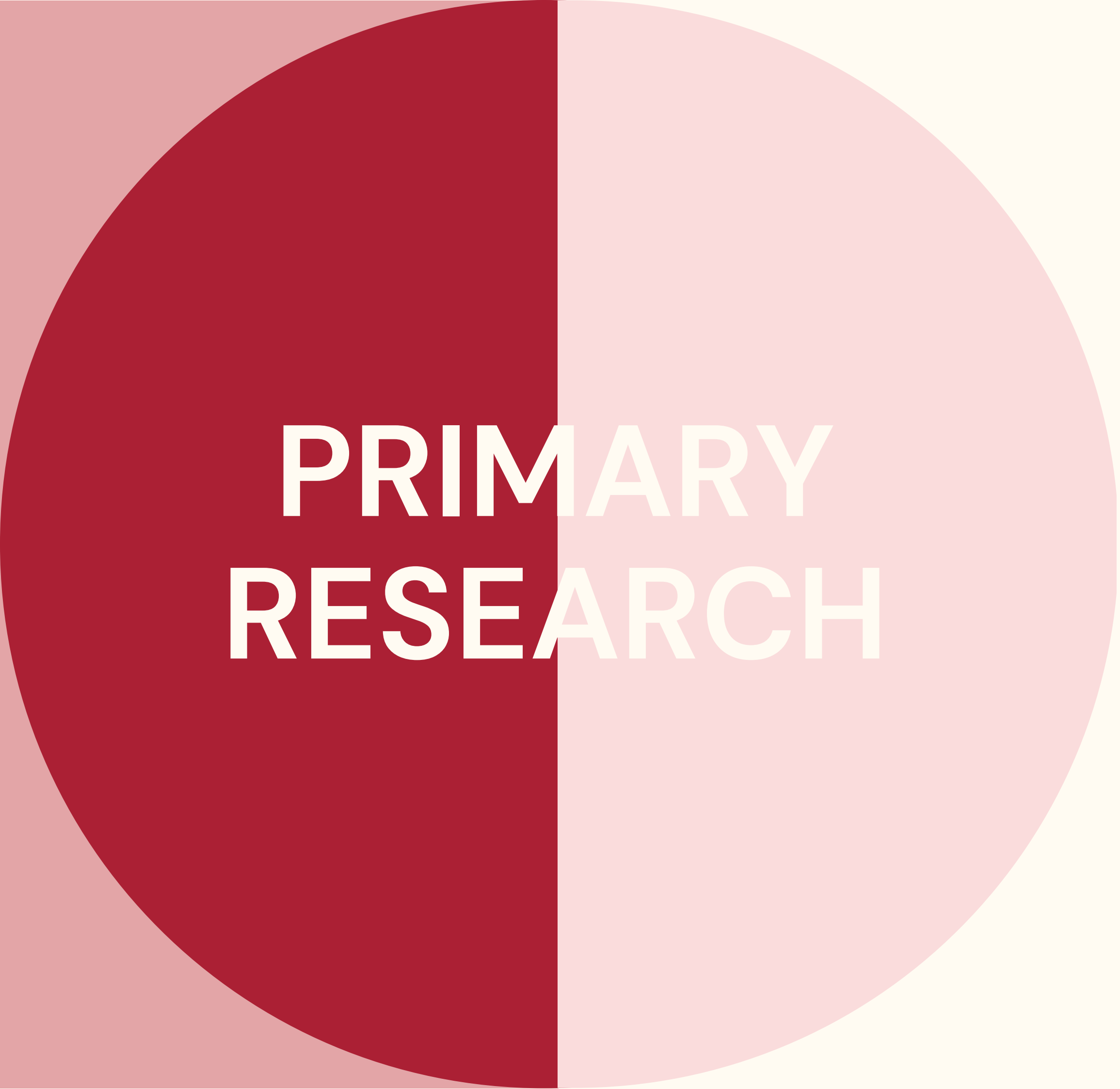




PRIMARY RESEARCH

A VISIT TO THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

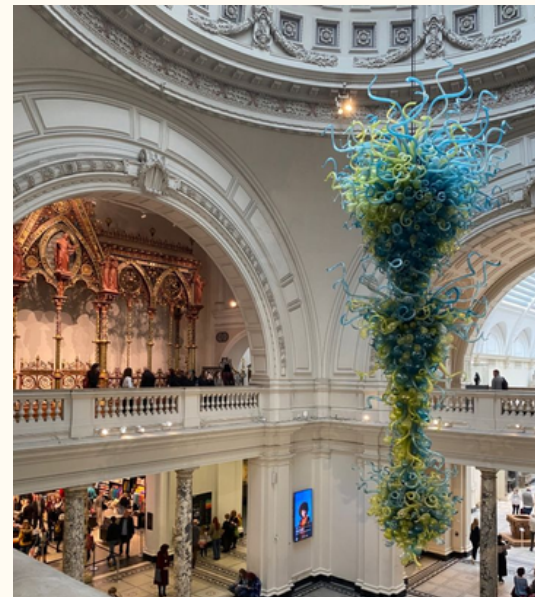
LONDON

As part of my primary research, I visited the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)—an iconic institution renowned for its commitment to design and culture. This visit is a key step in understanding the user journey and the role of design in shaping visitor experiences. Through observational studies and analysis of existing seating, the aim was to identify behavioural patterns, pain points, and opportunities for design interventions. This research is critical to grounding my project in real-world insights, ensuring the final solution is both empathetic and impactful within the museum context.

WHY THE V&A?

Having visited museums around the world, the V&A has always remained a favourite. It stood out as the perfect setting for this research due to its reputation as a global leader in art, design, and cultural heritage. With its diverse and immersive collection spanning 5,000 years, the V&A isn't just a museum; it's a place that champions creativity, storytelling, and innovation in design.

