

The Pritzker Family Children's Zoo

by Rachel Hellenga with Cricket Brooks; Katherine Johnson; Chad Tyler

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Taking the *Framework for Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions* for a spin at the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo

by Rachel Hellenga with Cricket Brooks

Lincoln Park Zoo was my zoo as a child, back when I was new to Chicago and still thought the official name of the John Hancock Tower was the Giant Hancock Tower. Just a few years later (who's counting?), it's my privilege to write a critique of the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo, which forms part of the larger Lincoln Park Zoo. I ventured downtown with my friend Cricket, a perfect partner in crime: mom, exhibit professional, and fellow fan of the *Framework for Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions* (Serrell, 2006).

The *Framework* is a tool for supporting peer review and discussion of an exhibition. I was part of the advisory board for the *Framework* project years ago, and this seemed like a good opportunity to dust it off. In essence it's a checklist of qualities to look for and think about during your visit; you can find a full description and printable version of the tool at www.serrellassociates.org/framework.html. Where relevant in our review, Cricket and I refer to the four *Framework* criteria (COMFORTABLE, ENGAGING, REINFORCING, AND MEANINGFUL) in all CAPS, and we highlight aspects—supporting examples of those criteria—in italics.

We chose a sunny summer weekday for our visit to the zoo with Cricket's family in tow. Overall, the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo (PCZ) is comprised of two

major areas: 1) a fully enclosed pavilion hosting an indoor climbing structure, terrariums, and animal habitats; and 2) an outdoor area with exhibit components, water features, and a path routing visitors past larger habitats for wolves and bears. Our tour of the PCZ was dominated by time spent in the pavilion, where Cricket's three-year-old son Jake was captivated by the climbing structure. We will focus this critique on our indoor experience and rely on the other reviewers to do justice to the equally attractive outdoor components.

The Building: COMFORTABLE & REINFORCING

We may not have recognized all that went into creating such a welcoming space, but our response was to feel very comfortable in the pavilion. The climate-controlled building offered a welcome break from the heat, while the immense windows kept us visually connected to the outdoors. In a post-visit phone call to architect Peter Exley, I learned about some of the building's specific features. The vines growing along the front of the building are part landscape element and part architectural element, reducing the building's energy needs and keeping it shady and cool.

The Climbing Structure: ENGAGING & REINFORCING (for most):

Cricket's observations: Upon entering the building, Jake squealed with delight at the colorful climbing structure and instantly named it "the ship." Where I saw a Luckey climber similar to those in many children's museums, he saw tall masts and intricate rigging. Jake jumped onboard at the marked entrance, but was stymied as to how to proceed. Without a clear path to a visible exit, he soon

lost his nerve and retreated back out the entranceway. I showed Jake an alternative entrance to the climber and he made some progress, but again retreated and exited the way he had come. This process repeated itself for some time. Then, after gradually more ambitious forays into the climber, he suddenly zoomed unassisted to the top—approximately 20 feet up in the air. Delighted with his achievement, he scampered back and forth, exploring every nook and cranny of the ship until it was time to leave. The climber was **ENGAGING**: *the physical environment looked interesting and invited exploration, and the exhibits were challenging and physically stimulating.* In addition, it was **REINFORCING**: *A challenging exhibit experience was structured so that visitors who tried to figure it out were likely to say, “I got it,” and feel confident and motivated to do more.*

A week later I showed Jake pictures from the visit and asked what he was thinking inside the climber. His response: “I might fall off the end.” A smaller, simpler climber paired with the primary structure might have offered a less intimidating entry point, increasing the **REINFORCING** nature of the exhibit not only for Jake but for visitors with varying physical and cognitive abilities or special sensory needs. That said, the fact is that Jake rose to meet a challenge and had a highly memorable journey of discovery and self-reliance, as evidenced by his use of the phrase “proud of myself” to sum up the experience during our visit.

Rachel’s observations: The forest theme was definitely subtle, and I could see how Cricket and Jake would have mistaken



Jake as a pirate in the crow’s nest. Photo by Cricket Brooks.

the climber for a ship. One could argue that any imaginative use of the climber is valuable, and in fact Jake’s experience was immensely positive. At the same time, a major financial investment carries with it a responsibility to convey a project’s purpose and to influence long-term behavior—in other words, to ensure the experience is **MEANINGFUL** (*e.g. the exhibit gave visitors the means to make generalizations, change beliefs and attitudes, and/or take action*). I noticed a small sign referring to the climbing

Bolder design elements aimed at conveying the forest theme might have aided in the messaging [at the climbing structure].



