

# Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions:

## Three Approaches

by Alan Teller

*People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise.*

Somerset Maugham.

Exhibitions are a powerful medium, a three-dimensional dance of ideas. Their impact on visitors ranges from the life-changing to the inconsequential. Those of us involved in the creation or evaluation of museum exhibitions struggle with ways in which we may judge our success or failure. The recent AAM Conference in Chicago provided a forum to discuss three distinct approaches to exhibition evaluation. The approaches presented were the Excellent Judges Framework outlined in the book *Judging Exhibitions* by Beverly Serrell (2006), who also served as panel Chair; the approach of an independent critic; and the use of summative evaluation methods.

To have a common basis for comparison of these approaches we focused on a completed exhibition, one already open to the public.

Shedd Aquarium's *Wild Reef* provided a focus for our study. The goal was not so much to comprehensively evaluate *Wild Reef*, as it was to discuss how these different approaches assessed the evidence for excellence.

### Introduction:

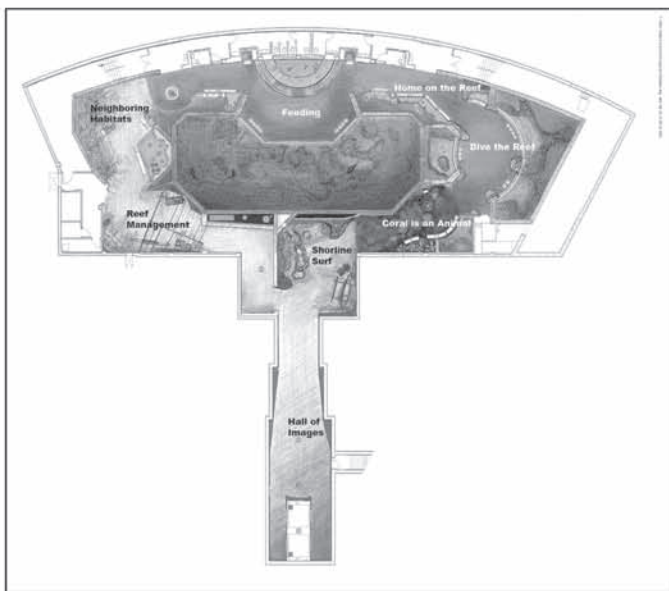
As Beverly Serrell said in her opening remarks "Nobody likes to be judged. We thank and apologize to the Shedd Aquarium and the developers of *Wild Reef*. We hope that our discussions help exhibit practitioners move to a broader range of considerations and a more shared set of values."

Serrell made the point that exhibition reviews, such as the ones we read in newspapers or even in *Museum News*, typically contain excessive praise. They ignore or lightly skim over

exhibition faults; they *describe* an exhibition rather than *analyze* it. They rarely offend or offer constructive criticism. Clearly, a system to assess exhibitions needs to be developed, some way of measuring evidence against specific criteria, be they highly organized or more personal. The goal of the AAM session was to hear about three assessment methods that take us beyond the vague review to methods that apply

**Allan Teller** is Partner, Teller Madsen, Chicago. He may be contacted at [ateller@tmexhibits.com](mailto:ateller@tmexhibits.com).

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Floor plan of Shedd Aquarium's *Wild Reef* exhibition ©Alan Teller

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“To be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.”

(continued from page 69)

research and evaluation gleaned from visitor studies.

**Excellent Judges Framework approach:**

Joy Bivins, curator at the Chicago History Museum, provided the first presentation. She discussed Serrell’s Framework for Assessing Excellence, hereafter called the Framework, an approach developed through an initial grant from the National Science Foundation. Bivins was a member of a group of six judges who used the same set of criteria to assess and then discuss *Wild Reef* as an exercise—a process—for professional development. Ideally, the Framework helps museum professionals develop criteria to improve the exhibitions at their institutions. Key here is that the Framework uses a *visitor-centered* perspective, rather than a subject matter/content, educational or purely aesthetic points of view.

The Framework is a unique tool that is as much about process as it is about product. It allows for individual participation that respects the combined experiences of museum professionals; it is not a simple or formulaic exercise. The developers of the Framework identified four criteria that help frame discussions and assist in the critical examination of exhibitions. As defined in the handout available through Serrell’s book or on-line at [www.serrellassociates.org](http://www.serrellassociates.org), they are:

- **Comfort:** An excellent exhibition helps the visitor feel comfortable—physically and psychologically. Comfort opens the door to other positive experiences. Lack of comfort prevents them.
- **Engagement:** An excellent exhibition is engaging for visitors. It entices them to pay attention. Engagement is the first step toward finding meaning.

