

SECONDARY RESEARCH PLAN

THE PURPOSE

Before diving into my project, I realised how important it is to fully understand the context of museums and their role in addressing mental health challenges. I need to explore how museums function, who visits them, and what gaps might exist in the way they currently support well-being. This plan will help me structure my research and ensure I uncover meaningful insights that guide my project direction.

WHAT DO I WANT TO LEARN THROUGH SECONDARY RESEARCH?

- Gain broader knowledge on role museums play in society. Are they simply spaces for art and culture, or can they provide something deeper like opportunities for reflection and emotional well-being?
- Who are the types of people that visit museums and why do they visit?
- The challenges museums face in adapting to societal changes, mental health and evolving visitors, how these shifts might impact their design and function by 2030.
- What does the current museum experience look like?
- How does the furniture in museums look like? What works and what needs improvement?
- How does the current museum furniture add to the experience?
- How do visitors interact with current furniture in museums and how do they feel about it?

HOW WILL I CONDUCT THIS RESEARCH?

- Museum Studies, Report, Articles, Journals
- Case Studies on existing museums and history of museums
- Trend Analysis influencing museums/public spaces
- Looking at existing Museums

After completing my secondary research I'm hoping that I would have gained actionable insights into user and context needs and challenges to identify the gaps and find opportunities for my future solution.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

"Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community"

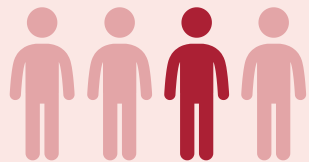
MENTAL HEALTH IS ESSENTIAL TO A HEALTHY LIFE



But billions of people around the world struggle with feelings of anxiety, fear, isolation, and depression, lacking access to the quality care and support they need.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ARE ON THE RISE WORLDWIDE

They are widespread, in every community, in every country, on every continent.



AT LEAST 1 IN 4 PEOPLE WILL EXPERIENCE A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM AT SOME POINT OF THEIR LIFE



HALF THE GLOBAL POPULATION WILL EXPERIENCE MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES DURING THEIR LIFETIME

DEPRESSION IS THE LEADING CAUSE OF MENTAL ILLNESS WITH

280 MILLION

PEOPLE AFFECTED

2
3

OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS DON'T RECEIVE THE CARE THEY NEED

WHY?

- LACK OF RESOURCES
- SHORTAGE OF PROFESSIONALS
- SOCIAL STIGMA

THE SECOND MOST UNHAPPY COUNTRY



A recent report by Sapien Labs, a research group, has revealed a concerning decline in mental wellbeing globally, with the UK ranking as the second-most unhappy country.

AMONG 71 COUNTRIES THE UK RANKED
SECOND-LOWEST IN MENTAL WELLBEING

Conducted as part of their annual "Mental State of the World" survey, which surveyed over 400,000 individuals across 71 countries, the findings underscore a persistent lack of recovery from the initial mental health impact of the pandemic.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SIGNIFICANTLY EXACERBATED THE GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

25% INCREASE IN THE PREVALENCE OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION WORLDWIDE DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC REPORTED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION

NOT ONLY A HUMAN TRAGEDY BUT AN ECONOMIC CHALLENGE

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS COULD COST THE WORLD

\$17 TRILLION BY 2030



THE GLOBAL ECONOMY LOSES ABOUT

\$1 TRILLION

EACH YEAR DUE TO REDUCED PRODUCTIVITY CAUSED BY MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The World is facing a Mental Health Crisis that demands action!

THE POWER OF ART AND CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health challenges are a growing crisis globally, impacting millions of lives. Beyond traditional therapeutic methods, art and culture have emerged as powerful tools for emotional healing and stress reduction.

ART AS THERAPY

Art provides people with a language to express emotions when words are difficult to find, helping them to process trauma and reduce feelings of isolation.

THE BENEFITS:

Research has proven that art can be beneficial for health both mental and physical

70% OF ART THERAPY PARTICIPANTS REPORTED SIGNIFICANT MENTAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENTS

REDUCES CORTISOL LEVELS (STRESS HORMONE) UP TO **75%** PROMOTING RELAXATION AND MENTAL CLARITY

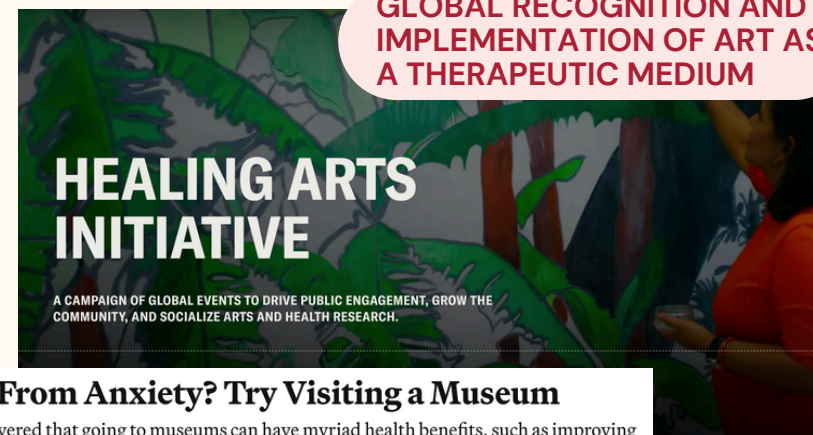
ART INSPIRES **NEUROPLASTICITY**

THIS PROMOTES THE BRAIN'S ABILITY TO FORM NEW CONNECTIONS, AIDING RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA AND STRESS

HOW THE WORLD IS EMBRACING ART FOR HEALING

Global Program integrating Art into Healthcare

Established by CULTURUNNERS and the WHO's Arts and Health Program in 2020, this global campaign advocates for improved physical mental and social health through the arts



Suffering From Anxiety? Try Visiting a Museum

A new study discovered that going to museums can have myriad health benefits, such as improving feelings of depression, easing chronic pain, and decreasing the likelihood of being diagnosed with dementia.

Art psychotherapy: How museums are helping people explore their mental health

Art psychotherapy in museums allows patients to connect to the artwork and inspires creativity, says **Alison Coles**

Sunday 24 February 2019 20:31 GMT • Comments

INDEPENDENT



Art psychotherapists are looking to art to aid them in clinical work (Getty/Stock)

"The gallery environment is an uplifting place to meet, and is free and easily accessible. The chance for visitors to move about as they wish also makes it the opposite of negative, intense clinical settings."

CREATING OR VIEWING ART PROVIDES A SAFE SPACE FOR INDIVIDUALS TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS THEY STRUGGLE TO VERBALISE

Doctors prescribe museum visits to combat stress

Brussels doctors prescribe museum visits to treat Covid-19 stress

Research "has proven that art can be beneficial for health, both mental and physical," the city's head of culture tells a Belgian newspaper



A new initiative sees doctors in Brussels prescribing museum visits to fight stress
© Ricardo Gomez Angel

A Call for Action

It's time for museums to address mental health

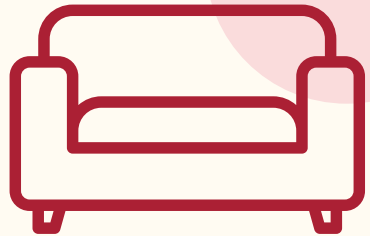
MA Museums Association

Museums and galleries could do much more to support people experiencing mental health difficulties, according to a new report

Art and culture could hold the key to addressing mental health challenges. Museums can lead the way in creating spaces that heal, inspire, and connect.

WHY FURNITURE?

BY DEFINITION:



"Furniture: things such as chairs, tables, beds, cupboards, etc. that are put into a house or other building to make it suitable and comfortable for living or working in" (Cambridge Dictionary)

FURNITURE AS A REFLECTION OF HUMAN IDENTITY AND SOCIETY

*"All the objects we make are inscriptions of the **human body and mind** upon the circumstances of **time and space**."*
(The Semiotics of Furniture Form 1999)

*"The story of furniture serves as an engaging narrative that **holds up a mirror to society's transformation**"*

*"It could be said that when we design a chair, **we make a society and city in miniature**." According to architect Peter Smithson (1986),*

INSIGHT

Furniture is not merely functional but a reflection of human values, cultural norms, and societal evolution. Each piece embodies the identity of the people who design and use it, creating a narrative that speaks to collective social frameworks and individual identity.

FURNITURE'S ROLE IN SHAPING AND DEFINING SPACE

*"Through furniture, we can live in a way we wouldn't otherwise be able to. Since we've evolved into humans, we've become designers and consumers of furniture – from the rocks in ancient caves to King's thrones to the millions of couches worldwide: **furniture is our tool for living.**"*

*"The renewal of the plan of the modern house cannot be undertaken effectively without examining the question of furniture."
(*"The Problem of Furniture,"* 1990, p. 157).*

INSIGHT

Furniture serves as an essential element in **defining and enhancing our interaction with spaces**. It enables us to **structure our environments and create zones of function, comfort, and aesthetic appeal**, underscoring its role as a key component in spatial design and utility.

