At the Chicago Academy of Sciences / Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, you find yourself immersed in multiple exhibitions, permanent or temporary, that introduce you to the wonders of nature. Have you ever asked yourself, how does an exhibition come to life? How do you go from an idea, to an interactive multimedia experience for audiences of all ages?

Exhibition in a Shoebox is a guided activity for kids and adults alike, who would like to experience what it means to curate, design and produce an exhibition. The guide includes space for you to document the progress of your exhibition development. You can print it out and create a booklet each time you would like to repeat this activity, to create your personal collection of exhibitions in a shoebox.
Step 1: From Idea to Concept

Every exhibition starts from an idea, which can come to you in many ways. It could be an image you dreamed at night, a word that is stuck in your head, a concept you read about. Creativity has no limits, and everyone in their own way is creative, in the sense that we “create” combinations of words, images and thoughts in our daily lives.

Begin with an idea and write it down on a big sheet of paper, or a whiteboard. Now begin to write or draw around it anything that comes to mind when you think about this idea. This can be words, images, entire sentences. You are now brainstorming and expanding your idea into a concept bubble.
Step 1: From Idea to Concept

You can use this space to create a concept bubble. You can also draw one on a big blank surface, then photograph it and tape your image in this space. You can always refer back to your original idea during the development of your exhibition.

Now look at your concept bubble. Try to think about one or two sentences that can describe your idea. This will be your concept.

For example:

“Urban gardens are a great resource to grow your own food sustainably”

Now write your own!
Step 2: Collect and Prepare Specimens

You can now go and search for materials for your exhibition. Think about what materials you can find in the environment around you that best represent your concept. You can look for plants, flowers, natural materials or objects in your house. Make sure to collect lots of specimens and objects. You will not use all of them in your exhibition, but you will decide what fits best later.

If you collect leaves, flowers or any other natural materials that can be subject to decay, and would like to preserve your exhibition project, you will need to treat specimens correctly. Next is a side activity for you to preserve your plant specimens. You can also find a video of this activity on the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum YouTube channel, part of the Curious by Nature series.
Side Activity: Plant Pressing

For a scientific collection, we collect as many parts of a plant as possible – stem, leaves, flowers, roots – as these aid with the identification process and can inform future study of the specimen. When collecting plants for fun, you can take smaller amounts – a stem with flowers and leaves, leaves on the ground, or just a flower.

The first step is to remove the moisture. Pressing your plant between pieces of paper helps remove the moisture from the plant during the process. Sandwich your plant specimen between two sheets of paper, or one folded in half. Make sure to cover the plant entirely. You can use newspaper, blotting paper, or regular copy paper.
Side Activity: Plant Pressing

The second step is to flatten the plant. Having evenly distributed weight across your plant is the key. A plant press used for scientific collections is made of sheets of cardboard interleaved with paper, book-ended with boards and tied together with adjustable straps. You can make these pretty easily if you plan to do more plant pressings.

If you don’t have a plant press, you can place the papered plants within a heavy book or between two pieces of cardboard. You want to ensure enough weight is applied to evenly press the plants, so stack a couple of heavy books on top. The specimen can take 1 to 2 weeks to dry, depending on the humidity level in your room.
Step 3: Prepare Your Shoebox

It’s time to choose your exhibition space! Find a shoebox that you like and some acrylic paint. You will start by painting the inside of the shoebox in white. This will become the base for your exhibition space. You can always decide to add some color to your exhibition box later on, but starting from a neutral space is a good way to begin designing an exhibition as if you were working on a blank canvas. You can also paint the exterior of your shoebox and the lid in white or in a different color. Let the paint dry completely and add a second layer of paint if needed. While the shoebox dries out, you can move to the next phase.
In the second part of the Exhibition in a Shoebox booklet, you will learn how to design and build your exhibition, using the specimens and materials prepared so far. But first, let’s write about your experience! Think about the first three steps in your activity. Which phase did you enjoy the most? What did you learn from this experience? What are you looking forward to in the second phase?