



**CREATING AN INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP:  
TEEN TOKYO AT THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM**

Speeches by exhibit team members at the 1993 AAM Annual Meeting. Fort Worth. TX

## SING HANSON

In April of 1992 The Boston Children's Museum opened its new 3800 square foot exhibition. Teen Tokyo, to the delight of visitors and professional peers alike. During the 2 years immediately preceding that, the exhibit team opened itself out to a process of international partnering which radically altered the ways in which each of us will approach future cultural exhibitions.

The most apparent result is an exhibit which works very well and in depth for our regular family audience but also works for a growing number of Japanese visiting Boston. A less apparent, but equally important, result has been the experience of working in a complicated, bi-cultural and multi-skilled web of museum professionals, funders, advisors and friends.

One year later, in writing our AAM speeches, we realised that we had somehow managed to create a show with a coherent vision by allowing our profound cultural differences to inform the processes and outcomes in every area of the project: fundraising strategies, staffing, content, design, audience, public relations and follow up.

This was not easy: it was a bumpy, quirky, slowly evolving process with its share of misunderstandings. It took time and it took patience. But it worked and we have thought about why. We would like to share our thoughts with you on the off-chance that you too may be contemplating an international collaboration.



## LESLIE BEDFORD

The opening last April of the Teen Tokyo exhibit was a milestone in both an institutional and a personal odyssey. While this journey has ostensibly been about The Boston Children Museum's long-term relationship with Japan, it is a story with relevance to all of us who are struggling to create partnerships with people we may not know too well--whether they live within blocks of our museums or thousands of miles away.

So, in the spirit of collegial candor, tempered by the inevitable tooting of our own horns, I would like to talk about this odyssey - both as a process and as a final product.

Teen Tokyo is the newest of three major Japanese exhibits at The Children's Museum: the first was a ten tatami mat room, originally built for the tea ceremony, which in the 1960's was rescued from a Boston karate academy and reincarnated as the Japanese Home exhibit. In truth, it didn't look much like a home - a Japanese family certainly wouldn't have recognized it as such - but it was a Japanese-style environment and it provided a unique setting for some very innovative programming, developed by American, including Japanese-American staff, with the help of some local Japanese people. Basically, it was the outsider's re-presentation of another culture's reality: we were certainly committed to the idea of authenticity but it was essentially an authenticity defined by non-Japanese.

When the Museum moved to larger quarters on Boston's waterfront in 1979, we were able to exchange our small tea room for a spectacular two story town house from our sister city of Kyoto. Unlike the Japanese Home, the new Japanese House exhibit is the real thing: an authentic kyo no machiya, a type of urban, domestic architecture indigenous to Japan's Kansai district.

Looking back as someone who wasn't there at the time, I'm struck by how progressive our approach to cultural exhibits was in 1979. We essentially invited the community, in this case the city of Kyoto, to curate the exhibit, to decide how they wanted to present their way of life to an American audience in an American institution. Rather than the bizarre hybrid of west and various types of east often found elsewhere, our kyo no machiya is an exquisitely realized and idealized version of a traditional

Japanese home. Idealized because the designers and builders quite naturally wanted to showcase the best of their culture and skills; they gave us a house that is more Japanese than Japan itself.

While the exhibit is glorious and has provided an extraordinary setting for years of successful programming, its birth was a difficult, even painful one. Although the Museum's leadership was unquestionably committed to cross-cultural collaboration, the project seems to have tested everyone's goodwill. I have always been grateful that my tenure as Senior Japanese Developer-Curator began a full year after the house was installed. I got some sense of what the process had been like from the question, asked only half in jest every time a new bit of Japan-related work came up: "Is this crazy or is it Japanese?"

Ryoko could flip the tables here and talk about situations when the Japanese no doubt would ask, is this crazy or is it American?

Translated, the question meant: Do we really have to do this? in such a hurry, with such detail and endless attention to official protocol?

Many of the requests did seem crazy - probably some were - and I suspect this was both because the staff at the time didn't know enough about Japanese customs to evaluate them and because like most people on this planet, we sometimes had a hard time seeing through the cultural differences to the individual human beings beyond. Our Japanese partners were often charming, polite, artistic, generous and quite baffling.

Those were the days before multiculturalism and diversity training. Despite enormous reserves of goodwill and patience, I think many of us just didn't get it. We would never have said or even thought it, but on some basic level, I think we assumed that there is really only one reasonable way of getting work done - and it's our way.

In fairness to my colleagues at the Museum, I want to say that programs like the Native American Program had learned to forge a very enlightened collaboration between Native and non-Native people. But in fairness to the rest of us, I must add that it's one thing to collaborate in a common language and another to work cross-culturally on an international plane without the reassuring safety net of a shared cultural heritage, linguistic or otherwise.



In any case, while the Japanese House exhibit was truly Japanese the program staff was not. As its head, I had some very hard times over the next several years creating a program. While I did have the good sense to know we had to have permanent Japanese staff - rather than just community consultants - I definitely wanted to be the boss and I didn't really know what cross-cultural collaboration meant. Nor did I hire people who understood it. The resultant programs tended to reflect either "the American point of view" or "the Japanese." Japanese staff would feel that programs weren't authentically Japanese and Americans would respond that being too authentic meant being incomprehensible to our audience.

When we needed to work with the local Japanese community, we would inevitably divide along national lines which would leave me angry and more defensive and my colleagues resentful at being thrust yet again into the impossible role of explaining the Museum to the Japanese community and the community to the Museum. Since Japanese people outside the Museum usually learned about us from Japanese staff, we were often misrepresented. The situation was schizophrenic and very stressful.

