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REINVENTING THE V&A MUSEUM OF CHILDHOOD

Helen Charman

The V&A Museum of Childhood in London

The V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, East London, will celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2022. Spurred on by this anniversary and in recognition that the museum's core focus on the material culture of childhood, and the curatorial language of its displays (lacklustre, serried ranks of glass vitrines containing toys, games, dolls houses and other domestic accoutrements of childhood) was so far past its sell-by date as to be almost a museum piece in itself, the V&A launched a FuturePlan capital project in 2018 to transform the museum from dry, dusty and defunct into a future facing creative powerhouse for the young. The Museum of Childhood sits within the Learning and National Programmes division of the V&A and has creative education as the core component of its activity and rationale.

The wider context for the transformation of the MoC from a museum showcasing the material culture of childhood to a future-facing creative catalyst speaks to a recalibration and new understanding of the role of the museum in a time of huge global challenges. From Extinction Rebellion to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the world is changing, fast. In the context of learning, global bodies such as the OECD and the WEF are questioning what education needs to look like if it is to equip today's learners for an uncertain future.¹ Of the 'known unknowns' that will dramatically impact education, we might factor in planetary resource constraints,² joining forces with socio-demographic changes (in the UK for example, a rapidly ageing population and an inversely proportionate age/wage ratio);³ the shifting sands of geo-politics with their concomitant redrawing of boundaries and freedoms;⁴ and a continued shift in economies from manufacturing to service and information driven, with a resultant demand for schooling that teaches new skills and aptitudes relevant for the workplace.⁵ And perhaps most challenging when writing from a context of material culture, the digital world with its tectonic technological advances which both liberate and threaten freedoms and cause deep ethical and moral dilemmas.⁶ In this context, orthodoxies of practice within museum learning must be rethought and refashioned, so that learning through material culture retains relevance and purpose and

museums continue to be places and spaces for connecting authentically with self, with others and with the wider world; and with past, present and possible futures.

This paper therefore takes the reinvention of the MoC as a case study to explore the process of change and the key drivers and mechanisms in inculcating and realising the transformed museum. As I write, the team at the MoC are preparing for a summer community focused festival to close the museum for a two-year refurbishment, with a schedule to reopen in 2022. Despite the out-dated displays (unless you are an adult seeking a nostalgia fest), in its incarnation as MoC it is nevertheless much loved and provided a safe, welcoming public haven for families and for young visitors up to the early teens. Its learning, community and educator professional development programmes are well-regarded, and it has built an excellent reputation for outreach activities, particularly with hospital schools. The strength and value of the museum is rooted in a community ethos dating back to its inception in 1872 as an educational resource for the communities of Bethnal Green. Since opening the museum has been through several incarnations, from its initial inception as the Bethnal Green Museum with a collection display including food and animal products from the Great Exhibition to the nomenclature as the Museum of Childhood, dating from 1974 under the V&A Director Sir Roy Strong who instigated changes to focus the display on the material culture of childhood. As the Museum of Childhood, a popular free temporary exhibition programme aimed at adult visitors has enabled the museum to retain some sense of relevance. However, overall, there was an accepted understanding that the museum no longer fulfils a meaningful function for its' visitors, particularly the young, and moreover is full of unrealised design and creativity potential.

This potential is the driving concept behind the transformation. The WEF situates creativity as a 'top 3' skill for the future and Tristram Hunt's appointment in 2017 as V&A Director brought with it a blast of vision and ambition for what the MoC could become in the context of future skills and civic engagement. On appointment as Director of Learning and

National Programmes at the Victoria and Albert Museum in spring 2018, my priority task was to shape a vision and purpose for learning at the V&A aligned with the museum's twin pillars of Imagination and Ingenuity. This task has been a process of reinvention and of change by design. Working with an energised and creative learning team, we underpinned our work with a commitment to human centred design as a core behavioural approach to museum learning such that it meets the needs, challenges, and opportunities of the real world. This approach takes as its conceptual co-ordinates four core behavioural principles that shape programmes to foster what we describe as 'designerly learning'. Designerly learning models the ways designers think and work, to catalyse change and do things differently in ways that matter. It is an approach which has informed the reinvention of the MoC. The principles of designerly learning foster behaviours that are:

- People centred – shaped by learner needs, interests, and motivations, promoting empathy.
- Outward focused – looking beyond the four walls of the museum to ensure real world relevance to real world challenges.
- Iterative – constantly in beta; learning as a test-site for trying things out in ways that matter.
- Project-based – shaped by multi-disciplinary teams working in an agile, sprint methodology to harness insight, expertise, and enthusiasm.

