

MERCER MUSEUM
PLUS ULTRA

PROTOTYPING EVALUATION

MAY 17, 2021



Amanda Krantz
Director of Research & Practice

RK&A, Inc.
rka-learnwithus.com

Evaluation is the systematic collection of information about an experience —from the **user's perspective**— that examines the successes and shortcomings of the experience **against the desired impact.**

LOGIC MODEL

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES (articulated by Max van Balgooy with Mercer staff)

The primary goal for the project is to create a strategic thinking and planning framework to guide the Bucks County Historical Society in planning future exhibitions at the Mercer Museum that encourage residents of Bucks County to:

- feel less overwhelmed and better engaged with historical objects at the Mercer Museum by offering more intimate encounters with the collections (recognize the trees in the forest of objects, relief from the visual overload)
- find personal meaning in the historical objects in the Mercer Museum (humanize objects, look at objects in new ways, see museum core differently, feel surprise and awe)
- be inspired to explore the history of Bucks County through local cultural organizations (experience a strong sense of place).

PROJECT INPUTS

Prototypes developed by Metcalfe and Sarah Archer. The prototypes will explore the concept of inheritance. The prototypes are designed to help visitors compare and contrast pairings of objects with questions prompting connectivity to visitors' personal lives. The prototypes are designed to be unfacilitated experiences.

VISITOR OUTCOMES with indicators in bullets that describe result of prototype on visitors (developed by RK&A; will be used to measure success in evaluation)

Visitors recognize material culture as evidence of the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures. (cognitive)

- Visitors describe a story told by one of the objects on display.
- Visitors describe objects as providing insight to the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures.

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra. (affective)

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories. (affective)

- Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.
- Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.

Visitors activate curiosity. (attitudinal)

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
- Visitors describe feel inspired and curious about something else as a result of their experience with the prototypes.

IMPACT (Result of the Mercer Museum on audiences; developed by RK&A with Mercer staff in 2019)

Inspired by Henry Mercer's creative vision and pursuit of meaning, visitors delight in experiencing a strong sense of place while contemplating historic artifacts and human ingenuity.

METHODOLOGY

- Prototypes for Room 27, 42, and 44
- Collected data over four weekend days (April 24 & 25 and May 1 & 2)
- Observed:
 - 94 walk-in visitor groups (containing one or more visitors)
- Interviewed:
 - 10 walk-in visitor groups (containing one or more visitors; all first-time visitors; and just one group from Bucks County)
 - 9 Mercer staff
 - 3 Community Ambassadors
 - 2 Fonthill staff,
 - plus written feedback from another 2 Fonthill staff

Visitor outcomes are lens for evaluation



REMINDER

The project is about **experimentation**.

The importance of the findings are to help calibrate the prototypes towards **the desired impact**.

Learning is the goal.

This may include **reconsidering visitor outcomes**.

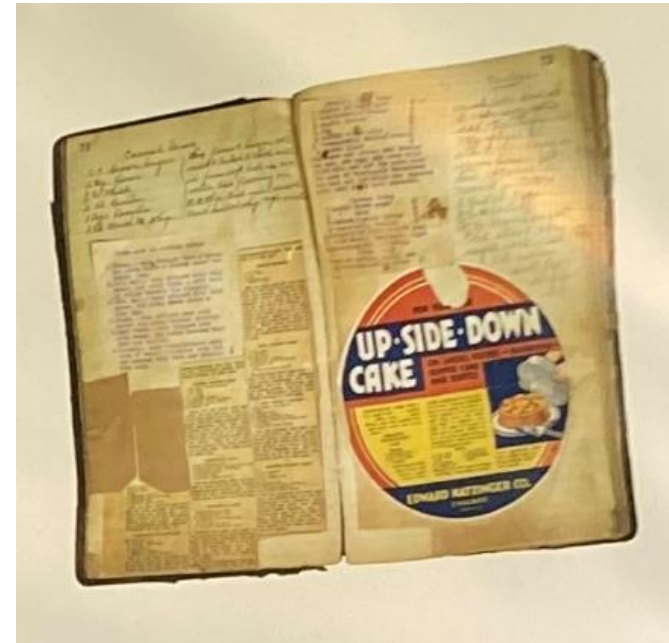
VISITORS FOUND PERSONAL MEANING IN THE OBJECTS

OUTCOME

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories.

- **Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.**
- Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.

Objects selected, such as the recipe book, perfume bottle, and banjo helped visitors to connect their experience with the prototypes to their own lives.



IT'S UNCLEAR IF VISITORS FOUND THE REFLECTION MEANINGFUL

OUTCOME

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories.

- Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.
- **Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.**

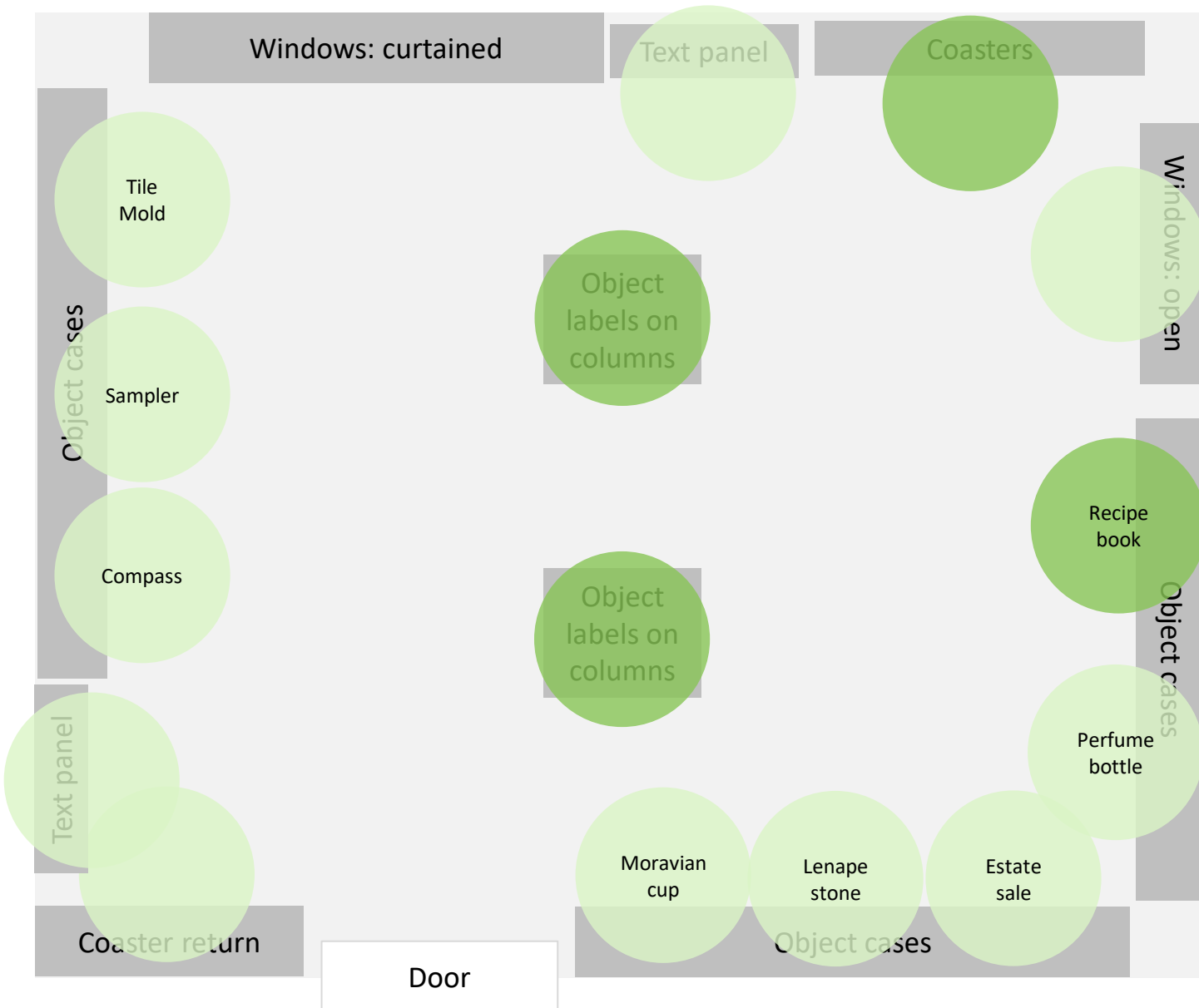
Visitors did not describe the process of reflecting on connections between objects and their life as meaningful. Notably, walk-in visitors did not mention the **questions on the label**, which is one primary scaffolding to help visitors move from making a personal connection with an object to considering this type of inquiry meaningful and important. Staff found the questions on the label important, so fore-fronting these questions may help achieve this end. Both staff and community ambassadors suggested making the questions more visually attractive and prominent in design (decals on floor, as orientation to prototypes, printed in larger text on wall, etc.)

SIGHTLINES

Views into Room 27 obscure the text panel with the questions



ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



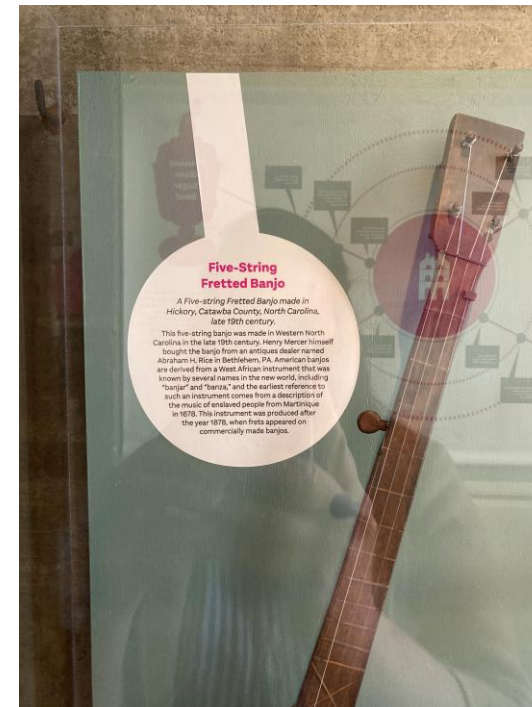
VISITORS DELIGHTED IN INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS

OUTCOME

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra.

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors find interest in a variety of the objects. For example, the banjo was particularly interesting to visitors, and the evaluator often observed visitors talking with other visitors in Room 42.



VISITORS DID NOT COMPARE OBJECTS THOUGH

OUTCOME

Visitors feel delighted in **comparing the objects** presented through Plus Ultra.

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors did not compare the objects, and staff often noted that they did not see a connection among the objects. The one place in the prototype that explicitly calls on visitors to compare objects is in the back of Room 27, which was not thoroughly visited.



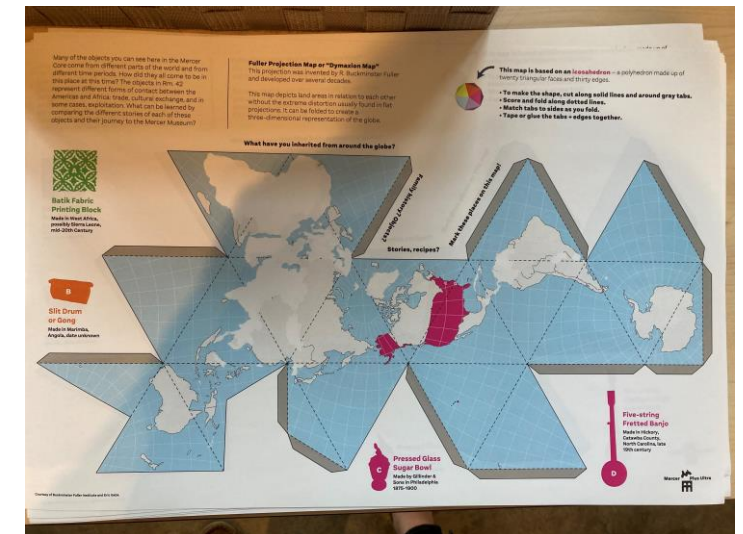
VISITORS LIKED TAKEAWAYS, BUT TO WHAT END?

