

The logo for The Economist, featuring the words "The Economist" in a white serif font on a red rectangular background.

## Not just child's play

### **Museums designed to encourage parents to learn from each other, and children to teach themselves, are booming around the world**

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COMBINE current ideas about childhood development and interactive learning with a dwindling number of safe street corners and what do you get? A global boom in children's museums. From Boston to Los Angeles and Shanghai to Dubai, museums for children are breaking ground, expanding and hiring world-class architects to design eco-friendly landmarks. The kudos from professional educators promises welcome enrichment to cash-strapped public schools and to hopeful parents of Harvard-bound toddlers.

More than 30m children and families flocked to 299 children's museums worldwide in 2005, according to the Association of Children's Museums in Washington, DC. "The trajectory just continues in an upward direction," reports Janet Rice Elman, the ACM's executive director. Nearly 100 new children's museums have swelled the roster since Ms. Elman arrived in 1994 as the association's first executive director; some 65 more museums plan to open over the next four years. As far afield as the Shanghai Discovery Children's Museum that opened in January 2004 and Children's City that opened in Dubai in March 2002, member museums share a well-documented conviction that busy hands spur active minds in children from infancy to 12 years old. "It may not look like learning," says museum designer Mary Sinker, "but that's the point."

In place of pick-up softball or hide-and-seek beyond a guardian's watchful gaze, children's museums prod learning with scaled-down construction sites or neighborhood supermarkets where children become bricklayers and checkout clerks. Instead of obeying commands, they take charge. In the process, they learn to sort objects by type, weight and size. The supermarket is simulated, say child-development experts, but feelings of competence are real.

At America's oldest children's museum, in Brooklyn, New York, a \$42m expansion nearing completion will double the floor space on the same city block it has occupied since 1899. Unlike museums that emphasize preservation, interactivity rules in Brooklyn. Staffers encourage children to touch anything they can reach. A travelling exhibit based on the journals of Joshua Loper, an African-American cowboy, replicates a chuck wagon campfire on the Chisholm trail; one small girl ladles out imaginary gruel for her adult companions. "Children's museums are not confined by the traditional museum model," says the president of Brooklyn Children's Museum, Carol Enseki. "They can experiment with ways to help children learn."

Despite stiff competition from shopping malls and weekend football matches, children's museums have gained ground in communities of every size. Foot traffic and memberships more than doubled after the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh completed a major expansion in November 2004. Under the banner "Play with Real Stuff", exhibit space bigger than a football field features a tilted gravity room with an exit slide crafted from a bowling alley floor bought on eBay, a giant heron built of parts rescued from rubbish skips, and "Pulley Rolling Slowly Bop"—a system of pulleys, scoops and switches that control rubber playground balls on wire tracks suspended in a former planetarium dome.

In rural Winchester, Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum drew a record 43,000 visitors last year to a new site on land the city donated in the hope of luring families to its flagging downtown shopping district. The Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum is one of 60 children's museums tied directly to inner-city redevelopment.

As a new children's museum opens in Naples, Florida, with an eye to boosting family tourism in a town best known for retirees, in Washington, DC, the congressionally sanctioned National Children's Museum aims to lure families from the busy Capital Mall to the up-and-coming Anacostia waterfront just blocks away. Scheduled to reopen in 2009 with 140,000 square feet of exhibit space, the former Capital Children's Museum embarked in January on a \$130m fund-raising campaign, a lofty goal for any cultural institution.

Amid news last autumn that the Boston Children's Museum will expand its existing site while the Los Angeles museum starts construction at a new site in the San Fernando Valley, a relocated Kohl Children's Museum reopened on nine acres of land in suburban Chicago, where three times as much exhibit space has attracted enthusiastic crowds and robust financial support. "We have been extremely lucky being at the right place at the right time," says Sheridan Turner, the museum's president and CEO.

### **Green as well as smart**

Allied to making kids smarter, museum agendas assign a high priority to preserving the planet they occupy. Five "green" children's museums have achieved LEED certification, recognition for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design bestowed by the Green Building Council, a national consortium in the United States of 5,500 architects, builders, contractors and product vendors who promote sustainability. Steps as small as building bicycle racks or as large as energy-efficient solar roofing win points towards a LEED certificate.

The Children's Discovery Museum in Normal, Illinois, snared the first LEED for its one-year-old location, where visits have soared four-fold. In addition to winning green credentials, the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh collected one of the 2006 Honour Awards for Architecture from the American Institute of Architects—an elite status conferred in years past on the Getty Centre in Los Angeles and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Financial sustainability will decide whether rejuvenated children's museums reach maturity. After capital campaigns meet aggressive targets and the blush of novelty subsides, museums can expect admissions, store sales and outreach programs to earn less than 70 cents for every dollar of annual operating costs. The rest will depend on fresh donations. Fortunately, many charitable resources favor childhood development these days. "It's a key focus of what we do," says Don Cooke, a funder at the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which supports three children's museums in metropolitan Chicago. Museums are also tapping wider corporate support, especially for exhibits that showcase health and environmental initiatives.

"It's certainly not a fad," says Leslie Bedford, who directs the leadership in museum education programme for New York's Bank Street College of Education. Author and child-rearing expert, T. Berry Brazelton, agrees. He predicts a healthy future for children's museums that furnish havens where parents can learn from each other and where children can teach themselves.