

Zoom – 20 Years Young

By Gail Dexter Lord, Co-President Lord Cultural Resources

It feels like just yesterday that Barry Lord and I were invited to Vienna to advise on the then very controversial project to create the Museums Quartier in the old Messepalast and Imperial Stables. This was a strategic initiative intended to transform Vienna from a city that was mainly nostalgia - focused to a Vienna that would welcome new ideas in art and architecture not just on the periphery but in its vital cultural centre. The transformation of Vienna is itself a very interesting subject because today Vienna is rated on international measures in the top 10 cities in innovation in the world. How Zoom, Austria's first children's museum, sparked new ways of thinking about children and the development of a distinct European philosophy of children's museum is the subject of my contribution to this anniversary publication.

Lord Cultural Resources was assigned the challenge of assessing the feasibility of a children's museum in Vienna. This involved such steps as demographic analysis, defining space and facility requirements and projecting attendance, revenues and expenses. Early on, we were introduced to a most remarkable woman, Dr. Claudia Haas, the highly energetic art historian who would become the founding director of Vienna's children's museum. She and we decided that since no one in Vienna knew what a children's museum could be – we'd go into the schools and talk to the children to see how they imagined a museum "for children and by children". Our consultation included the Turkish children in what was then an embattled minority community. This process resulted in a beautiful exhibition in a variety of two and three-dimensional media of what the children's museum would look like – from the inside.

Today, it is hard to imagine what a radical approach this was. A quarter century ago, children's museums were mainly in the US and mainly about empowering children by providing opportunities to simulate adult activities – shopping in a supermarket, working in a hospital or being a fireman. These museums also encouraged children to have a positive attitude to different cultures, but all too often this took the form of adult views of the exotic. It must be said the most children's museums in the US receive little public funding and they therefore struggle to generate revenue through an entertainment-oriented approach often linked to commercial sponsorship.

In Vienna, as in many European cities, city government financial support aligned with creative support from publicly-funded arts organizations have stimulated an atmosphere where critical thinking about children's museums is more possible and accepted.

Under Claudia Haas' leadership, Zoom took a distinctive approach—one based in the creativity of the child, one that invited children to think critically, to solve problems and that engaged children in fun in an aesthetic realm freed from commercialism. As parents, teachers, museologists and citizens in the 21st century, we will turn more and more to the children and youth of today to fulfill the promise of the Rights of the Child for all children and the achievement of a sustainable future for all humanity

based on a stewardship model rather than a consumer-oriented entertainment model. The world needs more Zoom!

Gail Dexter Lord is Co-president with Barry Lord of Lord Cultural Resources, the world's largest cultural planning firm which has conducted more than 25 projects to help children's museums become established or expand.