

Making More Interactive Citizens

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In our divided and hyper-partisan national climate, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, DC has been searching for new ways to use history to inspire people to talk to each other and to participate in the civic life of the country – to become more interactive citizens. In 2017, we launched *American Experiments*, a set of five interactive stations designed to inspire reflection and conversation about American ideas and ideals (fig. 1). In partnership with the Exploratorium, we designed and tested new ways to make the museum experience more emotional, relevant, and interactive for our visitors.

fig. 1. *American Experiments* at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History welcomes visitors to “share and discuss ideas, and to think about the questions that have faced generations of Americans.”



Valuing Conversation

The National Museum of American History’s mission is to help our visitors “understand the past in order to make sense of the present, and shape a more humane future.”¹ Over the past 15 years, the museum has focused on achieving this goal by embracing conversational interpretation as our primary pedagogical framework. We believe that getting visitors talking – with us and with each other – can help them better understand history and their role in it, and that this civil conversation helps build a healthy democracy.² We created new

1 “Mission and History,” National Museum of American History, americanhistory.si.edu/museum/mission-history.

2 For more on the role of conversation in civil society, see Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2016).



fig. 2. At the heart of Unity Square is the Greensboro Lunch Counter, site of the famous 1960 student sit-in protesting segregation. *American Experiments* was designed to enhance the ideas of participation, protest, sacrifice, and change that it represents. We were careful not to detract from the object display and interfere with the powerful emotion it inspires in many visitors.

programs, retrained staff and docents, and convinced some of our more traditional scholars that our role extended beyond the one-way transmission of facts.³ Visitors responded powerfully to our new discussion-based programs and we began to consider how our exhibitions might foster the same kind of experience. Conversation is easier when the museum is present in the form of an actual person. How can exhibits and interactives spark not just engagement but actual dialogue?

The Nation We Build Together

American Experiments is located at the heart of “The Nation We Build Together,” a 40,000-square-foot reinstallation of NMAH’s second-floor west wing that opened to the public in June 2017. The floor features flagship exhibitions on democracy, religion, and the peopling of the United States, as well as a mixed-use public space called Unity Square that uses history to inspire participation in American civic life. In addition to *American Experiments*, Unity Square is the new home of the Greensboro Lunch Counter (fig. 2, p. 45) one of the Smithsonian’s most revered artifacts. It is a section of the lunch counter from the Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina where four students started a sit-in on February 1, 1960, that would ignite a youth-led movement to challenge racial inequality across the South. The walls of Unity Square display large-scale photographs from our collections that depict civic participation. Within this inspirational context, we wanted the interactive exhibits of *American Experiments* to help connect our visitors to our big ideas being presented in the surrounding galleries, and to each other.

Partnering Across Disciplines

The National Museum of American History developed *American Experiments* in partnership with the Exploratorium, San Francisco’s world-class museum

³ At NMAH we were inspired by the work of many other museums in this endeavor, particularly Conner Prairie and their landmark “Opening Doors” study. See: <http://www.connerprairie.org/about-conner-prairie/driven-by-our-mission/our-mission-at-work>.

dedicated to science, art, and human perception.⁴ A visit to the Exploratorium is a deep dive into wonder. Visitors of all ages delight in an array of self-directed, often social exhibits. Our partnership grew out of previous work our two institutions had done together. We had participated in a “skills exchange” – Exploratorium experts led a rapid prototyping workshop for NMAH staff, and we assisted their team with development of historical content for their new building. Our previous work together had been energizing for both sides, and we were thrilled when the Greg and Julie Flynn Family Fund agreed to support our continued partnership.

As we began work together on *American Experiments*, our institutions were separated by both discipline and organizational culture. Exploratorium staff came to the partnership with unmatched expertise in creating dynamic exhibits but with little experience working in the realm of history. Their improvisational, agile thinking is embedded as deeply in their working style as it is in their final product. As a federal institution, NMAH’s slower pace reflects the bureaucracy and public scrutiny we work under, as well as the historical rigor we bring to our projects. We had much to learn from one another.

What made this meeting of minds electrifying? How did we manage to improve on each other’s ideas rather than talk past one another? Much can be attributed to the simple things that make any relationship successful. We tried very hard to be open minded and honest. We listened. We maximized in-person face time. And we had a genuine mutual respect and admiration for each other’s strengths.

