

TRENDS IN CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

By Gail Dexter Lord

President

LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management Inc.

Keynote Presentation, Hands-On Conference,

Brooklyn, 1999

ABSTRACT

Museums are one of the great success stories of the twentieth century. Whether they offer art, science or history, their collections and exhibitions are exciting and illuminating to an ever widening range of interested visitors around the world. Nations, states, provinces, counties, cities and towns all want museums, as do many universities. Increasingly, industries and even leisure pursuits -- from embroidery to balloon flying -- aspire to a museum of their own.

The twentieth century has seen the development of an entirely new type of museum -- the children's museum. This too has been a great success with the numbers of museums increasing in the United States, Europe and around the world. What exactly is a children's museum? Why do we call these places of discovery learning museums at all? And, what is their future in a culturally diverse society?

This presentation will explore trends in children's museums in the United States (where children's museums were invented nearly 100 years ago) and in Europe. The speaker will examine the demographic and lifestyle changes that have fueled the rapid growth of children's museums; and discuss two divergent trends -- one toward incorporating children's museums into existing cultural institutions; and the other to building independent children's museums as significant cultural and architectural landmarks in their communities.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, when the world is poised at the beginning of a new Millennium, children's museums will be 100 years old. The first was founded in Brooklyn in 1899.

There has been tremendous growth in children's museums. According to the American Association of Museums directory there were 128 children's and children's related museums in the US in 1989. In 1995, there were 256 -- an increase of 100%. And this does not include the many children's museums that expanded and built new buildings.

According to the research conducted by the European Hands-On organization, there is very significant growth in children's museums around the world. In Europe where there are 86 children's museums, Germany has the largest number of initiatives with 31 children's museums followed by the Netherlands (6) Russia (6) and England (5). Of those that reported a founding date -- none were before 1973 and 40% were founded since 1987. Our host the Tropenmuseum Children's Museum was founded in 1975, which is early by European standards.

WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

To speak about the growth of something presumes that we know what this phenomenon is. In reality, as the children's museum movement grows the nature of children's museums has become more diverse.

It's Own building or Part of Another Museum

The American model is an independent institution -- a “kids own place”. In Europe, while there are many initiatives to create this type of institution such as in the Carloseum in Essen and in Vienna with Zoom; it is more common to find what we have here in Amsterdam-- a children’s museum as part of a larger institution. We see this also at Launch Pad in the Science Museum (London) founded in 1986 and the emerging Lowry Hands-On Gallery in Salford which will open in the year 2000, the “Junior Museum”, an independent department of the Nordiska Museet in Sweden, and the Ruth Young Wing of the Israel Museum founded in 1978. These children’s museums have the great advantage of proximity to (and perhaps use of) major collections and the problem of lack of identity to the community at large -- and to children in particular.

They are All Museums

What is perhaps most remarkable about all these very different institutions is that they are all called “museum”. A children’s art centre like Kinderacademie in Fulda considers itself and indeed is a children’s museum. So too is Eureka, the large independent children’s museum in Halifax, although it contains no original artifacts nor works of art.

But, while most museums are places where authentic objects of art, science and history are preserved and interpreted, there are many museums where objects are secondary to IDEAS: this last decade of the 20th Century has seen the emergence of “the idea museum.” Foremost among these is the Musee Pour La Paix in Caen and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles which contain few artifacts but house a powerful experience of major ideas.

The definition of “museum” has expanded in the public imagination beyond the professional definition of ‘preserving, interpreting and presenting collections’ to something broader which I would suggest is something like this --

“ the experience of meaning in three dimensions”.

This includes how we increase our understanding both from experiencing objects and from kinesthetic experience. This is how children learn -- and this is also how adults learn. It is also a very multi-cultural way of learning -- that crosses barriers of language and the printed page. It is an affective mode of learning rather than a cognitive one -- but it does not exclude cognitive processes. It does suggest that cognition is not necessarily the central museum experience. It also suggests that museums are in the realm of *meaning* rather than in the *information business*.

And so I offer this definition of museum as one in which children's museums live quite comfortably for your discussion and debate at this conference.

This point was brought home to me just a few months ago when I led a workshop in the Seattle area at the headquarters of the Microsoft Corporation.