I would urge you to benefit from my mistakes and not repeat the experience - I suspect many of you recognize the pattern.

That's an abbreviated history of what lead up to Teen Tokyo: first, an exhibit about Japan done by Americans and secondly, one done by Japanese for Americans. Both models left unresolved major issues about leadership and voice, audience and authenticity.

In 1986 I went to Tokyo with my family for a year's research sabbatical. During that time I began to think about doing a new Japanese exhibit that would highlight contemporary rather than traditional culture and that would appeal especially to our growing audience of older children, youngsters aged 9 to 15. With the luxury of time off, I was also able to make another, critical decision - we had to find a way to work together or I, at least, was changing careers.

Now comes the moment to blow our own horn. We figured it out. Teen Tokyo was a genuine international collaboration. Despite the fact that most of the senior members of the exhibit team are not Japanese, every aspect of exhibit development: research and content choices, collections, design, evaluation, fund raising, PR, even the gala

opening party were done in partnership. And while this process certainly had its stressful moments, it was fun and we were sorry to have it come to an end.

So, having confessed to earlier sins, I want to share with you what I think we as a Museum - and me as a student of cross-cultural education - have learned about how to create a successful international partnership.

Number one is no surprise. It is that cultural differences, such as the language one speaks, are profoundly important. For instance, the words for museum, exhibit, design, audience all have different meanings in Japanese than they do in English. I will never again hire someone for a project like this who isn't bi-lingual. I'm not. Japanese is hard and it wasn't until I'd had a third year's stay in Japan under my belt that I felt I could finally function reasonably well in business conversations. But at the same time that I felt more at home in the culture, I realized I could finally put my pride aside and admit the limits to my own understanding, including language. I am never going to be Japanese, never going to have the unique perspective that comes from growing up in a culture. The all-inclusive "expertise" that we in the museum world confer on scholars is a limited expertise. It is often necessary but it is never sufficient.

Of course, these differences go beyond language. They also encompass how we do our jobs. For example, as a bi-cultural team we had to decide what stories we wanted to tell in "Tetsuo's Room." Tetsuo's Room is our object theater presentation of the daily lives of a real Tokyo family. We use video, sound, light and animated objects to bring a teenage boy's room to life for our visitors. On this particular morning, a number of special interests sat down at the table: the three theater people we'd hired to write a dramatically viable script; the developers who wanted to teach about Japanese family life; the designers who were committed to good design. In addition to the Japanese staff members, there were several Japanese volunteers working on the exhibit. However, since Americans dominated numerically and at The Children's Museum we are a highly verbal and opinionated group, the only opinions being heard around the table were American. As the session went on, the Japanese staff and volunteers became quieter and quieter. Finally, realizing that this verbal free for all wasn't working, I remembered learning how in meetings in Japan people often speak in turn. So, we changed our process. Once you had your say, you had to keep quiet. This was very hard on the Americans but it meant that, for the first time, we really heard



each other out. And the script reflects both the diversity - and the synthesis of these points of view.

People are usually most comfortable talking to people who look and talk like themselves. Neither insulting nor hurtful, this is just the way it is. Therefore, my second major point is that there is always, always the need for a cultural liaison person, someone who is sensitive enough to both cultures to anticipate the problems and argue for sides. Both Ryoko and I performed this role many times for our own constituencies and then had to be willing to do it with each other.

One thing a cultural matchmaker knows is that there is always an outsider's and an insider's perspective. Each needs to be formally acknowledged for what it is and, where possible, accommodated. An example of this in the exhibit is in the section on education. As a western student of Japanese society, I see schooling as training in cultural values: school is one of the main places one learns what it means to be Japanese, American, whatever. For the Japanese team members, school was an ordinary, everyday part of growing up: it meant making friends, doing homework, liking or hating your teachers, meeting the opposite sex. To recast it as socialization was interesting for the anthropologist but meaningless to the participants. We tried hard to fashion exhibit strategies that reflected both perspectives.

Throughout the process one must be sensitive to personal issues. For instance, one member of our design and production staff by coincidence is Japanese. According to our museum model of exhibit development, as a designer he shouldn't come into the exhibit process until after the developers have thought through their ideas. But as a Japanese, he felt strongly that he needed to be consulted throughout the process. It took him awhile - and, I might add, the experience of participating in a group session on diversity issues - to say this and the rest of us awhile longer to appreciate what he was saying.

My third point is that in designing cultural exhibits, it is hard, perhaps impossible to define what is a fair and useful generalization. One of the narrative episodes in our Tetsuo's Room script is called "A Small Earthquake." The earthquake is only a small one because one of the Japanese staff was very worried that the more dramatic earthquake originally scripted by our theatrical consultants would give Americans a false image of Japanese daily life as one natural disaster after another.

Alternatively, we discovered, one can worry too much about negative impressions. One can fall into a trap of thinking one has the need and the right to represent another culture in ways that protect it from the reactions of our audience. An example of this is the giant rubber sumo wrestler in the sports section of the exhibit. There was a real debate on the exhibit team about including what some worried would look like a "huge, naked and weird Japanese man" to our visitors. They questioned why we would knowingly contribute to the on-going Japan bashing. It was our Japanese design consultant who both suggested the wrestler and basically told us to lighten up; it was not our job to reinterpret the culture. And, in fact, when I went out on the floor with pictures of giant, half-naked sumo wrestlers to find out what American kids thought of them, the first group of boys I approached said, "oh, yeah, sumo, we studied that in school."

