
Eclipse: Eliciting the Subjective Qualities of Public Places

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review

Abstract

In this Pictorial we explain and describe Eclipse, a method aimed at eliciting subjective qualities of people's experiences of and relationships with public places. Our method guides participants to sequentially explore their memories, sensations, sense of place, and stories related to a public place. Our goal is to present this method in a pictorial form to make it more concise and more easily usable by other interaction designers; in this, we want to depict the richness and qualities of the elicitations, and ultimately the subjective qualities of a public place.

Authors Keywords

Design methods; Public place; Workshop; Elicitation.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction and concept

People's everyday lives unfold in a variety of private places like their homes. They also venture out into public places from the subway station to the nearby shopping mall to the local art museum. Through these everyday visits and encounters, people form relationships with public places that shape their lived experiences of them. People go to the subway station to get on a subway car, shop for clothes at the mall, and visit exhibitions of artworks at the museum. These overriding purposes shape people's sense of these places, and this can lead to one preferring a particular mall to another even though the shops are the same, or the avoidance of a specific subway station. In designing for public places, developing a more holistic understanding of qualities of experience beyond the utility or purpose of the places are critical factors. However, the well-understood purpose of the place can eclipse other experiential qualities that could (or should) be rich resources for designers. Designers want to design as much for the experience as for the purpose and, indeed, the success of a design is dependent on such complex factors, both directly and indirectly.

We faced such a problem in designing for an art museum in which we wanted to elicit our participants' experiences of the museum rather than solely their understanding of the artworks in it. In other words, we wanted to go beyond designing technologies to aid the authoritative interpretation of the artworks. We wanted to go beyond the master narrative of the artworks and a typical museum visit, and focus emphasis on the subjective relationships of a visit to the museum. We wanted to design for the qualities of the relationship that people have after having developed a relationship with the museum as a public place—qualities that are diverse, atypical, holistic, and experiential.

To address this issue we developed a method in the form of a workshop that we call Eclipse. The core goal of Eclipse is to shift the focus of workshop participants to the edges of their experience of a known public place. For example, our workshop aims to elicit memories of smell and qualities of light. How mundane objects like furniture, electrical outlets, motion sensors or ceiling textures influence our participants' experiences of place. How these qualities shape the memories, perceptual experiences, and public and personal stories that people bring to or create within a public place. Our workshop guides the participants to sequentially explore their memories, sensations, sense of place, and stories.

In this pictorial, we explain our method by describing a workshop we held at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in its Canadian Art Collection with 13 participants. The participants were frequent visitors of the AGO but had different understandings and levels of familiarity with the place. The participants included staff of the museum, such as a curator, docent coordinator, security guard, as well as the public, which included an art teacher, an artist, a computer programmer, a marketer, and others. Our aim in this paper is to present the method in a pictorial form to be concise and easily usable by other interaction designers; in this we want to depict the richness and qualities of the elicitations, and ultimately the subjective qualities of the relationships our participants have with the Canadian Art Collection at the AGO. We conclude by discussing how the outcomes of the Eclipse workshop can provide rich resources to support the design of new interventions in public places.

Eclipse: Four Sequential Activities



Memories

focuses on exploring what people perceive, pay attention to, and remember from a public place.

Showing participants that we were interested in things beyond the purpose of the place (the artwork).

Sensations

focuses on the exploration of sense impressions such as smells, sounds, light, and movement in a public place.

After the first activity, participants were more open to pursue our sensorial exploration of details and memories.

Sense of Place

investigates the multidimensional aspects of people's visits to the public place. Four conceptual layers of experiences are explored progressively from perceptual to intellectual.

The previous two activities encouraged participants to continue thinking of the gallery as an experiential space for perception and this framed how they felt about the artwork.

Stories

revolves around personal interpretation of the public place, including the space and in our case the artwork encouraging to select and remix elements of the place into a story.

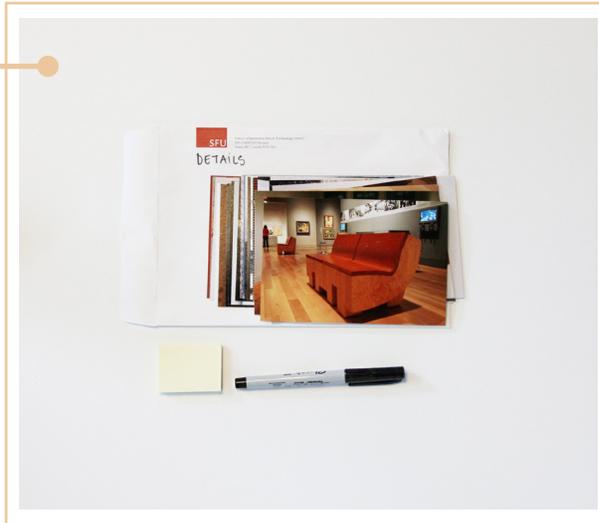
This last activity was influenced by the first three and allowed participants to not only remix and interpret the artworks but also the place in a more holistic sense.



