

Understanding Audiences: The Creation of the High Museum of Art Family Learning Gallery

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When the High Museum of Art opened its Richard Meier-designed building in 1983, a giant eyeball greeted Peachtree Street passersby from its prominent vantage point in the ground-floor front window. The iconic eyeball, along with a walk-on tongue, oversized ear, hand and nose and a host of sensory activities, comprised *Sensation*, a 3,000 square-foot exhibit for children. Talk to museum-goers who grew up or raised children in Atlanta during the 1980s, and they will invariably recall in fond detail their multiple visits to *Sensation*. Since 1968, programs and exhibits for schools, children, and families have evinced the High Museum's commitment to serving young audiences, and *Sensation* was neither the Museum's first nor the last interactive exhibit for children. It was, however, arguably the most memorable for both staff and audience. (See illustration 1.)



Illustration 1: *Sensation* children's gallery at the High Museum of Art, 1983

In keeping with that legacy, early plans for the Museum's major expansion, currently under construction, identified a gallery for children as a key component of the program. However, concentrated work on the development of that gallery didn't begin in earnest until August 2004. By that time, the gallery location (2,100 square feet located on the first floor of the Richard Meier-designed building), the project budget of \$300,000 and the gallery opening date of November 12, 2005 had been established. Museum leadership also specified that growing the family audience was the project's key goal, and the product should be every bit as memorable as *Sensation*.

Clearly, understanding audience needs would be key to developing a program that would draw families, but given the limitations of time and budget, the project team realized that in-depth audience studies and lengthy formative evaluation were simply not possible. So, the team sought audience data from the most readily available source: the Museum's own paid and unpaid staff. Further, to ensure the project was informed by best practices in the field and efficiently conducted specific research, the Museum retained a long-time art museum educator and audience evaluator to serve as exhibit developer.

From staff interviews and brainstorming sessions, the project team gleaned three vital pieces of information that would shape the project:

- The Museum's most successful galleries for young audiences were highly interactive and experiential, rather than didactic. The Museum staff, in particular, was far less satisfied with exhibitions characterized by close-ended activity stations devoted to content lessons.
- Both Museum staff and school educators perceived the school programs as successful and engaging. Informal audience surveys and staff observations suggested that the experience for family visitors was less so. And, of course, the needs of these two audiences are quite distinct.
- While *Sensation* clearly represented the Museum's most successful family exhibition from both the staff and visitors' perspectives, it was limited by both its unidirectional design (there was only one way through the exhibition) and by the fact that it did not relate to the Museum's collections. Families came to the Museum to visit *Sensation* and rarely extended their visits to include other parts of the Museum.

From this groundwork, the project team agreed upon three key principles that guided the spirit and form of the family gallery. First, the experience was to be genuinely child-centered, appealing to children aged 5-10, on a very basic and intuitive level. Second, the team envisioned an immersive, open-ended approach that engaged visitors on a multi-sensory and multi-dimensional level, allowing visitors flexibility in how they engaged in the space. Third, for a variety of reasons the space would not house original works, yet the gallery needed to make connections to the collection and exhibitions in personal and imaginative ways.

With the audience defined and these principles in place, the messy process of figuring out exactly what would go in the gallery began. A number of interesting ideas began to emerge but the various approaches had no central or organizing core. To work through this phase, the exhibition developer and on-site project manager began to read, watch, listen, and play. The book, *Exuberance: The Passion for Life*, by Kay Redfield Jamison (2004), influenced the development of the gallery's guiding premise. In chapter three Jamison reviewed research on the role of play in humans and animals. The following findings became the founding of the family gallery:

- Play is learning and it is an essential endeavor.

- Imaginative play stimulates creativity, flexible thinking, and the desire to interact socially in positive ways.
- Artists are adults who still remember how to play—with ideas, concepts, forms, and processes. Artists are famous for not following the rules and directions of others in order to create that which engages our hearts, minds, and bodies.

