



This is a repository copy of *Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/128904/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Birch, J. (2018) Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience. *Children's Geographies*, 16 (5). pp. 516-528. ISSN 1473-3285

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1447088>

Reuse

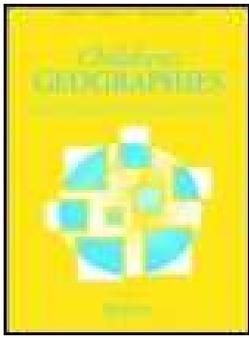
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience

Jo Birch

To cite this article: Jo Birch (2018): Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience, Children's Geographies, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2018.1447088](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1447088)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1447088>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 198



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience

Jo Birch 

Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Museum designers, curators and educators have traditionally emphasised children as a group of learners but children are also experiencers and players. Exploring frameworks of understanding, based on packaging and person matter intra-actions of new materialism, leads me to propose the development of an imaginative alternative to the learning rhetoric. An alternative lies in thinking collectively about children's and adult's museum experiences, offering: a rarely considered presentation of adults and young children as alike and a much-needed unpacking of the adult-child binary. In proposing a challenge to the generalisability of children's museum experience, an emphasis is placed on ambiguity and openness of experience. I suggest that matter is acknowledged as agential for children, as for adults and children may more freely be understood as humans entangled with the nonhuman and with each other.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 June 2017
Accepted 31 January 2018

KEYWORDS

Unpackaging childhood;
adult-child binary; museums;
new-materialism; spatial
design; ambiguity

1. Introduction

This paper is structured around the idea that we face a particular 'problem' or situation that is relevant for the design of museums for children and for thinking about children's experience of museums. This problem is centred around a difficulty with over-packaging of the child as distinct and separate from adults and embedded within this problem is an undercurrent of children being defined as a group of learners (Falk 2015; Mayfield 2005; Hackett 2014). For scholars of social studies of childhood and of children's geographies, the value of this paper is in urging recognition of the museum as (yet another) space in which children are problematically packaged according to perceived differences. A wake-up call is offered – to question how far we have come since acknowledging the manifold ways in which children have been negatively packaged and othered in public space where they are not wanted or wanted only as a certain kind of body. Those spaces have included: the street (Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 2000; Woolley, Hazelwood, and Simkins 2011) and neighbourhood and residential spaces (Malone 2002; Skelton, Gough, and Brown 2013). Also valuable to childhood and geographical studies is the consideration of children's museum experiences *in conjunction* with and as *similar* to adults' experiences. This is not supported for removing children's voices or limiting exploration of children's experiences. Rather, children's geographers are invited to revisit earlier notions of separability of child and adult (Lee 2005, 20), and be reminded that emergent sociologies of childhood were never intended to keep children and childhood out of mainstream social and cultural debates (James and Prout 1990, 24). This paper may also raise questions about the extent to which academic disciplines and sub-disciplines are complicit in over-packaging children and childhood, reminding us of how and why we study 'children's' geographies.

CONTACT Jo Birch  joanna.birch@sheffield.ac.uk  @_JoBirch

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The approaches and suggestions made in this paper redress how rarely children's experiences in museums are considered beyond a focus upon children's learning and how seldom children's and adult's experiences are considered collectively. The problem and 'solutions' I discuss have emerged from analysis of others' qualitative research and theory, drawn from an interdisciplinary collection of museology, anthropology, spatial design and urban planning, as well as geographies and sociologies of childhood. Within this analysis, I present examples of international design research, on which I have collaborated, that have been re-read through a fresh perspective of museums thinking.

After stating how museums are defined within this paper, Section 3 attends to the concept of the packaged child, offering some examples of how children are knottily conceptualised in museum spaces. A notion of the child as an 'experiencer' or one who bodily experiences is proposed, as a challenge to the common premise of the child as learner above all else. However, if the body and the experience are foregrounded in the name of child-friendliness, I propose that this problematic packaging can occur in other ways. Section 4 is concerned with thinking differently about museums to reduce packaging by means of viewing both children's *and* adults' museum experiences. In order to do this, I draw on aspects of new-materialism and posthumanism. When visitors' 'immersions' in doing and being with matter (Heft 2003) are explored, something of the human (child or adult) can be de-centred from stories of museum experience, which in turn subverts notions of the human as a central and stable actor, be it adult or child. If childhood is seen, instead, as 'a relational category' (Wells 2015, 15), then I suggest adulthood can be viewed similarly with the possibility for expectations of childhood and adulthood being shifted as we consider both alongside each other. Section 5 focuses on the nature of relations between people, space and matter suggesting that museum design and planning attend to sensory aspects of 'atmosphere' (Böhme 1993; Bjerregaard 2011) and 'intra-actions' (Barad 2007) as ways to offer ambiguity in experience, i.e. less knowable and translatable, yet potentially playful. Examples which attend to these qualities are cited from museum studies and from design research.

The paper concludes with a call for un-generalisability or ambiguity of museum experience – something a person may have outside the prescribed adult–child identity and package. The value in the ambiguity of museum experience lies in emphasising sensory and bodily encounters with space and matter, moving away from prescriptions of written texts and learning matter that keep children within a learning trope and/or keep children's and adults' spaces and experiences polarised. I suggest a relaxation of the adult–child binary within museum thinking and practice and, importantly for future research and thinking, make a case for discontinuing a long history of othering children through spaces and activities designed 'for' them.

