



Imagining the Possibilities

by D. Lynn McRaine, Leslie Bedford, Daniel Spock, and Andrew Anway

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Introduction by D. Lynn McRaine

As public institutions in the 21st century, museums continue to define and position their role as educational organizations. Recognizing that museums are distinctive learning environments, we museum professionals are identifying the unique characteristics of our own pedagogy and practice. While we embrace learning as a multidimensional experience, the affective engagement of our audiences sometimes takes the backseat to more information-driven messages, leaving the visitor (not to mention the museum professional) longing for inspiration. As we broaden our definition of learning, the imagination emerges as a powerful tool both for practitioners to draw on in creating and delivering interpretive experiences and for visitors to turn to for meaning-making. How can museum professionals value the imagination to foster new ways of thinking about their work and products, and encourage audiences to be more aware of their museum experiences?

In anticipation of its 150th anniversary, the Chicago History Museum recently launched a major renovation of its public spaces. A new menu of exhibitions and programs was premiered with the building's reopening in Fall 2006. During this period, I was fortunate to participate in two projects that changed my own practices as a museum educator and my understanding of learning in museums. One project was to create a history exhibition for kids and families; the other was to define the school group experience in the context of a new museum.

Both projects were striving to engage a younger audience in interpreting the past.

Through research and literature review, I returned to the work of Kieran Egan of the Imaginative Education Research Group on how teaching can draw on the imaginative tools all children have. Egan (2006) explores the development of a child through five zones of understanding based on the ways we learn to use language. Each zone has a set of cognitive tools to use in creating meaning. Among these tools are rhymes and rhythm, jokes and humor, limits of reality, extremes of experience, association with the heroic, a sense of wonder, and changing the context. To Egan the imagination is the ability to think what might be possible, going beyond what one has mastered.

History is often misrepresented as being only a series of dates, names, and events to be memorized. While history museums are comfortable in encouraging visitors to utilize the more traditional "tools of the historian"—inquiry, analysis, and interpretation—the imagination seems to be the unspoken if not forgotten tool. On the contrary, the imagination is a valid tool for the historian as well as the educator, and offers many possibilities for the museum professional as well as for the museum visitor. In fact, the imagination is the tool that can bridge the then and now, fill the empty space between the known and unknown, allowing an individual to reconstruct knowledge into new understandings and discoveries.

Two of Egan’s cognitive tools—a sense of wonder and changing the context—are means for finding a place for imagination in our own practice and products. In imaginative education, wonder is the emotional stimulus to asking questions to uncover the possibilities and potential discoveries that lie in any subject or situation. By creating a sense of wonder, we are able to reinsert passion into our work, creating products that evoke affective outcomes in our audiences. The imagination also allows us to break from the cycles and routines of our own practices. Egan declares routine to be the enemy of the imagination. By changing the context, we can choose a new path, one that may lead to unexpected, but equally wonderful and rewarding outcomes.

Through “a sense of wonder” and “changing the context,” the imagination became an unexpected tool for the staff and visitors at the Chicago History Museum. For school group visits, a cross-institutional team asked, “What if there were no guided tours? What would field trips to the museum look like?” By changing the context, the team was able to explore alternative tools and approaches for teaching history. For example, the team enrolled in The Second City workshop “Improvisation for Creative Pedagogy” and discovered how theater games were a viable interpretive tool for developing both individual and group skills in communication, “physicalization,” narrative (role playing), empathy, and team building. By changing the context for school group visits, team members were able to explore how to move from a “talk and tell” approach to a more experience-based approach to field trip visits. In the end, our imaginations provided the answers in the form of six interactive gallery stations that devise a new context for learning history.



At the Chicago History Museum, children measure the heights and root depths of native plants at an interactive gallery station. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum. Photo by Museum Explorer Inc./2007.

Children measure prairie plants, create their own skyscrapers and moving bridges, chart the path of the Chicago fire, and sit a spell at the front steps to discuss neighborhood issues. As they move through the museum’s galleries, student groups encounter the activity stations that in turn create for them a new context for learning history and connecting to the past.

