



INSIDE: A RARE AND NATURAL PARTNERSHIP: ROTO'S HANDS-ON "FIELD TRIPS"

PLUS: STAFF FACILITATION MODELS AT SCIENCE CENTERS

but why should that class of thing called a “commercial design firm” be limited by the nature of its partnerships in the first place? Still more so, why should that class of enterprise called a “museum” or “science center”—organizations with broadly-defined umbrella missions, professional staff, unique collections, equipment and material assets, flexible facilities, and (usually) a strong community mandate—be limited whatsoever by the nature of their partnerships? Museums are good at replicating proven patterns, but the lack of an existing model seems an insufficient reason, by itself, for limiting the creativity and versatility of mission-centered experiences. Perhaps a fresh look at unique styles of partnership can help change that.

END NOTES

[1] Dublin City Schools Board of Education, et. al., “We Grow Thinkers: 2016 Quality Profile,” Dublin City Schools,

<http://www.dublinschools.net/Downloads/qp.pdf> (accessed June 2016).

[2] While the Dublin district is impressively diverse, with a 33% minority student population and some 1,400 English Language Learners, it cannot cover the full range of audience cultures and backgrounds represented in all of our museum partners. This limitation only affects a relatively small proportion of the questions we are addressing through typical in-house evaluation and testing.

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DISCOVERING THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD TO MUZEIKO

By Jo Ann Secor, Paul Orselli, and Christina Ferwerda



Figure 1: Exterior of Muzeiko, the first children's museum in Bulgaria. Photo courtesy of Roland Halbe.

Developing a children's museum from conception to opening is quite like the fictitious scenarios of the Wizard of Oz. There are eccentric characters, potential wrong turns, and serendipitous moments that can sometimes create a sense that the project might go off course. In many cases, projects do run aground without funding, the creative vision to garner support, or the lack of a charismatic champion who will carry the project through its natural twists and turns. When there are so many ways for a museum project to go wrong, how do you ensure it will go right?

Muzeiko: The Children's Museum of Bulgaria broke several barriers to become a first in many ways for the country: it is the first museum to be built in Sofia in almost 50 years, the first children's museum in Bulgaria, and one of the largest projects undertaken by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. The project had a number of fortuitous incidents which helped it to come together – from chance meetings and well placed articles to the connections within the museum world and the network of professionals working within Bulgaria. With so many potential pitfalls, and the pressure of being tasked to create “a landmark building in

Sofia,” the work on Muzeiko is an example of how a museum development project can often follow a daunting and winding road, yet still produce amazing results.

Identifying the right resources, at the right time, was a key factor to the project’s success. While the American design team employed a signature design process to ensure local relevancy, the creative partners in Sofia made significant contributions in content, exhibit development and construction that make the project the success it is today. In an effort to share what we’ve learned as architects, exhibit developers, designers and as a collaborative team, we would like to take you through the “past, present and future” of Muzeiko. First, let’s step back to 2007, when the dream of Muzeiko started to become reality.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

After Paul Orselli, Chief Instigator of POW! (Paul Orselli Workshop, Inc.), gave a presentation during the Association of Children Museum’s annual InterActivity Conference in Chicago in 2007, an energetic young woman strode up the aisle to introduce herself. “My name is Vessela Gercheva,” she said. “I’m from Bulgaria, and I want to start a children’s museum there, since we don’t have anything like that in my country.”

Vessela had come to the U.S. with the idea to create a children’s museum in Bulgaria and was able to arrange a summer internship at the Arizona Museum for Youth. During her stay, Vessela connected over Skype with Deborah Edward, the founding Director of the Austin Children’s Museum, to gather additional insights about the many facets of starting a museum. Through her work with Deborah, Vessela was invited to a workshop back in Bulgaria organized by some of Deborah’s colleagues at the Fund for Arts and Culture of Central and Eastern Europe (now simply called the Fund for Arts and Culture). There Vessela and Sally Yerkovich (the Fund’s President at the time) met each other and that connection helped Vessela, in 2009, to obtain initial funding to develop “Children’s Corners” (small interactive exhibition galleries geared toward schoolchildren and families) inside a number of existing museums throughout Bulgaria.

