

New eco-friendly Humane Society building captures goodness for pets and humans

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From the Get Acquainted Rooms that feature hand-painted murals by artist Sonya Paz, to the big room where pets and humans soon will take yoga classes together, everywhere you went during Saturday's open house at the Humane Society Silicon Valley's new

48,000-square-foot shelter in Milpitas, dogs and people alike were making a joyful noise that sounded a lot like barking. Even the woman who sat on the floor near the Cat Condos, weeping, said, "This is so wonderful. I just can't believe it." And it was: wonderful and a little hard to believe.

The Humane Society's \$25 million eco-friendly Animal Community Center is filled with sunlit "galleries" and cathedral-like "reflection centers," in place of the cramped metal cages and pervading sense of sadness at the organization's

current quarters. The old facility in Santa Clara was built in 1951, and it placed frightened, snarling dogs in the close confinement of what amounted to a cell block.

Planning for the new building started 12 years ago, when the Humane Society took stock of its "save rate" — the number of animals that came in alive, versus the number that left alive. "That number was 30 percent, and as a humane society, that just wasn't acceptable," said HSSV President Christine Benninger. "Seven out of every 10 animals that came to us, we killed."



Wonderful space

Benninger hopes to increase the rate of adoptions from 4,000 a year to 10,000 at the new building, where the bright, airy rooms and eggshell-colored walls will allow visitors and animals a better chance to bond.

One problem with the old facility, said Humane Society spokeswoman Laura

Fulda, was that it reminded people of a prison. "So the more you loved animals, the sadder you were likely to find it," she said. But the only cages in the new building are those meant to contain animals that have just awakened from surgery in the center's medical center, which also will serve as a veterinary teaching hospital.

In fact, with theme park names like the Rabbitat for its bunny hutch, the new place seems almost like a petting zoo, which administrators are quick to point out is not the case.

"We have such a wonderful space, people start to think these animals don't need to be rescued, that they already have a great home," said Julia Lewis, who will run the vet facility after the official opening May 16. "We're trying to provide the best environment for the animals in a bad situation, but this is not a home for them. We want them to have a family to love them."

Positive energy

The center will be the first animal shelter in the U.S. to be certified gold under the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system. As much as 40 percent of its energy needs will be met by solar panels that will be installed over the summer, and a reflective "cool roof" is expected to reduce the amount of air conditioning needed. The green features added \$2.5 million to the cost of construction, but officials at the center expect to recoup that in savings on water and power.



The two dog parks outside — one for big dogs, one for the little guys — will not turn brown in the summer or muddy in the winter, and they don't require watering at all, because they're made of a synthetic turf that looks just like grass. The parks will have a membership fee of \$200 a year and be monitored at all times to prevent altercations, and on Thursday evenings during the summer there will be live music.

The center even has a feng shui certification, which, according to Chinese beliefs means the place has a positive energy or qi. The feng shui consultant was the one who suggested making the atrium round instead of rectangular. That pleased Benninger, who said she wanted visitors to "feel the hug" of the new building. Judging by the contented panting and face-licking going on in every corner of the place Saturday, everybody was feeling it.

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If you go

The Animal Community Center is located at 901 Ames Ave. in Milpitas. Go to www.hssv.org or call 408-262-2133 for more information.