

Where Should a Family Entertainment Park Be Located? A Location–Concept–Format Fit Framework

Dr. Maksim Godovykh

Abstract

Family entertainment center site selection is often reduced to population, children, income, competition, rent, and a standard drive-time radius. This article argues that no location is intrinsically strong or weak independent of the concept it must support. It proposes a Location–Concept–Format Fit framework that evaluates the interaction among market demand, target customer, visit frequency, attraction architecture, building characteristics, operating model, capital permanence, and customer-acquisition strategy. A destination adventure park, neighborhood activity center, toddler venue, creator studio, tourist attraction, and membership-based family club can require very different sites even within the same metropolitan area. The paper also introduces the Location Flexibility Index, a proposed measure of how much invested capital and operating capability can be transferred if a location underperforms. The framework encourages operators and landlords to evaluate not only expected site performance but also reversibility, temporary testing, smaller formats, community ecosystems, and the ability of a property to support a coherent family experience.

There Is No Universal FEC Location

Location advice in family entertainment often begins with demographic screens: population, number of children, household income, competition, drive time, traffic, parking, and rent. These variables are useful, but they cannot determine suitability without reference to the concept. A 30,000-square-foot adventure park and a 2,000-square-foot creator studio may both target families, yet their real estate requirements, frequency models, price points, catchments, and capital structures can be fundamentally different.

How to Build the Best Activity Park treats market analysis, location strategy, concept development, site selection, lease negotiation, equipment procurement, and unit economics as interconnected decisions rather than isolated steps (Godovykh et al., 2026). That integration is essential. The correct question is not 'Is this a good family market?' but 'Is this a good market and property for this particular family entertainment park, at this size, price, frequency, and attraction mix?'

Classical retail location models such as Huff's probabilistic trading-area approach emphasize that consumers allocate patronage among competing destinations as a function of attractiveness and travel friction (Huff, 1964). FECs add further complexity because attractiveness depends not only on size or retail assortment but on experience intensity, uniqueness, age relevance, repeatability, and social purpose.

Market-Concept Fit

The first layer is market-concept fit. A concept serving toddlers and caregivers may depend on dense concentrations of young families, easy parking, stroller access, morning demand, and short travel times. A destination ropes or adventure concept may draw from farther away if the experience is sufficiently differentiated. A membership-driven local club depends heavily on frequency and convenience. A tourist-oriented attraction may depend more on visitor flows, hotels, and destination itineraries than on resident children.

Visit frequency is especially important. The more often the business expects a family to visit, the more important convenience becomes. An annual destination attraction can justify a longer drive because the trip is exceptional. A weekly creator club or recurring activity program cannot rely on the same friction. Membership models should therefore be evaluated against the number of target households inside a realistic frequent-visit catchment, not only a broad metropolitan population.

The concept's age architecture also matters. Preschool, mixed-age family, preteen, teen, and multi-generational offers have different patterns of demand and competitive substitution. A location that works for birthday-driven younger children may be weak for after-school teen programming or community-based family events.

Property-Attraction Fit

A strong market cannot compensate for a building that conflicts with the attraction system. Ceiling height, column spacing, floor loading, power, plumbing, acoustics, fire and life-safety systems, egress, vertical circulation, outdoor rights, delivery access, visibility, parking, signage, neighboring uses, and structural modification rights can materially alter capital cost and operating capacity.

This is where equipment-centered site selection becomes dangerous. A team may become emotionally attached to a visible vacant box and then force the concept into it. The stronger process begins with experience requirements and identifies which property characteristics are essential, desirable, or adaptable. A high ropes course may require substantial clear height; a studio focused on creation and programming may not. A full commercial kitchen creates different utility and exhaust requirements from a limited food model.

The design should also consider parent use and the full journey. A property with excellent ceiling height but poor parking, difficult stroller access, limited restrooms, or no comfortable family circulation may undermine the whole-family experience even if the attractions fit physically.

Location Flexibility and Capital Reversibility

Site selection normally emphasizes upside: expected attendance, revenue, and strategic position. It should also examine downside. If the location underperforms, how much of the investment can be relocated, reused, or sold? This question motivates the proposed Location Flexibility Index.

Some investments are highly site-specific. Major plumbing, commercial kitchens, structural mezzanines, embedded slides, extensive custom construction, and certain ropes installations can be expensive to remove or transfer. Other assets are more portable: interactive systems, furniture,

modular climbing, loose play, creator stations, computers, robotics equipment, projectors, and temporary exhibitions. Labor training, digital content, customer data systems, programming curricula, and brand assets can be even more transferable.

The Location Flexibility Index can be conceptualized as the share of project investment and operating capability that remains recoverable or transferable if the site must be exited, adjusted for removal cost, resale value, and time to redeploy. It is not a replacement for conventional return analysis. It is a risk metric that becomes particularly useful when entering uncertain markets or testing new formats.

Temporary Testing and Format Strategy

Not every market decision requires an immediate long-term flagship lease. Smaller formats, pop-ups, recurring events, and Family Expos can function as demand tests. A landlord may provide temporary common-area space or a short-term unit. The operator can observe registration, conversion, family demographics, program interest, birthday demand, and repeat attendance before committing to a larger build.