2. Defining museums

In this paper, I use a broad definition of museums. Firstly, I include museums which are non-profit; open to the public, a public service and which have collections and exhibits (Dillenburg 2011, 9). The International Council of Museums (ICOM 2007) has a similar definition, but also uses the adjective of 'permanent' which disallows the inclusion of travelling and pop-up museums. I do not give examples of impermanent museums within this paper but see it as useful if they are drawn into understandings of what museums may be. Where Dillenburg and the ICOM emphasis public, not all museums are set up as public services so a broad and international understanding would also add the increasing number of museums and galleries that are private (Wei 2015). I incorporate art galleries, which are included in the definition from the UK Museums Association (1998), an organisation which places an emphasis upon the importance of collections. Collections, however, are not always emphasised in 'children's museums' which may have a stronger 'fun' and activity-led element. This can cause debate around children's museums' status as a 'proper museums'. Mayfield asserts children's museums are 'not adult museums' nor are they defined by having collections (Mayfield 2005, 181). I very much acknowledge children's museums as museums in this paper, though later go on to highlight problems with conceptualising children's museum experiences as

so different from adults'. Finally, included in this paper's definition is a range of museums which visitors might interpret as having *some* aspect that is 'for' children right through to those museums for which children are an unnoticed or forgotten part of society. It seems possible that museum ventures and communities might self-define their spaces and practices, bearing in mind the words of Costall and Dreir (2006, 7) when they say that 'classificatory practices are themselves rather special kinds of activities, often subservient to other ends in practice'. Next, I turn to ideas and constructions of children when they do visit museums.

3. The packaged child

3.1. *An uneasy shift from the child as a learner to the child as an embodied experienter?*

The child, in public space, it seems is always subject to the multiple constructions which adults impose upon her. In trying to break away from the concept that the child is a learning and developing mind, new thinking about the child as a body in museums is potentially helpful. I note, in particular, that children are likely to be considered as certain kinds of bodies – a learning body or a monstrous body liable to be in the wrong place.

Museums research is beginning to ask what we might ask and know about children's bodies and embodied perspectives. Consultative and participatory research can provide a broader picture, as this example illustrates:

... we worked with them [the parents and children] and invited them to come to the museum and have a look around. And we discovered so much [...] And their visits ... they photographed things round the museum, the children, who were about 3 years old, photographed things from their point of view and the director of the museum was really shocked. He said: 'but they can't see anything ... just the undersides of the shelves'. (Carrie, designer and museums consultant)

The above extract is from an interview with 'Carrie'. In the interview with Carrie, I hear her tell of visiting a museum space with a group of parents and children aged 3 and 4. Carrie was interviewed as part of a research project: *Designing with Children*, a Leverhulme funded project, (on which I worked as Research Associate), that sought to understand architects' and other spatial designers' experiences of designing with children. The project entailed interviews with 15 other spatial designers (only Carrie designed museum spaces), about their experiences of designing with children, followed by 4 case studies involving focused ethnography with 5 architects and 35 children. Methods included interviews with children and designers alongside the use of filming and researchers' observational notes in order to closely document dialogue between adults and children. Full details of methods and spaces designed may be found in Birch et al. (2017a, 2017b). The project took a new novel approach in that it was grounded in design and architecture as a process, as dialogue and as an activity rather than built thing or outcome.

When children are acknowledged users of space, organisation of space for accessibility and ease of use is a familiar design concept. It is often thought about in terms of museum exhibits: user-friendly hand height and eye height for young children, open and available for small hands. What Carrie reveals above is that the museum content, at that time, was thought to be inaccessible for the young children. The children's photographs revealed what they could see, or perhaps what they could not see around the museum (see Kirk 2013, 2014 who discusses children's use of cameras in museums). It is possible that the young children wished for the exhibition content to be organised better for their bodies, as did three- and four-year-olds exploring a skeleton bike as part of a bones exhibit in Dockett, Main, and Kelly's (2011, 25) study: 'Can you make a smaller one for me? My legs couldn't reach the pedals' (Liam).

Common sense and kindness might tell us that we ought to present museum objects at the right height and usable to account for children's bodies in terms of size and height, but what I suggest should be questioned, is the extent to which 'child-friendly' positioning of museum artefacts and opportunities for embodied engagement accounts for children as *learning* bodies (only). The rich

work of Piscitelli and her colleagues places great emphasis upon young children's experiential and physical museums experiences yet still calls attention to children's bodies as learning bodies (Piscitelli 2001). The thinking behind experiential museum exhibitions is that somatic multisensory experiences become memorable for children (Weier and Piscitelli 2003, 22) and that 'children learn best' this way (Piscitelli and Penfold 2015, 279). But how much can we think of children's bodies as *being* the museum experience itself?

Helpful are participatory research findings which can reveal a broader picture of children's embodied perspectives that are untethered to a learning trope, for example, revealing how children's movement in the Australian Museum, Sydney, leads to:

[...] pleasure from some of the more mundane aspects of the museum, such as climbing the wide marble stairs, and peaking through the railings in upstairs galleries can feature as important, and very much spatial, aspects of museum visits. (Dockett, Main, and Kelly 2011, 26)

In the next extract documenting participatory research with young children at Discover, a children's story centre in East London, the researcher reveals her encounter with children's physical engagement with museum spaces that led to design quite unfocused on museum-content learning:

We discovered other aspects which we had not anticipated, which we incorporated into the final designs. For example, we saw how much children enjoyed peep-holes and smaller spaces to squeeze through; as a consequence, we developed different sized entrances and windows ... (Cave 2010, 98)

Hackett's research, concentrating on ethnographic observation, rather than consultation or participatory interview techniques, adds much to a nascent area of work around embodiment which warrants further attention. In her 2014 paper, Hackett's focus is young children's walking and running around museums as central to children's perspectives of the museum, their placemaking and children's communicative practices. Hackett (2016) describes children's embodied practices during observed museum visits: running fast; wandering independently; going on searches with and without other people; drumming repeatedly and dancing within museum spaces.