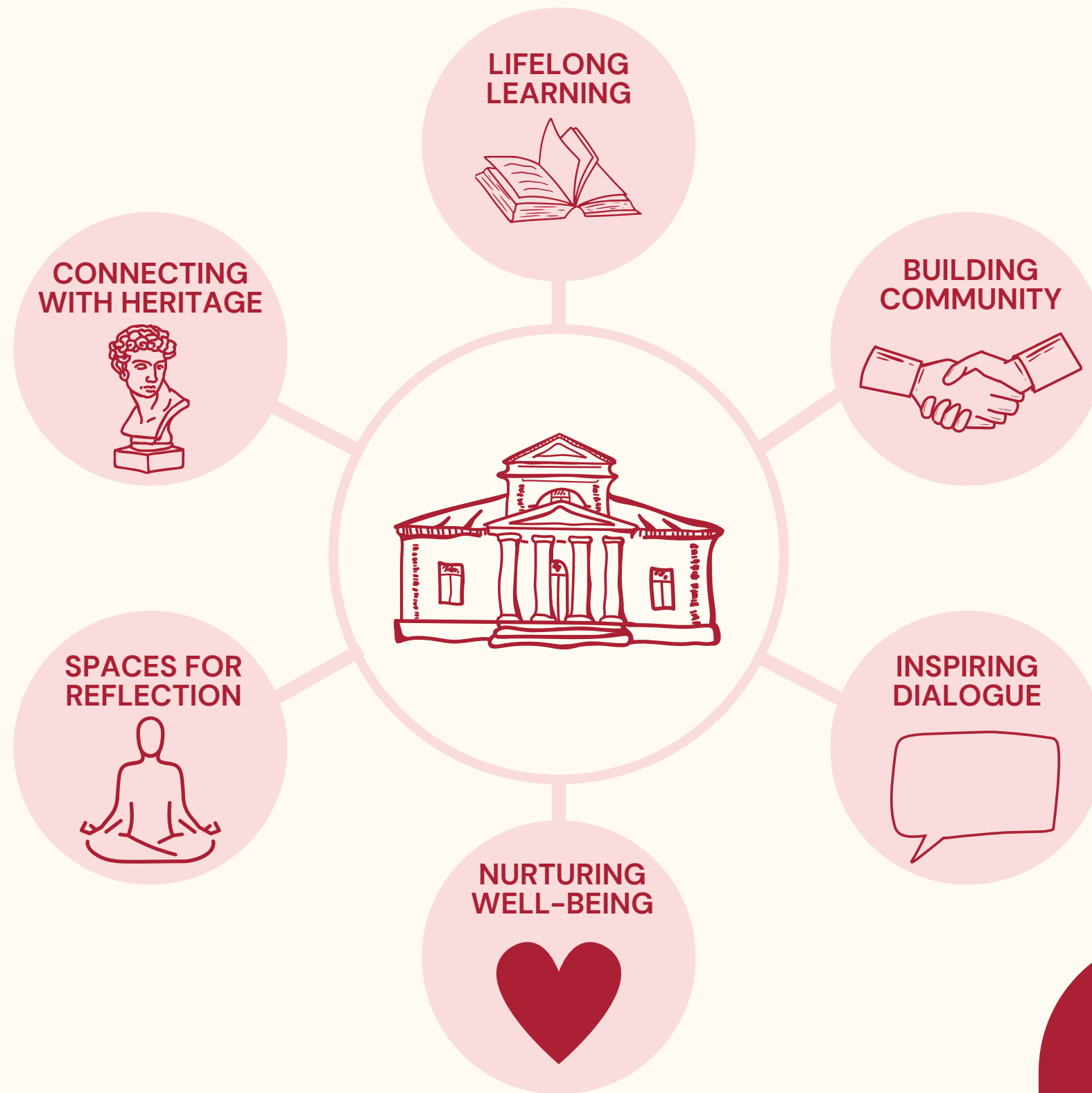
EVOLUTION OF FURNITURE AS AN ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

"The evolution of furniture is entertained with advancements in human history, reflecting socio-cultural backdrop, technology and artistic evolution of timelines."

INSIGHT

Furniture reflects each era's **artistic sensibilities, cultural narratives, and technological achievements**. It serves as a **historical artifact that showcases aesthetic and functional progress, embodying the artistic and technological values of its time**.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS



● **LIFELONG LEARNING**

Museums ignite curiosity and encourage exploration, creating opportunities for intellectual engagement that can inspire and uplift

● **CONNECTING WITH HERITAGE**

By safeguarding stories and traditions, museums create a bridge between the past and present, offering visitors a sense of grounding and identity in an ever changing world

● **SPACES FOR REFLECTION**

In a fast-paced society, museums offer rare moments of stillness inviting visitors to pause, reflect, and reconnect with themselves through art and culture

● **BUILDING COMMUNITY**

As spaces for shared experiences, museums strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of belonging, combating isolation and building community.

● **INSPIRING DIALOGUE**

By amplifying diverse voices and showcasing collective challenges, museums promote empathy, understanding, and meaningful conversations

● **NURTURING WELL-BEING**

Through creative and inspiring environments, museums nurture emotional recovery, spark imagination, and provide a refuge for personal growth

As I reflect on the evolving role of museums, I see them as sanctuaries where people can find healing and connection in ways that traditional spaces often cannot provide. This understanding has shaped my decision to focus on designing a product that not only complements these spaces but actively enhances their potential to promote mental well-being.

WHAT MUSEUMS ARE FACING TODAY

Museums have always been hubs of knowledge and cultural preservation. However, in today’s overstimulating and fast-paced world, they are being called to evolve. The need for museums to address societal challenges—like the mental health crisis—has never been more urgent.

CHALLENGES TO RELEVANCE

STRUGGLING TO STAY RELEVANT



- Competing with digital entertainment and fast-paced lifestyles.
- Audiences demand dynamic, immersive, and personalised experiences.

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



- Museums are underutilised as restorative spaces.
- Gaps in design solutions for mindfulness and emotional well-being.

BARRIERS TO EMOTIONAL CONNECTION



- Many spaces feel impersonal or overly academic.
- Visitors struggle to connect deeply with art, artefacts, and themselves.

ACCESSIBILITY GAPS



- Physical and neurodiverse needs are not fully addressed.
- Emotional accessibility is often overlooked.

OVERSTIMULATION CRISIS



- Cognitive overload from daily life follows visitors into museums.
- Lack of intentional spaces to promote calm and focus.

PASSIVE ENGAGEMENT



- Visitors want interaction, not just observation.
- Traditional formats limit emotional and communal connections.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Without adapting, museums risk alienating younger, tech-savvy generations who crave meaningful, personalised experiences. Museums have untapped potential as spaces for emotional connection and healing, but only if they recognise and address these challenges. By acknowledging these pain points, museums can transform into dynamic hubs of culture, connection, and mental well-being.

To remain relevant and impactful, museums must adapt to meet the evolving needs of their audiences while staying true to their core missions of education, preservation, and inspiration.

WHY MUSEUMS?

SANCTUARIES IN A FAST-PACED WORLD:

As life becomes increasingly tech-driven and overstimulating, museums will serve as vital spaces for people to slow down, reflect, and reconnect with culture, art, and themselves.

FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING:

With the rise of misinformation and superficial engagement online, museums will play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking and offering trustworthy, educational experiences.

THE GROWING NECESSITY OF MUSEUMS IN 2030

BUILDING COMMUNITIES:

In an era of growing social fragmentation, museums will act as hubs for dialogue, connection, and shared understanding, bridging divides across cultures and generations.

ENCOURAGING WELLBEING:

Museums will continue to be essential for mental and emotional health, offering restorative spaces where people can find inspiration, calm, and meaningful interactions.

WHO VISITS MUSEUMS?

To design effectively for museum spaces, I need to understand **the people who visit them**.

By breaking down the diverse types of museum visitors, highlighting their unique needs and behaviours I can begin to build a clearer picture of how my design can **address their needs and pain points**.

This understanding is a crucial step in ensuring my project resonates with its intended audience.

CULTURAL ENTHUSIASTS

- Frequent visitors, passionate about art, history, or culture.
- Spend long hours exploring exhibits in detail.
- Look for in-depth, reflective experiences.



CASUAL EXPLORERS

- Infrequent visitors who stumble upon museums during leisure trips.
- Prefer straightforward, easily digestible experiences.
- Spend shorter durations in exhibits.



SOCIAL VISITORS

- Visit museums as a group activity with friends or family.
- Seek interactive and engaging exhibits.
- Value spaces for discussion and shared moments.



TOURISTS

- Seek iconic experiences during their travels.
- Often on a tight schedule, valuing visually striking and memorable exhibits.
- Require well-located seating areas to rest.



FAMILIES

- Look for child-friendly, interactive exhibits.
- Need spaces to rest or engage in quieter activities.
- Appreciate accessible and inclusive environments.



LEARNERS & STUDENTS

- Visit museums as part of educational trips or for personal learning.
- Engage with information-rich exhibits.
- May require spaces for note-taking or contemplation.



DESIGNING FOR IMPACT

ALIGNING WITH THE UN SDGs

In a world facing significant challenges like rising mental health crises, growing inequalities, and the need for sustainable urban development, my project leverages thoughtful design to address these issues. By integrating restorative, inclusive, and sustainable principles, this product aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrating how design can create meaningful change within museum contexts and beyond.



Promoting mental health and well-being is a global priority, especially as mental health challenges rise worldwide.



Accessibility and inclusivity are critical for ensuring equitable engagement with cultural spaces.



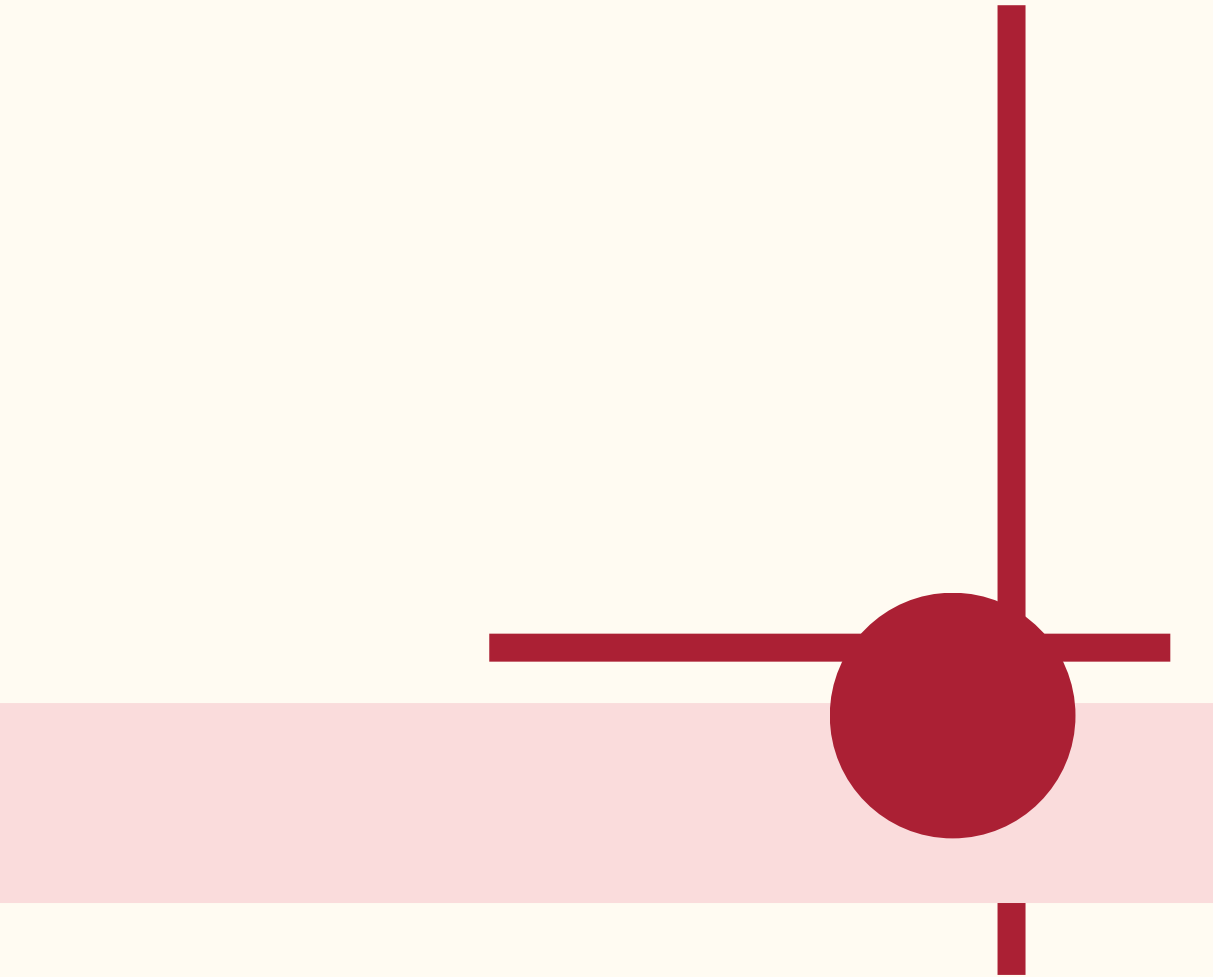
The role of cultural spaces in creating liveable cities cannot be overstated.

