

Harnessing the Power of History

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International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience

In December 1999, after a week of intense discussion at Bellagio, the Rockefeller Foundation's conference center in Italy, leaders of nine historic sites: the Workhouse (England); the Gulag Museum (Russia); the Slave House (Senegal); District Six Museum (South Africa); the Project To Remember (Argentina); the Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh); Terezin (Czech Republic); National Park Service- Sites include the Women's Rights Historic District; Manzanar (the Japanese internment camp), and the Underground Railroad-, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum signed and 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.

The idea for the Coalition grew from my frustration. For the past decade, as the founder and President of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, I had been working to make the history of the Museum's site (a 19th century tenement building, the first homestead of urban, working class and poor immigrant people to be preserved and interpreted in the United States), available as a tool for contemplating and addressing contemporary issues related to those broached by the Museum's historic interpretations.

I was having a hard time. Fundraising was proving unusually difficult as was finding like minded historic sites. While anyone who must raise funds to sustain a museum will tell you that it is difficult, I, who came to the task with over twenty years of fundraising experience, realized that this was more daunting than other projects. The reason soon became clear. Foundations accustomed to funding traditional museums, could not categorize the Tenement Museum. "Are you a settlement house?" asked one potential donor? While I was actually delighted that the Tenement Museum might be confused with a social service for the immigrant poor, I knew that the question meant the foundation would not fund the Tenement Museum. Foundations that funded social service and/or advocacy, routinely rejected our proposals saying, "We don't fund museums."

In the Museum community, I was distressed by the number of directors and staff who described their institutions in terms of square footage rather than mission. Often, after listening to my description of the Tenement Museum's programs and its plans to actively use history, these professionals pointed to their lack of space or funds or imagined board resistance as the reasons they would continue "business as usual." I was, quite frankly, feeling isolated and in need of other museum professionals who shared my vision when a conversation with the President of the Ford Foundation decided me to focus on finding them. After listening to my concept for the Museum and of the difficulties I was experiencing in fundraising, President Beresford said that it might be useful to demonstrate that this was the new direction for museums by finding even a handful of directors who saw it the same way. "Perhaps," she said, "you should look outside America." And so I did.

Memory Activists

In Bellagio, as the directors of the nine historic sites 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, ... and more. We viscerally understood Archbishop Olivier de Berranger’s ringing declaration of the necessity of history: “Conscience is formed by memory; and no society can live in peace with itself on the basis of a false or repressed past, any more than an individual can.” (The New York Times, October, 1997) 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. It was for this reason, I am certain, that rather than resistance, there was general acceptance of the ideas I set forth in my opening remarks.

“The historian, Arthur Bestor,” I told my new colleagues, “ said, ‘Deprive me of my [historical] consciousness, and in the most literal sense, I do not know who I am.’ (Bestor,1966:8) We are gathered here to deepen and expand our efforts so that citizens the world over may know who they are, where they are going and what steps they must take to get there. This is, after all, the implicit power of history. We are here to make it explicit.” Looking forward to the coming week together, I promised we would have opportunities to suggest ways in which each of our sites could make more explicit what has always been implicit in our work... namely, that embedded in the stories we at our historic sites are lessons sufficiently powerful, that if taken to heart, could improve our future.

If through the work of the Gulag Museum and Project To Remember, we clearly perceive the pattern of authoritarianism, totalitarianism and political repression, we can measure that pattern against the shape of contemporary developments. And, if we perceive a match, we can demand an alteration. If the Women’s Rights National Historic Park assists us in identifying the tracks of gender discrimination, we will be able to monitor its movement in our countries, our communities, and in our homes – and finally banish it. If through the Workhouse, we understand how a society has confronted the challenges posed by the poorest of its population, we can better judge whether our current programs are only a repetition of already failed policies or whether they represent new insight and understanding --- that we may build a more equitable society. If through the Liberation War Museum, we comprehend exactly what ignited the fire, which first fueled Bangladesh citizens’ demand for a democratic form of government, we can rekindle this insistence on freedom in each generation – not only in Bangladesh, but also in all countries. If through District Six, we learn how to overcome official resistance to restoring people to a memory that they may be made whole, we can do that in every community, which has been physically or emotionally obliterated. If through the Slave House, we understand the circumstances and the thought process that can lead one human being to regard another human being as property, we can fight against the factors that encourage this insidious view. If through the Terezin Memorial, we uncover the details concerning how a government, threatened by the very idea of a museum on the topic of this holocaust, tried to block its birth and stunt its growth, we can assist one another should the story we tell result in government sanctions against us”

