Letting Go?
Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World
Throwing Open the Doors
Communities as Curators
So can anyone be a curator? Public history institutions are wrestling with this question as they feel external and internal pressures to share interpretive authority with audiences of all kinds. Even as digital media collapse geographic distances, museums are deepening their relationships with local communities. This new intimacy between museum staff and their constituents may help to break down perceived audience barriers that museums have struggled with for years—exclusion, intimidation, elitism, and disconnection—but it brings new questions and challenges that museums now must face:

Is the definition of expertise in the museum context being radically transformed? Whose expertise is now valued?

How much content authority can or should be shared in community-shaped programming? Do visitors now expect to see their own cultural productions on the walls and in the collections of their local museums?


Finally, does the desire to respond to local needs change how museums measure success? What do excellence and quality look like within this new paradigm?
Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?

Kathleen McLean

Why is it that the most interesting and meaningful conversations among museum staff usually take place without the presence of visitors? When dreaming up exhibition and program ideas, framing the questions for research, and articulating future visions for our museums, we explore with colleagues our passionate interests and burning questions. Only rarely, though, does this passion and energy make it into the public arena.

It's not that museum professionals are opposed to interacting with visitors. Museum calendars are filled with receptions to meet the curators, lectures with question-and-answer periods, behind-the-scenes tours, and programs where artists-in-residence talk to the public as they work. And most museums incorporate some form of visitor participation—from comment books to make-and-take activities—into their exhibitions and programs. While these activities may indeed elicit visitor participation, they mostly preserve the usual novice-expert construct: the museum pushes content toward the visitor, and the visitor reacts.

True interaction, by contrast, requires an exchange of some sort, a reciprocity that creates new knowledge and insights. This is where the notion of conversation—the most essential of human interactions—can help museums create more meaningful relationships with their visitors. At their best, museums are places of inquiry that nourish the exchange of ideas. From historic house to national treasures house, from art gallery to science center lab and natural history display, museums are places to contemplate, celebrate, and share perspectives on human understanding. It naturally follows that all people have a narrative role to play in the exploration of human experience.

THE PROBLEM WITH EXPERTS

But museums, conceived and perceived as sites of authority, still embody the "information transmission" model of learning that developed in the late 1800s, with museums as the source of expert knowledge and visitors as the recipients of that expertise. Many of the people who work in museums today still see themselves as experts and see their visitors and communities as uninformed.
novices in need of guidance. (I recently heard an art museum curator liken his expertise to a medical doctor's and equate visitor-contributed exhibition content to "a gardener operating on one's children.")

Even within the ranks of museum professionals, a novice-expert tension prevails, as certain professionals are designated the creators of knowledge and others are not. While some museums have embraced new exhibition-development processes that challenge outdated hierarchical models of practice, they are in the minority. I still meet people with the word "curator" in their job title who insist that only they have the qualifications to frame the issues and develop the ideas in exhibitions. Other museum staff, such as designers and educators, may have as much content expertise as their curator colleagues, but they are still usually not considered knowledge-creators in the expert sense and are rarely given a voice in content decisions.

Given these ongoing struggles over power and expertise among museum professionals, it's not surprising that attending a museum might feel more like a visit to the home of the authorities than the home of the muses. In the midst of writing my first book, struggling with voice and verb, I turned to a writing coach for help. A gifted writer with a doctorate and several books under her belt, she was articulate and devoted to the creative spirit of writing. And she was intimidated by museums. "I don't know the rules. I know there's a code of behavior, but it eludes me."

She encouraged me to write a book for potential museum-goers that could help them navigate and feel more at home in a museum environment and better understand their role in the museum-visitor relationship. That suggestion stayed with me over the years: Why would such a creative and well-educated member of the public feel unschooled in the art of museum going? Why did she feel a need for a user's manual? (And she is not alone—I've encountered dozens of intelligent people with similar concerns.)

BEYOND AUTHORITY

Clearly, museum power structures and the people who work within them reinforce and benefit in some ways from perpetuating a novice-expert polarity. But this dualistic notion of learning just doesn't map onto today's Knowledge Age, with its dynamic flow of information and new forms of meaning-making contributed by people from all places and of all persuasions.

This is not to say that we should abandon our respect for expertise. Quite the contrary. We need to embrace the contributions of expert knowledge and at the same time expand our definitions of "expert" and "expertise" to include broader domains of experience. And we need to consider new roles for visitors as they engage more actively in our programs and exhibitions. Rather than perceiving visitors as novices, we would do well to consider them "scholars" in the best sense of the word—people who engage in study and learning for the love of it.

