Hard yards and 'collective genius': A tale of developing the *Encounters* exhibition for the National Museum of Australia

LEFT: **Content workshop 3.**

TOP: **Janey Wood.**

ABOVE: **Benita Tunks.**

TOP RIGHT: **Graphics prototyping with the Director.**

BOTTOM RIGHT: **Content workshop 2.**

Janey Wood and Benita Tunks

Ever found yourself in the middle of an exhibition development and wondered: 'Crikey, how is all this going to come together?'; or 'Everyone has such different ideas, how will we work together?'; or just thought, 'How did this exhibition end up like that?'

Then this story is for you.

The narrative starts way back in 2011 when, following a curatorial staff exchange, the British Museum (BM) and the National Museum of Australia (NMA) signed an MOU to produce two exhibitions: one at the BM in London and one at the NMA in Canberra, both based on the Australian indigenous collection of the British Museum.

The British Museum's collection is unparalleled. Formed over the last 245 years, it offers remarkable insights into early colonial relationships and illuminates stories of encounters between Australian Indigenous people and early settlers. The NMA curatorial team decided to focus on items from the BM's collection for which details of collectors, relevant Indigenous communities, places, and stories could be identified.

Over the ensuing four years, the curatorial team has consulted with more than thirty Indigenous communities across Australia about particular objects collected and their histories. Community members were first provided with extensive information about the BM's collection of objects from their region. Through interviews, people generously shared their stories, thoughts and feelings about the objects, the history surrounding them, and continuing connections to these objects today.

For many people this was an intensely emotional process, often providing the first occasion of knowing about the objects removed long ago. Through the community consultations a vast amount of content was generated, and staff back at the National Museum explored, discussed, and often disagreed on best ways to resolve and reduce it to an exhibition. The following topics were keenly debated: key themes to be explored, narrative techniques, use of apps and smart devices, design layouts, alternative interpretive approaches, and which objects and stories should be used for the exhibition.

By 2014, it was time to move from the consultation and research process to the design and development stage — to work out exactly what this exhibition was going to include. More NMA staff got involved. In addition to our work as project managers (for content and exhibition) and the contributions of a curatorial team, there were now designers, film and text editors involved as well as staff from learning services, multimedia, web and digital learning teams. The collective project team felt a huge responsibility: to represent the rich and diverse histories involved; to do justice to the stories shared by people; and to deliver a contemporary, thought-provoking and

1. http://www.ted.com/talks/linda_hill_how_to_manage_for_collective_creativity?language=en
2. Linda Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove & Kent Lineback, 'What Does Pixar's Collective Genius Look Like?', *Harvard Business Review*, on-line posting 11 June 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/06/what-does-pixars-collective-genius-look-like> accessed 30 Aug. 2015.
3. Linda Hill, 'Collective Genius: The art and practice of leading innovation', *Harvard Business Review*, 2014, p.13.
4. Linda Hill, http://www.ted.com/talks/linda_hill_how_to_manage_for_collective_creativity (2minutes54sec).

multi-layered visitor experience.

Like any other large, creative project (for example, a film, a video game or a play), developing an exhibition requires a large number of people, with a variety of skills and expertise, in addition to a budget and a timeline. Recently we came across a 2014 TEDx talk, 'Innovation is a collective genius', by Harvard Business School professor Linda A Hill,[1] and found that her research on collective creativity resonated with our project.