History As Central to Civic Society

I plan to ask my colleagues in the Coalition if they always regarded the past as important, or whether, like me, they once saw it as interesting, but peripheral to the main issues of our day and to the task at hand. Always preferring histories and biographies as reading material, I nevertheless viewed it as entertainment. Certainly I could not imagine I would ever need it to achieve my ends. And then, one day, I changed my mind.

Needing the Past to Shape the Future

In the 1970's, I was organizing a *National Women's Agenda*, a political platform designed to answer the age old question: What do women want? Things had gone well. Leaders of wildly diverse American national women's organizations had actively participated in the formation of the *Agenda's* platform. But suddenly it was stuck. Casting about for a solution, I telephoned Gerda Lerner, then Chair of the Women's Studies Department at Sarah Lawrence College and founder of the modern women's history movement. Introducing myself, I explained my dilemma and asked if I could have an historical consultation. After what felt to me to be an achingly long pause, Dr. Lerner said, "No one has ever asked me, an historian, to help develop strategy for the present." A few days later, Lerner treated me to a personal lecture on the history of women's organizing efforts. Learning that every successful national effort organized by women had been organized from the grassroots up, I realized I had been organizing from the top down. I restructured the campaign. In 1975 on the steps of the U.S Capital, women from over 100 national women's organizations announced the formation of a National Women Agenda. History had supplied a strategy.

Later in that decade, my need for history was again confirmed during a lecture series for American public school superintendents in which I participated. Almost exclusively male and a majority former football coaches, the superintendents knew only that I was the first women ever invited to lecture in this series and that I was speaking on the history of women in America. At stop after stop on a four-region tour, I met extraordinary hostility. At the first stop, I arrived to find the assembled superintendents leaving for the evening. "We are going dancing," said one man, "but you can't come." "Why?" I asked incredulous. "Because you are a feminist," he declared, "and everyone knows, feminists don't dance." When I rose to speak the next day, the moderator introduced me by telling a "dirty" joke. Five minutes later, much to the delight of the superintendents, he placed a ringing alarm clock at my ear and threw a book down over my notes. At other stops, men rose shaking out of the audience to throw spitballs and to scream, "What does your husband think of your running around like this? Go back to your husband and children." By the end of the third lecture, on the plane to the last, I broke down into tears. I felt I could not continue. In an effort to regain control of my emotions, I decided to try to read. I pulled a book out of my satchel. The Grimke Sisters of South Carolina, by the same Gerda Lerner who had so affected my understanding of history's potential, described the travails of these brave white abolitionists. As they spoke against slavery, mobs burned their building. "No one has burned my building," I said to myself. "I can go on." And I did. History had offered role models and the courage I needed to continue. Many times since, history has afforded me comfort, inspiration, perspective and role models where none seemed to be. I have come to view history as a powerful tool for the living.

At Home With The Past

As it turns out, many Americans agree with me. In the first survey of Americans' relationship to history, conducted in 1999 and described in their book, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found "Americans feel at home with the past; day to day; hour to hour, the past is present in their lives. Encountering the past, examining it, living and reliving it, they root themselves in families – biological or constructed – and root their families in the world. (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998: 36) ...Americans said they 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. By using these narratives to mark change and continuity, they chart the course of their lives." (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998: 12) In other words, Americans regard the past as a usable tool.

During the Coalition's first meeting, I learned that this belief in the power of history extended far beyond the boundaries of my country. Members of the Coalition are using history in unique ways. The Workhouse is planning a presentation of a contemporary "bed sit" or shelter beside its 19th century re-creation. The Gulag Museum works with Memorial, Russia's leading human rights group, to host conferences on human rights violations and to document past abuses. The District Six Museum served as the site for South Africa's Land Reclamation Court and now runs a shelter for street children. In a country where many perpetrators of "crimes against humanity," remain free and even in power, Project To Remember is archiving documentation of the atrocities involving thousands of "disappeared ones." The Liberation War Museum is conducting forensic investigation of the Killing Fields to bring the responsible parties before an international tribunal. The Women's Rights Historic Districts hosts international conferences on contemporary women's rights.

