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In 2010, Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) staff proposed to the board of directors that the next exhibit in our Cultural Exhibition and Programmatic Series should focus on the Muslim cultures. As the site of Ground Zero, New Yorkers still vividly remember 9/11—and grapple with the anti-Muslim sentiment that followed. The suggestion was met with enthusiasm and caution: how would the exhibition be created and how would the public respond? The urgent need to move forward to address equity and social justice issues affecting Muslims quickly put to rest any reservations. The board contributed \$75,000 in planning funds, enabling the museum to apply for and receive planning grants from the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Culture and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Our goal was ambitious: to represent 1.6 billion people of the same religion, but with different cultural expressions, in an exhibit for children. Seven years ago, we didn't anticipate how much the world was shifting, or the increase in hostility toward Muslims and toward diversity and immigration overall. In the end, the seven-year exhibit development process was unlike any other we have undergone. The resulting exhibit, *America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far*, set a high bar both culturally and aesthetically and allowed the museum to take a stand on a key social justice issue of our times.

The Value of Cultural Exhibitions

Unlike structured programs, workshops, or performances, which, while important, only serve a small fraction of visitors, exhibitions are available every day, all day, for self-guided play. Exhibitions invite repeat visits that can build familiarity and continued learning. In these spaces visitors can get to know new peers and their interests, as well as take part in spontaneous multi-



Belonging in America: Social Justice Messages in Cultural Exhibits

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generational and multicultural community conversations. Cultural exhibitions in particular provide visitors the opportunity to address social issues and learn about new perspectives and cultures in a safe, open-ended, and unstructured way. These subtly crafted experiences invite children and their adults to subtly revisit and rewrite norms for engaging across the differences they might have learned in the outside world.

Children's ideas of fairness and social justice are still forming. Cultural exhibits in children's museums are designed to help them see how other people's lives might look different but still involve many of the same needs, concerns, and aspirations as their own. Exhibits often focus on everyday issues (e.g., other people eat different foods, but we all eat). However, our goal in this exhibition was to represent a deeper set of experiences: to explore how people who share a common belief system express those beliefs in different cultural forms and practices. We also aimed to help our visitors explore beliefs

different than their own through the prism of beauty and joy, creating a positive foundation for understanding others.

Celebrate Diversity, Design for Universality

For *America to Zanzibar*, the biggest design challenge was finding the threads to interpret and celebrate the unity and diversity of millions of Muslims worldwide. In a climate that increasingly associates Muslims with specific identities and negative characteristics, our primary goal was to highlight individuals, cultures, and positive perspectives. According to a 2012 UNESCO report, teaching young children to have multiple perspectives "is likely to reduce problems involving prejudice or discrimination and is an important component of early childhood education." Consistent with our commitment to presenting cultures through authentic lenses, with past exhibits presenting Greek culture through *The Odyssey* and Chinese culture through the storied Monkey King, we looked for ways to incorporate the voices of our Muslim neighbors into the exhibition.

Visitors bring pre-existing ideas to exhibits, especially those dealing with sensitive topics. You can't tell them to change the way they think, and you must respect their different beliefs, interests, learning styles, knowledge base, etc. Instead of directing people to "celebrate Muslim diversity," *America to Zanzibar* invites them to experience firsthand the beauty and positivity that exists in Muslim cultures. We wanted an exhibit that would provide a safe space, a set of activities, and a collection of storylines that all children and adults could access and benefit from—finding points of reference onto which they could layer the new perspectives. Through conversations with advisors and community leaders, we were reminded that discovering the diversity among Muslim cultures would benefit all families, Muslim

and non-Muslim alike (not surprisingly, not even all Muslim families are aware of the diversity of Muslims in the world).

The foundation for interpreting Muslim diversity in a 3,000-square-foot exhibit for children was built with activities that every child would feel comfortable with: playing store and dress-up, hosting tea parties, fishing, truck driving, sailing boats, exploring homes and music. These familiar activities are distributed in five themed areas—architecture, courtyards, travel and trade, global marketplaces, and American homes—showcasing individual Muslim stories, cultures, countries, and histories.

