

# **The Children's Museum for London**

## **A Vision**

*“We must inspire our kids  
to become makers of things,  
not just consumers of things.”*

President Barack Obama  
US National Academy of Sciences, 27 April 2009.

## The Vision

To empower children to discover their potential, celebrate their creativity, and learn to make the best of their talents.

*“The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purpose as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.”*

United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, Principle 7, 1959.

*A dedicated space where  
the adventure of childhood  
can be celebrated.*

*A destination, and  
a point of departure.*

## Introduction

This document argues that we need to take a fresh approach to the enrichment of childhood. It calls for a new space where children and their families can explore and celebrate the creative potential of a child's early years, using the developmental power of play.

The document demonstrates the urgent need for this space, the vision that will shape it, and the principles that will guide the delivery of a London landmark centred on the child of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The proposal is based on extensive research: supporting evidence for our case is presented on the facing pages, as our argument unfolds. A full bibliography is given at the close.

“ Children should be encouraged to go out more, walk more and play outdoors more. Unfortunately . . . all the trends are in the opposite direction: they are going out less, walking less and playing freely less. These factors may be significant contributions to the undesirable trends in children’s health.”

Professor Roger Mackett, University College London  
(Mackett & Paskins 2007:355).

The Office of National Statistics *Time Use Survey, 2005* reports that women spent on average 32 minutes a day on childcare, men 15, the combined average is 24 minutes.

(Lader, Short, & Gershuny 2006:21).

“ Although the majority (74%) of parents say their child has been involved in some form of cultural activity with the family in the last 12 months, one in five say they (20%) have not. Even where parents report that their children have participated in cultural activities, the range of activities they have been involved in is, for some, relatively limited.”

(Ipsos MORI 2009:23).

“ The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born.”

(UNICEF 2007:1). The league table of countries  
is on page two of the report.

“ The evidence is very clear: investing in pre-school years pays most dividends.”

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, author of the report  
*Fair Society, Healthy Lives* (Marmot 2010),  
updating his statistics on child development, 11 February 2011.

“ London still has the highest rates of child poverty of any English region.”

(Trust for London 2011). For details, see  
[www.londonspovertyprofile.org.uk](http://www.londonspovertyprofile.org.uk).

# The Need

Every day, the world of childhood gets smaller. In spite of the apparent wealth of opportunities open to them, in reality children in the United Kingdom are growing up with ever more limited horizons. The time and space to play freely, to travel independently, and to interact with people and places have been declining. This loss of everyday freedom means that young children are being discouraged from imaginative engagement with the outside world. A risk-averse society limits their lives to a narrow space defined by indoor, screen-based activities, by car-confined travel, and controlled, consumer-oriented entertainment. As they are moved between the closely supervised worlds of home, nursery, school, car and shopping mall, they lose touch with more natural and spontaneous ways to flourish.

Childhood is getting lonelier. Families are smaller, and the time that parents spend with their children is shrinking. On average the time that parents spend on childcare is twenty-four minutes a day. One in five children have not taken part in any cultural activities with their family in the past year. A study by the United Nations Children's Fund ranks the United Kingdom in the bottom third of developed countries for child wellbeing, and bottom when measured in terms of family relationships.

Childhood is getting shorter. Children are sexualised at an earlier age, they are exposed to adult life earlier. The pressure is to deliver, not develop. Since the 1980s the time that children spend studying has increased, their time spent playing freely has fallen. Outdoor activities are being replaced by passive entertainment.

Children's early years are being wasted. This is the time when minds are formed and attitudes shaped, yet 44% of all five-year-olds in England are considered by their teachers to be falling behind in their development. There is a poverty of stimulus, a poverty of interaction with the world, and a consequent poverty of experience. In London, there is also simple poverty. Child poverty in Inner London is 44%, in Outer London 37%, affecting 600,000 children. However poverty is experienced, poor children make poor adults.

**The need is for a dedicated space where  
the adventure of childhood can be celebrated.**

“ If we take away the child’s ability, possibility and joy in projecting and exploring, then the child dies. The child dies if we take away from him the joy of questioning, examining and exploring. He dies if he does not sense that the adult is close enough to see how much strength, how much energy, how much intelligence, invention, capacity and creativity he possesses.”

Loris Malaguzzi, deviser of the Reggio Emilia approach to early learning, in (Rinaldi 2006:55-6).

“ A series of paired choices presented to children confirms their strong preferences for playing with friends and family: fully 9 in 10 (89%) would prefer to play with friends rather than watch TV, while a similar proportion (86%) would prefer to play with friends rather than use the internet. Three quarters (73%) would meanwhile prefer to play with their parents than watch TV.”

