

Exhibition Critiques:

The Tusher African Center at the California Academy of Sciences

by Marjorie Schwarzer, Margaret Kadoyama,
and Sheila Pressley

Shotgun Wedding: California Academy of Sciences' Tusher African Center by Marjorie Schwarzer

Marrying old taxidermy to a new building was clearly a daunting challenge for the team that developed California Academy of Sciences' *Tusher African Center*. The Renzo Piano-designed green facility that houses the new Center is bold: a LEED-certified platinum building capped by a living botanical roof. Inside are an immersive aquarium and rainforest, a living coral reef, and hundreds of exhibits and activities that support the Academy's re-tooled mission: "to explore, explain and protect the natural world." The goal of the \$485 million capital project was, in the words of the Academy's director, to transform a natural history museum into a natural future museum (Farrington 2008).

Yet should a museum of the future divorce its history? As a professor of museum studies and educator of future generations of museum professionals, I don't believe it should. A science museum's institutional history tells us important stories about how attitudes toward the natural world have evolved. Mine is not just an ivory tower opinion. During the Academy's planning process, visitors also expressed strong feelings about the Academy's legacy. Some old stuff could go, formal visitor evaluations revealed, but not the Academy's signature *African Hall*. Thus the team's challenge was to make a moribund gallery of dioramas compelling within a lively new building, and to honor history within a future-oriented mission.

There are so many stories the team could

have told about the history of exploration and society's changing attitudes toward explaining and protecting nature. One is how the hall came to be. The game was bagged by miner-turned-safari hunter Leslie Simson during the 1930s. Simpson competed fiercely with other "great white hunters," using new transportation, navigation and weapons technologies to collect rare and beautiful specimens. He paid the finest taxidermy studios to mount his bounty. Bay Area museums competed fiercely to acquire them. Oakland's wanted them. So did Berkeley's. But San Francisco's Academy won out (Waiczis, 1983). In this story a fascinating tale of exploration intertwines with Bay Area social history. Another worthy story is the hall's original design. The backdrops that frame the game were elaborate WPA-era stage sets, painted from on-site sketches and photographs. Wax props were meticulously crafted by artists and touched up by local Girl Scouts. The ceiling was inlaid with Beaux Arts tiles and the cases artificially spot-lit for dramatic effect, influenced by the city's new movie palaces. When the hall opened in 1934, it made a spectacular impression. Northern Californians could peek at African wildlife in their original habitats, as contrived by exhibition designers. In this story, the hall's aesthetics intertwine with community history and a pre-World War II approach to explaining Africa's biodiversity.

In ensuing decades, the hall was re-interpreted. That story too is significant. Most dioramas were scientifically inaccurate; specimens were positioned to mimic human behavior, not how animals really act in the wild (Asma 2001). Attitudes about diorama halls also evolved due to scholarly exposés of their inherent colonialism, sexism and racism (Haraway 1984) and research on poaching and endangered

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Should a museum of the future divorce its history?



A historic photo of the California Academy of Sciences' old **African Hall**. Courtesy of the California Academy of Sciences.

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species. By the 1980s, stodgy and “politically incorrect” dioramas were often blamed for natural history museums’ declining audiences (Boyd 1999). Besides, the displays had come undone. Backdrops peeled off walls; specimens frayed, their disintegrating stuffing popping through shedding hides.

The 2008 recast of the Academy’s **African Hall** therefore demanded considerable effort. Artists replicated the backdrops; conservators repaired the specimens; scientists realigned the hall’s geography. The result is five exhibits of live flora and fauna, twelve exact replicas of the old dioramas, plus four newly-designed dioramas. All are arranged to correlate to the African continent, starting in the north and culminating at the tip of South Africa. New labels and plasma touch screens bring the science up-to-date.