Three-year-old Rhian of Indianapolis spots a one-eyed turtle in this freestanding terrarium. Photo by Rachel Hellenga.



Carlos (9), and Berenice (7) play under a gentle mist in the tunnel. Photo by Rachel Hellenga.

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Reference:

Serrell, B. (2006). *Judging exhibitions: A framework for assessing excellence*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

structure as a “tree canopy,” but there was nothing clever about it to prompt me to read it aloud. Hence, Jacob proceeded to role-play ship climbing instead of tree climbing while I wandered off to explore other parts of the gallery. Bolder design elements aimed at conveying the forest theme might have aided in the messaging: perhaps a hollow, concrete tree stump to frame the entrance and exit to the climber, or eye-catching signs written for parents to read aloud (“Climb the tree and tell me what you see!”). Making sure parents

and kids pick up on the story line would have harnessed the impact of the climbing experience in service of the zoo’s larger goals and messages.

Terrariums: COMFORTABLE, ENGAGING, REINFORCING, & MEANINGFUL

Rachel: Terrariums dotted the exhibit floor around the climbing structure, and I was surprised at how popular they were. Groups of visitors mobbed each one in the same way families used to cluster around Christmas windows at Marshall Fields. The observations were nuanced, and the conversations were rich and on target. I overheard a little girl pointing out a turtle that had lost one eye, and as I peered into the tank, sure enough, there was a turtle with one bright beady eye and one spot where there used to be an eye. At another tank the children were all photographing “walking sticks” and squealing whenever one moved.

There was an amazing intimacy in these small glass enclosures. What was it about these gems that made the interactions so magical? I couldn’t put my finger on it until my phone call to Peter made me realize that freestanding tanks, all at different heights, are somewhat unusual. Ordinarily zoos and aquariums embed them in a wall, all at a single height, in order to place a service corridor behind the tanks for animal care. In this case, the design team challenged that working assumption. They identified every requirement that would be satisfied by a service corridor, but met those requirements in their design of freestanding tanks. The result evoked wonderful responses from visitors who, like me, were blissfully unaware of rules that were being followed or broken.

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Outdoor Features: COMFORTABLE

The outdoor features get short shrift in this review due to Jake's preoccupation with the indoor climber. But here's a brief shout out to the welcoming fountain and other water features; the path to search for the bear; and the spots to sneak into, hang from, or walk through. All were physically accessible and clearly COMFORTABLE: *welcoming to people of different cultural backgrounds, economic classes, educational levels, and physical abilities*. The park was packed with people from all backgrounds, and its lovely welcoming features made it a place many families could enjoy together.

Lessons for the Field

What did we take away from this installation that might apply to other projects? First, bold and challenging experiences that are just within our reach, such as the climbing structure, can offer opportunities for real engagement, learning, and growth. How amazing that a single exhibit component could hold a 3-year-old's attention for such a long, long time. The key is to offer experiences within the reach of a range of visitors with varying abilities.

Second, never underestimate a visitor's ability to miss your cues about the purpose of an exhibition. Clear messaging can make the difference between sending home tree climbers or pirates, and features that seem overly obvious to planners might be just what busy and distracted visitors need.

Third, a blended team that addresses multiple disciplines such as architecture, landscaping, and exhibit design in parallel, rather than in a sequence of

handoffs between firms, can achieve unexpected synergies—some as simple as vines on a building.

And finally, breaking problems down into discrete design requirements can move a creative team past the status quo, for example introducing terrariums that are not tethered to a service corridor. The result: pure magic in the form of visitors' rich, deep, varied, and shared experiences. Hats off to the magicians who brought us the Pritzker Children's Zoo—it was wonderful to see a new generation of children so engaged.

At Home in the Woods in Chicago

by Katherine Johnson

Since the 2005 release of *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, many educational institutions have scrambled to help reverse the crisis that Louv dubbed "nature-deficit disorder," a condition with a host of symptoms that result from children having a lack of meaningful contact with the natural world. The Pritzker Family Children's Zoo appears to be one of Lincoln Park Zoo's contributions to addressing the problem. Pitched for an audience of younger children, the exhibition features animals that are historically native to the Chicago region in a naturalistic environment.

Appropriate Mission and Theme

The entrance to the Children's Zoo is marked by a sculptural tower that prepared me for viewing native woodland creatures. The tall green metal poles, colorful friendly animals, and whimsical

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Metal cut-out shapes of wolves with talk tubes provide something to do when you can't see the real wolf hidden in the native foliage. Photo by Katherine Johnson.

lettering announce that this space has been designed for young children. The tall poles echo tree trunks, and this element is used as a motif throughout the space.