Yet in museum spaces, children's embodied practices, and those of their family or guardians, are not always recognised with such open-minded enquiry, often being judged to be out of kilter with institutional mores. Take, for example, a 2014 British media report which presented a story of a 9-year-old child who had been photographed lying down, fitting herself neatly within two child-sized blocks that form the lower two 'steps' of a ladder-like sculpture (Hewitt 2014). The child clearly ignored any canonical value of the piece (Costall 2014). The artefact on display was an artwork by Donald Judd 'Untitled 1980', a '10 million dollar' piece, at Britain's Tate Modern. The media report of how she 'clambered onto', or was 'crawling all over' the sculpture drew visceral comment from the museum, parent, art and cultural communities. A variety of discussions about children's 'places' and 'behaviours' within museums were presented with a general disdain for the notion of child-friendly or as a journalist, Ivan Hewitt, suggested, the 'child-centred philosophy'. It is, for him, at the heart of the problem:

This is the absurdity we've reached, thanks to the child-centred philosophy that now rules the discourse about how public spaces should be organised. Many people seriously hold the view that making children conform to the adult quiet of museums is a form of child abuse, which should be subverted at every turn. They must be allowed to run around freely, run their sticky fingers over the Shaker furniture or Chinese bronzes, and drink the babycinos thoughtfully provided by the museum café. (Hewitt 2014)

Children in this way are still conceptualised as awkward bodies, as demanding, as: 'out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous' (Shildrick 1996, 2 cited in Goodley, Runswick-Cole, and Lyddiard [2016, 3] who see this descriptor as matching not only social constructions of women, but also of children and disabled people). 'Monstrous childhoods' suggests Blaise can be 'those that are not normal, innocent, sanitised and decontextualised' (Blaise 2016, 618). Blaise was referring to both sculptural taxidermy artworks of young and foetal animals and the encounters with such artefacts within an exhibit, 'Phantasmagoria' in 2014, at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Yet these understandings of monstrous childhood are portrayed in Hewitt's report of the girl who climbs on the sculpture and in Hewitt's understanding of child-centredness. Hewitt's response reads like a manifesto for re-working values that would confine children to spatial 'islands' such as play spaces (Qvortrup 1994). Twenty years later, in Hewitt's (2014) article, children are still portrayed as 'a polluting presence [...] seen to be challenging the hegemony of adult ownership of public space' (Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 2000, 281). Part of this adult ownership is, of course, in the form of economic ownership and children, despite the barrage of advertising aimed at them, are essentially in a position of little or no consumption. Yet Hewitt also fears a consumerist children-in-museums culture, worrying that exhibits might be, for children,

[...] brought down to the kids' level [...] in much the same way as they think of Disneyland or Hamleys or the kids channels on TV: something adjusted to their needs when they were kids, and therefore to be left behind as quickly as possible, as they head towards adulthood. (2014)

These kinds of cultures, then, are seemingly trivial and impermanent and quite disconnected from the real and significant stuff of museums (Latham 2015). Yet, in a sense, Hewitt echoes something suggested by Aitken – the burden of children's 'being' children is a weight of 'responsibility and separateness' (Aitken 2008, 19). Children themselves can feel this, wishing to be disentangled from others' constructions of childhood desiring to:

distance themselves from the category of children altogether through, for example, the use of other terms such as 'people', 'little children', 'babies' and 'kids'. These were categories to which they did not see themselves belonging. (James, Curtis, and Birch 2007, 95)

3.2. *Othring children with child-friendliness*

Developing Aitken's notion around the responsibility of separateness, I propose a rejection, or at the very least a deep questioning, of the phrases 'child-centred' or 'child-friendly' in a museums context. In the case of the child on lying on the sculpture, these phrases serve to politically divide adults who can be left to feel both uncertain about rights to public space and judged for children's bodily engagement with space.

Whilst not well used in museums literature, 'child-friendly' is elsewhere discussed in terms of: care, communities, therapy, society, communications tools and research methods. In terms of space and place, there is a small body of work related to hospitals (Birch, Curtis, and James 2007; Lambert et al. 2014) and rather more that discusses outdoor environments, city neighbourhoods and urban environments (Kytä 2004; Whitzman and Mizrachi 2012; Malone 2013). I argue that the too-muchness of the child-friendly term serves only to ghettoise children from both adults and from other children of different ages. One person's 'oasis for children' (Cave 2010, 89) is another person's problematic and partitioned 'archipelago of "safe" spaces in a sea of adult-centric space' (Fincher and Iveson 2008, 107). The work of Whitzman and Mizrachi is useful here. It lies outside museums thinking and is grounded in fields crossing children's geographies and urban policy and design. I highlight their finding that children often prefer spaces that are not specifically designed for them and because of this, the authors caution against confining children's spatial needs to 'specific and limited child-cages' – such as skate parks or play areas in outdoor public spaces (Whitzman and Mizrachi 2012).

