

hand to hand

ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

Risk Taking Isn't Risky

Brenda Baker, Madison Children's Museum

Like most children's museums, Madison Children's Museum's (MCM) core audience is comprised of children who are natural risk takers, creatively testing boundaries and limits and constantly innovating in their approaches. They come into the world with openness, curiosity and the ability to make connections. If something they try doesn't work or "fails," they usually figure out what didn't work, gather new information, apply it to the problem and use repetition to build on their knowledge until they get it right (or lose interest!). Then they move on. Kids are born innovators. Experimenting, failing, trying again and ultimately finding new ways to do things is exactly how they learn and grow.

But for grown-ups, this method, which assumes some failures along the way, is usually avoided at all costs. By the time many people reach adulthood, spontaneity and creativity have been squelched. The ability to truly innovate has been hamstrung, since we live in a world where perfection-

ism is rewarded and making mistakes often gets penalized. But as museum professionals we know that without creativity, risk taking and, yes, failure, there simply is no such thing as innovation. Without innovation, museums flounder. Risk taking and creativity, trying something new, failing, trying again and then succeeding is the one and only path to innovation.

How do you develop the freedom to experiment and maybe fail, and embed risk taking into a museum culture? Through looking in depth at MCM's Only Local initiative, this article explores elements of the museum's institutional climate that support risk taking, creativity, openness and innovation, and shows how risk taking isn't really that risky at all.

Design Thinking/Knowledge Building

A relatively new paradigm that supports the many trial-and-error steps toward innovation is called "design thinking" and was

No idea is so outlandish that it should not be considered with a searching but at the same time a steady eye.

—Winston Churchill

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used informally in aspects of our new museum's exhibit development. Design thinking, used primarily in architecture, design and engineering fields, but quickly gaining ground in business and non-profit settings, stems from the recognition that linear, sequential thinking hampers the creative process, and that true innovation gives far more weight to intuition and right-brained thinking. Right-brained thinking does not imply lack of discipline, strategic thinking or oversight. It simply allows far greater flexibility to switch gears and adapt

when new ideas present themselves. In the typical children's museum exhibit design process, the most creative stage is brainstorming and concept development, with constant minor refinement happening along the way. Design thinkers conceptualize in terms of spaces instead of linear steps to allow for greater freedom in project development. Spaces can overlap, be combined or loop back over one another. Design thinking also implies a cultural awareness of context and relies entirely on local solutions to problems, rather than one formula for all situations.

MCM's Only Local initiative used an informal design-thinking approach in order to create a clear, experience-driven philosophy that started with deep understanding of the community's values and needs. MCM's slow hunch, simmering for the past twenty years, guided the new museum's building and current operations by focusing on the local in everything we do: local people, local products, local knowledge, local culture, local artistic talent and local concerns. Was this local, artful, collaborative approach risky? Maybe to outsiders, but not to us. Years of successes and failures, baby steps and giant leaps in the areas of sustainable design, local cultural exhibit development, community collaborations, environmental education and early childhood education development were just overlapping "spaces" in seeking answers to a long-standing question: How do we create the best possible museum that honors and respects children, the environ-



The museum's front desk sits under a cow that can jump over the moon when kids operate a manual control. The desk was developed, designed and created over a two-year period by an artist duo, working in collaboration with MCM exhibit and visitor services teams, the museum's architect, a group of museum patrons and neighbors from the YWCA.

ment and local culture, and is owned, loved and created by the community? The more important question is: What elements of our institutional culture allowed for this slow hunch to grow in an often risky and atypical fashion?

Heading Out on A Limb

Will Rogers said it best, "Go out on a limb, that's where the fruit is." This quote, which appears on MCM's Rooftop Clubhouse wall, is particularly apt when thinking about risk taking and the museum.

