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ography by Steve Rosenblut

A Slice of the City in Cross Section

It is the centerpiece of Boston's new Children's Museum. By Lois Craig

Above, inside the museum where the "Grandparents House" is sliced. At right, a 40-foot-high Hood milk bottle, originally built in Taunton, N.J., in the 1930s as a dairy stand and moved to the museum site in 1977.



Above, inside the museum where the "Grandparents House" is sliced. At right, a 40-foot-tall Hood milk bottle, originally built in Taunton, N.J., in the 1930s as a dairy stand and moved to the museum site in 1977.

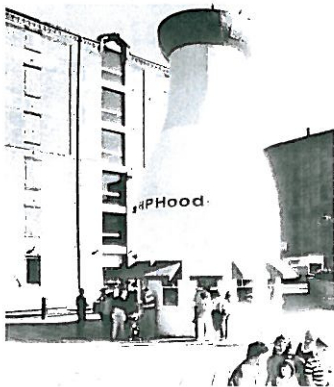
In a world of places and processes that often seem ever more remote and secretive, the Boston Children's Museum has built an enthusiastic audience for what's inside, what's behind, what's under and how it works. Today, the museum's new quarters in a refurbished 1888 brick and timber warehouse on Boston's waterfront provide the expansion of space and funds to take this point of view to the scale of a remarkable participatory exhibit called City Slice.

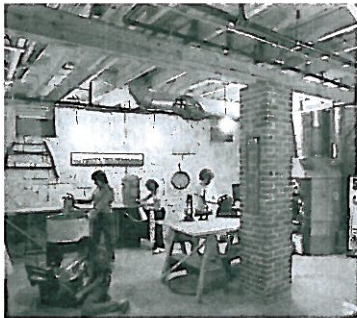
Before their eyes, underfoot or overhead, visitors experience a three-story exhibit of a house, street and yard with cross section views that reveal changing needs and design issues over the century from Victorian Boston to the present. Like an urban archaeological dig, City Slice exposes hidden systems, discontinued systems and complex, interconnecting systems—starting with those designed first and then modified or replaced by evolving urban life styles and technology. Visitors can literally enter this X-ray picture to explore the "Grandparents House," furnished and decorated to recall the way its inhabitants have lived.

Back in the early 1960s, Michael Spock, museum director, installed the first "What's Inside?" exhibit in a small house-turned-museum in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston. In the confines of a wall and a freestanding cube were mounted sliced-in-half and opened-up everyday elements of toaster, washing machine, toilet, thermostat, car engine, sewer pipe. This popular attempt to break through exhibit case settings eventually went into storage to make way for other experiments that tackled the traditionally static quality of museum presentations. Exhibit planning was based on the assumption of testing and refinement for later full-blown installation in larger quarters.

This year the Children's Museum and the Museum of Transportation moved from outlying locations to share a renovated in-town warehouse and an updated philosophy about cities. "The story both museums want to tell," said Spock, "is about the city, to help people understand it and learn how to manage it and use it for their own education." Museum Wharf demonstrates the lessons learned. The ground floor features a lively urban mix—

Ms. Craig is a writer and historian in Boston.





From top, the grandparents' cellar, with R2D2-like coal furnace, and the parlor, where 'Grandfather' tunes in a floor-model radio. (Costumes for children are stored in the attic.) At right, the kitchen sink.

Much that is usually buried is revealed.

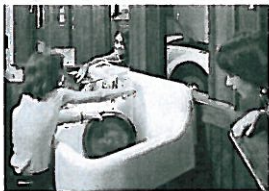
two commercial restaurants and shared lobby and museum store. An exterior glass elevator, which serves both museums, offers magnificent views of the harbor and city skyline. On a larger scale, the transformation of the 144,000-square-foot industrial building has boosted the city's waterfront development and prompted a new interest from developers in a once-dormant warehouse area.

Inside, the two museums have each designed permanent exhibits that emphasize a city focus. The Museum of Transportation contributes Boston—A City in Transit, which traces the development of transportation through modern times. The Children's Museum has reassembled some earlier exhibits in City Slice, a new and striking container for learning about the city.

