

All About Me, Eureka, The National Children's Museum, Halifax

Frazer Swift is impressed by an interactive exhibition that really gets children and adults to learn and play together

Even before visitors enter the gallery they are left in no doubt what kind of experience lies ahead – colourful images of joyful children of different ages and backgrounds lead the way, and child-height portholes in the wall provide glimpses of the exhibits beyond.

A traffic-light system and a countdown clock are used to control entry to the gallery. This is to ensure that everyone gets a short introduction from Zoom the robot, but it also creates a sense of anticipation and excitement. Having a non-human introduce a gallery that is about what it is like to be a human is a neat trick – we can help him find out about us – and Zoom pops up in various parts of the gallery to encourage children to complete their All About Me passport, a record of their height, weight, number of teeth, favourite smell and other characteristics and preferences. Zoom is the successor to Scoot, the affectionately remembered robot who spent 20 years welcoming children to the old

Me & My Body gallery, so he has big metal shoes to fill.

Everything about All About Me is interactive and child-centred, but what really struck me was how successful it is in encouraging adults and children to play and learn together, whether putting on a sling or finding out what children might look like when they grow up. This isn't a gallery where passive adults sit around the edges merely watching their children. Having said this, a few more seats for older or less mobile people might be useful – this is a large gallery and families could easily spend a couple of hours exploring it.

Serious play

It would be easy to assume that a gallery so focused on play and having fun might be frivolous and light on content, but this is not the case. This is serious stuff that children and adults need to know in order to understand themselves and be healthy.

The gallery is funded by the Wellcome Trust and has



What's up this nostril? Our Brain & Senses at Eureka's All About Me takes an inventive approach to the human body

Project data

Cost £2.9m

Main funders Wellcome Trust
£1.45m; Wolfson Foundation;
Garfield Weston Foundation;
Stavros Niarchos Foundation

Exhibition design At large

Graphic design

Public Works Office

Lighting design Light Perceptions

Interpretation consultant

Lucidity Media

Evaluation consultant

Emma King Consultancy

Access consultant Vision Sense

A/V production and microsite design Limehouse Heritage

Microsite project management

Lucidity Media

Project management

Rex Procter & Partners

Health and safety management

Rex Procter & Partners

Exhibition fabrication and installation Paragon Creative

Base build

DD Porter Construction

Electrical and data installation

Barker Electrical UK



obviously been developed in collaboration with medical specialists, ensuring that the exhibits are contemporary, credible and rooted in visitors' everyday experiences.

In the Health Centre, for example, families can role-play being a dentist or a GP's receptionist, carry out an ultrasound scan, test blood samples or change a baby's nappy. In Our Brain & Senses they can explore emotions and how we see, hear, smell and taste. A section on food and digestion enables families to assess their meal choices and discover how our bodies process what we eat, while surrounded by burping, breaking wind and other bodily sounds – always a winner with children of a certain age. Let's Get Active explores how our skeletons and muscles work, and visitors can test their climbing and balancing skills, find out how quickly they can react and see thermal images of their bodies.

During my visit I saw children of all ages enjoying the exhibits,

Spotlight on...

Zoom the Robot

Zoom in All About Me creates the storyline for the gallery as part of an introduction, but also provides a feedback mechanism for children as they near the end of the experience.

Zoom began with a discussion with local schoolchildren about what they liked and disliked about robots in popular culture. The session was run with our AV company, Limehouse, which came up with a series of ideas based on those discussions.

Our staff then provided the feedback that refined the design. Limehouse came up with a format for the content we had provided while the fabrication company, Paragon Creative, developed a way of manufacturing the unit.

The finished product has proved the star of the gallery with children already asking their parents if they can see Zoom before anything else in the museum.

Tudor Gwyn is the projects director at Eureka





from babies to early teenagers, but I would say that most were 5-10 year olds.

Child-focused

Sensibly, text is kept to a minimum as there are far too many exciting distractions to expect visitors to spend long reading. The text is skilfully written – explaining complex concepts concisely and accessibly for children is not easy. However, I think a little more information aimed at adults, to give them the confidence to support their children's learning, would be welcomed by some families.

It was good to see a space dedicated to babies, but it could have been more substantial and integrated – it didn't feel up to the same standard as the rest of the gallery.

The gallery's high ceiling and large windows give it a light and spacious feel, and I was impressed by the quality of finishes, the attention to maximising access (the use of BSL and subtitles, for example) and

children's safety, and the tasteful use of colour. I particularly liked the use of natural colours and imagery to make a connection to the outside world. Digital technology is widely used, but blends seamlessly with more traditional hands-on and role-play based exhibits, so catering for different learning styles.

I liked the fact that there isn't a set route around the gallery – enabling families with different aged children to choose which areas and exhibits to engage with is important. However, perhaps the pace of the gallery could have been varied a little more. While there are clear sections with different themes and interpretive approaches, they tend to merge and the visitor experience felt too similar throughout. Clear sightlines through the gallery are important for families to feel safe and connected, but more discreet areas might have helped create changes in atmosphere and encouraged some children to engage with exhibits more deeply. I also felt that a more definite end

All About Me at Eureka provides plenty of opportunities for children to get involved in meaningful play

to the gallery, which echoes the introduction in some way, would provide an opportunity for families to reflect on their learning and to say goodbye to Zoom.

Learning for the future

As I left, I noticed that Eureka's mission has been freshly and prominently applied to the wall beside the entrance to All About Me: "We encourage and promote children's learning through playful, educational activities... Play builds the kind of free-and-easy, try-it-out, do-it-yourself character that our future needs." Not only does this sum up neatly the approach taken in the gallery, but the fact that the philosophy is so visibly associated with it also suggests that All About Me is central to Eureka's identity and direction for the future. I'm sure Scoot would approve.

Frazer Swift is the head of learning at the Museum of London and an associate tutor at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester