Beyond the Generation Gap

Jim Zien

Imagine this: a grand, turreted Victorian house of many rooms and fireplaces, garlanded plaster ceilings, oak and marble floors, and a gracious portico letting onto a circular driveway. The house is not lived in, but on an April Sunday in 1954 it is far from empty. Every few minutes a car pulls into the drive and lets off two or three children, the girls in gathered dresses and patent leather shoes, the boys in neat gabardine trousers, white shirts and clip-on ties, their mother in a light wool suit. Mom and the children step through the front door of the imposing house, into its spacious foyer; they are greeted by a kindly lady seated behind a dark walnut writing table. Dad joins the group after a few minutes, having parked the car nearby. They all write their names in a guest book lying open before the woman at the table; she points them in the direction of several large, high-ceilinged rooms beyond the foyer, where other children and adults can be seen moving quietly about.

Is this family (a) shopping for some luxury real estate, (b) touring the mansion of a famous 19th-century industrialist, (c) attending a funeral or (d) none of the above?

Twenty-five years ago in Boston, the answer might well have been (d), and the family might have

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Playspace, an exhibit for preschoolers, shows parents the developing skills of young children. The photos in this article were taken at the Children's Museum, Boston.

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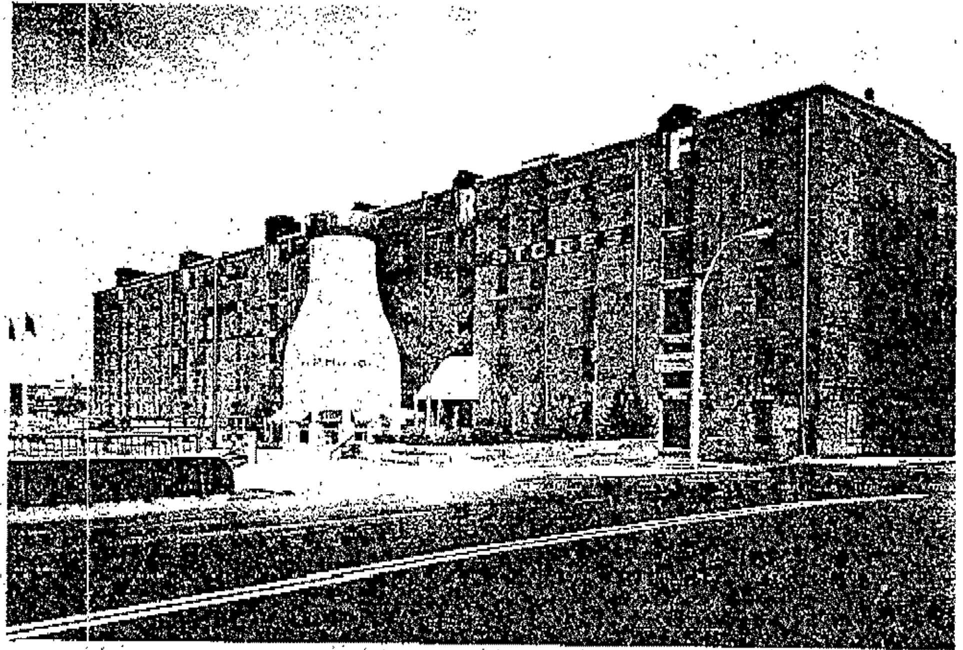


been visiting their local children's museum, where the youngsters could view displays of dolls, birds, rocks and coins; dioramas of Indian encampments and frog ponds; and exhibits of traditional life in faraway countries, which the adults in their company could comprehend and explain. By 1954 the notion of a museum for children, their parents and teachers had already reached middle age: Boston's Children's Museum was chartered in 1913 by a group of educators concerned with the lack of resources for children in the city's established museums; the Brooklyn Children's Museum opened around 1900.

The adults who founded these early alternatives to the existing institutions of their time believed that museums should be made accessible to children in ways that did not presume substantial prior knowledge or well-developed interests. In Victorian buildings in a barely post-Victorian era, that belief naturally led to the evolution of children's museums in which the guiding hands and voices of adults figured prominently in the experiences of young visitors. As children's museums developed over the first two decades of the 20th century, they supported parents and teachers in their sanctioned roles vis à vis children of the period—as authority figures and mentors. Aided by labels that described and narrated, adults could act as knowledgeable intermediaries between their youngsters and the museum's exhibits.