Changing the context was also incorporated into the development process of the children’s gallery. Early in the project, the team chose to depart from the museum’s traditional approach to exhibition development, i.e. first defining the historical focus. Instead, the team chose to foreground its audience throughout the process and seek their counsel and input at every stage. The team also brought the same sense of wonder and curiosity displayed by its targeted audience of eight- and nine-year olds, always questioning, testing, and revising our approach to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of children. We discovered that our targeted visitors have powerful imaginations and through sensory experiences, are able to make the leap from the present to the past. In *Sensing Chicago*, children’s senses and imaginations become the primary tools for connecting to the past. Children see themselves running the Chicago marathon, feel the excitement of a game at Old Comisky Park, hear the sounds

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Entrance view of **Sensing Chicago** where children draw on their five senses and imaginations to connect to the past. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.

(continued from page 41)

For me the imagination is the laboratory of the human spirit.

of the Great Chicago Fire, smell the Union Stock Yard and steel mills, and yes, become a Chicago-style hot dog.

What is the imagination? How can narrative and narrative theory shape the exhibition experience so it engages the imagination? What are standing assumptions about our work, and what “rules” prevent us from foregrounding the imagination in our practice and products? How do exhibitions and programs inspire visitors to draw on their own curiosity and imaginations to create affective learning experiences? The following kindred spirits recognize the power of the imagination and its potential for the museum practitioner and visitor.

What is the imagination? How can narrative and narrative theory shape the exhibition experience so it engages the imagination? by Leslie Bedford

Although defining imagination doesn’t seem a very imaginative endeavor, it can be useful for two reasons. First, we have inherited so many, often contradictory ways of understanding this slippery concept that it is hard to know what we are talking about when we try to apply it to our work in museums. Second, these various definitions

often carry almost moral judgments which have deeply influenced our contemporary thinking and practice in ways of which we may not even be aware.

A couple of messy historical references can serve to explain what I mean. The Bible teaches that only God has the power and right to creativity. Should man be so foolish as to, for instance, build a Tower of Babel or eat from the tree of knowledge and imagine an alternative future for himself, he will be swiftly punished. Like Plato before them, the thinkers of the Scientific Revolution had little interest in the arts or the imagination. It was “I think,” not “I imagine, therefore I am”! What was understood as the imagination had to do solely with images in the mind or childlike fantasies— what we might call the imaginary as opposed to the imagined. It took first some thinkers of the Enlightenment and later the Romantics to craft a more familiar view of imagination, one which exalted the role of the artist; but even so, especially when it came to formal education, reason and the intellect were considered superior to imagination and the arts (Egan, 2006).

In more recent years, our understanding of the power of the imagination to forge connections, to generate both images and ideas and work together with not in opposition to— reason has increased and been supported by philosophy, psychology, and most recently neuroscience. Supposedly if you put a monkey in a room with a bunch of bananas hanging from the ceiling, he will try one strategy after another to reach the bananas. I just read in a terrific little book called *Stumbling on Happiness* (Gilbert, 2007) that monkeys lack a frontal lobe—the part of the brain which appeared in our species some three million years ago and accounts for our

unique ability to imagine. To paraphrase Kieran Egan who preferred philosopher Alan White's definition: "to imagine is to 'think of things as possibly being so'." (2006) Imagining, he goes on to remind us, is nearly always deeply connected to our emotions and is perhaps more easily understood through metaphor than through rational analysis. For me the imagination is the laboratory of the human spirit.

By using this capacity we can put ourselves in the shoes of someone from another time or culture and empathize. We can try on an alternative identity and see how it feels. We can envision a possible future, something that is going on all over this conference and that can be, as we well know, for evil as well as for good. We can solve problems, like the monkeys with the bananas—in other words, the imagination working with reason, in a generative partnership we call creativity. And we of course create a poem, a painting, a school program, an exhibition or an AAM panel as well as experience deep emotional engagement with the creative works of others, something in the arts we sometimes call a transformative experience.

Probably the best way to understand the imagination is as a process, an action, a verb. It is a process that is cognitive, emotional, and physical. Indeed as we are coming to understand better and better these three are inseparable. Clearly there is a developmental component of the imagination. This is something Kieran Egan and the Imaginative Education Research Group (www.ierg.net) address

in some detail. Though some people are more "imaginative" than others, everyone has this capacity. And everyone carries his or her imagination to the museum.

