The Getty Family Room:
Unpacking the Ideas and Assumptions behind the Development of an Interactive Space

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Introduction

Art museums across the country have become increasingly interested in creating interactive gallery spaces geared to family audiences, as evidenced by the high attendance at the J. Paul Getty Museum's symposium on this topic over the weekend of June 4 and 5, 2005. These interactive galleries are typically conceptualized as spaces that address the unique learning needs of families in a museum environment in ways that traditional art galleries have been unable to achieve. The process by which they are developed involves learning theory, child development research, and museum-based audience research, and operates according to goals and objectives that are often divergent from those that dominate the rest of the museum's gallery spaces. Above all, museums create interactive galleries in an effort to provide engaging and educational environments for families. However, the specific visions and objectives for these interactive spaces, as well as the types of approaches used in their conceptualization and development vary widely from museum to museum.

In 2003, as I embarked on the development process for the renovation and redesign of the Getty Museum's family-oriented interactive space known as the Family Room, it became clear that in order to make decisions about the physicality of an interactive gallery, it was imperative to clarify and articulate the objectives for the space as well as the philosophies, assumptions, and values that would inform decision-making. I visited similar galleries around the United States with an interest in better understanding the ways in which other museums had answered the same questions that I was asking, and found that the priorities and visions that shaped spaces, though in many cases common, were also sometimes different from those at the Getty Museum. As a result, the process of developing our space was not as simple as borrowing ideas and learning from successful similar spaces around the country. It was more complex, and it would require us to define for ourselves what it meant to work with family audiences. In this paper, I will attempt to unpack the key values, assumptions, and philosophies that informed the decisions that shaped the 2004 Family Room renovation, and I will address some of the challenges and contradictions that arose from the process of articulating these underlying ideas. It is my hope that discussing the values and philosophies that inform the development of an interactive gallery space will make the Getty's decision-making process more transparent and will help other art museum practitioners to examine their positions in regard to the same issues as they develop their own interactive gallery spaces for family audiences.

Defining and Describing Our Audience

The first step in the Family Room renovation and redesign was to define what we meant by "family audiences" and to qualify how our definition would impact our choices. The Getty has a long history to inform us about working with families, both at the Getty Center in Los Angeles where the Family Room is located, and at the original Getty Museum located in Pacific Palisades (scheduled to reopen in 2006 as the Getty Villa). We also had the results of a 1999 evaluation conducted on the Family Room in its original installation, which included research on family audience needs and expectations in relation to a dedicated gallery space. From these experiences, we knew that families' priorities for a family-oriented gallery included the following: (1) hands-on activities and opportunities to touch, (2) things to do that are fun and entertaining, (3) self-directed activities for learning about art, and (4) a place to rest, relax, and "let off steam."

We conceptualized family audiences by focusing on their diverse nature, including multigenerational ages and various educational backgrounds, experiences, and personal interests, even within a single family group. This notion of diversity carried over to the larger vision of our audience, since we knew that our visitors include substantial portions of tourists, both domestic and international, as well as local Angelenos. This audience demographic meant that we could not assume that visitors would always be fluent in English, and that, based on Los Angeles demographics and public school attendance statistics, many would be Spanish speaking and/or bilingual in English and Spanish.

These audience characteristics led us to envision a space that would encourage participation from a diversity of audiences both through the selection of and approaches to subject matter. The characterization of families in terms of diversity and multigenerational groups also played a larger role, impacting the ways that learning opportunities were constructed, which I will discuss in greater depth below. The need for a comfortable, relaxing, and safe space also shaped our decisions, as did the commitment to developing a gallery that would be intuitive and not reliant on language as a primary mechanism for conveying ideas. Everything in the room would be touchable, self-directed, and suitable for the high energy level of our audience. Finally, all text would be presented bilingually in English and Spanish, and all activities would be designed to be intuitive so as to not rely exclusively on text for the learning experience to occur.

Addressing Institutional Objectives and Priorities

In addition to defining our audience and determining how we would relate to its needs, we needed to recognize the Getty's priorities for the project and establish how these goals would manifest in the gallery space. In terms of content, the Getty's priority for the Family Room is its permanent collection. We aim to connect the educational activities we create to our permanent collection or exhibitions, and in this case, to all six of the Getty Museum's permanent collections areas. Since the prior installation of the Family Room had focused specifically on only one permanent collection area, Paintings, we wanted the renovation to expand opportunities for families to connect to other areas as well. Furthermore, we wanted to use an object-centered approach that would address the collections through direct experiences with specific objects and

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provide conceptual tools for looking at art that could be used by families beyond the Family Room experience.

