

# Designing with Children

## Discover

Discover came to life in June 2003 following a Gulbenkian Foundation study, which identified a significant gap in informal learning opportunities in the UK, especially with reference to museum education. First, the museum director Peter Eatherley was keen to explore the identity of the newly established venue in partnership with the community of parents, carers and teachers. The outcome of this initial collaborative process was the establishment of Discover as a "story building": a museum focusing on words, imaginative and collective story making. Second, the museum set-out to communicate this identity to its target audience, reaching and involving young children in particular. A three-fold approach was followed:

– through outreach programmes, Discover approached Key Stage 1 pupils, nurseries, libraries, museums and community centres. This helped to convey the key ideas that Discover promoted and thus enable local schools to familiarise themselves with the new cultural venue;

– this was followed in January 2001 by an Exhibition Workshop Programme with the aim to test out ideas and involve the local community in exhibition design; and

– finally, a Children's Forum was established, which comprised 35 children aged 4-11 years old. The forum met regularly to contribute ideas to the development of Discover.

The focus here is the Exhibition Workshop Programme. This was led by artists and supported by volunteers, the creative director, Vicky Cave as well as the community and outreach officer. Workshops took place around once a month at schools and community groups.

## Motivation

The drivers behind the engagement of children and adults in the development of Discover were: putting people at the heart of its activities and exhibitions and engendering a sense of

### What

Exhibitions at a children's museum

### Where

Stratford, East London, United Kingdom

### Age

0-11

### Group Size

Over 20,000 adults and children were involved throughout the 3-year engagement activities

### Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development

### Children's Roles

(Co) Designers, Creative Inspirers

### Timescale

2000-2003

### Partners

Peter Eatherley (Discover Centre Director)

Vicky Cave (Discover Centre Creative Director)

3-11 year old children from community groups, schools and nurseries (Participants)

local ownership and pride for Discover. Through a series of creative events and workshops, the museum curators and artists involved thus sought an inclusive way to reach their target audience and raise its profile within the local community. In the longer-term, a key aspiration for Discover was to build a team of advocates, passionate about the place, interested and engaged in its exhibitions programme. Other objectives were to involve local artists in the development of Discover and promote literacy through stories and creative learning. All of this generated an environment supportive of community participation.

## Children's involvement

The key concept in the engagement process was story telling. This encouraged, motivated and inspired the children and adults involved to use their imagination, express themselves and create stories together. In this context, children, their parents and other adults had the opportunity to act out their own plays or explore a series of story narratives, such as pretending to fly to imaginary places, dressing up as monsters, or inviting friends to a party. They made puppets, drew postcards, secret recipes, wishes, poems and stories. Each one of the children created their own story in a story-book-bag using words, images, ideas and items collected from different story settings in the story trail. Other workshop activities involved exploring a 3D sensory path with 2-4 year-olds; identifying the organisation's mascot; designing garden play-structures; or exploring ideas for an animal picnic. These formed the basis for the brief development by the sculptor who led the workshops. Children also created the patterns for a responsive sensory exhibit; developed ideas and prototypes for costumes; and explored ways of transforming everyday objects into innovative exhibits.

Recording all the ideas generated out of this process was important for the design development of the museum. On completion of the workshops, therefore, meetings were held with the artists and the exhibition designers so that children's ideas would feed into the design brief. The artists provided the exhibition designers with an illustrated diary or report with samples of children's creations and photographs from the creative process. Some of these reports were in the form of a story, while an artist produced a CD illustrating animated children's work.

The creative director, Vicky Cave, explains that children's ideas were the focus of the exhibition development process: 'We became absorbed in what interested the children, the ideas they developed and the characters and narratives they created. These were the things which we used as inspiration for the design of the exhibits.'

## Outputs and outcomes

The ideas generated during the workshops were of primary importance for the development of Discover. According to the creative director, *'the process provided us with ideas and showed us where we were going wrong, but most importantly where we were going right. The things that went well, we built on, experimented with and extended. By running the workshops we were able to take a good idea and develop it further with the children and make it into something better.'*

Much of the artwork created by children was used by the designers to decorate the exhibition spaces, thus becoming an integral part of the Discover identity. All materials produced at the workshops, however, became a valuable resource for later design stages. The outputs of the workshops (e.g. photographs, quotes, and artwork) were presented to the funders in order to inform them about the mission and goals of Discover. These also spoke

for the success of the workshops, showing how much people enjoyed and gained from their engagement. Vicky Cave confirms this: *'Many parents told me how much they loved Discover when it opened, but my favourite comment was from this mother: "It's like stepping into the imagination of a child"'*.

## Resources

Discover 'Children's Story Centre' <http://www.discover.org.uk/> (accessed 3 July 2013).

Cave, V. (2010) 'Creating Exhibitions with and for Children', in *The New Museum Community: Audiences, Challenges, Benefits*. Online. Available: <http://museumsetc.com/products/new-museum-community> (accessed 10 December 2013)

Cave, V. (2010) 'Planning for Young Children and Families in Museums', in *The New Museum Community: Audiences, Challenges, Benefits*. Online. Available: <http://museumsetc.com/products/new-museum-community> (accessed 10 December 2013)

Cave, V. (2003) 'Story Garden – Green Space of the Month'. Online. Available: [http://www.ben-network.org.uk/pdfs\\_publications/Story\\_Garden.pdf](http://www.ben-network.org.uk/pdfs_publications/Story_Garden.pdf) (accessed 10 December 2013)



*Journey to Space exhibition. Courtesy: Racheal Brasier (photographer Tim Mitchell)*



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