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Children's Museums as an Opportunity for "Adults' Museums" and the Universal Education System in Poland¹

A brief history of children's museums, their origins, and methodological and program rationale

Children's museums are an American product. They are the result of pragmatic thinking about new opportunities for educating and raising children in the United States. One of the spiritual fathers of this thinking was John Dewey, an eminent American educator, who in one of his works from the early 20th century placed the museum at the heart of the educational activities of the school².

Over two decades earlier, Henry Watson Kent, a librarian from Norwich Museum and Library Connecticut, launched the custom of visits of entire school classes to museums, thus indicating their huge educational potential³.

The first children's museum was created in Brooklyn, New York, and was launched on December 16, 1899. The museum's mission was to provide children with their first cultural experience and to facilitate understanding of the world, whose rapid technical development was often

» 1 This text was delivered as a paper on 18.06.2018 at the Centre for Legacy Interpretation in Poznań at the conference *Education in New Museums and Institutions of Culture. Expectations, reality, prospects*. Excerpts of the text were used in the preparation of a brochure titled *Muzea dzieci – historia, idea, potencja* [*Children's Museums – history, idea, potential*], published in December 2018 for the sake of promoting the idea of children's museums during an education workshop in the Museum of Polish Jews POLIN in Warsaw (print-run of 50 copies).

» 2 J. Dewey, *The School and Society*, Chicago 1899.

» 3 M. Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals. 100 Years of Museums in America*, American Association of Museums, 2012, p. 9.

difficult to understand even for adults⁴ During the first sixty years of the 20th century, approximately 40 children's museums were established in the United States. This contributed to the dynamic development of the concept of museum education, which became the fastest growing element of American museum practice; it became its most recognizable feature in the second half of the 20th century. The revolutionary changes introduced by Michael Spock in the Children's Museum in Boston after 1962 led to an enormous enrichment of the mission of children's museums. With the exhibition *What's Inside?*, Spock made the museum a place not only of acquiring knowledge via play, but of children's discovery of both the world out there and his or her own resources of inquisitiveness, creativity, and sensitivity⁵. Spock's ideas were underpinned by the accomplishments of previous generations of educators. At least a few people should be mentioned among the most influential figures. In addition to John Dewey, who pioneered the development of pedagogy in the first half of the 20th century, there was Maria Montessori, who discovered so-called attention polarization and claimed that "the main task of pedagogy is to support the spontaneity and creativity of children, to enable them to foster their comprehensive physical, spiritual, cultural and social development". She moreover argued that "the fundamental principle must be the freedom of the learner, because it is only this freedom that triggers the creativity of the child inherent in his or her nature"⁶. Other figures whose ideas were instrumental for the operation of children's museums in the 2nd half of the 20th century were Jean Piaget, Janusz Korczak, and Loris Malaguzzi⁷.

As for Piaget, children's museums mainly used his insights into the successive phases of children's intellectual development which enable the proper selection of the content and scope of tasks for specific age groups participating in the programs carried out in children's museums⁸.

- » 4 The most comprehensive text on the history of children's museums in the USA is an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Hermine Wehlsin Din, *A History of Children's Museums in the United States, 1899-1997: implications for art education and museum education in art museums*, The Ohio State University, 1998 (with earlier bibliography references).
- » 5 H.W. Din, *An Investigation of Children's Museums in the United States – Their Past, Present and Future: A Proposed Study*, "Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working. Papers in Art Education", The University of Iowa, 1999, vol. 15(1), p. 63-69.
- » 6 "Maria Montessori", https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Montessori [access: 23.05.2019]
- » 7 M. Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals. 100 Years of Museums in America*, "American Association of Museums", 2012, p. 154. For summary discussion of pedagogical concepts strongly rooted in the reality of the developmental psychology of the child, see Renata Pater, *Edukacja muzealna – muzea dla dzieci i młodzieży*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2016, p. 55-78.
- » 8 J. Piaget, *La naissance de l'intelligence chez l'enfant*, Delachaux et Niestlé Paris Paris 1936; idem, *La psychologie de l'enfant*, Paris 1950; idem, *La psychologie de l'enfant*, Paris 1950.

