

HISTORY IS AS HISTORY DOES: THE EVOLUTION OF A MISSION-DRIVEN MUSEUM

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AN IDEA TAKES SHAPE

Perhaps like mine, your mother used to say, "Handsome is as handsome does." To my southern belle mother, to whom looks count quite a bit, actions nevertheless count more – much more. I agree with my mother, and I believe that it is as true of institutions as it is of human beings. What institutions *do*, rather than what they say, what they own, or the nature of their physical edifice reflects *who* they are and, therefore, whether they are of consequence.

Had anyone looked closely when the Lower East Side Tenement Museum opened for business in 1988 (and few did), s/he would have understood that the museum intended to offer history as a resource for shaping the future. It was clear from its mission statement: "To promote tolerance and historic perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America."

What was not clear – to anyone – was just how it would do this. But it has become increasingly clear, as the museum has insisted on asking not only *What is the history?* but also *What can the history do ... to improve the world?*

Indeed, the very idea for the Tenement Museum grew not from any interest (or knowledge) in historic preservation, but rather from my experience as an activist. A question common to all the work I had previously done – in organizations working on behalf of racial and gender

equality and civil liberties – was: *How will we be one nation and at the same time appreciate, enjoy, or at least not be threatened by the often profound differences we bring to the table based on our backgrounds?* The other underlying issue was: *How will we create a truly equitable society, where we stop using gender, race, class, or other factors as excuses to treat a group of people less well and to deny them equal opportunity?*

Could a history museum prompt visitors to ask these questions? Could it interest them in finding solutions to these and related, enduring social issues? Could it accomplish these things while creating a neutral ground for dialogue?

In my earlier work, I had been distressed by the apparent acceptance by some of the leaders of my organizations that our message – whether civil liberties, civil rights, or women's rights – had limited appeal. They assumed that the general public would automatically reject the message out of ignorance, or fear, or both. Feminist leaders cautioned me to eschew any involvement with corporate women, lest they corrupt "our" message. Similarly, closet feminists who staffed organizations of women they regarded as conservative, insisted that their constituents would *never* respond to the fundamental principles espoused by the feminist movement of the 1970s. Like the leaders of so many other causes, these feminists opted to "hunker down" with the converted few, rather than risk the anticipated rejection of women whom they had designated as the Other. Rejecting this point of view, I made a point of obtaining speaking engagements before audiences ranging from corporate women to women from the heart of America's Bible Belt, and was rewarded by an eager response. Along the way, I learned that in order to be heard, I had to find a way to relate to my audiences' particular concerns, and to do so in a language with which they were comfortable. In other words, I had to be respectful.

I brought the lessons of my movement work to the Tenement Museum. Paramount among them was the belief that to realize its mission, the museum's programming had to be predicated on the idea that everyone could learn, and that everyone would be welcomed and engaged, regardless of background, in that learning process. The museum would have to afford every visitor a safe place in which to contemplate his or her opinions about the issues presented. Simply put, to prosper the museum had to respect the public – *all* the public.

From my social work training I knew that diverse people, who regard themselves as different from one another, are more likely to unite if they can find common ground. Most Americans are descendants of people who came, willingly or not, from somewhere else. We share family histories containing the immigrant and migrant experiences of dislocation, relocation, and reinvention. Deciding to build on this common experience, I introduced long-rooted Americans to their family members – at the point of their arrival, when they knew not the language, the accent, or the customs of their adopted land and before they were economically secure. I hoped that, by connecting with revered ancestors, Americans would be moved to participate in a national conversation with similarly situated, contemporary immigrants and other "outsiders." Further, I hoped that Americans might realize that contemporary "strangers" have much in common with the forebears they so admire. For those newly arrived or struggling, I hoped to offer the comfort that comes from the knowledge that, as immigrants or migrants, they were part of a vital American tradition; and that others – many others – had experienced and often overcome the same challenges facing them.

With the critical assistance of Anita Jacobson, who now serves as a trustee of the museum, I launched the Tenement Museum out of a twelve-foot by sixty-eight-foot storefront, previously occupied by a shoe shop, in the basement of 97 Orchard Street. It took five years to convince the owner to sell the tenement property.

Rejecting the rather compelling idea of using the building as a stage set for the stories of all the area's history and people, we decided to capitalize on the power of place by limiting the interpretation inside our tenement to the stories of the people actually associated with the property – as owners, shopkeepers and tenants from 1863 to 1935. Once the tenement building was secured, research began on these "alumni." Using census, voting, marriage, death, military, religious and other records, researchers identified over thirteen hundred names.

Believing that to engage and challenge the public we needed to reach their hearts, we decided to select dramatic stories, and to give the stories pride of place. That meant the artifacts would be supportive of the stories, not the other way around. We also wanted stories that together expressed the change over time in the history of the building's population, from English, Irish, and German Protestants and Catholics,

to German Jews, Eastern European Jews, Sephardic Jews, and Sicilian Catholics, with considerable overlap. We looked for stories that had clear relevance to contemporary society. It turned out there were plenty from which to choose: a woman whose husband disappeared, a family forced onto relief rolls, a sweatshop worker who succumbed to tuberculosis, and a family stung by prejudice never experienced in their homeland. The overarching theme common to all these stories was, of course, immigration, and America's changing views about it.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

The core visitor experience at the Tenement Museum is a guided tour of a nineteenth-century tenement building. Erected by a German-born tailor in 1863, this six-story, brick structure occupies a lot twenty-five feet wide by eighty-eight feet deep. There are four 325-square-foot apartments per floor. Originally constructed without indoor plumbing, ventilation, or light, it was nevertheless sufficient for the owner and his family, who moved right in. Before its condemnation as a residence in 1935, the building was home to an estimated total of seven thousand immigrants from over twenty nations.

