

The Children's Museum: History, Careers, Issues, and the Future

In America today, there are over 242 children's museums and a total of 341 worldwide. The states in America with the largest numbers of these museums are California, New York, Illinois, Texas, and North Carolina.¹ These museums are not what we would typically consider as a museum. There are no ancient artifacts, no classic artworks, and no security officers telling you to keep away from the displays. Children's museums are interactive educational playplaces. Children can climb to the top of a mountain inside of a children's museum, for example; or they can also crawl below the ground and learn about the underground world of a city. Overall, children's museums are extraordinary places for children to explore and learn, but there are also many issues to consider with these museums. The museums often have huge corporate sponsorships, the playplaces are considered too dangerous, the museums are not very educational, and by targeting children they are limiting the numbers of people that will come to the museum, just to name a few of the issues. This paper will unravel the entire story of children's museums and discuss what the future holds for these educational playplaces.

History of the Children's Museum

According to the Historical Dictionary of American Education "no formal history of the children's museums in America exists" (77). However, it is important to see the groundwork of these museums so in searching a bit deeper one can find out much more. John Dewey proposed the first children's museum while working at the Chicago Laboratory School (HDAE, 76). John Dewey was a known force for education reformatting during the early part of the 20th century.

¹ Statistical Information from: The Association of Children's Museums Website

The first children's museum is believed to be the Brooklyn Children's Museum and it opened in 1897 (HDAE, 76). The website for the Brooklyn Children's Museum states that it was opened in 1899, so there is discrepancies in the facts. However, the Brooklyn Children's Museum is heralded as being the first to have the idea for a hands-on museum for children. The curator of the Brooklyn Children's Museum initially was Anna Billings Gallup considered to be a pioneer today of children's museums (Brooklynkids.org). Anna Gallup² was a young woman at the age of 30, just out of college when she came to the museum. In an article for the Journal of the National Institute of Social Sciences, Anna Billings Gallup states in her article "Museums for Children" that the founder of the idea of children's museums was William H. Goodyear (107). Mr. Goodyear was the curator for the Fine Arts Museum in Brooklyn. It is easy to see that there are many pieces to the children's museum foundation.

The museum focused on learning the natural sciences, this could be because of Gallup's biology background, but this was the first museum to offer to children to experiment and play with the sciences to learn about them. But perhaps with a combination of the ideas of both Gallup and Goodyear, today's children's museums have developed. The museum has become a melting of both the arts and sciences to create an educational playground for children. During Gallup's time there she really revolutionized the idea of a museum and wrote many documents that have founded the current ideas behind the children's museum.

During the early 1960s and early 1970s, the children's museum became more popular in America (HDAE, 77). During this time, the children's museum took on the more playplace characteristic. Upholding and developing hands-on learning to the fullest extent, children's museum has become a great destination for children. Enabling interactive learning has been determined to be one of the best methods for children's educational development. The most popular children's museum across the country today are San Francisco's Exploratorium,

² Information about Anna Billings Gallup from "The Museum in America: Innovators and Pioneers" by Edward P. Alexander.

the Boston's Children's Museum, the Indianapolis Children's Museum, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum (HDAE, 77).

Today's museum really sprang out of Gallup's "Museum's for Children" which introduced the world to the world of the children's museum. The Brooklyn Museum opened at a time when "forbidding signs, 'Children under twelve years of age not admitted unless accompanied by an adult.'" (Gallup, 107). The museums today are very successful across the country and the world. Nearly 30 million people visit children's museums every year according to an Association of Children's Museum survey. The Association for Children's Museums is a group that connects all of the museums around the world to maintain one mission for children's museums: "to serve as town squares for children and families where play inspires creativity and lifelong learning."