To architect and City Slice designer John Sloan, AIA, went the challenge of accommodating the functions and bulk of a life-size Victorian mansard cottage with its basement, attic, first floor and adjoining street to the existing structure of the warehouse, then sorting out what parts went to X-ray exposure. Advice for the building intricacies of a structure that typically would have had no architect and no plans came from historian Max Ferro. To Sylvia Sawin of the Children's Museum staff went the task of furnishing the house to show how grandparents lived not cut in half.

Up to 10,000 children and their parents visit the new Children's Museum each week. And City Slice is a crowd pleaser. Peering through the deliberately exposed framework, one visitor said, "I think they shouldn't finish it. It looks great the way it is." Children line up for the faintly guilty pleasure of clambering around inside "real" telephone and sewer manholes. The grown-up "kids" mutter and exclaim their way through the memory-evoking spaces of the grandparents' house where the basement accommodates a clunky coal furnace next to its later oil and gas counterparts, where the kitchen attests to the era of the ice box and the parlor to the radio that once beamed fireside chats to worried listeners.

For the patiently curious, there is an education to be had in the evolution of wiring, roofing, plastering, carpentry, plumbing, masonry. These trades have star billing in City Slice. Duct work usually buried within walls is revealed; remnants of gas piping stand near the newer knob and tube wiring and the still later BX, Romex and Greenfield electrical systems. Nineteenth century plastering is peeled back to reveal the horsehair scratch coat, the brown coat and the finish coat. An attic display traces the changes from wood to wire lath and then sheetrock. Rough-sawn 2x4s with wire-cut nails accommodate later changes made with today's smooth, so-called 2x4s that actually measure less. From the backyard one can examine the exposed mechanisms of an old window without sash cord or weight, a later window with cord





Above, Grandparents' attic and, at left, a couple of manholes, one for the sewer and another for the telephone system cables.



*Above, a view into the kitchen
Facing page, the cut-away bedroom
(actually off limits to children) with
a view into the kitchen, and above,
the attic.*

The slicing extends beneath street level.

and weight, and a still later window with a pneumatic spring system. Plumbing shows the changes from galvanized to brass to plastic pipe. Carpentry can be seen from hand-cut to mill work; the exposed rabbited-stringer and cut-stringer stairs can be compared.

Eventually, the halved toilet seen through the house framing will flush into a pipe opened to reveal the route from bathroom to sewer. Home-canned goods will appear on basement shelves. The yard will sprout a full-size tree. An empty wall next to the now cut-in-half Volkswagen Bug will display the facade of a triple-decker house to place the exhibit into the visual context of a typical street.

The most anticipated coming attraction is "earth slice," a below-grade cross section of the street. Here visitors will be able to examine in safety the armature and concrete construction of a tunnel that will contain a seven-foot section of a subway car. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority will provide—for slicing—a 1951 car from its Blue Line system.

In time, a graphics system, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, will assist guides in explaining the intricacies of City Slice. Slides and movies will show what tradespeople can really do—seldom-seen performances that during installation attracted an admiring audience from the construction workers employed on the warehouse renovation. The smoothly finished rosette on the parlor ceiling will be seen evolving through its many stages of application by skilled plasterer Caleb Jackson. The after-hours, volunteer work of Bob Beal will demonstrate the intricacies of telephone cable splicing. Manholes, which in the real world have been precast for the last decade and a half, will be shown taking form under the trowel of Eddie Dailey, a mason who reportedly built half of the manholes in Boston and came out of retirement to do one last manhole for humanity.

A tribute to the authenticity of City Slice was the reported appearance in the sewer manhole of the only rat encountered during the entire work on Museum Wharf. Here was a rat who, inside or outside, recognized a proper manhole. Two-legged visitors will recognize that City Slice, like the museum itself, implies that the city can be understood and managed. And acquiring competence with what's inside and how it happens can lead to the crucial questions why? and what if? □