As someone exploring the intersection of mental health and museum experiences, the V&A provided an ideal context to observe how design influences visitor behaviour, emotional connection, and engagement with art. Its carefully curated spaces, attention to detail, and iconic status as a hub for design excellence made it an inspiring ground for identifying pain points and opportunities within the visitor journey.

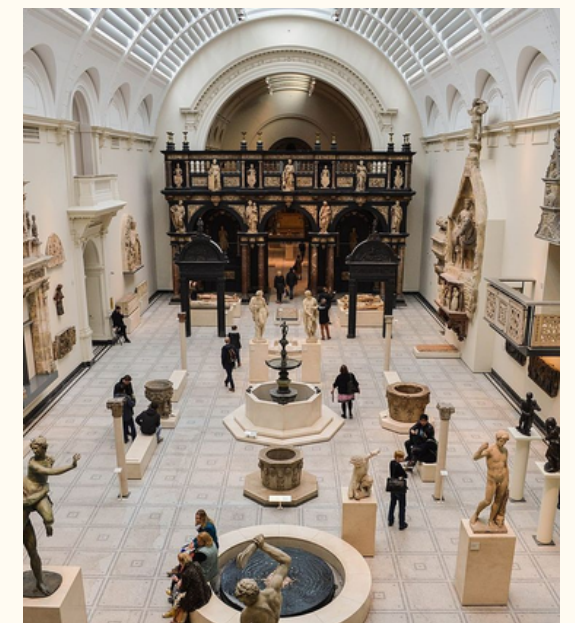


MY OBJECTIVE:

- **Understand the User Journey:** Explore the visitor experience from entry to exit, focusing on key moments of interaction, rest, and engagement.
- **Evaluate the Role of Seating:** Analyse how existing seating solutions support or hinder visitor behaviour, comfort, and emotional connection.
- **Identify Pain Points:** Pinpoint challenges or gaps in the museum experience, particularly those related to moments of reflection, connection, or overstimulation.
- **Discover Design Opportunities:** Uncover insights that can inform innovative seating solutions to enhance the museum's role as a space for emotional well-being and cultural engagement.