We also need to separate our own notions about expertise and knowledge-generation from the associated concept of "authority" derived from the ancient
Roman *auctoritas*—meaning the power conferred by authorship or socially recognized knowledge. The assumption that expertise *inherently confers authority and power* makes it almost impossible to support the open invitation to conversation and exploration that is essential to the life of the museum. Successful conversations require reciprocity and a mutual respect among participants, as well as mutual interest and a balance of contributions. This balance is difficult to establish when the authority of the expert is predominant.

Most museum exhibitions and high-profile programs grow out of curator-driven questions. Curators determine the scope of inquiry and parameters of content, and disciplinary boundaries abide: an art museum curator determines content about art, a history curator about history. Often the scope is quite narrow, particularly when curators think of exhibitions as their opportunity to create three-dimensional monographs. At the same time, educators, as visitor experts and "audience advocates," develop interpretive questions that attempt to "hook" people into being interested in curator content. Yet both these practices leave little room for the voices of visitors and community members. I find it curious that educators spend so much time trying to develop engaging questions to help visitors make sense of curatorial content, when visitors bring their own questions to their experiences in museums.

**COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS**

Museums, at their core, are learning environments, and much of the work of museum professionals—administrators, curators, educators, and designers alike—is to understand and support the learning process in our visitors and in ourselves. We at least need to be aware of current learning theory, which takes us beyond "information transmission" to more sophisticated and nuanced notions of learning. Today, it is generally accepted in the world of learning research that knowledge-generation is complex, is socially situated and learner-centered, and requires interaction, conversation, and reflection.

We need to think of visitors as partners in a generative learning process within a dynamic community of learners. In describing a museum-learning research project at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, educational researchers Josh Gutwill and Sue Allen "imagine an ideal world in which communication is so fluid that each person can bring his or her expertise and curiosity to a global 'ecosystem' of learning, moving among the roles of teacher, participant, and learner as the situation changes." Staff and museum organizations as a whole need to participate in learning along with their communities and visitors, and embrace the possibility of change as a result of that learning.

It's not as radical as it might sound. Increasingly, museums are employing visitor research and evaluation to better understand how their programs and exhibitions affect their end-users. Often driven initially by funder requirements, these studies are prompting rich exchanges between museums and their constituencies, and some museums are incorporating visitor research into their ongoing organizational work. As research and evaluation give voice
to visitor questions and ideas, these exchanges are having profound effects on museum practice.

BROADENING THE CONVERSATION

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), for example, is transforming its presence and practice through a series of initiatives that embrace public conversation and co-creation. With the receipt of a major grant from the James Irvine Foundation’s Arts Innovation Fund, the museum developed a program of visitor research, prototyping, and project experimentation designed to inform the 2010 reinstallation of its Gallery of California Art. One of the resulting projects was Cool Remixed, a temporary prototype exhibition co-designed in 2009 by local teenagers and education curators.

Conceived as “a cultural and historical counterpoint” to the Orange County Museum of Art’s traveling exhibition Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury, Cool Remixed explored a contemporary definition of “cool” from Oakland teenagers’ perspectives. The two exhibitions, installed simultaneously in adjacent galleries, set up an interesting dialogue of call-and-response, with visitors going back and forth between them.

The design of Cool Remixed experimented with new installation techniques suggested by the teenagers based on the outcomes of a focus group about the attracting power and accessibility (or the lack thereof) of the former Gallery of California Art. The exhibition, with its brightly colored walls, plenty of lounge spaces, plywood and hand-painted furniture, and “Loud Hours” programmed with music, provided an interesting contrast to the ’50s cool sensibilities of Birth of the Cool. Before the two exhibitions opened, some museum stakeholders considered Birth of the Cool the main attraction, and Cool Remixed a “community exhibition” not worth serious marketing attention or funding. But visitor response suggested something quite different. The freshness of the
content and the activated spaces in *Cool Remixed* attracted a broad range of visitors who stayed and engaged in the ongoing programs. Many of the design experiments in *Cool Remixed* ended up being incorporated into the reinstallation of the new Gallery of California Art.

Reflecting back on the overall process, I think the vitality of the exhibition grew out of its conversational nature: its origins in talks with teenagers about engaging with works in the art gallery, its position in dialogue with the *Birth of the Cool* exhibition, and its design that encouraged discussions among visitors in the exhibition. Working with education curators, teens joined the curatorial process and developed the questions: What does “cool” mean today? How does it look? What does it sound like and feel like? How can we create an exhibition that brings today’s cool to life for everyone?

**COMMUNITIES AS EXPERTS**

Conversation also shaped the Native Californian section of the new OMCA Gallery of California History. But in this case it was an ongoing dialogue among curators, project staff, and the museum’s Native Advisory Council. During review of an early curatorial plan for a “First Peoples” display, one of our Native advisors remarked, “We are not the First People. The First People were the rocks and the animals and the trees.” Native People were, he told me, the second and third people. I asked the advisors what they called that pre-contact time period, and they replied, “Before the other people came,” which is now the name of that section of the gallery.

