

THE HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

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Annotation: This article examines the historical development of children's museums, with a focus on the Brooklyn (1899) and Boston (1913) Children's Museums. It highlights the influence of Montessori and Dewey's educational theories on their interactive and experience-based approaches. Key contributors like Eleanor Moore and Delia Griffin helped shape the early philosophy of these institutions. Today, children's museums worldwide promote learning through play and serve as inclusive educational and cultural centers.

Keywords: USA, children's museum, Brooklyn, Boston, Montessori, Dewey.

INTRODUCTION

Children's museums have emerged as a distinct type of cultural-educational institution that goes beyond the traditional function of exhibition spaces. These museums offer interactive environments that stimulate curiosity, support experiential learning, and foster creative thinking in children. The first children's museum was established in Brooklyn, USA, in 1899, marking the beginning of a new museum concept. This study aims to trace the historical development of children's museums with a special focus on their spread and adaptation in European countries.

MAIN BODY

Children's museums have been gradually developing since the early 20th century. Many of the creative approaches and interactive exhibitions that seem normal to us today were almost nonexistent before the 2000s. However, the core principles guiding the work of children's museums and discovery centers have remained nearly unchanged since their inception. Nowadays, the idea that children learn through hands-on experience is widely accepted, but in the early 20th century, this was considered a new concept. At that time, the notion that children think differently from adults was only beginning to gain recognition in academic circles. Educators started to realize that instead of simply giving children information, they needed to actively involve them in the learning process.

The theories of Maria Montessori also influenced the early development of children's museums. Having adults assume the role of facilitator or guide, instead of strictly teaching, is essentially a Montessori concept. She also emphasized the importance of cultivating independence in children and of sharing activities and equipment. It's not at all a coincidence that this country's first children's museums (in Brooklyn, Boston, Detroit, and Indianapolis) were founded between 1899 and 1925, when Dewey's and Montessori's theories were initially popular. Directors of those museums clearly wanted to provide a first-rate environment for their young audiences, as well as experiment with the cutting-edge educational theories they were espousing [1,8p].

Attempts to systematize the diversity of children's museums, to formulate objective criteria for identifying institutions of this type, and to establish conceptual foundations have been made more than once.

The first to take on this task was Eleanor Moore, who conducted a study on this topic in 1941. She emphasized the difficulty of precisely defining a children's museum, yet proposed criteria that highlight its specific characteristics. Namely, a children's museum should contain objects that are:

1. Selected for children;

2. Displayed for children;
3. Interpreted for children;
4. Situated in a space for children[2].

One of the leading educators of the time, John Dewey, was making waves with his theories that emphasized the importance of personal experience in learning. In Dewey's opinion, the key to an education based upon experience was "to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" [3,267.p]. Consequently, Dewey pushed for more material things, more fodder for experiments, to be integrated into children's learning, and for children to have the freedom to experiment on their own, in their own ways, with the stuff of real life.

When the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences decided, in the 1890s, to pare down its collections in anticipation of a move to new quarters, some items "considered not quite up to standard were left (behind) to make a Museum for Children"[4,209.p]. That rather condescending attitude was quickly changed, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum opened in 1899 with the goal of stimulating and satisfying children's natural curiosity. Still, it took Anna Billings Gallup, an enthusiastic nature teacher, to unlock the glass cases and develop exhibits expressly for children to use, thereby setting the museum world on its ear. A subsequent director of the museum, Helen V. Fisher, said that the museum's "collections are not necessarily gathered for their intrinsic worth or rarity...but to...be of use in interpreting various subjects and conveying original ideas"[4,210.p]. In her opinion, adult museums, by acquiring important collections and sponsoring original research, add to general knowledge, but children's museums should be designed to direct children's interests.

The Brooklyn Children's Museum, established in 1899, holds a significant place as the first major initiative in this field. In the following twenty-five years of the twentieth century, three more important children's museums were established in the United States: the Boston Children's Museum (1913), the Detroit Children's Museum (1917), and The Children's Museum of Indianapolis (1925). Although these museums were founded by different individuals and groups, in different regions and at different times, they shared several important characteristics.

Brooklyn

Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM) opened in 1899, less than one year after Brooklyn became a borough of New York City. The museum originally operated under the umbrella of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (BIAS), then in the process of moving into a new and much larger building under construction on Eastern Parkway. The children's museum opened just a few blocks away in what was known as the Adams House in Bedford Park (now Brower Park) in Crown Heights.



Brooklyn Children's Museum.(archive photo)



Feeding tree toads children activity in museum.(BCM)

BCM was open to the public, free of charge, and sought to provide young people with an introduction to the natural sciences that supported the “various classwork of the public schools,” particularly along the “lines of nature study.” The BIAS Annual Report of 1901-1902 included a special invitation to teachers encouraging them to draw on the museum’s resources when developing “class work in nature-study.” This focus on nature study is perhaps unsurprising—New York’s recently appointed superintendent of public schools, William Henry Maxwell, was an advocate for nature study in the curriculum[5].

Boston

Delia I. Griffin was one of the other women attending the 1907 AAM meeting, where she presented her paper, “The Educational Work of a Small Museum.” At the time, she was director of the Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury, VT. Like Gallup, Griffin was trained in nature study techniques and had even produced a pamphlet titled *Outline of Nature Study for Primary and Grammar Grades*. At St. Johnsbury, she created lesson plans in nature study at the museum for local public schools. Griffin and Gallup became friendly, and when a second museum for children opened in Boston, Gallup recommended Griffin for the job of curator.

In 1909, members of Boston’s Science Teachers’ Bureau began building a collection of natural history objects that could be used in public school classrooms. By 1913, the bureau had founded the second children’s museum in the United States, the Boston Children’s Museum. Like Brooklyn Children’s Museum, it was housed in a former mansion. Located at Pine Bank in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood, the museum offered children access to ethnographic, natural

history, and historical collections. Griffin would later write that the goal of the children's museum was to train the "plastic minds of children to observe accurately and think logically."



Boston Children's Museum (1913).

Purchased through children's penny donations, Molly, a baby elephant that had passed away at the Franklin Park Zoo, is preserved and donated to Boston Children's Museum.(1926)

Over the past century, the number and popularity of children's museums have grown significantly. According to the American Association of Youth Museums, by the mid-1990s, there were about 400 children's museums worldwide, with the majority (about 300) located in the United States. There, they are referred to as "pioneers of modern education," "experimental spaces where learning can be engaging and joyful," and "centers of communication and shared leisure for children and parents." Researchers note that by offering "high-quality programming" that meets the needs of children and families from all social backgrounds, these museums attract significantly more visitors than other types of museums[6,3p].

It is worth noting that while museum educators and researchers studying this topic at least understand the essence of the phenomenon known as a children's museum, most people who are unfamiliar with academic works on the subject rely solely on their own associations. Often, they interpret children's museums merely as museums that tell the story of childhood activities

(for example, toy museums), although such museums are more “child-related” in content than in their actual function[7].

Children’s museums are specialized institutions aimed at supporting children’s personal development and education. They recognize every child as an equal member of society and strive to create a high-quality learning environment appropriate to their age. In these museums, play holds a central role as an educational tool. It is one of the key mechanisms for fostering children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development.

CONCLUSION

Today, there are more than 300 children’s museums around the world, serving millions of families. Each museum operates with a shared goal: to create interactive, innovative, and meaningful learning spaces for children. These institutions are more than just exhibition venues; they also offer various educational programs, experimental learning sessions, and collaborative initiatives that address pressing community issues related to children. Some museums lead advocacy efforts to protect children’s interests, while others work closely with local communities to support shared goals.

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