OUTCOME

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra.

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- **Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.**

About one-half of visitors used and or took coasters with them; similarly, a few took the map. A few visitors said the coasters were particularly visually attractive and they liked having it as a keepsake.



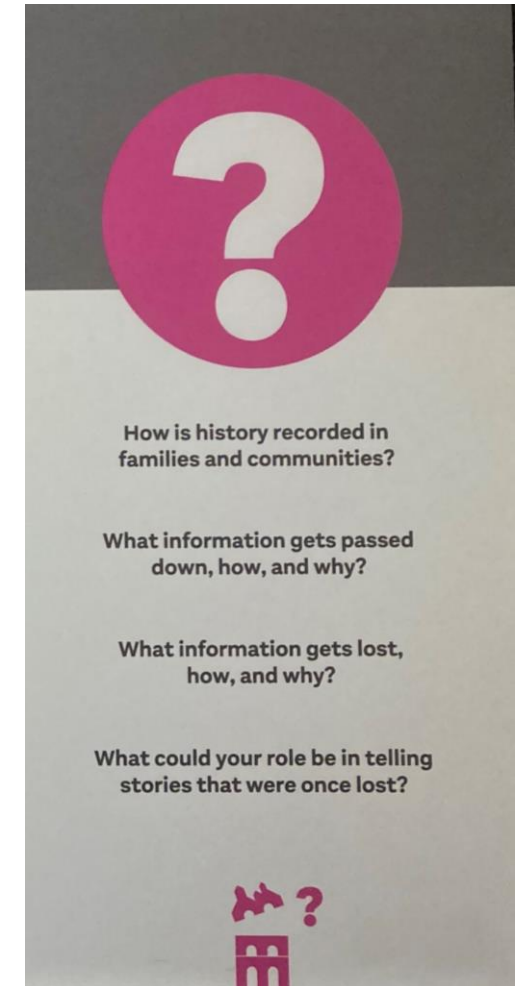
VISITORS DID NOT REFLECT ON MATERIAL CULTURE

OUTCOME

Visitors recognize material culture as evidence of the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures.

- Visitors describe a story told by one of the objects on display.
- Visitors describe objects as providing insight to the history & values of individuals, families, or cultures.

Visitors did not mention the theme of inheritance nor how material culture is the evidence of history and values of individuals, families, or cultures. While the questions on several labels speak to the idea of inheritance and material, as one community ambassador noted, the actual object descriptions do not answer those questions to help scaffold visitors' thinking.



VISITORS EXPERIENCED CURIOSITY IN INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS

OUTCOME

Visitors activate curiosity.

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
- Visitors feel inspired and curious about something else as a result of their experience with the prototypes.

Visitors find interest in a variety of the objects. For example, several visitors were interested in the photograph with Big Ben, including where in town the almshouse is/was located.



ITS UNCLEAR WHETHER CURIOSITY IS UNIQUE TO PROTOTYPES

OUTCOME

Visitors activate curiosity.

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
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An assumption of the project is the need to “awaken” or “activate” the core, which is “overwhelming” and hard to engage with. The prototypes provide more information about objects than the core, but whether they inspire curiosity is questionable.



PROTOTYPES PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE EXPERIENCE BUT A GOOD ONE?

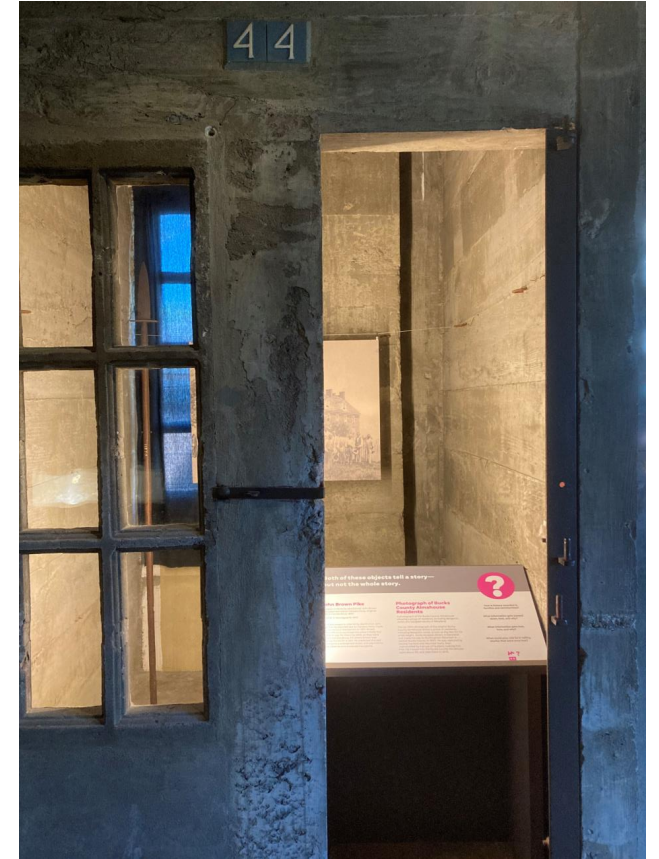


“It’s overwhelming out there and sparse in here. Two extremes.”
-Walk-in visitor



CONSIDERATIONS


Are these the right rooms to use?



CONSIDERATIONS

How to fore-front the questions in the design and interpretation?

**Both of these objects tell a story—
but not the whole story.**



John Brown Pike
*A weapon ordered by abolitionist John Brown for his planned raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Made in Connecticut, 1857.
Gift of W. E. Montague III, 1917.*

One of the weapons ordered by abolitionist John Brown for his planned raid on Harpers Ferry, made by a Connecticut blacksmith in 1857. Brown couldn't afford to purchase the pikes initially but was able to pay for them by 1859, so they were sent to Chambersburg, PA where Brown was gathering forces for a raid. He predicted the raid would inspire a widespread revolt, and planned to use the pikes to arm enslaved insurgents.

Photograph of Bucks County Almshouse Residents
A photograph of the Bucks County Almshouse showing a group of residents, including Benjamin Jones who escaped slavery in Maryland.

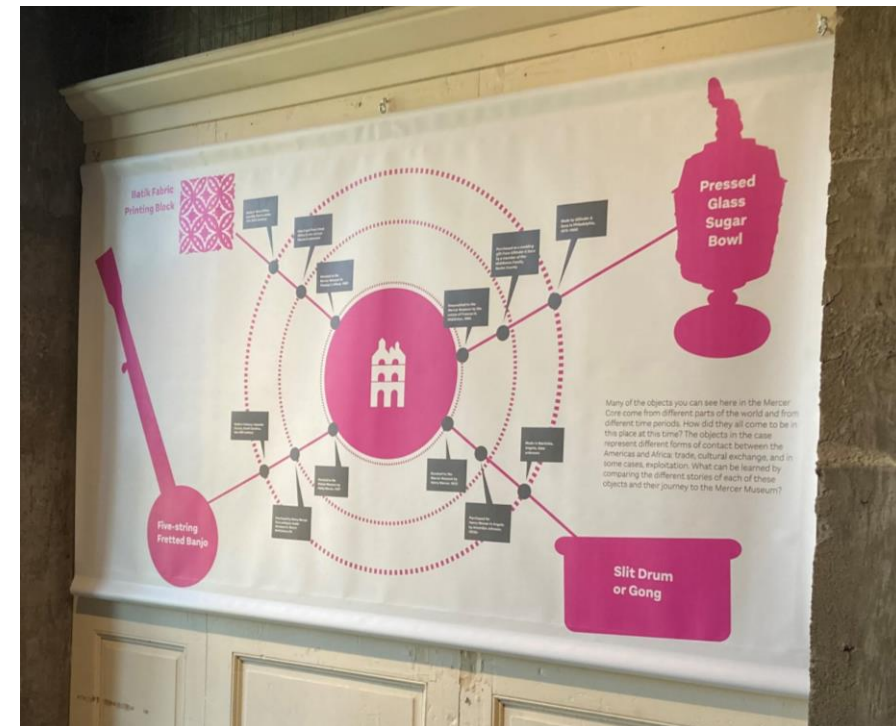

This ca. 1870 photograph of the original Bucks County Almshouse shows a group of residents, including Benjamin Jones, known as Big Ben for his great height. Jones escaped slavery in Maryland and made his way to Buckingham Mountain in central Bucks County in 1833. He was captured by bounty hunters and returned there, then manumitted by a group of Quakers, making him free. He moved into the Bucks County Almshouse aged about 65, and died there in 1875.

How is history recorded in families and communities?

What information gets passed down, how, and why?

What information gets lost, how, and why?

What could your role be in telling stories that were once lost?



CONSIDERATIONS

Is comparison important?

If so, how to use design and interpretation to promote comparison?



CONSIDERATIONS

Are these the right visitor outcomes? Are they what you want visitors to experience as a result of the prototypes?

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(developed by RK&A; will be used to measure success in evaluation)**

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APPENDIX SLIDES

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



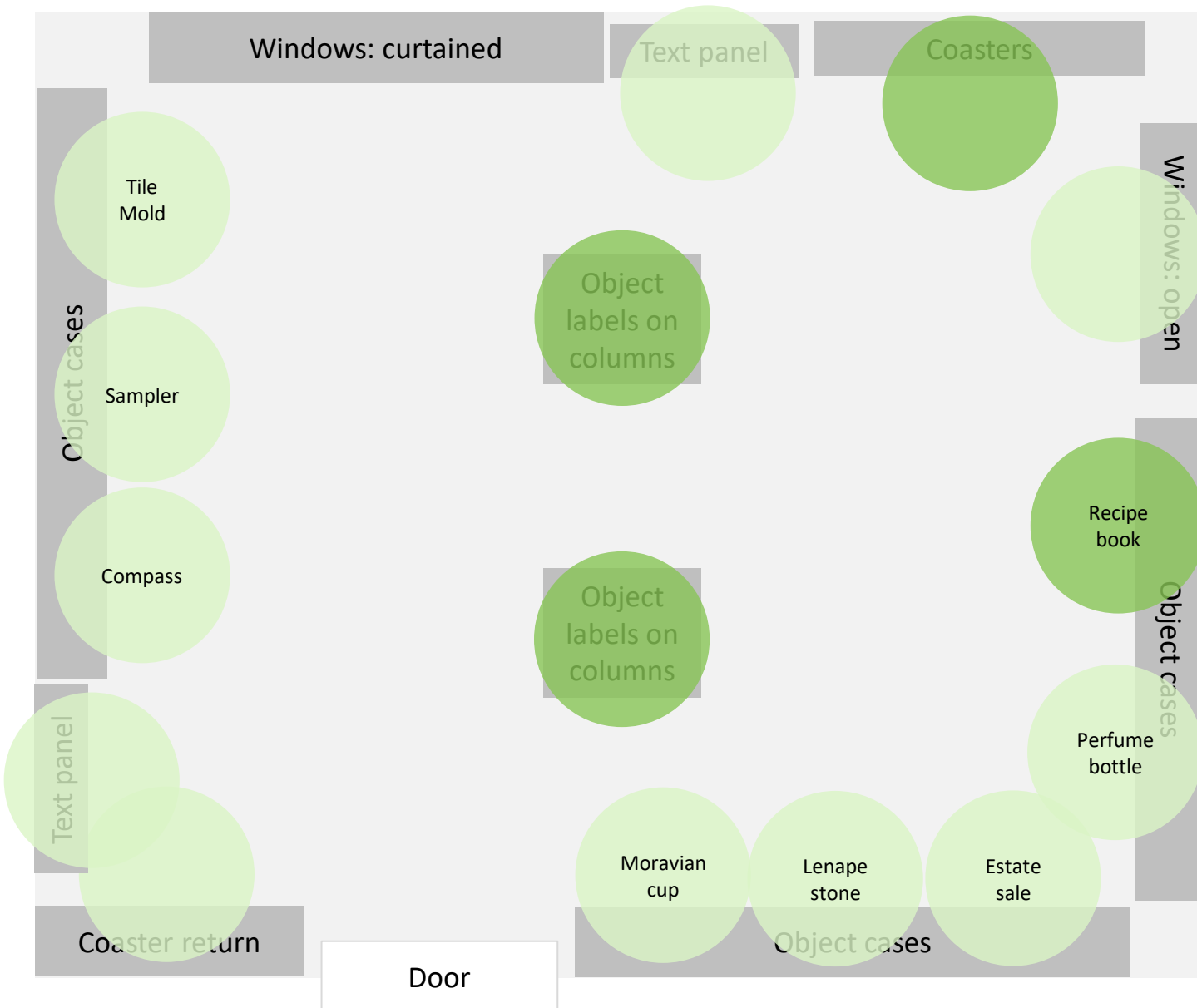
- One-quarter of visit groups who encounter this room do not enter.
- Visitors are more likely to enter if someone else is in the space.
- The direction from which visitors approach the space does not appear to affect the likelihood to enter the space. As shown in picture to the left, sightlines into the room from either direction do not highlight the prototype experience.

