

# OBJECT PROJECT



## A STUDY OF THE EXHIBITION

AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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Smithsonian Institution  
*Office of Policy and Analysis*

**PREFACE**

The Smithsonian community and the millions of visitors to the National Museum of American History (NMAH) welcomed the 2015 opening of eleven exhibitions and learning spaces dedicated to innovation, on the first floor of NMAH’s newly renovated West Wing. The Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) was therefore enthusiastic to undertake a study of one of its exhibitions, *Object Project*. This report documents our study.

Howard Morrison, the *Object Project* Co-Project Director, was a pleasure to work with. He has been an exemplary “client,” providing information, support and truly listening to our results and discussion. He met with OP&A staff to ensure that we understood the exhibition’s intent, answered our questions, and provided pamphlets to use as a token of appreciation for interviewed visitors.

The data for this study came from personal interviews with people visiting *Object Project* as well as iPad surveys completed by them. We appreciate respondents’ willing participation and comments. The time they provided, in the midst of a summer visit, is evidence of their interest in helping Smithsonian museums serve them more effectively.

OP&A staff member Zahava D Doering, and the contractors and interns listed below, made the study and this report happen. I thank them all.

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## THE EXHIBITION



[See <http://americanhistory.si.edu/object-project>]

*Object Project*, an exhibition that explores “everyday things that changed everything,” opened on July 1, 2015, in the National Museum of American History (NMAH), Smithsonian Institution.\* The exhibition, approximately 4,000 square feet, is one of eleven exhibitions and learning spaces that are on the first floor of NMAH’s newly renovated West Wing, dedicated to innovation. The 45,000 square-foot wing explores multiple facets of Americans’ drive for “game-changing ideas and new ways of doing things—for remaking the present and shaping the future.” Each of the spaces is unique but integrated around the themes of the Innovation Wing.

The *Object Project* exhibition was informed by studies of the museum’s audiences as well as the staff’s extensive experience in working with families and young people. It aims to be a place for a multi-generational audience that values learning about itself, engaging with both emotion and intellect, connecting personally with national history and narrative, and constructing authority for independent learning alongside the museum exhibit. The focus, however, was on adults.

*Object Project*’s design was also informed by the “IPOP” framework of people’s experience preferences, developed by the Smithsonian’s Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A). NMAH made every effort to include experiences that would resonate with visitors attracted primarily to Ideas (concepts/abstractions/facts), People (human connections/stories/social interactions), Objects (things/aesthetics), and Physical experiences (movement/touch/sound/light). And, adopting an extension of the framework that suggests that memorable meaningful experiences

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\* Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of the NMAH.

are those that cause visitors to “flip” from their preferred experience category to another, the NMAH developers deliberately combined and juxtaposed all four types.

*Object Project* uses more than 250 authentic objects from the Museum’s permanent and teaching collections to support its main idea, “People + Innovative Things + Social Change = Life as We Know It.” The space, at the end of the Innovation Wing, is in an open, public area in front of a wall of windows that looks onto neighboring new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The exhibition is divided into four sections with corresponding themes: Bicycles (Bicycles = Liberation), Refrigerators (Refrigerators = Happiness), Ready-to-Wear Clothes (Ready-to-Wear Clothes = Opportunity), and Household Hits (Household Hits = Transformation). The content of each section is intended to encourage intergenerational conversations, exploration, and personal reflection. The exhibition includes a central display of objects in individual cases (partial view below). Each case has a two-line label; the first is an interpretive point, while the second identifies the object.

Each section of *Object Project* offers a signature interactive. For example, standing in front of “mirrors” in Ready-to-Wear Clothes, users can try on clothes from the 1890s to the 1980s (an activity referred to in the interviews as “paper doll”) and move about in period settings or play *The Price is Right*, a game that requires at least two adult players in the Household Hits section. Low curving walls and benches that surround the central display separate the four sections of *Object Project*. The exhibit does not have a demarcated entrance or exit; instead, it has multiple entry/exit points. (See Figure 1 on page 5.)