As for Korczak, children's museums drew on his insistence on treating children with regard to their rights to unimpeded development and respect for dignity, which led to the emergence of the concepts of moral education and so-called social education schools⁹.

The last quarter of the 20th century was a time of tremendous popularity of the pedagogical principles developed by Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian pedagogue, a psychologist by education, and the author of an excellent program of pre-school and early school education known as the Reggio Approach, which rapidly became one of the most progressive projects of pre-school education worldwide¹⁰. The project rests on immovable foundations which can be identified in the operation of present-day children's museums: children must have a certain impact on how they learn, must be able to learn via the experience of touch, movement, listening, and observation; they must enter into relations with their peers and material objects and must be given an opportunity to examine, analyse and learn them on their own. Finally, children must be ensured unlimited ways and possibilities of self-expression¹¹.

Today the United States is home to about 400 children's museums. Their activities are mainly aimed at the comprehensive development of children's sensitivity and creativity, with the overriding goal of developing in children stable value systems and pro-democratic and deeply humanistic social behaviour. The activities conducted in such museums are guided by a principle which can be described as making the process of children's education more attractive by conducting classes of a participatory nature, giving children a chance to understand difficult phenomena not through a lecture, but via an attractive presentation combined with children's direct participation in all activities provided in the curriculum, and with the children's total emotional involvement in the implementation of the curriculum¹².

Throughout its century-old history, the mission of American children's museums has evolved, but always revolved around the idea of preparing children for contact with various manifestations of artistic creativity,

» 9 P. Piotrowski, *Inspiracje korczakowskie w idei edukacji 'just community' Lawrence'a Kohlberga*, [in:] *Janusz Korczak i oblicza dzieciństwa. Vol. I. Janusz Korczak i jego poglądy w recepcji współczesnych*, ed. K. Kochan, E. Skorek, Zielona Góra, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski 2012, p. 59–77.

» 10 *The hundred languages of child. The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*, Comune di Reggio Emilia, Italy, 1990; see L. Gandini, *Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*, "Young Children" 49 (1) 1993, p. 4–8; see P. Tarr, *Aesthetic Codes in Early Childhood Classrooms. What Art Educators Can Learn from Reggio Emilia*, "Art Education" (2001) Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 33–39.

» 11 The principles behind the *Reggio Project* can be found on its official website https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reggio_Emilia_approach [access10.06.2018].

» 12 Brooklyn Children's Museum website, <http://www.brooklynkids.org> [access: 10.04.2017].

and developing their sensitivity and ability to manage emotions. The tools used to work with children were increasingly adapted to their perceptual abilities in order to be in harmony with the world of their psychological experiences.

Today we can say that US children's museums are one of the most significant elements of cultural development of children and young adults in the United States, greatly enriching the core curriculum. On the other hand, as Neil and Philip Kotler argue, children's museums are a great marketing tool to stimulate adult Americans' needs for museum visits¹³.

The majority of children's museums try to include in their programs elements aimed at unleashing the resources of children's creativity. Ken Robinson is one of the greatest authorities in this field; he supports some British children's museums with his vast knowledge and experience. Many of his writings, some of which have already been translated into Polish, are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the programs of many American and European children's museums¹⁴.

When I visited a number of eminent children's museums in the United States in 1991, I was able to see the vast variety of programs on offer. For example, the museum in Los Angeles evoked the genius loci and held a "crazy" program of explicating many physical phenomena such as photography, film, and television broadcasts within a genuine television studio and with the aid of specially prepared installations that helped visualise how images emerge on photosensitive backgrounds or how motion pictures are created. Setting all of this within the reality of a Hollywood film studio, the educational programs were designed to skilfully lead the participants to transcend themselves, encouraging even the shy kids to play without any hindrance with make-up, performing on stage as actors and musicians, or imitating journalists and other professions that contribute to the creation of films and TV programs.

In Chicago, the educational activities were based on programs that familiarised children with the homes and customs of various ethnic groups that made up the multicultural US society. Participants of such activities were led to believe that each culture has the right to their own customs and patterns of behaviour, which should be respected by representatives of other cultures.

