

**CHILDREN'S MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS: DISTILLED OR WATERED DOWN?**

Exhibitions in children's museums often have an air of simplicity. They are built to meet the small scale of the target visitors, solidly constructed and may be adorned with bright colors and clear, bold-faced lettering. They are inviting, instantly user friendly and sometimes have almost a homemade quality. They are, by definition, made for children and, therefore, appear to be uncomplicated versions of information usually accessible mainly to adults.

But this apparent simplicity is deceiving. Simplicity does not mean over-simplification. Accessibility to information does not dictate the use of monosyllabic words. Similarly, hands-on programming with cultural artifacts does not necessarily mean using pseudo-authentic substitutes for the real things. Successful children's museum exhibitions take years of research and development, time and dedication of scholars, educators, designers, architects, educational psychologists, fundraisers, and other experts. Behind good children's museum exhibitions stands the same rigorous academic research as that which is conducted for an adult-oriented museum exhibition or a university project. The great difference—and perhaps the basis for excitement about this field—is that children's museums take information and interpret it with an interdisciplinary approach that translates complicated topics into a child's language in an interactive learning environment. This is our educational forte.

Why is it, then, that when it comes to dealing with the complexity of human cultures, our field suddenly finds short-cuts, has little time or money for research and

often settles for a level of simplicity that diminishes, rather than honors, the culture being presented? Children's museum boards of directors are distracted by the whims of the Muppets and the ageless, unending appeal of dinosaurs. We laud our ability to give basic training in hand-to-eye coordination, but pull back when it comes to providing the analogous basic training for living in a world populated with vast human diversity? We seem happy with giving visitors a creative play space but turn the other way when real substance is put into why we even open our doors each morning. Where and what are the values behind the institutions?

From numerous conversations with children's museum directors, staff, development directors and board members, I am seeing and hearing all too frequently a rejection of the need to present exhibitions with cultural content. Such reticence is of great concern to me as a museum professional and social scientist. I perceive that these decisions are based more on a fear of dealing with cultural differences than on a lack of funding. It is a fear that goes deep, I believe, into the American psyche of *E pluribus Unum* elitism. This fear hides ethnocentrism and xenophobia that must be vanquished if we, as educators, are to lead our institutions to making a positive contribution to society.

Children's museum professionals are skilled at transforming information by uniting fields of thought and expression. We deal with everything from fairy tales to animal digestive systems. Too often, however, we cut corners and avoid social responsibilities that stares us in the face.

tors? The big picture is rarely talked about but it should be. Do we integrate the philosophy of why we work in museums into all of our presentations? The broadest spectrum of subject matter is at our fingertips and exhibition content and institutional goals vary. But, a deep commitment to connecting exhibitions to life must be ever-present. Without this commitment, our presentations have no credibility, no integrity, and no soul.

Educators in museums are key providers of substantive learning environments for children, their parents, caregivers, and teachers. It's not a fill-in-the-afternoon kind of job, even for many well-meaning teens with a community activity requirement from high school. It requires moral commitment to making a positive contribution to society. Children's museums as educational institutions become active players in helping children identify and participate in their relationships to other peoples and their environment.

These observations are based on children's exhibitions focused on world cultures, for these are the presentations with which I am the most familiar. Since 1979, I have been involved in the development and installation of exhibitions which bring many aspects of cultural diversity, the arts and humanities, geography and the environment, to children's museums and school curricula. Through the re-creation of the architectural settings of cultures around the world, museum visitors have had the opportunity to travel beyond their homes and discover first hand while people all over the world have similar or analogous needs, they are fulfilled with strikingly different solutions.

In museum settings, culture (a topic difficult to grasp at times) becomes tangi-

ble through architecture, artifacts, music, dances, and foods integrated into the museum's interactive programming. The use of authentic artifacts, whenever possible, is extremely important. These artifacts are frequently the only "real" elements in the exhibitions because the settings are simulations and the interpreters are usually not from the cultures that are being presented.

Using real objects can be a transformational experience in itself. I am reminded of the child who was so entranced with a mousetrap made in Greece that he spent most of his visit imagining being in a Greek village and creating a drama about catching the mouse, keeping it alive and releasing it outside the house. That there are mice in Greece wasn't the point of his learning. What was important was that the object transported the child and his imagination to a different land, people, and solution. The object was the spark and it was paramount to his experience. The social and cultural context, aesthetics, environment, and technology of objects like the mousetrap can rarely be achieved with a reproduction. Something real is imbued in the authentic artifact. Attachments are formed through the intangible qualities permeating a hand-made, hand-created object. And children can tell the difference. By placing cultural exhibitions in the ethnographic present, we can afford to purchase real artifacts and replacements so that hands-on activities can truly replicate real life with its textures, shapes, and forms.

What has evolved over the years of working with anthropology for children is a personal commitment to providing children with direct involvement with difference. Difference is presented in an

accessible way—not intimidating, but inviting; not frightening, but welcoming. Foreignness and the unknown become challenges rather than seeds of xenophobia. How a straw hat is made, a garment woven or a musical instrument imbued with sound are not mysteries of “the other” but rather, paths to understanding the vast range of human creativity, aesthetic expressions, raw materials, technology and the limitless human capability to solve survival needs. In a way, these exhibitions allow us to act locally while thinking globally.