Tools of the imagination

I don't want to suggest that imaginative engagement is the only way to think about the visitor's experience at our institutions, but I do believe it's a fundamental part of who we are and why we exist. I say this not only because it is what I personally like to do in museums but also because, quite frankly, it is what I think we can do best. While we may inspire visitors to want to learn more about something, I don't think we're very good at teaching straight content or transmitting information, at least not in exhibitions. That requires time and skilled facilitation, something most visitors don't encounter very often. But if we decided to see our exhibitions, this unique if ill defined medium, more as an aesthetic than an educational experience, we would give ourselves greater freedom to play with the imagination and some of the tools that it employs.

The embodied imagination

In addition to metaphor, there is a second set of tools or strategies which involve the body, the senses; a dancer I heard talk recently referred to this as the embodied imagination. When I was running the Japan Program at the Boston Children's Museum, one of the most powerful insights into Japanese culture I gained came from being dressed in a kimono, two layers with a tight obi cinched around my waist. When I then tried to walk and sit, I understood



Central Hall, Ellis Island. Courtesy of Fred Elman.

(continued from page 43)

I don't think the visitor can use his imagination if we haven't used ours.



The diorama of the Great Chicago Fire from the Chicago History Museum's **Imagining Chicago** exhibition; one of seven dioramas that trace the history of the city's first 100 years. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.

through my body something powerful about what it was like to be a woman in traditional Japanese society. I know you—and your visitors—all have had such experiences. Egan's group refers to this as "somatic understanding" and it is worth further exploration.

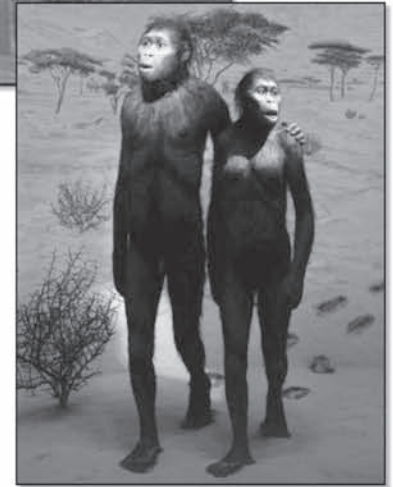
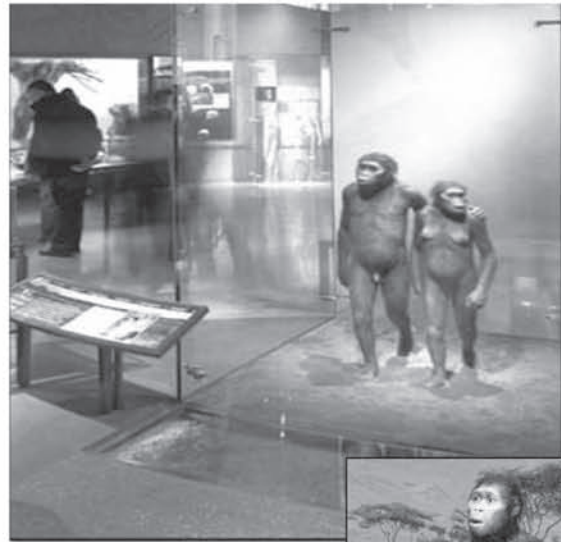
Narrativity

A third set of tools comes from narrative or storytelling. If imagination is the laboratory of the human spirit, then storytelling is one of its most successful experiments. There are as many ways to talk about the whys and whats of storytelling as there are stories. A philosopher might say we create stories with their beginnings, middles and ends to give order to an essentially chaotic universe; a cognitive psychologist could say we are hardwired for narrative and thus are more likely to remember something if told in story form; and a Jungian psychologist would talk about "metanarratives," stories shared by all people across culture and time.