Eclipse Workshop Toolkit

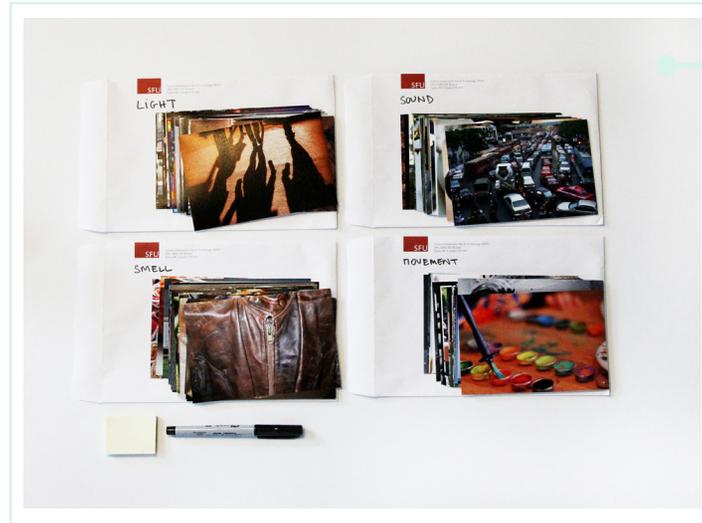
Memories

24 photographs
1 pad of post-it notes
1 pen



Sensations

4 sets of 24 photographs each
1 pad of post-it notes
1 pen



Sense of Place

5 index cards with instructions
1 audio recorder
1 photcamera



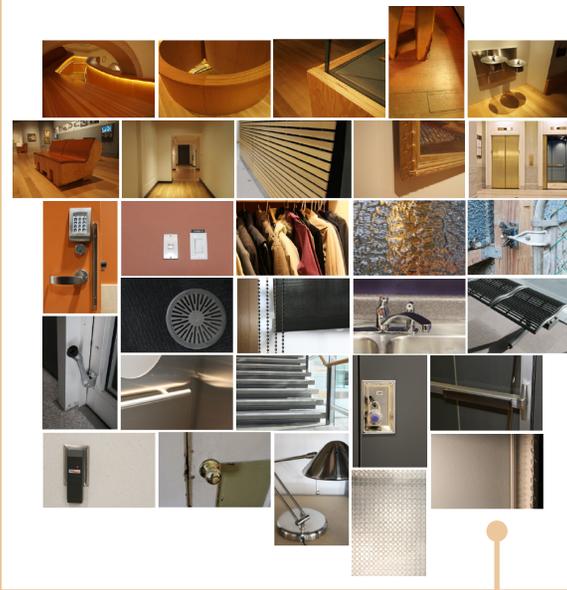
Stories

1 empty story-board
1 Polaroid pogo printer
1 roll of tape
1 pen



Memories

We assembled a collection of 24 photographs for this activity. This collection included photographs of textures, spaces and objects of the AGO itself as well as other places. The collection was presented to our participants and they were asked to select images that were from the museum. Participants could comment on their chosen photos with post-it notes.



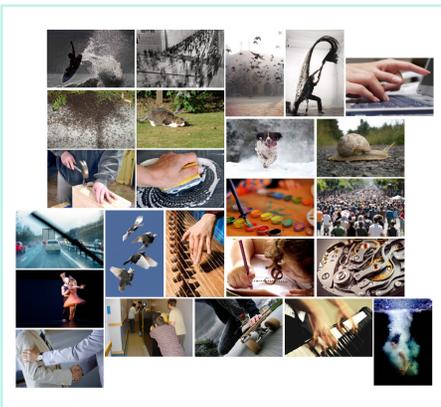
Most of the photos chosen by one participant were taken at the AGO. She picked an array of objects from the gallery. She also selected details from places outside the AGO, the collection of images represents an idea of what the gallery is.

A collection of 24 photographs (6 x 4 inches) including photographs of textures, spaces and objects both of the AGO itself as well as other places.

There were two benefits to this first activity. The first was to collect sets of images that represented personal and sometimes distorted memories of details in the AGO. These sets included, in addition to real elements from the AGO, things that participants might have expected to see in a space like the AGO. Secondly, the activity had the effect of broadening the participants' understanding of the scope of our exploration, which goes beyond the artwork in the gallery.

Sensations

We assembled four collections of 24 photographs representing qualities of senses (movement, light, smell, sound). One after the other, each set was presented to our participants. Similar to the Memories activity, they were asked to identify the photos of details that reminded them of the AGO. They were able to comment on the photos.



Movement. A participant chose photos that represented both slowing down to study artworks and rushing through certain areas or meeting other people.



