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slightly revised copy sent Trustees & Corp
members as part of Report Rept dated 10/19/70
The Children's Museum
September 14, 1970

MEMO

To: Project Committee and other interested persons
From: Mike Spock
Re: Some thoughts on where the Museum stands today.

I have been struck in some of the communications I have had with people interested in my project how each individual sees the Museum's problems in different ways -- and therefore applies divergent criteria to the choice of strategies I should be using to make this a productive year and to the kinds of solutions to the Museum's problems I should be seeking. For example, some members of the Board see finances and management as the overriding problem; some staff are preoccupied with questions of leadership and organizational structure; our audience with the relevance, availability and cost of our services; community leaders with our role definition and effectiveness relative to other institutions; and I with the problems of our times and my uncertainty about the sorts of contributions I should and can make to their solution through the Museum. While each of us shares some of the others concerns, I am worried that unless there is discussion leading to agreement on a common agenda of problems that should be addressed before I go much further with my work, we run the risk of coming up with "solutions" that do not relate well to each other or meet the real needs of the Museum and the people involved with its future.

I think it would be productive, therefore, to spend a good chunk of time in October bringing members of the Project Committee, PAC (the staff Planning Advisory Committee) and a few outsiders together to tackle this issue. Perhaps an intensive weekend retreat would be in order.

In the meantime I would like to have each of you take some time to chew over my analysis of what our problems are as a starting point in our discussions. We will certainly add to or modify them as we talk further. You may even want to prepare a memorandum of your own thoughts to circulate among us.

Definitional

If you've ever talked to uninitiated people about the Children's Museum you've suffered through their difficulty in imagining what a children's museum could be like. The word "museum" conjurs up all kinds of dusty and hoarding images. When that word is combined with "children" it's hard not to see the kids themselves as the exhibits, locked up in glass cases, rather than being the client for the museum experience.

In addition to being conceptually hard to grasp, when we apply the definition suggested by our name (an organization providing experiences with real materials for elementary school kids) to the question of priorities and what we should choose to do with our resources or leave for others, it sometimes seems to put us in too confining a box. If we really care about kids, many other media and experiences should be made available simultaneously, or in parallel with real objects to answer their questions and other needs when they arise. Finally, it seems clear that the elementary school-aged child almost always operates with, and is guided and transported by, parents, teachers, group leaders or other family and friends. A truly effective service institution appears to need a broader and more easily interpreted focus.

Scale

The Museum is at an awkward stage of its development. It has grown large enough so that it no longer seems reasonable to ask staff to be jacks-of-all-trades. Yet we are not yet able to afford the luxury of a completely specialized and departmentalized staff. We must either do without many necessary support services or pay a premium price for those services that could be used by a much larger organization at a lower unit cost. In other words our overhead is high. Secondly, our impact on our public is limited by our over-stretched capacity to serve their needs. For example, any attempt at an effectively decentralized neighborhood program demands a much deeper array of human and financial resources than we presently have available. Even something as straightforward as boosting attendance will lower the unit service costs, increase income from admissions and memberships, and attract the interest of associated commercial activities that could capitalize on the public traffic to produce concession income for the Museum. Finally, we find it difficult to command the attention of corporate givers or attract new trustees since we are not yet in the institutional big leagues.

But the price of growing still larger should not be minimized. For all the economies and greater impact that are possible with increased size -- intimacy, easy communication, flexibility and even responsiveness are apt to be lost. Certainly my role as director has become much more remote, administrative and financial. Many opportunities to get my hands dirty, deal with the public and stay close to the staff are no longer available. Perhaps the Museum has already grown too large and could be a happier and more effective place if it were reduced in size or subdivided into more autonomous and loosely federated projects or services, each responsible for its own funding but sharing space, support services, audience and some common goals. With this structure it might be possible to grow with the addition of new, self-supporting services and projects without putting a strain on the nimbleness of each subunit.

Location

The Museum is located inconveniently for its optimal use by all segments of the Greater Boston community. Trolley service from the center of town is slow. We are halfway out on one spoke of a radial transit system that makes few accommodations to the needs of cross-town traffic. With the future increasingly dependent on mass transit, this disadvantage will increase. Even by private car, we are viewed as relatively inaccessible to north shore and northwest communities. Parking is adequate to present building capacity, but there are only limited opportunities for additional spaces on the grounds or in the neighborhood to match the Museum's future growth. The grounds and neighborhood are attractively landscaped and offer substantial outdoor programmatic opportunities. However, the whole setting suffers from a certain "preciousness" that makes the Museum appear remote from the real world and the concerns of many of the people we hope to serve. The Museum must eventually have a more neutral and accessible location for its headquarters facility.

Facilities

Much about our present facilities seems to work to our advantage. We have put some old and poorly arranged buildings to imaginative and charming new uses. But so much of what we do and the way we do it is dictated by our facilities. We forget how many opportunities are lost, programs distorted, ideas rejected, unreasonable costs borne, and people disappointed because of the severity of these space limitations. We must eventually find a more open ended, rough hewn, adaptable, economical envelope to wrap around our ideas, people and things.

