

COMMENTS ON EXHIBITS IN THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

A comparison of the Algonquin Wigwam and the Oversize Exhibit

by Margie Kitchen, Jan. 1970

This term I have also observed exhibits at the Children's Museum and have tried to establish criteria for exhibition design. The following is the result of my observations, reading and thought.

In order to make a good exhibit, I think the designer or developer should be able to answer the following questions: 1) who is the audience?; 2) what do you want to stimulate learning about?; 3) and within #2, what do you actually want to teach? These questions must have answers or the exhibit will have no purpose, be merely instructive, not thought-provoking, or be too vague for its audience to understand.

An exhibit is a medium for communication, in which real objects are used to teach in a non-verbal way. Since real objects are used, it seems obvious that learning takes place through the perceptions of the senses. At the Children's Museum, the Anacostia Museum, and Muse, the use of several senses is encouraged, though not exploited to its best advantage. Most museums explore only the potentialities of the sense of sight.

Now let me try to demonstrate these ideas through a comparison of the Algonquin and Oversize exhibits at the Children's Museum. These exhibits are alike in type since they both are constructed environments through which something is learned.

The purpose of Algonquin is clear; through it children can learn about the Algonquin Indian. I've had to ask people what Oversize is about. Algonquin stimulates all sorts of questions from children; Oversize does not. The person who mans the Algonquin exhibit sits in the wigwam and answers questions; the children can see that he's sitting in an Indian's house right away and they want to know more about it. The person manning the Oversized desk top constantly tries to explain himself and tries to justify the objects, because he feels the children don't understand or should understand more than the exhibit tells them.

If we agree that a museum is unique because it deals with real objects, then the objects in an exhibit should be real, or, at least, if they are manufactured imitations, they should seem compellingly real.

The objects in Algonquin hold up to these criteria. The Oversize exhibit is a giant-size desk top. How many desk tops have alarm clocks on them? or "camp" photographs of little black girls? The clock is a big alarm clock that isn't a clock and doesn't have an alarm. If the developer decided not to have it work, to have it tick or ring, because the noise would have to be terribly loud, he shouldn't have used an object which in reality makes noise. The telephone also doesn't work, except you can lift the receiver and see how heavy it is. It doesn't have a wire; it doesn't dial; and it doesn't ring. It's obviously a fake phone, and children can't even climb on it, which is the only thing left to do with a fake phone. Why sunglasses on a desk top? Prescription eyeglasses are often left on desk tops, not sunglasses. If the exhibit is supposed to inspire curiosity about scale, wouldn't it be better to have eyeglasses on the desk with lenses that make everything look smaller when you look through them? I really like the paperclips; so do the children. The children really like the money too; but I think if you're going to use objects which are supposed to be giant size coins, they should be metal, and if they are twelve times as big, they should be twelve times as heavy. The children like the coins because they can play with them, but they learn very little about scale from them. (Look at what the girl on the video-tape did.)

We probably all agree that if more senses are utilized in an experience, the experience is more complete, and more is learned from it. Hence if people are to learn more from a museum experience, exhibits and programs should be designed which appeal to as many senses as possible.

The Kinesthetic sense is very important to children. In the Algonquin exhibit, most of the children must stoop slightly to enter the wigwam. Inside they can sit on the fur covered benches. Outside they can try on Indian clothes or walk around with a papoose hanging from their heads. And they can grind corn. In the Oversize exhibit, they can lie down on the ruler, turn coins, but they can't climb on the phone.

In both Algonquin and Oversize, the sense of sight is appealed to. And the sense of touch is used. In Algonquin there are very tactile objects, such as fur and suede.

Both exhibits, however, lack sound; there is noise from the children, but sound is not utilized to create a more authentic environment. Perhaps outdoor noises like wind in trees would make Algonquin seem more real, or recordings of Indian chants which the person manning

the exhibit could play periodically. I have already mentioned that sound is lacking from the Oversize exhibit, and how its absence makes the objects seem fake.

The sense of smell is appealed to by some objects in the Algonquin exhibit, e.g. the dried fish, the suede. And the sense of taste is utilized in the Algonquin school program when the children drink Indian tea. But both senses cannot be used in the Oversize exhibit as it is. Some erasers have an odor; a big eraser would have a big odor which might make a large part of the desk top smell like a desk top. I can't think how taste could be actually experienced by children there, but it could be suggested by a huge Coca-Cola can.