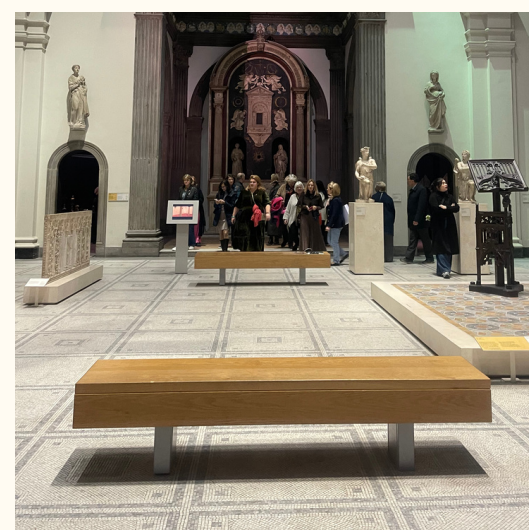
MY PLAN:

- **Ethnographic Observation**
- **Seating Design Analysis**
- **Photography and Sketching**
- **Behavioural Analysis**
- **Interviews**



SEATING AT THE V&A

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION

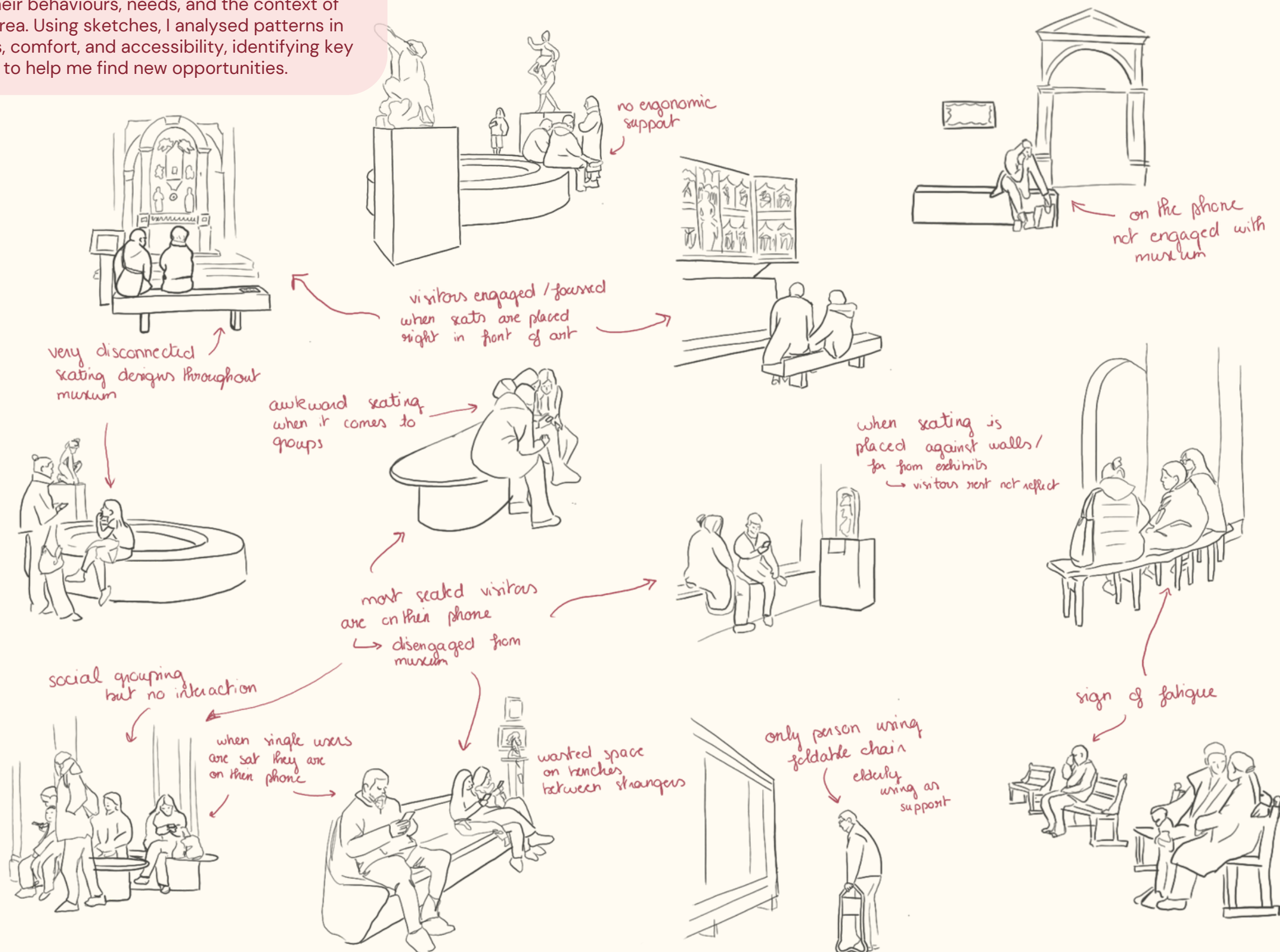


MY OBSERVATIONS:

- Variety of seating types but no consistency throughout the museum.
- No individual seating options, only benches or group arrangements.
- Most seating positioned along walls or in transitional areas, with fewer near exhibits and little integration into the central visitor experience.
- Hard materials like wood and metal dominate, offering durability but limited comfort.
- Minimal design, with most seating consisting of traditional benches.
- No comfort features incorporated into any of the seating.
- Only two benches feature an interactive element, both limited to single-user functionality.
- Uneven seating distribution across the museum, with some areas lacking seating entirely.
- Benches offer no connection to the museum's storytelling or cultural narrative.

USER INTERACTION WITH SEATING IN THE V&A

Through observational sketches and annotation at the V&A, I documented how visitors interacted with existing seating, focusing on their behaviours, needs, and the context of each seating area. Using sketches, I analysed patterns in social dynamics, comfort, and accessibility, identifying key insights to help me find new opportunities.



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS SET 1 FOR MUSEUM STAFF AND VISITORS

FOR MUSEUM/GALLERY STAFF:

- Do visitors ever ask about places where they can sit and rest or find quieter area to take a break?
