Welcome to the Museum

During summer 2012 I had the privilege of interning at the Austin Children’s Museum. The museum was founded in 1983 as a “Museum without walls”. With the help of dedicated parents and educators, the first exhibits and programs were hosted in schools, parks, libraries and malls. The Museum didn’t settle into its current downtown location until 1997. Since then it has enriched more than 800,000 visitors and has strived to create valuable learning experiences for children and their families. In this paper I will describe the museum, report on my duties there, and discuss the anthropological importance of “play” for the children that attended.

Among the Museum’s many values, two stood out to me the most: creativity and playfulness. It was motivating to know the organization I would be interning for shared my belief that these values were important to those of all ages. Both creativity and playfulness could clearly be felt in the atmosphere of the museum. As soon as you walk into the building, the sound of children’s laughter and a cheerful room greeted you. It would not be rare to see a bunch of bubbles floating away and a loyal posse of children following the flight. This kind of lightheartedness applied to my experience as an employee. There was not much of a dress code to adhere to, so as long as your shorts were not shorter than your apron, your shoes were closed-toed, and you didn’t go to the extreme with your wardrobe, the museum was happy to take you as the individual you were.

The staff also fit into the relaxed and playful manner of the museum. They were welcoming, professional, and experts on ways to play. The “floor staff”, as they were called, were responsible for maintaining the Gallery Floor and taking care of the visitors. Gallery
Managers, Gallery Educators, and volunteers (including interns) usually made up the museum’s floor staff. The managers included Kate Moon, Matt Brown and Ibaad Rahman. All three were responsible for running the Gallery Floor, but because Kate was in charge of the Early Childhood programs, she was my mentor throughout the summer. I was also able to work with the Gallery Educators. I considered them to be play experts. If pretending that you were a clucking rooster made a child’s museum experience better, they would not hesitate to do it. Educators such as Araceli Ripper, Chelsea Bunn and Paul Banks taught me a lot about how to present myself and better serve the children that visited the museum.

Because the museum is a non-profit organization, they rely on the help of experienced and supportive volunteers. This includes interns, college and adult volunteers as well as Museum Career Ladder volunteers. I had a chance to work with a few people from each group, but because each department had their own intern, we interns didn’t interact much with each other unless our duties overlapped. For example, I was able to work extensively with Caleb Carrizales, the Guided Tour intern, because I was expected to assist with tours. As for volunteers, I mostly worked with MCL’s and a few adult volunteers during the Early Childhood programs. The Museum Career Ladder volunteers were Austin teens who were searching for a meaningful way to build skills necessary for their future endeavors. As the summer wore on, they gained experience and were heavily depended on. One adult volunteer that I had the privilege of
working with and learning from this summer was Dr. Candra Thornton, an accomplished researcher on the developmental benefits of young children’s play. She presented on the subject for 10 years and has authored more than 30 academic works including *The Developmental Benefits of Playgrounds* (2004), and *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-deficit Disorder* (2010). Working with her provided me with great insight to why my internship was important as well as providing me with an anthropological subject, such as play, to think about and analyze during the summer.

**Time for a Tour**

Creativity and playfulness are themes that are not only seen in the staff, but can also be seen throughout the Austin Children’s Museum from exhibit to exhibit. The “museum floor” as we call it, consists of three floors. After checking in at the box office and info desk, guests are greeted with a large, bright, round room called the rotunda. In the summer, this is where most of the museum activities such as Discovery Time, Story Times, and Sing Along’s take place. The openness of the room gives you an almost liberating feeling as you realize that you can explore anything you want to throughout this huge building. Because of their unfailing ability to attract children further into the facility, the only “exhibits” that permanently stay in the rotunda are the train table and the light table. From there, visitors can wander into neighboring rooms or hallways which lead to other exhibits, as almost every exhibit is accessible from the rotunda.

The first accessible room is called Ready Set Roll. Here guests can use golf balls to play and experiment with the different properties of physics. There are various ramps, loop-de-loops, roller coasters and puzzles that your golf ball can explore and teach you about things such as gravity, velocity, acceleration, and momentum. This is one of the most popular rooms because
there are various ways you can change up just rolling your golf ball down a ramp. There are buckets on turning tables that have different sized holes and baskets that get further and further away from the ramp mouth all in order to make you think creatively at how you are going to get your ball to a certain destination.