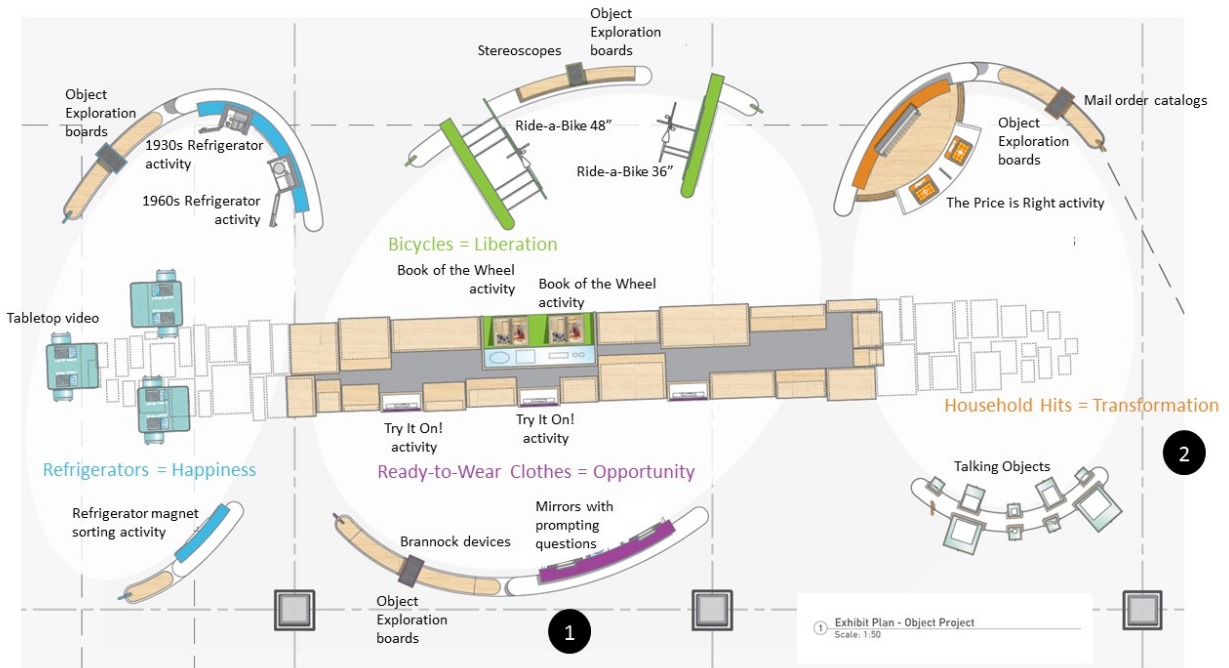


Figure 1. Object Project Layout

## THE STUDY

Judy Gradwohl and Howard Morrison, the *Object Project* Co-Project Directors, asked OP&A to assess this exhibition, giving special attention to questions of importance to the development team. While the grant from the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation, key funder of the exhibition, does not stipulate any assessment of *Object Project*, the NMAH Office of Education and Public Engagement has a strong commitment to understanding what visitors make of the space, how they use it, whether it is accomplishing its goals, and how it can be improved.

Since funds were limited, the final design for the study consisted of two components. First, OP&A staff intercepted visitors as they were leaving the exhibition (either at points 1 or 2 in Figure 1) and engaged them in a semi-structured conversation about their experience. While interviewers used a discussion guide, the participant was given considerable space for directing the conversation. The interview began with a couple of neutral demographic questions such as whether it is the visitor's first time at NMAH and whom they are visiting with. In the interview, users were asked how they would describe *Object Project* to someone back home, how it compares with other history exhibitions they've been to, and what they did in the exhibition, both in terms of activities and what they were thinking during the activity.

Before ending the interview, participants were asked to complete self-administered questionnaires on iPads. In total, 32 interviews were conducted and all the interviewees filled out the questionnaire (see Appendix A).

## CENTRAL QUESTIONS

### The Ambience

This exhibition's mingling of interactive materials, games, digital "clothing," and minimal explanatory text was relatively unusual for the Museum. Would the users find this approach effective? Should informal settings like this be considered for future exhibitions?

### The Presentation

Unlike most exhibitions at NMAH, *Object Project* followed different organizing principles and interpretive strategies. Did users like the exhibition as it was presented? Was there anything about the design that was a problem for them? Did they perceive it to be different from the usual museum display or was it business as usual? How did people describe it?

### The Rating

As part of assessments at the Smithsonian, visitors regularly rate exhibitions using a scale of Poor-Fair-Good-Excellent-Superior, named the Overall Exhibition Rating (OER). Over the past few years, across Smithsonian museums, generally about 50 percent of visitors mark "Excellent," the average category, and 20 percent mark "Superior," the highest category. How would *Object Project* compare? Aside from the OER, how would people rate *Object Project* in terms of "fun?"

### The Experiences

Previous studies of NMAH audiences have clarified the range of experiences that people seek when they come to the museum, and have shown how specific exhibitions highlight particular experiences for visitors. Which experiences would be highlighted in the *Object Project* exhibition?

### IPOP Preferences

Did *Object Project* meet individual preference for Idea, People, Object, or Physical experiences and/or did it also engage them in other preferences?

