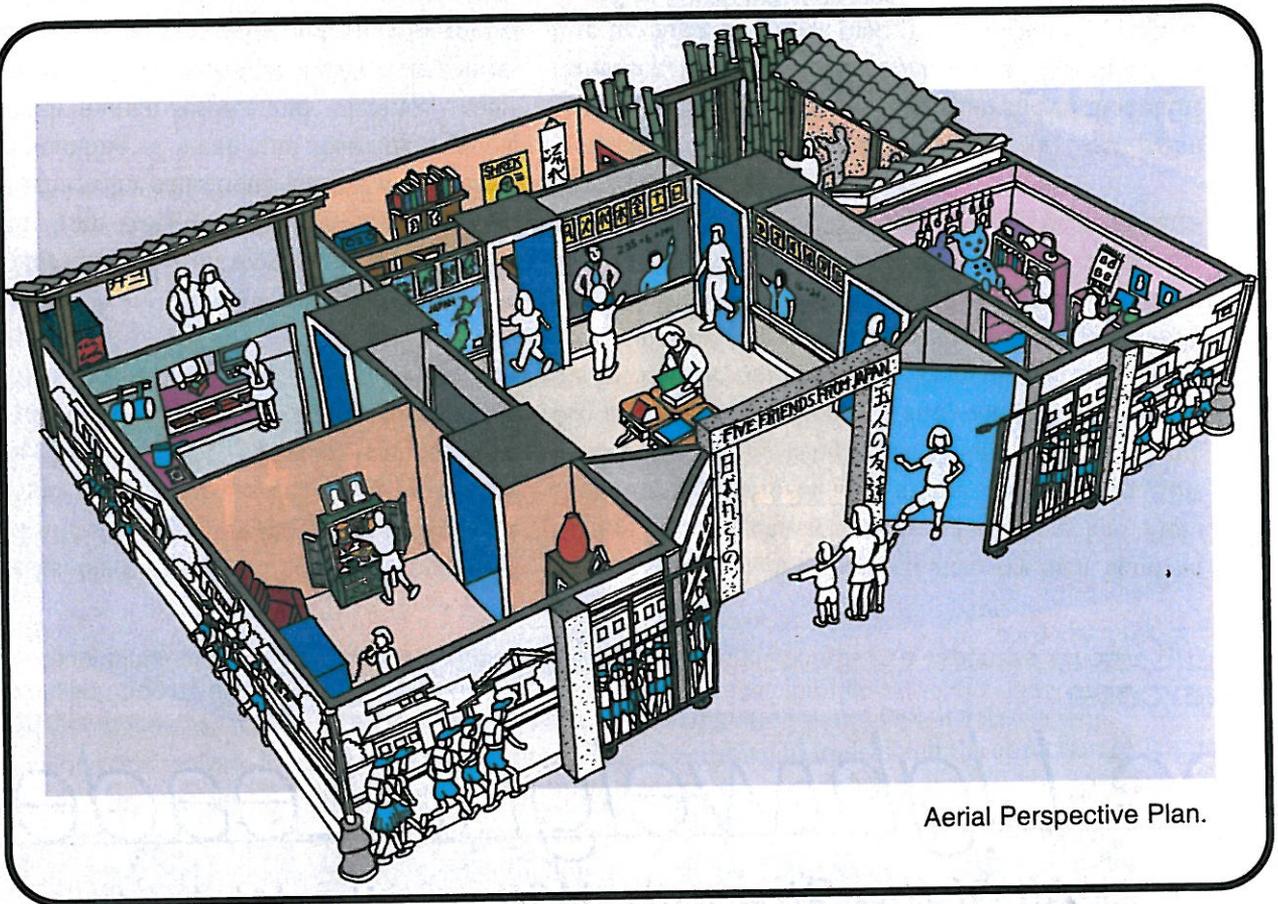


Five Friends From Japan

by Dianne Ludman Frank
Dianne Ludman Frank Public Relations
Birmingham, MI



Aerial Perspective Plan.

