

NIK MCGRATH

Within living memory: The transfer of Mary Featherston's Children's Museum archive

The Mary Featherston's Children's Museum archive (1982–97) provides a broad picture of Melbourne's first Children's Museum: a groundbreaking space dedicated to interactive information-based exhibitions that was located within the Museum of Victoria, then in Swanston Street, from 1985 to 1997. Designed by Mary and Grant Featherston, the archive includes their early concept reports, as well as meeting notes, correspondence, design briefs, research notes, production drawings, audiovisual material, publications, layouts, plans and media coverage. As an archivist at Museums Victoria, I worked closely with Mary Featherston and honorary associate Judy McKinty from 2018 to 2023 as they explored and digitised Children's Museum records held in the Museums Victoria archives. These records formed the basis of an illustrated history they co-authored and self-published in 2020, available to read via Museums Victoria's Collections Online website.¹ This laid the groundwork for the eventual transfer of Mary's personal Children's Museum archive to the Museums Victoria archives in 2023.

Transfer of an archive

The transfer of an archive held within personal records to a museum archive requires years of collaboration and trust-building. In 2018, Judy McKinty, a children's play researcher and cultural heritage interpreter long associated with the Children's Museum, contacted Museums Victoria archives regarding research, access and digitisation of Children's Museum records. At this early stage, Judy was endeavouring to appraise the archives held about the Children's Museum, with a view to securing the future of Mary Featherston's personal archive documenting the Children's Museum's history. The first aim was to produce a comprehensive digital record of the Children's Museum photos held in both the Museums Victoria archives and Mary's personal collection.

¹ Featherston, M., & McKinty, J. (2020). *Children's Museum, Museum of Victoria 1985–1997: Illustrated catalogue*. Museums Victoria Collections. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/16935>



Figure 1: Mary Featherston's Children's Museum archive at Mary's home in Ivanhoe, Victoria, prior to its transfer to the Museums Victoria archives, 7 May 2019. Museums Victoria Archives [DOC/19/9579]; photographer: Nik McGrath.



Figure 2: Mary Featherston's Children's Museum archive at Mary's home in Ivanhoe, Victoria, prior to its transfer to the Museums Victoria archives, 7 May 2019. Museums Victoria Archives [DOC/19/9579]; photographer: Nik McGrath.

Mary Featherston AM is an Australian interior designer specialising in the design of learning spaces for children. Grant Featherston (1922-1995) co-designed Children's Museum exhibitions with Mary, and his work is documented in the Children's Museum concept report (1984) and in Children's Museum exhibitions designed by Mary and Grant. Following several months of Judy's initial research in the archives, myself and Belinda Borg, manager of records and archives at Museums Victoria, visited Mary's home in May 2019 to appraise her personal archive, which was meticulously indexed and stored in archive boxes. Mary's Children's Museum archive includes 15 boxes and a bundle of large format items, including exhibition production drawings, posters and layouts.

Work on Mary's digital images was somewhat delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the transfer of the physical records finally occurred in March 2023. I worked with Rosemary Wrench, project manager within the strategic information and compliance department at Museums Victoria, to create a finding aid for the physical Children's Museum records available on Museums Victoria's Collections Online website.²



Figure 3: Mary Featherston, Judy McKinty and Nik McGrath at Melbourne Museum on the day of the transfer of Mary's Children's Museum archive to the Museums Victoria archives, 29 March 2023. Museums Victoria Archives [DOC/23/1757]; photographer unknown.

² McGrath, N., & Wrench, R. (2024). *Archives – Museums Victoria archives finding aid – Children's Museum physical records (1982–1997)*. Museums Victoria Collections.

Children at the museum

The Children's Museum opened on 29 September 1985, but it was not the first space dedicated to children at the museum. Almost 70 years previously, on 8 May 1917, the National Museum of Victoria (now Museums Victoria) opened the Children's Room — the first of its kind in any museum in Australia. In the 1918 Trustees Annual Report it was noted:

The Children's Room, which is the first one arranged in connection with any Australian Museum, was opened on the 8th May, 1917, by Miss Adelaide Stanley, in the presence of His Excellency the Governor, Sir Arthur Stanley, and Lady Stanley. The object in view is for the younger children to enter, and by means of an attractive display of specially selected objects, changed from time to time, to excite their interest and curiosity, and encourage a taste for nature study. The collection consists of mammals, birds, fishes, shells, and insects, mounted and arranged in cases of a height suitable for children, each object or group being accompanied by short, simply-worded descriptions. The life-histories of insects are shown by living larvae, with their natural food plant, undergoing their changes into pupae and perfect insects. A limited number of the commoner species of native wild flowers are also shown in season. Its advantages as a means of imparting instruction in nature study has been recognised and availed of by school teachers with their junior classes.³

The Children's Room provided a space within the museum for children to access collections, objects and information in an environment specially created for them. The Children's Room existed until 1941, when the space was given to the National Gallery of Victoria's drawing school. The 1941 Trustees Annual Report noted: 'It is hoped that the Government will provide money to house the displaced collections in a building adjoining the National Museum'.⁴ The Children's Room was reopened in 1945 and a few years later closed its doors again. (The exact date of its dismantling is unknown.)⁵