Finally, I would add the obvious point that collaboration takes time. Lots of time to listen to each other and to do things right. Whether it was in fund raising or design, we had to keep recommmiting ourselves to the collaborative process. Tempting as it was, we couldn't afford to fall back on our usual, hurried, often casual American approach to problem-solving.

I think I should confess something here: for all the necessary hard work and careful cross-cultural sensitivity, there's always a place for good luck. At some point in the process I learned the Japanese phrase that means "things that just fall into your lap" because we were blessed with a great deal of good fortune. The most extraordinary arose from being introduced to a man in Tokyo who wanted to build a children's museum, a popular idea in Japan now. On the hot and exhausting day that I reluctantly agreed to meet him, I had no idea that he was a famous movie actor who was just beginning to put together a philanthropic association of people in the entertainment world. The result of that meeting was a check for about \$400,000! The night we were given the check, five of us, including the chairman of our board who was in Tokyo in business, had to sing, before a large group of very well-dressed people, an acapella medley of five American songs, ranging from "When You Wish Upon a Star" to "Swing Low Sweet Charity." So, we earned every penny of our good fortune.

What I would like to talk about last is audience, because I consider that the central issue, the lynchpin in any collaboration.



There are two main audiences for Teen Tokyo - American and Japanese. We wanted to speak convincingly to both and, indeed, our main text panels were written separately by people of each culture in their respective languages; neither is a translation of the other. The exhibit is full of insider jokes. On our subway car, which Dan will show you, are eight riders, figures drawn on plexi with balloons over their heads revealing their private thoughts in both Japanese and English. You have to have lived in Tokyo to get it and we find many people chuckling delightedly at the figures or small details like the fact that the ticket machines say "out of order" in Japanese. They feel as if the exhibit was designed for them - as indeed it was! We wanted our Japanese visitors - or those non-Japanese who know Tokyo - to experience these private moments of personal recognition. There have been visitors who found the experience so evocative of their growing up in Japan that they speak about having to find a quiet place to just sit and remember.

However, our main audience is American families, half adults, half children. We knew that if the exhibit didn't work for them, it wasn't worth doing. Therefore, we needed to include the audience on the exhibit team from the beginning.

The main way we did this was through extensive formative evaluation. Nearly every exhibit strategy - from the choice of objects in the cases to the songs one can belt out in the karaoke booth - was tested on youngsters. For example, one of the central ideas in the exhibit is the concept of cultural borrowing and adaptation, something that's especially easy to identify in popular culture: California sushi and pizza topped with squid being good examples. We needed to know which artifacts could most effectively teach this idea to our young audience. So we took 15 objects out onto the floor and asked visitors to sort them into three piles: "Japanese," "American," or "could be either." In truth all of the objects were made in Japan, but those that looked most familiar - the pencil box decorated with a Jack O'Lantern, the Barbie Doll spin-off named Rika Chan - were assumed to be American. This exercise helped us with both our choice of artifacts and the ways we would display them in the exhibit.

Of course, the central theme of Teen Tokyo, which is popular youth culture, bespeaks our focus on audience. We were interested in young adolescents who were becoming an increasingly larger proportion of our museum audience. We wanted content and an angle that would immediately attract this age group, an audience that is indifferent, even hostile, to cultural differences, profoundly self-absorbed and disdainful of tradition - a tough audience for a cultural exhibit. Not uncoincidentally, it is the

very age group I happened to have living in my house with me in Tokyo, the year I first started to think about the exhibit. My own children taught me how American youngsters might learn about contemporary Japan - through the things they had in common with their Japanese peers.

This issue of voice - who is speaking - goes to the heart of of cross-cultural collaboration and learning.

I returned from Tokyo about the same time that the Museum accelerated its long-term commitment to multiculturalism by actively seeking to create a more diverse staff, board and public program, including exhibits. For a long time I felt acutely uncomfortable - even guilty. Here I was, the American, wanting to do another Japanese exhibit, one with no pretensions to be other than the outsider's perspective. I worried that it should be renamed something honest but deadly like Teen Tokyo: A Westerner Looks at Japan. I thought about weaving American kids as guides into the design, or of just giving up the whole thing altogether. It was Janet (Kamien), actually, who rescued me from my orgy of self-doubt and reminded me that the initial take on Tokyo - mine and my own children's - was the same as our visitors. They would also be beginning learners. And the beginning learner, by definition, can not be Japanese. And then it was Ryoko, and all the many other Japanese people we talked to and worked with who told us how pleased they were that an American museum was finally interested in contemporary Japanese culture, in other words, their own lives. We had chosen a topic that was larger than our respective cultures: it was really about growing up international. Therefore, I learned that both through the exhibit content as well as the process it's possible to create a common vision if not a common voice.

The result of having worked through all the issues - and many others - that I have mentioned and of having agreed among ourselves that our visitors had to be our first priority is an exhibit that is very different from either of our previous exhibits about Japan. Neither a presentation of traditional culture by Japanese people, nor an American's reinterpretation, it is something else altogether. It is a product explicitly about similarities as well as differences, achieved through a rigorous collaborative process.

And we continue to rely on this collaborative process to implement our programs. Last month we gave our second teachers workshop on Teen Tokyo: four of us, two Americans



and two Japanese, each able to provide an individual and complementary perspective on issues for which there is no single answer.

Like many of us, I sometimes am concerned that museums, like schools in an earlier era, are claiming a larger role in social change than they can honestly perform. But I'm basically an optimist and I think that if we can learn to create exhibits or programs that bring people together as true partners, then we are making a real contribution to the greater good. And that's not a bad way to think about a job!