(Family, Kids and Youth 2010:14).

“ Some have argued that play is children’s work, but I would say that it is far more than this. Play is their self-actualization, a holistic exploration of who and what they are and know and of who and what they might become.”

Pat Broadhead, Professor of Playful Learning at Leeds Metropolitan University (Broadhead 2004:89).

“ The wonderful thing about learning from real objects is that it’s the child who poses the questions about what interests them about the object they have picked up. It is the child who builds on that answer and then follows it up with other questions to build upon that knowledge.”

Janet Stott, Head of Learning, Oxford University Museum of Natural History, quoted in (Tims 2010:84).

“ If societies wish young learners (and learners across the lifespan) to be creative, especially in the science and arts, the young must have free play to watch, imitate, model, discover and explore in the openness afforded by the outdoor world. Most sciences and all arts rely in one way or another on direct experience, sustained practice and creative reflection about meaning.”

Professor Shirley Brice Heath, Stanford University (Brice Heath 2010:122).

## The Mission

Our mission is to provide a place in the heart of London for children and their families, where together they may play, discover, create and learn, in an open and informal environment where childhood is celebrated and enriched.

Our focus on childhood's early years calls for the creation of a space where young children, their families and carers can rediscover a sense of wonder at the world, in an environment that they are empowered to shape and define. Here, they will be encouraged to make connections: between each other, with their fellows, their communities, and the world at large. The space will appeal to the curiosity of children by engaging their minds through their senses. They will be encouraged to touch, interact with and imaginatively explore the experiences they are offered. It will be a place of beauty, delight and awe, where there is time and space to share dreams and possibilities, to make meanings and to enjoy the stimulus of the unexpected. Because children's ideas will be valued, they will learn to value the ideas of others.

The guiding principle of engagement with this space will be play. As academic experts recognise, the hands-on activity of play is a means to knowledge and a process of self-realisation. It is a creative form of learning, that allows the young child to develop at their own pace, and explore at their own will, strengthening their ability to respond to the demands of formal teaching and the opportunities and pressures of modern life. Both children and their families will learn together, about themselves, about each other and the world around them. As the child discovers the world through play, self-confidence is generated. As the child and adult play together, trust develops. Self-confidence and mutual trust equip the child to communicate and learn; the adult to meet and respect the needs of the child. Together they will make the memories that contribute to a secure, confident and grounded personal identity.

**A society that values childhood  
values its purpose and worth.**

“ Learning is a journey of personal, meaningful discovery and development rather than the ingestion of a programme of externally prescribed knowledge.”

Wendy Ellyat, the Unique Child Project (Ellyat 2010:90).

“ When play is child-centered, kids are experimenting, trying new things, often failing but trying again and again to figure things out, all the while employing their curiosity and imagination.”

Richard Winefield, Executive Director,  
Bay Area Discovery Museum (Winefield 2010).

“ Our brain is hardwired to our hands and our eyes and our senses, etc. Knowledge is often very abstract, and when we reify it, which means to make something abstract concrete, that is incredibly helpful... We build knowledge, we evolve it, it changes and we need to reify it.”

Dr Derek Cabrera, Cornell University,  
Founder of ThinkWorks (Cabrera 2010).

“ Manipulation of objects ... is connected to a number of arithmetical and mathematical skills. Manipulation of blocks, for example, is connected to the learning of numbers ... Notions of space and geometry, a lot of abstract thought in many thinkers had to be preceded by manipulation of objects. It is almost a timeless slogan, concrete before the abstract.”

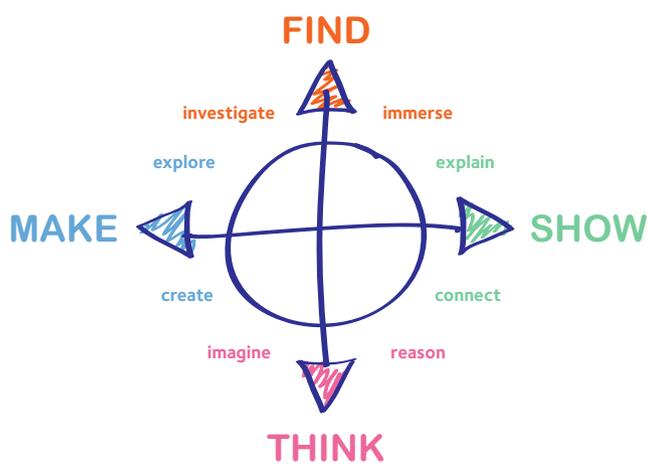
Kevin J. Brehony, Froebel Professor of Early Childhood Studies,  
Roehampton University (Brehony 2010).

