



play  
cultures of

childhood. The first exhibition, *Everybody*, opened in 1985 and was acclaimed for its originality and accessibility to the young. It explored concepts of the human body through sculpture, 'touch and feel' exhibits and a variety of imaginative activities for children. *Everybody* is an example of a first-rate interactive exhibition which fulfilled one of the Children's Museum goals: to present 'high quality and enjoyable activities for children which stimulate them to discover the [natural] world'.<sup>12</sup>

*You're It!*, which opened in 1988 and benefited from the talents of *Everybody's* designers, Mary and Grant Featherston, was developed from a quite different perspective. A rare instance of a children's museum making the folklore of the young a central project, the museum utilised the resources of the Australian Children's Folklore Collection, the major public archive documenting the play cultures of childhood in Australia.

This exhibition featured the traditional games of generations of children in this country: Marbles, Hopscotch, string games, spinning tops, paper cut-outs, Knucklebones. In order to 'highlight the universality of children's traditional games',<sup>13</sup> the exhibition included old play practices no longer current, such as Diabolo and Cup and Ball, relatively recent innovations such as Elastics, and non-Anglo variants of games: Aboriginal string games, Japanese Knucklebones (O-Tedama), etc.

Visitors were able to expand their repertoire of play by observing and practising Aboriginal string games, learning a Calabrian string game rhyme, and playing American, Japanese and Vietnamese versions of Knucklebones. Indirectly but most effectively, children were encouraged, through their games, to recognise their common humanity. Alone, this would not be sufficient to alter ingrained prejudice or antipathy; in

an environment which consciously reinforced reflection on the universality – and attractiveness – of the play traditions of children from other cultures, such activities enhance a museum's efforts to foster respect for difference and challenge bigotry.

Furthermore, by focusing on the non-official, outside-the-classroom traditions of child life, the Children's Museum provided an exceptionally efficacious bridge between generations. To observe a grandfather and grandson kneeling together in the marbles ring at the 'You're It!' exhibition, sharing their often differing knowledge of rules and procedures, was to recognise the potential for such an exhibition to evoke congenial and mutually satisfying interaction between children and adults. Both young and old were experts here, both had much to teach and to learn.

Programs built around the traditions and rituals of childhood create a special space, rare in contemporary culture, where children are acknowledged as teachers and leaders, and adults willingly accept tutelage from the young. No other museum project, in my experience, facilitates such reciprocal and egalitarian relationships between generations.

Once again, the Children's Museum produced an attractive and extremely popular hands-on exhibition. This time, however, it was not a feature of the 'real' world important to adults that was reinterpreted for children's delectation and enlightenment. Here was an exhibition which celebrated a central characteristic of childhood: play. In the words of the designers:

Play is at the very heart of childhood. The theme of play provides an opportunity for the Children's Museum to present an exhibition, not only for children, but also ABOUT children – children's own culture ... It will be a lively, participatory exhibition to rekindle memories and stimulate shared experiences across generations ...

Play is essential to every aspect of children's development – social, physical and cognitive – but it is still regarded by many, including teachers, as peripheral and ephemeral. In presenting this exhibition, the Children's Museum will give new status to play and games.<sup>14</sup>

Here, as in the Please Touch Museum, there was an awareness of the responsibility of a children's museum to enhance the status of activities of special importance to children. As well, the planners and designers of *You're It!* acknowledged the cross-generational bonding which the experiences of play, common across generations, can engender. Adults bring children to the museum, and there is every reason to consider opportunities to encourage their involvement in the museum's projects. Heather Russell, a consul-

tant to the exhibition and later its archivist, commented in a report written in June, 1989:

Thousands of people of different ages and cultural backgrounds visited the exhibition, and, in the case of adults, were inspired and delighted to relive childhood memories of playground games. Children were impressed that here was an exhibition in the Museum where they were the experts – they had the knowledge and the expertise which we adults ... wanted to know about. This reversal of the flow of information – from child to adult – contributed significantly to many children's appreciation and enjoyment of the exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

For many teachers bringing school groups to the C.M., the *You're It!* exhibition was something of a revelation. Teachers are rarely educated to appreciate the informal learning and artistry that develops amidst the hullabaloo of their school playgrounds. Most regard yard-duty as a necessary but unloved chore. The discovery, through the exhibition and related materials produced by the children's museum, that their students are tradition-bearers of ancient subcultures, and irreverent adapters and innovators as well, surprised – and delighted – many. Some spoke of their own youth, and felt a renewed sense of affiliation with their charges.

