

Are We There Yet? Children, History, and the Power of Place

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History is about perspective, looking back to recognize that nothing under the sun is truly new. History is about empathy, seeing the humanity in distant figures and bringing their experiences to life. History is about context, recognizing that our actions are shaped by systems of power and constraint bigger than any single individual.

Kids are terrible historians. Ask any (honest) parent: perspective, empathy, and sense of context aren't the qualities that distinguish our children. Babies arrive with a gaping, cawing need to be the center of the world—in a good way. Healthy kids sense that time began the day they awoke and that life revolves around them and their needs. If it doesn't, they're programmed to let you know that it should. People in their immediate circle constitute the entire world; everyone else is peripheral at best. Even when they begin to form mental pictures of territory beyond their view, kids continue to see their own experience as the reference point for all that has come before and after. They expand their sense of the world by building concentrically, keeping themselves and their attendants securely at the center of their domain.

This narrow, self-absorbed, presentist outlook would seem to be a disaster for historically minded thinking, right? Perhaps not. In their self-centeredness, it turns out, young people are not so different from the majority of museum visitors and, truth be told, historians. Everyone makes history personal; some are just more open about it than others. Young people's relatively narrow worldview is potentially an opportunity more than an obstacle.

If the classic admonition to writers is to "start with what you know," to history museums it might be "start where they are"—make history come alive for visitors by connecting it to the world in which they already have personal investment. The strategy that hits closest to home, literally, is to build from visitors' sense of place—their relationship to their physical surroundings, to the geographical area they call their own, to where they have built their lives and where, in their mind's eye,

they return in identifying “where I come from.” Adults often build connections to multiple places over the years. But what does place mean to kids? And how can museums use that sense of place in their exhibitions to connect kids to history?

In the most rigorous geographic sense, children tend to be quite fuzzy about place. If I remind my kids that I’ll soon be leaving for my trip to Memphis, they’ll look at me with puzzlement and say, “But I thought you were going to Tennessee.” With their limited life experience—their narrower window of context—children understandably are less able to register political boundaries or to grasp geographic scale. Just as “yesterday” for a 5-year-old might be 2 hours or 2 months ago, Egypt could just as easily be a nap-in-the-car-seat away as an ocean apart.

But kids do have a very strong sense of their immediate surroundings. They are keenly aware of home and of the world around it. Think of the enduring popularity of Richard Scarry’s *Busytown* books.¹ As much as these stories are about vocations, they equally are about geography: the world just outside your door is a hive of activity, Scarry’s bustling drawings show the child. Come explore! they beckon.

The Fort Lauderdale-based theme park Wannado City converts the *Busytown* idea into a three-dimensional experience. Children (“kids-zens”) choose a profession, don the uniform of their job, and walk the streets of a town made just for them (they can explore unaccompanied if age 8 or over). Throughout the day they earn and spend Wongas™ (the official Wannado City currency), which they deposit and withdraw at two bank branches and at State Farm® ATMs across the city. “At Wannado City,” says the park’s website, “kids can be whatever they want to be—right now. From paleontologist to news reporter, to everything in between, kids try out tons of grown-up jobs in the first indoor city just their size.”² In his book *Madlenka*, author Peter Sis beautifully conveys children’s sense of occupying a world within a world: “In the universe, on a planet, on a continent, in a country, in a city, on a block, in a house, in a window, in the rain, a little girl named Madlenka finds out her tooth wiggles.” The girl rushes out to share her excitement with her square block of Manhattan and its international array of merchants. In Sis’s full-page drawings, the geometry of Madlenka’s city literally centers around Madlenka, and her tooth is world news.³

Educator David Sobel notes that children struggle with what he terms “outside in” approaches to geography—curricula that begin with remote or abstract concepts of place, such as the seven continents or the solar system: “Instead of connecting children to place, this approach alienates them and cuts them off from their local environments. The

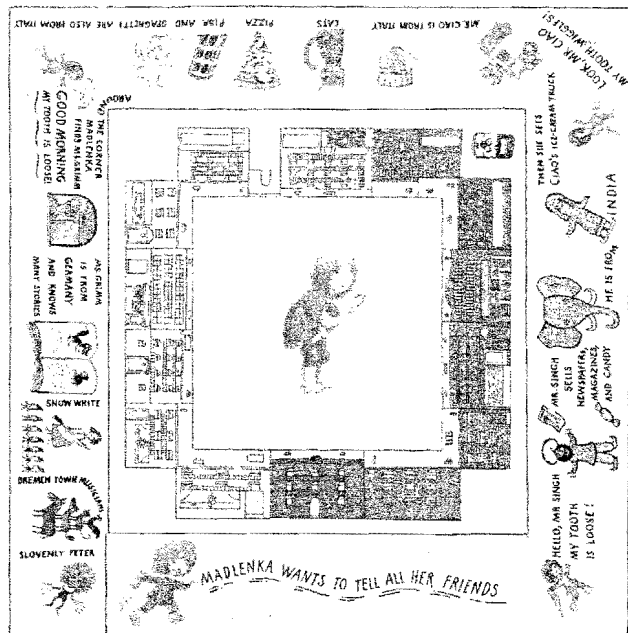


FIGURE 8.1. In author Peter Sis’s drawings, the geometry of Madlenka’s city literally centers on Madlenka, and the loss of her tooth is world news. illustration from *Madlenka* by Peter Sis. Copyright © 2000 by Peter Sis. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

inadvertent hidden message is: *Important things are far away and disconnected from children; nearby things, the local community and environment, are unimportant and negligible.*⁴ Sobel favors an “inside out” or “small world” approach for kids that builds from their surroundings: “Asking first graders to make maps of their neighborhoods makes sense; asking them to make maps of the continents puts the cart before the horse.”⁵

Kids may not chart place as a geographer would, but they do know where they are. How can young people’s awareness of place help museums show kids where they (and we as a society) have been? How can it teach them history? That deceptively simple challenge contains within it a fundamental question, What counts as history, and how do museums teach it and kids learn it?