***“For the understanding of
a picture, a chair is
needed. Why a chair?
To prevent the legs, as
they tire, from interfering
with the mind.”
–Paul Klee***





MENTAL WELL-BEING THROUGH FURNITURE DESIGN



CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Seating and sitting in the V&A Museum

Victoria and Albert Museum The world's leading museum of art and design

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V&A Online Journal
Issue No. 3 Spring 2011
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Seating and sitting in the V&A: An observational study

Tillie Baker
PA to Director of Learning, V&A

Abstract

Good public spaces accommodate, and attract, lingering. National museums in the UK are civic spaces, where seating is provided in circulation areas for visitors to wait, rest or otherwise pause. Different areas and kinds of seating support a range of uses by visitors in addition to sitting. A pilot study conducted in late 2009 investigated three circulation areas in the V&A - the Grand Entrance, Grand Entrance Steps, and the Sackler Centre reception, to explore how these spaces and the styles of seating provided are used by museum visitors. The study shows that differentiated spaces with varied styles of seating are an important aspect of the Museum's visitor provision.

'Seating is an explicit invitation to stay, either with others or by oneself'. (1)

Seating in public spaces is an easily overlooked aspect of our urban environment as we go about our daily lives, yet we use public seating for all sorts of reasons – to rest our feet, wait for a friend, eat a sandwich or tie a shoelace. Seating gives us a reason to pause and rest. National museums in the UK – the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) included – belong to the diverse spectrum of spaces which make up the public realm. We may not immediately consider museums to be 'public' in the same way as streets or parks – museums have thresholds, security staff, few issues with 'anti-social behaviour', and access is structured around opening hours. However, it is also true that the external public realm is not the openly accessible place we would ideally expect it to be. Much the same as entering a train station with a ticket or a café with an order of coffee, entering a museum is a contractual gesture – we may view the obligatory bag check on entering the Museum as the signing of an unspoken agreement between visitor and building. Museums have the remarkable privilege of being public spaces with access enough to allow visitors to move about freely, and invigilation enough to prevent damage to the building fabric.

In Civilising the Museum, Elaine Gurian draws on the early planning theories of Jane Jacobs to advocate for greater emphasis on the civic role of museums, pointing out that museum visitors spend a large portion of their time doing something other than engaging with exhibits or programmes. (2) Comparing museum interiors to 'streetscapes', she suggests that what Jacobs calls 'ad hoc' use, 'seemingly



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- + Promoting corporate environmental sustainability in the Victorian era: The Bethnal Green Museum permanent waste exhibit (1875-1928)
- + 'Nothing of intrinsic value': The scientific collections at the Bethnal Green Museum
- + Shedding light on the digital dark age
- + John Thomas and his 'wonderful facility of invention': Revisiting a neglected sculptor
- + Dialogues between past and present: Historic garments as source material for contemporary fashion design
- + Kütahya ceramics and international Armenian trade networks
- + X-radiography as a tool to examine the making and remaking of historic quilts
- + A patchwork panel 'shown at the Great Exhibition'
- + An adorned print: Print culture, female leisure and the dissemination of fashion in France and England, around 1660-1779
- + Seating and sitting in the V&A: An observational study

Findings of the study

After the pilot observations, categories of visitor behaviour were developed for 'Sitters' and 'Non-sitters'. Many activities were common to all spaces, such as waiting, idleness, reading; and some were particular to a space – such as looking at the Dale Chihuly chandelier in the Grand Entrance, and smoking on the Grand Entrance Steps. An early finding of the study was that 'waiting' was distinct from 'being idle', as people who were 'waiting' tended to be 'waiting for someone'. A person who may have appeared 'idle' initially was considered to be 'waiting' if that person then met a friend in any given space. People who were observed to be 'idle' did not show any significant activity or interaction throughout the observation.

Visitor activities common to all spaces (Sitters and Non-sitters)

- Waiting
- Being idle
- Interacting with friends or strangers ('direct interaction')
- Interacting using a mobile phone ('indirect interaction')
- Reading
- Writing
- Adjusting clothing
- Looking in or resting a bag on the seats
- Yawning ('fatigue')
- Personal (such as nose picking, kissing, or on one occasion, pulse-checking)
- Eating or drinking
- Pausing (to collect leaflets, look in a bag, look at a sign, etc.)

Visitor activities specific to spaces (Sitters and Non-sitters)

Grand Entrance

- Looking at the Dale Chihuly Chandelier

Grand Entrance Steps

- Smoking
- Using the ends of the steps in a 'stepping stone' fashion
- Dancing

Sackler Centre

- Holding a meeting
- Touching a chair
- Using a laptop

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Seating and sitting in the V&A Museum

KEY INSIGHTS

Visitors don't just view exhibits—they linger, reflect, socialise, and sometimes even work -> Spaces for these behaviours need to be thoughtfully integrated to avoid interrupting the flow of the museum experience.

Museums provide an escape from the overstimulation of daily life, especially for "Rechargers" or "Spiritual Pilgrims."

One design cannot serve all equally; adaptability and inclusivity are essential

Museums often lack thoughtful seating or spaces designed for longer pauses.

Museums attract a wide range of people with different motivations, behaviours, and needs

Museums are more than repositories of art—they're spaces for learning, relaxation, social interaction, and emotional experiences.

Crowded areas can hinder reflection and comfort, particularly during peak visiting times.

This case study reinforced my understanding of how seating shapes the museum experience, confirming visitors' need for spaces to rest, reflect, and connect. It also revealed the importance of adaptable designs that cater to diverse behaviours, guiding my approach to enhance comfort and connection in museum spaces.

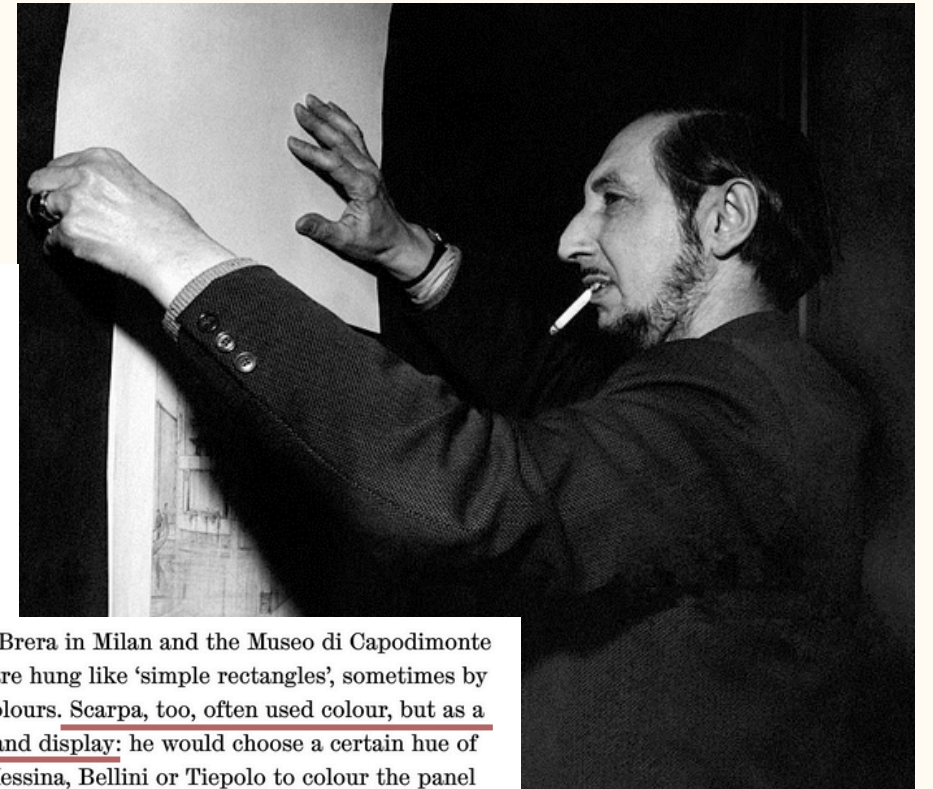
CARLO SCARPA



'had the power to give the form of a work of art to even the most banal things'

Scarpa transformed 19th-century museums into musées vivants, as defined by Henri Focillon in 1921: familiar places that are flooded with natural light and welcome all visitors. At a time when there was a lack of resources to rebuild homes, Italy's public institutions invested in museums as tools for cultural, democratic and social growth.

Like other museographers, Scarpa was aware that changes are inevitable during the life of a museum. In 1976, describing one of the solutions for Castelvecchio to his students, he observed: 'In ten years' time something will get damaged, and the new director will give it a different colour: it doesn't matter ... because tastes change, epochs pass.' He was right: museums must adapt to new educational goals. Until the early 2000s, these updates were respectful of the methodological and art historical value of the displays, but this has changed. While interest is growing for works such as the Olivetti Showroom or the Brion Tomb (where the sequel to *Dune* was filmed), Scarpa's installations are disappearing.