Showcasing local animals strikes me as an appropriate subject for this audience. Comparing the animals' needs to our basic needs works well to promote empathy as well as interest in the animals, and it supports concepts children will eventually learn in school. It also seems a logical approach to developing an exhibition to combat nature-deficit disorder.

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Visitors can pretend to be a sleepy bear and climb inside a hollow log. Photo by Katherine Johnson.

Setting

One of the most pleasant aspects of the Lincoln Park Zoo is the greenery. Shade trees line the paths, creating a uniquely Chicago lakefront atmosphere. Likewise the Children's Zoo incorporates native trees and herbaceous plants, but with a purpose. As I entered the exhibition I found myself surrounded by denser, native foliage planted to simulate a natural woodland. The colored, textured concrete pavement looks and feels like a wide dirt trail through the woods. The interpretive labels use the greens and browns of the setting and fit seamlessly into the surroundings. Even the glass windowed cages were designed to disappear into the landscape, making me feel like I was strolling through the woods, encountering river otters, red wolves, and bears along way.

The setting worked for me, but I am sensitive to these things. No labels tell visitors to experience the space this way, and as a result, I fear that many visitors do not get it. I saw a confused family wondering if they had accidentally left the Children's Zoo. That was a shame.

Interpretation

Throughout the exhibition, I found two distinct kinds of interpretive labels. Matching the entrance marquee were a series of whimsical panels that looked like pages from a children's book. The painterly illustrations and flowing text remind visitors of the big idea, that this is a story of animals that inhabit woodland environments. The obvious intent is to provide an entrée and connection for prekindergarten and early readers. While delightfully flavoring the experience and reminding me of the intended audience,



Visitors must use their own curiosity to figure out the purpose of this pole sculpture in the bear area. Photo by Katherine Johnson.

I did not find these labels to enhance the enjoyment of the animals.

A second type of interpretive label provided more factual content. These labels, written in a conversational style, presented basic facts about the animals: where they live and find shelter, what they eat, and other basic needs. These labels present maps of the animals' past and

Anticipating this problem [inactive animals] the exhibition includes sculptures of animals and interactive components along the path between exhibits.



An indoor climbing structure suspended above cases of small animals simulates a tree-climbing experience. Photo by Katherine Johnson.

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Reference:

Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books.

current ranges, prompting me to think about how things have changed since settlement. The facts were minimal, not overwhelming for young children, but maybe not enough for their older siblings.

Outdoor Exhibits

When visiting a zoo there is always a chance that you will find inactive animals. Young children in particular can lose interest pretty quickly when subjected to cage after cage of sleeping beasts. Anticipating this problem, the exhibition includes sculptures of animals and interactive components along the path between exhibits.

Near the red wolves area, I found several colorful talk tubes attached to life-size metal cut-out figures of wolves in various poses. These were attractive and appealing to children. It was not immediately apparent, but these are intended to help children understand that just as they communicate with each other by talking through the tubes, wolves also communicate through vocalizations such

as howling. The problem was that the talk tubes did not work well. In my experience, they never do. This is unfortunate because, like the words lost in the metal pipes, the interpretive message was also lost. I did appreciate the effort, however, because without this exhibit I would not have seen anything of wolves that day.

My favorite part of the exhibition was the black bear habitat. After watching the bear amble around between the trees it was easy to relate to this creature seeking shelter in a hollow log, a pile of sticks, or a fallen tree like those recreated for children to climb into. It was fun to crawl inside the make-believe bear dens and pretend to be a bear or any animal taking refuge from the elements.

A tall pole sculpture in this section was a curiosity to me. Attached to the poles were a bear sculpture, a panel of tree bark, a sculptural bee hive, and pictures of what bears eat. I found myself looking in vain for a label explaining its purpose. I decided that I was satisfied with it being a

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conversation piece, an object for families to talk about and interpret as if they have found some peculiar evidence of animals in the woods.

Indoor Exhibits

A vine-covered building in the middle of the exhibition houses the collection of smaller animals—the turtles, snakes, walking sticks, and other animals that benefit from being viewed in a more intimate setting. These cases surround the Tree Top Canopy Adventure, a two story climbing structure that appears to be the zoo's attempt to simulate a tree-climbing experience in the woods, which is an activity many kids are deprived of these days.