In writing about Pixar Animation Studios in the US (most recognised for *Toy Story*) as a model of a highly collaborative organisation in both R&D and product development,[2] Linda Hill has described the process of computer-generated (CG) film development, emphasising: '[h]ow iterative and interrelated — in short, how messy — the steps of the process are, because the story can and usually does evolve throughout the making.'[3]
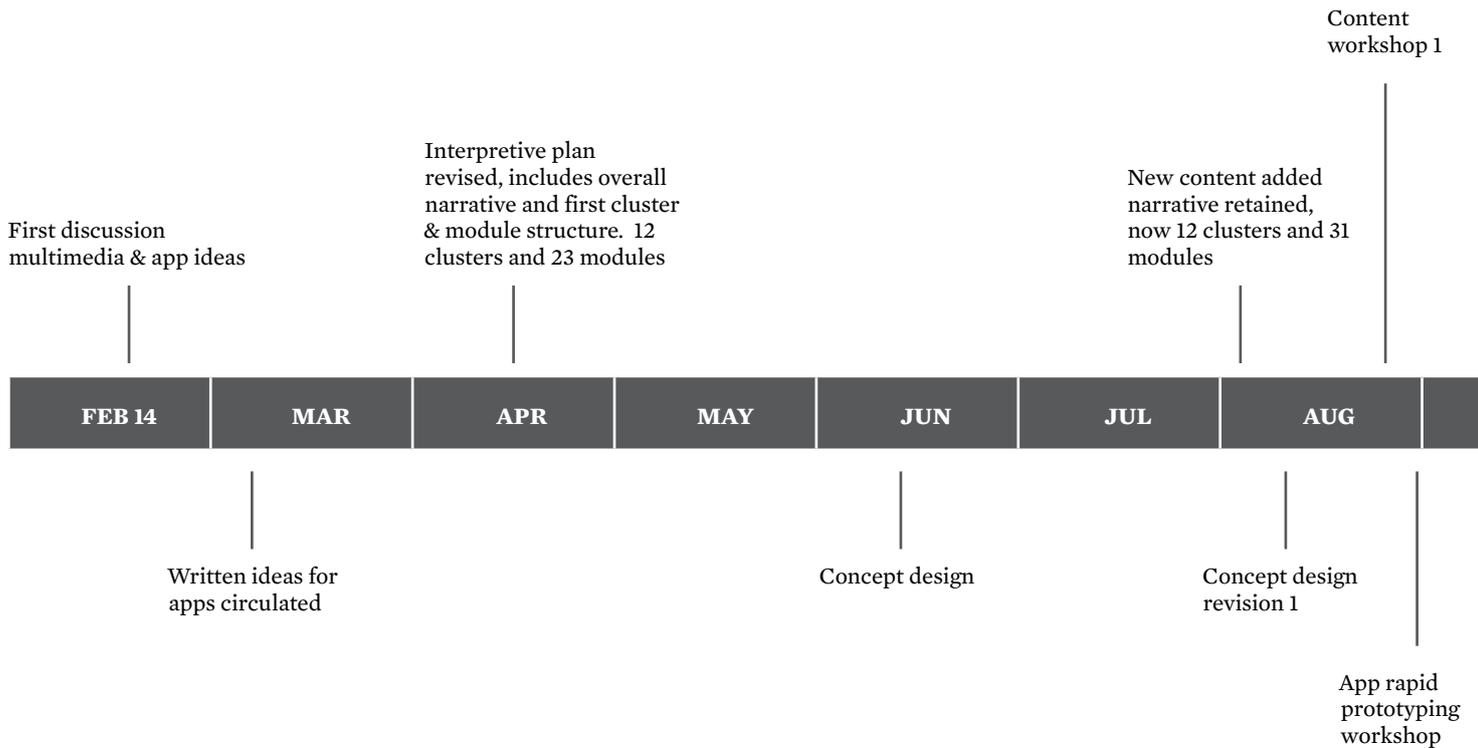
Hill further explained:

> To help us understand the Pixar process, an individual in the studio drew a flow chart of the steps they take to make a film. He did so reluctantly, because it suggested that the process was a neat series of steps done by discrete groups. Even with all those arrows, he thought it failed to really illustrate just how iterative, interrelated and, frankly, messy their process was.[4]

Sound familiar?

As project managers, we had to work out what would take us from development to delivery phase and guide everyone through the process. After attending a user-centred design thinking course, some of us as managers also wanted to try out some of the rapid prototyping processes within the Museum context. While previously familiar with prototyping for safety, interactive mechanics and scientific concepts, we now found the idea of prototyping needed to be applied to quite a different type of content and exploratory process.

