

# The Programming and Design Behind Four ‘Wow Factor’ YMCAs



Photo of Speer YMCA  
by Mark Borosch Photography



By Paul Steinbach

**W**ith 2,650 YMCA locations serving 11 million community members in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, there is naturally significant variance from one Y’s facility design and programming approach to another. According to David Martorano, vice president, Thriving Ys, YMCA of the USA, there is no requirement handed down from Y-USA’s headquarters in Chicago as to what a Y has to look like or how it must function.

Rather, Y-USA’s Certification and Membership Qualifications Division initiates a process that all local Ys must go through. This process includes conducting a site analysis to determine whether a new Y facility is feasible and sustainable, while ensuring that the new location does not cannibalize the market share of a neighboring Y facility and, in fact, has the support and approval from any neighboring Ys. Y-USA further

recommends and supports what Martorano calls a critical capital pathway for new Ys.

“This pathway includes items such as understanding community needs and feasibility studies,” he says. “These items inform Ys of what programmatic elements are needed most at that particular location — ranging from youth development programming, housing, food distribution, child care, group exercise, functional fitness, gym space, aquatics and more. Y-USA also offers resources tied to architectural or interior design, and accessibility standards.”

Given how different individual Ys can be, *AB* asked Y-USA to point us in the direction of established locations that exhibit an undeniable “wow factor.” Leaders at each Y then explained to us, in their own words, why they think their facilities and programming would rise to that level of respect in the eyes of Y-USA.

Here’s what we learned.

## Family YMCA of Marion and Polk Counties

Salem, Ore.

Tim Sinatra, president and CEO

The Family YMCA of Marion and Polk Counties has recently rebuilt our flagship facility named after our local community leaders Dick and Gayle Withnell. This new facility was envisioned as a place for all, designed to serve as a community hub where individuals — regardless of age, ability, ethnicity or socio-economic status — can come together to foster wellbeing and social cohesion. No matter where you stand in the building you can see into three different areas, creating a sense of community and safety. The building is fully accessible, with features such as ramps, elevators, gymnasium lines with a specific color scheme for people who may be color blind, and adaptive equipment to ensure that everyone, including people with disabilities, can navigate and use the space comfortably.

The facility's flexible design allows it to meet the diverse needs of the community, including fitness classes for various age groups, cultural and recreational activities, and educational workshops focused on health, financial literacy and job skills. Special initiatives are implemented to engage marginalized groups, such as youths at risk, seniors and refugee populations, providing them with resources and support systems to thrive. Incorporating a social impact approach, the facility aims to address broader social issues around stability, health and wellbeing.

Environmental sustainability is also a key focus. The building features energy-efficient systems and emphasizes the YMCA's commitment to environmental stewardship.

Overall, this YMCA is a dynamic community center that empowers individuals, builds connections, and promotes a healthier, more inclusive society.

The partnership between the Withnell Family YMCA and the Salem Keizer School District is a model of inclusivity and compassion, significantly impacting the lives of youths experiencing disabilities. By providing access to physical therapy in the warm, welcoming environment of the aquatic center, we're not only offering a vital service but also fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within our community.

The decision to keep the water temperature at 86 degrees demonstrates the Y's commitment to accommodating the specific needs of individuals with physical challenges, ensuring their comfort and safety while engaging in beneficial activities. This temperature regulation promotes relaxation, eases muscle tension and enhances mobility, facilitating more effective physical therapy sessions.

This program goes beyond physical benefits. It creates a supportive environment where individuals of all abilities can come together, fostering social connections. Through shared experiences in our inclusive aquatic programming, participants build friendships, develop confidence and gain a sense of achievement, contributing to their overall wellbeing and quality of life.



Photo by Damian Byington



Photo by 365 Creative Co.



Photo by 365 Creative Co.

Additionally, thoughtful consideration was put into the design of the building to ensure inclusivity for everyone. From wider doorways and spacious layouts to accessible showers and changing benches, every detail was intentionally planned to accommodate diverse needs.

