High Museum of Art Greene Family Learning Gallery: Case Study
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A dedicated interactive space for families to learn, play, and explore has been part of the High Museum of Art since 1968. Since that time there have been ten different family gallery installations. During the FLING 2007-2011 study, the 9th family gallery (2005-2018) was the focus of our research. This space was dedicated to a free-form style of creative play for toddlers through about age ten. An open space plan, the gallery comprised five hands-on activity areas: Building Buildings, Transforming Treasure, Making a Mark, Sculpting Spaces and Telling Stories. These discovery activity areas were inspired by some of the most popular objects in the Museum's collection.

The 2018 family gallery installation was part of the High’s huge collections reinstallation and the new galleries, and the Greene Family Learning Gallery opened to the public together in October 2018. When we began planning for the 10th installation of the Family Learning Gallery in 2016, our first step was to review the FLING research findings. We identified the big takeaways from the study and incorporated them into the new space which opened October 2018. So committed to the family audience was our director, Rand Suffolk, that our square footage was doubled, from approximately 2000 square feet to just over 4000 square feet, taking over space previously used for offices and a conference room.

We took this opportunity not only to celebrate the museum’s fifty-year commitment to family audiences but, more importantly, to re-envision our relationship with Atlanta’s families. Our goal is to make the High Museum of Art an essential place for our community, where children and adults can engage together in informal learning, intergenerational communication, and play. These are fine words. Here is how we walked that talk.

Who is visiting?

While we expected to see that the majority of our family visitors were mothers and kids, we were surprised to learn that most of these women considered themselves art enthusiasts. Over 70% percent identified themselves as people who create art for enjoyment and over 50% had taken art classes in the past. They tend to be regular visitors to our museum and 40% were members at the High. These mothers were also frequent visitors at other museums in the Atlanta area.
Why are they visiting?

Internal evaluation we have conducted over the years confirms that most visitors’ come to the High Museum to see a special exhibition or participate in a program. This means that, for most families, the Greene Family Learning Gallery is not the primary reason for visiting the High Museum of Art as only 2% of visitors said their primary motivation for visiting was the family gallery.² It does, however, play a supporting role in a family’s successful visit to the museum. Our family programs are an important motivation for about one-fifth of our family visitors and over a half of the visitors in our study participated in a family program. Parents also commented on the success of our family audio tours and reported reading labels together as a family.

Informing the Next Greene Family Learning Gallery Design

The FLING research that most informed our thinking for the 2018 (10th) installation centered around when families use the Learning Gallery during their museum visit³ and what they found most valuable about the space.⁴

First, we were surprised to learn that almost half of the visitors to the 9th Greene Family Learning Gallery did so at the end of their visit.⁵ When we designed that space in 2005, we envisioned it as a starting point for families. Our reasoning was that if families had a place where they felt comfortable, we could use that time to orient them to the museum as a whole and help them plan a more effective visit to the galleries and exhibitions. We planned to provide a place to sign up for guided tours, offer self-guiding brochures, and discovery backpacks to use in the larger museum. On paper, this seemed like a great idea. However, the FLING research told us that parents tend to use the Family Learning Gallery as an incentive for the children to behave while in the art galleries and a place to have some fun and blow off steam before they head home. They also tended to use the space as a type of holding activity while they waited for their special program to begin. Consequently, our efforts to prepare families to visit the larger museum went unused. It meant that in planning for our current (10th) iteration of the Greene Family Learning Gallery we had to 1.) rethink where we need to position the family tools designed to support gallery visits (e.g., self-guide brochures and tour sign-ups); and 2.) design the Family Gallery activities to build on the experiences visitors have already had or not be dependent upon them at all.

Second, the study revealed that parents greatly valued the opportunity to spend quality time together.⁶ For family audiences the social connection is most important. They see our institution as an enjoyable family leisure destination where memories are made. We realized that our 9th version of the Greene Family Learning Gallery did not

Figure 2: Family watches as child draws in the Greene Family Learning Gallery, 2006, High Museum staff photographer
provide enough opportunities for adults and children to participate together. This installation was primarily child focused with an emphasis on creative play, where the parent was more of an observer than an equal participant, as you can see in figure 2 where the parent is watching the child as she draws.

