

The Brooklyn Children's Museum and its Community in a Time of Crisis

Amit Cohen, CCNY

The Brooklyn Children's Museum, the first children's museum in the United States, was founded in 1899 to fulfill the needs of Brooklyn's public. At that time in Brooklyn, there were approximately three hundred school-aged children. The mission of the museum was to gradually grow into a museum that would educate and entertain children in the fields of natural history and multiculturalism. The museum's aim was to be available to children from Brooklyn and a variety of other communities in New York.¹

Today, the museum is located in the neighborhood known as Crown Heights. For the most part, this is a lower to middle-class residential area. Within the small geographic area reside communities of Lubavitch Jews, Caribbean Americans and African-Americans. Within these groups, residents come from a variety of countries and follow different customs and religious practices. The neighborhood has suffered from tension amongst these communities, and their coexistence has often been strained. Interracial and inter-ethnic tensions came to a head in 1991, when riots occurred between Jews and African American residents.

On August 19, 1991, a black 7-year-old boy named Gavin Gato was struck and killed by a Jewish driver from the highly religious Lubavitch community. Hours later, a gang of blacks, shouting "get the Jews," chased down, stabbed and killed 29-year-old Hasidic scholar Yankel Rosenbaum. The violence continued over the next few days, resulting in 188 injured local citizens and damage to many buildings. Lemrick Nelson, then 16 years old, was charged with killing Rosenbaum. A state jury acquitted him, but he was convicted in a federal trial and sent to prison for 19 years and 6 months. Charles Price, who videotaped and encouraged the riots, was sentenced to 21 years and 10 months.² The riots and the trials that followed attracted a high level of media attention both locally and outside the state. Social and ethical issues, such as interracial relations, became important national topics.

The Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM) could not ignore this situation. They felt obliged to get involved on behalf of their neighborhood, so the museum committed itself to taking an active social role in Crown Heights.³ It intended not only to address the problematic social and moral issues, but also to take some short and long term actions to solve the crisis or at least calm the tension between the communities.

The immediate response of the BCM was to offer its site to the Crown Heights neighborhood as a place to hold discussions between community leaders about the explosive events. This offer was approved by the police, who sought a neutral territory to host a dialogue between about twenty-five representatives from both sides.⁴ The physical location of a civic dialogue is important both practically and symbolically. The Children's Museum was geographically convenient; furthermore, the museum has been deeply rooted in the neighborhood for almost a hundred years. For many, this museum was already a center of cultural and community life that served them loyally.⁵ Additionally, the museum's interior design and open floor plan symbolically stood for the breaking down of divisions. The museum was therefore considered a safe and neutral public space for exchange between community leaders. Leaders from both sides accepted the offer and held their dialogue in the museum.

The museum took further actions, including collaboration on a multi-exhibit project with two other local organizations, the Brooklyn Historical Society and the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History.⁶ The New York Times Company Foundation encouraged this collaborative response, as it was eager to see Brooklyn's cultural institutions respond to the crisis.⁷ Planning for the exhibitions began in 1991 and resulted in the "Crown Heights History Project" in 1994.

The project involved three separate exhibitions, one at each site. Each institution explored the history of Crown Heights and the lives, beliefs, and cultures of the people who live there through oral histories, cultural artifacts, posters, and interactive displays. At the Brooklyn Historical Society, the exhibition "Crown Heights: Perceptions and Realities" discussed racism and anti-Semitism. The exhibition at the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History was titled "Crown Heights: The African Diaspora," and examined how and why people came to Crown Heights to live. The Brooklyn Children's Museum exhibit was titled "Crown Heights: The Inside Scoop." Led by two consulting curators, Jill Vexler, a cultural anthropologist, and Craig Wilder, a historian, this exhibition aimed to reveal the beautiful side of the Crown Heights neighborhood from a child's point of view.⁸

Interviews with children for the BCM exhibition focused not on fear, violence or other negative connotations of the events in 1991, but on what the children liked about their own neighborhoods. The exhibition presented a positive view of the multicultural community by emphasizing the children's appreciation of the colorful community and the diversity of its inhabitants, customs, holidays, food, businesses, and other aspects that define the people of the community.

