

“So I trusted in nature from day one and noticed an interesting thing: children play, and their best learning happens through play. Children are designed to be curious. From birth on, they want to know and figure out everything. Children are driven to succeed. They are constantly challenging themselves and can actually accomplish it all through a biologically implanted process that we call play.

[“http://www.naomaldort.com/articles.html](http://www.naomaldort.com/articles.html)”

**The Echtheit: Children’s Museums of the future.  
Elaine Heumann Gurian  
HANDS-ON EUROPE, BERLIN, 2007 1**

“For more than 30 years, children’s museums in Europe have been providing hands-on exhibits and programmes that help to deepen children’s understanding of themselves and of the world.

As society changes, children’s museums must keep pace, reflecting contemporary social, cultural, economic, and educational trends. This is extremely challenging within the context of an increasingly diverse society, where people from different backgrounds are living with conflict but striving to co-exist in harmony.

On top of this, our information society gives rise to ever-increasing expectations for children’s museums to be innovative and progressive in the development and execution of their programmes. With more and more »traditional« museums setting up interactive elements and a range of other facilities offering children’s museum types of experiences, it is necessary to reflect on the position of children’s museum in the broader informal learning sector. This conference examines the key aspects of the role of children’s museum in the areas of education policy and politics, social and cultural change and museological standards.”<sup>2</sup>

Based on these words announcing this conference, it would seem that the organizers believe that children's museums have reached a turning point. The world may have changed sufficiently since the last major children's museum experimentation of the 1960's that a new and potentially different paradigm for children's museums is now called for.

In the face of rising attendance in children's museums and the numbers of planned new ones, suggesting that we are producing a stale and predictable product may come as a surprising statement for some.<sup>3</sup> So let us explore the evolving state of children's museums to see if we can ascertain what might be the next successful mutation. As we do that, let us also remind ourselves that operating children's museums are not static and that new paradigms can probably be glimpsed within elements of existing institutions.

I believe that progressive change can be seen in some museums already. Rather than looking for an entirely new paradigm, I believe we must return to philosophical basics and review each museum against its mission and then consider writing a more accurate and reasonable one rather than the common *mélange* of unfocused aspirations. It is time to be more frank with ourselves and our institutions. I will attempt to consider some basics that can serve as a barometer with which to measure change.

## **AUDIENCE SEGMENTS IN CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS.**

Let me parse the audiences of children's museum to see if predicting the future can be glimpsed through the needs of three disparate audience segments – first, the general public most often made up of children and their caregivers, second, school parties and other formal education based groups, and third, members of disadvantaged communities who participate in many different groupings (organized out-of-school groups, subvented visits, or in off-site programs). The expectations of these separate groups have some overlap but they are not always compatible one with another either in their use of space or desire for content. The cost of serving each group varies as does the percentage of staff and staff time devoted to successful service.

Each of these three audience segments is funded by specific but different sources which tend not to overlap. The general public provides the major earned income mostly in the form of admission, membership, and purchased programs and products. The major funders for school groups tend to come from the government's education allocation. And the funders for community groups tend to come from government, charities and corporations (depending on the tax laws of each country) and are influenced by the existing governmental social policy.

Each funding source comes with inherent or overt requirements. In order to successfully receive continued funds, a museum must acknowledge the guidelines and live within them. In a continuous interaction the institution and the funders influence each other. And in a complicated dance the museum must balance the different and sometimes conflicting demands of their disparate funding sources and their different audiences.

In each institution, depending on their internally conceived mission and the available sources of external funding, there is a different mix of visitation between the three groups.

### **The needs of each audience group:**

What do we know about the needs and expectations of each group?

I would contend that when institutions generate a significant amount of their income from admissions, it is the "buying audience" who impacts the program most directly. And it is the well-educated middle and upper classes who are the major purchasers of services. These very same people serve as influential members of the governing boards of most private children's museums and, parenthetically, this influential group of educated affluent parents is often the impetus behind the founding of these children's museums in the first place.

