

ENG910

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### Exhibit Review - Participatory Museums

Nina Simon claims the failure of participatory museums falls onto design, not the audience, not the topic, not the location or exhibit itself, but the way in which it is formatted and presented. She asks, “which tool or technique will produce the desired participatory experience?” (Simon 2010), and the answer relies on design development and the professionals behind the scene. It is not a simple team of people that can make one or two decisions and go with it, rather, a group of individuals who all understand the multi-directional content that goes on, and how to approach each role of creators, distributors, critics and collaborators (Simon 2010). This approach makes sense when you compare it to some participatory museums studied in this course. For example, the Robert Munsch Experience located in Toronto. This museum has a special layout with many features that could express a multi-directional approach. Four of the classic Canadian tales get projected on towering walls, which wraps around the view. And this makes them feel as if they are ‘inside’ the story itself. With auditory background and animation, children would experience the stories as if they are movies and moving pictures, which can be plenty engaging. The experience could use more actual participation in this section, perhaps. And this technique has been done before, even for adults, in museums like the AGO, where art is curated into a motion screening, in dark rooms with unique audio movement that allows for true immersion into the art. But does it work as well for children? Simon does suggest that the

combination of professional design with participation lessons can lead to a successful museum experience.

After the showing, the group of participants in the Munsch Exhibit are escorted into the next scene, which is in the lobby full of more story decor with the chance to take pictures. This area could benefit from a more interactive approach. It serves only viewing pleasure which can lose a child's interest after they already came from watching and listening to the animation. Contemporary museological theory, introduced by Shelly Ruth Butler and Erica Leher is an approach that takes the constraints of specific exhibition space into account and proposes *Curatorial Dreams*, which can be conventional or unconventional. Since "all exhibitions are arguments" (Butler, Leher 2016) their theory of *Curatorial Dreams* offers new academic knowledge production, which the Munsch exhibition can use. By taking influence from scholars, these kinds of experiences can not only act as an entertaining afternoon for kids, but a place for learning and knowledge curation as well. Any interactive situation where the participants can watch, listen, and then reflect through activities and content participation prove a more sufficient overall experience. They can take something home and form an imaginative memory. As an exhibit for all, I feel the nostalgia of watching and remembering the stories of Robert Munsch. Sometimes even just that is enough to have a wonderful experience in a museum for a different age group. Having grown up reading his books, I wanted to research and feel that connection to childhood in this review.

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### Extending the “Storyland: A Trip Through Childhood Favourites Exhibit”

In Atlanta, Georgia, a non profit museum organisation called The Children’s Museum of Atlanta hosts many exhibits. The museum includes permanent and featured exhibits as well as field trips and homeschool meetups. One of the featured exhibits was, “Storyland: A Trip Through Childhood Favourites” which provides an imaginative, book-based experience for children ages 0-8. The exhibit specifically focuses on the two children's books, *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. *The Snowy Day* is a 1962 picture book about Peter, an African American boy, who explores his neighbourhood after the season’s first snowfall. Keats is both the author and illustrator, who helped pave the way for diversity and inclusivity in children’s literature. The story was culturally significant for the time it was published and now, decades later, is still a highly recognized and generational favourite. Similarly, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*’s author also illustrated the 1902 book. It follows a disobedient young Peter Rabbit who gets into, and is chased around, the garden of Mr. McGregor, and then when he escapes to return home to his mother, she gives him chamomile tea before bed. It is a classic because the character Peter Rabbit has remained popular amongst children ever since the book’s debut, over a century ago. It continues to be adapted and expanded through film, television and new book editions. These two books collectively create a unique

experience at the Children's Museum of Atlanta, but this paper seeks to propose and pitch extensions to the exhibit, with additional research and input from professional curators. Since the original exhibit solely focuses on play, games, and toys, there is room for improvement. With the addition of reading sessions with trained instructors and guides, participants can engage with the text itself, along with further activity using the literature as a teaching tool. It is also necessary to look at children's agendas, psychology, and the impact of parental support and engagement on the exhibit's success.

In his article, "Interactive Experiences and Contextual Learning in Museums", EunJung Chang examines the characteristics of museum visitors to accurately understand how to provide recommendations for better learning opportunities. Published just over a decade ago, the principles and studies impacts this exhibit extension greatly. Although curators do their best to create a purpose or plan for visitors, ultimately, people have their own ideas for how the day at the museum is going to go. There are many factors involved, especially when a child visits an exhibit. "Object-based research" with collections having been historically of primary concern for curators impacts the engagement with an exhibit (Chang 2006) and The Children's Museum of Atlanta *does* do a good job at shifting the culture to expand the community involvement. Offering new and featured exhibits like "Storyland" adds emphasis to this. But, the play aspect of the exhibit can be altered to adhere to Chang's thought on education in museums. Once curators thoroughly understand the variables of visitors, like their age, race, education, income, and gender, they can take the next step and look at how exactly the visitors are engaging. The children ages 0-8 may have a difficult time learning, and just want to play, however, there are methods that can provide proper care for their excited and intrigued minds. Along with this note on how curators must look at certain elements of their visitors, virtual museums can also play a

role here. “Storyland” would have benefited from a virtual extension, but in an article written by Werner Schweibenz, titled, “The virtual museum: an overview of its origins, concepts, and terminology”, we can better understand how virtual exhibits may not always work. Through analyzing the various definitions of ‘virtual’, I conclude that “Storyland” should remain in-person, but can include more ‘cyber’ and ‘digital’ aspects to the exhibit. The visuals and audio would add to the overall experience of the storybooks, bringing them to life. Schweibenz writes that virtual museums, “can and should go beyond the physical limits of the brick-and-mortar museum and provide access not to real but to digitized objects and the corresponding information,” (Schweibenz 2019). Access to these materials is the aim for this extension. We can also take into account the transition to the online world because of the recent pandemic that left children using virtual tools as a way of learning and play. The word virtual and use of it is not as taboo as it once was, therefore, the inclusion of these visuals within the exhibit may serve “Storyland” and its participants well. Virtual museums that exclusively remain online with little to no participation besides watching a screen are the type of cyberspace Schweibenz concludes may not be successful.