Thank you.

## RYOKO YAMAGATA

Over a year has passed since the opening of the Teen Tokyo exhibit, which I worked on for three years as an exhibition coordinator. I left the Museum shortly after the opening to return to my home in Tokyo, where I've been working on other international collaborations including the Children's Museum's ongoing fund raising work.

I am happy to have this opportunity to look back and share with you what I learned from those three years in Boston. I feel that I developed a vision of what a career in the museum profession can be and a strong sense of what I can personally accomplish. I very much hope that my talk will be helpful to those of you who are currently working on or planning to work on international projects.

I want to talk to you from the perspective of a Japanese person learning to work within an American non-profit institution on an exhibit about the modern Japanese culture in which I grew up. At the same time, as someone who tries to be sensitive to issues of cross-collaboration, I really hope that you don't come away from my talk with the idea that there is only one way of working with Japanese or with any other group. It is important to understand that each case is going to be different because the people involved are different. Generalizations are dangerous and often offensive.

From this perspective, I'd like to focus on three general topics: fund raising, content development and the collaborative process itself.

I am going to start with fund raising:

Teen Tokyo cost close to \$1,000,000, the most expensive exhibit the Children's Museum has done to date. Needless to say, the fund raising aspect of this project was challenging and time-consuming, and unlike most exhibits, because of the cross-cultural aspects, the responsibility lay primarily with the Japan Program.

I joined the project originally as an intern in the development department researching potential funders in Japan. I was interested in how the government and private industry support cultural institutions. In Japan most museums are either publicly administered, by the central or local government, or run by private

companies. In the 1980's, as Japan enjoyed its booming "bubble economy," there was a surge of interest in private and corporate philanthropy. But it is still a relatively novel idea.

From the beginning, the Museum saw this project as an effort to increase understanding between Japan and the U.S. and wanted the funding, as well as the ideas, to be international. Our efforts to gain support in Japan were very successful. About 2/3 of our funds and most of our in-kind contributions - ranging from the subway car to numerous smaller things - came from Japan.

Looking back, trying to analyze why we were so successful, I think there were five reasons:

The Children's Museum began planning Teen Tokyo at the time that Japan bashing was becoming a serious issue in US-Japan relations. People in Japan were concerned with how they were perceived in the US and often eager to support a project that they thought promoted a realistic and positive image of their country. The importance of Japan bashing as a theme came up again and again for me. When I would return home on my trips, I'd be asked if I was okay, if I'd been assaulted by anyone. And when the exhibit opened, I was asked by the American media how I felt about it. There were some uncomfortable times, for instance, when I had to present the exhibit to potential funders two days after a Japanese university professor had been murdered in a Boston hotel. I guess my point is that any international partnership will be greatly affected by international politics.

Secondly, the economy was in good shape in Japan and so people and corporations felt generous. Nonetheless, it was hard work. Leslie and I made several trips to Japan before we began to make progress. Japanese corporations do not like to make leadership gifts: things go more smoothly if everyone gives the same amount, agreed to in advance. At one point it seemed likely that we would have to use that traditional strategy, which would have tripled our trips to Japan and put the project off perhaps for years. It was the introduction to the well-know movie actor at a critical moment which gave the project its final push. That's the kind of pure luck Leslie was talking about.



Thirdly, the Museum had already built solid relations with Japanese organizations and individuals through the history of the Japan program, including a previous endowment campaign in the 1980's. We had a base.

Fourth, we were successful because we hired a coordinator in Tokyo who could commit to the idea of the exhibit and speak on our behalf, not just perform the tasks we gave her. She was someone we could trust. Communications between our Tokyo office and the Museum went pretty smoothly. Of course, there were many times when I was frustrated because I couldn't answer questions from the Tokyo side fast enough. The administrative structure of the Museum and the team nature of the exhibit process made it very difficult to make quick decisions and this often made it very difficult for me. Since I could always understand both sides, I often felt stuck in the middle. I would have to explain over and over that this is how American museums operate. This sounds like a simple, obvious thing to do, but when you're working with people thousands of miles away, it's really crucial.

Finally, I think we went about the process the right way, which is to say, by paying attention to how things work in Japan. We started the fund raising process by talking to the local Japanese Consulate and many other Japanese people who we knew were friends of the Museum. If you want to work with Japanese corporations or foundations, it's important to work through the government, as represented by the Consulate, because whenever people representing Japanese organizations, whether public or private, came to Boston or the Museum to visit, they nearly always contacted the Consulate. We were given introductions from the Consulate and always let them know who we were seeing. It's good fund raising strategy anywhere - don't let people learn about you from someone else. But it's particularly good practice in Japan where it often seems that everyone is in contact with everyone else.

Although we were eventually successful in our efforts to gain major support in Japan, there were many difficult moments. There was the corporate vice president who questioned why Leslie and I weren't at home paying attention to our families. Along the same lines, there was our experience with the Japanese corporation which we had approached to support a major part of the exhibit. Although originally they had been more than willing to deal with a young Japanese woman and an American female, it was clear after awhile that on the day to day detail level they were much more comfortable negotiating with a male member of our Japan program, even though he had less to do with the exhibit. This was very frustrating and is a reality about



Japanese corporate culture. At the same time I should say that there were many middle-aged management people who were able to work with us without any problems. It was interesting for me to gain this perspective on my own culture and I think I returned to Japan with different ideas about the role of women in the work world.