A behind-the-scenes view of exhibition planning

Content
workshop 1

Interpretive plan
revised, includes overall
narrative and first cluster
& module structure. 12
clusters and 23 modules

New content added
narrative retained,
now 12 clusters and 31
modules

First discussion
multimedia & app ideas

FEB 14	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	S

Written ideas for
apps circulated

Concept design

Concept design
revision 1

App rapid
prototyping
workshop

In developing strategies for the exhibition's development, we decided to:

- Conduct audience-focused content workshops;
- Revise and review the key aims of the exhibition, and have them pasted up as often as possible to refer to during content workshops;
- Involve as many of the project team as possible in workshops, to ensure a greater appreciation of the whole exhibition; and
- Use rapid prototyping[5] workshops to enable innovative ideas to surface quickly, and use low-tech processes (paper and cardboard), to save time and money.

And yes: our processes were messy but also usefully iterative. For example, have a look at our timeline (illustrated) to see just how frequently and rapidly things changed.

Each content workshop involved curators delivering draft content (draft text, images, quotes and short edited film interviews). Everyone attending the workshops received a copy of the content beforehand, and time was allocated to allow all to walk around and
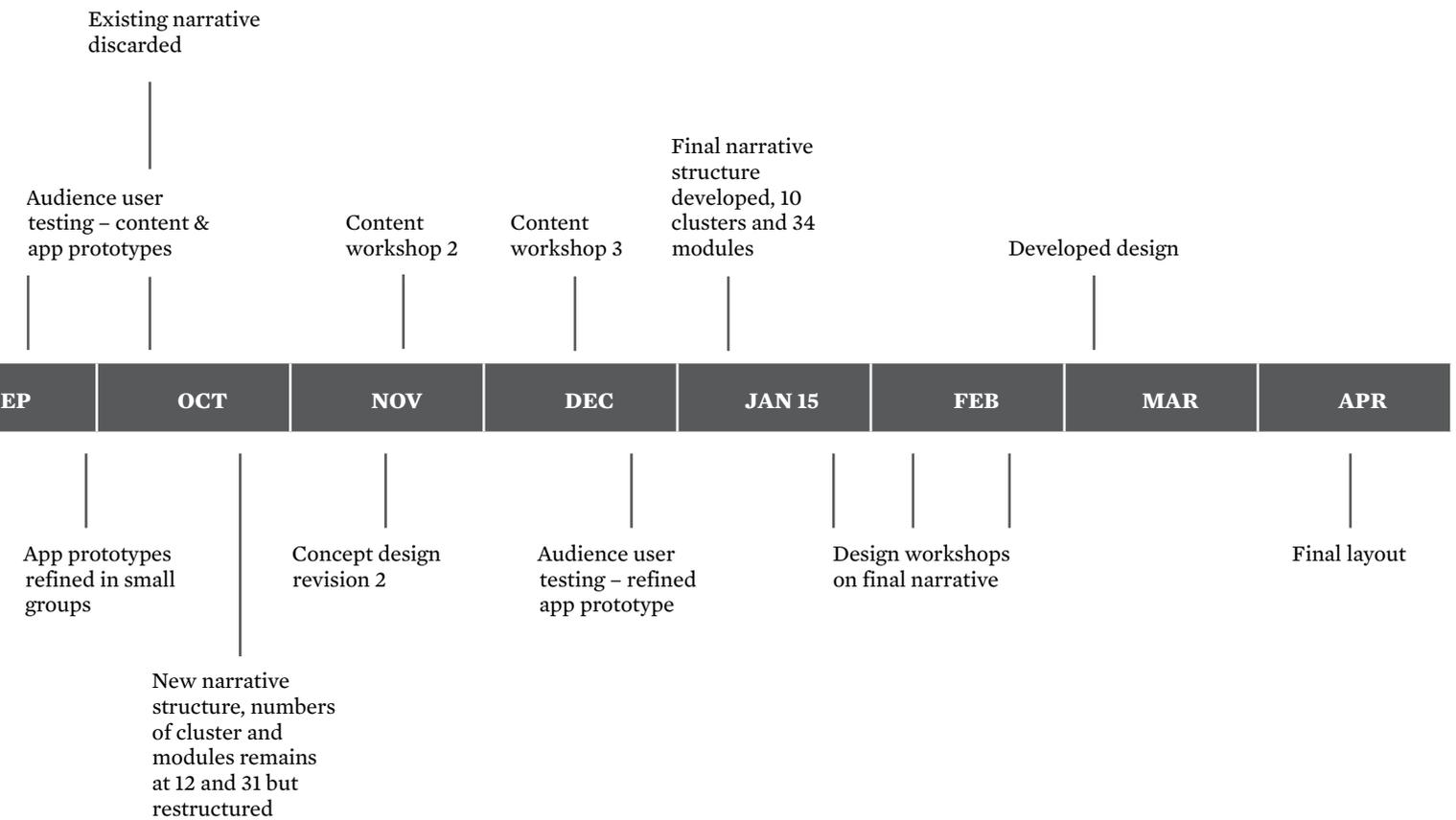
to post comments. As a team, we went through each part of the proposed content and provided feedback.

