

Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota
LEARNING EXPERIENCE MASTER PLAN

BACKGROUND. Since 2005, a group of early childhood educators, parents, and community members have worked diligently to bring a children's museum to southern Minnesota. Motivated by their knowledge of the long-term impact of early experience—and inspired by the promise and excitement of young children—they have been committed to a children's museum as a way to build on a strong local legacy that can contribute to future prosperity for the region.

In laying the foundation for what has become the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota (CMSM), the group has actively pursued two strategies that have interacted with and built on one another. They have delved into and learned about all aspects of starting, operating, and growing a children's museum. Through visits to other children's museums, attending national conferences, and researching children's museums across the country, they have gathered best practices, identified lessons learned, and clarified their hopes and dreams for southern Minnesota.

Over the same period, they have built awareness and support in the region around a children's museum and what the play-based, family-centered experiences characteristic of these museums can contribute to local children and families, and the greater community. CMSM has engaged children and families in hands-on activities at locations across the region, brought *The Amazing Castle* exhibit to Mankato, and opened Play Lab to share the kind of experiences children and families will enjoy in a permanent facility. CMSM has delighted children by inviting them, their parents and grandparents to play, imagine, and explore. And they have tested interest in a wide range of programs and exhibits.

In five years, this active group of educators, parents, grandparents, and community members has made friends, found new partners, and built a growing community around a children's museum. Through listening and active engagement of parents, educators, artists, and business people in their learning and planning, the group has started to shape a children's museum that reflects its home in southern Minnesota.

PROCESS. Growing evidence of community support prompted CMSM leadership to launch a master planning process in late 2010. To provide a foundation for the programs and interactive exhibits and environments it could offer on a regular basis in a permanent home, the Museum began development of a comprehensive learning master plan.

Working with Jeanne Vergeront of Vergeront Museum Planning (Minneapolis), a team of board, staff, and community members engaged in a three-part planning process that expanded, at the gallery concept phase, to include Jim Roe of Jim Roe Museum Planning (St. Paul). Three components together comprise the Museum's Learning Experience Master Plan.

- A Learning Framework consolidates CMSM's learning interests related to its audience, learning, and impacts.
- An Exhibit Experience Approach builds on the Framework and distills the experiential nature of the Museum's exhibits and environments.

- Gallery Concepts based on the Exhibit Experience Approach identifies and describes a set of concepts for interactive exhibits and environments.

RESULTS. The Learning Framework positions CMSM as a robust resource for play that contributes to the well-being of children and the community. With an understanding of children’s development, recent research on brain development, the role of play in children’s optimal development, and deep familiarity with southern Minnesota, the Framework orients the Museum towards irresistible experiences that get everyone into the act with play and make its value visible.

The Exhibit Experience Approach focuses on the first-person engagement that involves all the domains and senses and that is at the core of compelling exhibits and environments. A set of Essential Experiences that all children in the Museum’s age range, regardless of background, should enjoy regularly with family, friends, and peers, identifies the variety of opportunities and experiences. Unifying these experiences, providing coherence among them, inspiring ideas, and expressing a resounding commitment to play is a basic assertion: *play = possibilities*.

Gallery Concepts present both narrative and visual descriptions of the environments and activities where children, their parents, grandparents, caregivers, and educators will play, explore and share moments of discovery. Seven galleries including one outdoor gallery area and a rooftop gallery will animate the building and grounds. They are based on local settings and landmarks with play potential for children, their parents, grandparents, caregivers, and teachers to explore, think, discover, learn, and enjoy.

Since its founding, the Children’s Museum of Southern Minnesota has been thorough and energetic in its planning for a child-centered and family-friendly venue to serve the region. Consistently, its planning has been sound and solid. Further evidence of this conscientious approach and the commitment to being a recognized and reliable resource on the value of play is CMSM’s work observing and studying the play activities and conditions of children and adults in Play Lab. Such diligence promises an exciting and successful addition to the educational and cultural landscape of Southern Minnesota.