From this core concept, the team agreed to organize the family gallery around basic play experiences, inspired by works from the Museum's collection, and built on characteristics of the creative process. Basic play experiences are those things children have always loved to do, requiring a lot of imagination, simple materials, and no batteries. Staff's enthusiastic participation in recounting their personal childhood play stories helped the team gather new and exciting ideas. Because actual art-making would be accommodated in a well-staffed and fully-supplied art studio space located elsewhere, the family gallery would focus on different kinds of creative experiences. Building sand castles, a basic play activity we do knowing it will be washed away, became the central metaphor for gallery activities.

With the core concept fully developed and supported by Museum staff, the exhibit developer began to conduct "cheap and cheerful" visitor studies with families, intercepted at the Museum and elementary school students, interviewed in small groups. Participants in the study were first asked questions about their perceptions of play. The core concept for the family gallery was briefly described so participants could respond to the general approach. Then they were shown Idea Cards, given a brief description of the idea, and asked for their response.

Adults and children described play in three broad ways. The most frequent category was enjoyment, including entertainment, pleasure, and to have fun and learn. The next category was play as a relief from stress. Children and adults said they used play to release energy, to get away from the everyday world. The final category was social in nature. Play was seen as a way to connect with other people, to learn about each other, to communicate on a different level, and to make memories together. As one parent explained, "*I think of fun, entertainment, you play to get energy, to have fun and to learn how to do stuff, you also learn about people when you play, like who is nice to play with and who doesn't play fair, play is a way of communicating, humans are naturally inquisitive.*"

As was the case with Museum staff, participants responded favorably to the overall core concept, and were eager to share stories about ways they enjoyed playing. A number of patterns emerged from the data as people reflected upon the idea cards. These findings were invaluable as the project team began to make decisions about what to keep and what to delete. One fairly obvious finding, that areas well-conceived are those most well-received by families, pushed the team to clarify the intentions behind each play area. This study also supported findings from similar research: that people want to see and do unique things at the museum; things they cannot do at home, school, office, or shopping mall. One father of two boys, ages 4 and 8, explained, "*What I like about these ideas is that they would be different from what you get at home or school or day care, when you came here you would say 'Ah, I can't do it like that at home, only here!'*" At the same time, the experiences cannot be so unusual that visitors cannot figure out what to do fairly quickly. The beauty of the creative play approach was that people understood what they could do

and reveled in the possibility of experiencing the familiar in new and unusual ways. Finally, study participants readily identified and rejected those proposed activities that were didactic, overly structured and contrived.

The visitor research affirmed the direction of the project and resulted in *Inside Art*, the first installation in the High's new Greene Family Learning Gallery, to open in November 2005. *Inside Art* contains five hands-on activity areas inspired by some of the most popular objects in the Museum's collection.



Illustration 2: Gallery model for *Inside Art* (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

Visitors literally go inside art, as they enter the gallery through an enormous walk-through painting. Mattie Lou O'Kelley's *Yard Sale* extends a colorful welcome that will be accessible and familiar to young visitors. *Yard Sale*, which will be on view in a nearby gallery, represents one of the High Museum's most important pieces in its impressive Folk Art collection. (See illustration 2.)

The center of the space is appropriately devoted to architecture. The High Museum of Art is housed in four extraordinary buildings, designed by internationally renowned architects, Renzo Piano and Richard Meier. Using custom-created blocks, borrowing from the Piano and Meier vocabularies, children can re-create High Museum buildings or design their own in this space entitled Building Buildings. (See illustration 3.)



Illustration 3: Concept Design for Building Buildings area (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

Transforming Treasure is inspired by artists like Tony Cragg and Howard Finster who created their art using objects as ordinary as bits of plastic and pieces of sidewalk. Here, a giant magnetic wall becomes the canvas and everyday objects become the media, as visitors create their own extraordinary mosaics. (See illustration 4.)