Sound. A participant selected sounds that were part of the daily experience of the gallery as well as images that would represent the messy, layered, and ambient sounds of the gallery.



Smell. A participant chose images that represented the various types of people in the gallery (smokers and 'old ladies'), areas of the gallery like the cafeteria and galleria italia (a coffee shop), and the smell of age to represent



Light. A participant selected photos that reminded her of how the light filters through the windows of the gallery, of the space architecturally, and of qualities of light that related to the artwork.

This activity allowed participants to reflect on the different sensations they have when they are in the museum. Again, we did not focus on the artwork in the gallery but more on the various levels of the experience they have when they are in this space. However, since the activity allowed for more interpretation and openness, some participants still connected some physical sensations to specific artists or artworks.

Sense of Place

Participants were asked to describe their visits in the museum through 4 conceptual layers (perceptions, comfortable/contested, personal/public stories, and intellectual). While walking through the exhibit, the participant and researchers stopped at places chosen by the participant to take a photo of the participant in relation to the point of interest and start an audio recording. The participant described how this place or artefact relates to the current conceptual layer.

Perceptions

Take a moment to think about how you feel in certain places in the gallery. How does your body move through the gallery?

Things to think about:

- Where do you feel hot or cold?
- Where do you feel bright or dark?
- Somewhere there's a strong smell?
- Something that feels interesting to touch?
- Anywhere that makes you speed up as you move?
- Anywhere that makes you slow down?



"This is where my sense of smell kicks in. I like to come here for coffee. It's also for me a very serene space, more of the slowed down, more of the thinking. Again, I'll stare up at the natural light, and the texture in this room too, it makes me want to touch."

Comfortable / Contested

What place in the gallery makes you feel comfortable?

In contrast, is there a place that makes you feel uncomfortable?

Is there somewhere you would like more freedom or more control?



"I don't really come to this room often because I just don't relate to any of the pieces. I just don't think that they're really interesting. There's not a lot of information about them as you look at them. [...] When you're here, you feel like you have to either know what it is when you walk in or you just have to like it. I don't like it."

Personal / Public stories

Take us to a place in the gallery that you have an attachment to, somewhere that tells a story about you. This could be a story about you from another time you've been here, or a story about how this place represents you. What about a place that tells a public story?



"I grew up in Northeastern Ontario. I'm really familiar with the landscape and color palette and seasons. Pretty much makes me very nostalgic for home. [...] really nostalgic almost to the point of sad for having to live in the city and not being able to be out and experiencing it on a regular basis."

Intellectual

Find and show us three artworks.

For each, use one word to describe it, and one word to tell us its association to you.



"Joy - Provocative"

By asking our participants to lead us through the exhibits, we gave them autonomy to think about the whole place and to present spaces, details, or artwork that were relevant to them. The influence of the previous two activities, the progression of the conceptual layers, as well as the formulation of the questions (bring us to a place...) oriented the participants to not only focus on artwork. The outcomes of this activity are a set of reflections on spaces and artworks.

Stories

Participants were asked to create a story based on six things (artworks or not) in the gallery. Participants created the stories by attaching printed photos on a storyboard sheet (11x17in, landscape) and by adding written captions. Participants selected and photographed things or details across the collection and the researchers printed those photos with pogo printers (2x3in on photo paper).

Title: *The Making of a friendship*



Captain Haida - was a lonely captain who travelled all over the world. He met many people but never felt like he had met a true friend who shared his interests & sense of humour...



Queenie was an exciting artistic soul, always ready to try something new. She loved to travel, drink & laugh. She was a salon keeper & a Dorothy Parker & a performance artist... but she had never found anyone who truly challenged her.



Captain Haida was travelling in an Armada towards a pirate port. He was dropping off some goods after a trade trip to Belize. He was anxious to hop off the boat & let his hair down in a popular artsy hipster pirate bar...



Queenie lived in a pirate port. Her choice of homes was related to all the exciting things that happened in the port city - it suited itself to her eclectic character. Many crazy people & events inspired her artwork but she always felt like she was waiting for something...



Meanwhile at the pirate artsy hipster bar a performance piece, art battle, & dance party were going down... Across the room Captain Haida spotted Queenie surrounded by friends & hangers-on... He headed over cause it seemed like a cool crowd...



After a debauched drunken evening involving cherubs & white colonialists Queenie & Captain Haida realized they were a perfect friendship match (just friends... no kinky stuff). They formed a partnership that blossomed into a wicked artistic practice evidenced by their row canonical passenger pig & masked ball performance.

The End.

One participant used only artworks in her storyboard, but played with the different framing through her photographs. She combined sculptures, collections of sculptures, details in paintings, and sets of paintings. Her storyboard tells the story of two independent characters who finally meet and become the friends they should have always been.

SM.

