators, and visiting trainees.

The Leadership & Learning Center features various meeting spaces that provide access to technology and privacy for small groups looking for a place to collaborate.
Biophilia is humankind’s innate love of and connection with nature.

Biophilic design can reduce stress, improve cognitive function, increase creativity, improve well-being and expedite healing. The ideal early learning environment provides the nurturing, safety and encouragement that fosters the child’s innate desire to explore, to express and to communicate.

Throughout the design of the early learning center, you will see ways to connect with the natural world. Additionally, nodding to the Vine City neighborhood in which the Center sits, outdoor play spaces include vine concepts, such as the vine tunnel and vine teepee.

> Natural daylight to enhance learning
> Natural materials with neutral finishes
> Nature-inspired soft palettes to reduce stress
> Organic shapes in furnishings
> Explorative immersive play in the natural world
> Back Porches
> Outdoor Play Experience
REINVENTION

In early learning, options are important for development. Each space within the early learning center is designed with flexibility, allowing teachers and learners to reinvent their environments.

**Educators:**
- Panel wall systems with changeable components for sharing among educators and varying center content.
- Shelving on hidden casters for instant reconfiguration of learning center sizes and location.

**Learners:**
- Open-ended structures with “parts” for inventive play.
- Play lofts with openings, balconies, and doors for interpreting spaces.
- Non-gender restrictive play.
Movement matters. With children aging in range from six weeks to five years, the Y’s space was designed to maximize movement and square footage, allowing children to move and learn through play.

Leveraging space in the collaborative Learning Commons, shared materials are stored outside the classroom, freeing up more square footage for child-focused activities. Classrooms include play lofts that double the footprint for children.
PROGRESSION

Understanding the unique and diverse developmental stages that each child progresses through from birth to Pre-Kindergarten, learning environments are designed with developmentally responsive classroom identities.

This is seen particularly through the infusion of STEAM across the center—in messy rooms and science modules.

> MESSY ROOMS
Designed to sit between two classrooms and allow age-appropriate collaboration

Includes sensory tables, art materials and platforms, and space for active, STEAM-focused engagement of students at developmentally appropriate levels

> SCIENCE MODULES
Toddlers enjoy sensory bins that can be lidded and stored, swapped out for more adventure

Age appropriate STEAM activities for little ones too young to use messy rooms

Older children explore dedicated science modules for ongoing experimentation

These modules grow more complex with the children or be used altogether for a combined classroom or even school-wide science adventure in one classroom or in the Learning Commons.
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: Equipping the Whole Child

The Y strives to meet the needs of whole child, from birth through high school graduation, through flexible programs that include academic support, health and wellness, character development, and hands-on enrichment activities. Children participate in intentional programs that promote physical, social, and cognitive development in a safe and enriching environment. Beyond the innovative space of the Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center, children will also interact with many of these unique learning and educational spaces.

> The Delta Air Lines Outdoor Exploration Area
> Kaiser Permanente Community Wellness Center
> Chick-fil-A Foundation Training Center
> Community Market
In place of a traditional playground, this interactive environment incorporates tunnels, mounds, water play areas, music, an outdoor play kitchen, and more, giving children the opportunity for immersive play in nature. A covered pavilion provides a space for STEAM activities for early learners as well as outdoor learning activities for older children and teens, and a designated spot for community gathering opportunities.
The wellness center will host health promotion and wellness outreach for the community, as well as provide indoor exercise space for the Y’s signature Start For Life program for early learners.

CHICK-FIL-A
FOUNDATION TRAINING CENTER

The training center will serve as a hub for innovative professional development and staff training for those in early learning, afterschool, health and wellness, and more. This space includes two training community rooms, a computer lab, conference room, and a training gathering space.

KAISER PERMANENTE COMMUNITY WELLNESS CENTER

Opening in spring 2020, the community market—Market on Maple—and café will provide free wi-fi, healthy food and beverage options, as well as a farmer’s market, for surrounding neighborhoods. Building on the Y’s hunger relief programs, this will provide an additional resource to equip low-income families with healthy food after school hours and on the weekend.

COMMUNITY MARKET
Designed with experts in the field of early learning, the Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center at E.A. Ware is unlike any early education space conceptualized to date. With a growing understanding of the long-term implications of high-quality early learning, this state-of-the-art facility sits at the forefront of innovation in our field.

Most immediately, the physical design of the early learning center is being replicated across several other early learning centers currently in design for the YMCA of Metro Atlanta.

Additionally, through the training components and facilities of the YMCA Leadership & Learning Center, hundreds of educators will be brought through the early learning center to experience first-hand best practices in early education, including ideal environments for motivating and delivering intentional, child-focused learning. Through its partnership with Atlanta Speech School, the Y’s research-to-practice work will be featured through the Cox Campus—an online training site free to educators across the country.