As you exit Ready Set Roll and climb up the winding stairs, you find the center for creativity in the museum: Tinker’s Workshop. This exhibit is comprised of two rooms: The Design Center and the Workshop. The workshop has different testing and exploration stations where you can make a car to test on a testing ramp or discover how to make a toy pig fly. In the design center, guests can become an engineer or an inventor and create anything they can dream up. The museum equips you with a wall of recyclable items that you can use to make your imagination come to life. When you’re done with your invention, you can document it in Tinkerer’s video diary, test it out around the exhibit, or just take it home.

Now that you’ve mastered designing something, it’s time to try your hand out at actually building a house. As you walk out of Tinkerer’s and pass the stairs, you come up on the second floor of the three-storied Funstruction, an exhibit that combines fun and construction and takes you through the stages of building something. On the first floor you can use cranes and toy trucks to clear your building site. On the second, you can actually start the building process, whether that be with the building blocks or the nuts and bolts provided. The third floor provides a place where you can finalize your building and you have the option of donning hard hats and orange vests keep to keep you safe throughout the exhibit. These safety precautions were
especially useful when you tackle the Funstruction Slide. This three story exhibit is connected with a long, dark slide that takes squealing kids from the third floor all the way to the first. To say this was a popular attraction would be an understatement. You haven’t visited the museum until you’ve mastered the Funstruction Slide.

As you leave Funstruction, there is an area that is open to the tiniest visitors at the Museum. Rising Star Ranch is a fenced off playground where tummy time babies can explore things on their level. The playground is full of buttons, gadgets, textures and balls that babies can safely play with without getting bulldozed over by an excited child.

Next door, 123 Geometry Lane welcomes you to the neighborhood. Here, kids can become comfortable with math and get creative with the various ways to use it at home. The exhibit takes on the familiar setting of a house and as guests go through the different rooms they can measure, use 2 and 3-D shapes in practical ways as well as fish and garden in the back yard. Often times visitors make themselves comfortable in the kitchen and practice origami while others try to count how many of themselves they see in a 360° mirror.

Visitors can go from home to work as 123 Geometry Lane opens right up into Global City. Here, the museum imitates different parts of Austin that the children may see and enables them to explore how people work, live, and play together. You can join Storytime in the Global City Library, or defy gravity and hang up side down under the bat bridge. There are also a bunch of different occupations you can try your hand at all around the city. Whether you choose to be a veterinarian, a chef at the Global City Diner, or even a train conductor stationed up in the train
tower, visitors can get their creative and playful juices flowing as they explore the Austin Children’s Museum.

**Where’s the Staff?**

Staff areas and visitor areas contrast severely at the Austin Children’s Museum. Not only are the areas different in size, but in their overall atmospheres as well. The staff areas at the museum are very tucked away and wind around the exhibits, very unlike the openness of the rotunda and other public visitor areas. In Ready Set Roll there is a program closet that has everything needed for Early Childhood activities. Most children just run right past it as it is painted to look like the wall. At the end of the hallway that boarders Rising Star Ranch and Global City is a door that leads to Tinkerer’s supply room, the wood shop (for repairing exhibits), and a kitchen for the camp areas. As you enter and pass through the supply room, you’ll find a backset of stairs that will take you all the way up to the Museum Offices. Visitors only know the office to be accessible from the second floor between Tinkerer’s Workshop and Funstruction. As you enter, you immediately notice the difference in sound. Compared to the hundreds of playful children out on the museum floor, the office feels like a crypt. Although it did provide an excellent place to work and concentrate, it always felt as though there were some unspoken silent rule.

As if keeping in step with the “tucked” away theme of the staff areas, the office was no different. It was a large, square room that was packed with a bunch of cubicles in the center. Along the far left wall were the staff kitchen and a couple of offices that had their own rooms, but those were reserved for the heads of each department. The middle of the office was a labyrinth of ten or so cubicles that placed four people to a square, one in each corner with a long
desk on both sides. The people occupying these corners were the ones who managed and controlled how things were done in the museum. Some of these people included Education Managers and my bosses, Cybil Guess and Marcela Ramos as well as Gallery Manager Kate Moon. Throughout the summer these were the people I answered to and had the most contact with in the office. It was a miracle I found my way through the maze to the kitchen during lunch times as my desk was on the opposite end of the room, along the far right wall. This was what the office called “Intern Row”. It was a series of desks and computers that faced the wall, and I sat at the very end of it. All together there were 18 of us that shared 6 desks. Our schedules dictated when we would be in the office and where we would sit. I shared a desk with Allison, the blog intern, but only ran into her a few times when working late. It was a good thing too, as my internship duties required me to do a fair amount of computer work.

