Philosopher's Corner

Joyce Ma

February 2006

THIS IS **NOT** A DEFINITIVE FINAL REPORT

FORMATIVE evaluation studies like this one often:

- **are conducted quickly**, which may mean
  - small sample sizes
  - expedited analyses
  - brief reports

- **look at an earlier version** of the exhibit/program, which may mean
  - a focus on problems and solutions, rather than successes
  - a change in form or title of the final exhibit/program

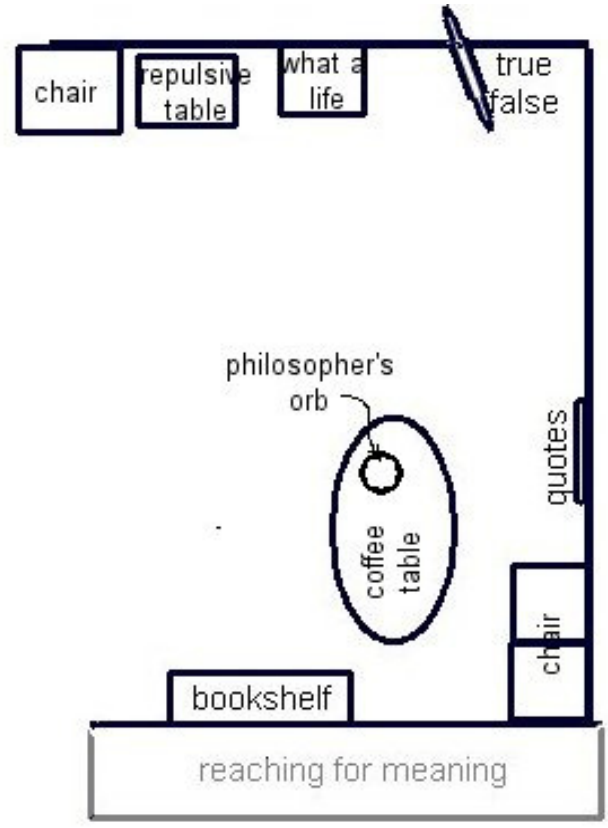
Mind – Formative
Philosopher's Corner

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PURPOSE

The Philosopher's Corner is a prototype space intended to encourage visitors to consider philosophical questions about the mind. It is currently instantiated in a carpeted area towards the back of the Mind section and has cushioned seats, books on a small bookshelf, and a coffee table. We also placed the *Repulsive Table*, skeleton in the closet (aka *What a Life!*), quotes on banners, a true/false paradoxical statement on a two-sided sign, and the *Philosopher's Orb* in the area. The current instantiation of the Philosopher's Corner represents the team's first step in creating a contemplative space in the Mind section. See Figure 1 - Figure 5.

Figure 1. Philosopher's Corner – Layout



The team is just beginning to experiment with ways to encourage visitors to reflect on philosophical issues in this area. This evaluation is, therefore, the first in a series and serves to help us collect baseline information about:

- What visitors do in the Philosopher's Corner. For example,
  - How long do people stay?
  - What do they look at and use?
  - What do visitors think about?
- How visitors perceive the Philosopher's Corner as a space. In particular, do visitors feel that the area is conducive for contemplation?

Figure 2. Philosopher's Corner (Feb 26, 2006)



Figure 3. Bookshelf

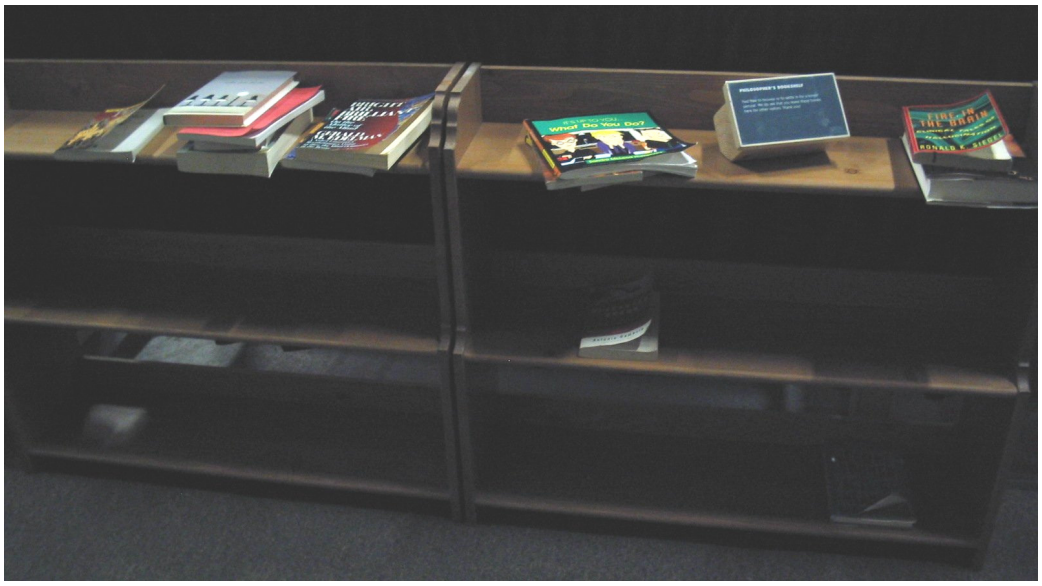


Figure 4. *Philosopher's Orb* on Coffee table with Quotes on Banner in background



Figure 5. *What a Life!* on right with *Repulsive Table* on left



METHOD

An evaluator observed every visitor who stepped into the carpeted area and who was 8 years old or older. She noted what the visitor did, paying special attention to what, if anything, the visitor read and what objects (e.g. *Philosopher's Orb*) s/he used. The evaluator also timed how long that visitor stayed inside the carpeted area.