» 13 N. Kotler & P. Kotler, *Museum Strategy and Marketing. Designing mission Building audiences Generating revenue and resources*, Wiley San Francisco 1998, p. 115–120.

» 14 K. Robinson, *Oblicza umysłu. Ucząc się kreatywności*, trans. A. Baj, Element Kraków 2010; K. Robinson, L. Aronica, *Uchwycić żywioł. O tym jak znalezienie pasji zmienia wszystko*, trans. A. Baj, Element Kraków 2011; K. Robinson, L. Aronica, *Odkryj swój żywioł. Jak odkrywać swoje talenty, znaleźć pasję i zmienić swoje życie*, trans. A. Baj, Element Kraków 2015; K. Robinson, L. Aronica, *Kreatywne szkoły, oddolna rewolucja, która zmienia edukację*, trans. A. Baj, Element Kraków 2015.

The museum in Boston ran a major project that let children experience the different life situations faced by people with disabilities on a daily basis. Riding down a sandy path in a wheelchair, trying to communicate with another person when one's ears are blocked, or moving around in a poorly designed public space with one's eyes covered were an unforgettable experience for the participants (children aged 5–8). They were made aware of the enormous problems persons with disabilities encounter every day.

The programs described above may no longer be shocking from the perspective of the educational activities carried out in the last 30 years, but if we take a closer look at the program recommended for implementation in kindergartens and early school education, we will assess their value differently. In fact, schools do not participate in educational activities and are gradually becoming factories that only transmit knowledge.

Reception of the idea of Children's Museums in Europe

The first children's museums in Europe were opened by the enthusiastic followers of reforms of educational systems. In 1972, a children's section of the City Museum in Frankfurt-am-Mein was launched, and in 1975 both the children's version of the Museum of the Tropics in Amsterdam and the Children's Museum in Brussels opened. The latter institution was founded by Kathleen Lippens, a psychologist who studied at Harvard and was a student intern at the Children's Museum in Boston¹⁵. Today, we have children's museums in over twenty countries across Europe and they are being created in a few others. They are absent in only a few countries in Europe, regrettably also in Poland. European children's museums demonstrate diverse levels and programs. In addition to those that take due care in the construction of their projects, as manifested by numerous consultations with psychologists or cultural anthropologists and taking efforts to employ staff with high pedagogical and psychological qualifications,¹⁶ there are unfortunately also those whose offers uncritically imitate US models of lesser value. They look more like play areas in supermarkets and have little in common with those who prudently design their activities in collaboration with all the stakeholders of the process of children's education (psychologists, educators, animators, artists, etc.). The latter group includes e.g. Austrian child-

» 15 Information from the website of the Children's Museum in Brussels <https://www.childrenmuseum.be/history/> [access: 15.05.2018].

» 16 See the descriptions of ways of working on exhibition production at the ZOOM Kindermuseum Vienna, in *20 Jahre ZOOM Kindermuseum*, redaktion Virgil Guggenberger, Wien 2014.

ren's museums in Graz and Vienna, the Czech Sladovna Pisek, an exceptionally interesting museum in Duisburg, Museo dei Bambini in Milan, as well as the aforementioned museums in Amsterdam and Brussels.

Why Children's Museums rather than Museums for Children?

The translation of the English term children's museum in Europe was far from straightforward. Conservative museologists from the 1970s were loath to use the name "museum", which they saw as reserved solely for an institution which e.g. gathered, held, and preserved art collections. Their views on the use of the name "museum" had been seriously tested a few decades earlier by the names of such institutions as the Museum of Steam Engines or the Pharmacy Museum. Once again, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the term Children's Museum raised doubt. The debates and arguments of that time were summed up by Renata Pater, who ultimately concluded that the most appropriate term in Polish would be a "museum for children" (*muzeum dla dzieci*)¹⁷.

Below I quote the arguments for using a different translation of the name, which stems both from the self-awareness of American children's museums and from the long conversations and discussions I have had with several outstanding Polish specialists in the field of the extracurricular education of children. Allow me to mention here the names of two of them: Maria Parczewska and Janusz Byszewski.