Rogers wasn't an advocate for recklessness, danger or unsafe tree climbing, but rather, giving it a shot and taking a chance—with adequate preparation. The goal is certainly not to fall, but to gather the fruit. Risk taking is about going out on a limb well prepared, knowing your strengths, understanding potential obstacles and knowing how to creatively regroup when things don't go as planned. How can we create exhibits that push us out on a limb, stretch our internal capacities, create significant change and take calculated, managed risks to help us gather juicy rewards?

Though it's hard to admit, most children's museums—Madison Children's Museum included—do not always model behaviors that encourage risk taking, despite personal interest or familiarity with new play research and best intentions to follow it. Worries about meeting budget projections, raising dollars and designing exhibits and programs that will be sure-hit audience favorites take over. No one wants to get it wrong for fear of bad press, lawsuits, wasted time and resources or other unintended negative consequences.

Only Local: What It Means

While the commitment to all things local was fairly simple, the decision and process to achieve it pushed MCM out on a limb. With more than 26,000 square feet of ex-

hibit and public space, the project was much larger than any we had tackled before yet it had a fairly modest budget of \$2 million for all exhibits, public spaces and remediation. Although we had waded in the “only local” waters over the past couple decades, our new goal of collaborating with more than 100 local artists and every elementary-aged child in our public school district while using only local, sustainable or recycled materials, products and resources was also far more ambitious than anything we had ever undertaken before. The risk was in the complexity of this multiple-layered project, the sheer number of unique objects and materials, as well as finding them, the management of a huge cadre of talent, a design approach that was not typical or straightforward and the

public seating.

- Countless community members donated objects or materials for *Possible-opolis*, an exhibit built with 95 percent reclaimed materials, including a three-seat hairdryer station, doll collections, benches, antique mannequins, historical artifacts and more than 15,000 board feet of sustainably harvested wood from local wood lots.

But was this really risky? A seriously radical departure for Madison Children's Museum? Or just a logical next step—in a years-long commitment to working collaboratively, locally and sustainably to build community, manage small budgets, and respond to the values of our progressive and creative community?

Institutional Elements That Support Risk Taking

Clearly, this shift in scale did not happen overnight and indeed could not have happened at all without a foundation in place. What kind of culture allowed the Only Local approach to flourish and with such a high degree of creativity? What are the elements that support creativity, risk taking and innovation in a museum environment?

• Leadership

A leadership philosophy that encourages risk taking, flexibility and divergent thinking, even when it feels uncomfortable, is the most important element. Museum Executive Director Ruth Shelly had to take several huge leaps of faith during the new museum's development process. Naturally organized, straightforward and detail-oriented, Ruth had to be adaptable and flexible when going to funders without clear drawings of what *Possible-opolis* would look like; instead, she stressed the *process* of creating the exhibit, its sustainability and community-building goals as much as the content. With an exhibit sustainability goal of 100 percent reclaimed materials, most objects and artifacts were found or donated, oftentimes inconveniently. We found out about a school in Milwaukee that was being torn down and had to mobilize the exhibit team in a matter of days to acquire, move, process and store

the gym floor and bleachers, which were re-used for exhibit flooring, wall finishes and seating. Likewise, we didn't know exact exhibit component details until near the end of the project because of the number of people involved, the creativity we allowed collaborators and the objects that presented themselves throughout the project. After scouting for a small airplane for over a year, we finally found one—four months before the museum's opening. We quickly adapted plans to make use of this great treasure in the way we had originally imagined. Rather than second-guessing or letting fear stop her when she wasn't in her comfort zone, Ruth believed in the fact that her staff would find creative solutions to whatever problems arose. And they did. They were out on a limb and could figure out how to get down safely, fruit in hand. One end of the plane became the base for a tinkerer's table, while the other became a music mixing exhibit called *Rock-It!*, created in collaboration with Sony Creative Software and a local company called nuVibrations.

