



Middle Ground: Reconsidering Ourselves and Others
Exploratorium
Select Preliminary Results

January 2021

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Credits

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Except p. 9: @coffeecruiser

Overview

Middle Ground, funded by the National Science Foundation, was an outdoor public installation developed by the Exploratorium and located in the Civic Center. This installation focused on the social science of how people think about others, particularly the cognitive basis for biases, judgements, and stereotypes, as well as more pro-social behavior and ways of connecting with others. Garibay Group is currently conducting a summative evaluation. As data are still being collected and analyzed, this report presents select preliminary results about installation-specific outcomes.

The *Middle Ground* installation consisted of 14 interactive multimedia exhibit units situated on the San Francisco's Main Public Library Western plaza. In addition to the exhibits, the space included tables and chairs throughout the plaza and a café kiosk.

Though a collaboration with Urban Alchemy, *Middle Ground* also integrated human facilitation in the experience. Additionally, the project drew on principles of placemaking to create a convivial community space.

Project Goals

The project included the following goals:

- Create a place that feels welcoming for the whole community; be widely seen as a positive addition to the neighborhood for the wide variety of audiences that use the area.
- Encourage social interactions among users, including strangers.
- Provide compelling learning experiences based on social psychology, especially in the areas of bias and stereotyping.
- Have people reflect on their own social responses, ideally moving toward greater compassion and empathy for others.

Summative Evaluation Focus

The primary goals of the summative evaluation included:

Visitors

- The success of exhibits and activities in engaging visitors with social science concepts to create insights about themselves (i.e., metacognition).
- The degree to which experiences at *Middle Ground* foster empathy and connection for those who appear to be different from themselves.
- The ways in which visitors generally use the installation and the extent to which *Middle Ground* draws more individuals to the space compared to prior to the installation.*

Placemaking

- The extent to which *Middle Ground* creates a convivial space for people from all walks of life to gather and interact with each other.

Partnership

- Document the overall qualities and outcomes of the partnership, particularly evidence of equitable collaboration and creating mutual benefit for all partners.

* Video data collected during the time the installation was open are currently being analyzed and will be included in the final report.

Methods

Data collection for the summative evaluation was scheduled to begin in spring 2020. Due to COVID-19, the installation was closed in March 2020. In lieu of collecting data at the exhibition for summative, evaluators used the data collected by the Exploratorium for a research study about the effects of facilitation on the visitors. These data were used to assess visitor and placemaking outcomes. Evaluators are currently collecting data to assess partnership outcomes.

Data Set

The data set used for summative evaluation consisted of 74 interviews with visitors at the exhibition during a facilitated condition.

Participants who visited the installation and used at least two exhibits and had an interaction with a facilitator were then randomly sampled and approached as they exited the exhibition area. Data were collected from August to October 2019.

Structured interviews consisted of Likert scale rating questions with open-ended probes asking participants to explain the reasons for their ratings. Participants were asked about their motivation for engaging with the Middle Ground exhibits, overall experience, and affective responses (e.g., discomfort, feelings of respect, compassion), as well as questions related to meta-cognition, such as whether the experience helped participants learn anything about themselves or their actions toward others.

The majority of interview respondents (60%) self-identified as female. More than half (56%) were between 18 and 39 years of age. Most (89%) did not have children with them. Nearly all interviews (95%) were conducted in English. See Appendix A for a detailed profile of respondents.

Data Analysis

Evaluators analyzed interview data to examine the visitor experience and assess outcomes.

Basic descriptive statistics, used to analyze quantitative components of the data, are summarized in tables and histograms. Survey data is presented in percentages (some percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding). Where appropriate, the actual number of responses (N) is provided.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a hybrid approach to coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) involving both deductive and inductive coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Patton, 2015). We initially developed a set of broad a priori codes. During coding of data, inductive codes were added as new themes emerged.

Limitations

As with any study, this evaluation had limitations. The closure of *Middle Ground* in March 2020 meant that evaluators used data collected by the Exploratorium team for research, not data collected by Garibay Group specifically for evaluation. Thus, evaluators were unable to use a culturally responsive approach (Hood, Hopson, Kirkhart, 2015; Garibay & Teasdale, 2019) as planned in the original summative evaluation design.

Garibay Group, however used a culturally responsive lens during the analysis, which revealed some limitations of the research instrument and potential validity of data.

Three questions asked respondents if the *Middle Ground* experience brought up feelings of respect, compassion, or connection with “people who are different from you.” This phrase appeared to draw attention to differences in negative ways. In some cases, it felt othering to people who are already marginalized (e.g., individuals experiencing homelessness). In other cases, the question seemed to provoke defensiveness and caused individuals to minimize differences (see page 16 for further discussion of minimization).

Additionally, the difference and nuances between the terms *respect*, *connections*, and *empathy* were not well-defined and some respondents appeared to see these as interchangeable terms for the same idea. This led to some confusion and frustration for some respondents, who perceived being asked the same question multiple times. In some cases, respondents did not elaborate on their answers because they indicated they had already answered the question. Thus, qualitative data to triangulate quantitative ratings and gain deeper insight into participant outcomes were limited.

Exhibits Used & Overall Experience

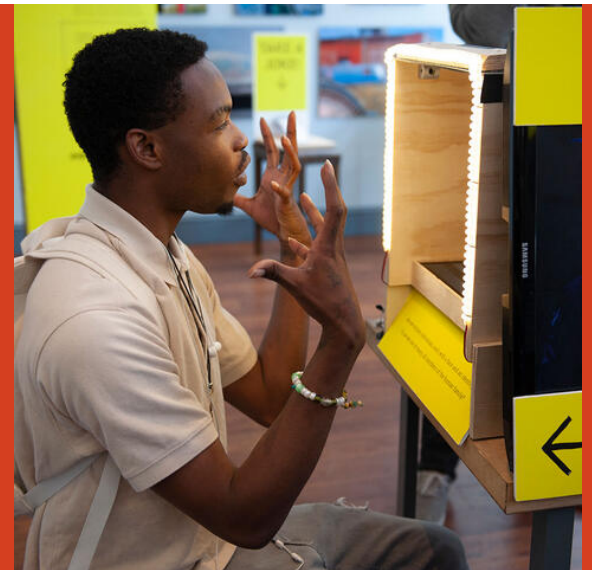


Exhibit Units Used

More than two-thirds of respondents used “Hands-on Music.” Half used “Unseen Stories” while just fewer than half used “Pulling Together” and “Face to Face.” The three exhibit units used by the fewest respondents were “Intro Panel,” “Thought Bubbles,” and “Northside You, Me, We.” Respondents used an average of four exhibit units during their visits.