Looking ahead, the YMCA of Metro Atlanta is respected nationally as a leading provider of early learning, both through its network of YMCAs across the country and through its strong partnership with Head Start. Already, the Y is being called upon to present on the best practices developed through its early learning programs, and the creation of a center that makes tangible the goals of these programs only builds upon this strong case for innovation.
The YMCA Leadership & Learning Center was built on a site that previously hosted key leaders in the community. The site was once home to Jordan Hall, part of Morris Brown College—a historically black liberal arts college—and before that, one of Atlanta’s first African American schools, Edmund Asa Ware Elementary School.

While extensive analysis proved the previous structure unsuitable for renovation due to structural issues, long-term vacancy, and the unique creation of a national model for early learning and regional training center, the Y worked closely with members of the community to honor the legacy of past leaders who left a special mark on our facility: Edmund Asa Ware, Bishop Frederick D. Jordan, and Dr. Ruth Hall Hodges.

Our early learning center honors E.A. Ware, Atlanta University’s first president, who originated the idea of a university to train educators, and for whom the site’s elementary school was later named. The outdoor pavilion (the shell of the previous Jordan Hall) will retain its name to honor Bishop Frederick D. Jordan, a former head of the AME Church and a benefactor to Morris Brown College, which converted the E.A. Ware School to one of its campus classrooms. And an art gallery space in the early learning center is named in honor of Dr. Ruth Hall Hodges, who was instrumental in bringing arts programming to the Westside.

Additionally, the exterior of the facility was designed with neighboring buildings in mind, replicating the historic brick appearance.
ELEVATING EDUCATION ACROSS THE CITY

At the core of the planning, design, and implementation process for the YMCA Leadership & Learning Center is the Y’s focus on making meaningful change in the communities we serve. In order to do this, every aspect of the Center—from the use of windows to separate indoor from outdoor space to the thoughtful use of hallway space for collaboration—was intentionally designed to enable each individual who walks into the Center to reach their full potential, regardless of background or zip code.

While early in the activation of this space, the transformative impact of the Center can already be seen in the community and the city.

EQUIPPING EARLY LEARNERS

The Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center will welcome 90 early learners through its doors on September 3, all of whom live in the surrounding Historic Westside neighborhoods and come from impoverished families. For these children, the Y’s signature early learning program will change their academic trajectory. Our early learning program utilizes research-based language and literacy strategies, evidence-based health and wellness curriculum, and innovative STEAM learning to prepare students for success. Through Read Right From the Start, Y early learners have shown incredible growth in their pre-reading and literacy skills. At the end of the 2018-19 school year, 80 percent of Pre-K students performed at or above average in receptive vocabulary tests, indicating they are on track to read to learn by the third grade. Prior to implementing the program, 40 percent of children were reaching this milestone. Additionally, children will participate in Start For Life, a signature Y health and wellness program that, according to four-peer reviewed studies, increases moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during the preschool day and reduces inappropriately high weight.

The YMCA Leadership & Learning Center is the culmination of years of work with community partners and experts in the field of education and innovative design. We are proud to build on our commitment to Atlanta’s Westside community.”

- Lauren Koontz, President & CEO of the YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta
EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS & EDUCATORS

As the living laboratory for the Y’s innovative programs, the Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center provides an onsite learning environment for the Chick-fil-A Foundation Training Center. And through this training center, the Y is already empowering individuals to find careers in early learning and educators to deliver the highest quality of learning to children across the Westside. With support from local funders, the Y is delivering two programs free of charge through the training center: Child Development Associate (CDA) credential program and You Are the Promise. Through the CDA program, offered at no cost to participants, the Y will train 50 individuals each year to launch a career in early learning. To date, more than 40 individuals have completed the certification, and all are now employed at the Y. And, to ensure other early learning providers on the Westside have access to the training and resources they need to better prepare children for kindergarten, the Y will offer professional development and training programs through You Are the Promise.

By working with educators and early learning centers across the city, the Center is playing a critical role in elevating the quality of education for countless children. Equipped with the tools needed for language and literacy success, educators will better prepare students to enter kindergarten on a path to read to learn by third grade—a critical predictor of academic achievement. Indirectly, through the hundreds of educators we create and empower, the Y is making a significant impact on the outcomes and success of elementary schools through Atlanta, equipping each child for long-term success.

Over the next couple of years, the design of the Arthur M. Blank Early Learning Center at E.A. Ware will inform the construction of two additional early learning centers and renovate an existing center, elevating the educational outcomes of thousands of young learners every year.