As part of the objective of connecting the interactive experience to the Museum, it was a priority to create conceptual links between the Family Room and the permanent collection galleries, with the hope that visitors would also make a physical link by going to see the art in the galleries. This vision for treating the Family Room as a sort of conceptual "springboard" for the more traditional museum experience also shaped how we chose and developed the interactives in the room. As the process unfolded, this desire to create links proved to be one of the project's major challenges, for though we were able to develop clear conceptual links to objects in the permanent collection through the use of image reproductions, creating physical links was more difficult due to the geographic separation of the Family Room from the galleries. In part, this physical separation was increased by an early decision that we would not include actual art objects in the Family Room. Reasons for this decision included the safety of the works of art both from a conservation and security perspective, and the difficulty of choosing what objects might be included (and thereby excluded from the main galleries). The decision to not include original works of art contributed to the challenge of connecting the experience of the Family Room to experiences with the collection because physically the connection could not be made directly.

It was also an institutional priority to cultivate a highly collaborative approach to the development of the Family Room, so that multiple perspectives and types of expertise would be captured in the space. To achieve this objective, both external and internal advisory teams were set up to inform the core project team. The external advisers included a child development specialist, a technology/special effects specialist, two architects — one a children's museum design specialist — and the director of another local art museum's interactive gallery. The internal advisers included the museum's senior staff and the core project team, which included two permanent collections curators, an exhibition designer, a preparator, a facilities and operations specialist, and several members of the museum education department, where the project was housed. The project team also included two architects from Predock_Frane Architects, the firm that had been selected for the project via a two-stage competition.

Lastly, the museum wanted to make sure that the new design for the Family Room would be compatible with the larger aesthetic of the Richard Meier–designed site while retaining unique qualities specific to the target audience, such as a dynamic use of color and space. The ideal characteristics of the renovation design would include an elegance and simplicity synergistic with the museum building and an overall conceptual vision that was coherent and unified.

Shaping Our Approach to Family Learning

As with many traditionally child-centered museum learning spaces, such as children's museums and science centers, the Getty's educational philosophy was informed by the writings of John Dewey and his experience-based approach to learning. All aspects of the Family Room build on a hands-on learning approach, and virtually every area of the room is activity-based. In fact, it is the Deweyan hands-on, activity-oriented methodology that characterizes the fundamental and underlying concept of the Family Room and that makes it unique from traditional art galleries

where conservation and security concerns make high levels of activity and touching nearly impossible.

Similarly, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory played a role in shaping the activities in the room. Although the Family Room is by no means a thoroughly multiple intelligence–oriented space, it carries the spirit of Gardner's work in the ways that audiences can interact with the activities. Gardner's theory brought to the process the notion that learners are diverse in their strengths and abilities, and that the ways in which we need to engage family audiences need to be diverse as well. Although each of Gardner's intelligences is not rigorously represented in every Family Room activity, the activities were nevertheless developed with multiple intelligences in mind, and they take on a variety of learning modalities that address intelligence strengths such as kinesthetic, spatial, and linguistic. In addition, activities were constructed, and docents trained, to build both interpersonal and intrapersonal learning opportunities throughout the room, responding in part to Gardner's model. Although individual visitors may not find every activity equally engaging, people with different strengths and abilities are all likely to find something in the room that caters to them.

The Family Room concept also evolved with child development research in mind and an understanding that activities need to be age appropriate. Because we simultaneously sought to develop activities that would be both age appropriate and appropriate to all ages (from young child to adult to grandparent), this vision became one of our challenges. To address it, we decided to use a multileveled approach, and we aimed to make each activity function on a variety of levels, both conceptually and physically. For example, an activity related to our Manuscripts collection allows for older visitors to learn about elements of an illuminated page — such as historiated initials, border decorations, text, and illuminations — by using colored marking pens to fill in incomplete sections of a blown-up reproduced manuscript folio. Yet the activity still has value for younger, preliterate learners, who can practice holding a marker and making a mark. This cognitively multileveled approach met with varying levels of success throughout the room, and leaves open the question about how one can serve a multigenerational audience and simultaneously achieve age appropriateness, or whether ultimately these objectives are mutually exclusive. We also used a physically multileveled approach, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