The evaluator would then approach every other visitor, whom she was observing, for an interview. On Saturday, February 18, the evaluator asked every visitor she observed for an interview. By then, we were confident that we would not be interviewing people from the same visiting group given the holding time and the length of the interview. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

DATA COLLECTED

We collected data on

Date	Day	Times
2/2/2006	Thursday	3 pm – 4 pm
2/9/2006	Thursday	3 pm – 3:30 pm
2/11/2006	Saturday	11:30 am – 3:30 pm
2/18/2006	Saturday	11 am – 4 pm

- Observations
  - N=30

Group Type	Count (out of 30)
Adult peer group	5
Multigenerational group	18
Individual adult	7

Gender	Count (out of 30)
Female	18
Male	12

Age Group	Count (out of 30)
Child	6
Adult	24

- Interviews
  - N=21[1]

Group Type	Count (out of 21)
Adult peer group	3
Multigenerational group	12
Individual adult	6

Gender	Count (out of 21)
Female	10
Male	11

Age Group	Count (out of 21)
Child	4
Adult	17

RESULTS

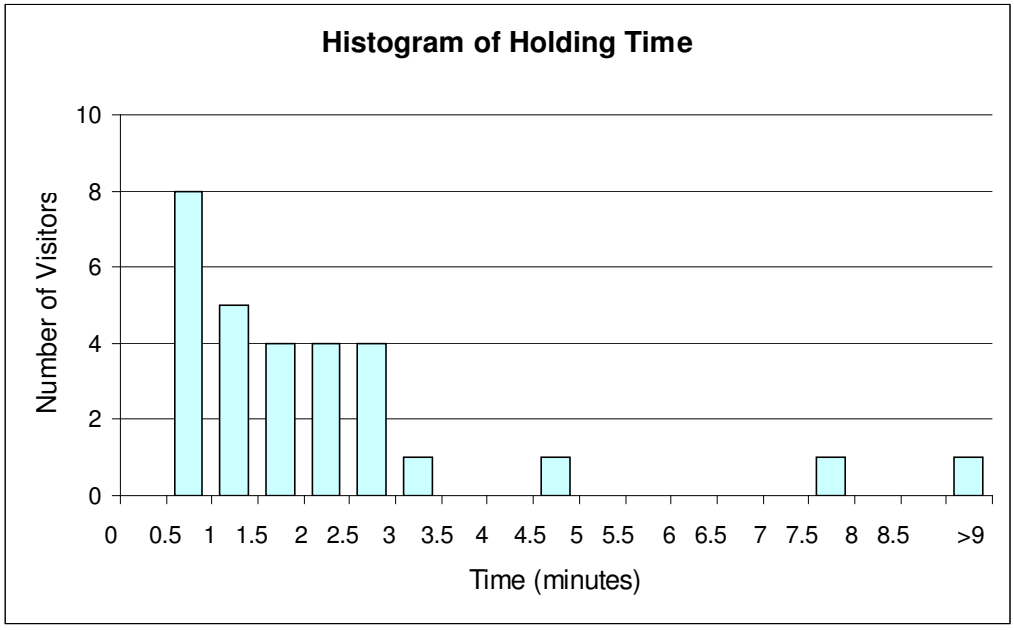
What did visitors do?

Holding Time

Figure 6 shows the amount of time visitors spent in the Philosopher's Corner. On average, people stayed 1 minute 39 seconds (median), with the maximum stay lasting about 22 minutes and the minimum stay being 31 seconds.

[1] Some visitors did not complete the interview. These cases are noted in the results reported.

Figure 6. Histogram of Time Spent in Philosopher's Corner



Visitors' Activities

During their time in this area, visitors:

Activity	Count (out of 30)
Opened the skeleton's closet	21
Looked at the *Repulsive Table*	15
Looked at the stories on the skeleton's closet	14
Read the quotes on the banner	9
Picked up the *Philosopher's Orb*	7
Read the true/false paradox	7
Sat	7
Ate a snack	2
Talked on their cell phone	2
Lied on the couch	1
Opened a book	0

Note that a majority of the visitors' behaviors we observed were not drastically different from their behavior on the floor using individual exhibits (e.g. interacting with an exhibit, reading

labels). In fact, during our times on the floor, we saw no one pick up and read a book, a 'new' behavior we wanted to encourage in the Philosopher's Corner.