Challenging Topics, Terminology, and Titles

Despite the existing unifying theme of the exhibit (Islam), many questions remained. How could we interpret Islam for children as well as their adults? Even terminology was challenging: Were we focusing on Islamic cultures or Muslim cultures? What's the difference?

We assembled a local advisory team of interfaith leaders and Islamic scholars to help guide the exhibit development. The team unanimously agreed the museum should not try to “define” Muslim, but celebrate those who self-identify as Muslim. An Egyptian colleague, trying to help us sort through these issues, pointed out that many people in her country, for example, identify as Egyptian first and Muslim second.

The exhibit's definition and signage became: “A Muslim is someone who follows the religion of Islam. In Islam there is only one God, called Allah. The holy book of Islam is the *Qur'an*, believed to be the word of God as it was revealed in Arabic to the prophet Muhammad. Muhammad was born around 570 A.D. in the city of Mecca, now in Saudi Arabia. There are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world today.” Like any other religion, Islam includes a range of religious practices and beliefs. The exhibit's goal was not to explain those details, but rather to show the different voices, perspectives, and cultural expressions under the Muslim umbrella.

The exhibition title, *America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far*, intentionally prioritizes our Muslim neighbors in the U.S. while communicating the diversity of other cultures included in the exhibit. Playing off traditional children's books that explore topics from A to Z, the exhibit travels the world, starting in America and ending in Zanzibar, a majority Muslim archipelago. The second

part of the title was much debated: In such tense times, should we advertise an exhibit about Muslim cultures? Would this draw attention from those we weren't looking to engage? Ultimately, we decided to select a title that stated our support for Muslim cultures worldwide.

Cultural Specificity, Voice, and Authenticity

Our search for authentic people, places, and cultures to flesh out our five themes led us to stores in Queens, streets in Brooklyn, markets in Harlem, and international photos on Flickr. We worked with professors and historians in Zanzibar, Oman, London, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, and with staff in embassies and missions to the United Nations. We spoke with local families and our own museum staff. Our extensive and enthusiastic engagement with so many people further increased our interest in and respect for our Muslim neighbors—a feeling we wanted to communicate to the children and families coming to play in the space.



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Muslim cultures produce some of the most beautiful buildings, objects, and works of art in the world. Even items commonly used in everyday life are infused with distinctive craftsmanship and design motifs. In order to convey this rich and varied cultural aesthetic, we pursued authenticity in the following ways:

- **Travel and trade:** This exhibit area was designed to help families experience the exchange of ideas, objects, and cultures via

travel over water, land, and desert through play, but also to be introduced to new perspectives on familiar methods of transportation (animals, boats, vehicles). The culturally specific versions we found included a North African dromedary camel, an Indian Ocean hand-sewn dhow (boat), and a Pakistani hand-painted truck—all accurately constructed and awaiting children to climb aboard and pretend play.

- **Moroccan rugs:** A Fair Trade business working with women's weaving cooperatives throughout Morocco's Atlas Mountains helped us to learn about the meaning of rugs' symbols. We incorporated these symbols into a collection of hand-woven rugs commissioned for the exhibit, which families can touch, roll on, view, and pretend to sell.

- **Mosque architecture:** We used Elumenati's projection dome—normally used for astronomy—to showcase the architectural diversity and beauty of mosques around the world. We combined 360-degree images of mosques (found on the website 360-cities.com) to create an interactive and immersive experience. Families control their journey, spinning the globe, choosing their mosques, and then looking up at the patterned chandeliers, down to the colorful carpets, or around the richly detailed walls.

- **Authentic objects:** Working with advisor Dr. Navina Haidar, curator of Islamic Art at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, we secured the loan of four Iranian tiles (13th to 17th century) from their collection. We also worked with The Hispanic Society Library and Museum of New York to feature Spanish Muslim objects from their collection.

Identity, Voice, and Message

Diversity has always been a defining characteristic of America. But at a time when many children and families are feeling unwelcome in the United States, *A to Z* illuminates and affirms Muslim children's identities and makes a clear statement of inclusivity. The exhibit does not attempt to address the negative rhetoric; instead, it shines a positive light on the Muslim children and families that deal with biases and prejudices.

