

FACTS AND CONJECTURES ABOUT VISITORS' RESPONSES TO ENDINGS, BASED
ON OBSERVATIONS, INTERVIEWS AND PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS.

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I. Some Generalizations about observations within the exhibit space between
July 31 and August 27:

Background: I made observations in the exhibit space for a total
of five hours during four different days throughout the last month of
summer vacation. During the first two observation days, I stood in one
location for 15-20 minutes and recorded activity in one specified area
during that time. During the last two observation days, I followed specific
groups from entrance to exit, recording as much of their interaction as I could
without being too obtrusive. This second approach seemed more fruitful and
I would have continued with a more orderly version of it if the exhibit
had been open in September.

What I will offer here are some generalizations that emerge in
reviewing these observations. They come out of the data recorded but also
from some memories and impressions evoked in reading over my quick notations.
I should mention that I made some recorded and many unrecorded observations
in the exhibit space during February and June of 1985 while collecting
addresses of people willing to answer questionnaires about ENDINGS. I will
only refer to these earlier observations when I am confident to note that

they either concur with or differ from generalizations I could make during the summer. A notable difference between the winter and spring observation periods and the most recent ones was the presence of large groups of children (from camps) in the summer. During the earlier months I spent either week-end days or school holiday periods in the exhibit. On school days in those months, the exhibit was not used extensively by visiting school groups.

GENERALIZATIONS

1. Number of visitors in exhibit: Between twelve and twenty-five visitors (children and adults) were somewhere in the exhibit space during most of the observation periods.

2. Areas of greatest activity: Places with the highest concentration of visitors were the video about t.v. violence, the white mice end of the alive/dead wall and the frogs. Peek-a-boo as an initial draw of young children into the exhibit was also often briefly in use, and the zoëtropes which received a lot of hands-on active spinning. The book-on-the-wall-resources alcove was often in use but usually by one or two couples or individuals at a time.

The whole length of the Dealing with Death area was seldom as crowded as the area along the alive/dead wall. Adults spent much more time with the cultural-memento case than children. Children mostly focused only when adults called attention to specific items. Also in that area, the gravestone and casket were investigated and discussed among camp and family

groups. The Talkback calling for beliefs about what happens after death was another area of concentration. This Talkback seemed to receive the most attention of the four boards in the exhibit. The central Talkback, calling for opinions and experiences, was not used as often as I remember it in earlier months. I began to notice that it was not well maintained. Pencils or paper might be missing, and the board itself was sparsely posted.

Generalizations about videos are limited because the puppets and Mr. Rogers were out-of-order (though being repaired) during two of my observation days. The mouse video was also erratic during that time. My impressions when the videos were working were similar to those I had before: The mouse video seemed disturbing or visually confusing to several watchers. Visitors might watch it twice to decipher the action or to experience the disgust along with a companion called to witness the grossness. Some parents worked on explaining and interpreting it to their children.

The seating rectangle for viewing Mr. Rogers and the puppet video were sometimes used as resting places for parents and children. The videos appeared to be incidental rather than areas of focus. Visitors coming in on various segments of Mr. Rogers could hardly have a clue about the direction of the entire program. The puppets' issues were more direct and compelling, but few families seemed to stay from start to finish of either video. Often a child would be distracted by Raceways or some other component of the exhibit.

Two components that received very little attention from the children were the compost heap and the butsadan. Although both of these could be integrated by active efforts on the part of interpreters, teachers or parents, they were otherwise easily passed by. Similarly the Talkback about names,

tucked in a corner of dealing with death, may have gone unnoticed by many hurrying toward Raceways. I never observed close to that corner myself so I am not sure that it was underused.

Involvement with the Timelines Talkback may have been as extensive as with the belief Talkback. It was frequently the component that drew in adults and older children (9 and up) at the entrance, while peek-a-boo drew younger children to the opposite wall. One other note about Talkbacks is that on three occasions I saw adults gather up one (blank) sheet from each Talkback station on the way out -- perhaps as mementoes, examples or something to fill in later in the visit.

3. The influence of Raceways: As soon as any group passed the t.v. violence video and most of the alive/dead wall, the entrance door into Raceways became visible. I saw more conflict and decision making between parents and children at that point than at the ENDINGS entrance or around the curtained video. In general children were eager to move on into Raceways as soon as they spotted it, and parents would either delay, distract or sometimes reluctantly follow children towards Raceways. In groups with older children or two adults, the adults might then return to ENDINGS after making their whereabouts known. For this reason, individual adults (often carrying babies too young for Raceways) might be seen around the cultural artifact cases or the resources alcove. Sometimes adults called children back from Raceways to a particular component -- either When Grandpa Died or one of the nearby Talkbacks.

