Speech for "Hands on"

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Children's museums world over are facing a dilemma. They may have exhausted the potential of the children's museums of the 70's without knowing what new approaches fit within the new millennium. This paper tries to analyze the fundamental philosophies and audiences of children's museums, past and present, in order to see where we might be going. "Hands-on," the keystone exhibition technique of the last three decades, while still useful, may not be enough.

Let us do a short review of the history of children's museums and their siblings children's rooms within larger museums so that we can see how we got to this place. The creation of the first of these institutions started at the turn of the century in the United States but one of the first five children's museums began in Holland. So we can say, even in inception, the children's museum phenomenon had worldwide origins.

And let me digress to suggest that while not ordinarily included in these gatherings, the creation of pioneer palaces in the former Soviet Union and their parallel organizations in China while different in organizational structure, creating bodies and desired outcome, borrowed heavily from the children's museum movement and should be considered part of the same history.

Excluding these, the founders of most children's museums were a combination of practicing teachers, former educators, and affluent powerful parents. And throughout all the different stages of children's museum history, the founding thinking mostly reflected the newest theories of child rearing and educational philosophy of the time. Thus, the philosophy was always progressive and had some currency in the world of the intelligent popular press.

The first phase of the children's museums history began at the turn of the century and continued until the First World War. The reason d'être was based on Deweyian philosophy and included ideas like children were not small adults but developmentally different and required educational instruction that was based on their specific needs. To best educate youngsters, the theory went, one needed tangible material to experiment

with, touch, observe, and examine. So the hands-on foundation stone was embedded in these institutions right from the start, though the application of this hands-on philosophy took different and more passive forms than those that appeared in the late 60's.

In the beginning, and quite within the teachings of Dewey, the most perfect subject matter for teaching children was natural history. Almost all the children's museums or children's rooms in larger museums of the time focused on natural specimens and many also produced loan kits of the same material that were available to schools, community institutions and some even had loanable material for homes.

The First World War ended with the hope that the League of Nations could provide a forum for discussion to end acrimony forever. The underlying assumption was that inexperience with other cultures caused hatred and violence and that to know each other better would aid in world peace. The existent children's museums (as well as the schools) enlarged their focus to include cultures around the world and began to pursue expansion of their collections into cultural material and used these items in exhibitions. This interest in cultural items fit within the earlier traditions of museums in general which began with "cabinets of curiosities," but the inclusion of cultural

material in children's museums now had a social underpinning -- the belief that the human condition was basically the same worldwide and exposure would create respect and tolerance.

The audience of children's museums through the 1960's were upper elementary aged people -- not infants or those in kindergarten or early primary grades. In fact, the word children meant this age (about 8-12) and there were other words used for younger people.

At the end of the 60's when the Boston Children's Museum under Michael Spock and the Exploritorium under Frank Oppenheimer began widespread exploration of tactile exhibitions and environments, there was a feeling that a radical break had occurred. In fact there was much discussion in the museum field that these two institutions were not museums. Yet it can be seen that these hands-on places were influenced by a continuum of the same educational history which was then expressed as the progressive school movement, the Montessori schools, all of which held that individualized learning worked best and children would succeed when exposed to learning stations that allowed for individual selection of handleable material. While these museums were a new iteration the current educational philosophy and some experiments done by science museums in

Europe especially in Germany, they were essentially in the Deweyan tradition with an enhanced interest in individual exploration.

At the same time as the Boston and San Francisco museum experiments were going on, there was widely announced work done by Jerome Bruner and others at Harvard that suggested that the earlier one stimulated one's children, the better they would do in school and subsequently in life. This started the social experiment in the United States of Head Start, a series of publicly funded preschools in order to allow less fortunate children the opportunity to catch up with their more affluent peers. At the same time, affluent parents began looking for stimulating experiences for younger and younger children. So the ages of visitors deemed appropriate for children's museums dropped, and even today young visitors average around 5-6 years old and visitation often begins with toddlers. Play spaces for infants began to be a regular staple for these and other museums. The explosion of children's museums in the 70's, 80's, and 90's were primarily institutions created for very young children.

The curriculum of information acquisition and exploration of different cultures created in those earlier children's museums did not seem appropriate for these young visitors and thus the museums produced exhibitions that were

experiential physical science stations and of child-sized familiar environments of daily life such as the shop, fire station, and boats. Children in the 8-12 year old group no longer frequented these museums and some museums, acknowledging that trend, restricted themselves to very young children while others, unsuccessfully, tried to lure back the older child.

That is where we find ourselves today: hundreds of new or newly refurbished children's museums with the interactive hands-on approach as their touchstone and very young children as their audience. Many of the experiments within the recent past of children's museums -- infant play-spaces, resource areas, parental information, climbing structures with an educational focus, etc., have been copied by other museums and in even more recent times by commercial venues. The once distinctive niche of the children's museum is no longer so apparent.