• Supportive Culture/Committed Staff

A culture that supports curiosity, creativity, serendipity and cross-pollination among disciplines also helps retain a committed staff that is deeply rooted in the community, which in turn helps further build existing community connections. Author Alice Walker, quoted on our Rooftop Clubhouse wall, says it best: “Bloom where you're planted!” MCM's highly committed and long-serving creative staff have deep roots in the community, making it easy to mobilize forces and build on relationships for new projects. Working to keep staff committed and excited about their work is a bedrock for creating a culture that can react creatively to new problems or situations that arise.

MCM's *Wilderness* exhibit was an extension of the previous sustainably designed early childhood exhibit *First Feats*, which opened in 1999. *Wilderness* was built on previous knowledge, but pushed the ideas further: What if we designed and developed an entire exhibit using natural materials from within a 100-mile radius of Madison, instead of a 500-mile radius, as we did in *First Feats*? Possible? Who knows? Let's try! Staff commitment and curiosity brought all kinds of unlikely combinations of people together, from rural landowners and a retired allergist who donated the more than 15,000 board feet of sustainably harvested wood for the floors, to a local contractor who transformed an enormous hollowed-out log into



Zane Williams

A scavenged airplane forms the base of the Tinkerer's Workshop where kids learn to tinker and repair things.

need to do it all on a tight budget. Consider the following projects.

- More than 13,000 local students made art in bottle caps for The Bottle Cap Mosaic project, which were then embedded into mosaic columns by art students from Madison's alternative high school.
- 300 students created tiles for the museum's eight restrooms.
- Three classrooms conducted historical research for the *Log Cabin* exhibit.
- 700 students worked on a nanotechnology window for the Art Studio.
- Twelve advanced woodworking students at University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM) made benches for

a slide, to local mosaic artists, stone workers and metalsmiths, to a group of artists who created small huts using mud, straw and linseed oil. Serendipity and cross-pollination of people and ideas led to the creation of a water dome using recycled curved glass from the building's former revolving door and recycled glass insulators for the building's rain chains. Though one never knows when any group's collection of experiences will have practical applications, the more an organization supports working across disciplines, the more interesting the end products will be.

• Flexibility

A flexible and open-minded team that can respond creatively and proactively to changing circumstances is essential to a culture of innovation. Creativity research shows that the most creative problem solvers can switch gears mid-way through a project when a new idea presents itself. They don't abandon the original idea but they don't feel wedded to it either. They find ways to modify ideas throughout the process.

Possible-opolis, the brainchild of long-time exhibit developer John Robinson, came about in direct response to budget challenges. Significant exhibit budget cuts took place in response to the 2008 financial recession while the museum project was under development. Rather than wallowing in defeat, staff seized the opportunity to switch gears and create something even bolder. New fiscal challenges offered an opportunity to showcase ingenuity and to play and invent as we opted to create the entire exhibit out of reclaimed objects, some that we had in storage and all repurposed in totally new ways. This fit within the larger Only Local goals and pushed staff to work more closely with local artists who could transform reclaimed objects into new forms. In the *Possible-opolis* Wayback Machine, for example, one young artist transformed a telephone booth into the "philosophone," complete with bits of philosophical musings. Another artist transformed old computer screens into an interactive visual game with hockey sticks and golf clubs as controls, while a UWM chemist and glass artist created over-sized test tubes filled with glass fish and constantly erupting bubbles, controlled by a nearby lever.

Possible-opolis gave staff the forum to honor all of the outlandish ideas they'd ever had and put them into play, side by side, in a new context: a bicycle made out of old socks; a life-sized cow model that kids could manually control to "jump" over the moon;

and a "punch buggy" crane. The thrill of invention and creativity emanate from being able to try out crazy, seemingly impossible, even ridiculous ideas, and work in a flow state of not knowing the final outcome. It is exciting for both staff and museum visitors when the same principles apply to exhibits on the floor with unknown outcomes. As Winston Churchill reminds us on the wall in *Possible-opolis*, "No idea is so outlandish that it should not be considered."

