

# hand to hand

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM NETWORK

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## State of the Museum



## Michael Spock:

LOOKING BACK ON 23 YRS

One of the highlights of last year's American Association of Youth Museum's Inter-Activity was listening to Michael Spock reflect upon his twenty three years at the helm of the Boston Children's Museum—a leadership under which BCM gained an international reputation for innovative informal educational programs and interactive exhibits. The Boston Children's Museum is not only a role model for other children's museums but has had an impact on all types of institutions. In addition, it serves as a national training center for professionals in museum interpretation and education.

In *Children's Museums, Zoos, and Discovery Rooms: An International Reference Guide*, author Barbara Fleisher Zucker states that "Almost immediately (upon Michael Spock becoming director in 1962), an institution that had changed little for years began to show new vitality. The 1960s hands-on participatory exhibit, 'What's inside,' became the first of many pioneering installations."

Michael Spock began his museum career designing and building exhibits for the Dayton Museum of Natural History and the Ohio State Museum. Although the Children's Museum may have been his first leadership position in the field, many have since followed. These have included being a founder of the American Association of Youth Museums, Massachusetts Cultural Alliance, and Cultural Education Collaborative. He has been a member of the American Association of Museums' Council since 1971, serving as an officer several times. He has also held positions on the AAM/COM Board.

Michael Spock has been Vice President for Public Programs at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago since January 1986. There he is "responsible for rebuilding a major public museum into an effective community resource including all exhibits, programs, and public support systems." He is challenged by this mandate and feels more freedom for creative "play" in his job since shedding the responsibilities of "being the boss."

Michael Spock is fond of talking about the special educational role of museums as "places with real stuff." Michael Spock, himself, is a "real" person in terms of being genuinely open and very unassuming. His keynote speech, presented below, was characteristically friendly, informal, and low key.

I recall the first day I arrived at work. Everybody looked suspiciously at me and wondered who I was and what I was going to do. Prior to being hired, I had gone through a series of interviews with members of the Board and I remember myself doing all this arm waving—saying we could do this and that—all kinds of ideas that were just coming out of the top of my head. That first day I asked for a few things and my secretary closed the door behind me with the assumption that *now* something was going to happen. So I sat down at the desk and, after looking in all the drawers, I asked myself "now what?" I didn't have the foggiest idea of what I was going to do next—probably because I had never run anything before in my life.

Even questions as fundamental as "What is a children's museum?" were a mystery to me at that point. There were all kinds of jokes about stuffed children, after all, you have art, science, and history museums so a children's museum has to be about kids (and in fact there are a few children's museums about the history of childhood). So I was really just mucking around for a long time, trying to find my way.

The Boston Children's Museum originally started as a teacher's center in 1908 and became a museum 5 years later. It was created by teachers who felt that the "serious" museums in town weren't paying attention to the educational potential of museums in terms of what they could do for school teachers or parents. Their sense was quite in opposition to what was going on. They were trying to make a clear and different statement. I think that intention has been the motivating force for many children's museums, even ones that are beginning now.

By the early 1960s museums had realized that there was an educational role for them to play. At that time nobody was paying any attention to the Children's Museum and nobody cared about what we did, we had

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Michael Spock, Director of The Boston Children's Museum from 1962-1985

In  
Cooperation  
With

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH MUSEUMS

# Spock: Looking Back

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a few jovous years, before everybody caught on, when we could do almost anything. Even the mistakes were welcome because something was happening and it looked like change.

Looking back on a moment in institutional history, one easily forgets all the hardships that occurred in arriving to this point today. Now it looks very neat and linear—there's a big building, professional staff, substantial exhibits, etc. So I'd like to tell you some of the things that, in retrospect, seem to be a collection of issues and observations that may be helpful and interesting to think about.

