



ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM



INTRODUCTION

The first museum designed for children, Brooklyn Children's Museum, opened in 1899. By 1960, thirty-eight children's museums were in operation in the U.S. By 2012, this number had increased to 300 children's museums worldwide, and continues to grow today.

Looking at the timeline of children's museums, it's possible to identify the social and cultural trends that fueled the field's different periods of growth. However, in addition to empirical research, it's critical to engage the people behind this growth, and learn their first-hand experience.

With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), ACM convened a small group of children's museum leaders, past and present, for The Children's Museums History & Culture Summit on May 5, 2017. The Summit engaged leaders active in the children's museum field in the past twenty-five years, with a focus on the explosive development of the field between 1995 and 2005.

This meeting was part of an ongoing project to collect stories and data to help tell the



Early Brooklyn Children's Museum followers encourage people to "Join the children's museum league."

The First Four:
Origin Stories of the First Children's Museums in the United States

Jessie Swigger
Western North Carolina University

In the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, four museums for children opened in the United States: Brooklyn Children's Museum (1899), Boston Children's Museum (1913), the Detroit Children's Museum (1917), and The Children's Museum of Indianapolis (1925). These four museums—opened by different individuals and groups in different places and at differ-

ent times—were linked by more than their shared focus on young audiences.

First, they were all shaped by the progressive education movement, which was then at the height of its power and influence. Second, at each museum, women played significant leadership roles (which was unusual in the museum profession, or anywhere). Many of these women knew one

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Children's Museums: The Boom Years
1995-2005

Stories from historians, museum planners, architects, scholars, organizational leaders, exhibit designers, museum directors, and board members about how a new kind of museum laid the foundations for spectacular growth of a new field and the entire museum world

One Museum Opens: Three Perspectives



Creative Discovery Museum, Chattanooga, Tennessee

THE ARCHITECT

The Children's Museum as an Urban Revitalization Anchor

Lee H. Skolnick and Jo Ann Secor, Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership

THE INSPIRATION FOR CREATING the Creative Discovery Museum (CDM) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, began in the 1980s with Andree Caldwell who, at the time, was the education director at the Hunter Museum of Art in the same city. She wanted to establish some sort of children's interactivity center at the Hunter and had approached the museum's board about the idea. While they did not think it was aligned with their mission, they encouraged and supported her efforts to start a separate children's museum. Several museum board members became founding board members of the children's museum and worked to garner community support from other leaders.

Andree eventually left the Hunter and turned her attention full-time to developing a children's museum. Based on a recommendation from Paul Richard, then-vice president of the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, Lee Skolnick's firm was hired to help with the project's conceptualization, planning, and design. Lee and Andree began collaborating on the visioning and planning process for CDM, and the project blossomed. A \$16.5 million capital campaign, led by chairman of the board Joe Davenport, III and board member Ben Probasco, included major gifts from local philanthropists Mr. and Mrs. John T. Lupton, Rodolph B. and Elizabeth L. Davenport, Lyndhurst Foundation, Benwood Foundation, Inc., and Tonya Foundation. Local leaders were inspired by the Tennessee Aquarium, which opened in May 1992 in a formerly blighted downtown area of Chattanooga that desperately needed revitalization. CDM was considered to be the "next kid on the block" to add to this urban transformation.

It was clear the founders wanted to build something that would contribute to the city's rebirth as a vibrant downtown.

Cultural institutions were seen as key to establishing anchor destinations that would spur infill development, including retail, hospitality, entertainment, and, ultimately, residential projects—a phenomenon Lee referred to as "culture as catalyst." We worked with the local, public/private Chattanooga Design Studio to identify a site that would provide prime visibility, easy access, and an optimal physical relationship to the existing audience magnet of the Tennessee Aquarium, which was attracting a large number of visitors. Museum construction began in 1994.

Lee was asked to come up with a unifying theme for the new institution and proposed one that had always interested him: creativity as an integration of the arts and sciences, as embodied in the life and work of the ultimate Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci. This established narrative, combined with understanding the target audience of children and families, formed the basis for

designing a museum that reflected a comprehensive vision for the entire project, integrated both outside and inside.

The building would announce itself by re-interpreting the classic historical clock tower or bell tower as a giant, iconic, copper-clad, forty-two-foot high science tower, visible from a great distance and beckoning visitors to the "village center." As people approached the museum or passed by on foot or in a car, they would see a ninety-three-foot-long curving glass façade, revealing a dramatic interactive water sculpture inside. This water feature integrated the arts and sciences while visitors provided the "power" that made the enormous machine perform its magic. This bold façade obviated the need for a big sign to identify the museum. The architecture and exhibits combined to make a clear and strong visual statement and signal a place of discovery and fun for children and families.