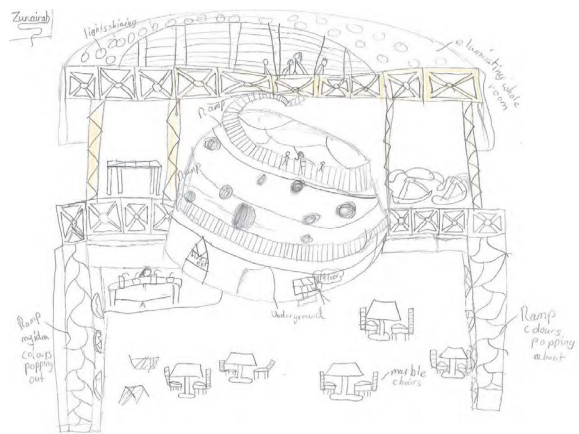
We therefore approached the reinvention of a museum for the young through introducing design thinking as the core method to reenergise and reinvent the MoC across a threefold creative rubric of Imagine, Play and Design. In this, Imagination is understood as the catalyst for creativity, with curiosity at its heart. Play is the foundation for learning, from early years onwards. And design is how we shape change – the skills to change our world and change the world.

The first step in this transformation was to define the vision for the new MoC. To do this, we worked with a catalytic combination of design thinking and organisational psychology shaped by two consultants from the House of Creativity (HoC), a design duo formerly in senior leadership and change-management positions at IDEO. IDEO is a globally reputed design company that creates change through design using a human-centred approach that focuses on need. HoC worked with the content teams at the MoC across learning, curatorial and user experience (digital, visitor experience) to help us reshape our thinking to align with the four core designerly principles for learning. We adopted the IDEO double diamond model of divergent and convergent thinking, and across a six-month period opened up thinking beyond the museum walls.

In so doing, we moved away from the museum collection as a starting point, instead framing our thinking through external contexts from the hyper local (borough priorities in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets where the museum is situated, and public policy commitments for youth and family provision) to the global (for example, the UN Sustainable Development Goals). Examples of activities across this period included holding a 'big brainstorm' with fifty contributors from outside the museum in related fields; testing emerging themes and approaches with an expert

panel across cognitive science, early years education, play specialists, immersive theatre, human-centred design, philosophy and citizenship education; and partnering on a round table with forty participants for an All-Party Parliamentary Group for Design and Innovation. The first phase of content development culminated with a six-week sprint, where multi-disciplinary teams worked to the principle of 'never losing more than a week's input' (i.e. sharing work weekly, testing, and iterating) and used tools such as scenography, story-boarding and signature experiences to generate the new gallery themes, core messages and a new curatorial and interpretative display language in which objects will be richly contextualised and will work hard to fire imagination and ingenuity in our young audiences through the use of props alongside collection objects. This visioning phase of proactively divergent thinking laid the foundations for the core concepts for the new museum permanent displays and creative programmes, concepts which would be built on as the content development work got underway with the fit-out designers, Agents of Change (AoC).

One of the key drivers and manifestations of the transformation project for the MoC is a co-design approach and project. The outcome of the visioning process was to shape the new MoC's vision and purpose. This is "to build creative confidence with future generations". And in this endeavour, the collection is key. The new MoC will do this by activating the V&A's world leading collection of art, design and performance to inspire, equip and empower audiences with creative skills for today's world, in ways that are locally responsive and globally relevant. It will harness its resources on behalf of and with young people and families to support their energy and unlock their creativity as change-makers and problem-solvers. A co-design approach helps ensure that the museum is a responsive, neighbourly centre of community that speaks to audiences' needs, interests, and motivations. Co-design workshops have generated input for the capital project from the outset. Architects De Matos Ryan (DMR), and fit-out designers Agents of Change (AoC) worked with the museum's 'Children's Forum' comprising three classes of eight to fourteen-year olds from two local primary schools, Bangabandhu and Globe, and a key stage 3 class from Morpeth Secondary School, to co-design core elements of the new museum.