Although more citizens trace the beginning of their families' American experience to the urban rather than the rural environment, and most descend from working-class immigrants, 97 Orchard Street is the first homestead of urban working-class and poor immigrant people to be preserved and interpreted in the United States. This, in itself, serves as a corrective in the landscape of historic sites, which have heretofore utterly failed to explore this now majority aspect of our national heritage.

Today, five carefully restored apartments set the stage on which guides introduce visitors to immigrant families who actually lived in 97 Orchard Street. In the Museum's *Getting By* tour, visitors meet the Gumpertz and Baldizzi families struggling against the ravages of the great economic depressions of the 1870s and 1930s, respectively. German-born Natalie Gumpertz is the first female household head ever presented in a National Historic Site. Similarly, through the Sicilian Baldizzi family, visitors meet illegal immigrants and explore the issue of private and public welfare and the questions that endure: Whom should society help? To what extent? On what basis?

In the *Piecing It Together* tour, visitors consider New York's garment industry – past and present. Looking at two Jewish families, in the 1880s and again at the turn of the century, visitors see the industry move from home-based "sweatshops" to factory operations. In the Levine garment shop, just a few feet away from the humming sewing machines and the steam of the presser's heavy irons, Jennie Levine gives birth to her third child, assisted by an immigrant midwife. (Jennie's fifth delivery will be in a hospital – the American way.) Entering the Rogarshevsky home in 1918, set at the moment the family is *sitting shiva* (observing the Jewish tradition of seven days of mourning), visitors come face-to-face with death itself and with the ever-present tendency to blame the victims of an epidemic. Tuberculosis, which claimed the life of the family's patriarch, Abraham, a presser in a garment factory, was then referred to as the *Jewish Disease*, yet proportionately fewer Jews had it than did members of other groups.

The stories are full of difficulties but, like our own stories, are not without their triumphs. Thus, museum docents explain not only that Natalie Gumpertz's shoemaker husband disappeared, but also that she established a dress-making business that was sufficient to build a foundation for her family's success in America. The Baldizzi apartment is interpreted on the day they were evicted, but visitors cannot miss the morning glories, planted by Mr. Baldizzi in a cheese box supplied by government relief, which spiral up the window. Years later, his daughter, Josephine, recalled the effectiveness of her father's strategies for warding off despair: "To this day, mention the Great Depression, and my first thought is morning glories."

By presenting three-dimensional stories of people who experience depression and delight, tragedy and triumph, we hope to offer our tenement's characters as historical role models. Because our lives are also multi-dimensional and complex, whether we are rich or poor, formally educated or illiterate, we can relate to 97 Orchard Street's people and learn from them.

Docent-led Tours

Fire regulations and our desire to make visitors feel welcome prompted us to make our tours docent-led. There are no ropes, no text labels, and no glass cases in the historic immigrant apartments. Docents help

preserve the historic fabric, convey the family stories, and interact with visitors. Thirty-two full-time staff and thirty part-time docents make up the museum's guide staff. Tour groups of fifteen people start every twenty minutes, seven days a week. Quality control is the obvious challenge, and as the museum has grown, so too has the process of training and evaluating tour guides. At this writing, we are overhauling the training program to further emphasize the importance of good storytelling, interaction with visitors, and inviting visitors' questions and stories. We are also instituting a more formal evaluation process. The relatively few visitor complaints about a tour guide have been met with an automatic apology and a refund. It is obviously in the museum's interest to make every tour a rewarding experience. Many have questioned the efficacy of our approach. Certainly it is expensive (though having all full-time staff conduct tours cuts down on some of the cost), and it is time consuming to train staff. But the result is a rare combination of intellectual and emotional experience for visitors, which makes the effort worthwhile.

Americans Want to Learn From Their Encounters With History

In the first survey of Americans' relationship to history, conducted in 1999, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that "Americans feel at home with the past; day to day; hour to hour, the past is present in their lives" (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998: 36). In addition, "Americans ... want to make a difference, to take responsibility for themselves and others. And so, they assemble their experiences into patterns, narratives that allow them to make sense of the past, set priorities, project what might happen next and try to shape the future" (p. 12). In other words, Americans regard the past as a usable tool. So do I.

The question is how to make the past available in such a way that it can be easily used to this end.

THE USE OF HISTORY

Last year, a management expert asked the full-time staff if anyone could state the museum's mission. To his utter amazement, twenty-five voices rose in unison to recite the museum's mission statement by heart. From its inception, the mission has been central to the museum's work. All of our programs and policies are measured against their capacity to advance

it. I have come to believe that more than anything else, the museum's success in communicating its mission and its sustained efforts to advance it both internally and externally account for its ability to attract, retain and motivate an exceptionally fine staff.

