

Activating the Past for Civic Action: The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience

In 1987, Nelson Mandela organized an unprecedented meeting of prominent Afrikaaners and top leaders of the African National Congress. He chose to hold it at the Slave House at Gorée Island in Senegal, where slave traders and slaves lived cheek-by-jowl in the 18th century before slaves were transported to the Americas. The meeting proved to be the turning point in the struggle against apartheid. Nelson Mandela later told French President François Mitterrand that the haunting site of the African slave trade served as one of the keys that unlocked the door to new communication, making his release and everything else possible.¹

On February 14, 2002, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum invited an unusual group to pay a visit to the recreated 1897 home and factory of Harris and Jennie Levine. Packed in an intimate circle, leaders of conflicting sectors of the garment industry today—workers and manufacturers, retailers and union organizers—listened to the story of how this Russian immigrant family slept, ate, raised a family, and turned out hundreds of dresses in a tiny 325-square-foot space. Why did these people, who spend most of their time attacking or avoiding each other, want to come together to talk here? As one participant put it, “the Museum provides a neutral environment that facilitates discussion among all of us in the garment industry. The tour is extremely balanced, making people from all sides of the issue feel included. The environment here puts everyone a little off-balance, in a way that really opens discussion. It provides a wonderful

opportunity to look at all these issues together.” After a day-long summit about what new perspective could be gained by looking at the garment industry in the past, the participants emerged with new ideas about how all sides could work together to prevent sweatshop conditions in the future.

What these two stories tell us is that historic sites have a special power to inspire and shape important new dialogues on pressing issues that divide us. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum was founded in 1988 to offer our visitors a usable past—that is, to offer history as a resource for considering and addressing issues in the present. Located in a neighborhood whose residents today hail from 36 different countries, the heart of the museum is a tenement at 97 Orchard Street where an estimated 7,000 immigrants from over 20 different nations made their homes between 1863 and 1935. Entering the carefully restored apartments of families who

actually lived in our building, you will meet America's revered immigrant ancestors before they were accepted, before they lost their heavy accents—for some, before they were considered “white.” Our families' stories touch the most pressing issues of our time, but allow visitors to consider them through the lives of individual people, and from the safe distance of people living generations ago. On one tour, we introduce two families struggling to make ends meet and be accepted in America during economic crises. You'll meet Nathalie Gumpertz, a German single mother who struggled to raise her three children as a dressmaker after her husband abandoned her after the Panic of 1873, speaking German in the face of the first English-only law to be imposed in the United States. You'll then visit the Sicilian Baldizzi family, who went to great lengths to enter the country illegally, only to be forced to go on government relief during the Depression. Another tour brings you to Harris and Jennie Levine, the Russian immigrants who opened a dressmaking shop with three employees in their tenement apartment in 1892—creating the very type of space the word “sweatshop” was, in that moment, coined to describe. After hearing of all the reforms that were introduced to eradicate the sweatshop, you'll be able to visit the Rogarshevsky family in 1918, and hear how Abraham, who worked as a presser in a new modern factory, nevertheless fell victim to tuberculosis, alternately called the “tailor's disease” or the “Jewish disease.”

Each of our families had a totally personal, idiosyncratic experience. At

the same time, these individual people, whether they knew it or not, were at the center of national debates taking place from Congress to the corner store. Their stories provide a safe yet generative place from which to explore pressing questions we're still grappling with today, including: Who is American? Who should help people with economic needs—the neighborhood, private charities, the government? What are fair labor practices? What is a sweatshop?

