Toolkit for Reimagining Children’s Museums

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Welcome!

This is not a report; it is an *invitation to imagine* and a *toolkit* to help you do so. To be precise, it is a toolkit to help you *re-imagine your museum*, because the difficult work of creating a children’s museum no doubt required you to do an extraordinary amount of imagining already.
But why reimagine your museum at all? Well, because your museum—any museum for that matter—lives within an environment of continual change, some of which we can predict, but for all of which we need to keep fashioning new responses. Changing demographics, advances in technology, and shifts in approaches to and understanding of parenting, philanthropy, and workforce development—just to name a few—are affecting every part of society. Failure to change, failure to respond, will eventually lead to the failure of our museums. So reimagining, as a way of responding to these changes, is an absolute necessity.

But it is also an opportunity. Remember that sense of joy you felt at the launch of your museum or when you began a new phase of your career at your institution? Remember that wonderful frisson combining a commitment to a mission and the satisfaction that comes from creation? There’s no reason that should be a one-time experience, and every reason, as we’ve just seen, for it to be an ongoing experience.

With the generous support of the MetLife Foundation and the extraordinary contributions of museum and non-museum professionals from around the world, we have assembled here a toolkit to help you reimagine your children’s museum.

On behalf of everyone at the Association of Children’s Museums we invite you to reimagine and urge you to engage wholeheartedly in this vital process. We truly believe you’ll find it to be one of those rare and wonderful activities in life that is both necessary and fun.

LAURA HUERTA MIGUS
ACM Executive Director

JANE WERNER
ACM Board of Directors
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The concept of ‘a children’s museum’ and the act of imagining (or reimagining) have been closely and productively associated for more than a hundred years.

In fact, it’s almost hard to imagine a time when:

- exhibits were only static displays, not interactive engagements;
- education meant exposure to edifying examples and occasional curios, not the sparking of true learning and the introduction to wonder;
- the display of the collections was more important than the experience of the visitors.

And yet, right from the start, and continuing through to today, children’s museums were constantly changing, evolving, responding to and sometimes even leading their times. Museum professionals have always sought new ways to deepen the impact of the museum-going experience and deliver more than just a pleasant afternoon away from school or home.
It is in the nature of children’s museums to constantly evolve and meet higher standards, because a child entering a museum will have far less time there than with parents or teachers, so the critical experiences must be profound. At the same time, the museums exhibits and programs offer a connection that home or school experience simply can not even approach.

**So why the current push to reimagine?**  Won’t children’s museums always be growing and changing? Perhaps. But it is the remarkable confluence of technological and societal change that makes this an ideal, if not unique, time to reimagine.

**Consider technology**

- immersive experiences are growing more realistic and more informative;

- interactivity is no longer just a “cool” experience, it is becoming an essential way to learn;

- digital asset sharing means information from any place or any time, can be accessed at any here and now; and

- the promise of 3-D modeling and replication is seriously exciting (e.g., Intrigued by what you see? Take home your own realistic copy).

**Consider society**

- the idea of multiple intelligences is increasingly being married to the idea of different modes of learning, opening the possibility of many different kinds of visit experiences at the same museum;

- fewer and fewer children know the experience and rewards of unsupervised play, creating an opportunity for children’s museums to provide this stimulus to intellectual and emotional development;

- with attention spans shortening, digital media exposure growing, and the increasing breakdown of what were once age-appropriate filters, we face a generation that is less innocent, less able to process what it learns, and in the end effectively less knowledgeable.

By any measure, then, now is clearly the time to reimagine children’s museums. By the same token, no one expects change to abate or slow, so now is also the time to instill a reimagining ethos that will make the process of transformation continuous, productive, and enjoyable.
a closer look

Asking someone to reimagine something is usually code for ‘throw out everything you’ve done and start over.’ And while that’s always an option, that is not generally what is meant here.

Reimagining means
Challenging your assumptions about what you do, how you do it, and even for whom you do it.

We don’t mean brainstorming, which is typically a limited exercise in proposing, and at least initially not challenging, as many solutions as you can think of to a particular problem. If visitors to your museum on rainy days are slipping on the wet entryway to your building, you could:

• rough-up the concrete,
• install an overhang to keep it dry,
• bevel your paving stones to create more drainage and better footing,
• lay out ribbed rubber mats, etc.

Eventually you’ll hit on a clever and reasonable solution, but that’s not reimagining. Reimagining would be more like digging up the entryway and replacing it with memory-foam so people would actually want to slip, or eliminating the entryway altogether and having everyone enter from underground tunnels leading from the surrounding buildings, etc. In other words, reimagining means completely rethinking the purpose, function, and operation of that slippery sidewalk.

Reimagining means
Crafting changes in response to challenges or as a means of seizing opportunities.

We don’t mean change for change’s sake or change just to shake things up periodically. Most children’s museums are operating fairly close to the margin already; they do not have the luxury of time or the financial cushion to make random, experimental changes. There needs to be a clear reason for the reimagining.

Perhaps there’s been a change in the mix of languages spoken by the community you serve, a change in the number and distribution of nearby schools, a plant or military base closing. These are the kinds of changes that will affect your revenue, membership, and program emphasis. These are the kinds of changes that will spur you to reimagine your museum. Similarly, new plants or businesses moving to the area offer the promise of new collaborations, as would new green spaces or conserved areas, the construction of new infrastructure like bridges or stadiums, or the installation of community-wide Wi-Fi networks. All of these changes would give you reason to reimagine expanding the sphere of your influence far beyond your walls.
Reimagining means
Finding the best ideas, regardless of their source.