Changes in children's museums philosophical directions over time can be seen to come from parental dissatisfaction with current child-rearing or educational philosophies that

seem to need rebalancing. For example child-rearing literature of the 30's, 40's and into the 50's was seen to be too rigid and formulaic. It was based on avoiding a "spoiled" child which was replaced by the more easy-going permissive literature of the "Spock era", etc. The history of children's museums is, in part, the history of adjusting to the contemporary yearnings of privileged parents and teachers and offering a physical venue that expresses those aspirations.

Since the 70's, parents have been influenced by literature that suggests that success of adults is tied to stimulation at very early ages. Thus, they see the children's museum as a highly desirable institution in their pursuit of stimulation for their own very young children. In many countries this philosophy (based on the work of Jerome Bruner and others) caused the median age of visiting children to move down from the original upper elementary school aged child for whom children's museum was originally designed at the turn of the century to pre-school and early elementary school aged children where the median age of visitors now sits.

These yearnings however are not conjured up out of thin air nor are they consistent or homogeneous. They are the amalgam of the interplay between child-rearing literature, gifted teachers, curriculum development, the current educational theory, the intelligent popular press and currently, parenting blogs where parents talk directly to each other in a search for advice and aid. Thus, reading child-rearing material in the press can serve as an important forecaster of what will be expected in children's museums in the near future.

The second principal audience group is the school group. Teachers need curriculum justification to take their classes to the museum because field trips are expensive and because, currently at least in America, there is considerable pressure on every teacher to produce specifically prescribed and tested academic achievement for every class. To address that pressure, the children's museum needs to advertise and provide an experience

that is educationally useful and that distinguishes itself from its general-audience reputation as a “play place.”

The beloved hands-on exhibition design based on individual choice and free exploration are often anathema to the teacher who needs every child to have a common experience. The curriculum provided for school groups tends to focus on slightly older children than those brought by their parents during free time. These school children include a wider economic stratum, diverse languages and experiences. Depending on the school, this may be the first museum experience of any kind for some of the children.

Because the teachers demand more content, the museum provides more instructional personnel, both paid and volunteer, and more attention to curriculum development often using carry-on props rather than the exhibition as the focus.

In United States children’s museums, the school group audience is somewhere between 20-40% of annual attendance and is artificially limited by the museum administration because in part, funding for school groups is not sufficient to accommodate them all; in Europe, especially if the subvention allows for free school-based entrance, the percentage can be much higher.

While the family group is the audience that the exhibits are often designed for, the salaried staff is primarily hired to work with the school groups. Trained teachers on the staff find school groups easier to predict and easier to prepare for than working with the unpredictable general audience. Without altering the balance of program offerings preferred by the staff, more school programs and school-like programs would be provided than any other.

The third principal children’s museum audience group is children and their caregivers from the lower economic strata. This group tends to be referred to euphemistically as “community.” No matter what ethnicity, racial or language group, they have different

expectations from those already discussed. They tend to be wary of institutions and do not have a museum-going tradition. They are skittish about authority and venturing out into unfamiliar environments that have clearly been organized for others. They are generally non-trusting of those who offer good deeds and who might be well-meaning but appear patronizing or worse, irrelevant. They often come, for example, from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds than the more affluent attendees in the same city; they often have more than one language spoken at home and are not always fluent in the majority language. They may have an uneasy status in society as guest workers or immigrants, both legal and illegal. The lives of the adults are more stressed, and they are more focused on issues of immediate need. Generally they do not feel completely welcome into the museum.

This audience is not waiting around hoping to be invited in. Serving this group is not as simple as providing increased access. Without knowledgeable and experienced staff advocates, a philosophy of cultural acceptance in a nuanced fashion and without consistent funding streams provided by charities or governments, this group is served only minimally and intermittently despite the institutions rhetoric.