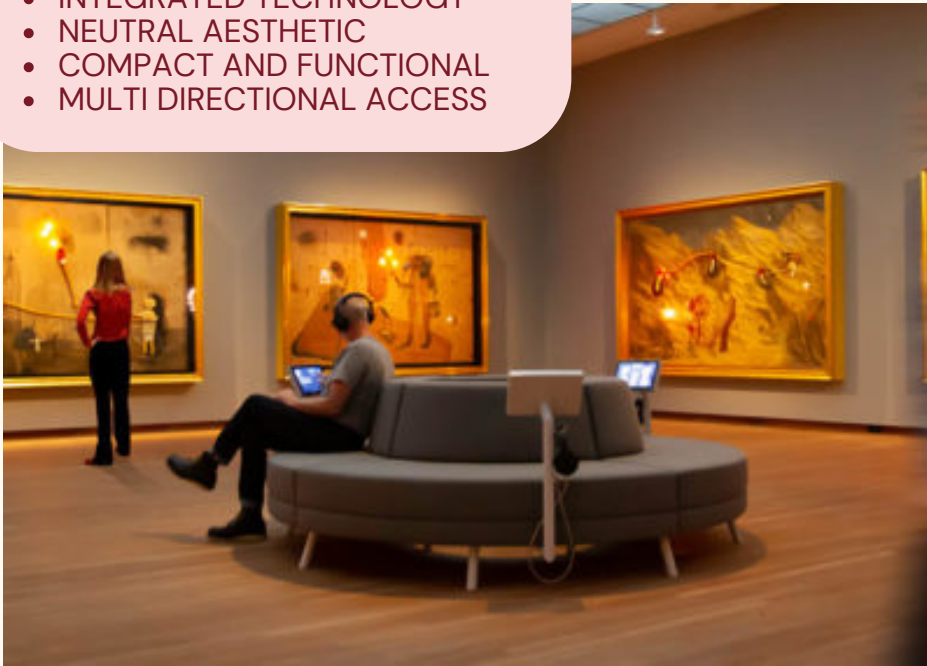
In the renovated rooms of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan and the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, both reopened in 2022, paintings are hung like 'simple rectangles', sometimes by the dozens, on walls painted with puzzling colours. Scarpa, too, often used colour, but as a way to create a dialogue between the works and display: he would choose a certain hue of green, blue or red painted by Antonello da Messina, Bellini or Tiepolo to colour the panel behind the painting. He did this with a purely educational purpose: visitors would be attracted by the colour of the backdrop and, as they approached, would find it inside the painting. This would encourage them to observe the artwork more closely.

Although he was aware of the need to preserve the structural integrity of the exhibits, Scarpa still believed that 'there is nothing like powerful sunlight to make works of art look wonderful'. Natural light – the backbone of museographic reform in Europe since the 1930s – provided a perfect view of the works and reproduced the environmental conditions of the home, offering visitors a familiar setting in the museum. Exhibited pieces were transformed from 'elitist', distant objects into a friendly presence. Now sculptures and paintings live in dark rooms, pierced by merciless beams of artificial lighting.

Carlo Scarpa's work highlights the importance of designing museum spaces that adapt to changing visitor needs, using light, color, and thoughtful layouts to create engaging and calming environments. His focus on making art accessible and fostering deeper connections aligns with my goal of designing furniture that promotes mindfulness and emotional well-being. Scarpa's balance of innovation and preservation inspires me to create adaptive, human-centered solutions that enhance the museum experience.

EXISTING EXAMPLES

- CIRCULAR DESIGN
- INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY
- NEUTRAL AESTHETIC
- COMPACT AND FUNCTIONAL
- MULTI DIRECTIONAL ACCESS



ADDON FURNITURE in the Bonnefantenmuseum

- DUAL FACING
- SEAMLESS
- MODERN
- FUNCTIONAL
- COMFORTABLE



The Getty

- MODULAR
- GEOMETRIC SHAPES
- ZONING SPACE
- CONTRASTING COLOURS
- SOCIAL AND SOLITARY



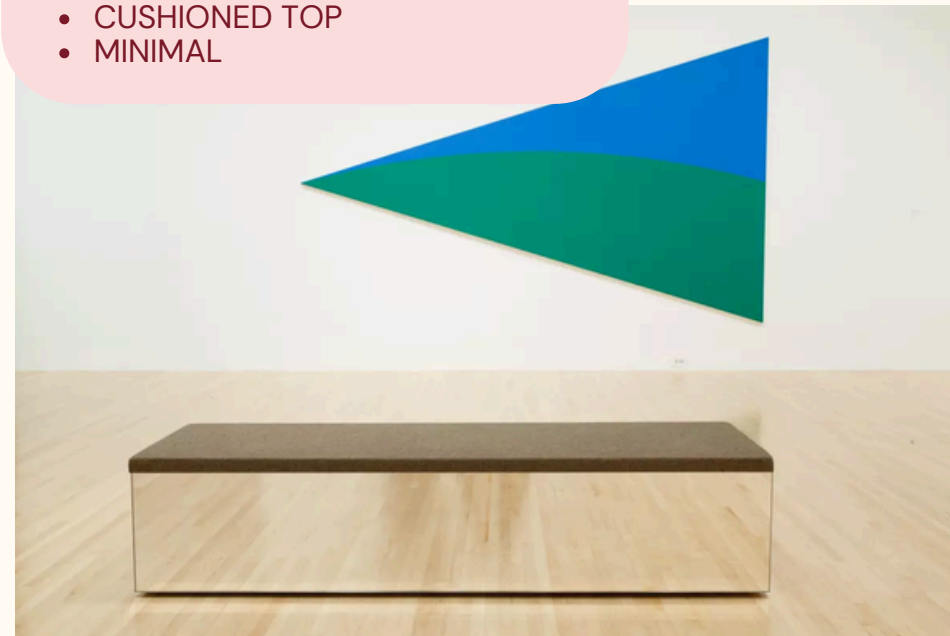
FURNITURE FUSION in St Fagans National Museum of History, Cardiff

- MINIMAL
- NATURAL MATERIAL
- DUAL SEATING
- FUNCTIONAL SIMPLICITY
- TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP



CHRISTIAN O'REILLY

- INTERACTS WITH SURROUNDINGS
- MODERN
- CUSHIONED TOP
- MINIMAL



PROJECT ROOM in the Museum of Contemporary Art

- STREAMLINED
- MONOCHROME
- UNOBSTRUSIVE PRESENCE



Orange County Museum of Art

INSIGHTS FROM SECONDARY RESEARCH

HIGH PRIORITY

The world is facing a growing mental health crisis with increasing numbers of individuals finding public spaces overwhelming

Art and culture could hold the key to addressing mental health challenges

Museums can act as sanctuaries for stillness and mindfulness

Museums lack thoughtfully designed seating

Museum seating needs to meet needs of diverse users

Museums can lead the way in creating spaces that heal, inspire, and connect.

MEDIUM PRIORITY

Museums risk becoming irrelevant to new generations if they don't adapt to meet evolving user needs

People crave calm and connection, making museums a retreat from busy routines.

Visitors are overstimulated by screens and seek opportunities to disconnect.

Integrating preservation and innovation enhances museum environments and user experience

LOW PRIORITY

Seating can reflect culture and history, enriching the museum experience.

Crowds, bright lights, and overstimulation reduce engagement, making calming spaces essential.

Visitors want self-paced exploration but lack supportive environments.

Visitors want active engagement, not just observation.

WHAT MUSEUMS ARE FACING TODAY

Museums have always been hubs of knowledge and cultural preservation. However, in today's overstimulating and fast-paced world, they are being called to evolve. The need for museums to address societal challenges—like the mental health crisis—has never been more urgent.

CHALLENGES TO RELEVANCE

STRUGGLING TO STAY RELEVANT



- Competing with digital entertainment and fast-paced lifestyles.
- Audiences demand dynamic, immersive, and personalised experiences.

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



- Museums are underutilised as restorative spaces.
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BARRIERS TO EMOTIONAL CONNECTION



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ACCESSIBILITY GAPS



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PASSIVE ENGAGEMENT



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WHY THIS MATTERS

Without adapting, museums risk alienating younger, tech-savvy generations who crave meaningful, personalised experiences. Museums have untapped potential as spaces for emotional connection and healing, but only if they recognise and address these challenges. By acknowledging these pain points, museums can transform into dynamic hubs of culture, connection, and mental well-being.

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THE GROWING NECESSITY OF MUSEUMS IN 2030

BUILDING COMMUNITIES:

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Promoting mental health and well-being is a global priority, especially as mental health challenges rise worldwide.



Accessibility and inclusivity are critical for ensuring equitable engagement with cultural spaces.



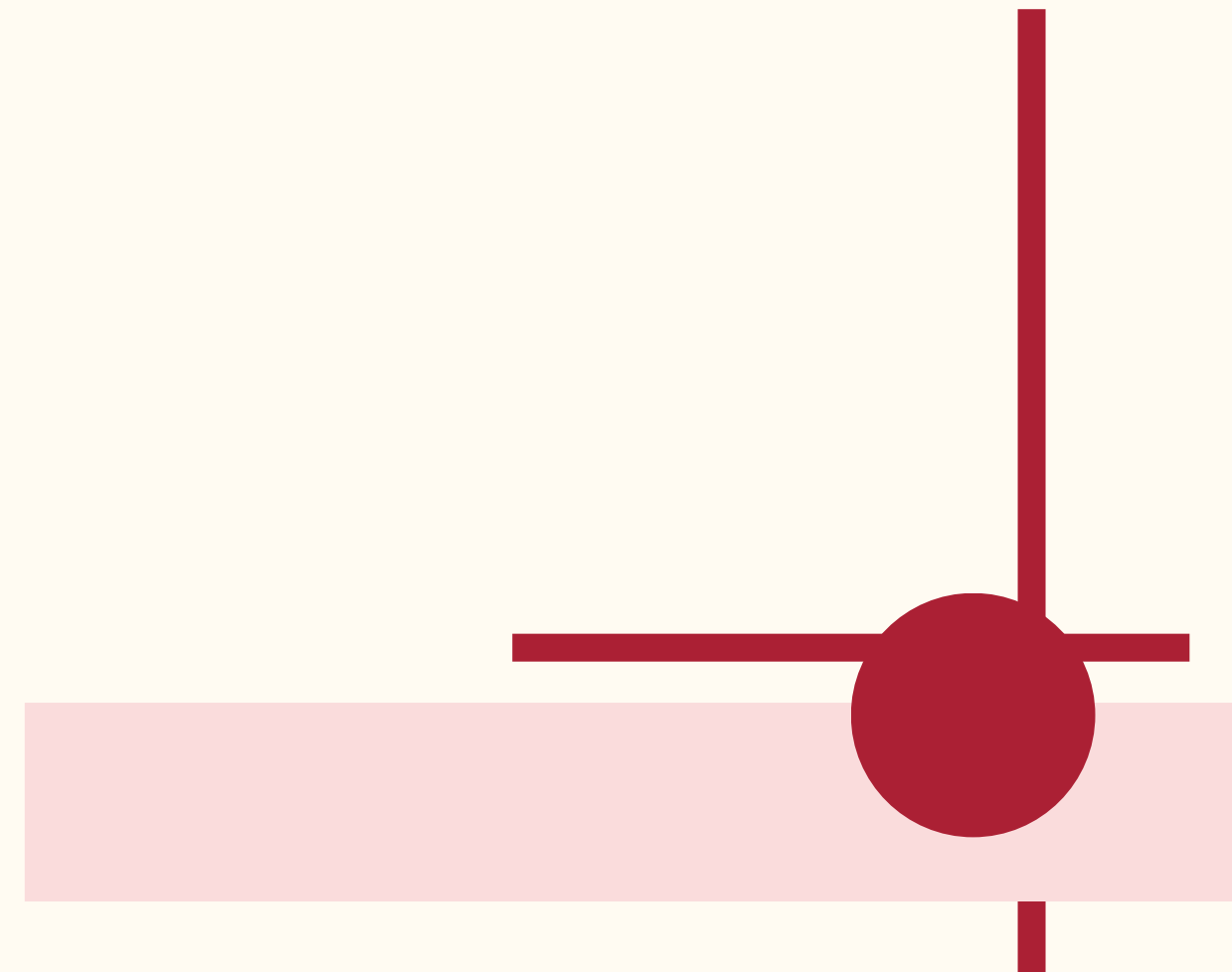
The role of cultural spaces in creating liveable cities cannot be overstated.