"Always the Story Labels accompanying the exhibits were couched in simple but vivid language," writes the author of a 1937 history of the Boston Children's Museum, "so that to read their stories . . . made clear to the visitor of whatever age the understanding of the object studied. . . . However, children always 'want to be told,' and be the labels ever so plain and instructive they desire to hear as well as to see. To have a person with a comprehending mind at hand not only to answer questions but to arouse interest in the story of the objects displayed is a most important function of the modern Museum. . . ."

Upon visiting virtually any children's museum in 1954, our hypothetical family would have encountered methods of exhibition, approaches to education, and assumptions about the relative roles of children and adults that had changed little over the preceding 50 years. The adults in the family would have assumed traditional roles as chaperones and informants, keeping one step ahead of their children in order to read up on the objects in the next exhibit case. The children

The 40-foot high milk bottle in front of the Children's Museum doubles as a frozen yogurt stand and a landmark of Boston's waterfront.

probably would have been more bored with the proceedings than young visitors of previous generations, having experienced television and Technicolor movies and heard rumors about a new place for kids called Disneyland. The museum itself was likely to have been struggling along financially, with a dwindling attendance and a worn-out feeling permeating its Victorian quarters.

For the children's museums of the early 1950s, change was clearly in order when one of the truly momentous events in the history of American education, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown* v. *the Board of Education,* set educational and social reform in motion in communities and institutions nationwide. Three years later, in 1957, the launch of Sputnik and the space race accelerated the development of new technologies which would have equally as great an impact on American life and learning as the *Brown* decision.

In the dynamic quarter century from 1954 to 1979, children's

Resource Center at the Boston Children's Museum, where adults and children can acquire learning materials and participate in education programs.

museums acquired a renewed sense of educational purpose and focused on helping adults as well as children to perceive and understand the rapid social and technological changes occurring in the world around them. They also developed new, less didactic educational methods, emphasizing participation by adults and children together in predominantly nonverbal, first-time learning experiences. And into their traditionally mixed bag of scientific, historic and cultural programs, the museums incorporated the concerns of environmental, civic and ethnic groups in their communities, producing exhibits and other educational resources of immediacy and significance for adults and children alike.

The emergence, after the *Brown* case and Sputnik, of children's museums as organizations for community education was supported by expanding programs of private and government funding for educational innovation and community service. At the Boston Children's Museum, major efforts to reach adults with resources for their own learning, and for their educational activities with children, were begun in the early 1960s and continue today.

Funded by the U.S. Office of Education, a curriculum development project called MATCH (Materials and Activities for Teachers and Children) was the first such effort. On subjects ranging from the contemporary life of Eskimos to the character of cities, the museum developed programs that integrated objects, audio-visual media and books with such learning strategies as simulation, role-playing and inquiry. To eliminate the need for teachers to function as adult authorities on every subject, the MATCH programs were designed to allow teachers to collaborate with children in active discovery of the significance of real materials and processes.

The notion of collaborative, discovery-based learning by adults and children carried over from the MATCH curriculum project to the development of the museum's first participatory exhibit facility, which opened to the public in 1968 as a collection of environments, rather than objects, which could be experienced on different levels by people of different ages and backgrounds. The exhibit environment of Grandmother's Attic, for example, was designed to permit children to enter the worlds their grandparents and parents experienced as youngsters from the 1900s through the 1940s; at the

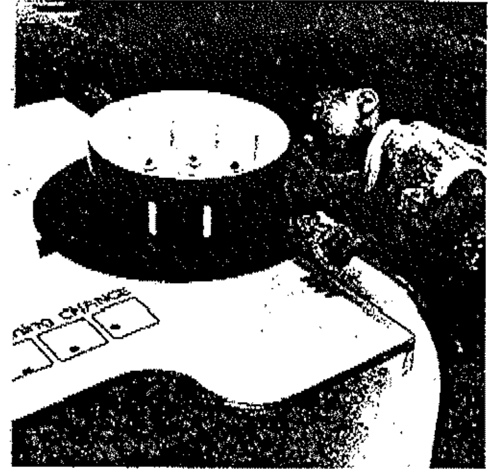
same time the Attic provided adults with opportunities to remember their childhoods and to demonstrate the significance of artifacts too old for children to recognize.