It is no surprise that there is a huge field called narratology inhabited by scholars called "narratologists." They helped me understand the difference between story, which is what-happened-at-some-time-to-some-people-in-some-place and narrative, which is the telling, how the story is interpreted through a medium, whether book, play, film, video game, or exhibition. And they also helped me understand a concept that I think is really useful for us and that is narrativity. Narrativity refers to *the potential to evoke story in someone's head*. It exists independently of narrative. In other words, a piece of music might have narrativity, while a genuine story if told badly might evoke nothing more than profound boredom (Ryan, 2004).

I want to share several images which I believe speak to the concept of narrativity. The first is actually not an image but an exhibition label,—for a Phoenician sarcophagus from the fourth century B.C., which I saw at the Beirut National Museum:

New and original installation of *Australopithicus afarensis*, otherwise known as "Lucy"—or Luci and Desi as the staff call them. Courtesy of New York's American Museum of Natural History.



In this coffin lie I, Batnoam, mother of King Ozbaal, king of Byblos, son of Paltibaal, priest of the lady, in a robe and with a tiara on my head, and a gold leaf on my mouth, as was the custom with the royal ladies who were before me.

Did this evoke a story in your mind? Would it have had the same effect if it had been in third person curatorial prose about Phoenician burial customs in the fourth century?

The image of the pillar covered with scribblings is from the central hall at Ellis Island.. Someone there had the imagination to preserve the graffiti left long ago by new immigrants passing through. Museum dioramas may possess narrativity. For instance, among several in the Chicago History Museum's new *Imagining Chicago* gallery is one of the great Chicago fire, a great example of an installation with narrativity.

We can all probably conjure up memories of museum dioramas which inspired us to create stories. Here is a particularly vivid one from among those by Michael Spock and his team in the early 90's:

The really great [diorama] was the jaguar stalking the big rodent. And I couldn't read that word when I was a kid of what the animal was. And it was supposed to be someplace like Venezuela, but I thought that jungles were all in Brazil, so I thought it had to be Brazil. But it was neat to me. It was like seeing another way to paint, or another way to make a picture at least, to create this environment. And you could stand in front of it and just make up a whole

story about what the bird that was sitting on the branch was going to do next, where that jaguar had come from, and, you know, did this big rodent have a family somewhere and was it out gathering food? I mean, there was this whole thing that you could fill in yourself about it, but that was really exciting. M. Spock (personal communication, July 25, 2007).

One of the more memorable installations at New York City's American Museum of Natural History is of *australopithicus afarensis*, otherwise known as "Lucy"—or Luci and Desi as the staff call them. The original version, known to generations of visitors, included a painted background. This spring the pair was reinstalled in the new Hall of Human Origins. The backdrop is gone but the story remains; once upon a time, about three million years ago, two figures walked side by side across the African plains. Do you think their installation at ground level, done to show their actual size, enhances their narrative power or not?

This concept of narrativity is only one way of looking at how storytelling nurtures the imagination. If you visit the Lincoln Museum in Springfield you'll find another example. There, the designers are tapping deeply and effectively into our emotions to pull us through their narration of Abraham Lincoln's life and legacy.

(continued from page 45)

Visitors' own scripts

A fourth approach, which I have just started exploring, would be to look at the stories visitors themselves tell as they wander through our exhibitions. This approach has the potential to reframe the imaginative power of exhibitions as something closer to interactive theater than simple storytelling. In reading the transcripts of visitor conversations in the *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* exhibition at the Minnesota History Center, I had the sense of people creating story together, performing rather like actors on a stage. The props were provided by the museum, but the scripts were the visitors' own.

But however you approach this topic, one thing remains constant. The imaginations of the visitor and of the exhibit maker are two sides of a single coin. Process and product are one. I don't think the visitor can use his imagination if we haven't used ours.

When I was a little girl I loved this book called *The Story of the Root-Children* which I just learned was first published in Germany in 1906. (von Olfers) When I found it a few weeks ago I was delighted, and I also gained an important insight into why I am spending so much of my time these days talking about our imaginations. As a child I loved imagining the tiny root children sleeping in their secret underground home and then trooping up into the spring to live among the fields, forests and meadows. My imagination is fed these days by different memories of different experiences but I believe the process is very much the same.

In closing, I want to ask you to think about the books, images, films, moments in your lives that continue to feed your imaginations and how might you bring them and that process into your work.