Further, going back to basics, I would suggest that the underlying experiences and philosophies of child rearing are changing somewhat as well. A tour of the child rearing book section in any book store for the inquisitive intelligent parent while still producing books on enhanced individualism such as multiple intelligences and inherent personality types now compete with books that concentrate less on the exploration of

individualized creativity and more on the common needs and responsibility of the family and the community. Politics in America both from the left and the right stress "family values", and stresses the focus of inter- and multi-generational activities, nonviolent problem solving, delayed gratification for the common good, disciplined accomplishment, and interpersonal caring. There is a new emphasis on citizenship that is now permeating our child development books. In response, in children's museums one begins to see exhibitions that enhance group solving and sharing of resources.

Further, the experience within our more heterogeneous cities has brought home to us that simple attention to cultural difference does not necessarily make a safer society. Accordingly, simple cultural exhibits that stress commonality -- we all eat, we all sleep, only we use different and intriguing products to do so -- no longer seem to be adequate as the message for children's museums exhibitions.

But while middle-class parents are interested in group responsibility, the family rather than the individual, and the notion of a safe pastoral environment, they also hope that multiculturalism will not cause a major change in their cherished beliefs. These parents maintain a certain nostalgia for the old homogenized cultural and class-bound lives we all used to live,

even as we museum professionals speak of inclusion. So there is a certain tension between our spoken words of responsibility toward the less fortunate and one of our primary audiences hopes for the protection of their children.

So now we, as children's museum professionals find ourselves serving three audience segments -- general public, school groups, and the underserved -- whose needs and aspirations are not always compatible. Each of these audience segments has different demographics, needs, and funding bases. In different countries, the annual visitation of these groups differ in percentages but the identifiable aspects of each group, their needs, and their funding sources remain the same worldwide.

We use three sets of rhetoric when describing the needs of each group and the aspirations we have in serving each. One of the problems of our work within each of our museums is that we often use words from one set of high aspirations of service to describe work with another group. Upon reflection we find that these words are not transferable from one group to another. A second problem occurs when our programs and our spending priorities do not match our rhetoric.

Even though they use the same facility, they most often come at different times. To make our work even more complicated, the funding and income sources brought by each group is distinctly different and requires different attention of the senior staff to secure and use it. So how would one describe each of these groups and their desires?

In order to survive economically, all children's museums need the general visitor who comes on weekends and school holidays, who pays admission and uses and pays for all kinds of additional ancillary services (food, parking, parties, programs, etc.). In America, the admission base is generally the largest single source of income in the annual budget make-up. This audience is made up of highly educated people who are also either affluent or temporarily poor by virtue of some current life choice like studying or participating in some lower paying but socially responsible work. Having been steeped in the popular early childhood literature, they have learned that stimulation at very early ages makes for the most successful adults. Thus, they seek enrichment for their children in all forms and see the children's museum as a highly desirable institution in their pursuit of age appropriate engaging stimulation for very young children.

The adult, in the general visitor segment, is generally demanding, wishes a steady flow of temporary exhibitions, a clean and aesthetic environment and ever-changing programs. They share common child-rearing practices with each other and expect certain ways of relating to children that still stimulate individual choice and encouragement for endeavors great and small while hoping for sharing of toys and "turns" in a civil manner. In America, these adults also insist on safety for their children and that translates into a certain nostalgia for a return to their real or fantasized childhood of the past. They are usually urban or suburban middle-class regardless of their ethnicity, religion, race, or country of origin. They wish to be surrounded by more of the same. To serve this population best, the museum encourages, wittingly or unwittingly, certain class-determined attitudes toward children.

The children of this population have had a more protected experience in that they are carted around from one safe environment to another, have constant supervision from, or even interference from adults, and less exposure to the consequences of their decisions than do their less affluent counterparts.

Because this audience is the bedrock of most of the income stream, they have many advocates within the staff. If catered to properly the attendance and income rises and the museum prospers.

The second group -- the school group -- needs curriculum justification to travel since it is expensive to go on a field trip and because, currently, there is pressure for every teacher to produce measurable academic achievement in every class. The teacher who determines the school trip needs to be selective. For its part the children's museum needs to provide a justifiable school visitation that is educationally useful. The museum needs to distinguish itself from its general-audience reputation as a "play place." The age of the children in school groups tends to be slightly older than those of the general visitor. School group demographic tend to include a wider demographic mix of economic strata and language skills and a wider range of both urban and rural populations.

Programmatically, the group leader demands a "class" where the group members are each given the same material in some orderly manner. Because the teachers demand more content, the museum provides more instructional personnel, both paid and volunteer, and more attention to curriculum development and carryon props.

The dynamics that surround the school group visit are quite different from the volitional family social group. The children are surrounded by fewer and

less bonded adults and the children themselves are conscious of and bonded to each other. They are used to each other and their social interaction becomes part of their agenda. When large number of groups, like camp groups and family groups, share the building they often annoy and interfere with each other.