### **Public and private not-for-profit governance:**

The influence each group of users has in shaping the direction of any particular institution varies either by percentage of use or percentage of funding. For example there are profound programmatic differences between those institutions that are founded as private not-for-profit institutions, those established as augmentations to the schools and those that are not only funded by the state but are a product of government policy. It is the intention of the institution that determines its major focus.

These groups are not interchangeable and do not measure success in the same way. The adult, in the general visitor segment, wishes for a steady flow of changing exhibitions and experiences for their children and a clean and aesthetic environment. As a group they share common child-rearing practices with each other and expect the staff to relate to their

children in certain ways. These include encouragement for endeavors great and small with a gentle insistence on sharing and “taking turns” in a civil manner.

To serve this important (and revenue-producing) population best, many private museums encourage, wittingly or unwittingly, certain class-determined attitudes toward children. For example, there is an expectation that the volitional visitor child has leisure time, access to technology, has traveled, has access to enough nutrition, knows references to childhood movies and books, and comes from homes where learning is encouraged and success is expected.

Most of the children of this population have had a more protected upbringing than their own parents. They are carted around from one safe environment to another, have constant supervision, or even interference from adults, and less exposure to the consequences of their decisions than do their less affluent counterparts.

The parents wish their children to be protected and expect the museum to be safe, albeit challenging. They remember their own childhood fondly and recall (sometimes inaccurately) being able to leave the house freely and explore the neighborhood by themselves and with their friends without adult supervision. They often wish for a return to these values while still providing supervision and safety and hope the museum will create such a place. Thus we see the rise of many “in-door playground” components. Yet these playgrounds are generally structured with varieties of freedom that are much narrower than the previous generation experienced for themselves.

An inevitable tension exists between the interests of parents of these families and funders of programs for the other two principal audience groups. These funders often look at statistics of impact on a scale that is unrealistic. Their measurement of success is not based on individual impact but rather on numerical counts. Institutions founded by or principally funded by governments are more interested in using their organizations as instruments of

social policy which includes child welfare, work-force training and the elevation of talent as national treasure.

And in addition to the differing measurement of success, they advocate for different types of service. A current interplay between these competing interests can be seen in the interest of “after-school” programs. While the middle class has often over-programmed their children, it would seem that the underserved population could do with more directed programming. So children’s museum are offering more out-of-school programming as an instrument of government and foundation policy just at the same time, parents are fantasizing about more free time for their children.

The “SureStart” experiment recently initiated by the Blair government in the UK -- linking parenting centers, interactive play centers, and social service in a comprehensive program -- is worth watching as a government funded model serving more than a million families of the less advantaged. In addition to child-care models similar to head-start, SureStart has voluntary drop-in centers that quite resemble play spaces in children’s museums.

### **The squeeze of three interlocking audience segments:**

If serving three distinct and not necessarily compatible groups were not difficult enough, each one of the groups – family, school, and community – is influenced by both a philosophy that is currently in practice and a debate of that practice among scholars and thinkers, with successive new philosophies waiting in the wings. So one must not only segment one’s audience and establish their specific needs, it is also important to ascertain each group’s upcoming philosophy in order to predict and then prepare for the future. And of course, the specifics of the debate vary country to country.

Each group’s philosophy over the decades can be seen to change on a continuum that moves from the glorification of the individual to the importance of group coherence. For

example, the middle class family, influenced by theories of good parenting and good education, generally waver between the need to accommodate individual's wishes, achievements and desires and the need for family harmony working as a cooperative unit. In school, changes in philosophy move from achievement of the individual child to the need for a classroom-wide mastery of a commonly agreed curriculum of attainment. Further the school is effected by the specific need to create an educated workforce within a peaceable society. For the community there is the tension between the need for harmonious group interaction with a common national agenda (the melting pot) and the rights of the different culture groups to maintain their identity (multiculturalism). This can be seen world-wide between the debate between the need for and pride in a national identity and the celebration of individual cultures of migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants. Overall one can hear now about the need for altruism, civility and citizenship while pressuring individual youngster to attain increased skill.