Other original features that literally stood out to enliven the building from all sides included the *Little Yellow House*, which contained the Early Childhood Gallery; the bright blue cone of the Birthday Party Room, studded with tiny, sparkling colored windows; the undulating glass façade of the second floor Art Studio, with its outdoor activity terrace; and, perhaps most importantly, the winding path to the plaza with its interactive bronze figures of children leading the way to the main entry, which appears to splay open, welcoming all to the exciting experiences within.

Because of the combination of community involvement from the very beginning of the project, strategic placement of the new facility in relation to major highways, key traffic patterns, and city landmarks, and the compelling icon of the building itself, the Creative Discovery Museum fulfilled the goals of the city leaders, the funders, and the founder: to create a vital community resource. Today, CDM is not only a beloved place in the hearts and lives of children and families, but it's also an important ingredient in the alchemy that would transform a desolate and decrepit downtown into a shining example of civic revitalization.



The Little Yellow House and the Science Tower



Founding director Andree Caldwell

A FOUNDING BOARD MEMBER

The Children's Museum as Learning Landmark

An interview with Lu Lewis, Creative Discovery Museum founding board member and first director of education

Where did the idea of opening a children's museum originate?

The idea originated with Andree Caldwell. When I was approached to serve on the board there were very few children's museums in cities of our size. I wondered how this idea could fit with Chattanooga's downtown revitalization. Every exhibit idea came from Andree. She had a very strong aesthetic vision and was interested in exhibits and ultimately programs that would attract local visitors, but also position the museum nationally as a model of innovation. She formed a board and gathered local philanthropists, community agencies, and other key team members to the project.

The board wrestled with the question of whether the museum was going to be primarily entertainment with some education added in or vice versa. What would be the major focus? There were arguments on both sides. Most of the children's museum board members also served on the aquarium board (and some on the art museum board) and brought that experience to the table as well. In the end, everyone agreed that the museum could be both educational and fun.

Why open a children's museum in Chattanooga?

Andree had a strong vision of how the

museum would benefit the children of this area. The intention was to bring a unique, fun, and educational experience to the children of Chattanooga by creating a museum that could hold its own in the context of similar museums nationwide. The core target audience was five-to-eight-year olds, with *The Little Yellow House* exhibit for kids birth to four. The early childhood programming has grown over time and is an important focus today.

What did you think the children of Chattanooga needed at the time?

Experiences. The museum bought new and exciting experiences to local children, expanding their understanding of the world around them and of their own potential. Experiences are so important for every child, not just Chattanoogaans. Experience really does matter.

What was the educational philosophy?

Children should explore in a safe, supportive space and try different things. Exhibit areas were crafted based on information provided to the staff on different developmental stages and learning styles and how to work with different age groups. The beauty of the museum was that children could try all kinds of things—whether it was art or music or putting things together—constructing an individual and personal learning experience. Learning how to learn through exploration is a skill that stays with you throughout your life.

What museums inspired you?

As we visited and spent time with the staff of several children's museums, a few stood out to me for their great early childhood exhibits, including the Brooklyn Children's Museum and Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia. All of the museums we visited had successful features, and our staff worked with outside experts to adapt what we learned to our museum.

How involved was the local community in planning and developing the museum?

Hundreds of adults and children had input into the development of the museum, including focus groups, local experts, schools, teachers, and parents' groups. For example, then-local residents Jeff Patchen and Mary Patchen were both very involved; she focused on art while he did music. (Jeff Patchen began his career as a music teacher and later held the first endowed chair in arts

education at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga before eventually becoming CEO of the Children's Museum of Indianapolis.)

What were the biggest challenges?

For the educational staff, determining the learning goals of the exhibits after they had been installed was sometimes a challenge, but also a great exercise. After we observed children in the exhibits, we were able to use the observations to enhance the educational depth and breadth of each exhibit. We had such good conversations and we were delighted with what the children were doing.

How did the community respond to this new museum?

When CDM opened, it was unique in the region. We were concerned that using the word "museum" would give the impression that children would look at the exhibits rather than interact with them. Once parents saw how their children were learning through their experiences and having so much fun in the process, the community began to understand what an incredible resource the museum was.

At the grand opening on May 26, 1995, then-Mayor Gene Roberts said as he entered the doors, "This is a wonderful, magical place." He was joined by dignitaries far and wide, including popular NBC weatherman Willard Scott, who introduced the museum to the entire nation on the "Today Show" and kicked off the celebration. "Sesame Street" host Bob McGrath helped officially open the doors.