Unfortunately, these back-stories weren’t apparent to me when I visited the Academy on a sunny Thursday afternoon. My impression is that the story the team chose to tell conforms to the hall’s original intent—to showcase Africa’s fauna and flora. They have attempted this by blending historic exhibit elements such as the replicas of the old dioramas with some weird 21st century touches. The three most noteworthy are: 1) a line of humanoid skulls

anchoring the Northern Africa wall; 2) a tank of live Namibian penguins anchoring the Southern Africa wall; and 3) a hologram projection of elephants in the middle. The exhibition is thus confusing, if unsettling.

I entered via Northern Africa (which in the spirit of confusion is actually at the building’s south end). Next to a mounted Mountain Gorilla, standing upright in his glass-encased habitat, is a large map of Africa. The label proclaims: “We Are All Africans.” Casts of six humanoid skulls line the wall. Maps, labels and photographs of fossilized footprints describe famous digs in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. “Evolution is not a straight line,” the text reads. Bravo to the Academy for using the e-word, unthinkable when the hall debuted in 1934. But why do casts of ancient humanoid bones—shown as flat wall pieces—anchor 3-D habitats of fully-fleshed-out zebras, leopards, and guinea fowl from the 1930s? And why is there no talkback mechanism for the controversial (even in San Francisco) topic of how humans originated?

Walking through Africa’s eco-systems, I passed glassed-in habitat scenes of taxidermy: a pride of marble-eyed African lions, a snarling cheetah about to devour a limp gazelle, animals frozen in space and time. Suddenly, staring into the “Somali Arid Zone,” I noticed movement in the form of flickering lighted dots. It took me awhile to realize that I was viewing a computer-generated hologram projected onto the backdrop of elephants marching back and forth. Is this whiz-bang technology intended as homage to the cinematic nature of the dioramas of yore, or to a drug flashback? How does it add to the storyline?



The new **African Center** closely resembles the original hall, a longtime San Francisco favorite. It is now also home to five live animal displays, including African penguins at the end of the hall. Courtesy of the California Academy of Sciences. Photo ©Tim Griffith.

During the time of my visit, a large crowd was gathered at the end of the hall. Behold the Center's stars: twenty live penguins that swam, dove, and wiggled to the delight of the crowds. "South Africa's water is nutrient rich," the label reads, supporting "a unique variety of marine life: the African penguin." Inside the aquarium was a human staff member feeding the penguins. Her behind-the-glass presence was an odd bookend to the encased humanoid skeleton across the hall.

Envisioned as windows onto an exotic world by naturalists who had very different ideas than we do today about what it meant to explore, explain and protect the natural world, what the new **African Center** communicated to me is that team members may have had very different ideas from each other about the exhibition's storyline. The opportunity to create a contemplative gallery inside a bustling building and to call attention to a rich history was lost

to a confusing nod to the theory of evolution, a trippy hologram and the weirdness of waddling penguins viewed alongside waxen taxidermy.

I think the Center will evolve into a successful exhibition space. The exhibition team needs to tie the elements together better and make the hall's back-story more transparent. Adding to the Academy's existing cell phone tour is one relatively quick way to accomplish this. The Center would also benefit from a brief orientation, possibly delivered during the regular penguin feeding programs, when the crowds seem to be largest. One important way we can explore, explain, and protect nature is by understanding how museums' approaches toward exploring, explaining, and protecting have evolved. If the Academy can stimulate that kind of thoughtfulness, then the marriage will work. Continually re-envisioning the **African Center** will be well worth the effort.

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The Tusher African Center: Engaging the Audience? by Margaret Kadoyama

It was with anticipation that I visited the **African Center** at the California Academy of Sciences recently. There were many reasons for this, and in the interest of transparency, I will disclose them. First of all, I am a former staff member at the Academy, working as a public programmer and new audience developer from 1987-1995. My focus then (as now) was to work with community members to ensure that the museum was community-focused. My perspective as an advocate for museums being vital members of their communities began while I was working at the Academy twenty years ago, and it has been the heart of my work since then. Knowing that the **African Center** was the primary place within the new Academy where a sense of the old Academy would be preserved, I was curious about how this would happen. I was particularly interested in who would be visiting, and I hoped that the Academy would feel welcoming. I visited on a Sunday afternoon in November, with my husband and my 14-year old daughter. I wondered what my family, and all the other people in the hall, would do during their visit. Would I hear comments about how it compared to the earlier **African Hall**? What would the audience do or say?