### "Research" Behavior

Were users inspired to ask questions, look for and find answers within *Object Project*, and reach their own conclusions?

### The Message

Was *Object Project* understood to be about innovation and/or part of the Innovation Wing? Did people link it to other spaces in the Wing?



## THE INTERVIEWEES

OP&A conducted 32 interviews and gathered iPad survey responses from the same individuals. These interviewees can be described as follows:

**The interviewees were predominantly first-time visitors to the museum.** On the day they were intercepted, most were making a general visit to the Smithsonian and either had visited another museum on their trip or intended to do so. The vast majority of interviewees were attending with one or more companions.

**Almost all of the interviewees were from the United States.** Data collected across the Smithsonian demonstrates that this is typical for the time of year in which the interviews were conducted (July-August).

**Only one family appeared to have heard of the exhibition before entering.** Again, OP&A data confirms that it is normal for the tourist audience on the Mall in July and August to be visiting museums without having heard about specific exhibits.

**Approximately one-third of the men and women interviewees, of all ages, were attending with children,** and the children themselves participated occasionally in their parents' interviews. OP&A spoke to about equal numbers of women and men, ranging in age from teens to seniors. Half of the interviewees were between 30 and 49 years of age.

### Bottom Line

THE MAJORITY OF THE INTERVIEWEES WERE ADULT AMERICAN TOURISTS MAKING A FIRST VISIT TO NMAH WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY.





## THE PRESENTATION

**In their comments visitors praised the exhibition design.** Interviewees almost unanimously enjoyed the interactive, participatory nature of *Object Project*. Secondly, some visitors felt that the exhibit was designed mostly for children because of the games, the bicycles, the buttons next to many of the objects, and the absence of long textual components [14]\*. One person suggested that the placement of the exhibit, in an open space near café tables, made it feel like it was meant for children [01]<sup>†</sup>. A second set of interviewees guessed the target audience of the exhibit as ages 9-12 [29]. Interviewees who attended as parents voiced appreciation for the access to seating and the ability to allow their children to explore the space on their own [9, as one example]. When asked to compose a Tweet or SMS message of 20 words or less, on the iPad questionnaire, to describe *Object Project*, several responses pertained to this theme:

*Worry-free zone for parents  
Hands on, fun for children  
Fantastic, interactive fun zone!*

**The exhibit texts were well received, but some visitors appeared to want more easily accessible information.** The gallery boards, for example—which provide primary source materials and historical-thinking prompts for many of the objects on view—were lauded for their content but criticized for their poor visibility because of their placement in bins in the benches. When asked how *Object Project* could do more to engage adults as well as children, visitors tended to respond that they would like to see more text for parents to read as their kids play:

Interviewee: [Walked through the exhibit] *“maybe to look in the glass, but there is nothing printed, nothing to read, I’m just kind of ‘wow that’s neat,’ and that’s about it. But I am an adult, these are kids, I am sure you’re trying to hit it all.”*  
Interviewer: *“As an adult, do you feel that it is important to have something to read?”*  
Interviewee: *“I like that, can’t speak for everyone.” [22]*

One person liked the Tiffany bike, but commented:

*I’m curious how you got it and why it is here and whom it was originally built for and all of that. So in a lot of your other exhibits you have more information as to the background but that one I didn’t see except where it was gifted from, but not what was the original history, like why it was ever built. Did someone get really creative and contact Tiffany like we want a bike, or what happened, but that would be interesting to know. [02]*

In addition, visitors had mixed responses to the thematic, rather than chronological, organization of objects and texts. Some interviewees expressed a desire to feel like they were “walking through time” [28] in a more linear fashion:

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<sup>†</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to the interview number. See description of interviewee in Appendix B, Figure B.1.

*It didn't work in my mind because I like to track history." [26b]*

Still others appreciated the exhibit's thematic and playful design, commenting that it helped facilitate their experience:

*21<sup>st</sup> century learning at a museum [08]*

Furthermore, they commented that it was less "stuffy" [03] and/or overwhelming than other museums they had experienced.

**In addition to comments on design and accessibility, several visitors had comments on pathways, instructional signage, and advertising.** Interviewees made requests for better advertising of the exhibition elsewhere in the museum, clear directions so that people entering *Object Project* from any direction can tell what it is about, and signage guiding visitors to interact correctly with exhibit components. One visitor suggested that the bikes were a significant visual draw and could be facing the foyer, adding a comment about further signage:

*...not to limit this section to an age group but have... a signage somewhere that says, you know, "come play" or "come see" or "come interact" or something to draw [children and families] in... it was just by mistake that we rounded the corner and saw [the exhibit and the bicycles, in particular].... none of us would have known it was here." [02]*

A different visitor in the same group/interview [02] commented that she had no idea the exhibit was called *Object Project* until the interviewer mentioned it, because she entered from a side path that did not have a clearly displayed sign. One family, the only group interviewed that was making a return visit to *Object Project*, commented that a sign in the foyer or an ad in a Smithsonian magazine might aid visibility.