Shaking My Sillies Out
As the Early Childhood Programs Intern, Cybil and Kate made me responsible for a variety of things. First and foremost was the development of the Baby Bloomers and Cub Club curriculum. Baby Bloomers was a toddler program that lasted from 9am to 12pm every Monday morning. It is a special time where babies can play freely without the worry of older kids running around. It consisted of three staff lead activities. First, Story Time opened the program at 9:30am where kids gathered in a circle around the rotunda and listened to stories appropriate for their age group. Then at 10:30, the staff passed out shakers and scarves and the kids had a ball dancing and playing during Sing Along. Finally, Little Explorer’s Lab, an age appropriate, staff led activity, ended Baby Bloomer activities at 11:00. Cub Club is the Saturday morning version of Baby Bloomers. Not only is it shorter (only from 9-10am), but it focuses on dads as well. These mornings, dads get in for free and the activities are lined up a bit differently. For example, instead of closing the program, Little Explorer’s Lab opened our Saturday morning festivities. Then Circle Time starts at 9:30 and is a cross between Bloomer’s Storytime and Sing Alongs. In the past, interns had only developed detailed curriculum for these programs for a span of three or four months. As I got settled into my internship, I noticed that nobody paid much attention to the schedules developed by past interns. I brought this up to Cybil at one of our weekly meetings and she had said it was because the only person who normally takes care of the early learner programs was Kate. Sometimes, the planned activities would be too difficult for one person to carry out by themselves, so she often improvised. We brainstormed ways to make this more efficient and
realized that a loose schedule might be more effective than a detailed one. So instead of planning specific activities for specific days, I created a schedule for the programs on Excel that would last the year. There would be six themes: 5 Senses, Animals, Nature, All About Me, Colors and Shapes, and ABC-123. Each would be paired with two months out of the year so that we could recycle activities. For example, May and December would have the theme Colors and Shapes and on the corresponding excel sheet I listed Little Explorer’s Lab Activities, songs and books that go along with the theme. Singing different songs and reading different books than the ones listed would be possible; the list was just to give whoever was facilitating the program an idea of what to follow.

Along with developing the curriculum for Baby Bloomers and Cub Club, I was also responsible for running the program. This included setting up, carrying out, and taking down anything necessary. As the summer wore on I was able to lead all of the activities without Kate’s assistance and direct the volunteers that helped us with the programs. I came to become a master at entertaining toddlers and had no fear in shaking my sillies out during sing along or waddling like a penguin during Story Time.

Although I was the Early Childhood Programs intern, the museum gave me other departments to work in. Because Bloomers and Cub Club were only on Mondays and Saturdays, I was also responsible for assisting with the Guided Tours. These tours were catered to summer camps and daycares that were coming to get a supplement to the lessons they were teaching in their curriculum. A group could be from anywhere between 5 to 30 kids and the grades ranged from pre-k to 5th. They would always come with their own chaperones, but by the end of the summer I was able to take any group around and explain the exhibits in a way their age group could understand and engage in. Even though guided tours weren’t my primary responsibility at
the museum, I enjoyed leading the tours because it gave me an opportunity to work with a wide variety of youth.

Interns at the Austin Children’s Museum are also required to complete a special project. At first, I found this challenging as I continued to lean towards doing some type of outreach program in order to benefit the museum’s future expansion to a bigger facility. After brainstorming with my manager, we settled on the idea that I would take on crafting surveys for the museum in order to figure out what our organization is doing right, what we could do to improve, and to gather information in order to create future early learners programs. I created three surveys for the project. One to administer to those already attending Baby Bloomers and Cub Club, one to administer to those who attend the museum with early learners but have not heard of BB or CC, and one to administer to the public who do not visit the museum but have children ages 3 and under. According to Cybil, this information has been needed for a while and it was especially crucial since the museum was moving to a bigger facility in 2013. Because this project was so big and because I only had a few weeks to get into it, I was only responsible for the drafts of all three surveys as well as the writing of the protocols that would go along with each one. Luckily, Cybil found a very qualified person to take over the project once I left so I was comfortable leaving my work with someone who could help it continue along at a fairly good pace.