From the very beginning, the oldest American children's museums implemented programs that complemented schools' educational activities. This resulted from the different role of the museum which was attributed to it by American society at the turn of the 20th century. It was unique and its assumptions significantly exceeded the tasks set for museums in Europe. More and more distinctly, the American museum gained the status of a place of education and axiological rebirth of American society in the aftermath of the Civil War¹⁸. Both John Dewey and George Brown Goode opted for a fuller application of the enormous educational potential of museums, a lot of which were set up in the US in the 1st half of the 19th century¹⁹. Therefore, when in 1899 William H. Goodyear established the first institution to supplement the activities offered by a school (Brooklyn Children's Museum), a decision was taken to grant it the status of a museum, a social institution of what was then perceived the highest moral probity and the greatest educational potential. The use of the Saxon

» 17 R. Pater, *Edukacja muzealna...*, p. 79–85.

» 18 M. Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals...*, p. 8ff.

» 19 *Ibid.*, p. 1–14; see S. Conn, *Museum and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1998, p. 20.

Genitive was self-evident for all English speakers – it was a children's institution. Some of the US children's museums account for their name on their websites, dispelling all doubts²⁰.

The programs of all children's museums make us think about them as institutions different from schools. In a school, the conditions and rules of its operation are determined by the adults who create it **for** children, while in a children's museum they are based upon assumptions such as democratisation of the education processes, consisting in treating children as partners (Dewey), education by leading to the development of self-reliance, self-education and responsibility (Montessori), recognition that the education process is most efficient when children learn on their own (Piaget), respect for the rights of the child (Korczak), and granting the child a partial initiative in the educational process (Malaguzzi) – we must recognise it as an institution which **belongs to** children. It is children who are the museum's owners and hosts. They are its subject, while adults are only a tool for the implementation of the above principles. In children's museums, for obvious reasons, adults are indispensable, yet their presence should not dwarf that of children. There is no teacher–pupil relationship between them as there is in school; there is no person who gives orders and a person who obeys them; at best there is a relation built on mutual respect between a child (small human being) and a friend (big human being), or between pupil and a master. In my opinion, the name of the children's museum as belonging to children implements the whole philosophy of its functioning and the division of roles for children and adults to be found in it.

Significance of children's museums in the United States

Museums are a very important link in the American universal education system. I have written above about its beginnings, which hark back to the end of the 19th century. The custom of visiting museums by school groups developed and intensified in the first quarter of the 20th century; by the 1950s it had already become a well-established practice²¹. Today,

» 20 A good example of such an explication is e.g. information on the website of Portland Children's Museum in Oregon. "Who We Are: Our Name Says It Best. A museum's name tells you a lot about what it treasures. You hear the name—art museum, history museum, automobile museum—and you immediately know what you'll find there: objects, rare and wonderful; encounters with the unusual; beauty for beauty's sake. The specifics differ, but in each case, the collection takes center stage. Our name shows what we treasure, too, and it tells you how we're different. We're a museum that doesn't act like a museum because our audience—children and the adults who care for them—is more important to us than anything we collect. Indeed, our audience is the essential component that gives our exhibits meaning". <https://www.portland-cm.org/about-us> [access: 15.07.2017].

» 21 *The Art Museum as Educator. A Collection of Studies as Guides to Practice and Policy*,

the number of American museums is huge, totalling around 35,000. Both the traditional use of museums for educational purposes – common for the past century – and the awareness of the substantial outlays on museum maintenance, prompted pragmatic Americans to take action that does not have a statutory legal framework, but we can certainly speak of a practice established by tradition. This practice involves conducting up to twenty percent of primary and secondary school classes on the premises of various types of museums²². The youngest age groups are happy to take advantage of the opportunity to have lessons in children's museums. A series of several to several dozen visits of the youngest children (up to about 10 years of age) to these museums has become a kind of overture to get to know the museums of "adults". It is in children's museums that children have a chance to enjoy extraordinary experiences, which in turn trigger various emotions that influence the formation of specific value systems and promote specific social behaviours and attitudes. Children's museums do not implement school curricula – they have their own programs, not always complementary to the activities carried out in schools. However, while schools teach, children's museums impact the world of values²³, sublimating all kinds of sensitivities, including those aimed at the reception of art. The more positive the impressions resulting from children's contact with children's museums, the more trustful the children's approach to adult museums because the "museum" is already a domesticated, friendly, accepted thing; it is a part of the world in which a small person lives on a daily basis.

