So I trusted in nature from day one and noticed an interesting thing: children play, and their best learning happens through play. Children are designed to be curious. From birth on, they want to know and figure out everything. Children are driven to succeed. They are constantly challenging themselves and can actually accomplish it all through a biologically implanted process that we call play. <http://www.naomialdort.com/articles.html>

It is rarely too late to acquire knowledge, but often it is dangerously too early and out of harmony with the internal journey of the child. <http://www.naomialdort.com/articles.html>

However, there are no grand roles for us grown-ups: true creative play needs no active encouragement or support. And no, we don't need to be the source of the fun or do much entertaining.

We are the invisible net of support and safety. We get to encourage play by deduction - by not intervening or interrupting, and by not showing preference to classroom type activity.

# The Echtheit: Children’s Museums of the future.

# Elaine Heumann Gurian

# HANDS-ON EUROPE, BERLIN, 2007 [[1]](#endnote-2)

“For more than 30 years, children’s museums in Europe have been providing hands-on exhibits and programmes that help to deepen children’s understanding of themselves and of the world.

As society changes, children’s museums must keep pace, reflecting contemporary social, cultural, economic, and educational trends. This is extremely challenging within the context of an increasingly diverse society, where people from different backgrounds are living with conflict but striving to co-exist in harmony.

On top of this, our information society gives rise to ever-increasing expectations for children’s museums to be innovative and progressive in the development and execution of their programmes. With more and more »traditional« museums setting up interactive elements and a range of other facilities offering children’s museum types of experiences, it is necessary to reflect on the position of children’s museum in the broader informal learning sector. This conference examines the key aspects of the role of children’s museum in the areas of education policy and politics, social and cultural change and museological standards.”[[2]](#endnote-3)

Based on the write-up of this conference, it would seem that the organizers believe that children's museums are facing a dilemma. The world may have changed sufficiently since the last major children’s museum experimentation of the 1960’s that a new and potentially different paradigm for children’s museums may be called for. I concur with that assessment.

In the face of rising attendance in existent children’s museums and the numbers of contemplated and completed new ones, suggesting that we are producing a stale and predictable product may come as a surprising statement for some.[[3]](#endnote-4) So let us explore the evolving state of children’s museums to see if we can create a framework that allows us to consider what might be the next successful mutation. As we do that, let us also remind ourselves that operating children’s museums are not static and that new paradigms can probably be glimpsed within new elements of existing institutions.

## AUDIENCE SEGMENTS IN CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS.

The Children’s museum serves three disparate audience segments – the volitional general public generally made up of children and their caregivers, school groups, and members of the disadvantaged communities served in community groups, subvented visits, or in off-site programs. The expectations of these separate groups have some overlap but they are not always compatible one with another either in space use and content delivery. The cost of serving each group varies as does the percentage of staff and staff time devoted to successful service.

Each segment is funded by specific but different sources which tend not to overlap. The major earned income comes from the general public (i.e. volitional visitors consisting of children and their caregivers or relatives. This tends to be revenue associated with admission, membership, programs and products. The major funders for school groups tend to come from the private and public school budget. And the funders for community groups tends to come from government, charities and corporations depending on the tax laws of each country and the governmental social policy. Each funding source comes with inherent or overt requirements, aspirations and philosophy. In order to successfully receive continued funds, a museum must acknowledge the guidelines and live within them. In a continuous interaction the institution and the funders influence each other. And in a complicated dance the museum must balance the different and sometimes conflicting demands of these disparate funding sources.

In each institution, depending on their internally conceived mission and the available sources of funding, there is a slightly different mix of the percentages of visitation between the groups.

## The needs of each group:

What do we know about the needs and expectations of each group?

I would contend that when institutions generate a significant amount of their income from

admissions, it is the “buying audience” who impact the program most directly. And it is the well-educated middle and upper classes who are the major purchasers of services, members of the governing boards, and often the impetus behind the founding of these children’s museums in the first place.

Having been steeped in popular early childhood literature beginning in the 1960’s, they have learned that stimulation at very early ages makes for the most successful adults. Thus, they see the children’s museum as a highly desirable institution in their pursuit of age-appropriate stimulation for their very young children. In many countries this interest has moved the median age of children down from the original upper elementary school aged child for whom it was originally designed at the turn of the century down to pre-school and early elementary school aged children where it now sits.