Rather than structuring the exhibition around the anthropology curator’s perspective and subject interest, we reorganized exhibition concepts around what our Native partners thought most important. They determined the focus of content; selected the Native participants; interviewed, videotaped, and edited all the commentary; and participated in selecting and placing the...
objects. Curators responded to and supplemented the Native content, and
designers and Native artists shaped the installation. While much of the exhi-
bition content remained similar to the original curator’s plan, the emphasis,
voice, and aesthetic shifted considerably.

Admittedly, this is not a new idea—the National Museum of the American
Indian and other cultural history museums use similar approaches in develop-
ing most exhibits and programs about Native People today. But they often end
up feeling like fixed presentations, delivering messages very similar from one
to the next. The challenge for OMCA going forward will be to find ways to
encourage ongoing dialogue among visitors and the Native participants that
might, in turn, alter the look and feel and content of the exhibition.

Yet another conversational model shaped the section of the OMCA his-
tory gallery that focuses on the period from 1960 to 1975—a truly iconic and
intense time in California. Here again, community members played expert
roles. Design of the section, called “Forces of Change,” also began with cura-
torial ideas, but the museum’s Latino, African American, Asian Pacific, and
Teacher Advisory Councils quickly dissuaded us from those intentions: the
advisors felt that the conceptual plan did not accurately depict the chaotic
and diverse spirit of the times. With their help, we identified twenty-four
people from across California who lived through the 1960s and early '70s,
and invited them to design and create individual displays that embodied their
personal experiences and memories of that time. Participants attended several
workshops with the exhibition team to explore potential design ideas and
installation constraints, and then worked with staff to create their own displays.

The resulting installation, which includes a light show, music, a staff-
compiled “Top 100” list of major events of the period, and a place for visitors
to leave their comments and stories, creates a gestalt that more adequately
represents the collective memory and history of this period. In exit interviews
soon after opening, some visitors cited the “1960s memory boxes” as their peak gallery experience. Perhaps even more telling were the hundreds of comment cards contributed by visitors during the opening weekend. Visitor stories, questions, and even messages to the creators of the displays covered literally all the empty wall space, extending the “voice of the people” sensibility of those times into the gallery.

FRAMING THE QUESTIONS

While much of the work described above can be characterized as encouraging “visitor-generated content,” the fundamental intention goes deeper than that, to the generation of questions. All meaningful museum experiences grow out of compelling questions asked: “I wonder who...?” “What happens if...?” “Why is it that...?” Museums need to stretch beyond existing channels of communication and find ways to include visitors more interactively, even in the articulation of core questions. Besides conducting focus groups to ask visitors what they think about our ideas, we should be figuring out how we can bring them to the table as questions are posed and ideas developed.

Conversation isn’t any easier for visitors than it is for museum experts—many visitors have difficulty articulating questions at the drop of a hat. Josh Gutwill and Sue Allen spent over five years at the Exploratorium learning how to encourage family groups to participate in active inquiry around science museum exhibits. Although their research focused on interactive exhibits of natural phenomena, their experiments helping visitors to work together to articulate “juicy questions” can help us model what we should be asking ourselves: How can museum programs and exhibits better support visitor-generated inquiry? What skills do visitors need to engage more deeply? How can visitor questions inform museum practice?

In discussing her use of artworks in history displays, Louise Pubols, OMCA chief curator of history, also focuses on questions: “The content of an exhibition depends on who is asking the questions, whether it is a curator, an educator, or a visitor. I brought history questions to the art: Who paid for the art? Where did they hang it? What did they want people to look at and why? Historians may choose an artwork for its impact on society, and to understand what people were thinking about at the time. These are valid questions, and potentially interesting for visitors as well.”

Arguably the most dynamic conversations and exhibitions take place around the edges, in the margins, in the overlap of disciplines, and in the
framing of questions in surprising new ways. Extending that idea even further, Pubols suggests that intriguing questions can come from anywhere. “Take for example, an exhibition about salmon. A scientist might ask, ‘What is the role of salmon in the health of a riparian community?’ A philosopher might ask, ‘What is the proper relationship between humans and salmon?’ A historian might ask, ‘What was the role of salmon in establishing the cannery industry?’ An artist might ask, ‘How does the salmon symbolize California wilderness?’ And a visitor might ask, ‘How can we protect salmon for future generations?’”5 All of these questions suggest different conceptual frameworks that could form the basis of different exhibitions and require different methods of inquiry.