- Where do visitors typically pause or sit down most often in the museum? Are there any common areas where people linger?
- What visitor behaviours do you observe in seating areas (resting, sketching, socialising)?
- Do you think visitors have enough opportunities to sit and rest while moving through the museum?
- How well do you think current seating options support different visitor needs like resting, reflecting or even socialising?
- How important is it for seating to blend with the gallery's visual environment?
- Do you find that visitors prefer more private, quiet seating areas or do they gravitate towards open social spaces?
- What improvements or changes to seating of you think would enhance the visitor experience?
- Do you think that furniture design could help visitors feel more connected to the museum environment which would help them engage more deeply with the exhibits and then stay longer?

FOR FREQUENT MUSEUM VISTORS:

- During your visit, do you find yourself needing a break? If so, what for (e.g., resting, reflecting, sketching)?
- Where in the museum do you usually prefer to sit if seating is available (e.g. near exhibits, in quieter area or open spaces)?
- When you sit in a museum, do you prefer to be alone, or near others with shared interests?
- How do you feel about the current seating options in museums you visit? What would you change or improve?
- Do you ever use seating in museums to take time to reflect on what you've seen or is it more about resting physically?
- How do digital devices impact your museum experience? Would you value a break that encourages you to disconnect from all devices?
- Is there anything you think would make the seating in museums more enjoyable or useful for you?