The other thing that was very difficult for me as a Japanese dealing with the Japanese supporters and funders was that they would tell me things as a Japanese that they would never say to the non-Japanese staff. This is natural and had some positive effects, but it also meant I had to handle a lot of complaints and much more work than the Museum ever really understood. The role of cultural liaison itself is a full-time job.

Next, I'll talk about Content Development.

After the funding was secured, I became more involved in the actual content of the exhibit. That's when things got more complicated for me.

I can still remember the day I attended the meeting we had for all our NEH consultants to talk about the central ideas of the exhibit. We had an NEH planning grant and gathered six scholars together to brainstorm about Japanese culture. I listened to them pontificate: "Japanese people tend to form groups to achieve their goals. For example, their sports days are all about group training. Look at how different McDonalds in Japan are from McDonalds in America." And so on. I listened to them pull all these examples together to support some generalization about my culture and thought, "I've never done any of the things they're saying Japanese do. I don't know what they are talking about."

It was very strange to be in a group of people who were talking about my own country and culture, almost defining who I was, without knowing anything about me. I know there are many non-Japanese who know more about Japanese literature, history, and sociology than I do, but it didn't seem right. I was telling myself that my opinion had to count because after all, I'm Japanese, but I couldn't say anything because I couldn't be as articulate as they were. And in truth, after living in the States for three years, I was no longer sure how well I fit the category of "typical Japanese."

At the same time, I felt I had to speak up to represent my country. This dilemma was one I ran into all the time during the process of creating the exhibit and, generally

speaking, that's how you usually feel when you're living in a foreign country. I would often ask myself: am I reacting this way because I'm Japanese or because I'm me? Sometimes I knew but often I didn't know if it was my culture, my gender, my age or just my personality.

As Leslie mentioned earlier, there is an insider and an outsider's perspective. If you're an insider, you have to try and look at things as objectively as possible. In order to keep the exhibit from being too general (the outsiders perspective) or too personal (the insiders perspective), we tried to include Japanese teenagers, both in the US and Japan, as consultants. We asked them to tell us about their experiences as teens. Fortunately, they spoke very openly. My job was to bring their views into the exhibit in the right way - which meant not only translating their words but also their meanings. Then we had to take their thoughts and present them in ways that our American audience could relate to.

The whole process was a major learning experience for me. I traveled a lot between Japan and the US. When I was in the Museum, I was one of the people who spoke for the Japanese point of view. When I was back in Japan, I had to represent the staff and Museum to the Japanese people. This often meant taking on the outsiders point of view, even if I didn't personally share it.

The collaborative process itself.

As part of the exhibition project, we published a curriculum unit called Teenage Tokyo: The Adventure of Four Japanese Junior High School Students. It's in comicbook form, called manga in Japanese. The making of this manga illustrates the collaborative process especially well. Early on in the development of the exhibit, we persuaded a former manga editor, who worked for a foundation, to support our idea of publishing curriculum for American middle schools in comicbook form. We knew we had a good idea but had to work out a successful process.

The content of the comicbook was decided by the Japan program staff. We tested out various ideas, including styles of drawing with American kids. Then we asked Japanese teens such questions as what would you like Americans to know about you. One thing we learned was that Japanese teenagers living in the States feel their American classmates don't understand that they like to do things other than study. They felt they'd been unfairly stereotyped as grinds. Once the content was



determined. we hired an American comicbook writer to write the story so it would be interesting to average kids. Then it was translated into Japanese and taken to the Japanese publishers who had promised to provide an illustrator.

The publishers had never heard of a manga of only 48 pages: they said it was much too short. They'd been in the business of publishing manga for decades and they had firm ideas about what a manga is. However, we knew their idea wouldn't work with our American audience. It took many, many discussions, visits, and faxes back and forth to get them to agree.

The choice of the artist was a similar issue. We wanted someone whose style would work with American teens. The Japanese wanted to use a big name, since this book was going to bring them international recognition. As a Japanese. I understood their thinking but as a member of the exhibition team, I had to make it clear to them that we really needed an illustrator who could speak to American youngsters. They insisted that we meet with one big name artist who made us extremely uncomfortable by criticizing the project, our content and expertise. He was clearly out of the question, particularly as his specialty was manga about fishing! The publishers finally understood and we got our young, more international artist who wasn't a big name but worked out well. He came and lived in Boston for 2 months and went over the story frame by frame with the writer and the program staff. It was very tedious but ultimately successful.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest some points that I think might be helpful for those of you who might work on this kind of international collaboration:

1) It is important when you collaborate with an institution in another country, to identify people who are in sympathy with your basic philosophy. You don't work with them just to get things done. You work with them to achieve together culturally significant goals.

2) This kind of cross-cultural collaboration is new. We need to remind ourselves of that and figure out our own ways of proceeding. There are always risks, and failures, in trying something new.

3) Communication is key to any project which involves international collaboration. For instance, when you are faxing messages back and forth, you have to know the

subtle meaning behind the words. Otherwise, you invite misunderstanding. Usually, you need to explain things in far greater detail than you would normally do.

Finally 4) When you work with people from another culture, you may often first attribute problems to cultural differences because it can be an easy explanation. However, the problems may have more to do with the skills or personal issues of the people you're working with than where they come from. We have to work hard to identify what the source of a problem really is.

I am now involved in projects with people from many different nations. I enjoy working with people from different backgrounds, but I still get frustrated sometimes. However, the more I do, the more I appreciate the diversity of ideas that I encounter. I hope we will continue to have more and more international collaborations in the museum world.

Thank you.



