

Isla MyT Sésamo

El Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia // Mexico City, Mexico

Fostering a Culture of Peace Among Children

Set David Solís Adame

Set David Solís Adame is Senior Exhibition Designer at Sietecolores, Ideas Interactivas located in Mexico City, Mexico.

At the heart of Mexico City sits El Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia (Tolerance and Memory Museum), an interactive space that fosters a culture of peace within the community. This museum was established in 2010 as a private initiative to focus on the consequences of violence, genocide, and discrimination. The museum seeks to be a driving force of development for understanding cultural diversity and a step towards eradicating hatred and genocide.

About the Museum

The permanent exhibition is divided into three sections: Memory, Tolerance, and *Isla MyT Sésamo* (Memory and Tolerance Sesame Island). The first section displays historical cases of well-known 20th-century genocides – such as the Holocaust during the Second World War, the Armenian genocide of the 1910s, the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s, and the genocide in Guatemala of more than 100,000 indigenous people in the 1980s. The second section showcases narratives and experiences related to discrimination, human rights, inclusion, social justice, and the richness of diversity, among others. Because of its content, both sections are not recommended for children.

About the Exhibition Concept

Fortunately, there is an option for kids and their caregivers, teachers, and students: *Isla MyT Sésamo*, an exhibition for children from four to 10 years old (fig. 1). This space was created in alliance with Sesame Street as

The critique is a writer's assessment of an exhibition, shaped by their professional expertise and their own visitor experience, and formed without (or with only minimal) consultation with the exhibit's creators. Its audience is the profession.



IMAGES COURTESY OF MUSEO DE MEMORIA Y TOLERANCIA

Fig. 1. Exterior of *Isla MyT Sesamo*, which is located in the ground floor of the museum.



an effort to offer fun spaces that foster the learning of universal values from an early age, using the beloved puppets from *Plaza Sésamo*, Latin America's Sesame Street (fig. 2). The alliance between the museum and Sesame Workshop comes from the interest of both organizations to create inclusive and diverse educational spaces for all.¹ This exhibition explores the true meaning of tolerance, teamwork, respect, and diversity through workshops, exhibits, and educational programs (fig 3).

As Brenda Campos, Sesame Workshop General Manager for Mexico,² has noted,

Sesame Workshop is happy to collaborate with the museum because currently, it's important to promote meaningful experiences allowing children to learn about diversity and respect for our differences; *Isla MyT Sésamo* is part of an effort to create safe spaces and promote a culture of peace among the children of Mexico and Latin America.

The exhibition workshops and contents are related to the educational approach of the Ministry of Education in Mexico and foster informal learning through play. While the adult-oriented exhibit sections confront genocide head-on, the children's exhibition focuses on cultivating the values and skills that can, hopefully, help children combat bigotry and hatred. For example, the themes kids encounter in the exhibition include: coexisting in peace; collaboration and teamwork; caring for the environment, and socioemotional skills.

About the Experience

The main goal of the exhibition is to create a safe space where kids can learn how to cultivate the skills they need to be good, empathetic, non-bigoted citizens of the world, and that, armed with the kinds of understandings and skills gleaned from the exhibits, will hopefully help them to become people who would not dream of harming others for their beliefs or how they look.

It is important to mention that the exhibition is designed to be educator-guided (by appointment) with a group of children in the company of their teachers or caregivers. The dwell time is approximately 100 minutes, depending on the age of the children. As a participant and observer, I felt that the time was well spent to achieve the final goal of the exhibition, which is to reinforce family and school bonds between the visitors. It does what well-designed collective experiences like this do best: address the importance of teamwork, respect, tolerance, and inclusion by promoting peaceful coexistence, as well as a culture of tolerance and acceptance of those who are different.

The exhibition is divided into workshops, activities, and interactive exhibits. Unfortunately, due to pandemic restrictions, some exhibits were not available. However, I noticed that the museum staff was able to transform this into a positive situation; the flexibility of the exhibits allows the adaptation of different activities and workshops to create new experiences for the visitors.



Fig. 2.

General overview of the exhibition.



Fig. 3.

View of the central part of the exhibition, "One for all and all for one: Explore and know the world."

Fig. 4. View of the exhibit presenting the Sesame Street characters.

