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Publisher: Routledge

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## International Journal of Play

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rijp20>

### A more playful museum: exploring issues of institutional space, children's play and well-being

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Published online: 10 Mar 2014.

**To cite this article:** Stuart Lester, Ailsa Strachan & Charlotte Derry (2014): A more playful museum: exploring issues of institutional space, children's play and well-being, International Journal of Play, DOI: [10.1080/21594937.2014.886137](https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2014.886137)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2014.886137>

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## A more playful museum: exploring issues of institutional space, children's play and well-being

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(Received 1 April 2013; accepted 12 December 2013)

Manchester Museum has been participating in an experiment to look at ways of making museum space more playful and by doing so to enhance children's well-being. The aim of this paper is to look at the design, implementation and changes occurring from participation and to set this in a wider discussion around children's presence in traditional museum space, notions of playing and the slippery concept of 'well-being'. Findings from the action research/appreciative inquiry approach developed for this project suggest that increasing attentiveness and sensitivity to children's moments of play throughout the museum has led to co-producing spaces where bodies, symbols, time and materials can take on a different purpose and form, and where temporarily life is a little more pleasurable for everybody.

**Keywords:** play and well-being; museum space; what if ... ; affect; playful disposition

### Introduction

A Visitor Services Assistant (VSA) approaches a small group of children and presents them with a precious and fragile dinosaur egg (a blown goose egg) and asks them if they would take it to the VSA on another gallery. The children smile as one of them takes the egg and they carefully climb the stairs, whispering and giggling amongst themselves. At some point they find the VSA and hand over the egg. A short while later, this VSA passes the egg to another child and it starts over again.

This is a simple intervention in which perception/action, emotions, imaginations, bodies and things become differently ordered to produce a more vibrant moment before returning to normal. But of course, it is not a return to a previous state; this moment of playfulness, or 'being well', creates a sense of alertness to further possibilities that might be present in the environment. The aim of this paper is to explore this intervention process and the ways often common-sense understandings of play, the purpose of museums, children, adults and space can be teased apart to reveal other ways of seeing and acting within these complex productions.

Manchester Museum (MM), in collaboration with external play specialists, was successful in bidding to become a 'Happy Museum'<sup>1</sup> project, funded through the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, with the stated intention to 'enhance the well-being and happiness of children and families who visit the museum, through supporting more opportunities for children's undirected, free play'. This statement reflects a growing appreciation of the contribution museums can make to

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health and well-being and in this case, the focus falls on promoting children's sense of enjoyment and associated beneficial changes in physiology and emotions (Silverman, 2010). Indeed, the key argument of the Happy Museums initiative 'is that by encouraging happiness and well-being museums can play a part in helping people live a good life without costing the earth' (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 8).

Notions of well-being and associated terms such as 'quality of life' (QoL) and 'happiness' now dominate public policy-making (Galloway, 2006), a reflection of the transformation to outcome-based policy and the importance of measuring and monitoring 'what matters' to ensure shrinking public funding is being well-spent and programmes are seen to contribute to government priorities (Ben-Arieh, 2005). Its origins in public policy use can be traced to the medical and economic sector, each with different understandings and application of these terms to their areas of concern. More recently there have been policy initiatives seeking to bring QoL/well-being and happiness to the fore in public accounting (see, e.g. Michaelson, Abdallah, Steuer, Thompson, & Marks, 2009). While well-being has often been an implicit, unstated aim of government policy, it has now gained explicit recognition as a legitimate goal in itself. Museums, as public funded institutions that exist for public benefit, now fall within this accountability process. The all-embracing nature of the concept of well-being 'brings culture to the same policy table as other major policy goals such as health, education and the economy' (Ander et al., 2011, p. 238). Museums are well placed to play an active role in supporting the policy agenda. But taking this opportunity will require 'reimagining some key aspects of their role, both in terms of the kinds of experience they provide to their visitors and the way they relate to their collections, to their communities and to the pressing issues of the day' (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 1).