The first thing I noticed was how noisy it was. There were about one hundred people visiting the exhibition when I arrived, and it sounded like many more. The hall-like open space was easy to navigate through, especially for families with strollers. The **Center** is 136 feet long by 28 feet wide, or 3,808 square feet. The exhibition is designed as a series of dioramas lining the

long north and south walls, with a large open space in the center. At the east end of the hall is a large African penguin habitat with a colony of African penguins. Besides the dioramas and penguin habitat within the hall proper, there were three other exhibits: A Mountain Gorilla diorama at one entrance to the hall, a Lake Malawi Cichlids tank of live freshwater fish at the other entrance to the hall, and, along the west end of the hall, an exhibit of human evolution, "We are all Africans: Evolution is not a straight line." The eleven dioramas along the north wall and six dioramas along the south wall included large, majestic scenes as well as smaller cases with live animals.

Next to each exhibit is a large panel with interpretive text, photos, and a map. Some exhibits also included videos. From my perspective, the large panels are effective interpretive tools with interesting information about the animals. I found some of the information particularly engaging: Each panel included: a map highlighting the range of the animals being discussed; the Kiswahili name of the animal; and the conservation status of the animals being discussed.

Who Was There That Day, and What Did They Do?

The visitors were mostly in groups of 2-4 people, representing all ages, from young children in strollers to older adults. Most of the children were younger, from babies though about age 9, and there were just a few tweens and teens. I heard several different languages spoken by visitors, and it was an ethnically diverse group. I was especially interested in how audience members would engage with the exhibits. Would they cluster to the ones with live animals and bypass the more traditional

dioramas? Would the penguins be the main attraction? What I saw was somewhat surprising.

I expected a large crowd at the penguin habitat and not many people at other exhibits. The penguins were the biggest attraction, but I was happily surprised to see that there were groups of people at every diorama, often pointing out to one another different elements that caught their attention. I saw many young children with their faces pressed against the glass, pointing at something within the exhibit that they found interesting. The dioramas that seemed to attract the most attention were those with large animals, such as the African Lion, Cheetah and Somali Arid Zone dioramas, and those with live animals, including the White-throated Savanna Monitor and African Reptiles exhibits. The Somali Arid Zone was particularly engaging, as this was open (not behind glass) and included a tree that was placed out in the hall itself where visitors could walk around it. One of the delightful surprises was looking above my head and seeing a leopard (not live) at rest in this tree. I saw people taking photos of one another in front of many of the exhibits, and the Somali Arid Zone was probably the most popular for this.

The penguin colony was indeed the most popular exhibit, and there were about 30 people in front of the penguin habitat when I visited. The penguins are fed twice a day during public hours, and I suspect that it becomes quite crowded at these times. While I was there, visitors did not stop at the gorilla or the cichlids tank, but there were a number of people looking at and reading the interpretive text in the human evolution exhibit. Three of the exhibits (African Lion, Cape Floristic Province, and

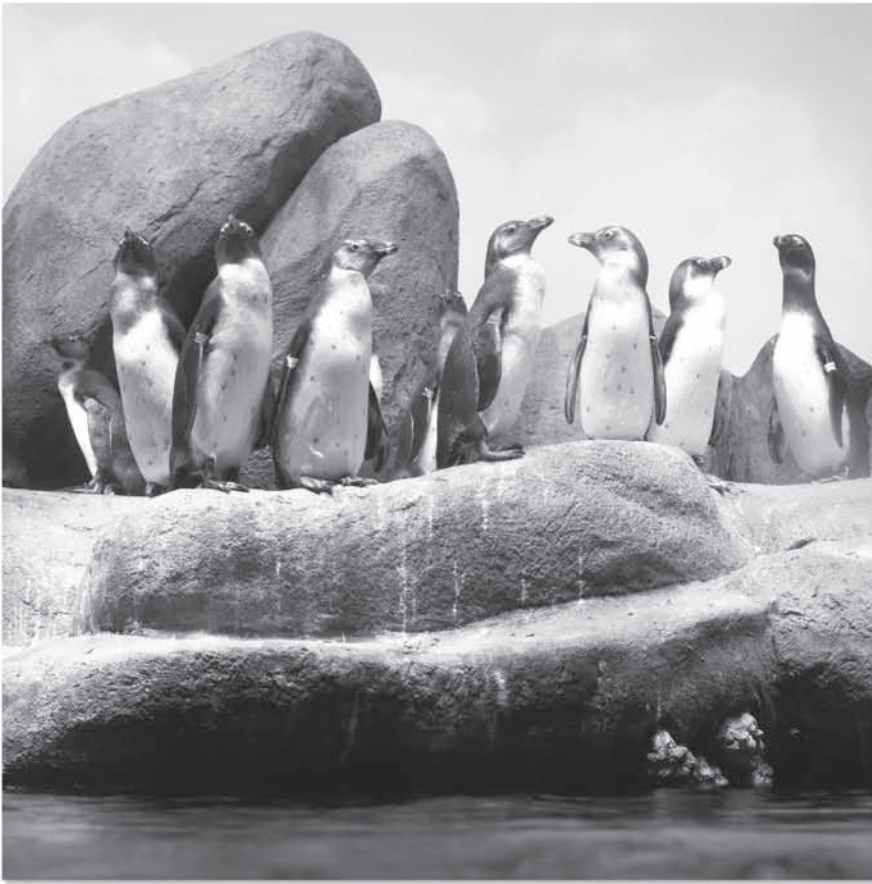


Leopard in tree, Somali Arid Zone exhibit. Photo courtesy of Margaret Kadoyama

Kirk's Dikdik) included interactive videos and/or touch screen games in their wall panels. I saw a few kids using these, but the noise level in the hall prevented me from hearing the narration in the African Lion and Cape Floristic Province videos. (Note: On a later visit the following day (a Monday afternoon), I was able to hear the narration. I found the stories of the researchers' work interesting. The games were not as engaging.) I observed visitors of all ages reading the wall panels. I was interested to note that my 14-year old daughter particularly liked the photo of the baby cheetah on the panel for the Cheetah exhibit. It evoked the "cute response," and she took a photo of the panel.

Since my work is primarily with visitors, especially those considered new audiences for museums, I was curious about what kind of interpretation was available for visitors who speak languages other than English. All interpretive text and videos were in English only; the videos were also close captioned in English only. Visitor maps in a number of languages (French, German, Spanish, English, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean) are available at the museum entrance. In addition, audio

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Live South African Penguins anchor the Academy's new **African Center**, 2008. Courtesy of the California Academy of Sciences ©Tim Griffith.

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tours in French, German, Italian, English, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and Chinese are available to rent at the museum entrance. These visitor maps and audio tours, along with the staff members greeting visitors when they arrive, indicate a welcoming atmosphere. There is a mobile phone tour available at no cost, and there is one stop in the **Center**, at the human evolution exhibit (415.294.3602 .8#). Unfortunately, when I attempted to dial this while in the hall, I was not able to connect, so I dialed it from home and was able to listen later. It featured an Academy anthropologist talking about human evolution, with an emphasis on Africa. Highlighting the work of Academy scientists was particularly interesting, and I would have enjoyed listening to it while I was onsite.

What Did We Learn?

As I visited and watched other audience members in the **Center**, I thought, "What does the exhibition seem to be trying to do?"

