

AAM Excellence in Exhibition Competition Turns 20

by Penny Jennings

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In early spring 2008, a panel of exhibit professionals will convene to review and evaluate the entries to AAM's twentieth annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition. The judges will look for "excellence" as defined in the "Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence," stressing innovative or provocative use of collections, content, and/or design. Competition entries are welcome from all types of museums, large and small, art, history, science, zoos, aquaria and arboreta, and the winners will be featured in a panel session at the 2008 Annual Meeting in Denver and in a subsequent issue of *Museum News*.

The competition originated twenty years ago as a project of the AAM Curators' Committee (CurCom). Over the years, reflecting changes in exhibition development practice, other Standing Professional Committees (SPCs) joined in the effort. Now it is managed jointly by CurCom, NAME, the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) and the Education Committee (EdCom). Each committee appoints a representative judge to the panel, and oversight and coordination rotate every two years.

Revised Entry Guidelines

In 2006, the SPC Chairs made major revisions to the entry guidelines, in an effort to streamline the process and make things easier on entrants and judges alike. The current entry guidelines can be found at the end of this issue. They have been greatly simplified, and entries can be submitted on CD rather than in the weighty notebooks of previous years. There's more emphasis on the objectives and outcomes of the exhibition, and less emphasis on ancillary programs or publications.

Twenty-three exhibitions were entered in 2007, a substantial increase over previous years. The sponsoring chairs hope the new guidelines will support even more great entries in the coming years.

Other competition opportunities

While there are other design competitions out there, few are oriented specifically to museum exhibition design, and none encompass the broad content scope of the AAM competition. Entering an exhibition in other national competitions like those sponsored by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) or Society of Environmental Graphic Designers (SEGD) is a difficult fit. AIA focuses on the building, not its contents, and at SEGD exhibitions compete against retail and commercial spaces including shopping malls, airports and hospitals, in which designers are communicating information, not ideas.

Goals for coming years

At the NAME Business Breakfast in Chicago last spring, members discussed the competition and voiced their concerns and suggestions for the future. Many of the suggestions focused on promoting the competition and its winners, and increasing visibility for all entrants. This year, NAME will work with AAM to showcase photos from all the competition entries at the Annual Meeting in Denver, and to expand the competition's presence on our website.

NAME is committed to ensuring that the competition continues to encourage creativity and excellence, and promotes critical reflection and dialogue about best practices. We encourage all members who are involved in interesting, exciting, excellent, and unusual projects to share your results with the field by entering the competition.

Past Winners

NAME is interested in compiling a comprehensive list of past Excellence in Exhibition Competition winners, and archiving descriptions and photographs for future reference and inspiration. We have teamed up with ASTC's ExhibitFiles project, a wonderful user-generated collection of exhibition case files and reviews.

If you submitted a competition entry in the past and have materials to share, please log on to ExhibitFiles (www.exhibitfiles.org) and post a Case Study. If your exhibition won an award, please note it in the description (including the year of the award) and add "AAM award" in the keywords field. 