In the next installation we developed activities to encourage more meaningful interaction between the adults and children. As we worked with our designers on the 10th iteration of the gallery, we were very mindful of this goal and came up with several activities that really engage adults and children in play together, see figure 3. For example, parents and children love working together, or sometimes side by side (grownups like to make art too) at the Community Tree to make works of art directly related to the High’s collection and hanging them on the tree together.

Marketing Efforts to Families

When we learned that too many family visitors and, particularly, first time visitors were not even aware that the Family Learning Gallery existed, we saw how a clearer marketing strategy could help us build a stronger and larger family audience. In addition, we realized the importance of good customer service training for our front of house staff. If everyone who comes in contact with our visitors is aware of the programs and special experiences available, then they can appropriately direct families as they encounter them in the museum.

Testing Our Ideas

We spent the summer of 2016 conducting a study to experiment and test activities for the new (10th) 2018 Greene Family Learning Gallery. It was also an opportunity to listen to family visitors about what they would like to experience in such a space. The findings of this study supported both studies in the FLING research results and provided specific insight into what types of experiences resonate most with families at the High Museum.

Figure 3: Family plays together Greene Family Learning Gallery, 2018, ©CatMax, High Museum of Art

Figure 4: Fewer visitors at the High Museum of Art have heard of the family gallery than at the Speed and the Frist. From Luke, et. al. 2011(a)
We took over a high visibility space in the museum, named it *Art Lab*, and invited our family visitors to test new activities and tell us what they wanted in a new space. We initiated a playful visitor response area, inviting people to respond to three different prompts.

1. *If I could design a new family learning gallery it would definitely have...*
2. *I bring my family to the High Museum of Art because...*
3. *The greatest challenge I face when talking about art with my family is...*

In addition, we conducted interviews and surveys with families who tested our activities.

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<tr>
<th>Most Important Needs in a New Family Gallery</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Children</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Interact with Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Stimulate their creativity and Imagination</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For Parents</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Have a place to sit and observe while their children play</td>
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<td>2. Learn new strategies to talk about art</td>
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<td>3. Play with their children</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For Family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Create a shared memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Have fun together</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Interact with art together</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Use creativity and imagination</td>
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<td>5. Make art together</td>
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<td>- Parents perceive that young children learn best by interacting, exploring, and engaging the senses.</td>
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<td>- Parents perceived the art museum as being a unique environment where creativity and imagination are more likely to be sparked</td>
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<td>- What do parents perceive as their greatest challenge when discussing art with their families?</td>
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<td>- Not understanding or knowing how to explain art</td>
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<td>- Stimulating interest</td>
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<td>Parents seemed to have varying degrees of understanding of the nature and purpose of play, both for children and adults. Most adults appreciated play and saw it as something they wanted for their children.</td>
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<td>Many parents emphasized the importance of creating shared memories, saying it is probably the main reason why they bring their families to the Museum</td>
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<td>Parents like to have fun and do things together and this includes both cooperative activities where adults and children work on the same thing, as well as “parallel play” where adults and children are both engaged in an activity while near each other.</td>
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*Figure 6: High Museum of Art, Art Lab, 2016*  
*Figure 6: Hearing from our visitors, High Museum of Art, Art Lab, 2016*  

*Figure 7: What do families want in a new Greene Family Learning Gallery? Results of 2016 front-end evaluation. From Ancelet, 2016*
What did we learn? We were excited to find that 84% of parents felt these new activities were
designed for both adults and children. Clearly, we were strengthening the family bond. When
asked about why their family visits the High Museum of Art, the four most frequently mentioned
reasons were:

1. To increase our appreciation art
   “My parents don’t think I’m getting any culture watching Peppa Pig.”
2. To look at art
   “We love seeing fun, funky, amazing and great exhibits.”
3. To have fun and enjoy ourselves
   “This is fun for the whole family.”
4. To learn more about art
   “Understanding of art helps us understand the history of being human.”

When asked to rate how much a list of statements reflected their experience in the Art Lab the
visitors rated the following statements quite high:

- I had fun.
- I am more likely to perceive the High Museum of Art as a place that welcomes and
  values families.
- I am more likely to perceive the High Museum of Art as a place to bring my family
  more than once.
- I stimulated my curiosity and wonder.
- I stimulated my creativity and imagination.
- I feel more confident facilitating art experiences for my child.