From my perspective, the intent seems to be to highlight African life and habitats, and to introduce visitors to the diversity of life in Africa. If that was its goal, I think it succeeds. If its intents were to engage visitors on a deeper level, I don't think it does. To achieve this goal, it would be helpful to include some method for visitor feedback or resources for visitors to learn more. I spent an hour in the hall on my first visit. From my experience as a visitor researcher, this is probably longer than most visitors will spend there. It seemed like most people walked in one end of the hall, walked along one side, stopping for a minute or two at each diorama, stopped and watched the penguins for three or four minutes, then walked along the other side, stopping at each diorama for a minute or so. I did not conduct any formal tracking studies, but the visitors I observed probably spent no more than 15-20 minutes in the **African Center**.

The hour I spent there was time well-spent. I learned more, and was able to see more, than I would have during a regular visit. I had a specific goal: to experience the **African Center**, assess it from my own perspective, and observe what other visitors are doing during their visit. During a regular visit, I would have done what I saw other visitors do: spend 15-20 minutes there. I would like to see some benches in the hall, to encourage visitors to linger. The hall is large, the lighting and color in the dioramas are attractive, the animals are engaging, and it's a pleasant place to be—except for the noise. I had wondered whether a diorama was an outdated exhibit format, but the **Center** convinces me that it is not, especially when combined with live animals. As I heard one visitor exclaim while looking at the White-throated Savanna Monitor, "That's a real lizard! I just saw him move!"

The Tusher African Center at the California Academy of Sciences: Bringing Africa to Life?
By Sheila Pressley

I have conflicted memories of the old **African Hall** at the California Academy of Sciences. I spent a great deal of time there while my children were still in preschool. They always begged to visit the **African Hall** first on any visit to the Academy of Sciences. Although I always found the taxidermy animal displays to be reminiscent of hunting trophies, covered with a thin layer of dust and imperial entitlement, my children found them thrilling. While they ogled the gorilla’s huge chest, I tried to convince myself that the experience was helping them to develop an interest in live animals perhaps even those in their natural habitat; but in the dark, vaguely creepy **African Hall**, I could never quite shake the feeling that these frequent visits might encourage them to grow into eccentric animal collectors.

While the Academy was closed for rebuilding in Golden Gate Park, their offsite location featured no hall of animals. I was surprised to learn that the **African Hall** was going to be recreated in the new Academy of Sciences, an innovative, breathtaking building designed by the Pritzker Prize winning architect, Renzo Piano. I know that San Franciscans are notoriously sentimental about their past, especially when it comes to their cultural institutions, but I had to wonder why a museum, opening a brand new, world-class science, conservation, and educational institution would reinstall a hall designed during a period when Africa was still under colonial rule and the general public had no easy access to footage of animals in the wild.



The label at the left of the cheetah diorama illustrates a multilayered format. Courtesy of Sheila Pressley.

A particular focus of my twenty-plus year career (at a visual arts institution in the same park as the Academy) has been to help the viewing public acknowledge and refocus the distorted lens inherited from colonialism, particularly when looking at non-western cultural artifacts.

The Center

The new Academy of Sciences reopened its doors to the public in September of 2008. I must admit that I headed over to investigate the newly renovated **African Center** with some reservations. I was also skeptical of the claim on the Academy’s visitors’ map that the “Twenty-one detailed dioramas” would “bring Africa to life.” My immediate impression upon entering the gallery was disappointment that very little had changed; the architecture was identical, from the long narrow gallery, lined with inset dioramas, down to the arched ceiling, decorated with molded tiles. On second glance I noticed that the largest and brightest diorama at the opposite end of the hall was, in actuality, full of life, both behind and in front of the glass. An animated crowd was gathered around a beautifully designed and lit floor-to-ceiling case, fascinated by a colony of (living!) South African Penguins. Five of the other dioramas contained—not nearly as lively as the penguins, but live non-the-less—examples of small African reptiles and fish. I still was presented with sixteen cases of mounted African

I noticed young children playing around with the interactivity and was impressed that—at least while I was watching—they actually became engrossed with the footage, especially of the very alive animals in their natural habitats.