History As Peripheral

Various historians have written movingly and convincingly about the necessity of history. "Planning for the future without a sense of the past," wrote Daniel Boorstein, "is like trying to plant cut flowers." In his extraordinary book, The Historians' Craft, published after he was murdered by Nazis, French historian Mark Bloch wrote, "Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past." (Bloch, 1953:43)

At the same time, there persists among many activists and opinion leaders the feeling I once had: that history is of little practical value to their work. Explaining why a certain cultural institution managed to flourish, a New York City leader said, "It has not allowed itself to become a museum," – meaning, it has not allowed itself to be sterile. In America, to dismiss an idea as unimportant or irrelevant, one says simply, "It's history." Trying to explain why the United States Government was cutting funding for the arts and humanities, a foundation executive said, "I don't think the arts are seen as integral to human existence." (Dobrzynski, NY Times, August 2, 1999: E-1) Recently, as part of the Tenement Museum's ongoing effort to get to know and reach out to leaders in all aspects of our local community, we invited a housing activist to address the staff. After describing her organization's effort to obtain decent housing for economically disadvantaged people, she announced that she could not imagine how the Museum could be helpful. Indeed, she suggested that by presenting historically poor people's stories, the Tenement Museum could be aiding and abetting the enemy by placing issues such as housing and economic inequities in the past. 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 value but not public value, it will not be afforded a 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 involving those same policies. Decisions about our future will be made in the absence of understanding the past. This is why neither the Tenement Museum or any historic site or museum can afford not to respond to those who see no practical use for their work.

As it turned out, just as the housing advocate was expressing her skepticism about the Museum's value for her work, the Museum's educational staff was developing *Tenement Inspectors*. The project emanated from staff's understanding that many children visiting the Tenement Museum live in circumstances that rival the difficult conditions portrayed in the Museum's historic apartments. Lack of plumbing, heat and ventilation and the battle against rats are not "history" to these children and their families. Because the Tenement Museum views history as a tool for the living, we asked, "How can the history of our site be used as a vehicle for improving the housing conditions in which so many of our students live?" In *Tenement Inspectors*, children will be trained at the Museum to identify violations of the 1901, 1910 and 1934 housing laws as well as those governing the present. Then, after returning home, they will inspect

their own premises. With the support of the City's Housing and Preservation Department (the historic descendants of the Tenement Inspectors), the children will be helped to alert the appropriate authorities to the violations they uncover. Here, we are using the history of housing and housing reform, so integral to the Tenement Museum's site and story, not only to teach this history, but also to train a new generation of public advocates, and to communicate the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. But the Museum's visitor from the housing advocacy group could not imagine a museum would undertake such a program, because it did not comport with her understanding of the role of a history museum, or historic site. That is because most of them continue to fail to help the public use their information to address personal and community problems. And worse, far too many don't even tell the truth.

Telling the Truth

Concealment of the historical truth is a crime against the people.

General Petro G. Grigorenk, in a Samizdat Letter to a History Journal, 1975. (Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 1995:11)

Just as the public yearns for history, it yearns for truth. In Lying, Sissela Bok articulated a common wisdom, " ... [T]rust in some degree of veracity functions as a foundation of relations among human beings; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse." (Bok, 1979:33)

If you believe, as I do, that history holds a fundamental key to our present and future, and if you also believe that lying undermines the very fabric of a civil society, then you fully comprehend how very important it is to get that history right. One place we should certainly be getting it right is in our nation's schools. But in America and, as I understand from my colleagues, in other parts of the world too, we aren't. In Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, James W. Loewen documents a web of misinformation, omissions and lies in some of the nation's most popular and widely used history textbooks. No wonder, as the Rozensweig/Thelan survey found, Americans have rejected history as it is taught in high school as "dull" and "irrelevant." They felt this "standard issue history" with its "patriotic story of the American nation, denied them credit for their critical abilities and was insulting" to their sense of themselves as "critical thinkers." (Rozensweig & Thelen, 1998:179)