***“For the understanding of
a picture, a chair is
needed. Why a chair?
To prevent the legs, as
they tire, from interfering
with the mind.”
–Paul Klee***





MENTAL WELL-BEING THROUGH FURNITURE DESIGN



CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Seating and sitting in the V&A Museum

Victoria and Albert Museum The world's leading museum of art and design

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Seating and sitting in the V&A: An observational study

Tillie Baker
PA to Director of Learning, V&A

Abstract

Good public spaces accommodate, and attract, lingering. National museums in the UK are civic spaces, where seating is provided in circulation areas for visitors to wait, rest or otherwise pause. Different areas and kinds of seating support a range of uses by visitors in addition to sitting. A pilot study conducted in late 2009 investigated three circulation areas in the V&A - the Grand Entrance, Grand Entrance Steps, and the Sackler Centre reception, to explore how these spaces and the styles of seating provided are used by museum visitors. The study shows that differentiated spaces with varied styles of seating are an important aspect of the Museum's visitor provision.

'Seating is an explicit invitation to stay, either with others or by oneself'. (1)

Seating in public spaces is an easily overlooked aspect of our urban environment as we go about our daily lives, yet we use public seating for all sorts of reasons – to rest our feet, wait for a friend, eat a sandwich or tie a shoelace. Seating gives us a reason to pause and rest. National museums in the UK – the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) included – belong to the diverse spectrum of spaces which make up the public realm. We may not immediately consider museums to be 'public' in the same way as streets or parks – museums have thresholds, security staff, few issues with 'anti-social behaviour', and access is structured around opening hours. However, it is also true that the external public realm is not the openly accessible place we would ideally expect it to be. Much the same as entering a train station with a ticket or a café with an order of coffee, entering a museum is a contractual gesture – we may view the obligatory bag check on entering the Museum as the signing of an unspoken agreement between visitor and building. Museums have the remarkable privilege of being public spaces with access enough to allow visitors to move about freely, and invigilation enough to prevent damage to the building fabric.

In Civilising the Museum, Elaine Gurian draws on the early planning theories of Jane Jacobs to advocate for greater emphasis on the civic role of museums, pointing out that museum visitors spend a large portion of their time doing something other than engaging with exhibits or programmes. (2) Comparing museum interiors to 'streetscapes', she suggests that what Jacobs calls 'ad hoc' use, 'seemingly



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- + Seating and sitting in the V&A: An observational study

Findings of the study

After the pilot observations, categories of visitor behaviour were developed for 'Sitters' and 'Non-sitters'. Many activities were common to all spaces, such as waiting, idleness, reading; and some were particular to a space – such as looking at the Dale Chihuly chandelier in the Grand Entrance, and smoking on the Grand Entrance Steps. An early finding of the study was that 'waiting' was distinct from 'being idle', as people who were 'waiting' tended to be 'waiting for someone'. A person who may have appeared 'idle' initially was considered to be 'waiting' if that person then met a friend in any given space. People who were observed to be 'idle' did not show any significant activity or interaction throughout the observation.

Visitor activities common to all spaces (Sitters and Non-sitters)

- Waiting
- Being idle
- Interacting with friends or strangers ('direct interaction')
- Interacting using a mobile phone ('indirect interaction')
- Reading
- Writing
- Adjusting clothing
- Looking in or resting a bag on the seats
- Yawning ('fatigue')
- Personal (such as nose picking, kissing, or on one occasion, pulse-checking)
- Eating or drinking
- Pausing (to collect leaflets, look in a bag, look at a sign, etc.)

Visitor activities specific to spaces (Sitters and Non-sitters)

Grand Entrance

- Looking at the Dale Chihuly Chandelier

Grand Entrance Steps

- Smoking
- Using the ends of the steps in a 'stepping stone' fashion
- Dancing

Sackler Centre

- Holding a meeting
- Touching a chair
- Using a laptop

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Seating and sitting in the V&A Museum

KEY INSIGHTS

Visitors don't just view exhibits—they linger, reflect, socialise, and sometimes even work -> Spaces for these behaviours need to be thoughtfully integrated to avoid interrupting the flow of the museum experience.

Museums provide an escape from the overstimulation of daily life, especially for "Rechargers" or "Spiritual Pilgrims."

One design cannot serve all equally; adaptability and inclusivity are essential

Museums often lack thoughtful seating or spaces designed for longer pauses.

Museums attract a wide range of people with different motivations, behaviours, and needs

Museums are more than repositories of art—they're spaces for learning, relaxation, social interaction, and emotional experiences.

Crowded areas can hinder reflection and comfort, particularly during peak visiting times.

This case study reinforced my understanding of how seating shapes the museum experience, confirming visitors' need for spaces to rest, reflect, and connect. It also revealed the importance of adaptable designs that cater to diverse behaviours, guiding my approach to enhance comfort and connection in museum spaces.

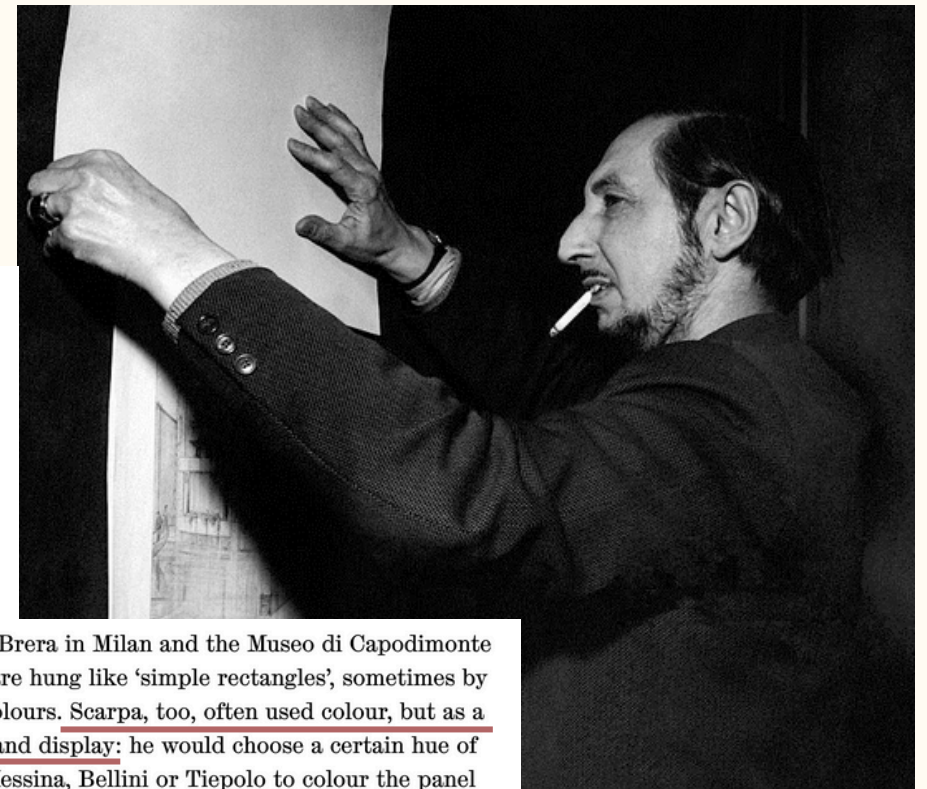
CARLO SCARPA



'had the power to give the form of a work of art to even the most banal things'

Scarpa transformed 19th-century museums into musées vivants, as defined by Henri Focillon in 1921: familiar places that are flooded with natural light and welcome all visitors. At a time when there was a lack of resources to rebuild homes, Italy's public institutions invested in museums as tools for cultural, democratic and social growth.

Like other museographers, Scarpa was aware that changes are inevitable during the life of a museum. In 1976, describing one of the solutions for Castelvecchio to his students, he observed: 'In ten years' time something will get damaged, and the new director will give it a different colour: it doesn't matter ... because tastes change, epochs pass.' He was right: museums must adapt to new educational goals. Until the early 2000s, these updates were respectful of the methodological and art historical value of the displays, but this has changed. While interest is growing for works such as the Olivetti Showroom or the Brion Tomb (where the sequel to *Dune* was filmed), Scarpa's installations are disappearing.



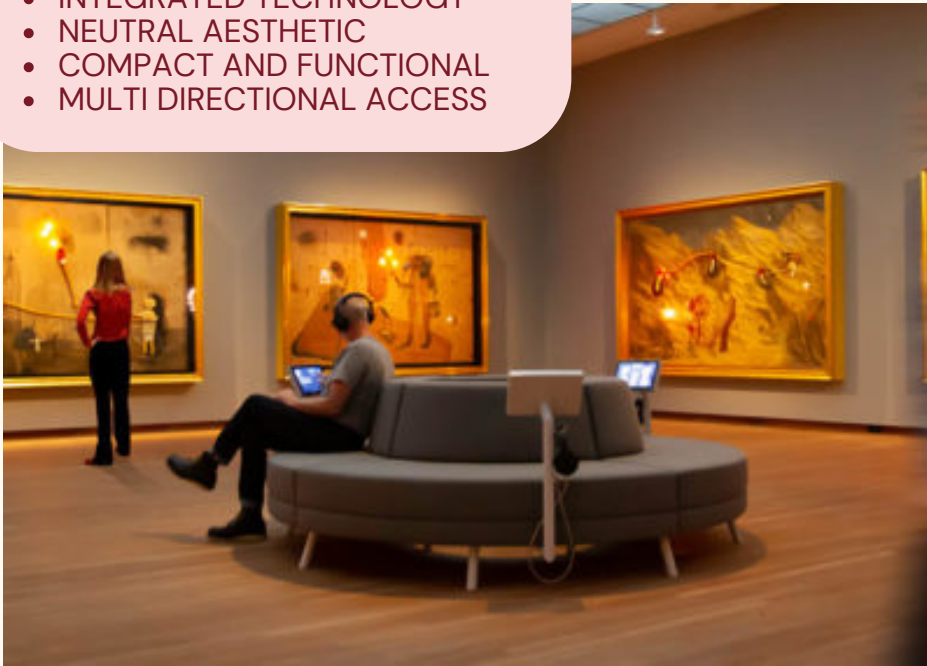
In the renovated rooms of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan and the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, both reopened in 2022, paintings are hung like 'simple rectangles', sometimes by the dozens, on walls painted with puzzling colours. Scarpa, too, often used colour, but as a way to create a dialogue between the works and display: he would choose a certain hue of green, blue or red painted by Antonello da Messina, Bellini or Tiepolo to colour the panel behind the painting. He did this with a purely educational purpose: visitors would be attracted by the colour of the backdrop and, as they approached, would find it inside the painting. This would encourage them to observe the artwork more closely.