Visitors' Thoughts

We were particularly interested in whether or not visitors were reflecting on their own thinking in this space and asked visitors what they thought about, if anything, when they were in the carpeted area. We then categorized their responses into three broad categories:

Physical includes comments about the physical space and the objects in that space (8 out of 21 visitors)	Visitor3: It felt kinda like a living room, kinda comfortable. Visitor16: It's more of a contemplative area. Visitor5: Nothing, just looking at the chair, thinking about sitting down. Visitor9: Ancient times. Sort of a spiritual feeling from the shadows up there. … Visitor18: Well I read some of the things and thought about what they said like in that cupboard. Visitor19: Not too much. The quotes are interesting. Visitor20: I looked at the table with the shoes and thought about what the label was talking about … I don't know if this is really the right place for it. It's kinda loud. Visitor27: Neat stuff but needs to be more. Visitor30: I thought, "Oh, I really don't want to look at a skeleton."
Mental includes remarks about thinking where the subject of their thinking is thinking itself (4 out of 21 visitors)	Visitor7: I thought about how I ought to think about things more deeply. Visitor13: It got me thinking, especially as the three of us were talking about questions from the orb, all of this stuff you never really think about. Visitor20: I looked at the table with the shoes and thought about what the label was talking about and thought about if I feel in line with what it was saying. I read the poetry. I thought it would be really great to think but I don't know if this is really the right place for it. It's kinda loud. Visitor25: We were confused. We were confused about what we were thinking, we confused ourselves, and we were confused with what was going on in our heads.
Behavioral includes remarks about what visitors thought about doing in the space (4 out of 21 visitors)	Visitor5: Nothing, just looking at the chair, thinking about sitting down. Visitor7: I thought about how I ought to think about things more deeply. Visitor9: I wanted to investigate that but he ran off. It has sort of a mystical feel. I was wishing that I could sit and read some Nietzsche with a cup of tea. Visitor30: I thought, "Oh, I really don't want to look at a skeleton."

Six out of the 21 visitors we interviewed reported that they did not think about anything in particular, and one visitor talked about life in general:

> Visitor11: well, life. And the things in life and the important things that matter and the fun things in life.

We also asked visitors during their interviews what they did in the space and looked for examples of thinking about thinking, paying particular attention to if and how the objects in the Philosopher's Corner provoked thought. We found few examples in visitors' responses, but that may simply be due to the wording of the question, which focused visitors on what they *did* as opposed to what they *thought*. The few instances of visitors' talk about their thoughts regarding the objects we placed in the Philosopher's Corner are given here:

For the *Philosopher's Orb*:

Visitor7: I read everything, read the quotes, thought about discussing the questions [in Philosopher's Orb] but thought I'd do it later.

For *What a Life!*:

Visitor11: I came over and opened up the door and read the thing there and looked at the skeleton. The thing it says, it's very true, about experiencing all aspects of life if you really want to live. You don't know when you're going to die. And thinking about, like a graveyard. When you walk by, you don't know how long those skeletons have been there. Maybe some of them aren't even skeletons anymore, they could just be dust. Like the Bible says, we start as dust and end as dust. It was quite absorbing. It makes you think.

Visitor13: I tried to figure out that exhibit with the skeleton. I tried to see if I felt different emotions, I didn't. But I really liked the philosopher's orb; that was good.

For the *True/False Paradox*:

Visitor25: Well we looked at the skeleton closet and that didn't really work. And the statement thing [paradox] was really interesting because there's a lot to think about…it's hard to explain.

How visitors perceived the Philosopher's Corner as a space

Initial Impressions

We asked visitors what they expected to find when they first entered the carpeted area.

- About one-quarter (5/21) saw it as a place to sit.

  Visitor5: It says an area to think so I thought it was just to sit and think.

  Visitor11: At first I thought it was a place to sit down and rest, but when I got in and saw the skeleton…I didn't know.

  Visitor20: … I also thought it would be a place to sit and rest.

  Visitor25: Just a seating area with nothing.

  Visitor26: I thought- relaxation.

- Others (5/21) talked about the exhibits (and signs) they expected to find in the area

  Visitor9: Well I saw him open the closet door with the skeleton in it and I wanted to get a picture. I would not have known what to expect, I was just following my grandson.

  Visitor15: Some kind of horror thing in that coffin.

  Visitor18: Old things. [Why did you expect to find old things?] It just seemed like that kind of place.

Visitor19: My wife told me to read the quotes so…

Visitor28: I saw that hanging stuff so I went to see.

- A small minority, 3 out of 21 visitors, thought of the area as a place to think.

Visitor5: It says an area to think so I thought it was just to sit and think.

Visitor20: I read that it was the Philosopher's Corner and that it's a place to sit and think. And I saw there were displays set up to investigate thought. …

Visitor23: Stuff about philosophy.

But, about half of the visitors who dropped in (10 out of 21) said they had no expectations. This suggests that the space may not have a very distinct and clearly articulated character as yet. Visitors may not know what they are 'supposed' to do in the current Philosopher's Corner.