For children and adults, warm gestures of introduction and friendship are universally appealing. But for visitors to the traveling exhibition, *Five Friends From Japan: Children in Japan Today*, these engaging greetings are also the invitation to learn more about kids in Japan today – the similarities as well as differences, and the richness and diversity of contemporary family life among our neighbors across the globe.

Created by the Boston Children's Museum and Capital Children's Museum of Washington, D.C., *Five Friends* is the largest exhibition of the Freeman Foundation's Asian Exhibit Initiative, made possible through a \$1.1 million grant, and administered by the Association of Children's Museums. Opened in January 2004 in Boston, the exhibition is scheduled to travel to ten cities across America. Cambridge Seven Associates (C7A), architects and exhibit designers in Cambridge, MA, was commissioned by the museums to design the exhibition as an immersive and hands-on, educational exhibit that helps children ages six

to 12, and their adult care-givers, experience Japanese culture.

Focusing on five, real Japanese schoolchildren who were interviewed, selected and filmed in Japan, the exhibition explores their education, family life and interests in order to dispel stereotypes and encourage a better understanding of modern life in Japan through the discovery of similarities as well as differences. Integrating a range of activities, multimedia and graphics, the 1800 square foot exhibition is designed as a cluster of modular rooms that can be installed in various museums to which it will travel over the next five years. The innovative audio/visual media in the exhibition has received a *MUSE Award* from the American Association of Museums for Excellence in Interpretation and Education in History and Culture.

The exhibition begins as the five new friends magically "spring to life" through an audio/visual show and the technology of large, flat plasma screens camouflaged as chalkboards in a Japanese schoolroom. In the classroom, com-



The exhibition begins as the five new friends magically "spring to life" through an audio/visual show and the technology of large, flat plasma screens camouflaged as chalkboards in a Japanese schoolroom.

plete with desks, blackboards and bulletin boards with maps, artwork and school projects, visitors experience the room as students and teachers, as well as "meet" the five children who become their Japanese friends. Brief audio/visual introductions are the invitations to follow the classroom experience with a visit to each of the new friends' homes.

"Immersive spaces are the cornerstones of the initial idea. It is fun for kids to be transported to a new environment different from their own. And through hands-on activities, we achieve the educational goals of developing a greater understanding of Japan, and fostering a global perspective with mutual respect and tolerance," comments Peter Kuttner, FAIA, president of C7A, a firm internationally known for its pioneering work in educational concepts and immersive environments for museum, exhibit and aquarium design.

In fashion-conscious Sakiko's bedroom children can dress up in traditional Japanese kids' attire. Shoko loves music, and in her living room, children have the chance to play along with both traditional Japanese folk songs and pop music on an automated electronic keyboard. Entering

a tatami mat in Ken's home, children try their hands at writing Japanese characters. Aisa's family has had a tofu shop for generations, and in the recreation of this kitchen/shop front, visitors learn about this versatile food, play at buying and selling tofu, and cook in the kitchen. In the yard of the country home belonging to Yusuke, children watch their shadows as they mimic an aikido master. Through these activities, supported by objects, multimedia and graphics, children are transported to a culture and environment different from their own, yet with remarkable similarities as well.

Willamarie Moore, senior manager of East Asian Programs at Boston Children's Museum and curator of the exhibition, states, "We know what works in teaching culture to children. Rather than generalities, kids relate to specifics – stories of real people, real life and daily experiences. In order to break down prevalent stereotypes, we need to provide experiences that are accurate, tangible and conducive to comparing and contrasting one's own life – thus constructing new meaning for oneself. *Five Friends* gives kids different things but also things they can find in their own culture. This approach is much more valuable

In fashion-conscious Sakiko's bedroom children can dress up in traditional Japanese kids' attire.