Careers

Children's museums offer many job opportunities, but the titles may be a little bit different than the typical museum or a library. Currently at the Boston Children's library they have openings for a: Birthday Party Coordinator, Exhibit Interpreter, Grants and Foundations Manager, Visitor Service Associate, and the Vice President of Development (Bostonchildrensmuseum.org). These are all quite interesting especially the birthday party coordinator, which is basically a party coordinator, so that could definitely be a fun position. Otherwise there are many library-focused careers at children's museums. At the Brooklyn Children's museum currently they are seeking an Education Resource Center Project Coordinator, this position requires a library degree in order to apply. Other examples of library degree required positions at children's museums are: Library Services Director, Educational Services, Exhibition Development, and many others. Many of the children's museums are operated with lots of help from volunteers. Having a library science degree for children's museums is useful, but not always necessary. The organization of the materials at a children's museum is very different than at a typical museum. There are no archives and it is a constant learning process of what the children are interested in and also what is

the most educational. A librarian can coordinate all of these processes with knowledge of children's services and materials.

ISSUE I: Museum vs. Playplace

A big issue within children's museums is whether or not they should actually be considered a museum. Surprisingly, only four percent of all children's museums are accredited by the American Association of Museums.³ According to the American Association of Museums to receive accreditation from the association a museum must:

- be a legally organized nonprofit institution or part of a nonprofit organization or government entity
- be essentially educational in nature
- have a formally stated and approved mission
- use and interpret objects and/or a site for the public presentation of regularly scheduled programs and exhibits
- have a formal and appropriate program of documentation, care, and use of collections and/or objects
- carry out the above functions primarily at a physical facility/site
- have been open to the public for at least two years
- be open to the public at least 1,000 hours a year
- have accessioned 80 percent of its permanent collection
- have at least one paid professional staff with museum knowledge and experience
- have a full-time director to whom authority is delegated for day-to-day operations
- have the financial resources sufficient to operate effectively demonstrate it meets the Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum

The reasons that a children's museum is so often not considered a museum is detailed in why they do not qualify for this accreditation. The top signifier, "be a legally organized nonprofit institution or part of a nonprofit organization or government entity" is usually not the case of these museums. Another issue, that the essay will address further, is that they are almost all funded by big corporations like Target or McDonalds and cannot be considered nonprofit institutions because of this. Also ticket prices for a typical children's museum are

³ Statistical Information from: The Association of Children's Museums Website

going to be usually much closer to the cost of a children's admission into an amusement park than to an art museum.

Continuing, although children's museums are considered educational in nature, there has also been some debate within this as well. The educational benefits of these playplaces are not easily distinguishable amongst the books and artwork that other museums may offer. Which goes into the actual material housed within a museum. It is usually built within, similar to a playground, and does not feature any sort of exhibits per se. So the part of the criteria that states, "use and interpret objects and/or a site for the public presentation of regularly scheduled programs and exhibits" can also dismiss some of the children's museums. Similar to science museums, children's museums do not really fit the typical idea of a museum. Although it is perhaps a better way to learn, it may not be any different than the public park or day care in the eyes of many in the public.

In 1972 it was groundbreaking to see that when taking a child to a museum it was necessary to make it more interesting by playing games and having interactive puzzles so that the museum would come to life in the child's mind as discussed in Susan Sollins, "Games Children Play: In Museums." Sollins' ideas of incorporating a bit of fun into the color wheel or the classical portrait from the 1700s make clear sense. The incorporation of this idea in the children's museum is quite in your face.

There have been no studies done of the overall educational benefits of children's museums, but it is easy to see that the museums are reaching the children in a way that no other museum or media can. The idea of a museum does need to be expanded to include modern concepts, but also children's museums should do some more adapting to the classical principles of museums to make a relationship between both ideas. In Houston Texas they are working on establishing a relationship between the children's museum and the public library system, this is discussed by Maureen White, et al. in "Great Things Come in Small Packages: A Parent Resource Library." The Houston children's library was developed with the parent in mind, ensuring that all of the exhibits that they

have are safe and also educational. Many children's museums have established relationships with libraries and this creates a solid educational basis for the museum⁴. Having the resource of the public library has really helped the Houston children's library and museum system to become more successful overall.

At the inception of the Brooklyn Children's museum, Gallop stated in her article that "[the] aim [of the museum] is to give children an active interest in and love for Nature, and to offer encouragement and practical assistance to young people engaged in nature study pursuits" (107). It is important for children's museums to keep in mind that they should have a target to their educational playplaces and also incorporate some real exhibits of art, historical objects, nature specimens, etc... Further into the article Gallup describes the contents of her museum at the time as having:

Carefully selected and prepared specimens and models illustrative of the various departments of science; operates a wireless telegraph station; maintains a Nature reference library of about 7,500 volumes; conducts free courses of illustrated lectures; lends natural history specimens to schools; offers the continuous services of a docent, and encourages the activities of children's Nature clubs and societies (107).