One of the greatest dangers of working with the child-friendly template is that it over-simplifies and packages up adults and children separately 'as something totally quantified, measured and defined to the last detail [...]' (Bakhtin 1984, 58 cited in Frank 2005, 965). The concept of the package (Bone and Blaise 2015) is effective here to reflect on to what extent museums do or do not do.

Whilst Bone and Blaise discuss packaging of a human from quite a particular perspective, there are messages of caution we can draw from the over-simplified and normalising processes of packaging of humans – of children in this papers' context – that happen when we use terms such as child-friendly. Bone and Blaise (2015, 23) talk about the identity of the human being erased when a child is

(re)packaged as a refugee or asylum seeker. Identity deletion is a feature of Hewitt's branding of children, (and associated supporting adults) as problematic 'others' within museums and broader society (Braidotti 2013). Within the museum setting, the welcome, accepted brand and package is the child as intelligent learning body.

And in order to be known, to be perceived as a figure that can be 'seen', a person or thing must be put in to the categories of the other, categories that reduce, finish, consummate. We see not only ourselves, but the world, in the finalizing categories of the other. (Holquist 2002, 84)

Next, I consider how thinking differently and thinking collectively about children's and adults' experiences in museums might offer a route to unpacking of children.

4. Thinking differently about museums experiences to unpack the adult-child binary

James and Prout (1990, 24), in stirring up the beginnings of the new sociology of childhood acknowledged that it would be an error to take theorising of childhood out of mainstream sociological debates. We can soften some of the problematic partitioning of children's and adults' experiences (Lee 2005; cf. Johansson 2012) by turning to some current discourses of adults' and children's engagements with museum matter and asking just how firmly fixed are the differences between adult and child experiences?

A perspective comes from of Dudley's work on museum materialities. Dudley argues that museums tend to overprovide text and meaning for (adult) visitors rather than concentrate on the object-audience encounter. We are familiar with the more dominant narrative around museums expecting even young children to be engaging with written text and literacies (Cave 2010, 82, 100), but Dudley infers that this affects adults too. Whilst adults are often expected to interact with the traditional written interpretation of museum objects, for Dudley, it was the matter, the large bronze figure of a horse, that acted as text:

The horse was green, over a metre high, and stood considerably higher still as a result of its plinth. I was with utterly spellbound by its majestic form, its power, and, as I began to look at it closely, its material details: its greenish colour, its textured surface, the small areas of damage. I wanted to touch it though of course I could not – but that did not stop me imagining how it would feel to stroke it, or how it would sound if I could tap the metal, or how heavy it would be if I tried to pick it up. I was, in other words, sensorially exploring the object, even though I had to intuit and imagine rather than directly experience most of the encounter. (Dudley 2012, 1)

Dudley's presentation of this encounter places an emphasis upon the object's 'power to fixate' (Clifford 1985, 244) and this power, it seems, was not diminished by the absence of interpretive written text nor the restrictions around touching it. Rautio suggests that children too are likely to have such an experience with children displaying an:

[...] aesthetic-affective openness towards material surroundings: an attentiveness to and sensuous enchantment by non-human forces, an openness to be surprised and to grant agency to non-human entities. (Rautio 2013, 395)

For Rautio, these are not necessarily 'special' qualities that children possess. Children are thought to anthropomorphise objects with ease (Nieuwenhuys 2011), yet in previous works, Rautio notes how adults are moved by non-human matter and may communicate their relations to the non-human world in sensuous, affective and anthropomorphic ways. Adults too conceptualise non-human elements with abilities to feel and act (Rautio 2011, 112).

Other adults' recollections of being moved by matter and recognising its agency are told by Latham's interpretive phenomenological study of the ways in which adult museum visitors experience 'real things' on display in museums. 'Steve', a museum visitor in Latham's study, in discussing a perfume bottle within a Titanic exhibit, notices it still has a little liquid inside. He states how reading about it or seeing it in a book or online is not the same experience as being with it in the museum: 'If

you're physically there, it's almost entrancing – it's like, this is here, this is in front of me' (Latham 2015, 10). 'Paula', from the same study, assigns an animate quality to the paper money in the exhibit stated that it 'should have degraded [...] so it had a way of living even though it should have been destroyed. That's why I found it interesting' (2015, 11).

In recognising the agency of museum matter, perhaps adults are rupturing the 'stable and restricted adult subjectivity' that is expected of them (Johansson 2012, 112). Or perhaps it is less complicated – it happens as a shared human experience. Another shared experience between adults and children can be noticed in the ways that height, majestic form and power impress (Ahmed 2004, 6). This effect upon Dudley is felt in similar ways by very young museum visitors. In Dudley's vignette, the bronze horse is introduced to us, being significant first for its size. It is worth noting the number of museum studies which have discussed how large objects are memorable and significant for young children too (Kindler and Darras 1997; Piscitelli and Anderson 2001; Anderson et al. 2002; Kirk 2014). Whilst the young children in those studies did not state, or were not expected to state, reasons why scale mattered, adults have been found to feel the magnitude of something in a museum contributing to its 'realness' (Latham 2015, 7).