What are standing assumptions about our work, and what "rules" prevent us from foregrounding the imagination in our practice and products? by Daniel Spock

Recently I paid a family visit to the Portland Zoo. We made our way to the elephant enclosure. What I saw there saddened me. A solitary elephant stood quietly with his head turned to a massive, closed steel door, his eyes downcast. I imagined him depressed by the boredom of his confinement, weary of the gawking onlookers. Suddenly, a small boy looks at me and says, "The door is closed because his mommy wants some privacy." The museum professional in me thinks about the boy's reaction: he is literally "musing," making a meaningful story-image in the mind. He makes an imaginative link from the moment to something familiar in his prior experience.

But the story doesn't end there. The next morning the newspaper carries a story about the zoo. It seems that, on the day of our visit, a male elephant underwent a delicate operation to remove a chronically infected tusk. The elephant had to be anesthetized for the procedure and was lowered onto a waterbed to prevent him from suffocating under his own weight. (Apparently elephants don't ordinarily lie down.) The article added one more tantalizing detail. It described the elephant as "a gentle Romeo." So now I imagine that there was an elephant on a waterbed behind that door and that the elephant standing on the other side was actually a lover keeping a vigil for her toothache-stricken mate! And, while the little boy might not have gotten it perfectly right,

The museum tradition is rooted in the imaginative act.

his intuition probably came closer to the emotional truth than what I had imagined.

The root of the word museum means literally “House of the Muses,” in other words, a place for *musings*. The ancient Greeks believed that each act of inspiration drew on one or more of the Muses—acts of the imagination channeled the gods. Each Muse specialized in one of the arts, history or sciences, but the distinctions between had not yet hardened into today’s disciplines. The Muses were said to be the daughters of Mnemosyne: memory, reflecting the sense that inspiration is rooted in memory. For the label writers, muses were also said to have invented letters and the myths. In this sense, they were the divine inspiration for the original stories and their storytellers.

In some traditions, Prometheus, the giver of fire to humankind, is also credited with the invention of letters. Incidentally, I was the editor of my high school newspaper, ostentatiously called *The Promethean*. However grandiose that sounds, we “givers of fire” were firmly situated one rung from the bottom of the high school food chain, just above the audio-visual club and just below the band. Not exactly having your liver pecked out each day, but for a teenager, pretty damn close.

There’s a paradox here. The museum tradition is rooted in the imaginative act. Like the boy at the zoo, museum-goers are continuously forming indelible images in the mind—*images*—implying both a sensory experience, perhaps predominantly visual, but also the attachment of meaning to those images. This is an imaginative act

by the museum-goer. Meaning making requires an act of the imagination.

But it seems to me that museums that are unimaginative and uninspired in the making are unlikely to produce the same result in the museum-goer. There is a correlative relationship between the two. Just as there is with a great storyteller and her audience, the better the telling, the greater the imaginative leap of the listener.

But everywhere we look, we find museums that appear to have been created with indifference towards the vital role of imagination.

Why?

These are some of the habitual pitfalls I see in museum thinking:

The perception that imagination is frivolous

When asked about my religious background, I sometimes say Puritanism without God. Museums have a similar legacy. We have trouble loosening up. We’re kind of obsessive and serious about things. Imagination is threatening because, at its most harmless, it seems related to idle behaviors: daydreaming or the word *imaginary*—make believe. Imagination seems like something childlike or childish, and not in a good way. It runs counter to our desire to be taken seriously. Make believe, in particular, is seen as the enemy of reason and of facts, rather than a natural ally in the facilitation of a museumgoer’s creation of engagement and personal meaning through imagination. Lost in all of this is the central fact that we must make

(continued from page 47)

The challenges
that we now
face demand
fresh ways of
imagining that
draw on new
combinations
of study and
thought.

belief in facts as surely as we do in myth.

At worst, imagination is seen as a renegade, rebel force, inappropriate to the museum. It is similarly misperceived as a solo act, the province of grandiose visionaries and auteurs, that is, *people who can't be trusted*. Imagination in many museums is that interloper Prometheus; we just want to chain it to a rock and peck its liver out.