*This place is unfortunately not very well known, because you have to know this place in order to come here. [04]*

#### **Bottom Line**

**THE EXHIBITION DESIGN OVERALL WAS WELL-RECEIVED, BUT THERE WAS AN ISSUE WITH THE VISITORS SEEING THE GALLERY BOARDS, AND SOME PEOPLE WANTED MORE EXPLANATION.**

## THE PRESENTATION: EXHIBIT THEMES

As discussed earlier, *Object Project* has four sections and corresponding themes. These are: Bicycles (Bicycles = Liberation), Refrigerators (Refrigerators = Happiness), Ready-to-Wear Clothes (Ready-to-Wear Clothes = Opportunity), and Household Hits (Household Hits = Transformation). Each section is designed to encourage intergenerational conversations, explorations, and connections. OP&A's interviewees brought up some parts of the sections, and we will report here what appeared to be most salient to users in each part of *Object Project*. Visitor interpretations of each section varied, and some themes were interpreted as envisioned by the NMAH developers while others took on different meanings.

### Bicycle Section

User Interpretations: a humorous reminder of how easy life is now



- Some visitors particularly enjoyed the penny-farthing bicycles, commenting that the different frame and style of the bicycles led them to reflect on:

*... how easy things are now, how hard things were back then. [27]*

- One parent mentioned that it made her think about the future and further opportunities for innovation, and how her own child might not know the word "bicycle." She suggested that perhaps he would have access to far more efficient means of transportation, such as flying [27].

- In addition, visitors who talked about the penny-farthing bicycles mentioned that they were good photograph opportunities, or expressed humor at how strange and/or difficult they must have been to ride. One interviewee asked if the bikes were historically accurate, observing that their size must have been very awkward if the dimensions were real [10b]. The image of the African American record-breaking athlete caught an interviewee's eye, and he described it as "groundbreaking" [29] but quickly moved on to talking about taking photographs of the bikes.

*I like the bike because it is a good memory photo for the pictures... so, I like that. And I always remember the bike here, so I feel like that's a remembering thing in this museum. [04]*

*He was on top of it and I was asking him to make it seem like he was pedaling really hard, so to make it, you know, realistic pictures. [02]*

- Two younger participants, in separate interviews, mentioned that they loved the Tiffany bike. A parent wanted more information about its history [02].
- The book of bicycle history was described as "magical" [10a] and reminded some viewers of *Harry Potter*.



## Refrigerator Section

User Interpretations: memory, wonder, and intergenerational communication



- Visitors who had lived through the era of iceboxes, or whose parents had, appeared to enjoy talking with younger companions about what life had been like. During interviews, they expressed memories such as:

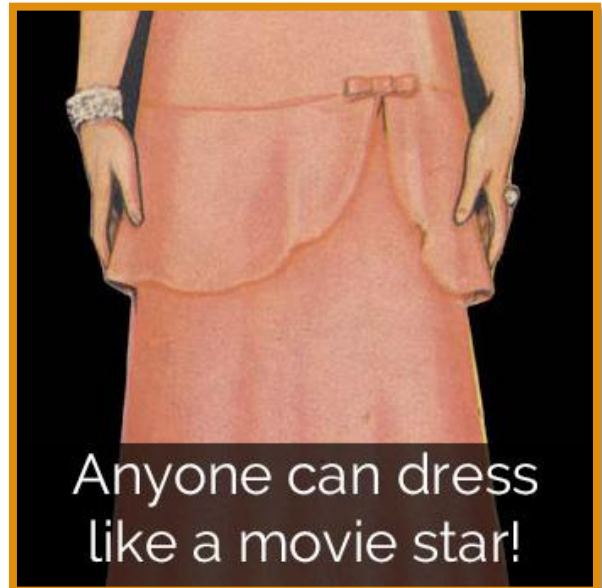
*When you think about it, my mother, they used ice in their refrigerators. You know, back then you had to wait for the ice and you kept it over winter, and now we have an old refrigerator that I use just for display... we're so spoiled, and now they have the defrosting refrigerators you know, they do anything, ice-makers and it's wonderful, we are so fortunate. [02]*

*...but I don't think they can really know, understand it. You're sitting there and you've lived it, like an old ice box where the ice man used to come in to put in the box, you know, and that is why they used to call it an ice box, not a refrigerator... so it's nice to see where these words came from. [21b]*

- Younger interviewees expressed relief at having had refrigeration their entire lives.
- Some visitors found the sorting activity that uses magnets, representing various convenience foods, confusing and were stumped by being unable to open the doors.