Neither the vestibular nor the organic sense is appealed to directly by either exhibit.

This term I have observed Algonquin and Oversize fairly carefully. I have suggested here what I think is good or bad about each of them in their present state of development, and I have tried to capture on video tape some of the observations which lead to these conclusions. I realize that the development of a really good exhibit is a tremendously complex process; this has been demonstrated to me at the Children's Museum. But I think the design of an exhibit might be more expediently done, if it were approached with fairly clear cut criteria as I have tried to show here. My criteria may seem simplistic to those who have developed exhibits themselves, but I think it is useful to have a framework within which to work.

May 28, 1975

Dear Mike, Pat, Elaine,

I have very much enjoyed working at the museum and would like to continue in the future. However, I do have a limited ability to be at a specific place at a given time, due to the seemingly endless parade of new and fascinating ways my body is responding to chemo-therapy. I dislike the feeling I get, that I can not be totally committed to my work. What I seek is a way to be a part time staff member without rigidly scheduled hours — i.e., I would work a specified number of hours a month on my own time. Some of the ways I envision being used would be as follows:

1. Updating science oriented loan boxes to make them more useful to teachers as teaching tools — not primarily display material.
2. Continuing to work on the already begun bone exhibit in Living Things — making skeletons from carcasses which could be used, broken, and replaced; evaluating this exhibit with an eye to future development in the new museum, if it seems appropriate. I'd like to more + more see comp. anatomy, evolution, and form and function an integral part of LIVING THINGS.

3. Developing possible natural history exhibits for the new museum; most particularly I'd like to encourage you to consider a really comprehensive paleontology / archeology / geology exhibit. I think many children don't understand how things get covered up, why they need to be dug up. A sand table where little villages could be set up and then sand blown over them and a water table & earth with a good hose + drainage system and the same set up, where a river pattern with erosion + deposition would be a 1st step. A volcano model would be exciting.

Boxes with layers one could sift through, the layers each having clues to tell a story - charcoal proving a fire was burned, sea shells showing that the ocean was nearby or trade & sea people was possible, etc.

I talk this better than write it. It does have a lot of potential, plus many visitor activities that could be natural spin offs.

From paleontology → fossils → current issues:
Just think of the whole concept of Endangered Species. I had a group of kids recently who first began to try to say what was a species; then were asked whether there were ever "endangered" species before man; then began to play with the whole big concept of how

various forms of life changed or failed to change. What happened to dinosaurs? What makes fossils?

4. Being in an area where visitors could sometimes prowl while I was actively in the process of setting up an exhibit — preparing bones for a skeleton, setting up a tank, etc. This kind of set up could be superb for relaxed spontaneous teaching and one could involve visitors in the actual setting up process (or cleaning up) thereby making them feel more a part of the Museum. Perhaps a Magnet course could be developed enabling kids to set up museum exhibits.

5. Teach occasional workshops for whomever would need same.

6. Perhaps in the Spring I could again teach a Magnet course if needed.

I certainly will understand if you feel you have no need for a less than full staff member. Right now I keep thinking of what I feel are really relevant, exciting Museum kind of environments for learning which I want to share. I can certainly see how it might become needlessly complex having someone in my capacity bounce in and out. Should you not be able to use me now I'll be happy to ask in a year and a half when hopefully all

4.
this waiting ordeal will be completed.

Thanks again for letting me be a part of the Museum this Spring. It's lovely working in an environment where one is surrounded by such open, caring, sharing adults. I have loved it.

Please RSVP. Thanks.

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P.S. Sorry if this is not well written. It's now 2 AM.

My eldest has just been ill after a coughing
seize and I am writing a bit poorly, I'm
afraid.