### **A critical perspective**

While gaining prominence in policy documents the often conflated terms of well-being, QoL and happiness are lacking definition and used inconsistently in the literature; an accepted uniform definition of all of these simply does not exist (Galloway, 2006). The relationship between the conditions of people's lives and the ways they feel about these is extremely complex and requires a textured and multi-layered analysis. Therefore, understandings and applications of well-being are not without problems and along with other all-embracing concepts (e.g. resilience and social capital) have become widely criticised for being both conceptually ambiguous and pervasive (Morrow & Mayall, 2009). When it comes to children there is scant attention paid to subjective expressions of well-being (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009); children are measured against a set of developmental milestones and learning outcomes paying little heed to the ways they experience their lives. Policy initiatives become framed in the context of 'social investment', children as future citizens rather than subjects whose present well-being is important (Prout, 2005). Approaches to evaluating children's well-being apply a deficit approach, i.e. children's well-being is measured by a 'lack of'. Such a stance reinforces the dominance of an individualistic needs agenda in which the identity of children is pre-ordained and applied to determine what may be missing from being normal (Morrow & Mayall, 2009).

An alternative starting point for MM's approach is the widely accepted correlation between playing and well-being in animals and humans (Held & Spinka, 2011; Lester & Russell, 2008). Developing this further, well-being is not a unitary or static condition but an expression of the contingent, complex, dynamic and mutually influential qualities of the biological, psychosocial, economic, cultural, political and material environment (Lester & Russell, *in press*). A state of being well marks the ability of an organism to achieve the most favourable position (internally and externally, pre-consciously and consciously and moment-by-moment) that conditions allow.

The ability to cope with the ongoingness of life involves an alertness and vigilance to the surrounding environment and a response—ability to take advantage of conditions by forming connections with other bodies, materials and so on that collectively increase the power to act. These formations, or assemblages, constitute the foundations of well-being or what may be referred to as happiness (Damasio, 2010). The implications from this will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

### **A conceptual framework**

While most museums nowadays have specific areas designated as ‘children’s spaces’ (Mayfield, 2005) the approach developed by MM followed a different route by paying attention to the conditions under which children’s playful dispositions may be actualised; thus all available museum space is perceived as potentially playable. However, along with the idea of well-being, concepts of play and space are highly slippery and certainly do not lend themselves to any simplistic cause–effect relationship; when placed alongside the other significant elements of the production of museum space (adults, artefacts, children and so on) the issue becomes even more messy. At the outset, MM recognised the need for a shift in thinking about these complex and interrelated productions to instigate a deeper appreciation of the relationship between play and well-being. As such, the opening period explored and articulated key concepts underpinning the design and implementation of the project and briefly summarised here. However, it should be pointed out that while these are presented under separate headings they are mutually entangled and shape each other in complex ways.

### **Children as museum visitors**

Traditionally, museums have been seen as the repository of artefacts from history (recent and ancient) encased and displayed in order to provide information about past times. Certainly the Victorian neo-Gothic splendour of MM offers a space of enchantment and mystery, presenting the spectator with a sense of discovery and fascination. Children’s position in museum space is primarily the ‘learning child’, a perspective which privileges cognitive knowledge/information acquisition, self-control and rationality. Their experiences of museums are generally through accompanied visits where adults perform varying degrees of guidance with children: some children may wander around fairly independently, while for others, parents are keen to share knowledge and keep children under close supervision. In the majority of cases adults clearly see a museum visit as a broadly educational experience and support activity seen to be educationally purposeful, while being ambivalent about other forms of behaviour such as running in the museum. Hackett’s (2012) study reveals that parents discuss the benefits of museum visits in a discourse of learning even though this may not align with their own lived experiences and observations of how children use and enjoy museum space. Undoubtedly children will come to the museum with a range of desires, expectations and experiences which may contrast with adult intentions and idealised images of children as eager discoverers of fascinating objects (Jordanova, 2006).

Whatever children’s visiting mode, their presence and movement is subject to adult gaze, expectations and control. This is evident from Milligan and Brayfield’s (2004, p. 294) study in which a museum attendant expressed the following:

First and foremost, we don’t want them playing with anything, we don’t want them fidgeting with anything. And then before they ever enter through the doors, they get a little lesson on not touching

and not running and not leaning on the walls and that is also done in a questioning mode so that they are answering what they are supposed to do and not supposed to do.

At a wider level of analysis, children's positioning in museums is a reflection of a broader construct of childhood that prevails in the UK. There are legal, cultural and biological boundaries of being a child in any society which establish distinctions between maturity and immaturity; the condition of childhood is placed in direct and inferior relation to adulthood. Children are children because they are not yet adult and as such need to be safely guided and progressed to grow up. Childhood, thus, is a conceptual scheme embedded with power relations in which adult rationality and autonomy hold value as the most desirable qualities. Such value separates and situates children in islands of institutional spaces in which adult practices act upon immaturity; they not only fix children in the right time/spaces, but also situate adults as apart from children, to the detriment of both groups.

### **An alternative perspective**

While this broad perspective on childhood has shaped educational and social policy and associated adult beliefs and practices, the interdisciplinary field of the social studies of childhood counters universal truth claims about childhood and development by repositioning children as social actors in their worlds. However, in doing so it perpetuates a binary distinction between childhood as either natural or a social construction (Prout, 2005). The challenge is to develop a new set of conceptual tools that can work with the multiple, messy and mundane ways in which children actively construct their lives. The social and the biological are mutually and reciprocally implicated and development is not a universal teleological process but a continuous variation occurring through the ongoing myriad encounters of heterogeneous materials and bodies in assemblages (Duff, 2010). Bodies are constantly shaped and re-shaped as things happen (Thrift, 2008).

Spaces, rather than being physical containers for action, are produced through interrelations operating at many scales of influence. They are always spheres of possibility brought about by the coexistence of multiple bodies, things, histories, imaginations and so on which collide, combine, intermingle and fall away (Massey, 2005). Spaces are never fixed or complete but are constantly being produced and reproduced through encounters. At the same time such productions are inevitably a reflection of relations of power that find expression in a range of materials and practices. Spaces are not natural or neutral; dominant forces claim legitimacy to situate children into the right space and mode of behaviour. Thus, the prevailing, common-sense production of museum space may be educational; the exhibits are designed to inform in a cause-effect manner and space is specialised with clear boundaries and zones of inclusion/exclusion.

Yet no matter what dominant accounts seek to impose, spaces are always open to other interpretations and formations or 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), in which intense desires redistribute time and space and create gaps in order to become differently or dis-ordered. It marks the capability of bodies to affect and be affected to produce moments of joyful union with others (bodies and materials) and to avoid assembly with things lessening a capability to act. It is an 'accretion of feelings, capacities, opportunities and interactions' (Duff, 2011, p. 149) in a singular moment of being well. Rather than passive subjects of adult desires for progress and the repository of adult hope of a better tomorrow, children have their own desires or a productive force that finds expression through creative acts or what is referred to here as play (Lester, 2013).

### **Playing in the museum**

For many, the terms 'play' and 'museum' may not seem particularly compatible with one another. Play is often associated with non-sense, enjoyment and pleasure, while museums are generally



held to be serious places for education. The connection of play with learning, or what Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to as the progress rhetoric, gives licence to adults to provide those forms of play which can clearly be shown to have educational value while at the same time prohibiting play behaviours perceived to be frivolous and purposeless. This is clearly evident in many of the dedicated areas set aside for children in museums, and in the promotion of discovery through play (Mayfield, 2005). The intention here is not to diminish this valuable role of museums but rather to present a more extensive account of the nature and value of play with particular reference to museums as spaces of children's well-being.

A narrow perspective of play and learning fails to take account of the defining characteristics of play, namely its 'as if' quality, spontaneity, tenor of pleasure, unpredictability, and the ways children collectively maintain control of being out of control (Lester & Russell, 2008). Playing involves the creation of uncertainty, testing bodies and materials to see what more may be done. Thus rather than developing skills, as the extensive literature on play and learning would suggest, playing represents the actualisation of children's desire to co-create moments in which bodies and materials are reconfigured into new, more pleasurable and interesting arrangements. These moments are often fleeting and occur in and between the apparently mundane routines and spaces of children's everyday lives. But such moments matter for children and act as indicators of being well (Held & Spinka, 2011). This can be illustrated by a brief example (Lester, 2013, p. 22) introduced to museum staff:

Two young children, a boy and a girl, are sitting playing with some 'goeey' stuff, when the following conversation occurs:

Boy: What about if everything was made out of goeey?

Girl: Well, hmm, we would actually have all goo on our bums and stuff and we'd be all goeey and poeey and boeey

The boy laughs

Boy: What if everything was made out of poo, eugh!

Girl: Err, we would all have poo on our bums

Boy: And what about poo people?

Girl: Yuck

Boy: And what about poo willy's!

Girl: No [boys name], no

Boy: What about poo trees

Girl: Yuck

Boy: What about, this is the worstest thing, what about poo leaves!

Girl: Why would you want to make poo leaves?

Boy: What if everything was made out of poo?

Girl: I dunno

This example is significant for the phrase 'what if'. The desire to play is a particular disposition or positive state of arousal to the world; an anticipatory readiness that perceives the possibility of 'things' for imaginative and creative action (Bennett, 2010). Using bodies, ideas and materials in novel, creative and apparently irrational combinations temporarily suspend the limitations of the real world and allow exciting affective substitutes to emerge (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Extensive research suggests that the production of such moments has immediate benefits in terms of enhancing capabilities to flourish and cope with the demands of an uncertain world (Lester & Russell,

2008; Spinka, Newberry, & Bekoff, 2001). The joy of co-creation produces emotionally vivid, moderate, desirable stress and initiates playful resolutions. Such experiences contribute to refining a range of adaptive systems commonly associated with resilience and well-being (Burghardt, 2005; Lester & Russell, 2008). What is produced (i.e. made) rarely has application to real world contexts, but as Sutton-Smith (1997) asserts, the processes engaged in play may trickle down into other forms of relationships – but not in a deterministic manner.

This moves away from adult beliefs about the utilitarian and causal value of play to improve outcomes towards a more holistic stance. It also marks a shift from locating children as having deficiencies or lacking and therefore in need of guidance and control to one which acknowledges children as competent and capable in developing self-protecting mechanisms enabling them to better survive and thrive in the many localised environments they encounter in their daily lives (Lester & Russell, 2010). From this perspective, playing assumes a different utopian impulse by creating time/space in which things are better (emotionally, relationally, environmentally, behaviourally and so on) and life can simply go on. They represent brief moments of positively charged affect enlivening the practicalities of the everyday (Kraftl, 2008). Given this and with particular reference to MM's project, attention becomes focused on the conditions which may enable children's playful dispositions to be actualised throughout the museum as well as providing dedicated spaces for structured play activities. The challenge is to design environments allowing for:

... excitement, wonder and the unexpected; children living childhoods not entirely ordered and determined for them by adults and their preoccupations; relationships and experiences that are not defined or legitimated only in terms of work and outcomes; the value of play and playfulness in its own right, and not just as a means to other ends. (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 111)

### **Developing an approach**

At the heart of cultural institutions lies the intrinsic value of the encounter and interaction between object, space and person (Holden, 2006); 'intrinsic values are better thought of then as the capacity and potential of culture [and spaces of culture] to affect us, rather than as measurable and fixed stocks of worth' (Holden, 2006, p. 15). In relation to children's presence in the museum, we take this intrinsic value to suggest children are more than passive observers and learners: they also have an intensive desire to play with the possibilities the environment affords. Without this value the other two points identified by Holden in his model, namely instrumental value (the ancillary effects of culture in achieving some stated policy objective) and institutional value (the processes and approaches cultural institutions adopt to create value for the public), are diminished.

Yet it is often the instrumental value that takes precedence in the design of museum space for children; such value also determines the so-called objective outcomes by which success is measured. Holden (2006) comments that proving any cause-effect relationship between culture and desired social outcomes is difficult to establish due to the complexity of personal interactions and the specific context in which it occurs, along with the multiple variables impacting on experience. Of particular relevance to this project is Holden's discussion of institutional value and the ways the museum both perceives and engages with the public. A full discussion around the issue of developing an organisational ethos supporting playfulness is beyond the scope of this paper although this was vitally important in creating conditions for change. The main focus of attention for what follows is the collaborative work undertaken with the VSA team using an integrated action research (AR) and appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Egan & Lancaster, 2005). Rather than present the issue as a problem, an integrated AR/AI approach begins with revealing the