Figure 1. Exhibit Units Used by Respondents

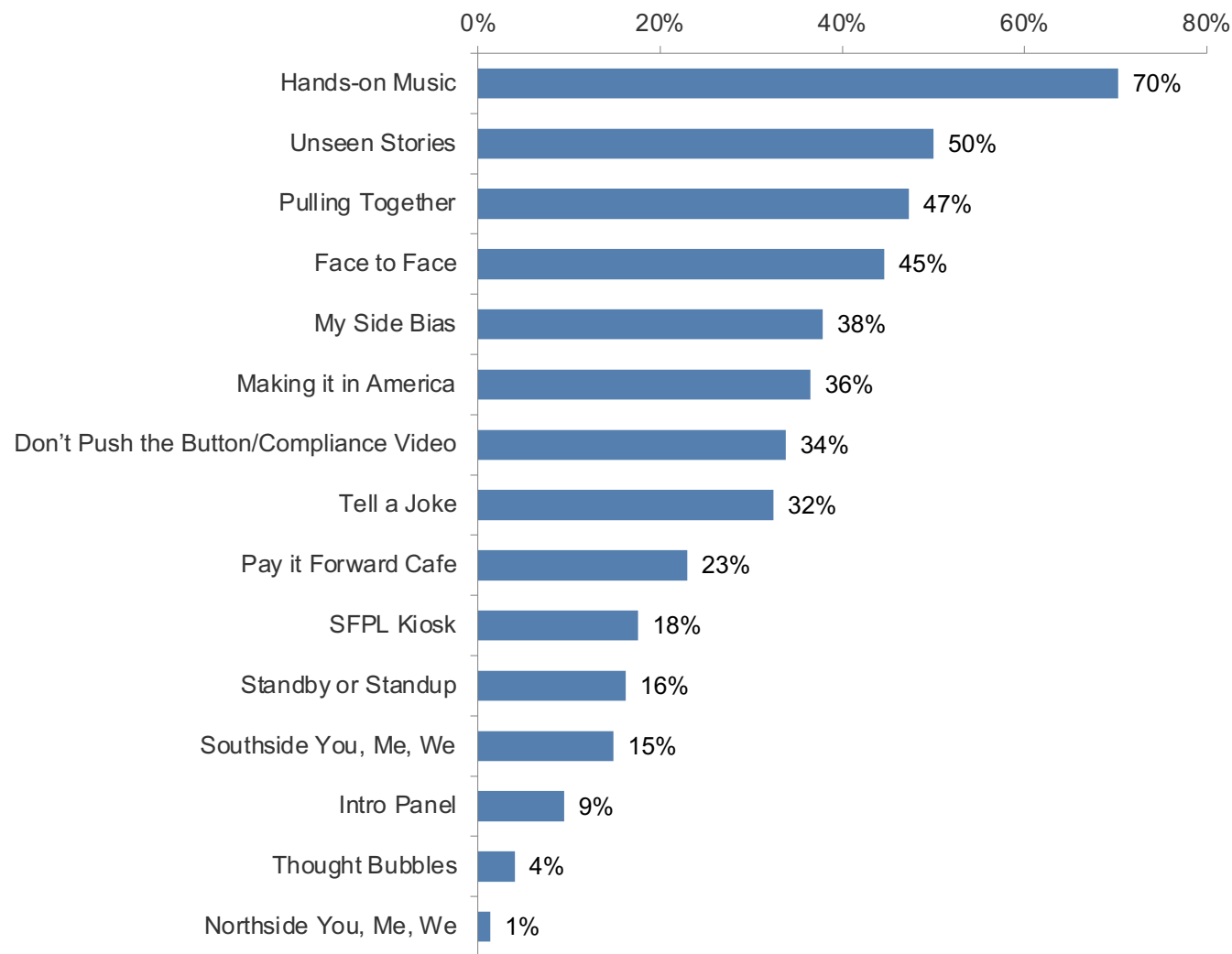


Exhibit use was based on observational data. During observations, researchers did not always have clear views of the You, Me, and We exhibit units, which may have resulted in lower percentages of use for these units.

N = 74

Overall Experience & Welcome

Respondents rated their experience in *Middle Ground* very highly. A large majority (80%) gave it a “Very Good!” rating, with the rest rating it “Good.” Moreover, all reported feeling welcome in the space.

Figure 2. Overall, how good or bad was your experience during this visit?

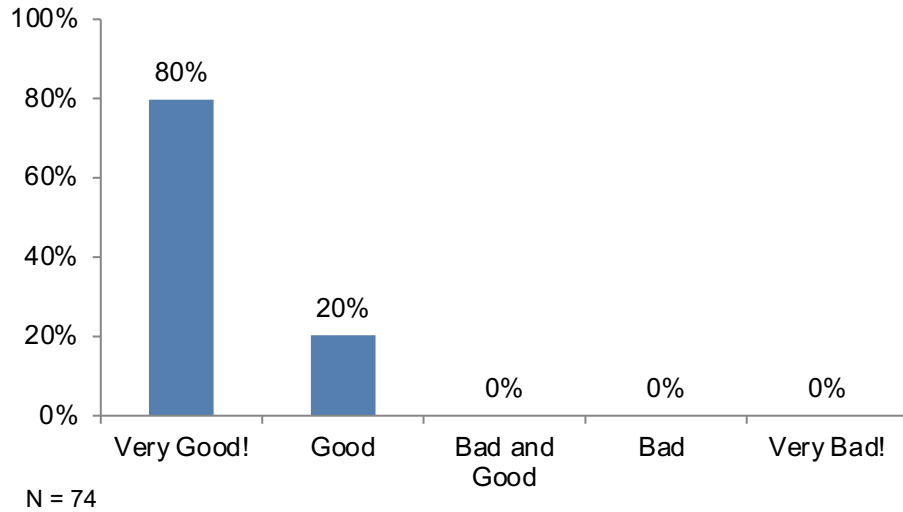
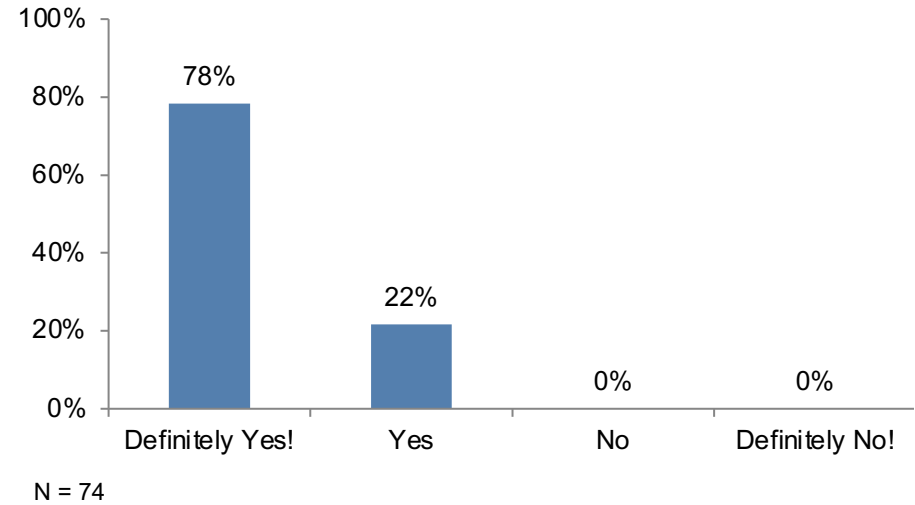


Figure 3. Did you feel welcome in the space?



After rating their experience, respondents were asked what made the experience good (or bad). Nearly all respondents gave more than one reason. As these reasons were analyzed, categories emerged, although the categories were not mutually exclusive.

Five major categories were prevalent in interviews. The top reason for a good experience, given by more than a third (39%) of respondents, was that *Middle Ground* was intellectually engaging. It was, to quote respondents, “thought-provoking” or “fed the mind.” The next most common category of responses (35% of respondents) was engagement with the Urban Alchemy facilitator.

One respondent explained, “My favorite part was talking to the young people.” Another said, “Just talking to the lady that was showing me everything [made it a good experience].”

The next highest-scoring reason, given by 28% of respondents, was that *Middle Ground* was entertaining or fun. One respondent said, “It is very interesting. It’s not very common. People do stuff...out of curiosity, I think it was fun.”

Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents noted that the interactive/hands-on nature of the exhibits made for a good experience.

Overall Experience & Welcome, cont'd.

For example, one respondent said, “[It’s] super-unique. And I like the interactivity of it.”

Finally, the fifth major category—mentioned by 22% of respondents—was the social nature of the experience. As a respondent said, “It was fun to do with someone.”

A number of other categories were less prevalent, mentioned by fewer than 15% of interviewees. These included references to the content or topics addressed, its uniqueness, the opportunity it gave to engage with strangers, the design of the exhibition, the fact that it was unexpected, and the way it piqued curiosity. In addition, a few caregivers also mentioned that the experience was a good way to teach a child about issues such as bias and judgements.

It's a lot of fun. I think you learn a lot or you remember things that you tend to forget, right? But it's so fun....it brings you joy to participate in that activity. So instead of just kind of preaching to you these things that we all know and sometimes forget, it gets you—it gets you moving, gets you busy, and it's fun.

I think that the way the games are designed is very interactive and also we are in a very open area.

I've always dealt with the Exploratorium since I was a little kid... I like the science aspect of it and the kind gentleman that was explaining things to me....because I don't think I would have got that it was supposed to be interactive...to enhance community and in meeting people just on my own....It's a positive message.

The environment was pretty much welcoming and the exhibits were easy to navigate. I felt like I could ask anyone who worked here how to do anything...I knew if I asked someone they would also open a conversation that was friendly.

It's out here on a beautiful day, for one, so...and ...everybody in the area seems to have a great attitude and it was fun. I don't know necessarily if it was educational for me, but it was fun.

It was very interesting, the whole idea behind the exhibit about making people come together and realize how important it is to have a human touch with each other. So I found that very interesting.

Because it's fun. It's new. I never have seen this before here.

I thought I was interesting because I feel like a lot of social experiments are just done through, like, one day...if you look on YouTube there's a lot of social experiments where they try to break, like, prejudice about like different races and genders...it's like just one YouTube video and that's it. But I feel like with an exhibit like this you really get to experience it and you're taking something that, like, had been done before but then pushing it to another level that people may have not necessarily thought about before.

It's nice to see there are artists putting up this kind of exhibition to let people explore different aspects of...social issues and also help people to think in a way slightly different, maybe, from sometimes they probably don't care.

I noticed that it's about communication and not only communication—put yourself out there—and I wanted to not only experience it because I see a lot of people go to these exhibits, but I felt the need to express myself...when you're out here in the streets, you see certain things happening and...you want to just put your opinion out there, which I did. I wrote my opinion on a piece of paper.

I thought that it gives different perspectives about things that is always helpful for people to be able to understand one another.