## Ready-to-Wear Clothing Section

Visitor Interpretations: entertaining, with opportunities for photographs



- Many interviewees mentioned the “paper doll” activity. People appeared to enjoy seeing themselves in “retro” clothing (one visitor commented that it felt like she was in “Happy Days” [05]; many people reported taking pictures of themselves on screen or wanting to go back and take pictures. The overall tone of visitor responses to the “paper doll” implied that the experience was fun, personalized, and laughter provoking.
- Some younger interviewees expressed surprise at the images of early bathing suits, and had not realized how different they were compared with contemporary swim-wear.

*... the very first one invented, I was really surprised because.... They are a lot different from what it is now. [23a]*

- One visitor remarked that he would have to tell his father about the paper doll, because

*shopping is going to be like that in the future [01]*



## Household Hits Section

Visitor Interpretations: convenience, changes, and differences highlighted



- This section, like the refrigerators, provoked intergenerational conversation on the subject of convenience throughout time. Some interviewees told stories connected with objects on display, or expressed the feeling that life used to be simpler and easier due to family and community. Most participants added that they did not miss the amount of labor that household chores used to demand.

*A simpler time because families were together, I think we had communities and a sense of who we were and where we were going, but difficult because if you wanted to make a ham dinner, it took you eighteen hours. [06]*

- Conversation between genders was provoked by some of these objects as well. For example, one woman corrected her husband's observation that the objects chosen were not innovative enough by reminding him that he did not understand how much washing machines changed women's ability to work during the day [26b].
- All generations and genders appeared to enjoy "The Price is Right," and some people remarked that it was one of the most informative parts of the exhibit. However, one interviewee remarked that the introduction was a little long for his childrens' attention spans (ages 5 and 9) [09].

- Several participants (many of them parents with their children along) expressed amusement at the mistakes that younger visitors made in this section, for example, one group of children thought that the telephone was a coffee machine [21a], while another boy thought that the vacuum cleaner looked more like an airplane [10b]

### Bottom Line

THE SECTIONS ON REFRIGERATORS AND HOUSEHOLD HITS CAME CLOSEST TO HAVING VISITORS UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET THEIR THEMES AS INTENDED, USING INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATION. BICYCLES AND CLOTHING APPEARED TO BE MORE FUN, INTERACTIVE, AND UNEXAMINED.



### THE RATINGS

On leaving *Object Project*, visitor OERs were very much like the Smithsonian average. While none of the 32 rated it as Poor, and only one person gave it a rating of Fair, the number [n=8] that rated it as Poor/Fair/Good was nearly equal to those who rated it Superior [n=6], and most rated it Excellent.

Users gave *Object Project* a rating on “fun” nearly identical to the OER.

None of the 32 interviewees rated is as Not fun at all or Not very fun. The proportions of people who responded It’s just ok, Really fun, and Amazing are quite similar to the responses Good, Excellent, and Superior.

### Bottom Line

VISITORS GAVE THIS EXHIBITION AVERAGE SMITHSONIAN RATINGS.

## THE EXPERIENCES: SURVEYS

Visitors were asked *Which of the following experiences were especially satisfying for you in the Object Project exhibition today? [Mark no more than 3]?* Nine experiences were listed:

- *Seeing everyday objects that changed my life* (Half of the 32 interviewees selected this experience)
- *Having fun*
- *Making historical connections*
- *Imagining other times or places*
- *Gaining information/knowledge*
- *Seeing innovative things* (One-third of the interviewees selected this experience)
- *Feeling an emotional connection*
- *Enriching my understanding*
- *Being motivated to find answers*[2 interviewees of the 32]

On the iPad, the experiences were randomized; above they are shown in rank order (from most to least selected). Between half to one-third of the interviewees selected each of the top six experiences and considerably fewer the last three.

### Bottom Line

MANY USERS REPORTED SEEING HOW OBJECTS CHANGED THEIR LIVES, HAVING FUN AND MAKING HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS AS VERY SATISFYING EXPERIENCES. ONLY A FEW SAW BEING MOTIVATED TO FIND ANSWERS AS A SATISFYING EXPERIENCE.