“ It's equally important for kids to reconstruct an answer as it is for them to understand how they're reconstructing it... Kids are developing their own meta-cognition, meaning they're understanding how they're thinking. They're thinking about how they're thinking. They have much more confidence because they know how they think about things. They need to distinguish between one thing and another. They know what process is, they know they need to try and develop relationships between ideas. They need to take many different perspectives. They need to organise and connect concepts into systems. If you think about the museum, it's a perfect venue for developing that meta-cognition without the constraints that school systems have.”

Dr Laura Colosi, Cornell University,  
CEO, ThinkWorks (Colosi 2010).

# The Shaping Concept

Play is a form of exploration; learning is a process of experiment and discovery. Both are journeys that call for a compass. A compass situates, and locates, but leaves a free choice of direction to take. The Children's Museum for London will serve as a compass whose quadrants are defined by the four activities that give it its spatial as well as intellectual rationale:



The physical space will house activities that flow into each other in a non-hierarchical manner. The child is at the centre, each one free to find their bearings and chose their own direction. In contrast to the conventional process of traditional 'inter-active' displays, the activities within each domain will be genuinely trans-active and individually responsive, generating encounters and discoveries where the child and the activity have the potential to shape each other. Science and art meet in the common creative process of encountering materials and concepts so as to be able to produce new forms, ideas and understanding.

The compass concept is both literal and metaphorical. It organises ideas within the space; it also reaches out, to make connections with the rest of London, and to what other places and museums have to offer. These connections can be real, or they can be virtual, for the compass also gives shape to the digital links that can be made. Within this museum there are no barriers; its limits are the limits of the imagination.

**The space also suggests itself as an observatory, a place for child-centred research into play and childhood learning.**

**It will be a physical destination, but it will also be a point of departure, a resource for the community.**

“ Children’s life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life. It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money.”

Frank Field, report on the effects of child poverty (Field 2010:5).

“ Culture can play a major role in making the lives of young Londoners fulfilling and enjoyable. There is a huge amount of excellent and diverse work being done across the city by a range of organisations. However, either because of geography or socio-economic background, there remain a significant section of young people who do not access these cultural opportunities.”

The Mayor’s Cultural Strategy for London (GLA 2010:7).

“ London is an epicentre for contemporary art, so in a strategic business sense, you take advantage of the fact that you’re not just in a place that happens to have good artists, you’re in the epicentre for it.”

Robert Sain, Executive Director of the Centre for the Living Arts,  
Mobile, Alabama (Sain 2010).

“ The traditional approach to learning has relied on the transmission, accumulation and reproduction of information on the assumption that we need constantly to build on what has been acquired before ... Many voices are now coming together for a new approach, however, and this is one that relies more on the essential nature of personal ‘meaning making’, learning focused on the excitement and discovery of something new rather than simply a function of memory.”

Wendy Ellyatt, the Unique Child Project (Ellyatt 2010: 89-90).

## Specifics

The Children's Museum for London will be created to serve the interests of 0 to 11-year-olds. It has adopted the term 'museum' because it is part of the 400-strong international Children's Museum movement. London has no institution that is specifically dedicated to developing the creativity and strengthening the resilience of children in the way that has been described. There are already museums and galleries in London that offer forms of engagement to children, but these are usually ancillary to their main purpose, and are driven by curatorial interests that focus on collections. This new institution recovers the original meaning of the word museum, as a place of contemplation and discovery. Here, art and science will have an equal role to play in stimulating creativity and the imagination through hands-on, activity-based exhibits and experiences.

The content will be highly flexible, and responsive to children's input. By encouraging learning by doing, and being always sensitive to their feedback, the idea is that children should become their own curators. It will always be a 'work in progress' as the active participation of children and their families deepens the understanding of child development, and programmes are enhanced through a continuous learning process. Always changing, it will stimulate repeated visits, as visitors return to develop earlier experiences and creations.

The Children's Museum for London will be for all the children of London, most especially for those who may feel culturally excluded by conventional museum and gallery arrangements. The experience of their parents and carers is of equal importance to that of the children. Our purpose is to enhance the lives of both children and adults.

The Children's Museum for London will be designed as a purpose-built contemporary cultural space, with an emphasis on flexibility and accessibility. The choice of site will be determined by the need for good transport links and a socially and culturally appropriate location.

**The Children's Museum for London will be a new museum for the 21st century: by dedicating it to children, we are building for the future.**

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- Two workshops with the Islington Arts and Media School
- One workshop with year three cohort at Latchmere School, Kingston-upon-Thames
- One family workshop with children of mixed ages held in central London

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