Metacognition & Social Science Concepts



Metacognition & Social Science Concepts

In this section we discuss exhibit social science content, focusing primarily on the extent to which *Middle Ground* fostered metacognition and impact of the experience. (Table 1 shows the key social science concepts addressed by exhibit unit.)

Metacognition

At its most basic, metacognition is thinking about one’s thinking. While there is no one definition of metacognition (Veenman, et al., 2005), the term generally refers to awareness of one’s thinking and learning (Chick, n.d.). In *Middle Ground*, it was posited that metacognitive self-reflection about the way one thinks about others and how one acts toward others paves the way for behavioral change (Gutwill, personal communication).

The dataset analyzed consisted of self-reported Likert-scale questions (e.g., yes, no, don’t know) as well as open-ended prompts that asked respondents to further articulate their responses. Answers to these probes were analyzed to look for evidence of metacognition and impact.

Self-reported data asked about two categories of metacognition. Compared to self-reported ratings, our analysis of qualitative data found less evidence that respondents engaged in metacognition. However, when we coded for all instances of evidence of *any* metacognitive thinking, 80% of interviews showed at least one instance of metacognitive thinking.

This pattern held true for self-reports related to affective impact—that is, bringing up feelings of respect, connections to others, and/or empathy/compassion. Overall, however, in the qualitative data, 89% of respondents showed evidence of at least one instance of affective impact.

Specific Social Science Concepts

We also looked for evidence that visitors were engaging and reflecting on the key social science concepts addressed by the exhibit units. We were not able, however, to assess the full extent to which participants recognized these ideas or compare prevalence across exhibit units. The interview instrument used primarily closed-rating questions with an additional prompt as opposed to more open-ended questions that would typically elicit richer qualitative data that allows for fuller of ideas and perspectives. Additionally, data did not include equal numbers for each exhibit unit. Some units (e.g., Unseen Stories) were visited by many more respondents while other exhibits that were visited by very few (e.g., Thought Bubbles).

Despite these limitations, however, analysis of qualitative responses taken as a whole revealed that visitors did engage with and reflect on the key social science concepts in some way.

We first present the self-reported data and then discuss the analysis of qualitative data.

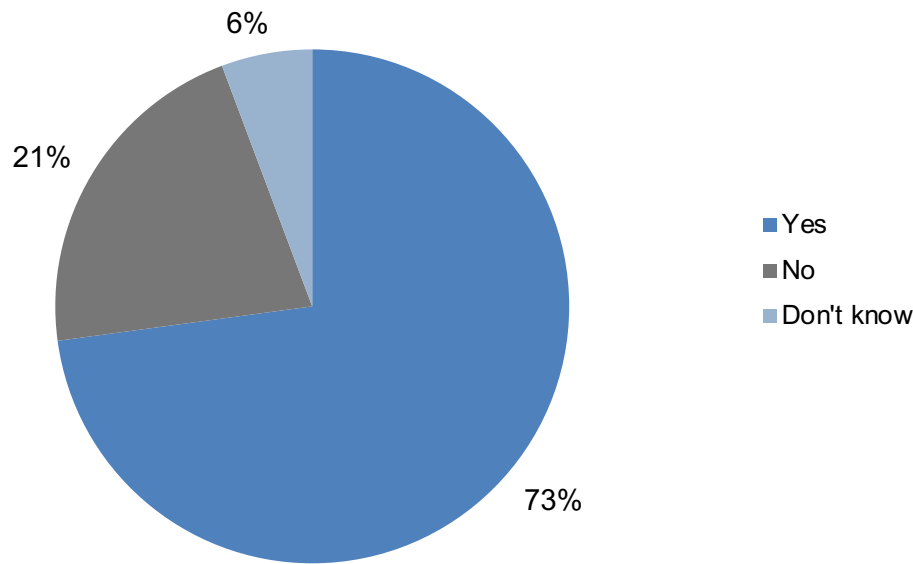
Table 1. Exhibit Units and Key Social Science Concepts

Exhibit Unit	Key Social Science Concept
Don't Push the Button/ Compliance Video	Power & compliance
Face to Face	Including others in the self
Hands-on Music	Intergroup contact
Making It in America	Social mobility
My Side Bias	Issue involvement & selective exposure
	Quick & slow thinking
Pay It Forward Cafe	pro-social behaviors
	Reciprocity
Pulling Together	Social loafing
Standby or Standup	Bystander effect
Tell a Joke	Positive effect of humor
Thought Bubbles	Quick & slow thinking
	Stereotype
Unseen Stories	Perspective-taking
	Quick & slow thinking
	Stereotype
You, Me, We	Including others in the self

Learn About Self or Others

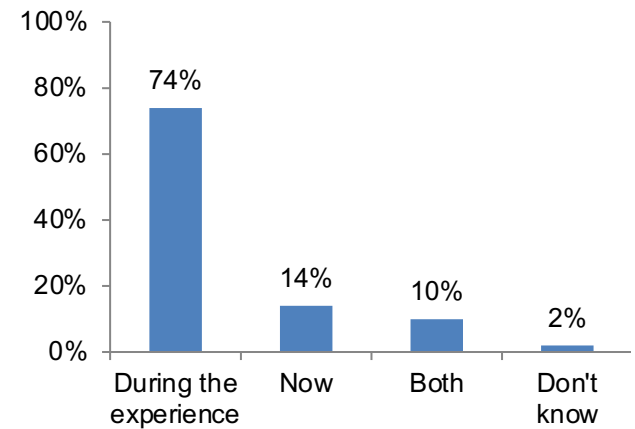
Nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents reported that they felt they learned something about themselves or others during their *Middle Ground* experience. About a quarter, however, reported that they did not feel they learned something or did not know if they did. Of those who reported learning something, 84% said they noticed they were learning during the experience.

Figure 4. Do you feel like you learned anything about yourself or others during your experience in the exhibition?



N = 70; Skipped = 4

Figure 5. When do you think you noticed you were learning that?

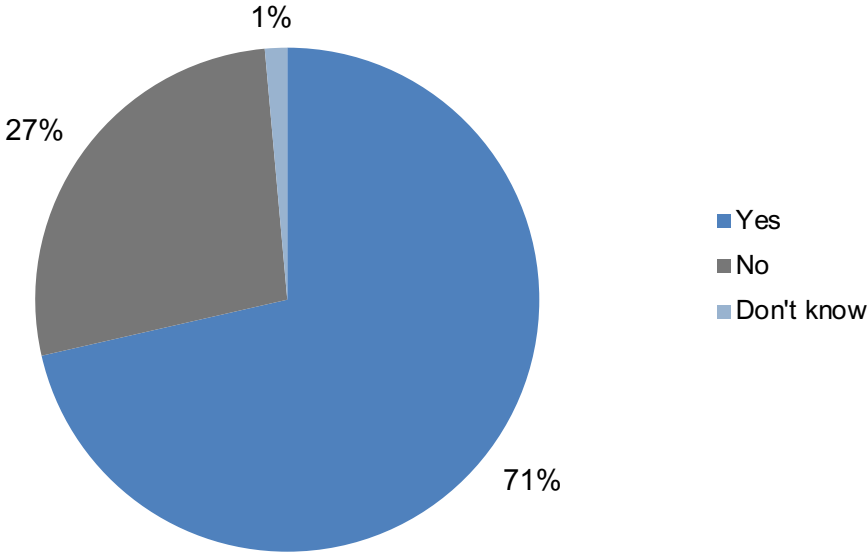


N = 50; Skipped = 24

Think About How they Act

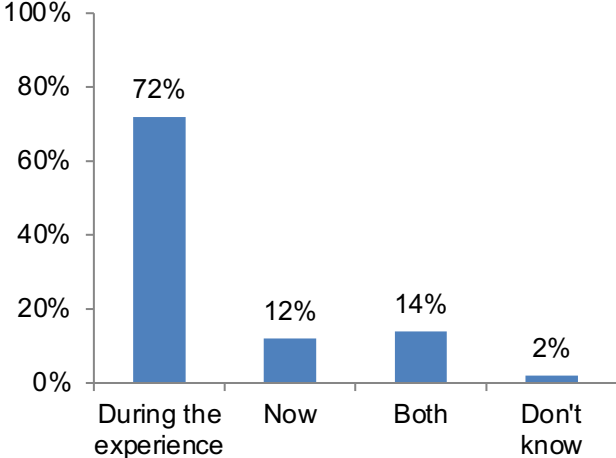
More than two-thirds of respondents (71%) reported feeling that their *Middle Ground* experience made them think about how they act with other people. Of those who reported that the exhibition made them think about how they act with others, 86% said that they noticed doing so during the experience.

Figure 6. Did your experience in the exhibition make you think about how you act with other people?