Why visitors leave the area

We found that people left the area for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons:

- Intrinsic (11/19) reasons include wanting to see more interesting exhibits and having 'finished' using the exhibits or reading the signs in the space. These visitors seem to think of the Philosopher's Corner as a set of exhibits, which they use and then leave, usually for more interactive exhibits elsewhere.
- Extrinsic (8/19) reasons include needing to chase after or accommodate usually a young child who wanted to go elsewhere. So, the space and the activities it offers did not seem to accommodate long interactions for family groups.

These findings bring to light challenges to address in future incarnations of Philosopher's Corner: Visitors may see it as a set of individual exhibits that they use and then leave for 'more interactive' exhibits elsewhere. Some visitors who may want to stay longer in the Philosopher's Corner may be at the museum with children who are more interested in moving to another area.

The Philosopher's Corner as a different space

Yet, we found that most (17/20) visitors thought the space seemed different from the rest of the museum. They thought the Philosopher's Corner felt different because:

- It is physically different (6/20)

Visitor3: The rest of the museum is very individualistic, but this one seems like it's all around you.

Visitor13: Well, most of the other ones seem more hands-on. This looks like a living room.

Visitor17: Simpler.

Visitor20: It's got the couches and the seating so it's telling people they can sit down. It's not necessarily inviting curiosity.

Visitor22: There's not as many things going on in here, so I guess it's different in that way.

Visitor27: It's carpeted and has couches

- It's designed for a different set of activities (6/20). In particular, visitors thought the area was for relaxing, sitting, and thinking. More specifically, 2 visitors said that the area seem to encourage deeper thinking.

  Visitor5: It's just an area where you could relax if you didn't have kids with you.

  Visitor7: I think it appeals to older people because they're not such practical things to do. It's about thought. It's not very tangible for a child. It seems more tangible for adults.

  Visitor9: Again, I wanted to sit and read and spend some more time.

  Visitor11: It's different in the fact that you can sit and give deep thought to what you've seen. It's a place to really ponder and come up with your own deep thought. I might write a poem about it actually.

  Visitor27: you can relax there.

  Visitor30: It makes you think a little bit more.

- The content focus is different (5/20)

  Visitor7: It's about thought.

  Visitor25: It's more about how your mind works rather than physical things.

  Visitor15: Most exhibits don't show history, which I enjoy.

  Visitor19: It's philosophical.

  Visitor18: Because all the other areas are about illusions and stuff. This is about everyday life in a way.

- It has a different feel to it (3/20)

  Visitor9: It kind of takes you back in time. It just feels spiritual, maybe even a sacred place.

  Visitor16: I think it's quieter and not as interactive. It's a space but might need something that defines it better.

  Visitor26: because it's kind of more relaxed.

- It's designed for an older audience (2/20)

  Visitor7: I think it appeals to older people because they're not such practical things to do. It's about thought. It's not very tangible for a child. It seems more tangible for adults.

  Visitor28: Another place kids more fun. But this area is more higher age people.