Reimagining does not have to be a private or closely-held activity. Involving vendors, community leaders, neighborhood workers, schools and service organizations, as well as parents, children, and supporters will probably widen the scope and inventiveness of what is proposed as well as pave the way for greater buy-in and support for whatever path your reimagining ultimately takes.

Nor does your reimagining necessarily need to be original. With more than 300 member museums, someone within the ACM community has likely aspired to create the same kind of change you envision, or been presented with similar challenges. And it would be reasonable to consider their ideas and implementation. A case in point is the 2014 Promising Practice Award that asked applicants to reimagine one of the previous 43 practices at their own museum.¹ For example, the Children’s Museum of Denver reimagined the Children’s Museum of Tacoma’s Pay as You Will admission program.

And in addition to the Promising Practices and Best Practices information on the ACM website describing what others have already done, you may also want to make use of ACM’s Community Conversations to gather and explore new ideas or create a ‘virtual reimagining’ exercise reaching across the entire membership.

Reimagining means
What you want it to mean.

Really. You know your institution’s capacity for change, you know your staff’s tolerance for stretching, and you know your community’s needs. And you know the expectations of funders and the realities of your financial situation. All of these can bound your thinking and limit your imagination or they can be seen as challenges to be overcome or opportunities to succeed brilliantly and unexpectedly. So go ahead and use reimagining as a means to solve a specific problem, but don’t overlook the opportunity to view it as permission to momentarily put all of those problems aside and look at your museum with the same unbounded promise of the time when it first came into being.
As described in the next chapter, instilling the capacity to reimagine may require testing the process on some relatively smaller challenges at first. If you start, for example, with reimagining the traffic flow through your museum’s lobby or reimagining the placement of trash and recycling receptacles, your staff will develop the skills to reimagine collaboratively, evaluate and select the best ideas, test them, and transition to implementation.
Once that skill level is achieved, it makes sense to tackle those larger challenges that have true transformative potential. There are after all only so many hours in the day, an always-surprising amount of work simply to keep your museum afloat, and only so much staff emotional energy to devote to reimagining, so make the effort count.

At ACM’s May, 2012 Leadership Pre-Conference, in preparation for our annual meeting that year, we gathered more than 100 museum professionals and thought-leaders in associated fields to look into the future of children’s museums and to begin the reimagining process. A significant take-away from that meeting was the identification of seven key areas where participants believed the most benefit would be derived from reimagining. While you are of course free to reimagine any aspect of your museum, we think these areas may prove especially fruitful:

- Sustainability
- Design
- Community
- Collaboration
- Change
- Learning
- Technology

No doubt these topics look all too familiar and no doubt you’ve given all of them considerable thought already. But unless you’ve already been practicing reimagining, those thoughts have probably been along this line:

I know our current situation and I think I know what the near-term future holds for [ fill in topic here ]. How do I get us from where we are to where I want us to be?

For reimagining, though, we’re asking you to look at these topics from a different (opposite, actually) perspective:

How do I build a step-wise path backward from where we ideally could be back to where we currently are?

The formulation this took at the 2012 meeting was typically What if…, as in

What if all children’s museums were free of charge?
What if children’s museums were a required part of the traditional school curriculum?

There are many more examples throughout this toolkit. And there’s no reason you can’t imagine even more boldly than those. For example,

What if our roof were actually a giant lens focusing sunlight and generating energy for our museum and at the same time providing illumination for our exhibit spaces? And why not make it also its own exhibit on new energy sources and sustainability?
a closer look at the seven areas

For each of the seven suggested areas of concentration, we'll provide some guidance on what participants thought they might encompass, but as we've said elsewhere in this guide, you should not feel constrained by our interpretations. You're imagining the future for your museum, not all museums.

Sustainability

In some ways this is the most difficult area to reimagine because in many of its forms it actually resists change or is the opposite of change. If you ask How can we sustain our facilities? you’re assuming that that is a baseline goal. But maybe the future of your museum is a highly distributed and fractured model with museum-guided programs embedded within others’ facilities. Or maybe your current facility is such a drain on resources that it really shouldn’t be maintained and it would be better to replace it entirely.

That said, you can think of sustainability as relating to:

- Finances and funding
- Community support and backing
- Facilities and infrastructure
- Audience support and attendance
- Institutional memory
- Fidelity to your mission
- Retention and growth of staff
- Balance and interplay between learning and fun
- The energy and excitement of a startup

In other words, imagine new ways to sustain those features of your museum that are core to its mission and essential to its survival.
Design

Design most frequently focuses on museum facilities and the physical spaces and objects/exhibits within and surrounding them. Yet design also refers to a creative process used to develop new concepts. Architect Louis Sullivan’s famous dictum that “Form ever follows function” encompasses both the physical and the process itself leading to a starting place for design reimagining: reimagining function.