I remain undecided about the value of this experience in the context of the exhibition. On the one hand, it provides a welcome diversion to walking around on a hot summer day and gives kids a needed break from information overload. On the other hand, the act of climbing through this human-built structure did not appear to me to convey an authentic tree climbing experience. In spite of signs prompting children to think about animals living in trees, the kids were more focused on running to repeat the climb than they were in the nearby adorable smooth green snake or the rare Blanding's turtle, both nearly as active as the children at that time.

I think the zoo staff would agree that the Children's Zoo is not the only answer to getting more children exposed to nature, but it is a conscientious effort on their part. Is it successful? As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but if your visitors regard the zoo as a place to gape

at exotic, charismatic megafauna rather than a place to connect with local nature, then they may not drink. I enjoyed the exhibit, and I applaud Lincoln Park Zoo for trying.

Lost in the Woods: A Critique of the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo by Chad Tyler

I clearly picked the wrong day to pop in for a visit to the Lincoln Park Zoo's Pritzker Family Children's Zoo. An unfortunate recipe composed of a dash of dead camera batteries (my own stupid mistake), a smidgen of oppressive heat (completely out of anyone's control) and, as I would come to find out, a heaping spoonful of American Zoological Association (AZA) accreditation preparations (the game we all have to play once every five years) resulted in a less than appetizing experience. Shucks.

It didn't take me long to resolve the dead battery situation once I found the helpful staff at the Zoo's information center who were happy to let me plug in. Soon thereafter, I found some respite from the heat in the shady and gorgeously planted entrance to the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo. An immediate calm fell over me. That is, until I noticed what appeared to be an empty graphic carrier—and another—and another. This couldn't be right, could it? My expectations weren't through the roof for this seven year old, mostly outdoor exhibition in Chicago—a climate of harsh extremes I rarely miss—but I certainly did not expect to find myself critiquing an exhibition in such a run-down condition. Nonetheless, I

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Entering the pine-birch woods with sophistication and a touch of whimsy. Photo by Chad Tyler.

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persevered with a new goal: to find out where all the missing signs had gone. It wasn't until my third time through the exhibition that I was able to locate a staff member who guessed the missing signs might have had something to do with the upcoming AZA accreditation. I was able to confirm this to be true later with a phone call to the LP Zoo's Director of Design and Communication. I picked the one week of the exhibit's seven-year life when the interpretive, storybook graphics were being refinished.

At the Entrance

The Pritzker Family Children's Zoo is an exhibition comprised of four iconic North American mammals in outdoor habitats and an indoor pavilion with a large climbing structure and smaller avian and reptile exhibits. The exhibition opens with two title pieces and, consequently, what feels like two entrances. The first, an elegant grey stone wall with bronzed dimensional letters

framed by lush understory plantings at the outermost entry to the exhibition, sets a sophisticated and inviting tone. The second, a much more whimsical approach, introduces the tag line, "at home in the woods," in such a playful and delicate way, I wonder how many visitors capture this important message at the outset. The major success here, though, is in the thick plantings that eliminate views into the landscape, which allows anticipation to build within the visitor, and creates a real sense that you are indeed entering the woods.

Along the Exhibition Path

The first exhibit you approach along the path is the river otter habitat, a riparian landscape replication. When I visited, the otters were in repose somewhere off stage. This left visitors to scan longingly for signs of life; that is, if they could see above the glare in the window. It is impossible to understand why designers have not yet figured out they need to

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avoid specifying light colored surfaces directly in front of acrylic windows in natural light settings. Viewing into the exhibit through the glare is a terribly frustrating experience even if no animals are visible.

Nearby the otter habitat is the first “play” area, a collection of traditional playground sound tubes beneath an arching metal structure with small metal vines entangling each tube. The sonic tubes, in primary colors, allow children to make calls from one end of the tube to other, but few clues are given in this area to help guide what sounds they should make. This results in children leaving the activity quite quickly. The combination of plentiful shade and seating makes this nook the perfect area to engage the children for a longer period of time, but this activity had little holding power. I struggled to find a connection between this activity and the otter habitat. It is entirely possible that it wasn't meant to connect at all, but shouldn't it? This seemed to me like a great opportunity for a gross motor play activity. How about a network of burrow-like crawling tubes that contain a special children's-only view into the otters' own burrow?