Through its educational programming and collections, the Boston Children's Museum has furthered the forty-five year relationship of the city of Boston with its sister city of Kyoto. In the mid-1970's, the Museum had received the gift of a traditional *machiya* home to commemorate the 20th anniversary of this sister-city relationship, and the Kyoto structure was reassembled in the Museum's new, and now current, home on the waterfront. The Museum has also worked with Harvard University's Asia Center on outreach programs

and effective in facilitating the learning of cultures today."

Kathy Dwyer Southern, president and CEO of the National Children's Museum in Washington, D.C., enumerates the primary goals of the exhibit, "This exhibit will foster awareness, empathy and understanding among children in the U.S. for people from other countries and cultures; it will provide compelling age-appropriate exhibition experiences in Japanese culture and effective tools for learning about culture; and it will encourage the children, parents and teachers to learn about the complexity of one specific culture, that of Japan.

"We believe that children, parents, teachers and others will find rich and engaging experiences in *Five Friends* that will introduce them to Japanese culture through the lives of children," she notes.

Doug Simpson, exhibit designer at C7A, concurs, "The real strategy for the exhibit is to become introduced to five kids and their lives, and through that, learn about Japan. Kids are genuinely interested in what kids in Japan do. Since school life is so important, we start there. The convention we set up is that of kids visiting a Japanese classroom and making new friends who then invite you to visit their homes."

Drawing Upon A Unique And Long-Standing Relationship With Japan

The creation of the *Five Friends* exhibition continues the long-standing relationship both institutions enjoy with Japan.

for the K-12 level, developing educator and professional development, seminars and teaching support related to China and Japan for 25 years.

In addition to ties to Japan, the collaboration of *Five Friends* also draws upon the successful educator and professional development kits that have been another hallmark of the Boston Children's Museum's programming since its early beginning in 1913. The Museum's kits are boxes filled with artifacts, teachers' manuals and lesson plans on various topics, a concept that originated in partnership with the Boston Public School teachers to enhance natural history and science by bringing real objects into the classrooms. *The Japanese Family*, a kit first developed in 1960, had proven so popular that it had been continually used and updated through the late 1990's.

"We have a strong base of support from Harvard University, the city of Kyoto and Japanese foundations which support our Japan-related programming. The Museum has a large collection of artifacts related to Asia, and of these, those from Japan are a significant part. Our connections are multifaceted, and we draw upon much history and resources as well as the community," reflects Moore.

Since its inception, Capital Children's Museum has been a leader in educational reform, advocating a dynamic, hands-on educational process. The Museum's permanent exhibit, *Japan Through the Eyes of a Child*, created by the Museum and the Japan-America Society of Washington, D.C., fosters a greater understanding of Japan among children of the U.S. through cultural, economic and social

aspects of Japanese life. Museum staff pulled from their experiences with their permanent Japanese exhibit, their background in educational programs and materials, and their wealth of contacts with Japanese cultural organizations and the Japanese Embassy of the collaboration of *Five Friends*.

The Boston Children's Museum partnered with the Capital Children's Museum of Washington, D.C., which was also interested in submitting a proposal for a Japan exhibit to the Freeman Foundation. Cambridge Seven Associates was brought on board early on to assist in the development of the proposal, its concept and visualization for the exhibition. Following an early proposal of the recreation of a train station hub, the concept of the *Five Friends* emerged from these collaborative brainstorming sessions in Boston with C7A and both museums.

Moore reflects, "Cambridge Seven's overall design in terms of how people are engaged and how people flow through the exhibit is incredibly valuable. Cambridge Seven brought their experience in exhibit design and their creative process to make things work. We worked really well together in brainstorming the possibilities. It was a fun process to throw out ideas and have them respond."

Dispelling Stereotypes and Reflecting Diversity in Japanese Life

Five Friends from Japan dispels stereotypes by introducing five real schoolchildren who reflect the diversity of Japanese families today – a mix of boys and girls from a variety of backgrounds, urban and rural, an only child, those with siblings, a multi-generational family unit and a bi-racial home.

