

Footpath to Bendwood Park
Baseball Park
Tennis Courts (full-size)
Lifeguarded Swimming Pool
Picnics and outdoor play

Crème Racquet Club
Tennis Lessons and AfterSchool Play (3/4 size Courts)

AfterSchool Picnic Area

Basketball Court

Theater-in-the-Woods
Fair-Weather Stones, Puppets, Entertainment

Preschooler's Picnic Area

Typical Garderie
Tables/Study Areas
Large Playroom or Garderie
Books, Educational Materials
Toypark
Private Washrooms
Changing Area (CCTV-equipped)
Casiers for Handbags from Home
Private Cot Storage

Typical Child's Washroom
Single toilet in Each Room for Older Children
Junior-size fixtures
Handcapped Washrooms
CCTV-Monitored Changing Tables

Frog's Field
Children 2-3 yrs

Trikepark

Dance/Gymnastiques
The Buffalo Bayou Dance Co.

Teddy Bear Theater
Music, Entertainment —
Clowns, Magicians, Puppet Shows

Catchacrémer Creek Water
Pump House
Catchacrémer Creek
Duck Races
Splatter's Pond
Tippingbuckets Lagoon
Changing Room
Gullywasher Waterslide
Old Fashioned Handpumps

Trike Autobain

Trike Garage
Trike SuperService

Main Yard
Children 4 yrs. and over
Sandpits and
Diggers

Garderie
Children 3 yrs.

Garderie 2
Children 3 Yrs.

Reception
Children's Activities Display
Real-time display of child's current location, activities, teacher, upcoming activities.
Closed-Circuit TV Monitors
Continuous surveillance of changing areas, classrooms, other activities.
Secured Keypad Entry Using Member's Code
Crèmesoft Scheduling and Billing
State-of-the-Art Fire and Security Systems
HPD Policeman During Morning/Evening Rush