Among the functions children’s museums currently serve are: essential community learning resources and modern town squares, places where all families are welcome and learn together through play and hands-on activity. Try reimagining how your museum welcomes families. For example, if your museum is now and expects to continue serving increasing numbers of non-native English speakers, you might rethink your signage. Instead of rewriting signs in multiple languages, reimagine...could visitors select a language upon entry and have it encoded in, say, a wristband or app that would automatically trigger that language in exhibits or on directional signs when the visitor was nearby?

After reimagining its current functions, what new functions does your museum envision? What audience needs does your museum foresee? Would physical space be needed and how might it be imagined? Or you might consider some of the concepts created by the four interdisciplinary design teams:

- What if a children’s museum was not a single building, but a series of interlinked spaces—private and public, indoor and outdoor, small and large—all within a twenty-minute walk?
- What if a children’s museum was a hybrid between a landscape and architecture—participating in the environmental fabric of its community and addressing nature deficit in children?
- What if play itself was an agent of change, influencing public policy? What would the museum be doing and what would it look like?
- What if a children’s museum generated energy for its community and those energy generating mechanisms became part of the museum experience?

See the History and Background appendix to learn more about the interdisciplinary design teams.
Community

Community presents what might simultaneously be the greatest challenge and the greatest potential. Unlike the other six areas of concentration, your museum will have a relatively small affect on the changing demographics and economic health of the surrounding community. And yet, in just those circumstances where demographics are in flux and the economy is in distress, you actually have a leveraged and heightened opportunity to change the lives of the children you serve. You know the power of ideas in young minds and you know the motivational energy that flows from realizing new paths and opportunities. In these settings, your museum can be both a window on and push towards futures for these children that they might never have imagined on their own.

There is probably no way to predict all of the changes your community might experience. Can you confidently guess at the timing and severity of the next recession, the impact of the next refugee resettlement in your city, the increased frequency of severe weather, the mix of new businesses moving in or old ones exiting? Or any of dozens of other changes?

So one capability that you need to reimagine is your faculty to respond to change. How can you become more nimble and more effective when change occurs? One way is to be constantly reimagining your museum (!), but to always have that informed by a rich and detailed understanding of your community. That may mean spending more time and engagement outside your museum or inviting the community to join in that reimagining. It might mean rethinking what aspects of your museum are permanent and what are temporary. It might even mean being willing to adjust some of your key goals; where in the past you may have been positioned to challenge children to think beyond what they had already learned, maybe your museum now needs to give more emphasis to instilling that basic learning first.

Perhaps a measure of your readiness to respond to a redefined community is to think back to your museum’s response to meeting the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Did you simply comply (or react to change) or did you look at it as an opportunity to expand your audience and broaden your mission (or embrace change)?

Collaboration

Collaboration can take many forms and serve as many ends.

You can, as we’ve just seen, work with your community to make your institution stronger, but you can also work with the community to make their services more effective. Obvious candidates might be local schools where your programs can complement their curricula and where they in turn look to you to excite and inform students in ways they are unable to do. And beyond schools, just about every other public institution should be considered a potential collaboration partner, from hospitals to courts,
police, fire, EMS, libraries, recreation, social services, and even public works in terms of recycling, clean water, and much more.

Businesses offer opportunities as well. A classic and simple example was the Boston Children’s Museum’s Recycle program, later emulated by dozens of other museums, where manufacturing rejects and excess materials were given to the museum, which in turn sold it (profitably) for as little as $3.50 per filled grocery bag. Children got a wonderful array of play-stuffs, as did teachers and others, the ethic of recycling was learned, and no doubt the companies making the donations got credit as well.\(^2\)

One avenue of collaboration with enormous untapped potential is collaboration between museums. While information sharing and program adoption between and among children’s museums has been steadily increasing, the opportunity for jointly developing and interactively administering such programs is poised to explode, given the growing pressures on program costs and the dramatically reduced costs of communication.

The good news is that any of the programmatic collaboration just described is practice and groundwork for reimagining collaboration, because there is no reason not to undertake reimagining with these very same partners. And given the relationships of trust and shared values you’ve already established, there is every reason to work together.

“What if children’s museums set a target of 80 percent of the kids in their community being school-ready by kindergarten?”

—Charles Trautmann
Sciencenter (Ithaca, NY)
Change

A central theme running throughout this toolkit is that reimagining is a key way to respond to and even get ahead of the change that is all around us and affecting our museums in countless ways.

If you can institutionalize a respect or even love for reimagining at your museum, if it can become part of everyone’s work and methodology, then you will have created an environment where change is not viewed as a threat that must be resisted. In other words, whether any of your reimaginings ever result in wholesale overhauls of your museum, you will accrue serious benefits by inoculating yourself to the downsides of change and positioning yourself to take advantage of the upsides. Reimagining is good training to survive and to thrive.

So while reimagining (i.e., imagining change) in any of the other six areas of concentration is fairly straightforward, reimagining change itself (i.e., imagining changing how you change!) is a little more complicated but just as important and equally beneficial. And the exercise of reimagining is just one way to develop a capacity to take advantage of change. There are many schools of thought on change and change management, running from disrupter models to more subtle and embedded approaches.

