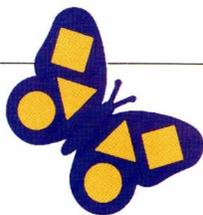


Papalote, the Children's Museum



*Miguel Angel Pichardo E.**

Touch, play and learn

In November 1993 a new institution opened its doors, aiming to enrich the cultural life of Mexico City: Papalote, Museo del Niño.¹

The modern buildings that make up this special museum are located in

¹ *Papalote* is a Náhuatl word meaning kite; Museo del Niño means the Children's Museum. (Editor's note.)

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the second section of Chapultepec Park, on grounds that once belonged to the National Glass Factory.

Papalote seeks to assist in educating children and young people, the future leaders of Mexico, helping them learn the research and analysis tools which are indispensable in a world of constant change.

Its interactive structure makes it different from other museums: it seeks to help children and adults alike

understand why things happen —by making them happen. Thus it helps introduce, or complement, what is learned in schools, laboratories and libraries.

It's against the rules not to touch

This phrase, posted at Papalote's entrance, sums up the philosophy behind this extraordinary museum, which has adopted new ways of promoting learning among children.



Other museums of this size and quality take 5-10 years to be completed. Papalote was inaugurated after only 2 years.



The museum grounds once belonged to the National Glass Factory.

This involves the recognition that human curiosity, the natural urge to investigate, is a search for explanations of the phenomena that surround us. The principle of “learning by doing” has been the source of many of humanity’s greatest discoveries.

The concept of interactive museums is not a new one. The educational theories of John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget laid the groundwork for the sort of learning experience provided by such museums.

In 1961 the Boston Children’s Museum took up these educators’ conceptions, seeking to provide an environment that would foster

learning through play, with toys and games called interactive exhibits.

There are now 400 such museums throughout the world. All of them have shown the potential of “interactiveness” or direct action to encourage learning in an innovate, accessible and fun way which complements the formal education provided at school.

A high-flying kite

The idea of creating a children’s museum in our country was proposed by a group of prominent young entrepreneurs who, in 1991 —after visiting several museums abroad— set out to establish a

museum that Mexico’s children would enjoy.

To fulfill this dream they founded a civic association, establishing a board of directors which, in turn, carried out a fund-raising campaign for the project. 290 companies and individuals contributed to the construction and development of Papatote.

Lots of hard work and a great team made it possible to set a new record by inaugurating the museum after only two years. Other museums of this size and quality usually take between five and ten years to be completed.

The museum achieved striking results after coming on line. Four thousand visitors arrive each day. As for Papalote's pedagogical value, surveys have found that 95 percent of visitors say that interacting with the exhibits was a learning experience.

The museum also has a program to sponsor visits by public-school classes, which brings 16,000 lower-income students from Mexico City primary schools to Papalote each month. This is made possible through the support of several important businesses whose contributions pay for the students' transportation and museum tickets.

Cuates help visitors

No predetermined route has been set for visitors to the museum. The 290 interactive exhibits are divided into five major subjects: the Human Body, Consciousness/Science,² Expressions, Our World and Communication.

The exhibits consist of apparatuses which reproduce phenomena, helping the visitor understand how things work, including machines. This encourages discovery through direct action, since the exhibits work at the speed appropriate for whichever person is using them.

² In Spanish the title, *Con-Ciencia*, is a play on words combining "consciousness" and "science." (Editor's note.)

The displays have been carefully selected to stimulate children's creativity and imagination, and are geared to well-defined teaching objectives.

To help explain the exhibits, young students called *cuates* — a Náhuatl-derived word meaning "friend" or "my other self" — act as facilitators, responding to visitors' specific needs, taking into account their interests and ages and the kind of information they require.

A museum with a Mexican flavor

Papalote, the Children's Museum, bears the stamp of Mexican culture. An example are the museum's colors, design and architecture, together with



Arturo Píera.

Papalote is a fun way to learn.



The principle of "learning by doing" has been the source of many of humanity's greatest discoveries.

the content of the exhibits it presents. In addition to displays which use the highest-level technology to explain aspects of universal knowledge, visitors encounter a number of authentically and specifically Mexican cultural expressions.

Among them is the extraordinary collection of Mexican toys. Today's kids would consider some of them a "blast from the past," while for many grown-ups they bring back memories of their own childhood. This is a place where the generations come together, as parents and children play and learn while sharing their experiences and interests.

More than a museum

Papalote has other attractions apart from its exhibits. One of them is the "superscreen": Mexico City's first auditorium to be equipped with the IMAX projection system, where 70 mm digital-sound films are shown, allowing for the highest quality in sound and image. The auditorium holds 330 people. The topics of the films are selected to complement visitors' tour of the museum, and in addition to showings during Papalote's regular hours, the superscreen can be used for evening events.

Given that many tourists and busy executives lack the time to come

during the day, on Thursdays a special night schedule has been established, from 7 to 11 p.m.

Visitors who pay a special rate, slightly above the regular entrance fee, can see two films on the superscreen in addition to touring the museum. Funds collected are used for upkeep so more children will be able to enjoy the museum.

In addition to a cafeteria and parking lot, there is also a remarkable store offering educational toys, books, handicrafts and souvenirs of visits to the Papalote museum 