This inclusive approach to facility design not only enhances the experience of those utilizing our aquatic therapy program, but also sends a powerful message of acceptance and equality. It demonstrates our belief that everyone deserves access to quality resources and opportunities for physical activity and wellness, regardless of their abilities.

## Mahaska YMCA

Oskaloosa, Iowa

Barry Martin, president and CEO

A variety of design choices emphasize flexibility in the programming of the Mahaska YMCA's various venues. Multipurpose spaces maximize the range of programs offered in each space. In addition to the more obvious gym curtains and collapsible glass walls, an innovative soft wall divider system can split the Gross Motor room into three kid-friendly spaces, and a glass industrial design garage door in the Intergenerational Room can be used as a convertible wall. All of these features combine to get the most out of every space. The 21 classrooms in the Early Childhood Center are full of innovative room designs, including double classrooms separated by supervision-friendly shared restrooms, kid-sized FF&E, car-seat-sized cubbies and designated high-strength tornado shelters, just to name a few.

Design considerations extend to the selection of equipment and amenities within the facility, as well. All new wellness floor equipment from Matrix Fitness fits seamlessly in an open floor plan design that is subtly divided into distinct areas for selectorized equipment, cardio, free weights and functional fitness. There are group exercise studios and a dedicated cycle studio, all with 24-hour member access.

Designers worked directly with operators in creating an inviting and functional space within the 88,000-square-foot facility. This collaborative approach provided a variety of seemingly small touches that have made a big difference in the functionality of the programming spaces. For example, a collapsible glass wall between a group exercise studio and the Queenax area allows for the flexibility to open the wall for functional fitness classes or close it off for cardio classes. The oversized gymnasium is outfitted with state-of-the-art LED lights from Musco Sports Lighting, including Musco's Show-Light Entertainment package to give young athletes the same game-day experience as the pros, complete with multicolored lightshows choreographed to music — Let's Get Ready to Rumble! Behind the scenes the mechanicals are equally high-tech, with software control over lighting (Musco Control-Link), HVAC (Johnson Controls) and room reservation panels synchronized to MS Outlook calendars (Extron).



## YMCA of Greater St. Petersburg (Speer YMCA)

St. Petersburg, Fla.

David Jezek, president and CEO

The combined Speer YMCA and public middle school is only the third pairing of its kind in the U.S. and the first in the Tampa Bay Area. People come from all across the country to see what we created here, and we are proud to share.

The longstanding partnership between the YMCA of Greater St. Petersburg and Pinellas County Schools puts us in a unique position to work together to address the needs of the community while combating the underuse of facilities in an area where land is becoming scarcer and more valuable. When the school day ends and spaces vacate, the YMCA can activate key spaces for member use during the afternoons, weekends and summer months.



Photos by Mark Borosch Photography

An innovative collaboration, two organizations and two architects came together with the joint vision of maximizing one site to best utilize our resources and build smarter. Designed with the community in mind, the project is a joint venture between WJ Architects and Harvard Jolly | PBK, and constructed by Creative Contractors.

The Speer YMCA and Mangrove Bay Middle School joint campus features a 111,757-square-foot, two-story building, nearly 30,000 square feet of which will pivot between YMCA and school use – including the media center, dining hall, gymnasium, culinary center, sports field, track and garden.

The onsite aquatic center boasts an eight-lane, 25-yard outdoor competition pool, a separate warm-water instructional pool, a splash pad, an outdoor playground and a deck area for relaxing.

This partnership is focused on promoting a healthy body and mind for life – from birth, through school and into adulthood.

Mangrove Bay Middle School, a health and wellness magnet school, is home to an art center, a music/ band room and more than a dozen classrooms offering electives aligned with the YMCA's areas of impact: youth development, healthy living and social responsibility. The YMCA features spaces designed to meet a wide array of community needs, including the aquatics center, a first-floor exercise studio that offers easier access for seniors in the mornings and dance rehearsals in the afternoons, a technology lab, a Kid Zone for onsite childcare, an upstairs fitness floor, a cardio and free weight area, an outdoor wellness terrace and more.

