

## **Minnesota Children's Museum History**

On December 12, 1981, the first children entered the original Children's Museum, known as "Minnesota's AwareHouse," in downtown Minneapolis. A picture of the original Children's Museum, Minnesota's AwareHouse. They experienced the wonders of hands-on children's museums. Each child who visited the Museum over the years has found creative, colorful, educational, safe environments to explore and discover exciting galleries and programs based on sound principles of learning.

The Museum founders, Marialice Harwood, Kate Donaldson and Suzanne Payne, built a museum based on the philosophy that there would be no "Do not touch" signs in this Museum. "When we were opening the Museum in Minneapolis years ago, we had very limited financial resources and were behind schedule," says Harwood. "The night before the grand opening I remember painting the exhibits with Board members late into the night, trying desperately to finish before the doors opened the next day." During the first year, 65,000 visitors embraced "thinking small" in a big way.

Attendance grew to 80,000, and the Museum quickly outgrew the original space in downtown Minneapolis. In 1985, the Children's Museum moved to an old blacksmith's shop in Bandana Square, transforming dirt walls into 18,000 square-feet of galleries. At the new location, even more young visitors discovered the fun of playing to learn. Attendance the first year in Bandana Square jumped to 200,000. By the early 1990s, the Museum's visitors and exhibits again outgrew the space in Bandana Square. Plans to build an even bigger museum began. The doors to Minnesota Children's Museum in downtown St. Paul opened with 65,000 square-feet of gallery and program space in September 1995.

Three of the most popular exhibits moved from Bandana Square to Minnesota Children's Museum in downtown St. Paul: *Habitot*<sup>®</sup>, where babies and toddlers can safely explore, climb and crawl; the Crane, which moved to the World Works gallery; and the Maze, which moved to Earth World and became the giant anthill. The crane and giant anthill are part of larger exhibits where children can enter the beaver den and pretend to be a busy beaver, crawl under the 500-gallon aquarium, challenge your balancing skills at the bouldering wall, come face-to-face with turtles, make waves at the wild water table or turn a gooey mess into paper art. During the first full year, more than 375,000 visitors came to touch, climb, splash, crawl, push, pull and press it all.

Today, more than 6 million children and their families have discovered the spark of learning through play.