Having such a diversity of expertise and knowledge brought together proved highly productive. The workshops provided a catalyst for identifying problematic issues early, and collaboratively coming up with solutions. For example, the film editor identified that some film footage wasn't long enough for a loop; designers then asked the film editor if footage would work without sound, and they discussed the optimum scale of media to be employed. At the same time web and multimedia staff suggested alternative uses for some content, and education staff advised of potential links between proposed content and the school curriculum.

The inclusion of people previously unfamiliar with the proposed content was invaluable, since they identified conceptual gaps and inconsistencies. Meanwhile project managers and designers pointed out potential difficulties with the overall quantity of scoped content — in terms of both gallery space available and visitor duration times. Discussions of

ABOVE: **Timeline showing key paths in the development of *Encounters*.**

5.   On rapid prototyping: We found the rapid prototyping model very useful for ideas-testing – as evolved through design thinking approaches to innovative design of change. It offers a very useful tool for harvesting the creative energies in a group when developing the ideas and impact potential of an exhibition's content and key themes. See much material on design thinking and rapid prototyping available on the web.

Existing narrative
discarded

Audience user
testing – content &
app prototypes

Content
workshop 2

Content
workshop 3

Final narrative
structure
developed, 10
clusters and 34
modules

Developed design

EP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN 15	FEB	MAR	APR

App prototypes
refined in small
groups

Concept design
revision 2

Audience user
testing – refined
app prototype

Design workshops
on final narrative

Final layout

New narrative
structure, numbers
of cluster and
modules remains
at 12 and 31 but
restructured

'why that object?' abounded.

In overview, the National Museum's content workshops gave the designers a thorough understanding of the contents and media finally proposed, as well as refining the interrelationships between the various elements of the exhibition — connections between objects, film, images and text. During a recent review process, the editor commented that this exhibition's text was proving to be the most interrelated and integrated in content that she had ever worked on.

Most importantly, the content workshops — simply by virtue of having proposed exhibition material and themes pasted up on walls and engaging numerous viewpoints about their development — enabled people to identify when things were not working. As a result of each workshop, crucial components of narrative, text types and story development were subject to change. Mostly the desired changes were identified by the team during the workshops. On a couple of occasions we were able to leave the content up for some time and this allowed other staff also to review

it, again providing critical input to the exhibition development process.

A subsequent visitor prototyping workshop on content development provided feedback on both the content to be presented and the different interpretive formats employed to enrich the engagement of audiences. Visitors gave us their reactions to different types of texts, and the lengths of text; and articulated their desires to have more direct information about objects — what they are made of and how they were used — and to ensure people were identified clearly; for example, answering questions such as: 'Why does she have the right to speak for this community? Who is that? Why is he speaking?' They also provided feedback on the impact of stories about early colonial conflicts — these stories are still confronting to many people when presented in an exhibition.