All under one roof, the two facilities and the shared-use spaces are connected by a central spine called "The Link." This media center and communal space is the connector and security point from which all program spaces branch. During school hours, the doors from the YMCA to the media center are locked with staff supervision. After hours and during special programs, YMCA members have access to select shared areas.

The new building is a certifiable Green Globe building that sits on a complex site where wetlands hold a major portion of the site boundary. Despite the constraints, the site plan is successful in maintaining frontage for both entities. The wetlands, storm ponds and landscaping provide a buffer to the neighborhood and focus activities at the core of the site.



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## The Ottawa YMCA

Ottawa, Ill.

Joe Capece, president and CEO

The new Ottawa YMCA, an achievement of many partners, strengthens the health of its community. The organization focuses on health equity and providing health/wellness services to those who need them most.

Evidence-based prevention programs bridge clinical care and health promotion/chronic disease prevention programming in a supportive environment. Healthcare providers refer patients to these programs, which are led by certified health coaches and guide people to make healthy lifestyle changes.

In 2018, the Ottawa Y received approval to offer Enhance®Fitness, an evidence-based group exercise program targeting older adults with movement issues and arthritis. This class is recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other national organizations that promote senior health.

In 2020, the Ottawa Y overcame COVID obstacles to hold its newly certified diabetes prevention classes virtually. Soon after, it added LIVESTRONG® to help cancer survivors. Also in 2020, the Ottawa Y signed an agreement with OSF HealthCare Saint Elizabeth Medical Center as a partner at the new facility, with OSF renting space for patients' physical therapy needs. Healthy Kids U was integrated into YMCA child-care programs with OSF providing the framework.

A passionate YMCA employee helped bring Rock Steady Boxing in 2022 to strengthen Parkinson's patients. This year, The Ottawa YMCA will launch a blood pressure monitoring program to boost community health. All these programs are free to members, and scholarships are available to those in need.

Stroke Wellness will be The Ottawa Y's newest offering beginning this fall.

Embracing its entire community, the Ottawa Y spotlights wellness, offers picturesque views of the Illinois and Fox rivers, and pays homage to downtown Ottawa. The main entry, as well as a secondary entry off an adjacent park, lead members and residents to a shared public area featuring a "living room" with a double-faced fireplace. A full glass wall displays the aquatic center, complete with a competition lap pool, a therapy/activity pool and a children's play area. The public zone also has a spiritual chapel, a meeting room and restrooms.

The building's spine culminates in the wellness center, where floor-to-ceiling windows offer the aforementioned river views. Additionally, triangular cross-bracing, visible through the glass at night, not only supports the structure but also pays tribute to the historic Ottawa Rail Bridge that spans the Illinois River. A suspended walk/jog track overlooking the wellness center and gymnasium amplifies the energy and openness of the facility.

Two interior studio spaces accommodate group exercise and group-cycling activities, and



Photos by Legat Architects

a rooftop studio allows patrons to enjoy river breezes while exercising outdoors. The Y also houses a child watch room, group rooms and a multipurpose room with a demonstration kitchen for teaching healthy cuisine preparation. Operable partitions subdivide the group and multipurpose rooms to maximize flexibility.

The building's exterior design gives a nod to the quaint architectural character of Ottawa. Downtown buildings inspired the color selection of facade materials, including the buff limestone color of the precast concrete wall panels and the terra-cotta-colored metal panels.

The Ottawa YMCA was possible because of the generosity of many donors. The chapel's stained-glass window, for instance, was designed by a local artist commissioned by a donor. Another donation resulted in the bronze statue at the main entry. It depicts children making the famed "YMCA" gesture with their arms. 