BCM EXHIBITIONS 1913 TO 1986: ROUGH CUT

LOCATION	NAME	OPENING DATE
Jamaica Plain	Molly the Elephant (glass case)	1913-1950s
	Eskimo exhibit	1913-1950s
	Ice Age (pre-recorded history)	1913-1950s
	Life in the Middle Ages	1913-1950s
	Live Animals	1913-1950s
	Loan Exhibit: China	1913-1950s
	Rabbit exhibit	1913-1950s
	Shoes Around the World	1913-1950s
	Zuni Dance WPA Diorama	1913-1950s
	Glass case: Birds	1915
	Glass case: Mammals	1915
	Miss Kyoto	1928
	Dolls, Dollhouses	1930s
	Glass case: Egypt	1936
	Egypt Exhibit	1950s
	Boston Nickelodeon	1960s
	Geology	1960s
	How Movies Move	1960s
	Maps	1960s
	Mirrors	1960s
	Calculators	1960s
	Colors	1960s
	Discovery	1960s
	Higgins Armory Exhibit	1960s
	Eskimo Children's Paintings	1960s
	* What's Inside?	1964
	Informal Exhibit Room	1966
	* The Japanese Tea House	1967
	Ancient Tools and Technology	1970s
	Calculators	1970s
	Changes	1970s
	Circus	1970s
	Climbing Structure	1970s
	Cloud Room	1970s
	Collections Projects	1970s
	Deloras Piculas Climbing Sculpture	1970s
	Erehwon Health Food Store	1970s
	Factory	1970s
	Fire	1970s
	If I Were a Kid Back Then	1970s
	Kids 5 & 10 Store	1970s
	Kids Look at Health	1970s

Kids Look at Work: Barber Shop	1970s	
Kids Look at Work: Dentist's	1970s	
Kids Look at Work: Garage	1970s	
Kids Look at Work: Pizza Parlor	1970s	
Kids Look at Work: Superette	1970s	
Lito the Shoeshine Boy	1970s	
The Manhole	1970s	
Me	1970s	
Meeting Ground	1970s	—
Grandmother's Attic	1970s	
Multiples	1970s	
Rattles	1970s	
Through the Looking Glass	1970s	
Video Studio	1970s	
Water Extravaganza		1970s
Waterplay	1970s	
What is It?	1970s	
What's Inside?	1970s	
WKID	1970s	
The Haunted House	1970s	
Big and Little Exhibit	1971	
Optics	1971	
Weaving	1971	
Weights and Measures	1971	
Grownups and Kids	1972	—
Algonquin Wigwam		1973
Bones	1973	
Center Street	1973	—
Dollhouses		1973
Everybody Into the Pool		1973
Mirrors		1973
A Walk in the Woods		1974
Bits and Pieces		1975
Computers		1975
Fantasy Castle		1975
Hospitals		1975
Japanese Noodles		1975
Living Things	1975	
* What If You Couldn't?		1976 —
Before You Were Three		1977
Playspace		1978

Museum Wharf

Fort Point Channel	1978
Dolls, Toys and Games	1979
City Slice	1979
Grandparents' House	1979

The Manhole	1979	
Computers	1979	
Congress Street Superette	1979	
Factory	1979	
Fort Point Channel Health Center	1979	
Giant's Desktop	1979	—
How Movies Move	1979	
Living Things	1979	
Playspace	1979	—
We're Still Here	1979	—
WKID	1979	
Waterplay	1979	
What If You Couldn't?	1979	—
Ruth Harmony Green Hall of Toys	1979	
Luckey Climbing Structure	1981?	—
Japanese Home/Kyo No Machiya	1981?	—
Japanese Intro Exhibit /Toshi's Story	1981?	
The Art of the Muppets	1981?	—
Lego	1981	
Games from Parker Brothers Archives	1981	
Dedication Wall	1982?	
Endings, an Exhibit about Death & Loss	1984	
The Real Art of Fake Fgood	1984	
Black Dolls & Toys	1984-1987	
The Babies	1984-1987	
Bubbles	1984-1987	—
Is it Africa?	1984-1987	
Salad Dressing Physics	1984-1987	
Tools	1984-1987	
UNICEF Photos	1984-1987	
Where's Africa?	1984-1987	
Hands on Traditions	1985	
Masks from Montgomery	1985	
The Clubhouse	1986	
Faultless Jamming	1986	
Recollections	1986	
Traveling Bubbles (2)	1986	
Chinese Marketplace #1	1986	
Families	1986	
Paper Dolls	1986	
Traveling Raceways (2)	1986	
Traveling Wheels (2)	1986	