“

I'm currently working on my graduate design project, focused on creating a seating concept for 2030 that helps people disconnect from our increasingly busy, tech-filled lives. My idea is to design seating for museums that gives visitors a comfortable spot to pause, reflect, and connect more deeply with the art around them and even with each other. Museums seem like a great place for this because they're spaces where people seek meaningful experiences, yet they often lack cozy seating that allows for rest and quiet reflection after a lot of walking. By creating thoughtful seating, I hope to enhance the museum experience, giving visitors a place to step away from the hustle, unwind, and engage more fully. Your perspective would be a huge help in shaping a design that not only offers comfort but also supports a reflective, connected experience.

”

INTERVIEWING A V&A VOLUNTEER

PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

Using my prepared questions, I conducted an interview with a museum volunteer to gain a deeper understanding of how visitors engage with seating and rest areas within the V&A. This allowed me to explore key themes such as visitor needs, behaviours, and preferences in seating, while identifying potential gaps or opportunities for design interventions. The insights gathered from this conversation aim to inform my design process by highlighting how seating can enhance the museum experience and foster deeper connections with the environment.

KEY QUOTATIONS FROM VOLUNTEER

I see people standing around leaning on the walls or even the art because they can't see a place where they can sit

Older visitors or those with mobility issues are those who ask for seating the most

Foldable chairs are provided for sketching, offering mobility, but they are not sufficient for other visitor needs like resting or reflecting.

Usual sitting behaviours include resting, waiting for someone, or using their phones

Seating is often located at the edges or sides of the galleries rather than integrated into the middle.

The main seating areas are located near the entrance or canteen, with limited availability in gallery spaces.

REFLECTING

This interview highlighted key issues with how seating is placed and designed in the V&A. Seating is often found in less central areas, making it harder for visitors to engage with exhibits while resting. Many visitor needs, such as accessible and reflective seating, are not fully addressed. There is little variety or interaction in the seating options, which limits their role in creating meaningful experiences. These findings show an opportunity to design seating that better supports rest, reflection, and connection, while also enhancing the museum's storytelling and visitor engagement.

HMW create seating that feels integral to the museum experience, enhancing engagement rather than acting as an afterthought?

HMW design seating that fosters a deeper emotional connection between visitors and the museum experience?

HMW design seating that supports a variety of behaviours, such as resting, reflecting, socialising, and sketching?

HMW integrate seating into the museum's design and storytelling to create a seamless visitor experience?

TRANSCRIPT

do visitors around the museum ever ask you if they if there's places to sit like are they looking for places to sit or rest? No, no one ever asked

Unknown Speaker 0:13
. not really They'll ask where the canteen is

Unknown Speaker 0:16
okay

Speaker 2 0:16
or the cafe, but not specifically, is there somewhere that I can sit down? Okay? And

Unknown Speaker 0:22
do you find that people sit on the floor sometimes, if

Unknown Speaker 0:25
they don't find a bench, sometimes, not that often, okay, okay, she'll see somebody sitting down.

Speaker 1 0:31
Children, no raised children or older people. So do you find that visitors typically like pause sometimes, to like, stand on like, corners or things like that, to,

Unknown Speaker 0:42
like, take a break or not at all.

Speaker 2 0:44
No, they'll lean like, they'll lean against the pillar, I mean, around the expressions because of the shot, yeah, and like, you'll see people, so if they're waiting for somebody, then they tend to lean on what pillars. Okay,

Speaker 1 0:53
okay. And what, what sort of behaviors do you observe when people are sitting down, like, are they just resting or sitting on their phones. Are they fetching

Speaker 2 1:02
something like that? Guys on his phone? Yeah, sometimes people are waiting for somebody, okay, looking at the guidebook.

