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Brooklyn Children's Museum Bang a can: Children are welcome to make noise at Sound Around, at the rethought and redesigned museum.

Kids, Can You Say 'Cultural Diversity'?



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Now that nearly every museum is also a children's museum — now that nearly every museum has programs that strive to lure the young — what do we seek from a museum that really is a children's museum? And not just any children's museum, but the venerable Brooklyn Children's Museum, reopening this weekend after spending nearly \$70 million on reconstruction, rethinking and redesign?

**EDWARD
ROTHSTEIN**

**MUSEUM
REVIEW**

I got an inkling of what might be sought when I entered the curved blazing-yellow frame of the expanded building, which, next to the stately buildings across the street, looks as sedate as a beach ball at a black-tie dinner party. I turned past the well-stocked shelves of the requisite gift shop, and entered Totally Tots, an entirely new realm where children under 5 are being inducted into museumland. And I laughed.

I laughed because in Water Wonders, the first gallery of this exhibition space — O.K., the first amusement area of this colorful indoor playground — water was spraying against whirligigs mounted on a blue wall, spinning them before coursing down into a plastic pond. Dams could be lifted, letting the water cascade in mini-waterfalls as bright plastic toys bobbed on the surface. I imagined a score of young visitors reaching, spraying, screeching with pleasure at the unceasing motion, the bold colors and rush of liquid sensations. On transparent walls through which the dry hallway could be seen, more aesthetically minded toddlers could paint or draw, before their masterpieces were washed away with the turn of a faucet.

I laughed because this was clever and daring; the water ma-

chinery would have lured even a jaded adult to join in child's play, had he been in appropriate company. Nothing else in Totally Tots rose to this level, though the sandbox with its brilliant blue granules, and its wall dividers decorated with geodes and fossils from the museum's collection, might come close. The reading nook and puppet theater were also thoroughly inviting.

So here was something potentially different. Admittedly, the cranky critic in me worried that there was no identification of the objects on display in Totally Tots: the dolls behind glass cases adjacent to others more readily played with, the extraordinary masks that could not be handled along with others that could. Who knows what conversations might arise with a child if a few well-chosen facts were provided? Knowledge too can be a form of play.

But exuberance could be felt here. So could surprise. And if this spirit were combined with a playful approach to knowledge, what else might be possible? Many museums, serving far less troubled neighborhoods than this one

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