But since the public regards history as critical to its well-being, it is determined to get it. Spurning school as an unreliable source, Americans turn elsewhere. More than one-third of the survey respondents had investigated the history of their family in the previous year; and two-fifths had worked on a hobby or collection related to the past. And in large numbers, they turn to historic sites and museums, which they regard as "the most trustworthy sources of historical information." More than half the survey respondents had visited a museum or historic site during the previous year. "They trusted history museums," reported Rozensweig and Thelan, "as much as they trusted their grandmothers." (Rozensweig & Thelen, 1998: 12)

The American public trusts historic sites; and time and again, historic sites have betrayed that trust. The terrible truth is that the history supplied in far too many historic sites is as lacking in depth, perspective, and integrity and is as dismissive of the public's intelligence as those textbooks the public has rejected. Crisscrossing the country, visiting historic sites big and small, James W. Loewen was forced to conclude, "Guides almost always avoid negative or controversial facts, and most monuments, markers and historic sites omit any blemishes that might taint the heroes they commemorate, making them larger and less interesting than life. ... America has ended up with a landscape of denial." (Loewen, Lies Across America, 1999:19)

But the public remains faithful to the sites, impugning them with veracity withheld from other sources. Why? The difference is that in those sites and museums there are artifacts, and, according to the Rosenzweig/Thelan survey, the public regards those artifacts as the “real” stuff of the past. But, as any museum professional knows, those artifacts can be used to support a lie. One example cited by Loewen involves the aircraft carrier, USS *Intrepid*. Displayed at dock by the Sea-Air Space Museum, it is described as “the battle-scarred veteran of World War II.” Visitors assume they are experiencing the environment known to thousands of WW II sailors. But, because the ship was completely overhauled for service in Vietnam, they are not. The ship’s service in Vietnam, for which it won citations, is not mentioned because, according to Loewen, the Navy declared the information too political. (Loewen, Lies Across America, 1999: 404-405)

When historic sites get history wrong, they trivialize history, mislead the public and render history peripheral. According to the Rosenzweig/Thelan survey, Americans yearn for history that actively assists them in making connections between the past and the present, a history that, “can be used to answer pressing current-day questions about relationships, identity, immortality and agency.” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998:178) Yet, historic sites, which render this assistance, are rare. Worse, very few historic sites have even recognized there is a problem, much less moved to address it.

Addressing the Problem

In founding the Tenement Museum, I decided to begin with what we have in common. Most Americans are descendants of people who came – willingly or no – from somewhere else. We share family histories containing the experience of dislocation, relocation, and reinvention. I decided to introduce long rooted Americans to their family members before they became acceptable – at the point of their first arrival, when they knew not the language or the customs of their adopted land. I hoped that through this confrontation with revered ancestors, Americans could be moved to participate in a national conversation on similarly situated contemporary immigrants. I further hoped that Americans might realize that those strangers have more in common than not with the forebears they so admire. For those newly arrived, I hoped to offer the comfort, which comes from the knowledge that as immigrants, they are part of a vital American tradition.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

The core visitor experience at the Tenement Museum is a guided tour of a 19th century tenement building. Erected by a German born tailor in 1863, this five-story brick structure occupies a lot 25ft wide x 87 ft deep. There are four 320-sq. ft. 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 residence in 1935, the building was home to an estimated 7,000 immigrants from over twenty nations; the Museum has identified over 1,300. 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.

Sensitive Subject Matter

Today, four carefully restored apartments set the stage on which guides introduce visitors to immigrant families, who actually lived in 97 Orchard Street 1863 –1935. The stories were selected for their capacity to demonstrate the chronological span of 97 Orchard Street, and the tenants’ national and religious diversity. Another consideration was the stories’ emotional impact and their ability to raise contemporary

issues. Thus, in meeting the German born Natalie Gumpertz in the 1870's, visitors discover the first female-headed household ever presented in a National Historic Site. Encountering the Sicilian Baldizzi family in the 1930's, visitors confront the first family on welfare and the first illegal immigrants ever interpreted in an American historic house. Entering the Rogarshevsky home in 1918, visitors come face to face with death itself and with the ever-present tendency to blame the victim of an epidemic for the epidemic. For at the time, TB, which claimed the life of the family's patriarch, was referred to as the *Jewish Disease*, though proportionately fewer Jews had it than did members of other groups.

