

## [A Synopsis... continued from page 6]

The guide was structured to respond to major user and process issues. First, issues were explored, then information was analyzed, and relations between issues and design responses were established. Finally, key design principles were generated which synthesized all the information into generic – and graphic – design directives. Major concepts covered include the context of children's museums, the design challenges they present, design issues, and design principles and their key features.

Cohen's and McMurtry's vision of design sees the museum as a landmark in its community and considers how well museum design integrates with community design. By recognizing that a museum sends messages and communicates before the visitor arrives and after the visitor leaves, Cohen and McMurtry approach design in its broadest perspectives. In their view, design encompasses the entire museum, interior, exterior and community; it isn't something that just happens within exhibit halls.

Accordingly, their interests lie in "the location and accessibility of the building, the form of the building and the image it conveys, the organization of paths and circulation, the distribution of functions and their mutual connections, the relationships of indoor spaces to near and distant outdoor spaces." Questions which emerge from these concerns include:

- "Do the building's envelope and its interiors express the museum's purpose?
- Does the structure demonstrate or enhance what is being displayed and experienced?
- Does the distribution of functions and their clusters contribute to a better understanding of the building and its internal logic?
- Do circulation patterns create quality spaces for retreat, spontaneous meetings, variety and change?"

Cohen and McMurtry address these questions by developing design principles and concepts and offering a wide range of possible solutions.

**Editor's Note:** Museums and Children: A Design Guide, is in report form. The manuscript is available for purchase for \$15. Copies of this manuscript may be purchased from Publications in Architecture, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, P. O. Box 413, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, 53201.

Dr. Cohen stressed that although his focus when beginning the project was on children's museums, the resulting book is generalizable to many types of museums. Cohen would appreciate receiving critical

comments from those who utilize the manuscript. These comments will be of assistance in producing a final version of the book and will also help document the application of the design principles.

A further source of information about Dr. Cohen's work is "Learning from Children's Museums: Implications for Design," in Children's Environments Quarterly, Volume 4, Number 1, Spring, 1987.

## NOTES FROM QUICK AND DIRTY STUDIES

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There is a role for "quick and dirty" evaluation work in museums, as long as the methodology used is appropriate to the study. The usefulness of such work was demonstrated to staff at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis several years ago when Dr. Robert Wolf completed a series of one-month "mini studies." The studies were designed to provide "quick and dirty" insights into visitor behavior and expectations that were puzzling staff. Each study was independent of the others, but because answers to one set of questions often provoked additional questions, a number of the studies built upon one another. Data were gathered using visitor observations and interviews, conducted on different days of the week and times of day. Sample sizes were small: 25-100 observations and interviews, depending upon the nature of each study.

Staff recognized that to utilize the data with high confidence, additional, more rigorous evaluation work would be required. However, because the studies shed light on visitor expectations and behavior, they provided starting points for staff planning exhibits. This meant staff was able to more quickly identify strategies and establish desired exhibit outcomes. Staff are still using these insights and continue to check their validity by doing formative testing during the early stages of exhibit development and by conducting summative evaluation after an exhibit opens.

Some of the insights provided by the Wolf mini studies are shared here because they have proven useful to exhibit staff in Indianapolis and may be useful to others. Readers are reminded that the data is site-specific; the findings are not necessarily generalizable. However, if other children's museums find similar results with their visitors, more insights about behavior in children's museums may begin to emerge.

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**[Quick and Dirty... continued from page 7]**

The Indianapolis Museum found:

- Visitors often have conflicting desires and expectations. For instance, they expect that their favorite things will always be on display, but also expect to find new things to see and do.
- Visitors want to learn something, have an opportunity to apply what they have learned, and have a little time to decide/evaluate how they feel about the topic, while they are in an exhibit.
- Adults sense that there is something available for all age levels, but do not always know what is most appropriate for their children.
- Adults emphasize the importance of children being able to learn contextually and see this as an important difference between the museum and a school setting.
- Adults want thematic labels and do read them. (Other evaluation work by Wolf indicated visitors preferred exhibits with high object density and few labels to exhibits with fewer objects but more information.)
- Three general models of adult/child interaction were observed, based on exhibit type:

EXHIBIT TYPE:	ADULT/CHILD INTERACTION:
Didactic	Child needs adult as mediator, resulting in high level of interaction.
Participatory	Adult not needed; child can take control; low level of interaction occurs.
Combination	Child wants to take control but there is not enough support material in the exhibit to allow this to happen; low interaction as a result.

Adults tend to have more energy to talk with their children at the beginning of the visit. If adults start in exhibits which do not require their mediation, they do not tend to alter their interaction style when they get to didactic or combination exhibits where the children do need help.

•Two different "parenting" types emerged from observing adults interacting with their children. Type One goes through the exhibit with the child, talking about the exhibit and asking questions back and forth. These adults want help with process kinds of learning: how to help their child with critical and creative thinking, problem solving, etc. They are very interested in cause and effect relationships, both within exhibits and between exhibits. They tend to be conceptually oriented, rather than factually oriented. These parents look to the museum to provide experiences that are different from those offered in schools, i.e., to provide other ways for their child to learn.

Type One adults want exhibits which stimulate a child's natural curiosity. They request handouts and want examples of the kinds of questions they can ask to stimulate critical thinking and problem solving. They want examples in the labels of how to establish relationships between the exhibits (bridges built into the exhibits that make connections). They want to use present-day experiences as an entrance point to the past and to the future. They want more exhibits that deal with current issues, are relevant to today.

Type Two adults surrender authority to the museum and have few interactions with the child, except to set the pace of the visit or to provide discipline. These adults want to be provided factual information to impart to their child. They want experiences which extend what happens in school. While this type of adult does not reject process-related experiences for their child, they are not extremely excited about the process type of exhibit.

•Most children under the age of ten don't really understand the concepts of collections and conservation and, consequently, don't know what a museum really is.

•Many children repond poorly to objects out-of-context, perhaps because of their developmental stage, perhaps because they don't understand the role of objects in a museum and are not very object literate.

•Many children under the age of ten have no language to talk about objects and consequently, are not able to independently generate many questions about objects. They have not been taught how to make visual comparisons, so it is difficult for them without assistance to compare objects within an exhibit or even compare an object in the exhibit with those they have at home.

•Most children don't seek out labels as a primary learning strategy and do not look for labels to provide answers to their questions. As a result, they don't learn much from them.

•Many children say they don't like labels, but not because they can't or don't like to read. They say they don't read labels because they have no incentive to do so. If they do read a label, it has to be right in front of them.

•Audio-visual presentations receive high marks from children; they are often able to recite detailed information acquired from watching such presentations. □

A Future Issue of  
*Visitor Behavior*  
will feature  
Program Evaluation  
Send ideas to

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