Liz Sevchenko, vice president for programs, oversees the design and implementation of the museum's public programs. Liz explained:

Being the American-born child of an immigrant father with multiple identities was, for me, a defining experience. My Dad would frequently respond to something I said or did by asking, "Are you an American?" In this way and in others, he constantly reminded me that behaviour I considered normal, was not necessarily normal in another society. This perspective was an uncomfortable one for a kid, but it inspired me to look at my own world – not just to accept it. Then too, my academic parents traveled a lot. Before we visited some person they knew in the foreign country, my mother would tell me what to expect and how to act in accordance with their customs. In time, I found I was most comfortable in situations where I was obviously different, and I looked for them.

In her college history classes Liz discovered "that things I thought fixed and permanent in the world, were not. I saw that often they'd been some other way before, and that individual people had and could again make change. I learned that race and gender were historically defined, and that depending on the time, the same person could be classified differently. I came to feel that the historical perspective could be the most powerful tool for social change."

With her sensitive antennae for differences, her preference for situations where those differences exist and are acknowledged, and her belief in the power of history, Liz had the right credentials for the hard task of inserting the concept of the *usable past* into all the museum's programs.

Learning that area immigrants were waiting up to three years for places in free English classes, the museum initiated its own, with a curriculum that incorporated the diaries, letters and memoirs of earlier immigrants. "I not only learned English," declared a graduate, "I learned I was not alone." Upon discovering that nineteenth-century immigrants were often met at Ellis Island by charity workers who provided

employment or housing advice, a student exclaimed, "No one was there for us at Kennedy Airport!" With that, the idea for an immigrant resource guide was conceived. The first edition, developed in collaboration with the New York Times Company and published in Chinese, Spanish and English, contains stories of immigrants past and present, a list of immigrant-assisting organizations, and answers to the most commonly asked questions. It was the history of immigration that furnished the newest arrivals with a fresh sense of possibility and emboldened them to act.

Teaming up with private and public schools, the museum developed a program with a simple message: *a person's worth cannot be measured by calculating his/her material wealth*. As a first step, nine-year-olds were invited to write down words they associated with the word "poor" both before and after a visit to the Tenement Museum. The number of negative associations with the word "poor" (including *mean, dangerous, dishonest*) plummeted from ninety before the visit to twenty after it. The resulting program, *Networth*, has been piloted with Lyndhurst, a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Frick Museum in New York City.

Well aware that many of the some thirty thousand school children who visit the museum annually return to homes that are less adequate than the museum's nineteenth-century tenement – or to no homes at all – the museum developed a program to teach the history of immigration, housing and nineteenth-century reform, as well as citizenship and advocacy skills. In cooperation with the city's Department of Housing and Preservation, the museum trains children to recognize violations of the early twentieth-century housing codes at the museum's tenement. Returning home, the children check their own housing and report violations to the appropriate authority.

INFUSING THE CORE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Through these projects, the museum put *promoting tolerance and historical perspective* into practice. However, the more difficult challenge of infusing the museum's core visitor experience with the *usable past* concept still loomed before us.

The museum's newest apartment, the Levine Garment Shop, gave us the opportunity we needed. Built on two years of scholarship regarding

the garment industry past and present, and supported by a Rockefeller Humanities Institute grant, the apartment interprets the story of Jennie and Harris Levine, who came from Poland in 1890 and established a sweatshop in their apartment. Factory inspector records noted that the Levines, who hired non-family members and children for sixty-hour-plus workweeks, were in compliance with the law.

From the beginning, we sought to help visitors use the Levine story as a basis for considering the present situation. What has changed? What has not? To that end, we invited representatives from all sectors of the garment industry – workers, union organizers, manufacturers, designers, government inspectors, and retailers – to participate in the planning. Steve Long, the museum's chief curator, and Pamela Keech, a consulting curator, developed the furnishing plan. "To my way of thinking," said Steve, "objects don't have any intrinsic value. What's important is the meaning and stories we impose upon them. Take the crib in the Levine apartment. It's just an ordinary old crib. But visitors are enthralled by it. Likely it slept both the two- and five-year-old Levine children. With its high sides and placement near the stove, it was the safest and warmest place. Still, it speaks reams about the family's limited choices. Sandwiched between the shop presser, with his hot steaming irons, and the finisher, who is handing the presser the clothes right above the babies' heads, the crib gets people thinking about the Levines and the situation they faced in a new way. When a group of garment workers visited, they said, 'You know, people are always saying garment workers are stupid for taking their children to the factory. But what choice did the Levines have? They needed to keep a close eye on their children, and the best place, despite its dangers, was with them.'"

Because in his own life, Steve routinely uses history to situate himself, the museum's insistence upon using history as a tool for contemporary life seemed natural. "My first question about most any new situation in which I find myself," Steve offered, "is: What's the history? By answering that, I surround myself with others who have been in this situation before and have dealt with similar issues before. In other words, it makes me feel I am not alone." Steve's father has used the Long family history in a similar way. Steve explained, "My great great grandfather, Benjamin Long, built churches and towns in Alabama and founded a coal mine." Steve notes those accomplishments but is more impressed by his great

grandfather's maverick political thinking. The next generation was not so successful, and failed to recover from arson and theft. It took the third generation to resuscitate the family; Steve's grandfather became a minister. "But he was quite studious and socially uncomfortable," explained Steve. In his own family, Steve saw that history could inform us about what we *do* and *do not* want to be and do. In this most personal of ways, history was a usable tool for the present.