Dudley's interaction, not in the affective response but in the sensorial exploration feels akin to Wurtak's observed interaction between a wandering four-year-old and bowl of brightly coloured polished stones within a museum's 'Discovery Touchroom'. Unlike Dudley, the four-year-old is able to handle the items:

The wanderer can't resist and stops to run her fingers among the smooth stones, carefully lifting and then letting them slip through her fingers. She does this over and over again, mesmerized by the colours, the silky feel of the stones and the delicate noises as they fall. (Wurtak 1987, 17 cited in Kirk 2014, 32)

Of course, we only know the adult construal of the child's experience here and we cannot comprehend the child's reflection upon of her own experience, but both observations seemingly show how, for both Dudley and the girl:

[...] encounters with the world seem nearly automatic and habitual, and the experience of a boundary between the self and the world is negligible. We are 'simply' immersed in situated doing and being. (Heft 2003, 151)

5. How we might 'unpackage' the child and adult – thinking about what is in between person and object

I now move on to consider how we might further unpackage the child by thinking more about museum engagements – in particular through a breaking down of the boundary between self and world, as Heft suggests or, as I propose, by giving attention to what is in-between.

The previous section's descriptions of adult and child interactions with matter such as bronze, glass, paper and stone, are not described in the context of specific learning or educational frameworks. Instead of the object being 'the primary experience of exhibitions' (Bjerregaard 2011, 76), I propose a consideration of what Bjerregaard (2011) and Böhme (1993, 114) term: atmosphere. This atmosphere is an 'in betweenness' or 'relation between environmental qualities and human states' (Böhme 1993, 114). Perhaps Böhme would see the environment and human as separate while Barad might see them as indistinct, as entities that 'emerge through their intra-action' (Barad 2007, 33). In other words, in a museum context, a Baradian viewpoint would suggest that we should concentrate upon the phenomenon or the relationship between the person and the object rather than the two as separate.

A statement of the similarities between Barad's intra-actions and Bjerregaard's in-betweenness or atmosphere is something new I bring to museums and other spatial discourses. They may have differing ontological bases, yet I suggest that there is potential for museums thinkers, designers and practitioners to draw on one these ideas in planning for children's and adults' experiences in museums. These theoretical standpoints offer a shift away from the museum as learning space

towards museum as an experiential place that fosters relationships between and across people and things.

5.1. *In-betweenness in practice*

As an example of how these ideas are manifest within museum practice, Bjerregaard's account of the Villa Sovietica is valuable. Bjerregaard highlights how this exhibit, of Soviet everyday objects at Musée d'ethnographie de Genève in 2009, focuses upon atmosphere or in-betweenness rather than the objects themselves. Curators, without particularly knowing what they wanted to say, 'dissolved' objects' status by emphasising space and methods of viewing. For example, the exhibit has ladders to climb and view furniture which is otherwise hidden behind white cloths. In another section, a magnifying glass is set within a door to a closed room housing a rotating toy car. These descriptions sound like they could be part of an exhibit set out with children in mind but no mention is made of a specifically adult or child audience. The atmosphere created and connections between object and viewer and are purposefully embodied yet offer personal interpretation, mystery and ambiguity.

The importance of ambiguity or uncertainty in spatial design is highlighted by Juhanni Pallasma, renowned Finnish architect and thinker – with a particular interest in sensed and embodied artistic and architectural practice. He suggests the power of uncertainty in maintaining and stimulating curiosity advocating 'a growing capacity to tolerate uncertainty, vagueness, lack of definition and precision, momentary illogic and open-endedness' (Pallasma 2009, 111). Uncertainty, as a theme, appeared many times in architects' discussions of children's involvement within the Designing with Children study. In particular, Susanne, architect from the German case study, bases most of her collaborative design workshops on the principle and practice of atmosphere. Her participatory workshops with children that we observed and those that she does more broadly with her practice Die Baupiloten are founded on the idea that atmosphere, though imprecise, may be more knowable than concrete and tangible features of a place or building. Atmosphere is understood and communicated through visual modes in her work – using magnified photographs of matter and through models and collages (Hofmann 2014, 30). She uses atmospheric visualisations in order to find a common language between spatial designer and participants/space-users, be they children or adults. In an interview for the project, she described the uncertainty and imaginative elements associated with doing this:

Well we never go the straight way but we always try to make creative detours with the children and try to trigger their imagination and work on purpose outside their everyday life. Because, really, design-wise I don't have an idea before ... I have a feeling [when] if I go to a space that it has to open up [...] (Susanne, architect)

For all the architects we spoke to within our study, the single stand-out characteristic which they valued in doing design work with children was children's openness to possibility (Birch et al. 2017a). This parallels Olsson's (2013, 231) idea that 'children actually display a veritable taste for creative thought and that what they really do is to go on a hunt for that which glimmers'. In stating what adults notice about the ways in which children go about their lives, there is a temptation to identify these ways as 'children's special qualities' and that this proves children as distinctive from adults. I argue that this is not the case. Instead, what happens is that scholarly and societal habits of separating out children's and adult's behaviours and environments lead to an assumption: that describing children as something means that adults are not this thing, for example, that adults are not playful, nor open to the possibility.

