

Finding a Space for Children and Their History: The Manitoba Children's Museum and the Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization

JO-ANNE MCCUTCHEON

Manitoba Children's Museum, Winnipeg
Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of
Civilization, Hull

The first children's museum in North America opened in Brooklyn, New York, in 1899. The founders of this museum sought to provide an alternative to existing museums where the "...impressive, magnificent exhibits in vast halls tended to quell the eagerness of a child."¹ Part of a movement intended to improve the lives of children living in cities, the Brooklyn Children's Museum's primary objective became a standard: to create a space for children that would emphasize their experience instead of emphasizing the preservation and interpretation of artifacts.² In general, children's museums were and are designed to provide an informal, early museum experience for children and their families. These museums encourage children to become life-long patrons thereby cultivating a responsible audience and future clientele.³

Although concerned with children's experience, up until the 1960s children's museums also managed collections of artifacts. According to Cindy Schofield-Bodt from the Brooklyn Children's Museum, early children's museums in the United States considered themselves equal to their more established adult-oriented counterparts. The first children's museums collected artifacts to enhance children's experience at the museum. As Schofield-Bodt noted, "The difference between collections at the pre-1940 children's museums and 'adult' museums was not in the type of object collected, (neither juvenile in nature nor inferior in quality) but in the way in which they were exhibited and used. The objects were an integral part of the philosophy of learning by doing."⁴ The implementation of new education theories later challenged the focus of children's museums.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a renewed interest in children's museums in both Canada and the United States changed the emphasis from historical objects and experience to interactive, hands-on learning. The first change occurred at the Boston Children's Museum in the 1960s, when the collection was packed away, the glass

cases were discarded and large-scale interactive props were built to facilitate children's learning.⁵ Other established children's museums followed this practice, and new children's museums adopted the interactive approach without any framework to collect artifacts. By the late 1960s, administrators at the Brooklyn Children's Museum agreed with these changes and accordingly changed its emphasis from providing children with first class artifacts to building interactive learning exhibits.⁶ The establishment of "museums" without a mandate to collect, preserve and interpret objects, especially the Los Angeles Children's Museum, replaced the standard set by the Brooklyn Children's Museum in 1899.

These changes within the museum community ultimately affected the establishment of the first children's museum in western Canada. After visiting Los Angeles in the early 1980s, Linda Issit, the founder of the Manitoba Children's Museum, worked to establish a similar children's museum in Winnipeg.⁷ Her efforts led to the creation of Manitoba Children's Museum in 1986. In 1989, as part of a new building complex, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, opened a children's museum. Both museums provide programs designed to enrich the lives of children and their caregivers by offering activities that stimulate imagination, creativity and curiosity, evoke critical thinking and problem-solving skills and build self esteem. In addition, children's museums support the role of family members as a child's first teacher.

Both museums strive to empower families to "experience, explore and discover" together.⁸ Displays and gallery exhibits are designed for the purpose of interaction. Exhibits are designed to provide children with useable objects. Despite these similarities, the two museums under review are not identical. Each possesses different qualities compared to the children's museums in the United States. The Manitoba Children's Canadian Museum is modeled after the interactive learning formats of the Los Angeles Children's Museum, and therefore, does not collect artifacts. The Children's Museum of the

Canadian Museum of Civilization provides a hybrid of both the first children's museum in Brooklyn, and the Los Angeles model.

In 1994 the Manitoba Children's Museum moved into a new, spacious site near the centre of Winnipeg known as The Forks. There are five permanent exhibits that provide children with a space to interact with objects and props and to discover information about natural history. The "All Aboard Gallery" houses a 1952 F-7 "bullet-nose" diesel locomotive, a 1910 Pullman passenger car and a prairie-style train station.⁹ This gallery contains important artifacts related to Winnipeg's railway history and also provides children with the opportunity to use clothing reproduced to 1950s workwear styles. Perhaps the only museum component of the Manitoba Children's Museum can be found with the All Aboard Gallery.