The Tenement Museum offer programs that invite people of all ages and backgrounds to address these questions in different ways. After hearing the stories of 97 Orchard Street's former residents, visitors can participate in public dialogues about their own families' immigration experiences and larger immigration issues. In “Tenement Inspectors,” a collaboration with New York City's Department of Housing and Preservation, we invite school children to learn about how housing standards and conditions changed over time in our building, who organized to change them, and how they can take action against violations in their own homes. The museum established an Immigrant Programs Department to serve the 37% of our neighborhood who are recent arrivals to this country and to showcase the cultural expressions of contemporary immigrant theatrical, visual, literary, and digital artists. Through this department, we host English and civics classes for new immigrants. Students learn how previous generations of immigrants faced the challenges of settling in a new country, finding a job, making a home—and how they organized to win

many of the basic rights in labor, housing, and cultural expression that all Americans now enjoy. Each class then participates in a discussion of challenges immigrants face today, and develops ideas for how to face them, leaving the program with practical information about rights and resources found in the first guide for new immigrants in New York City, published by the Museum with *The New York Times*.

To us, the connections between past and present, between history and civic participation, are absolutely natural, and quite inseparable. According to a recent national study conducted by David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, thousands of Americans feel the same.² Thelen reveals America's "participatory historical culture," documenting countless ways in which diverse Americans use the past in their everyday lives, individually and collectively. After analyzing the ways respondents turned to history to decide how to raise their children, where and with whom to live and work, and how to organize for social change, Thelen and Rosenzweig discovered that overwhelmingly "the point of engaging the past was to understand choices in the present to shape the future."³

Museum professionals increasingly got the point, and new conversations began to emerge about the identity of the museum. Lone, but significant, voices in the museum field began to talk of moving the role of the museum beyond its 19th-century identity as a keeper of relics, and even beyond its hard-fought 20th-century identity as a trusted educational institution.

More than places for passive learning, we could re-imagine museums as centers for active exchange on issues that matter outside their walls. The American Association of Museums (AAM) published *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, in which it envisioned the museum as "a center where people gather to meet and converse ... and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change."⁴ Announcing the publication of the book, AAM's president and chief executive officer, Edward Able, boldly declared that "the times demand that museums take this [civic] responsibility seriously as a core value."⁵ The Ford Foundation articulated its own vision of the civic museum space, celebrating "a growing number" of cultural institutions that "are moving to claim an active, intentional role in public dialogue around the kinds of contemporary issues that provoke multiple viewpoints." Such institutions are "an extraordinary civic force, and one whose potential remains significantly underacknowledged."⁶ To promote greater acknowledgment of this potential, the foundation spearheaded the Animating Democracy Initiative, which provided a wide range of resources to arts- and humanities-based civic dialogue projects.

Yet outside of professional conferences, our practice remained anathema. Comparing their collections of, say, Wedgwood china or paintings by Vermeer, to ours, which includes a few hundred buttons, a laundry ticket, and a mummified rat found in our ceiling,

many of our fellow museums couldn't see how we had anything in common. While some found our inclusion of contemporary immigrant stories "funky," few gave any serious thought to playing a similarly active role in their own communities. Those who did embrace the general idea of civic engagement interpreted its meaning so differently from us and from each other that no consistent set of practices was emerging to give the idea weight. On the other side, human rights and social welfare agencies often refused first invitations to visit and discuss collaborations with us, considering museums effete, precious, and a big waste of time. Accepted neither as museum nor as advocate, yet feeling strong in our identity, we searched for a crowd, and a name, to call our own.

Founding a Coalition

The Tenement Museum's president, Ruth Abram, put out a call to museums around the world describing the role she felt historic sites could play in their societies, and asking if anyone else felt the same. Eight responded: the District Six Museum (South Africa), remembering forced removal under apartheid; the Gulag Museum (Russia), the only Stalinist labor camp to be preserved in Russia; the Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh), excavating killing fields and memorializing the genocide of the Bangladeshi people during the Liberation War of 1971; the Maison Des Esclaves (Senegal), an 18th-century slave transport station; the National Park Service (USA), representing the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls and other sites;

Memoria Abierta (Argentina), commemorating the "disappeared" during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s; Terezin Memorial (Czech Republic), a labor camp used to model the "humane practices" of the Nazi regime to the Red Cross; and The Workhouse (United Kingdom), a 19th-century solution to poverty. Supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, we organized a meeting at the foundation's villa and study center in Bellagio, Italy. Realizing that our new approach to museum work required new support, we unanimously decided to form the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience.