Notions of play, atmosphere, ambiguity as well as spatial and sensory qualities are all features of an example I next highlight from sensory (museum) studies. An exhibit described by Wiseman (2010), in writing of the Indians of the Rainforest exhibition, at the Copenhagen Museum of World Culture alludes to a potential for the (adult or child) visitor to experience the museum in ways that recall both play and the body:

The physical and sensorial model of the exhibition is essentially that of the playground. In this respect, it is singularly effective in triggering the adult visitor's somatic memories. It somehow allows the visitor to break with normal bodily habits and this, in turn, contributes to a sense of being in an unfamiliar environment. (Wiseman 2010, 251)

The architect-designed exhibition offers little by way of explanation and text is limited to mythology and metaphor rather than history or science. Wiseman describes the pathway through the exhibition as 'deliberately labyrinthine which draws in the visitor but avoids imposing a fixed itinerary' (Wiseman 2010, 251). Amid zones crudely defined as: Household, Nature and Transition, a huge video installation of a waterfall, over 10 metres wide preceded by light and sound before the visual element, observes the curatorial aims for the provision of multisensory and relatively unexplained experience. The lack of emphasis upon explanation may be judicious, in attempts to avoid presumption around either learning or connection with the past through museum artefacts which is disputed by Bjerregaard (2011, 76) and by Tolia-Kelly (2016). A sensory museology is risky, however, as Wiseman points out, criticisms of this kind of museum experience arise because of departure from the traditional emphasis of the 'real' in museum artefacts. Yet I suggest that museums might be interested in making a deliberate place for the unknowable, for the ambiguous, because the distinction between person and object may be somewhat dissolved. A space that is more ambiguous and less stable and prescribed may better support a de-stabilising of the adult-child binary.

A final example of a place for the unexplained, comes from some Australian Museum exhibits described by Dockett, Main, and Kelly (2011, 25). When a dinosaur exhibit wears a set of pearls, 3-year-olds are open to this capricious curation of diverse agential elements (Bennett 2010, 23) and the 'foolish' (Bennett 2010, xiii). Dockett and her colleagues, in actively digging deeper into children's suspension of reality, received children's statements in the research journals they were given, imagining if 'a lizard ate me' or '2 hyenas ate 2 men'. These are reflective of the states of play, risk and imagination which were conjured up between those children and the artefacts and spaces they encountered. Kirk (2014, 157) and Feder (1989) have observed a combination of fear and fascination in children's museum engagements. In these examples, we can see how museums might align with an understanding of curiosity as risky (Phillips 2014, 2352), as transgressive and 'a rejection of the known as inadequate, incorrect, even uninteresting' (Benedict 2001, 4).

6. Conclusion – acceptance of the ambiguous and ungeneralisable

I have presented what I consider to be a problem or theme of interest associated with thinking about children in museums: conceptualisation of children in museums on the basis of their dissimilarities from adults is, I have argued, unhelpful. It contributes to an uncomfortable packaging of the child which serves to continue a long history of 'othering' and 'excluding' children. Notions of children's museums or child-friendly museums or exhibits do not, I believe, address this problem. In response, I have presented examples of where children and adults can be thought to share ways of engaging with objects and spaces – with adults and children both being attentive and capable of 'sensuous enchantment' (Bennett 2010; Rautio 2013, 395). These suggestions are important in making a case for returning to the idea that adults' and children's separability is only partial (Lee 2005, 20). A significant implication of this paper is that through it, I propose that future research reaches across disciplines and draws up research questions and methods that better address this partial separability. I also suggest that what is needed is a continuation of new materialism's theoretical and practical (e)positioning of bodies with (other) matter. This means attendance to relations between the two – what might be called intra-relations, in-betweenness or atmospheres that happen in museums.

Finally then, I offer a way of 'doing' children in museums, both in research and curatorial practice – through ambiguity of museum experience to allow more mutable concepts of (adult and child) personhood. At first I thought that a 'disassembling of the fixed-ness of narratives' (Bennett 2007, 37; Tolia-Kelly 2016, 907) might be done via a 'personalisation' of museum experience yet personalisation is an unhelpful term and could be better replaced by 'matterisation', with the human 'no longer

at the centre of the action’ (Pickering 1995, 26). Ultimately, I reject a neat and alluring one-word term, instead more broadly proposing that individuals – adults or children, separate or together – be offered opportunity for personal, not universal, encounter with museum space and objects. The encounter may be special, intimate, subjective; it may happen to be relational or collective in the context of other people.

Both children and adults can experience museums through atmospheres of ambiguity, not just through learning-focused texts and interpretation, but through sensory and bodily encounters with space and matter for these are valid ways of knowing and instruments of comprehension (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 235).

Ambiguous, non-generalisable interaction between human bodies and non-human matter have been happening for a long time within childhood theory, child care and education practice. Nicholson’s (1971) theory of loose parts within early childhood studies spoke of embodied possibilities, flexibility and openness. But what if playfulness and openness of interpretation were more embedded within children’s *and* adults’ museum experiences? Children and adults, in museums, would both be an undefined kind of monstrous, both ‘becoming-imperceptible’, self-inventing ‘in interaction with a material, social, and discursive environment’ (Colebrook 2014, 47, 48; Taguchi, Palmer, and Gustafsson 2016, 706), choosing ways to move from tangible worlds to the possibilities of imagined or virtual ones (Bennett 2001, 111).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the children, spatial designers, architects and colleagues who took part in the Designing with Children study, in particular, Rosie Parnell, who conceived it and approved a re-interpretation of some of the project’s findings. I am grateful to Helen Woolley for her comments on earlier versions of this paper and to the editors of this special issue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Part of this work was supported by The Leverhulme Trust (The Designing with Children project) [grant number RPG-2012-682].