The Levine tour begins with a taped recording of comments of people working in various segments of the garment industry today. A survey of visitors discovered that the resulting exhibit did indeed stimulate visitors to make comparisons between past and present. We were on our way.

Meanwhile, members of the museum's program team established ten criteria for evaluating all programs, including:

- showcase and interpret the cultural and artistic expressions of immigrants/migrants, past and present;
- raise awareness of the contemporary implications and/or counterparts of the history the museum interprets and offer visitors the means to evaluate these issues on their own;
- stimulate dialogue among people of diverse backgrounds focusing on immigration and related enduring social issues and challenging prejudices based on ethnicity, nationality, class, and race and suggest opportunities for audiences to become involved in addressing these issues;
- encourage and assist immigrants/migrants of all ages to participate fully in political, civic, and social life; collaborate with other Lower East Side community organizations, artists, and residents by integrating reflection on the past into their work.

Examination of all the museum's programs against these criteria clarified the necessity of making other changes. First, we needed to start the visitor experience in a new way. The History Channel came to the rescue, working with the museum staff to produce a film which examined how successive waves of immigrants have struggled in the context of America's ongoing debate as to who and what is American.

We also needed to reconfigure the museum's tours, making more explicit the issues we hoped visitors would recognize as still unresolved.

Cognizant of the powerful, positive impact the history of immigration has on contemporary immigrants, and seeing a benefit to staying current with the contemporary form of the historic story we tell, we determined to make a special effort to reach this audience on a sustained and systematic basis. We established an Immigrant Programs Department, the first in any historic site in the United States. The program's bilingual director, Maggie Russell-Ciardi, now oversees the *Immigrant Art Project*, which brings immigrant visual, dramatic, and digital artists and poets to the museum to produce new work – often in their first languages – about contemporary immigrant experiences. The department also runs a program for immigrants learning English, which features a series of visits to the museum's historic apartments, followed by discussions comparing the immigrant experience past and present as well as information immigrants need about housing, health care, education, and more.

THE MISSION NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED IN EVERY ASPECT OF THE MUSEUM

It is not productive to place the entire burden for realizing the museum's mission on the program side of the operation. Rather, every department of the museum needs to participate. Senior Vice President Renee Epps, who is responsible for administering the staff as well as the museum's restoration and renovation projects, understands this well. The daughter of parents who both worked in public health and welfare agencies, Renee recalled the conversations that shaped their home. "My Dad talked about his horror over the segregated swimming pools in the Kansas of his youth. My mother spoke movingly of her clients, whether they were teachers or prostitutes." As a child of a family that moved every other year until she was fourteen, Renee had more than her fair share of adjustments to make. She explained, "My experience of being the new kid on the block over and over made me very sensitive to how I was treated. I was grateful to anyone of the kids who befriended me. Often they were poor or of a different age. I realized what mattered is that they wanted to be my friend. My parents encouraged me to accept people for who they were,

rather than for any attribute unrelated to character." Renee has brought the lessons of her childhood to bear on the museum community.

Believing that history is as important as health care, the Tenement Museum provides employee coverage in both. All members of the museum's full-time staff, regardless of education, prior training or position, are an integral part of the teaching and learning process. *All* conduct public tours of the museum's land-marked tenement. *All* participate in a weekly program, which includes field trips to area organizations and historical or skills training. *All* participate actively in planning the museum goals and objectives. The topic for each year-long study program is chosen to support a new program; topics have included the history of Chinatown, American immigration, the history of the garment industry, and the history of social welfare and its relationship to immigrants past and present.

The dividends of this investment are great, not only for the staff, but for the museum. As Renee points out, "With every one of the staff conducting public tours, everyone knows why they are working here: it's to serve the public. If you never see the public, you can easily forget." Then, too, because the public really likes the tours, every staff person gets a weekly dose of public praise and appreciation. "Giving my tour is a high point of my week," said Georgina Acevedo, the museum's financial and administrative manager. Born in Puerto Rico, Georgina delights visitors with her own immigrant experience in the course of her tour.

There are additional advantages. Because they are deeply knowledgeable about the history the museum interprets and about its mission and goals, many staff are equipped to represent the museum to the public, to various specialized forums and to the press; and they do. This affords the museum a far greater reach than enjoyed by more traditionally hierarchical institutions.

Many new staff comment on how collegial the atmosphere is. While each person seems quite clear about his or her specific responsibilities, they are quick to assist a colleague. Renee's respect for all types of work is undoubtedly a factor. "I can't stand the 'it's not my job' attitude," she said. "All work is necessary to make the whole thing go. It's unacceptable to denigrate anyone's job by suggesting you are somehow above doing it."

It is obvious that by restoring and interpreting a tenement building, we advance the museum's mission. Less obvious is that the philoso-

phy defining the manner in which the restoration of 97 Orchard Street has been handled is also mission-driven. "Our project is a combination of preservation, conservation, re-creation, and renovation," explained Renee. "We've taken a layered approach. In any given space, you can see all the layers. In this way, we assert that all the years and layers are valid. We're not making decisions for visitors – for instance, about which year is the *most* important. Tolerance includes allowing people to draw their own conclusions."