**How is Anthropology at the ACM?**

One of the reasons I was so interested in landing this internship were the first hand encounters with how much play influences child development. The Anthropology Department at Texas State offers an elective course called Comparative Juvenile Behavior. The course is taught
by biological anthropologist Dr. Kerrie Lewis Graham, whose particular research focus is how play or early social interactions relate to the development and evolution of a particular species. We learned that play benefits growth as well as social behavior such as encouraging things like sharing, reciprocity and fairness (Bekoff 2001; Burghardt and Graham 2010).

As a juvenile of a species grows, play is one of the most important things it can engage in. In a study by Byers and Walker (1995), it was observed that play frequency peaks at a juvenile’s most sensitive developmental periods. It is thought that play at this juvenile period of life not only lends to important muscular development but also to motor training skills. (Bekoff and Beyers 1981) If a crawling baby is playing chase with an older sibling or parent in Rising Star Ranch, the increased speed of the crawling strengthens the arms and legs, therefore helping the child grow and develop at a healthy rate.

One could observe many different types of play throughout the museum floor, but the one that is most recognizable and is the most important for our species is social play. Social play is a type of contact that is crucial to not only learning the cultural norms of one’s environment but to also developing social skills. There are various studies that show that juveniles who engage in play throughout their childhood are more apt to behave correctly in certain social situations than those who were deprived of it (Pellegrini 1993). Solid evidence of these phenomena can be seen in an unfortunate study conducted in 2001. Due to a severe economic crisis in Romania during the 1980’s, 65,000 infants were packed into orphanages and deprived of normal social contact throughout the majority of their childhood. This neglect severely damaged the children’s cognitive abilities and a number of regions in the brain were dysfunctional (Chugani et al. 2001). The children were observed to have a significant absence of crying, expressions of pain as well as utilizing the adoptive parents as a secure base. The role of play in a child’s life can be
underestimated by those who consider is a frivolous act, but it not only aids in the development of physical and social growth, but in the development of neurological growth as well. Because a child’s brain is so sensitive at an early age, the Romanian orphans did not have a chance to absorb information they needed.

This point was illustrated further one night at the Museum when Dr. Thornton hosted a workshop. During her presentation, she explained why play was so important and what it does for a child’s brain. As a child grows, different “synapses” or connections between nerve cells are created when something is learned. By 8 months, a child has already formed 1,000 trillion synapses; pretty incredible considering we are born with zero (Hawley 2000). The numbers of synapses peak at age 7 and then begin to die off in order to make room for more. This is why it is ideal to teach a child a foreign language at a young age. At birth, we are equipped with all of the neurons necessary to help us master a language without having an accent. As we grow and do not put them to use, our ability to turn our tongue a certain way or make a certain noise is lost. It’s the saying “use it or lose it” in action. I witnessed synapses being created everyday I was on the gallery floor. Whether it was a baby engaging in object play and exploring the textures of a bumpy ball, or a child playing with blocks and experimenting which ones he could stack up on each other, synapse connections and play were all over the museum.
Anthropology is sometimes described as the academic study of humanity. We study everything from languages, to past cultures, to the species that are most like us. Why, then, is it so hard for people to see how an internship at the Austin Children’s Museum relates to this discipline? Play is an important part of who we are as a species and how we develop through the years. It is through this train of thought that play, whether it is at the ACM or anywhere else, should hold a spot in the study and discipline of anthropology.

Conclusion

Ever since I spent a summer in the New Mexico Mountains working as a program counselor for a high adventure camp, I knew I wanted to have a career working with kids. What I didn’t realize, however, was how I wanted to go about starting along that path. Taking information and turning it into a program or presentation that others could enjoy, particularly children, was my ultimate goal. I had found a love for it when I was a program counselor, and I wanted to explore what I could do with it. Luckily, I found an internship that seemed to be a pretty good fit at the Austin Children’s Museum.

One of the beliefs listed on the Museum’s website is “The most important skill we can give children is the ability to learn”. Isn’t that what we who study anthropology master? We learn how to learn no matter what the environment. At the Austin Children’s Museum, visitors learn how to learn through play. Working as an intern at the
museum this summer has helped me define exactly what I want to do with my career and has given me a clear view of the places I could go with a degree in Anthropology and a desire to work with children. Hopefully my next steps are going to be toward graduate school for Early Childhood Education so I can further explore how to help children learn through play.

The Austin Children’s Museum is a wonderful place to intern as it is still growing and improving. It’s nice to know that as you build your skills, you can say that you took a big part in helping the museum expand.

References


