

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh

Mission Statement

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh provides innovative museum experiences that inspire joy, creativity, and curiosity.

History of Museum & Its Architecture

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh has been housed within the Old Post Office building since 1983 and is recognized as a regional asset for its adaptive use of historic property. The 20,000 square foot building of Italian Renaissance design is listed with the National Register of Historic Places and was designed by William Aiken, architect for the U.S. Treasury Department. It is graced with a four-story, copper domed rotunda adjoined by an enclosed courtyard. The building opened in 1897 as the main post office for the city of Allegheny and was saved from destruction by Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. It was deeded to the Children's Museum in 1991.

The land now occupied by the Children's Museum and its surrounding buildings has a long history of public use and civic pride. When the city of Allegheny (annexed by Pittsburgh in 1907 and now known as Pittsburgh's North Side) was first surveyed and planned as a county seat in 1784 and 1788 under orders from Benjamin Franklin, this area served as part of a Reserve Tract of 3,000 acres to be used as payment for Revolutionary War veterans. The 36-block square grid plan with common land at the center and the periphery is familiar to many New England towns, but the practice also dates to ancient Rome and the Old Testament.

The city of Allegheny flourished independently as a home to thriving industries such as iron, glass, rope, flour, oil, cotton, wool, brass, pottery and leather. The cotton industry attracted the family of young Andrew Carnegie in 1848. The department store Buhl and Boggs played an integral role in Allegheny's social and economic vitality. After Henry Buhl's death, his estate provided significant support to the civic and cultural development of Allegheny—and his eponymous foundation continues to support the region's assets, including the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh.

One of the early beneficiaries of Buhl's generosity was the Buhl Planetarium and Institute of Popular Science, which opened in 1939 across the street from the Old Post Office. Designed by the prominent architecture firm of Ingham and Boyd, the building's Art Deco design mixes classical architectural form with allegorical sculpture in a forward-looking streamlined aesthetic. This style was especially appropriate for the German-built Zeiss Mark II planetarium projector under the domed roof, which could recreate the appearance of the heavens thousands of years into the future or the past.

The Buhl building is an example of the 1930's "Stripped Classicism" style of architecture that went to an extreme in having no publicly visible windows. It was constructed of the highest quality materials, befitting a scientific institution in the early twentieth century, and combined limestone, terrazzo, copper and aluminum with some of the more progressive technologies of the era.

For decades, the Buhl Planetarium was a source of dreams and curiosity for generations of children who sat in wonder beneath its dome. Carnegie Science Center, which operated the Planetarium since 1986, moved its programs to a new facility with a state-of-the-art planetarium, leaving the Buhl building unoccupied in 1991. Carnegie Science Center has acquired the Zeiss II from the City and hopes to place it on permanent public exhibit. The projector is believed to be one of the last of its kind.

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh Exhibit Design

Philosophy: Play with Real Stuff

The Museum's "play with real stuff" design philosophy promotes an organizational commitment to the use of authentic materials and processes in its exhibits and overall design. Intrinsic to this approach is a deep respect for the Museum's visitors, and the belief that a well-designed environment that utilizes sustainable and quality materials, affords visitors, children and adults alike, a comfortable and empowering museum experience.

Design Principles

- Design process: When designing visitor experiences, the Museum employs the design process of collaborative ideation, iteration, and reflection. Frequent prototyping of designed experiences is the essential characteristic of the Museum's approach to exhibit development.
- Sustainability: Sustainable practices that reduce cost and environmental impact of exhibits are implemented through the choice of products and materials, the intended use of the experience over its lifespan, and potential for re-use or repurposing.
- Flexibility: Elements of the space (furniture, materials, tools, etc.) are constructed in a way that allows for varied use, reconfiguration, and repurposing. Museum experiences encourage flexible thinking and allow for emergent outcomes, where visitors are encouraged to experiment, discover and determine their own path of exploration.
- Universal Design & Accessibility: Applied to museum experiences, universal design is the design of components and environments that are usable by all people without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design principles are integrated into all exhibit design, including hands-on interactive components, signage, and programming.
- Multi-Layered: Visitor experiences at the Museum are designed to allow for repeated and varied use by visitors. Exhibits enable frequent visitors to experience familiar exhibits anew, and encourage visitors of any age to engage in experimentation and discovery.
- Shared Experience: Experiences designed by the Museum purposefully encourage a shared interactive experience between visitors. This sharing is often between parents and children or among visiting children of diverse ages.
- Simple and Intuitive: The Museum works to create exhibits that, through simple and straightforward design, enable intuitive engagement and use by visitors of all ages. This becomes a functional as well as aesthetic principle of practice, allowing the Museum to keep instructional signage to a minimum, and as a result, broaden visitor interpretative use and accessibility.
- Tough Enough: Designed for the explicit audience of children and families, all exhibit elements within the Museum are built to be robust and able to withstand extensive and aggressive visitor use.