Collections

Our collections of artifacts and specimens are an extraordinarily rich resource for development work; as a stimulus to new ideas and insights; as a place to browse, answer questions and compare. Most specifically, they provide the opportunity for in-depth explorations not available in our exhibits, kits and programs. A great deal of work and money has been invested in reorganizing and recataloguing these materials. Yet all are inaccessible to most staff, teachers and kids since they are stored away in a warehouse and the cataloguing and rehousing remains to be completed, and we have not had a chance to learn how to use them in these new ways. A tragic waste of an immense resource that gives a distorted and superficial emphasis to the Museum's services. These collections must be made available for everyone to use.

Board

The Museum has some interested and useful trustees. However, there are few members of our Board who see the Museum as their first commitment after their work and families. Only one or two trustees are in a position to invest a substantial number of hours working on Museum concerns. The Board is not skilled at fund raising nor willing to put much energy into that grubby work. Few trustees have access to major personal or outside financial resources. The Board represents only a narrow segment of the ethnic, geographic, working educational, cultural and economic concerns of the community. We have not been remarkably successful in locating and recruiting new members who would increase the Board's representativeness and financial and human resources. And existing members' capacities have not always been used to best advantage. We must begin the job of carefully building an effective, hard working board that can raise the money needed for a healthy Museum and establish policy guidelines responsive to broad community needs.

Financial

Money has always been a problem for the Museum. But everything points to the bind becoming even more acute from now on. While stringent budgeting, pooled overhead and purchasing, and a more focused program will help some on the expenditure side, costs, particularly for personnel, will continue to escalate. The real bind comes from a larger national problem. As a direct by-product of the growing sophistication and efficiency of our industrialized economy, such labor dependent activities as medicine, education and the arts may be priced beyond our capacity to pay for them. While it takes many fewer man hours today to make a car or grow a cabbage, it takes almost as much or more time as it did fifty years ago to take out an appendix, teach a child to do long division or compose a string quartet. In other words, relative to the cost of manufactured things we will have to pay what will seem to be increasingly outrageous prices for these services. I am not optimistic that our society recognizes the nature of this problem and will change their spending habits so as to keep institutions like ours alive and healthy.

More skilled and aggressive fund raising by the Board, more staff and my time devoted to proposal writing and peddling, a more productive annual event for the Aid can all bring in more money. But other sources of income are less certain. Our fee schedules already cut some clients off from our services. Only if we move to a new location and facility can we increase income from fees, admissions, rentals and concessions by attracting and accommodating significantly more traffic and associated commercial activities. Schools will have less and less cash in the future for buying services from the Museum. The lease and sale of Museum developed products is not promising. The prospects for a significant increase in federal, state or local support for the arts and education are unclear. Joint, regionwide membership, door-to-door and mail campaigns or business solicitations will be difficult to initiate and are unlikely to keep pace with increasing budgets.

So the financial outlook is not promising. Our only hope seems to be in playing all these options as effectively as we can and in not being afraid to take substantial risks. The alternative is the Museum's death.

Flexibility

The pace of change in the world is accelerating. What seemed relevant only a short time ago, no longer does. It becomes increasingly difficult to predict what will be needed in the future. Our society suffers from future shock. Institutions must be organized so that continuous review and change is an integral part of their operation to be expected by its staff, board and the community. The Museum's history, organization, size and our clientele's expectations all conspire to inhibit our responsiveness. In order to survive we must develop a more nimble stance with respect to changing conditions.

Demands of the Times

We all feel the intense challenge to be relevant and effective in the midst of overwhelming problems that pummel us, our society and our institutions. Racial strife, war, urban decay, ecological disaster, poverty among affluence, and even the pace of change all threaten our existence. In these times it seems frivolous at best and criminal at worst to apply scarce human and financial resources simply to the business of protecting and maintaining old expectations, structures and relationships. The Museum must decide what things it can do to help the world survive and get on with doing them.

Human and organizational

For all its exciting potential and accomplishments, the Museum has not been an altogether happy place for many of us. For both myself and the staff there needs to be an organizational format that takes better account of where we are at each moment in time -- that sees where we have strengths and interests and capitalizes on them; that detects concerns and weakness and helps us with them; that allows for change and growth as we and our institution change and grow.

A necessary corollary of unlocking more of the Museum's human resources is an increased openness -- a sharing and respect for each other's feelings. We must learn to trust ourselves with each other and treasure the special things we have to offer each other.

Specifically, I need to redirect my attitudes to take the time to be closer, to hear people better, to not be in such a rush to accept responsibility for every problem, to not push us all to premature solutions, to not place people in limiting boxes, but most important of all, to let people know where I am and where they are with respect to me, to put myself on the line where people can get to me.