A young visitor takes a "Virtual Safari," led by an African guide. These videos accompany a number of the dioramas in the exhibition. Courtesy of Sheila Pressley.

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Multimedia in a gallery space can often overwhelm the very thing it is trying to illuminate. In this case, I think the Academy got the balance right

mammals, who looked as dead as ever, although their painted backdrops were freshly recreated.

The gallery was full of young families, and I was brought back to my time here with my own young children. What was the educational value of observing glassy eyed, mounted animals, and why had I been pulled to this same place so often to let my children put their hands and face up to a glass wall and roar at a mute lion? As a huge proponent of object based learning, I appreciate the importance of the authentic object for creating springboards for interest and knowledge acquisition. Natural history dioramas such as these provide visitors with close enough proximity to encourage visual exploration and a visceral experience of scale. I found particularly effective an overhanging tree branch with a leopard perched above the suddenly prey-like visitors.

Labels

Each diorama is explained by a large, well-designed, informative label. The labels are approximately two feet wide and four feet high.

They are not overly text heavy and it seemed to me that font size clearly indicates interest level for different ages. The lower registers of each label—kids' eye view—have great graphics: Most contain a photograph of a preternaturally cute baby animal coupled with a simple fact or engaging question. (For example: Cheetahs are born with solid grey fur and only develop spots at three months of age. How are your hands similar and different from those of a baboon?) Four of the labels, in different corners of the gallery, are cleverly imbedded with touch activated plasma screens complete with a virtual educator/African guide.

Virtual Educators

On each screen is an African guide inviting the visitor to accompany him on a "Virtual safari." Two different safaris were offered on each screen, which was the extent of the interactivity provided. This limited interactivity was, I think, a good choice given how loud and crowded the space. The audio was difficult at times to understand due to the ambient noise, but the visuals were beautiful and compelling. The

short tours emphasized either the environment (on a climbing tour of Kilimanjaro we learn that global warming is causing the snow line to move higher each year) or the specimens on display. The videos provided pertinent information on endangered species, migration, and natural selection. I noticed young children playing around with the interactivity and was impressed that—at least while I was watching—they actually became engrossed with the footage, especially of the very alive animals in their natural habitats. The video screens are on the small side and my first impression was that they should have been larger, but as I watched visitors engage first with the actual dioramas (particularly the large, well-lit taxidermy specimens), and secondarily with the videos, I realized that the size had been carefully considered. Multimedia in a gallery space can often overwhelm the very thing it is trying to illuminate. In this case, I think the Academy got the balance right.

Living Educators

The most popular and effective educational offering in the *African Center*, while I was there, was the penguin feeding. While a marine biologist—outfitted in a wet suit and an audio headset with microphone—fed the penguins, a second educator took questions from the visitors. I liked the give-and-take of the

presentation; the marine biologist was able to answer questions and provide the information visitors most wanted. Children and adults were actively engaged.

Doing Better

The contrast between the penguin case and the other dioramas is stark, and although the attempted mediation works to a point, I couldn't help but wish that the marine biologist would jump into the case with the mounted gazelle, magically bring the animal to life, and—I suppose—transport it back to Africa. Perhaps that is the point, wishing we could do better for the animals and habitat of Africa. There certainly are lots of suggestions in the gallery for how we can do just that. The gallery itself is humming with the activity of its visitors. I have no doubt that it will become a favorite gallery for a new generation of children, which considerably raises the stakes about lessons learned. I see a real need for the inclusion of some language to help the visitor (be it an overly worried mother, a picky neighboring museum educator, or the general public) articulate the connections and disconnections between colonial dioramas and a twenty-first century commitment to conservation and education. This could be easily accomplished with some additional signage comparing how our views have changed since the 1930s. ☀