The C.M. encouraged teachers to observe their students at play and recognise the extraordinary cultural richness and collaborative learning that takes place outside the classroom. Instead of the customary guide-dog/sheep-dog role often forced on teachers by the traditional museum ethos, there was now an opportunity to interact with the children's museum staff as colleagues. Most teachers, after initial hesitation, responded enthusiastically.

Exhibitions of this kind, with their focus on children's interests and capabilities, have the capacity to draw together youngsters who otherwise are separated by culture or convention. When *You're It!* was taken to schools as part of the Children's Museum's Outreach Program, teachers remarked on changes they observed among their students:

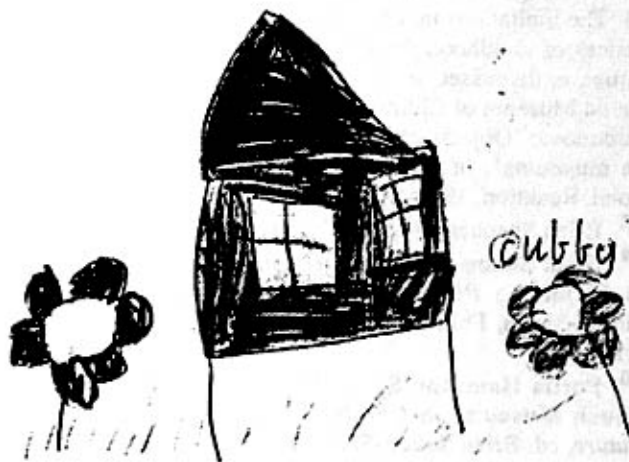
You'd think with all those children, with a huge group of them playing Marbles, that you'd have a few blues. Hardly any of that has gone on and it's really good because it's got boys and girls, children of different nationalities, different ages, all playing together. It's something they all enjoy. Marbles is something you don't have to be really sporty to be good at playing. It crosses a lot of ability barriers, age and sex stereotypes barriers. Yes, especially for some of the Asian children,

who knew some of the games the Children's Museum brought out, they relate to those very well and teach the other children how to play. I think it's really helped them socially too.

[The games] generated a lot of interest from kids with different migrant backgrounds ... They brought their games along and taught other kids how to make the equipment e.g. for Elastics using rubber bands threaded together ... Before [the Children's Museum] came none of the kids from Asia had volunteered any stories to me about what it was like in the camps in Thailand, etc. All of a sudden it was 'This is what we used to play in the camps in Thailand.' ... 'So that's the way I played this game and I had to sit there and play while mum was selling food in the market to try and get us some money.'

They felt good because they were actually in a position to show somebody something else that they were better at. There weren't just the differences in these games. There were a lot of similarities discovered. That kids play the same games like Marbles in many parts of the world. They began to swap a lot of ideas e.g. How we played Marbles in Asia, etc. The kids were really receptive to each other.<sup>16</sup>

Such developments in a children's museum are of great importance. They provide the opportunity for youngsters to demonstrate and reflect, in a secure and comparatively non-judgmental environment, on the lore and language of their many cultures. They permit a more holistic approach to the lives and interests of children than that which has emerged historically: on the one side, hands-on, activity-based children's museums endeavouring to make the world of science and the arts (adult-constructed categories) accessible



and attractive to the young; on the other side, museums collecting childhood-related materials and artefacts for an audience of adults and children to look at and read about rather than handle or use.