Reimagining change will quickly surface a host of related issues. Some of your staff, or those with whom you collaborate, or even those you serve, will see change as negative, as personal, and as a threat to their position or self-esteem. Some may find an environment of continual change to be an unbearable workplace. Some may mistakenly view your museum’s desire for change as making you unfocused or unreliable. To do this, you might:

• Take reimagining slowly;

• Cast reimagining as experimenting and testing, rather than aimless wandering;

• Communicate your goals and reasons for reimagining repeatedly and extensively;

• Document and communicate successes, both quantitative and experiential;

• Use the reimagining process as the opportunity to build trust and relationships;

• Point to the larger picture: Reimagining doesn’t threaten you; instead, it gives you the power to influence the direction of the entire museum and everyone it touches.
Learning

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of theories of learning and there are easily thousands of tactics, approaches, and strategies that derive from these theories and seek to build on their insights in very real and immediate ways. As we’ve defined it here, though, the reimaging process is not designed to spur you to create yet another theory of learning.

In fact, at this point, we need to step back and look for a moment at an old debate about how much actual learning should be expected to take place at children’s museums.

One view is that all childhood learning is derived from a spectrum of sources, with, say, more formalized, school-based learning on one extreme and more personal, informal and experiential learning occurring at the other extreme, which is represented by parents, museums, and other sources. Then, for argument’s sake, let’s say that museums’ current role is piquing interest, igniting imagination, or giving physical form to otherwise abstract concepts. In that case, reimaging your museum’s role in learning may be reimaging:

- Where you stand on that spectrum. Maybe digital experiences have extended the width of the learning spectrum, occupying one extreme and repositioning children’s museums more in the center. This implies that children’s museums might be well positioned to act as a learning bridge between these two end-points.
- Where the hand-off and overlaps occur between your museum and other institutions. Traditionally, museums have been viewed as supplements to schools, adding tangible experiences to what’s taught in the classroom. But what if museums (reimagined) covered the same part of the spectrum as school but only did it differently? What if, just as there are for many schools, there were Standards of Learning for museums themselves?
- How best to leverage the museum learning experience. We expect children to return to school each day and for each day’s learning to build on what was learned before. What if we had a similar expectation of repeated returns to museums? How could you best schedule a series of “brain bombs” at your museum so that each visit and each amazing insight built upon all of those that came before?
In other words, don’t look to reinvent learning. Create a description of what you mean by learning at your museum, then reimagine ways for your museum to stimulate or reinforce that learning; ways that deepen the experience and give it lasting resonance.

Here’s one more challenge: What if your museum could plant experiences with children that would trigger at some later time, when the child’s cognitive capacity was sufficiently developed to make use of what had been stored there in memory years earlier? For example, could you design a museum experience that indirectly or subconsciously gave young children a model for analogies, which, unrealized at the time, would be part of an ah-ha! insight years later? What if your entire museum was a top-level of exhibits and a lower, sub-rosa level of concepts? How would that affect children’s learning?

Technology

Few of us are very good at imagining the future of technology. (How many of us are still waiting for our hover cars?) And after all, your job is running a museum, not envisioning the future at some tech start-up. So instead of thinking “what’s the next technology and how can we make use of it,” look at the Steve Jobs quote in the next chapter:

You’ve got to start with the customer experience and work backwards to the technology. You can’t start with the technology and figure out where you’re going to sell it.

Now you can imagine without thinking of technological constraints and instead frame your “What if…” questions around outcomes and experiences. For example, probably the most frequent child wish at your museum is “Can I take this (experience) home?” Now you can wish it, too:

What if every child who visited our museum could capture and bring that experience home with them and then re-experience it with the same fidelity and goose-bump excitement?
If that’s what you reimagine, then now all you have to do is to find the technology to make it possible. It may not be sitting on a shelf today, but your formulation of that experience may be just the spur to someone to invent the technology you need. And once your reimagined experience is well in mind, you and your network will be on the lookout for any steps in that direction. Your dream may have to be realized incrementally, but if it addresses a true need for your visitors, then every step along the way will be valuable and appreciated.

In sum, your challenge is to imagine outcomes and then to become a passionate communicator of that vision to anyone who might help make it come true.

What if children’s museums leveraged ideas like the future role of games in learning to promote the types of learning that we know are so critical for children?

—Chris Siefert
Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh (PA)

There are no hard and fast lines demarcating these seven areas of reimagining. In fact, some of the more powerful reimaginings might just spring from hybrids. These days it’s difficult to think about learning without bringing in technology and nearly impossible to discuss community without also including collaboration. And if it’s true that these seven areas are the ones most fruitful for reimaginative change, then how much more powerful would they be when combined?
The challenge of assumptions...

It’s worth saying right up front: there is no one, right way to go about reimagining.

There are many techniques to spur the creativity of groups and to solve problems collectively, but none has a corner on success. And though we describe some of those approaches here, you should feel free to explore others or create your own hybrid, guided in large measure by the character of your staff and the particulars of your situation.

One of the harder parts of reimagining is recognizing the many assumptions we are always making about our institution, its work, its audience, and more.

Well, of course the building needs a roof.
Well, of course our message should be about play.

In fact, every time you hear or utter the phrase Well, of course… it should be a warning that you’ve just bounded and restricted your reimagining. And it should raise a question about whether you really want to limit your thinking in this way or if setting this assumption aside gives you the freedom to become even more inventive.
The problem is that we aren’t always alerted by catch phrases like Well, of course… and we don’t easily recognize what we’ve taken off the plate before we’ve even begun.

The author David Foster Wallace tells a story that aptly illustrates the challenge of recognizing assumptions:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the [heck] is water?”

