

Brianna Jones

CAML -Barbara Mathe

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Cultural/Memory Institution Observation

For my observation assignment, the two cultural or memory institutions I visited were the Long Island Children's Museum [LICM] and the American Museum of Natural History [AMNH]. I have visited both institutions numerous times throughout my life; in fact, I make it my mission to visit AMNH at least twice a month; it is my favorite museum in the world.

I visited LICM on Sunday, February 3rd, as a way to spend time with my older sister and my two little nieces who are three and five since I had not seen them in a while. The museum is located in Nassau County on Museum Drive, which is a strip next to the Nassau Community College [NCC] that features four museums: LICM, Cradle of Aviation Museum, Nassau County Firefighters Museum, and NCC's Plaza Art Gallery. The outside of the building has a modern design and is partly made from recycled material, with a painted mural of a diverse range of children faces.

The museum has three floors; the first floor contains the lobby, gift shop, party room (for birthdays and school trips), a passageway to the backyard exhibit, then various activity stations and huge jungle gym. The second floor is dedicated to activities related to music, film/tv, and make-believe. They also have blocks and funhouse mirrors. The third floor is geared more towards education and feature activity stations where kids can learn about living with different disabilities and a science lab area where they host experiments and have reptiles and insects on display.

It was somewhat crowded for a Sunday afternoon, mostly moms with their children, very few dads which I found interesting. The children ages seemed to range between infant to about seven or eight years of age. The most popular sections were the bubble stations, the music room, and the media room. The bubble stations seemed to be where kids spent the most time; a lot of kids did not even blow bubbles; they just splashed water everywhere. The music room was completely soundproof and contained musical instruments from around the world that the kids touch and play. The media room was set up as a news broadcasting station on one side and a radio station on the other. Channel 12 News donated the equipment for the broadcasting station, but nothing actually worked.

None of the activities seemed structured, you had few employees around (high school aged) to make sure nothing got out of hand, but for the most part, kids were allowed to run and roam freely. I asked one of the workers if they ever have any stricter tours or workshops and they stated that they usually reserve any type of programming for scheduled school trips, birthday parties, or summer camp trips.

The whole museum is mostly funded through donations and private partners, but based on the state of some of the equipment, I would assume that they are low on funds. A lot of the media equipment was broken, and in bad shape, the blocks all had kid scribble on them, the funhouse mirrors were all smudge with dirty fingerprints, and none of the employees seemed to care enough to clean it.

I visited AMNH on Saturday, February 2nd. As I stated at the beginning of my paper, I try to visit AMNH at least twice a month. Similar to LICM, AMNH is also a family/children friendly museum, but on a much bigger scale. As always weekends during the winter and fall are

packed with people. Because the entry fee is suggested and people can enter with paying just \$1.00, it makes it accessible for people of all economic backgrounds and thus has a more diverse group of visitors than LICM.

The museum has five floors that are open to visitors and is the length and width of an entire city block. In size and visitor foot traffic comparison, the AMNH museum is at the least triple in size and visitors than that of the LICM. While both institutions are friendly for people of all ages, AMNH is a place that anybody of any age could experience and enjoy alone. LICM is a place that only really children could enjoy. Once arriving I immediately headed to the fourth floor towards my favorite halls: Hall of Saurischian and Ornithischian Dinosaurs, and Hall of Extinct Mammals. While walking through the halls, I noticed that there were a lot of tours going on and the spaces were very crowded with people trying to photos. Unlike LICM most exhibits, halls, and dioramas at the Natural History are not touch friendly, except for areas like the discovery room for children ages infant - five, and certain special exhibits.

Also unlike LICM AMNH has curated and special exhibits throughout the year. An interesting observation I made between how people interact with technologies such as cellphones and social media is that the cellphones/technology usage at AMNH was way higher than LICM. I believe that a significant reason for this is the average age of the visitors at each institution. At AMNH you have a broader and more evenly dispersed range of ages, sometimes there are more teenagers and adults than there are little children. Thus, it would make sense that the tech use is higher among that population, while at LICM the population is the majority of children under nine years old so they would not have cellphones or much tech.

Throughout the museum, there are various touch-screen video screens that people can interact with to learn more about certain objects or specimens, which seemed to be a big hit with visitors of all ages and nationalities. There are also two different audiovisual special exhibits Dark Universe and Backyard Wilderness, but these require people to pay full price for a ticket.

Overall I found the American Museum of Natural History to be more accessible, diverse in terms of visitors, more structured and offered a wider range of activities and exhibits for people of all ages to enjoy. I would also like to note that I believe the primary reason why the Long Island Children Museum lacks in all those departments is due to lack of funding. As we have been learning this and last semester, funding significantly affects things such as access, programming, acquisition, and the ability to implement innovative education technology.