While the specificity of goals vary country to country, philosophies all revolve about maximizing the success of the individual while at the same time creating a harmonious and cohesive group. While the preferred philosophy guiding action is always in flux, the reality is that these tensions are inbuilt and ultimately unsolvable. The tension inherent in these unsolvable polarities and the interrelationship between the three competing users of the institution make for a very interesting and ever-changing stew in children's museums, in our education system as a whole and in the notion of citizenship within each country.

These are all influenced by the current larger overlay of subject matter concerns in all our societies. Some of the current ones involve the alarm of global warming on our very existence, the tension between religious forces and political extremism on the body politic, the amount of terrorist violence potentially imminent in all countries, the rise of the use of internet and other technology as redistributors of economic power, the emerging changes in our educational system needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that reward innovation and

entrepreneurship of acquisition of specific content, and the vast migration of people looking for better opportunities.

### **Let us return to first principals:**

In order to predict the future, I would suggest we return to underlying first principals. In my paper titled “Choosing” I described the majority of children’s museums as “client centered” a term I learned from Michael Spock and then went on to describe these as:

“The museum’s main focus is on ways of promoting learning among their targeted visitors (i.e. children and families) (Borun, 1995). The staffs of these institutions view themselves primarily as educators and are interested in child-rearing norms and learning theory, and continue to seek out and embed this theory in improved approaches to their programs and exhibitions.

The principal visitors to these museums include novice learners of all ages. Exhibitions and programs are structured to reduce any apprehension to learning. Since client-centered museums are focused on the audience, their concern includes the non-achiever, the non-literate, and the handicapped.....

A strength of these client-centered museums is “free-choice learning.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than working with school groups as groups, these museums often allow individual exploration. And they are interested in enhancing socializing behavior between individuals. These museums often intentionally provide psychologically supportive environments to parents, caregivers, and their children.” (Gurian, 2002)

### **The questions that come to mind --**

Given these first principals, here are some questions we must ask ourselves.

For the family:

- Is the foundational exhibition technique of the last three decades -- hands-on interactivity (while still useful, beloved, and increasingly imitated elsewhere) -- enough to sustain the institution?
- What are the prevalent parenting theories and how will they affect children's museums?
- Given that the ages of children served have been lowered over time, are these institutions sustainable or is there a way to broaden their appeal?
- Have children's museums become indoor physical playgrounds and adventure parks and less "educational" if so, is that ok?

For the school group:

- What is the prevailing and upcoming philosophy needed to educate our next generation?
- How has the technological age affected our young children and should children's museums counter technology or embrace it?
- Is the current quality and quantity of content level sufficient to sustain these institutions as educational? Appropriate to the ages served?
- What is the role of values, altruism and citizenship that should be enhanced by these institutions?

For the community:

- What is the real meaning of “town square” and “forum” in the context of Children’s museums?
- Should museums be advocates for causes?
- Is social service an appropriate and integrated activity within the institution? If the answer is yes, what is the local need and context for our meaningful involvement?
- How can multi-cultural peaceable interaction be enhanced within the walls of the museum?
- Given the assault of authoritative institutions by the rise of the internet, blogging, etc. what is the appropriate change in voice and tone between the institution and its users to accommodate the user as teacher and participant?

Inevitably, individual children’s museums, in asking themselves these questions, will create new missions to replace old ones, seek new pathways to enlarge their subject matter, expand their service to different age groups, and broaden their relationship to the educational and social service systems in their environment. In a word, using a matrix of audiences and their needs, museums will inevitably change.