## Audience

This business of the name—should it be called the Children's Museum or not—took us seven or eight years to figure out. When I first arrived, the museum didn't look any different than any other museum. So I spent a lot of time exploring what made it a children's museum and not just a smaller adult museum. What seems absolutely self-evident now was a real struggle back then. The breakthrough (relating to the "children's" part of the name) came when we finally understood that what makes a children's museum different is that it is *for* somebody rather than about something. This idea of being client-centered directs an extraordinary number of decisions on a day-to-day basis, all kinds of things, even administrative structures, begin to fall into place in a straightforward way. The other aspect of our name—the "museum" part—comes from the fact that the Boston Children's Museum is an object-based institution. I know that a lot of children's museums aren't collecting institutions but that thing-based quality is a critical part of Boston's name.

A startling revelation to us was that half of the number of people who come to all children's museums are adults. What does that mean? Does that imply anything? Certainly driving the car is an important part of why they're there but you only need 1 adult to drive 5 kids. We discovered (and so many of these realizations came from a 19th-century naturalist type of wandering around out in the world, observing, speculating and then suddenly seeing things become clear) that the reason more or as many adults as kids come to children's museums is that they are places where someone who doesn't have credentials can feel comfortable. A lot of museums intimidate adults and make them feel like they need some prerequisites before they can make good use of them or should even visit them. Children's museums are places for beginners or people who don't want to admit that they don't know about something.

Strategies for interaction, in spite of the name of our institutions, have to address this relationship of the adult and child working together in the space. Therefore, even though it may not be reasonable to expect kids to read labels, one of the dynamics is that parents need some other information in support of the role they are playing there, including their own introduction to the subject matter based on words, diagrams, etc. Initially, this was something we didn't understand.

Probably one of the most profound discoveries is that the same child essentially becomes a different audience depending on the context in which he/she visits the museum—as a member of a school class, as a neighborhood kid hanging out after school who becomes almost an adjunct staff member, as part of a family or, even timewise, as a five-year-old who is now visiting years later as a ten-year-old. Therefore each of the strategies you develop (again in a client-centered way) turns out to be startlingly different. So many museums say, "our audiences are adults, or children, or tourists, etc." They don't get enough time given their understanding that the dynamics change depending on the constellation of people and the type of visit they are dealing with.

## Exhibit Process

Once you claim to be a client-centered institution, you become much more serious about evaluation. The question of "is it working?" just demands to be addressed. We soon realized that evaluation done at the completion of a project is almost totally worthless. At the end of developing something new, either (1) the money has been spent so you can't do much about whatever you learn from the evaluation, or (2) you're sick to death of it because you've committed so much of your energy and emotions, you need a breather at that point and just can't make any more changes, even if you've been cautious

and saved money. Therefore, "process evaluation"—the kind you do along the way as you're developing the idea—is very important and is most effective in understanding what works and what doesn't.

*So what does one use to describe a "process evaluation"? A brilliant, elegant, simple way of stating what appears then momentary seemed like a very complicated issue. Elegant exhibits come out of strong intellectual demands and a rigorous process of development.*

One thing that's true in children's museums, however, is that you keep coming back to revise the same project even years later. Mike Sand (who is head of his own consulting firm) originally developed our exhibit on Zoetropes (the drums with slips of paper in them that you spin to make a movie). That exhibit went through ten transformations over a twenty-five year period. Each time we went back and worked on it there were still things that needed to be tinkered with. Frequently, when we revised something we would forget the critical variables that our memory as an institution had stored because the same person who was making the revision was not involved in the original development. It's like unknitting part of a sweater each time you redo it.

As an example, the original zoetrope drum was black on the outside and we thought since it looked so dull we'd make it lustrous. When we spun it and looked down—in that first glorious moment of anticipation—we couldn't see a thing; there was so much reflection, so much ambient light from the outside, that you couldn't see through the slits to the background. That was the reason for painting it black that people in the 19th century had known but we had forgotten. The Exploration's Cookbooks are great because they analyze the critical variables of an exhibit and allow you to play with and redevelop something yourself as long as you don't forget those important factors.