The exhibition then takes you towards the red wolf habitat, passing yet another sound tube activity. This one at least gives children and their caregivers some visual clues for the intended engagement. Two-dimensional cut-outs of wolves in howling poses sit just behind the sound tube, provoking the children to practice their howls with one another. With little interpretation to go on and no sign of the animals I pushed on with the other families. Later in the day, when I walked

through the exhibition for a third time I encountered a staff member in this area, at which point I learned about the fascinating story of the red wolf and the important role the Lincoln Park Zoo's red wolves have played in helping to reintroduce this species in the wild. The black bears were clearly not afraid of the heat, and after walking into the middle of this area we got an opportunity



The second of two sets of sound tube areas with a wolf howling theme. Photo by Chad Tyler.

to see a fantastic display of this animal's impressive dexterity—swinging a large tree trunk like a baseball bat and then spinning it about his body like a baton twirler. Like many families around me, I was glued to the bear's window for twenty minutes watching him twirl this log. All the while another bear gave us



The dexterous black bear in his skillfully designed stream bank habitat. Photo by Chad Tyler.

experience a truly transporting feeling. A small interactive area accompanied the bear habitat and demonstrated the challenges of maintaining an outdoor exhibit. Images within the worn, and difficult to operate, View-Master, were faded beyond recognition and the smell-and-match activity had no smell other than that of the water-worn fiberboard that enclosed it. Very few visitors made even a passing attempt to take a closer look.

If after two habitats of hiding animals, the smile on my face was beginning to fade, the black bears brought it right back. So too, did the beautiful beavers. This is the perfect animal for this children's exhibition: active, comical, and engaging.

The path winds around and brings visitors to the first of two spectacular underwater views into the beaver habitat, adjacent to the front of the architectural centerpiece of the exhibition—a downplayed modernist building with grape vines growing up its façade. Apart from its protruding doorways, the building essentially folds



Tired interpretive activities of the black bear exhibit. Photo by Chad Tyler.

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plenty of opportunities to get close-up views as it played in the stream running through the exhibit. Again, the landscape design was very well executed, giving the

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itself into the gorgeous green landscape so well, you hardly notice it's there. A playful fountain in front of the building was incredibly popular on this scorcher of a day, and the children were taking full advantage of the cool water spraying intermittently from the recessed jets in the floor. The fountain is a fun piece, but much like the sound tubes, the design failed to connect in any discernable way to the story of the exhibit and made no attempt to connect to the adjacent beaver habitat—a major opportunity lost in my view.

The climber on the interior of the main building, a 20-foot tall structure composed of wavy birch panels true to the standard fare of the children's museum menu, made a better attempt to tie into the theme, but faltered as well. Don't get me wrong, I love climbers. They serve a very important role in helping young children develop a complex variety of skills—independent decision-making, mental mapping, and of course physical dexterity. But I continue to struggle with half-hearted adaptations of the standard climbing kit. I wish the Canopy Climber were indeed an actual tree instead of the acutely abstract version. I appreciated the many small habitats attached to the base of the climber structure, although I quietly wondered what effect all those vibrations must have on the animals. Ultimately, it seems more could have been done to engage the parents with their children, using the habitats as the starting point. The interpretation could make better connections between the species on display and the climbing structure. The possibilities are endless to make an exciting canopy climbing experience, but instead it is just another

climber—focused on the playground activity without the connection back to the message.

Lack of Connections in Context

This was the common problem throughout the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo: beautiful habitats with engaging animals, rather standard playground opportunities, and not a tremendous amount of connection between them and the central message. I did some digging and found photos of the graphic panels from the exhibition. I looked back at my photos of the graphic panels in the main building of the exhibition, and reassured myself that even if the interpretive graphic panels had been in place, the connection between the animals and the visitors would still be lost.

I think, perhaps, the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo falls victim, as do so many zoo and aquarium exhibitions, to the common budgeting scenario of pouring the bulk of the money into architecture, then animals and habitats, and lastly, and often the first to get value engineered, the exhibits and their interpretive messages. Perhaps just enough was done to attract the caregivers of the neighborhood for the occasional repeat visits (no doubt made easier with free admission). But it seems likely to me that those repeat visitors are really only coming for the water fountain, the climber, and a glimpse of the more active bears and beavers. I fear they are walking away each time with smiles on their faces but with little conscious or unconscious hold on what the exhibition set out to do, "to raise awareness about the importance of understanding and protecting wildlife right here at home" (Lincoln Park Zoo, 2012). ✨

Reference:

Lincoln Park Zoo. "Take a walk in the woods and discover North American wildlife at the Pritzker Family Children's Zoo." Retrieved July 15, 2012, from http://www.lpzoo.org/sites/default/files/pritzker_family_childrens_zoo.pdf

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