Nurturing Conversation

Over the course of our nine-month development process, which included extensive prototyping with visitors in both San Francisco and Washington, DC, our joint team winnowed our initial list of over 20 ideas to the five strongest experiments. These five

⁴ Learn more about the Exploratorium’s mission and offerings at www.exploratorium.edu.



fig. 3. “Head to Head” is a bracket game that asks visitors to decide “Who Changed America More” or “What Food Is More American.” Players begin with 32 choices printed on tiles that hang on pegs.

discreet exhibits utilize different pedagogical and design approaches to create a variety of experiences for our visitors:

1. **“Head to Head”** Visitors encounter a large March madness-style bracket and can choose to answer one of two questions: “Which food is more American?” (fig. 3) or “Who changed America more?” Working together or in competition, players decide who or what moves forward to the next round for

16 different head to head pairs, eventually coming up with a winner. The beauty of this activity lies in its fundamental ridiculousness – it’s entirely subjective whether turkey or squash is a “more American” food, but in marshaling an argument for one or the other, visitors consider for themselves what it means for something to be American. Whether two people are playing or 25, the game highlights how groups make decisions and come to consensus.



fig. 4.

A group of visitors play “Ideals and Images” while another use “People Power.”



fig. 5.

“My Fellow Citizens” offers visitors a chance to rest, reflect on their own ideas of citizenship, and share them on a whiteboard. Photos submitted by visitors scroll across the screen at the top.

2. **“Ideals and Images”** Four players sit at a table, each with an identical deck of cards containing contemporary photographs of everyday places, objects, and situations – a church, a school bus, a family eating dinner (fig. 4). A player spins a wheel embedded in the center of a table, which reveals one of 16 “ideals” – words like democracy, independence, diversity, freedom, community, or dissent. Each player picks the four cards that best represent that word to them. When everyone turns over their selections, they talk about what they picked and why. The similarities and differences in what is picked highlight the different interpretations people have about ideas that we often assume are commonly interpreted.

3. **“Where Do You Stand?”** In this interactive, four players sit together at a semicircular table, facing a monitor. Each player has a dial, which they can twist to move their avatar on the screen along a spectrum from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The monitor then presents players with a series of statements about protest and voting, from the personal (I would participate in a protest if I had to take a day off work or school) to the political (16 year olds should be allowed to vote.) The statements are designed to get people both thinking and talking.

4. **“My Fellow Citizens”** After reading the U.S. Naturalization Oath,⁵ visitors respond to the prompt “A good citizen should....” on a handheld whiteboard, and get their picture taken (fig. 5). We encourage visitors to tag their photos on social media with #myfellowcitizens.⁶

5. **“People Power”** This is the most experiential and least didactic of the five exhibits. Two tall metal poles flank a window in Unity Square that looks out over the National Mall, the Washington Monument, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Visitors are prompted by a small sign on each pole to form a human chain connecting the two poles by holding hands (fig. 6). When done successfully, visitors create a circuit between the two poles that triggers a song to play. This activity has a multifaceted emotional impact: there is a sense of wonder and surprise as visitors figure out what the exhibit does and try to noodle through how it works. Visitors feel connected to each other as they take the intimate step of holding hands. And many feel a sense of patriotism as they look out at the view and hear one of the three songs: “This Land is Your Land” by Woodie Guthrie, “America the Beautiful” by Ray Charles, or “Woke Up This Morning [with My Mind on Freedom]” by the Freedom Singers. One small panel on the window ledge identifies the Mall as a place where people come together both in celebration and protest, and asks them to think about what people can accomplish together that they can’t do on their own.

5 To read the full text of the Oath, see: www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test/naturalization-oath-allegiance-united-states-america

6 We want people to consider and discuss the idea of citizenship no matter what their own citizenship status is. The exhibit’s language makes clear that we are not exclusively discussing American citizenship and that all visitors are invited to participate.

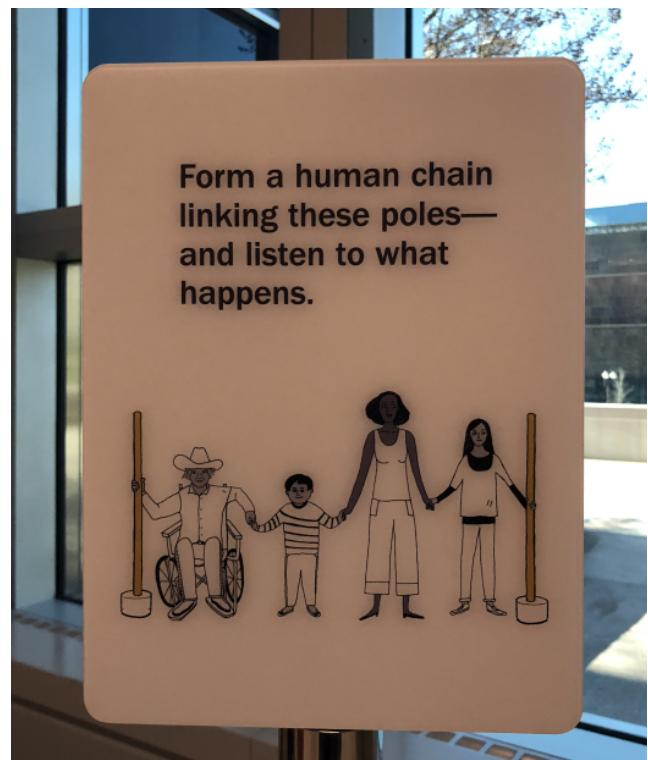


fig. 6. “Use diagrams” like this one on the “People Power” label make the activities more welcoming and accessible to a range of audiences.

