



Exhibitions of Special Distinction: Winners of the 26th Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition

by Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt

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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 exhibition development and execute it boldly with commitment and passion. In addition the competition awarded one honorable mention this year to the exhibition *Shop Life* at the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in New York City.

***Design for the Modern Child,* Philadelphia Museum of Art Special Distinction: Imaginative Design and Interpretation**

The temporary exhibition *Design for the Modern Child* at the Philadelphia Art Museum was designed for children ages three to ten and their caregivers. The exhibition incorporated interactives and a wide range of objects designed especially for kids including toys, textiles, a video game, furniture, and eating utensils. The goal of the exhibition was to challenge visitors to think differently about the objects they use in their daily lives. *Design for the Modern Child* embraced children's inventive potential and the particular notion that children can be creative problem solvers.

The entrance featured a giant cardboard house that invited children to climb inside. A dotted pathway on the exhibit floor then encouraged children to follow a thematic self guided tour through the exhibition, searching for particular objects. The routes, titled "Chairy Tales," "Toy Stories," and "Lights On," led visitors on hunts for chairs, toys, and lights on display in the gallery. Objects from around the world were featured, including a Japanese interlocking fiberboard shelf in the shape of a reindeer, brightly painted wardrobes in the shape of Dutch row home, Finnish textiles featuring colorful cars and trucks, and a toy made by a local Philadelphia architect. The accompanying labels featured text, illustrations, and/or tactile elements. In addition to highlighting information about a particular object, the labels also explained connections between objects joined by the dotted line paths on the



Two divergent "Find" paths on the floor, in medium and dark blue, encouraged visitors to take different routes through the exhibition. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



The "Many Nations" section of the First Peoples exhibition provides a focus for the Museum's national collection of Aboriginal objects. Touch screen digital labels connect each of the 400+ artifacts with the people and communities that made and used them. A hands-on activity table allows visitors to explore some of the surrounding objects. Behind the table are children's traditional toys and objects brought to life through on screen interactive animations. Courtesy of Museum Victoria.

floor. Several designers provided sketches which were used to cover walls near a corresponding object, reminding visitors that three-dimensional objects often begin with two-dimensional drawings. Labels and objects were placed at lower heights, ensuring that children had increased access to them. The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because the design created an art space for children that integrated the exhibition gallery with the adjacent programming space in an engaging manner. The exhibition was on display from May to October, 2013.

**First Peoples, Museum Victoria
Special Distinction: Innovative
Integration of Design and Content**

The 13,358 sq ft permanent exhibition, *First Peoples*, tells the story of Victoria's Native Peoples from the time of Creation to today. It celebrates the history, culture, achievements, and survival of Victoria's Aboriginal People—more than 40 Aboriginal language and cultural groups that are still thriving today. The exhibition was developed collaboratively and co-curated with museum staff and a group of cultural and language experts from across Victoria. This group provided

cultural leadership, advocacy, support, and access to the wealth of knowledge embedded in traditional communities.

The exhibition attempts to illustrate the complexity of Aboriginal Australia before Europeans arrived. This challenged many visitors' beliefs about Aboriginal cultures. The exhibition team's goal was to create a space that was accessible, dynamic, and exciting, and where all visitors could feel welcome to come and share in the stories of Victoria's First Peoples.

The exhibition design invites visitors to explore Aboriginal culture as a multi-sensory "walking" journey. Staged over multiple levels featuring a ramped and stepped floorplan, the display follows a winding, circuitous route through a range of unique environments. The notions of "walking a story" and learning as a physical journey are explored through exhibition communication methods drawing from traditional Aboriginal education models. The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of the beautiful design built around very thoughtful content interpretation.

The exhibition design invites visitors to explore Aboriginal culture as a multi-sensory "walking" journey.



Signage for the “Swing like a Gibbon” activity encourages visitors to race as well as to collaborate to get their whole troop across without touching the ground. Courtesy of the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden.

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Jungle Trails appeals to visitors’ emotions through emphasizing innate connections that we all share with our closest animal relatives.