The changes in these children’s museums philosophical directions, when they occur over time, come from parental dissatisfactions with child rearing or educational philosophy that are seen to be no longer working. The history of children’s museums is, in part, the history of adjusting to the contemporary yearnings of privileged parents and teachers and offering a physical venue that expresses those aspirations.

These yearnings however are not manufactured in thin air nor are they consistent or homogenous. They are the amalgam of the interplay between child rearing literature, gifted teachers, curriculum development, the progressive educational movement, the intelligent popular press and currently, parenting blogs.

An inevitable tension exists between the interest of parents measuring success in their own family as a social unit and other funders who are more interested in services that are quantified in blocks of children served.

The second group is the school group. Teachers need curriculum justification to take their classes to the museum because field trips are expensive and because, currently at least in America, there is considerable pressure for every teacher to produce proscribed measurable academic achievement for every class. To conform to that pressure, the children’s museum needs to overtly advertise and provide an experience that is educationally useful that distinguishes itself from its general-audience reputation as a “play place.”

The beloved hands-on exhibition design based on individual choice and exploration are often anathema to the teacher who needs every child to have a common experience. The curriculum provided for school groups tends to focus on slightly older children than those brought by their parents during free time. These school children include a wider economic stratum, diverse languages and experiences. Depending on the school, this may be the first museum experience of any kind for some of the children.

Programmatically, the teacher needs the museum to provide a “class” where the group members are each given the same material in some orderly manner. Because the teachers demand more content, the museum provides more instructional personnel, both paid and volunteer, and more attention to curriculum development often using carryon props rather than the exhibition as the focus.

In the United States children’s museums, the school group audience that is somewhere between 20-50% of the annual attendance and is artificially limited by the museum administration; in Europe, especially if the subvention allows for free entrance, the percentage can be much higher. And in some places, the majority of the audience is indeed school children.

While the family group is the audience that the exhibits are often designed for, the salaried staff is primarily hired to work with the school groups. Trained teachers on the staff find school groups easier to predict and easier to prepare for than the general audience. Without attention by the administration to the balance of program offerings, more school programs and school-like programs are provided than any other.

The third group is the children and their caregivers in the lower economic strata which tend to be referred to euphemistically as “community.” No matter what ethnicity, racial or language group, they have different expectations than those already discussed. They come, for example, from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds than the more affluent attendees; they often have more than one language spoken at home and are not always fluent in the majority language. They may have an uneasy status in society as guest workers or immigrants, both legal and illegal. They are skittish about authority and venturing out into unfamiliar environments that have clearly been organized for others. They are generally non-trusting of those who offer good deeds and who might be well meaning but appear patronizing or irrelevant. The lives of the adults are more stressed, and they are more focused on issues of immediate need. The audience is not waiting around hoping to be invited in. Serving this group is not as simple as providing increased access. Without a knowledgeable and experienced staff advocates and without consistent funding streams provided by charities or government funding, this group is served only minimally and intermittently.

## Public and private not-for-profit governance:

The influence each group of users has in shaping the direction of any particular institution varies either by percentage of use or percentage of funding. For example there are profound programmatic differences between those institutions that are founded as private not-for-profit institutions, those established as augmentations to the schools and those that are not only funded by the state but are a product of state policy.

The adult, in the general visitor segment, wishes a steady flow of changing exhibitions and a clean and aesthetic environment. As a group they share common child-rearing practices with each other and expect the staff to relate to their children in certain ways. These include encouragement for endeavors great and small with a gentle insistence on sharing and “taking turns” in a civil manner. They wish their children to be protected and expect the museum to be safe, albeit challenging. They remember their own childhood fondly and recall (sometimes inaccurately) being able to leave the house freely and explore the neighborhood by themselves and with their friends without adult supervision.

To serve this important (and revenue-producing) population best, the museum encourages, wittingly or unwittingly, certain class-determined attitudes toward children. For example, in most museums there is an expectation that these children have leisure time, access to technology, have traveled, have enough nutrition, know references to childhood movies and books, and come from homes where learning is encouraged and success is expected.

The children of this population in most places have had a more protected upbringing than their own parents. They are carted around from one safe environment to another, have constant supervision from, or even interference from adults, and less exposure to the consequences of their decisions than do their less affluent counterparts.

An inevitable tension exists between the interest of parents in the family as a social unit and the other funders who are more interested in services that are measureable in blocks of children served.

