

The Mountain: Designing an Interpretive Plan for the Seattle Children’s Museum

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Background

Built in 1995, The Mountain exhibit at the Seattle Children’s Museum (SCM) has become an important fixture of the museum for generations of visitors. However, due to its age, several aspects of the exhibit are outdated and require improvement. The interpretive signage is not developmentally appropriate for the museum’s younger visitors and the exhibit does not align with the new educational framework that SCM has recently developed. In order to bridge these gaps, we have created an interpretive plan with recommendations to better align the exhibit with SCM’s educational goals.

Purpose and Impact

The SCM tasked our thesis team with developing an interpretive plan that provides a framework for updating *The Mountain* to align with the Museum’s key ideas, outcomes, and characteristics for the exhibit. The plan outlines recommendations related to the design and implementation of:

- A **cohesive and place-based theme** for the exhibit
- **Developmentally appropriate interpretive text** for the exhibit’s young audiences
- New **play-based learning opportunities** to engage visitors in the exhibit

The recommendations in the interpretive plan are intended for the Museum’s visitors, particularly children ages 3 to 5 and their caregivers. Based on the SCM’s existing Educational Framework for the exhibit, the plan outlines several **Key Outcomes** for visitors to *The Mountain*:

- Visitors will...
- Be curious about the natural things they encounter in the world around them
 - Make choices that help care for nature
 - Feel more comfortable/confident being in and with nature

Process

Fall 2025 (September–November)

- Refine project: adapt final deliverable and adjust scope
- Research interpretive planning, best practices, nature-based learning
- Develop evaluation plan

Winter 2025–2026 (December–March)

- Front-end evaluation: data collection and analysis; surveyed 54 visitors regarding potential updates to exhibit
- Construct project outline: determine major components and priorities, draft preliminary recommendations

Spring 2026 (April–June)

- Finalize recommendations: design major components & iterate
- Convey phasing/feasibility/sustainability
- Present recommendations to stakeholders



SCM’s Educational Framework for The Mountain

Key ideas	Key Outcomes	Key Characteristics
• We share outdoor spaces with other people & other living things • Everyone can find ways to enjoy & be inspired by the outdoors • As part of nature, we have a responsibility to help take care of it for others to enjoy & for other living things to thrive	Visitors will... • Be curious about the natural things they encounter in the world around them • Make choices that help care for nature • Feel more comfortable/confident being in and with nature	• Indigenized/ decolonized approach to enjoying the outdoors responsibly (mutual responsibility, being part of - not dominating - nature) • Ensuring accessibility to experiences to promote increased outdoor accessibility • Based in the local environment, which also includes urban nature

Need Assessment

This project emphasized the importance of listening to your audience as you design interpretation. The evaluation study was essential in determining what aspects of the exhibit work well and in what ways the exhibit could improve. As we spoke with participants during the study, it became clear how beloved the museum is by its visitors. Several of the caregivers we spoke with had visited the museum when they were young, and now they bring their children. It’s important to honor that relationship by incorporating their feedback, especially since we wanted the final product to be an exhibit that is more enjoyable and engaging for visitors.

Deliverable

We created an interpretive plan detailing recommendations for updating The Mountain in line with SCM’s new key ideas, outcomes, and characteristics. The recommendations within the plan were driven by literature regarding developmentally-appropriate museum strategies and pedagogy, nature-based learning, and an evaluation study conducted on-site.

The plan includes an updated exhibit “big idea” to guide the refresh, exhibit subjects drawn from evaluation data, and implementation guidelines, including specific design and interpretive elements, timeline, budget, and priorities assessment. The plan concludes with possibilities for future evaluation and larger takeaways for future interpretive planning.

Next Steps

The next step for the Seattle Children’s Museum will be to implement the recommendations in the plan.



References

The Seattle Children’s Museum Key ideas, outcomes, and characteristics for *The Mountain*. (n.d.).
The Seattle Children’s Museum. (2026). <https://seattlechildrensmuseum.org/>