To balance the presentations, Museum docents explain not only that Natalie Gumpertz's shoemaker husband disappeared, but also that she established a dress making business. Although the Baldizzi apartment is set on the day they were evicted, Morning Glories planted in a cheese box supplied by welfare, spiral up the window, signaling the family's intent to claim its right to the "pursuit of happiness." By presenting three-dimensional stories, of people who experience despair and delight, tragedy and triumph, we offer our tenement's characters as historical role models. Because our lives are also multi-dimensional and complex, we can relate to 97 Orchard Street's people ... and learn from them.

Many museum professionals have asked "how do you get away with it?," meaning - How has the Tenement Museum managed to take on so called "sensitive" subjects without bringing down the wrath of God - much less the public upon its head?. There is, in the museum profession, a certain fear of the public. At its base is the mistaken idea that the public cannot bear the truth. But, the results of the Rosenzweig/Thelan survey and our own experience at the Tenement Museum says otherwise. The public is clamoring for the truth.

Battles Over Interpretation

There have been some skirmishes surrounding interpretation at the Tenement Museum. One involves whose history the Tenement Museum should tell. Most Americans familiar with the Lower East Side are under the misimpression that until very recently, it had always been exclusively Jewish. For American Jews, the Lower East Side is something of a sacred site, and a place of pilgrimage. Members of Bar and Bat mitzvah classes and synagogues nationwide visit the Tenement Museum to "see" their ancestors' first American homestead. Many have been surprised and some have been distressed to find the Museum's interpretation includes non-Jews.

The majority of the known residents of 97 Orchard Street appear to have been Jewish. At the same time, reflecting the patterns of immigration to the neighborhood, inhabitants included substantial numbers of German, Irish and then Italian residents. The Museum has elected to tell the entire story.

This decision prompted a leader of the local Jewish community council to write that he would be happy to assist the Tenement Museum "if and when you make a decision to commit the necessary resources to chronicle the predominant 'culture' of the Lower East Side - the Orthodox Jewish community and its myriad of synagogues, *shtiebels*, charitable and 'self help' organizations. "

Another dispute involved the depiction of the tenement's landlords. As everyone who has ever seen a Jacob Riis photograph "knows," hard working, decent tenement residents were exploited by greedy and uncaring landlords. But, as our research progressed, a more complex story emerged. The landlords, it turned out, were immigrants themselves. Our first landlord, Lucas Glockner, a German born tailor, lived in the building as did his bookbinder son, daughter in law and grandchild. The Court records which first revealed Natalie Gumpertz' story, also recorded her landlord's testimony in support of her claim. When the death of her husband left Fannie Rogarshevsky, who spoke no English, high and dry, her landlord saved the day by hiring her as the building's janitor and furnishing her a rent free apartment.

Many scholars and members of the public expected the Tenement Museum to corroborate their understanding of a tenement as a slum. But, as we peeled back the history and the wallpaper of our tenement, a more complex picture emerged. Although the building's early tenants, highly skilled crafts people, and the landlord himself, clearly had other choices, they chose to live at 97 Orchard Street. And indeed, some of the reasons for their decision are now clear. For example, although not required by law, 97's builder installed the most up-to-date outhouses – connected to a sewer system.

Associating tenements with poverty, many visitors expect to see dirty, unaesthetic apartments. Again, using memoirs of former residents as well as information scrapped by conservators from walls and floors, we have had to conclude differently. Keeping persons and apartments clean was a battle, but it was one in which tenement dwellers were constantly engaged. “My mother, “ explained Josephine Baldizzi, “was fastidious, and even for eviction, should would never have packed haphazardly. She loved to shine her pots; they called her ‘shine-em-up-Sadie.’” Furthermore, lovely decorative touches abound in the tenement – layers of patterned wallpaper, faux paint finishes and even a gold leafed chair rail. A piano stool found in an abandoned apartment and the Confino family’s memory of the precious victrola provides glimpses of lives that included, dare I say it? Fun!.