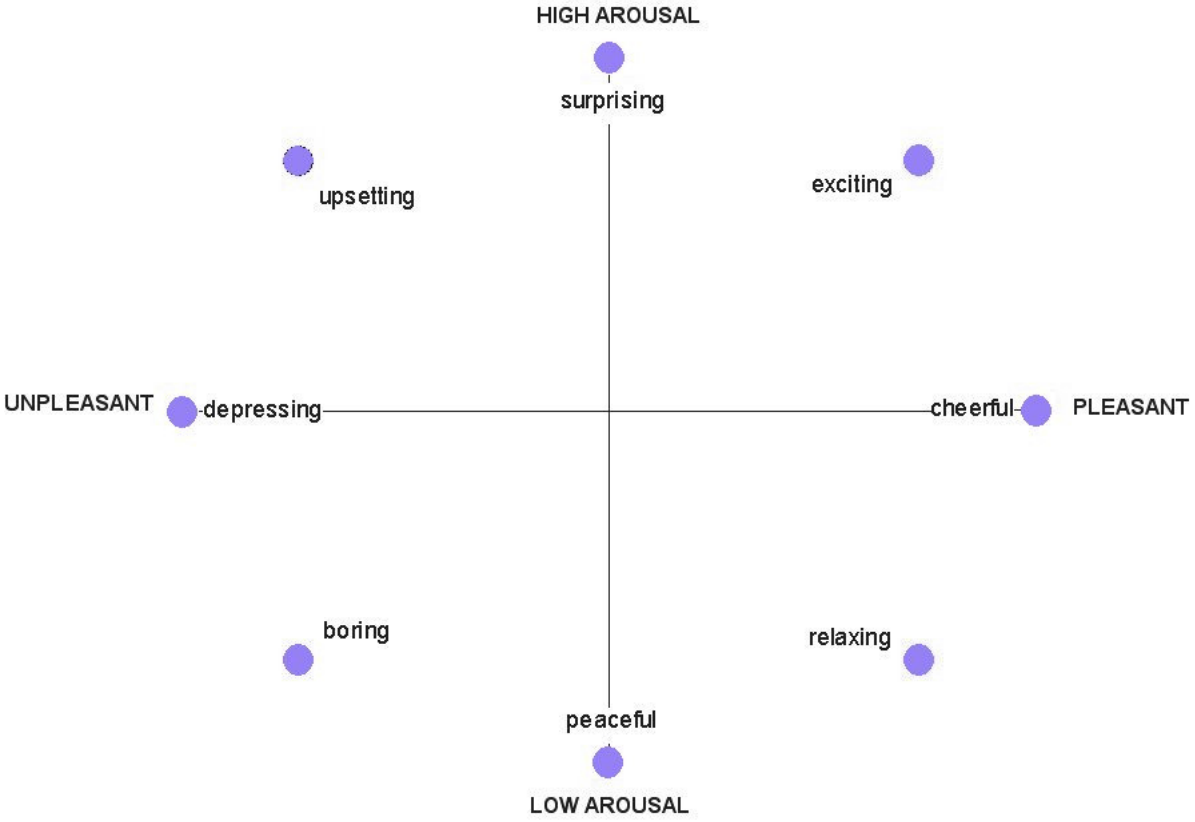
The perceived character of the space

We followed by asking what words visitors themselves would use to describe the area to gauge the mood or character of the current space:

Comfortable (2)	Thought provoking (3)	Interesting (1)
Quiet (2)	Confusing and interesting (1)	Mystical, sacred (1)
Relaxing (1)	Difficult to understand (1)	Cool (1)
Homey, nicely lit (1)	Experimental, more reflective (1)	Different (1)
A break (1)	Non-scientific (1)	A funny place (1)

We then showed each visitor we interviewed a set of words on cards, one word at a time, and asked the visitor to sort each card, identifying whether or not the word was a good description of the area they were just in. In selecting our words, we chose to characterize emotions according to two dimensions, valence and arousal, that define a circumplex, and then selected words from that circumplex.[2] See Figure 7 for the words and their place in the valence – arousal space.

Figure 7. Words in Valence - Arousal Space



In addition, we included 4 words that did not map neatly to these two dimensions[3] but that were moods that the space was trying to effect or avoid. These were:

[2] Some researchers believe that all emotions can be described according to three independent dimensions: pleasure (or valence), arousal and dominance. See Mehrabian and Russell (1977). We, however, chose to look only at valence and arousal to keep the number of words to a manageable number (8) and, at the same time, allow us a range of words that may apply to Philosopher's Corner.

[3] This suggests that describing emotions according to pleasure and arousal may be inadequate in characterizing an environment that needs to encourage learning and not just effect a mood. Recently, researchers are looking into defining an emotion set more relevant to learning (Kort, Reilly, & Picard).

- Contemplative
- Thought-provoking
- Overwhelming
- Confusing

Note that the emotions that each word connotes may differ for each visitor. Our results, therefore, give a very rough feel for how visitors were perceiving this space.

Figure 8 shows the number of visitors who thought that the word was a good description of the area. No one thought the space was boring, a large majority of the visitors thought the area was contemplative and thought-provoking, and more than half of the visitors thought the Philosopher's Corner was peaceful, relaxing, yet surprising.

Figure 8. Number of visitors who thought the word was a good description for Philosopher's Corner