Several decades later, in 1982, Mary and Grant Featherston were commissioned to write a concept proposal for a Children's Museum. In a concept report for stakeholders, written in 1984, Mary created a series of early concept drawings that illustrated ideas for potential interaction and engagement with children's exhibits. In 1985 the Children's Museum opened its first exhibition, *EveryBody*, about the human body. The hugely popular *EveryBody* began travelling around Victoria in 1988, the same year the Children's Museum's second exhibition — *You're IT!*, about children's traditional games — was launched. In 1989 a Colour Room opened with prototype exhibits for a major colour exhibition. From 1990, the Children's Museum moved around within the Museum of Victoria, with *EveryBody* and *You're IT!* sharing the same gallery. In 1993 *You're IT!* closed

3 Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria (1918). *Report of the trustees of the public library, museums, and National Gallery of Victoria, for 1917*. <https://webresource.parliament.vic.gov.au/VPARL1918No6.pdf>

4 Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria (1941). *Report of the trustees of the public library, museums, and National Gallery of Victoria, for 1940*.

5 Pescott, R. (1945). *OLDERSYSTEM-00017 MV archives – National Museum of Victoria – general – children's museums 1944 – 1948*. Museums Victoria Archives.



Figure 4: Birds exhibited in cases placed at children's height in the Children's Room at the National Museum of Victoria, 1928. Museums Victoria [MM 47278]; photographer unknown.



Figure 5: Mary Featherston's early concept development drawing for the proposed Children's Museum, illustrating potential visitor interactions with interactive exhibits including computers, 1984. Museums Victoria Archive [ARCHIVE-1333]; artist: Mary Featherston; © Mary Featherston.



Figure 4: Mary Featherston's early concept development drawing for the proposed Children's Museum, illustrating visitors interacting with museum collections and a study space for children in the Discovery Room, 1984. Museums Victoria Archives [ARCHIVE-1333]; artist: Mary Featherston; © Mary Featherston.

and *What about WATER?* opened in the gallery with *EveryBody*, remaining open until 1997 when the Children's Museum and the Museum of Victoria closed their doors at 328 Swanston Street ahead of a move to Carlton Gardens.

The Children's Museum (1985–97) featured many firsts throughout its 12 years of operations and was considered innovative within the sector. Mary included computers in her early concept drawings, to be used as interactive learning tools for children within exhibition spaces. Adopting computers in this way was pioneering, and other exhibits were designed to encourage curiosity, exploration and interaction. *What about WATER?* included a tank of live exhibits and a water cycle exhibit that produced rain inside the museum. Controversially, real human organs, the skeleton of a child and a family of life-sized naked sculptures were displayed in the *EveryBody* exhibition, in response to children's requests to see the 'real' human body. Although some exhibits may have been controversial, explainers were employed to help children interpret complex subject matter and to answer their questions. The Children's Museum was innovatively expanding learning opportunities for young audiences.

Significant material in the Children's Museum archive

It is valuable for an archivist to work directly with the person who created the records within an archive. I had this unique experience when working directly with Mary Featherston and Judy McKinty on the Children's Museum archive. Mary has always kept records as part of her professional practice as a designer, and this was applied to the whole development process for the content and interpretation of Children's Museum exhibitions. The documentation in the Children's Museum archive reflects Mary's keen interest in the relationship between children, learning and design. Mary documented and retained her correspondence, meeting minutes, proposal documents, reports, research and development records and exhibition documentation (including concept drawings, exhibit design, staffing, programmes, visitor comments, audience statistics, reflections, images and layouts).

With the transfer of Mary's archive to the Museums Victoria archives, along with an accompanying illustrated catalogue by Mary and Judy, we are fortunate to now hold significant material relating to the history of the Children's Museum. This collection is further substantiated with administrative records created by the former manager of the Children's Museum, Ingrid Tadich, and Museum Directorate records.

Conclusion

Following the closure of the Children's Museum, Mary Featherston's design practice continued. Lessons from the Children's Museum have informed Mary's work in the design of learning spaces in schools. In January 2025, Mary brought a group of teachers from Princes Hill Primary School to Melbourne Museum for a workshop, which included a tour of the Museums Victoria archives to view material from the Children's Museum archive, followed by a tour of the Children's Gallery. Teachers and educators continue to learn from concepts established in the Children's Museum in the 1980s and 90s. Judy McKinty's work with the Children's Museum led to a career

in children's play research and her role as a Museums Victoria honorary associate, working with the Australian Children's Folklore Collection.

Archive available for access

Mary Featherston's Children's Museum archive is accessible via the Museums Victoria website: [Contact us - Museums Victoria](#). This valuable collection is held in a central repository, to be kept permanently for researchers to access into the future. It is a resource for educators and others to learn from the innovations developed by Mary and her collaborators during the life of the Children's Museum.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contributions made by Judy McKinty and Mary Featherston to this article, and all the work they have contributed for many years to the Children's Museum, and more broadly to research, design and development in their respective fields of expertise. I would like to thank both Judy and Mary for their mentorship and support in the work I do at Museums Victoria.