Since no children’s museums existed in Bulgaria, the Children’s Corners were installed in existing cultural institutions throughout the country, including an archaeological museum, an outdoor history park, a geology museum, and a military museum. These smaller exhibitions served as an effective “proof of concept” for a permanent children’s museum as well as a way of building excitement in parents, teachers, and children for the possibilities of a modern, interactive project like Muzeiko. In many ways, Muzeiko would benefit from lessons learned during the creation of

the Children’s Corners.

For example, the first Children’s Corner inside the Regional History Museum of Blagoevgrad allowed visitors to experience the life of the earliest Bulgarians. Families could try on clothing made from skins and gather around a simulated campfire near a recreated hut. Since one of the exhibition areas inside the Muzeiko building would come to focus on archaeology and learning about the past, the Blagoevgrad Children’s Corner served as a model for possible exhibition experiences. Similarly, the interactive geology experiences developed in the Children’s Corner inside the National Museum of Earth and Man helped inform geology interactives inside Muzeiko.



Figure 2: A farming interactive inside the completed Children’s Corner in Blagoevgrad. Photo courtesy of Paul Orselli.

There was some initial resistance to possible exhibition ideas for a Children’s Corner at the Etra Architectural-Ethnographic Complex in Gabrovo. The Director and staff were rightly concerned about the impact interactive exhibition components might have in the context of historic buildings and artifacts. However, after Paul Orselli heard the project partners at Etra exclaim, “This is not possible!” in both Bulgarian and English in response to most, if not all, of his exhibit ideas, he worked with Vessela Gercheva to develop alternative approaches, such as mobile exhibit activity carts which were positioned outside the museum.

The experience in Gabrovo was a harbinger of the respectful and thoughtful ways that the team would be able to work with our Bulgarian counterparts throughout the development of Muzeiko. One can learn a lot about project partners by discovering how to resolve disagreements and overcome creative challenges. Fortunately, the funder of both the Children’s Corners and Muzeiko, the America for Bulgaria Foundation, encouraged this open dialogue between the American and Bulgarian partners that became essential to forming a strong creative team.

The American for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF) was made possible by an investment fund created by the United States to support Eastern European democracy after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Over the years, the American for Bulgaria Foundation has supported a wide range of cultural programs aimed at bringing American art to Bulgaria, promoting the appreciation for Bulgarian culture, and supporting both art education and art management programs. As a result, the Foundation's interest in a children's museum for Bulgaria was a quite natural outgrowth of their organizational aims.

In 2009, through the Foundation for Arts and Culture, Sally Yerkovich, Alan Knezevich of Alan Knezevich Design Associates, and Marc Pachter (a Senior Advisor to the Fund), were charged with conducting a study on the "state of museums" within Bulgaria and noted among their findings that the installation of permanent collections was generally not appealing or of interest to contemporary audiences; Soviet-era culture as propaganda may have had an impact on the poor attendance at museums in Bulgaria; and most importantly, Bulgarian museums created few programs or other opportunities for public engagement, especially for children and families. The research results of Yerkovich and her colleagues coupled with the initial success and enthusiastic public reception for the first Children's Corners led to a perfect set of circumstances to cause the America for Bulgaria Foundation to commit funding for the creation of the first children's museum in Bulgaria, to be located in Sofia, the country's capital.

As a preliminary effort toward this objective, ABF initiated a Bulgarian-based study, "Testing the Children's Museum Concept" in 2012, to elicit preconceived notions and opinions from local children, parents, and teachers about museums, informal education, and the topics that might be found inside the future Bulgarian Children's Museum. The results clearly indicated that there was little familiarity with children's museums, parents were concerned about admissions costs, and teachers questioned how such an institution would connect with the school system. Around that same time the America for Bulgaria Foundation began to prepare an international Request for Proposals in order to find creative partners to help them realize their vision of a world-class children's museum to be located in Sofia.

And this is where our story takes another serendipitous turn. Several ABF board members happened upon an article in the New York Times about the successful opening of the DiMenna Children's History Museum located inside the New York Historical Society. ABF staff reached out to the designers of the DiMenna project, Lee H Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership (LHSA+DP) inviting the firm to participate in an international design competition for a

new, science-focused children's museum in Bulgaria which called for the renovation and addition to a former laboratory building on a university campus in Sofia. Shortlisted for the project, the firm then developed a creative proposal anchored on a narrative journey that sought to bridge the familiar with the new and mysterious. After careful deliberation, ABF selected the LHSA+DP team to lead the interpretive master planning, architecture, exhibit, and graphic design process, and concept development began in August 2012. Paul Orselli, based on his previous experience in Bulgaria working with Vessela Gercheva on the Children's Corners projects, as well as his previous museum project work with LHSA+DP, joined the team to become the primary Exhibit Consultant to the project.