The *Crown Heights History Project* was shaped by extensive involvement of community members from different backgrounds, who participated in advisory committee meetings every few months.⁹ With the help of community leaders, project directors and curators identified residents who provided oral histories and objects for display in the exhibitions. Moreover, residents were asked their opinion on how their ideas about the community's history might be expressed and invited to suggest community structures that might be developed to establish long-term harmony and stability among residents.¹⁰ Panel discussions with public audiences accompanied the exhibitions.¹¹

The project aimed to encourage a new type of communication between public museums and civic audiences. By participating in the curatorial process, the community became no longer an "outside audience," and ensured an authentic exhibition. In this way, not only did the actual process create a connection between participants, it also promised a better engagement of civic issues in the exhibitions.

The BCM took further steps in order to ensure an exhibition that engaged the community. They organized a series of neighborhood tours for museum staff, and visited Jewish institutions to become more familiar with that community, to learn and to view it from within, rather than from the outside.¹² Educational programs and workshops accompanied the project, and a video depicting the diverse residents of the neighborhood was distributed to area schools.¹³

The *Crown Heights History Project* raised several questions about a museum's role in addressing and even attempting to ease social problems. Will the museum succeed in reducing racism and anti-Semitism, in building a bridge between disparate communities? The problem is that it is impossible to measure these kinds of results. The BCM did not operate under the delusion that its acts would heal Crown Heights. The museum probably

will not change people's values and minds radically. However, by giving visitors more information about each other, they can encourage communication.

Although ideological results are not measurable, attendance is. The museum did not break down audience statistics during the period of the *Crown Heights History Project* exhibition, but according to Alison Devers, BCM Public Relations officer, the percentage of Jewish and African-American visitors are now equivalent to their respective percentages in the neighborhood.¹⁴ Not only do different ethnic groups attend, but they interact with one another in programs offered by the museum.

Since it was founded, the Brooklyn Children's Museum has contributed to the educational and cultural vitality of New York City. The long-standing commitment of this museum to its community was unique during the aftermath of the Crown Heights riots. Since 1991, the museum has prioritized dealing with current social issues of its multi-cultural community.¹⁵ The museum's staff, site and exhibitions are all dedicated to addressing these issues. The dedication was not a one-time act but is rather a continual series of acts, direct and indirect, short-term and long-term. Through permanent and temporary exhibitions and public programs, the museum has continuously dealt with the relevant problems of the community. The BCM demonstrated that it is connected to the needs of its community.

Although relations are getting better, for many New Yorkers the name Crown Heights remains synonymous with racial tension. Museums cannot cure the ills of society, but they have proven that they do have the power in some cases to do what may be considered impossible. The Brooklyn Children's Museum is perhaps the only place in Crown Heights where you can see religious Jewish and black children play together. Even if it is only in the world of children, the Museum has managed to bridge both sides. This is definitely a start to better community relations in Crown Heights. Indeed, the Crown Heights of 2003 has already gained a stronger community and is a better place to live, thanks to the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

¹ The attendance record at the BCM during its first months of operation is, December 1899: 809, January 1900: 1607, February 1900: 1740, March 1900: 2584, April 1900: 4915, and May 1900: 8864. Available at the BCM web site, "<http://www.bchildmus.org/about/index.html>," accessed December 2004.

² Susannah Cassidy O'Donnell, "Making Peace in Crown Heights," Ford Foundation grant summary, *Museum News*, July/August 1994, pp. 61-63.

³ Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 1999, p. 71.

⁴ O'Donnell.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bacon, et al., p. 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The BCM's web site: <http://www.bchildmus.org/BCM2/about/index.html>.

⁹ Bacon, et al., p. 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Alison Devers, BCM Public Relations officer, interview with the author, November 30, 2003.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*