positive capacity within the team to enhance the possibilities for moments of play to emerge throughout the museum. In-depth qualitative interviews with four experienced Gallery staff at strategic stages throughout the process, casual and regular on-Gallery conversations, and semi-structured interviews with personnel across a range of face-to-face and management roles following the opening workshop sessions collected rich data of existing practices and routines that produce museum space and influence children's playful presence in the museum. This was thematically analysed using an inductive approach focusing on the positive stories, observations and experiences identified by interviewees. Findings from this process were used to continually shape and maintain an open and creative approach to project design and implementation. It is important to highlight that these iterations did not produce inert data 'waiting to be in/formed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems' (MacLure, 2013, p. 660). There are considerable a limitations in seeking to represent the messy and complex processes involved and there is a tendency to order stories into a coherent and linear pattern (Thrift, 2008). If only life was readily reducible to such neat explanations. AR/AI provides a framework for working with and reconfiguring the situated knowledge and practices of the adults charged with the everyday production of gallery spaces. It also allows for an experimental approach; it is a 'what if ...' stance that holds-off, as far as possible, the prediction of what will happen, developing the capability to work with emergence. Thus it is accepted things will happen, but what this will look like is inevitably and desirably (given we are working with children's play) unknown. It is recognised as things emerge (ideas, events, feelings, behaviours and so on) further experiments can be created to increase collective awareness of how playful space works. It is a process of continuous knowledge creation rather than reproduction.

### What happened?

This section will pay attention to some of the significant processes and events that emerged from the research programme. As discussed above, there is much more going on than can be presented here, yet there is considerable value in outlining some of the everyday things which happened to give a sense of the overall approach. In line with the project itself, it will resist as far as possible drawing cause-effect relationships and definitive conclusions.

*Stage 1.* The intention of this stage was to surface the diverse ways museum space is currently produced by VSAs. One significant theme that emerged from interviews was a sense of shifting roles over the past 2 or 3 years, from a traditional security function to a more informal and informative role. This has been accompanied by attempts to make the museum more child-friendly, although as one VSA noted:

... it can get a bit overwhelming with the noise particularly on busy weekends, bank holidays when there's lots of children running around and ... which I sort of, well it's great that people are making use of the museum but at times I do feel sorry for the people who want to come to a museum and study ... quietly and there's no way that they can do that. Also the way the museum has gone, made steps, been more child friendly but some of the galleries ... I'm a bit of a traditionalist and they seem a bit experimental and a bit lacking in information ... I mean you can't please everyone, but if it goes too much towards too child friendly I always have the worry that it will be a bit sort of devoid of information that want that [sic].

This neatly summarises a consistent dilemma identified in this opening period between the playing and learning child and children's wider presence in the museum.

Another important theme was daydreaming and imagination. VSAs acknowledged they had numerous ways of responding when a gallery was devoid of visitors. One VSA commented on the importance of reverie and imagination – 'you sort of become good at daydreaming very quickly in

this job' – while another shared her way of dealing with the quiet periods by balancing along a narrow line formed by the mosaic pattern on the floor, trying not to 'fall off'. These responses would suggest that, as adults, they are still actively engaged in moments of playfulness. Discussions also covered responses to children's imaginings, which were particularly influenced by the film series 'A Night at the Museum'. Some assistants adopted a fairly neutral response to children's questions about whether the exhibits came alive at night. One VSA remarked that when adults encourage children's imaginations and seek confirmation from the VSAs, their response is 'usually I would tell them I don't know because I'm not around at night ... I couldn't say whether they do or not'. But another VSA commented that they would readily play along with the idea by affirming they had been present when things came to life at night.

*Stage 2.* Two workshop sessions further explored issues of space, children's play and VSA roles to think creatively and differently about the museum as playful space. The sessions introduced play as moments of 'what if', elaborated by a series of playful prompts requiring an imaginative and physical re-working of bodies (e.g. what if heads were where our bottoms are?) and various other shared moments of differently ordering space and materials. The primary focus was to appreciate that children's play is not something bounded in time and space but emerges anywhere conditions (internal and external) allow. It also invited VSAs to view children's presence in galleries through a playful lens. The approach acknowledges it is possible for bodies to learn to be affected (Latour, 2004) and VSAs can, with practice, distinguish more and more subtle movements that are the mark of children's playfulness. One VSA commented that his attention was drawn towards a child who appeared to have created an imaginative game and associated movements involving the pattern of tiles in the main entrance, something perhaps previously unnoticed. Slowing down to pay closer attention also initiated a conversation with the parent who commented that of all the things in the museum this seemed to be the most attractive at this time. This recollection, rather than objective classification, reveals the ways in which child, adult, floor tiles and so on assemble to produce a singular moment of movement and playfulness. It also marks an enhanced ability to look at the opportunistic formations that occur anywhere and everywhere and to reveal these relationships by telling their stories (Ingold, 2011). This stage also paid attention to ways in which VSAs may be able to develop spatial provocations to enhance the profusion of playful moments. The intention here was to design for creativity and emergence rather than look for cause-effect relationships, reinforcing an experimental approach to simply see 'what might happen if ... ?'