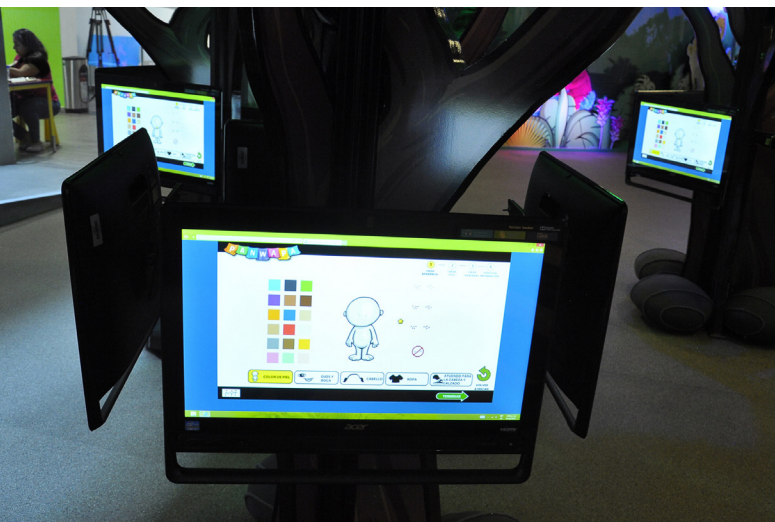


Fig. 5. Detail of an interactive exhibit in “One for all and all for one: Explore and know the world.”



Fig. 6. A group of children and adults collaborating in an activity.

Among the most important elements of the experience are the workshops, guided by experts in education, with activities related to the Sesame Street television show. For example, “Design your card” is an activity that fosters the value of self-awareness through the creation of a card describing what makes you unique and special, acknowledging the richness of diversity among children. I found this activity a good exercise in developing empathy and self-esteem, because it also describes those negative characteristics which limit tolerance and empathy, allowing children to know what needs to be changed to create a culture of respect.

Related to this is a large-format screen allows the projection of several videos that introduce the narrative and characters of Sesame Street (Azibo, Elmo, Cookie Monster, and Abby Cadabby), which teach children how to avoid stigma and stereotypes, realizing that everyone is equal but different at the same time (fig. 4).

Next, a workshop about diversity allows children to take actions to prevent discrimination by knowing about cultures from children around the world, what problems they are currently facing, and inspiring them to become heroes with small actions inside their community.

In the middle of the exhibition is a beautiful exhibit about collaboration and diversity. Titled “One for all and all for one: Explore and know the world,” it is an interactive experience that promotes teamwork through organization and communication skills.

Kids help Azibo, a friendly green monster, build their home by knowing about the world’s diversity (fig. 5).

The final parts, “I’m tolerant” and “Learning about my values,” are two workshops with complementary activities. The first one uses educational materials, group activities, and reflection to focus participants’ attention on the recognition of their values to create a space for brave actions in the face of hatred (fig. 6). The second one, created especially for preschool kids, promotes the recognition of such values as respect, tolerance, cooperation, friendship, empathy, and solidarity. Children attach magnetic words (the values) to a house wall. While identifying, understanding, and applying them might look simple and boring at first sight, we need to remind ourselves, as exhibit developers/designers, that an action so simple as identifying a word is just that – but in early childhood, this action may involve several developing cognitive skills, such as memory and self-awareness. The beauty of this exhibit is that it makes children more able to use simple words to express thoughts and feeling and to share their experiences (fig. 7).

Some Final Words

I recommend visiting *Isla MyT Sésamo* because it is an excellent example of the balance between an interactive exhibition, a workshop, and a safe space that allows children to awaken empathy, practice tolerance, celebrate diversity, and promote inclusion.



Fig. 7.

Detail of the exhibit titled “Learning about my values.”



Upon reflection, certain elements were crucial to create a meaningful experience for children, caregivers, and teachers:

- The group visit format fostered an engaging, fun, and participatory learning experience about complex concepts, such as social justice, tolerance, empathy, equity, and diversity.
- Creating moments of collaboration between children helped to promote the importance of tolerance, respect, and a culture of peace.
- Learning to recognize actions based on stereotypes and prejudice can, hopefully, help prevent bullying and discrimination among children.
- By making the visit participatory, the session fosters empathy and dialogue as tools for developing problem-solving skills among fellow students.

Finally, it is important to clarify that a museum is not responsible for decreasing hate crime, discrimination, or violent situations in its community. I truly believe this was never the goal of creating *Isla MyT Sésamo*. Museums are not panaceas, but they can have a powerful influence on people. In conclusion, *Isla MyT Sésamo*'s goal is to create safe spaces where children feel brave enough to address their diversity, practice a culture of peace, and take action. ■

1 Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit behind the television show *Sesame Street* – and so much more. Serving vulnerable children in more than 150 countries with research-based media, philanthropically-funded social impact programs, and formal education, its mission is to help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.

2 “Sésamo y Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia anuncian la nueva *Isla MyT Sésamo*, abierta al público a partir del 5 de septiembre del 2018,” press release, Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia, September 5, 2018.