

Perspective

PORTICO PORTAFERRY | CLIMB-IT W5 | BELFAST INTERNATIONAL RESTROOMS | SCOL CENTRE

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Climb-It, W5



THE TEAM

Client
W5

Architect White Ink Architects

Artist and Exhibit fabricator
Luckey LLC (Spencer Luckey)

Structural Engineer RPS

Lighting Designer
Sutton Vane Associates

Lighting Supplier Roscolab Ltd

Furniture Supplier Work Rest Play

Main Contractor Gilbert Ash

Photography

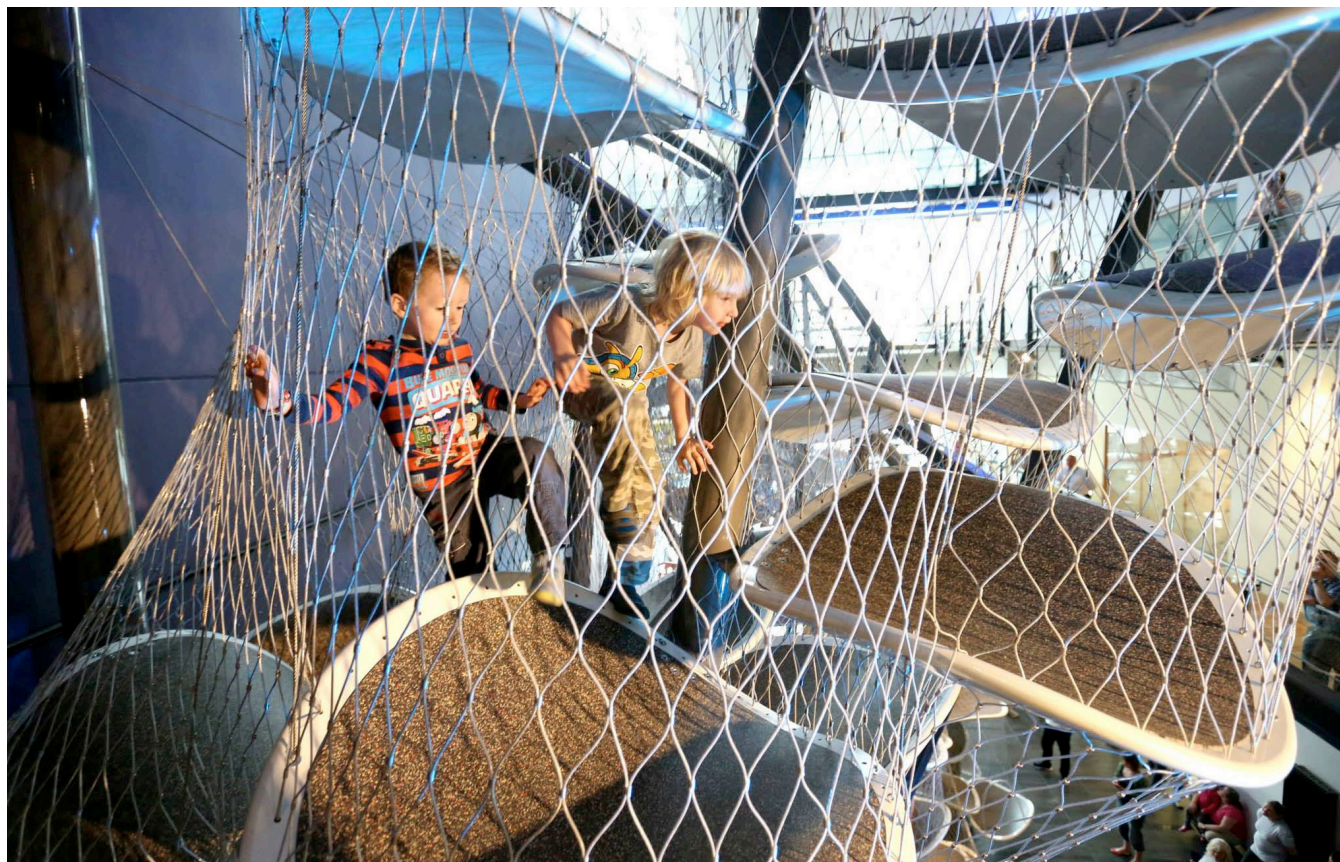


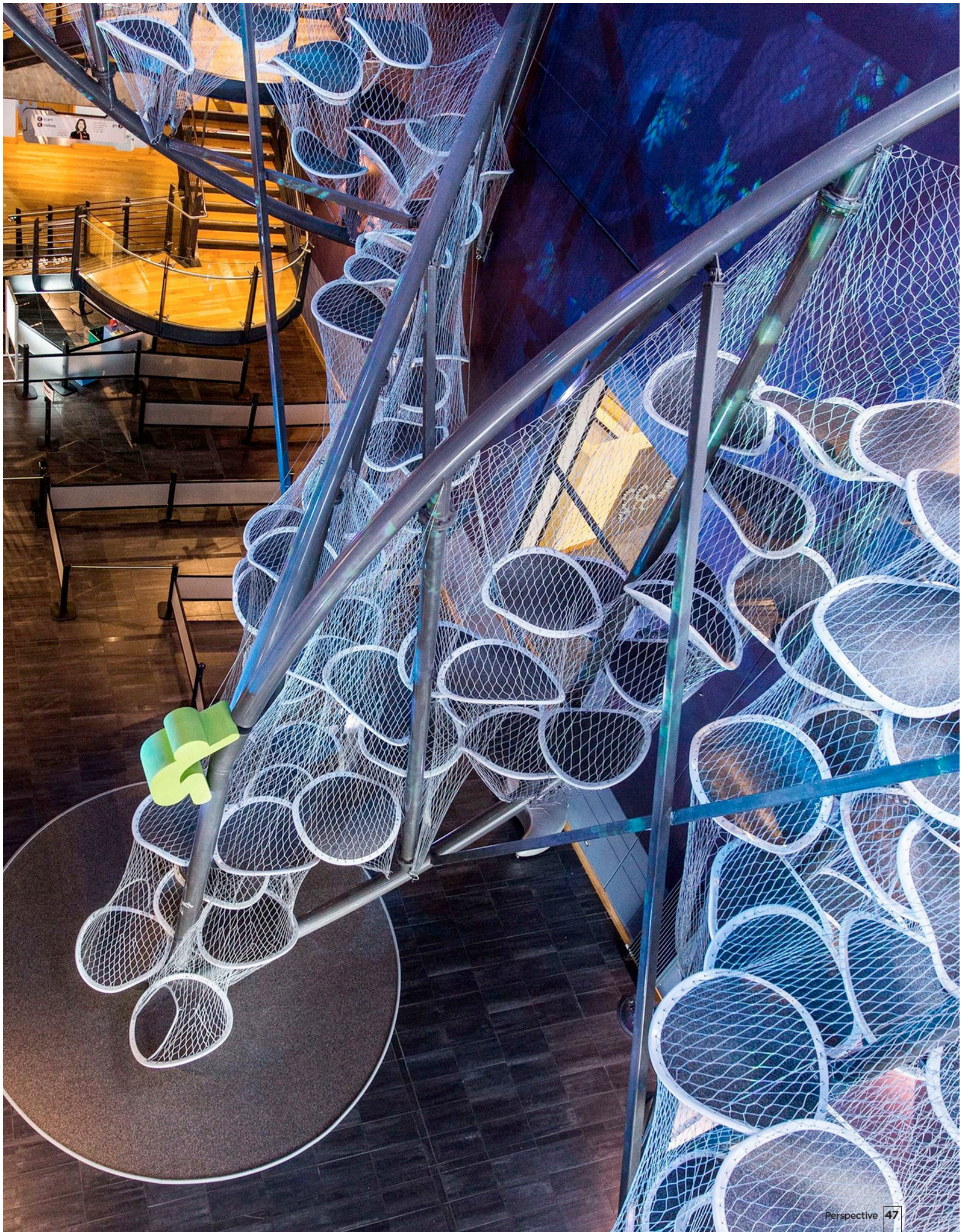
In an era when electronic phone apps are peddled as ways to encourage physical activity, it is refreshing to review an architectural project that aims “to let children push themselves and thrill themselves” without need for gadgets or digital reward. The project, Climb-It, at Odyssey Belfast’s W5 Interactive Discovery Centre is a multi-story structure that is part architectural and structural gymnastics, part artistic ingenuity, and part interactive exhibit. It is the result of collaboration between White Ink Architects (led by Director Joan McCoy with Architectural Assistant Cormac McCartney) and US-based artist Spencer Luckey, with lighting designers Sutton Vane, and contractor Gilbert-Ash. Climb-It fulfils W5’s original vision, since it opened in 2001, to use an atrium space between its main exhibits for a suitable dynamic visual and physical intervention.

W5 set a brief for a Fantasy Venture to dominate the Centre’s atrium and create different journeys and different experiences, even for the multiple user/visitor (“a physical activity for

children up to the age of 14 mainly, while also catering for older youths groups and adult activities”). The finished project occupies and activates the narrow fourteen metre tall atrium. It integrates well with W5’s established interactive science exhibits (DEVELOP, GO, SEE, DO) and existing architectural features including a cantilevered steel and timber stair in the atrium. Described by W5 as “a unique, visually elegant, three dimensional sculpture specially designed for climbing,” the finished structure has been more imaginatively termed a Celtic dragon, a distorted ‘W’, and even an exploding crisp-packet at zero gravity.

White Ink has a long-term client-architect relationship with Odyssey and W5 (Joan McCoy was Chief Architect for the Odyssey and co-founded White Ink with Claude Maguire and Sean Tunney to undertake the fit-out for W5 when both companies opened their doors in 2001). Their prior work on changing exhibit areas provided a sound knowledge of the building’s constraints and potential. While this put them in





a strong strong position to form a design team to achieve W5's goals, they still had to win the project through open European competition.