To unearth the compelling narratives in each unique situation, LHSA+DP employs a signature process referred to as: "Listen, Learn, Distill, Create." Each project begins with a conversation, as the project team works closely with clients to discover core values, key audiences, and messages to be conveyed. The "Listen" aspect of the process is captured in a Visitor Experience Criteria, a document that describes this foundation and keeps the vision at the forefront of the process. LHSA+DP believes in designing from the inside out, to learn and discover relevant information and identify educational goals and appropriate interpretive methodologies that will inform the developing narrative. This information is distilled into a story that aims to enrich the lives of clients and communities. Finally, the firm creates – storylines, site plans, exhibit concept and bubble diagrams, fabrication drawings and construction documents. These inform the project as it moves into final construction administration on all components crafting an "integrated design experience" intent on reflecting the educational and design criteria established at the onset of the project.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Under the leadership of LHSA+DP Principal, Lee Skolnick, Scott Briggs, Senior Associate for Museum Services and Jo Ann Secor, a series of trips to Bulgaria kicked off the site reconnaissance and creative development process including identification of core content, and the addition of content specialists and creative partners in Bulgaria and North America who would be essential to realizing a complex project of this nature. On one of the first trips made to Bulgaria during a January snowstorm, the U.S. team discovered that the central square of Sofia is paved with golden-colored bricks, a gift from Austro-Hungarian Tzar Ferdinand I. This "Yellow Brick Road" discovery was the first of many encounters with the unique culture and history of Bulgaria. Selecting the stories to tell and bring to life for children in the new museum proved challenging, but identifying and playing into the strengths of local

Figure 3: Before and after renovation photos of Muzeiko building. Photos courtesy of Scott Briggs (before) and Roland Halbe (completed).



resources and the rich and varied cultural legacy kept the exhibit development and design on track.

These early trips included several site visits to assess current conditions of the abandoned building. Our goal was to create a strategic program and creative plan for a visually aesthetic, educationally dynamic and physically engaging destination for children and families. Wayfinding signage from the nearby, recently-completed subway and a bright, colorful science playground at the museum entry, complete with a large wind turbine, act as a beacon to Muzeiko.

Given the tight constraints of the site, all areas and surfaces were considered in order to maximize interpretation. The site planning also included several treatments to additional outdoor and interstitial spaces including a Skyloft and roof garden accessible from the upper level and a planned space for rotating exhibits. The interpretive program was predicated on using content and creating experiences familiar to children as a bridge to explore topics that were new or unfamiliar, especially because the concept of a children's museum itself was so unique.

Speaking about the narrative approach, Lee Skolnick, FAIA, said, "Because the interpretive program was very broadly focused on a wide range of scientific disciplines, we needed a conceptual approach that could weave them together into an intuitive storyline. Since we had the opportunity to create three levels of exhibitions, it occurred to me that we could place the visitor underground, on the ground, and above ground, and that these locales could be linked,

respectively, to the past, the present and the future. In arriving at this simple but highly coherent and integrated conceptual and spatial arrangement, we were able to cover a comprehensive array of scientific topics and at the same time lead visitors on a voyage of discovery that was easy to understand and appreciate."

As the design phases commenced, there was a swift realization that working locally and with significant contributions from Bulgarian partners would not only allow the project to run

smoothly and stay within budget, but would also allow for a shared development of content, design and fabrication technologies and strategies. Several Bulgarian experts in fields such as meteorology, robotics, and space technology acted as consultants to the design team.

Exhibit fabrication was undertaken by Maltbie, a Kubik Company, based in New Jersey, which executed major components of all the exhibits and oversaw local fabrication of specific elements. During this period of development, the design team also interviewed several possible consultants to execute the final exhibit graphics and interactive media programs. Bulgarian-based firms PostStudio and BonArts Media were asked to join the team to work on the creation of graphics and media interactives, respectively. Both firms came with highly relevant expertise in their fields, but had never worked in a museum environment. With the experts as well as the local media and graphic design firms, there was significant educational exchange to share Best Practices in creating exhibits; for example, preparing graphic design files for production, writing label copy, and creating educational games for a dynamic museum environment.