N = 70; Skipped = 4

Figure 7. When do you think you noticed you were thinking that?

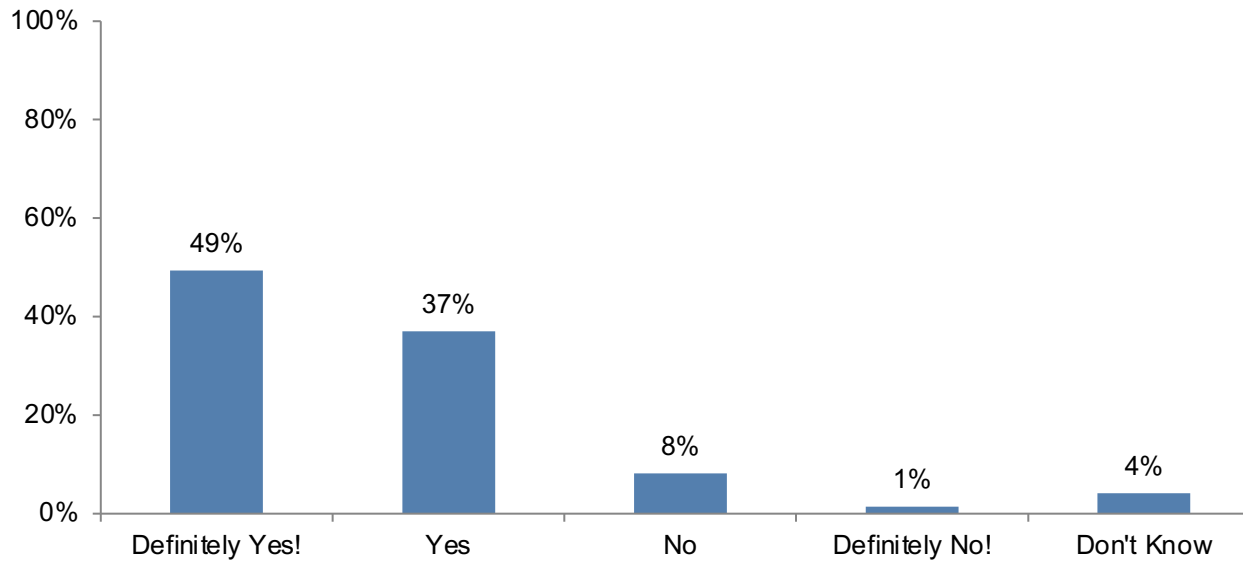


N = 50; Skipped = 24

Respect

The majority of respondents (86%) reported that their *Middle Ground* experience brought up feelings of respect for people who were different from them. Only 9% reported that it did not.

Figure 8. Did your experience in the exhibition bring up feelings of respect for people who are different from you?

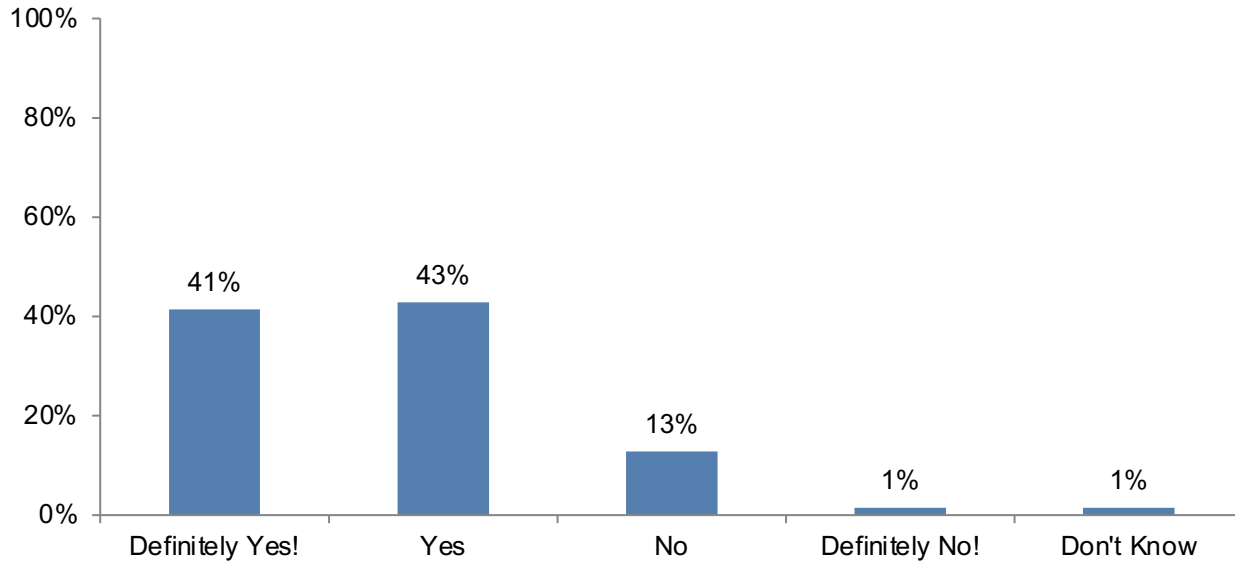


N = 73; Skipped = 1

Connection

Most respondents (84%) said that their *Middle Ground* experience brought up feelings of connection with people who were different from them, while 14% said it did not.

Figure 9. Did your experience in the exhibition bring up feelings of connection with people who are different from you?

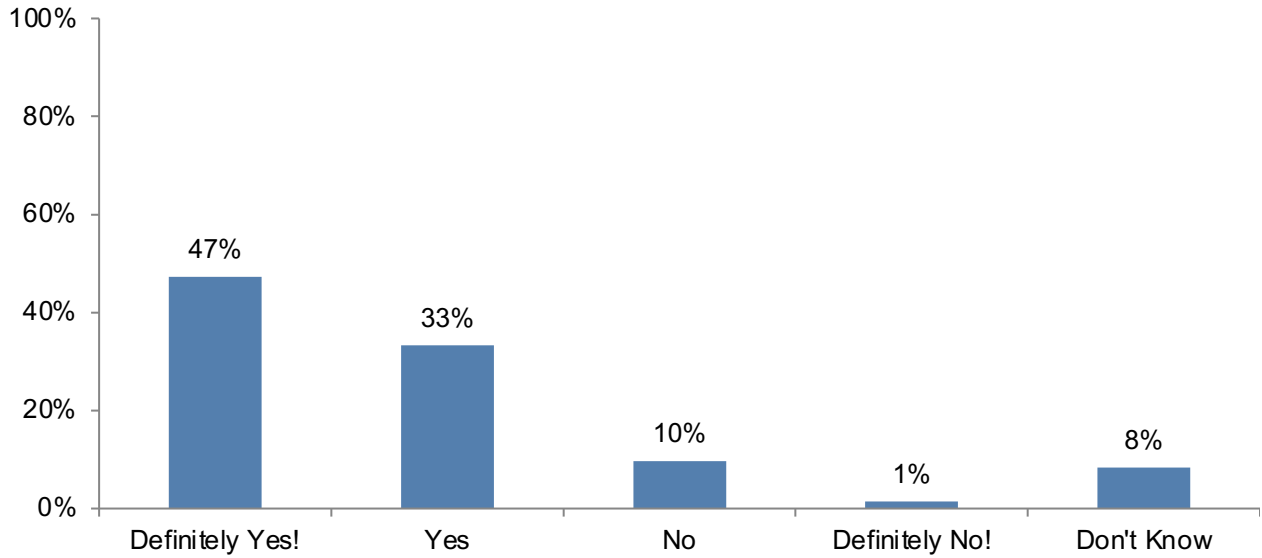


N = 70; Skipped = 4

Compassion

The majority of respondents (80%) said that their experience in *Middle Ground* brought up feelings of compassion for people who were different from them. While 11% said their exhibition experience did not bring up feelings of compassion, 8% said they were not sure whether it did.

Figure 10. Did your experience in the exhibition bring up feelings of compassion for people who are different from you?