The museum recently acquired an additional tenement building at 91 Orchard Street to house its offices, archives, conference rooms, and storage. The upper four floors will continue to accommodate primarily immigrant tenants in rent-stabilized and rent-controlled apartments. To allay any fears on the part of the tenants as to the intentions of its new landlord, the museum invited them to a reception. Invitations were issued in English, Chinese, and Spanish. When they arrived, the tenants were told about the museum's plans and they were given a tour of 97 Orchard Street, in whatever language they spoke. Then we began construction, focusing first on correcting decade old electrical and plumbing problems. A letter to Renee from the daughter of one of our tenants attests to the impact of following Renee's management rule – "I ask myself how would I like to be treated in the same circumstance."

My father ... came to this country with nothing but his personal belongings [and moved] into 91 Orchard Street almost 30 years ago. Like most immigrants who did not speak any English, my father worked as a chef and my mother as a seamstress. To provide for [our] family [my parents] have lived very frugally. We are grateful that we have [had] a roof over our heads. Yet for years, my family struggled with past landlords about heat, hot water, and basic repairs. When the bathroom, living room, and bedroom ceilings collapsed, the landlords showed no concern. We had no choice but to complete the repairs ourselves. I am very impressed with the compassion and understanding that you and your staff have shown to my family. My parents would like to thank Peter [Tran] for translating for them, Georgia [Acevedo] for coordinating the rent transfer, and you for answering all their questions and concerns. After so many years of struggles and frustration, my family is happy to be heard.

As Renee says, "The tenants at 91 Orchard Street *are* the present; they are our living example of what has and has not changed about the urban immigrant experience."

EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF DIVERSITY

Today, it is impossible to attend a museum conference that does not include at least one panel on "diversity," at which panelists discuss how their institutions have sought (often unsuccessfully) to fill one or more positions or board slots with a person of colour. While there is a general agreement that diversity is good, there is not a general understanding that it can take many forms or that it is *absolutely necessary* to the future of museums.

At the Tenement Museum, we believe that *only* if we achieve organization-wide diversity will we realize our institutional goals and objectives. For instance, only because we have staff fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Spanish have we been able to make important contacts with the many neighbourhood people who are fluent in those languages, but not English. Only because we have staff fluent in these languages, as well as in Vietnamese, German, Russian, Italian, and French, are we able to serve thousands of foreign tourists. Our study of the history of the garment industry was greatly enhanced by information from staff members who have worked in it. Similarly, our study of the welfare system was deepened and expanded by the perspectives shared by former recipients on our staff. Finally, each staff member brings his or her special network. The more diverse the staff, the more diverse the network to which the museum has access.

While the museum's success in diversifying staff in positions not requiring museum experience has been excellent, the most senior staff are people from European origins. This is in large measure because the children of America's working class, minority, and immigrant families are not selecting museum work as a profession. The young Asian-American woman who confided in me that her immigrant parents would not hear of her following her passion for art is not an isolated case. Imagining years of struggle and financial insecurity before her, and consequently before them, her parents urged her to take up work in the more secure areas of computers or science, business, or law. Anything except art and museums. The woman is now a banker.

We could have thrown up our hands at the situation, but we did not. Instead, supported by the Chancellor of the City University of New York, the museum collaborated with the university to found the Urban Museum Studies Program. This M.A.-granting program is the first to train the children of working class, minority, and immigrant parents to read and to interpret the urban environment. Absent a plethora of candidates from which to choose, we are trying to grow our own. This is not an overnight process; but the investment is surely worth it.

Because of its location on the edge of New York's Chinatown, the museum felt it was imperative to form relationships with Chinese-American organizations, press, and leaders. That prompted us to seek trustees with connections to this community. The three Chinese-American trustees (a union leader, an accountant with his own firm in Chinatown, and the former director of the Mayor's Office on Immigrant Affairs) who currently serve have been key to the success of the museum's relationship with the area's foreign-born community. The relationship has resulted in press coverage (there are nineteen Asian-language newspapers in New York City), community support, new visitors, and new sources of financial support. One of our trustees has raised thousands of dollars from small businesses in New York's Chinatown. Beyond that, it has proved extremely useful for the museum to have trustees with contacts with the city's various ethnic, religious, and professional networks. For instance, Irish-Americans have helped the museum identify leadership for fundraising for its Irish Family Apartment. The labour leaders on the board helped the museum locate retired garment-shop workers and organizers to be trained as museum docents – the better to draw connections between past and present. And they opened up new funding streams for the museum, making its case to the labour movement.

Another big topic in museum circles is reaching underserved and non-traditional museum audiences. At the Tenement Museum, we have taken that to mean people who have had little experience with museums and therefore don't have them on their entertainment "must see" list, and people who have had disappointing museum experiences. It means people who can't speak the language in which the museum programs, people who can't spare the money for the admission price, or people who have a physical or mental disability.

