



## **Balconies Front-End Evaluation #2**

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## Introduction and Method

This report summarises an evaluation carried out for the Balconies project. The Balconies project is part of the long term planning for the Life Galleries redevelopment. This gallery is anticipated to be mainly for adults.

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Find out visitors' feelings about and reactions to a variety of potential specimens.
- Find out which potential themes were the most interesting to visitors.
- Find out visitors' reactions to the word iconic

Adult visitors to the balconies area were interviewed during both weekdays and weekends in July. A total of 32 visitors were interviewed. Visitors were shown photographs of potential specimens and asked to choose words from a list to describe their feelings. Visitors also sorted themes in to categories according to how interested they were. Several open-ended questions were also asked.

## Visitor Profile

*Figure 1: Visitor profile by age and gender*

	17-24	25-34	35-44	45-59	60+	Total
Male	1	8	7	2	1	19
Female	6	5	0	2	0	13
Total	7	13	7	4	1	32

It can be seen from the visitor profile above that most visitors interviewed were under 35. There were slightly more males interviewed than females.

Visitor's probable ethnicity was noted down by the interviewers. Only four visitors were noted as visibly from an ethnic minority.

Visitors were most likely to come from the UK but there were a high proportion of tourists and overseas students interviewed.

*Figure 2: Visitor profile by place of residence*

Country of residence	Number of visitors
United Kingdom	11
Rest of Europe	2
USA and Canada	5
Australasia	5
Asia	5
South America	3

## Findings

### Specimens

Visitors were shown photos of specimens and asked to imagine they were seeing them in a gallery.

The labels, which showed only factual information with no interpretation techniques were placed on the back of the photograph so that visitor could read the label if they wished.

The specimens used were:

*Figure 3: Specimen photographs used*

<b>Name of specimen</b>	<b>Label description</b>
Fluorescent minerals	A collection of minerals that are fluorescent
Blue John	Blue John stone is a rare, semiprecious mineral found at only one location in the world – in the Derbyshire Peak District National Park, England.
Meteorite	Not any meteorite – Vigarano is the oldest object found from the solar system
Botanical illustrations	These are from Captain Cook's first voyage 1768-1771.
Origin of Species by Charles Darwin	Page of the original manuscript and letter to wife.
Drawers of seeds	Historic collection of seeds
First chocolate specimen	Illustration and type specimen of Cacao. Collector Hans Sloane created edible chocolate by mixing it with milk and sugar.
Drawers of beetles	From the Museum's collections
Mole cricket	Thought to be extinct in the UK, it was recently discovered again.
Mosquito	Spread malaria which kills millions of people.
Giant armadillo	A mammal from the Pleistocene (1.8 million years ago to 10,000 years ago).
Baryonyx claw	Very large claw of the dinosaur
Archaeopteryx	The evolutionary link between dinosaurs and birds. Archaeopteryx is the earliest known flying bird.
Blashka model	One of the delicate glass models by Blashka of a type of plankton
Dodo	Became extinct in 1681.
London Jack	He was a railway dog in London, used to collect money for charity. He carried on collecting after he was stuffed.
Original plan of Museum	A sketch by Richard Owen showing the vision for the Museum.
Drawings...	By the architect of the Museum showing terracotta details.
Giraffe heads...	In the Museum's store
Fashion items for human use	A scarab beetle pendant and crocodile handbag.

Visitors were then given a pile of words to choose from to describe their feelings towards the specimens. Visitors did not have to look at all of the specimens or use all of the words.

The words visitors could choose from were:

Figure 4: Words used to describe specimens

Admiring
Awe-inspired
Beautiful
Boring
Contemplative
Curious
Embarrassing
Excited
Facinated
Horried
Indifferent
Inspired
Interested
Offensive
Provoked
Surprised
Ugly
Wonder

Visitors were most likely to use the word interesting to describe the specimens. Some visitors seemed reluctant to use the word boring and often used indifferent instead.

Several visitors also added their own words such as "wow" to describe the specimens and these have also been noted below.

Figures 5-24: Visitors' feelings towards specimens showing how many visitors chose words for each specimen

*Fluorescent minerals*

Beauty	12
Curious	8
Interested	8
Boring	3
Wonder	3
Awe-inspiring	2
Fascinated	2
Indifferent	2
Admiring	1
Not interested	1

*Blue John*

Beauty	11
Interested	8
Indifferent	6
Curious	5
Boring	3
Contemplative	2
Embarrassing	1
Excited	1
Surprised	1
Pretty	1
Wow	1
Not interested	1

*Meteorite*

Indifferent	6
Interested	6
Boring	5
Fascinated	5
Curious	4
Awe-inspired	3
Excited	3
Admiring	2
Inspired	2
Contemplative	1
Surprised	1
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Wow	1
Not interested	1