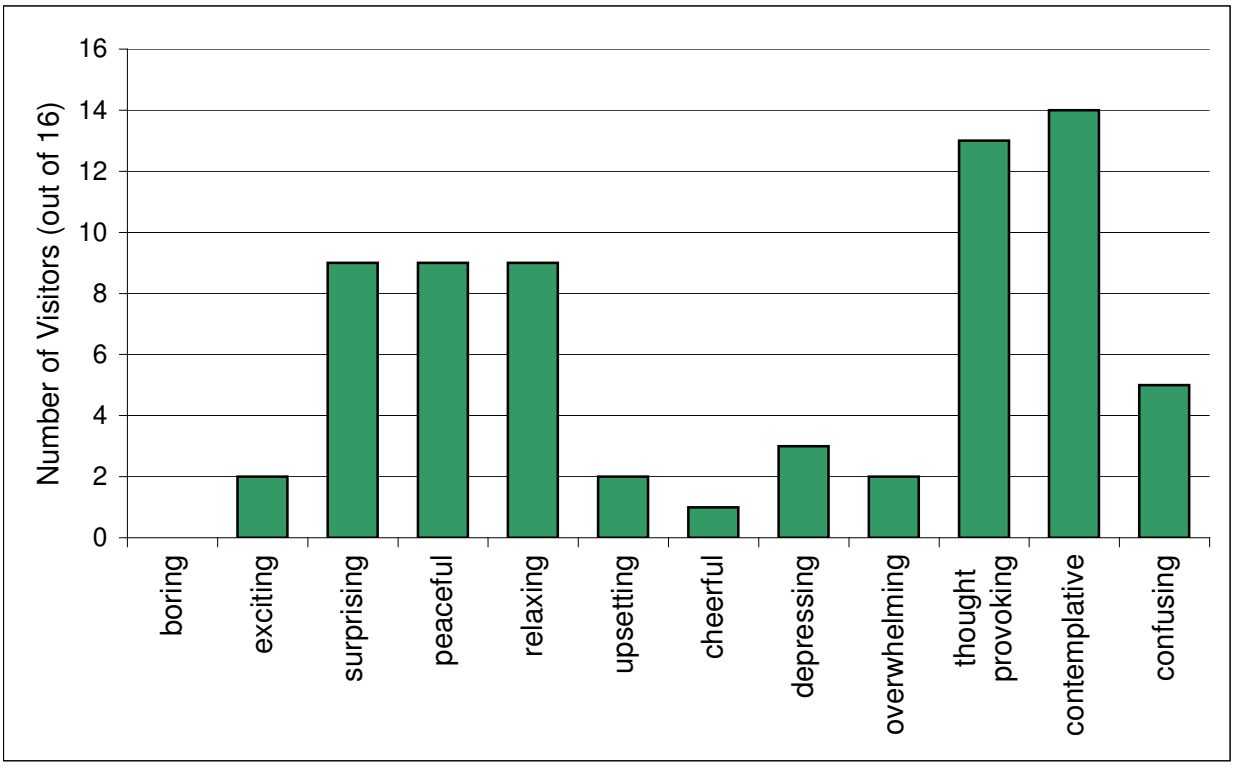
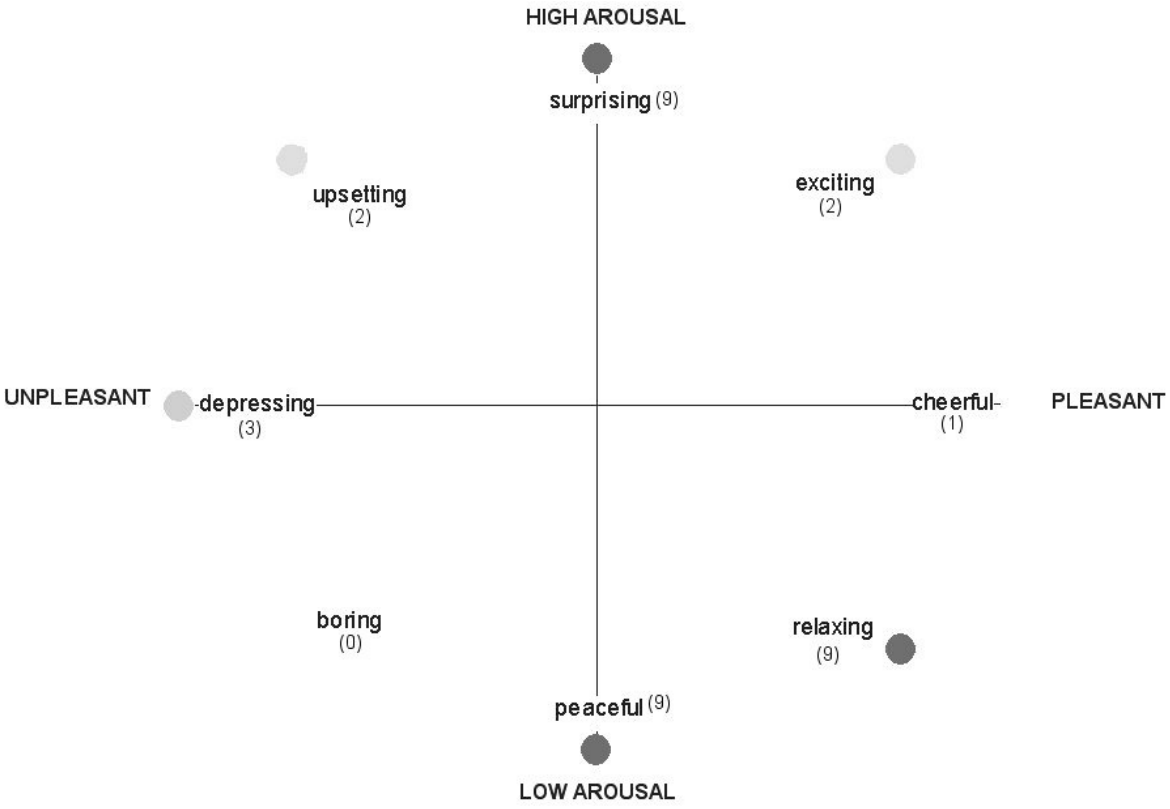