So you have to practice recognizing the water all around you, practice stepping back and asking what assumptions underlie your thinking and what might happen if you open your imagination further by eschewing these assumptions altogether.

That becomes easier to do when you also recognize that there is no penalty attached to imagination and that dozens or even thousands of imaginings that don’t pan out might still provide useful information in terms of suggesting, alternatively, where more promising ideas lie. Thomas Edison was famously quoted to this effect after spending five, seemingly fruitless months working on a battery design:

I found him at a bench about three feet wide and twelve to fifteen feet long, on which there were hundreds of little test cells that had been made up by his corps of chemists and experimenters. He was seated at this bench testing, figuring, and planning. I then learned that he had thus made over nine thousand experiments in trying to devise this new type of storage battery, but had not produced a single thing that promised to solve the question. In view of this immense amount of thought and labor, my sympathy got the better of my judgment, and I said: ‘Isn’t it a shame that with the tremendous amount of work you have done you haven’t been able to get any results?’ Edison turned on me like a flash, and with a smile replied: ‘Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results! I know several thousand things that won’t work.’

So, how to begin? Most of us, unfortunately, can’t simply erase all of our assumptions and start reimagining on the level and at the scale to make significant differences in our museums. We need some sort of framework or process to guide us along the way.
inside the box (boyd and goldenberg)

Here’s a simple start. Drew Boyd and Jacob Goldenberg have devised a process called Systemic Inventive Thinking, consisting of five techniques (Subtraction, Division, Task Unification, Multiplication, and Attribute Dependency) designed to stimulate your thinking. Here are brief examples of each technique in action:5

1. Eliminate the Essential
Think of a product. Now imagine it without its core component. This forces you to examine what’s left and see if it provides some new benefit. For example, when Sony removed the speakers and recording function of a cassette deck, they created the Walkman.

2. Make a Copy
Another strategy for summoning creativity is to duplicate part of a product, then qualitatively change it. Ben Franklin created bifocals by copying an optical lens suited for distance, then modifying it so that one could see up close when looking through the bottom of it.

3. Unify Tasks
You can give a product an additional function by stealing the job of something external. The PlayPump, a sustainable water-pumping system used in Africa, is disguised as a playground fixture; the roundabout. As children spin it, they’re also pumping water out of a well and into a holding tank for their village.

4. Dare to Rearrange
Reorganizing the parts of a product or the steps of a process is another way to innovate. Think about the control buttons on a television. When you remove them from the TV and put them elsewhere in the room, you create a remote control.

5. Create Dependency
This involves forming correlations between product attributes. The key phrase is ‘As one thing changes, another thing changes.’ Smartphones are equipped with many such dependencies: the ringtone changes based on who’s calling, apps function differently based on a user’s geolocation, etc.

In their book explaining their approach, Inside the Box,6 Boyd and Goldenberg offer many more examples as well as a structured process to use these five techniques in a productive way, sorting through the ideas you generate and evaluating them against different standards. And in addition to the book, there’s a website7 and an iPad app.8
Our keynote speaker for InterActivity 2014 was Tom Kelley, one of the founders of IDEO, a design firm celebrated both for its innovative designs and its unique approach. That approach, called Design Thinking, has a few key aspects that make it consistently successful:

- It’s a group or collective approach, drawing on several people’s ideas, not just those of an individual.
- It encourages, and improves, when those contributions come from people with a variety of backgrounds and experiences.
- It’s not a strictly sequential process, but more of an amalgam of overlapping and coincident processes.
- It’s centered on solving human problems rather than technology implementations, what Kelley calls “empathy”.
- Experimentation is essential because not every thing that you imagine will be a success and it’s important to learn that quickly and then try something else.

And the idea underlying it all is that we—as in every human being—are all creative. In Kelley’s view it’s not that people are more or less creative but that they are more or less inhibited in terms of tapping and expressing that ubiquitous creativity. What we need, he says, is something he calls “creative confidence.” It’s a talent that we all have, a resource upon which we can all draw. And that’s great news for you and your museum, because it means you don’t need creativity experts to tell you what to do as much as you need to find ways to set that creativity free within your own staff. That may sound too sentimental to you, but just imagine what it means if it’s true, imagine what potential is awaiting release within your own organization. The upside is so great that even if you’re skeptical of that now, you should bet (and bet heavily!) on your people and on your museum.

IDEO has been generous in sharing the details of its Creative Confidence theory and its Design Thinking process in books, TED talks, and elsewhere, some of which are referenced in the Resources appendix.
finding your element (sir ken robinson)

You may know Sir Ken Robinson for his iconoclastic views on education and his enormously popular TED talks, including the signature pieces *How Schools Kill Creativity*¹¹ and *Changing Education Paradigms*.¹² The relevance to your museum is no doubt obvious. But, it is another facet of Robinson’s thinking that may actually be even more helpful as you set out to do reimagining; that is, his recent book *Finding Your Element: How to Discover Your Talents and Passions and Transform Your Life*.¹³

Robinson’s book is directed to individuals, which may seem to contradict what we’ve said earlier about involving all stakeholders in your reimagining. What we mean is to think of your museum as an individual and to discover its talents and passions as an approach to a broader reimagining, but to make those discoveries collectively.