To reach out to visitors for whom the ticket price is daunting, the museum instituted a good-neighbour program, which annually provides

free tickets to hundreds of its already discounted group visitors, and half-price tickets to the third of our visitors who are students. Participants in many special programs come for free as well. To welcome non-English speakers, the museum recruited staff who could conduct group tours in German, French, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Russian. Further, it initiated a regularly scheduled Spanish-language tour, and provides pre-booked tours in over five languages. At this writing – six months after launching the Spanish-language tour, and in spite of a barrage of press coverage in English- and Spanish-speaking media, as well as targeted outreach – the response has been poor. Certain there is a market, the museum decided to try new tactics to reach it. A well-publicized tour for Latino leaders and celebrities is in the planning stage.

Although the small dimensions of 97 Orchard Street's hallways and rooms preclude opening this historic site to visitors in wheelchairs, the museum has aggressively sought to serve visitors with other disabilities. An advisory board of disability experts meets regularly. Staff has been instructed in how to serve these visitors. The museum's touch and sign-language tours are popular. Visitors unable to climb our stairs can take a guided photo-tour in our Visitor's Center, or a virtual tour on the web. The large-print materials and assisted-listening devices have made the programs accessible to many visitors who would otherwise be effectively barred from the experience. In a nation in which one in five people has some kind of disability and one in ten has a severe disability, this audience represents a large, mainly untapped and very welcome pool of visitors.

MARKETING, PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND FUNDRAISING MUST SUPPORT THE MISSION

It turns out that the museum's mission not only helps attract and sustain excellent staff and a committed board, it also gives the museum a certain edge with the press. "In every conversation with journalists," explained Katherine Snider, "we lead with the museum's mission. We talk about how much the past and present immigrant stories have in common – especially in a city which is forty percent foreign-born. It differentiates us from other institutions." An immigrant from Montreal, Katherine attributes her early love of history and diversity to her father. "We were

a family of mutts – Irish Catholic, Protestant, German Jewish, Lutheran, Catholic, and Anglo-Saxon Protestant. As a boy, my Dad's decidedly un-Irish name forced an outsider status upon him in his parochial Boston Irish Catholic neighbourhood. Montreal, with its incredible diversity, was wonderful for him. He loved the fact that our friends were so diverse and that when we described them, we simply referred to them as friends and did not characterize them by their race or ethnicity as they had in Dad's childhood neighbourhood." Katherine's paternal grandfather had set the stage for this family's tolerance, electing to sit at the Black counter in a segregated Washington, D.C. restaurant in the 1940s. "He thought it [racial segregation] was ridiculous," explained Katherine. Careful to imbue their daughter with their values, the Sniders screened schools for diversity and selected "... a Catholic girls school," recalled Katherine, "whose director was a nun who had converted and was determined to promote tolerance. She established a kosher section of the cafeteria. At every assembly, she spoke on women's rights. Then, too, my family attended an unusual church. When I was eight, the Pope ruled that girls could no longer be altar girls. Our priest would not go along. When I was twelve, the Pope visited our Church. Altar girls participated in the service".

The museum's mission is an expression of staff's internal codes. "I can't imagine," Katherine told me, "ever again working in a place which is not mission-driven. Otherwise, you have to separate your 'real' self and feelings from your work self. Here, there is a seamless relationship between my personal and professional goals." Britta Graf, executive associate to my office, agreed. In the 1970s and '80s, Britta's native Switzerland was alive with agitation for women's rights, civil rights, and a new discussion of immigration and internationalism. "My generation felt compelled to not just go along. We felt we could change the world." But while new to her generation, such feelings were not new for Britta's family. "My grandmother was an ardent pacifist who urged my brother to go to jail rather than to serve in the army." After finishing university and working in women's rights, the AIDS campaign, and a local immigrant project, Britta immigrated to New York City. From many other options, she selected the Tenement Museum, because, "I prefer to work in places which advance my point of view." Britta's abiding interest in, and respect for, people from all walks of life guarantees that people interacting with my office – whether an ambassador, philanthropist, scholar, student, or welfare

recipient – will be treated with equal courtesy and dignity. That's a great asset for any institution; it is essential for ours.

There is an inextricable connection between program, public relations, and marketing in a mission-driven institution. "Thanks to members of the Lower East Side Community Preservation Project," explained Katherine, referring to a coalition of over thirty community groups that the museum organized several years ago, "we have met new constituencies and new press." Florence Li, the director of the Chinese American Planning Council, is just one member who has brought many groups in her network to the museum; and before we had the in-house capability, Ms. Li translated our press releases into Chinese. "Of course," Katherine Snider pointed out, "the Chinese-language newspaper staff can speak and read English, but it's a sign of respect to send our release in their first language." Today, reservations for the museum's tour can be made in Spanish; the website features multi-lingual sections, and text for art installations is routinely printed in Spanish, Chinese, and English.

MOVING HISTORY FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE

In spite of the importance "ordinary" Americans have been found to attach to the past, there persists among many activists and opinion leaders the feeling I too once shared: that history is of little practical value to their work. A housing activist invited to speak to the museum staff described her organization's effort to obtain decent housing for economically disadvantaged people, and announced that she could not imagine how the museum could be helpful. Indeed, she charged that by placing issues such as housing and economic inequities in the past, the Tenement Museum could contribute to the problem. If we are to be successful, we need to find convincing ways to respond to this skepticism about history's value. It is worth trying, for as long as history is viewed as an instrument of private but not public value, it will not be afforded a central role in public life. World leaders will continue to form cabinets and other advisory councils with no reference to history. Commissions will be established to grapple with important social policies without regard to historical precedents. Decisions about our future will be made in the absence of understanding the past. This is why the Tenement Museum,

indeed any historic site or museum, simply must respond to those who see no practical use for our work.