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



- Most visit groups who enter the space spend a short amount of time (less than one minute).
- Conversation among visitors seemed relatively limited.

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



- The **most attended to** items in the space are the recipe book, coasters, and object labels on the columns.
- The **least attended to** items in the space are the other 7 objects, labels, and coaster return.
- While not an intended stop in the room, the open windows are attractive to a few visit groups.

ROOM 27 INTERVIEWS

MOST INTERESTING OBJECTS:



Recipe book: The recipe book was mentioned by visitors, community ambassadors and staff alike. Many said it reminded them of something they have or a family member had. It also made them think about change over time.



Perfume bottle: The perfume bottle was mentioned by several staff, community ambassadors, and one visitor. Staff generally liked the connection of the object to Henry Mercer's aunt. Some also mentioned how it reminded them of things they have inherited.



Sampler: The sampler was mentioned by a few staff, community ambassadors, and one visitor. They were interested in it having known someone who sews or within the context that this was created by a 13-year-old girl.

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ROOM 27 INTERVIEWS

ASPECTS THAT ARE CONFUSING OR DISLIKED:

Unwelcoming appearance: Several disliked the apparent emptiness of the space, and staff and community ambassadors felt their needed to be something more visually engaging to draw visitors into the space. One visitor said of the room, “It’s overwhelming out there and sparse in here; two extremes.”



Coaster placement: Several disliked that the coasters were placed in the back of the room. Some staff felt they were a main feature of the prototype and were hidden to visitors looking into the room.



Label placement: Several disliked that the labels were placed on the columns instead of with the objects, although one visitor liked that it gives the objects space.

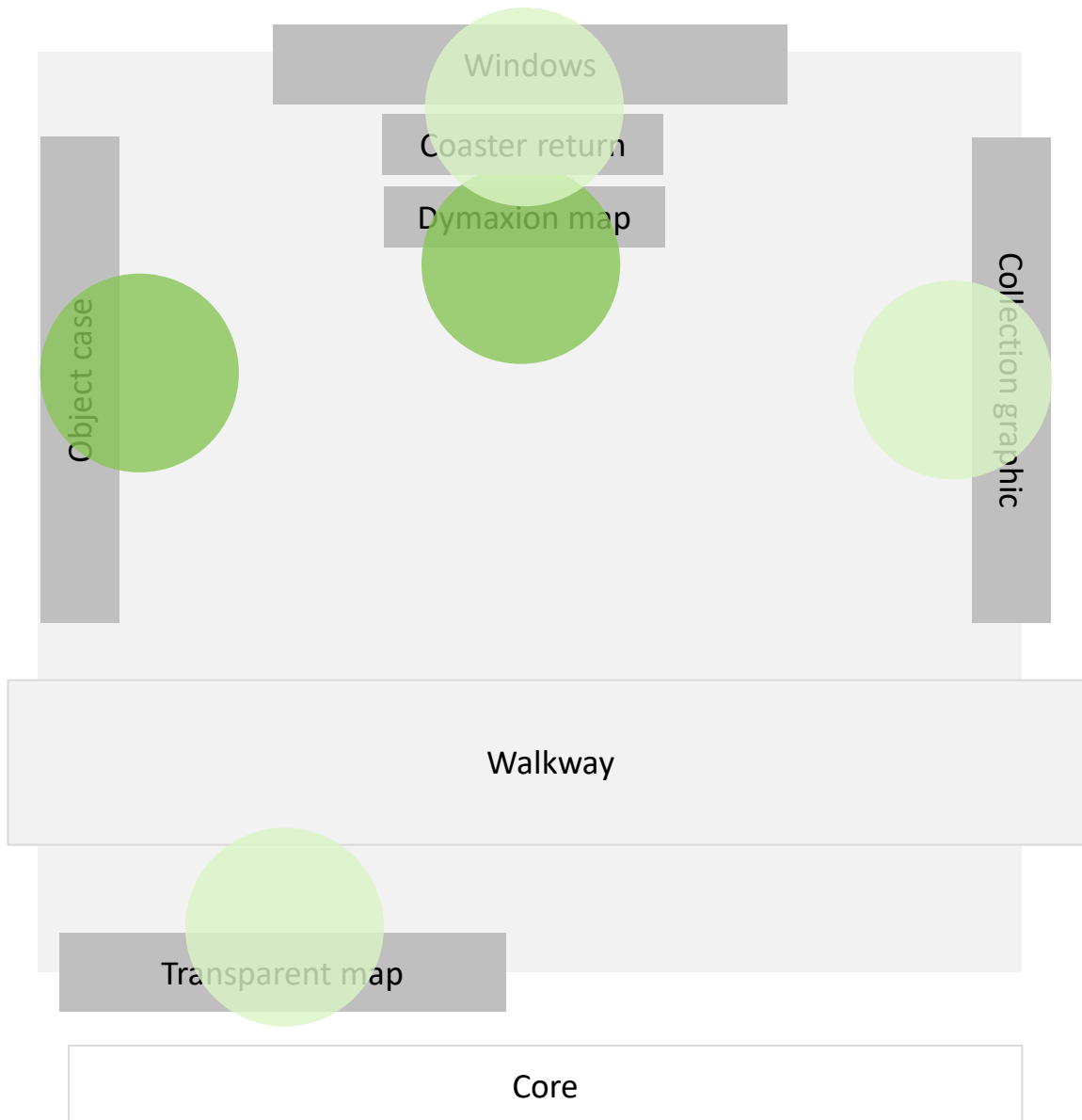
Connection among objects: A few staff felt the connection among objects was too loose and not well-articulated.

ROOM 42 OBSERVATIONS



- One-fifth of visit groups on the fourth floor do not encounter the space.
- The visitation on this entire floor is largely affected by the presence of other visitors, particularly with the current social distancing efforts.

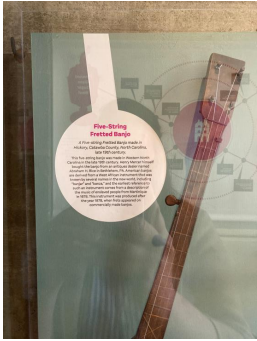
ROOM 42 OBSERVATIONS



- The **most attended to** items in the space are the object case and the dymaxion map activity to take home. From observation, it was not possible to distinguish the most attended to objects.
- The **least attended to** items in the space are the collection graphic, coaster return, and transparent map.

ROOM 42 INTERVIEWS

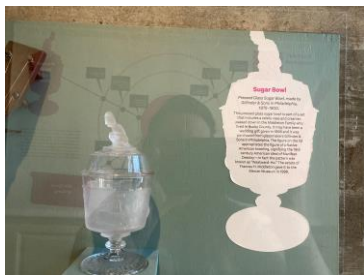
INTERESTING OBJECTS:



Banjo: The banjo was mentioned by visitors and staff. Among visitors, the banjo was particularly interesting to those with musical interests.



Drum: The drum was also mentioned by visitors and staff who were particularly interested in its African origin, with staff noting that much of the Mercer collection is American made artifacts.

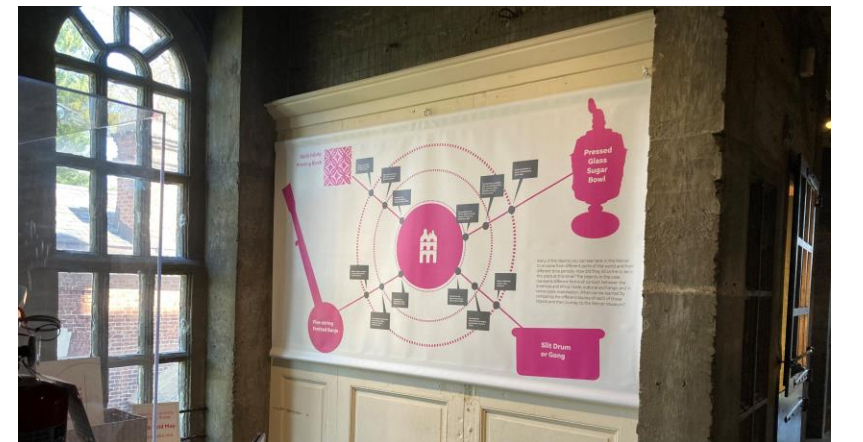


Sugar Bowl: The sugar bowl was mentioned by two staff and community ambassadors. They liked the craftsmanship of the object and its origins in Philadelphia

ROOM 42 INTERVIEWS

ASPECT THAT COULD BE IMPROVED:

Transparent map graphic: Several staff and community ambassadors had issues with the map graphic that was displayed above the rail overlooking the core. A few found the graphic difficult to view because of how the light enters the space and reflects on the glass. Two found the orientation of the map confusing. Two also had concerns about blocking that specific vantage point over the core since it is a popular photo space. Another found it a secondary piece to the graphic panel showing objects coming to the Mercer—which they considered more important (and a few other staff, visitors, and community ambassadors had said they particularly appreciated for its simplicity).



ROOM 44 OBSERVATIONS



- One-third of visit groups on the fourth floor do not encounter the space.
- The visitation on this entire floor is largely affected by the presence and movement of other visitors, particularly with the current social distancing efforts.
- Because this room is directly at the top of the stairs, it seemed even more greatly impacted by the movement of other visitors—i.e., folks feeling pressure to move to one side or other at top of stairs to make space for others.