We have stood our ground against those who insisted that we tell the story as an exclusively Jewish one, featuring good, immigrant tenants and evil American born landlords; and presenting lives of unrelieved drudgery in uniformly dreadful physical conditions exacerbated by tenants’ inability or disinterest in aesthetics. We stood on the facts. And we could not be moved.

Using Mistakes as a Teaching Tool

Sometimes, however, we have gotten the facts wrong. A prime example involves an inventory. Written in pencil on a door jam in one of the tenement apartments, the inventory lists 100 shirts, 43 pants, 100 shirts, etc. Upon seeing the inventory, a garment union representative said, “No one tailor could put out that volume; this must have been a sweatshop.” After a full year of sharing this assumption with visitors, we were thrown off balance when a child pointed out an entry at the bottom of the list: 22 *shoes*. Tailors don’t make shoes; we had assumed wrong. Today, we tell visitors the story of how we got it wrong. For reasons I have never understood, many historic sites are reluctant to share their “mistakes” with the public. Yet, if there is anything the public needs and deserves to know, it is that history is a continual process of discovery and correction.

The Benefits of Good History

What do we gain by insisting on calling and interpreting the facts as we see them? For starters, it helps us avoid becoming part of the problem of the erosion of trust that is so critical to the maintenance of a civil society. . In [Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life](#), Sissela Bok pointed out, “Those who learn they have been lied to in an important matter ... are resentful, disappointed and suspicious. They see that they were manipulated, that the deceit made them unable to make choices for themselves according to the most adequate information available, unable to act as they would have wanted to act had they known all along.” In 1964, 78 percent of the respondents to a Gallup poll said they could “trust Washington to do what is right all or most of the time.” By 1994, the figure had plummeted to 19 percent. (Bok, 1979: 21-22) Similar declines in the public’s trust toward doctors, lawyers and major companies in the United States and elsewhere have also been documented. It is unconscionable for historic sites, perhaps the last of our public institutions to enjoy some modicum of confidence, to contribute to the decline in the people’s trust.

By insisting on truth, we help illuminate some important concepts, which, if taken to heart, could inform and improve lives. For instance, in offering a nuanced picture of the landlord, we offer an alternative

model of behavior for contemporary landlords – one in which they and their tenants are mutually dependent. It follows that a mutually supportive rather than antagonistic relationship makes the most sense. Also, our interpretation illuminates immigrant entrepreneurship. Then and now, tenement landlords were immigrants, seeking a foothold in the economic life of New York City. By admitting our mistakes, such as our misreading of the inventory, we invite the public to assist us. After all, it was not a scholar, but a child who challenged our interpretation of the writing on the wall. That suggests everyone is invited to regard history with skepticism because it is an ongoing process of discovery and (hopefully) correction. The bottom line message is that there is no shame in getting it wrong; but rather in refusing to correct what is known to be wrong. The Museum’s decision to tell Jewish and non-Jewish stories may help people realize that sharing sacred space need not diminish its sacredness to any particular group. Rather, the shared experience – then and now – could be used as a point of commonality and a foundation for other joint ventures. In the urban environment, where all space must be shared, examples of earlier sharing can serve as a useful guide. Finally, by insisting that its interpretation rest solely on its research of the tenement’s physical and social history, the Museum unexpectedly refuted several common fallacies about poor people as unsanitary and without aesthetic sensibilities.

Putting History To Work

Historic sites compound the damage they are doing by concealment, obfuscation, simplification, and misrepresentation by ignoring the public’s clarion call for *usable past*. With few exceptions, historic sites fail to provide the past in such a way that it can be used by the public to make informed choices for themselves. Yet, the process of becoming informed and making choices based on that information lies at the very heart of civil society.

Of late, several American foundations have called for the revitalization of our democratic processes, principles and institutions. These foundations are seeking to fund efforts to demonstrate the relevance of the arts and humanities to the task of fostering a more civil society. Were historic sites to respond to this challenge, they would stop dishing out skewed and dishonest portrayals of people and events; and they would provide good history in a form which allowed and encouraged its transformation into a tool for contemporary living. This is exactly what we are attempting at the Tenement Museum.

