



Weaving theory and practice: young children and museums

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Programming and designing for young children in museums and cultural spaces raises exciting questions about, for example;

- the purpose of museum visiting
- what we mean by learning and engagement
- the relationship between thinking, movement and bodies
- and the sensory experience of being in a museum space.

As museum educators and curators respond to these questions, during both practical day-to-day decision-making and future planning about programming, marketing, design of spaces, and so much more, an important and often implicit question is; how are we imagining or anticipating the babies, toddlers and young children that enter our museums?

Some further questions might be:

- Why do we think young children and families are here, and what might they be interested in?
- What might be the first thing they do when they arrive?
- How might a visit unfold, and what would a successful trip look like?
- What matters to young children when they are in museum spaces, and why do children matter to museums?

For the last several years, we have been researching young children's museum visiting, and writing about the importance of things like place, architecture, movement, repetition and sensory experiences to this audience (eg Hackett et al, 2018). We believe that theory and research should help to inform practice in museums, by offering suggestions and critical prompts to the kinds of questions we have listed above. We have recently edited one of the first books to weave theory and practice about young children in museums (Hackett et al, 2020), with the aim of offering practical ideas and responses to the question of how we imagine or anticipate young children in museums. In this book, we wrote:

'Good theories should make sense in the everyday. They should become illuminated, transformed and made to shimmer more vibrantly by practice.'

Hackett et al, 2020, p.2

The book then, was a call for, and an introduction to, theories about children's experience in museums that resonate vibrantly with the things that tend to actually happen when young children explore museums. In particular, we have suggested those theories that foreground the body, movement and the sensory (rather than centring mostly on talk, cognition and memory), are particularly well placed to help us notice and value what takes place between children, spaces and things in museums. In this overview, we will describe some of those theories, and the implications for those working with young children in museums.

MOVEMENT AND THE MUSEUM

Imagine a young child enters a museum. Perhaps they are 2 years old, or five and a half years, or 10 months. Maybe they come with their family, or a group of children from their nursery, or couple of families with kids of a similar age. They run to the museum entrance, or do their new funny walk they invented on the way here, or sit in a pushchair messily eating a biscuit. Perhaps they pause at the threshold, a little uncertain. Or they run inside, and down a corridor before their grown up has had a chance to remove their coat. A young child has entered a museum and something is going to happen.

Hackett et al, 2020, p.1

The growing body of international research on young children (0-5 years) visiting museums emphasises the bodily, sensory nature of museum visiting and the importance of movement, spaces and objects. The QUT Museums Collaborative Research Project, twenty years ago, was amongst the first to research museum visiting of younger children (4-6 years), emphasising the importance of full body engagement or what the authors described as 'hot and sweaty' learning (Weier and Piscitelli, 2003, p.19). A starting point of how bodies experience and move in spaces might prompt us to notice how children explore museums with their bodies and experiment with what they can do and feel in spaces. For example, Hackett (2016) highlighted young children's walking and running in museums as central to their experience, Carr et al (2013) described nursery children noticing and replicating bodily practices in an art gallery and Cooke (2020) described a child reacting to a huge expanse of floor in a stately home by laying down and rolling. Starting with how bodies move in spaces might encourage us to notice how spaces in museums shape and influence bodies; there is a two-way dance between human visitors and nonhuman spaces and objects during a museum visit. Writing about the importance of museum architecture for influencing visits, Vergeront wrote 'long corridors whisper... run!' (2002, p.8).

Too often children's fast movement in museums can be viewed as disruptive, or at least unproductive. However, starting to attend to what children do in museums (and fast movement and bodily exploring are frequently central to this) requires us to think more carefully about the relationship between movement, thought and experience. Perhaps, as we argue in our book, the opportunity for a body to move or feel differently in unique, unusual and never-encountered-before spaces, is central to why museums are important to young children. Perhaps movement is an important aspect of how young children express themselves, and moving through space a productive way for children to shape and lead a museum visit. Perhaps knowing a museum through how it makes your body feel, and experimenting with what the possibilities are for different kinds of movement in different spaces, is just as 'valuable' (in terms of learning, experience, engagement – however we are thinking to measure 'value') as knowing a museum through facts, stories or conversations.

MUSEUM VISITS ARE MORE-THAN-HUMAN

In recent years, social science research has increasingly questioned the way in which theories of learning and experience tend to assume humans are central to everything that happens. This critique extends to objects as well – we tend to think about objects from the point of view of the roles humans have allocated to them; an object that is useful to us, or contains a human story or memory, for example, or has a specific role to play in helping children to learn or to play. However Bennett (2010), amongst others, has argued that objects always exceed their human-allocated roles; they have capacities to drive action and unanticipated effects above and beyond what humans might envisage for them. Bennett calls this ‘thing-power’.

