Coming Clean UCL

The British Museum — National Trust

‘Researcher for the Day’: Inviting Visitors to Crowdsource Conservation Needs

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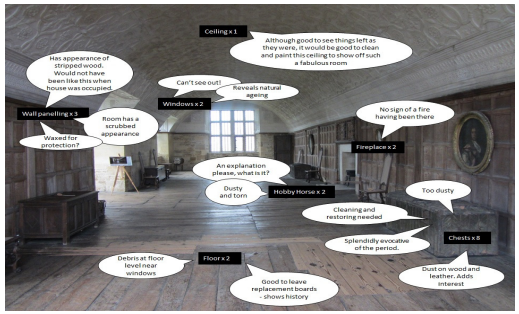
“There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder…Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.”
Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, 1966.

1. Background

Who decides what is ‘dirt’, ‘unwanted’ or ‘non-original’? While conservators ask these questions explicitly when making cleaning decisions, visitors may also ask these questions implicitly as they appraise and interpret historic objects and environments. As part of the Coming Clean project, over 300 visitors to National Trust properties and the British Museum were invited to be a ‘researcher’ for the day. Visitors were given a digital camera and asked to (a) photograph anything they felt needed more care, conservation or cleaning or (b) find objects that ‘need to be cleaned’, were ‘too clean’ or were ‘soiled but interesting’ (c. 1150 photos). For reasons of inclusivity, accessibility and reliability, data were collected and analysed offline. The analysis was transferred to widely available mapping and photo sharing applications, showing how a photo survey can provide a communication route between visitors, researchers and collections care professionals.

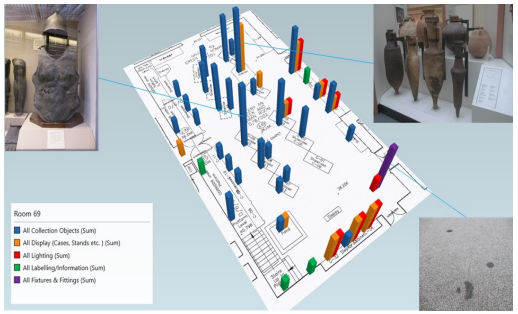
2. Thematic Analysis

This annotation of the Long Gallery at Chastleton House illustrates how consensus and disagreement amongst visitors emerged from the data, as did lay expression of conservation controversies such as the tension between minimal intervention and restoration. Gaps in knowledge and questions about objects pointed to new engagement opportunities.



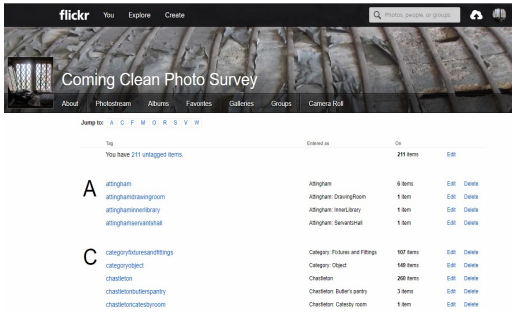
3. Mapping

The focus of visitors’ attention, limits of acceptability in terms of dust and dirt, and the impact of the display environment were also apparent. Mapping the analysis onto gallery plans (e.g. Rm 69 at the British Museum below) illustrated objects and areas that were frequently noted by visitors and patterns in observations (e.g. lighting and display case concerns).



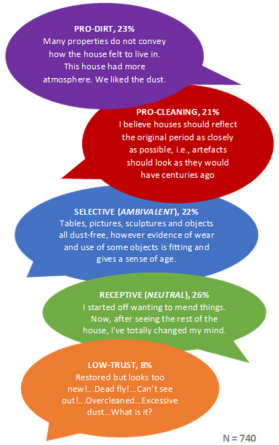
4. Indexing

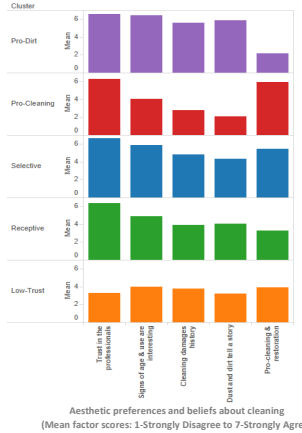
The photos and content analysis were transferred to flickr using tagging and comment fields. Tags were constructed from the qualitative coding scheme so that they would appear as a searchable index, allowing collection care staff to browse location, object type, reasons for observations, types of soiling and damage, materials and surface features.



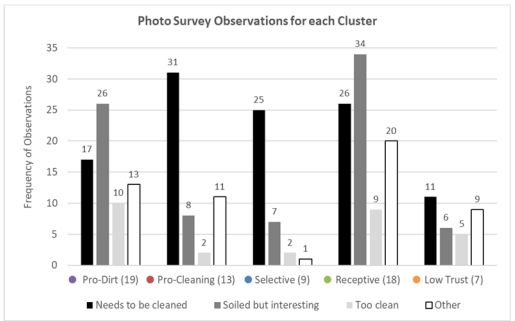
5. Segmentation.

Cluster analysis resolved variation in questionnaire data also collected in the project into coherent visitor voices. A similar cluster structure emerged over three iterations of the study (main National Trust results below). The clusters predicted preferences and tolerances for dust in a decision experiment and were associated with reasons for choosing objects in the photo survey. Subgroups of visitors had different images of the past, expectations and needs when interpreting the surface of objects.





Cluster	Demographic	Preference for Dust	Visiting Frequency	Knowledge & Experience
Pro-Dirt	> Families	Highest	Least frequent	> Consults most information sources; self-rates as most knowledgeable about conservation
Pro-Cleaning	> Male	Lowest		> Consults least information sources
Selective	> Female			
Receptive				> Self rates as least knowledgeable about conservation
Low-Trust			Most Frequent	



Cluster profiles adapted from: Dillon, C., S. Golfomitsou, F. Ravaioli, C. Storey, C. Tully, G. McArthur, and K. Lithgow. 2017. A clean sheet: A bottom-up and mixed-methods approach to understanding visitors’ perceptions of dust, dirt and cleaning. In *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference Preprints, Copenhagen, 4–8 September 2017,* ed. J. Bridgland, art. 1506. Paris: International Council of Museums.

6. Consultation

Collections care staff commented that the results offered reassurance about visitors’ perceptions, but also some actionable feedback about the impact of conservation plans and what visitors find attractive, alarming or anomalous. The results highlight the relationship between collections care and object presentation and interpretation, and hence the overall visitor experience.

7. Acknowledgements

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