I also noted some flow of groups from Raceways into Endings. One pattern seemed to be camp groups hitting the high spots from Raceways

to the frogs to the mice and then to the t.v. violence booth. Counsellors tended to be urging kids along rather than encouraging them to stay and explore the exhibit further. This may suggest that counsellors did not feel comfortable or prepared to deal with issues raised in ENDINGS.

Although Raceways was clearly a distraction from the nearby components of ENDINGS, many families adjusted to the situation and perhaps exploited it to everyone's advantage while children were occupied in Raceways. Adults who were not solely responsible for the children with them could investigate the exhibit on their own and make some judgments about what they would want to share with their children. On the other hand, many adults did not have this freedom and probably did not appreciate the proximity of the two exhibits. The opportunity to experience the exhibit as a whole was certainly diminished.

4. Interaction in the exhibit:

Adult-Child: Adults did a lot of reading to themselves and to children. Adults seemed to welcome the verbal guidelines. Also, many adults were bending down to peer with children at windows and flaps in the alive/dead wall and to the spinning zoetrope. Some adults were quite directive and determined to bring out key information in the exhibit. Others seemed to be exploring along with children, without strong expectations. Many parents and children drew close together around Alex and Atticus and When Grandpa Died. Holding hands, hugging, leaning together were frequent and seemed to be response to recalling some shared experiences of loss (or fear of loss).

Adult-Adult: Adults in groups with children also shared verbal and visual material with each other, particularly humor and cultural artifacts.

Child-Child: Children called each others' attention to animals, manipulative components (peek-a-boo, zoetrope, phones) and the videos (t.v. violence and mouse-maggot). Older children (9+) invited each other to read and write in Talkbacks. However, I did not see many children reading to each other or to themselves, although they were attentive to adults reading or paraphrasing material to them.

General comments on interactions: Although this summer I did witness one screaming child and angry-flustered adult in the life-cycles area, this scene was not at all typical of the usual emotional responses of visitors anywhere in ENDINGS. Before the exhibit opened last year, some people anticipated that such distressed reactions within ENDINGS would be common. Seeing this one episode, I realized how people feared this exhibit might be and how generally easy-going the atmosphere really is.

5. Time spent in exhibit: On the two days I timed groups going through the exhibit, the range of time spent was between four and twenty-six minutes. Four groups spent 4-6 minutes; three spent 8-12 minutes; three spent 17-26 minutes.

On the two days I observed for 15-20 minute intervals in different areas, I noted certain groups were somewhere in the exhibit during the entire time. Clearly, there were visitors who were very interested in the

material and wanted to explore the whole exhibit. Of those who spent less than six minutes, some may have returned later or been returning.

II Circumstances and reasons for not entering ENDINGS, gathered from interviews on August 7th and 8th.

In earlier observations, I recorded numbers and determined percentages of visitors who did not enter the exhibit (see thesis, chapter 5). The current interviews were intended to bring out reasons for passing it by. One of our concerns was whether the information at the entrance helped people to decide about entering. I tended to begin each interview by asking whether the entrance information was sufficient. This allowed me to lead non-judgmentally into questions about how and why visitors had decided to pass by.

I tried to interview visitors shortly after they passed by the entrance -- generally near or shortly beyond the t.v. camera, where they might pause briefly. On the first day, I observed and interviewed in that area for more than an hour. On the second day, I spent slightly less than an hour.

Complications: Although I was trying to learn why people did not go into the exhibit, in several instances, the interview changed the visitors' original course. Some had gone by hastily without really making a decision, and others hadn't noticed it. In these instances, the interview questions called attention to the exhibit and roused curiosity about it. Several people went in shortly after the interview and returned later to report favorably on their explorations.

Several other visitors I interviewed had already been in the exhibit at another time. Their explanations for passing by reflected the pacing of their visits rather than an assessment of the exhibit.

These two circumstances reduced the actual number of interviewees who could give something beyond temporary explanations for passing the exhibit by. Many people who did not enter at a given time would happily enter at another. On the other hand, I may also have been cut off from hearing the most negative opinions of the exhibit. In some interviews (or escaped interviews) I felt parents were uneasy about talking at all about an issue they had hoped to avoid. Trying to be sensitive to this, I did not press anyone who seemed eager to get away. Therefore, those who were most disturbed or annoyed are probably underrepresented here.

One Pattern and One Recommendation: Considering this limitation on candor, I cannot be sure what the genuine range of reasons would be for passing the exhibit by. No one interviewed stated an outright disapproval of the exhibit topic, but some expressed doubts that it would be appropriate for their particular group.

The only recurring explanation for avoiding the exhibit came from people with children under three. Many spoke as though they assumed that an exhibit about death and loss must be for older children. Although other adults with toddlers were meanwhile entering the exhibit, many had ruled it out as inappropriate for that age group. Although I was tempted to challenge their assumptions during the interviews, I restrained myself.

I had already altered group itineraries with much simpler information.