The museum roof was designed as a green, active space and includes a climbing wall to add to the physical engagement for kids. Walltopia, a leading worldwide fabricator of climbing walls, happens to be based in Bulgaria and was hired to create the iconic tree structure centrally located in the museum in addition to a rooftop climbing wall and an adjacent mini-outdoor amphitheater. After touring the sets at a film studio just outside of Sofia, the local company ASquared was brought in to fabricate several of the immer-

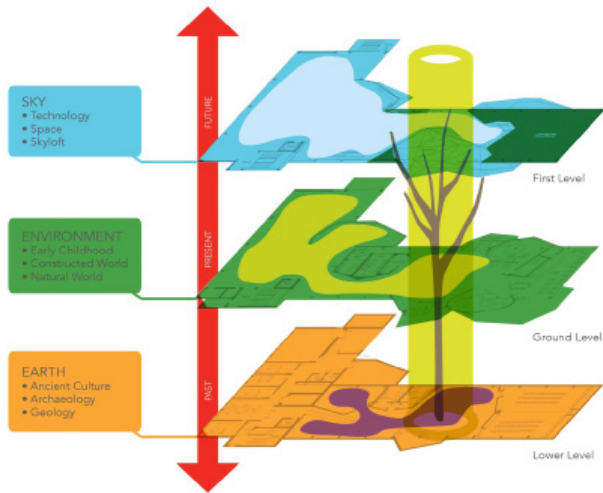


Figure 4 (left): Concept Diagram for the visitor experience at Muzeiko. Photo courtesy of LHSA+DP.
 Figure 5 (right): The central “Interactive Tree” built by Walltopia. Photo courtesy of Roland Halbe.



sive, scenic environments on the lower level. The services provided by the local scenic, graphic, and media companies would have been beyond the project budget if they had been produced in the United States, and the expertise and direction from LHSA+DP allowed PostStudio, BonArts, Walltopia, and ASquared to expand their skill set in return.

The museum’s architectural theme, “Little Mountains,” is an allusion to Bulgaria’s mountainous topography. The structure’s glass volume is broken by three sculptural forms, or “mountains,” each referencing through its color scheme and texture indigenous craft traditions in the country. One form features abstracted patterns inspired by textiles and embroidery, another by glazed ceramics, and the third by traditional wood carving. The Museum’s façades are comprised of large glass panels which reveal the playful interiors, communicating transparency and openness about the activities inside, in contrast to the impenetrable exteriors of other Bulgarian institutions.

As the exhibits were in fabrication, the museum staff turned their attention to staff and program development. Harry White, Science Centre Consultant, was introduced to the Bulgarian team and acted as a liaison to the At-Bristol Science Centre in the UK to form an institutional partnership. Muzeiko staff traveled to Bristol several times leading up to and after the opening, for training in museum operations. Beyond program development and design, the partnership included mentoring in several crucial aspects of managing a new institution including how to organize staff meetings, measure and employ the skills necessary for various staff positions, and how to conduct various levels of evaluation and impact assessment. This partnership is ongoing, and the Muzeiko staff continues to benefit from this alignment with a regional leader in science center Best Practices.

A QUICK TOUR

Upon entering the museum, a central, iconic sculpture of a tree connects the three floors of exhibits, from its roots in “the past” to the solar-panel “leaves” in the canopy at the upper level. This sculpture animates the central staircase, with several interactive features such as a bellows that blows air through a horn, a captain’s wheel that sets a ball in motion, and a double-helix sculpture that lights up on the first landing. These immediately set the tone that unexpected and interactive experiences will be a major part of the visit. The main stair leads down to the lower level, where visitors navigate a forest of tree “roots” to exit and explore two main exhibit areas: archaeology and geology. A small niche at the bottom of the stairs allows children to learn about the ornithomimosaur, a feathered dinosaur found in Bulgaria. By operating small claw-like arms in a tabletop game, visitors can compete to gather eggs, a presumed food source for the animal.