## THE EXPERIENCES: INTERVIEWS

While many visitors recounted experiences to do with individual objects or sections, as discussed above in “The Presentation: Exhibit Themes,” there were also many comments that discussed *Object Project* as a whole. Some of the most salient themes for visitors that were *not limited to a particular section* are discussed here.

### Experiences of Time

Anachronism, Inter-generational comparison, and Nostalgia or Reflection

- Many visitors expressed pleasure, amusement, or wonder at anachronism. These interviewees enjoyed the sensation of interacting with different time periods in a space that felt contemporary, directly or indirectly (for examples of the latter, the many

people who took pictures of themselves on old bicycles or in old clothes, laughing). Some visitors expressed this sensation explicitly:

*It's really cool how it's modern and then around old fashioned stuff... It's really cool how it doesn't clash, but yet it clashes with how... you know what I mean?... The way it's designed and the way it has combined things together, the way how generations should be combined together. [30]*

- Numerous interviewees expressed wonder at innovation with regard to how far technology had come since the exhibit's objects were produced, rather than taking the objects themselves as signs of innovation. These visitors expressed their general impressions using the following types of language:

*It makes me think we've come a long ways. [07]*

*It's eye opening what they had back then and how far we came now... obviously we have a lot more better resources, I guess... better technology. [05]*

*We get caught up in today, forget about even last year's technology. This is a good reminder of how it used to be. [28]*

Alternatively, some participants expressed the belief that the exhibit's objects would provoke greater intergenerational understanding because younger visitors would begin to understand how difficult life used to be:

*Maybe... the younger people are looking, at... say the old machine, [and then they think] well this is what an old Maytag washing machine looks like. It must have been hard for mom, for grandma and grandpa to deal with this, especially my girls they have got somebody like me with them, yeah, this is what we actually had to deal with. [21b]*

*... [in] today's world that you don't have that connection with the older people... when you have grandparents and family reunions and hear their stories... going through my great grandpa's place and seeing all the books and the old smells and even the smells and stuff and even the dust... Down to the smell of it, it is just, it always intrigued me that the history of where people come from. [30]*

- Finally, visitors reflected upon their histories or their family histories, and expressed nostalgia for simpler times. When young people participated in this kind of narrative, they mentioned how the objects were built to last as compared to the consumer items they are currently used to [23b, for example].

#### **Interactive Experiences and Research Behavior**

##### Accessibility, Play, and Curiosity

- As expressed earlier, many participants enjoyed the interactivity of *Object Project*, particularly children. Those who enjoyed the format talked about feeling playful or curious, which led them to interact further with the exhibit. One interviewee commented:

*If you come out of here and haven't learned anything, it's your fault. [07]*

Additionally, one interviewee mentioned that her husband, an engineer, was attempting to “figure out” the Apple??? computer [10b]. A second engineer, female, expressed interest in the refrigerators to see the progress of technology through time [25a]. Similarly, one self-described “geek” commented on how much he enjoyed playing with all of the toggles and buttons [15].

- Only one interviewee thought that the exhibit was not interactive enough, commenting that he would like to be able to do more with each object [24a].
- Importantly, one interviewee attending with a daughter with disabilities was overjoyed at the exhibit’s accessibility. In the interview, she seemed very happy that her daughter was able to interact with the “paper doll” screen, push the arrows, and play with the telephone:

*...this really has been the highlight of our day. We've been to two other exhibits or museums, and this has been the first one where she actually got out of the chair and was playing and having fun, and for me that was the highlight of my day. [03]*

#### **Bottom Line**

**OBJECT PROJECT LED MANY VISITORS TO REFLECT ON CHANGE THROUGHOUT TIME, THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS, AND THEIR FEELINGS ON INTERACTIVITY IN MUSEUMS.**

## IPOP PREFERENCES

In the survey administered to interviewees, OP&A included a twelve-item IPOP battery of questions designed to assess each visitor's experience preference. Each question presents an activity, such as "I like to identify patterns," then asks the participant to select how personally relatable each statement is (see Appendix A). The individual IPOP scores were calculated and standardized. In general, the survey data suggests that visitors to *Object Project* represent the average Smithsonian distribution of experience preferences (i.e., we encountered nearly equal numbers of Idea, People, Object, and Physical people).

When the IPOP data are examined in conjunction with the OER ratings discussed above, the data suggest that people with Idea, People, and Object preferences were about equally represented in the group of visitors who rated their visit Superior. People with Physical experience preferences were not. There were fewer People people with Physical experience preferences in the group that gave the exhibition below-average ratings than the other three types of preferences. Visitors who rated the exhibition Excellent were equally distributed across all IPOP groups.