- **Reinforcement:** In an excellent exhibition, the exhibits provide visitors with abundant opportunities to be successful and to feel intellectually competent—beyond the wow of engagement. In addition, the exhibits reinforce each other, providing multiple means of accessing similar bits of information that are all part of a cohesive whole. Visitors are confidently on their way to having meaningful experiences.
- **Meaningfulness:** An excellent exhibition provides personally relevant experiences for visitors. Beyond being engaged and feeling competent, visitors find themselves changed, cognitively and affectively, in immediate and long-lasting ways.

The procedure in using the Framework is to first meet with six to ten museum professionals to discuss the Framework method and to clarify terminology. Next, each member of the team visits the selected exhibition individually and writes notes (call-outs) describing their thoughts, feelings, and responses as they experience it as a visitor, paying attention to the criteria described above. After the visit, using the call-outs as reference, judges assess the effectiveness of identified ‘Aspects’—the evidence defining each criterion. For example, under ‘**Comfort**,’ a judge would decide whether there were convenient places to rest, or if the lighting, temperature, and sound levels were appropriate. Under ‘**Engagement**’ she would determine if experiences came in a variety of formats (e.g., graphics, text, objects, AV, computers, living things, models, phenomena) and a variety of sensory modalities—sight, sound, motion, touch, etc. The ‘**Reinforcement**’ criterion asks, among other questions, if the presentation had a logic, if it held together intellectually in a way that was easily followed

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and understood. Finally, the **'Meaningfulness'** section might ask a judge to determine if the exhibit experience promoted change in people's thinking and feeling, even transcendence, if it gave visitors the means to make generalizations, change beliefs and attitudes, and/or take action.

These ratings are thus based on two different kinds of data: the Call-outs (the judges' experiences in the exhibition as a visitor) and the Aspects (the evidence that supported each Criterion.) While the collecting of this information is significant, its sharing is even more so. At a second meeting of the judges, their ratings are discussed and tabulated. Armed with a common language and set of criteria, it is possible to assess the extent to which the exhibition is successful. Both disagreements and consensus opinions can be put into a format that can aid in future exhibition development.

Bivins explained that applying the Framework to Wild Reef yielded these results:

- The exhibition seemed confusing and disjointed
- Comfort was an issue with controlled access, poor orientation, tight spaces, and limited seating
- The physical environment, particularly the coral reef, was fantastic
- The people story was not handled well, not integrated.

#### **Independent Critic's approach:**

I was privileged to present the point of view of an independent, hopefully informed, critic. I have been a partner at the museum exhibition planning and design firm Teller Madsen for twenty years. Prior to that, I worked in the Exhibits Department of the Field Museum.



*Within a gallery at the exhibition. ©Alan Teller.*

My training is in Anthropology and photography and I have extensive teaching experience ranging from kindergarten through Graduate School. I am currently on the faculty of Lake Forest College, where I teach courses on museums and exhibitions in both the History and Art Departments. All of these experiences, plus my work as an exhibiting photographer and published critic, influence my appraisal of exhibits. My talk at the AAM conference showcased how an experienced critic can add to our understanding of the effectiveness of exhibitions. This approach differs markedly from the Framework, which is a group evaluation process. The critic's is an individual assessment. His or her impressions are anecdotal but informed by experience. They are neither repeatable nor as structured as those produced through the Framework approach. Nonetheless, if critics state their biases their standards may not be shared, but they can be known. And if a critic builds up a series of published critiques, his/her viewpoint can become evident to the public.

At the start of my talk, I expressed the point of view that we all bring our biases to the table. If we articulate them to the best of our ability, our opinions may be better understood and appreciated. My own biases include a belief that exhibition design is the communication of ideas in space—it is design to serve content. While I believe in the power of aesthetics, and in the creative fit and finish of an exhibit, it is ultimately meaningless if a visitor fails to understand the ideas behind the exhibition.

Their primary message was to convey the fact that Philippine coral reefs support an amazing abundance of life and anchor a delicate network of dependencies among animals, habitats, and humans.

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*(continued from page 71)*

I believe in the power of exhibitions and institutions to effect social change. For me, museums should serve as a public forum. I feel strongly that museums and their exhibitions have a responsibility to their communities, a responsibility to tackle difficult issues. I need my museum to help me understand my world. I am extremely frustrated, for example, that we have yet to see a major traveling exhibition on Islam, despite the fact that we are in the middle of a war and few of us understand that culture. Clearly, I take this work seriously, and these perhaps idealistic standards affect my assessment of the *Wild Reef* exhibit (and everything else, for that matter.)

Baudelaire expresses the point of view of the engaged critic well: “To be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.”

The idea is not simply to be opinionated—it is to raise questions and further involve the audience in critical assessment. That is precisely what the Assessing Excellence AAM panel intended though the exploration of multiple tools to assess excellence in exhibitions.