After acknowledging the need for understanding museum visitor experiences and how it alters depending on various factors, it is necessary to narrow this thought down. Children as an age group are unique and delicate to work with. Museum curators want to ensure there is a balance between learning, play, discipline and support. How is this possible? We must first look at how children learn best. Since the extension directly has to do with literature, children’s education must be studied. In the article, “Helping Young Children Learn Language: Insights from Research ” by the Chief Science Officer of the Bezos Family Foundation, Ellen Galinsky, this idea is directly discussed. Galinsky writes about the specific language adults must have

around children, suggesting that giving a ‘play-by-play’ of description during activity can aid in children’s communication. Adults must also consider using sophisticated words that go beyond the here and now. Since the participants of “Storyland” range from 0-8, this is a prime time for the development of an infant or child’s brain. To propose an extension using trained teachers or instructors, these little changes will make the world of difference. Museums want to ensure that a child is learning as much as possible, in the healthiest way, too. Along with the reading sessions can come discussion time. This is where Galinsky notes that, “some seminal studies have now shown that what’s really important is taking turns while talking...going back and forth, with an adult building on what a child is saying or doing, is crucial to the child’s development of language and literacy,” (Galinsky 17). An exhibit based on children’s classic literature must engage in literacy, not only play and activity. Reading and discussion is one way to do so. And this only makes sense to fully elaborate on the basis of this exhibit, taking play into a side role rather than the main feature. Frank Serafini writes about the importance of children’s education in the article, “Creating Space for Children’s Literature”, published in 2011. To aid in better participation within exhibits, building an extensive library and opportunity for literacy development is a way to build *readers*. Serafini notes that to build readers, teachers should encourage children to curl up with their books and focus much more on the practice and act of reading instead of supplementary activities about the book afterwards. “Probably the most productive way to create space for literature in the class-room is to limit the amount of activities associated with reading instruction” (Serafini 31), he writes in the article. However, for the proposed extension, I would suggest a balance. Since there are little to no reading circles or corners available for participants in “Storyland”, building an area for just quiet reading and literacy discussions with trained leaders and guides would add on to the play and activity

portions, offering multiple options for both the parents and kids to choose from. If children are to become better readers, they need the tools to work with, and an exhibit strictly focusing on classic children's literature is the perfect place to start.

Continuing on the thought of children's education opportunities in museum exhibits, curators of "Storyland" may also consider the role of parents. How do they support—or lack-support—for their children during museum play? In class, we have discussed backgrounds, demographics, income, and many more factors that impact a parent's involvement in museum exhibits with their kids. It is necessary to acknowledge how not every child will have access to learning and reading in the home, but when it comes to the chance to have it in an exhibit, there is a place for how parents involve themselves in the process. Like mentioned using Ellen Galinsky's article on how adults should work with children, the parent-child social play in a museum idea has brought about much research and developments for better participatory museums. If, like Galinsky suggests, parents understand the necessity of language, wording, conversation, and literacy similar to how teachers and instructors who work in "Storyland" would, then a child's participation can be even greater. They may connect better with a parent versus an instructor at the exhibit. Stephanie Shine and Teresa Y. Acosta write in *Family Relations*, about this topic. The article, "Parent-Child Social Play in a Children's Museum" conducted two studies on the matter, examining pretend play in families visiting a children's museum. How can educators and curators improve parent-child interactions in museums? Or, is this out of their control? Research shows there is a positive impact on children through parent-child play, specifically in exploring social relationships (Acosta, Shine 47). These social situations can occur in "Storyland" through play areas that mimic exploration and movement like pretend grocery stores and kitchens. Study one from Acosta and Shine's article suggests that

parents who followed a play script and enforced imaginative and inventive scenarios in pretend play succeeded in guiding their children through social concepts and prosocial behaviors (Acosta, Shine 48). The goal of a participatory museum is to have optimal participation with beneficial takeaways from the exhibit. There must be a positive footprint both on the museum and the child's experience, and looking at studies like this further prove how much this topic must be taken into account for children's museum curators.

Reading sessions with trained instructors, possible virtual and audio visuals within the play-area of the exhibit, and proper parent-child play are all part of the proposed extension for "Storyland: A Trip Through Childhood Favourites Exhibit". The original exhibit solely focuses on play and these additions are meant to serve as ways to enhance a child's participation through multi-directional approaches, and their overall experience for high-level learning and social engagement. The stories, *The Snowy Day* and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* are classics and deserve an exhibit like this one, prompting storytelling and children's literature as something significant to a child's life. Without these classic stories, literature would not be the same. They promote exploration and fun, as well as dynamic learning and a solid understanding of the world. Having children read these stories in the exhibit with instruction, but also room for their own imagination and independence, will make "Storyland" an even more interactive experience for their growing minds. The studies and research ideas used to explain the proposed extension prove how necessary it is for curators to take many angles into consideration when creating a children's museum exhibit.

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