### Bottom Line

THE DATA SUGGESTS THAT SIMILAR RATINGS WERE GIVEN TO *OBJECT PROJECT* BY PEOPLE IN EACH OF THE FOUR IPOP FRAMEWORK PREFERENCE GROUP. FURTHER, THE DISTRIBUTION OF IPOP PREFERENCES OF THE 32 INTERVIEWEES WAS SIMILAR TO THAT OF THE SMITHSONIAN AVERAGE.

## ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

There was some evidence of visitors connecting to a national narrative. Some visitors explicitly described the exhibit as *American* history [20, as one example]. Many, however, used the word "history" without qualification, but may have meant American history as a default (especially since so many of our interviewees were themselves American). Some of the exceptions, such as a French Canadian couple, expressed that they too had some of the objects on display when growing up [25b] though they were non-specific. One visitor began talking about what it meant to be American, after wondering aloud whether or not pressing buttons instead of reading text appealed to Americans:

*I was watching and down there they had the screens, and they also had the writing and it was the same exact thing, but they had that video of people saying what they thought about hip hop and it was... [Interviewer: "the turn tables, I think?"] yeah, so, instead of reading all that stuff that was on the wall you could push that button and listen to it. I'm lazy. I think most Americans - most people - are... Not just Americans, but... I mean, I guess I'm American. What makes you America, right? [01]*



In addition, one interviewee (formerly from India, now living in the United States) raised the point that it might be especially interesting to recent immigrants to learn about American history and technological innovation:

*Even for the adults, especially people who weren't born here, for them to see how America was before, so I think it's much more of an eye opener in that way. When people come to America it's... finer things, so I don't think anyone knows how they got here... I think it's really cool that when people come in they can see the history of America. [05]*

Finally, some of the responses to the survey questions "Please describe Object Project in a Tweet or SMS message of 20 words or less" alluded to a national timeline. Again, while some used the word "American" explicitly, others used "history" with no qualifier.

*An engaging trip through the everyday American's daily life over the years. I looked at how technology has shaped Western society. It was interesting seeing how things have progressed.  
Display of historical objects used in everyday life.*

**When asked to compare *Object Project* to another museum or exhibit, most interviewees generalized and said it was like any other history museum: however, a few other unique comparisons were made.** Some interviewees compared it to technology and innovation-oriented spaces, such as at the Ford Museum in Detroit or the Dayton Air Force Museum [01]. One interviewee said that it was almost like a museum in Chicago where everything could be interacted with, but not quite, because the Smithsonian is more inclined to keep things locked up [24a]. Finally, one visitor compared her experience in *Object Project* to the Korean War memorial, because it made her connect strongly with other lives:

*... the faces of the soldiers in the field, seeing the faces is so surreal... you don't want to experience it because it's so hard for people, but just seeing all the faces, you kind of want to be there but not at that time, you know? I wonder what it was like and you can't because you're here now in your own person, but the experience is close enough that you can feel it just by seeing a face or just by experience by touching something or playing and interacting with it, it's just so cool to experience something somehow. [30]*

#### **Bottom Line**

**SOME VISITORS CONNECTED TO A NATIONAL NARRATIVE AT *OBJECT PROJECT*, OTHERS WERE NON-SPECIFIC. THE EXHIBIT REMINDED VISITORS OF A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT MUSEUM TYPES.**

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this OP&A study, 32 visitors to *Object Project* were interviewed and surveyed. The majority of study participants were adult American tourists, making a first-time visit to NMAH (and the Smithsonian in general) with friends and/or family. Overall, visitors liked the exhibition design. However, some interviewees wanted more signage and textual information in the exhibit and advertising directing people to it. In addition, many interviewees were under the impression that the space was intended primarily for children. Of *Object Project's* thematic sections, visitors came close to understanding the intended messages of Household Hits and Refrigerators. The sections on Bicycles and Clothing were regarded as fun, interactive, and appealing, but they did not provoke reflection on the part of interviewees.

With respect to general impressions and experiences in all four sections, many users reported seeing how objects changed their lives, had fun, and thought about history. Very few reported being motivated to find answers as satisfying in this exhibit. Many interviewees reflected on change throughout time, the differences between generations, and their feelings on interactivity in museums. One of the exhibit's goals was to have visitors connect to a national narrative, and some interviewees reported experiences that could be construed as such but they were not usefully specific. Finally, *Object Project* appeared to offer a good experience to visitors by offering something for people with all IPOP experience preferences.