*Stage 3.* Following the workshop sessions there were further informal discussions in the galleries between VSAs and researchers, leading to the emergence of a series of experiments. The first of these was a chance occurrence in the Discovery Centre, where hoops were placed in a curving line on the floor in an empty space between two of the activity rooms. What was immediately apparent was the lure of this arrangement for a different way of moving through this space for both children and adults, with hopping, skipping, jumping and racing behaviours seen in a short period of time, and accompanying playful banter and laughter. Further 'what if's' followed, including marking a hopscotch grid in the Living Worlds gallery which immediately changed the feel of space from passive observation to one in which visitors moved differently, creating moments of playful lingering as children and adults congregated around and played on the grid. As more experiments were conducted, momentum and enthusiasm increased, with a mixture of directed prompts such as leaving newspapers and tape underneath an empty display cabinet with a sign stating 'One of our dinosaurs is missing, can you replace it by making a model from newspaper and tape?' and more open-ended spatial arrangements. This is exemplified by a provocation in which a VSA simply laid a length of paper towel along the middle of the gallery floor and stood back, admitting to a sense of wonder about what might happen. One

child wandered alongside, asking his father ‘what is this for?’ and receiving a reply ‘I don’t know’. Shortly afterwards, another child started to walk along the roll, careful to both stay on the paper and also not to tear it. More children followed and as they reached the end turned around and started to walk back. This created a further challenge as children moving in opposite directions now had to negotiate their way past each other. At one point, the length of paper was torn and the children quickly moved in to tear up the remainder of the length of paper with their feet, leaving fragments of kitchen roll scattered across the floor.

Interventions generally occurred during the week-end and holiday periods, interspersed with more concentrated events organised around a specific theme making a more explicit connection with some of the exhibits, but still retaining an element of playfulness. For example, an ‘animal’ day saw a prompt to make shelters for animals on display and a VSA noted ‘children take on the role of being the animal that they are building a den for; “I’m an otter, I’m an otter” coming from a child inside a cardboard box’. The stories generated from this process are numerous; what was evident was the VSA’s growing confidence to experiment with no expectation other than their own curiosity to see what might happen, and an intuitive intention to open up space to more possibilities for play.

*Stage 4.* While separated here for ease of presentation, the process of continuous review, sharing stories, observations and interviews underpinned and informed every stage of the programme. Most notable are the comments collected from VSA interviews discussing both children’s behaviour and their growing appreciation of the nature of their role. This VSA response epitomises a common perception about changes:

... since it started children do seem to be more comfortable and confident with expressing their feelings, i.e. running about ... the parents don’t seem to be saying ‘quiet’ as much or holding their children.

Another experienced VSA commented: it is ‘not like traditionally where they come to the museum and see a set amount of things, but coming and being surprised. They arrive expecting one thing and getting that and something else, they get more excited because they were not expecting it’. It also became apparent that some VSAs quickly grasped the essence of the approach: ‘you are encouraging a playful way of looking at the museum; you are not changing what’s there’. Another made the telling point that the approach ‘breaks routine [this project is] seen as being more multi-level; it makes two dimensional space more multidimensional’, while another noted ‘what I have realised is it’s the simple things, not the big elaborate things that have worked’.