Becoming Places to Learn

In just a single generation, museum workers have witnessed a dramatic expansion of museums' sense of possibility and responsibility. As Stephen Weil has pointed out, one can chart the rising tide of expectations through the American Association of Museums' (AAM) blue ribbon reports. Even a few decades ago, the notion that museums could be educational institutions was not firmly established. Museums existed to create aesthetic experiences that transported visitors beyond humdrum realities. In 1973, Weil recounts, a group of prominent museum educators threatened to secede from AAM in disgust over the organization's disregard for their efforts. By 1984, though, with the report *Museums for a New Century*, AAM asserted "A New Imperative for Learning," calling for "a new approach to the place of education in the functioning of museums." The 1992 report *Excellence and Equity* asserted "unequivocally" that there should be "an educational purpose in every museum activity." In more recent years, museums seemingly have set their sights even higher: *Mastering Civic Engagement*, a 2002 AAM report by another group of museum luminaries, argued that museums could be powerful agents for social change. In the volume's lead essay, author Ellen Hirzy envisions a museum that "becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change." As Weil summarizes, in three decades museums have shifted from seeing themselves as providers of diversionary "refreshment" to offering "education" to fostering "communal empowerment."⁶

Even as the museum community's sense of responsibility and purpose has expanded, its faith or interest in a museum's ability to convey factual knowledge has decidedly narrowed. When researchers began to look in detail at how visitors actually behave in museums—as opposed to how curators hope they will behave—they found that mastering content was only one among many concerns and preoccupations of museum-goers. As visitor-studies pioneers John Falk and Lynn Dierking have noted, a museum visit is a multifaceted experience, one that extends from the parking lot through the exhibitions, the museum café, and the gift shop and is shaped by visitors' preconceptions and interests. "Museum professionals," Falk and Dierking write, "want to know what visitors have learned, but have traditionally used a narrow definition of learning. They examine what visitors have learned from exhibits and labels, for example, which is an important aspect of the museum

experience, but only one aspect." Falk and Dierking find that visitors "perceive their museum experiences as a gestalt." Museum-goers build experiences by making a series of choices shaped by the expectations they bring to the visit and their impressions of the environment around them: "Whatever the visitor does attend to [in the museum]," Falk and Dierking conclude, "is filtered through the personal context, mediated by the social context, and embedded within the physical context."⁷

At every point in their journey through the museum, visitors absorb messages and make meanings. Indeed, influenced by constructivist learning theorists such as George Hein, exhibition developers have begun to recognize that visitors constantly take learning in new directions that reflect personal interests, preconceptions (or misconceptions), and mental maps of the world. Hein writes:

Museums are not efficient places for traditional "school" education, learning specific facts and concepts, because people don't spend enough time and are not there primarily for that purpose. . . . For visitors to have a positive experience, their interaction with the contents of the museum must allow them to connect what they see, do and feel with what they already know, understand, and acknowledge.

Visitors, in Hein's conception, "learn by constructing their own understandings."⁸ Anthropologist Grant McCracken notes that a museum visitor is increasingly like a consumer, "accustomed to being treated as the arbiter of his or her own choices. . . . Visitors bridle when, wittingly or not, the museum insists they are subordinates."⁹ As sites of voluntary, informal learning, then, museums operate differently than do traditional classrooms. Visitors are in the driver's seat as they navigate the learning environment of the museum.¹⁰

The implications of this reconception of museum learning are tremendous. History ceases to be an inert collection of names and dates and becomes a series of processes and habits of mind. Success is measured not by the amount of content absorbed but by the visitor's ability to deploy it in his or her own life. Accuracy as a buzzword is replaced by relevance. For young people in particular, history shifts from being a body of facts to being an historical outlook built on a core set of awarenesses:

- precedent: someone came before me;
- change: the world has not always been as it is;
- agency: people shape the world around them;
- perspective: historians assemble the past from evidence, and different people piece it together differently.

If the goal is to encourage students to adopt a way of thinking about the world, teaching in the museum depends more on engaging the learner than on assembling an airtight body of information. "The emphasis should be on method, not content," museum educator Elaine Davis asserts. History becomes open-ended, not a closed case, and teaching becomes a process of building trust and creating partnerships. "Dialogic practice and shared authority," Davis writes, "are essential to the intellectual growth and autonomy of the individual."¹¹ Young visitors need intrinsic motivation to study the past; a feeling of safety in taking intellectual risks; and a sense of personal investment as they build links between past and present, Self and Other.

Here is where museums and the power of place thrust themselves into the forefront. A sense of place is a uniquely effective tool for engaging young people in the historian's habit of mind. In trying to inspire kids, museums can draw on their own status as alluring places in young people's eyes; on kids' recognition that museums can be places of departure to parts unknown; and on the power of stories rooted in local places to make history concrete and personal for young audiences. To understand how museums can fully connect kids to history, we need to explore these three strategies.