Although he was aware of the need to preserve the structural integrity of the exhibits, Scarpa still believed that 'there is nothing like powerful sunlight to make works of art look wonderful'. Natural light – the backbone of museographic reform in Europe since the 1930s – provided a perfect view of the works and reproduced the environmental conditions of the home, offering visitors a familiar setting in the museum. Exhibited pieces were transformed from 'elitist', distant objects into a friendly presence. Now sculptures and paintings live in dark rooms, pierced by merciless beams of artificial lighting.

Carlo Scarpa's work highlights the importance of designing museum spaces that adapt to changing visitor needs, using light, color, and thoughtful layouts to create engaging and calming environments. His focus on making art accessible and fostering deeper connections aligns with my goal of designing furniture that promotes mindfulness and emotional well-being. Scarpa's balance of innovation and preservation inspires me to create adaptive, human-centered solutions that enhance the museum experience.

EXISTING EXAMPLES

- CIRCULAR DESIGN
- INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY
- NEUTRAL AESTHETIC
- COMPACT AND FUNCTIONAL
- MULTI DIRECTIONAL ACCESS



ADDON FURNITURE in the Bonnefantenmuseum

- DUAL FACING
- SEAMLESS
- MODERN
- FUNCTIONAL
- COMFORTABLE



The Getty

- MODULAR
- GEOMETRIC SHAPES
- ZONING SPACE
- CONTRASTING COLOURS
- SOCIAL AND SOLITARY



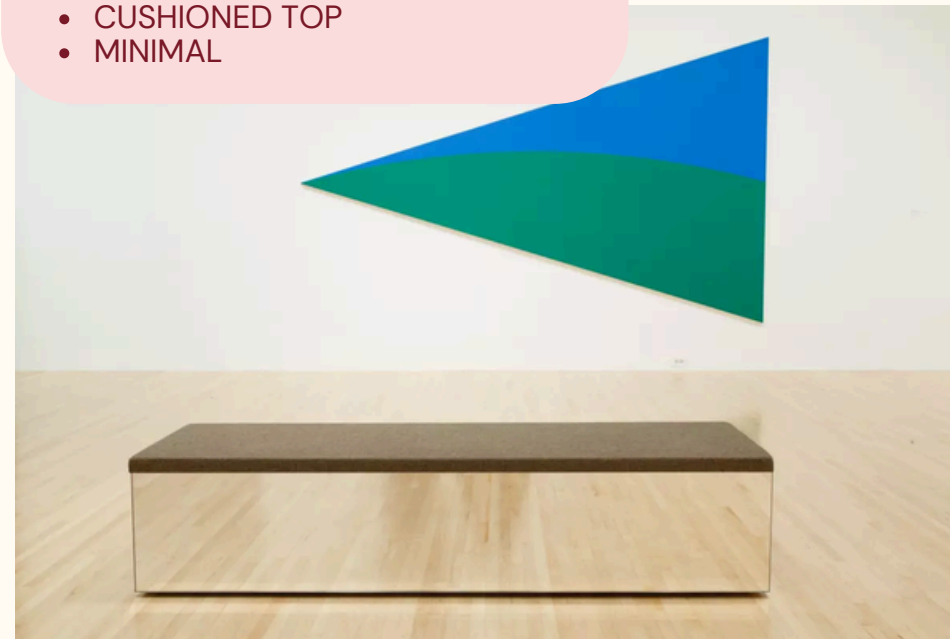
FURNITURE FUSION in St Fagans National Museum of History, Cardiff

- MINIMAL
- NATURAL MATERIAL
- DUAL SEATING
- FUNCTIONAL SIMPLICITY
- TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP



CHRISTIAN O'REILLY

- INTERACTS WITH SURROUNDINGS
- MODERN
- CUSHIONED TOP
- MINIMAL

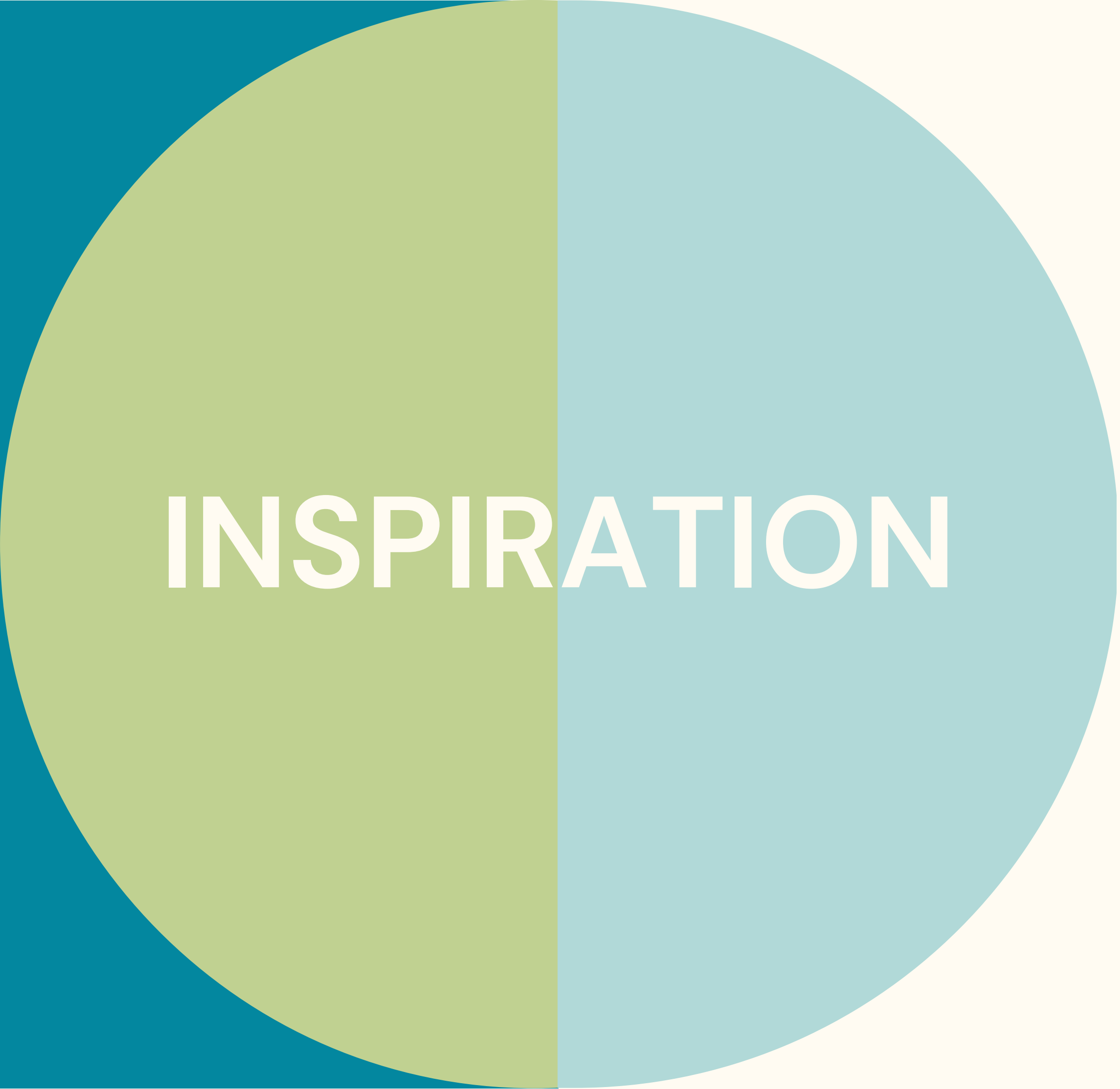


PROJECT ROOM in the Museum of Contemporary Art

- STREAMLINED
- MONOCHROME
- UNOBSTRUSIVE PRESENCE



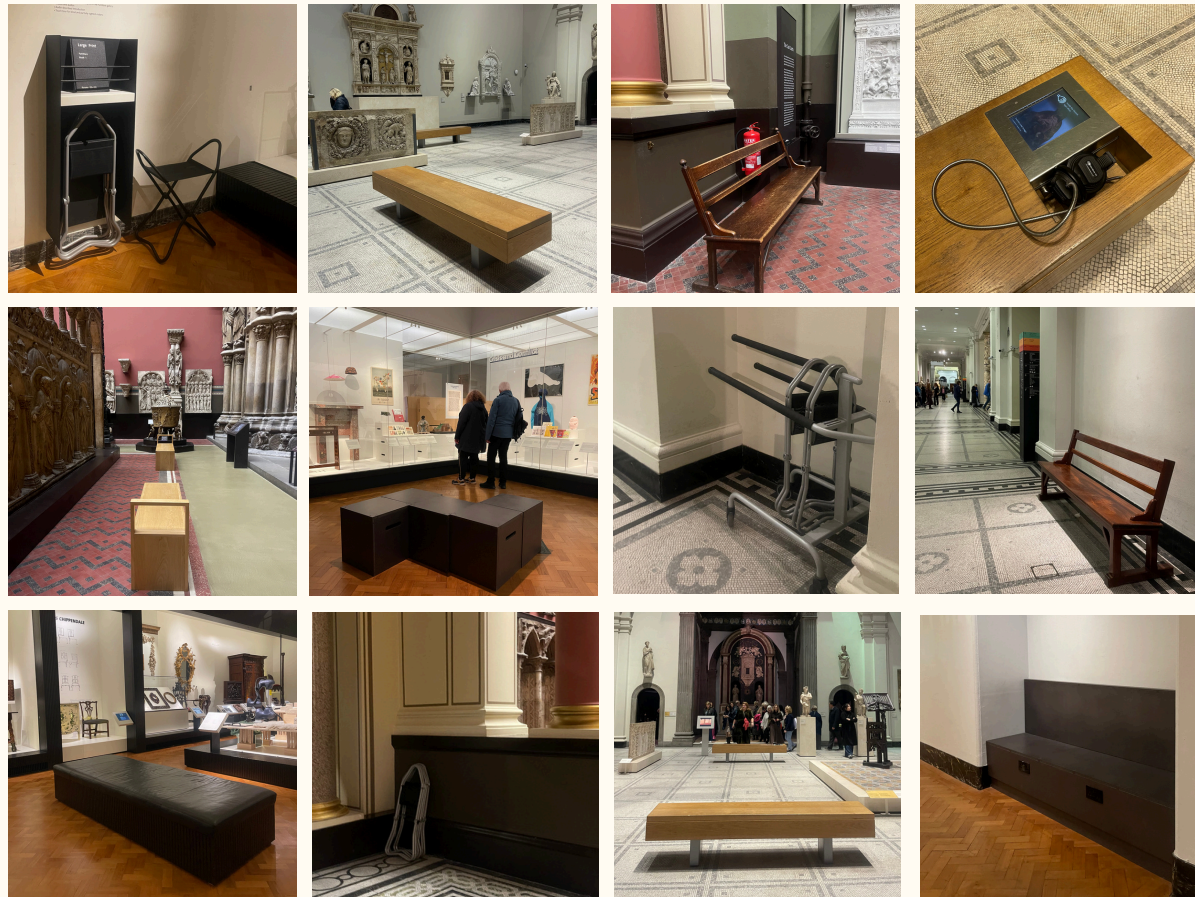
Orange County Museum of Art



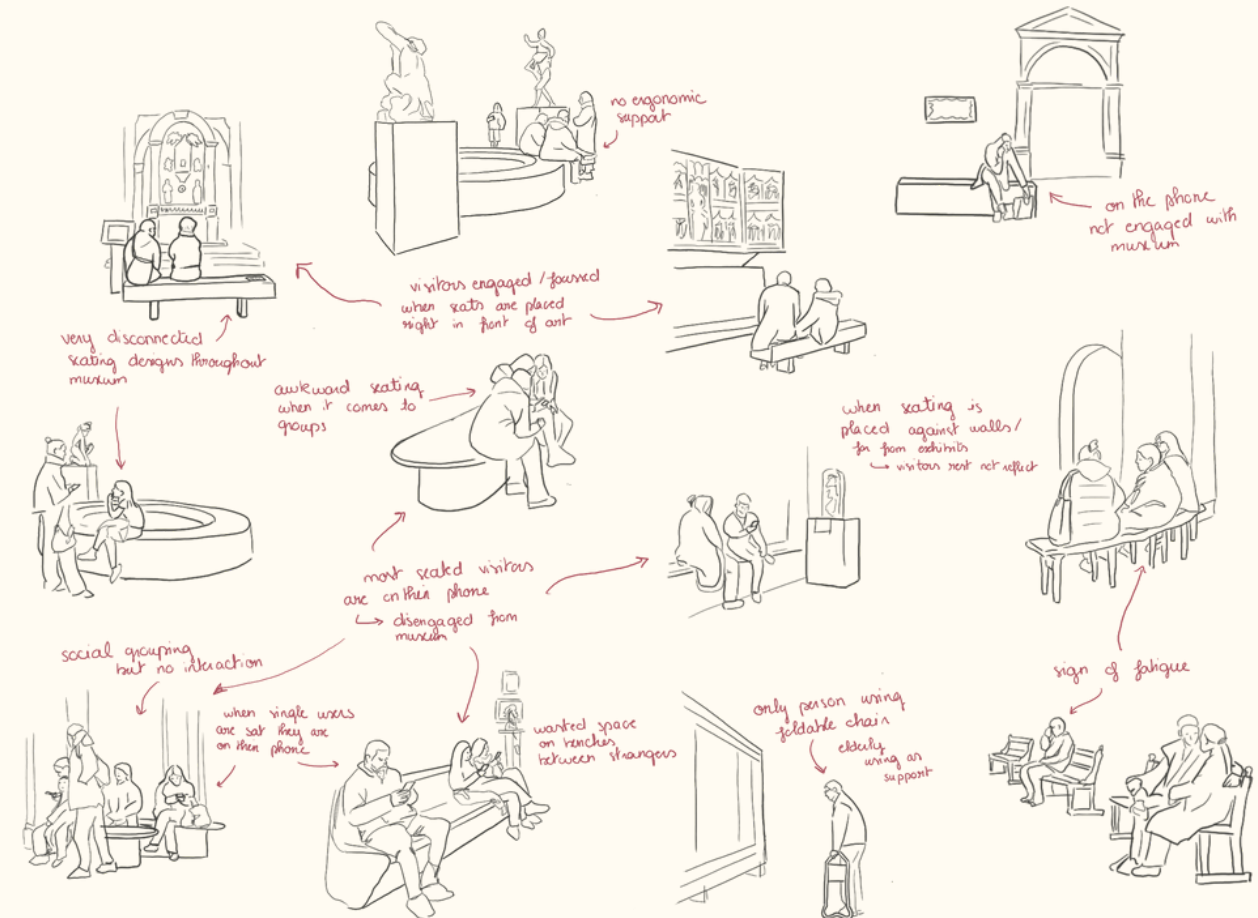
INSPIRATION

WHAT CURRENTLY EXISTS?

THE PRODUCT



THE INTERACTION



CURRENT STATE OF SEATING AT THE V&A

Observations that revealed the deeper realities of 'block seating':

- Seating is often **pushed to transitional or edge zones, not integrated** into the main gallery experience
- Hard materials (metal, wood) dominate — **prioritising durability over emotional or ergonomic comfort**
- **Minimalist form, but not minimal in impact:** most seating appears unconsidered, secondary to the space
- Only two seats showed any kind of interactive or multisensory engagement (e.g. screen/tablet use)
- **Visitors used seating mainly for fatigue relief, phone use, or social retreat** — not reflection or deeper engagement
- **No ergonomic support was observed** — users slouched, leaned awkwardly, or sat far from artwork

What does this mean?

- Seating is not treated as part of the museum experience
- Visitors are physically fatigued and emotionally disengaged
- The current design encourages detachment, not presence
- Behavioural needs (rest, solitude, re-engagement) are not met

My ethnographic observation at the V&A revealed that current museum seating is **not designed to enhance the visitor experience**. Most seating was tucked into corners or placed against walls, offering no sense of presence or purpose. Users were **often fatigued, disconnected, or distracted** by phones. Body language suggested **discomfort and a lack of ergonomic support**. **No seating observed encouraged reflection, reconnection, or sensory engagement with the museum's content. In short, seating is not integrated into the narrative or flow of the museum — it's an afterthought.**

This insight validated the need for a design response that **reframes seating as an active, emotional, and reflective component of the museum journey** — one that supports wellbeing and deeper cultural engagement.

COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

ADDON FURNITURE



AddOn supplies modular, upholstered seating systems for high-traffic cultural venues. Their designs focus on durability, flexibility, and group use.

STRENGTHS

- Highly durable and modular supports varied layouts
- Upholstered – offers basic physical comfort
- Integrated tech (charging/headphones) for accessibility
- Designed for group pause, not deep engagement

LIMITATIONS

- Corporate, generic aesthetic – lacks emotional or cultural resonance
- Bulky and impersonal – not inviting for reflection
- Passive use – no prompt for presence, mindfulness, or engagement
- Lacks narrative or site specificity

V&A



The V&A's in-gallery seating consists mostly of traditional benches, positioned along walls or in transitional zones, with minimal design variation.

STRENGTHS

- Unobtrusive – does not distract from the gallery's visual language
- Durable – often made of wood or metal
- Minimalist – aligns with institutional design norms

LIMITATIONS

- Low comfort – hard surfaces, no ergonomic support
- Limited typology – doesn't suit varied bodies or behaviours
- Functionally invisible – not emotionally or narratively integrated
- Poorly placed – often distant from key exhibits or artworks
- No guidance toward reflection, reconnection, or stillness

WHAT BOTH LACK:

While AddOn and traditional museum seating meet functional needs, neither supports the visitor's emotional wellbeing, mental state, or the growing demand for intentional engagement in cultural spaces.

WHY V&A IN FOCUS IS DIFFERENT:

V&A In Focus doesn't treat seating as an afterthought or infrastructure. Each design acts as a purposeful moment prompting emotional grounding, personal reflection, or shared connection. Its innovation lies not in just materials or forms but in how it reshapes behaviour and experience throughout the museum.

ARNE JACOBSEN



WHO IS ARNE JACOBSEN?

a Danish architect and designer whose philosophy centred on the **“marriage of form and function.”** He brought warmth and softness to modernist design through **organic curves and sculptural seating.** Jacobsen designed for total environments, from architecture to furniture to lighting.

most iconic contributions — the Egg Chair and Swan Chair — were originally created for the SAS Royal Hotel in Copenhagen (1958–60), offering sculptural yet highly ergonomic experiences in public spaces.

“Egg-shaped” curves and organic contours became his signature, bringing softness to modern design. Jacobsen believed that **good design should enhance the user experience while retaining aesthetic allure**

Like a sculptor, he **used these malleable materials to work out the characteristic shape of the Egg,** creating a design with a **harmonious sculptural expression** that immediately earned it a central place in design history.

DESIGN PROCESS AND MATERIALS

Advocated for sculptural ergonomics — form should hold the body softly

Used moulded forms to shape both comfort and enclosure.

Crafted designs to evoke emotion while addressing physical needs



The SAS Royal Hotel in 1960, where virtually every room received its own specific furniture piece.

Swan chair invites relaxed conversation

The Egg's enveloping form offers privacy and comfort in public spaces

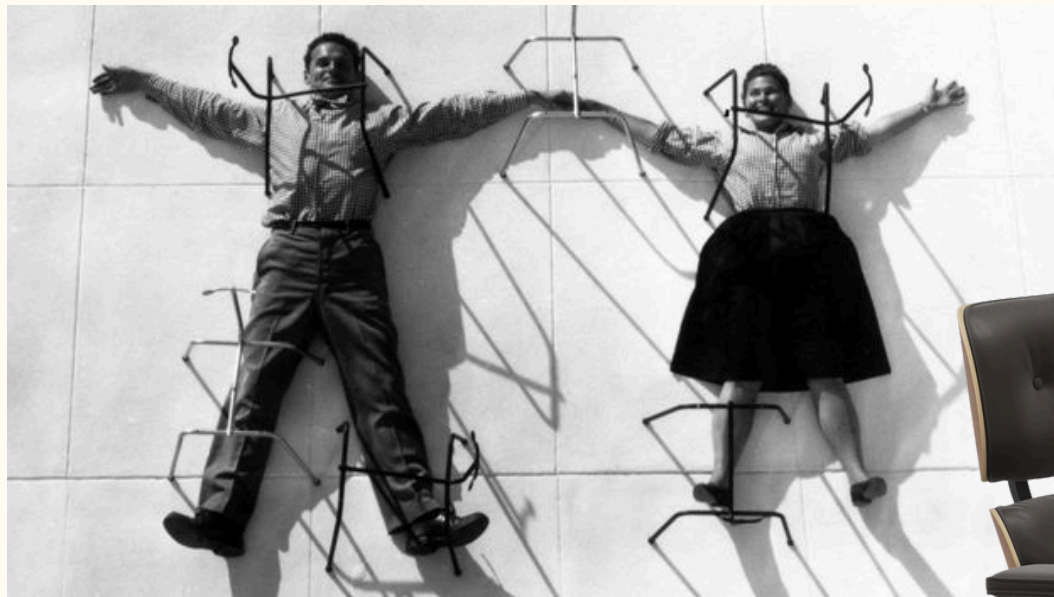
Believed furniture was part of a unified experience, not an isolated object

Arne Jacobsen's approach taught me that **sculptural form doesn't have to come at the expense of comfort** — in fact, the most powerful designs achieve both. His **use of organic curves to invite physical ease and emotional security directly influenced my development of the Haven and Ease seats.**

Like Jacobsen, I'm designing with a **strong emphasis on the whole experience — not just what the seat looks like, but how it feels, how it connects to the space, and how it supports different emotional states.** His concept of the “furniture as part of a whole” resonates with my goal to create a system of emotional touchpoints in museums — where the **environment, furniture, and visitor journey align.**

I'm also inspired by his materials thinking — the balance between sculpted structure and sensory upholstery.