One participant (an information worker) made this moving comment on the importance of meaning in three dimensions:

“Most of my life is spent looking at a two-dimensional screen

For work I use a computer.

For relaxation, I watch a TV screen.

For entertainment, I go to the movies and watch another screen.

Art is three-dimensional, it speaks to your humanity.”

Is this why museums are more popular than ever before? I think it has a lot to do with it.

I was reminded of this incident in Seattle by my experience here at the Tropenmuseum Children's Museum. I do not wish to spoil the surprise that awaits you in the coming days. But, I would like to introduce the idea so that you might think about it and discuss it, that the type of display that has been developed here is very much about communicating cross-cultural meanings in three dimensions and through kinesthetic experiences. And as I participated with a class here I was truly impressed by the quality of the affective learning experience -- which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the science centre and so many children's museums, which have focused their energy on exhibits based on 'learning from objects' and text explanations -- missing the powerful kinesthetic and interpersonal forms of communication that are so rich here and in "Enchanted Realms" in Rotterdam's Children's Museum.

Will children's museums continue to be successful

So long as an institution fulfills people's real needs, it will be successful. For children's museums, there are some demographic realities that continue to be particularly favorable.

Demographics

The number of children is growing. While the baby boom generation in the US was born between 1946 and 1964, the baby boom in Europe was later, between 1960 and 1969. Also, the current trend in delaying childbirth until parents are in their 30s has resulted in high birth rates in the 1990s. In Austria, for example, 1961 to 1969 were the peak years of births ranging between 133,000 and 138,000 per year. In Germany, it was between 1961 and 1968. People born in the 1960s are now in their 30, which is becoming a peak childbearing age. This year in England, for the first time since such data has been recorded, more women were bearing children in their thirties than in their twenties. Given this tendency to have children later in life, it is likely that Europe will experience a baby boom echo now and into the next decade. In 1990, children 12 and under were 14% of the German population and 15% of Austria's population. But the biggest age bands in Europe were in the age of 20 to 34.

Social changes:

Education

Parents are better educated. The “typical” participant in cultural activities is well educated. In both Europe and North America, the fact that a higher % of both women and men of child-bearing age have achieved some post-secondary education means that there is a larger audience than previously for museums in general - and for children’s museums particularly among parents with young children.

Further, educated parents demand leisure activities for their children that are educational, not just entertaining.

Changing patterns in family life

The needs of families are changing, for leisure time is decreasing. Two-income and single-parent families with longer working hours and commuting time in a very competitive environment result in limited time for parents to spend time with their children. Children’s museums provide an educational environment in which families can have fun without feeling uncomfortable about children’s behaviour - because it is a place designed for children.

In the European community, people may move more easily for employment and there is also in-migration. As a result, physical distances between children and grandparents increase, and parents can no longer rely on the older generations for advice and child care. Children’s museums play a vital information role for parents, and they can help newcomers to learn about their adopted community and vice versa -- as exemplified by Enchanted Realms.

Children's Rights

The growing awareness of the rights of children and the demand that cultural institutions be more accessible **to people of all social and economic** backgrounds support children's museums and galleries. In turn they are encouraged to explore social issues such as tolerance- poverty, health and the environment, thereby attracting families of all income categories and of more diverse ethnic backgrounds than other types of museums. Right now, as we meet, there is a children's summit in France with more than 600 children from around the world.

Feasibility

Apart from demographic and social reasons for the increase in demand for children's museums internationally, there are also economic reasons for their success:

Children's museums are **cost effective**. They achieve higher levels of attendance and income generated per square foot than other types of museums. This is in part due to the **high repeat visitation** particularly among area residents and school groups typical for children's museums.

Children's Museums also require a lower capital investment than conventional museums, for children's museums are extraordinarily flexible institutions that fit well into many building types:

One danger I would foresee in Europe in the conservatism that tends to discourage the children's museum's from "growing up". Whether the children's museum is its own institution or part of another -- it needs to have its own identity -- its own address to the public. Its message is a powerful and transformative one that is broadly appealing. The host institution has far more to gain from sharing the children's museum audience as it grows up than it has to lose by holding its children's gallery too tightly inside "home".