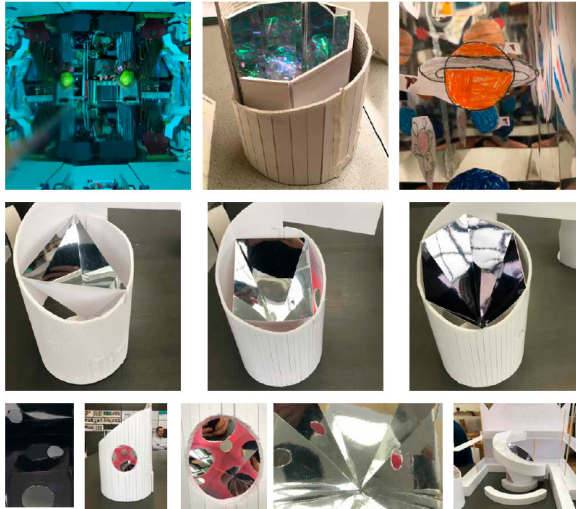
1. Zunairah's sketch for the kaleidoscope stair. Age 8.

3.5.4 Cafe & Feature Stairs

During Stage 3, we have been working through Co-Design to further develop the brief and design ideas for the large magnet stair in the main Hall, taking into consideration accessibility issues, integrating the cafe and its catering requirements as well as evaluating visitor flow in the space.

From the design ideas generated there was a desire and ambition to make the space colourful, interactive, exciting and joyful. There was also an ambition to highlight, amplify and expose the beauty of the existing building and engage more actively with the rich collection of toys and objects in the museum.

Through this, the concept of the kaleidoscope is now in progress. We have explored the collection of optical toys in the museum and how these could be scaled up and enable the stair object to be interactive whilst reflecting the museum architecture in a new light. Like the concept of a kaleidoscope, it requires an end user to engage with it and become interactive and to come to life. By moving through the space and with the help of mirrors and optical devices, the object changes colour, reflects colours and objects in a curious, engaging and dynamic way. This movement is what makes the object vibrant, curious and magical. There will be intriguing and exciting spaces to explore within the central core of the object and these can be viewed from various sides and vantage points as visitors go up and down the stairs and ramp.



de matos ryan

V&A Museum of Childhood - Base Build re-design | Design Summary

Stage 3 : Design Report 72

2. Co-designed prototype models for the stair



3. MoC Assembly co-design session

As a snapshot of the co-design process for the base build, architectural co-designed elements focused on three areas:

- Up and Down (vertical circulation). Co-designing a staircase that will act as a visual 'magnet' for visitors.
- In and Out (the external landscaping, connecting with the neighbourhood). Co-designing a welcome to the museum that builds trust and enthusiasm for the visit.
- Round and About (internal circulation). Co-designing ways to increase visitor dwell time.

Up and Down generated what will become a signature architectural intervention, a kaleidoscopic staircase winding up from the 'town square' central hall to the top floor. First expressed as a helter-skelter slide, the co-design workshops with DMR and the MoC curators explored optical toys from the MoC Collection, from kaleidoscopes to zoetropes. For many of the children this was the first time they had encountered optical devices and the resulting prototypes and final design both literally and metaphorically demonstrate