ROOM 44 OBSERVATIONS



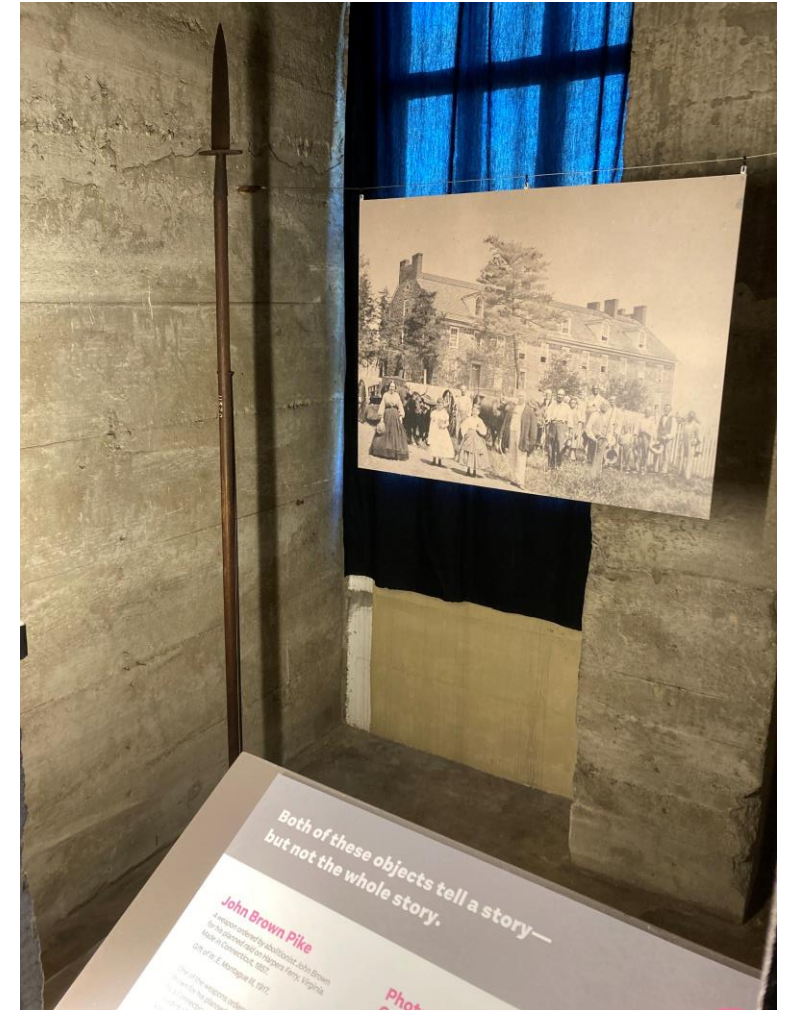
- Given the proximity of items in the space and the challenge of observing this room with social distancing, it is unclear what items were **most attended to** or **least attended to**.
- Conversations overheard suggest most are looking at the photograph (e.g., “Where is this building?”; “What is an almshouse?”; “That is Big Ben”).
- Conversations overheard suggest many are looking at or at least reading about the pike (“What is a pike?”; “Where is the pike?”)

ROOM 42 INTERVIEWS

INTERESTING OBJECTS:

Pike: Most staff were interested in the Pike because of its historical significance. By comparison, this was not an object named by visitors. Notably, two visitor groups said they did not notice the Pike, with one saying he was familiar with John Brown and would have been interested in seeing it.

Photograph: A few visitors and community ambassadors as well as one staff were particularly interested in the photograph. Visitors were interested in it for a variety of reasons: it is a photograph, it shows Big Ben, it shows Doylestown. Community ambassadors and staff were particularly interested in its local representation.



OTHER REACTIONS TO THE PROTOTYPES

Room choices: Staff and community ambassadors preferred the rooms on the fourth floor to the one on the second floor. They liked that the rooms on the fourth floor felt more integrated. By comparison, they felt Room 27 need more visual appeal. Two staff said they would have been interested in using some of the rooms higher up in the museum.

Colors and design overall: Most staff and community ambassadors like the design approach to the prototypes. They particularly liked the graphic of the Mercer Museum with the top open and object silhouettes.

Concept: Most staff said they really liked the concept for the prototypes. Some, however, noted that the theme needed to be more explicit. Several felt that moving the questions to be more prominent may help. A few still felt that the objects would need to be connected more directly to support the theme.

MERCER MUSEUM
PLUS ULTRA

EVALUATION OF PROTOTYPE C

APRIL 2022

kera

COLLECTIVE

Amanda Krantz
Director of Research & Practice

Kera Collective
keracollective.com

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- find personal meaning in the historical objects in the Mercer Museum (humanize objects, look at objects in new ways, see museum core differently, feel surprise and awe)
- be inspired to explore the history of Bucks County through local cultural organizations (experience a strong sense of place).

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- Visitors describe objects as providing insight to the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures.

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra. (affective)

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories. (affective)

- Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.
- Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.

Visitors activate curiosity. (attitudinal)

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
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IMPACT (Result of the Mercer Museum on audiences; developed by RK&A with Mercer staff in 2019)

Inspired by Henry Mercer's creative vision and pursuit of meaning, visitors delight in experiencing a strong sense of place while contemplating historic artifacts and human ingenuity.

METHODOLOGY

- Prototypes for Room 27 and 49
- Collected onsite data over three weekend days (May 14, 15, & 21); and conducted remote interviews with community members May to June
- Observed:
 - 128 walk-in visitor groups (containing one or more visitors)
- Interviewed:
 - 18 walk-in visitor groups (containing one or more visitors; mostly first-time visitors; one-quarter of the groups are from Bucks County, and one resides in 18901);
 - 5 Community Ambassadors

Visitor outcomes are
lens for evaluation



REMINDER

The project is about **experimentation**.

The importance of the findings are to help calibrate the prototypes towards **the desired impact**.

Learning is the goal.

This may include **reconsidering visitor outcomes**.

SUMMARY BY OUTCOMES

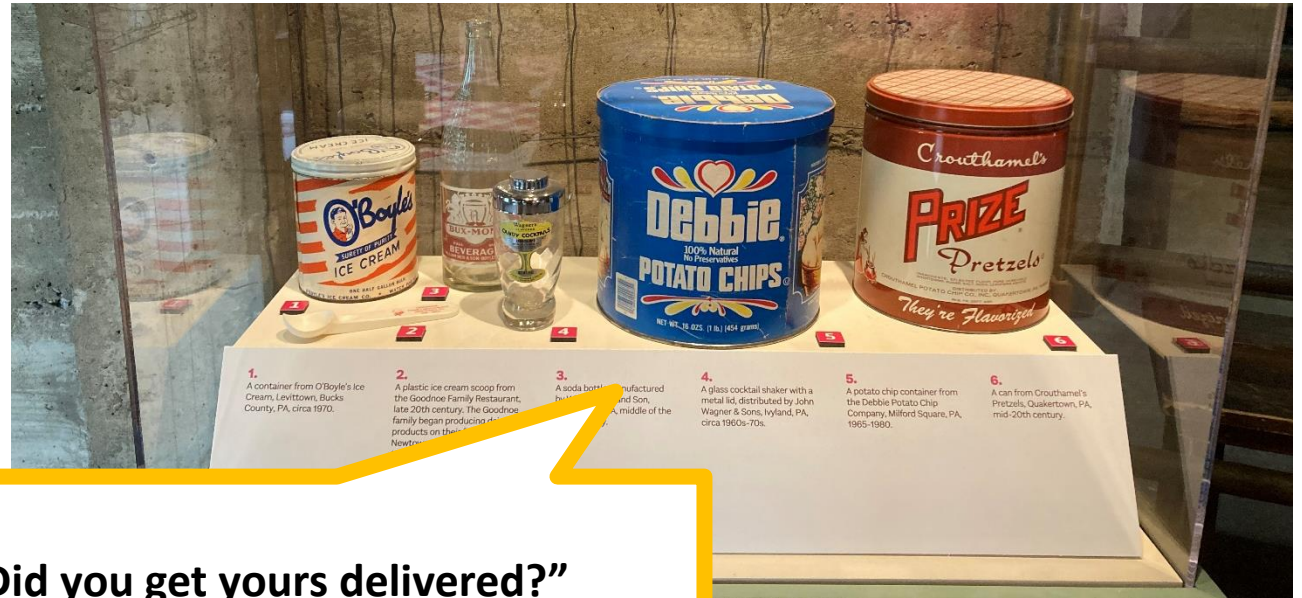
VISITORS FOUND PERSONAL MEANING IN THE OBJECTS

OUTCOME

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories.

- *Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.*
- Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.

Objects selected, such as the potato chip container, salt and pepper shakers, and rolling pin helped visitors to connect their experience with the prototypes to their own lives.



“Did you get yours delivered?”

-Adult visitors overheard talking about potato chip container

VISITORS FOUND THE REFLECTION MEANINGFUL

OUTCOME

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories.

- Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.
- ***Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.***

Visitors reflected on connections between objects and their life and found it meaningful.

For **groups with children**, connecting objects to their child's life was an entry point for engagement. For example, one adult talked to a child about how they use their rolling pin to make pizza.

For **adults**, connecting helped them explore memories as well as understand life more broadly. For example, one adult described excitedly the chip containers she had long heard about.

This is a positive change from Prototype A and B.

VISITORS DELIGHTED IN INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS + PROTOTYPE AT LARGE

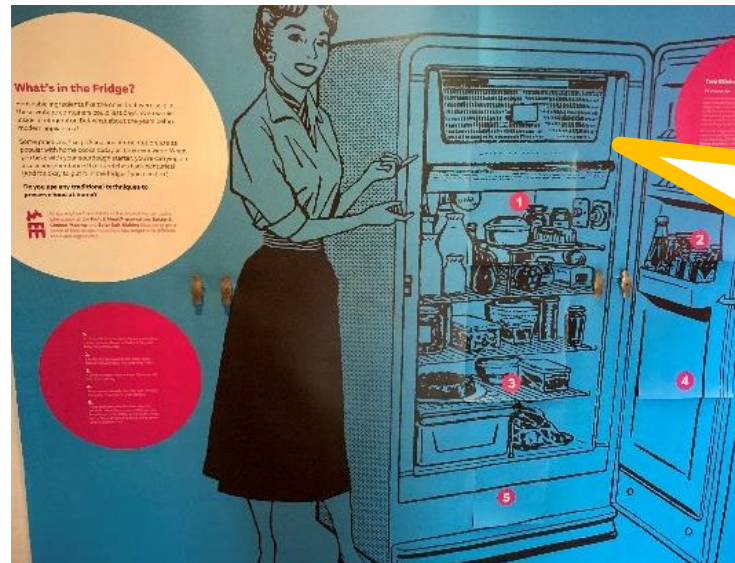
OUTCOME

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra.

- **Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.**
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors find interest in a variety of the objects, graphic materials, interactive and media components in the prototype. The evaluator often observed visitors talking with other visitors in both Room 27 and Room 49.

Conversation was more observed with Prototype B vs. A, another positive change.



“What is in the fridge? Let’s get a flashlight”

-Adult visitor reading aloud to child and guiding behavior

VISITORS ENJOYED THE PROTOTYPE, BUT NEEDED PROMPTING IN ROOM 27

OUTCOME

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra.

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- ***Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.***

Visitors appeared engaged with both prototype rooms. In Room 27, however, the evaluator sometimes had to prompt people to lift the flaps to engage the objects, either because they were not aware of them or needed permission to engage in a way they perceived as an engagement strategy for children.

However, overall, visitors appeared to engage more with Prototype B vs. A, another positive change.



“This is for kids”

-Adult visitor

VISITORS DID NOT REFLECT ON MATERIAL CULTURE

OUTCOME

Visitors recognize material culture as evidence of the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures.

- Visitors describe a story told by one of the objects on display.
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As with Prototype A, Prototype B did not prompt visitors to think about how material culture is the evidence of history and values of individuals, families, or cultures. While the strategies in Prototype B emphasize the idea more (like plate shown below) than in Prototype A, more needs to be done to forefront the ideas if a continuing goal for Prototype C.



VISITORS EXPERIENCED CURIOSITY IN INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS

OUTCOME

Visitors activate curiosity.

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
- Visitors feel inspired and curious about something else as a result of their experience with the prototypes.

Visitors express curiosity about individual objects, but how much that translates outside their experience in the rest of the museum is unclear.



“We thought this was a tea service. It had us wondering about when coffee cups got so big.”