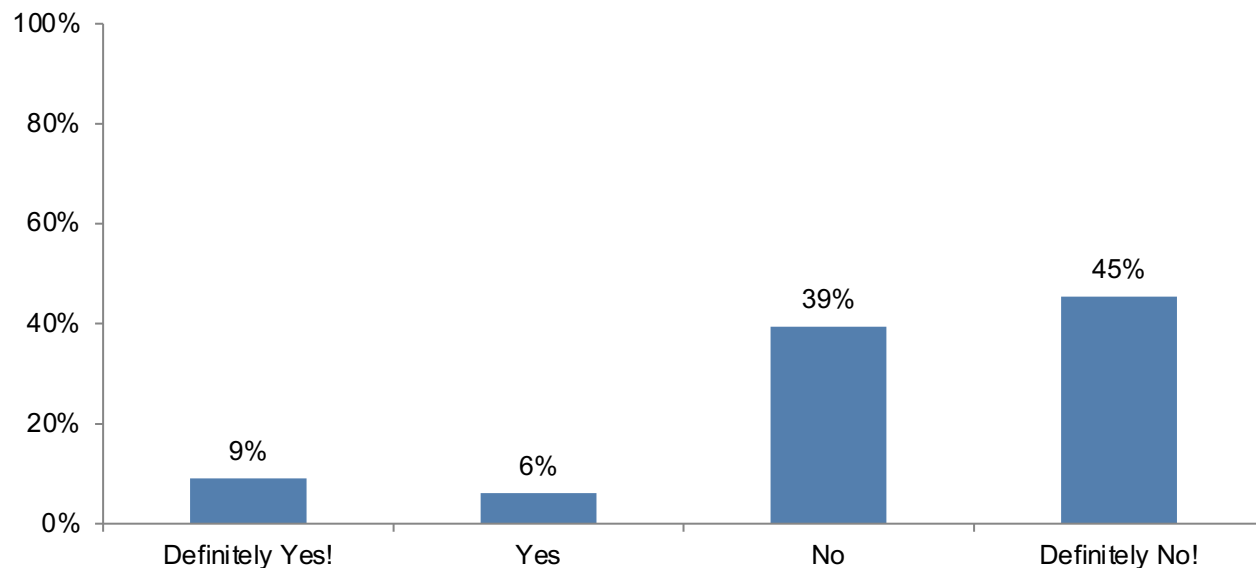


N = 72; Skipped = 2

Discomfort

Most respondents (85%) reported that the *Middle Ground* experience did not bring up feelings of discomfort with people who were different from them. Some (15%), however, said that they did experience feelings of discomfort in the exhibition.

Figure 11. Did your experience in the exhibition bring up feelings of discomfort with people who are different from you?



N = 66; Skipped = 8

[At Making It in America] I think I recognize that I started a little higher...than many other people....[my discomfort is] not about other people, it's about like how do I address this from the standpoint of being a little higher up?

It's a little weird because...It's like treading into the unknown and interacting with somebody that you don't know.

I feel like most people are uncomfortable working with people they don't know....It's about not seeing that feeling as necessarily negative, but also embracing that feeling....it can also be really good because it's interactive and collaborative and I think that's a feeling that we should feel more.

Analysis showed that some participants' ratings to the discomfort question did not match their qualitative responses. On further analysis using the Bennett Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (2004) (a framework for understanding how people orient with and engage cultural difference), we found that these respondents appeared to be in the "minimization of difference" stage. Those at this stage believe that similarities outweigh differences and may overestimate their own tolerance. By focusing on similarities, minimization enables people to avoid recognizing their own biases and avoid discomfort. Thus, the number of respondents who reported having no discomfort may be overestimated.

For those who did report feeling discomfort, our analysis found that these respondents most commonly reported being initially uncomfortable interacting with strangers, particularly at You, Me, We and Hands-on Music. All who reported feeling initially hesitant, however, eventually overcame the feeling, and saw these interactions as positive. A few specifically mentioned that facilitators put them at ease. Other reasons given by respondents were feeling discomfort with: a) their own privilege (in Making It in America); b) other people's opinions that differed from their own (My Side Bias); c) the realization of their own bias and judgement of others as well as feeling judged by others (Unseen Bias), and d) not knowing if they would help someone else in the situation depicted in Standby or Standup.

Metacognition: Qualitative Data

Analysis of interview data also showed that *Middle Ground* prompted and supported metacognition, particularly as it related to observations of one's own behavior or values and bias/judgement. Moreover, this metacognition led to positive impacts—in particular, learning about oneself, fostering feelings of empathy and compassion, and making connections with others.

Metacognition

Analysis showed a range of ways in which participants experienced moments of awareness of their own thinking about themselves or others. This could include observations of their own behaviors, beliefs, or values; reflecting on biases, judgements, and stereotypes; and perspective-taking. We found that when the experience fostered metacognition, it often prompted reflection in more than one of these areas or “categories.” For example, respondents often thought about their own behavior and values in terms of their biases or judgements about others or their ability to see issues from someone else's point of view. It is important to note that these “categories” are not exclusive; usually, participants described several of these types of reflections taking place in their experiences at *Middle Ground*.

Awareness of biases or judgements was the “category” mentioned by the most respondents in the interviews. Half of the respondents (50%) interviewed described at least one instance of thinking about bias or judgement as a result of their experience in *Middle Ground*. The exhibit unit Unseen Stories closely linked to instances in which participants were prompted to think about their biases and judgements.

Unseen Stories was specifically mentioned in nearly 40% of instances of respondents talking about biases or judgement. The only other exhibit unit which spurred awareness about biases or judgement was My Side Bias, which was specifically mentioned in fewer than 20% of responses.

In addition, we found that experiences with the Urban Alchemy facilitators themselves—especially when they shared their personal life stories with visitors—also prompted respondents to think about biases and judgements. For instance, one respondent said, “I think having him [the facilitator] as one of the volunteers here is very interesting...while I was talking to him, I didn't rush to any conclusions, and it was interesting just to hear, kind of, his life story. It became evident that he came from a difficult home life when he was young, and so it really explained how he might have done things without having good parental supervision or community supervision.”

Respondents' observations of their own behavior and values was also a common “category” in coded interview data. Nearly half the respondents (47%) mentioned at least one instance of observing their own behavior. For example, respondents talked about how their *Middle Ground* experience

I like to...see myself as a person who is...open-minded....I lean much more towards liberal ideals....But then sometimes I kind of cast-type people who maybe don't hold the same ideals.

[I learned] knowing about people not only culturally but also...racially and...economically. Like those differences and how those kind of intersect. And just how many ways you could judge people and how many ways you really shouldn't.

That one question [in My Side Bias] where they were asking...does it feel harder to look at the other side of this story if you're pretty passionate about this topic versus if you're not passionate about this topic and you're like “Oh yeah, indeed, it gets hard to listen to another side when you're so deeply passionate or convinced of your side of the story.”...It brought quite a lot of subtlety in opening up the doors a bit more, which was nice.

Having never met this person before [the facilitator], I'd made no assumptions. And it was a surprise to have him admit right up front that he had been incarcerated. I didn't pass judgement...I could still talk to him and he seemed like a nice person. And so it was easy to ask him questions and he was comfortable and responded and he was open.

Metacognition: Qualitative Data, cont'd.

prompted them to think about how they act in social situations, such as complying with authority, making snap judgements about others, or avoiding interacting with strangers in public.

Exhibit units commonly cited by respondents as spurring thinking about their own thinking and behavior, and where they were clearly engaging, were the Compliance Video, Unseen Stories, and My Side Bias. Respondents, for example, often said that watching the Compliance Video led them to consider past interactions and behaviors with authority figures, noting that they would likely comply with someone in a uniform just as the people in the video did. Unseen Stories prompted many respondents to think about and even confront their own behavior in terms of biases, judgements, and even stereotypes of others based on visual appearances. My Side Bias, which involved reading other visitors' views on different issues, helped respondents consider the perspectives of those who did not agree with their opinions. For example, some of respondents said that reading some the opinions about universal health care they did not agree with made them uncomfortable, but that while they struggled to understand the other perspective, they did value the experience.

There was also evidence of respondents beginning to see, and perhaps even appreciate, others' points of view and perspective-taking as a result of their

experience at *Middle Ground*. About a third of respondents (32%) described at least one instance of perspective-taking related to their exhibition experience. For example, as one respondent explained, *Middle Ground* helped “kinda open my mind up to the fact that there are two sides... There’s another side other than my side.” Another talked of “putting myself in other people’s shoes... Trying to remain open and not close-minded... walking into the exhibition, [I] kind of already had that mind frame. [My experience here] just reaffirms things.”

The exhibit unit that respondents most closely linked to perspective-taking was My Side Bias. This exhibit prompted them to think not only about their own opinions but also others' beliefs and opinions—and, even if they disagreed strongly, to at least acknowledge the legitimacy of beliefs and opinions other than their own.

There were fewer instances in the data related to respondents reflecting on beliefs and values (20%), quick and slow thinking (18%), or stereotypes (8%), yet all of them did appear. Some respondents talked about how their experience in *Middle Ground* led them to think about their own beliefs and values when interacting with or judging others. For instance, one respondent explained, “My history of living in San Francisco has always been one of wanting to interact with many different people.” Another talked about how the exhibition reminded him that “it’s important for me to

I mean, those words with the ‘think twice.’ You just look at them, and, like, “I do this” (laughs). So, oh my God, this is, like, a lot of feelings. This experience was awesome in all the ways possible... [it made] you look inside and rethink everything you know.