Perhaps with this foundation, one can understand why the Brooklyn Children's Museum is on the short list of children's museums that are accredited American Association of Museums. A big issue in today's libraries is a lack of a collection of any sort. White et al. address this, "[t]he only mention of children's museum library collections was in the context of an extension to learning based on a particular exhibit" (8). Children's museums should work to incorporate more classical ideas of the museum into their formatting or they at some point will lose the respect of visitors.

ISSUE II: Corporate Sponsorship

Children's museums frequently have many issues with money and staying

⁴ Diamant-Cohen, Betsy and Sherman, Dina. "Hand in Hand Museums and Libraries Working Together."

up to date technologically. Too often this means that the director of a children's museum will allow a big corporation to promote their products through the children's museum. It is not a basic corporate sponsorship it turns into a corporation advertising free for all. This means that the corporation can perhaps change the name of a train ride exhibit to Coca-Cola Polar Bear Express or give out goods with their logo, and so on... It is a bit of a hairy scenario since children are the most advertised to group of all. Parents try to shield their children to advertising, because children are very susceptible to the ads. If a child sees an ad for the newest hottest toy they will usually demand it with vigor. So having so much advertising in a public children's museum can create visitor disappointment and distrust in the quality of the materials housed within.

Something positive that has begun recently in the world of corporate sponsorships of museums are the Target Free Days. Museums across the country thanks to donations from Target are open one day of a week completely free to the public. It is a great marketing tool for Target and also gets more visitors into the museum. As mentioned before, the cost of going to these children's museums is a bit pricier than the average museums so this is a great opportunity to showcase the museum to new users. There are about eleven children's museums that offer the Target free day including: the Chicago Children's Museum, the Children's Museum of Denver, the Indianapolis Museum for Children, and Boston's Children's Museum. Doing these type of corporate sponsorships is a more acceptable strategy for businesses. Overall, this sponsorship makes Target appear more education and community friendly and other businesses should take note of this tactic.

ISSUE III: Modern Parenting and Safety Concerns

Recently, the first release of classic Sesame Street shows from 1969-1974 was released on DVD, on the case there is a disclaimer that states "that they are intended for grown-ups and may not suite the needs of today's preschoolers."⁵ Parenting has come a long way since 1974, some are positive and some are

⁵ National Public Radio Story, "Sesame Street Reissues Not for Kids." 15 Nov 2007.

negative. Nonetheless, parents have a great role in whether or not they will bring their children to a children's museum. A child will not drive him/herself to the museum or even walk. So if a museum is not concerned with a parent's perception of the museums educational or safety values, they are bound to lose visitors. The article by White et al. discusses the struggles of working with parent's a creating a zone where both children can have fun and parents will not worry. At the Houston museum that White et al. describe, "[t]here are no visual barriers in the space, so parents can see their children at all times." Most children's museums do not go to this extent. Take for example the City Museum of St. Louis, it is a large art sculpture jungle piece made out of junkyard materials refashioned to create a children's playplace called MonstroCity. A picture is provided below:

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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This aircraft in the air is probably 12 stories into the air and you can climb all the way up from the ground to this area through the chains and tubes and every imaginable thing. Also, yes those are people climbing through the spring tube high in the sky. It is truly amazing. However, there are many people who see this as being far too dangerous. There have been a few lawsuits against the museum in St. Louis for broken ankles and such, but they have all settled out of

⁶ Photo Courtesy of The City Museum's Myspace Page

court and nothing more. In the St. Louis area there are not any protest groups against this space, but given the current environment it is very surprising.

Parents today are very protective over their children and we are losing a lot of the great fun spaces that have been created for children because of it. Children's museums should compromise to a certain degree with parental demands, but perhaps not as far as Houston has gone. They also should not go so far as the City Museum in St. Louis to go against the grain and test parents. Again, ultimately it is the parent who decides on whether or not to go to the museum.