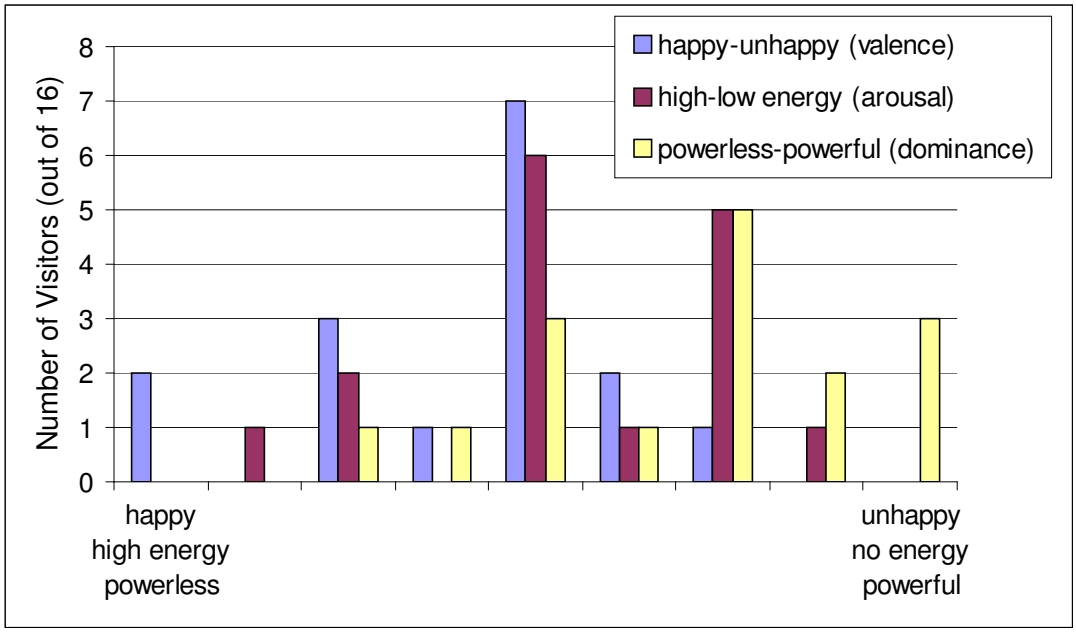
Figure 9. Number of visitors who thought the word was a good description for Philosopher's Corner according to valence and arousal.



Finally, we asked visitors to use the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM), developed and tested by Morris (1995), to describe how the Philosopher's Corner made them feel.[4] The results are shown in Figure 10. We found that visitors did not have strong leanings in either direction for valence or for arousal, averaging a 5 on both measures. Visitors did report that they felt in control in the space, with an average dominance rating of 7 (out of 9).

[4] SAM is used in advertising research and has been correlated with adjectives defined by Russell and Mehrabian (1977) in their work refining the three dimensional description of emotional responses. We decided to try SAM with our visitors mainly to experiment with using this instrument to collect information about visitor affect.

Figure 10. Visitors' SAM response. Median for valence = 5; median for arousal = 5; median for dominance = 7.



SUMMARY

This formative evaluation looked at what visitors did and how visitors perceived the first instance of the Philosopher's Corner, a space intended to encourage people to pause and reflect on the more philosophical questions related to mind.

<u>What visitors did</u>

- Visitors stayed 1 minute 39 seconds (median) on average. The longest holding time was about 22 minutes[5], and the shortest was 31 seconds. We suspect that deep self-reflection may not happen in a few minutes.
- A majority of the visitors who came into the Philosopher's Corner used an exhibit, most often *What a Life!,* or read the quotes and statements hanging in the area. Very few visitors used the space in a very different way from other exhibit spaces on the floor. That is, we saw no one open a book, and only a minority (7/30) of the visitors even sat down.
- About 20% (4/21) visitors reported thinking about their own thinking while they were in the Philosopher's Corner. One person even contemplated life in general. However, 7/21 visitors said they didn't think about anything in particular and 8/21 remarked on an object they saw as opposed to reflecting on their own thoughts.

[5] This person talked on her cell phone most of her time in the Philosopher's Corner.

Our current findings suggest that few visitors are engaging in deep ponderings in the Philosopher's Corner. However, it's possible that the area is provoking thought but currently does not support prolonged reflection while the visitor is in that space. The following visitor comments hint at this:

> Visitor7: I read everything, read the quotes, thought about discussing the questions [posed by the Philosopher's Orb] but thought I'd do it later… I did think about sitting and reading, but my brother's got one of those books so I thought I could just read his later.
>
> Visitor9: I wanted to investigate that but he ran off. It has sort of a mystical feel. I was wishing that I could sit and read some Nietzsche with a cup of tea.
>
> Visitor20: I thought it would be really great to think but I don't know if this is really the right place for it. It's kinda loud.

Creating activities, objects, and context to support thinking about thinking remains an ongoing challenge for the Philosopher's Corner.

How visitors perceived the Philosopher's Corner as a space

We have some indications that visitors see the current Philosopher's Corner as a set of exhibits to be used rather than a space to spend time in contemplation. For example:

- About half of the visitors who dropped in (10 out of 21) said they had no or little idea of what to expect when they first entered the Philosopher's Corner. This suggests that the space may not clearly communicate its intent and lacks what Allen (2004) calls 'immediate apprenhendability' for reflection (i.e., it does not readily suggest and afford reflection). This might explain why some visitors default to 'typical' museum behavior of moving from one exhibit to another and why few visitors engage in activities such as reading books or simply sitting and talking in the Philosopher's Corner.
- About half the visitors said that they left the Philosopher's Corner because they were 'finished' looking at whatever was in there, usually referring to exhibits, or because they thought there were more interactive exhibits elsewhere.
- Less than a quarter articulated reflecting on thought itself in the space.