Museums as Destinations

If museums think at all about themselves as places, they tend to do so in terms of tourism—our building will draw visitors looking for some place to show Aunt Gladys when she comes to town. But with children, especially, a museum's physical environment can be a pedagogical tool. Museum buildings are places that capture children's imaginations and can make them ready to learn. As Barbara Piscitelli and David Anderson found in their study of 4- to -6-year-olds, "children perceived museums as settings that were exciting, happy, and provided opportunities to learn and gain many ideas." As Piscitelli and Anderson also noted, children closely observe the museum spaces around them: "Children's visual recall and verbal descriptions of their previous museum experiences were remarkable in their accuracy in depicting actual exhibits and architectural features of museum settings. . . . [Their memories] showed astonishing accuracy for spatial relations, scale, shape and size."¹² Children engage museums as places and actively absorb messages from the physical environments they encounter there.¹³

Children's books again capture young people's perspective, the sense of wonder they bring to museums. In Lois Wyse's *How to Take Your Grandmother to a Museum*, the book's take-charge narrator calls

her grandmother: "Grandma, I said. 'This is me. I want to take you to an Interesting Place. . . . I want to take you to the Museum of Natural History.'" At the museum, the girl expertly leads her grandmother through the galleries, sharing her excitement and her feeling of mastery of the space:

"To Africa," I said. "Follow me!" We took a shortcut through Asia and turned left at Central America. Grandma was so amazed she wasn't sure where to look first. It's a good thing I was there to be her guide.

"This feels like a safari," she said.

"They're all real animals, not paintings," I explained. "These kinds of exhibits are called dioramas."¹⁴

The young visitor relishes the feeling that this museum—and her grandmother—are very much her own.

In *From the Mixed-Up Files of Basil E. Frankweiler*, when a child needs a home away from home the logical destination is a museum:

Claudia knew that she could never pull off the old-fashioned kind of running away. . . . [H]er leaving home would not be running from somewhere but would be running to somewhere. To a large place, a comfortable place, and preferably a beautiful place. And that's why she decided upon the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.¹⁵

For kids, museums are truly "destination vacations" in their own backyards, places that feel safe and familiar and that, at the same time, inspire awe.

Taking Off

Even as children embrace museums as destinations, they also appreciate them as points of departure. Museums are places where kids go to transport themselves to *other* places. *Under the Dock* at the Boston Children's Museum used ambient sound, aquaria, videos, and kid-sized crab costumes to invite children to enter the marine world beneath the surface of Boston Harbor.¹⁶ Indeed, journeys of the imagination in museums do not necessarily depend on high-tech renderings of distant lands or razzle-dazzle hands-on activities. Piscitelli and Anderson found that children's "salient recollections of their visits to museum settings centre on experiences which appeared to be non-interactive in nature," particularly "large-scale exhibits" such as dinosaurs and life-sized models.¹⁷ Smaller scale displays can be transporting, too. The dioramas at

the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York allow young people to imagine that they have traveled to the African Savannah or the Alaskan Peninsula. These installations are magical places within a place. It was not just Ben Stiller's goofy hijinks that made my 11-year-old love the film *Night at the Museum*, in which the AMNH's dioramas come to life. The movie (based on a 1993 children's book by Milan Trenc) animated for her the fantasy implicit in the dioramas: What if you could actually enter the world the exhibits depict?¹⁸ Museums, then, can build a sense of place by taking young people beyond the "real" world—back in time, to a different region or country, or to a place of the imagination.

Personalizing Place

Even as we celebrate museums' potential to deliver flights of fancy, in thinking about how to engage young learners in history we must return to the core of the notion of place—our physical surroundings. When museums tie history to specific locations in the contemporary, everyday world, they offer young people personal connecting points to the past and a window into the historian's craft. The premise behind this approach seems simple, but it is not at all straightforward: young people care more about the past if they can link it to their own lives and the places they call their own. The American Revolution seems less remote if students can imagine residents of their own town mustering to join the fight or weighing the benefits of siding with the British against their neighbors. The Great Depression hits home when students look at welfare relief rolls from their city or see a photograph of bread lines on Main Street.

History is not usually taught this way in secondary schools. Teachers often start as far away as imaginable from the students' lived experiences—John Locke's social contract for example—and either stay at this remote distance or, perhaps, gamely try to paddle back to terrain that might seem recognizable to the students: the social contract, natural rights, the Declaration of Independence, the First Amendment, (whew!), your right to criticize the principal in your school newspaper. In most history classes, larger-than-life figures act on the world stage, whether the Hall of Mirrors or the halls of Congress. Obligatory units on state history tend toward a similar approach, just shifting focus from the White House to the state house. Is it any wonder kids find history distant and bewildering?

Historians have spent decades trying to bring history down to earth. Since the 1960s, the "New" Social History has pursued the stories of ordinary people. Many of the pioneering works of the field, significantly,

bore in on specific places, recreating the inner workings of individual communities.¹⁹ Committed to "challenging the traditional ways that people learn about the past," the American Social History Project produced a textbook that tells the tale of the nation "from the bottom up," from the perspectives of working people. First published in 1989, the two-volume *Who Built America?* is now in its third edition.²⁰ In the 1990s, the National Standards for History likewise worked to make history more accessible to students. It emphasized skills over rote memorization, the need to study multiple perspectives and diverse people in the past, and the importance of student engagement. The voluntary standards include a unit on "The History of Students' Own State or Region" that invites teachers to use primary sources to "describe local community life long ago" and to "examine local architecture and landscape."²¹ In that spirit, some model projects developed curricula in which students do original research on local history. In Georgia, *Keeping and Creating American Communities*, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, has spurred high school students to research, write, and advocate about their local cemeteries, endangered historic landmarks, and the promises and perils of urban sprawl.²² The National Parks Service's "Teaching with Historic Places" website offers teachers lesson plans that connect one hundred historic sites to classroom subjects.²³

To some extent, then, secondary schools have broadened their conception of history and deepened their connection to place. But their progress in this direction remains halting and marked by obstacles. Innovative teachers face the challenges of confinement in classrooms, pressures from standardized tests, and backlash against deviations from the traditional historical narrative. For the overwhelming majority of students, history remains something that happened somewhere else.