Using History to Teach English, Welcome, Acculturate and Empower Immigrants

Learning that area immigrants wait up to three years for places in free English classes, the Museum initiated its own. Our curriculum utilizes the diaries, letters and memoirs of earlier immigrants. “I not only learned English,” said a recent graduate, “I learned I was not alone.” This year, we will explore the state of immigrant services in New York, using the information to design a more comprehensive approach. . During a segment of the English classes, students learned that 19th century immigrants were often met at Ellis Island by charity workers who provided employment or housing advice. “No one was there for us at Kennedy Airport!” exclaimed a participant. With that, the idea for the *Immigrant Resource Guide* was conceived. To be published in several languages, the *Guide* will contain stories of immigrants past and present, a list of immigrant assisting organizations, and answers to the most commonly, asked questions. Thousands of copies will be distributed free to immigrants throughout the New York City. As if responding to Rosenzweig and Thelan’s promise that “history can make people aware of possibilities for transforming the status quo,” this history has furnished a new sense of possibility and entitlement.

Using History and Historic Preservation To Establish Common Ground

To test whether the experience of immigration and migration was sufficiently powerful to serve as the basis for establishing a sense of “common ground,” the Museum launched *Kitchen Conversations*. Area Residents from over twenty different nations and a wide array of ages, races, and educational backgrounds listened intently as each told his/her individual which scholars placed in historical

perspective. Having originally assumed they would have little in common, participants marveled at discovering so many similarities with one another and with the stories of immigrants past.

The success of the *Kitchen Conversations* led staff to wonder whether a diverse community could be united through the process of preserving and interpreting a historic site. At that moment, we were approached by the largely African-American congregation of the 175 year old St. Augustine's Episcopal Church. Explaining that the Church contains the only slave gallery (holding pen) known to exist in a New York City Church, they asked the Museum to assist in preserving and interpreting this Slave Gallery. In February 2000, with over 100 community groups participating, the *Slave Gallery Project* was launched. The Episcopal Bishop sent an emissary with a formal apology for the Church's involvement in slavery. The healing had begun. As historians and preservationists report their findings, representatives of the participating community groups will involve their constituencies.

Using History to Generate a Dialogue on Social Problems

The Museum's *Sweatshop Project* builds on two years of scholarship on the garment industry past and present. Plans are underway to re-create the Harris Levine sweatshop, cited by Factory Inspectors in the 1890's for working non-family members and children over 60 hours a week. Visitors will be helped to use the history of this subject as a basis for considering the present situation. What has changed? What has not? Assisted by UNITE!, the garment worker's union, and other labor and manufacturing groups, the Museum will reach out to invite factory workers, managers, buyers, advertisers, and union organizers to participate in using this past to shape a future - together.

Using History To Combat Class Bias and to Stimulate Empathy

Teaming up with private and public schools, and with Lyndhurst, a National Trust Site, the Museum is developing a program with a simple message: *a person's worth can not 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 90 before the visit to 20 after it.

Origins Theater Project is collaboration with City Lights Youth Theater that offers inner city youth an opportunity to step into the shoes of people from other cultures. Each summer, students learn the history of one of the immigrant families, which lived at 97 Orchard Street. Then, with professional writers and directors from City Lights Youth Theater, they write, produce and act in a musical about that family. This year's work on the first women to vote from our tenement brought students their first insights into the struggle for woman's suffrage. "It makes me want to go out and vote for something," said one girl, newly aware of how hard fought was her suffrage. An activist has been born of Mother history.

Using History To Diversify the Museum Profession

Responding to the American Association of Museums' challenge to diversify the Museum profession, the Tenement Museum joined the City College of the City University of New York to establish the nation's first *Urban Museum Studies Program*. Offering a graduate degree to students largely drawn from minority, immigrant and working class families, the *Program* will train a new cadre of museum professionals, reflecting the nation's diversity.

Putting Democratic and Humanistic Values to Work Institutionally

The Tenement Museum is committed to making all members of its full-time staff, regardless of education, prior training or position, 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, historical or skills training. All participate actively in planning the Museum goals and objectives. Last year, to provide further focus and to deepen the training experience, the staff focused on the neighboring Chinatown and devoted three hours a month to studying Chinese and Chinese-American history and visiting Chinatown institutions, leaders and historic sites. This year, leading scholars will deliver a series of lectures on the history of immigration. Believing that history is as important as health care, the Tenement Museum provides employee coverage in both.