Penny J. Sander, project manager at C7A, describes, "Each child's room engages visitors in a primary, hands-on activity that reflects general Japanese culture, such as Japanese writing, playing music on a keyboard, or the martial art of aikido. They also offer secondary activities that grew out of each individual kid's stories and share actual information and pictures of their homes, lifestyle,



Each child's room engages visitors in a primary, hands-on activity that reflects general Japanese culture, such as Japanese writing, playing music on a keyboard, or the martial art of aikido.

interests and hobbies."

The selection of the five actual "friends" from Japan involved a thorough process that included networking, word of mouth, and the help of a research assistant. Willamarie Moore, Veronica Szalus and Doug Simpson of C7A traveled to Tokyo and Kyoto and small countryside towns between the cities, visiting schools and homes and kitchens, and seeing demonstrations of martial arts, calligraphy and food preparation. Moore, who drew upon her ability to speak Japanese and her former experiences studying and living in Japan, made an additional trip to Japan to work with the producer of raw video footage of the five children, as well as to purchase materials and furniture.

Drawing on theme areas and topics such as food, clothing, music, sports, the team developed interview questions in collaboration with an anthropologist. More than 25 elementary school-aged kids in the Tokyo and Kyoto areas were asked about their likes, dislikes, daily schedules, school lives, home and relationship to other family members. Final selections were made based on a variety of family structures, the representation of diversity and a balance of how the stories worked with each other.

The objective of dispelling stereotypical notions is reflected in Ken's bi-racial family, and Yusuke's dislike of studying, for example. The selection of a background



The selection of a background related to foods was a challenge because of the dwindling of the mom-and-pop shops in Japan as in America.

related to foods was a challenge because of the dwindling of the mom-and-pop shops in Japan as in America, but did eventually result in including a family-owned tofu shop, with graphics explaining the sales of prepackaged food along with fresh food to help keep such small businesses afloat.

Making Five New Friends Through Real-Life Experiences

Looking through a school yard fence, visitors are drawn to the exhibit entry by the sight and sounds of Japanese kids playing. On second look, a visitor is playing with them, too. Through an adjacent green room and chromakey technology and rearview projection, a popular activity allows visitors to magically "insert" themselves in a playground scene.

Visitors then enter the elementary school classroom, where they are immediately introduced to daily activities and objects that are both different and similar to those in American schools. Mathematics, for example, is shown by

both Roman numerals as well as an abacus. Pin-up and tack boards display actual artwork and projects made by schools in Japan. Many familiar school subjects are represented, but the classroom also helps visitors learn uniquely Japanese aspects, for instance, Han groups, in which Japanese kids work as a team and classroom responsibilities, such as serving lunch and cleaning. The desks of our five new friends provide clues to their interests, such as baseball cards, a shell collection or a picture of a pet dog. *Whose desk is it?* Adults are prompted to help their children find the clues and meet the new friends.

Portals beckon to visitors to make the transition from the classroom to each individual new friend's home. A large, bold graphic shows the friend and the exterior of their home to help orient the visitor and introduce what they will find

inside each room. Audio recordings in the portals subtly reinforce the transition to a new environment – the sizzling sound of food cooking in the tofu kitchen, or bird and insect calls in Yusuke's backyard.

"One of the elements that works best in the exhibition is the way kids are invited home from the classroom. The media is the key to it all. Peter Kuttner of C7A had the idea of a video in the classroom. You press a button in the chalkboard; a new friend turns from writing on the board and says 'hi' and invites you to enter the doorway near that chalkboard. In less than 10-20 seconds, the video starts bringing things to life. It is a human invitation, and when you enter and search for the people who live there, you find the photo album. Once in each room, the award-winning, in-depth video of each friend starts the same way – a kid walks in the door, removes his or her shoes, welcomes you and asks to show you around. Then the individual story begins," says Moore.

To maintain the immersive environment, each video monitor is creatively integrated into the room. The monitor in Yusuke's yard appears to be part of a shoji screen and then transforms into the video when activated. Filmed in Japan with the actual Japanese children, the videos begin with original Japanese which fades into American



Tatami room.

voice-overs.

