

Helping Cats Find Their Happy Place

Towering trees, designer digs—and more modest efforts, too—showcase kitties and please people

BY JIM BAKER



A fish-eye view of the "Cataquarium" playroom at the San Diego SPCA and Humane Society. The aquarium-themed room gives cats plenty of things to do, and provides an atmosphere where potential adopters want to linger.

Towering over visitors' heads, the tree has become quite an attraction, visible even from the road, turning the heads of drivers who pass the Angels for Animals shelter in Canfield, Ohio.

"We've had all kinds of questions about it. People [who see it] have asked me if we have primates," says Diane Less, who co-founded Angels for Animals in 1990.

It's a reasonable question: The large room that holds the tree is the key attraction in the shelter's 13,500-square-foot, \$3.5 million Lariccia Animal Center. At 24 feet tall, the tree is constructed of steel pipes, plywood, and artificial grass, and wrapped

with durable, black plastic netting that makes the trunk and branches climbable. The branches terminate in big, green pads that are perfect for high-altitude lounging. And at first glance, the room does bear some resemblance to those that zoos set up to house monkeys.

But the tree is orangutan- and chimp-free. Instead, it serves as the centerpiece of the main cat colony space at the shelter—and on any given day, it's the high-altitude hangout for between 30 and 40 cats waiting for homes.

The space offers plenty of room for its feline inhabitants, places to go when they

desire some "alone time," prime spots to sunbathe, and volunteers to interact with.

"They just love it; they have a great time in there," Less says. "They climb all over it. But most of the cats that we put in there run down when we walk in the room. They're very friendly animals."

Because the cats dig their space, they're happier and more outgoing. And because the tree provides such an unusual visual to the shelter's adoption space, people are drawn there to meet them.

Called the Tree of Marie—in honor of Marie Stilling, a supporter who, on her death in 2002, made a \$100,000 bequest designated



Visitors to Angels for Animals in Canfield, Ohio, are typically awestruck upon seeing the “Tree of Marie,” a 24-foot-tall climbing structure in one of the cat adoption rooms.

to create it—the structure and its room embody what should be a guiding principle for shelter adoption spaces: They should serve both the animals they house and the people who come to visit.

The tree is tall, but so far there haven’t been any serious mishaps with kitties losing their footing and falling from the two-story tree. “There were a couple of lessons learned when it was first put in. The only thing we had an issue with was they learned quickly not to put any declawed cats in the room,” says George Beaver, systems manager, who says that one declawed cat fell from the tree and got a minor sprain. Now felines allowed in the room have to have all their claws, to ensure they’re surefooted enough to enjoy the tree safely.

Visitors to Angels for Animals, says Less, are “just blown away” by the cat tree. “It’s kind of funny. We’re out here in a rural

area, and the shelter’s sort of become like the zoo—it’s the destination out here.”

Sitting Kitty

Less estimates the tree room cost about \$150,000 to create—a price tag that’s likely out of reach for many budget-strained shelters. And most shelters have enough space challenges housing their animals without trying to find a room for an enormous tree!

But while the tree in Ohio is a soaring example of creative and appealing cat housing, it doesn’t take tens of thousands of dollars or hundreds of extra feet to showcase cats in an environment that keeps them safe, healthy, and sane, while treating potential adopters to an enjoyable experience. There are simple ways shelters can improve cat adoption spaces, using basic design to keep adopters hanging around, and to draw their attention to the cats.



It might not be Cloud 9 exactly, but to cats clambering on the two-story-tall “Tree of Marie” at Angels for Animals, in Canfield, Ohio, it must seem that way. Adoptable kitties residing in the room have to have all their claws, so they can climb and descend the tree safely.

For shelters unable to make sweeping changes, small updates can create a more effective and pleasant environment. Improve the lighting by changing bulbs; introduce more color; isolate intrusive sounds, like barking; keep litter boxes clean; don’t let kennel cards hide the cats; reduce clutter; and let in fresh air and sunlight whenever possible.

Many of the fixes that serve the mental and physical needs of the four-legged residents simultaneously appeal to the senses of the two-legged visitors—and the more comfortable and engaged a person feels in a cat adoption space, the more likely it is they’ll leave your shelter with a new, furry family member.

“That’s always been my point with everything I teach: You don’t have to do everything, but you can do something. And that something—that positive change that may be only one thing—can make a huge difference,” says Kit Jenkins, project manager for agency enrichment at PetSmart Charities, based in Phoenix. Jenkins, who has worked in the animal welfare field for 30 years, gives

presentations and webinars about ways to improve conditions for shelter cats and boost their adoption rates.

Among Jenkins' pearls of wisdom: If you can keep your kitty room less stinky, potential adopters may linger longer, increasing their chances of meeting someone they want to get to know. If you can get visitors to perceive cats as individuals, they'll be more likely to make a personal connection with one. If you make a good first impression, visitors will stay around to take a second look.