Far From Satisfied

For all its innovation, the Tenement Museum is far from satisfied that it has achieved its own stated goals. While various specific programs effectively make use of the past to understand and address related contemporary issues, our average visitor does not experience them. The majority of the Museum's visitors takes one of the tours of historic immigrant apartments, and there, we have yet to make our intentions explicit. But, as I cautioned my colleagues in the Coalition, it is only by making explicit what has heretofore been implicit in the work of our sites, that we can establish an objective whose outcome can be measured." If," I continued, "the Tenement Museum sets out, as its has, to use history to address prejudice against poor people, we can and should measure the outcome of that program. It is not enough for us to ask simply whether participation in our program made children think about the issue, for that was not our objective. Rather, we must ask whether children, who prior to their participation in the Tenement Museum programs described a poor person with words such as "mean, ugly, dishonest and dangerous" actually changed their viewpoint after participating in our program. If they did not, we must alter the program so that the outcome meets our stated and explicit objective."

"By making explicit what has been implicit, we will sharpen the focus and objectives of our programs to meet these newly specified goals. Again using the Tenement Museum as an example. If we really want to use the history of the American immigrant experience past to stimulate dialogue on contemporary immigration policies and related issues, it is not sufficient to simply present the story of immigrants past to visitors. A presentation is not a dialogue. Rather, to achieve our stated objective, we must find ways to engage our visitors with experts, and with one another, and we must furnish them with reliable, balanced and comparative information on immigration past and present. Further, we must establish a place and a format for dialogue, open and useful to all. Without the information, the place, and the format, we cannot expect our visitors to make full use of the power of history to inform their lives."

The Tenement Museum's challenge I described at the Coalition's first meeting, is yet to be adequately addressed. This fall, in an attempt to begin to rectify that, the Museum will pilot a dialogue with its visitors. The topic upon which we will focus first is the one binding all our presentations – immigration. Our hope is to format an ongoing opportunity for visitors to discuss the contemporary implications of the history presented at our site. If we are successful, we will not only break new ground in the use of history, but also, because our visitors are diverse, we will also pioneer in establishing a dialogue which crosses the usually divisive lines of class, race, religion, national origin and more.

Some Good Examples

Of course, the Tenement Museum is not the only historic site or museum where staff has concerned itself with the accuracy and balance of the history it presents or the presentation of the past in such a way as to make it useful to the public. One can find excellent programs in museums and historic sites large and small which achieve these objectives. Still, I am struck by the fact that while these projects clearly represented the longings and even actions of individuals within the Museum community, they generally do not reflect a total and comprehensive institutional commitment. And until they do, rather than contribute to a civil society, historic sites and history museums will continue to undermine it.

Historic Sites As Places of Engagement

A new role for historic sites and museums is emerging. Every historic site represented the Coalition is important and their directors understand they are leading 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, as I suggested the eve of our first gathering, there is much we can do:

1. We can establish an early warning system. One of the first signs of the rise of political repression is a move to destroy history. Should that transpire, we can be there one for the other, to sound the alarm, to serve, if need be, as a temporary repository for whatever records and objects the new regime finds threatening.
2. We can lend our expertise to newly emerging historic sites. Leaders of the international human rights organizations say that when people arise from the shadows of an oppressive government, they frequently express the desire to preserve and interpret an historic site associated with that repression. But, they are often prevented from realizing this ambition simply because they have no contacts with the museum community and therefore have no ideas of how to proceed. The Coalition could be there for them. For no one knows better than we how important it is to preserve and interpret historic places, and no one has more expertise on how to do it – in difficult unresolved or even hostile political climates, with insufficient resources, and a host of other obstacles.
3. We can stimulate collaboration and exchange– not only among ourselves and other historic sites, but also with international human rights organizations, scholars, museum planners, artists and arts and media organizations from around the world.
4. We can develop and apply evaluative tools with which to measure the impact of our work and thus demonstrate its relevance to contemporary society:

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 hope to make explicit that which has heretofore been implicit: Our sites and history museums are important not because of the stories they tell (though of course we are devoted to those stories) but rather because implicit in the stories they tell are lessons so powerful that if fully understood could improve our lives. Such is the power of history. Our challenge is to harness that power to improve the world.