We can therefore say that children's museums are a great preparation for contact with the real museums of "adults". They are a perfect introduction to the atmosphere of the museum, being at the same time one of the basic institutions that cares for the emotional and axiological development of the child.

Thus, "adult" museums in the United States owe so much to children's museums, because it is the latter which make the young man-turn-teenager treat the museum as a part of his or her own reality, one which he or she is able to draw on independently. It is thanks to children's museums that even small "adult" American museums are visited

ed. B.Y. Newsom, A.Z. Silver, University of California Press, 1978, *passim*.

» 22 Information from the Smithsonian Science Education Center, confirmed by educators in multiple museums across the US during a study trip of Janusz Byszewski and Zygmunt Kalinowski in American museums during the *American Museums* project (1991).

» 23 Much controversy across Europe was triggered by an exhibition opened in 1983 at the *Brooklyn Children's Museum* about the difficult art of coming to terms with the loss of one's loved ones. *Endings: An Exhibit about Death and Loss* was a show whose assumptions are no longer surprising to anyone today, let alone children's developmental psychologists; see Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals...*, p. 154ff.

at weekends by similar numbers of US citizens as are today's shopping malls in Poland. For several decades, visiting museums has become something more than just fashion for Americans; it has become a part of their lifestyle.

In search of rationale for establishing children's museums in Poland

If today we are looking for ways to encourage Poles to take advantage of various manifestations of broadly understood culture, the construction of children's museums is one of these ways. As the old saying goes, "as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined". And in this sense, for all those "adult" museums, where ambitious plans seem to include visions of exhibition halls filled to the brim with passionately discussing young people, children's museums are a great opportunity. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to adopt several assumptions and meet several conditions.

Firstly, adults' and children's museums should be allowed to speak their own distinct language. I am confident that responsible museum directors can ensure that museum activities meet the requirements of valuable educational initiatives. This is what thousands of specialists – psychologists, educators, anthropologists, and artists ready to cooperate with museums – can do.

Secondly, we should seek close cooperation between "adult" museums and children's museums. This cooperation should bear fruit with coherent systems of general axiological education, binding on all cooperating museums and schools. This is the case in many American cities and in Europe, e.g. in Vienna, Graz, Brussels, or Milan. The enormous educational potential of museums has been exploited in Poland for many years, but there are no embryos of a system that could free schools from fetishizing the core curriculum, giving them the liberty to choose their own teaching methodologies and practices. This would probably create an opportunity for the renewed existence of many museums, which until now have only occasionally been engaged in educational activities. Then, children's museums could fulfil educational tasks similar to those performed by American children's museums, becoming an important link in the system of operation of museums in contemporary culture.

The educational system in Poland assumes that the school is the primary place of education and mainly assigns it the role of a knowledge applicator, ignoring the importance of the process of socialization of children, to whom we should ensure the most frequent possible contact with new places, new people, new experiences, etc. However, even the teaching process on which the school mostly focuses is far more efficient outside school premises and yet teaching is not the only goal of educational activities. No less important are activities aimed at acquiring essential

social competences, e.g. the skills of building interpersonal relations, or developing attitudes and value systems. All of this the child should “experience” rather than listen to or learn about. The classroom is not the best place for this type of activity. In this sense, children’s museums are a great opportunity for the common education system in Poland.

I have a dream ...

I have a dream that building Children’s Museums in Poland should be as obvious as building shopping malls; that children in big cities and small towns might experience the same emotions as their peers in Los Angeles, Graz, Milan, Amsterdam, and Duisburg, so that when they grow up to become mature and socially sensitive people they might endeavour to create theatres, retirement homes, animal shelters, initiate flood relief and nature conservation actions, read books, visit theatres and museums as an obvious element of their active and creative lives. ●

