Inside: Redefining the Natural History Museum for the 21st Century

Plus: To Pee or Not To Pee, A Summit with the Dalai Lama, Science at the Mall, and MORE!
In this Issue:

Summit with the Dalai Lama: Fostering Universal Ethics and Compassion Through Museums

Bathroom Boundaries, To Pee or Not to Pee: An Empathy Exercise for All

Redefining the natural History Museum for the 21st Century

Disruption by design: The Development Story of the Petrosains Design Thinking Process

Science at the Mall: A Win-win Strategy for Museums and Malls


Subscriptions Information:

The Informal Learning Review
1 year, six issues, bimonthly, print and online: $65 in the U.S., $72 in Canada/Mexico, $80 elsewhere. Online version ONLY, $55. Individual electronic issues can be purchased for $12 and will be delivered via email. Please contact us at ileinc@informallearning.com if you would like to purchase a single issue.

Traveling Exhibitions Database
1 year, unlimited access: $85 worldwide. There is no charge for listing exhibitions in the database. Please contact us at ileinc@informallearning.com for more information. Exhibitions with immediate availability may be placed on the 11th Hour Page.

You can sign up for the Informal Learning Review and the Traveling Exhibitions Database via our website at www.informallearning.com. Online transactions are made securely via PayPal or Intuit.
**Bathroom Boundaries**

**To Pee or Not to Pee: An Empathy Experience for All**

*By Shafer Mazow, Sal Alper, Matthew Harman and Sam Sharkey*

**INTRODUCTION**

“You don’t look 5’4’ to me!” It’s not something you expect to hear or say in a bathroom, but we said it...and heard it, first at the Exploratorium in San Francisco and then at the 2018 annual meeting of the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) in Hartford, Connecticut. It was one of the reactions participants had to a temporary interactive exhibit in an unexpected place: the bathroom. The installation, called Bathroom Boundaries, changes the signage outside restrooms from “Men” and “Women” to other seemingly clear cut binary categories, based on height, eye color or hair length. Restroom visitors must then decide which bathroom to choose – not so easy when the categories are blue eyes and brown eyes but your own eyes are green or grey.

First conceived as a rogue experiment in staff bathrooms, the installation was prototyped and developed to become a featured experience at public programs for adult audiences. The project was created, developed, and implemented by four Exploratorium staff members from different backgrounds and different roles at the museum—Sal Alper, Manager of the Exploratorium Field Trip Explainer Program; Matthew “Herbie” Harman, Public Programs Coordinator; Shafer Mazow, Senior Grants Manager; and Sam Sharkey, Cinema Arts Program.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2016 and 2017, while lawmakers in a few U.S. states were in heated debate about who could use which public restroom, staff at the Exploratorium were doing what comes naturally here—we were asking questions. As the conversations intensified and expanded across the nation, some of us started asking questions with more urgency and frustration. We first asked Facilities what it would take to change restroom signage on the museum floor to be more inclusive. We got some answers about building codes, city regulations, and state laws that require toilets to be marked by geometric signs that somehow indicate gender (a triangle for “Men’s;” a circle for “Women’s”), and so on. The answer was clearly, “It’s complicated.” But at the Exploratorium, we are trained not just to ask questions but question answers; and this answer, while valid, seemed incomplete.

When proposed regulations in several states threatened to rescind protections for transgender and gender-non-conforming youth in schools and public spaces, some of us thought we needed to do more. Maybe we needed to ask questions about this issue in a different way, a way that could create a strong tie to self and experience for more people. We thought that it might be time to ask more fundamental questions about cultural practices and as
assumptions, about how we relate to and treat one another. Bathroom Boundaries (or the Bathroom Experiment as it was then called) was born out of this—an urgency to find a way to shift perspectives about a real-life, everyday occurrence so routine and automatic for some people and so stressful, traumatizing, and threatening to others.

HOW IT STARTED
In the Spring of 2017, two of those others—Sal and Shafer—had each been thinking independently about ways to respond to this critical issue. We learned about each other’s urge for activism around gender and equity both in the museum and in broader public contexts and explored some options. We considered putting gender neutral signs on the staff bathroom doors, but Shafer had been contemplating arts-based immersive interventions that could provide a deeper understanding of what many people, himself included, feel every visit to a public restroom.

So early one morning in May, without asking anyone, we changed the signs on the staff bathrooms at the Exploratorium. What was once the men’s room was now designated for people 5’4” and shorter; and the former women’s room, 5’6” and taller. The next day we changed the signs again—one facility for people with brown eyes and the other for blue. What about people with green eyes?! Or people who are 5’5”?! We’ll get to that.