Doing '*something*' with mobile smart devices was a matter of endless debate in early content and design discussions. Relative merits of additional content, augmented reality and social media were debated. Issues and risks around public and private

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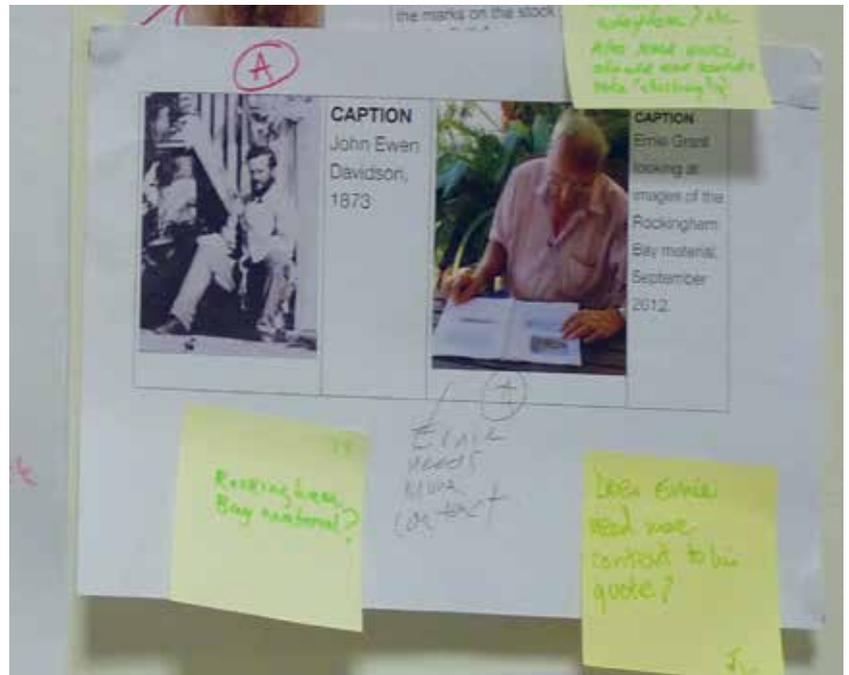
conversations were raised — not least the Museum's responsibility to the people represented in the exhibition. Often discussions turned into content versus interpretation. Interestingly, it turned out that few of the people in the room had even used many GLAM apps, let alone developed one! There was opportunity within the Museum to do something about this gap in a more purposeful way, as corporate plans and budget discussions now identified 'smart device projects' as a significant strategic direction to pursue.

Prototyping workshops were then useful in developing alternative app ideas: to test them with visitors, develop simple paper prototypes, and test again. Many ideas surfaced: additional content, structured dinner-table conversations, scrapbooks, comment threads, and question-and-response formats. It repeatedly proved to be the case that rapid prototyping workshops allowed people to work outside their normal teams and reference-frameworks; to generate many innovative ideas but also, most importantly, to let go of long-held views and provide new resources in a collective iterative process of developing a final product.

A second visitor-testing session, using simple paper prototypes and screen-shots, was conducted with eight visitors representing relevant audience segments, and staff from the project team interviewing the participants. This session provided us with significant visitor data to have a business case approved to develop an in-exhibition app. Although this part of the project did not ultimately proceed, nevertheless everyone involved learnt a huge amount — again, about how prototyping works, how to interview visitors, how to draw screen-shots — and this staff learning component expanded people's ideas about what an exhibition app could be for audiences. It provided us with new skills to build on in a future project, and that proactive disposition is itself a new resource to carry forward.

