

GLASGOW SCIENCE CENTRE

By Kirk Ramsay

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Glasgow Science Centre (GSC) is located in the Govan area of Glasgow and was constructed as one of the major Millennium Projects, opening to the public in July 2001. GSC was intended to be a catalyst for regeneration in what had been a derelict docklands area of Glasgow for over 30 years. The area around the science centre has now become the digital media quarter of Glasgow with leading organisations such as BBC Scotland located on site as a direct result of the science centre having created a focus of commercial, educational, entertainment and tourist activities in this part of the city.

The riverside setting for the iconic buildings of the science centre creates a spectacular image of contemporary Glasgow and one that strongly reflects the impressive history and current success of the city in science, engineering and medicine. The buildings include the Science Mall, Glasgow Tower and the IMAX 3D Giant Screen cinema. The interactive exhibit areas are within the science mall. Glasgow Tower is the tallest free-standing structure in Scotland at 127m high and is unique in that the whole tower rotates from the ground up to face into the prevailing wind. A viewing cabin at the top of the tower offers panoramic views of the city and surroundings. The IMAX cinema shows the latest 3D films and a range of high quality science education films such as 'Hubble 3D' which is an excellent way to learn about the Hubble Telescope.

The vision for GSC is: A brighter future for Scotland through science experiences that engage, challenge and inspire.

Given the major social, economic, energy and environmental challenges we face the importance of science has never been greater. Engaging as many of our population as we can in interesting aspects of science that relate to every day life and therefore making science meaningful to each individual is a primary target for us. We do that by creating enjoyable, fun



experiences that challenge stereotypes of science and scientists and demonstrate that independent of age and experience science really is for all of us.

Our view is that “kids do not come by age, just by size” and we find that parents and grandparents enjoy and learn just as much as the school-age children that are often assumed to be the only audience for a science centre.

Total admissions to GSC are 450,000 per year including 64,000 school pupils who come on curriculum-based visits from their schools. The new ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ introduced in Scottish schools encourages more integration of subject activities and ‘learning outside the classroom’ becomes ever more important to give experiences that cannot be replicated in the school. We have developed a range of programmes in conjunction with teachers to ensure that the fun experiences are also meaningful contributions to meeting the educational outcomes of the curriculum. Learning in informal environments is becoming a widely used term and science centres are excellent exponents of the techniques that lead to successful learning in informal environments. In practice we all do most of our learning outside of school, college and university. Having specialist centres that

expose us to science, engineering and technology in highly interactive ‘hands-on’ ways personalised by our own interests and approaches is transformative and takes us away from traditional views of learning about science.

We use our science show theatres to give interactive shows such as: ‘Blood Bile & Body Bits’ which all about the human digestive system, ‘Bang or No Bang’ which is about risk or chance, ‘Flame-On’ which about fire and combustion, and a long list of others. Where else can you have your hand set on fire – safely!

Our planetarium offers the best quality star field available to investigate the solar system and beyond but also acts as an interesting venue for related events. During 2009 International Year of Astronomy a long list of activities were supported. ‘Stellar Sounds’ is a series of music events with astronomical interludes under the stars in the planetarium and has been supported by a number of quality bands.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the first manned Moon landing, Glasgow Science Centre ran lunar themed activities for the whole family, one of which investigated the allegations that the moon landing was a hoax and did not actually take place. Being able to



investigate such issues in direct dialogue with experts in the field is a powerful way of getting past the ‘hype’ to the reality, particularly when you can test out some of the key allegations by getting your own hands on experience to augment the expert discussion and demonstration. Bringing members of the public into working proximity with experts from a wide range of disciplines is something that the science centre does very well. We guard the integrity of our work closely so that the high levels of confidence visitors have in us is maintained.

Our main exhibition areas usually have approximately 400 interactive, hands-on exhibits in place covering the physical sciences, medical science, risk & ethics, innovation & invention.

At present we have the ‘Wallace & Gromit Present A World of Cracking Ideas’ exhibition on one of our floors providing a focus through this summer for our innovations theme which is a developing area of interest for all as we see the possibilities of new opportunities opening up in social, economic and cultural exploitation of innovation from sources throughout our population. Again, the key differentiator is ‘hands-on, brains-on’ activities that enable us to see and feel the results of our actions and efforts. The science centre experience is different from most others

because the predominant outcome of the engagement is the personal impact of the immediate and often unexpected response that results from our actions that can be retried, experimented with, followed up and extended through our own efforts or facilitator and expert support.

Extending the science centre experience outside the building is an important aspect of our work. GSC has an extensive outreach programme for schools and communities that covers all of Scotland and in the last year engaged with over 62,000 individuals. Our ‘Bodyworks On Tour’ exhibition explores the amazing machine that is your body developing a health and wellbeing theme that is of real value to all children and adults through exciting interactive exhibits and programmes that can be individually or competitively applied. Schools always welcome these visits as high value-add to the curriculum that produce excitement and motivation as well as desired learning outcomes for the children. As a consequence our tour programme is usually fully booked and further expansion is expected to meet the demand.

Glasgow Science Centre is representative of the high quality image, impact and success that align with science, engineering and technology in our society and an example of how we can engage and motivate people to become informed and active citizens of our knowledge age.