Institutions founded by or principally funded by governments are generically more interested in using these organizations as part of social policy which includes child welfare, work-force training and the elevation of talent as national treasure. For example, although not ordinarily considered children’s museums, the creation of pioneer palaces in the former Soviet Union and their parallel organizations in China, Cuba, and North Vietnam (while different in organizational structure, originating bodies and desired outcome) borrowed heavily from the children’s museum movement and should be considered part of the same history.(Wikipedia, 2007) These institutions were interested in broadening public education to create a class of champions in many fields and more workers with needed specializations.

The current experiment initiated by the Blair government which links parenting centers, interactive play centers, and social service in a comprehensive program called SureStart is worth watching as a current government funded model serving more than a million families of the less advantaged. In addition to child care models similar to head start, SureStart has voluntary drop-in centers that quite resemble play spaces in children’s museums.

## The squeeze of three interlocking audience segments:

If serving three distinct and not necessarily compatible groups were not difficult enough, each one of the groups – family, school, community – has a philosophy that is currently in practice, debate of that practice among scholars and thinkers and a new philosophy waiting in the wings. These are not usually separate thoughts but rather to be found on a continuum of practice which one might say swing in pendulum fashion from one pole to another.

For example, the middle class family is influenced by theories of good parenting and good education which generally waver between the need to accommodate individual’s wishes, achievements and desires and the need for family harmony working as a cooperative unit. For the school education focuses on achievement of the individual child, the need for a class-room wide mastery of a commonly agreed curriculum of attainment and the need to create a group of educated workforce within a peaceable society. For the community there is the tension between the need for harmonious group interaction with a common agenda and the rights of the different culture groups to maintain their identity. This can be seen world-wide between the debate between the need for and pride in a national identity and the integration of migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants. While the specificity of goals is different they philosophies all revolve about maximizing the success of the individual while at the same time creating a harmonious and cohesive group. While the prefared philosophy guiding action is always in flux, the reality is that these tensions are inbuilt and ultimately unsolveable. The tension inherent in these unsolvable polarities and the interrelationship between the three competing users of the institution make for a very interesting and ever-changing stew in children’s museums, in our education system as a whole and in the notion of civility within each country.

The changes in children’s museums strategies, when they occur, result from a general and generalized dissatisfaction with and recalibration of commonly held beliefs of child rearing, educational philosophy or civic tranquility that are seen to be no longer working. The history of children’s museums is, in part, the history of making the contemporary yearnings of privileged parents, teachers and government policy (writ small) visible and offering a physical venue that expresses those new aspirations.

These are all influenced by the overlay of changes in society wholesale. Some of the current ones involve the alarm of global warming on our very existence, the tension between religious forces and between political extremism on the body politic, the amount of terrorist violence potentially imminent in all countries, the rise of the use of internet and other technology as a redistributor of economic power, and the seeming breakdown of agreed civic values.

Let me pose one example taken from the American scene which I know best and its effect of children’s museums. Currently American middle-class children have had a more urban, more protected upbringing than did their own parents. They are carted around from one safe environment to another, have constant supervision from, or even interference from adults, and less exposure to the consequences of their decisions than do their less affluent counterparts. Their parents, in recalling their own childhood nostalgically wish that their own children would have more unsupervised play in more natural surroundings. Children’s museums are creating more extraordinary indoor and outdoor physical play places than ever before. Yet once these are operating, the institution gets a reputation for being less educational and less desirable for the school group in need of curriculum learning. The tension is exacerbated because the cost of admission is sufficiently high that buying admission for purposes of play seem wasteful to the very sector that wished for it in the first place. “Messing around” is seen both as desirable and even instructive and but not measureable in an accomplishment sense and therefore not valued.

## The questions that come to mind --

As we ponder the future paradigm of children’s museum, a few questions come to mind:

For the family:

* Is the foundational exhibition technique of the last three decades -- hands-on interactivity (while still useful, beloved, and increasingly imitated elsewhere) -- enough to sustain the institution?
* What are the current prevalent parenting theories in current use and how will they affect children’s museums?
* Given that the ages served have been lowered over time, are these institutions valuable to the very young or is there a way to broaden their appeal?
* Have children’s museums become indoor physical playgrounds and adventure parks and less “educational” if so, is that ok?