When we consider that not just humans can have an effect on what unfolds during a museum visit, we can start to think about a museum visit as an assemblage. An assemblage always involves both human and nonhuman things, flowing together and apart, creating patterns of activity, energies and consequences. Perhaps there is a particular object that attracts a child, or perhaps it is the staircase, or the fire extinguisher, or a tiny toy in the child’s pocket, or the way the light from a window makes patterns on the floor. Hill and O’Gorman (2020) describe the powerful connections children can have with small treasured objects, and the way in which ‘the sensual particularities’ (p.65) of materials can invite action, as well as the ‘vital’ (p.66) nature of the gallery space itself in shaping how children and nonhuman things come together.

Thus, whilst we might give objects a human allocated role or meaning, they are not only there ‘for us’. For example, think about the ‘after-life’ of discarded objects and the role they play in pollution (Bennett, 2010), or the ‘pre-life’ of an object such as a digital tablet, made from minerals and natural resources that are collected often with great harm to both environment and workers (often children) (Gallagher, 2019). As museum professionals, we might dedicate our lives to learning with and about objects, yet that learning will always be partial, from our limited human position.

If a museum visit is more-than-human, what does that mean for children, museums and staff? Museum visits are always social and material, and seeking to understand young children’s experiences in museums could involve tracing which parts of an assemblage seem to come into play and have a significant effect on an unfolding visit. Perhaps, ultimately, we are still most interested in the experiences of human visitors (more than the staircase or the fire extinguisher), but still, in order to understand how these experiences are shaped, we may need to accept that they emerge within human / nonhuman assemblages. Relatedly, we may also need to accept that sometimes the experiences of humans are influenced by things outside of the control of humans and can take us in unanticipated directions.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE MOMENT, AND WHAT HAPPENS OVER TIME

One of the key messages to emerge from the growing body of research on young children visiting museums is how productive repeated visits to the same spaces can be for young children (Hackett 2016; Kirk and Buckingham, 2018). Whilst much of the early research on children in museums focussed on school visits (with an emphasis on what learning could be achieved in a one-off visit), young children's museum visiting tends to build in confidence, experimentation and creative departures over subsequent visits to the same place. Through slowly and iteratively experimenting with what people, objects and movements can do, feel or set in motion in this particular space, children might build a strong attachment to a space, a preferred route, a ritual or a tradition, bodily memories. Often in research, we see how recurring visits to the same space, and the development of repeated routines in a particular place or with a particular object, can generate connections and build relationships with both human and nonhuman others in the museum.

A focus on what happens in the moment and what happens over time can help us to take seriously James Joyce's thought that perhaps not only do people remember events, but that also 'places remember events' (Orley, 2012). For example, when children re-encounter a place or objects that triggered a running routine in a previous visit, they find themselves set in motion once again as the running (or dancing, or storying, or role playing, or climbing...) is reignited: it is as if the place was waiting for the child.

Often when young children visit museums, they are encountering something for the first time; a room that massive, a corridor that long, taxidermy, skeletons and massive pieces of art ('is it real?'). Hopefully, there will also be something familiar to support children and families as they encounter so much that is unfamiliar; toys or drawing materials perhaps that they have encountered in other spaces, benches or cushions for dwelling and slowing down (Hackett et al, 2018). For those planning or supporting young children's museum visits, a good question might be; how can we balance the excitement and wonder in response to the new, whilst at the same time providing a safe space in which to create familiarity and attachment?

IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSEUMS

When research about young children in museums leads us to theories about bodies, movement, place and sensory experience, how might we (as parents/carers, practitioners, policy makers, designers, teachers or researchers) respond? We firmly believe there is not one 'right' way to work with young children in museums, and not one 'right' theory to guide decisions. Rather, it depends; on audiences, spaces, collections, priorities, and also on what unfolds in any given moment. Remember – we have argued museum visits are always more-than-human; in which case, what happens can never entirely be under human control!

As part of our book, we asked case study contributors to offer their top tips and advice for colleagues working with young children in museums. Here is some of the advice they offered;

Place and movement

'Experiment so there is a balance between people thinking'. 'This is just what I expected to do in a museum' and moments of 'I never imagined we could do this in a museum!'
Hoare and Kelland, 2020, p.104

'Be brave and embrace those moments which feel uncomfortable or difficult in order that we better understand the extraordinary potential of museum spaces for young children.'

Noble and Wallis, 2020, p93

Objects

'It is important to take the time to observe how children under five engage with activities once you have launched them in the museum. We were surprised how many children did something unexpected with the activities we have provided.'

Howarth, 2020, p.39

'Acknowledge the ability that children have to create their own individual and significant connections with our spaces and collections.'

Wallis, 2020, p.32

Time

'Discover and celebrate the family traditions and rituals that developed over repeat visits.'

Hallberg, 2020, p.148

'Allowing children to lead visits using their own bodies and senses... allow a narrative to unfold of the children's own making, based on their own interests, curiosity and social interactions.'

Carter, 2020, p.177

And finally

'Take the time to see what young children are really doing and what they are showing you.'

Smith, 2020, p.164

'Be present, in the space and with your audience.'

Plan for possibilities but embrace the things you can't plan for...

Be inspired by children, chance and imagination.'

Clayton and Shuttleworth, 2020, p.121

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