Unknown Speaker 1:08
Okay, okay, so, yeah. So

Speaker 1 1:10
my project is basically creating, like, this new type of furniture for museums so that people can, like, actually pause and take in the art around them, and not just sit on their phones and not just like, be all this like digital impact. So do you think that visitors have enough opportunities to sit and rest in the museum, not in the gallery spaces? I don't think not in the gallery spaces. Okay, and how well do you think the current seating options support their needs, like resting or reflecting or sketching,

Speaker 2 1:44
not for sketching because they have these foldable chairs, yeah? So

Unknown Speaker 1:47
what do you think of these foldable chairs? Well,

Speaker 2 1:49
I think they're good for the sketching because, you know, because all these seats tend to be on the side, okay, you if you're sketching, you want to be mobile, yeah? But they don't tend to have seats in the middle. Okay? Spaces, they tend to be on the side.

Speaker 1 2:05
Okay, okay. And how important do you think that the seating in museums should blend with the like, the gallery's visual environment?

Speaker 2 2:13
I think I don't think it should be jarring. I think it'd be nice it can blend. Okay,

Extract of transcript – full one can be found in appendix

INTERVIEWING V&A VISITORS

PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

Using my prepared questions, I conducted an interview with a couple of visitors at the V&A to gain insights into how they engage with the museum’s seating, their behaviours and preferences, and the overall visitor experience. The purpose was to understand how existing seating impacts their journey through the museum, identify their pain points, and uncover opportunities for design improvements that align with their needs and expectations.

KEY QUOTATIONS FROM VISITORS

After an hour I get tired and just want a to find a place to sit down

Sometimes I just need to sit to take the weight off my feet for a second

There aren’t that many places to sit that are actually near the exhibits

To be honest the first thing I did when I sat down was check my phone, its a reflex

Sometimes you just want a quiet isolated space to take it all in but theres no space for that

Allot of the time we forget to actually switch off and end up just walking and passing the exhibits without properly looking at them

REFLECTING

This interview revealed that visitors seek more than just functional seating, they value spaces for reflection, mindfulness, and deeper engagement with the museum. The lack of seating near exhibits and the habitual use of phones highlight missed opportunities for connection. Visitors expressed a need for quiet, isolated spaces that support emotional well-being, emphasising the importance of seating that fosters both physical comfort and meaningful interaction with the environment. These insights point to the need for designs that enhance the visitor experience by blending rest, reflection, and engagement seamlessly.

HMW create seating that encourages visitors to disconnect from their phones and engage more deeply with the exhibits?

HMW design seating that provides both physical comfort and emotional well-being, fostering reflection and mindfulness?

HMW integrate seating into exhibit spaces in a way that invites visitors to pause and engage with the art more meaningfully?

HMW offer seating solutions that balance the need for quiet, isolated spaces with opportunities for light social interaction?

TRANSCRIPT

Honestly, like, it's so casual, but like, okay, so separately, or, like, no, no, as you like that, we can just have a conversation. So during your visit, do you find yourself, like, needing a break when you walk through museums, like, do you find yourself getting tired, like, walking a lot

Unknown Speaker 0:15
at all? Or, No, yeah, especially if you don't know the museum right. You don't have big ears, yeah? Okay, we've never been there before. Exactly. From, like, if you're a guitarist or something, you're coming to travel, you've probably done a lot of walking already out, yeah, museum. I was also trying to ask, like, how old are you guys? Nearly 22 okay, I'm nearly 23 Okay, so are you here like tourists, or are you here like visiting, or I'm here visiting. I live here. Okay, so you're like, on a tourism

Unknown Speaker 0:42
Okay,

Unknown Speaker 0:43
okay. So, like, usually when you eat a break, is it like more like resting and like sitting on your phone, or is it like looking at the pictures that you took from, like the art around you? Or is it like reflecting? Or is it like sketching? Or what type of like thing do you feel like, Oh, when I want to pause, like, what type of activity me? It's probably like, reflecting, like, I probably wouldn't go on my phone. I'd probably just sit and look around me. Probably people watch. Okay, thank you. And is there like, a specific place that you'd like go to, like, near the entrance, to like, stop, or like corners, or like, near the pillars, or like, is there any specific area in the museum, or is it just like, that's good question. I feel like, maybe in, like, the more open spaces, because I feel like, if you're near the art, I mean, I'd be a bit scared. I would accidentally, like, touch us.