History museums face some of the same pressures and obstacles as teachers. As local or regional institutions, however, they are much more intrinsically rooted in place. They would seem to be well positioned to show young people that history is all around us. The appeal of historic sites, certainly, rests on the notion that "history happened here." Children may have little interest in the grand political arc of history, but they are fascinated by the idea that people came before them, and they love standing in their shoes. Kids ask, Is this where they ate breakfast back then? Did they sleep in this bed? Did someone die in this room? Young people fuzzy on the details of the Civil War respond to the notion that they are walking the same ground on which Gettysburg soldiers fell. Living history sites particularly try to capitalize on the "you are here" feeling. Colonial Williamsburg invites visitors to take "a trip to a

different place and time." Children can rent eighteenth-century-style costumes and walk the streets that "re-create a living, changing town where people worked, dined, shopped, and visited."²⁴ The immigrant stories at Ellis Island and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum gain immeasurable poignancy from the fact that they are told in the spaces where they actually happened. Historic sites offer the allure of geographic authenticity: on this actual ground, real people from the past made history.

Many museums that do not literally recreate the past nonetheless take advantage of the power of their historic locations. In 1999, Old Salem (North Carolina) rebuilt a log church on the site where enslaved African Americans had worshipped; however, instead of reconstructing the church interior, the historic village uses the space to showcase contemporary artists' interpretations of slave life, including audio recordings in which actors present first-person stories about slavery in the village.²⁵ Although the interior space in no way attempts to be historically accurate, it gives visitors the powerful experience of hearing the stories of enslaved people on the same ground where they lived their lives. The National Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, Iowa, does not have historic buildings in its complex, but it, too, builds on the power of place, chronicling the mighty force that flows right outside its walls. Corporate museums often create gleaming high-tech installations that nonetheless draw on a sense of place. The appeal of the Louisville Slugger Museum, the World of Coca-Cola, or the Hershey Museum depends in part on locality: learn the story of the products you love *right here* where they are being made.

Industrial history museums have been particularly adept at working within former factory sites to bring manufacturing history to life. In the Museo Del Acero in Monterrey, Mexico (opened 2007), visitors learn the history and science behind steel production by exploring exhibits installed within a seventy-meter-tall blast furnace. Visitors listen to oral interviews with former workers, slide down a cutaway model of a furnace, ride an ore lift to the catwalks atop the site, and watch a sound-and-light show about the manufacturing process.²⁶ The complex of museums in Lowell, Massachusetts, likewise uses historic structures to house contemporary exhibit experiences relating to the histories of those buildings. In Lowell, the Boott Mill boarding house includes an exhibition on *Mill Girls and Immigrants*, and the Boott Cotton Mills Museum showcases an operating power loom and other interactive exhibits; the Tsongas Industrial Center bills itself as a history center where "students learn about the American Industrial Revolution through hands-on

activities and by experiencing history where it happened."²⁷ Similarly, the Mill City Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was built within the ruins of the landmark Washburn A Mill. The museum uses interactive exhibits—including a water lab, a baking lab, and a moving freight elevator housing a multimedia show (the "Flour Tower")—to involve young people in industrial history.

Building Place

But can exhibitions connote place when their locations are *not* any place in particular—when seemingly (in Gertrude Stein's formulation) there is no there there? Children's museums often manufacture environments that engage young people. The grocery store, the restaurant, and the bus are all staples of the industry. The Minnesota Children's Museum invites children to don brown costumes and enter an ant hill. Almost always these settings are generic, places that could be anywhere or nowhere, and rarely do they look back in time.

Many history museums, however, have successfully created a sense of place, seemingly out of nothing, within their galleries. Often they do so by making visual references to local places beyond the museum's doors. Such exhibits rely on associations with sites that visitors bring with them, either from first-hand experiences or from virtual, media-driven exposure. *Brooklyn's History Museum*, a 1989 long-term installation at the Brooklyn Historical Society, built its exploration of the borough's history around five icons of the place and its past, each of which was mocked up in large scale in the gallery: the Brooklyn Bridge, the Coney Island Cyclone roller coaster, the Ebbets Field dugout, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the *Honeymooners* stage set. Each icon anchored a broader theme: the bridge opened onto an exploration of Brooklyn's transportation history; the roller coaster was a setting for discussion of leisure history.²⁸ The Chicago History Museum's *Sensing Chicago* (opened 2006) likewise spotlights icons of place: kids bump over old Chicago's wooden streets on a high-wheel bike, sit in seats from Comiskey Park, smell the Chicago Fire, and, through interactive technology, see themselves run the Chicago marathon and ride the "L" train.²⁹

Do children get place-based allusions of this sort? No doubt most young Brooklynites recognize the bridge, but some probably don't; and they may or may not place the Cyclone, still thrill-riding after all these years. Likewise, most Chicago youth have associations with the "L" and in some, but not all, have heard stories of old Comiskey Park (torn down in

1991 and replaced by U.S. Cellular Field). Even so, these “places” in the gallery—even those that existed beyond living memory—make history less abstract. They provide settings for the past and, implicitly, offer context for the oral histories that recollect what it was like to work at the Navy Yard or stroll the Coney Island boardwalk with the Cyclone’s lights above. For children too young to grasp the geographic references, the settings nonetheless reinforce the idea that the past surfaces in the places of everyday life—that history is *everywhere*. As the *Sensing Chicago* website says in its invitation to young visitors, “Use your five senses to explore Chicago, uncover the past, and discover that history is all around you.”³⁰ History gains tangibility by being set in place.