Being a children's museum is serious business. It doesn't take you off the hook about quality and standards. It is an intellectually demanding field for the staff. When developing an exhibit, it's imperative that you have a conceptual framework you keep working with and applying to content and methodology. This is not easy. There



Michael Spock outside the "CitySlice" exhibit  
The Boston Children's Museum

are exhibits that result from long, difficult process that appear so simple you might look at them and say "Oh I can do that." Scientists have a term for this "I can do that" stuff. They use the word "elegant" to describe a brilliant, clean, simple way of stating what up until that moment has seemed like a very complicated issue. An elegant solution to a problem means there is a great deal of economy in the way it is stated—it works, it's very powerful, it achieves a lot in a very simple way. Elegance comes out of strong intellectual demands and a rigorous process of development, not out of a very simple-minded "Oh let's go make an exhibit" mentality.

One of the hardest things to talk about with colleagues who are starting museums is that the exhibit process is much more important than the end product. The way you orchestrate the process has everything to do with the way it turns out. Some of this just relates to the human dynamic of how you turn an idea into an exhibit. Because people basically feel uncomfortable with things that are undefined and unfinished, the usual approach is to rush to a solution and invent the way out of that uneasiness you feel at the beginning about what's going to work. The rush to a solution means as soon as you begin to think you understand what the end point is going to be, you can no longer clearly see what's really working and what isn't as the development process continues. So there's a great deal of importance in that tension of the unresolved exhibit or program, the one where you're delaying coming to closure well past the point where you feel comfortable with it. Unfortunately, the process of exhibit funding (such as with federal grant proposals where you have to submit examples of label copy, etc.), pushes you towards describing what the completed exhibit is going to look like before you should be able to know. The institution's leadership has to spend a lot of time giving protection to the staff who are in that terribly exposed situation of not yet knowing the right answer but thinking they have to have it quickly. It's a dilemma. I don't know the answer except that somehow the director in particular must take the responsibility for saving to those vulnerable staff members. "Not only do I not care what the form of it is but it's terribly important for you not to feel pressure from me." This is an issue that everybody needs to attend to.

As a person who loves to generate ideas and is recently facile at it, I have a growing realization that the idea for an exhibit is only marginally important—ideas are very cheap. In fact, the idea that slips into a solution almost seamlessly is an extremely dangerous one, especially if it's very exciting. Again, it is dangerous if an exhibit at another museum, which is the end product of a long process, becomes the idea for you—the spark, the light bulb going on. Developers have to be inventive and skilful at generating or inventing solutions so ideas do play a very important role. It's just that they can be so powerful and seductive in sending you down particular paths that may be dead ends. Commitment to an idea often blinds you from seeing and understanding what is going on.

## "What's Inside?"

The first exhibit I developed at the Boston Children's Museum was called "What's Inside?" It was based on somebody else's concept for an exhibit of the same name that I read about in *The Museumist* in the early 1960s. The article described how the director of a museum in New York state was driving on a long trip with his 8-year-old daughter who started asking how different things worked. He began to describe to her what she would see inside various things if they were cut in half. When she suggested that he do an exhibit, he thought it was a good idea. As far as I know, the museum did an exhibit with 10 or 20 items, like fire extinguishers, etc., that illustrated what was inside them. It sounded wonderful to me.

I was looking for a topic that would move us away from displays in exhibit cases (the visitor experience at that time). I was interested in eliciting visible audience behavior that would indicate what was happening for the visitor. So, the purpose of doing interactive exhibits for me, was in eliciting feedback as much as it was in exciting kids about something.

One component of the exhibit that worked very well involved fresh gladiolas placed on a table every day. Pieces of paper with parts of the gladiola drawn on it were also put on the table. Children could pull the flowers apart and tape them down on the matching spaces so that they had to observe how each part was different and where it belonged.

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# Spock: Looking Back

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There was previously a fair amount of vandalism in the museum. Kids would bring in screwdrivers and remove the screws from the exhibit cases. So I assumed "What's Inside?" would consume itself in 6 months, even with a lot of maintenance. Surprising, it lasted 5 years and was still essentially intact. That exhibit was just wildly successful. It fully changed our thinking and I think everybody else. From that point on, we got bolder about trying things.

## "Interactive"

I'd like to talk about the "hands on" concept. When we began developing interactive exhibits like "What's Inside?" in the early 1960s, there were already a number of "interactive" exhibits in museums. However, they were usually push-buttons that energized some pieces of machinery inside an exhibit case, turned on a light, started something moving, etc. The action was essentially predetermined—whatever was started would go through its course and then stop unless it was broken.