Title: *The Weekend Explorer!*

		
<p>Wanting to explore the city. This weekend Sarah decides to go to the AGO.</p>	<p>Looking for inspiration and seeing new, she notices the small details in the paintings that catch her eye and make her stop and look deeper.</p>	<p>Moving on to the next room to see the familiar work of the group of seven. Hoping again to really look.</p>
		
<p>Not knowing which group it is she checks the plaque.</p>	<p>Flitting from one room to the next, getting lost in a good way.</p>	<p>She continues her exploration, amazed by the space and light of the gallery. She continues her exploration until she realizes it's hungry. Time to</p>

J.S

Title: *The Murder of Mr. Vol*

		
<p>The killer walked towards his kill, he knew he would have him, Mr. Vol.</p>	<p>"Ahhh" screamed Mr. Vol in terror. The killer had drawn a dagger straight through him.</p>	<p>Mr. Vol's blood dripped the walls. He had an odd luck that day, hence the colorful moods.</p>
		
<p>The killer made a quick escape up the rock wall, never to be found.</p>	<p>The citizens left a memorial for Mr. Vol, for he allowed them to sense true freedom, letting their souls take flight.</p>	



While participants wrote their stories, we printed each of their 6 chosen photos on the pogo printers.

These two storyboards show different approaches to the storyboard activity. Some participants engaged in a fictional story with characters and a narrative arc while others used images to describe different areas in the gallery. We also see that participants did not only take photos of artworks, but also spaces and furniture.

This last activity provides a way to explore how participants see the collection, what parts are inspiring to them, and how they make sense of the different parts as a whole. The selection of the subject of their photo, the framing of the photo, the sequencing of the story and the captions are all elements that can inform designers on the ways a participant interprets parts of the collection. The Stories activity uncovers the most intellectual aspect of the workshop since it focuses on sense-making, creativity, and interpretation.

Discussion

In this Pictorial we have explained and described Eclipse, a method for (i) capturing subjective qualities of people's relationships with public places and (ii) generating rich resources to inspire design interventions in public places. Through our case study at the AGO, we emphasized the crucial role that the progression of activities in Eclipse play in engaging participants and eliciting a diverse range of rich data. While our ultimate goal was to explore people's interpretations of the museum, each activity was tactically used to open up and explore different dimensions of people's experiences, associations and interpretations of a public place.

The first activity, *Memories*, begins by probing and documenting people's memories of the range of objects and infrastructure that encompass the gallery. Our focus was not on the accuracy of people's past memories, but rather using this material to catalyze prospective reflections on what is considered normal or expected to be part of the museum and why. The second activity, *Sensations*, aimed to describe the space sensually with an emphasis on people's embodied experiences and mental associations. This tactic helped people focus on intangible aspects of the gallery (like smell or movement) and emphasized using one's bodily senses to literally make sense of the environment. The outcome provided an understanding of sensations that are felt in the gallery as well as ideas of sensations that people associate with the gallery. The third activity, *Sense of Places*, intended to open up participants to explore the gallery, drawing on the four conceptual layers to make sense of and talk about specific places or artworks. Each conceptual layer was meant to guide participants from reflecting on physical perceptions towards more intellectual reflections on the gallery and its space. The fourth activity, *Stories*, engaged participants in constructing their own narrative of the public place. Rather than asking the participants to abstractly reflect on and interpret

the artworks, this activity directly engaged participants in creatively making their own representation of what this public place means to them. When taken together, these sequential activities help create rich and diverse materials capturing people's perceptions and interpretations public places. The workshop leverages the existing and subjective relationships that may lead to more novel and personal interactive systems within public places.

We believe the Eclipse method has different benefits for interaction designers. It addresses the complexity of designing for "the public", where an audience will hold a diverse and dynamic range of interpretations and associations. This complex and multidimensional design space can be difficult to study, structure, and understand. In our case, Eclipse provided a variety of rich materials that capture a diversity of perceptions and interpretations among participants. In addition, this data is already in a form that is familiar and inspiring for designers. More precisely, data was collected as annotated photos about material details of the space and embodied sensations as well as remixed interpretations of the artwork as opposed to raw 'field observations' or survey data. In this way, engaging a variety of participants familiar with the public space in an intimate, creative, and participatory manner can help designers move away from their own preconceptions and experiences associated with that public place.

A central goal of this pictorial is to explain the four steps of the eclipse method so that it can be applied, reshaped, and appropriated to fit other public places from the mundane (subway station or shopping malls), health (swimming pool or doctor's office), to the cultural (museums or libraries). In our ongoing research, we are using data gathered with Eclipse as a resource for grounding conceptual design explorations aimed at producing a suite of interactive prototypes that will be installed and encountered in the Art Gallery of Ontario's Canadian Collection.



1. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mercyhealth/10999094205>
2. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/96768802@N00/3394463629>
3. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/charliebrewer/67838081>