By participating in these activities, visitors are practicing many of the behaviors that make for a strong democracy: compromise, collaboration, listening, and respect for nuanced viewpoints. Our expectation was that most of our visitors would participate with the groups they are visiting with, and our hope was that on occasion we would find strangers playing together. We have been thrilled to discover that strangers are participating with each other every day, and often seem grateful for the opportunity to make a connection with someone new.

So how do you nurture a useful conversation about voting rights, protest, or the civil war without causing arguments? How do you make rich, authentic conversation happen? We've worked to create a place where rich dialogue can happen in *American Experiments* by paying attention to three important factors: facilitation, atmosphere, and framing.

Unity Square is staffed by paid facilitators, who act as a lifeguard or party host. The facilitator welcomes people into Unity Square, invites them to join an activity, and asks thoughtful questions that prompt visitors to go deeper in their discussions. None of the activities rely on mediation – we designed *American Experiments* from the outset to be able to operate without staff, knowing that facilitation costs can be difficult to maintain over the long-term. But the presence of a well-trained person in the space does improve the experience for our visitors, and allows for troubleshooting and resetting the activities as needed, particularly during our heavy visitation seasons. Facilitators are also able to conduct surveys and provide essential qualitative feedback about how visitors are engaging with the space. In the first weeks of opening, our facilitators designed and implemented a tracking study that showed that some of the exhibits weren't being used as much as some of the others. Based on the data, we were able to rearrange the exhibits in a way that better fit the way that visitors were naturally moving through the space.

Most NMAH exhibitions are filled to the brim with content – objects, labels, media, signage, and graphics.

By comparison Unity Square is large, airy, and flooded with filtered natural light. The furniture was selected to encourage conversation between visitors, and the graphic design of the experiments is lively, quirky, and friendly. Overall the space is bright, cheery, welcoming, and calm. This atmosphere helps visitors feel not only welcome but safe, and helps us shape the tenor of conversation.

We have chosen and tested language that sets a tone of thoughtful, respectful provocation. In many of the experiments, we are deliberately vague in our framing. The question “Who Changed America More?” isn't clear or easy, and much of the substantive conversation that bubbles up between people is actually in defining the nature of the question itself. What does it mean to have changed America? Did this person change America or the world? Does change have to be good, or should we talk about how someone might have made the country worse? These are important discussions that help people understand the history being presented in the rest of the museum, but they aren't pointed enough to cause partisan strife.

Lessons from Our Partnership

In addition to pushing us in new aesthetic and interpretive directions, the Exploratorium brought a new perspective on engaging visitors that easily translated from their science and art-rich environment to our world of history. A few best practices we learned:

Give people room to watch. Observation is just as important as other participation, and you should build space and interpretation into exhibits to encourage it.

Don't just tell, show. “Use diagrams” (in our case, line drawings depicting people in the midst of the activity) allow people with limited English skills or cognitive issues to participate. Also, they have been shown to increase girls' participation in interactive exhibits in particular (see fig. 6, p. 49).⁷

7 Toni Dancstep and Lisa Sindorf, “Exhibit Designs for Girls' Engagement: A Guide to the EDGE Design Attributes” (San Francisco: Exploratorium, 2016). See: www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/EDGE_GuideToDesignAttributes_v16.pdf.

Don't talk too much. We know a lot about history. We don't always have to tell our visitors every bit of it. Restraint makes for a more powerful and memorable experience. Let the visitors' experience be the content.

It's never too early to start testing your ideas. Within a day of our initial brainstorming with the Exploratorium, we were already testing ideas on the floor with the public. This helped push our ideas forward and kept the team focused on the real audience for what we were developing.

It doesn't have to be perfect. The Exploratorium's fluid, iterative, development process helped us battle our deeply held desire to make things perfect before we put them out on the floor. Visitors are intrigued and engaged when they see us experimenting!

Continuing the Conversation

We are now looking at how to extend this model out to the rest of the museum – by creating discussion stations or other kinds of experiences in and around existing exhibitions. We're also adapting the five experiments into classroom-ready versions, so that

teachers across the country can use these techniques to engage students in the classroom. We have launched a large-scale independent evaluation of our work in Unity Square, but thanks to formative evaluation by Exploratorium staff and regular reporting and evaluation from our facilitators, we already have anecdotal evidence that *American Experiments* is succeeding in getting people talking to each other. We hope that by giving them a chance to practice the skills of democracy and engage in civil discussion, visitors leave more prepared to play their role in creating a more humane future.

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