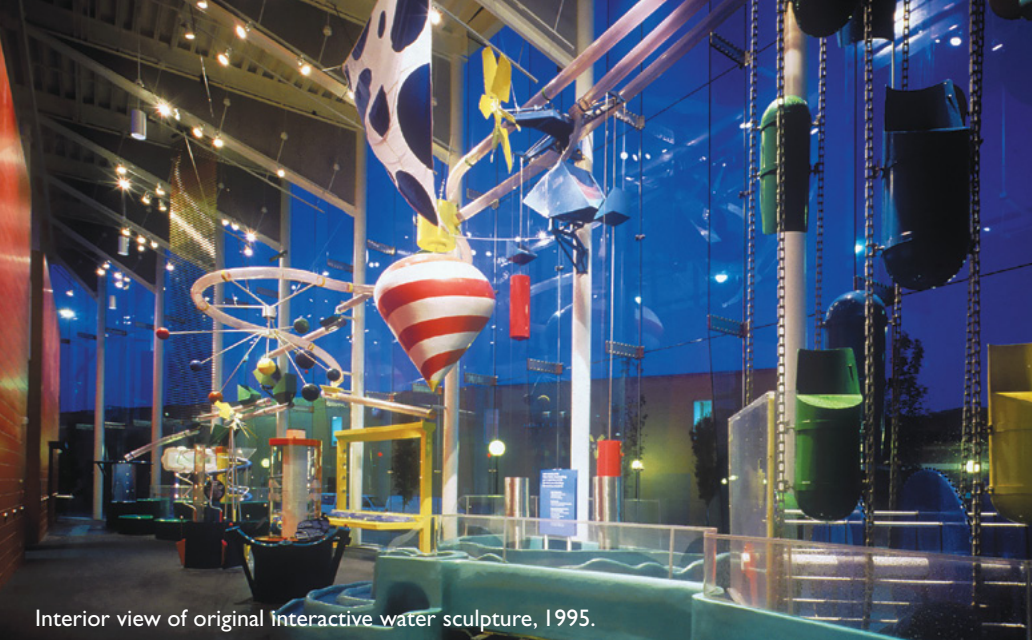
Chairwoman of the Chattanooga City Council, Mai Bell Hurley, called the museum "absolutely spectacular" and noted "it links the early childhood and later development of children to creativity, which is really one of the keys to creating a whole person." I think the Creative Discovery Museum was a key contributor to Mai Bell's often repeated statement that "Chattanooga is a great place to raise a child."

THE SECOND/CURRENT DIRECTOR

The Children's Museum as an Evolving Community Institution

Henry Schulson, Executive Director

When the museum opened in 1995, it was like a big, handsome tree without deep roots. When I became director in June 1997,



Interior view of original interactive water sculpture, 1995.

**HISTORY
&
CULTURE
SUMMIT**

[BACK WHEN ACM WAS THE ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH MUSEUMS], I was presiding over a council meeting as board president. The business of the meeting was finished, and the subject of what the museum community thought about us came up—we felt they were looking down their noses at us. And the issue was raised: “Well, if we do a good job as children’s museums, lifting the curtain so that adults see how children learn and conveying our value, then we should all go out of business at some point.” This was a very lively discussion “Wow! If we really did our jobs very well, then even the Metropolitan Museum of Art would learn from us.” That was gratifying. And they have. But we’re still here, there are more of us, and we are bigger.

—Barbara Meyerson

as with most newly-opened museums, the challenge had shifted from opening a showcase museum to growing a sustainable and connected learning institution. Over the last twenty years, the museum has established very deep roots and partnerships to support its still handsome structure. In 2017, CDM had the highest attendance in its history with over 249,000 visitors, and it served over 51,000 children through outreach programs; the museum’s total reach exceeded

300,000 people. (In comparison, in 1995, the museum attracted about 192,000 visitors and outreach programs had yet to be established.)

The exhibit galleries have undergone major changes, with a move away from technology and a greater emphasis on engaging interactive processes that serve different ages and support different learning styles. The change in the *RiverPlay Gallery* is one of the best examples. The original exhibit was a

stunning piece of interactive art, but there was not much for children to do. The exhibit that replaced it was designed with child engagement as the top priority. It features a riverboat, climbing structure, and water table with related activities through which children learn about water—currents, locks, and dams.

Today there is greater emphasis on using local resources. A good example are the statues of children on the plaza in front of the museum entrance. Designed to signal adventure for children and lead the way into the museum, these bronze statues were created by a studio in Brooklyn using children from New York City as models. When the museum installed Ben’s Garden, a memorial to a local child in front of the tower, it added a statue (produced in Chattanooga) of Ben leading other children and becoming a centerpiece of the installation. The museum today includes a collection of artwork that has been produced by local artists, often in collaboration with children from the community.

As the museum plans for its upcoming renovation, it will again work with the original architect, Lee Skolnick, in collaboration with a local architectural firm. Our goal is to take advantage of Skolnick’s internationally recognized expertise and expand on his original vision for the building that has served Chattanooga so well. At the same time, we have learned that it is very important to make sure that whatever we do is grounded in the local community and to take advantage of the talents, resources, and vitality that has blossomed in Chattanooga since the museum opened more than twenty-one years ago.

Henry Schulson is the executive director of the Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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