## **WHAT’S TO BECOME OF CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS?**

At the outset of this paper, I suggested that children’s museums may have exhausted the potential of the current paradigm, even as their numbers continue to grow, and other museums continue to borrow from children’s museums strategies and poach (appropriately) on their audience. I remain unconvinced that a viable new paradigm is waiting in the wings ready to supplant what we have. Rather there is, and always needs to be, rethinking and changing in parts of our institutions on a continual basis. I would contend that the long term sustainability of children’s museums is not based on tweaks in strategy, subject matter, or audience mix, but in fulfilling the deeply held and often unexpressed aspirations of parents,

teachers, community leaders and politicians. We need constantly to return to our basics of involvement in learning theory, specific need and empowerment of users within the local community.

To review: The changes in children's museums strategies, when they occur, result from a general and generalized dissatisfaction with and recalibration of commonly held beliefs of child rearing, educational philosophy or civic tranquility that are seen to be no longer working. The history of children's museums is, in part, the history of making the contemporary yearnings of parents (often privileged and teachers and the expressed government policy (writ small) visible. Children's museums are the physical venue that makes new aspirations visible.

## **MY PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS**

Based on my assessment of current aspirations I would contend that contemporary children's museums have too much "doing" and too much stimulation. Given new findings on art, on imagination, creativity, and innovation, there is not enough time to smell the flowers, walk in the woods, see the sunset, practice skills to one's own satisfaction, or even being able to identify one's own "satisfaction" in the first place. There is a pervasive lack of silence for children, of satisfying examples of doing nothing, of fostering and teaching children the pleasures and repose of an internal reflective life. Modern children's museums have not paid enough attention to imagination and fantasy, examples of meaningful work, idealism and beauty, religion and spirituality, handwork and kindness, silence and inner lives, and creativity.

Parents need some help leaving children alone. For example Naomi Aldort suggests:

“... there are no grand roles for us grown-ups: true creative play needs no active encouragement or support. And no, we don't need to be the source of the fun or do much entertaining.”<sup>5</sup>

And finally we need museums with more belly laughs, less accomplishment testing, and more plain old fashioned “horsing around”.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the organic successor to many previous writings on Children's Museums including, “The Molting of the Children's Museum in GURIAN, E. H. (2006) *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*, Cambridge, England, Routledge , *Museum management and curatorship*, Guildford, Surrey, Butterworth-Heinemann. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/02604779>. a speech to the “Hands On” Conference in Lisbon in May 1998, subsequently presented at the Association of Children's Museum conference of the same year. The basis of this paper was written first with Anne Dobbs Tribble as

GURIAN, E. H. & TRIBBLE, A. D. (Eds.) (1985) *Children's Museums, An Overview*, And revised as

GURIAN, E. H. (1995) A Draft History of Children's Museums. Cleveland Children's Museum Underpinning it all is a debt of gratitude to Gregory Baeker for his master's thesis written in 1981 and to Anne Dobbs Tribble now Butterfield for all the work we have done together.

BAEKER, G. G. (1981) *The Emergence of Children's Museums in the United States 1899-1940. Museum Studies*. Toronto, University of Toronto

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from the on-line write-up of the Hands On Europe Conference in Berlin, November 2007

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<sup>3</sup> The museum website of the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) reproduces a 2001 Chicago Tribune article that puts the attendance figures of US children’s museums at 33 million up from 8 million in 1991, the number of institutions at almost 300 from 200 in 1990 and 38 in 1975 with 80 in the planning phase and many existing children’s museums in the process of expansion.

DEAN, T. L. (2001) Children's Museums Exhibit Attendance Leap Over Decade. *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago, [http://www.childrensmuseums.org/Chicago\\_Tribune.htm](http://www.childrensmuseums.org/Chicago_Tribune.htm).

4 Falk, John, director of the Institute for Learning Innovation favors this term to describe the learning behavior in most museums. The website uses the expression multiple times, i.e., “Established in 1986, the Institute for Learning Innovation is a non-profit organization committed to understanding, facilitating, and communicating about free-choice learning. “

<sup>5</sup>Naomi Aldort, the Authentic Parenting Site, <http://www.authenticparent.com/>