FINDING PARTNERS FOR A NEW CONCEPT OF HISTORIC SITES

In the Tenement Museum's first decade, I was often frustrated by the lack of acceptance of the principal ideas behind it. Fundraising was unusually difficult; with over twenty years of fundraising experience, I realized that this was more daunting than previous projects. Foundations accustomed to funding traditional museums were uncomfortable with our lack of fine furnishings and art. (I couldn't bring myself to tell them our collection included a rat – an unavoidable part of tenement life.) Before turning us down, one confused foundation official said, "You're not really a museum; you're a settlement house, right?" Foundations that funded social services and/or advocacy routinely returned our proposals unopened, saying, "We don't fund museums." Unaware of the role history plays in the lives of individual Americans, these foundation executives could not imagine that a museum could offer anything to their effort to rectify the world's injustices.

Leaders in preservation derided the idea of including a tenement in the National Register, saying tenements had no redeeming architectural features; there were thousands of them; and that no one of any importance had ever lived in ours. I was dismayed by colleagues in the museum community who described their institutions in terms of square footage rather than mission, and who insisted that the conservative perspectives of their trustees and the perceived tastes and interests of their audiences were insurmountable obstacles to adopting any of the ideas or practices the Tenement Museum espoused.

Feeling isolated and in need of other museum professionals who shared my vision, I went to see the president of a leading foundation. After listening to my concept for the museum and of the difficulties I was experiencing in fundraising, the philanthropist said that the concept was so new that it was difficult for foundations to categorize and therefore easiest just to turn us down. She suggested I look to see if I could find even a handful of directors of historic sites who saw their role as I did.

My letter asking who saw history as I did was answered by directors of eight institutions: the Workhouse (England), the Gulag Museum (Russia), the Slave House (Senegal), The District Six Museum (South Africa), Memoria Abierta (Argentina), the Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh), Terezin Memorial (Czech Republic), and the National Park Service, which presented the Women's Rights National Historical Park and Manzanar (the Japanese internment camp).

Supported by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations and the Trust for Mutual Understanding, these directors travelled to the Rockefeller conference centre in Bellagio, Italy. As we introduced ourselves for the first time, we were amazed to learn that with few exceptions, we had not come from the museum profession to our task. Rather, we shared histories of social activism – against dictatorships and terrorism, against war and poverty, for women's rights and civil rights, as well as other issues. We were activists who had come to believe that our best contribution to the ideas we held dear could be made through history, and specifically, through historic sites. We accepted our roles as formers of public conscience.

After a week of intense discussion, we issued the following statement:

We are historic site museums in many different parts of the world, at many stages of development, presenting and interpreting a wide variety of historic issues, events and people. We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function. To advance this concept, we have formed an International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience to work with one another.

Our second meeting, again at Bellagio, took place in October, 2001. Working closely with the coalition members, RBH Media, a New York based media and design company, designed our website. Funded by the Open Society Institute and launched at www.sitesofconscience.org, this website links coalition member sites with human rights and social welfare organizations working on the contemporary form of the very issues raised at

our sites. Visitors are invited to learn more about both the historic issues and the contemporary situation, and to participate in groups working to address the issues.

We also designed *Dialogues for Democracy*, the second phase of the coalition's work. Different at each site, these programs are designed to make more explicit what has always been implicit in our work – namely, that embedded in the stories we tell at our historic sites are lessons so powerful that, if taken to heart, they could improve our future. Each program engages visitors in a dialogue that makes explicit connections between the history of a site and related contemporary issues.

For example, most visitors to the Gulag Museum's restoration of the site of a former Stalinist labour camp and principal place of confinement for political prisoners from the 1930s through the 1980s, are Russians. Their country is in transition from a communist, totalitarian rule to a democracy. Although the bare bones of democracy are visible – there are courts, a parliamentary system, and free elections, for example – the historic mentality of enslavement and fear still informs the populace. The Gulag Museum is dismayed that there is no broad citizen involvement in the instruments of democracy and no tradition of voluntary, private watchdog groups. The museum wants to challenge this mentality and educate a new generation of Russians to cherish and participate in democracy by building civil society.

The questions the Gulag Museum's visitors will consider include:

- Why, between 1917 and 1991, did our society allow a majority of our citizenry to become victims of government abuse?
- Could Russia return to a repressive form of government?
- What institutions or activities are fundamental to a democracy? Which does Russia have, and what are the results? Which does it lack, and what are the consequences?
- How can I take responsibility as an individual for safeguarding democracy?

The Gulag Museum's *Dialogue for Democracy* program begins with an exhibit of Soviet propaganda materials, to demonstrate how the government brainwashed people. Then, through a film, the museum reveals what was really happening: the virtual enslavement of millions of citizens

in the network of gulags to provide fuel for the industrialization of the Soviet Union and the repressive atmosphere that stifled free thought and action and incited deep fear and suspicion for generations. As most Russians do not yet understand it, the program will also clarify the difference between democracy and communism. The museum will also distribute *Power and People in Russia*, a cartoon pamphlet that offers a brief history of Russia from the tenth century onward. Using this history as a starting point, trained dialogue facilitators will engage visitors in the central questions throughout the program.