We were shocked by the amount of conversation sparked among museum staff. For many people it was the first time they walked up to a restroom and had to ask if they belonged or not. Most staff embraced the discomfort, appreciated the change in perspective, and connected their reaction to the stress and discomfort many people experience daily. Other staff found it too challenging to break the convention of gendered restrooms and chose to go elsewhere. We had hoped to prompt reflection and create dialogue among staff, and we were very successful.

While we were encouraged to consider the impact of rogue experiments on other departments and personnel, overall, and to our great relief, the museum embraced the idea that a wider range of the museum community could experiment with inquiry-based experience design. The administration appreciated the urgency of the issue and the project’s effectiveness as an empathy exercise. As conversations continued across the museum, staff members at all levels became interested in and supportive of ways to bring the Bathroom Experiment to the public.

EXHIBITING AN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE–ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL DESIGN
Bathroom Boundaries embraced the Exploratorium method of exhibit design, language, and engagement style. We included classic exhibit signage with cues to promote noticing and observing, information about the phenomena, and prompts for further reflection. We experimented with different strategies to allow participants to share their thoughts and invited them to engage in dialogue with us as facilitators. We also provided resources about the history of gendered restrooms and gender diversity and
inclusion theory and practice, including the Transgender Law Center’s guide, “Peeing in Peace.” The intimacy of this experience and the intentional disruption of routine and discomfort is more provocative and potentially problematic than is associated with anxiety in other learning contexts. And while the installation focused on phenomenological experience, the subject matter directly and overtly tied to social realities of inclusion and exclusion in the context of an issue at the forefront of many conversations. Among other considerations we needed to be able to connect the exhibit with meaningful inquiry that had the potential to shift perspective without advocating any specific view or outcome.

Choosing the binaries

One of the biggest challenges in the design was deciding what categories to use. We had discussed the possibility of dividing facilities on preference-based dichotomies such as “dog lovers” vs. “cat lovers.” And while an interesting social question, these internal identifiers could not provide the same circumstances as visible physical characteristics that could be “called” out or challenged in a way that more closely models real world challenges of gendered restrooms. There were concerns over the potential implications of some physical traits that may relate to other social categories (such as the connections between race and eye color or hair length and gender norms). It quickly became evident that as in real life, any binaries we would choose would have some type of limitation or problematic associations.

In the end, we chose three categories of physically observable traits--eye color, height, and hair length. For each, we made sure there was some group left out. Since eye color and height are standard identity markers on driver’s license, those serving as “monitors” could use this form of ID as a proxy of sorts for the proposed enforcement of gendered restrooms based on birth certificates. It should also be noted that we changed the categories every hour or so throughout the event. Those who had already participated were disarmed again, thinking they had figured out what facility to use, but the changing of the rules without warning reinforced the experience others have in not easily being able to take care of a basic need.

What about green eyes?!

One of the most notable and consistent responses from visitors at each Exploratorium event and the ASTC installation was a concern with the gap, the group of people in each category for whom there was no option. “I’m 5’5”, where do I go?” “What about green eyes?” We very intentionally created parameters where some people would be left out. Trying to replicate real-world conditions, we provided somewhat obscure and hard-to-find signage that indicated that height or eye color or hair-length neutral restrooms were available elsewhere. Still and maybe more to the point, this gap caused anxiety, even for those who fit into the categories available, which makes us think we were successful to a large degree in illustrating the complications of oversimplified binary categories.

From staff space to public engagement

In early 2018, the Exploratorium’s Staff Advisory Council was focused on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and decided to sponsor the Bathroom Boundaries installation for visitors at an upcoming After Dark, the museum’s Thursday night programming for adults. The theme for this program was Boundaries, and this experience felt like a perfect fit for creating discussion. Broadening the experience to the public brought up some additional questions and challenges: How do we get permission to temporarily change signage? How do we prepare staff to respond to potential concerns? What should be the look and feel of the experience? How provocative should we be? To what extent are we willing to create discomfort for visitors? Do we want to collect data and if so, how?

True to Exploratorium process, we prototyped the experience at three different After Dark programs before the culminating Boundaries event. We tried different restrooms in the museum, experimented with different signage and placement. We tested where to best position the comment board; how much and what type of facilitation was effective for the visitors; how much “provation” or monitoring of the categories was appropriate and to what extent it enhanced or hindered empathetic response.