Sander notes, "Each room is placed in its real-life context as an immersive environment. The view out of Shoko's apartment is that of contemporary urban Japan, with its mix of traditional structures and new skyscrapers. Music interactives play a variety of traditional and modern tunes. Kids take off their shoes to try out tatami mats, or listen to Sakido's video play through speakers integrated in her boom box. In the popular tofu shop, younger children enjoy role-playing with actual objects and make up their own activities as they go along. In Ken's room, older kids can practice writing on a computer."

Using Details And Accuracy To Experience Japan

Specific activities, attention to detail, and accuracy were critical to achieving the educational goals for the exhibition and creating a sense of what Japanese life is today. Furniture, artifacts and objects were brought from Japan that could be incorporated in the rooms, such as an authentic Japanese mailbox, school desks, blackboards and wooden molds from a tofu shop. For graphics, the design team drew from publications that target young audiences in Japan, interpolating the busy and bold type, outlined lettering, boxes and bubbles, and bright, strong colors.

Construction details use actual Japanese materials wherever possible, and replicate the traditional high finish of Japanese carpentry. A fabricator specializing in Japanese millwork produced all the shoji screens using a more durable acrylic rice paper to replace the traditional, fragile paper screens. The western red cedar prominently used throughout Japan was located through a specialty manufacturer who travels to Japan once a year. For Yusuke's house, special roof tiles made of a heavy-duty fiberglass resin from a manufacturer in Japan were incorporated into the design.

The exterior facade of the tofu shop is made from fiberglass to duplicate traditional glazed brick. Tatami mats, traditionally made of straw and reed, are now available in Japan in a synthetic polyethylene reed, a more durable product for the wear-and-tear of children and wheelchairs. Mats, traditionally filled with straw and weighing up to 80 lbs, are now made with a dense foam center and lighter in weight, an important consideration in shipping and handling. Thus, wherever possible, products now updated in Japan through new materials and technology were selected.

Gail Ringel, vice president of exhibits and production for the Boston Children's Museum, notes the importance of the attention to details, "There are a lot of design details in *Five Friends* that reinforce being in another culture and place. Shoji screens, traditional living spaces with tatami mats, wood molding, not to mention about 90% of the furnishings brought from Japan – all these details contribute to authenticity in the exhibit. That makes a difference for sophisticated and knowledgeable visitors as well."

Moore and the in-house production staff of the Boston Children's Museum who built the exhibition, met bi-weekly to coordinate the myriad details involved in the exhibition fabrication. In addition to the Museum's own staff, numerous people became involved in the "labor of love." Play-food items in the foreground of the tofu shop were made by a group of dedicated volunteers to the Museum who emptied packages of real food and reinserted dense

foam, then resealed with heat shrunk plastic. The wagashi sweets in Shoko's living room were painstakingly hand-crafted from fimo clay by a teenage volunteer enamored by Japanese culture. Shoji screens were made by a specialty contractor in San Diego. Consultant Philip Clendaniel assisted in media hardware and software. Joshua Muntain at the Capital Children's Museum and freelance consultant Jeff Poretzky lent their expertise in video editing and media.