5. The new museum model in Open Studio

Interpretation and Displays

With the new vision, core gallery concepts and co-design process established (2018) the second phase of the transformation process (2019) pulled focus to content and creative programme development, working hand in hand with the fit-out designers AoC who were responsible for designing the permanent galleries and all other user experience spaces in the museum (retail, café, entrance lobby etc). We established 'Open Studio' in one of the MoC galleries on the top floor of the museum. This was a project space which served as a test ground for interpretation and display, a space for prototyping and co-designing new approaches. It comprises three areas: a test lab, workshop space and studio. A team of colleagues capture data on how the space is used through observation and direct engagement, with monthly reports to the Design and Content teams to inform ongoing development of the galleries and interpretation. The workshop is used for performances and other led activities with interactive elements on a day to day basis – for example, in its first iteration the space had a toy library (miscellaneous toys on plain shelves), which were then replaced with textured shelves and construction materials as part of testing an approach for the early years space in the Play Gallery. It also has a question of the week feedback shelf where specific topics can be addressed. The Studio is used as a hub for the new gallery development, to test museum staff working in a more visible way. Although this area is closed to the public, visitors can look through the windows as staff work, and meetings and project presentations take place. The Test Lab is a prototyping space to test different methods of display and interpretation, one for each of

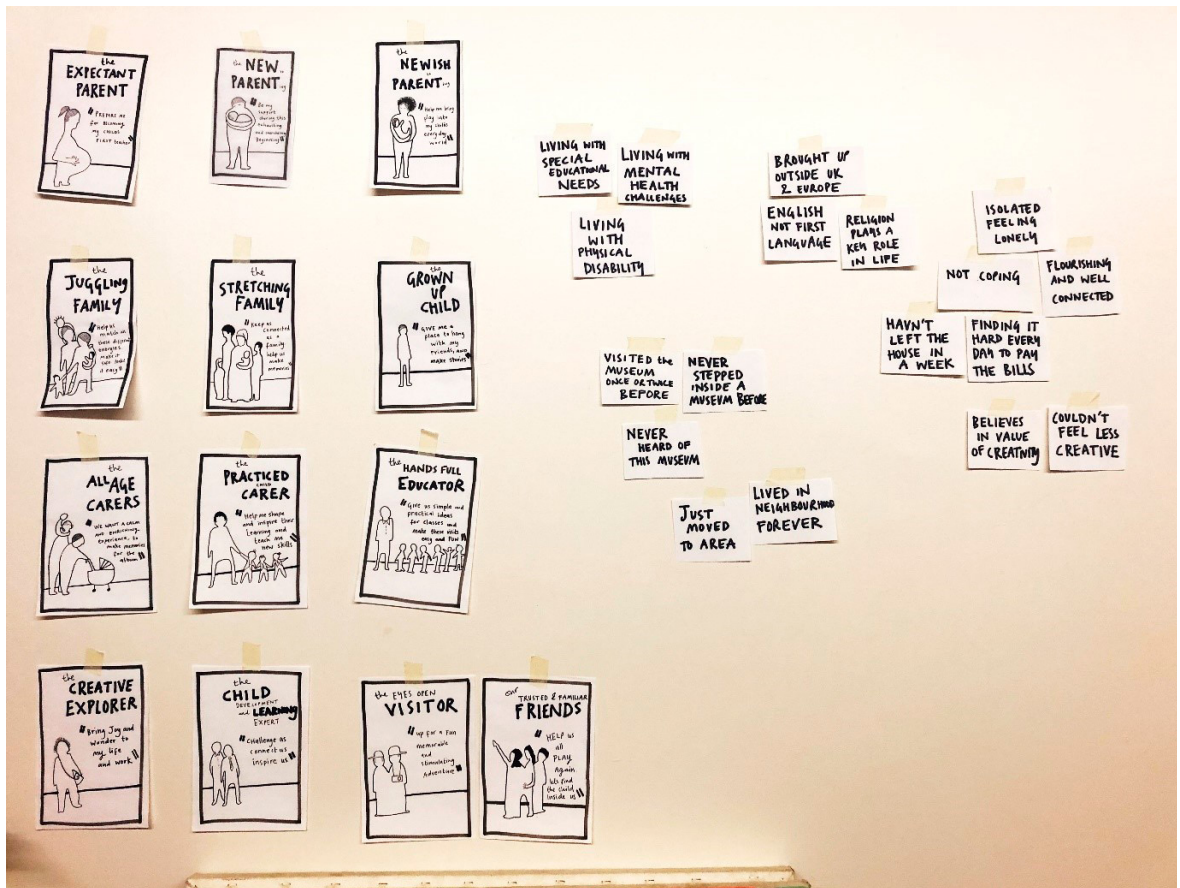
the post Futureplan gallery themes; Imagination, Play and Design. The Children's forum has helped select the objects and the methods of display, for example, large scale, washable and robust versions of Fröbel Gifts with text prompts to encourage visitors to interact with the shapes as designed and prompt interest in early years development and the importance of play. Using Open Studio as a test ground means that when the museum re-opens, we can be confident that our content and approach is aligned with visitor needs, interests, and motivations.

