Turning Outward: The Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh

By Suzanne McCaffrey and Chris Siefert

After World War II, an unmistakable decline began in Pittsburgh’s North Side neighborhood, once a thriving, prosperous area. The postwar expansion of highways and suburbs uprooted 5,000 North Side residents (Carlin, 1993). Beginning in the 1960s, an urban renewal and redevelopment effort overhauled the former city center: the central market and department store were torn down, along with churches and ethnic neighborhoods, to be replaced by a hermetic shopping mall and apartment buildings. The new center of the North Side blocked direct access to its other neighborhoods from downtown Pittsburgh. Business—and the entire city of Pittsburgh—began a steady decline when the steel industry collapsed in the 1970s and 1980s (City-Data.com, n.d.).
The Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh (pittsburghkids.org) opened its doors in 1983 in the basement of the historic Post Office Building located at the heart of the North Side’s reconfigured center. Along with other North Side institutions, including the National Aviary and Carnegie Science Center, the children’s museum was part of an enhanced cultural infrastructure initiated by concerned citizens’ groups and local philanthropy. While Pittsburgh was struggling with losing its industrial powerhouse identity, a number of civic-minded foundations endowed by the largess of that period had the means and the desire to support cultural assets.

The North Side was still challenged by poverty and urban decay into the 1990s—and yet public and private support grew for an interactive, family-centric institution. The museum expanded in 1987 but exceeded its capacity by 1998, welcoming more than 100,000 visitors annually. Encouraged by this growth—and spurred by the needs expressed by other local child-oriented organizations—the museum elected to continue to expand its current facility rather than relocate, transforming into a North Side cultural campus. Following the model of high-tech incubator hubs in Silicon Valley, the campus would gather child-focused cultural, educational, social, and advocacy services that would benefit from sharing space, ideas, and resources.

In the nearly two decades since this process began, we at the museum have witnessed how “turning outward”—engaging the community and participating in cultural and civic collaborations—can lead to positive change. Such partnerships have brought success and opportunity not just for ourselves but for the North Side and the City of Pittsburgh as a whole.
CREATING A CULTURAL CAMPUS

We launched the $29 million expansion project with a community engagement initiative, gathering stakeholders and local experts to discuss what they would want in such a space. Their feedback crystallized into five major points. The resulting center should 1) respond to the needs of children and families in a sustainable manner, 2) provide exhibits based on a “play with real stuff” philosophy, 3) preserve the historic nature of the buildings, 4) use the potential of technology, and 5) improve access and connections to North Side neighborhoods in a cost-effective, innovative fashion.

In 2000, these ideas were used as a design brief for a National Endowment for the Arts-funded competition to help select the architect and design for the expansion. The result, completed in 2004, offers a varied yet illustrative opportunity for learning through real-world tools, materials, and processes. Exhibits present opportunities to learn and create alongside teaching artists. Technology is layered into the visitor experience—embedded into interactive artworks, for example—to encourage further exploration.

The museum worked with the City of Pittsburgh Historic Review Commission and the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation to preserve the two historic structures—the Old Post Office and the adjacent former Buhl Planetarium Building—that bookend the expanded facility. Both inside and out, sustainability is a key focus: by building its own exhibits and working directly with artists, the museum remains fresh and innovative. At the same time, we are creating a burgeoning business by renting exhibits, selling component designs, and consulting for other institutions.

At 80,000 square feet (7,432 square meters), quadruple its original size, the museum saw attendance soar to well over 200,000 in the first year after the expansion, a figure that has grown every year since. Free admission days, youth programs coordinated with local schools, and subsidized admission for low-income families and schools strengthen our ability to serve all families.