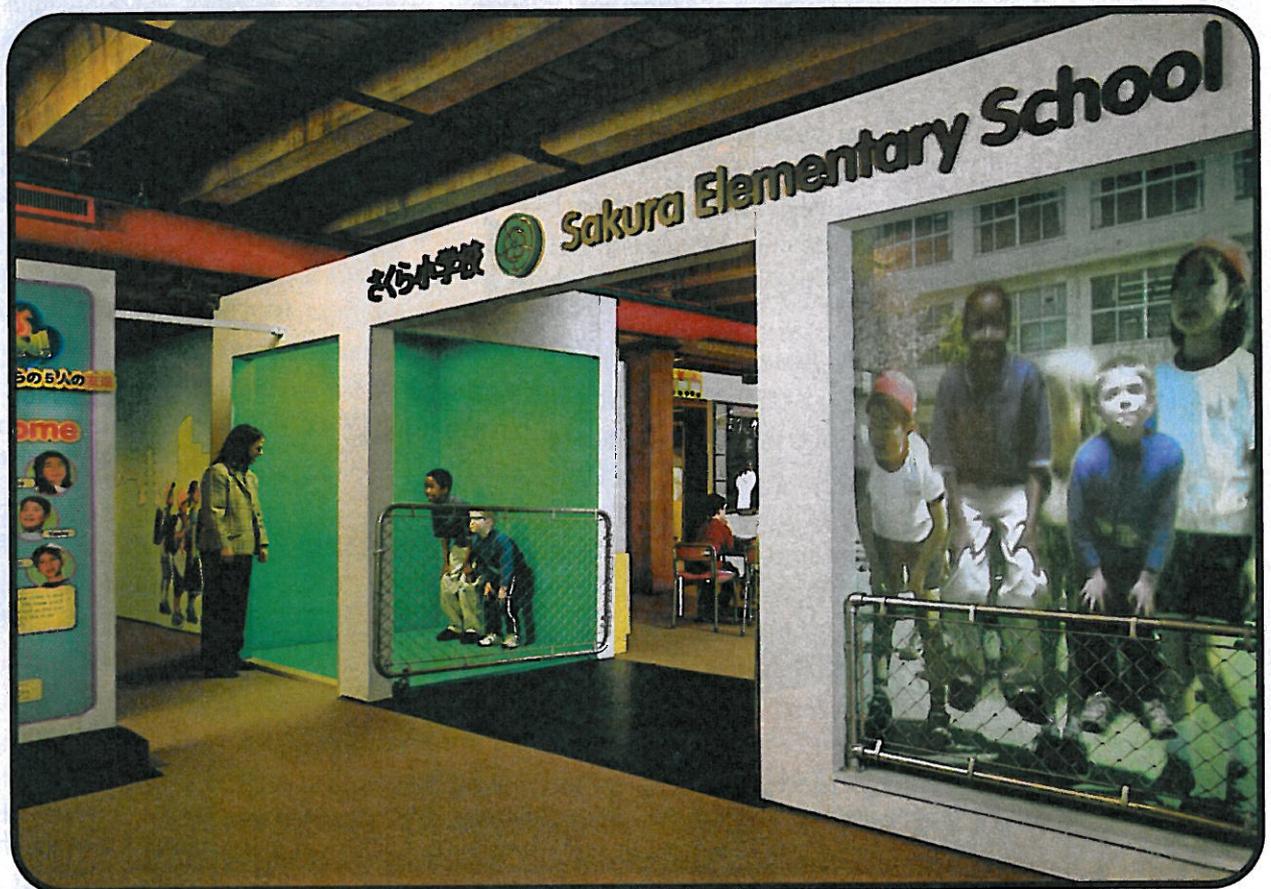
Capital Children's Museum partnered with QuickScholar to adapt an existing computer software program to teach Japanese writing for use with English translations and instructions for the exhibition. For a relatively small cost of \$10,000 to \$12,000, the exhibit gained a software program that would otherwise have amounted to \$60,000 in costs of writing an original program.

Veronica Szalus, director of exhibits of the National Children's Museum, relates, "The computer software was an interesting find. We had spent an amount of time researching potential products, hoping to find an off-the-shelf program. We located a product that focuses specifically on the language of Japan. But, it is designed for class-

room use, and we needed it to be more animated. Fran Farrand of QuickScholar, worked with us to modify the software for the exhibition and make it more museum-friendly. The result is an interactive program that kids are easily able to navigate and enjoy while learning about the Japanese language in a fun setting."

John Spalvins, a member of the in-house production staff of the Boston Children's Museum, comments, "The total package is a beautiful exhibit that gives you a sense appropriate to the culture. It looks different from anything you would find in America. Packaging the exhibit to travel was difficult – we had a rough idea of the places it would go, but knew that some institutions do not have in-house design staff to help."