## DAN SPOCK

In preparing a cultural exhibition, the choices that developers, curators and designers make in the ways they present information will affect for the visitor how that culture is perceived. We, as museum professionals, have a stake in the outcome, but increasingly so do the people we seek to represent. In the past, museums have spent little effort agonizing over whether a culture was being presented fairly. Relying on traditional western assumptions about scholarship and anthropology was considered an appropriate course, the designer simply worked out the arrangement of artifacts to support the thesis and filled in the blanks.

Though we knew from the outset that we would not take this traditional approach in the Teen Tokyo exhibit we could not have anticipated how the pursuit of an alternative would challenge our assumptions and affect the outcome. It was easy for us to say that we would seek to collaborate with the Japanese on the design of the exhibit, it was quite another to decide how that collaboration should work:

- When is it important to maintain control of the project?
- How are cultural prerogatives balanced with visitor expectations and needs?
- How do mutual goals for the exhibition get articulated and implemented?
- How do you know when, as an outsider, you'll be needing help?

These were all questions that would need to be answered differently at different times. We would find their resolution at times to be arduous, complex and contentious, at other times playful, inspired and unanimous. But I would learn that it would never be predictable.

It was obvious to me from the outset that I had a lot to learn in order to design an exhibit about Japanese teenagers. I was an eager neophyte: excited at the prospect of designing a potentially fabulous exhibit, but privately insecure about my lack of knowledge about Japan which consisted mostly of what I gleaned from reading "Shogun" and watching specials on PBS. Among designers in the west Japan is held nearly universal reverence for its unique design tradition. How could I, as an American, hope to capture that spirit? Reflexively I wanted to immerse myself in the culture hoping to somehow understand it from the inside out, like a native of Japan. I suppose it's a very American trait to assume that with a little diligence someone can

become whatever one wants to become. It wasn't long before I would throw out this notion. Somewhere along the learning curve I would begin to feel like I had Japan all figured out - only to have my new found assumptions shattered by some event that would symbolize how elusive the understanding of a culture other than one's own can be.

With the opening of the exhibit more than three years away, I hired a Japanese graphic designer, Masa Sato. My insecurity guiding me, I had the vague idea that he would be useful in the design of Teen Tokyo. At the time I didn't realize how valuable his hiring would be. He became an in-house insider, someone who understood our objectives as an institution, a critical voice that represented a Japanese perspective and someone who could reassure me that I was on the right track and wasn't doing something terribly inappropriate. I started going to meetings with our panel of consultants. Through these meetings I met Shun Kanda, an architect in Cambridge who was born and raised in Japan and who continues to work there in occasion. He would also become a valuable resource.

My first cross-cultural crisis occurred fairly early in the project. A person who was instrumental in helping us to secure funding for the exhibit in Japan, began to pressure us to appoint a Japanese "art director" of her choice to design the Teen Tokyo exhibit. The man she chose, Ryoichi Enomoto would not become the "art director," but his advice and inspiration would later prove to be a crucial asset in the success of the exhibition.

The problem of design control went right to the core of our mission as a museum. Superficially, the pressure was about a conviction that a Japanese designer could produce a more authentic exhibit, but lurking below the surface was an issue of trust. Were we to be trusted to represent the Japanese culture fairly? This question in turn caused us to ask ourselves: who are we to tell American children about a culture to which we don't belong? We instinctively knew that it would be wrong to relinquish control of the design of the exhibit, but we had to be clear amongst ourselves why. We were in an awkward position since we were very much indebted to this person for her support.

Part of what made us uncomfortable about the pressure was the term "art director" itself. We had never used that term at The Children's Museum. It conjured up images of a sort of design czar, someone with a measure of individual control unprecedented



in our organizational culture. Our institution had always taken a team approach to exhibition development and design. I had to remind myself that we had put together a team of experts and museum professionals. American and Japanese, precisely because we wanted a broad base of experience and perspective to inform the exhibition.

I also felt that our audience was at stake. If we wound up with an exhibition that was a personal artistic statement from only one cultural perspective, then the exhibition would be a failure. Though we were not all Japanese, we did know our audience and we were committed to presenting an image of Japan to our public which would be coherent. Later, as the design work progressed this issue would be my mantra: will this work for kids? Is it interesting and engaging or just weird? We recognized that there was a danger in presenting things that were too obscure without some strategy to illuminate them. Without this, visitors might feel put off, made to feel stupid and left with a negative impression of Japan.

As it turned out, Enomoto was a perfect match for us, an enthusiastic student of Japanese popular culture with a vigorous creative energy that continually delighted and amused us all. His insights informed the exhibit throughout and were particularly useful in devising strategies to appeal to our Japanese public. I could see right away that he would be an invaluable asset to our consulting team. Unfortunately, he did expect to be the "art director" of the exhibit and the job fell to me to explain why that wouldn't work. It was strange for me to be arguing for the "team approach" with him since the standard national stereotypes would have had our roles reversed, but he eventually accepted our position on the issue.

I had less success convincing him about the needs of our audience. In an effort to persuade him I explained that much of our public didn't know the difference between Japan and China. I stressed that it was our mission to serve the beginning learner, to assume that we were introducing Japan to many visitors for the first time and that we wanted to provide beginning points for a lifetime of learning on the subject. He didn't really get my point but he did accept my offer to serve as a special consultant on the project.

Only later when he visited us in Boston, did I feel he finally grasped what I had been saying about the beginning learner. While standing in front of our Japanese house exhibit, a child ran by us and blurted out, "Hey Mom, look at the Chinese house!" A look of recognition passed over his face and we both broke up laughing!

