

PUTNAM PLACE • Architects Tsoi/Kobus & Associates remake a basement into a ticket to ride for teens transitioning from foster care



THE NEW SPACE includes a lounge area for watching television (LEFT) and a woodworking shop (TOP). The back side of the “T station” (MIDDLE AND BOTTOM) holds the music studio.

For seven years, Putnam Place, a renovated Victorian house in Dorchester, Massachusetts, has been a residence for young men, ages 16 to 19, who are transitioning from foster care to independent living.

TO SUPPORT PUTNAM PLACE, contact Cambridge Family and Children’s Service at helpfamilies.org.

It is a safe, supervised environment where they can learn life skills, continue their education, or get job training. But with eight young men sharing bedrooms, and parlor space converted to a staff office, there was no place to congregate, pursue a hobby, or study. That changed dramatically when Tsoi/Kobus & Associates of Cambridge, Massachusetts,

offered to renovate the basement as a community service project to mark the architectural firm’s 25th anniversary.

“The design phase really engaged the residents in terms of what they would like,” says Maria Mossaides, executive director of Cambridge Family and Children’s Service, the agency that runs Putnam Place. “It was very empowering for them.” In addition to

study space and a new laundry room, they wanted a music studio that wouldn’t disturb the rest of the house, a woodworking/art shop, and a place to watch television or play video games.

They also came up with a design theme: the MBTA’s Red Line. “We thought it would be really cool to make Putnam Place into a train station,” says resident Sean Wilson, 18. The T is, after all, what connects them to school, jobs, and friends.

Teaming up with Commodore Builders of Newton, Massachusetts, Tsoi/Kobus set to work on the design, the to-the-foundation demolition, and the complete rebuilding of the basement into the defined spaces the residents requested. “We started in 2008 and it took a little over a year to complete,” says Rick Kobus, Tsoi/Kobus principal. With a mural of a Red Line train by artists Richard Habecker and Laura Nathanson that is so realistic it has you pulling out your Charlie Card, the T never looked so good.

“This is a nice way of expressing what happens at the house,” says Mossaides. “It is a connection to the world.” ■