George Marcincavage, also of the in-house production staff of the Children's Museum of Boston, cites some of the production challenges, "The challenge was doing things that were new. Because this is a cultural exhibition, we wanted to closely match what exists in Japan. We found a specialty manufacturer so that the wood on the shoji screens would be authentic. We worked with Japanese roofing material and tiles, using instructions that were not



The classroom and each of the five rooms are designed as individual modules, which can be laid out in a number of configurations. The entrance is its own module, and the graphics of kids walking to school can be placed anywhere in the exhibit space.

translated. We had to recreate bamboo. We even needed to use the right color green for the classroom chalkboards – a different color than what we have here."

Spalvin agrees, "We used a lot of materials we had not used before – cedar and Kydex plastic with a textured surface. We tried to get as much of the materials from Japan as possible, shipping an entire container of materials and furniture."

A Japanese dog house hides the projector for the aikido master's shadow play. For the wood vertical members of the garden shed, Marcincavage found dried pine trees that had been struck by lightning and cut the wood himself, another example of the care and extra effort devoted to the project. A specialty fabricator made the silk leaves and bamboo. A cement structure base that resembles dirt was crafted in small modular units to ship easily. Additional furniture needed to match the smaller scale of Japanese furnishings.

Flexible and Modular Rooms

As a traveling exhibition, *Five Friends* needed to be flexible to fit a variety of different museum environments and multiple configurations, unknown flooring and lighting conditions. It also needed to be easy to assemble and disassemble, and durable enough to withstand shipping and reinstallations as well as the wear and tear that normally accompanies children's hands-on activities.

"Children's museums are unforgiving environments. Many museums have small staffs. For reasons of travel and budgets, we kept things simple and uncomplicated, yet interesting," says Ringel.

The classroom and each of the five rooms are designed as individual modules, which can be laid out in a number of configurations. The entrance is its own module, and the graphics of kids walking to school can be placed anywhere in the exhibit space. When mounted in the Boston Museum, visitors could enter and exit at the same entrance. However, the exhibit offers two rooms that can function as additional entrances for those galleries that need to have entry at one end and the exit at the other. The tofu shop and outdoor yard are designed to have additional flexibility to also serve as exits.

C7A also needed to address the design challenge of how the classroom would relate to each individual friend's room, balancing the need to enclose each immersive environment, while allowing for some visual access for museum staff and caregivers to monitor children. The designers prepared models to assess various alternatives of open-

ness and transparency, resulting in a 6" view window around the perimeter of the entry graphic.

The design, layout and sizes were kept as simple and standard as possible while accommodating the Japanese objects in the exhibit. Because tatami mats are one size, for example, the size of the rooms was based on the Japanese module of an eight-tatami mat room.

C7A's Simpson elaborates, "Durability is another key criteria for a traveling exhibition. We spent a great deal of effort specifying finishes that are 'bullet proof' to withstand the hard use by children as well as the need for shipping and assembly. We used materials that hold up in the most demanding environments, like Kydex, a plastic sheeting material often used on ATM machines that does not show scratches because of its integral color, and Kalite, a fiberglass sheeting used in commercial kitchens."

While exhibit graphics are typically backlit by fluorescent lighting behind transparencies, a new electric vinyl product was used for its glowing effect and to meet the specialty requirements for this exhibit to travel. As slim as a credit card, the product would ship better than breakable tubes, and help keep walls as thin as possible. A considerable effort also went into producing an extra thick ½" acrylic overlam for graphics, cut with polished, radius edges which gives a super high-gloss effect appropriate to the modern Japanese aesthetic.

In order to keep floors low and flat for wheelchair use, a special ¾" thick wood flooring impregnated with resins and used in trade shows was used in a 33" square module, clipped with no visible fasteners for a seamless effect.

C7A designed the portals to each room as a special entry experience with roofs to distinguish them from the classroom and homes. To give a sense of roofing for the transition space, yet allow for the fire sprinklers, the designers used a wood grid with 80% opening to meet code requirements.