Another area of friction between Enomoto and I had to do with our respective goals for the exhibit. I made it clear in my blunt American way, that my main concern was to communicate effectively with our audience as I saw it: American children and their parents. He revealed that his main goal for the exhibition was that it seem an undistorted representation to a Japanese visitor. In time I came to realize that, though there was tension between the two approaches, these goals had to coincide in order for the exhibit to succeed. His advocacy for the Japanese point of view was not only natural, but also entirely appropriate. His contributions gave the exhibit a recognizable Japanese voice that we could not have created on our own. In the end we got an exhibit that was not only appealing for kids, but which Japanese also find surprisingly evocative.

Besides his consulting visits, we established a system where I'd fax Enomoto my elevations and plan drawings for his review so that he could respond with a critique or catch anything that wouldn't be appropriate from a cultural standpoint. I had been wary of this relationship, not wanting to bog down the design approval process too much and fearing this would open the door to trans-oceanic meddling. My fears proved to be unfounded. He kept his comments to a bare minimum and the comments he did make were almost always useful.

In one case I had suggested making some of the labels in the shape of a traditional Japanese scroll, using contemporary materials to reflect the modernity of the topic. Enomoto endorsed the idea but pointed out that in my drawings I had gotten the proportions of the scroll wrong. He knew that if I were able to get my design consistent with tradition, it would feel right to the Japanese visitors and that otherwise it would seem like a westerner's cartoon impression.

Perhaps because we felt guilty about limiting Enomoto's role in the design of the exhibition, we offered him the design of the exhibition logo. This turned out to be a goof on our part. I realize now that he probably didn't even want to do it, but he tried and the result taught us an important lesson. What he produced was a logo which would have been perfect - if the exhibit had been in Japan. Teen Tokyo was spelled out very large in Japanese letters, the English being very tiny by comparison. It occurred to me that it wasn't fair to expect him to anticipate our needs as Americans, just as he couldn't expect us to intuit his prerogatives as a Japanese. Our roles in the project had to suit our cultural perspectives.



From the very beginning of the project, Leslie Bedford wanted to put a Tokyo subway car into the exhibit. Not only is the subway a sort of universal symbol of the city, but, as our discussions with Shun Kanda and later Ryuichi Enomoto revealed, they are a paradigm for the traditional Japanese character in the modern world. Shun pointed out first how traditional concepts about personal space are expressed in subway etiquette and Enomoto pointed out the parallels between the businessman who sleeps on the train to create a private inner space with the Zen Buddhist priest who does the same in meditation. Japanese children begin to travel alone on the subway at a very early age and for teens it provides a freedom of mobility that most American teens without a driver's license can hardly imagine.

Not all of us agreed, however, that a subway car in the exhibit would be worthwhile. Some of us felt that the car would have to move and the doors open and shut for the experience to be a compelling one. Others were uncertain about how we could convey didactic content through such a mundane object. Personally, I had a lot of anxiety about how to carry it off. Getting a whole car was out of the questions. I felt certain that we couldn't fake the car and that we'd need all the genuine interior hardware to make it seem real. I knew that getting the stuff and constructing a realistic mock-up in house would be very difficult. What's more, the car took up a lot of space in the floor plan. What if the car fell through late in the project? What would we fill the gap with?

To help us decide whether the car was worth doing, we did some formative evaluation to see if there was any interest among our public in the idea. The results were encouraging. Visitors were intrigued with the idea but they seemed to think it would be most interesting if the subway train moved. Later, with subwoofers rumbling the floor and lights streaming by the windows, we would accomplish this effect. We would use formative evaluation to test virtually every element of the exhibition: the karaoke machine and rock videos in the pop music section, the animated films and comic books in the manga section, the sumo wrestler, try-ons and even the ideas behind the Tetsuo's Room object theater.

By pure luck, the father of one of our Japanese staffers, had an old school chum who was now the Vice President of a company that manufactures subway cars. By this fortuitous coincidence we were able to get entree and make our pitch. The Vice President listened carefully to our plan and made his comments, which were

disappointing. He thought the idea a poor one. After all, weren't there subways in Boston? What was so special about the subways in Tokyo that it would warrant all the trouble of bringing one to Boston? Having convinced ourselves, now we had to convince him. When I pointed out all the little details I'd noticed that were different: the upholstered seats, luggage racks, clear station announcements, high tech electronic displays, interesting advertisements, etc. he warmed up to the idea. I found out that this would not be the first time we would have to convince someone that a certain thing ordinary in Japan was, to us, rather exotic and unique. There would be many details and difficult negotiations still to come on that subway car, but through a combination a sheer luck and persuasion, we got the car and it has been very popular with the visitors.

My working method in developing the exhibit design had been keyed by one of our director's insights. He advised me to remember the things in Tokyo that startled me or that jumped out and grabbed my attention on first sight. He knew that those first impressions would provide an important clue to discovering the things that would engage our visitors. I knew, however, that I would never remember all that I saw, so I took an autofocus camera to Tokyo and shot liberal amounts of slides - shooting anything and everything that captured my attention. With these pictures I was able to build a reference of objects such as street signs, posters, architectural elements, etc. I used them to devise a palette of colors and materials representative of modern Tokyo. I also catalogued a pictorial shopping list of genuine objects we wanted to obtain in Japan. I remember showing Masa, my Japanese designer some of the designs I had worked up based on my observations of modern concrete, stainless steel, polished granite and glass surfaces ubiquitous in Tokyo today. I wondered, were the ideas Japanese looking enough? He smiled and told me that most of the contemporary design in Tokyo was inspired by international trends. It wouldn't make any difference if it looked Japanese or not since the Japanese designers were trying to look western!