Without representation of the world *from children's perspectives and reflecting their priorities*, a children's museum is still, in essence, a conduit for adult perceptions, adult criteria of importance (and usually a narrow range of adults at that). More-or-less voluntary, engaging, pleasant for the eye, ear and hand, the children's museum remains as it began: a progressive educational outpost. Lacking a commitment to reflect, analyse and celebrate childhood *as children experience it*, such a museum cannot be regarded as comprehensive, or, in an intellectual and cultural sense, truly innovative.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> R. D. Abrahams, 'Interpreting Folklore Ethnographically and Sociologically', in *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. R. M. Dorson, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983, p.345

<sup>2</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Folkgames of Children*, Texas, University of Texas Press, 1972, p.538

<sup>3</sup> J. Haider & T. Azhar, 'Children's Museums: Critical Issues in Architectural Design', *Hand to Hand*, 8:3, Fall 1994, p.2

<sup>4</sup> W. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971

<sup>5</sup> June Factor, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia*, Melb. Penguin, 1988, pp. 20-21, 27

<sup>6</sup> R. L. Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance', *Longman's Magazine*, vol.1, no.1, Lond. Longmans, Green & Co. 1882, p.5

<sup>7</sup> Not all Museums of Childhood are as limited as this description suggests. In Australia, for example, the Museum of Childhood at the Edith Cowan University in Perth has consciously and successfully challenged the 'toys and things' approach. See Brian Shepherd, 'Childhood's Pattern: appropriation by generation', in *Museums and the Appropriation of Culture*, ed. Susan Pearce, Lond. & Atlantic Highlands, NJ, The Atholone Press, 1994, pp.65-83. The limitations inherent in attempts to convey the experiences of childhood through adult-made and chosen playthings is discussed in a critical response to the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood in London by the historian L. Jordanova: 'Objects of knowledge: a historical perspective on museums', in *The New Museology*, (ed. P. Vergo), Lond. Reaktion, 1990, pp.22-40

<sup>8</sup> Brian Shepherd, *op cit*, p.72

<sup>9</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, 'Projections: The Future of Play', in *Children's Play: Past, Present & Future*, ed. Brian Sutton-Smith, Philadelphia, Please Touch Museum, 1985, p.19

<sup>10</sup> Portia Hamilton Sperr, Executive Director, Please Touch Museum, in *Children's Play: Past, Present & Future*, ed. Brian Sutton-Smith, Philadelphia, Please Touch Museum, 1985, p.2

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Another American museum to feature the traditions of childhood play rather than the artefacts of commer-

cial manufacturing for children is the Museum of the City of New York, which held an exhibition, *City Play*, in 1988-89. This exhibition proved aroused considerable interest and appears to have influenced other urban museums. See *City Play*, by Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin, New Brunswick & Lond. Rutgers University Press, 1990. The annual Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, in Washington DC, always includes children's play and performance. See for example Diana Baird N'Daiye, 'Kids' Stuff: Children's Traditions of Play and Performance', *1993 Festival of American Folklife, July 1 - July 5*, Smithsonian Institution, pp.84-9

<sup>12</sup> *The Children's Museum, Museum of Victoria*, brochure produced by the Director and the Advisory Board of the Children's Museum in 1986

<sup>13</sup> 'Can You Help? The Children's Museum Needs Exhibits', leaflet produced by the Children's Museum, undated but probably 1988

<sup>14</sup> Mary & Grant Featherston, 'Concept Report', cited in the *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, No.11, October 1986, pp.9-10

<sup>15</sup> Heather Russell, 'Collecting Children's Folklore at the Children's Museum of Victoria: December 1988 - June 1989', *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, No.16, July 1989, pp.15-16

<sup>16</sup> Teachers at Coomoora Primary School in Springvale, Melbourne, recorded by Cathy Hope and quoted in her article, 'Traditional Games in an Outreach program', *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, No.16, July 1989, pp.20, 21