The school and community group either pays for admittance or the museum receives a subvention from school or other governmental authorities. In the United States this is an audience that is somewhere between 20-50% of the annual attendance; in Europe it can be much higher. There is usually a staff advocate for groups such as the Director of Education or the School Services Coordinator and floor staff tend to be trained teachers capable of giving a class. This group takes up much of the staff time and often much of the program development time. Former teachers on the staff find this portion of the population easier to predict and easier to prepare for. Without attention by the administration to the balance of program offerings, more school programs and school-like programs are provided for than any other. These programs do not necessarily work well for the general audience or the underserved populations without modifications.

The third group are the children and their caregivers in the under-served, lower economic and more needy portions of our environment. No matter what ethnicity, racial or language group, they have different expectations. They are often culturally different from the more affluent, they often have more than one language spoken at home, or an uneasy legal status in society as guest workers, immigrants both legal and illegal. They are skittish about authority and venturing out into unfamiliar environments that seem to be organized for others and that requires, or at least suggests, a whole set of behaviors that are not natural or comfortable to the group. They are generally non-trusting of those who offer good deeds and who might be well meaning but appear patronizing or irrelevant. Most of this population never visits the museum, and when they do are generally less organized about the use of their time, and more focused on issues of immediate need. The audience is not waiting around hoping to be invited in. Serving this group is not as simple as providing increased access. Without a knowledgeable experienced staff advocate in a senior position and without consistent funding streams such as endowment or government subvention, this group is talked about often but served only minimally and intermittently. The rhetoric of inclusion is often used, and is included in all mission statements. The desire to serve the under-served is often expressed, but practice and economics make real service to this group inconsistent and intermittent.

Why does anyone bother with a population of nonusers? There is an important fourth group to be considered. They are also nonusers and powerful funders -- politicians, policy makers, foundations and charities, corporate sponsors and grant-makers. These people of authority and resource are often interested primarily in the under-served or school based community. They are rarely interested in funding the more affluent. So every well-meaning and even cynical child's museum wishes to serve the under-served community and wishes to be funded by one of these funding agents. I would further say that there is a long history of public service and charity in the founder community. While they often don't know much about the less fortunate in their community, they are acutely aware that they bear some responsibility for their well-being. Their hope of service springs from genuine feeling.

In America, the problem of service is made more acute because most funding for the disadvantaged population is short-term and in support of limited products, such as exhibitions and curriculum material. This kind of funding tends to set up a cycle of cynicism within the less affluent community because short-term staff for one project or another are always arriving or being phased out. Successful working with the less affluent audience

requires, by comparison, long term advocacy and constant community presence. Every children's museum working in low income communities has learned quickly how constant their work with this population must be to make any difference at all.

To serve the differing segments best, and to keep us honest and realistic when deciding on our own internal priorities and resource allocations, there should be an advocate for each group within the hierarchy of the staff. And each must be armed with different skills, experiences, and passions. Currently, in most cases, the advocate for the poorer segment of the community, such as outreach coordinator, is often of a lesser stature than the advocates for the other groups, and the work they do is often performed at sites outside the museum proper. So while the museum can justify the work with this community, it is basically neither advocated for internally nor impacts the staff or program within the building proper.

Thus we are faced with many simultaneous dilemmas about how to proceed in the future to recreate our children's museums so that they reflect the aspirations of our audiences. If we really want to serve the children in the areas of least affluence and opportunity, then we must create budgets, staff

structures, board representation, and long-term strategies that allow for the needs and differences of these families to be expressed and catered too.

Current children's museums are popular with the affluent general audience, I would contend because they evoke the middle-class homogeny that we often speak against. Middle class parents are creating more and more institutions that fit within their suburban community so that they do not have to face the distinctive differences that others would bring to bear, seemingly jeopardizing the safety of their children. They are, unintentionally, reinventing ghettoization, while speaking of a forum for the whole community. It is a dilemma when the economic base of children's museums in America rests squarely on the privileged users and when that same economic base is now eroding as other museums and for-profit institutions create competing attractions.

So we must begin to have a dialogue that puts such issues squarely on the table. If we are to be responsive to new theories of child rearing what are the programs and models that work best and should be replicated? If we wish to continue to be a teaching site, what are the curriculum-based issues that fit within our institutions? And if we plan to include the underserved populations we must be willing to think about new models of children's museums which

include elements of social service, different hours, people who become guides from the community to the museum and who have enough power within the structure of the museum and enough ways of securing funding so that long term useful programs can be sustained.

If we do not succeed at all of these, we might become a waning movement even as we grow in numbers. But our history has shown us to be resilient and the major source for museum experimentation. I suggest that when facing these three areas squarely -- changing views on child-rearing, curriculum development for young school children, and the needs of a very different and needy underclass -- we might again regain our place as the most exciting and innovative part of the museum community.