Illustration 4: Concept Design for Transforming Treasure area (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

Telling Stories features custom-made puppets directly inspired by some of the Museum's best-loved paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts. These puppets come alive in the hands of children who endow the objects with personality, voice, and story. (See illustration 5.)



Illustration 5: Concept Design for Telling Stories area (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

For children, a folding table and a blanket can become a fortress. In *Sculpting Spaces*, designers have de-constructed objects from the Museum's contemporary art collection to create shapes and images children can use to turn giant peaches, fabrics, protractors, and tubes into imaginative spaces and sculpture. (See illustration 6.)

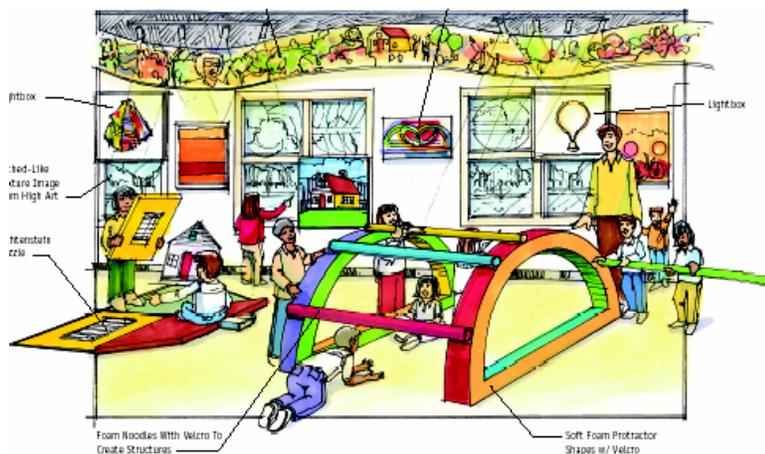


Illustration 6: Concept Design for Sculpting Spaces area (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

Whether it's by signing a yearbook or building a sand castle, people find ways to leave evidence of their presence wherever they've been. In *Making A Mark*, plexi-glass easels ask visitors to leave their mark by drawing self-portraits, still life or scenes from their imagination. (See illustration 7.)

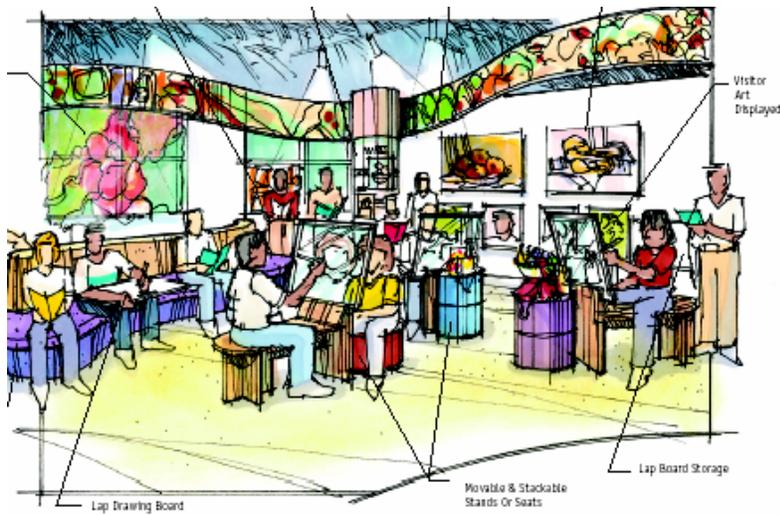


Illustration 7: Concept Design for Making a Mark area (Kraemer Design & Production, Inc.)

The Greene Family Learning Gallery is designed to be a place where families can start their visit and become comfortable with the Museum and engaging with the art. A range of tools—from self-guided brochures, to guided family tours, to discovery packs—will help visitors move from this family space into the galleries and throughout the Museum. By specifically catering to the growing family audience, the Museum aspires to develop repeat visitors, family members, and life-long museum-goers.