It opened my mind up again to this, you know, I gotta be more open-minded because I found myself becoming more narrow-minded and just in this little box right here and it’s my way or the highway. But, you know, the world does not work like that. And I know it. So this was a refresher... to be more open-minded.

I tend to speak my mind about certain matters whether, like, people want to hear it or not, but with exhibits like this... now that I realize that, like, I do have to take into consideration of everyone and what they’ve been through, not just what I think I want to say because people might not necessarily need to hear that or want to hear that.

It makes me look at the different people that are that are walking around that I’m not seeing, you know, that your mind kind of blanks out and to project onto them to see, consider their points of view or their own perspective.

[Unseen Stories] asked “What may people think about me?”... I’m really quiet, people think I’m shy, I’m introverted. I was thinking how you can be introverted but not necessarily shy. I’m just thinking about that.

It made me wonder would I have stopped to step on that thing on the ground just because this guy is asking me. I don’t think I would have been smart and said “I don’t know who you are.”

Metacognition: Qualitative Data, cont'd.

always check up on myself and how I'm thinking but also be more aware about what other people might be thinking or what they're experiencing differently in their own lives...these are things that I already know, but I feel like I should be doing it more often."

Quick and slow thinking was often linked with bias, and stereotypes, which can often result from making snap judgements. As one respondent explained, in *Middle Ground*, "[I was] kind of thinking back on my experiences and trying to look at it, like, was it, like, the first thought, or, like, should I have taken like a second moment to try and evaluate who that person is before kind of like jumping to a conclusion?" Another remarked, "I think that's [snap judgements] something we can all relate to. Whether it's, you know, just going through traffic or you're dealing with a rude person...It's relatable." These three types of metacognition—reflecting on beliefs and values, quick and slow thinking, or stereotypes—were less strongly associated with any particular exhibit, though *Unseen Stories* was the one exhibit mentioned most often across the board.

Impacts

We found that when the experience fostered metacognition, it also led to positive impacts, such as feeling respect for others, feeling connected to or aware of others, feeling empathy/compassion for others, learning

about oneself or others, interacting with or thinking about others, and reflecting on how one wants to be or act. In examining the prevalence of the co-occurrence of metacognition and impact codes (e.g., fostering empathy, connection, respect), we found that 97% of interviews in which metacognition occurred also included evidence of at least one type of impact (e.g., fostering empathy, connection, respect).

Well over half the respondents (59%) described at least one instance of feeling respect for others based on their experience in *Middle Ground*. Similarly, in more than half the interviews (57%), respondents described feeling connection to or awareness of others. Finally, more than half the respondents (53%) also described at least one instance of having feelings of empathy or compassion for someone else during their experience.

In the qualitative data, interacting with or thinking about others was less prevalent (41% reported at least one instance) as was evidence of learning about oneself or others. Finally, 30% of respondents described at least one instance of how *Middle Ground* helped them reflect on how they aspired to be or act. For example, one respondent said, "even if you're not thinking about it along your day, I think going through this exhibit, you think about being more empathetic toward other peoples' situations."

It opened my eyes a little bit more. You know instead of walking down the street, "There's another homeless person," you know, you think "Well, how did they get that way?" Problems we need to solve to help people in that situation.

The [Unseen] Stories were definitely a good reminder of...you can't always see what someone's going through. And I think a lot of people know that, but seeing it more and more, and in people's own handwriting, is a really good reminder.

I read some of these stories and I'm like, "Wow, they're so sad," like, people go through this, like, on the daily.

I also catch myself being very biased very quickly. And it doesn't take too long to switch me to not biased anymore. But I feel like I still come to any place with my point of view and it was nice...for a second to take a step back...we just had this discussion about homelessness and reading some stories made me think that maybe I'll...be less judgmental a little bit about that...So that was good.

Metacognition: Qualitative Data, cont'd.

Among the exhibit units that prompted or supported these impacts, interviewees specifically mentioned Unseen Stories most often. In particular, they mentioned that Unseen Stories evoked empathy and compassion in respondents or helped them feel a sense of connection to others, particularly the people whose stories were featured. For example, one said, “I’m just being more...more empathetic, really. It’s not, not being so quick to judge people I think...[specifically] when I saw the thing where it like, you flip the picture, like there’s a picture of someone [Unseen Stories] then you flipped it and it says what their real story was and that was pretty cool.”

When asked what in *Middle Ground* triggered feelings of empathy, another respondent explained, “Just reading the stories. Looking at the faces of these people. Looking at the faces, reading the stories. That’s [Unseen Stories] the main installation that brings me these kind of feelings.” Still another respondent said, “Reading the stories made me feel connected. I also see something that is part of me at the same time, so I read a story and I see me in that kind of story. So, I feel connected to the people that I read the story of.”

The other exhibit that was strongly linked to impacts, particularly interacting with and fostering a sense of connection with others, was Hands-On Music. The physical linking of hands with strangers—whether Urban Alchemy facilitators or other visitors—was unusual and powerful. As one respondent explained, “the music one (Hands-On Music) spark[ed], like it made us feel a lot of joy...like we wouldn’t have felt in any other way.... we all came together. We were interacting in a way that like we would never interact before.” Another said, “It [Hands-On Music] was just really cool to feel like, when people join together, a lot of good things could happen. I felt like when you saw the result of activities, you never really thought about how awkward anything was.”

It feels like the holding hands [Hands-On Music] is like a good introduction to, 'oh, let's do something together,' but it's overall just playful and delightful, versus those stations here with, like, the stories [Unseen Stories] and the, like, bias [My Side Bias] is much more [thought-provoking]...you take your time here.

Because in reading other people's stories I was thinking what I would do in that situation...what I would say about myself and what people, like, friends, would say of me. So that definitely got me thinking. And some of the other ones where it's like, 'don't do this' and, like, but I want to do this (laugh). That definitely got me thinking.

[I felt connection] when I was holding other people's hands. And when I was looking across from somebody in the mirror. And reading the notes over there where people were writing about themselves. You always see yourself in other people's stories, if you pay attention to their stories.

I really felt that with the hands-on music activity, that one, since we were all holding hands, you felt, like, the physical connection. But also seeing how we made the music start playing, it was also, like, kind of metaphorical as well.

Social Science Concepts

There was evidence that respondents who engaged with an exhibit unit recognized the key social science concepts associated with it. In our analysis, we found only two units—Pay It Forward Café and Thought Bubbles—where we did not find such evidence, perhaps due to limitations of data collected.

Table 2. Exhibit Units, Key Social Science Concepts, and Representative Quotes

Exhibit Unit	Key Social Science Concept	Illustrative Quote Sample quotes showing ways respondents articulated the specific social science concept
Don't Push the Button/ Compliance Video	Power & compliance	<i>I was reminded of how we all fall in that trap just because someone looks official, we accept that this guy is some authority figure....No matter how stupid his order because he's wearing something that looks like a uniform, people do it....it was a reminder sometimes how people...are very ready to accept orders even if they don't know why or from who it's coming.</i>
Face to Face	Including others in the self	<i>I love the photo exhibit because it showed all ages, all skin colors...But everybody has similar expressions. That was an amazing exhibit.</i>
Hands-on Music	Intergroup contact	<i>We started with just us and the lady [facilitator] brought us round and then a guy was walking by we said, "Come here." He didn't look particularly rich, but we held hands and danced for a minute. And why not? We were all happy.</i>
Making It in America	Social mobility	<i>It was funny that it [Making It in America] had the social mobility...I underestimated the truth every time. (laughs) So I don't have any faith in the social mobility. But that was interesting to see that most people overestimated, and I underestimated it. So that was interesting.</i>
My Side Bias	Issue involvement & selective exposure	<i>I think...[My Side Bias] made me think about the other side a little bit better....I understand their side a little bit better because...I think kids shouldn't be on social media as much...I think that there's a lot of crazy [stuff], but then I looked at the other side of it and it seemed like there's a lot of reasons why it's good too...not just the bad stuff.</i>
	Quick & slow thinking	<i>There's the one about snap judgements and I think that's something we can all relate to. Whether it's, you know, just going through traffic or you're dealing with a rude person....It's relatable.</i>
Pulling Together	Social loafing	<i>It was a little striking..."Oh, you tend to work harder when other people can see your progress,"...I think that that's definitely true, and also like I was thinking... if I had been able to see my own progress the first time, it was more like against myself...I want to see how hard I'm pulling, just for myself...I felt myself kind of reflecting on that process.</i>
Standby or Standup	Bystander effect	<i>And there's also one exhibit [Standup or Standby] where it's like kind of like the effect where you, like, you ignore people who might need help.</i>
Tell a Joke	Positive effect of humor	<i>She [a stranger] was reading the description of the exhibit so when I offered to tell her a joke she was very open to it and then we both shared a lot over a simple silly joke.</i>
Unseen Stories	Perspective-taking	<i>The one [exhibit] where you hear other people's opinions and stuff, and how they see themselves is cool because even if they're not present then you're still, like, learning about someone.</i>
	Quick & slow thinking	<i>Not being so quick to judge people I think, is the main thing I thought of. I think [I thought this] when I saw the thing where...there's a picture of someone, then you flipped it, and it says what their real story was and that was pretty cool.</i>
	Stereotype	<i>Just getting that information of...people who are different from you—what they experience, what kind of stereotypes that are put against them, but what they actually identify with? I have compassion for that.</i>
You, Me, We	Including others in the self	<i>[It brought up feelings of connection with people who are different from me] When I was looking across from somebody in the mirror.</i>