VSAs have also remarked on attitudinal changes to children’s playful presence and a common theme to emerge is how this has led to an increase in their own levels of enjoyment and ‘feeling much more relaxed’. But perhaps the most telling observation is the following edited story about a VSA who initially ‘struggled’ with the approach:

... a VSA approached me to show a photo she had taken of a baby sitting on one of our empty handling tables with a revolving circle in the middle, normally for showing objects. The baby has been sat there by her mum and was being spun round. The VSA who observed this, let it happen ... Observing the baby on the handling table the way she did, without getting involved to break the moment of play between the mother and baby or being concerned about a ‘Health and Safety’ issue that didn’t exist, signified a huge breakthrough in her understanding the concept of what we were trying to do with the project. She recognised that moment of play and was able to step back and let it happen ... She said it was because she realised there was fun to be had if she relaxed and let it happen. For me though, it wasn’t just a case of letting fun happen, it was that she recognised the moment of play, its significance and she shared it.

This highlights and reinforces our view that the approach is much more than intervening in the physical environment. A growing attentiveness to the ways in which children's bodily performances take place and create moments of shared playfulness has enhanced affective capacities to reveal new forms of engagement and responsibility, 'fostering a heightened sense for what might be possible' (Popke, 2009, p. 84).

## Discussion

What these illustrations reveal is a growing sense of playfulness emerging through the museum, with and apart from VSAs, discovered materials, and museum exhibits. But of course it is not unproblematic; the tensions around the purpose of museum space and children's position have been reduced but habitual questions of the value of the approach in terms of learning outcomes and relevance to the collections are still present in some conversations with VSAs and senior management. The continuing challenge is to value play and education as mutually influential, but distinctive, processes. It also raises important issues around children's presence in shared space, as child/citizens and not citizens-in-waiting, and the ways in which children and adults might get on together rather than privilege the needs of one over another. Such issues relate to the wider organisational context, and significantly MM has embarked on an explicitly stated mission to become a 'playful museum' as a way of maintaining and sustaining this approach.

Research clearly indicates that adult participation in cultural activity has significant health benefits (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013) arising from the intrinsic value of the complex encounter between artefacts, space and people. The argument presented here is that intrinsic cultural value for children, and by association health and well-being, may be more than an aesthetic response to objects, but lies with the broader potential of museum space, and all that this contains, to create playful moments that for the time of playing simply and temporarily makes the rest of life worth living (Sutton-Smith, 2003). Play spaces are co-created in a series of encounters and associations that collectively generate potential health benefits. As such, the entire museum can be seen as a health-enabling space (Duff, 2011) and attention is drawn to realising the potential of the space to support children's well-being; an 'over-emphasis on the collection as the starting point, and an unduly limited sense of social purpose, can lead to museums missing opportunities' (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 5).

Visitors (both children and adults) might not be immediately aware of changes; there are no grand displays or exhibitions, no programme of planned events, but as they wander through the museum, they may be surprised by strange juxtapositions of objects or engage with VSAs in a playful and imaginative manner. It also creates a sense of alertness to the possibilities present with and beyond the exhibits; the space invites children and adults to be playful throughout the museum. Children's opportunity to co-create moments of difference may also lead to a re-enchantment of museum space for all visitors and staff; 'an open, ready-to-be-surprised disposition before, in and with the world' (Woodyer & Geoghegan, 2012, p. 2) to reveal how the world might be otherwise. A 'what if' stance problematises rather than seeks neat solutions, it is deliberately speculative, outcomes not fixed or pre-determined and problems not completely resolved but constantly reformulated.

Talking about play becomes embedded into the formal and informal relational processes occurring within the museum; it has aroused a sense of curiosity among the staff and an increased sensibility and alertness to the ways children can develop moments of playfulness as they move through the space; VSAs are engaged in a continuous process of learning to be affected. As with the children carrying the egg through the museum, it cannot return to where it was. MM, through its participation in the Happy Museum's programme, has disturbed habitual ways of perceiving

children and the production of museum space, and by doing so has destabilised traditional accounts and left space for further playful disturbance.

Through these disturbances, and the potential of more to come, it could be hypothesised that there would be a further increase in the well-being of staff and visitors. The extent of this could be the subject of a further research study, widening sector understandings and developing practice.

### Acknowledgements

The authors' thanks to Emma-Louise Simpson for sharing the observation of 'what if ...', the VSAs and management team at MM who embraced the experimental approach in highly creative ways and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Happy Museum's programme for funding and guidance to support the 'Playful Museums' project. They also thank the two anonymous referees who provided valuable guidance on the first draft of this article.

### Note

1. Full details of the Happy Museums programme can be found at: <http://www.happymuseumproject.org/>.

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