come again, bring a friend

a design brief from Benjamin Fleming & Nathan Judges

our vision

" We aim to shift the perception of the MCA as a solely aesthetic and passive experience to one that visitors view as a leisurely, socially connected environment. We seek to augment this aesthetic experience with interactivity and play so that the museum retains its inspirational and educational qualities in a way that visitors will want to return to with another.

We hope to break down preconceived barriers that guests create; the museum can be a stifling environment that does not enable social leisure and that you need to "know" art to have a good time. We will achieve this by utilising what the MCA already possesses: a breadth of curated modern art content, expansive and self-exploratory indoor exhibition rooms, the striking exterior architecture and the harbour-side locale it resides in. We will interweave this with our insights into what visitors require from a place to warrant them to return to conceptualise a digital, tangible experience that emboldens their sociality and makes them want to visit time and time again. "

it's justification

The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) is a museum dedicated to making "contemporary art and ideas accessible to a range of audiences through a presentation of diverse exhibitions and special events" (MCA, 2018). The gallery houses more than 4000 works in it's collection and is trafficked by more than a million visitors a year, many of them tourists, due in part to it being situated on Sydney's idyllic harbour in The Rocks precinct. The gallery is split over four levels; the innards are made up of cavernous exhibition rooms (ceilings so tall you can barely make them out, polished concrete floors and spotlights on pieces as the main light source) contrasted by multiple modest side rooms with differing curatorial themes or media artworks. The exterior is a striking amalgam of the buildings original colonial architecture and a new modern wing, surrounded by lush grass for public space, drawing any passerby towards it.

Museums and art galleries are intended as educational leisure settings; they seek to weave educational and aesthetic elements in a social context (Forrest, 2014). If this is the intent - why do some visitors feel these settings do not enable them to have a leisurely time with a friend? In our initial brain dump and mind mapping activities, we learned that majority of our peers visit the MCA once and then do not return (either ever, or only in a blue moon). We sought to understand what exactly about the MCA led to this, and focussed our research on these one-time only visitors. Prior to this - we undertook contextual mapping activities on the environment itself, shadowing users and understanding the space to provide requirements for our proposed solutions and to inform our generative exercise design.

The concept of visitor experience can be defined as "an individual's immediate subjective and personal response to an activity, setting or event outside their usual environment" (Packer et al., 2016). By this definition, visitor experiences are subjective and personal, making understanding the visitor experience a relatively challenging research undertaking (Packer et al., 2016). Despite this, our team conducted generative research sessions with 8 participants. They had a variety of ages, backgrounds and personal circumstances: some were students, parents, artists or professionals. All had the one-time visit in common. To unpack the reasons behind this we created co-design activities which explored the places they go with a group - places they go all the time, ones they'd never visit again, and the who, why and what they were doing on these outings, in order to take the key issues and desired traits of these experiences to apply to our museum context.

Through our analysis of this research, we have distilled the insights into three key needs to address that enable a space such as the MCA to encourage sociality:

Casual, laid back settings with ancillary activities are key to a good outing:

The MCA isn't necessarily a formal place, there is just a misconception amongst users that it is. Certain atmospheric qualities contribute to this - users cite being in the presence of high value art, and the library-esque quietness of the place as not enabling them to have a good, social time. When we interviewed gallery assistants they assured us that this was not the intent. They also need stimulation: to participate rather than browse (which is why the vibe & pool table at settings like the pub draws them back). Contemporary museums are becoming active producers of culture, not merely passive collectors of it (Smith, 2011), it's visitors also expect an active role in this production.

The connectedness that comes
from shared reflection is the best part of the gallery:

A common thread in our users discussions on their experiences at galleries was that the contents aid in conversations with their peers was their primary love of them. They love "finding obscure parts of pieces and sharing them" and that they "enable discussions with friends that may not happen otherwise." This is part of the MCA's goal and our own social interaction driven vision; our concepts should seek to augment this element as the projects vision needs to be embedded within the larger vision of an institution to succeed (Fox, 2014).

I don't know enough about art to fully immerse myself in a gallery:

This need ties directly with the reflection aspect above, and is an intriguing facet of the experience shared explicitly by some users and tacitly by most. The MCA is an aesthetic and educational institution and requires no pre-existing foray into the art world to be enjoyed, although users who feel ashamed at their inability to interpret a gallery routinely feel ashamed and inclined to withdraw from them entirely (Forrest, 2014). Ones interpretations are personal, and your own and your peers are realistically all that are required. Our concepts should quash this notion through their treatment of the other two needs to create an experience enjoyed by all, regardless of educational level or art anxieties.

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