What else did we learn?
• Working with diverse teams of people generates new solutions and opportunities;
• Working in groups over time builds confidence for people who wouldn't normally volunteer comments;
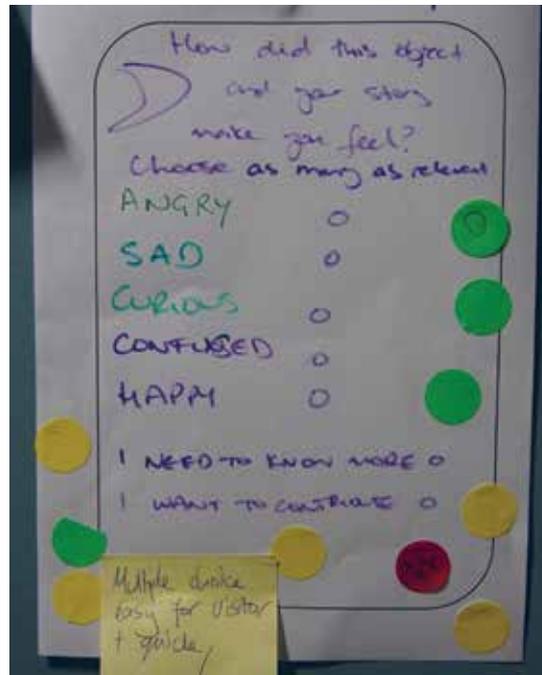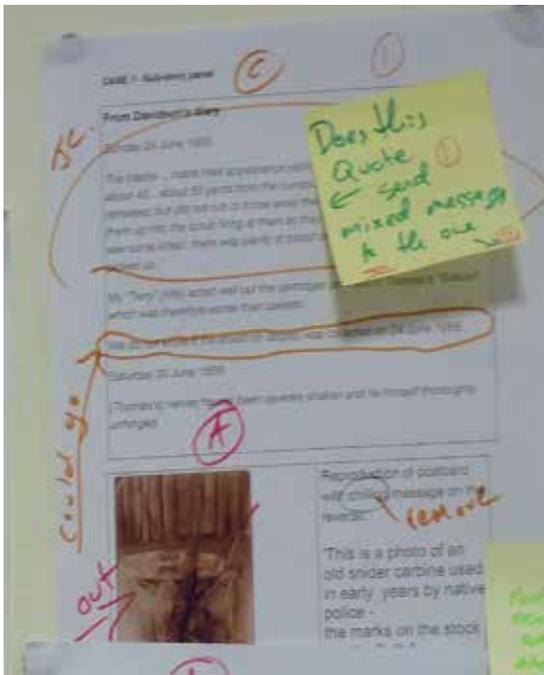
- These types of processes encourage listening and the debating of views — and yes, it can be scary to put ideas out for robust scrutiny; (we need more practice at this, but can see the benefits);
- Physically walking through the content rather than drafting on paper gives a completely different feel to planning an exhibition, and it's much more apparent when something is or isn't working;
- It's really hard to find a space large enough to put everything up, and where people don't get annoyed at you leaving things on the walls for long periods of time;
- People appreciate opening up the development process, and having their expertise and views valued and heard; and
- Visitors had just as much fun at the prototyping workshops as we did.

In describing the Pixar film development process, Linda Hill highlighted the daily rushes. Work goes up on a daily basis, with *everyone* able to comment and offer feedback, and with small comments developing into major components of a movie. Whilst we didn't manage daily sharing, having regular, open workshops and using the prototyping cycle, we did provide opportunities for people inside and outside the Museum to identify concerns, to advise and, at times, radically change the visitor experience.

It's been hard and exhausting for everyone involved: trying to work out compromises between opposing viewpoints; managing the many changes to object selections; monitoring the narrative, designs and text, and iterating these processes again and again. Hill's 'messy' tag doesn't seem to quite cover it.

None of us will be laying claims to collective genius just yet. However, like CGI films, exhibitions today require large numbers of people with a variety of skills and expertise to come together to exchange ideas, test options, and create a coherent whole. The types of processes we used for the *Encounters* exhibition for the National Museum of Australia, are assisting us to get better at these processes for future projects.

So how did we go?

Well, three weeks out from the start of installation and 14 weeks from opening – as text moves to layout stage; as we frantically hunt for the last few images