The facility also is home to five partner organizations working for or on behalf of children: the Saturday Light Brigade, a family radio program; the University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out-of-School Environments (UPCLOSE); Reading Is Fundamental Pittsburgh; Allies for Children, a
child advocacy organization; and two preK/Head Start classrooms of Pittsburgh Public Schools. The museum has collaborated in many ways with its neighbors. UPCLOSE has provided an in-house researcher to explore our questions on visitor satisfaction and traffic, exhibit development, and family learning, for example. The preK students regularly explore our exhibits to expand their lessons, and we invite these young guests to special events and photo shoots. The directors of the museum and its partner organizations meet regularly to share agendas and join forces when opportunities arise.

REVIVING THE CITY’S CHARMS

After expanding, our next step was to work with the City of Pittsburgh, the Andy Warhol Museum, and the Northside Leadership Conference, a coalition of community-based organizations, to renovate a nearby vacant theater. The children’s museum served as the lead fundraiser and the design and construction manager and provided leadership, accounting services, and parking for the theater once it opened. The $2.5 million project was completed in September 2006. Today, the New Hazlett Theater is a thriving cultural asset offering a variety of performances and community services, as well as an active participant in planning future developments and forming new connections in the North Side.

This success furthered the idea that the North Side is full of cultural assets—“charms” dotting the community—that could link into a “bracelet,” enlivening the area with a sense of creativity, connectedness, and responsibility. With the museum in a leadership role, the Charm Bracelet Project was launched in 2006 to inspire neighboring cultural institutions to collaborate on creative projects related to community life. In this way, the many and varied organizations of the North Side bring forth what they do best. Public art and performance, environmental stewardship, stakeholder and community events, and outdoor recreation all converge in a renewed sense of local place-making.

Concurrently in 2007, we set our sights on reinvigorating a long-neglected city-owned park right outside our doors. Part of the original cultural campus vision of 2000, the renovation would provide an outwardly visible face for the transformations that had been happening inside the museum for more than a decade. In keeping with our previously successful process, the museum led discussions, tours, and creative activities with residents, community groups, and city officials to understand the wishes for this historic site. We learned of desires to honor the site’s history, create a multiuse space, and provide an urban park setting for families to explore during museum visits. We raised more than $6 million to rejuvenate the park and again served as design and construction manager for the project. Completed in 2012, Buhl Community Park returned a historic part of the North Side to use for the entire community and provides another accessible place to meet, lunch, and make connections. The museum offers various programming in the park space, such as our Summer Solar Concert Series.

To continue expanding our cultural campus, the museum is currently pursuing the renovation of another vacant city-owned property, a former library. In keeping with the community’s wishes, the result, on track for completion in 2018, will transform a neglected asset into a multiuse facility, with several onsite partners and a training center for teachers.

Over the past decade and a half, the North Side
has turned a corner and is now a thriving and desirable district. Even the hermetic mall at the center of it all has undergone a dramatic transformation. It is now the site for the city’s Maker Faire, a family-friendly festival celebrating invention, craft, tinker- ing, art, engineering, and much more, hosted by the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh.

REFERENCES:

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WHY SHOULD SCIENCE CENTERS AND MUSEUMS “TURN OUTWARD”?

- We are community anchors, offering expertise, leadership, facilities, and (sometimes) funding that can be mobilized in support of change.
- We work at the neighborhood scale and collaborate across multiple sectors (including education, economic development, housing, public safety, health, and arts).
- Our missions call for it, as we enhance quality of place, quality of life, and broader social goals.

SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES FOR TURNING OUTWARD

- Recognize and work within your sphere of influence. Utilize staff’s expertise, look for ways to make unique contributions, and always remember your mission.
- STRETCH. Embrace the idea that turning outward benefits both the institution and the community. Instead of thinking about such contributions as an obligation, they must become part of the institutional DNA.
- Share and join agendas. Familiarize yourselves with potential partners’ interests and priorities, and prepare to share your own.
- Ask and listen. Question both your staff and the community on how the museum can make connections and become more central to local life.
- Be willing to give up control. Your greatest contribution may be in a supporting role, with others taking the lead on management, oversight, or operations.
- Employ improvisational techniques because you do not know what will come next. The scene is created as you go.

—S.M. and C.S.