ORCID

Jo Birch  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0155-0242>

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Aitken, Stuart C. 2008. Desarrollo integral y fronteras/Integral Development and Borderspaces in Aitken, Stuart C., Ragnhild Lund, and Anne Trine Kjørholt (2008). *Global Childhoods: Globalization, Development and Young People*. London: Routledge.
- Anderson, David, Barbara Piscitelli, Katrina Weier, Michele Everett, and Collette Tayler. 2002. “Children’s Museum Experiences: Identifying Powerful Mediators of Learning.” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 45 (3): 213–231.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1984. “Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book.” In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, 283–302. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barad, Karen Michelle. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Benedict, Barbara. 2001. *Curiosity. A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Bennett, Tony. 2007. “The Work of Culture.” *Cultural Sociology* 1 (1): 31–47.

- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Birch, Jo, Penny Curtis, and Allison James. 2007. "Sense and Sensibilities: In Search of the Child-Friendly Hospital." *Built Environment* 33 (4): 405–416.
- Birch, Jo, Rosie Parnell, Maria Patsarika, and Maša Šorn. 2017a. "Creativity, Play and Transgression: Children Transforming Spatial Design." *CoDesign* 13 (4): 245–260.
- Birch, Jo, Rosie Parnell, Maria Patsarika, and Maša Šorn. 2017b. "Participating Together: Dialogic Space for Children and Architects in the Design Process." *Children's Geographies* 15 (2): 224–236.
- Bjerregaard, Peter. 2011. "Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations." *Ethnos* 76 (4): 559–561.
- Blaise, Mindy. 2016. "Fabricated Childhoods: Uncanny Encounters with the More-than-Human." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37 (5): 617–626.
- Böhme, Gernot. 1993. "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1): 113–126. doi:10.1177/072551369303600107.
- Bone, Jane, and Mindy Blaise. 2015. "An Uneasy Assemblage: Prisoners, Animals, Asylum-Seeking Children and Posthuman Packaging." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 16 (1): 18–31. doi:10.1177/1463949114566754.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cave, Vicky. 2010. "Planning for Young Children and Families in Museums." In *The New Museum Community. Audiences, Challenges, Benefits: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Nicola Abery. Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2010.
- Clifford, James. 1985. "Objects and Selves: An Afterword." In *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, Vol. 3, 236–246. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Colebrook, Claire. 2014. *Sex after Life: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 2. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Costall, Alan. 2014. "Canonical Affordances and Creative Agency." In *Rethinking Creativity: Contributions from Social and Cultural Psychology*, edited by Vlad PetreGlăveanu, Alex Gillespie, and Jaan Valsiner, 45–57. London: Routledge.
- Costall, Alan, and Ole Dreier. 2006. *Doing Things with Things: The Design and Use of Everyday Objects*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Dillenburg, Eugene. 2011. "What, If Anything, Is a Museum." *The Exhibitionist* (Spring): 8–13.
- Dockett, Sue, Sarah Main, and Lynda Kelly. 2011. "Consulting Young Children: Experiences from a Museum." *Visitor Studies* 14 (1): 13–33.
- Dudley, Sandra. 2012. "Encountering a Chinese Horse: Engaging with the Thingness of Things." In *Museum Materialities*, edited by Sandra Dudley. London: Routledge.
- Falk, John. 2015. "The Director's Cut: Toward an Improved Understanding of Learning from Museums." *Science Education* 88 (1): 83–96.
- Feder, Mike. 1989. "Walk with My Father: The Museum." *Journal of Museum Education* 14 (2): 14–15.
- Fincher, Ruth, and Kurt Iveson. 2008. *Planning and Diversity in the City: Redistribution, Recognition and Encounter*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frank, Arthur W. 2005. "What Is Dialogical Research, and Why Should We Do It?" *Qualitative Health Research* 15 (7): 964–974.
- Goodley, Dan, Katherine Runswick-Cole, and Kirsty Liddiard. 2016. "The disHuman Child." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37 (5): 770–784.
- Hackett, Abigail. 2014. "Zigging and Zooming All Over the Place: Young Children's Meaning Making and Movement in the Museum." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 14 (1): 5–27.
- Hackett, Abigail. 2016. "Young Children as Wayfarers: Learning about Place by Moving Through It." *Children & Society* 30 (3): 169–179.
- Heft, Harry. 2003. "Affordances, Dynamic Experience, and the Challenge of Reification." *Ecological Psychology* 15 (2): 149–180.
- Hewitt, Ivan. 2014. "Should Children Be Banned from Museums?" In *The Telegraph*. Accessed March 24, 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/museums/10644502/Should-children-be-banned-from-museums.html>
- Hofmann, Susanne. 2014. *Architecture Is Participation*. Berlin: Jovis.
- Holquist, Michael. 2002. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- ICOM (The International Council of Museums). 2007. "Museum Definition." Accessed April 22, 2017. <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>
- James, Allison, Penny Curtis, and Joanna Birch. 2007. "Care and Control in the Construction of Children's Citizenship." In *Children and Citizenship*, edited by Antonella Invernizzi and Jane Williams, 85–96. London: Sage.
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout. 1990. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.
- Johansson, Barbro. 2012. "Doing Adulthood in Childhood Research." *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research* 19 (1): 101–114.
- Kindler, Anna M., and Bernard Darras. 1997. "Young Children and Museums: The Role of Cultural Context in Early Development of Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviours." *Visual Arts Research* 23 (1): 125–141.
- Kirk, Elee. 2013. "Gaining Young Children's Perspectives on Natural History Collections." *Journal of Natural Science Collections* 1: 38–43.