As the museum converted its approach to exhibitions from didactic to discovery-oriented, from passive to interactive, and from narrowly child-centered to cross-generational, a philosophy of museum education began to emerge which might be summarized as the Boston Children's Museum doctrine of hook, line and sinker. Within this doctrine, exhibits are the hook because their function is to catch a visitor's interest in a subject and hold onto it for a short period of time. Resources—books, audio-visual media, kits, workshops and courses by the museum's subject specialists—are the sinker, because they can take an interested learner into a topic as far as he wants to go. The line between hook and sinker is the museum's Resource Center, where adults and children can acquire learning materials and participate in extended education programs related to every major museum theme.

The complementary adult- and child-serving programs of the Boston Children's Museum's Exhibit and Resource Centers have evolved through a process influenced strongly by the participation of individual adults and community groups outside the museum staff, who perceive the museum as an ally in communicating their special concerns to children, their parents and teachers, and to the public at large.

Nowhere is the Children's Museum-community partnership more evident than in the museum's exhibits, educational materials and teaching programs about cultures, which reflect the widespread interest of Boston-area ethnic groups in preserving their cultural traditions, educating children about their heritage, establishing positive group identities, and combatting stereotypes. A case in point is the relationship between the Children's Museum and the Wamponaog Indian community of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The involvement of Wamponaog people in educational development projects at the museum first occurred around an effort to revise for commercial publication one of the original MATCH curriculum units, *The Algonquins*. In its prototype form, the unit had been concerned only with the ancient culture of Indian tribes of the northeastern United States and presented no perspectives on the contemporary lives of Indians in New England. To revise the unit for national dissemination, the museum collaborated with descendants of the Indians who met the first Pilgrims to land in Massachusetts Bay. Chemists, craftspeople, parents, teachers and community leaders, the Wamponaog participants in the revision process acted not only as advisors, but also as subjects of the new *Indians Who Met the Pilgrims* MATCH unit, personally interpreting their cultural history and traditions from the points of view of their present day lives.

While this first museum effort at educational collaboration with a community group was by no means easy—requiring definition and redefinition of the roles of the museum and Indian participants, and compromises all around concerning topics and methods of presentation—it established a strong precedent for the future development of museum educational resources with Indians as well as other ethnic groups in the Boston community. Subsequent collaborative projects in cultural education have included *We're Still Here*, a permanent exhibit about past and present Native American life in New England; *Meeting Ground*, a multicultural exhibition; and *Ethnic Discovery*, a teaching program, each created with the assistance of advisory boards of Bostonians of Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican and West Indian background; the reconstruction in the museum of an authentic Japanese artisan's house in cooperation with the Sister City Committees of Boston and Kyoto; and the development of educational kits concerning the Jewish and Chinese cultures, with the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Boston and the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association.



Zoestrope machines allow children to animate their own movies.

Beyond the realm of cultural education, adults have been the audiences, sources, subjects and objects of Children's Museum programs concerned with child development, handicaps and urban neighborhoods.

The museum's Playspace, for example, is a unique environment for exhibiting to parents and other adults the developing physical, social and intellectual skills of young children at different ages. In the Playspace, visiting preschoolers can climb up, down and around fanciful structures seeking hidden visual surprises; play with objects cooperatively, or not, as the case may be; and try out toys and games of incremental difficulty. Watching the action, with interpretation provided by graphic panels and exhibit staff, parents gain a rare chance to observe their own children's play and learning behaviors in relation to those of other youngsters.

Children's disabilities as well

as their developmental abilities have been subjects of growing museum and community concern in recent years, with legislation in Massachusetts and other states mandating the removal of architectural barriers to the use of public facilities by handicapped people and the "mainstreaming" of disabled children into public school classrooms. In response, the Children's Museum has developed an exhibit, a series of curriculum units and a book, each entitled *What If You Couldn't . . .?*, which introduce nondisabled children and adults to simulated experiences with orthopedic, visual, hearing, learning, emotional and mental handicaps and their treatment.