We took heart that we were on the right track, addressing some weaknesses revealed in the
FLING 2011 study and more closely aligning the family experience with our vision for the new
space.

**Working with our Community**

In 2017, the Museum brought together specialists in different aspects of education, early
learning, design-thinking, accessibility, and special needs from the Atlanta community for a
brainstorm around the new space (10th version, 2018). From a graphic designer to a public-
school kindergarten teacher, to a Reggio Emilia expert, to a STEM education leader and leader in
working with children with disabilities, this group worked closely with us for over a year,
helping us to form our vision and intention statement, develop our goals, and review and
comment on the design plans as the process unfolded. These community members were also
invaluable partners in testing our design concepts. A powerful moment occurred when we shared
the plans for a climbing area that was adjacent to an area about texture. The kindergarten teacher
offered, how about punching some holes in the wall between the two spaces, so the kids can see
each other. That way the children who can’t or don’t want to climb can engage with each other.
A terrific idea which we quickly employed. We invited them to their own special pre-press event
walk-through to personally thank them for all their efforts. They are also each recognized on the
High Museum’s website.
Development Process

Our work with the community resulted in a clear “vision and intention document” that articulated what we want our family visitors to walk away with (how families benefit from the Family Learning Gallery experience), our conceptual/pedagogical framework (such as Reggio Emilia and the importance of a shared social experience), specific design issues (opportunities and constraints), and what we called “content puddles” as we did not want to define the exact content too soon. This document accompanied our Request For Proposals to approximately eight design firms.

The vision and intention document turned out to be a wonderful tool as we met with potential designers and they made proposals in response to our RFP. The fact that we had done this work in advance of bringing on the designer and had offered the information to potential designer firms to inform their proposals, meant the proposals were stronger, the designers understood more clearly our goals and desired outcomes and when we finally settled on the winning firm, we really hit the ground running on our very collaborative work process.

Marking the 50th anniversary of our commitment to family spaces, the High debuted a total redesign and expansion of the Greene Family Learning Gallery with new interactive environments in October 2018 (10th version). We got even more attention for the new space as it was part of the Museum’s overall reinstallation project and therefore part of a huge press rollout. The new Greene Family Learning Gallery expanded to include a 2,000-square-foot space across the hall from its previous footprint. The High’s Education department worked with Roto design firm to create the Gallery’s two distinct spaces based on a set of goals, which were informed by years of visitor observation, community expert input, and research. Each space offers a welcoming, safe and fun environment that is child-centered and child-directed with age-appropriate activities for kids ranging from babies to 8-year-olds. The open-ended, intuitive, multi-sensory elements, designed to be inclusive for all, combine cutting-edge technology with hands-on activities.
Our goals for the new Greene Family Learning Gallery were to:

- Offer a space for families to make memories while fostering stronger connections between caregivers and children.
- Empower children and their caregivers to explore the Museum and more confidently engage with its collection.
- Inspire wonder and encourage children to be curious about the art they encounter every day.
- Celebrate creativity, imagination, empathy, and play, and help families develop these skills through one-of-a-kind interactive experiences found only at the High.

The original Greene Family Learning Gallery space became “CREATE,” a bright and open studio devoted to developing young visitors’ art-making abilities and centered on the creative process. The newly created second Gallery space, “EXPERIENCE,” is a deeply immersive gallery that enables visitors to explore what art means, how it feels, and where it can take us. Each Gallery space features a quiet space with activities designed for reflection and a chance to get away from the noisier more active main rooms, as well as an area specifically for babies and toddlers.

*Figure 9: Greene Family Learning Gallery, “Create,” High Museum of Art, 2018, ©CatMax*

*Figure 10: Greene Family Learning Gallery, “Experience,” High Museum of Art, 2018, ©CatMax*
High Museum Case Study References
[www.artmuseumfamilyspaces.org](http://www.artmuseumfamilyspaces.org)
[www.artmuseumfamilyspaces.org](http://www.artmuseumfamilyspaces.org).

ENDNOTES

1 Luke, et. al., 2011(a)
2 Luke, et. al., 2011(a)
3 Adams & Ancelet, 2011; Luke, et. al., 2011(b)
4 Adams & Ancelet, 2011; Luke, et. al., 2011(c)
5 Luke, et. al., 2011(c)
6 Adams & Ancelet, 2011; Luke, et. al., 2011(c)
7 Ancelet, 2016.