Yet each time someone gave this explanation, I grew more certain that a formal or informal program about ENDINGS should be given by the Parent Resource Room. In fact, many different answers to many of my interviews over the last several months have confirmed my sense that some kind of workshop-discussion of issues in ENDINGS would serve many people well. It would be useful to those who are hesitant to enter and those who want to talk or hear more after entering. Judging by the responses visitors were willing to share with me, I think people would appreciate some forum. Similarly, if this exhibit does travel, I feel that some guidelines for group discussion should go with it.

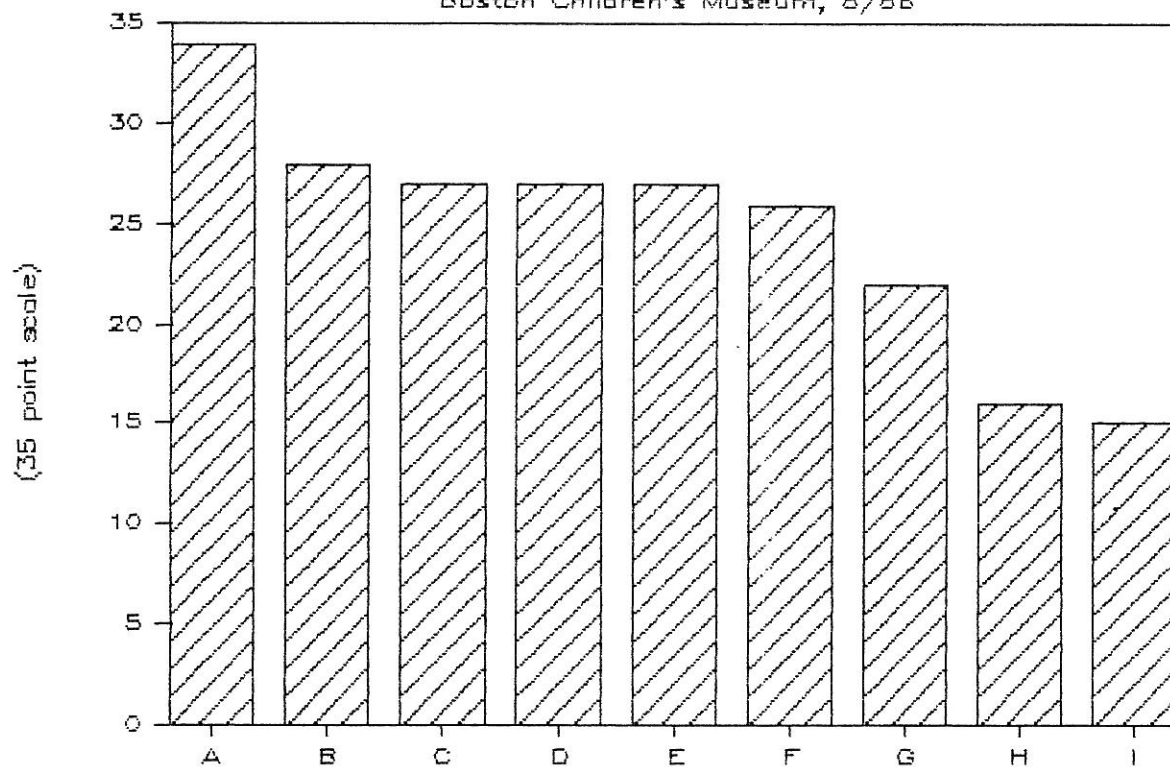
Comments on Placement of the Exhibit: In these interviews and in other observations, there were several indications that the placement of this exhibit was not ideal. Several visitors felt Raceways was an unwelcome distraction. I have discussed this in detail on previous pages (pp. 4-5). However, another concern was placement of the entrance. Unlike most other exhibit entrances in the museum, this one was set back and covered to the extent that some visitors passed without noticing it. Earlier observations and these interviews confirm this. On the other hand, most visitors did take note and were able to get some sense of the exhibit by peering in the door or windows. Many read the heading, if not the paragraph, on the entrance panel. After these preliminaries, some visitors did move elsewhere, but the majority did go in.

Most of my observations and interviews, including these, suggest that visitors inside and outside the exhibit accepted its presence in the museum. Those who entered generally did not feel misled.* Those who stayed out may have been mistaken about what was inside. A bit more verbal information and visual access from outside the entrance might safely encourage more visitors to venture in.

* On one sheet (August 14) are several notes of interviews inside the exhibit, specifically on the question of decisions to enter. In these I did not feel I was getting beyond anything already confirmed by earlier interviews and questionnaires. Few people expressed any regret or particular concern about their decisions to enter.

RESEARCH ISSUES FOR GRAPHICS STUDY

Boston Children's Museum, 8/88



- A = Instructional Aid
- B = Adult-Child Graphics
- C = Attracting Power
- D = Image
- E = Mood & Ambience
- F = Physical Positioning
- G = Supporting Information
- H = Programs
- I = Follow-up