For the school group:

* How has the technological age affected our young children and should children’s museums counter technology or embrace it?
* Is the current quality and quantity of content level sufficient to sustain these institutions as educational? Appropriate to the ages served?
* What is the role of values and citizenship that should be enhanced by these institutions?

For the community:

* What is the real meaning of “town square” and “forum” in the context of Children’s museums?
* Should museums be advocates for causes?
* Is social service an appropriate integrated activity within the institution?
* How can multi-cultural peaceable interaction be enhanced within the walls of the museum?

Individual children’s museums, in asking themselves these questions, are creating new missions to replace old ones, seeking new pathways to enlarge their subject matter and expand their service to different age groups, and broaden their relationship to the educational and social service systems in their environment

It is probably realistic to looks at some incremental changes made to children’s museums since that great experimentation of the 1960’s which solidified hands-on and participatory exhibitions as a museum staple and see if one can predict that next generation or so of these institutions.

## MISSION STATEMENTS

We can see the distinct trajectory of children’s museum history by comparing the original mission statement for the first children’s museum, established in 1899 in Brooklyn:

 "... to form an attractive resort for children with influences tending to refine their tastes and elevate their interests; to create an attractive education center of daily assistance to pupils and teachers in connection with school work, and to offer new subjects of thought for pursuit in leisure hours." (Gallup, 1907)

And compare that with the current mission statement of the not yet opened National Children’s Museum in Washington DC:

“To inspire children to care about and improve our world.”

The first one is limited, realistic, proscriptive and one might suggest authoritarian and the second is cause-related, optimistic, open-ended but potentially over-reaching and unrealistic.

## A REVIEW OF CURRENT PHILOSOPHIES?

### PARENTING

Values, appropriate to the age, too much pressure, cultivating a spirit of optimism, learning to value struggle and disequilibrium, feeling safe, balance of needs, community support, extended family, supporting play and learning, diversity, technology, parents as learning, confidence over powerlessness, non-violence

An important clue to the possible future directions of children’s museums might be found by reviewing the contemporary popular press in the areas of parenting, education, and learning theory.

A cursory review suggests that some of the underlying experiences and philosophies of child rearing are changing. One can still find books on enhanced individualism, such as multiple intelligences and inherent personality types (Gardner, 1983). But these now compete with books that concentrate less on the exploration of individualized creativity and more on the common needs and responsibility of the family and the community. Words juxtaposed like “individualism – collectivism” invade many sociological treatises. Like most previous parenting books, research based scholarly journals form the underpinning of parenting material.

Politics in America both from the left and the right currently stress “family values,” accordingly there is an increased interest in “interrelatedness,” nonviolent problem solving, delayed gratification for the common good, disciplined accomplishment, and interpersonal caring. There is a new emphasis on citizenship now permeating child development books. In response, one begins to see exhibitions in children’s museums that enhance group problem-solving and the sharing of resources.

An even newer category of parenting books stress spirituality and specific religious training as central to rearing successful children. At least in the United States, given the political climate, the intermixing of the values with religion is everywhere noted in the press as a new frontier of interest. Interesting there has been a recent spate of Jewish Children’s Museums which might fit within this category.

The explosion of agritourism, ecotourism and rural vacations suggests there is an increased interest by families in experiencing nature.[[4]](#endnote-5) Embedded in that trend, is nostalgia for the imagined small the town of yesteryear, hence the explosion of town-like play environments in children’s museums...

One can see that the expansion of petting zoos of domestic animals into Zoos that formerly had only exotics, speak to the interest by parents of providing children access to the animals the parents knew in childhood. Looking at children’s museums currently expanding, one can see increased use of outside exhibition spaces with plantings as well as inside themed areas of “faked” apple orchards, forests, and other nature formats.

The difficult world situation with the religious polarization has brought home to us that simple attention to cultural difference, promoted so earnestly in children’s museums of the past, does not necessarily make a safer society. Accordingly, cultural exhibits, based on our League of Nations’ past, that stressed commonality -- we all eat, we all sleep, only we use different and intriguing products to do so – seems no longer adequate as the message for children’s museums exhibitions.