Visitor feedback, observations, and responses

During the four public iterations of Bathroom Boundaries at the Exploratorium, we witnessed a wide range of reactions both in one-on-one conversations with visitors and on a comment board. As expected, many people said that
they were uncomfortable, even a little scared. “I second guessed myself” There were more than a few “WTF?” and “I don’t like it at all!” or “I like men’s and women’s rooms, let’s keep it that way.” But there were also many comments about feeling brave, validated, and empathetic. “Thank you for changing my perspective,” “Surprised but then thrilled that people could feel more comfortable.” There were many, many comments and concerns about urinals, which indicated some deep rooted mystery and mythology about what one (especially women and others who have not been inside men’s rooms before) sees in a men’s room. As one example, a facilitator serving as a “monitor” at one iteration of the experience stopped a visitor with green eyes who came out of the bathroom designated for brown-eyed people and said, “You used the bathroom for brown eyed people? Your eyes don’t look brown to me.” “Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t see an option for green eyes and I thought, ‘My eyes definitely aren’t blue, so I’d better use the other one.’” The provocation, mild but intentional, led to a few minutes of dialogue. In the end the monitor asked, “So how did it feel for me to call you out about using the wrong bathroom?” “It felt awful,” he said. “Right?! Didn’t it?” the monitor replied. “Who am I to tell you what restroom to use?!” “Yeah!” he said, “who are you to tell me?!” “Oh,” he said, “I get it…I hadn’t thought about it like that before.”

Beyond the issue of gender diversity and inclusivity, the installation proved to be a fascinating examination of social protocols and expectations around bathrooms and likely other gendered spaces in our culture. It was interesting to notice what cues people use to “follow” rules. Often, visitors ignored signs altogether and simply followed a person with similar gender presentation into a facility. Heterosexual couples in the same height range were amused and a bit disarmed about going to the bathroom together in a public context. Same-gendered friends with different eye colors were distressed about having to separate. A few different women said that they think of the ladies room as a place of privacy and that having men in that space disrupts that sense, even though they acknowledged that there’s nothing private about a public restroom.

Overwhelmingly the reactions were positive, but there were people who chose not to participate, following signs to private restrooms usually called “family restrooms.” We noticed lines forming at the single-use restrooms even when there was no waiting to use the originally gendered but now altered bathrooms.

BEYOND SAN FRANCISCO

Many people asked what it would be like to lead this experience in a place other than San Francisco, where the social and political climate might be different. We were thrilled to bring Bathroom Boundaries to the ASTC Conference in Hartford, CT in September 2018, where we re-created the installation at one set of restrooms in the convention hall over the course of two days and again at the party for the participants, as well as led a discussion session to share our process and further the dialogue. The responses from conference attendees were largely the same as those at the Exploratorium, though many participants from less progressive areas noted that this installation would likely cause much more conflict in their communities than we experienced. We did notice that museum professionals were more likely to take time to watch how others interacted with the experience, which indicated that Bathroom
Boundaries could also be useful in studying the interest in and efficacy of observation of social science phenomena.

**BATHROOM BOUNDARIES AS AN EMPATHY EXERCISE**

Empathy is the ability to share and understand the emotions of others. Empathy exercises attempt to increase the capacity for an individual to know emotionally what another is experiencing from within the frame of reference of that other person. Educators and researchers continue to study the role of empathy in museums and informal science centers. There are many exhibits that put a visitor in another’s shoes, so to speak. The Exploratorium’s Science of Sharing exhibition engages visitors in social psychological situations that involve assuming roles while examining the behavioral economics of cooperation and competition. Bathroom Boundaries is unique as an empathy exercise in that instead of asking a participant to assume a role, it uses the visitor’s own authentic identity as the potential “burden.” Our observations indicate that this creates a certain visceral impact with potential for a different level of empathetic response.

**BEYOND BATHROOMS: INTENTIONS, IMPACT, AND MORE QUESTIONS**

It is a challenging time for cultural and educational institutions and our visitors. There are pressing questions about the role of museums, about the importance or even legitimacy of “neutrality,” and what museum staff and others can do to increase understanding and agency in a way that remains aligned with educational goals and mission. Bathroom Boundaries is an installation that stems from these questions.

Even though Bathroom Boundaries started as a rogue action, the Exploratorium enabled and fostered the experiment and recognized the profound impact it could have for visitors. The way it was devised and developed also helped museum staff think more about the notion of comfort—who has it, who deserves it, and how much should we avoid the discomfort of majority groups at the expense of others. This work is now informing the museum’s evolving philosophy around expanding access and opportunity.

Bathroom Boundaries got a considerable amount of attention and positive response at the ASTC Conference, and several museums expressed interest in conducting something similar at their institutions. As expected from an Exploratorium project, we were also left with many questions. How do we as individuals staff explore personal motivations in our institutions? What does it mean to be provocative in a science museum? Does this type of exhibit cross the “boundaries” of education vs. advocacy? We are looking forward to exploring some answers, and asking more questions.

Shafer Mazow is Senior Grants Manager at the Exploratorium. He may be reached at smazow@zspace.org. Sal Alper is Manager of the Exploratorium Field Trip Explainer Program; Matthew “Herbie” Harman is Public Programs Coordinator; and Sam Sharkey is curator in the Cinema Arts Program.
On the cover:

London’s Natural History Museum is evolving-- the skeleton of a stranded whale faces the modern world.

Full story on page 14.