A Room with a View

Not every shelter can make a first impression with an enormous, cat-bejeweled tree—but the Canadian Bow Valley SPCA, in Canmore, Alberta, has a slightly smaller version: a floor-to-ceiling cat tree featuring a spiral of sisal-wrapped steps leading up to two ledges that cats can go back and forth between.

The custom-made wooden structure was designed and constructed by a local home builder, and like the one in Ohio, it's the focal point of the shelter's main cat playroom. It draws plenty of appreciative comments from visitors, who can see it through big windows the moment they arrive at the shelter. The sight of the resident cats climbing the tree, observing the squirrels outside, and cuddled in blankets has proved to be an irresistible attraction.

The shelter also has five smaller cat "chalets" that house different groups of cats: one for seniors, one for kittens, even one for a cat who won't accept other feline roommates—his own private suite.

Staff members have discovered that visitors want to linger in the playroom and the chalets, where big windows provide natural light and there are seats for humans, too. "A whole family can go into a room and spend as much time as they like in there," says Sonya White, adoption center manager. "... Quite often, families will come regularly, like once a week. They'll just grab a key, go into a room, and we won't see them for an hour."

As a result of the time they spend socializing with the cats, people get to know them as individuals—and the cats get to know many different people. "We encourage that; it's good for the cats. It helps them become more adoptable, because they're used to being handled by people, so they're not as



Volunteer Lucy Taylor watches a cat descend a custom-made, floor-to-ceiling climbing structure in the big playroom of Bow Valley SPCA in Canmore, Alberta. Cats at the shelter enjoy spaces that are clean, bright, and stimulating—qualities that appeal to potential adopters, too.

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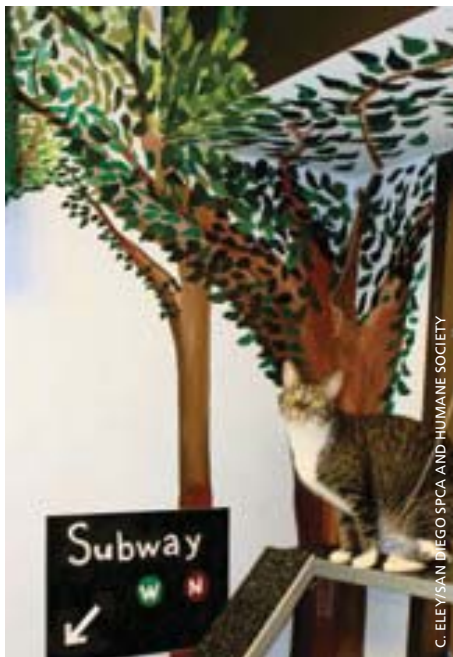
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SARAH JANELLE MARSHALL/DOROTHY H. O'CONNOR PET ADOPTION CENTER

These cats in the cat playroom of the Dorothy H. O'Connor Pet Adoption Center in Victoria, Texas, display an uncanny sense of symmetry as they lounge on colorful, wooden forms mounted on the room's walls.



C. EILEY/SAN DIEGO SPCA AND HUMANE SOCIETY

Each of the 17 separate cat adoption spaces at the San Diego SPCA and Humane Society has a different theme. The "Central Park West" room, pictured here, is meant to evoke the sights of New York City, complete with the trees of Central Park and the subway. Is this kitty headed uptown or downtown?

frightened when a potential adopter comes in a room," White says. "They're not running to hide; they're coming to the door, or climbing in their laps, and that really attracts people, if they're looking for a cat, and the cat is actually jumping on them."

Part of what makes people stick around is the smell—or the lack of it, says Jenn Rowley, the shelter's board president. The windows open, and the air system regularly pumps fresh air into each room.

"I think that people are more likely to go into a room where it doesn't smell like cat," Rowley says. "Our staff is really good at keeping our rooms clean, keeping the male cat smell to a minimum, keeping the litter pans with the litter inside them instead of kicked around the floor. I think people are more willing to sit on our floor here than I've ever seen at another adoption facility."

Bow Valley SPCA is a small shelter; there's not much room to spare. The solution, when it came to giving cats space, was to go *up*—thus, the cat tree in the main playroom, and the various levels and ledges that abound in the chalets.

"I think vertical space is really important. I'm just looking at our rooms right now, and I'm thinking that if we didn't have any of those ladders or the cat-scratch post or any of our ledges, everyone would be confined to the floor. And I think that is going to end up with them needing to have more hiding places, territorial issues, stress issues, and basically the potential for fights," Rowley says.

Mindful of the need to present cats as individuals, Bow Valley also strives to mix together cats of different colors, patterns, ages, and personalities. "I've heard at other adoption facilities that it's really hard to adopt out black or black-and-white cats, so you don't want to have a room of that solid color. You don't want to have a black cat room and an orange tabby room," Rowley says.

Open-Air Accommodations

Is it possible for shelters to do *too* good a job when they update their cat spaces?