New Galleries

The three new MoC permanent galleries Imagine, Play and Design will feature over 2000 collection objects drawn from the full V&A collection, opening up opportunities for visitors to engage with objects beyond the V&A's national childhood collection which constituted the former displays at the MoC in its iteration as a museum of the material culture of childhood. Collection objects will work hard, and differently, in the new MoC. They will inspire and activate visitors to look afresh and to think differently. They will promote the vision to build visitors' creative confidence. The display languages will be playful, interactive, provocative. A new interpretation framework has been developed based on a rigorous understanding of audiences and their needs in the gallery environment. To develop this understanding, we worked with our 'Design Thinker in Residence', Ella Britton to create a set of audience personas for the new MoC. The residency programme is one strand of activity within the overall V&A Learning portfolio and situates creative practitioners at the heart of our activity. Ella's human centred design



6. Exterior of Open Studio



7. MoC audience personas developed by Ella Britton 'Design Thinker in Residence' (2018–2019)



Primary

Globe & Bangabandu

19 pupils
6 sessions complete

A Day in the life
Look Touch Make-believe
Objects Have rights
A riot of colour
Town square



Secondary

Morpeth

11 pupils
3 sessions complete

A Day in the life
Look Touch Make-believe
Telling Stories



Teachers

6 teachers
3 sessions complete

A Day in the life
Objects have rights
Gallery learning



Families

35 recruited participants
3 sessions complete

A Day in the life
Look, Touch, Make-believe
A riot of colour

Ongoing engagement with the core user groups

Co-design

8. Summary co-design core user groups

(All photos courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

practice proved a powerful catalyst for driving forward the MoC transformation in respect of a visitor centred approach. Ella constantly brought our thinking back to our learners – their motivations, interests, and needs. She cast a light on the need to develop a deep understanding of our audiences through research and development with audiences. With Ella, we created a set of audience personas from the content team's experience of working with the existing MoC audience. Each persona individuates a visitor and expresses the kernel of their motivations, beliefs, needs in the context of a museum visit. The audience for the new MoC will be children, families, and young people from babies upwards and as such the personas were devised to encompass a wide a spectrum of individuals within this.

Alongside an in-depth understanding of visitors, the interpretation framework and toolkit were also necessarily predicated on delivering the vision for the new MoC to build creative confidence. In developing the new vision, we defined Creative Confidence (CC) as comprising five core components:

- Curiosity.
- Compassion.
- Experimentation.
- Self-belief.
- Embracing ambiguity.

Together these can be thought of as a 'mindset' that enables anyone to feel confident in their creative abilities. These

components underpin the interpretation framework for the new galleries and manifest in two key approaches. In the first, objects will be displayed in ways that invite visitors actively to develop these behaviours using props and activities. In the second, displays will champion and advocate for the importance of these behaviours through case studies of creative projects, experiences, and stories, enabling visitors make sense of their value to them in today's complex, fast changing world. In this way the vision to build creative confidence is both a lens through which we develop our content (e.g. how can this experience and these objects encourage experimentation?) and our content (e.g. case studies that demonstrate the role of compassion in the design process).