• Collaboration

A collaborative approach that welcomes divergent thinking does wonders for moving along the path toward innovation, and Only Local offered the chance to collaborate with as many groups as possible. The handmade benches scattered throughout the building were the result of a semester-long collaboration with a UWM furniture program. Each student or student team worked collaboratively with the museum as their client, learning by doing as they participated in a public art process. New ideas would never have happened without the synthesis of collective minds working together. One bench was made out of old coiled fire hoses found in the building during demolition; another was made of old piano parts and dozens of antique chair legs.

Both the Artist Alphabet Project and set of twenty-six quotes throughout the museum and the artist-made Pie Project for our Pie In the Sky Diner gave three dozen artists the chance to collaborate with MCM and bring freshness and new energy into the building. Likewise, the museum's front desk was developed, designed and created over a two-year period by an artist duo, working in collaboration with MCM exhibit and visitor services teams, our architect, a group of museum patrons and neighbors from the YWCA. The ideas that emerged from the many collaborations would not have come about without many talented minds working on the questions at hand.

• Prototyping and Permission to Fail

With prototyping, of course, the goal is to fail as fast as you can, to learn what works and what doesn't and to make revisions while the exhibit is still in development if possible. Rapid prototyping helps test new ideas before things have gone too far. It's difficult for

small museums like MCM to prototype everything, but prototyping on the floor with the public provides real-life feedback. It also helps visitors see the creative process in action and invites them to be part of figuring things out. Sometimes behind-the-scenes prototypes or tests in our Experimental Gallery Prototyping Lab didn't reveal all of the potential troubles until the exhibit was already installed. This happened with ball runs built in-house with reclaimed materials and installed in the museum's Community Concourse. When we first opened to a crowd more than twice the size we imagined, the ball runs simply couldn't take the abuse. But rather than looking at the problem as a failure, we looked at it as an opportunity to learn new information with our visitors. By not treating these kinds of situations with doom, gloom or panic, and by inviting the



Zane Williams

Museum staff worked with Madison artists, musicians, craftspeople and an electronics wizard to create *The Wayback Machine*, a visitor-controlled experience.

audience to help test the new solutions in progress, we extend our own learning on the fly to our audience.

Other parts of our process didn't go as planned too, despite our best efforts and prototyping. In some situations, our tight budget dictated that we work with students rather than professional carpenters. As a result, several components needed to be modified within the first year since they were not built hardy enough to last. Many exhibits, including our *Gerbil Wheel*, needed continual tweaking the first year, as unpredictable *adult* behavior was not something we witnessed during the prototyping phase; we found that parents behaved differently with their children when the museum was packed (less oversight and more complacency). We dealt with these problems by seeing them not

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as failures, but as ways to learn something new. We added many more safety features and altered our lighting to prevent show-off behavior, installed a brake, changed our signage and permanently moved a staff member to the area, among other things. But mostly, we embraced the idea of failure as a necessary part of the process of learning.

Moving Forward

As we move forward with the development of the third floor exhibition spaces, we'll push our recipe for innovation to yet another level. Community science advisers have been crystal clear that one of their top priorities for MCM is to develop a space where risk taking and failure are celebrated—not every kid will succeed on their first try, but every child will fail in some way and learn in the process. As we walk down this path, we'll continue our same dogged pursuit of answers to big questions by: building on existing ideas and seeing them grow and morph; taking detours as they present themselves; and committing to mostly following our recipe, with alterations, spontaneity, serendipity, cross-pollination, limb crawling, risk taking, failures, collaboration and support and leadership liberally added as necessary to produce our museum's unique and Only Local brand. Seen within the context of design thinking and knowledge building, risk taking is not really risky at all. It's the only path to institutional innovation and cultural vitality and to serving kids—our current and hopefully lifelong innovators.

Brenda is director of exhibits at Madison Children's Museum, where she has worked an artist, educator and exhibit designer for the past twenty-one years. When not working or making art, she likes to explore her local culture and environment on foot, bike or cross-country skis with her husband and two sons.

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