Indeed, even exhibits that do not depict iconic locations have deployed place to powerful effect. The Minnesota Historical Society used a single ordinary house as a frame for a set of stories. *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* (opened 2006) focuses on an unremarkable house in St. Paul (472 Hopkins Street) and the fifty families who have made it home—from the German immigrants who built it in 1888 through the Italians, African Americans, and now Hmong who succeeded them. With its tight focus, the exhibition is about the richness of a single place and the concentric boundaries within which people live: visitors explore how families built lives within the four walls of 472 Hopkins Street, within the circle of railroad tracks that bounded their neighborhood and within the broader boundaries that defined them as Germans, Hmong, Minnesotans, and Americans.³¹ The exhibition shows how residents turned “this place” into “our place” and invites visitors to explore their own set of connections between family, home, and self.

Open House could not use the real house in the gallery; the structure is being lived in, two miles from the Minnesota History Center gallery.³² Nonetheless, the exhibition’s designers felt it was essential to create a sense of “house-ness” in the museum. The exhibition is built around a series of rooms, each of which represents a different time period and tells the stories of a different set of families from the house’s history. Visitors enter the front door of 472 Hopkins and step into the 1890s sitting room of the German residents; they then move through installations such as a 1930s kitchen from the Italian era and a 1960s backyard (set for a birthday party) before ending at a contemporary living room setting that profiles the latest Hmong occupants. Since the rooms are impressionistic installations, not artifact-based re-creations, visitors are free to touch everything—to stand on the city map embedded in the floor on the front porch, to open the kitchen stove (which triggers an audio story about raising chickens in the basement), and to sit at the

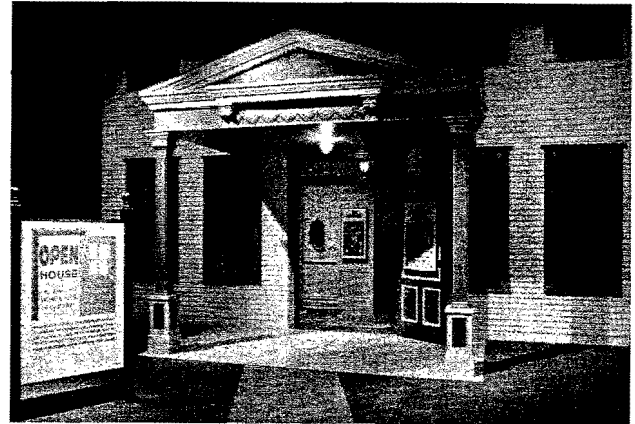


FIGURE 8.2. In *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk*, visitors approach a façade representing 472 Hopkins Street as it looked when it was built in 1888. A panel presents the exhibition’s premise (“One house”; “50 families”; “118 years”; “Explore”). Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org.

dining room table (which launches audio and images that surface in the plates). Formative evaluation showed that young people accepted the premise instantly: this place was a house, and they were free to explore its nooks and crannies (people over thirty were more inclined to keep their hands behind their backs unless given cues encouraging them to touch). Summative evaluation suggests that the sense of being in a domestic space prompts visitors to make associative connections between the past and their own experience.³³ Interestingly, the summative evaluation also shows that visitors explore the space at a more considered and deliberate pace than in other comparably sized installations.³⁴ Impressionistically, the gallery seems to suffer less damage than do others in the History Center. Could it be that young people sense the space’s “houseness” and therefore treat it with more respect?

Here and Now

By itself, then, place matters in the museum gallery. The most powerful evocations of “here,” however, connect it with an oft-overlooked partner, “now.” Here and now would seem to be natural bedfellows, but



FIGURE 8.3. From the 1920s onward, first-person voices tell the stories in *Open House*. Visitors who sit at the dining room table are rewarded with a surprise—images surface in the glass plates and audio tells stories of family dinners during the house's Italian era. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org.



FIGURE 8.4. Set to represent a 1960s–70s neighborhood birthday party, the yard in *Open House* features a mural painting that gives the feel of an outdoor scene. Visitors play hopscotch and Pin the Tail on the Donkey, try their hands at the clothespin drop, and pull down the kite to read about the Krismer family's kite-flying exploits. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org.

their union has usually been anathema to professional historians and teachers alike. Academic historians are terrified of “presentism”—the charge that one’s scholarship has been tainted by contemporary concerns. Traditionally, an historian is supposed to examine evidence and use the tools of the discipline—not subjective interests—to interpret and evaluate. History can be relevant to the present but not shaped by it. In the name of this dispassionate ideal (coupled with the pressures of the school calendar), history has often been taught in ways that divorce the past from the present. Again, think of how most secondary school students encounter American history. The teacher bravely starts the year by introducing hunter-gatherers, moves on to Pilgrims and Puritans, accelerates through the cotton gin and the Civil War, careens through World War I and the Depression, and sputters out sometime shortly after World War II, decades before the students’ parents were born. History remains mired farther back in time than students can conceive.

If academics fret about bringing history too close to today, museums worry about how to make their subject relevant to contemporary audiences. One museum administrator explained low visitation to me lamenting, “History is too much about the past.” Yet despite their desire to close the gap with visitors, museums themselves often contribute to the distancing of the past. How many state history museums have permanent “overview” installations that start with the Ice Age? (One state museum begins with the Big Bang.) Some museums don’t feature an image of a single living person in their galleries. The “pastness” of the past need not be disguised, but if we truly expect young people to connect history to the present we need to show them it can be done. Again place offers a way in. Young people who may have no understanding of historical causation or precedent nonetheless grasp intuitively the notion that there are layers of the past beneath us. Think of the universal appeal of archaeology among children (and in children’s museums). With the tag line “now you’re in *their* world,” the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis features a dinosaur dig and a working paleontology lab.³⁵ Just as there are layers of earth, there are layers of time, and children are fascinated by the notion.