- Kirk, Elee. 2014. "Crystal Teeth and Skeleton Eggs: Snapshots of Young Children's Experiences in a Natural History Museum." Doctoral thesis, University of Leicester.
- Kyttä, Marketta. 2004. "The Extent of Children's Independent Mobility and the Number of Actualized Affordances as Criteria for Child-Friendly Environments." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24 (2): 179–198.
- Lambert, V., J. Coad, P. Hicks, and M. Glacken. 2014. "Social Spaces for Young Children in Hospital." *Child: Care, Health and Development* 40 (2): 195–204.
- Latham, Kiersten F. 2015. "What Is 'the Real Thing' in the Museum? An Interpretative Phenomenological Study." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 30 (1): 2–20.
- Lee, Nick. 2005. *Childhood and Human Value: Development, Separation and Separability*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Malone, Karen. 2002. "Street Life: Youth, Culture and Competing Uses of Public Space." *Environment & Urbanization* 14 (2): 157–168.
- Malone, Karen. 2013. "'The Future Lies in Our Hands': Children as Researchers and Environmental Change Agents in Designing a Child-Friendly Neighbourhood." *Local Environment* 18 (3): 372–395.
- Matthews, Hugh, Melanie Limb, and Mark Taylor. 2000. "The 'Street as Thirdspace'." *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning* 8: 1–22.
- Mayfield, Margie I. 2005. "Children's Museums: Purposes, Practices and Play?" *Early Child Development and Care* 175 (2): 179–192.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phénoménologie de la Perception. Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Humanities Press.
- Museums Association. 1998. "Museums Definition." Accessed May 3, 2017. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>
- Nicholson, Simon. 1971. "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts." *Landscape Architecture* 61 (1): 30–34.
- Nieuwenhuys, Olga. 2011. "Can the Teddy Bear Speak?" *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research* 18 (4): 411–418.
- Olsson, Liselott Mariett. 2013. "Taking Children's Questions Seriously: The Need for Creative Thought." *Global Studies of Childhood* 3 (3): 230–253.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2009. *The Thinking Hand*. London: AD Primer.
- Phillips, Richard. 2014. "Space for Curiosity." *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (4): 493–512.
- Pickering, Andrew. 1995. *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piscitelli, Barbara. 2001. "Young Children's Interactive Experiences in Museums: Engaged, Embodied, and Empowered Learners." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 44 (3): 224–229.
- Piscitelli, Barbara, and David Anderson. 2001. "Young Children's Perspectives of Museum Settings and Experiences." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19 (3): 269–282.
- Piscitelli, Barbara, and Louisa Penfold. 2015. "Child-Centered Practice in Museums: Experiential Learning Through Creative Play at the Ipswich Art Gallery." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 58 (3): 263–280.
- Qvortrup, Jens. 1994. "Childhood Matters: An Introduction. I: Qvortrup, J. Badry, M. Sgritta, G. & Wintersberger, H (red) Childhood Matter." *Social Theory, Practice and Politics*.
- Rautio, Pauliina. 2011. "Writing about Everyday Beauty: Anthropomorphizing and Distancing as Literary Practices." *Environmental Communication* 5 (1): 104–123.
- Rautio, Pauliina. 2013. "Children Who Carry Stones in Their Pockets: On Autotelic Material Practices in Everyday Life." *Children's Geographies* 11 (4): 394–408.
- Shildrick, Margrit. 1996. "Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body." *Body & Society* 2 (1): 1–15.
- Skelton, Tracey, Katherine V. Gough, and Donna Marie Brown. 2013. "Young People, Anti-social Behaviour and Public Space: The Role of Community Wardens in Policing the 'ASBO Generation'." *Urban Studies* 50 (3): 538–555. doi:10.1177/0042098012468899.
- Taguchi, Hillevi Lenz, Anna Palmer, and Lovisa Gustafsson. 2016. "Individuating 'Sparks' and 'Flickers' of 'a LIFE' in Dance Practices with Preschoolers: The 'Monstrous Child' of Colebrook's Queer Vitalism." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37 (5): 705–716.
- Tolia-Kelly, Divya P. 2016. "Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of 'Race' and Culture." *Sociology* 50 (5): 896–912.
- Wei, QiaoWei. 2015. "Community Archaeology and Alternative Interpretation of the Past Through Private Museums in Shanghai, China." *Archaeologies* 11 (2): 204–219.
- Weier, Katrina, and Barbara Piscitelli. 2003. "Hot and Sweaty in the Museum: Young Children Learning about Nature, Culture and Science." *Journal of Education* 23: 9–23.
- Wells, Karen. 2015. *Childhood in a Global Perspective* [electronic resource]. Second ed.
- Whitzman, Carolyn, and Dana Mizrahi. 2012. "Creating Child-Friendly High-Rise Environments: Beyond Wastelands and Glasshouses." *Urban Policy and Research* 30 (3): 233–249.
- Wiseman, Boris. 2010. "Sensing Others." *The Senses and Society* 5 (2): 250–253.

- Woolley, Helen, Teresa Hazelwood, and Ian Simkins. 2011. "Don't Skate Here: Exclusion of Skateboarders from Urban Civic Spaces in Three Northern Cities in England." *Journal of Urban Design* 16 (4): 471–487.
- Wurtak, George. 1987. "Now I Know Why Moose Antlers Clash So Loudly': The Discovery Room at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature." *The Journal of Museum Education* 12 (2): 17–18.