On the other hand, there were unexpected cases where I inadvertently misjudged what would be important to the Japanese. We went to the Tokyo Rapid Transit Authority and to the Tokyo Police to obtain genuine street and directional signs. In an effort to be helpful, we told them we would be glad to take any old signs that were being replaced. No, they replied sternly, that would be a "shame on Japan!" They would give us the signs, but they would all be brand new!



In another instance, we were trying to copy a life-size sushi shop sign that had three traditional calligraphy characters, each centered in a square light box. As a short cut, I tried to substitute the square light boxes with round ones, the square ones being out of stock with our supplier. Surely, I reasoned to myself, it wouldn't make any difference. Ryoko was the first to point out that, in Japan, the boxes would be square. Were there any exceptions? Ryoko politely, but firmly told me she didn't think so and when I asked Masa, he told me the same thing: it just didn't seem right. The round light boxes are still under my desk and I can only hope that they'll prove useful in some future exhibit. In the last minute crunch, it's always tempting to finesse it, but I learned the hard way that it's still better to check back.

In the construction of the subway interior, we were informed by a Japanese staff member that he felt certain that we had built the ceiling of the subway car too low. Would this reinforce subliminal stereotypes about the height of people in Japan? And what would the subway car company say? In a panic we checked and double checked our measurements and found that everything was the right size after all, but it showed that there was plenty of anxiety about "getting it right" to go around and the Americans on the staff weren't the only ones feeling the pressure.

Later we installed the contemporary Tokyo characters we had created to "people" the subway. There was only one character in the lot that was dressed in the traditional costume: an image of a Zen priest dressed in kimono, meditating. I realized too late that the image of the priest as we painted it was reversed, he would be dressed with his kimono right flap covering left flap. This difference would be insignificant to any casual western observer, but to a Japanese visitor this would clearly indicate that the priest had died! Rather than putting a dead priest in the subway, we remade the panel.

Throughout the project the approach that worked best turned out to be fairly simple, if not always easy to do: be flexible, get plenty of help and really listen! Most importantly I had to learn to weigh my own needs and agendas with the concerns of our Japanese collaborators and be humble enough to allow their comments to shape my thinking. As it would turn out, there was a lot to learn and what I would learn would frequently change my mind. Striking that balance and seeing its results realized in a successful exhibit would be one of the more gratifying aspects of the work.

I am proud to have been a consultant to the Teen Tokyo project, especially since they've produced such a fine exhibit. But I am prouder still of what has only been briefly touched on in these histories, something that, for me, is the most important thing of all: the fact that this institution and this group of people chose to do an exhibit of this kind in the first place.

There are plenty of international collaborations. They go on every day. Objects of artistic and/or historical value are lent between institutions. Curators from a lot of different nations and cultures - sometimes even the culture or nation that produced the objects in question - negotiate procurement, dates, shipping, insurance, security, etc. They transcend the ordinary obstacles of language and cultural differences and communicate with each other in "art history-speak" and "conservation speak" etc. Although this is surely not nothing, these kinds of collaborations and exchanges needn't tackle and usually don't, the issues of really trying to create a new, shared vision of an exhibition that will read, as this one does, across cultures. For the curators talk to us the visitors in "art history-speak" or "anthropology speak" as well. This is, of course, what training in an academic discipline allows one to do - speak with others in the language of that discipline. The shared discipline becomes the "culture." And those of us who are not "natives" are left behind regardless of the other inherent or acquired potentials we may have to engage in the presented materials.

The difference here is the wish to produce an exhibition that is not so much "about Japan" but, more about the visitor and our relationship to these things and ideas that are Japanese, be we actually Japanese, or Japanese American, or Anything American. Having included so many in its vision, the exhibit can afford the in-joke or two. Not knowing that the signs read "out-of-order" in Japanese does not diminish the richness of the larger experience for the non-Tokyoite.

Now here's the bad news, by my lights, and it comes in 3 parts:

Number 1: Like so many of the things we do in this wonderful profession, the experience of making the exhibit was undoubtedly better for the participants than using it is for the visitors. This isn't for lack of trying, it is simply the nature



of the exhibition or maybe even media in general. And even an exhibit that so succeeds in transcending the usual and ordinary bounds of exhibiting the beautiful or rare objects of another culture cannot transcend the barrier summed up by the phrase "You hadda be there."

Number 2: A collaboration of this kind may only be possible between cultures/nations/groups who feel equal economically and otherwise. Shared funding may have more to do with our ability to create shared vision than it is polite to admit.

Number 3: The learning curve for everyone involved is very high. The willingness, smarts and commitment to such a project must be equally high. Vulcan minds melds are not for the faint of heart.

On the other hand, here is the good news. Take it from the person who calmly shook hands with each animal handler in a line of zoo keepers at the Delhi Zoo only to look over my shoulder at the dismayed expressions of my Indian hosts, the woman whose French is so bad she has trouble getting a glass of vin rouge, whose lack of breeding shows at dinner parties in Amsterdam and who is not even sure of all the mistakes she may have made during her last visit to Cairo - projects like these help us to see the way. People who are willing to try a model like this, willing to take risks and suffer possible embarrassment, willing to test and potentially reject their own assumptions, and willing to try and tell the rest of us what it was really like to do all these things are beacons. Not only can light be shed on how understanding can be forged internationally, but projects like these help us to see how relationships and shared visions might be forged right here in our own back yard.