In the highly participative *What If You Couldn't . . .?* exhibit, two distinct systems of explanatory signage, one addressed to children, the other to adults, complement opportunities to pilot wheelchairs over variously textured surfaces, don increasingly vision-obscuring masks and engage in other simulation activities. Large-type illustrated signs for children describe the specific problems, needs and feelings of

What if You Couldn't?, *an exhibit that shows children what it's like to have a handicap.*

Above: Congress Street Supperette, *an exhibit that lets children explore work situations. Right: Children use wheelchairs to simulate the experiences of the physically handicapped.*

others their age for whom disabilities are real facts of life. In smaller type, adult-oriented signage presents an overview of the practical, legal and caretaking issues associated with each impairment and provides the names of organizations that serve the needs of handicapped people and their families.

For teachers, six *What If You Couldn't . . .?* kits, each concerned with a different type of disability, present an approach to helping students relate to handicapped people, who are in some way the same as and in some ways different from themselves. In its book form, *What If . . .?* sets forth less formal activities for adults and children to use to explore handicaps at home or in school.

For the Playspace and *What If You Couldn't . . .?*, adults in their capacities as caretakers and teachers of children are clearly a primary audience. In helping to develop most of the cultural exhibits and resources described earlier, adults are important subjects, as well as sources of information, criteria, ideas and materials.

The final example of adult involvement in Boston Children's Museum programs features adults as direct objects, acting out their real-life roles in the museum and on its neighborhood shopping street a few blocks away.

The Centre St. Project, funded in 1973 by the National Endowment for the Humanities, produced an exhibit, street fair and book about the people and places of the business district in the urban neighborhood surrounding the museum. The exhibit, a replica of a small segment of the real Centre St., contained two storefronts on a sidewalk, alongside a stretch of street with a trolley car. These environments were places where children could try on the uniforms and play the parts of shopkeepers, grocers, doctors, trolley drivers and firefighters; they also served as stages for visiting pharmarcists, television repairmen, antique dealers and shortorder cooks to demonstrate their trades. During the Centre St. fair, held on a Saturday while the exhibit was at the museum, the entire Centre St. community watched its members do demonstrations at curbside, augmented by museum

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Above: Children reconstruct the skeletal structure of a sheep in a nature exhibit. Right: The Ruth Harmony Green Hall of Toys

staff drilling and sawing with early American tools in front of the hardware store, making butter at the dairy store with a hand-cranked churn, and supervising parlor games from the museum collection outside a shop full of toys and games.

To preserve the experiences of the Centre St. exhibit and fair, and to portray the street's personalities and places at one moment in time, the museum produced a book of thumbnail sketches and photography. Six years later, the Centre St. book reads like a history, many of the street's small, independent establishments having been replaced by company-owned chains, the husband-and-wife candymakers gone into retirement, never to demonstrate chocolating cherries in their display window again.

Ironically, one of the neighborhood establishments that disappeared from the scene a few years after the Centre St. exhibit and fair was the Children's Museum itself.

The new museum picture looks something like this: a large warehouse on the Boston waterfront. Unlike other warehouses in the area, this one is not abandoned. On a summer day in 1979, several hundred people sit at the water's edge, munching sandwiches and licking ice cream cones bought from a three-story high, milk-bottle-shaped dairy stand. The crowd is made up of adults and kids: office workers on their lunch hours; families; groups from camps and community centers. Everywhere, there are animated conversations, in Spanish, Chinese, Italian, English and several other languages. On foot and in wheelchairs people make their way up a long, low ramp toward the warehouse entrance. Inside, adults and children alike share the excitement of many new learning experiences: operating computers and television cameras; working wood with ancient bow drills and treadle lathes; manufacturing spinning tops on an automated assembly line; eating rice with chopsticks in a real Japanese house. Inspired by their experiences to learn more about new and old technologies, past and present cultures, and natural and manmade environments, they find there's a section of the building with a large store of books, slides, films, tapes, kits and objects to borrow, and a program of apprenticeships, workshops and courses to sustain all kinds of old and newfound interests.

The new warehouse home of the Boston Children's Museum is the culmination of an educational and physical renewal process begun in the changing times of the 1950s and 1960s. The result is a combination of programs in the museum's Exhibit and Resource Centers that permit adults and children to learn together and teach important lessons to one another.