

## *Exhibitions of Special Distinction*

by Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt

The Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition is AAM's premier venue for honoring achievement in one of the major functions of our field—the creation of exhibitions. The competition recognizes exhibitions for overall excellence or for specific innovative techniques that move our field forward. This year's winners were all given Special Distinction awards for their ability to embrace a key aspect of exhibit development and execute it boldly with commitment and passion.

### **Special Distinction: Aesthetics and Materials**

The temporary exhibition *Light: Installations by Bruce Munro* at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania displayed eight light installations by UK artist Bruce Munro. The interpretive goal of *Light* was to create a nocturnal artistic intervention that illuminated areas of the property in compelling and transformative ways. The installation showcased portions of the gardens that were less visited and encouraged visitors to explore and engage with these spaces. Artworks were strategically placed throughout Longwood Gardens to highlight a range of areas within the gardens, transforming lakes, meadows, forests, and fields in ways that demonstrated the links between nature and culture. The installation altered everyday materials such as recycled CDs and PET bottles into beautiful art. The everyday materials were utilized with the intent of discovering beauty by highlighting what might have been overlooked, and thus transforming a dark walk through the gardens into something meaningful and inspirational. After experiencing *Light*, the garden hoped visitors would leave Longwood with an

“expanded concept of beauty, an ability to recognize it in the wider world, and a desire to protect and expand it when they can.”

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of its innovative use of everyday materials to create an aesthetically beautiful exhibition experience. This project expanded the role of a public garden as a place not only to view nature but also appreciate art.

### **Special Distinction: Messaging and Engagement**

This permanent exhibition *Health Happens Here* at The California Museum in Sacramento was developed for California elementary students and policy makers. The California Endowment, a private foundation, approached the museum about creating an exhibition that challenged prevailing attitudes and assumptions about health. According to conventional wisdom, health depends on individual behaviors and genetics and takes place in a clinical setting. *Health Happens Here* focuses on showing health happening in neighborhoods, in schools, and with prevention. Components promote interactivity, personal connections, and empowerment. By playing kid-friendly games, visitors explore connections between health and communities, including food access, urban sprawl, public education, civic participation, sustainable community-building, social equity, and environmental issues. The points they earn playing these games can be redeemed for an actual donation to a community organization they care about. The California Endowment supports the activity with an

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The Excellence in Exhibition competition is sponsored by four of AAM's professional networks: for research and evaluation, curation, education, and exhibitions. For the last two years Elizabeth Kunz Kollmann (CARE) has served as the competition's rotating coordinator. This year's judges were Stacey Swigart, Director of Collections at Please Touch Museum (CurCom); Beverly Serrell, principle at Serrell & Associates (CARE); Erin Narloch, an independent museum professional (EdCOM); and Aaron Goldblatt, Partner, Museum Services at Metcalfe Architecture & Design (NAME).

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Light's "Water Towers" marked the transition between Longwood's formal gardens and its natural landscape. Sixty-nine structures were built from one-liter plastic bottles filled with water, laser-cut wood layers, and fiber optics connected to an LED projector and sound system. Courtesy of Longwood Gardens.

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The installation showcased portions of the gardens that were less visited and encouraged visitors to explore and engage with these spaces.

annual grant of \$100,000 to “promote healthy change in communities, build a sense of empowerment, and foster a culture of activism and philanthropy in the next generations.”

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because it interprets the topic of health in a novel way designed both to teach and to empower visitors.