In addition to the influences of Dewey and Gardner, the project was also informed by the work of John Falk and Lynn Dierking as well as Lev Vygotsky's notion of social interaction in learning and "scaffolding." We addressed the idea of families as communities of learners in their own specific sociocultural context by aiming to create opportunities for shared, social, and collaborative learning experiences with multigenerational appeal. These ideas played out in the physical space in a number of ways that were geared toward supporting and building upon social interactions among families. First, we developed activities that are physically multileveled so that collaboration is encouraged via activity layout. For example, a sculpture-making activity involves the placement of large tubes in receptacles at various heights, some very low and others very high. Similarly, physical spaces were created so that small groups could collaboratively participate in an activity, rather than creating a spatial layout that encouraged individually focused activity. We also aimed for a conceptually multileveled approach, as described above.

To create a personal context for learning, we also developed activities that were likely to have relevance to many visitors' personal experiences, such as activities related to beds and sleep, highway travel, and the observation of bugs. We anticipated that these content choices would appeal to multiple ages and generations of visitors.

In addition to considering learning from both cognitive and sociocultural points of view, we examined our ideas about learning in terms of content. Primarily, our approach to dealing with art-related content was influenced by our understanding of constructivist theory. Instead of delivering authoritative content from an unknown and invisible knowledge source via wall text panels, audio recordings, etc., the project team preferred to create opportunities, via activities and art-inspired imagery, for visitors to engage with content in creative and open-ended ways through hands-on experimentation. Traditional modes of content delivery were not entirely lost in this approach, since computer terminals interspersed throughout the museum galleries provide access to databases with information about all of the objects addressed in the Family Room. However, within the space's immediate context, little art historical information is delivered via traditional means. Furthermore, by using an open-ended approach — meaning that each activity has many possible outcomes and that activities are not linear or sequenced — visitors' meaning-making activities can have multiple outcomes that validate the specific personal and sociocultural contexts that they bring to the experience and the dialectic between these contexts and the material encountered in the Family Room.

Conclusions: Continued Challenges and Questions

To conclude, I would like to discuss several of the challenges and questions that we faced but did not resolve in the development of the Family Room and raise some questions that I believe have ongoing relevance to the larger project of family-oriented interactive galleries.

Audience-Specific Approaches

It is worth analyzing the approach of dedicating a gallery space to a specific audience, in this case, families. As in many art museums, the family-oriented interactive space is the primary gallery designed for the needs of children. As such, it functionally becomes a space dedicated to school groups and community groups with children as well (e.g. scout troops, campers, day-care groups, etc.). The implication of this practical audience shift is complicated because several of the approaches that we brought to the Family Room development were based on a description and understanding of the specific needs of families, such as intergenerational, collaborative adult-child learning experiences. Space was developed with family dynamics in mind, with the expectation that adults would be present, involved in the activities and facilitating their children's experiences. Similarly, work areas are suitable specifically for small group interactions. With large groups such as school groups, the same level of adult involvement is usually not present, the motivations for gallery use are different, and the spatial requirements change, often in ways that are directly opposed to the kind of environment we create for families. Nevertheless, because we do not have a School Group Room or a similarly dedicated space for other audiences that include children, it may be necessary to rethink the approach of building an audience-dedicated space. However, this shift could raise several new questions, such as: Can

spaces that are appropriate for school groups also best serve the needs and learning tendencies of family audiences? If we were to create a multi-audience space, would we be compromising the experiences of each specific audience?

Balancing Visitor Needs with Museum Goals

We learned from our 1999 evaluation of the Family Room that visitors' needs and priorities are not always aligned with museum goals for an interactive space. An example from this evaluation is the finding that family visitors liked and wanted the museum to provide more computers with educational game software. However, the software we were running at the time of the evaluation was an off-the-shelf package available to the public and not related specifically to our collections. Therefore, we did not feel that providing this experience was a unique service that capitalized on the Getty's strength of having a permanent collection. As a result, we discontinued it, even though visitors had asked for more. Perhaps the most salient example of the discrepancy between museum goals and visitor needs is a comment card the Getty received that said, "Please build more rides." (The Getty has a tram that takes people from the parking lot to the museum site.) Ultimately, we often find ourselves in the position of having to negotiate between the opposing terrains of institutional and public priorities. Perhaps one way of approaching this is to focus more on educating our visitors about art museums as institutions, to help them to better understand our strengths and missions and what we are best poised to offer as a public service.