One significant point from the visitor experiences was that many of the objects in this exhibit were regarded not as innovative, but as cumbersome, old, or "retro." As such, this study suggests that the majority of visitors thought about change throughout time and the differences between generations, but did not grasp the central theme "People + Innovative Things + Social Change = Life as We Know It." A second significant point that came out of the interview process is that a significant portion of interviewees thought the exhibit was designed for children and wanted more information in order to relate to it as adults. Visitors as a whole responded well to *Object Project*, found it enjoyable and interactive, but may not have grasped the messages intended by exhibit designers.

**APPENDIX A**

**Object Project Questionnaire**

**Is this your first visit to this museum, the National Museum of American History?**

- m *No*
- m *Yes*

**Please rate your overall experience in the Object Project gallery today.**

- m *Poor*
- m *Fair*
- m *Good*
- m *Excellent*
- m *Superior*

**Which of the following experiences were especially satisfying for you in the Object Project exhibition today?**

[Mark no more than 3]

- m *Feeling an emotional connection*
- m *Enriching my understanding*
- m *Gaining information/knowledge*
- m *Imagining other times or places*
- m *Being motivated to find answers*
- m *Having fun*
- m *Making historical connections*
- m *Seeing everyday objects that changed my life*
- m *Seeing innovative things*
- m *None of these*

(Response options were randomized)

**Please describe Object Project in a Tweet or SMS message of 20 words or less.**

**Where do you live?**

United States. Please specify ZIP code: \_\_\_\_\_

Another country. Please specify country: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your age?**

- m *12-14*
- m *15-17*
- m *18-19*
- m *20-24*
- m *25-29*
- m *30-34*
- m *35-39*
- m *40-44*
- m *45-49*
- m *50-54*
- m *55-59*
- m *60-64*
- m *65-69*
- m *70 & over*

**What is your sex?**

- Male       Female       Transgender       Other       Prefer not to answer

**Who are you visiting with today?** [Mark one or more]

- I am alone  
 One or more adults  
 One or more youth under 18

**Help us to understand your interests. For each of the following items, please indicate the degree to which that activity describes you. I like to...**

	Not me at all	A little me	Me	Very much me
...bring people together	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...construct things	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...divide things into categories	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...go camping	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...help others in person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...identify patterns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...jog/run for fun	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...know how things are made	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...learn philosophy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...play competitive sports	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...shop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...spend my leisure time with other people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**How 'fun' was this exhibition, Object Project, for you today?**

- Not fun at all  
 Not very fun  
 It's just ok  
 Really fun  
 Amazing

Thank you for your assistance! The Smithsonian Institution is grateful for your opinions and feedback as we work to make future visitor experiences more satisfying. Please hand back the iPad to the Object Project staff member.

## APPENDIX B

Note: The gender and age in Figure B.1. are those of the visitor who completed the survey. In some cases, an entire group contributed to interviews while only one was asked to complete the survey. Interviewers recorded group composition.

Figure B.1. Demographic Data of Survey/Interview Participants

ID #	Gender	Age	From	Group Composition
1	M	25-29	OH	Two male friends
2	F	40-44	FL	Three adult females, one male child
3	F	45-49	NC	One adult female with daughter
4	F	12-14	VA	Adult male, adult female, female child
5	F	25-29	NJ	Two young women in their 20s
6	F	55-59	MA	Two women, possibly friends
7	M	20-40	USA	Two young men
8	F	20-24	NY	Several young women
9	M	30-34	WI	Male, wife, children, male adult friend
10a	F	40-44	OR	Wife, husband (40s), son (10)
10b	F	35-39	MD	Woman with young child
11	F	18-19	OH	Visiting with at least one other person
14	F	40s	USA	Wife, husband (40s), son (12)
15	F	70 & up	OK	Couple: He spoke/she helped and did survey
17	F	50-54	PA	Visiting with at least one other person
20	F	20-24	WY	Two adult females
21a	M	45-49	VA	Adult male, adult female, younger girl (8)
21b	M	70 & up	USA	One man (74) in company of daughters)
22	M	30s	USA	Couple: She spoke/he helped and did survey
23a	M	40s	USA	Adult male, boy (13), girl (14), mom (30's)
23b	M	40-44	CO	Two adult male friends
23c	F	40-44	VA	Visiting with at least one other person
24a	M	60s	USA	Adult male
24b	M	55-59	IL	Visiting with at least one other person
25a	M	45-49	IN	Adult couple
25b	M	25-29	Montreal	Adult couple
26a	M	65-69	WA	Visiting with at least one other person
26b	F	60-64	TX	Adult couple
27	F	30-34	TX	Adult Woman with child
28	M	30-34	CA	Two adult male friends
29	M	20-24	Canada	Siblings, one male, one female
30	F	40-44	NY	Two adult women