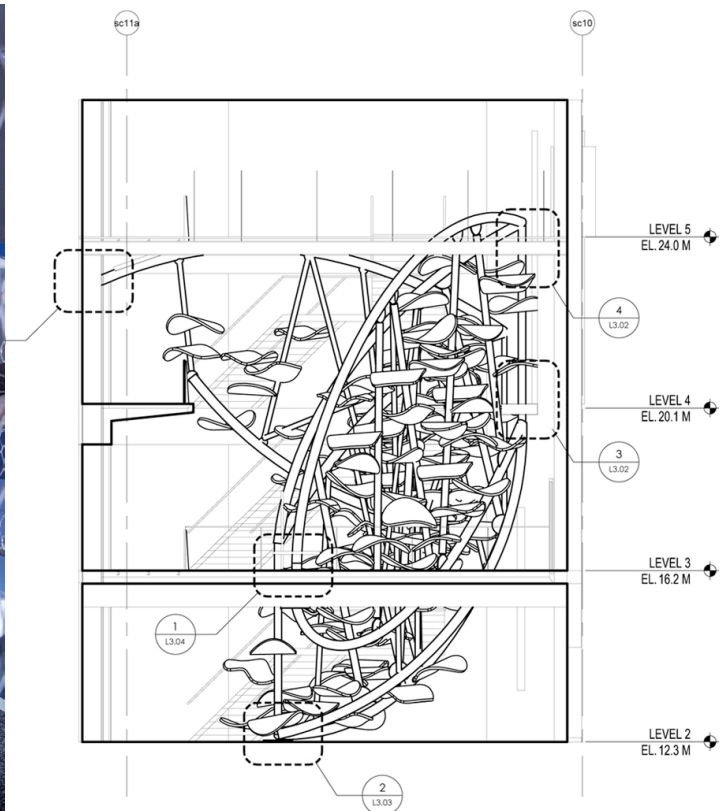
The completed structure, which can accommodate 60-70 children, comprises a robust tubular steel frame and plastic-encapsulated steel cable mesh, which criss-cross the atrium and combine to suspend and enclose dozens of "pods" (i.e., floating lily pads, dragon-scales, or crisps, etc.). Each individually designed and arranged painted-CNC milled plywood pod is bolted to the steel sub-structure, which in turn connects everything back to the building superstructure.

There is only one way in and out of Climb-it, for obvious health and safety reasons, but once inside users (mostly young children) can branch out to negotiate an array of journeys of their choosing by climbing and contorting themselves safely amongst the uniquely distorted pods within the mesh enclosure. Spaces are flexible, designed for continuous exploration or

to find a personal space to sit and observe others, or to take advantage of views out of the building to Belfast Lough, Abercorn Basin marina, and -for now- Titanic Museum. As far as possible, the structure has been made accessible to those with learning difficulties and reduced levels of sensory or physical abilities, with supervision. Climb-It does not rely on architectural artifice or added interactive "experience" to allow users to focus on their invented experience.

The mesh and sub-structure - an essential feature for structure, safety, and lighting, as well as the user experience - are part of artist Luckey's worldwide trademark of interactive climbing structures, which he designs and fabricates from his studio and workshop in the US. White Ink worked to pare back Luckey's typical use of primary colour in order for users to bring their own colour and to allow the new structure to more neutrally complement the existing building and future exhibits/events.

The three-dimensional mesh gives stability to what one at first perceives as a dynamic structure - something that no



doubt gives confidence to younger users, and to parents and guardians alike. From inside, the mesh also visually reduces one's awareness of being up to ten metres in the air – encouraging risk in a safe environment. The mesh can seem to disappear from the outside or become subtly highlighted in multiple hues from hidden lighting projectors.

While the installation appears random, McCoy described “a lot of rules” that had to be followed including considering how to design and install the steel frame while W5 remained in operation, how to connect to existing columns and adapt to movement, how the overall structure would be a flexible play-space while preventing continuous and long falls, and how to manage access and egress within the structure and atrium space in the event of a fire or emergency evacuation. Detailed 3D models were key to finding solutions through weekly trans-Atlantic video-conferencing with Luckey and the design/construction team. Each pod was milled and finished in durable car-paint and safety surfacing in the US before shipping to Belfast where White Ink and Gilbert

Ash coordinated the final design and installation while W5 remained open.

As a result of an inspiring client and coordinated team approach, Climb-It has become a successful and popular part of the W5 experience. On the morning I visited the installation quickly filled with children. Whether it seemed to be a child's first tentative independent venture, digitally captured, or the opportunity for parents/guardians to safely let children roam more freely and adventurously, Climb-It appears to meet its challenge to children (and adults in touch with their inner child) to push themselves. As much as satisfying structural and safety concerns, more architectural projects could benefit from Climb-It's procurement process, which valued experience and design equally, and its experiential outcomes, which aspire to enviable notions of discovery, flexibility, joy, and humour. ○

Saul Golden