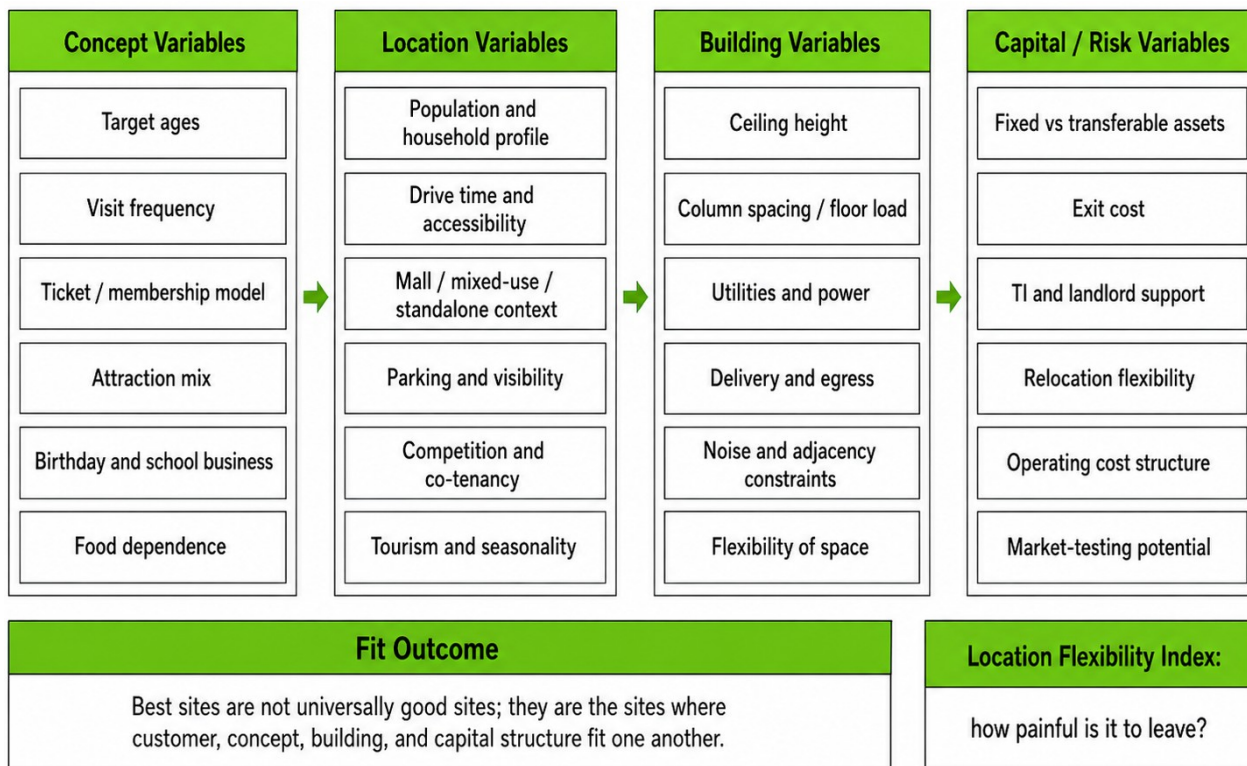
The Future Experience format family illustrates this portfolio logic through larger Parks and Centers, compact Studios, temporary Pop-Ups, and flexible Expo or outreach formats (Future Experience Park, 2026). The same logic can be applied by other family entertainment brands. A small local concept does not need to reproduce every attraction in a flagship. It can preserve the experience principles – movement where possible, creation, challenge, progression, co-creation, community programming – while adapting the physical infrastructure to the site.

Smaller formats may also reduce dependence on specialized infrastructure. A concept without a full kitchen, major mezzanines, or large permanent equipment can have greater location flexibility, shorter build time, and lower exit cost. The trade-off is that the concept must generate sufficient differentiation through programming, social value, creation, and repeat-use systems rather than sheer physical spectacle.

Ecosystem Fit

The surrounding ecosystem can be as important as the building. Schools, camps, homeschool groups, libraries, community organizations, universities, employers, family-service providers, food tenants, and complementary attractions can expand weekday and off-peak demand. A family entertainment park designed as a community platform should therefore map partnership infrastructure alongside household demographics.

Kid-Friendly World similarly argues that family-centered environments are strengthened when planning crosses sector boundaries and when families participate in ongoing design and evaluation (Godovykh, 2025). For FECs, ecosystem fit can determine whether the venue becomes an isolated weekend attraction or a recurring local platform.



Research Agenda

The Location–Concept–Format Fit framework should be operationalized through data from real FEC openings, relocations, closures, and format changes.

- Estimate how drive-time sensitivity varies by concept uniqueness, visit frequency, age segment, and membership dependence.
- Separate resident, worker, student, and tourist demand rather than relying on one population count.
- Model the economic effect of ceiling height, parking, visibility, and building modification requirements on unit economics.
- Develop and validate the Location Flexibility Index using actual relocation and resale outcomes.
- Compare permanent sites with pop-up or event-based market tests to determine which pre-opening signals best predict later performance.
- Measure ecosystem variables such as school density, community partnerships, complementary tenants, and event infrastructure as predictors of weekday demand.

Conclusion

The best location for a family entertainment park cannot be identified without understanding what the park is trying to become. Demographics and rent matter, but so do frequency, attraction architecture, building constraints, capital permanence, parent experience, community partnerships, and the customer-acquisition model. A strong site-selection process therefore

evaluates fit rather than simply scoring properties. It also values reversibility: when uncertainty is high, flexible formats and transferable assets can preserve strategic options while the operator learns what the market actually wants.

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