There are many wonderful stories about broken exhibits but my favorite was an interactive exhibit built in the 1940s in a mid-west health museum. This was an animated exhibit on dental health consisting of the upper half of a mannequin with one arm and a toothbrush in its hand. Its lips were pulled back and when you pressed the button, the arm was supposed to reach over and brush the teeth in the right direction. Well, the arm was slightly dislocated and had been for a long while so it was doing a wonderful job of rubbing all the paint off the mannequin's chin.

Frank Oppenheimer of the Exploratorium had the clearest sense about why pressing a button that caused some repetitive action was not the way to understand scientific principles or anything else for that matter. Defining the range of things that can happen in any variable will not give you an understanding of why something is working the way it is, what is driving it. You have to have enough freedom of operation in the exhibit to generate the phenomena but also be able to push it past the point where the phenomenon no longer occurs. The nature of this exploration allows you to begin to *really* understand and explains why the button is not the method to use in a "hands-on" approach.

A second point is that interaction is a mental activity—it's what goes on in your head. Your arm is an extension of all the perceptual and motor mechanisms that constitute you as a person, from your head to your arm. What is happening in your hands is important but so is what is happening in your mind at the same time. We are imaginative, symbol-manipulating beings with a capacity for extending ourselves outside of our head and into a scene. When you look at a miniature diorama of a house, you are interacting with it by walking through that scene in your imagination. That's as much interaction as the hands on kind.

I think "interactive" is a better word for what we are about than "hands on."

## Building a Community

I was personally being complimented by people in the museum world for "this great thing you're doing here." I kept saying "it's this great staff I have" and they'd say "yeh, yeh, but it's really you." Certainly I don't mean to dismiss the role I did play (one which was very different from other staff members), such as providing protection to the developer and setting an institutional tone as the leader. But what happened at the Boston Children's Museum over those 23 years was a team effort in the truest sense. We became a community of people who developed a common vocabulary and way of seeing issues, who shared mutual goals and commitments to a process.

This enabled us to get to the heart of issues in a very productive way. We felt, however, that we were in some glacial process. It was only from time to time that we'd get outside of it. When visiting colleagues would remark about how differently something was being done from three years earlier, we would be surprised. We would lose that kind of perspective.

This sense of community takes time to develop. It occurred in Boston because we were struggling with the same issues over a long period of time. Staff in new institutions shouldn't be impatient or anxious. They need to realize that community-building doesn't happen quickly, but grows slowly from within as necessary skills and insights evolve. Those in older museums where the leaders or key players are changing (as in both the Exploratorium and Boston now) should understand that readjusting an existing community and letting it take on a different flavor is very time-consuming. These transitions are complicated yet very, very important.

Often leadership changes rapidly in the museum profession—directors stay only 3 to 5 years or so. During the 1960s and early 1970s when *Future Shock* and the accelerated pace of change were being discussed, you had the sense you were a failure if you stayed more than 7 years at one place. By staying, you were putting a terrible weight on the museum because all your ideas had been used and you were just marking time. It was important to sweep the place clean and obtain new leadership to provide a chance for reinvigoration. I think that may be true and even helpful in certain situations, but it doesn't address the issue of community-building.

## The Founder

\* The problem of the founder is perhaps the trickiest issue for new or emerging children's museums. The founder's initial role is one of a staff member as much as it is a member of the board. Eventually there comes a time when that person has to say "we're going to hire a director whose ideas will be different than mine, I'm going to have to retire to the board and play the hands-off role of a board member or I'm going to have to leave the board to become the executive director who can be fired by the board." I think we have to collectively address and explore how to deal with this terribly difficult and painful transition period that every institution seems to experience.

## Building a Building

At the time the decision was made to relocate the Boston Children's Museum, I was strongly committed to renovating an old building rather than building a new one. I later realized that the great advantage of renovation was it limited you from being overwhelmed by too many variables and reduced them to a manageable number. An existing building has a direction of its own and keeps telling you things that you have to listen to.