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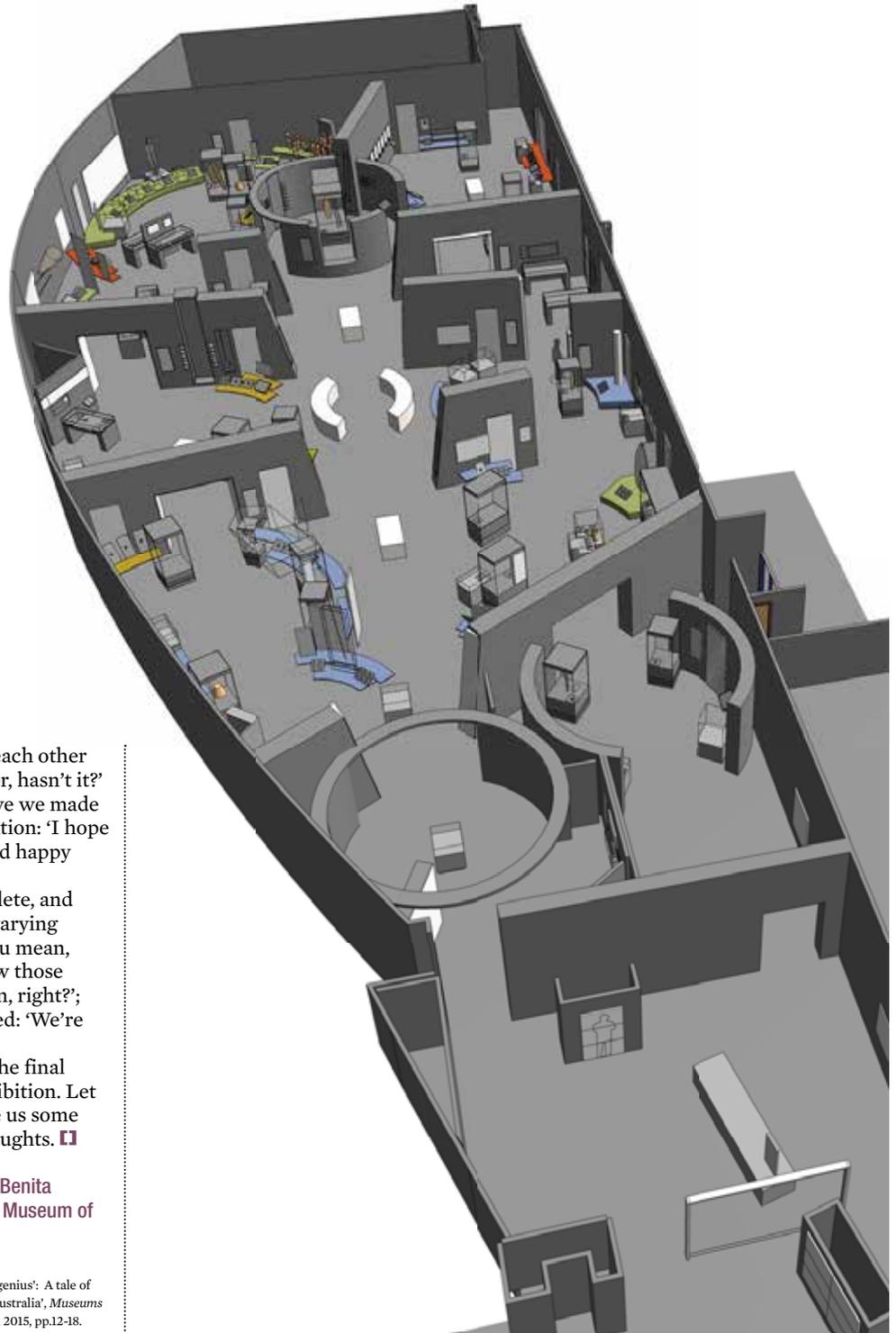
needed — people are muttering things to each other like: 'I think it'll be OK'; 'It's come together, hasn't it?' But also still-nagging queries surface: 'Have we made this clear enough?' And ripples of anticipation: 'I hope Aunty/Uncle/community will be proud and happy seeing their story.'

And yes, we're find things still not complete, and we're still having *those* conversations (in varying tones of horror and hysteria): 'What do you mean, you want another object there?'; 'You know those label trays have already gone to production, right?'; and some are aghast at new details divulged: 'We're *re-filming*?'

Let's be honest. In the end, we can't be the final judges of our work. Come and see the exhibition. Let us know your reactions. Be frank, and give us some feedback. We'd really like to hear your thoughts. []

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