-Adult visitors

CONSIDERATIONS

After the evaluation of Prototype A, we asked,
Are these the right rooms to use?



← Room 49 seemed well used (attractive, encouraged exploration, people observed using the bench and enjoying views from the windows).

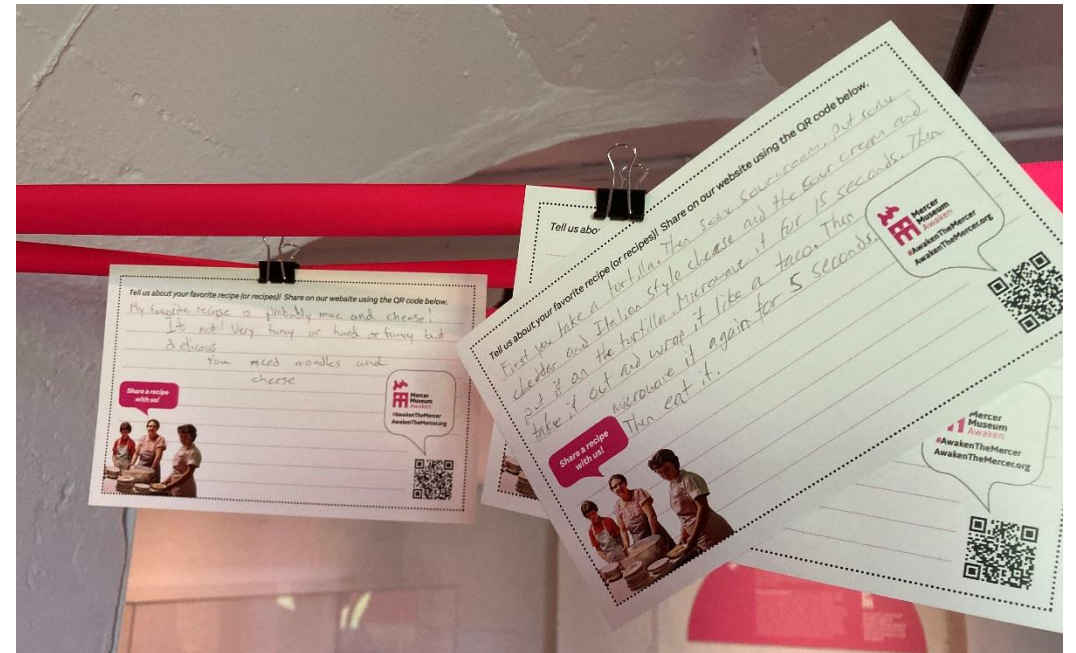
The question still remains whether Room 27 is a good choice. Are visitors ready to explore outside the core at this point in their visit? Is the room attractive enough to encourage entry?



CONSIDERATIONS

In the Prototype A evaluation, we asked, **is comparison important?**

Results from Prototype B suggest comparison is not important in achieving most of the goals outlined for the project particularly delighting in the objects and making personal connections to ideas and objects presented in the museum.



Are these the right visitor outcomes?

Based on our understanding, we suggest the following revisions:

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~~Visitors recognize material culture as evidence of the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures. (cognitive)~~

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FINDINGS FROM ONSITE DATA COLLECTION WITH WALK-IN VISITORS

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



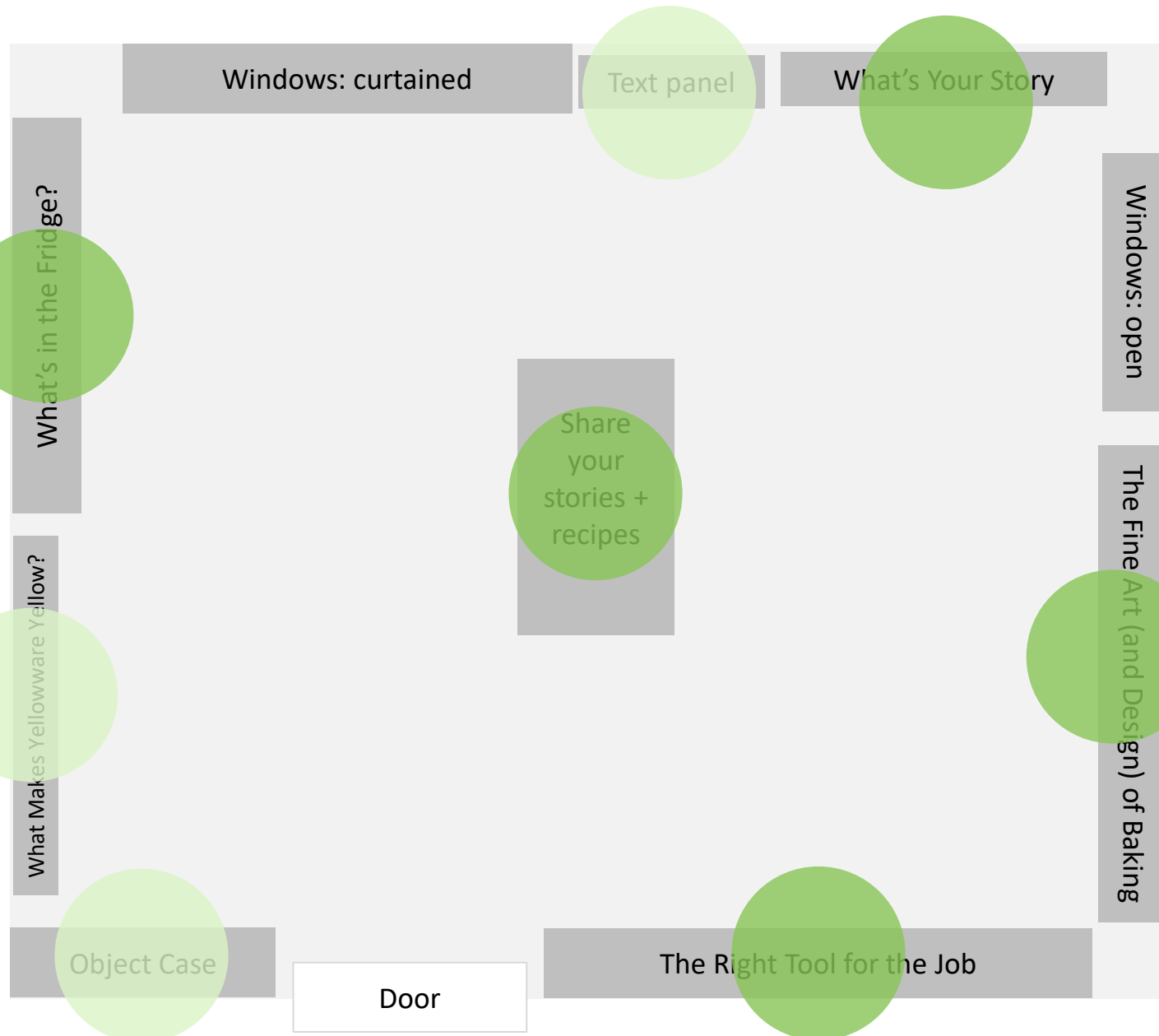
- One-third of visit groups who encounter this room do not enter (approximately same proportion as with Prototype A).
- Visitors are more likely to enter if someone else is in the space.
- The direction from which visitors approach the space does not appear to affect the likelihood to enter the space. Although the sightlines into Room 27 have been greatly enhanced from Prototype A to B (see image on the left).

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



- Most visit groups who enter the space spend 2 minutes or more (longer than Prototype A).
- Conversation among visitors was frequent, particularly with intergenerational groups who lifted the flaps to view objects (more than with Prototype A).

ROOM 27 OBSERVATIONS



- The **most attended to** spaces are interactive: What's in the Fridge?, The Fine Art (and Design) of Baking, and The Right Tool for the Job where you could lift the flaps to view objects. Also, the Share your stories + recipes space in the middle of the room and What's Your Story media were well visited (although few left videos or recipes)
- The **least attended to** items are traditional object cases and the intro panel.

ROOM 27 INTERVIEWS

MOST INTERESTING OBJECTS:



Milk Bottle: Several mentioned the milk bottle, some commenting on its locality and some recalling receiving milk deliveries in bottles like this. The milk bottle is object #1 in the fridge, located relatively high.

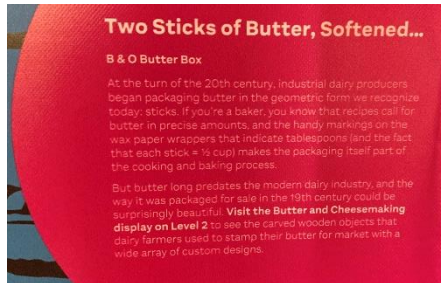


Plastic Canisters: Several mentioned the canisters recalling family having something like them and also recalling the Levittown kitchen. The plastic canisters are object #1 in the kitchen, located mid-height (same as other objects in kitchen).



Yellowware: Several mentioned the yellowware because they were familiar with yellowware and were interested to learn about how the coloring is because of the clay.

MOST INTERESTING OBJECTS:



Butter: A few mentioned the butter because they had not thought about the purposefulness of its shape and packaging. The butter is object #2 in the fridge, located relatively high with specific explanatory text nearby.



Kitchen objects and cooking: A few generally liked the focus on kitchen objects and cooking because it was a relatable topic.



Videos

Graphics: A few liked the graphics. One said the graphic reminded them of furniture they used to own.

ASPECTS THAT ARE CONFUSING:

Flaps: Several did not realize that there were objects under flaps in the graphics. A few suggested a written prompt on the graphic telling them to lift. Another suggest different design elements to make that obvious. Additionally, a few said it felt like something for kids to do (however one such person then looked at many objects after the interview).



Flashlights: A few were unsure about some aspect of the flashlights. For example, some saw the bowl of flashlights but did not realize they were to be used to see better the objects behind flaps in the graphic panels. Additionally, one saw the prompt to use the flashlight but used the one on her phone (not seeing the ones in the bowl on the table).