Even if you have a well-written building program, constructing a new building is a horrendous task and takes an enormous amount of time and energy. The Indianapolis Children's Museum was the first children's museum to build a new building. Millie Compton, then the director of Indianapolis, said you can only move a museum once in your life. She was absolutely right and I have adopted that as a rule of thumb.

A second insight is that on opening day when you cut the ribbon—and the band plays, the mayor speaks, everybody roars in and it's a success—you have just about reached the midpoint of the project, if you're lucky. A lot of work is yet to come—settling in and making everything function, completing jobs, redoing construction that is the wrong height, raising money for cost overruns, etc.

## Organizational Structure

Much of the importance of what we did doesn't seem to have anything to do with the program, audience, and all the "juicy" things that drive us to make the kind of career commitments that we do in this work. The way budgets, fund raising efforts, etc. are organized turns out to be critical. I'm not referring just to the need for a balanced budget, but to the fact that the structure of a budget is determinant in the way you do your work. For example, maybe a client-centered institution should organize a budget so that the cost centers revolve around each of the different client populations and corresponding programs, with an administrative structure reflecting that also. If you then look at income and expense within these areas, interesting patterns begin to emerge. There are some program areas which are not only self-supporting as earned income (like admissions) but in fact generate a surplus. If you do this kind of structuring, you realize that outreach programming for underserved communities and audiences will never generate enough income from the user. You then develop a whole strategy that focuses on that fact. You're no longer raising money to overcome a deficit (which is very unexciting to donors), you're now raising funds in a positive way for part of your audience that can never pay the cost of their service (which is very understandable to those giving the money). That took us 15 years to figure out because we spent that much time raising money so we wouldn't have a deficit.

The new strategy even got us into long term efforts based on the understanding that outreach is a common issue. Every institution wants to make this kind of social commitment. Grants are always available to formulate an outreach program. But then what? We realized we had to develop a funding mechanism at the state level that would support an ongoing program and would cut across the entire institutional community. We finally implemented it after 8 long years.

## Conclusion

The Boston Children's Museum went through a major transformation in the late 1960s to restructure the way it was organized. We were facing a large deficit and would have been out of business very soon.

My philosophy of management had been one of democracy, consensus, and collaboration—everyone was in on everything. I felt this approach would allow creativity to flourish. As the museum got bigger and funding became more difficult, it didn't work. The staff was too large a group for effective decisionmaking. Finally, an organizational development consultant was called in and worked with us to establish new management systems—job descriptions, lines of communication, budgetary and financial management, etc. This resulted in a new clarity of structure and responsibility that appeared to me, at the time, quite hierarchical and undemocratic. In fact, however, it generated the setting for an outpouring of creativity and helped establish the atmosphere of protection I spoke about earlier where people felt they could make mistakes.

I think people who view the Boston Children's Museum as a role model are dazzled by the programs, they look at the exhibits and say that's the story. They don't think about how critical structure, process and continuity of key staff are. The issues of organization and administration, which seemed to have nothing to do with kids or hands on concepts or innovation, are what really made a difference in the Boston Children's Museum becoming what it is today.

## Watch For...

The July/August issue of *Museum News*, published by the American Association of Museums, will feature three articles about children's museums. For copies, contact AAC, 1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005.

## IN PROCESS...

It's election time!! A slate of AAYM officers will be in the mail soon to Full Members. Peter Sterling, director of the Indianapolis Children's Museum (IN) and Freda H. Nicholson, director of the Science Museums of Charlotte (NC) have been nominated to the AAM/COM Board. Bonnie Pitman-Gelles, associate director for programs at the Seattle Art Museum (WA) and Elaine Gurian, deputy assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian Institution have been nominated to the AAM Council as vice president and councilor-at-large, respectively. Elections will take place this spring. Claire Lieberwitz is the new director of development at the Brooklyn Children's Museum (NY). She was previously the director of corporate development with Affiliated Artists. Museums conducting Director searches: The Discovery Museums (Acton, MA), Monadnock Children's Museum (Keene, NH), Louisiana Children's Museum (New Orleans, LA), Los Angeles Children's Museum, Executive Vice President of the Dolores Kohl Education Foundation (Wilmette, IL) oversees the Kohl Children's Museum.