Thinking of your museum as an individual (with talents and passions) is not as unusual as it might at first sound. Every museum does have a distinctive personality and it was brought into being and exists today in a unique environment. Certainly, there are shared experiences among museums, but when you take into account all of the many defining characteristics from demographics to staff experience to funder interests to local collaborators and all the rest, it’s apparent that your museum really is unique. And thinking of it as an individual and employing the many exercises in Robinson’s book may provide just the mental distance that you and the other stakeholders need to kick-off a flurry of reimagining.

“What if children’s museums made sure that every child in the U.S. could come to a museum?”

—Jane Werner

*Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh (PA)*
pick a tool...
any tool

A tool is just a way to leverage and complement your innate abilities. No tool is guaranteed to work for all tasks; no one approach is best for every museum to employ in their reimagining. Just as reimagining encourages you to experiment, so too, you should experiment to find the right set of tools and methods to actually do that reimagining. **In the end, there are just two rules:**

1. Find what works best for you.
2. Share your experience with others.
In nearly every organization people will key into the unspoken cues and adapt their behavior to align with activities that are rewarded.

Very often it is the rewards of compensation, promotion, and even attention and recognition that dictate where someone will direct their energies and best efforts. Meaning that it will not be enough to simply talk about reimagining unless you also show everyone that reimagining is valued and that time devoted to these activities will not somehow be unsupported or dismissed. If the message is ‘you must do all of your usual activities without diminishing them and you must also spend time reimagining,’ the initiative will likely fail. For it to succeed, the message must be more like ‘reimagining is now part of your overall responsibilities and we understand that time on everything you did before will now be reduced somewhat to accommodate reimagining—and that’s okay because in the long run everything we do will improve.’

Continuous and public recognition of all efforts to reimagine your museum, not just the successes, is key. In this way, and over time, a climate will be established that welcomes and encourages innovation.
It takes time, and practice, and repetition before reimagining becomes an embedded activity. Why? Because it’s the exact opposite of what we naturally do. We don’t examine every action we take and try to think about how we could do it differently or better. We’d end up nearly paralyzed if we did so. The truth is that we get through the day, in an efficient and productive way, by NOT overthinking every move. Reimagining cuts against the grain… Why would I try to reimagine how to peel a carrot when I’m already employing this peeler that’s fast, cheap, and easy to use?

The carrot of course is an extreme example but it illustrates another nuance of embedding a reimagining ethos into your organization; namely that it needs to be pervasive and continuous but it must also be focused where it is most effective, as we saw earlier in the chapter on Where to Concentrate. It will take time for everyone to become comfortable with the concept and proficient in its implementation.

That said, it can be overwhelming for some people to think in these terms. I manage the trilobite exhibit, how can I reimagine the entire museum’s fundraising strategy? So it may well be worthwhile introducing some smaller reimagining activities at the beginning so everyone becomes familiar with the process, comfortable in putting forward ideas, and confident in the process’s value. Once everyone can see these small successes (and it might be useful to focus on something that actually can be seen so it can act as a reminder), then move on to reimagining on a larger scale. And as for the trilobite manager, she might in fact be perfect for reimagining fundraising, in part because she doesn’t have to confront and put aside the assumptions that the development folks do and in part because metaphors and analogies are frequently powerful ways to energize new thinking. After all, trilobites survived for some 270 million years, aided by their geographic and morphological diversity. Maybe in the same way, a ‘trilobite strategy’ for fundraising, constantly seeking to diversify the geographic and wealth-profiles of our donors could similarly help us establish more stable, long-term financial security.

“What if attending a children’s museum on a regular basis was as commonplace in society as going to a fast food restaurant?”

—Marion Wiener
Children’s Museum of Phoenix (AZ)
It is said that it takes repeating an activity for 21 days for it to become a true habit. If that’s true, then even if you were to devote one full day each month to reimagining, it would take nearly two years for this to become commonplace and integrated into your museum’s normal operations. That’s clearly too long, and in the end what’s become habituated are these single days of reimagining, not an organization-wide ethos of focused and ongoing reimagining.

One way to foster reimagining and to make thinking about it more commonplace is to begin at the other end of the change spectrum. Instead of diving in with large, profound, and revolutionary changes, start with small, continuous, and incremental changes. The Japanese business and manufacturing philosophy known as *kaisen* embodies this approach exactly. Workers at every level, in every function, at every step of any process are encouraged and rewarded for finding small improvements that make the product or service perform better or make its delivery or production more efficient. Because the scale of change is small, it encourages everyone to contribute and because the effect of these changes is additive, it sums overall to better products and healthier companies. And it profoundly nurtures individual initiative, a valued outcome whether you ever engage in true reimagining or not.

Once you’ve succeeded in instilling the habit of *kaisen* or a similar approach into the daily operations of your museum, the step to reimagining on a far grander scale will feel far more natural and far less threatening. In fact, an organization that routinely looks for small, productive changes may transition naturally and on its own to the more challenging activity of reimagining. Your staff may actually lead you to reimagining without ever realizing that’s what they’ve done or that’s what it’s called.

Finally, you may hear some organizations proudly say that they “celebrate failure,” which is not what they really mean. In fact, organizations that do celebrate failure are likely soon to get their wish and actually fail. Instead, what they mean to say is that they celebrate trying, putting ideas forward, and taking risks without fear of negative consequences. It’s that kind of work environment that is essential to any attempt at reimagining with a chance of actually succeeding.