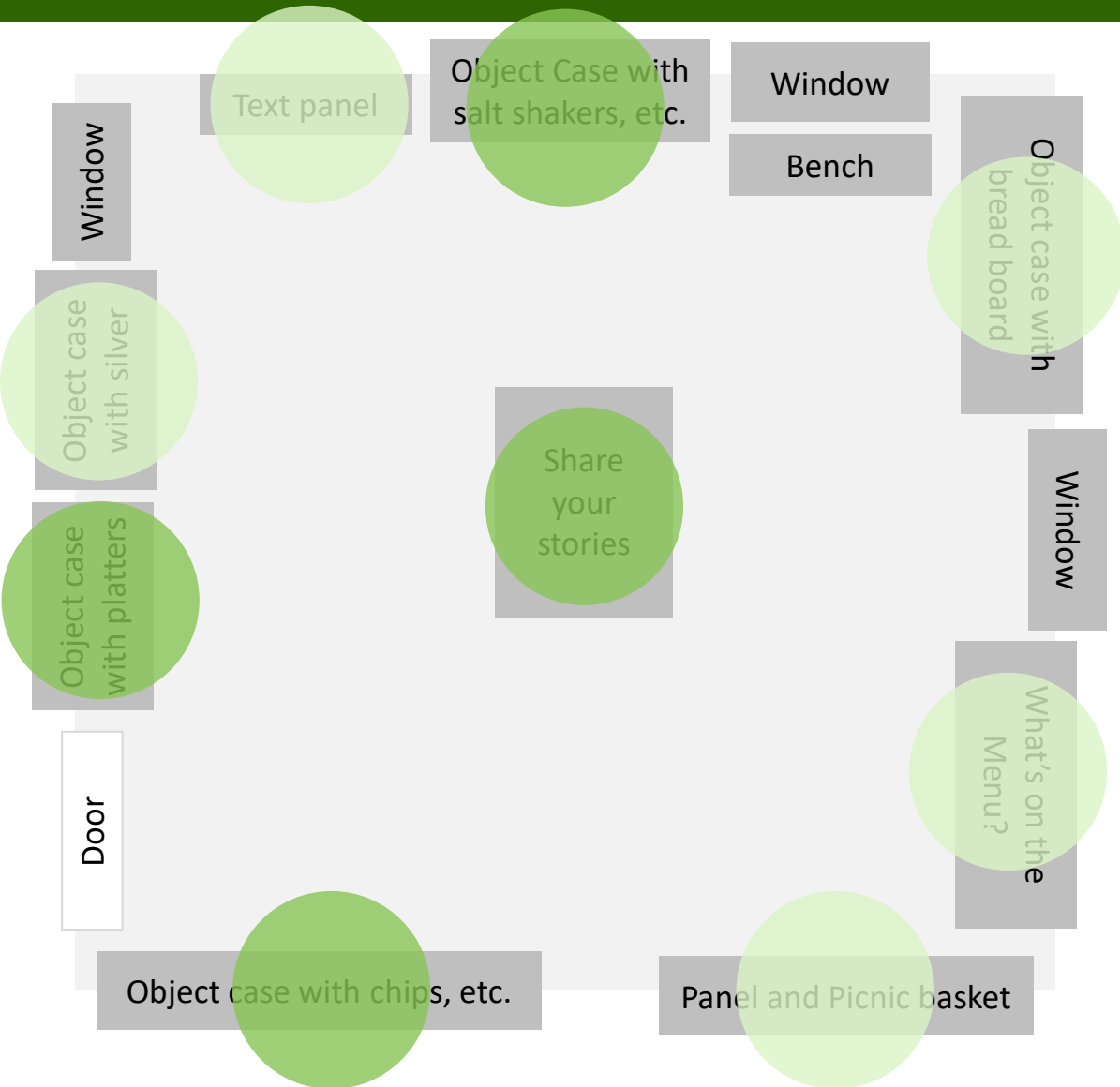


ROOM 49 OBSERVATIONS



- One-third of visit groups who encounter the room do not enter.
- Visitors are more likely to enter if someone else is in the space.
- The visitation on this floor is affected by how they visit the upper floors that still have signs prompting one-way traffic. Sometimes, visitors skip the corner of the floor in which Room 49 is situated.

ROOM 49 OBSERVATIONS



- The **most attended to** items in the space are the two object cases on either side of the entrance door, the object case with salt shakers and other items, as well as the Share your stories interactive in the middle of the room.
- The **least attended to** items in the space are the object cases with the picnic basket, bread board and other items, and the china and silverware. The text panels were also less attended to.



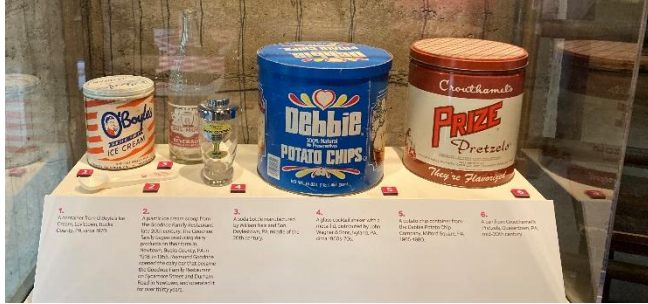
INTERESTING OBJECTS:

Salt and pepper shakers: A few mentioned the salt and pepper shakers from Woolworth. Some remembered going to Woolworth to eat.

Coffee service: A few mentioned the coffee service. Some were surprised that it was a coffee service, having initially assumed it was a tea service. A few were surprised by the size of coffee cups and wondered when they became as big as they are today.

Both the salt and pepper shakers and coffee service are in the same case.

ROOM 49 INTERVIEWS



INTERESTING OBJECTS:

Potato chip container: A few recalled having chips delivered or had heard about.



Porcelain: A few found the porcelain and china beautiful. It also reminded some of things they own or were within their family.



Menus: A few recognized the local restaurants.

FINDINGS FROM REMOTE INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

OVERALL FEEDBACK

Positive reaction overall: All community members interviewed had overwhelmingly positive feedback about Prototype B. Community members who recalled Prototype A had particularly high praise, feeling this version was a “huge improvement.”

Enjoyed the theme: Most said they enjoyed the “cooking” or “food (and gathering)” theme. They felt it had a lot of relevance for all people because “everyone loves food.” One person who visited with children said they were able to have a lot of conversations as a family in the prototype.

Liked the design: Most described liking the colors, graphics, and use of the rooms overall. One described how the design was tremendous in the details, such as pink gingham, pink ribbons, and pink borders, bringing everything together.

Wanted more promotion: Two felt there were opportunities to promote the work of the Mercer Museum and these prototypes more, such as at Thursday movies. One said they were not aware of the prototypes until receiving an email invitation from staff.

ROOM 27 FEEDBACK



Liked invitation to interact: A few thought the various interactive elements that invited personal storytelling were terrific. One described seeing great potential in the media piece but were not sure if there was enough budgeted to take that element to the next level.

Liked the flaps but need more instruction: A few mentioned the need for additional instructions in this Room, particularly related to the flaps and the flashlights.

ROOM 49 FEEDBACK



Superior prompts for personal storytelling: A few found the prompts in Room 49 to be better at generating discussion than Room 27. For example, one talked about the question of what to bring on a picnic. One, who came with children, said they spoke a lot about their favorite meals.



Design: A few found the design in Room 49 to be more appealing than in Room 27. While they had a hard time describing why this was the case, they suggested the balance of object cases, interactives, and general layout of Room 49 was more comfortable to them.

MERCER MUSEUM
PLUS ULTRA

EVALUATION OF PROTOTYPE C & CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

APRIL 2023



kera
COLLECTIVE

Amanda Krantz
Director of Research & Practice

Kera Collective
keracollective.com

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This is the third evaluation report for Plus Ultra, an experimental exhibition project by the Mercer Museum. The project was made possible with funding from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

Kera Collective has had the privilege to serve as evaluator and thought partner throughout the course of the grant, from 2020-2023. Two evaluation reports preceded this report (one each for Prototype A & B).

On the next slides, we journey through the three years of evaluation, summarizing findings from Prototype A, B, and C, and the changes we observed. The remainder of the report presents findings from observations and visitor interviews specific to Prototype C, the third and final one of the project.

By definition, evaluation is the systematic collection of information about an experience—from the **user's perspective**—that examines the successes and shortcomings of the experience **against the desired impact**.

For an experimental project like this, the evaluation findings are important to help calibrate the prototypes towards the desired impact (see the logic model in the appendix). **Learning** is the goal. Learning applies to the short-term, adapting practices between evaluations, and the long-term, strategizing for sustained community engagement through exhibition projects.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A

The first prototype (Prototype A – 2021) introduced a distinct style, color palette, and extensive interpretative text that contrasted the exhibition approach in the core exhibition. Visitors to the exhibition, who were all first-time visitors from out of town, made personal connections to the individual objects although it was unclear if they felt the connection was meaningful. Visitors felt the overall design sparse and in too stark contrast to the core exhibition.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

B

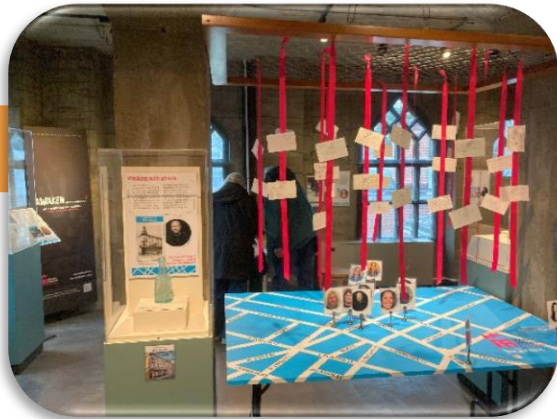
The second prototype (Prototype B – 2022) was exhibited in one new space, enhanced the style of the exhibition, overcame attraction barriers, refined the approach to the interpretative text, and introduced new engagement strategies that encouraged visitor participation. Visitors to the exhibition, who were largely first-time visitors from out of town, made personal connections to the individual objects and felt the connection was meaningful. Observations suggest visitors were more engaged with Prototype B versus A.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

C

The third prototype (Prototype C – 2023) leaned into the style developed through prototyping, enhanced the engagement strategy, and took a community-centric approach to the curation and interpretation. Visitors to the exhibition, who were mostly Doylestown residents, made notable personal connections to the individual objects and felt the connection was meaningful. Prototype C was clearly effective in engaging the community, as evidenced by shared experiences and conversations among visitors.



As an evaluator, we witnessed **significant learning by the project team** through the 3 years of Plus Ultra prototypes.

PROTOTYPE C EVALUATION FINDINGS

METHODOLOGY

Kera Collective evaluators collected data onsite at the Mercer Museum over four weekend days: March 25-26 & April 1-2. Mercer Museum staff promoted these weekends as community weekends to Doylestown residents, who could visit the museum for free on these dates.

Most visitors to Prototype C, which was displayed in Room 49, were Doylestown residents. Most had been to the Mercer Museum before, but some were first-time visitors.

Kera Collective evaluators observed over 100 visitors to the exhibition and interviewed 45 visitor groups (containing one or more visitors). Data were recorded through handwritten notes and analyzed qualitatively for patterns.

Visitor outcomes are lens for evaluation



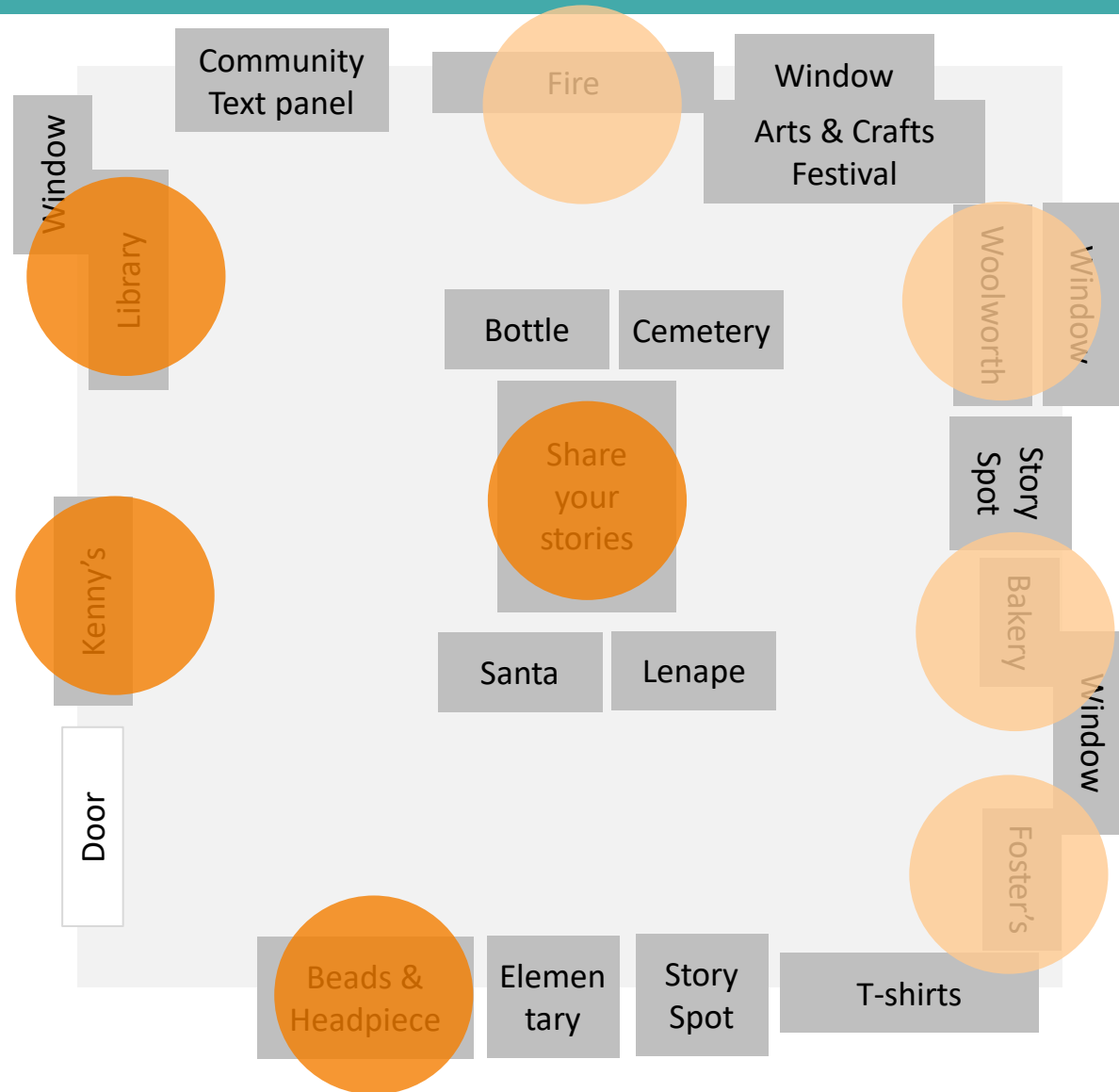
KEY FINDINGS #1

Observations reveal that most visitors to the exhibition were in a group of one or more people. The experience was **highly social**. Visitors talked together frequently, much more so than observed at other prototypes.