*Botanical illustrations*

Beauty	9
Interested	8
Indifferent	4
Admiring	3
Curious	2
Fascinated	2
Awe-inspired	1
Excited	1
Inspired	1
Wonder	1
Nice	1
Not interested	1

*Origin of species*

Interested	12
Fascinated	8
Curious	6
Awe-inspired	4
Wonder	4
Excited	3
Inspired	3
Beauty	2
Admiring	2
Boring	1
Indifferent	1
Surprised	1
Provoked	1
Wow	1
Not interested	1

*Drawer of seeds*

Indifferent	6
Curious	5
Boring	4
Interested	3
Beauty	1
Embarrassing	1
Fascinated	1
Excited	1
Inspired	1
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Cluttered	1
Not interested	

*Chocolate specimen*

Interested	7
Boring	5
Curious	4
Fascinated	4
Indifferent	4
Admiring	2
Excited	2
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Inspired	1
Makes me laugh	1

*Drawer of beetles*

Beauty	12
Interested	8
Curious	6
Fascinated	6
Surprised	2
Admiring	2
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Horrorified	1
Indifferent	1
Inspired	1
Excited	1
Awe-inspiring	1
Cool	1
Not interested	1

*Mole cricket*

Interested	8
Curious	7
Indifferent	4
Beauty	2
Inspired	2
Surprised	2
Ugly	2
Wonder	2
Embarrassing	1
Admiring	1
Provoked	1
Horrified	1
Not interested	1

*Mosquito*

Curious	8
Interested	4
Fascinated	3
Horrified	3
Boring	3
Indifferent	2
Inspired	1
Ugly	1
Awe-inspiring	1
Not interested	1

*Giant armadillo*

Interested	12
Fascinated	11
Curious	7
Awe-inspiring	2
Beauty	2
Excited	2
Inspired	2
Indifferent	2
Wow	2
Contemplative	1
Admiring	1
Surprised	1
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Cool	1
Woah	1
Not interested	1

*Baryonyx claw*

Interested	7
Fascinated	7
Curious	6
Excited	4
Admiring	3
Awe-inspiring	3
Indifferent	3
Boring	1
Inspired	1
Wonder	1
Not interested	1
Wow	1

*Archaeopteryx*

Interested	11
Fascinated	9
Curious	8
Awe-inspired	4
Beauty	4
Wonder	4
Admiring	3
Excited	3
Boring	1
Inspired	1
Indifferent	1
Wow	1

*Blashka model*

Beauty	10
Curious	6
Interested	6
Indifferent	4
Excited	4
Surprised	3
Inspired	3
Fascinated	3
Wonder	2
Contemplative	2
Offensive	1
Admiring	1
Boring	1
Provoked	1
Pretty	1
Uplifting	1
Not interested	1

*Dodo*

Interested	9
Curious	4
Indifferent	3
Beauty	2
Provoked	2
Excited	2
Inspired	2
Boring	1
Contemplative	1
Fascinated	1
Amusing	1
Cool	1
Thought provoking	1

*London Jack*

Interested	6
Curious	4
Boring	3
Excited	2
Inspired	2
Indifferent	2
Admiring	1
Fascinated	1
Horrified	1
Ugly	1
Wonder	1
Provoked	1
Surprised	1
Depressing	1
Amused	1
Not interested	1

*Original plan of museum*

Interested	13
Boring	8
Beauty	3
Indifferent	2
Ugly	1
Contemplative	1
Curious	1
Admiring	1

*Waterhouse drawings*

Beauty	7
Interested	6
Indifferent	3
Boring	3
Admiring	2
Contemplative	2
Curious	1
Excited	1
Fascinated	1
Offensive	1

*Giraffe heads*

Interested	9
Horrified	5
Offensive	4
Fascinated	3
Surprised	3
Ugly	3
Curious	2
Beauty	1
Boring	1
Contemplative	1
Excited	1
Cluttered	1

*Fashion items*

Interested	10
Horrified	5
Offensive	4
Educative	3
Surprised	2
Wonder	2
Fascinated	1
Ugly	1
Boring	1
Excited	1
Beauty	1
Admiring	1
Sad	1

The tables above show what was said about each of the photographed specimens and the number of people who chose each word. There was a wide range of feelings about each one and no specimen was given all positive or all negative words.

There were only a few instances where a third (10) or more visitors used the same word to describe the specimens.

It can be seen from the tables that visitors found the fluorescent minerals, Blue John and Blashka

model beautiful. The Darwin letter, Archaeopteryx, original plan of the museum and fashion items for human use interesting. The giant armadillo was fascinating for a third of visitors.

Following on from this exercise, visitors were asked which were their favourite specimens, the ones they would most like to see in an exhibition.

