
WALKING ON THE LINES

“She’s walking the lines on the museum floor and it seems to be the most interesting thing for her, here, right now!”



In this short article, Charlotte Derry proposes that this observation might help us think about how we might bring people closer to our museum’s purpose - through an appreciation and engagement with play and way-fairing, setting the scene for the themes of the next Messing around in the Museum workshop on November 5th.

An everyday occurrence: Playing on the floor tiles at the museum could be more insightful than it may first appear.

“There are large square floor tiles in the main entrance to the museum. A young girl is carefully balancing along the grooves between the tiles in a seemingly random fashion. A short while later another girl joins in, setting her own pattern of movements. As they pass each other, the new arrival turns to the first child and says, “What happens if you fall off?” (Rules for a Playful Museum, 2015, p.4).

When Museum staff are encouraged to pay close attention to the behaviour of people in their immediate environment, it can produce stories of movement and relationships that may previously have been unremarkable. The story of the girls walking the lines of the museum was recounted by a Visitor Services Assistant at Manchester Museum, who had ‘slowed down’ and begun to pay attention to how these mo(ve)ments emerge:

“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”. (Lester, Strachan and Derry 2014, p.31).



Manchester Museum 2014

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LESTER, STRACHAN & DERRY

By sharing our stories of how children move and how people generally move and behave, we can pool our knowledge to think about how we can work with what we know about human beings in our work contexts, and how we might make our environments attractive, playful places. And by playful places we mean places sympathetic to how people, (children and adults alike), want to come together, move freely, relax, be stimulated, and create a relationship with the space, objects and people that are around them.

As Tim Ingold suggests “We are not separate from our environment but intimately interconnected with it. Lines have no start or end point..., there is only movement and flow.

Lines are always in movement and relationship with something else. Unlike separate, static blobs, lines have vivacity, flexibility. They give us life itself.”

(Ingold, 2015).

“....Letting go of some of our concerns about playful way-fairing may bring visitors more comfortably and closer to us....”

Working together to see how we can improve our environments in relation to the people who use them is always the focus of the *Messing Around in the Museum* events. Our next one on November 5th at Chester Zoo looks at how observation and playful experiments can result in strategic change, as well as help build confidence in letting go of some of our concerns about playful way-fairing which may bring visitors more comfortably and closer to us.

For more info about Messing about in Museums see <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/messing-around-at-the-museum-radical-and-serious-tickets-50352127569?aff=erelexpmlt>

For some fascinating reads on the importance of lines, play, stories and museums see:

<https://takeplayseriously.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/april-july-2016-museum-stories-all.pdf>

<http://happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/International-Journal-of-Play-Article-Manchester-Museum.pdf>

<http://canada2017.ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/8A-Playful-movements-and-the-creation-of-play-space....pdf>

(References in this article can be found in the links provided above).

Charlotte Derry is a Play and Museums Consultant and an Associate of The Happy Museum.

This short piece is adapted from *A More Playful Museum*, *International Journal of Play* (Lester, Strachan and Derry 2014, p.31) and from *Playful movements and the creation of play-spaces: exploring the dilemma of ‘planning for play’ A Presentation for IPA Triennial conference: (Wendy Russell and Stuart Lester, University of Gloucestershire, UK 2017, in Calgary, Canada).*