Two other galleries focus more on the needs of pre-school children and primary school students. The "Sun Gallery" and the "Tree and Me Preschool Gallery" provide children with information about the solar system, and the natural environment of animals. These galleries are designed to engage and encourage children to role play. The fourth gallery, "OUR-TV," is a television studio equipped with cameras, monitors, a control desk with switches, mixers, a newsdesk, and audio and lighting controls, enabling students to record a news broadcast. Some of the recordings are shown on a Winnipeg cable station. The fifth gallery, called "Live Wire," is dedicated to computers and related technology. Visitors can also leave a video message in a "Say What" booth. These messages are also edited and broadcast as part of local children's programming.

The Children's Museum at the Canadian Museum of Civilization provides a diversified experience for a wider age spectrum of children and their families. Visitors embark on a cultural journey as they interact with objects relating to everyday life in Nigeria, Mexico, Japan, India, Indonesia, and Egypt. For example, children can enter an Egyptian pyramid that contains hieroglyphics and English translations, view a video recording explaining why the pyramids were built, or how Egyptian society treated children, and see a mummified cat. The pyramid is designed for children to explore, complete with an entrance that is patently unfriendly to adults. These objects and interactive props demonstrate the various levels of interest that might be raised: the young child, unable to read, might explore the entrance or listen to the video about life in Egypt; the school age child might try to spell

using hieroglyphics while older children and adults might be fascinated by the mummified cat.

Examples of toys and games from around the world are included in the museum. In this section, children are encouraged to play the French game of "Escargot," known more commonly as hopscotch, or look at toys from other countries and earlier time periods. One of the central objects of this section is the Forster Doll House, built in 1921 to house a collection of miniatures made in Dublin, Ireland, in 1868. This doll house exemplifies the museum's first-class collection of historic artifacts that date back to the 1820s.¹⁰ As with other toys in this section of the museum, they are encased in order to ensure preservation. In this way, the Children's Museum in Hull is different from the museum in Winnipeg because the curator and exhibit designers have access to a world-class collection of artifacts from the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The Children's Museum also collects objects related to children and made by children from around the world. Researchers can examine the Nickerson Collection of children's drawings, circus posters and toys made by children in West Africa from recycled consumer products. The practice of collecting artifacts at the Children's Museum in Hull is comparable to the original philosophy of the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

The mandate of both museums is to address the needs and demands of visitors from ages two to about twelve or fourteen and their families. Neither institution, however, targets the interests or needs of those caught between the stages of early childhood and adulthood. This void has been filled by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta. In 1994, it launched a permanent exhibition entitled *Growing Up and Away: Youth in Western Canada*. This exhibit, the first of its kind in Canada, provides visitors with artifacts and activities related to experiences of youth spanning a hundred-year period. The photographs, clothing, toys, and music and other artifacts that are included in this exhibition encourages "...discussion, interaction, noise and laughter," among visitors.¹¹ In this way, the traditional museum has adapted to reflect the view that audiences are interested in interactive exhibitions related to personal experiences. The Glenbow Museum has also worked to encourage teenagers to visit the museum by obtaining input from students between the ages of fourteen to eighteen.¹²

The Toronto Museum of Childhood, yet to be opened, is also working to enhance our knowledge of the history of childhood while

providing a space for children to learn and interact with artifacts. Its founder, Loet Vos, is dedicated to celebrating childhood and its various expressions in cultures around the world.¹³ This museum has the advantage of being able to build upon ideas established at the aforementioned three Canadian museums. The exhibit at the Glenbow, the Toronto Museum of Childhood, and both children's museums under review demonstrate the interest in children and youth of the past, present and future. Given that together the Manitoba Children's museum and the Children's Museum at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, welcome over 500 000 visitors a year, they have an opportunity to provide the research community with sources related to the everyday experience of growing up in Canada.¹⁴ At the Glenbow Museum visitors have the opportunity to record their views of the exhibit, and reflect on six questions posed by museum programmers. These memory books could provide invaluable information for future researchers.¹⁵