Placemaking



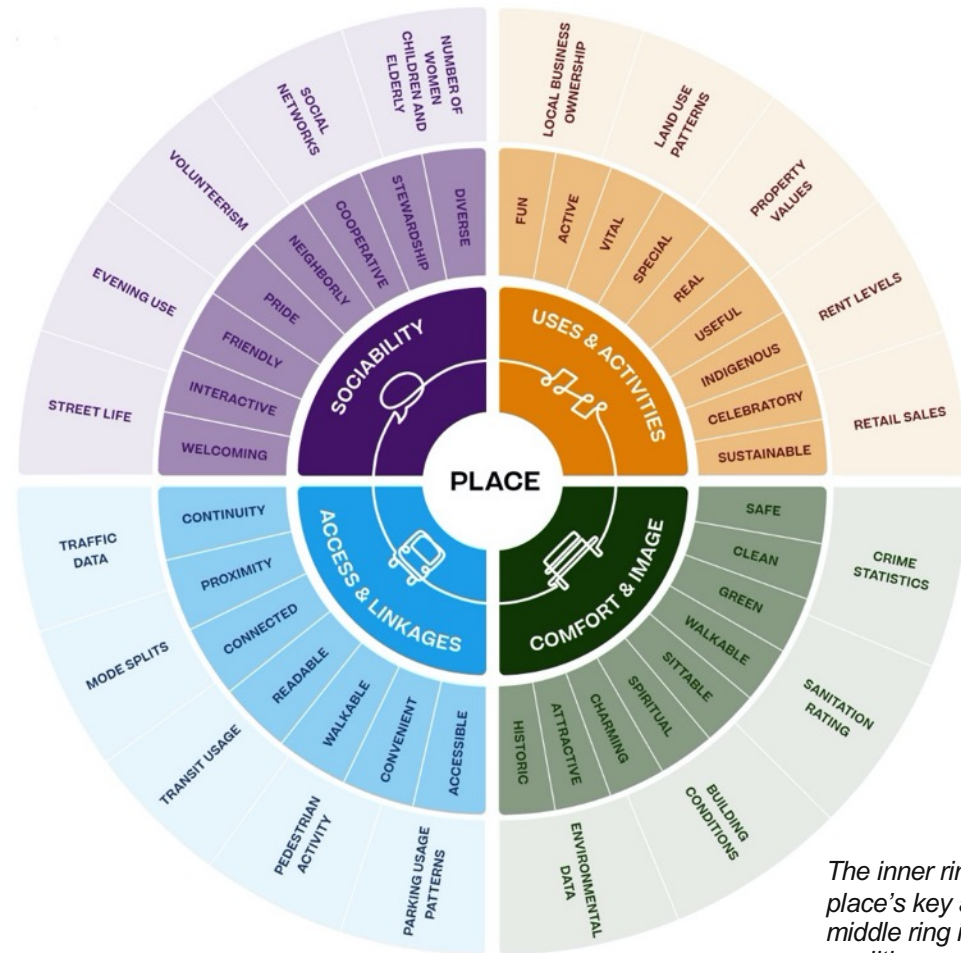
Placemaking

Drawing on the placemaking movement and philosophy, one of the stated goals of *Middle Ground* was to create “positive pedestrian experiences at street-level in urban centers to increase social interaction and build community” (NSF project proposal, p. 3). This evaluation found evidence that the installation contributed to placemaking in the Civic Center; more than half (58%) of interviews showed at least one instance of visitors commenting on some element of placemaking in describing their experience in *Middle Ground*.

Although the data on which this evaluation drew did not specifically focus on placemaking, we were interested in finding out whether we could glean insights about the extent and ways in which *Middle Ground* contributed to creating a convivial space (Shaftoe, 2012) where people could come together in a public, open space to relax and interact.

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) developed a model that defines characteristics of placemaking spaces and groups them into four broad categories (see Figure 12). Using the PPS model as inspiration, we analyzed data to look for the presence of any of these elements of placemaking. Data were coded as having some general evidence of placemaking if visitors, describing their experiences, commented on any of the following: a) seeing the space as accessible, inviting, attractive, or comfortable; b) seeing the space spur social interactions with strangers; c) feeling a sense of welcome or belonging; or d) characterizing the space as active and/or fun.

Figure 12. “What Makes Places Great?” from the Project for Public Spaces



The inner ring represents a place’s key attributes, the middle ring its intangible qualities, and the outer ring its measurable data.

Placemaking, cont'd.

It was interesting to note that even though interviews did not explicitly ask about placemaking, more than half of participants (58%) interviewed did mention some element of placemaking in describing why their experiences were generally very positive. Our analysis also identified four specific elements of *Middle Ground* that contributed to creating a convivial space.

Design: The design of the space, with its bright colors, seating, and interactive exhibits, signaled to participants that it was an active spot for people from all walks of life to gather and engage.

Social Dimension: The ways in which *Middle Ground* fostered social interaction among visitors was among the most-often mentioned elements of placemaking. While the majority of interactions were between visitors and facilitators, just over a quarter (27%) of interviewed visitors interacted with a stranger other than the facilitator. (Facilitators often served as a bridge in encouraging interactions between visitors.) Some visitors even expressed surprise at their own pro-social behavior (e.g., talking to a stranger, dancing in public) because, they said, it was not how they would normally behave.

I think visually it just gets passers-by to see that there's so many different people just using the space and connecting with each other and talking to each other.

It looks appealing. It looks like people like to come and sit and chat and have some coffee and talk...all those different people from different places. That's nice.

You know I actually want to keep exploring more of the stuff but then I'm, like, conflicted because I want to go to the farmers' market and buy stuff 'cause I'm hungry (laughs)...it's fun, I want to come back here and do this now.

OK, say for instance there was an older person, generation-gap-wise, and another one was an immigrant. And he'll say, I've got something to do and I want to keep [unintelligible] and then we'll say just come in here for a moment and he may not want to be interested but after maybe awhile, maybe after two or three minutes, you get used to this place and you don't want to leave. You want to sit down, have coffee, and chat. So versatility is a good thing....These chairs, you get to sit. You know, you don't just--two or three hundred people standing around. I like that. You get to sit down and I know you don't want people on your property (laughs). I want to sit down; if I had coffee I would have. Maybe tomorrow or maybe some other time I'll enjoy some coffee.

It just made me feel like the city became a bigger, closer community rather than all separated.

I saw some people around me that were also enjoying the activities. so it made me more comfortable.



An image from Google Maps street view showing the emptiness of the plaza without *Middle Ground*. Many people sit on the concrete edging around the trees, but the plaza itself is lifeless, with nothing drawing them to interact with one another or linger.



People in *Middle Ground* during a book sale at the San Francisco Library. *Middle Ground* was seen as an active gathering space.

Placemaking, cont'd.

Exhibits: The exhibits themselves, particularly Hands-on Music and Tell a Joke, also encouraged visitors to interact. The fact that exhibits focused on content that was 'about' people (i.e., social science) appeared to contribute to placemaking in that it spurred visitors to think about themselves and others.

UA Facilitators: Urban Alchemy facilitators were critical to *Middle Ground's* contribution to placemaking at the Civic Center. Among the most prevalent findings across all interviews was the significant contribution that facilitators made to visitors' positive experiences. Their specific philosophy and style of facilitation seemed key. Participants often talked about their interactions with facilitators, in particular, as being especially meaningful in helping them connect with someone different from themselves and in spurring visitors to engage with others in the space.

I think the first impression is that, whoa, these people are very nice and engaging and it's trying to create a really nice community space.

Oh my God. I just danced over there. And I don't dance outside. People see me on the street. (laughs) I just did it!...I need to be more outgoing. Feel more free to do things...It was fun.

Look, I got that family to stop. He was walking by and I said hey Mr. Tall Guy with a Beard, go let your wife have a beard too, It's fun. And they're still here. And look, he just bought somebody a cup of coffee. And he [unintelligible] taught his kid something too. They were walking by when we were dancing.

I think it just brings people from different walks of life into a space where nothing else outside of it matters and sort of brings everyone into one particular goal, without any other judgement.