ISSUE IV: Children being "Children"

Limiting the children's museum to only be for children within itself has limitations. Many children stop wanting to be called children at six or seven, although by most standards they are obviously still considered children. The name of "children's museum" probably does draw away to the actual content of the museum. Many of the children's museum have taken on other ways to take away this stigma of the children's museum name. For example, Kaleidoscope in Kansas City, MO or the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia, PA, these museums have made a successful attempt to keep names within the realms of the children's museums ideals but to keep away from limiting it to only "children." In the end, it's hard to distinguish what would be better to name it a name that most people can recognize for your space or to change it to accommodate a wider audience.

Most children's museums have a limit on the age of around twelve. The most frequent age group to frequent the museums is around seven years old. Perhaps including more programs for all ages and advertising those more frequently would dismiss some of these concerns. Many children's museums are not restrictive towards people without children coming and visiting, but some museums do have a strict policy on if you are over 18 you must have a child with you. This can be protective for the children for fears of child predators and other crimes of that nature. However, it can be very limiting for people that would

enjoy the exhibits housed within. This also goes to the issue of similar to Chuck E. Cheese, there are height and size limits on most of the indoor playplaces because they were built with a child in mind. Having a parent run around on their knees through some of these exhibits can be treacherous and can lead to a parent being unhappy with the overall children's museum experience. These museums are really walking on a fine line with the creation educational fun spaces.

ISSUE V: Educational Benefits

Children's museums are easily questioned for their educational benefits. Some of the children's museums are doing a great job in securing strong ties to their play spaces and educational information. Of course there are some that are not as successful, creating very large indoor McDonald's Playlands and not really offering much beyond this. There should be more checks on the environments created in children's museums. If the museums perhaps did not have to comply with the Association of American Museums but to a separate organization associated with Children's Museums. This is a partial attempt of the Association of Children's Museums, but there is no checking policy. To join their organization you have to fill out a form, there is no further check on the quality of the exhibits, sadly.

Creating successful playplaces and exhibits is key to having a museum that will remain funded, visited, and treasured. Children are the future of this world and it is important to make an impression of both lasting fun and education to keep them coming back when they have children themselves. As Marian Koren elaborates in her article, "Children's Rights, Libraries' Potential and the Information Society:"

Most children are underestimated. Their thoughts and feelings are not taken into account, their views not seen, their voices not heard. Yet they do feel, they can think and create their own solutions. Sometimes one can even wonder who is educating whom.

The opportunities for education within the children's museum are endless.

However, most museums are not expanding the ideas because of pressure from funders and directors and other sources. Now is the time to think outside of the box and create a new children's museum for the future.

The Future

It is important with children's museums to think of the future. Staying on top of technology and children's culture is essential for success with the children. But even beyond this in the future, the children of today are smarter and will continue on this trend hopefully for the rest of time. Children's museums must incorporate more educational materials and activities into the museums to stay on top of this culture. Also children are very used to playing in digital spaces. Developing spaces in which children can play with other children in new ways could really open up the museum world to them. Furthermore, the future of children's museums is in the hands of the children's museums of today, making any changes in any of the issues above will cause a shift in the culture of these museums. Achieving the balance between children's fun and parent's worry is going to make all of the difference in having a museum stand the test of time. If parents do not go to the museums today their children will not go in the future when they have children of their own.

Final Thoughts

As Anna Billings Gallup foresaw, Children's Museums were a new way to incorporate children into museums that was not allowed prior to the creation in 1899. Quickly after the creation of the children's museum children were going to more museums as Marion E. Fenton discusses in her address entitled, "Work with Children at the Museum," from 1911, "[I]f any of us had been asked five years ago we may have answered truly that a museum and especially an art museum was a place for grown-ups and not a place for children under foot" (62). Children's museums have really been great fighters in the world for children's rights. The people who work at children's museums truly appreciate that they are providing a space for children to play that's both educational and lots of fun.

Solving all of the issues above will probably only result in more issues to develop, but it is a step in the right directions for these museums. The early founders of these museums really had great insight on what the spaces could be for children, if we expand on these ideas the museums will be unstoppable.

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