Children’s books again illustrate the point. Nadia Wheatley’s *My Place* richly charts the life and livelihood of one spot in Australia, moving backward from 1988 to 1788; Bonnie Pryor’s *The House on Maple Street* traces three hundred years of history in one neighborhood, a story that culminates with two girls digging up an arrowhead and a broken china cup in their yard; *A Street through Time*, by Egyptologist Anne Millard, offers cutaway views of buildings in a single spot, moving from a

nomadic outpost to a farming community, a medieval castle, a bustling merchant quarter, and finally contemporary office buildings.³⁶ In one of my most rewarding teaching experiences at the Minnesota Historical Society, as part of a four-week curriculum called "History Happened Here," I took fourth-graders from a Hmong charter school on a walking tour of the retail district a block from their school building in St. Paul. Armed simply with city directory listings from 1900, 1940, and 1960, the children excitedly charted how the space that now housed an Asian grocery and a tortilleria used to be a Swedish Baptist Church and how another building had evolved from drugstore to barbershop to jeweler to, now, a Western wear outlet.³⁷

How can history exhibitions help young people draw connections such as these within museums? Mainly, museums simply need to start making the effort to highlight history in the world around us. At the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, *Forgotten Gateway: Coming to America through Galveston Island* (2009) features "Then and Now" stations that show newspaper headlines relevant to each section's historical themes: not just then (in the 1920s) but right here and now, immigrants are dying trying to get to America, are working in cramped quarters for less than minimum wage, are terrified of deportation.³⁸ *Sensing Chicago* purposely features historical icons that still exist in the city today. From the start, an essential part of the plan for *Open House* involved representing contemporary immigrants: it was essential that the walk through time that begins in 1888 continue up to the present. The exhibition set out to emphasize that the issues immigrants faced in the past—fleeing home, making a new start, raising children, wrestling with memories—are still with us. On the table in the 1930s-era kitchen sits the citizenship exam, along with recollections from the Italian residents about how terrifying the test was and how important it was to pass it; on the table in the 2005 living room sits the citizenship exam, along with recollections from the Hmong residents about how terrifying the test was and how important it was to pass it. Including a contemporary Hmong family signals that these relative newcomers, too, are part of the city's history. To young people in particular, following the house's story to the present makes a bigger point: history is all around us and within all of us.

And How

In striving to activate young people's historical sensibility, a powerful partner to "here" and "now" is an approach that we might call "how"—inviting kids to take part in the history-making process. In the same way that the *Whodunit* exhibition (opened 1993) at the Fort Worth Museum

of Science and History brilliantly involved young people in the science of criminology, history museums have the potential to involve kids in the process of historical detection. Exhibitions that draw on the closely observed details of place offer opportunities to show how historians construct history and to encourage visitors to try out the research tools themselves.

One strategy is to give visitors, young and old, access to the primary sources that historians used to assemble the exhibition's stories. *On Gold Mountain*, an exhibition at the Antry Museum of Western Heritage (opened 2000), was based on author Lisa See's meticulous research into six generations of her family's history in both China and San Francisco. Visitors explored a series of environments, from a trans-Pacific steamship to a San Francisco restaurant, each of which contained family photos, documents, and records. Toward the end, the exhibition shared with visitors the genealogical methods that See used to uncover these sources and build her stories.³⁹ In the Valentine Riverside Museum's *Windows on Richmond* exhibition (1994), visitors looked through viewing devices to compare the contemporary James River landscape to historical photographs taken from the same vantage point.⁴⁰ *Open House*, too, encourages direct engagement with primary sources. Instead of giving visitors a master narrative, the exhibition asks them to piece stories together by exploring rooms salted with family photos, public records, letters, and oral recollections. Pulling open bureau drawers reveals pages from a high school yearbook; cranking a sausage grinder spins out a quotation from an oral history (about curing meat); opening the refrigerator door shows beer bottles with photos of the house's brewery workers and milk bottles with reminiscences about refrigeration; looking closely at a worker's uniform reveals that sewn across it are words from his death certificate ("contributory cause of death: age and hard work"). Such explorations invite cross-generational conversation. They enable grown-ups to answer the young person's query, Is this true? and they visually demonstrate that history is stitched together from multiple sources.

Some exhibitions directly cast young people as historians. In *Mysteries in History* (opened 1985) at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, children examined evidence from the past within nineteenth-century-style log cabins and shops on a 1900s main street.⁴¹ The National Museum of American History's *Within These Walls . . .* (another exhibition that traces a house's residents through time) adopts the mystery metaphor in the how-to section of its website. Likening houses to a time machine, the site exhorts, "Whether you own your own house, rent it, or live in an apartment, . . . you and your family can become house

detectives and discover the history of your home.⁶² At the Outagamie County Historical Society (Appleton, Wisconsin), *Time Capsules: History Goes Underground* (opened 1995) encouraged an historical mindset by asking young people to imagine themselves as *future* historians. The exhibition asked children to vote on whom they thought historians would remember one hundred years from now (Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre consistently topped the list) and to write letters to future Wisconsinites. Working from a sense of place, museums can involve young people in the process of historical inquiry, of gathering and evaluating evidence, and recognizing multiple perspectives.