Unknown Speaker 1:28
Yeah, okay. And when you sit in a museum, would you prefer to, like, sit by yourself and, like, reflect by yourself, or would you like, be open to, like, sit next to people and, like, maybe talk to them. Like, Oh, did you see like, sort of interact, or, like, sit completely by yourself. I think I don't know, maybe a bit of both. Like, sometimes it might be nice just to be by yourself, but then I think it'd also be nice to have the option, yeah, okay, chat with other people. But Okay, nice. And what do you guys feel about, like, the current seating options, like these chairs and like the benches, the benches

Unknown Speaker 2:04
and chairs. And then they're like, in some area, in some areas, they're like, just benches. What do you guys think of that? Like, better? Okay, other museums and art galleries, okay, there was one art gallery and it was, I can't remember it was. It might have been at the Harvard or the Yale Art Gallery, and they had like, these really cool, like, sofa designs that kind of like, fitted the design of the art around them. Okay, which was cool, Okay, nice. Do you feel like there are there, like, specific things that, like, could improve seating areas or museums or seating spaces? I think

Unknown Speaker 2:40
it's kind of hard in one like this, because there's so many there's so many things in one room, yeah? So maybe having more like, little kind of crevices, like, where there are the little spaces, okay? And like that, that could be, yeah, yeah. And the coronaries, okay? Or, like, here, like they could be sort of here, yeah,

Unknown Speaker 3:01
yeah.

Unknown Speaker 3:06
So, so you said, like, when you find seating pieces, it's more to like reflect over, like physically resting, or do you find that it will be like you're going to physically rest and then reflect?

Unknown Speaker 3:18
That's a great question.

Unknown Speaker 3:22
I think. For me, it's probably a bit of both, okay, yeah, like, I kind of want to sit because, yeah, maybe just take the weight off my feet for a second, yeah, and then I just find myself reflecting. But sometimes it might be I want to sit and reflect for a bit. I just so happens that I'm resting. Okay, Okay, nice. And do you find that, like, digital devices impact your museum experience. Would you like, value a break that encourages you to, like, disconnect from all your devices? Or maybe, but I think sometimes it's nice to then have the pictures as well. Okay, so the pictures are, like, the most important thing, basically, like, using your phone and things like that. Yeah, I don't think, I don't think I've ever, like, gone on my phone to go on Instagram or something, yeah, so it's mostly like just camera, yeah, okay, okay, thank you guys

Extract of transcript – full one can be found in appendix

KEY INSIGHTS FROM MY VISIT TO THE V&A

Seating is often peripheral and fails to integrate meaningfully into the museum journey, creating a disconnect between the environment and visitor needs.

LACK OF INTEGRATION

Visitors value spaces where they can pause, reflect, and engage deeply with the museum's content, but such opportunities are currently limited.

DESIRE FOR REFLECTIVE SPACES

Seating materials and designs prioritise durability over comfort, offering limited support for long periods of rest or reflection.

LIMITED COMFORT AND FUNCTIONALITY

Interactive seating features are rare and often underutilised due to limited accessibility or unclear purpose.

Current seating lacks a connection to the museum's narrative, missing a chance to enhance the cultural and emotional experience through thoughtful design.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STORYTELLING

Seating does not sufficiently cater to diverse user needs, such as those of older visitors or individuals with mobility challenges.

INCLUSIVITY GAPS

Visitors commonly use their phones when seated, highlighting missed opportunities to create spaces that encourage mindfulness and deeper engagement.

BEHAVIOURAL OBSERVATIONS

Seating clusters are often fully occupied, leaving other visitors to lean against walls or sit on the floor.

This visit underscored the need for seating that is not just functional but also transformative. The insights reveal that the design must foster emotional connections, promote mindfulness, and enhance visitor engagement with the museum's exhibits. Addressing these gaps can create seating solutions that go beyond physical rest to shape meaningful visitor journeys.