Each discussant explained his/her approach. I first take a quick walk through the entire exhibition, gathering initial impressions. This may well be the way most visitors see the exhibition anyway. I then go back for a second look, examining exhibit elements more closely. My first reaction to *Wild Reef* was that the exhibit was beautifully designed to respond to the colors and textures of coral—the design grew out of the subject matter.

I felt that the sound of crashing waves at the exhibition entry worked well as an attractor and I especially appreciated *Wild Reef's* immersive nature. There is much to see above, below, and around visitors.



*Design and subject matter meld together in tanks surrounded by mock coral ©Alan Teller.*

The Polyp sculpture in particular is engaging, an aesthetic delight. Headers provide an excellent, quick content summary, setting out the main ideas well, usually reinforced by what people see in front of them. Live animal habitats are seamlessly incorporated into surroundings. In sum, at first glance, this is a beautiful, immersive experience answering most people’s needs for simply seeing the unusual. Opportunities are there for those who wish to explore additional interpretive material.

A second pass through the exhibition reinforced some of these observations while revealing other weaknesses. It became clear that aspects of the content were somewhat overwhelming, despite the creativity of delivery. A section of

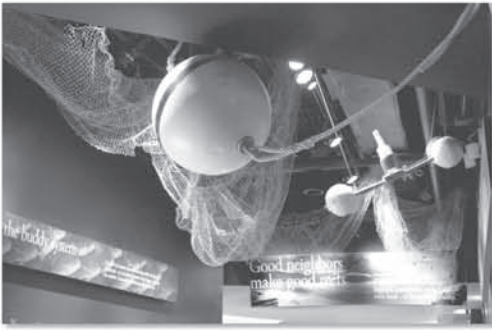


Exhibit elements are found above, below, and around visitors ©Alan Teller.

the exhibit explaining the social impact of coral on the Philippine island community of Apo was especially problematic. While it was a good introduction and made the unusual advance of examining cultural context, the developers simply did not go far enough. The environmental message of this section was to be expected and the social context was a real plus. But where was politics? Clearly, economics and politics are intertwined. How can we realistically talk about community life without addressing issues of power? For example, what role does the Philippine government play in the economy of coral? Who benefits from tourist dollars? One of the great advances in academic research since the 1960s has been an acknowledgment of the importance of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and access to resources. None of these issues was addressed. This leaves an informed visitor with a nagging question: if the Shedd left these issues out, what else might be missing? Another bias of mine is that complex issues such as these can definitely be addressed creatively, engaging visitors at all levels.

I also felt that an opportunity was missed at the end of the exhibition. Once visitors have been exposed to the environmental realities of coral's precarious position, they are simply shown the door. The exhibition would benefit from an Action Center, where there might be an opportunity to explore specific things we can do, groups to get involved with. Today's technology makes all of this simple. An on-site terminal could allow interested visitors to input their email addresses and be on a mailing list, or provide access to web sites for additional information. It is even possible to have a direct link to the people of Apo Island themselves, which would begin to address the issue of power.



The oversize polyp sculpture serves as an attractor ©Alan Teller.

In sum, my personal conclusions about Wild Reef were that I:

- Value the fact that the design is related to the content
- Appreciate the exhibition's immersive nature and its aesthetics
- Am pleased to see a social message
- Am critical of the lack of political analysis
- Am critical of missed opportunities to engage visitors in follow-through

**Summative Evaluation approach:**

The John G. Shedd Aquarium contracted with Lorrie Beaumont, an independent evaluation consultant, to conduct the summative evaluation of *Wild Reef* during November and December of 2004. The purpose of this evaluation was to examine the ways in which the exhibition met its intended goals and communicated its intended content messages. Her study systematically collected feedback from visitors, looking for evidence that the exhibition's objectives were met, and defined success in those terms. Beaumont conducted structured exit interviews and did participant observation and depth interviews. She gathered quantitative data, consisting of time spent in the exhibition, exhibition ratings, and demographics. Of all the assessment methods, hers was the only one privileged to know what the Shedd Aquarium

(continued from page 73)

**References and Further Reading:  
Excellent Judges Framework**

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Chambers, M. (1999). Forum: critiquing exhibition criticism. *Museum News*, September/October: 31-37, 65.

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McLean, K. and McEver, C. (2004). *Are We There Yet? conversations about best practices in science exhibition development*. San Francisco: The Exploratorium

McLean, K.. (2000). Critiquing exhibits: meanings and realities. *Exhibitionist* 19(2).