Our founding declaration described the role we believed historic sites should play in civic life. It reads: "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 site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function."

We established strict criteria for membership in the coalition as a way of challenging ourselves, and other museums around the world, to meet our civic obligations. We defined a site of conscience as a museum that:

- interprets history through historic sites;
- engages in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function;
- shares opportunities for public

involvement in issues raised at the site.

In our view, there was nothing inherent in a site that guaranteed it would play the civic role we envisioned, and nothing that precluded it from doing so. Instead, for us a site of conscience was defined by the commitment of its stewards to play an active role in engaging its audiences in civic dialogue around contemporary issues. The most powerful site of the Atlantic slave trade cannot spontaneously inspire democratic exchange about contemporary racism, and risks lying dormant at the margins of civic life. On the other hand, there are almost no limits to the stories and themes that can inspire important dialogue. Sites representing the triumph of democracy, social justice, or human rights, such as the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, where the International Declaration of Human Rights was drafted, are as powerful as sites representing their failure, such as the Maison des Esclaves in Senegal. Sites representing the histories of human interaction with the natural world, like the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, are as important as sites interpreting humans' interaction with one another. The door was wide open to any site: the onus was on the stewards to activate these sites as democratic forums.

Giving a Site Conscience:

Moving from Temple to Forum

What's involved in establishing a site of conscience? Member sites have worked to make their sites centers for civic dialogue on three levels: opening new perspectives on civic issues by

writing new narratives; activating these new narrative perspectives by fostering civic dialogue; and building a forum by designing new spaces for dialogue to happen.

Opening new perspectives on civic issues. For many sites emerging from repressive political contexts, their first task was to write new national and community narratives, identify new actors and heroes, and expose truths that had been long denied. Rewriting these narratives is the first step in liberation; writing these narratives into the public memory by installing them in a museum is the first step in guaranteeing that liberation for future generations. The District Six Museum in South Africa tells the story of how the apartheid government razed a racially integrated neighborhood and displaced its thousands of residents. The museum's aim is "to ensure that the history and the memory of forced removals in South Africa endures and in the process will challenge all forms of social oppression." Similarly, Memoria Abierta in Argentina recovers documentation of abuses under the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s in order to "promote a social conscience that values active Memory as a means to avoid history from repeating itself." For these and other sites, simply telling the story is a radical political act, when many of the perpetrators are still in power and the line between historical artifact and legal evidence is blurred. For sites in more stable, but unfinished, democracies, rewriting narratives is an important first step in creating opportunities for broader civic engagement. The Tenement

Museum challenges the canonic story of European immigrant success and inclusion in America, often used against new immigrants from Asia or Latin America struggling today. Instead, we introduce visitors to immigrant families before they were accepted in this country, when they faced discrimination, labor abuse, and poverty.

Activating new perspectives: Dialogues for Democracy. Telling a new story is critical, but to foster new civic participation and generate new democratic processes, it is not enough. Sites of conscience are committed to making explicit connections between the past and the present, actively engaging visitors in discussing the future, and inspiring and equipping them to participate in shaping it. Together, directors designed a series of programs, called Dialogues for Democracy, to take place at each site. In developing its dialogue for democracy, each site was asked to consider:

- What is the story you want to tell?
- Why do you need to tell that story; that is, what is the contemporary political and social context in which you are working that makes this story important to tell?
- What civic questions do you want your visitors to consider during a visit to your site?
- How will you engage them in dialogue around these questions?
- What impact do you hope to have and how will you measure it?

The Workhouse in England preserves a rare surviving example of a Victorian “solution” to poverty, structures that once loomed on the outskirts of every town as threats to the

“idle and profligate.” After touring the segregated quarters and forced labor yards of the workhouse, visitors enter an exhibit titled “What Now? What Next?” that compares the classification and segregation of Britain’s poor from the Victorian era through the present. The Workhouse invites policy makers and advocates such as the international leadership of Oxfam and representatives of Britain’s welfare system, as well as their general public, to engage in dialogue around the following questions: Where would the people of the workhouse be today? How have things improved, or become worse? What solutions to poverty and its related issues may we try in the future—is there anything new that has not been tried before?