Valet
Carseats, Other Daytime Storage

Kiss & Drive
Assisted Prearranged Loading/Unloading

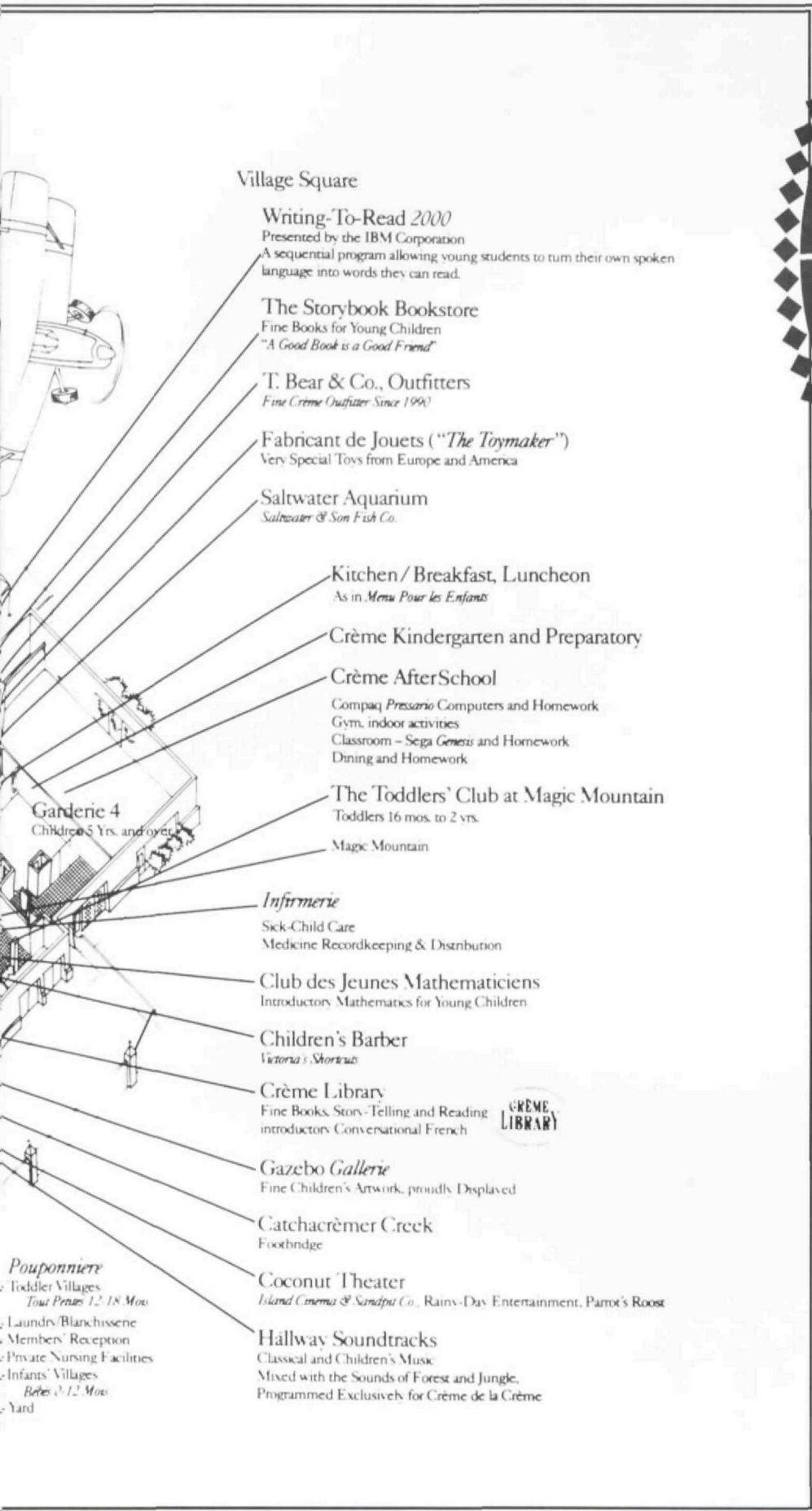
Crème Refreshment Stand
Complimentary Snack/Beverage from
2pm for Departing Children

SORTIE

ENTRÉE

courtesy Crème de la Crème

"A One-Minute Tour" of Crème de la Crème.



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nutritional
standards.

No one would
argue that the single
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Barrie Scardino

Before and even during World War II day care for children of working parents was a family affair. Rosie the Riveter's kids stayed home with Granny who had the help of teenage cousins after school. Four major shifts in society since the 1960s have thrust thousands of babies into the arms of strangers. Working mothers are now the norm, but Harriet wasn't always home with Ricky and David. Non-working moms of times past, who spent plenty of time at Sears, garden club meetings, and playing bridge, relied on the same system as wage-earners. Mobility, the second factor that has disrupted the Brady bunch, has spread us all over creation without relatives on whom we can count. Coupled with all this moving around, families are generally smaller, leaving a desperate mom with fewer cousins or siblings available for free babysitting. And, on top of all that, full-time nursemaids and nannies are pretty well extinct.

As these changes have occurred, an ad hoc system of day care centers began to develop in the homes and apartments of those willing to keep a few kids for the extra money. Totally unregulated, these care providers were friends and neighbors of their clients, and they were happy to be paid their unreported income in cash. More institutional types of facilities began in Sunday school rooms, a short psychological step from grandma's living room. Private schools that once took pre-kindergartners at age four, began to take little brothers and sisters. The whole system blossomed without much thought given to

drearing or childcare continues to be the adults who nurture, teach, and serve as models for their charges. But space matters next. The environment, both indoor and outdoor, where children spend most of their time can have a profound effect on their level of curiosity, feeling of safety, and sense of responsibility for their surroundings. There are more than a few studies and reports from educators and psychologists giving statistics and advice on how to structure a world for little children. The architecture and design of childcare centers should be child-centered, or so we have been told.