CHARLES AND RAY EAMES



WHO ARE CHARLES & RAY EAMES?

Charles and Ray Eames were American designers who revolutionised modern furniture through an iterative, user-centred design process. Their philosophy centred on **problem-solving for real life**, combining material **innovation with empathy** for how people live, move, and interact with objects.

They believed that furniture should be **intuitive, affordable, and purpose-built** — leading to iconic designs like the Lounge Chair & Ottoman and the Eames Plastic Shell Chair. Their work embraced mass production, but never at the expense of comfort or joy.



DESIGN PROCESS AND MATERIALS

Used an iterative process, refining prototypes based on human interaction and comfort. Instead of starting with stylized sketches, the Eames Office engaged in hands-on experimentation — building models, prototypes, and even full-scale mockups in an iterative process to refine solutions. This practical, user-focused approach treated the designer as “a good, thoughtful host, anticipating the needs of the guest”. In other words, furniture should accommodate how people actually sit and live, not how designers imagine they should. The result was an Eames design philosophy centered on human-centered problem-solving, where design is for living.



Charles and Ray Eames taught me that problem-solving begins with people. Their iterative, behaviour-led process inspired how I approach each of the V&A seating designs — not as forms to admire, but as responses to real-world behaviours in a museum setting. Their belief in emotional resonance through functional design supports my goal to make each chair an intuitive emotional tool, not just an object. Like them, I'm seeking the balance between industrial efficiency and personal connection — something visitors can feel, not just see.

MARCEL BREUER



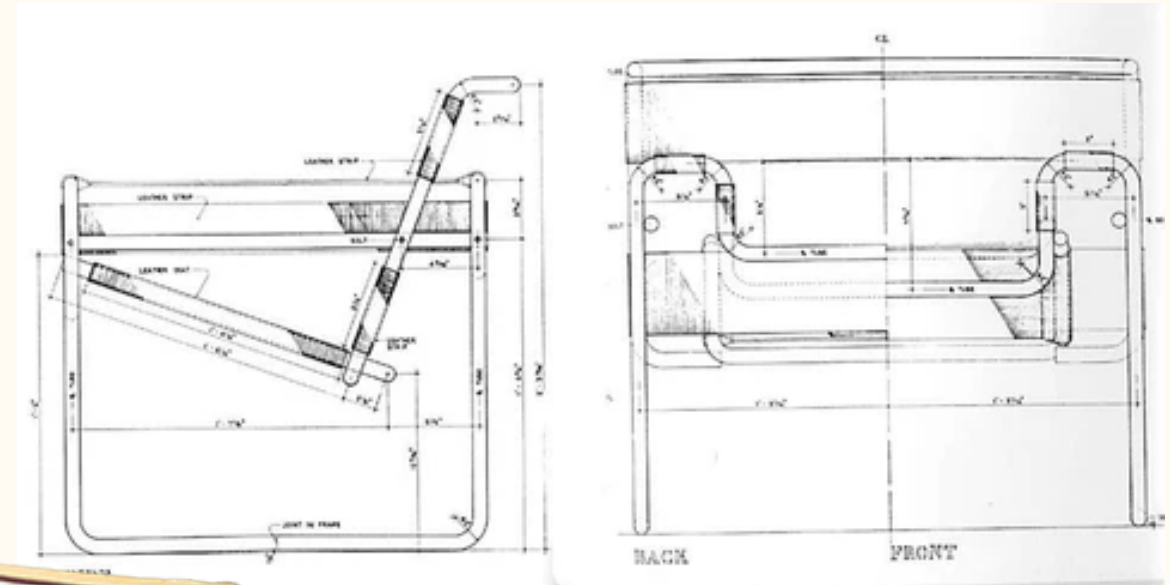
WHO IS MARCEL BREUER?

Breuer was a Bauhaus-trained modernist known for bringing architecture's structural logic into furniture design. He championed functionality, minimalism, and mass production — stripping furniture to its core purpose while maintaining visual harmony.

he revolutionized furniture by introducing tubular steel as a structural material — a radical departure from traditional wood craftsmanship.

Inspired by the light, strong handlebars of his bicycle, Breuer imagined using steel tubes for furniture frames.

This led to the iconic Wassily Chair of 1925–26, which was essentially an armchair reduced to a skeleton of nickel-plated steel tubes with canvas or leather straps. Breuer intended to make the chair “transparent in construction,” with minimum material yet full functionality. By removing bulk and ornament, he achieved a design that was logical, lightweight, and utterly modern.



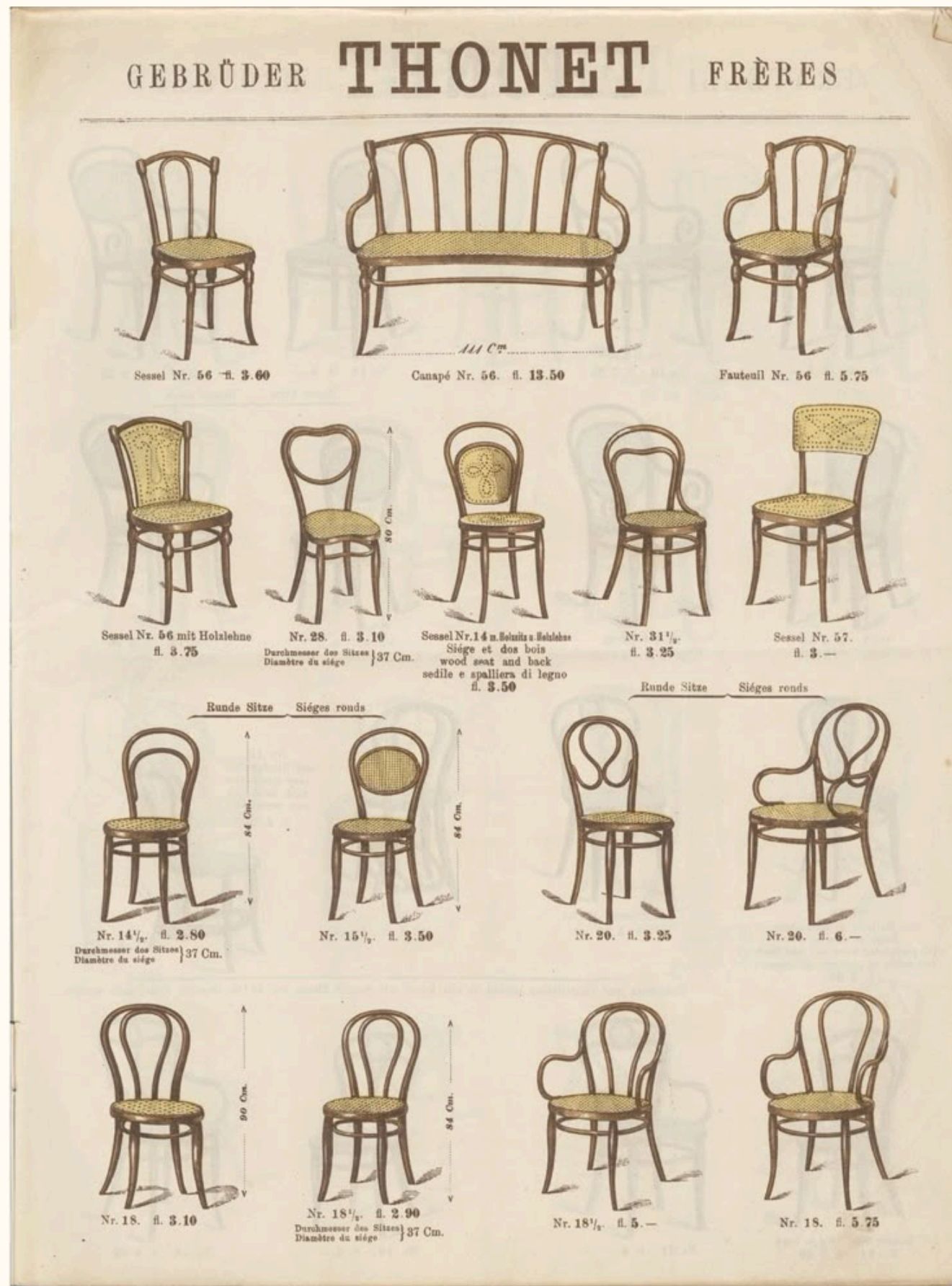
DESIGN PROCESS AND MATERIALS

- Embraced a “less is more” approach — no excess, no ornamentation
- Pursued mechanical clarity, making structure visible
- Believed that a chair should be logical, honest, and efficient

He was not driven by comfort in a soft sense, but by integrity — how materials, structure, and form aligned.

Breuer's use of visible structure influenced the development of the Lean and Link seats — pieces that allow clarity of function and invitation through form. His work reminds me that simplicity can be expressive. In my design, I'm applying his structural transparency to help visitors intuitively understand how to use each seat. The aim is not to mimic Breuer's aesthetic, but to channel his precision and spatial economy, reinterpreted in a way that supports emotional utility in a public, cultural space.

THONET



I've always been drawn to Thonet's work there's something timeless about the curves, the clarity of form, and the way each piece feels both delicate and grounded.

The simplicity of the structure never feels boring it actually feels intentional, almost quiet. The use of bentwood and cane creates such a warm material language, which is exactly the feeling I want in my own project. It made me realise how much you can say with very little, and that restraint in form can still hold a lot of character.

