

AUDIENCE RESEARCH TO DESIGN AND PLAN A CHILDREN'S MUSEUM "WE KIDS NEED A PLACE TO FIND OUT ABOUT THINGS"

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An audience research project was recently completed for use in both the strategic planning process and the design concept of the new Children's Museum, which will open as part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization complex in Hull, Ontario, in August, 1989.

The visitor survey portion of the work focused on socio-cultural data, family demographics and profiles of young visitors. It was carried out over a two-week period in June and July, 1988, at the building which the Canadian Museum of Civilization shared up until September, 1988, with the National Museum of Natural Sciences. All visitors to the building were included in the study population.

Focus group and individual interview questions concentrated on the expectations and needs of potential visitors to the new Children's Museum, as well as on their reaction to it. Respondents were screened for French and English language representation, multicultural origins and a balance of children's ages. A total of twelve focus groups were conducted. These included: children aged nine to fourteen; parents of preschoolers and primary school children; preschool and primary school teachers. Individual interviews were done with children aged six to eight years of age.

The findings showed that the visitor profile was similar to that of most North American museums, with some exceptions. As in earlier studies at this location, the largest visitor age category was twenty to forty-four years. However, it was a surprise to discover that the second largest age group of visitors was under six years old. Teenagers and seniors were virtually absent. Most visitors were local people who came with their pre-teen children. The predominant languages were English and French but many respondents also spoke other languages in the home. A large proportion of the audience was born outside of North America.

The qualitative work identified the following factors as crucial for the future success of the Children's Museum:

- content that is intercultural and international
- discovery of and entry into other cultural worlds
- hands-on participation in a three-dimensional environment
- highly visible human resources such as volunteers, representatives of different cultures who can act as interpreters, and museum specialists such as archaeologists
- staff experienced with children in facilitating family interaction
- a friendly, welcoming atmosphere with bright, colorful design
- a changing temporary exhibit area
- adequate visitor services and facilities, including rest and snack areas, baby changing areas, and restrooms

This research project was timed so that its results would have maximum impact on the planning of the client-centered museum and they have had a profound influence on the future direction of the new Children's Museum. For example, the design team used the results to formulate design principles, presented in the concept report, which have driven both the physical form and conceptual content of the new museum.

The results also were incorporated into the Environmental Assessment of the Strategic Plan for the Children's Museum as part of the scan of the future operating environment for the museum. The study also confirmed the relevance of the goals of the Children's Museum.

Other divisions of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and other Canadian museums also are using the work to help plan their marketing, sales and educational strategies for their pre-teen audiences.

Note: The Canadian Museum of Civilization's efforts to standardize the data collected during this project with previous Museum data, Canadian Census data and data from other relevant museum surveys should be of particular interest to professional museum evaluators in the U. S. Museum data organized to be compatible with Census data became a powerful tool in determining size and locations of potential markets, projecting attendance, and obtaining additional information about the market.

The specific findings of the focus groups should be of interest to children's museums. These covered current visitation patterns, sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, expectations and reactions to the new Children's Museum concept, overall design expectations,

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the interests of children of varying ages, preferences about interpretive approaches and techniques and overall museum content, responses to a proposed outdoor area, interest in a resource center for adults and students, prioritization of facilities for visitor comfort, defining the role of the new Children's Museum etc.

It is also interesting to note that the Museum has a Youth Advisory Committee which helps the Museum in the development and implementation of products, programs and services. This committee is composed of 14 voting members (7 boys and 7 girls) between the ages of 8 and 14. Presently residing in the National Capital region, the members have been selected from a mix of cultural, social and academic backgrounds. The committee meets formally four times per year, and other informal consultation may also take place at other times. The children provide a forum for the discussion of needs and interests of the focus audience of the Children's Museum, review proposals and plans, recommend changes or additions, test/evaluate products, programs and services, and act as "ambassadors" of the Museum. The term of office is two years, as long as the children are 14 years of age or under. Continuity is assured by staggering membership. The Children's Museum staff presently chair the Youth Advisory Committee meetings as ex-officio/non-voting members, but eventually this task will be assigned to one Museum staff person. Kim McDougall, Head, Children's Museum Planning can provide additional information.

The study was directed by Jennifer Cave and carried out by Rosalyn Rubinstein. For more information contact: Jennifer B. J. Cave, Box 1028, RR 1, Cumberland, Ontario K01 1S0. □

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A Synopsis of Cohen & McMurtry's MUSEUMS AND CHILDREN: A DESIGN GUIDE

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While museums have always learned from each other, children's museums seem to be taking the lead in broadening the nature of the museum experience, leading us to new definitions of what a museum can or should be. The exploratory spirit and experiential opportunities offered by children's museums appeal to all ages. The popularity of these approaches is demonstrated by the rapidity with which new children's museums are being created. Visitors and museum professionals alike are discovering that good design for children appeals to the child in all of us.

How can other museums learn from the successes children's museums are enjoying? When Uriel Cohen and Ruth McMurthy set out to answer this question, they found a lack of design guidance, based upon "empirically-tested information on users of children's museums in relation to physical design." They developed an applied research project which generated "user-oriented and process-based design guidance" while keeping in mind the idea that such information should be applicable to a wide range of museum contexts. Funded by the Design Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, the project outcome was the draft of a book, Museums and Children: A Design Guide.

They describe the book as "intended to stimulate and inform those who conceive, program, plan, and design museums of all types for all people. It is selective, not comprehensive, addressing some of the more important, or the more overlooked issues and concepts. It presents an abundance of examples so that the readers can learn, compare, and select concepts which are appropriate for their own situation."

"The conceptual approach to the project was derived from an integrative model of research and design... developed by the project directors. The project team employed information collection, programming, and translation methods including: systematic reviews of museum research and design literatures, field observations, focused interviews with clients and users, review of similar building types, and experts' reviews."

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