Appealing to place, then, enables museums to address young people where they are. Instead of dismissing the self-centeredness and presentism of youth, place turns these qualities into departure points. It validates kids' worldview and, at the same time, offers humility. On the one hand, recognizing the power of here, now, and how allows museums to exalt young people's powerful place in history. History happened right *here*—in your backyard. History matters right *now*—your own life is history. You can learn *how* to do history—be the historian detective. On the other hand, the lessons of here, now, and how gently put young people *in* their place, in the way that all good history does. Others were here before you. Others will come after. History is an ever-shifting mass of assertions and uncertainties. What a place to be.

NOTES

1. E.g., Richard Scarry, *Busy, Busy Town* (Racine, WI: Western Publishing Co., 1994); Richard Scarry, *What Do People Do All Day?* (New York: Random House, 1979 [1968]).
2. WannadoCity, "Welcome to WannadoCity" and "Plan Your Visit," www.wannadocity.com/grown_ups/index.php (accessed June 2, 2008); www.wannadocity.com/grown_ups/planvisit.php (accessed November 24 2008).
3. Peter Sis, *Madlenka* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 2–4.
4. Emphasis in the original. David Sobel, *Mapmaking with Children: Sense of Place Education for the Elementary Years* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 7.
5. Sobel, *Mapmaking with Children*, 5–6. This "inside out" approach is not without its detractors. In the 1990s, advocates of national history standards criticized social studies curricula in which children focused on their local communities, deriding the approach for diluting history education. "From kindergarten through fifth grades," writes historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, "children studied a curriculum consisting of 'me, my family, my neighborhood, my community, my town, my state, and my nation.'" Ravitch decries this "expanding horizons"

approach as "content-free, vapid, [and] trivial": "Typically, social studies textbooks for the elementary grades consisted of little more than stories about shopping in a generic supermarket, meeting a generic police officer, and learning how families eat dinner together" (Diane Ravitch, "History's Struggles to Survive in the Schools," *OAH Magazine of History* [April 2007]: 31). Ravitch envisions reversing the order of these concentric circles: "The core ring will be the skills and ideas that everyone in the nation (and the world) needs to know. The next ring will be peculiar to the state (reflecting its history, geography, and regional concerns). And the third will be local (supplying whatever the community cares deeply about)." (Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide* [Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1997 (1995), xxviii]).

Defenders of "expanding horizons" counter that problems with the approach stem primarily from the unimaginative way it has been implemented in some schools—the generic approach that Ravitch herself decries. Many educators feel that there is room to do sophisticated work that begins with a tight local focus. Theorists also note that the "inside-out" and "outside-in" strategies need not be irreconcilable: students can be taught to tack back and forth between small- and large-scale concerns in a "think global, act local" approach. See David Hutchison, *A Natural History of Place in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 41, 44.

6. *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1984), 54, 63; Ellen Cochran Hirzy *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998 [1992]), 3; Ellen Hirzy, "Mastering Civic Engagement: A Report from the American Association of Museums," in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002), 9; Stephen E. Weil, "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 32–4.
7. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, DC: Whalesback Books, 1998 [1992]), 84, 93, 4.
8. George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 153, 179.
9. Grant McCracken, "CULTURE and Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum, Part 2," *Curator* 46 (October 2003): 423.
10. In recent years, many historians and educators have argued that traditional classrooms, too, should grant more active agency to learners and allow for more collaboration and dialogue between professor and student. See, e.g., Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Winnie Wade, Keith Hodgkinson, Allison Smith, and John Arfield, eds., *Flexible Learning in Higher Education* (London: Kogan Page, 1994); Peter