Jungle Trails, Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden
Special Distinction: Exemplary Model of Creating Experiences for Social Engagement

Jungle Trails is a permanent exhibition at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden. It aims to engage families in meaningful shared experiences and to foster learning about how primates survive in the tropical forest. Family focus groups revealed that people like to compare themselves to animals and to connect personally with individual animals. Kids crave active play, and adults want to engage in that physical play along with the kids. These were among visitor findings that strongly informed the exhibition design.

Jungle Trails winds visitors through a two acre path of jungle-type landscape, featuring African and Asian primates, including Sumatran orangutans, gibbons, and bonobos. The exhibition appeals to visitors’ emotions through emphasizing innate connections that we all share with our closest animal relatives. As they

learn how primates survive in the jungle, guests are prompted through signage and interactives to wonder what it would be like if their family lived in the jungle.

Interactive iPads with large family friendly sized screens above allow visitors to watch videos of the keepers at work, meet the individual animals, and learn how they can help save the species. The exhibition features eight interactive group challenges that our non-human primate relatives face every day. For example “Orangutans Find Fruit by Memory” challenges visitors to match up fruits just as orangutans do to remember where to find ripe fruit in the wild. “Balance like a Lemur” encourages families to test their balancing skills on a mini-ropes course, both in collaboration and competition with their group members; and “Big Brains at Work” asks individuals to work together with their group members to push a stone through a maze using sticks that fit into holes along the edge of the maze. This mimicks the way bonobos fish for termites with sticks in the wild. The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of the playful way it encourages families to explore together in a multi-sensory experience.



Nature Lab is a 6,500 sq ft hands-on gallery with over 200 specimens, live animals, interactives, media, and scientist demonstrations for visitors of all ages. Courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles.

**Nature Lab, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles
Special Distinction: Outstanding Connections Between Design, Content and Community Context**

Nature Lab is a permanent 6,500 sq ft hands-on gallery with over 200 specimens, live animals, interactives, media, and scientist demonstrations for visitors of all ages. Museum scientists and researchers worked with exhibit developers to identify the key stories to highlight why Los Angeles is a biodiversity hot spot. Animal stories invite visitors to explore the exhibition in fun and unexpected ways. *Nature Lab*'s various exhibits and activities encourage visitors to look around at their familiar surroundings and to see what they've never seen before in urban nature. In the process they are introduced to the fascinating study of urban biodiversity. The exhibition's goal is to surprise visitors with the discovery that nature in L.A. is rich and diverse—and that there's much more of it than meets the eye.

The exhibition evokes Los Angeles' urban environment by removing the multi-

level acoustical tile ceiling in a formerly dark basement space, exposing existing pipes and electrical ducts. The first set of experiences and themes illustrates why urban L.A. has such biodiversity. Visitors can explore through stories of specific animals, such as rats, how species were introduced into the city, why and how they thrive, and how their habitats are changing. The second set of experiences focuses on inviting visitor participation. In "Mapping L.A.'s Nature" a wall features recent discoveries made by citizen scientists. Another display features an online mapping tool to document wildlife encounters throughout the city via smartphones. Stories of wildlife encounters and maps of nature memories personalize L.A.'s natural history.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to give *Nature Lab* an award of special distinction for its engaging content and design which juxtaposes nature and urban life in creative and open ended ways. Its use of collections and animal stories introduces visitors to a specialized form of museum research—urban biodiversity—in a relevant and personal manner. ✨

The Excellence in Exhibition competition is sponsored by four of AAM's professional networks: for research and evaluation, curation, education, and exhibitions. Stacey Swigart (CARE) served as this year's competition's rotating coordinator. This year's judges were David Kennedy, Curator of Collections at Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center (CurCom); Juli Goss, Research Associate at Museum of Science, Boston (CARE); Courtney Brouwer, Assistant Director of School Programs & Resources, Civics Program at the McCormick Foundation (EdCOM); and Aaron Goldblatt, Partner, Museum Services at Metcalfe Architecture & Design (NAME).