Using a Multileveled Approach to Learning

As discussed above, based on the goal of creating collaborative social learning environments for multigenerational families, the challenge of developing age-appropriate learning opportunities arises. In using a multileveled approach, what is sacrificed in terms of educational opportunities for specific ages? And what is gained by prioritizing the collaborative nature of family interactions? Lastly, does the age-free approach that some museums use mitigate these challenges or create new ones?

Inclusion of Original Art Objects

Another issue that presents itself in art museums is the question of whether or not to include original art objects in an interactive space. The choice to exclude original art from the Getty Museum Family Room had its downsides. It added to the challenge of connecting the hands-on activities to the original works of art. Instead, visitors are forced to rely on reproductions in the immediate context of the Family Room. To some extent, this separation ghettoizes the interactive gallery, conceptually decoupling hands-on activity and art-making from the products of these activities, the art. It also raises the question of whether interactive spaces are subspaces where the museum's greatest strength and treasure, its collection, is absent. The exclusion of original art objects sends a subtle message to the public that the "real" art is not for families.

Yet the choice to include original art objects in an interactive gallery raises similar conceptual challenges. In addition to the conservation and security concerns that immediately come to

mind. Specifically, the inclusion of untouchable works of art in an otherwise hands-on, all-touchable gallery creates a disjunction in message: while everything else in the room is touchable, the visitor must stop short of the plexiglas case where an object is housed. And without clear Do Not Touch signage, how is a child to know which things can be handled and which cannot, especially given that most of the installation is not like a visitor's typical living room, and in many ways quite precious-looking in itself. Similarly, how does adding untouchable areas impact the parents' experience? Instead of being able to fully relax and engage with a child, the adult instead is forced to maintain his or her guard, for fear that the child may touch one of the untouchable areas in this otherwise tactile experience. Several art museums, including the Getty Villa, have included original art objects in their interactive spaces. Yet, the question of what is gained and lost in each case is still not fully resolved.

Ideas about Knowledge

Perhaps one of the most challenging parts of the development process for a family-oriented interactive gallery space is the negotiation of ideas about knowledge. On one hand, art museums are hubs of art historical research — of accumulated knowledge about histories of artists, objects, cultures, and more. In a sense, a museum employee cannot help but feel some responsibility for sharing this research-based knowledge, which the museum works so hard to generate, with the public. On the other hand, in the process of sharing this knowledge with family audiences in interactive spaces, questions about whose knowledge it is, how it was gained, whose perspectives it represents (and whose it does not) are infrequently asked. Through many traditional communication mechanisms, the visitor is indirectly treated as a passive recipient of the museum's accumulated knowledge about an art object rather than as an active participant in meaning-making and in the construction and interpretation of knowledge associated with that object. In the process, the museum may communicate an underlying inaccessibility to the families it aims to serve, suggesting to them that they cannot play an active role in constructing meaning about the works on display; instead, they must rely on the invisible experts from whom the information is received.

The Family Room project team sought to address these issues through its reliance on constructivism as a philosophy for dealing with content, yet the Family Room has been criticized for its lack of "information" about the art. Perhaps most representative of the sense of missing information that some people experience in the Family Room is a question I was asked by an internal staff member after we completed installation and opened the renovated room: "When will you add the informational wall panels?" Furthermore, if one looks to institutionalized standards for judging exhibitions — such as those disseminated by the American Association of Museum's standing professional committee, the National Association for Museum Exhibitions (NAME) — one finds suggestions that the Family Room might not meet quality exhibition standards as a result of its constructivist approach. For example, the NAME Standards for Museum Exhibitions includes the standard that "significant ideas, based on appropriate authority, are clearly expressed though reference to objects in the exhibition" (from Section 2) — a standard that I believe we do not fulfill as it was intended (especially because I do not know who the appropriate authority might be). Thus, we are left with the dilemma of how to negotiate the terrain between traditional ideas about knowledge construction that are often a museum's

foundation and more contemporary ideas about learning and cognitive development that are informed by constructivism and other strains of poststructuralism. Finally, in addition to addressing these epistemological issues internally, how should museums navigate visitor expectations in relation to information delivery?

Outcomes: Is Learning Happening?

Perhaps the most persistent question that comes with the interactive educationally oriented gallery is the issue of whether learning, or "education," is taking place, and if so, how. This is an area that museums and research institutions are beginning to explore, and it requires much continued research. I hope that as the field progresses, and as museums improve their ability to create interactive family-oriented galleries, that the outcomes of these galleries will be examined in greater depth, and that we can improve our understanding of the nature of the visitor experience in these spaces specifically in terms of learning outcomes.

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