The exhibit's Home area reflects local Muslim voices and showcases personal objects, stories, books, music, languages, and history. This area proved to be contentious when the exhibit concept was presented to a class of American Muslim students at Hofs-



Children view authentic objects in one of fourteen object cases that also feature the stories of Muslim individuals, including an African-American historian, a Turkish-American museum educator, an American-Bangladeshi mother, an East Indian-American mayor, and a Nuyorican hip hop artist.

tra University. Due to a miscommunication that the exhibit would only represent one American Muslim home, many students objected to this idea, with one saying, "There is certainly not one Muslim American home." The students were adamant that Muslim American homes should not be presented as different than other American homes.

This experience reinforced our goal of reducing curatorial voice to amplify the multiplicity of American Muslim voices. Reaching out to friends, advisors, and museum visitors, we found Muslim neighbors willing to share personal stories and objects. Fourteen object cases feature the stories of Muslim individuals, including an African-American historian, a Turkish-American museum educator, an American-Bangladeshi mother, an East Indian-American mayor, and a Nuyorican hip hop artist. Each person crafted his or her story and selected the toys, books, clothes, songs, prayer beads, gavel, golf clubs, slippers, or lipsticks that represented their unique American Muslim home story.

The object cases are complemented by an American Muslim Artist Series that features the work of six contemporary artists. We've also developed an original iPad app for children to learn how to write and speak in the different languages spoken by Muslim New Yorkers. Users learn how to say "My name is..." in twenty-one languages, allowing them to introduce themselves to new friends.

New York City has the largest diversity of Muslims in the world, so it was important

to highlight local Muslim families. We also wanted to reinforce the message that our local Muslim neighbors have always been a part of our everyday America. They are not "others." They are "us."

Preparing for Controversy: Staff Training

As we headed toward the exhibit opening in late 2015, increasing aggression and negativity throughout the world led us to question whether we should open the exhibit at all and put the institution and its families at risk. Although we have been running Muslim cultural workshops and performances for years, the level of preparation needed for this exhibit was unprecedented.

To help us stay ahead in our defense against those who may attack the project, we hired BoomGen, a public relations advisory team. We decided on a messaging strategy that communicated that this project wasn't just about cultures around the world, but that our local communities in New York City and the United States were at its core. We realized our local communities would be our number one support network if and when we were challenged to defend the exhibit. We reached out to leaders across faiths and disciplines throughout city to make sure they were poised to be vocal on our behalf. Museum leadership attended off-site press trainings, where we were grilled on-camera to learn how not to succumb to questions that led us away from our messaging. This practice helped solidify our united voice.

To address staff worries, we embarked

on a series of trainings and informational sessions that positively transformed our institution. We held workshops about Islam to help staff become more comfortable and knowledgeable about the religion and to correct misconceptions. We talked about how the exhibit was not about the religion, but about the diversity of people who identify as Muslim. Staff began to understand the basic difference between Islam and Muslim, and that each Muslim practices his or her religion differently (as one staff member exclaimed, "just like Christians!"). Staff carefully reviewed the exhibit to feel comfortable explaining it to visitors, leading to increased confidence in drawing connections between themselves and their Muslim neighbors. Everyone began to use words like "neighbors" and "friends" to continually remind themselves that the exhibit wasn't only about foreign countries, it was about our local friends.

Staff began to value the exhibit as a statement of celebrating *all* diversity, beyond Muslim communities. We were standing up—together—for what was right in the face of adversity. Staff outside of the exhibits team started cleaning, installing, promoting, and caring for the exhibit in ways we had never seen before. It was a powerful moment for the institution to reflect and stand for the diversity that existed within our staff family. By doing this exhibit, we sent the message to our staff that the institution celebrates diversity on all levels, even when immersed in an external climate that may argue otherwise.

Opening day came and went without a hitch. Only three museum members wrote in protest, and executive director Andy Ackerman responded with a personal invitation to tour the exhibit; two of the three remained members. Since the exhibit opened, we have received minimal negative feedback. Museum admissions and membership have increased and we have seen a more diverse audience on our floors.