The majority of visitors to the exhibition were **highly attentive**. The high level of attention is likely since most were visiting specifically to see this exhibition (because of the mailer sent out to announce community weekends and at the direction of staff onsite at the museum).

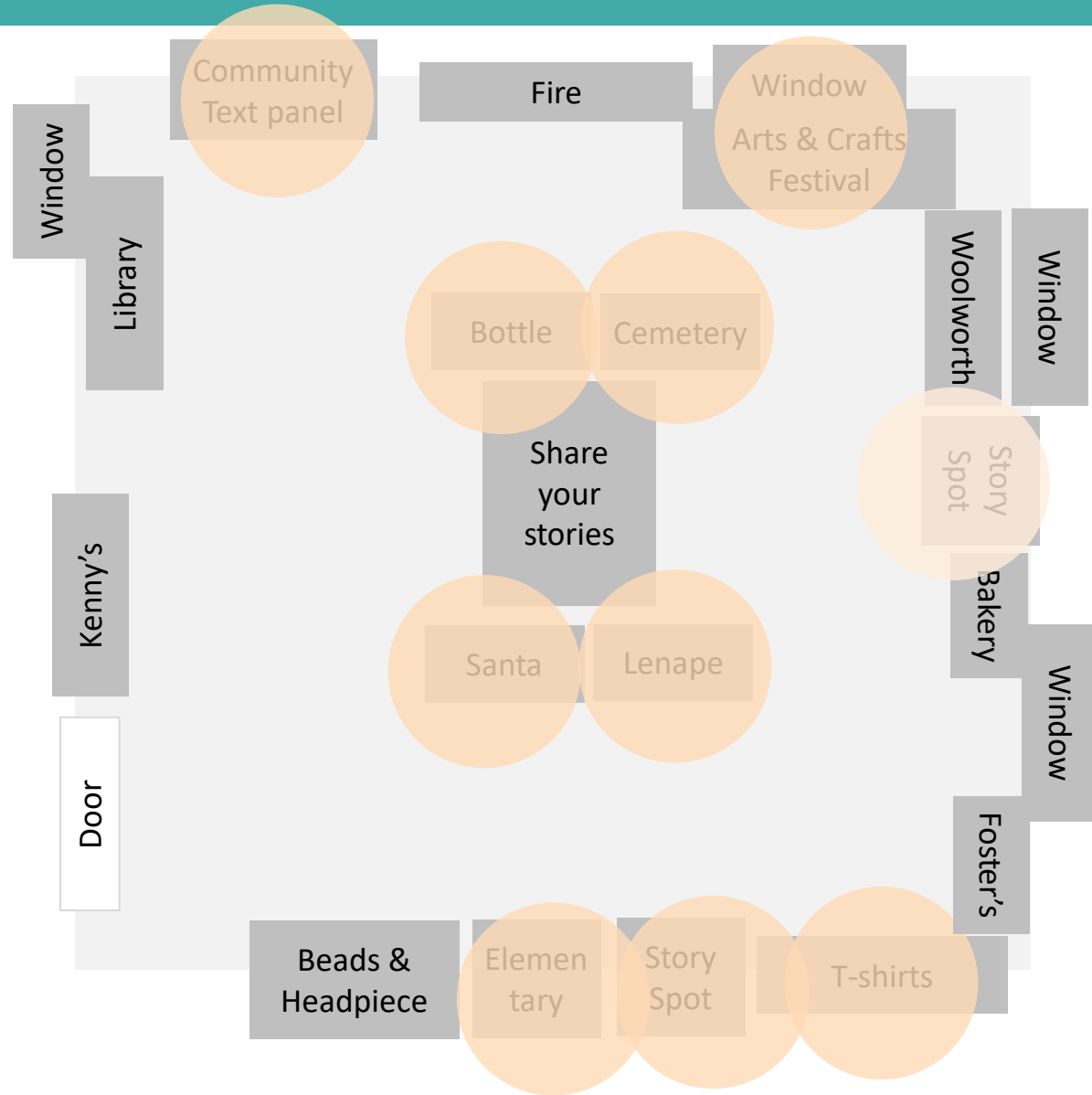
These two findings suggest the **interest** and **resonance** of the exhibition.

OBSERVATIONS



- The **most attended to** items in the space are near the entrance door (Kenny's, Library, and Breads & Headpiece) and the Share your Stories interactive in the middle of the room. The location of these items and the relatively large space around them enhanced their attraction.
- The **next most attended to** were Fire, Woolworth, Bakery, and Foster's. These items are all located along the exterior walls farther into the exhibition. Their placement, but also their content, enhanced attraction to these items.

OBSERVATIONS



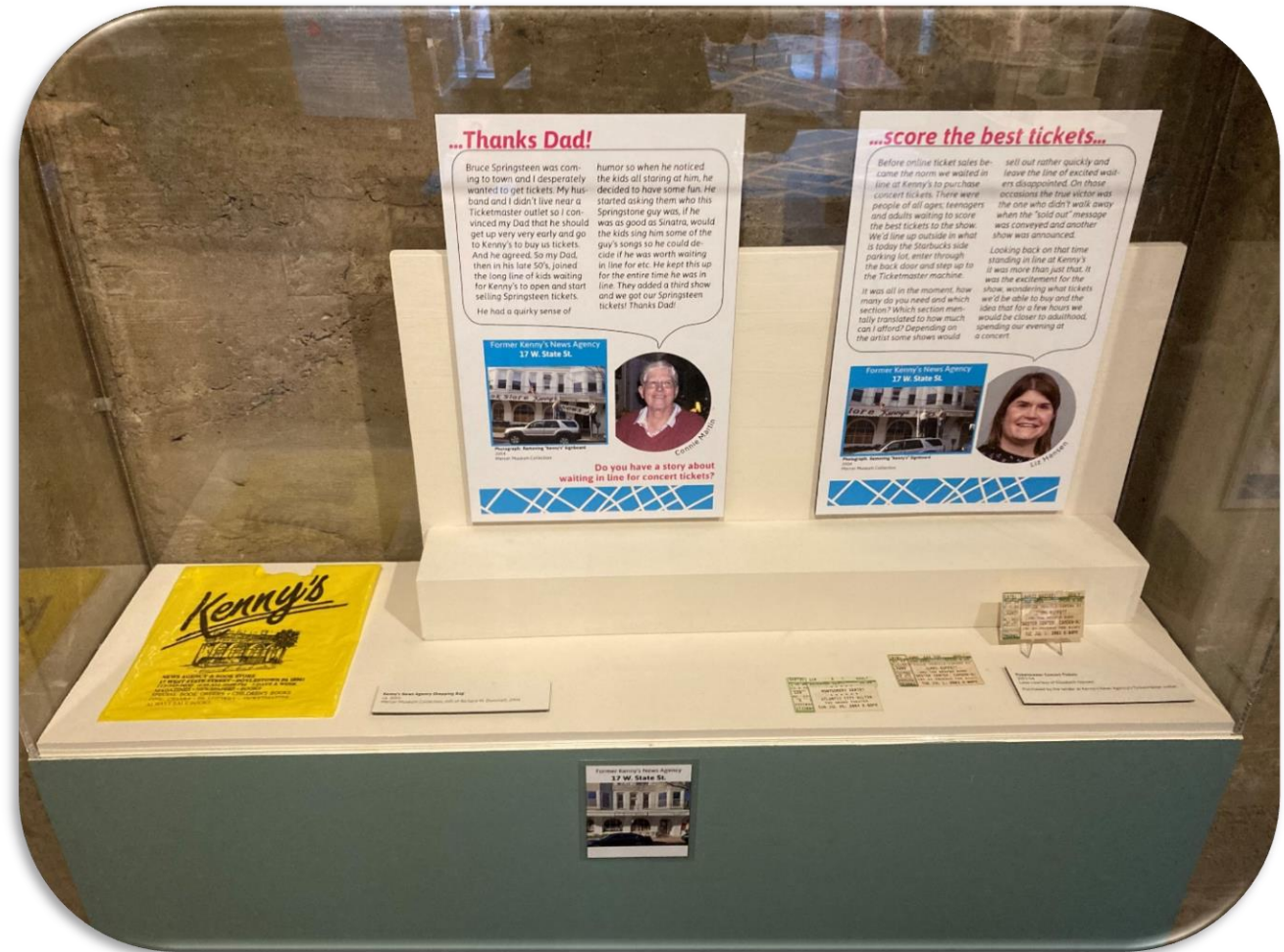
- The **least attended to** items in the space are the object cases and panels around the Share Your Stories interactive in the middle of the room (Bottle, Cemetery, Santa, and Lenape). These items might have been overlooked because of their location. For example, one person suggested Santa should be included in the interactive, and the evaluator pointed out that the display already existed.
- Other **lesser attended to** items include some along the wall, such as the Story Spots, Community Text panel, and a few object cases.

KEY FINDINGS #2

Visitors were **delighted and took interest in various objects** on display in the exhibition. The objects and their **stories** were often described in tandem when visitors shared why something was interesting. Visitors described various points of engagement, including the aesthetic of the object, an object's familiarity or nostalgia, unusual or funny stories, or stories that prompted visitors' personal memories.

INTERESTING OBJECTS & STORIES

The **Kenny's** objects and stories were most frequently named as interesting. Some locals recalled going to Kenny's themselves and had their own stories to tell about Kenny's. Others (non-local at least at the time of Kenny's) recalled their own stories of getting concert tickets. A few were also delighted by the story of a father waiting in line to buy tickets for his daughter.



INTERESTING OBJECTS & STORIES

Although Kenny's objects and stories were most named, visitors also listed a wide variety of objects and stories that interested them. Nearly one-quarter each mentioned the following:

Beads / Prison

This object and story intrigued visitors. A few described putting themselves in the shoes of the children or thought about the parents who learned their children were making bracelets with "murderers."

Korean headpiece

Visitors were attracted to the object's aesthetics and Sue Lee's perspective of sharing her culture.

The prisoner story. Hilarious. Just picturing 16-year-olds coming home and being like, "We're hanging out with murderers today."