The primacy of the object

Stephen Weil (1990) pointed out that, while collecting and preserving objects may be a core *function* of most museums, museums must have a purpose that rises above the mere functions every museum routinely fulfills. Yet many are the exhibitions where collections are displayed with apparent disregard for the interaction the public will have with these objects. When an exhibition project begins with the assumption that the first priority is the display of the collection, the flexibility of thinking about possibilities, about purposes other than object appreciation, tends to close down. Objects never stand independent of a museum's intentions, though, every choice a museum makes in the display of an object changes the relationship a viewer has to the thing.

A partial exception may be granted to art, since art in particular is created through a process of imagination to stimulate a process of imagination in the art viewer, but even here, the museum plays a definite role. For example, Walter Hopps was a renowned art curator not only because he had a great eye for collecting, but also for his mastery of *hanging a show*, taking hours and hours to explore the interplay of pictures in the galleries, worrying relationships, trying variations, being aware

of how an experience of one thing interrelated with an experience of another proximate thing. The result was something more than the sum of the parts.

A museum's collections riches are often its greatest liability in this regard. When the overriding goal is to "get the collection out there," it also tends to override the importance of the visitor's sense of imaginative interaction with those objects. This relationship wants to be about quality not quantity.

The dominance of the written word

We forget that museums are never merely an information delivery medium. Museums are better understood as imagination catalyzing zones where everyone gets to hash out meanings together: museum-goers, museum-makers, everybody, in a dynamic interaction of what James Gibson (1977) termed *affordances*, interplay between humans and what the environment will afford in the way of possibilities.

A good many of us in the museum world are here because we're awfully good with words and have been rewarded through life for that gift. But when the sum of the ideas underlying an exhibition is found only in written labels, then, it seems to me, the exhibition has failed to engage the imagination of the museumgoer in the full sensory realm of the medium.

This underscores the importance of design that gives full sensory expression to the world of ideas. The museum environment itself is content. By appearances it tells you what it is and what it is not. Labels are effective only if they extend what is already evident in the sensory realm. Ideas are always important but

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ideas do not begin or end with what you might write down—especially not in the museum.

It seems that when we habitually work from the words outward, the visitor experience becomes our last concern. Why not try opening with the sensory realm of ideas and work intuitively back to content and objects? And involve your designers in this process from the start.

The straightjacket of discipline

Most museums are created in the name of a particular, usually academic, discipline. Disciplines are framing devices that have some proven utility. But all frames of reference lend meaning not only by what they show as by what they leave out. Museum-goers, however, scarcely live their lives bounded by disciplinary frames of reference. Ordinary people rarely go through life saying “I’m having a historical experience now. Now I’m having a natural history experience.” Life, by its very nature is multidisciplinary.

The chemist August Kekule—the first to discover the atomic structure of molecules—had studied architecture before turning to chemistry. This affinity for understanding structural relationships prepared Kekule for perceiving the nature of chemical compounds in an entirely new way. Museums can produce a similar sense of insight if we create a richer context for making remote associations between ideas and things. Unfortunately, many of us feel insecure when we step beyond our isolated domains of training and expertise. We could get better at being both bolder and better students of the things we don’t yet know.

A colleague of mine once said in the course of developing a history exhibition, “...but that’s how a science museum would do it!” Yet, some

of the most interesting recent exhibitions have been hard to peg: *Massive Change, Benjamin Franklin, Race, Devices of Wonder*, for some recent examples. These exhibitions have been powerful and provocative precisely for the fact that they cross traditional boundaries. A multidisciplinary approach is often the most engaging and provocative way to go.

Many of the pressing matters of our age defy the traditional boundaries of academia. The challenges that we now face demand fresh ways of imagining that draw on new combinations of study and thought. Global warming, secular strife, the pressures on human populations and the natural world by global culture and trade, all become more relevant when rendered through a multiplicity of perspectives.

Imagination needs breathing room

Museums have a funny way of wanting to own the meaning of things. Museum-goers have an equally funny way of making their own meanings. I suggest that we drop our illusions of thought control. Museums are probably better at stimulating curiosity than satisfying it. Museum-goers have a lifetime to follow up, so it’s senseless for the museum to monopolize knowledge. Instead, museums might explore the space between knowledge and mystery as a natural zone for reflection that need not be cluttered up with pre-formulated meanings.