The District Six Museum covered its floor with a map of the destroyed neighborhood, and invited former residents to place their homes, streets, stores, and community spaces. This memory mapping project became the basis for land reclamation claims, and the museum organized and hosted one of the Land Courts on its site. Former residents sat in chairs directly on the map of their old neighborhood, as the court granted them, in the words of one, “our land back, our homes back, our dignity back.”⁷

The Gulag Museum hosts international conferences on human rights issues, inviting policy makers and advocates to use the story of the gulag to imagine the future of democracy in Russia.

Alarmed by the rise in racist violence in Czech Republic and the lack of public discussion around it, the Terezin Memorial designed a series of

teacher training workshops and school programs that use the perspectives of the Holocaust to foster open dialogue on the current situation. Stressing the importance of individual citizen participation, and the consequences of inaction, the workshops analyze recent patterns of discrimination and violence against Roma peoples, as well as emerging neo-Nazi movements, and ask students and educators to develop ideas for how to build a pluralistic and tolerant society for the future.

Just a few weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center, in response to the dragnet for Arab and Muslim immigrants and the national anxiety around potential terrorists in our midst, the Japanese American National Museum held a public town hall meeting, also broadcast on local radio. The museum invited a representative from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), together with former internees of Manzanar and other camps, to engage a live and call-in audience in a discussion of maintaining democracy and national security.

Building a forum: designing a space for dialogue. What does a site of conscience—a forum—museum—look like? Many sites have realized that a commitment to serving as a forum for civic dialogue requires a new physical design. Traditional museum design has focused on passive learning, guiding visitors along a linear path of panels or cases in which the interaction is solely between the visitor and the information presented. But what if the mission of the museum is to engage visitors with each other?

Several sites are struggling with how to build dialogue into their designs. In the architectural plans for its new National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, the Japanese American National Museum is incorporating both a “forum,” a 200-seat auditorium that “serves as the centerpiece for the National Center’s Commitment to discourse, dialogue, and community engagement,” as well as a “democracy lab” designed for “group discussions, polls of current national and local issues, and more.”⁸ *Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site*, dedicated to preserving sites related to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that brought an end to segregation in public education, is building a new visitor center in the former Monroe elementary school, a segregated school for African Americans in Topeka, Kansas. The visitor center was designed under an overarching concept of “discovery and discourse,” and “will include spaces for individual reflection and group discussion.”⁹

While these sites model their democratic forums after spaces of official public deliberation, such as the town hall or the legislature, others recreate the more intimate, spontaneous, and marginal places where important civic engagement happens. The Tenement Museum’s dialogue space is called “the kitchen”; the room’s soft lighting, kitchen tables, and mismatched chairs welcome visitors to participate in an informal dialogue that begins with personal experiences—those histories that are told and retold in the kitchen—and uses them as the starting point for a discus-

sion of larger issues around immigration. The Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh created a mobile museum, a sort of democratic forum on wheels, that travels to schools around the country. According to Director Akku Chowdhury, the space of the Bangladeshi classroom remains undemocratic: desks are arranged in rows; students must stand up to speak and must speak directly to the teacher; free exchange and inquiry are not encouraged. Rather than conduct its programs in the classroom spaces, Liberation War Museum staff park the bus on school grounds and invite students to board. In the intimate space of the bus, surrounded by exhibits on the genocide of Bengali people and their struggles for democracy, the rules and culture of the classroom don't apply. Students sit in a circle and engage in open discussions around questions including Who is Bangladeshi? Which of the country's founding ideals has been realized? Which have not? Where do you see evidence of that? Why do you think this is the case? What can I do to help realize them?