So whatever you call it and however formal its precepts, it is essential to begin today to create an environment that will make reimagining possible.
You know from your work and a lifetime of watching kids—and even having been one yourself—how much of childhood is a wholehearted embrace of imagination:

What if rocks could talk?
What if my bike was a rocket ship?
What if I could walk through walls?

What if... is certainly a magical phrase. Begin a sentence with those two words and nothing that follows is out of bounds or beyond a dream. At some point, though, those same words take on a second, nuanced meaning more along the lines of I wonder... And it’s then that the phrase transforms from imagination to investigation, from That would be amazing!... to I wonder how we’d actually do that?...
In essence, that is the same transformation, the same journey, that we’re asking you to make: imagine what your museum might be and then find ways to make it so.

If we’ve given you the impression that this is easy, then we apologize because we’ve been misleading. Make no mistake; it’s hard work, and no part is harder than getting out of your own way by banishing objections and letting your imagination run freely. On the other hand, if we’ve given you the impression that this is fun, then we’ve succeeded admirably. It is fun, and it is also profoundly and transformationally rewarding for everyone involved in the process and everyone who benefits from its realization.

So as you start your own journey of reimagining, remember that as you do so, you have the admiration of your peers and that you will always have the full support of all of us at ACM.

P.S.

Now that you’ve read the Toolkit, please read it again. Really! It is simply not possible to present a concept as rich and far-reaching as reimagining children’s museums in an entirely linear fashion. There are ideas, for example, in chapter three that will make chapter one clearer, and so on and so on. We promise at least one such Ah-ha! moment if you do so.

And the more you understand what we meant, the more you’ll be able to create your own scheme, rationale, and benefits for reimagining. Because in the end (which is where we are now) this is your process and your opportunity to create your museum’s future. So we wish you the best of luck, and we’ll meet you back at chapter one…
The winners of this challenge (the 2014 Promising Practice Award Reimagined) were announced at InterActivity 2014.


Wallace was making a larger point, in his 2006 commencement address at Kenyon College, about how we assume, without knowing it, that our needs and wants are more important than those of anyone else around us. He suggests we remind ourselves of this by simply repeating “This is water. This is water,” a phrase that works equally well in discovering assumptions as we reimagine museums. You can see an engaging re-creation of Wallace’s entire address here: https://vimeo.com/68855377.

These originally appeared on page 46 of the August 2013 issue of Southwest Airlines’s Spirit magazine.

http://www.inside-theboxinnovation.com


Steve Jobs was an early and long-time client of IDEO who shared the firm’s perspective on customer centered design. As he says in this video, “You’ve got to start with the customer experience and work backwards to the technology. You can’t start with the technology and figure out where you’re going to sell it.” This should be valuable advice as you embark on your reimagining. See Job’s remark in context in this five minute video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUZcjgSTp6w.

Kelley says that even using the term “experiment” has benefits because it gives you permission to fail (and learn) and lowers other people’s resistance to your attempts at change.

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms. This is presented as a very entertaining animation.

Other approaches that share this improvement ethic include the generalized Total Quality Management (TQM), or the more specific ISO-9000 or Six Sigma. Whether you choose a detailed and precise methodology or opt to simply create a shared understanding and receptive workplace, these can all serve to prepare your museum for reimagining.

In Search of Excellence, the 1980s classic by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, Jr., contains many examples of kaisen-like approaches to organizational improvement. A companion video to the book makes the point memorably by showing one such example at North American Tool and Die. When a worker found it difficult to insert one metal part into another during an assembly process, he took it upon himself to place the smaller piece in a freezer for a short time, thereby causing it to contract and making it easier to insert into the metal housing. You can see this referenced at the 63-minute mark in this preview video: http://carltonstraining.com/in-search-of-excellence-with-tom-peters.
As we’ve seen, reimagining is a concept that touches on any number of key aspects of your museum, including planning and strategy, staff development and training, motivation, collaboration, analysis, and many more. It would not be hard to imagine a combined MBA and MS in museum science, all built around the theme of reimagining (Anyone up for the challenge?). That being the case, you should feel free to shape your program of reimagining along any lines you feel will be most productive and to draw on materials from education, psychology, organizational behavior, business, industrial relations, etc. What follows here are only a few suggested resources, largely keyed to references in this toolkit.

If you’re looking for material to help you over a very specific hurdle not covered here, please get in touch with us at either acm@ChildrensMuseums.org or 703.224.3100 and we’ll do our best to help.

“What if children’s museums were able to influence the ‘teaching to the test’ education culture?”