The Gulag Museum hopes to foster an engaged, educated citizenry. It seeks to fight historical amnesia, to be sure that voters do not allow power to be consolidated in a totalitarian regime again.

Each of the sites¹ has developed a similarly considered approach to the challenge of engaging its visitors in the contemporary implications of the historic issues raised at their sites. Each asks compelling questions:

- Has the welfare system gotten better or worse? (The Workhouse, England)
- What made it possible for racist violence and genocide to occur during the Holocaust, and is it possible that it could happen again today? (Terezin Memorial, Czech Republic)
- What can you do to help realize the country's funding goals? (Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh)
- How can I recognize injustice in what looks like a normal society? How can I act on it? (Memoria Abierta, Argentina)
- What forms of slavery exist today? (Slave House, Senegal)
- What will it look like when men and women are truly equal? (Women's Rights National Historical Park, U.S.A.)

HISTORIC SITES AS PLACES OF ENGAGEMENT

A new role for historic sites and museums is emerging. Every historic site representing the coalition is important, and their directors understand they are pioneering institutions. Every one of them embraces a mission that goes far beyond the simple chronicling of history. By coming together and further expanding our group, we hope to firmly and clearly

articulate this larger mission, and thereby demonstrate the benefits of letting the mission be central to every aspect of a museum's behaviour.

In the coming year, the Tenement Museum plans to launch an Institute for Directors of Historic Sites to train coalition members in the use of history as a foundation for civic engagement. Members of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience are working toward the day when historic sites offer not only a deep sense of some aspect of history, but also assist the public in drawing connections between that history and its contemporary implications. We are conceiving of historic sites as places of engagement in which visitors, motivated to participate in finding solutions to enduring social, economic, and political issues, will be directed to organizations working in the field. We are mining and illuminating the power of history in an effort to improve the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum was conceived in my imagination. But many attended its birth and still more have nurtured it to this, its fifteenth year. Dr. Gerda Lerner, founder of the modern women's history movement, first opened my eyes to the power of history as an agent for social justice. My loving husband, Herbert Teitelbaum, supported me when very few saw any merit in the idea of a Tenement Museum. I am profoundly grateful to Anita Jacobson, who worked with me in the museum's early and somewhat desperate years, and to the distinguished group of men and women who lent their prestige to such a nascent and untried institution. These include William F. Kahl, the first chair of the board, as well as the first trustees Lisa Belzberg, Paul A. Crotty, Norman K. Keller, and Isabel C. Stewart. Renee Epps, senior vice president, has led the museum's day-to-day operation and the restoration for almost a dozen years with skill and humour. Senior Vice Presidents Liz Sevchenko and Katherine Snider have served as inspired leaders. Chief Curator Steve Long has lent his passion and determination to establish the nation's first collection of the material culture of the urban working-class and poor-immigrant experience. My associate Britta Graf's superb organizational skills make the organizational wheels turn smoothly and

in a timely fashion. Preservation architects Roz Li and Judith Saltzman, of Li/Saltzman Architects, have lent their professional and personal talents to this path-breaking project. Pamela Keech's curation of the museum's historic apartments, and of the museum's annual benefits, has brought us renown. These are only some of the well over a hundred people now associated with the daily work of the Tenement Museum. Each and every one has contributed in a unique way to the museum's success. Then, too, the visitors, who come in increasing numbers year by year, have been truly instrumental in the creation of an institution that works for a broad cross section of people.

ENDNOTES

- 1 At its second meeting, the Coalition voted in the following new members: Angel Island Immigration Station; Auschwitz-Birkenau National Museum; Eleanor Roosevelt National Historical Site; Fort Sumner State Monument; Japanese American National Museum; Martin Luther King National Historic Site; Statue of Liberty National Monument/Ellis Island National Monument; National Civil Rights Museum; Thoreau Institute; Arbejdsmuseet/The Workers' Museum; and the Women's Rights National Historical Park.

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OUR STORY IN OUR WORDS: DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IN THE GLENBOW MUSEUM

Gerald T. Conaty and Beth Carter

A NEW APPROACH

On November 3, 2001, *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* opened as a permanent exhibit at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This 800 square metre (ca. 8,000 square foot) gallery presents the culture and history of the Blackfoot-speaking¹ people, as they know and understand it. It is the first significant modification to Glenbow's First Nations exhibits in over twenty-five years, and represents a change in both our curatorial knowledge and our approach to exhibit design. The project also represents an important evolutionary development in the museum's approach to community inclusion and participation in our exhibit and program-planning process. For the first time, a community was included as full partners in the development of an exhibit.

FIRST NATIONS AND MUSEUMS IN CANADA

By the late 1980s, many Canadian museums were inviting First Nations peoples to advise in the development of exhibits and programs. The Royal British Columbia Museum and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia have had long-standing programs in which West Coast First Nations carvers were brought to these institutions to demonstrate their art and help interpret their culture (Ames