### EDUCATION

### CITIZENSHIP

## IS INCREASED TECHNOLOGY GOOD FOR INTERACTIVITY?

The term “hands-on” used to mean tactility of all kinds. Now it has been expanded to mean technological interaction. And technological interaction is increasingly available in children’s museum. There is growing literature both pro and con about the meaning of children’s interaction with technology. On the one hand there is an explosion of knowledge available to children, and because they are taught computer use at an early age in school, they can access information on their own very early. On the other there is a certain mesmerizing lack of sociability found in sitting in front of a screen. A deep discussion will have to commence about the role of technology within the children’s museum exhibition palette. In fact, a new children’s Museum in Pittsburg has eliminated high tech access for children within their new museum. Here is an interesting quotation about why they did it, as food for thought:

Indeed, our own research suggests that in some cases, while enhancing an individual’s experience, ‘interactives’ – in particular those relying on computing and information technologies – inadvertently impoverish the social interaction that can arise with and around exhibits in museums and galleries. There is a danger that we are confusing interactivity with social interaction and collaboration. (Heath and vom Lehn, 2002)

## WHAT’S TO BECOME OF CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS?

At the outset of this paper, I suggested that the prototypical children’s museums may have exhausted the potential of the paradigm, even as their numbers continue to grow, and other museums continue to borrow from children’s museums strategies and poach (appropriately) on their audience. I remain unconvinced that a viable new paradigm is waiting in the wings.

I would contend that the long term sustainability of children’s museums is not based on tweaks in strategy, subject matter, or audience mix, but in fulfilling the deeply held and often unexpressed aspirations of parents, teachers, community leaders and politicians.

For me the current modalities within children’s museums have too much “doing” and too much stimulation. There is no time to smell the flowers, walk in the woods, see the sunset, practice skills to one’s own satisfaction, or being about to identify one’s own “satisfaction” at all.

There is a pervasive lack of silence for children, of satisfying examples of doing nothing, of fostering and teaching children the pleasures and repose of an internal reflective life.

So as we try to envision new models let us try to have the broadest perspective. Museums have not paid enough attention to imagination and fantasy, examples of meaningful work, idealism and beauty, religion and spirituality, handwork and kindness, silence and inner lives, and creativity.

My hope for the next generation of children’s museums would include the following:

* A celebration of the watcher as learner. We need more passive computers to watch the action (slave monitors), viewing platforms, scanning areas to prepare the shy for next until the kid is finally ready to engage. Holding back is not just shyness and even if it is why do we not value reticence, moderation in response, soft talking?
* Respect for the modulated visit. We need more quiet spaces, spaces for calming down.
* Spaces that foster loving interaction between generations. One might say, we need more holding and rocking, sitting still and listening to lullabies.
* A focus on group enterprise that requires cooperation and that doesn’t work without all helping.
* Rewards for experimentation that arise from within, rather than through external approbation, allowing for joy and flow. (Csikszentmihály, 1990)
* More discipline and less judgmental overlay. Children need to understand that practice is its own reward without having to appear to be practicing for the Olympics.
* Apprenticeships where learning by doing is not faked but real and with real consequences.
* More belly laughs, less accomplishment testing and more rolling around.

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1. This paper is the organic successor to many previous writings on Children’s Museums including, “The Molting of the Children’s Museum in
GURIAN, E. H. (2006) *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian,* Cambridge, England, Routledge,  *Museum management and curatorship,* Guildford, Surrey, Butterworth-Heinemann. a speech to the “Hands On” Conference in Lisbon in May 1998, subsequently presented at the Association of Children’s Museum conference of the same year. The basis of this paper was written first with Anne Dobbs Tribble as
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BAEKER, G. G. (1981) The Emergence of Children's Museums in the United States 1899-1940. *Museum Studies.* Toronto, University of Toronto. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Exerted from the on-line write-up of the Hands On Europe Conference in Berlin, November 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The museum website of the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) reproduces a 2001 Chicago Tribune article that puts the attendance figures of US children’s museums at 33 million up from 8 million in 1991, the number of institutions at almost 300 from 200 in 1990 and 38 in 1975 with 80 in the planning phase and many existing children’s museums in the process of expansion.
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4. “Ceballos-Lascuráin (1993) reports a WTO estimate that nature

tourism generates 7% of all international travel expenditure

(Lindberg, 1997). The World Resources Institute (1990) found

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4%, nature travel is increasing at an annual rate between 10% and

30% (Reingold, 1993). Data which supports this growth rate is

found in Lew's (1997) survey of tour operators in the Asia-Pacific

region who have experienced annual growth rates of 10% to 25%

in recent years (Lindberg, 1997).”
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