Cite set out to look at a variety of facilities in Houston that care for preschool youngsters. We found what we expected — an incredible range from small, modest but loving places, to overcrowded, under-staffed stables, to attractive, well-funded traditional school rooms. What we didn't expect was Crème de la Crème.

In an unlikely setting off I-10 behind Town and Country Village mall, this new child care center seems to have it all. The founders and owners, Roberta Babb and her lawyer husband Donald Babb, opened the first Crème de la Crème in 1982 inside a leased building (now a Randall's grocery store) in Town and Country. Donald Babb says that this first space was an experimental design station, where he initiated his "Main Street" concept on a smaller scale.

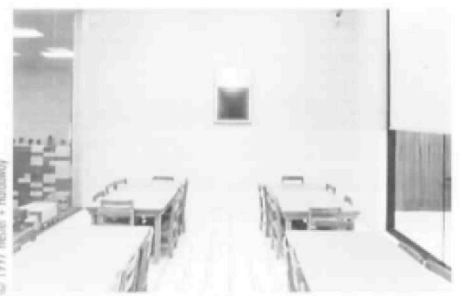
The Babbs's conviction was that a homelike setting could be combined with an imaginative child-sized world, age-appropriate educational resources, the highest standards in cleanliness and nutrition, and a low staff-to-children ratio. They were right. Crème de la Crème is yet another example of how the private sector can establish standards that lead the



Crème de la Crème, Main Street, Donald Babb, designer.



Crème de la Crème, Hermes Reid Architects, 1996, entrance.



Crème de la Crème, art and lunch area.



Crème de la Crème, infant play area.

way in innovative design. Although Crème de la Crème probably has the highest tuition rates in town, the Babbs have pioneered some concepts that could be standardized in public facilities.

The current Town and Country center opened in February 1996 after a prototype was constructed in Atlanta for a franchise operation. (Crème de la Crème has another location owned by the founders in a downtown Houston storefront and three franchise operations in Atlanta. Plans are currently underway to build other franchises in Dallas, Denver, and three in Chicago). Houston architects Hermes Reed Architects designed the building and worked with Donald Babb on the interiors. Stephen Reed was project manager of the building, the exterior of which is unremarkable. It resembles nearby mall buildings, also designed by Hermes Reed, with the exception of a huge dome-skylight visible and intriguing from the street.

Maximum security is a priority. At drop off and pick up times, an off-duty policeman is even on hand. At the front of the quiet, brass-sconced reception area, a mesmerizing grid of TV screens provides constant surveillance of each classroom area. Parents are welcome to drop in anytime to observe their child on TV. Actual classroom visits could be disruptive and are discouraged. During our visit, a couple of mothers had taken time to stop in and observe.

The director, Janet Brown, was our enthusiastic guide. Leaving the reception/administrative area we were stunned to walk into a miniaturized Disneyland. The little Victorian "buildings" in "Town

Square, 1892" contained a children's barber shop (good idea!); a uniform store (the kiddies wear uniforms everyday but Friday); the *Gallerie* exhibiting children's artwork; a *Bibliothèque*; the *Infirmier*; and other French-named places. When asked, however, if they taught French, Brown said, "No. We did, but now we teach Spanish." Since even the *Sortie* signs are in French, this seems like a lost opportunity. The French title of the school sets the tone for the whole place. Everything is a little Frenchified but, in any case, *la petite* Main Street is magical.

The scaled down (way down) buildings were constructed under a high, two-story glass domette, which provides plenty of light, making the little streets (halls) seem open and fresh. The streets lead to different age-appropriate areas. For example, infants (*bébés 0-12 mois*) play and sleep in a surprisingly homey setting, with rocking chairs, carpet, soft light, and every infant toy imaginable. Crème de la Crème accepts babies as young as six weeks, but currently the youngest is two months old. There are no playpens; when awake, infants are put in a swing, on the floor with stimulating toys, or cuddled by staff members. Here it seemed that there was one worker for every two or three babies.