I have been told that such re-creations of the ethnographic present “romanticize” world culture, that cultural presentations should really focus on urban life and how kids live in big cities around the world. I can only respond that those who choose to emphasize high-tech and urban elements of world cultures ignore the fact that over 85 percent of the world’s population has never made a telephone call, much less surfed the Internet. What we consider standard life amenities are barely dreams for the vast majority of the world’s children. Thus, visiting these traditional, sometimes pre-industrial societies, through a museum exhibition is hardly romantic. It is reality in its most palpable form. And, it just may humanize that person who lives a dramatically different life and sensitize visitors to other realities that exist at this very moment on the planet.

Experiences with other peoples and cultures stick in peoples’ minds and feelings. Each of us remembers using chopsticks or wearing a sombrero for the first time. We remember the tone of voice of the waiter, teacher or parent who first introduced us to something we didn’t

know or had never done. We remember the texture of rough wool or soft silk. We remember words like kimono, dashiki, or sari. It didn’t take fifty English words to describe these garments. We just learned a new word for something. We don’t even italicize these words anymore. The English language, like the American pluralistic society, is enriched through these additions. Why do we think that today’s kids would have a different response to these experiences than we did? Why do we think that a child’s worldview wouldn’t be broadened through these first-hand experiences as ours was?

Therein lies the goal of the museum exhibition: to take the visitor beyond the engaging event of using chopsticks or putting on a big hat. Museums provide contexts and give us glimpses of the never-ending nuances of the human touch. They tell us things through guides, texts, and programs that we might not learn on our own. Visitors are willing learners. It is our challenge to garner that energy sparked by engaging people in human expressions and give it a run!

The children’s museum setting is usually free of intimidating architectural proportions and information and thus, has an ethos of openness and experimentation. Visitors, adults and children alike, are not self-conscious about stepping into another person’s home or trying on clothing in a children’s museum. These are simply the kinds of things one does in the spirit of the place. All the while, what is also happening is that we educators, curators and designers are subtly implanting the very core of multicultural understanding and, perhaps, preempting other negative cultural stereotypes that haven’t yet been implanted into the child’s worldview.

Museum mission statements—be they in children's museums or others—often deal with critical issues, like multiculturalism, access, content, and discovery among others. We need to ask ourselves if these are in vogue or if they represent real guidelines for evaluating everything that we do: how we conceptualize installations, build community relations, develop programs and staff our institutions? It seems that few museums recognize the social responsibilities implicit in their very existence. Children's museums in particular have the potential of setting an example for the community at large and becoming institutional role models for pluralism and community inclusion. Staffs, boards of directors, people who write texts need to represent and have the sensibilities of the people who come in the doors. When they don't, there can be an implied ethnic, racial and economic division between those who direct and those who visit the museum. The subtle message, then, is that "We who run the museum don't have anything to share with the visitors." We would never want to imply that "We don't have anything to learn from one another." Is programming based on patronism or on inclusion? Does the appearance of our institutions imply elitism or populism? How is this reflected in our exhibitions and programs? How can we honestly present exhibitions with the goal of connecting us to one another if our staff doesn't look like our visiting public?

These thoughts on the inner and outer images of the museum are delicately linked to the central premise of distilling information in order to give children the best possible learning opportunities. Different people bring distinctive cultural consciousness to the exhibition process.

The broader the net cast, the greater the sensibilities expressed, the more inclusive we become. In developing cultural exhibitions, all effort should be made to involve members of the cultures being presented in the exhibition and its programming. We need the insider's eye to guide us in the research process and at the end of the installation, say, "You got it!" We can't just put artifacts into tastefully designed spaces if we don't know what they mean to the people who use them. We would know if we saw an exhibition on the United States that was almost right—but not quite. If a hamburger were served on a slice of square white bread instead of a bun, we would know that something hamburger-ish was presented but it just wasn't right. So, it is with every culture and every challenge that faces a researcher, designer, or museum interpreter.

Returning to the central concern of creating high quality exhibitions, I propose that children's museums dedicate at least part of their exhibition areas to creating settings in which the wonder of cultural diversity and human expressions can be explored and examined from within. Learning in these settings will reinforce the value of all individuals and the vast cultural heritage they are a part of. Let's do what we do best by creating a desire to discover something that we don't know or present cultures in a new light.

Discovery is about humanizing the person who is different from you. Museums have the potential to transform what might be rejected for its difference into examples of basic, understandable solutions for living. It's that simple.

Discovery does not have to be high tech or fancy. Children and adults can understand vernacular architecture. It is a

log cabin, a stone house, or a house of teak slats. It is not a high rise skyscraper. Understanding sophisticated urban architecture takes training to which we can aspire after grasping the basic nature of shelter.

Creating a setting for discovery does not mean that museums must be afraid to take a stand. If, in fact, we educators do not take a stand about the roles that museums can play in helping people to understand one another, then, I deeply believe we are shirking the greatest contribution we can make to the next generation. What greater gift to give a child than the tools to live in a pluralistic society where "the other" is not only in Mexico or Thailand, but also right next to you in line at the supermarket? We don't need to recreate the supermarket. We need to recreate the glorious diversity of human

expressions that informs and builds this complex society.

Museums encourage people, particularly children, to learn through direct contact with tangible differences. These differences ultimately unite us as humans; they do not separate us. While reasonable minds may disagree, the world is NOT becoming as global and homogenous as Wall Street pundits would have us believe. This isn't the central message of multiculturalism or diversity training anyhow. What exhibitions do is give children tools to understanding and thus, respect for the "other."

What greater legacy to give to the next generation?

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