A decade ago, when Jay Rounds was my boss in a start-up museum project devoted to the subject of creativity, he used to say of the exhibitions we were developing, “I see too much plumbing. Where’s the poetry?” It took me years to understand what he meant. I felt safer in the known realm of plumbing where things are concrete and connect neatly and

It stands to reason that the more we invite visitors to create a visitor experience that relies on their imaginations, the more likely that visit will be memorable and meaningful.

(continued from page 49)

logically together. Poetry, on the other hand, is metaphor, inherently open to interpretation. As interpreters, we fear misinterpretation more than almost any other thing. But we have to get comfortable with ceding some control for the creation of meaning in the imagination to the museum-goer, because that is what museum-goers do. This is the essence of the museum experience. It's counterproductive to deny it.

How do exhibitions and programs inspire visitors to draw on their own curiosity and imaginations to create affective learning experiences?
by Andrew Anway

Isn't it amazing that we are talking about how to nurture imagination in visitors in a museum setting! What could be more the point of a museum visit than igniting our collective imaginations? And yet we routinely develop visitor experiences that are linear and highly moderated, leaving little room for creative imaginings for fear our visitors will draw the "wrong" conclusions or fail to inhale the pre-determined "take-away" messages.

But no design begins with anyone stating, "Let's keep imagination out of it!" Without exception, every museum we have ever worked with has wanted us to design visitor experiences that are fun, engaging, imaginative, and that promote "a life-long love of learning"! And yet, many museums make visitors work awfully hard to keep the life-long love of learning alive. This is in large measure because we do not allow visitors imaginations to be an integral part of their experience. Let me explain what I mean. First let me speak from a personal perspective

about imagination in a non-museum setting. I am the father of three sons – seventeen, fourteen, and nine. Those of you who are parents, especially of boys, know that there is a special place in whatever-your-version-of-heaven-is for those of us who have lived in a household with the *diabolical* imaginations of children. I can always tell when the line has been crossed. I observe some event that to my kids seems completely reasonable and all I can think is, "What could they possibly have been thinking?" How about the idea of seeing if caps and toilet paper will burn and finding out that they really, really do and, thinking quickly, deciding that group peeing on the frantically exploding flames is the quickest way to extinguish them!

I once came home from work when my youngest son was three and the oven door was lying on the kitchen floor. It was just lying there! Everything else was normal, the older kids were doing homework, playing and talking, and my wife had started dinner. Everyone was walking round the oven door as if it was always lying limp on the floor like that. I asked my wife what happened and she said she didn't know, but that little Eli must have been playing with it and "ripped it off the hinges." So little three-year old Eli ripped the oven door off the hinges because he was playing with it, and it's the most normal thing in the world—now I put to you that nurtures a life-long love of learning!

So in a museum setting, what is the visitor equivalent of the "oven door to a three year old"? How can we as developers and designers envision spaces where an exhibition can carry broad interpretive possibilities, imparting specific information, yet opening up visitors' imaginations?

Let's imagine it

Try this "Air Art" exercise with a friend. Each of you is going to draw a picture of something, based on the description below. You are not going to draw it on paper though, you are going to draw in the air. You might be thinking, "but I can't draw" ...well, that's the beauty of "Air Art": only you will know what you are drawing and how great it is! Get comfortable, relax and imagine your picture as you draw it in the air.

Draw a large rectangle [in front of you.]

In the upper left hand corner, draw a circle..., ah, make it a little bigger.

Draw a few squiggly lines coming off the circle; make them different lengths.

Draw a semi-circle, kind of s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d about 1/3 of the way up from the bottom of the rectangle.

Draw a straight vertical line perpendicular to the stretched semi-circle line.

Draw a large triangle attached to the top of the vertical line.

In the upper right hand corner of the rectangle, draw three big puffy balls, overlapping a bit.

Draw a wavy line completely across the rectangle about 1/4 of the way from the bottom.

Now, paint the circle and the squiggly lines in the upper left hand corner bright yellow.

Paint the three big puffy balls in the upper right hand corner white.