A Process Using Research and Assessment

Research and assessments were conducted both at the front end of the design process as well as after the exhibition had opened. People, Places and Design Research, a research consultant, assisted in developing questions, organizing the surveys, training staff, conducting interviews and reporting findings. Once the major concepts were established and a story line developed, line sketches and scripts of activities were shown to kids and adults to help refine design ideas. Assessments following the exhibition provided valuable measures of success in achieving

the goals.

"The statistics proved what we knew – that kids are wide open to learning new ideas, but that adults resist and tend to hold on to the stereotypes. It was interesting to me that when we showed sketches of living rooms in Japan that look like the average modern living room, adults did not find them exotic or surprising enough. Yet, because of the activities in the rooms, kids were fascinated. Kids based their answers not on the environments but the kind of activities they would find within them," notes Moore.

Thus, the interactives for children are designed to be inviting and self-explanatory; labels and exhibition graphics are kept simple and brief, used largely to inform the adults and provide background information.

The first findings from the post opening assessment revealed that approximately 90% of visitors exiting the exhibition responded positively when asked if they would like to be friends with any of these five Japanese children, boy or girl. Each of the five rooms was named as the room that was enjoyed the most.

"Because our primary audience is children, our first and primary goal is to engage children. If kids are engaged, then parents will also get interested. The most beautiful moments are when kids who are engaged in something

because it may be familiar or they have an interest in it, or have learned something in school, can turn to the adult and teach a parent," Moore remarks.

As the exhibition travels, host museums also receive ancillary material, school material for programming, floor kits for museum staff and other educational programming material to make the exhibition as informative as possible. Materials cover various levels of programming: floor kits for each of the five theme rooms; 20-30 minute workshops in adjacent space for families that explore the five themes in more depth; and museum-wide programs, festivals and performances that broadly introduce Japan in collaboration with other areas of the museum.

The Growing Network Of Friends

From Boston, the exhibit moved to Rockford, IL. *Five Friends* visited Washington, D.C. in November, where the National Children's Museum partnered to open *Five Friends* in a major gallery of the National Building Museum, forging yet another collaboration in the life of the exhibit.

Capital Children's Museum closed in September 2004. Building on the 30 years of CCM experience, a new state-

of-the-art National Children's Museum (NCM) is in the works. During the transition while the new Museum is built, NCM will launch a "museum without walls" with school and community outreach programs, traveling exhibits and programs in partnership with other organizations. *Five Friends* is the first of these collaborations.

Kathy Dwyer Southern states, "The National Children's Museum and the National Building Museum have joined together in a unique partnership to present the *Five Friends from Japan* exhibit to the Washington, D.C. community. This project represents an excellent opportunity for the two institutions to combine their respective expertise around one exhibition that will introduce participants to contemporary childhood in Japan through unique environments. The project represents the National Children's Museum's knowledge and understanding of children and families and is the first realization of the Museum's commitment to offer continuing educational opportunities while its new facility is under development. The exhibition also addresses the National Building Museum's mission to introduce visitors to the built environment by experiencing a contemporary Japanese classroom and individual Japanese homes."

Bringing *Five Friends* to the National Building Museum is yet another partnership and reflects the ability of children's museums to work with other institutions. National Children's co-hosting of this exhibit at the National Building Museum matches the mission of both institutions. The focus of the individual stories of the children and their environments fits with the National Building Museum and its plans to expand into family visitations," comments Szalus.

Boston's Ringel summarizes, "We are always looking for an exhibit to reflect the goals we set from the beginning, yet also take advantage of opportunities we did not anticipate. We accomplished that in *Five Friends*. We were trying to introduce people to Japanese culture, things that are the same and things that are different. We were looking to make people feel welcomed by a different culture and inspired to explore that culture and dispel provincial stereotypes.

"If we can get our audience to feel that they are connected to someone on the other side of the planet who might be like them, and with whom they might want to be friends, then we have succeeded." eb