There has been debate among the academic community about the role of children's museums within the established museum community. Linda Issit acknowledged this question in a 1986 article published in *Dawson and Hind*. She posed the question that many have asked about the use of the term *museum* for children's museums: "Should it be called a 'museum' or is it really an activity centre for children?" She answered this question by providing a definition for the term museum to include the following four criteria, "...to own a collection, to care for it, to exhibit it, and to utilize it for educational purposes."¹⁶

The Manitoba Children's Museum is based on the philosophy of those children's museums that do not collect artifacts as part of their mandate. In this respect, the Manitoba Children's Museum cannot claim to share the rich heritage begun in the United States at the turn of the century. To refer to it as a only a play centre or an activity centre denigrates the important work being done to provide children and their families with important learning experi-

ences. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to it as the "Manitoba Children's Arts, Science and Nature Centre." The Children's Museum in Hull, because it is part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, is a museum for children and their families. Reviewing the history of children's museums in the United States demonstrates that this museum has maintained the view that collecting, managing and interpreting artifacts is as important as providing children with an interactive learning environment.

Administration at both institutions have a wonderful opportunity to leave future historians and researchers with sources, data and other valuable information about images and views of children by establishing a preservation system to save objects and sources collected from other parts of the world, and also from their contemporary clientele. The Manitoba Children's Museum could save the recordings of children's broadcasts to provide historians with images of children and their perception of current issues, thereby expanding its role to include collection management. If the job of collecting sources was not possible, then perhaps arrangements could be made with museums that already have a system of collecting in place. At the Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization, their collection could be enhanced by ensuring that children's artwork and activities or examples of their work from interactive stations are documented and preserved.

These sources will provide to historians and other researchers documents and insights into experiences of growing up in Canada. By continuing to combine the philosophy of the original children's museum in Brooklyn and the interactive learning methods advocated in the 1960s and 1970s, the Children's Museum at the Museum of Civilization, the "Growing Up and Away," exhibit at the Glenbow Museum, and the Toronto Museum of Childhood will provide space for children and youth to learn about the past while ensuring that their history is preserved for future generations of museum patrons and researchers.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Cindy Schofield-Bodt, "A History of Children's Museums in the United States," *Children's Environment Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 4.
2. For an excellent discussion about the role of museums in society and the re-organization of their

spaces and collections see, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge), 1992.

3. Nancy A. Newman, "Programme Philosophy... Manitoba Children's Museum Style," *Amuse Paper* (Fall 1995): 1, and "The Great Adventure: A Profile

- of the Children's Museum." (Document from the Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996).
4. Schofield-Bodt, "A History of Children's Museums," 4.
 5. Ann W. Lewin, "Empowering the Mind of the Child in Children's Museums," in Jan R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zeneton, eds., *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 78. The Boston Museum was established in 1911 and the man credited with the change is Mike Spock.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 78. This change took place under the directorship of Lloyd Hezakiah. According to Lewin, by the 1980s there were about three hundred children's museums in the United States.
 7. Linda Issit, "Manitoba Children's Museum," *Dawson and Hind* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 8.
 8. Newman, "Manitoba Children's Museum Style," 1, 4.
 9. Nancy Newman, "All Aboard for an Express Trip Destination: Imagination," *Amuse Paper* (Winter 1994, 1995): 1.
 10. "History of the Forster Dollhouse," (Document from the Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996).
 11. Christina Simpson, "Welcome to Your Childhood," *Glenbow* (Autumn 1994): 4.
 12. *Ibid.*, 3. See also Cindy Pawluk and Linda Hawke, "The Great Balancing Act: Bridging the Gap Between Teens and Adults," *Glenbow* (Autumn, 1994): 34-37.
 13. Michele Landsberg, "Cherished Childhood Moments Need a Place to Rest," *Toronto Star* (Sunday, 16 July 1995): A2.
 14. *Annual Report, Manitoba Children's Museum* (1 July 1993-31 December 1994). "The Great Adventure: A Profile of the Children's Museum," (Document from the Children's Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996).
 15. Simpson, "Welcome to Your Childhood," 3.
 16. Issit, "Manitoba Children's Museum," 8.

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- . "Here Comes the Sun." *Amuse Paper* (Spring 1995).
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