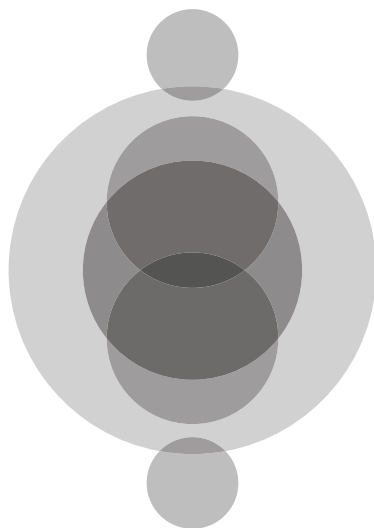


*a toolkit for the design of transformative museum
experiences for children regarding futures*



Designers of the Future

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a toolkit for the design of transformative museum experiences for children regarding futures

Nowadays, children are growing up in a highly unstable world. In our popular, shared narrative, “the future” seems to have become a synonym for socioeconomic crisis and environmental disaster. In the hugely globalized and intercommunicated reality we live in, this is a story that children can hardly stay oblivious to. At the same time, children’s creativity, enthusiasm and empathy seems to indicate that other futures are possible — especially if the younger generations are the ones creating them.

Knowing that, this graduation project started from a very big question: how can we help children realize the power they have over what the future will look like, through a museum experience? In other words, how can we invite children to speculate about futures, in a way that is empowering for them? These questions were posed by Nieuwe Instituut, the museum for architecture, design and digital culture of Rotterdam. They represent the ultimate goal of the Co-Learning Expo — an exhibition for children, co-designed with children, which is currently in its early stages of development. This project aimed to provide an initial framework for the design of empowering, transformative museum experiences for children regarding futures.

The goal of this project was to provide guidance to designers and museum educators working towards museum experiences that empower children to realize their influence over the future. Design requirements were translated into guidelines, and then again into challenges; this showcase presents the 8 main challenges that should be addressed to create such an experience.

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I – The Visionaries

I



The Visionaries

How can we encourage children to create their own images of the future?

What kind of images of the future are included in this exhibition?

Is there space for children to draw their own conclusions about the topics presented? Are these topics discussed in an open-ended enough manner?

Is this exhibition perpetuating either dystopian or utopian stereotypes?

What less conventional perspectives can be taken on this topic? How can we remain nuanced?

What kind of questions do we want to present children with?

Research insights

What children think of the future is highly influenced by what adults (parents and teachers) tell them, as well as what they see in the media (movies, shows, social media, TV).

If the exhibition perpetuates these narratives, children are not going to come up with their own version of the story, which is our ultimate goal. Therefore we need to invite them to think beyond the typical.

II – The Champions

II



The Champions

How can we stimulate children to engage in futuring?

Are children being challenged by this exhibition? Is the topic of the challenge relevant for children?

How are children invited into this challenge? What can they gain from solving it?

Is the scope of the challenge appropriate for children's comprehension and skillset?

Are there opportunities for them to engage with their families or other children to solve this together?

Research insights

Children are attracted by challenges, and making serious issues into a game is a simple way to encourage them to engage with more difficult topics.

During the research carried out, children were asked to imagine the future. Recurring topics that form the basis of the future for them are innovation, heritage, nature/climate, health, food/water, safety and enjoyment.

III – The Bridge

III



The Bridge

How can we help make the future more concrete and tangible for children?

What are some actions or issues associated with this topic? Which are simple? Which are complex? How can we create a bridge between them?

Are the connections between the present and the distant future made clearer by this experience?

Are children being guided in gradually moving towards abstraction?

Research insights

During the activities carried out with children, it became clear that thinking about abstract futures is not difficult to them. However, they do not see how these issues could affect them in the future, or how their current actions affect the future.

There needs to be a way of connecting their daily life and the things they understand to the distant future, so it makes more sense to them.



How can we design an **empowering** experience for children?

What skill related to this topic can be relevant for children to have in the future?

Are children truly being empowered through this experience? = Are children given the opportunity to develop or practice skills that are useful for their future? (soft / hard skills)

Are they being made aware of this fact? Is there any element that can be added to the experience to reinforce children's pride in their abilities?

Research insights

Empowerment can mean very different things, but in this case we focus on educational empowerment: providing children with the tools they will need in the future. Futures Literacy (learning to imagine different futures) is one of these abilities, but not the only one.

Children should come out of the exhibition feeling proud of what they know, excited about the new things they have learned and better prepared for the future than when they entered.

V – Expression



How can we accommodate for children's preferences when expressing their ideas?

What do we want to get children's input and ideas on, regarding this topic?

Are children able to express their ideas in verbal, non-verbal and embodied ways?

Are children's ideas being given appropriate weight, shared or archived in any way?

Research insights

Instinctively, every child prefers to express their ideas and opinions in a certain way. Mainly, these ways fall into three categories: verbal/discursive (talking, writing), non-verbal/designerly (drawing, building) or embodied/enacted (roleplaying, acting).

If this exhibition means to invite children to share their ideas, then there should be space for them to do this in the way they are most comfortable with.

VI – *The Explorer*

VI



The Explorer

How can we stimulate children to take the lead and explore freely in this experience?

How are children being stimulated to explore?

How can discovery and wonder be integrated into the experience? If they wish to, can children move freely through the exhibition?

Are children being given the agency to lead the experience (for their families)? If so, what is the desired role for their parents to take?

Research insights

We want children to be the protagonists of this experience. This means giving them the freedom to follow their intuition; this should be done through the design and distribution of the space.

Literature also shows that children respond really well to being given a role to play, a responsibility. This could be one technique to use as well.

VII – The Staircase

VII



The Staircase

How can we ensure the intricacy of the exhibition is adequate to different ages?

What layers of complexity can be added or stripped back in this experience?

How do children know they can “go up the staircase” as much as they want? Can children decide how much they want to engage with the expo, based on their interests?

Is there an opportunity for children to build their knowledge further, if they so wish? (during / after the exhibition itself)

Research insights

For younger children, big quantities of new information can result in being overwhelming. Especially if there are multiple stations, too many stimuli can drain them. Because of this, the message each station wants to transmit should be clear and simple.

However, older children appreciate being intellectually challenged; they do not want to be viewed as little kids, so if the challenges are too simple they will not be engaged. That is why there could be different levels of complexity.

VIII – Balance



How can we make space for children's concerns and fears, as well as their hopes?

How can the exhibition show nuance? What are positive and negative futures related to this topic?

Is the narrative of the exhibition balanced between the positive and negative descriptions of the future?

Is there space for children to share their worries and concerns, as well as their hopes? How is this facilitated? Who are they sharing with?

Research insights

Children are a lot more aware of the issues we are facing than we usually think. This, in some cases, results in fear and sadness related to the future.

The aim of this exhibition is to empower children, showing them that there is something they can do to change the future. Still, the message the exhibition gives should be nuanced, instead of purely positive, which could be insincere.