Furthermore, some of the visitors who did want to stay explained that they were with children who wanted to go elsewhere. This suggests that the current Philosopher's Corner does not accommodate all members of family groups, our largest constituents. In fact, a few of the visitors even characterized the Philosopher's Corner as a place for adults and not children.

Yet, a large majority of the visitors (17/20) thought that the Philosopher's Corner felt different from the rest of the museum because it was physically different (e.g. carpeted, had places to sit), it seemed to be for a different purpose (e.g. for relaxation), or because it seemed to focus on a different content area (e.g. thinking). When asked to describe the Philosopher's Corner in their own words, a few visitors volunteered 'quiet' and 'thought-provoking.' Then when we asked visitors to select from our set of adjectives, a large majority thought the space was

'thought-provoking' and 'contemplative' while more than half picked 'peaceful', 'surprising', and 'relaxing'.

So, there is some indication that visitors perceived the Philosopher's Corner as a different space with a different mood from the rest of the museum.[6] However, it currently does not have a clearly defined character for visitors. As one visitor explained:

> Visitor16: I think it's quieter and not as interactive. It's a space but might need something that defines it better.

In the coming months we will continue to experiment with better defining the character of the Philosopher's Corner as well as methods to gauge visitors' thinking and visitors' affect about the space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[6] Future studies may compare visitors' descriptions of the Philosopher's Corner to descriptions of the larger Mind section and of the Exploratorium to see if there is a difference.

APPENDIX A

Shuffle the words beforehand.

1. What did you expect to find when you first entered that area? Anything, in particular?

2. Can you tell me what you did in that area?

3. Can you tell me: What did you think about when you were in that area? Anything in particular?

4. Why did you decide to leave that area when you did?

5. Does that space seem different from or similar to the rest of the museum? How so? [Probe: how is it similar? How is it different from the other parts of the museum?]

6. What words would you use to describe that area? [Probe: any other words come to mind?]

7. I'd like to show you some words that other people have used to describe this area. Will you tell me if you feel that the word is a good description of the space, a poor description of the space, or if you don't feel it's either a good or a bad description.

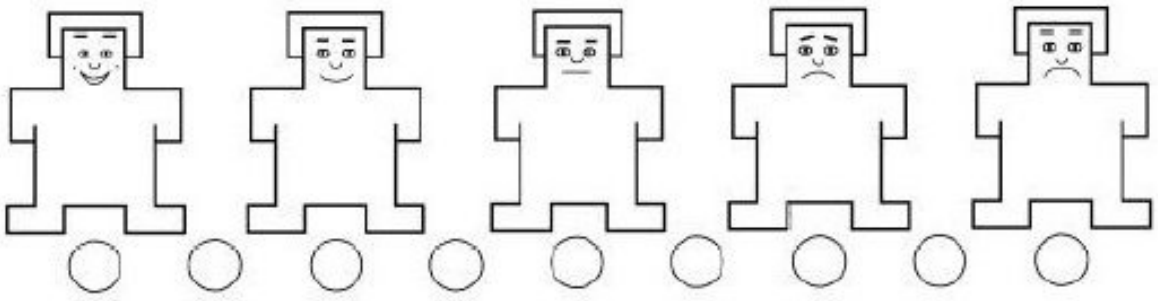
Word	Good	Bad	Neither
Boring			
Cheerful			
Confusing			
Contemplative			
Depressing			
Exciting			
Overwhelming			
Peaceful			
Relaxing			
Surprising			
Thought provoking			
Upsetting			

8. And one last thing. Will you mark on this piece of paper, how you felt when you were in that space?

How did you feel?

Please check one of the circles.

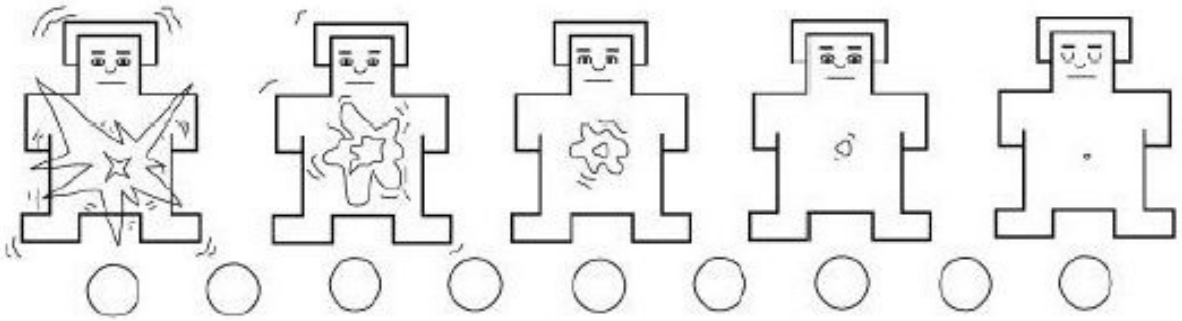
Happy Unhappy



Please check one of the circles.

Energetic Sleepy

High energy Low, no energy



Please check one of the circles.

Powerless Powerful

Being Controlled In Control