How someone would feel invisible, but allowing her to express her culture here made her feel connected to her own roots in Korea.

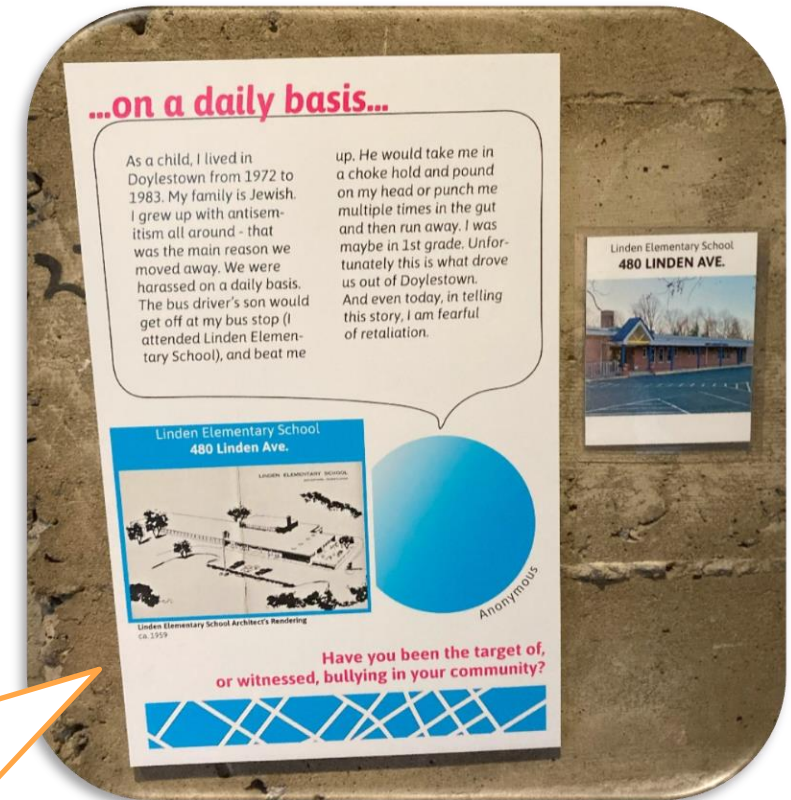
INTERESTING OBJECTS & STORIES

Another one-quarter mentioned the:

Linden Elementary story

This story made visitors feel many things — sadness, surprise, and disappointment. One person felt cognitive dissonance, having attended this school around the same time as the anonymous commentator, but was unaware of any antisemitic incidents. Another appreciated that the museum is featuring diverse stories.

The kid that moved away because of antisemitism. I was surprised and saddened by it. Surprised that it happened here, but not surprised. It's nice to see that they're trying to include more diversity because it's not much of a diverse community or hadn't always been. It's an eclectic grouping of things from the past. Feels like my dad's basement.



KEY FINDINGS #3

The exhibition inspired **many personal connections** for Doylestown residents and non-residents alike.

Doylestown residents, particularly those who have lived in the area for a long time, were **observably engaged** and voiced many connections as they visited the exhibition. In interviews, they continued to share the **connections, nostalgia, and other memories that the exhibition prompted.**

Non-residents or new residents also described personal points of entry for themselves—either deriving meaning from the history of a place or connecting to the shared humanity of the stories.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO OBJECTS & STORIES

One-third of visitors described personal connections related to the **Kenny's objects and stories**. Some recalled going to Kenny's, while others recalled waiting in line for tickets in a similar place to Kenny's near where they grew up.

One-quarter of visitors described personal connections related to **Woolworth**. Some of these visitors recalled visiting the Woolworth in Doylestown, while others recalled visiting a Woolworth or similar store and lunch counter.

When Woolworths was in town, we always went there. The lunch counter, we all loved it. [What'd you order?] Grilled cheese and fries.



It was fun explaining what Woolworths is to my child. This is how history gets lost if you don't keep memories alive.

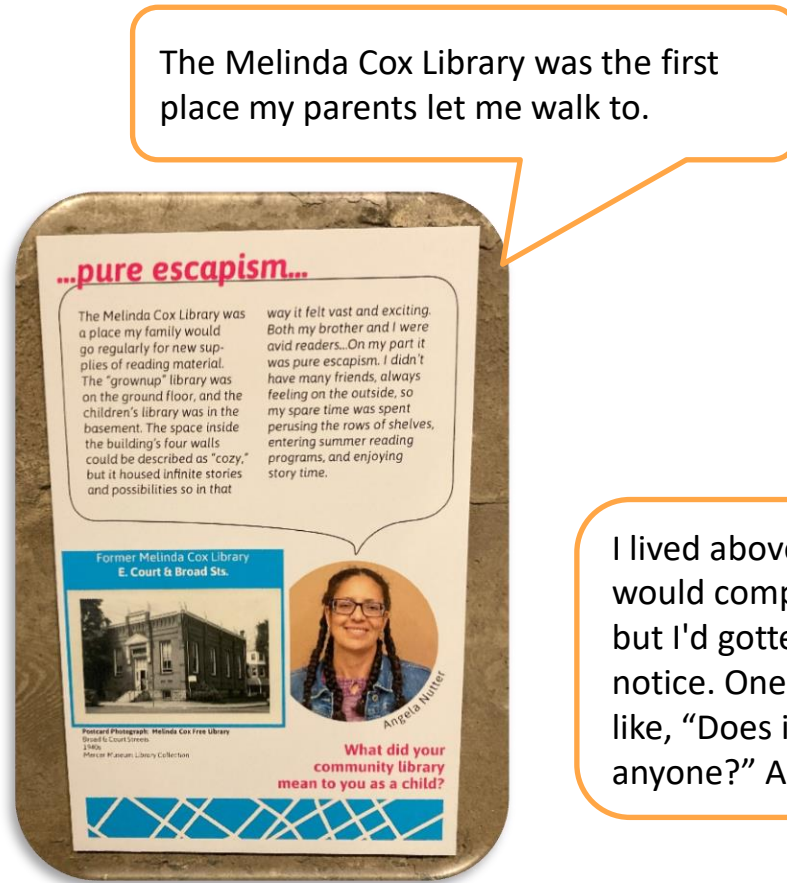
You wouldn't think anyone would save anything like that. Either they got it when the store was closing or stole it one when it was open. (Laughs)

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO OBJECTS & STORIES

Many Doylestown residents also talked about their connections to **Foster's Toy and Cycle Shop**, **Melinda Cox Library**, and **Hornberger's Bakery**.



So many memories with my kids at Foster's Toy Shop.



The Melinda Cox Library was the first place my parents let me walk to.



I lived above Hornberger's, and my kids would complain it smelled like donuts, but I'd gotten so used to it I didn't notice. One day a friend visited and was like, "Does it smell like donuts to anyone?" And the kids were like, "Aha!"

KEY FINDINGS #4

Visitors had overall **positive reactions** to the exhibition, its location, the variety of objects and stories. Visitors spoke about how the Plus Ultra project is **mission driven**, aligning with the mission of the Mercer Museum and Henry Mercer's intentions for having established the museum.

Doylestown residents **valued that the exhibition prompted memories and nostalgia**. Again, this felt in alignment with their perceptions of Henry Mercer's intentions.

ENJOYED THE CONCEPT BEHIND PLUS ULTRA AND THE EXHIBITION LOCATION

Doylestown residents were happy with the concept behind the project—local content that offers something different from the Core and encourages you to come back to the museum. Visitors also felt it was different but kept in line with the mission of Mercer.

I'd been here before and saw the castle. I'm not sure I'd come back again to see just that, so this was cool, different, unique. It is still about local stuff. Fresh.



To be honest, when I first saw it, I was disappointed. It looked small. But when you read closely, you get what you're looking for. It is good that it isn't bigger; it would be overwhelming. More and more people moving into town that don't have the same memories I did growing up here. It goes along with the Mercer idea. Mercer collected things to show how daily life was so many years ago. So this is similar, collecting these memories is an important part of that.

A little surprised, when you think of the Mercer you think of the historical artifacts, the farming stuff and wagons. This felt different but different is good.

Downstairs, they've always been interactive with the community. I assumed it would be in the music show gallery, but this is good because this forces you to wander through the museum to find this.

VALUED NOSTALGIA AND MEMORIES

Doylestown residents appreciated that the exhibition captured objects and stories of their town. It was clear visitors valued the experience of feeling nostalgic and recalling memories, both in terms of their comments during interviews and overheard social interactions. The evaluator even observed two separate visitor groups sharing stories and discussing their memories of Doylestown, its people, and shared connections with each other.

It is nice to see people's memories of places that are no longer here that I could remember.

I started remembering things that I didn't remember, like the old Santa. The more I saw on the map, the more I remembered.



Now I see why they call it awakening. Awakening about each person's story, whether sad or happy or trying to heal.

KEY FINDINGS #5

Visitors were very interested in the Mercer continuing the type of work they have been doing with the Plus Ultra project in terms of **community engagement**. They shared some suggestions that could deepen the exhibit's engagement and enhance the visitor experience in the future.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Visitors were very pleased with the project and had suggestions for deepening engagement:

- Expand the map to include more parts of Doylestown
- Include side-by-side past and present photos
- Dive deeper into one story or one person's stories
- Include more recorded content like StoryCorp
- Hold events that encourage in-person story sharing



I bought tickets at Kenny's. It'd be cool if there were a bunch of people sitting around having a beer talking about these things. [Laughs] Having you [the interviewer] here helps because it invites talking. I was going to add a card. I had a homebirth and there was a drugstore I went and bought the things I needed there. I just started feeling sentimental. [She didn't leave a written story].

APPENDIX

LOGIC MODEL

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES (articulated by Max van Balgooy with Mercer staff)

The primary goal for the project is to create a strategic thinking and planning framework to guide the Bucks County Historical Society in planning future exhibitions at the Mercer Museum that encourage residents of Bucks County to:

- feel less overwhelmed and better engaged with historical objects at the Mercer Museum by offering more intimate encounters with the collections (recognize the trees in the forest of objects, relief from the visual overload)
- find personal meaning in the historical objects in the Mercer Museum (humanize objects, look at objects in new ways, see museum core differently, feel surprise and awe)
- be inspired to explore the history of Bucks County through local cultural organizations (experience a strong sense of place).

PROJECT INPUTS

Prototypes developed by Metcalfe and Sarah Archer. The prototypes will explore the concept of inheritance. The prototypes are designed to help visitors compare and contrast pairings of objects with questions prompting connectivity to visitors' personal lives. The prototypes are designed to be unfacilitated experiences.

VISITOR OUTCOMES with indicators in bullets that describe result of prototype on visitors (developed by RK&A; will be used to measure success in evaluation)

Visitors recognize material culture as evidence of the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures. (cognitive)

- Visitors describe a story told by one of the objects on display.
- Visitors describe objects as providing insight to the history and values of individuals, families, or cultures.

Visitors feel delighted in comparing the objects presented through Plus Ultra. (affective)

- Visitors talk animatedly with their group about the prototypes.
- Visitors describe their experience with the prototypes engaging and enjoyable.

Visitors find personal meaning in reflecting upon their own lives and histories. (affective)

- Visitors connect their experience with the objects to their own life.
- Visitors describe the process of reflecting on the connection between the objects and their own life as meaningful or important.

Visitors activate curiosity. (attitudinal)

- Visitors describe questions or ideas that they wondered about as a result of their experience with the prototypes.
- Visitors describe feel inspired and curious about something else as a result of their experience with the prototypes.

IMPACT (Result of the Mercer Museum on audiences; developed by RK&A with Mercer staff in 2019)

Inspired by Henry Mercer's creative vision and pursuit of meaning, visitors delight in experiencing a strong sense of place while contemplating historic artifacts and human ingenuity.