Defining democracy: truth-seeking vs. dialogue. The coalition itself has provided a spirited forum in which to debate how historic sites can serve as democratic institutions and demonstrate democratic processes. At the heart is a debate over what democracy looks like, and what is the most effective path to reaching it. Coalition members come from a wide variety of political contexts. All sites interpret experiences and events that relate to pressing issues of today, but some, like Memoria Abierta, are living in the

immediate aftermath of these events, while others, like the 18th-century Slave House in Senegal, are looking back on a longer legacy. This difference in distance informs how different members view the role of their site in their society, what they view as the most urgent democratic project, and how they seek to engage their audiences.

Some sites, particularly those representing government agencies, such as the U.S. National Park Service, or larger institutions, such as the British National Trust, were concerned that being a site of conscience was too "political." By "political," they meant explicitly advocating a specific position on a contemporary issue, such as who should receive public assistance and for how long, or who should be allowed to immigrate to the United States. Instead, these members resolved to serve as open forums for dialogue on all sides of contemporary debates, taking care to pose questions with a variety of possible answers. For many, that meant including multiple perspectives in their narratives, as in the Tenement Museum's audio introduction to its "sweatshop" exhibit, featuring the voices of workers, contractors, designers, and union organizers. For others, it meant inviting participants from a variety of perspectives to exchange experiences at the site, such as when the Gulag Museum brought together former prisoners and former guards to meet and tell their stories, or when the Japanese American National Museum invited both an INS agent and a former internee to speak on racial profiling.

For other sites, multiple perspec-

tives smacked of moral relativism. Directors of the District Six Museum, Memoria Abierta, and the Liberation War Museum are just a few of the members based in human rights movements. Their projects are an integral part of larger truth-seeking efforts, related to proving that crimes against humanity occurred, bringing perpetrators to justice, and establishing truth commissions. These sites' specific goal within the larger human rights effort is to develop a public consciousness or acceptance of certain facts as indisputable. Exposing the total abrogation of democracy and developing a strong public memory of this abrogation is their highest priority in their effort to build a democratic culture. These sites leave the truths of human rights violations unquestioned, but offer the future of their countries as an open debate, inviting visitors to consider a variety of ways they can participate in shaping it. The District Six Museum asks children of displaced families to return to District Six and imagine the future of the neighborhood. It asks, What are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen? How does my city work? How can I make my city work for me? After telling the story of how torture and abuse occurred under the noses of Argentine people for over a decade,

Memoria Abierta asks, When I see an injustice happening, does it involve me? Am I responsible or implicated?

Spreading the Word

The coalition's greatest ambition is to put itself out of business. We dream of the day when citizens all over the world, faced with a significant social issue, will automatically turn to historic sites to consider and address it. Just as Mandela used the Slave House in Senegal to change race relations in South Africa for decades to come, political leaders can find new incubators of peace on every continent. We dream of the day when historic sites will be seen as some of the most important training grounds for democratic societies, places where young people learn to be active citizens. We hope that historic sites interpreting a single moment or event will be continually renewed by citizens challenging the latest legacy of what happened there as it takes new form in their societies. In short, we dream of the day when the role for historic sites that the coalition envisions is so taken for granted that it needs no name or special group to support it. In the meantime, with great enthusiasm, we challenge ourselves to redefine what historic sites are here to do.

For more information on the Coalition and its member sites, or to download an application, go to <http://www.sitesofconscience.org>.

Endnotes

1. Lawrence Weschler, *Calamities of Exile: Three Nonfiction Novellas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2. David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
3. David Thelen, "Afterthoughts: David Thelen." Web site: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/survey/afterdave.html>.
4. American Association of Museums, *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*

- (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2002).
5. Press release, "American Associations of Museums Announces the Publication of *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*," April 25, 2002.
 6. Barbara Schaeffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue* (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 1999).
 7. Audio recording of Land Court proceedings, District Six Museum.
 8. Brochure, National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, 2002.
 9. Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site application for membership in the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, 2001.

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