



Children's Museum

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EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF EXHIBIT

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by

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EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF EXHIBIT

Let us begin with our client; a family comes to the museum. They are a mother, father, and two children: One age five and one age nine. They visit our Japanese Area which includes a fully-functioning Japanese house.

The five-year old explores the house and lies down on the futon -- a bed that is new and strange to him. He is satisfied. The nine-year old learns how to use chopsticks from an interpreter and is satisfied. The mother is seemingly uninterested, but as a calligraphy demonstration and workshop takes place in the classroom, she looks in, and to her surprise, she is captivated. She watches the class, tries out the brush and ink, and leaves with a bibliography and the name of a teacher in her neighborhood. The father, who does carpentry at home, is in the reading area watching a video tape of traditional Japanese joinery.

This is a mythical family. Each member of the family has different interests, varying levels of information on the subject, and all of them have come for a single afternoon to visit this and other exhibits.

Let us concentrate on the problem. Can a museum provide beginning experiences and more in-depth experiences in the same location? Furthermore, can a museum be responsive to the visitors next step by helping him/her get there? What are the elements which must exist in one location to provide the visitor with the opportunity to begin a subject, and to go further if he/she wants?

The history of our exhibition policy may be useful in understanding our current position. The Boston Children's Museum, founded by teachers in 1913, is the second oldest children's museum in the United States.

From the Museum's inception through the 1950's, the installations were almost exclusively "glass case.". Staff explained the exhibit and occasionally had handling material. Paper and pencil games were available to the visitor.

In the 1960's, Michael Spock, the new director, introduced the idea that the visitor is a self-directed learner and learns best by doing. He introduced participatory exhibitions. This resulted in the storage of most of our collections while we concentrated on exhibits using expendable artifacts.

The 1970's saw a cautious re-introduction of the collection into the exhibits. We experimented with a combination of protective but engaging collection based installations (hands-off) and interactive elements (hands-on) side by side.

Simultaneously, our commitment to our Resource Center, the Museum's department responsible for developing extended and off-site opportunities (such as kits, workshops, publications, courses), grew. The Museum defined itself by having two program divisions, the Resource Center and the Exhibit Center, of equal weight.

We merged the traditional job of educator and curator into one -- a subject matter specialist known as Developer.

We created a team approach to the development and design of all our products. This team was comprised of the developer, the designer, and a neutral administrator known as the "Broker" to

adjudicate. Because the designers and developers work together on the projects, it is reasonable to assume traditional roles are sometimes blurred; our designers act as educators. It is equally reasonable to designate our educators as part designers.

We have made the following assumptions about our exhibit design:

1. We constantly try out and revise, using our installations as experiments rather than finished products.
 2. We look for as many avenues as possible to re-use the same development work. It is possible, even logical, for an exhibit to become a kit and course and visa versa.
 3. We acknowledge that passion on the part of the developer/designer and interpreter are contagious. We as staff should care about the subject material, and material that does not excite us is unlikely to excite our public.
 4. We design elements for different age groups within the same exhibit.
 5. We use every exhibition strategy we think will be effective. We are always on the look-out for elements that appear in other museums and can be reshaped in our own institution for our own uses.
 6. We are careful about collections by conservationally appropriate installations.
 7. We design for as much interaction as seems appropriate.
 8. We exhibit elements that allow for multiple entry/multiple outcome rather than single entry/single outcome (i.e. push buttons).
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9. We use simple, familiar materials whenever possible.
10. We use non-monumental ^{intimate,} scale because we believe ^{that size} it is not intimidating *to the visitor and aids learning*
11. We eliminate elements of the exhibition which have been inserted by our need to round out the topic yet don't work naturally in an exhibit format.
12. We design most exhibits to be unstaffed, but add additional elements that work when staff is present.
13. We are concerned about aesthetics, but attempt designs that support rather than overwhelm.

Now in the 1980's, we plan to combine all the previous elements and focus on comprehensive learning opportunities, both on- and off-site. Our comprehensive work includes extended multi-visit study, teaching in schools, teacher training, publications, kits, consultation, and community outreach. (However, this paper focuses on the expanded experience of our mythical family coming for a single on-site visit.) We at the Boston Children's Museum are currently experimenting with the following elements. Within each specific subject area, this might include:

1. Concentration of a specific exhibit and its related resource environments such as classrooms, study storage, and resource rooms in one location. Some offerings in each area will be open to the general public on a drop-in basis.
2. Uses of a variety of exhibition techniques within the exhibit format to accommodate different learning styles.

3. Intermingling of cased objects (hands-off) with interactive opportunities (hands-on) in the same exhibit.
4. Use of many label and reading strategies to allow different levels of interest and reading ability to be accommodated.
5. Visible collection storage imbedded within a public space and available for expert and non-expert use.
6. Specialized training ^{for} ~~of~~ interpreters to work on the exhibit space. This training focuses on being responsive to the individual visitor in different audience configurations.
7. The development of different levels of programs delivered on the space by interpreters. The variety of programs allow the staff to choose ones that fit each circumstance as it arises.
8. ~~The~~ "advertising" within the exhibit space of more in-depth resources within the Museum or outside it.
9. The use of ~~of~~ "demonstrators" to enrich the program. These demonstrators do both passive and interactive programs.
10. Special events that focus the whole Museum's attention on the subject including performances, community resources.

We have enlarged our internal definition of the word "exhibit" so that it can include many study opportunities simultaneously within a single on-site visit. While this has raised potential internal jurisdictional disputes and administrative confusion between the Exhibit Center and the Resource Center, we are united in believing that the individual is better served if a smorgasbord of learning occasions exists for his/her selection.

Our intention is to make it possible for every visitor to start at his/her own pace and to be able to learn as much as she/he wants. We have made the following assumptions about our visitors:

1. They range from young children to adults. 45% of our general audience are adults.
2. All of us are beginning learners about some topics while we have a range of previous experience in others.
3. The audience has various reading ability levels and differing interests. Text should be enhancing rather than necessary.
4. While some of our visitors will want to learn more, others will not be particularly interested. The visitor with the cursory interest should feel as satisfied as the more in-depth learner.

The Boston Children's Museum has not produced an all-inclusive comprehensive area as yet. We have tried out many pieces and many in combination. We are experimenting currently with single subject areas that combine classroom, resource reading rooms, study storage, offices as well as exhibits within the same space. All of these areas will be open to the general visitor some of the time.

This is a report about a new and on-going process. We are into the thick of the experiment, but it is too early for us to evaluate all the outcomes.

It is not the individual elements that are new, in fact many of the elements are recastings of earlier work. What is exciting for us is the commitment to the individual learners and our desire to make all possible learning avenues simultaneously available to them, as well as all possible depths of information.

Oct 3, 1984.

To: Evelyn, Olivera, Marie, Juanita, Chris
Copy Anne, Pat, Mike, Pyl

From: Elaine

Re: Speech given in Israel 1983

Upon rereading this speech in preparation for my
~~trip~~ speech in Holland I decided that while
it was not graceful it might be useful as

- A. Part of the ~~collection~~ for truck for visiting professionals
- B. as training reading for orange and others?
- C. as pieces of the letter that might answer professionals questions
- D. as boiler plate

Therefore if any or all is useful to you
please feel free to use it

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