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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Title: Origin of the Species

Author(s): Not Listed.

Source: Not Listed. (1981). Origin of the Species. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 2 No 9*, 421.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1819>

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# ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

*Innovation and imagination were the qualities that won this year's museum of the year award for the Natural History Museum. Giles Velarde looks at its new exhibition on evolution*

Two great basilicas straddle the southern end of London's appropriately named Exhibition Road: the Victoria and Albert and the Natural History museums. Both command immense numbers of visitors and no matter which high priest is in residence their attendance remains roughly the same.

While the design of the V & A's permanent galleries remains firmly rooted in the nineteenth century, its policy leans towards show business: it has a continuous programme of temporary exhibitions which are partially financed by the public. The Natural History museum, by contrast, is dedicated to education, so financial return is not sought and the number of visitors has no commercial significance. The aim is to make it 'an exciting place where the layman can enjoy exploring and discovering natural history.'

Before the beginning of the 'sixties, when museums first came into contact with designers, most museum-goers had to explore before they could discover anything. Those who went to the Natural History museum found a man-made jungle of stuffed tigers, toucans and whales in which they had to grope for information.

Still, they had fun. They didn't when the museum began edging towards the twentieth century with its Fossil Mammal gallery: despite its marvellous models, tableaux and dioramas, its single and disastrously high academic level and its cumbersome design made it obsolete before its completion.

The Natural History museum's exhibition, 'British Birds' was much more successful, and, by the mid 'seventies, it had adopted methods heavily influenced by evaluation techniques which had originated in commercial museums in Milwaukee and Chicago. The public services department set up an ambitious programme that rightly commanded the attention of all who were interested in museums, exhibitions and education.

'Man's place in evolution' is the latest in this series. It marks a major step forward in the evolution of the building from a museum into a natural science centre. But have the designers fulfilled their part in expressing this complex policy? Have they learnt from the trial-and-error techniques started with the Hall of Human Biology?

No doubt about it, 'Man's place in evolution' is most professional. The stan-

dard of finish is very high, almost to the point of being overdesigned, but the enclosing of both the graphics and the exhibits in immense glass cases is intended to pay off in permanence and low maintenance costs. On the other hand there must be doubt that the question and answer presentation, which is set this time at 'O' level standard, will remain interesting for long enough to justify its Fort Knox construction. The entrance feature - a nude albino couple at the top of the great staircase - is a magnificent draw; but once inside, you are in a compulsory push-button sequence which, I suspect, will prove ultimately tiresome and which can certainly be demoralising (if you fail to pay attention in test 1.1 you will feel stupid in test 1.2 and will wind up confronted by the computer humourlessly dismissing your failures at the end of the exam). In this way, enjoyable exploration has been replaced by dry didacticism.

The lighting is superb; spotlights on a high, unobtrusive frame brightly illuminate the displays with great economy. There has been a deliberate attempt to respect the building and it has partially succeeded with the consultative help of Sir Hugh

Casson, one of the museum's trustees. The designers have isolated all the bulky cases from the architecture and allowed visual access to the fine 'clerestory' windows and detailed brickwork. But forcing the exhibition structure into the access gallery to make space between it and the fabric of the building has cramped its visitors and confined their view.

Though the story follows a linear path through the exhibition, it is also developed through vertical paragraphs in a 1550mm band mounted 450mm above the floor. Because maintaining a linear flow has become difficult, the designers have resorted to arrows. The trouble with this is that an arrow is such a familiar visual command that it automatically demands attention on its first appearance. For instance: if a right-pointing arrow on the right of a panel is the first thing to catch your eye, you tend to bypass the information to the left of it, and thus lose the sequence of the exhibition.

A radical force in a conservative environment, the public services department of the museum has been put on to the defensive. It has published numerous reasoned arguments and references in

support of its activities, as well as statistics as proof of its success. All of this would be unnecessary if it weren't for the barrage of abuse levelled at it (by everybody except the general public). The department deserves to be allowed to get on with its method of expressing the museum's historic ideals. Time will prove it right or wrong. Still, its sensitivity to criticism is evident in the self-conscious atmosphere of its exhibitions.

When communication designers spend their time drafting rather than designing, deciding policy rather than applying method, then their exhibition work will tend to be academic and aloof. A warm and welcoming atmosphere is the fundamental strength of any exhibition - its importance cannot be overestimated. I feel that the Natural History museum needs to relax, to allow its designers and public more freedom and fun and thus produce exhibitions which will have more valuable, if less definable, qualities than those they are constantly having to try to justify.

The exhibition is open from Monday to Saturday between 10am and 6pm and on Sunday between 2 and 6pm