

***Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence.* Beverly Serrell.
Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2006. 187 pp.***

Reviewed by Kym S. Rice

Books by museum professionals can be frustrating for the uninitiated reader because they are usually directed solely at an insider audience. Yet these works offer tantalizing clues to the preoccupations and quirks of those who work in modern museums. In the world of museum practice, everyone's eye is now fixed on reaching the visitor, but, in my view, that has not as yet resulted in better exhibitions—ones that are more daring, provocative, or compelling. Over the years, the efforts to create useful guidelines by which to measure an exhibition's success or failure have never come to much. Two decades of museum visitor studies, however, have brought us somewhat closer to understanding how visitors experience and make meaning in our exhibitions and our museums. A good exhibition is one that cares about its audience.

Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence describes how a group of Chicago museum exhibition folk led by Beverly Serrell created a standard of excellence for exhibitions—called the “framework”—that measures an exhibition's success or failure in terms of how it reaches visitors. A well-respected museum consultant, Serrell wrote *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 1996), a practical text that promotes better exhibition text writing. She invented “The Big Idea,” which advocates that all exhibitions contain a clear and direct main message that a visitor can easily discern. Soon after its inception, the *Judging Excellence* project concentrated on developing a system that ideally allows museum professionals, by recognizing their assumptions and biases, to look at exhibition products differently.

Judging Excellence is a loose case study that follows the project's beginnings in 2000 to its decision shortly thereafter to “focus exclusively on visitor-centered issues: what visitors could experience, where we could see evidence for visitors' needs and expectations, how the exhibition might impact them” (p. 5). The National Science Foundation (NSF) funded the framework's further enhancement, which was polished by literature reviews, meetings with exhibition developers, educators, visitor studies specialists, and others, many of whom tested the framework themselves in actual exhibitions. (I, for example, participated in two regional museum association conference sessions in 2003 and 2004 that used the “Excellence” framework as the basis of exhibition critiques.) A website (now inactive) about the project made the framework widely available for download. The project was even the subject of a special museum studies class in 2002. The research, supported by NSF and described as the project's “theoretical underpinnings,” draws mostly on the methodologies of education and visitor studies.

The “Excellence” project (as participants called it) ultimately developed four primary standards for exhibition evaluation—comfortable, engaging, reinforcing, and meaningful—each with its own subset of aspects (“defining qualities”) within them. Creating this common vocabulary of

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“exhibition excellence” (p. 20) for participants to use was a principal goal, even if one can quibble with how the standards are defined: “comfortable,” for instance, ranges from issues of seating to whether the particular biases of an exhibition are revealed (“The exhibits reveal who is talking, fact from fiction or opinion, the real from the not real”). Some will find it problematic that the framework accords every aspect equal value; arguably, exhibition developers might want to rate certain features, like the successful delivery of content, higher than other more mundane qualities. According to Serrell, visitors don’t recognize such distinctions: they value places to rest every bit as highly, or even more highly, than well-written text panels.

The “judging” process is relatively simple, although it takes time. A museum staff or professional group (say, an exhibition team) selects an exhibition to review. First, there is an orientation meeting to go over the framework’s process, followed by the actual visit. At that time, “judges” fill out “call-out” sheets (examples are provided in the book) with detailed notes that describe the exhibition as a visitor would. After leaving the exhibition, everyone completes an aspects assessment and then, using that assessment, establishes overall scores for the exhibition’s success or failure based on the criteria itself (again, sample forms are included). Ideally the group then meets, discusses in detail their reviews and comes to a consensus about the positive and negative elements (with a final opportunity given to change their minds based on discussion). As Serrell notes, “we sought to define criteria of excellence in a way that would enable conversations among professionals and result in a better product for visitors” (p. 20). At the same time, Serrell makes it quite clear that the process is not scientific and therefore not a substitute for formal exhibition evaluation by professionals. In particular, exhibition teams will find the framework useful as a team building exercise to help establish common ground among members.

The book is short, easy to read, and engaging. It is well designed with sidebars that emphasize particular information or reproduce a participant’s comments. Included is a compact disc offering the framework’s sample forms, a glossary of terms, a series of Frequently Asked Questions (which supply a condensed version of the book’s main points), illustrations of exhibition elements together with their judges’ call outs, and finally, a dramatization of the “Excellent Judge” process enacted by a group of museum professionals who participated in the project. This last piece may cause some groans and eye rolling among watchers (c’mon...this isn’t brain surgery, no matter what an esteemed exhibition developer is quoted in the book as declaring). I found *Judging Excellence* refreshingly honest about the project’s ups and downs. Serrell describes how developers and participants disagreed regularly on aspects of the framework—the use of the term “excellence,” for example. She also is well aware that the framework may not work well for every exhibition on the planet.

Putting aside my nagging suspicion that only exhibition virgins truly experience an exhibition through a visitor’s eyes, I nevertheless found that the framework (especially when coupled with this publication) has real merit. While this is not the final evaluative tool created for exhibition review, Serrell hopes that museum practitioners—especially students, exhibition developers, curators, educators, project managers, and designers—will try using it. Anything that can potentially help exhibition professionals to perfect their skills and improve their audience sensitivity is a good thing.

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