

# Being Small is not a Problem at All...



## HEY NOW, WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

**Kate Petrusa** Curator, White Rock Museum & Archives

Many of us have experienced walking into a gallery, garden, or transformed space and feeling immediately more aware of our surroundings. The senses gather together – pause – and absorb. In the BCMA's new tool, which is found online on BCMA's Brain, *The Art of Storytelling in Exhibitions*, Tim Willis reminds us that our ultimate goal goes beyond presenting information to our visitors; it is our responsibility to guide them to experience the topic for themselves, their way.

The summer exhibition at the White Rock Museum & Archives (WRMA), *Castles In Your Mind: White Rock's Sandcastle Phenomenon 1978-1987*, is evaluated here using Willis' exhibition tool as a matrix of assessment. This exhibition shares the story of the Canadian Open Sandcastle Competition that took place in White Rock in the 1980s. It displays the carnival atmosphere, and conveys how this grass roots festival began, and ultimately grew to become an international event. The exhibition also explains why the festival ended after just eight years.

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**Everyone is unique, your audience is not a homogenous group.**

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I didn't adopt Willis' checklist during the exhibition planning stages; rather, this clear and simple tool was used following installation to see how I measured up. This exercise was a great opportunity to learn from Willis' expertise and experience, allowing me to interact with an expert from a distance, serving as a form of collegial evaluation beyond my small team. Willis' tool provides a way of improving our exhibition development approaches. As we will see, bringing these principles to life is harder than it looks; at WRMA, we will consciously incorporate them when planning the next exhibition!

### Thinking about visitors

The first section in *The Art of Storytelling in Exhibitions*, discusses how we ought to consider visitors; it underscores the fact that everyone is unique, your audience is not a homogenous group. As such, Willis' suggests actively choosing your exhibition audience, which might be different each time.

In the case of *Castles In Your Mind*, it seemed that our social media audience chose us. As this event took place relatively recently, many people with different views recall this time in White Rock. Every time WRMA has shared historic photos or memorabilia about the sandcastle competition on social media, our community is very engaged.

### Who do we most want to appeal to?

I built this exhibition for fans of the original and proposed sandcastle competitions. These are local people, but also people who have left White Rock and can interact with us online.

*Castles In Your Mind* is geared at people in their 40s to their 70s, who remember the competition first hand, and have an opinion about it. It's also for people who live in White Rock, or nearby, and can easily imagine the pier and beach with massive crowds. The look and feel of the exhibition (fonts, artifacts, colours) celebrates the 1980s, which is currently a popular style. We hoped that the marketing itself would also draw a third audience.

### What's our big idea?

Willis defines the big idea as the central notion we want visitors to leave with; this should only be one sentence long. As Willis warns, this can be tricky to establish. Here's my crack at the big idea for *Castles In Your Mind*:

The Canadian Open Sandcastle Competition was a fantastical and complex event that continues to make an impact in White Rock today.

I'm not sure if this is a pro big idea, as these take time and practice to write. What I hope is informative, however, is how this main thesis drove which exhibition elements were selected and included in the gallery.

Feet sand sculpture  
Photo credit:  
Tom Kirstein



"FEET" (Sculpture)

110%

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## **Fantastical**

To invoke the fantastical, it was important to have the physical space embody a fanciful spirit. From my brainstorming a 12-foot by six-foot high blue castle of my mind emerged against a yellow backdrop, serving as one large artifact plinth. I also included three large-scale images of the crowded beach scenes, and close ups of the sand sculptures.

I was fortunate to have access to many hours of video footage of the sandcastle days. These scenes conveyed the powerful and instant creative spirit of the day. I included one hour of highlights with audio, which showed scenes of the crowded beach, wandering minstrels, interview clips with sand sculptors about their inspired creations, and teams cheering and laughing.

## **Complex and contemporary**

Alongside the fantastical, this event still carries a lot of meaning for many past and present residents of White Rock. There were a number of reasons why the competition ended in 1987. There's also been a recent push by a community group to bring this competition back to White Rock in a smaller, contemporary way in 2020. Finally, there are environmental, cultural, and safety concerns that didn't exist in the 1980s.

To provide a taste of the complexity of the event and its contemporary presence, I completed a series of oral history interviews with a range of people. These interviews were edited into clips for viewing in the gallery, and we are also publishing them every week on social media.

Crowds at the White Rock Pier during the Open Sandcastle Competition held in White Rock.  
*Photo credit: White Rock Museum & Archives*



## From information to interpretation

The crux of Willis' tool — and what I think I could improve upon most — is ultimately the art of turning information into interpretation in our use of text.

Here's an example of some of the text currently in the exhibition space that has begun to sound very informational:

White Rock locals Tom Kirstein and Chip Barrett planned and implemented the sandcastle competition eight times in White Rock with the help of thousands of volunteers. Over its life span, the competition likely drew more than 700,000 visitors to the beach and Marine Drive.

Here's a humble try at providing more *interpretation* to the story as a practice for next time:

For six weeks each summer, co-organizers Tom Kirstein and Chip Barrett re-created the sandcastle competition, buried in a mountain of

imaginative planning, trying to top last year's success. They realized their dreams with the help of hundreds of impassioned community volunteers. Imagine exiting this Museum on Sandcastle Day and entering a crowd of more than 100,000 people!



KATE PETRUSA

I learned a lot working with Willis' tool kit, even after the exhibition has been up for two months. This evaluation has encouraged me to continue to have the physical gallery space embody the big idea in some way. It has also given me a goal to develop my text and written materials into a story, rather than simply reporting information.

My exhibition development journey continues, and I'm sure there's more for me to discover with this evaluation tool. Thank you BCMA Brain and Tim!

12 foot by 6 foot high  
blue castle display  
for the *Castles In  
Your Mind* exhibit  
Photo credit:  
Kate Petrusa