—Sheridan Turner
Kohl Children’s Museum of Greater Chicago (IL)
Reimagining Children’s Museums Project
http://childrensmuseums.org/members/community-conversations/reimagining-childrens-museums

- Reimagining Children’s Museums: Leadership Pre-Conference Proceedings
- Hand to Hand: Keynote InterActivity 2014 Tom Kelley, IDEO
- Reimagining Brochure and Photos

Best Practices and Promising Practices
http://childrensmuseums.org/members/community-conversations/research-practice-exchange/

Systemic Inventive Thinking
Drew Boyd and Jacob Goldenberg
www.insidetheboxinnovation.com
http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/inside-the-box-drewboyd/1114314549?ean=9781451659290

Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool’s Guide to Surviving with Grace
Gordon MacKenzie
http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/orbiting-the-giant-hairball-gordonmackenzie/1102832155?ean=9780670879830

Design Thinking
IDEO

- Creative Confidence
  http://www.ideo.com/by-ideo/creative-confidence
  http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/creative-confidence-davidkelley/1114701309?ean=9780385349369

- Design Thinking
  http://www.ideo.com/about/
  http://designthinking.ideo.com

- Change by Design
  http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/change-by-design-timbrown/1016388563?ean=9780061766084

- Design Thinking for Educators
  http://www.ideo.com/by-ideo/design-thinking-for-educators

Finding Your Element
Sir Ken Robinson
http://sirkenrobinson.com/?page_id=420
appendix ii—History and Background: Reimagining Children’s Museums project and the ACM commitment

Since 2012, the Association of Children’s Museums has been engaging the children’s museum field in an examination of what it means to experience a children’s museum in the 21st century. Throughout this examination, the Reimagining Children’s Museums project incorporated ideas from creative thought leaders in design, philanthropy, management, education, and other fields pertinent to the future of museums. What follows is a short history and background of the project.

To launch the project, ACM hosted a Leadership Pre-Conference on May 9, 2012 at InterActivity, held in Portland, OR. More than 110 children’s museum leaders gathered and engaged with thought leaders from outside of the museum world about trends and issues affecting children, families, and communities. Content was organized around a recurring sequence of thought leader presentations, in-depth table discussions, and reports to the entire group.

Also in 2012, ACM conducted an international design competition and selected four interdisciplinary design teams to engage with the field, ask questions, and produce concepts that would serve as springboards to new ways of thinking about what it means to be a children’s museum.

The Reimagining Children’s Museums Design Teams included:

- LEVENBETTS, New York City: David Leven and Stella Betts with Pentagram (Michael Bierut, partner); Robert Sillman Associates (Nat Oppenheimer, principal); Jonsara Ruth, designer / artist; and Lisa Sigal, artist. http://www.levenbetts.com

- muf architecture/art, London: Liza Fior, Katherine Clarke, Mark Lemanski, Caitlin Elster, Alison Crawshaw with Objectif Graphic Design (Axel Feldman); and Richard Neville, storyteller. http://www.muf.co.uk/

- Suisman Urban Design, Santa Monica: Doug Suisman, Eli Garsilazo, Jack Hartley, Erick Rodriguez with Michael Vergason Landscape Architects (Michael Vergason and Beata Corcoran); Louise Sandhaus Design (Louise Sandhaus); and Richard Louv, author. http://suisman.com

- WANTED landscape, Montreal: Paula Meijerink and Thierry Beaudoin with Sophie Malouin, interactive media writer and director; Sarah Watson, museum program curator and art historian; and Atelier Big City (Howard Davies and Randy Cohen, architects). http://www.w-a-n-t-e-d.com/en/ http://www.atelierbigcity.com/
The design teams’ visual presentations were featured at InterActivity 2013 in the Reimagining Exhibition of Ideas—on view throughout the conference—and through a formal design seminar that provided the culminating conference experience.

The Reimagining Exhibition of Ideas and design seminar were among many new offerings at InterActivity 2013, April 30–May 2, as the project provided ACM and host museum, the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, with the opportunity to reimagine the conference itself. Reimagining Children’s Museums became the conference theme. InterActivity 2013 opened offsite at Pittsburgh’s Byham Theater with SmallTalks, a day-long program combining the best formats from creative conferences around the world. Professional development sessions were organized by cross-disciplinary streams paralleling the areas of concentration generated at the 2012 Reimagining Children’s Museum Leadership Pre-Conference. A post-conference for international children’s museums allowed attendees to more deeply imagine the future of children’s museums in their cultures and communities. Indeed, the entire conference stimulated conversation and ideas connected to the project.

Reimagining Children’s Museums was again a major focal point at ACM’s InterActivity 2014: Are We There Yet? hosted by the Children’s Museum of Phoenix, May 14–16, 2014. SmallTalks at the Orpheum Theater kicked off the conference with a half-day program. Each day professional development sessions offered new ideas and processes to reimagine, including a session on design thinking. Co-host, i.d.e.a. Museum, provided an in-depth presentation and discussion of their Image of the Future project that effectively transformed the Arizona Museum for Youth into the i.d.e.a. Museum. The final day of the conference included the 2014 Promising Practice Award Reimagined recognition ceremony and keynote address by Tom Kelley, general manager of IDEO. Mr. Kelley presented key ideas from his recent book, Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All, as well as how organizations can foster a culture of innovation and creativity.

Reimagining Children’s Museums continues in the field, with the use of this toolkit, and by children’s museums posting their ideas through ACM’s Community Conversations.
acknowledgements

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Reimagining Children's Museums Convenings

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Penny Lodge, Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh
Stephen Long, Children’s Museum of the East End
Laura Lott, American Alliance of Museums
Mary Maher, Hand to Hand
Cynthia Mark-Hummel, DuPage Children’s Museum
Julianne Markow, The New Children’s Museum
Jenni Martin, Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose
Trapeta Mayson, (formerly) Please Touch Museum®
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Suzanne Olson, Children’s Museum and Theatre of Maine
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Sunnel O’Rork, i.d.e.a. Museum
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