Ask the staff at Dorothy H. O'Connor Pet Adoption Center, in Victoria, Texas. Visitors watching the cats in the shelter's playroom regularly make comments like, "I don't know if I want to adopt, because they're having

more fun here," according to Sarah Janelle Marshall, assistant director.

The playroom's become a sensation in cyberspace, too; virtual visitors can observe the goings on via a cat webcam that provides a live feed of their activity. The shelter has even had adoptions result from people who've watched the "cat cam" and fallen in love with a particular star.

The shelter made the latest updates about a year ago, paying for them with funds raised at a garage sale. Marshall came up with a design for wooden shapes—boxes, ledges, stairs, cubbyholes, etc.—that could be built and mounted against the back wall, giving the cats a kind of hanging playground to climb on, hide in, and perch upon. A local man was hired to create the forms, which he coated with a durable, pet-safe paint that could stand up to being sprayed and wiped down for sanitation purposes. The forms are bright and colorful, painted red, yellow, black, and green.

Cats are in the playroom from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., and then are returned to their individual kennels for the evening. New cats quickly adjust to the routine. In the morning, they seem eager to be taken into the playroom, Marshall says, and by late afternoon, they're waiting at the door for staff to return them to their individual kennels.

Fresh air and sunlight are often said to be the best disinfectants—and the best de-stinkifiers. The cat playroom here provides plenty of both. The front wall, which faces into the lobby, is glass; the rear wall supports the vertical jungle gym; and the two side walls are sturdily screened in, but open to the elements. Ceiling fans keep the air circulating. Should it get too hot, staff can simply take the cats back to their kennels—but executive director Sally Kuecker says that rarely happens.

Kuecker credits the playroom with reducing stress among the cats, as well as giving them an environment in which their personalities can bloom. The wooden boxes, ledges, cubbyholes, and steps give cats the ability to get away from each other—especially from those annoying kittens—when they're feeling stressed, or just need some time alone.

"Before, they didn't have that opportunity. We had cat trees and things like that,

and we still didn't get the results that we do now," Kuecker says. "You can see they're a lot more contented."

Divine Design

Both cats and people are contented with the spaces at the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA. In 2007, with help from 40 professionals from the local chapter of the American Society of Interior Decorators (ASID), the shelter went beyond simple shapes for cats to climb in and perch on. ASID worked on "Dog Digs and Cat Cribs" as part of its community service program.


Designers were challenged to create unique, "home-like" spaces that would offer a positive atmosphere for adoption. They gathered donated materials and furnishings to complete their themed rooms. The results of their work are cat habitats (and doggie apartments) that not only provide safe, enriching environments for pets, but continue to amaze visitors.

The rooms amounted to about \$250,000 in donated work and materials, but were created at virtually no expense to the shelter, according to Renee Harris, senior vice president for animal services. The designers gutted existing space at the shelter, remaking it into 12 cat condos, four larger rooms called cat habitats, and then the biggest space, the "Cataquarium." Each condo and habitat has a different theme, with murals on the walls and furnishings to complete the look. For instance, the "Aristocats" room is painted and furnished to suggest a quaint French village, while "Central Park West" evokes the sights of New York City (including a painted banner ad for the Broadway musical *Cats*).

The home-like settings model the idea that pets are part of the family and should live indoors with their people; the tranquil settings, coupled with places to perch and things to do, encourage the personalities of the cats to emerge. The environments are much less stressful than traditional cages—and that means healthier, happier cats.

And of course, visitors love them. "It's really amazing," Harris says. "On any given day, if there's somebody in a room, you can walk into that cat area and hear them say, 'Wow, this is great,' 'This is cool,' 'Look at that one, watch that one,'" Harris says. In addition, the décor of the cat rooms has held up over time. Occasionally staff will have to remove

a piece of furniture that gets worn out, but that's about it.

Harris suggests that shelters contemplating an upgrade to their cat spaces should figure out specific goals, such as making the cats as presentable as possible, or reducing their stress (and thus disease outbreaks, too). It's important to keep in mind, she says, that whatever you design has to be easily sanitized and maintained, with furnishings that can be replaced at a reasonable cost. The idea is to create a space where people can fall in love with cats—with all the coolness, curiosity, and playfulness that makes them who they are—and want to take them home. 

Resources

- Go to the resource library at animalsheltering.org to access "Feline Good" (*Animal Sheltering*, May-June 2009) and "All Together Now: Group Housing for Cats," (*Animal Sheltering*, Mar-Apr 2003).
- Many of the ideas discussed in this story are covered in Kit Jenkins' webinar, "Improving Your Cat Space for Adopters and Felines." This webinar can be accessed at petsmartcharitiesblog.org/. Click on the "Animal Care" link, then the specific webinar. You will need to provide some simple registration information before you can access the recording, but it's free.
- For a closer look at the cat spaces described in this story, visit:
 - San Diego Humane Society and SPCA; sdhumane.org
 - Bow Valley SPCA; bowvalleyspca.org
 - Dorothy H. O'Connor Pet Adoption Center; docpac.net
 - Angels for Animals; angelsforanimals.org

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