**Special Distinction: Community Engagement**

Chicago History Museum’s temporary exhibition *Out in Chicago* explored the vibrant lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history of Chicago. It detailed the emergence of diverse LGBT communities, emphasizing the everyday lives of these Chicagoans as well as their activist struggles for equality and against homophobia and the fear of gender difference. *Out* served as a space where both LGBT and non-LGBT visitors could experience the Big Idea: *Chicago’s position as an urban center fostered the development of diverse and vibrant communities that challenged norms of*

*gender and sexuality beginning in the 1850’s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

Developing *Out* required the museum to interpret in an exhibit gallery themes and topics generally reserved for adult evening programming. The museum worked extensively with the LGBT community to create the exhibition. Community members served as exhibit advisors; loaned and donated artifacts to the museum; were featured in videos throughout the gallery; and were critical in developing a platform of community programming in the museum and throughout the city (bus tours, neighborhood walking tours, history pub crawls, and smart phone apps. The innovative programming series demonstrated a real interest in continuing conversations started in *Out*. *Out* community engagement initiatives have become a model for museums and historical societies.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of its continued commitment to engaging the community in telling the story of a group that has not



A set of exhibit graphics in Health Happens Here features a composite image showing people engaged in healthy activities, while the background illustrates the transformation of their community (unhealthy on left, healthy on right). Courtesy of The California Museum.

previously been featured so contextually and completely.

**Special Distinction: Alignment of Site and Mission**

The Natural History Museum of Utah was recognized for its suite of Exhibitions: *Sky, Life, Land, First Peoples, Great Salt Lake, and Past Worlds*. In November 2011 the museum opened its Rio Tinto Center, located on 13 acres along the shoreline of Lake Bonneville, with views of Salt Lake City, the Great Salt Lake, and the Oquirrh Mountains. The new building served as an opportunity to rethink the role of the Natural History museum and its exhibitions. Inside the museum, a series of galleries cascade from the top floor downward, mimicking outdoor trails that encourage meandering. Visitors can move from one space to another, head out onto the terrace and follow paths, and then move from gallery to gallery. The spaces are linked together spatially as well as thematically through common topics about energy flow, evolution, ecology, and biodiversity.

*Health Happens Here* focuses on showing health happening in neighborhoods, in schools, and with prevention.



This 70s era living room in Out invites visitors to listen to the stories of twelve individuals and couples across the LGBT spectrum. Visitors often sat through all twenty-two minutes of video, and sometimes stayed for a second viewing. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.

These six permanent exhibitions provide a place-based visitor experience rooted in the natural phenomena of Utah's unique landscapes and ecosystems and the science they inspire. Because the exhibits were designed in tandem with the building, the museum included carefully framed views of the city and natural spaces beyond the museum walls. The result interweaves immersive spaces, pathways, and experiences. The group of interrelated exhibitions is cohesive, but each exhibition also stands on its own.

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A view of the Land gallery at Natural History Museum of Utah illustrates its relationship to the Life gallery above; a set of “switchbacks” on the right, allow visitors to trek down from Life while learning about one of the three geologic provinces in Utah. In the foreground, visitors learn about stratification and experiment with erosion and weathering. Courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Utah.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose these exhibitions for an award of special distinction because they were especially effective in their melding of exterior and interior space to achieve their mission.

### Conclusion

When creating exhibitions we strive to incorporate best practices into our process. By integrating visitor feedback, strong and accessible storylines, powerful objects, robust experiences, and purposeful design, we hope our exhibitions will resonate with the public. This year's winners, however, took their projects a step further. Each exhibition highlighted here had a unique vision or intent that guided the process and set it apart from many other projects.

*Light* at Longwood gardens embraced the concept of beauty in an exhibition. It created an outdoor environment that delivered extraordinary beauty to its visitors. *Health Happens Here* at the California Museum challenged the way their audiences thought about health and

then enabled them to take action. The message of empowerment was carried all the way through to the innovative digital points reward system, allowing visitors to convert their points into actual donations to local groups. *Out in Chicago* at Chicago History Museum created thoughtful and long-term relationships with the LGBT community. These relationships resulted in structural changes in the museum that will endure far beyond the run of the temporary exhibition. Finally the Natural History Museum of Utah's suite of exhibitions seamlessly integrated the architecture of the building with the exterior landscape and interior exhibitions. It created immersive spaces, pathways and experiences all anchored in the local natural phenomena.

Through sheer beauty, visitor empowerment, community engagement, or integrated architecture, each of these winners pushed forward an element of exhibit development or design and created an exhibition worthy of recognition. Congratulations to this year's winners! ✨