The Exhibit Makes Its Mark and Then Some

The museum recently extended the exhibit's stay for a second year due to its popularity among family visitors and among a new, extended community of users, including United Nations families and representatives, university, middle, and high school students, and interfaith groups. The exhibit's Courtyard area is used to showcase a wide array of performances that further expose families to the sounds, voices, and perspectives of Muslim cultures near and far.

The exhibit will soon we travel to other cities and communities around the U.S.

Children and their families can and should be afforded the chance to process and explore the complexities of the world. Our own internal research shows that the exhibit can develop the roots of social justice in young children and families. When we used surveys to ask families, on a scale of one to five, "Does the exhibit foster awareness and respect for other cultures?" numbers four and five won easily.

In the Marketplace, children naturally combine elements of Muslim cultures around the world through pretend play: a Tajikistan tea party with Turkish plates, Zanzibari fish, and Egyptian spices, while dressed in Senegalese fabrics from the Harlem Senegalese tailor, and sitting on handwoven Moroccan rugs. The adults with them, squished on the kid-sized chairs, help children wrap and re-wrap their Senegalese fabrics and pretend to sip hot tea and eat delicious fish. These open-ended, self-guided, pretend-play opportunities are available every day of the week. Not only are children building positive associations with diverse Muslim cultures, but perhaps they are correcting negative associations under construction.

As Danielle Marshall, director of community engagement programs at Ka-BOOM!, writes in her Altarum Institute blog post, "Child's Play: It's a Social Justice Issue": "I have always found it refreshing that children from the earliest of ages are able to jump right into a play session without giving a second thought to the race, religion, or ability level of the next child. Instead of worrying about what zip code each resides in they are more likely to measure success by who can jump the highest or collect the most bugs. It is through the eyes of adults that children learn to judge."

Children constantly hear, see, and encounter information—good and bad. They are keenly attuned to mean comments, harsh voices, stern looks, slumped body language, and more—social injustices do not go over a child's head. Children begin processing information about the world at a young age and at a speed that is faster than adults can comprehend. Some adults aren't even aware of what their child has encountered in one day, so how can they combat negative messages if they don't even know what the child has encountered? In addition, research shows that 85 percent of our brains are developed by age three, and biases are formed by age five. At such an early age, when vo-



A projection dome presents images of some of the world's most beautiful mosques. Visitors can choose a mosque, sampling its architectural wonders, from ornate chandeliers to richly designed carpets and intricately detailed walls. Through this immersive experience, children develop an appreciation for Muslim places of worship worldwide.

cabulary and high level concepts aren't even grasped (i.e. what does "social justice" mean to a child?), it can be challenging to know exactly how and what to say to children on the subject.

The most valuable way a cultural exhibit can promote social justice consciousness for children is to offer positive opportunities for young children to identify and process the social injustices they encounter. Through exhibit design, we can simulate the scenarios they're struggling to comprehend in child-friendly ways that encourage pretend play. Cultural exhibitions are safe spaces for children to positively reconstruct what might otherwise develop into negative attitudes and norms for interacting with others—and for their adults to revisit their existing knowledge and preconceptions in a nonjudgmental environment.

Conclusion

America to Zanzibar was developed as the fourth exhibit in our popular Cultural Exhibition and Programmatic Series, which had previously explored the cultures of Ancient Greece, China, and Japan. It was not developed primarily to address social justice issues, but this need permeated all of the work. Our team was inspired to dig deep and design a context embracing the diversity of stories within a context of common beliefs among Muslims. Positive responses from among the exhibit's record-breaking visitorship affirm the fact that a children's museum can take on a special role in an in-

timidating environment.

"We believe that in learning more about others we are learning more about ourselves" is a motto at the Children's Museum of Manhattan. It guides exhibits and programs for our diverse audiences. A thirteen-year-old girl visiting *America to Zanzibar* reflected: "I learned that I like learning about other cultures." In this exhibit we stuck to subtle social justice messaging, so that we could achieve our not-so-subtle statement of respect for self and others.

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