The lower level exhibits are highly immersive, with several scenic elements that allow children to imagine the past and what life was like at different times in Bulgaria’s history. The exhibits team selected three environments to be recreated, based on the diverse civilizations that inhabited Bulgaria in the past: A Paleolithic hut, a Roman bath, and a Medieval home. Each environment has carefully selected activities, such as weaving grasses into the hut’s structure wall or dressing up in Medieval clothes. A dig pit and a “Field Lab” replicate how we find out what we know about the past, showing how objects are unearthed, documented, and researched. The other gallery on the Lower Level, entitled “Bulgaria Rocks” focuses on seismology, plate tectonics and volcanoes – visitors are able to make a model volcano “erupt” using their body on a weight-sensitive floor and engage in other physical interactives

to demonstrate earthquakes and plate tectonics. Life-size stalagmites and stalactites inhabit a limestone cave with an “underground lake,” and exhibits on cave ecology, fossils, and cave painting illustrate the rich information to be uncovered in a cave exploration.

On the main level a large tunnel resembling the manmade water delivery pipes found throughout the mountains takes the visitors into the urban and rural landscapes of Bulgaria. Emerging on the other side of the tunnel through a concrete culvert or pipe, a water maze allows children to move water from the natural resource of Lake Iskar to the city of Sofia, and then back through the water cycle, demonstrating immediately that urban systems and natural systems are interconnected.



Figure 6: The interactive “Building Bot” on the main exhibit floor.

A major feature on the main level which breaks through to the upper level is an impressive, towering anthropomorphic building, called the “Building Bot,” set within a street-scene sized for children. Information about traffic moving on the street or subway, power, water, and construction are revealed through several activities within the street-scene, such as turning a wrench to “open” a fire hydrant,

or controlling a traffic light. Adjacent to the Constructed World area, an illustrated mural of rivers, peaks and local trees, plants and animals sets the stage for Natural World exhibits that encourage deep observation of animals and plants from the region. Exhibit areas focus on three main aspects of the Bulgarian environment: forests, animals and an important nocturnal animal in Bulgaria: the bat. Visitors can look into animal headsets with viewers to “see” like different animals, and a simulated bat cave rounds out the sensory components. Set within these exhibits, two digital “Field Guides” connect exhibits to the work of scientists around the world, enhancing the global aspect of the Natural World exhibits. Multisensory components were a focus in this gallery, allowing children to “smell” trees and using gesture interface to interact with a projected forest scene through the seasons.

The upper level encourages visitors to understand and contribute to resolving society’s future challenges. The four “Grand Challenges” – Environment, Energy, Health, and Communication – are linked in a “Connect Four” interactive floor game, and visitors are poised to delve into exhibits about the innovations that are being developed to sustain future life. Several additional interactive media games (designed by BonArts) allow children to try and create a sustainable city, or find out about local food sources. A Creativity Studio is located on this floor so that visitors who are so inspired can use the space to investigate technology and feel a part of technological innovation.

Having investigated the challenges that humans are facing on Earth, visitors can pass through an immersive exhibit that calls to mind preparing for a space journey, culminating with a component that simulates blasting off from Earth in a space capsule. In the “Space Chase” exhibits that follow, consultants working with the Bulgarian Space Agency helped to develop exhibits which highlight particular strengths of the program: freeze-dried food and the development of the space greenhouse. Additionally, a “Planetarium” projection area with seating presents a rotating video of stars, live feeds from space agencies around the globe, and other programmed activities.

The design team realized early on that identifying and creatively collaborating with key local resources were essential to the project’s ultimate success. The museum is imbued with the interactivity of an American children’s museum, but tells a story specific to Bulgaria in large part as a result of the strategic use of these assets. When we reflect on this process, several key lessons become clear: the steadfast dedication of the Bulgarian and American teams to collaboratively achieve a high-quality project; reliance on local expertise and strong regional commitments provided specific and important information essential to

the creation of a locally-relevant resource for the community; the teams worked hard to communicate clearly, provide information in their respective areas of expertise, and were willing to embrace the continued surprises of the development process.

OPENING DAY ARRIVES!

On September 30, 2015, a grand opening celebration was held for invited guests, including national and local dignitaries and representatives from the America for Bulgaria Foundation. Along with the LHSA+DP project team, the new staff and local consultants were present with their families. Amid a marching band playing the song, “I Love Muzeiko!” (written by Lee Skolnick), logo “clouds” of the Muzeiko mascot floated out and above the crowd, and fireworks highlighted the evening’s festivities. The next day, the museum opened its doors to all visitors and quickly became one of the top destinations for families during the weekend and for school groups during the weekdays. With an emphasis on high-quality customer service, Muzeiko welcomed over 18,400 visitors during its first month of operation, double their initial projections. Based on the first six months of operations, with a total of 70,000 visitors, Muzeiko expects to continue to exceed these projections by 10%-20%. The breakdown of visitors includes almost 12,000 students, with 119 schools coming from within Sofia and 122 from other parts of Bulgaria.