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AAM Standards for Museum Exhibitions. <http://name.pmhclients.com/aboutus>  
Standards



Welcoming visitors to the Apo Island section of the exhibition ©Alan Teller.

actually had in mind when it designed *Wild Reef*. Their primary message was to convey the fact that Philippine coral reefs support an amazing abundance of life and anchor a delicate network of dependencies among animals, habitats, and humans. Beaumont measured the success of the exhibition by looking at the extent to which visitors understood this message. She spent over 120 hours collecting data from a total of 321 visitors. Early in the project, a topical framework for the study was developed in collaboration with the exhibition team. This approach differs from the Excellent Judges' or the critics' by being based on goal-referenced criteria—the intentions of the institution in mounting the exhibition. It focuses on hearing from the visitors as opposed to museum professionals be they judges or critics.”

Beaumont's structured interviews, as described in her report to the Shedd Aquarium (2005) consisted of data collectors speaking with visitors prepared to leave the exhibition and asking them to participate in short interviews about their experience. The participant observations/depth interviews involved the data collector approaching a visitor group as they entered *Wild Reef* and asking if they might accompany them throughout their time in the exhibit. Data collectors tracked visitor stops and how much time they spent in each of the seven sections of the exhibition. Depth exit interviews were conducted with most of the respondents who were tracked and observed. Most interviews were recorded, and later transcribed and analyzed. Respondents for this study were purposively selected, handpicked for certain characteristics such as age, gender, race and ethnicity and group composition to assure a wide range of responses. Beaumont's sampling turned out to be very close to a general

visitor profile done at the Shedd in 2004. It is likely that her results do represent the general population of visitors at the aquarium.

Beaumont noted that visitors spent quite a bit of time in the exhibition, particularly at the habitat in the Feeding section. Seventy percent spent more than 20 minutes in the entire exhibition and several visitors stayed over an hour. She found that using sharks as a marketing 'hook' was problematic: they came expecting to see sharks. However, they came away talking about coral and preserving the wild reef. According to her research, visitors connected to the exhibition on several levels: cognitive, experiential, and personal. The primary complaint of visitors concerned non-working interactives and large crowds.

*[My favorite part] was the really big glass tanks because they [make it] seem like you're swimming in [them] when you get close. I thought the animals were happy because they had so much room. It lets animals swim around, and has a wave machine to make them feel at home.*

Beaumont (2005), quoting a 9-year-old girl

Beaumont's findings included:

- Visitors were awed and amazed by the exhibition's size, design, color and light and its immersiveness
- Visitors took away strong conservation messages regarding the health of our oceans and reefs and the importance of habitat preservation
- Visitors connected with this exhibition on an experiential level; it reminded them of trips they had taken to such places as Hawaii, Aruba, Honduras, Belize, etc.

- Visitors saw the sharks as the top predator of an ecosystem and were surprised that they could happily coexist with all of the smaller fish in the tank.

### Conclusion:

Beverly Serrell summarized the strengths and weaknesses of the three methods, stressing the commonalities of *Wild Reef* assessments. She suggested that all three approaches identified the strengths of the immersive design; the appeal of live animals; and the accessibility of information. Similarly, for the most part, the three approaches noted the weakness in orientation; in the role of Apo Island people in the story; and the frustration encountered with non-functioning interactives.

Serrell offered a comparison of the end results of the three approaches, identifying who benefits from these methods and the institutional action they suggest. The **Excellent Judges Framework** provides professional development; affords kernels of truth; develops group momentum; creates a shared vocabulary and criteria; has universal applications. **Exhibition Critiques** are individualistic, their significance based more on the experience of the critic than on stated standards; can achieve meaningful insights; become archival only if published. **Summative Evaluations** reflect data-based findings; have implications for future actions; can provide useful conclusions for each unique context.

The panel discussed the challenges and opportunities of these approaches, agreeing that there was a need for repeated and systematic practice of all methods to build databases for yourself, your colleagues and your staff, within and across institutions. Specifically, for the Excellent Judges Framework and for **Summative Evaluations**, the techniques need to be used repeatedly and systematically to build up a history. For Exhibition Critiques, we



*The curved walls of the shark gallery continue the illusion of immersion ©Alan Teller.*

need to have more and better ones published. Serrell asked “Who are the Roger Eberts of museum exhibition critiques?” She suggested that exhibition reviews be posted on [www.ExhibitFiles.org](http://www.ExhibitFiles.org).

In conclusion, no one method is better in all ways than another. The point is not to choose one, but to understand the benefits and limitations of each, and to use them all. As more museum exhibition developers focus on making visitor-centered experiences, they have a need to share and critique their work with colleagues to strive for best practices. The Framework, the insights of independent critics, and the research of summative evaluation are all tools to this end. ☀

### Further Reading Continued.

#### Summative Evaluation:

Beaumont, L. (2005). *Summative evaluation of wild reef-sharks at shedd*. Unpublished Evaluation Report. Chicago: John G. Shedd Aquarium. Retrieved from [www.InformalScience.org](http://www.InformalScience.org)

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