In the Imagine Gallery, the visitor will enter a world of curiosity where things are not quite what they may first appear. In these richly immersive and theatrical galleries, young people will explore and encounter objects and installations from the V&A collection that invite unfettered curiosity about our world, and open up ways to imagine alternative, future worlds and selves. There will be a stage for performances surrounded by wondrous and intriguing objects drawn from the Theatre and Performance collection. There will be an invitation to go on a journey inspired by landscapes and people from paintings, or by props from the museum's extraordinary sculpture, metalworks, ceramics, and glass collections. There will be a child-scaled street with the museum's world-renown collection of dolls houses re-displayed in ways that situate the visitor on a 1–2–1 footing with them, inviting interaction through props. There will be

immersive, performative installations. In the Play Gallery, an open landscape of dynamic exhibits, tactile replicas and interactive displays the V&A collection will be activated for our young visitors to feel confident to play and engage with our stories and objects, and explore how experimentation through play is a vital part of the design process. There will be a dedicated area for early years visitors, from babyhood to toddlerhood, featuring objects and plinths alongside props that speak to the language of early childhood development including a collection-based alphabet to support literacy development. The much-loved sandpit will be re-imagined as a river for tactile experiential play, and for older children a central area will promote open-ended construction play, with a dedicated section for young teenagers focusing on game design.

The Design Gallery invites visitors into the shoes of designers to participate in design challenges on themes drawn from IMAGINE, PLAY and beyond. Inspired by the language of the atelier and design studio, it will feature *The Designer's House*, for the museum's first artist-in-residency programme. With a design inspired by the museum's historic Brompton boilers – which once formed part of the V&A in South Kensington, *The Designer's House* will provide a space for artists and visitors to work together, as well as offering young people a glimpse into the life of a creative practitioner. The displays will feature contemporary case-studies on inspirational international design from around the world, showcasing the power of creativity to change the world. Live workshops and making spaces for groups will encourage visitors to experiment and dream up their own design concepts, tackling design briefs inspired by collection themes and real-world challenges as well as opening up to community engagement for co-created content. Design is a powerful force for change, so this gallery will equip the young with the skills of design so they can shape the future.

Conclusion

The work of transforming a museum is both creative and imaginative and at the same time operational and grounded

in the detail of policy, practice, budgets, fundraising, stakeholder management, communications strategy and so on. Running alongside all that this paper has discussed is the heft of workforce development including appointing a new role, Creative and Skills Director, to lead the museum through the transformation. Their remit includes developing a new business plan; devising a new model for the exhibition programme; conceiving an activity programme for the closure period to ensure audiences are retained and grown; rewriting the MoC's collections policy to align with the new vision and incarnation and more besides. In this context of change, of keeping many plates spinning, the key to success is to hold fast to the new vision and mission. This becomes the true north of a project and provides the backbone and co-ordinates. That is why it is so important to spend time at the inception of a project on shaping the vision and mission as everything spills out from this and returns to it. The MoC capital project is also proving to be a test-bed for new approaches to shaping curatorial practice and museum learning, a space to try things out in ways that matter in a socially relevant context, one that harnesses the unique material, physical and intellectual resource of the museum to contribute to a progressive and transformative agenda for the new MoC in the twenty-first century.

Thinking divergently, what does this impetus for change mean for the museum concept and for practice more widely? Museums are places to connect through material culture past, present and future, with ourselves, with others and with the wider world in all its complexity – now and for future generations. How might museums redefine their role and responsibilities today, for tomorrow? What does broad, imaginative, and ingenious creative change look like from local to global? Will the redesigned museum generate new types of professionals, challenging orthodoxies of practice? The complexities and uncertainties of our fast-changing world bring with them an emergent new research agenda and concomitant need for museums themselves to learn and to change in order to better meet the needs, interests and motivations of visitors now and in the future.

Abstract: In 2018 the Victoria and Albert Museum launched a capital project to transform the Museum of Childhood from a museum of the social and material history of childhood to a powerhouse of creativity for the young. This paper therefore takes the reinvention of the MoC as a case study to explore the process of change

and the key drivers for inculcating and realising the transformed museum. In particular, the process of co-design with and for young people is considered as a mechanism for change in creating future facing museums that speak to the needs of young people in a rapidly changing and complex world.

Keywords: museum, children, creativity, capital transformation, Museum of Childhood, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Endnotes

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