Well, you know, it has a lot to do with the way you relate to the world and a lot of times we're all locked up in our own little world, doing our own thing, and we don't take the time to think beyond our immediate surroundings and our immediate universe. So when you come to an exhibit like this it makes you step out of that shell and expand your considerations about the rest of the world and how you think of other people and their experiences.

I interacted with [the facilitator] and he introduced me to, I believe, a homeless gentleman with a rabbit and so I bought him a coffee (laughs).

It was just really cool to feel, like, when people join together, a lot of good things could happen, so...I felt like when you saw the result of activities, you never really thought about how awkward anything was.

I hang out here a lot and I'm not used to that many people being so openly friendly.... everyone else went out of our way to try to include us in whatever was going on here and to be honest, we had no idea what it was, we thought it was just an art installation.

When people make an effort to just be friendly, that kind of brings up everyone's energy level, you know. He [facilitator] was just amazing.

I didn't really see anyone as different but everyone I did talk to was just really, really, really super-friendly. Like beyond friendly....is this always like this? Are people always this friendly here?



A UA facilitator engaged three women at Hands-on Music. Facilitators' ability to set people at ease and model social interaction was key to *Middle Ground* being a positive experience.

About Urban Alchemy

Urban Alchemy (UA) is an organization that trains previously incarcerated persons to bring "a sense of peace and respect to America's most chaotic urban areas that are struggling with the intersection of extreme poverty, addiction, mental illness, and hopelessness." UA says they use "the transformative power of love, passion, respect, and a sense of belonging to reshape the lives of society's most vulnerable members into society's most valued members."

Their trained facilitators employ pro-social interactions, including greeting people, serving as docents, and maintaining a positive appearance. In their positions, facilitators are also expected to negotiate negative behavior using their communication skills and keep areas clean and safe for children.

Placemaking, cont'd.

When the placemaking aspects of *Middle Ground* mentioned by respondents are mapped to the PPS model, we can see that the qualities mentioned fall in all four quadrants of the model. Remember that the interviews were not designed to probe on placemaking aspects of the exhibition, so respondents are identifying these aspects of *Middle Ground* unprompted by the interviewers, which suggests they were strong, recognizable aspects of the experience. We suspect respondents would have identified other aspects of the model had there been specific, related probes.

The Sociability and Access & Linkages were the quadrants where *Middle Ground* has the most overlap with the model. The Sociability overlap reflects the social nature of the *Middle Ground* experience, particularly the UA facilitators who were especially effective at giving the area a friendly and welcoming feeling. The Access & Linkages overlap also reflects *Middle Ground*'s location outside the San Francisco Public Library, near transportation hubs and other areas of activity such as a playground and City Hall.

Figure 13. Middle Ground Data Mapped to PPS's "What Makes Places Great?"



The areas shown in color represent qualities for which we found evidence in the *Middle Ground* data.

Conclusions



Conclusions

Based on data analyzed to date, summative evaluation indicates that *Middle Ground* met its public audience and placemaking goals.

Overall Experience & Welcome

Middle Ground positively engaged respondents, with the majority (80%) rating their experience “very good.” Moreover, 100% of respondents interviewed reported feeling welcome in the space.

Metacognition & Social Science Concepts

Summative evaluation found solid evidence that the *Middle Ground* installation fostered metacognition and, as a result, positively impacted visitors, including prompting empathy, connection, and respect.

Over 70% of respondents reported that they learned something about themselves or others during their *Middle Ground* experience. Likewise, over 70% reported feeling that their *Middle Ground* experience made them think about how they act with other people. Furthermore, for both measures of metacognition, over 80% of respondents said that their metacognition took place during the experience.

While qualitative data showed less robustness than self-reported data, our analysis of interview data still revealed a range of ways in which the experience fostered metacognition in visitors. Most commonly, respondents: a) made observations of their own behaviors, beliefs, or values; b) reflected on their biases, judgements, and stereotypes; and c) engaged in perspective-taking. Importantly,

we found that 80% of interviews showed evidence of at least one instance of metacognitive thinking.

Based on the qualitative data, the exhibit units that respondents mentioned most often when describing instances of metacognition were Unseen Stories, My Side Bias, and the Compliance Video. These units correspond with the social science concepts most prevalent in the qualitative data: Quick and slow thinking; perspective-taking; stereotypes; and power and compliance.

Social Science Concepts

There was a strong relationship between the social science concepts that respondents engaged with and the exhibit units that respondents used. We found evidence that in all but two components (Pay it Forward Café and Thought Bubbles) respondents recognized the key social science concepts for that exhibit unit.

Impact

Evaluation also found strong evidence of affective impact as a result of successfully prompting metacognitive thinking. Over 80% of respondents reported that their *Middle Ground* experience brought up feelings of respect, connection with, and compassion for people who were different from them. This self-reported data was triangulated through coded qualitative data that showed evidence of at least one instance of affective impact in 89% of interviews.

Placemaking

This evaluation also found evidence that *Middle Ground* contributed to placemaking in the Civic Center. More than half of the interviews contained at least one instance of respondents commenting on an element of placemaking during their experience in *Middle Ground*. Evaluation identified four specific elements of the installation that contributed to creating a convivial public space: the design of the space, the social interactions fostered by *Middle Ground*, the exhibits themselves, and the UA facilitators.

The UA facilitators, in particular, appeared critical to the experience and made significant contributions to visitors’ engagement with exhibit concepts and overall positive experiences.

Mapping the placemaking aspects of *Middle Ground* mentioned by respondents (and unprompted by interviewers) to PPS’s “What Makes Places Great” model shows that these placemaking aspects were perceptible to visitors and touch on all four quadrants of the model. Aspects of the Sociability quadrant were particularly prevalent in interviews.

Although some data are still being collected and analyzed—and the available data set is limited—evaluation findings nonetheless indicate *Middle Ground* is a promising model for engaging a broad and diverse public.

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Appendices



Appendix A: Respondent Profile

Note that in some cases these percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3. The rung that most represents where respondents think they stand at this time in their life compared to others in the United States

Level of Rung	% of Respondents (N = 69, Skipped = 5)
1	1%
2	3%
3	4%
4	10%
5	13%
6	23%
7	16%
8	17%
9	9%
10	3%

Table 4. Age

Age Range	% of Respondents (N = 66, Skipped = 8)
18–29	35%
30–39	21%
40–49	9%
50–59	12%
60–69	17%
70+	5%
Prefer not to say	2%

Figure 14. Gender Identity

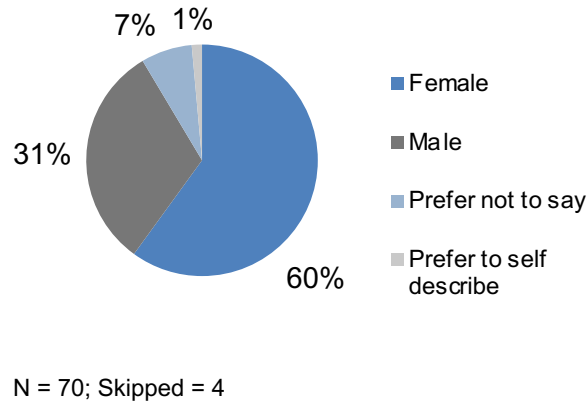


Figure 15. Group Size

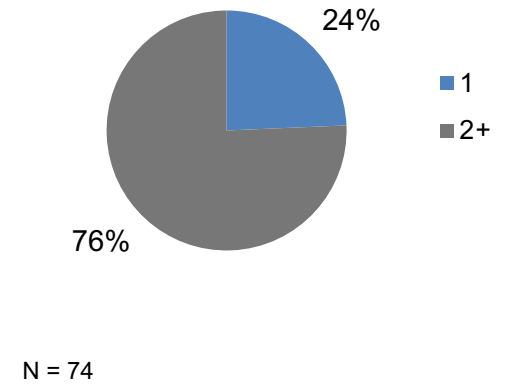


Figure 16. Interview Language

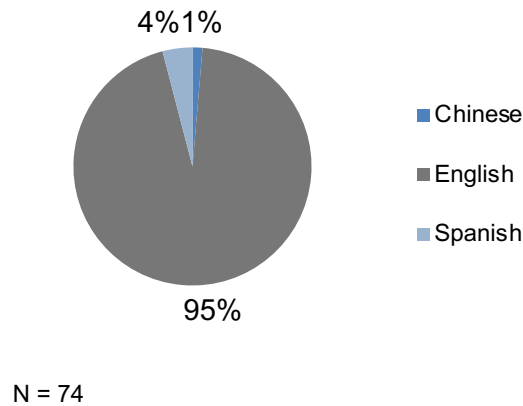


Figure 17. Children in Group?