*Figure 25: Visitor's favourite specimens*

<b>Specimens</b>	<b>Number of visitors</b>
Archaeopteryx	13
Drawer of beetles	12
Origin of species	10
Blashka model	9
Giant Armadillo	6
Fluorescent minerals	5
Meteorite	5
Baryonyx claw	5
Drawer of seeds	4
Giraffe heads	4
Dodo	3
London Jack	3
Chocolate specimen	2
Waterhouse drawings	2
Fashion items	2
Botanical illustrations	1
Mole cricket	1
Mosquito	1
Original plan	1
Blue John	0

It can be seen from the table above that the archaeopteryx was visitor's favourite specimen overall.

Over a third of visitors said it was the one they would most like to see on display. The drawer of beetles was also popular.

Visitors mentioned that they liked the specimens because they were unusual and they hadn't seen things like them before.

Visitors were also asked which specimens they would least like to see in an exhibition.

No visitors mentioned the mosquito, giant armadillo, baryonyx claw, archaeopteryx or Blashka model showing that no visitor had strong feelings against these specimens.

Figure 26: Specimens visitors would least like to see in an exhibition

Specimens	Number of visitors
Original plan of Museum	11
Giraffe heads	11
Drawer of seeds	7
Fashion items	5
Waterhouse drawings	4
Fluorescent minerals	3
Blue John	2
Botanical illustrations	2
Origin of species	2
London Jack	2
Meteorite	1
Chocolate	1
Drawer of beetles	1
Mole cricket	1
Dodo	1

Visitor's least favorite specimens for display were the giraffe heads and the drawer of seeds as can be seen in the table below. However, the reasons for not wanting these specimens were different. The giraffe heads were perceived as too shocking to be displayed as they were in an exhibition, while the seeds were not felt to be displayed in an interesting manner. This contrasts with the way the beetles were displayed, even though both are in drawers.

### Themes

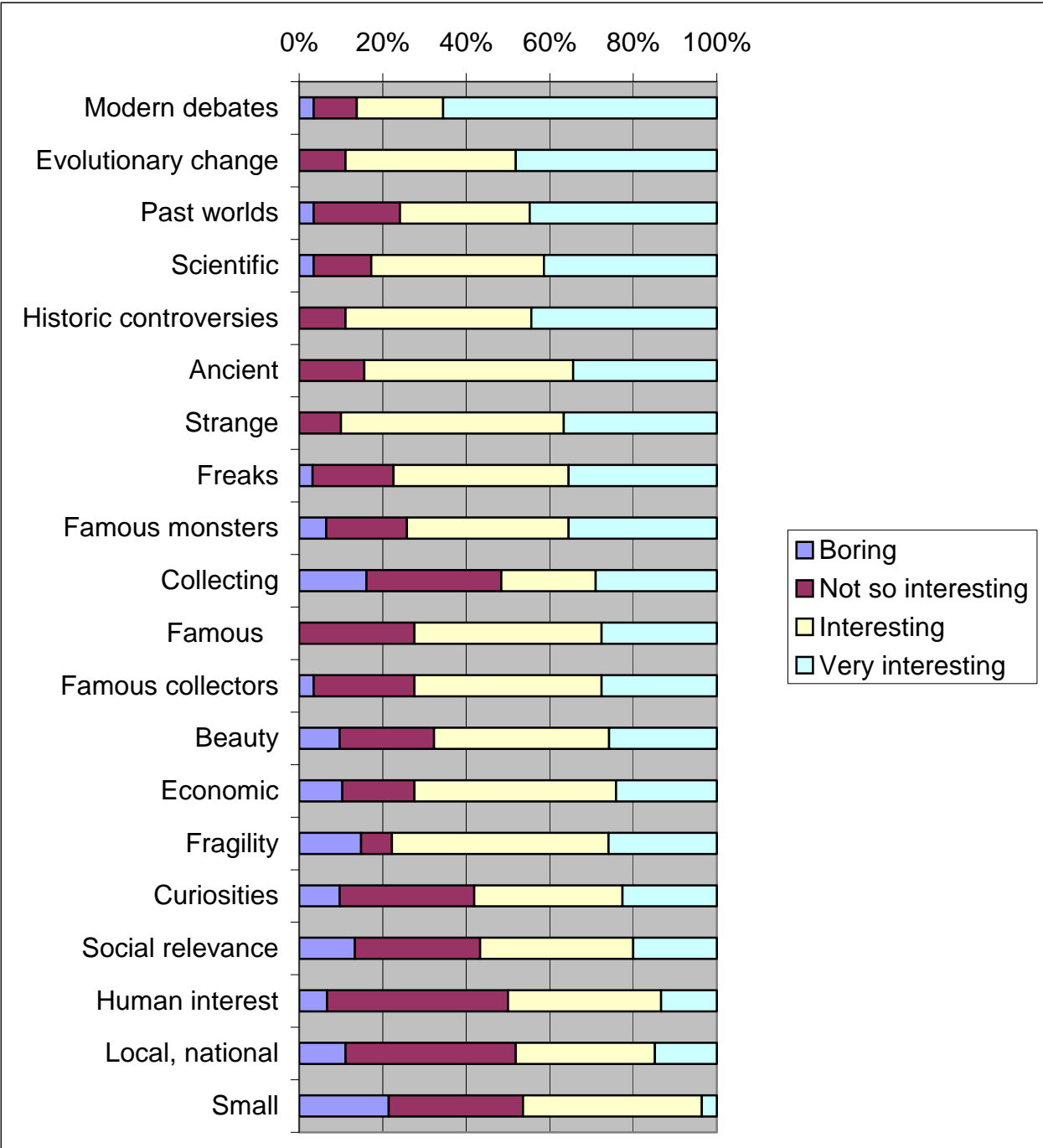
Visitors were asked to sort out cards with themes for types of exhibition specimens. The themes were:

Figure 27: Possible exhibition themes

Theme	Examples given
Past worlds, extinct life	Giant sloth, giant armadillo
Fragility of nature	Dodo, other extinct species
Strange	Angler fish, blood sucking moths
Famous collectors	Personalities eg Darwin, Sloane, Owen
Scientific	Maggots used in forensic work
Evolutionary change	Archaeopteryx, coelacanth
Collecting methods and preservation	Fine glass models, microscopic views, taxidermy(stuffing)
Famous monsters	Historical perspective of fossil finds
Human interest	Desert locust, mosquitoes, fleas, black death
Curiosities	Flea circus, two antlers locked together, insect jewellery
Beauty	Rows of butterflies
Controversial aspects of history	Slavery, colonialism, over collecting
Modern debates	Genetically modified organisms, climate change
Local, national interest	Mole cricket, Blue John
Small but fascinating	Fly/beetles collection, pollen grains
Freaks	Genetic abnormalities, two headed sheep
Famous	Guy the Gorilla, Chi Chi the Panda, Thames Whale
Ancient	Mummified cat
Economic history	Domestication, cattle breeds, herbal medicines

Visitors sorted the topics into whether they were very interesting, interesting, not so interesting or boring.

Figure 28: Most popular themes



The most popular topics as shown by the chart above were modern controversies, evolutionary change and past worlds. The least popular were small, local, national and human interest.

Interestingly, however, although visitors appeared to be not so interested in small, the drawer of beetles proved very popular, perhaps showing that it is the way the small specimens are displayed and interpreted which is important.

Also although local, national was not so popular, several overseas visitors mentioned they would be more interested if it was local to them rather than local within the UK.

### **Iconic?**

The term iconic is one which has been used to describe the type of specimens that could go in the Balconies gallery. But what does iconic mean to our visitors?

Seven visitors did not give an answer to the question "What does iconic mean to you?". Of the remaining 25 visitors, four said that did not know the meaning.

Three visitors mentioned that an iconic specimen is one that is historic. Two mentioned that it would be unique and original. Two further visitors thought an iconic specimen was one that was famous or well known.

Only one visitor gave a "correct" dictionary definition of iconic i.e. a representative example.

If visitors struggled to articulate what iconic meant to them they were asked to think of example of specimens they had seen in the museum which they considered to be iconic.

Three visitors mentioned the T Rex, two Dippy, two the blue whale and two the archaeopteryx seen in the previous questions. Are these the specimens the Museum would call iconic?

### **Conclusions**

The visitors surveyed represented the target audience of the Balconies gallery. They were lone adults who were generally interested and experienced museum goers or tourists. About two thirds of visitors were not from the UK. There was, however, little ethnic diversity.

This represents the profile of the Museum now but not what the Museum might anticipate its profile to be in 10 years when the new gallery is built.

It must also be noted that visitors other than the target audience will visit the gallery and so must also be borne in mind.

Visitors had wide ranging views and feelings when asked about the photos of the specimens. Many visitors actively read the labels before deciding how they felt and as such there did not seem to be a big difference between "innate" or "narrative" specimens in terms of popularity.

In general however, the palaeontological specimens were popular and the drawings less so.

There were interesting reactions to the controversial specimens, the giraffe's heads and fashion items with some visitors commenting that although they were horrible they contained important messages.

The themes also show visitors were interested in controversy. Both the controversial and debate topics (historic and modern) were popular, as was evolution, which has become more widely

debated recently.

Visitors were not that sure about the term iconic and some questioned how relevant the word was, with one visitor describing it as "*almost cliché*".

In conclusion, the evaluation has shown that our thoughtful, purposeful visitors have a wide range of interests. A larger sample would have been useful to really understand the relationships between the visitors, and their choices of specimens and themes but there are clear trends in the most popular specimens and themes that can aid decision-making.