With planning work undertaken months in advance with the At-Bristol Science Centre, Muzeiko developed 35 different programs to offer and sought, hired, and trained staff to conduct these programs and provide exhibition interpretation. The programs included science and art workshops and specially-themed activities as well.



Figure 7: The American team posed for a photo with Bistra Kirova, Muzeiko’s Director, at the opening. Photo courtesy of Christina Ferwerda.

WHAT’S NEXT? CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR 2016

In post-opening discussions with Muzeiko’s Executive Director, Bistra Kirova, we learned that the first three months were focused on providing the best service and experience possible, improving and changing procedures, fixing and tweaking exhibits, developing and improving the programs and workshops. Written feedback forms were completed by visiting children, parents and teachers and reviewed at staff meetings. These comments and recommendations became part of the museum’s 2016 Strategy, created in January:

1) Increasing Visitorship and Outreach:

Although the museum received more than half its yearly projected visitors in the first five months (annual projection was 100,000 visitors) focused attention will be given to increasing audiences in the following three areas: *Muzeiko to the Schools*—to overcome the lack of transportation to the Museum, planning is underway to send museum teams into local schools to conduct paid, full-day themed programs. It is the hope that children will encourage their parents to take them to the museum as a result of this in-school exposure to Muzeiko. *Increased Visits from Rural Schools* – the museum is seeking sponsors to financially support school trips to Muzeiko from rural areas. This could be quite successful with some towns already indicating potential local sponsorships for their children and schools. *Toddler Days and Adult Nights* – Muzeiko is looking to attract outside the core target audience of 6-12 year olds by designing programs for toddlers and parents during the weekdays and offering adult evenings with special games, music and food and beverage to extend their perception of the museum as relevant to their interests.

2) Fundraising:

Having been created under the initiatives of the America for Bulgaria Foundation there is a misperception that ABF is fully funding the annual operating costs of Muzeiko, which is not the case. International data shows an average of 50% to 60% of science and children’s museums’ annual expenses are covered by admission, membership and earned revenues. Muzeiko achieved 65% in the first five months. Effort is being put toward cultivation of corporate sponsors to assist with both on-going operational costs as well as special project funding. Thus far, and perhaps due to the novelty of Muzeiko, several major international corporations have committed to invest in Muzeiko’s future.

3) New Program Development:

The question which faces every new museum is “how do we encourage visitors to come again and again?” and Muzeiko is certainly very aware of this challenge. The museum is proactively meeting this challenge, planning to create new and varied programs and activities not only for their



Figure 8: A Muzeiko program in session. Photo courtesy of Muzeiko.

target audience but also for the following special interests: *Teen Programs*, *English Classes* (using the museum as a novel place to learn this language via interactive exhibits, games and other activities), and a robust *Science Club*.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the final scenes of “Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy realizes that her adventure was just a dream, and that the key roles were played by familiar faces in her life. It’s this deep conviction to the creation of a dream that makes museums come to life. Like the fantasy world of Oz, the familiar is imbued with a new sense of wonder and magic at Muzeiko, and visitors are leaving the following comments which capture the spark created by this institution: “Today we visited Muzeiko and [left] with excellent impressions. [The] exhibitions are interesting and activities for the kids [are] fascinating. Congratulations [on] the idea and implementation. Thanks to the whole team - everyone was very attentive and cooperative, and special sections [such] as

the planetarium and workshop were great and the kids are truly inspired by them.”

The creation of Muzeiko was mostly a positive process, despite several potential hurdles which shows just what is possible with the right team, commitment and dedication – all working toward the same dream. As a design team, we had the benefit of working with professionals already aligned through the

America for Bulgaria Foundation. The striking, creative design serves the functional needs of the first children’s museum in Bulgaria, and as “a landmark architectural monument of the 21st century” having already garnered several awards. The Museum’s continued evolution and growth will hopefully demonstrate its ability to successfully serve as a community-based, informal science education destination for years to come.

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Figure 9: The Bulgarian band and Color Guard at the opening. Photo courtesy of Muzeiko.