We passed the toddler area (*pouponniere*), which looked a little more bleak because the cribs were larger, and a few kids were gazing around, gnawing on their crib siderails. But they seemed content. Rooms for older children (*garderies*) were divided into a sanitized tiled area for art projects and eating and a carpeted play area with reading nooks and the like. The taste police would have nothing to do here. Pleasant and colorful abstract art was sparingly hung on white walls, and oriental rugs for gathering round in the center of the floor are placed over the wall-to-wall carpet.

Having gotten over all the French, we ventured outside to another imaginary world. Several playground areas with different equipment were fenced separately. The trike barn and little roads youngsters safely speed around had no sidewalk cracks or dangerous cars whizzing by. The Racquet Club sign across from the junior-sized tennis courts looks as if Ralph Lauren designed it.

Crème de la Crème is without a doubt a safe, clean place with lots of caring adults (the staff numbers approximately 70 for about 300 kids at any one time). The physical environment is charming, stimulating, just what we all wish we



Crème de la Crème, Toddler's Club entrance.



Crème de la Crème, Main Street.

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Crème de la Crème, Frog's Field playground and Trikepark.



Crème de la Crème, Theater-in-the-Woods.



Crème de la Crème, Racquet Club storage house.



Crème de la Crème, toddler sleeping area.

could provide at home (nice furniture, the latest toys and books, swimming pool, and tennis courts). The mix of children represented broad racial backgrounds, but one doubts that their economic backgrounds are very diverse.

But given our national obsession with starting early to get our children on the road to success, privilege is a gift that can't be given too early in life. Whether through getting the kids into the right pre-school, jockeying for transfers to the best HISD schools, or setting up private tutoring lessons, child rearing has become a high stakes strategy game. In the miniature country club setting of Crème de la Crème, the game is made into theater, where everything is at reduced scale. For the parents watching the monitors, it may even become a junior-sized TV soap opera. ■

CARE PACKAGES

As in other U.S. metropolitan areas, Houston has hugely diverse child care centers. The gamut of possibilities runs from small home care centers, where word-of-mouth is the only advertising, to neighborhood churches that use Sunday school rooms during the week, to method-based programs such as Montessori schools, to expensive, privately-owned centers, to large national chains with local affiliates. Houston's *Yellow Pages* devotes more than seven full pages to "Child Care Facilities." According to Sul Ross, regional manager for child care licensing of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, 1,455 licensed child-care facilities serving 129,073 children are in operation in Harris County. In addition, 2,545 regulated in-home programs are licensed to care for up to 12 children each, adding another 30,000 under school-age children to the number that spend most of the day away from their parents and their own homes.

The YMCA, with over 8,000 children enrolled at various sites throughout the city, is the largest Houston-area day care provider. The second largest is Children's World Learning Centers Inc., with a total of almost 4,000 children in its several locations. *The Book of Lists*, published by the *Houston Business Journal*, ranks Houston's largest day care centers and provides general information including rates, activities, and ages of children accepted. However, data are based on voluntary questionnaires, therefore the list is incomplete, excluding many of the better-known centers. Large day care complexes such as the YMCA accept infants to 12-year-olds. Most provide pre-school care for infants to age five.

Monthly rates vary from \$30 to \$775. The low end of the spectrum reflects centers that receive federal or state subsidies, have remote locations with minimum amenities, and large staff-to-children ratios. Very expensive centers such as Crème-de-la-Crème (which charges \$775 for infants and \$665 for pre-school children) generally have the most complete facilities and lowest children-staff ratios. There are 24-hour drop off centers where parents pay by the hour. Regulations limit the number of hours that children may stay at these places to four in the daytime or six at night. At the other end, there are places where your child has no chance of being admitted unless you register the day the baby is born, and then you may be on a waiting list.

Every licensed child care center is required by state law to provide to all of its registrant families "A Parent's Guide to Day Care," published by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services. This type of "help," rather than first-class public child care centers, is what our tax dollars now buy for young American parents. B.S.



Crème de la Crème, TV classroom monitors in reception area.