- Filene, *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
11. Elaine Davis, *How Students Understand the Past: From Theory to Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 112, 161–2.
 12. Barbara Piscitelli and David Anderson, "Young Children's Perspectives of Museum Settings and Experiences," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19, no. 3 (2001): 277–8.
 13. Museums that consider the educational implications of their physical space have often been influenced by the child-centered Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. To Reggio practitioners, "the environment is the third teacher" (after the child's classroom instructor and parents); see Louise Boyd Cadwell, *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 99. As educator Lella Gandini describes, every aspect of Reggio schools—"the color of the walls, the shape of the furniture . . . the arrangement of simple objects on shelves and tables"—is designed to foster "encounters, communication, and relationships" (Lella Gandini, "Foundation of the Reggio Emilia Approach," in *Next Steps toward Teaching the Reggio Way: Accepting the Challenge to Change*, ed. Joanne Hendrick [Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004], 16–7). The goal, writes educator Karen Haigh, is to create space that provokes "a sense of wonder, exploration, and socialization, and that fosters connections with nature and culture. The environment is seen as living and forever evolving" (Karen Haigh, "Reflecting on Changes within Our Learning Environments at Chicago Commons," in Hendrick, *Next Steps*, 200). Inspired by the Reggio approach and the Reggio Emilia-sponsored traveling exhibition "The 100 Languages of Children," the Children's Museum of Minnesota created an installation in which first- and second-graders expressed their views of the Mississippi River through the arts, including "dance, story, painting and a three-dimensional model of the city that traces the path of the river through the city of Saint Paul" (Minnesota Reggio Network, *The 100 Languages of Children*, www.mnreggio.org/hundred.html [accessed December 1, 2008]). For discussion of how the Reggio approach shaped the philosophy of staff members at the Kohl Children's Museum (Wilmette, IL), see Fran Donovan, "Using the Reggio Approach in a Children's Museum," in *First Steps toward Teaching the Reggio Way*, ed. Joanne Hendrick, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 181–95.
 14. Lois Wyse, *How to Take Your Grandmother to a Museum* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1998), 8, 22–3.
 15. E. L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-up Files of Basil E. Frankweiler* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1967), 5.
 16. Diane Willow, "Exhibitions as a Context for Engaging Young Children and Families with the Ideas That Technology Can Reveal," *Exhibitionist* 27 (Spring 2008): 80.
 17. Piscitelli and Anderson, "Young Children's Perspectives," 269, 275.
 18. For a poetic description of how exhibitions transport the young imagination, see Felice Holman, "Museum," in *Behind the Museum Door: Poems to Celebrate the Wonders of Museums*, ed. Lee Bennett Hopkins, (New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2007), 16.
 19. For example, John Demos explored everyday life in Plymouth Colony (*The Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1970]); Kenneth A. Lockridge looked at Dedham, MA (*A New England Town: The First 100 Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* [New York: Norton, 1970]); Stephan Thernstrom focused on Newburyport (*Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-century City* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964]); Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum studied Salem (*Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974]); Paul E. Johnson apprenticed himself to Rochester (*A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1978]); and Roy Rosenzweig pursued Worcester (*Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983]).
 20. Christopher Clark and Nancy Hewitt, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History, Volume One to 1877*, 3rd edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.
 21. National Center for History in the Schools, "K-4 Content Standards," <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/>; <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/standardsk-4-1-2.html> (accessed June 3, 2008).
 22. Keeping and Creating American Communities, <http://kcac.kennesaw.edu/> (accessed June 3, 2008).
 23. "Teaching with Historic Places," *History Education News* 1 (May 2008), 5. See also www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/ (accessed August 14, 2009).
 24. *Official Guide to Colonial Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2004 [1998]), 7, 1.
 25. Old Salem Museums and Gardens, "Plan Your Visit," www.oldsalem.org/visitor.php?id=151 (accessed June 3, 2008).
 26. Sanya Pleshakov, "Museo Del Acero," Exhibit Files: A Community Site for Exhibit Designers and Developers (Web site hosted by Association of Science-Technology Centers, Washington, DC, October 8, 2007, modified October 19, 2007) www.exhibitfiles.org/museo_del_acero (accessed July 22, 2009).
 27. Tsongas Industrial History Center, "What Is the Tsongas Industrial History Center?" www.uml.edu/tsongas/index2.htm (accessed June 3, 2008).
 28. For a description of the installation, see Michael Frisch, "Brooklyn's History Museum: The Urban History Exhibit as an Agent of Change," in *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits*, ed. Kenneth L. Ames, Barbara Franco, and L. Thomas Frye (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1992), 264–79.
 29. Chicago History Museum, "Sensing Chicago," www.chicagohistory.org/documents/home/aboutus/pressroom/exhibition-releases/sensingChicago.pdf (accessed December 1, 2008).

30. Chicago History Museum, "Exhibitions," www.chicagohistory.org/planavisit/exhibitions (accessed June 4, 2008).
31. For information on *Open House*, see www.mnhs.org/openhouse/.
32. In contrast to *Open House*, the National Museum of American History's *Within These Walls* . . . exhibition is built around a real house, an artifact from the museum's collection. The house was collected by Smithsonian curators in the 1960s, who saved it from the wrecking ball and reassembled it in the museum's galleries as an example of eighteenth-century building style. Reflecting social history's influence, a 2002 reinstallation shifted the focus of the exhibit from architecture to people. The house remains, towering, in the gallery, but the new installation highlights five families who lived in the home. Since the house is an artifact, visitors cannot enter it. National Museum of American History, *Within These Walls*, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/house/home.asp> (accessed June 4, 2008).
33. "Interaction with a history exhibition that includes and elicits storytelling is a process of a visitor placing themselves [sic] within place, time, and sense of self. This allows visitors to place themselves within the larger historical narrative, and both internal and external histories simultaneously acquire relevance, which is key to constructing personal meaning" (Kirsten Ellenbogen, Beth Janetski, and Murphy Pizza, "Summative Evaluation Report: *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk*," prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society [unpublished], 2006, 7).
34. Evaluators found the median time spent in the 5,200-square-foot exhibition to be 33 minutes (Ellenbogen, Janetski, and Pizza, "Summative Evaluation," 3).
35. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, "Welcome to Dinosphere," www.ChildrensMuseum.org/themuseum/dinosphere/index.htm (accessed June 5, 2008).
36. Nadia Wheatley, *My Place* (Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1994); Bonnie Pryor, *The House on Maple Street* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992 [1987]); Anne Millard, *A Street through Time: A 12,000-Year Walk through History* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 1998).
37. "History Happened Here: Educational Curriculum That Brings History Home!" Minnesota Historical Society (unpublished), 2006.
38. For information on *Forgotten Gateway*, see www.forgottengateway.com (accessed May 31, 2009). The "Then and Now" strategy was presented at an advisory meeting I attended in Austin, TX, February 22, 2008.
39. The Autry Museum is now the Museum of the American West, part of the Autry National Center; see Autry National Center, "About the Autry National Center," www.autrynationalcenter.org/about.php (accessed June 18, 2008). James Hong, "On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience," *Newsletter* (summer 2000), Chinese American Museum; Xiaojian Zhao, "On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience" (review) *The Public Historian* 23 (spring 2001), 127–29. Like *On Gold Mountain*, *Open House* and *Within These Walls* . . . each ends with a "how to" section.
40. Henry Chase, "Past Due and On Time!" *American Visions* (June–July 1994), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_rm1546/is_/ai_15495026?tag=artBody;coll (accessed December 2, 2008).
41. Cynthia Robinson and Warren Leon, "A Priority on Process: The Indianapolis Children's Museum and 'Mysteries in History,'" in Arnes, Franco, and Frye, eds. *Ideas and Images*, 220–221.
42. National Museum of American History, "Clues within These Walls," <http://americanhistory.si.edu/house/clues/clues.asp> (accessed August 14, 2009).