Paint everything below the horizontal wavy line dark blue.

Paint the triangle and the semi-circle off-white

Paint everything else light blue...

What do you think you have drawn?

Finally, draw someone you love and put that person inside the semi-circle. Turn the edge of your rectangle sideways and send your loved

one on an adventure by filling the triangle with air—blow hard and wave goodbye. Consider this, did you draw what I imagined or did you draw what *you* imagined?

Opening visitors' imaginations

In the best exhibit design, the imagination of the visitor drives the success of the experience. So what lessons can we bring from successful exhibitions to new ones that will help us involve visitors in opening up their imaginations? There are many, but the following five strategies form the foundation of a design approach that will virtually guarantee visitors' imaginations will be engaged.

1. Establish a context. Make it simple and be clear what the exhibition is about and who it is for.
2. Provide a set of intuitive tools. Let visitors know how they can readily engage exhibitions.
3. Create something emotionally arresting. Design something beautiful, loud, clever, unexpected, amusing, self-deprecating, and fun.
4. Provide an invitation. Make certain visitors answer "Yes!" to the question, "Is this for me?"
5. Step aside! Allow visitors to set their own course, no matter what.

The following are three examples of exhibitions that employ these five strategies. They make use of different themes and tools, and use a range of emotionally arresting environmental designs to suggest contemplation, discovery, whimsy and play—all for the purpose of inviting visitors to explore and imagine. In all cases, the aim is to provide visitors with multiple ways into the exhibition theme or themes, from which visitors can create their own experience.

We do not allow visitors' imaginations to be an integral part of their experience.

In the Chicago History Museum **Sensing Chicago** exhibition, children are invited to "be a Chicago-style hot dog!" with all seven condiments. Courtesy Amaze Design, Inc.



(continued from page 51)

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The African Burial Ground Interpretive Center in New York City commemorates and memorializes the burial site of perhaps as many as 15,000 enslaved Africans who lived and labored under indescribably cruel conditions in New York City in the 17th and 18th centuries. The design distills the essence of the exhibition into a burial scene that invites visitors to join in. This space provides a focal point from which visitors can launch their exploration of the exhibition and reinforces the humanity of the enslaved Africans buried here.

The Connecticut Historical Society's Old State House exhibition, *History is All Around Us* in Hartford, Connecticut targets a middle school audience to explore the history that is evident in everyday things throughout Hartford. In the introductory gallery visitors are greeted by stylized environments in which they see an attic trunk, a person reading a book, talking portraits, and elements from popular culture. These elements showcase the ways in which history is evident in everyday items and that visitors are part of, and constantly creating history.

The final example is on its way to becoming one of my favorite exhibitions of all time, primarily because it is so elegantly simple and elicits so much joy. The Chicago History Museum's Children's Gallery, *Sensing Chicago*, allows children to explore Chicago's history by using their five senses. While the exhibition create tactile, auditory, olfactory and visual experiences that satisfied four of the five senses, the challenge with the fifth sense, taste, was to express something unique about Chicago culinary delights without actually providing a restaurant. The result—you be a Chicago-style hot dog!

By following simple guidelines, and by being willing to let visitors control much of what they do and how they do it, possibilities for imaginative outcomes are intensified. Let's return for a final moment to the "Air Art" exercise. Imagine if you had been asked to draw what was described on a piece of paper instead of in the air. How different would the experience have been? I would venture to guess that many of you would have been very concerned about how "good" your drawing was, whether you were "accurately" drawing what was described, and you would have been much less inclined to imbue your drawing with your own interpretive flourish. That is not because you are not imaginative—it is because your imagination is constrained by convention when you are asked to draw something on a piece of paper rather than in the air. Now take this idea to a museum setting. It stands to reason that the more we invite visitors to create a visitor experience that relies on their imaginations, the more likely that visit will be memorable and meaningful.

Here is my final thought. Think back to your AirArt image. When you inflated the sails of your imaginary sailboat you sent your loved ones on a journey. Where did you send them? Where are they now? If you envision them in a place of adventure and enlightenment, then you just employed your imagination to create a universe that is the essence of a great museum... hold that thought! ✨