**LEARNING TO LISTEN**

I am not suggesting that museums replace curator expertise with public chat. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media take care of those exchanges quite nicely. At the same time that visitors expect to engage more actively in their museum experiences, they also expect and want to hear from museum experts. Visitors want to know what the experts think, why experts value some ideas or objects over others, and how that expertise can help them make meaning and find significance in the world around them (or at least at the museum). But visitors are just not interested in monologues. This means that museum experts need to learn how to listen and respond, share the inquiry process, and change perspectives as new ideas emerge.

Engaging in conversation is an acquired skill, an art form that requires practice and experimentation and a willingness to fail, or at least to stumble around a bit. When the new OMCA galleries opened, I wasn’t prepared for the responses of some of my colleagues, who thought the Native Californian display was
uncomfortably dissimilar from the rest of the gallery. And not all visitors appreciated the community approach employed in the “Forces of Change” display:

“Wow! I am extremely disappointed! Instead of an honoring of... political and cultural upheavals, I found a cheeky little collection of panoramas of ‘my summer vacation’ in the 60’s by mostly non-political, non-Bay Area folks. Yes there was something interesting about the zeitgeist captured there... but it felt completely void of our amazing collective historic struggle!”

Because these installations are designed as prototypes, we actually have the opportunity to adjust and change them in response to visitor comment. For example, we went back to the “Forces of Change” participants and asked them to write a short description of the social and political context of the times from their perspective. Their writings, now included in the gallery, have added a depth of content and a palpable sense of personal witness that was missing from the original installation.

TOWARD RECIPROCITY
Let’s face it. We live in a world interconnected in ways unimaginable just a few short years ago. On the radio in the morning I can listen to a song that’s creating a sensation in Nairobi nightclubs, contact the Congolese musicians and their fans by noon, and engage them in a lively discussion with museum visitors in San Francisco that evening. As people around the world “log on” and weave together increasingly interconnected patterns of knowledge, they expect museums to be players.

And people expect to be able to take more active roles in shaping their own learning activities, from co-designing the programs they attend to asking their
own questions and contributing their own expertise and opinions. The issue isn’t whether we should provide opportunities for people to choreograph their experiences in museums; it’s how we embrace these opportunities ourselves. If we don’t take people’s expectations seriously, they will simply “vote with their feet” and go elsewhere.

We need to find ways to bring the museum’s expert knowledge into conversation with the people who attend our museums—people who bring with them their own expert knowledge. And this means letting go of the notion that we, museum professionals, are a class apart from our visitors. And we need to find new ways to create narratives in common, narratives that will change over time as the world around us changes. As the news each day reminds us, these are not always easy or comfortable conversations. But they will breathe new life into our museums.

1 Joshua P. Gutwill and Sue Allen, Group Inquiry at Science Museum Exhibits: Getting Visitors to Ask Juicy Questions (San Francisco: Exploratorium; Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 3.


3 Gutwill and Allen, Group Inquiry at Science Museum Exhibits.

4 Conversation with author, December 2009.

5 Ibid.

The "Dialogic Museum" Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection

John Kuo Wei Tchen and Liz Ševčenko

In May 2010, Jack Tchen and Liz Ševčenko sat down over soup noodles to reflect on their early experiences and subsequent struggles with the idea of "dialogue-driven" practices, and its implications for museums. This collaborative essay began with that conversation's transcript and then layered subsequent thoughts and edits.

Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen is a historian, curator, and dumpster diver. In 1980 he co-founded the New York Chinatown History Project, now called the Museum of Chinese in America. He co-curated the museum's new core exhibition in its new space that opened in 2009. He is the founding director of the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute at New York University.

Liz Ševčenko is founding director of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network of historic sites that foster public dialogue on human rights and social justice issues, and inspire visitors to address their contemporary legacies. Before launching the Coalition, she spent over ten years developing dialogic public history projects in New York City and around the country.

How did you come to your original idea of "dialogue"?

Jack: In 1989 I wrote "Towards a Dialogic Museum" reflecting on nine years of work with the New York Chinatown History Project (NYCHP), now the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA). It marks a certain moment with all the possibilities of that moment. We were a part of the emergence of the "new social history" movement, which pioneered a variety of ways to document the story
of people who had not been part of dominant historical narratives. The Chinatown History Project related to how history, politics, and citizenship/power emerged in New York. In New York City we have the New-York Historical Society or the Museum of the City of New York—they both represent a historical formation of white Anglo American institutional power that emerged in the 19th century. But what was/is not collected? What is not exhibited? What dialogues are not going on? And therefore, in that absence, why must different collections begin to emerge in that breach?

Another reason for the formation of the NYCHP was a disconnect between new immigrants from Hong Kong and Canton and the older rural Cantonese.

Mr. Lee, a retired laundry worker, explains how this heavy coal-heated iron was used to press shirts, 1997. Such dialogues with New York's Chinatown History Project staff were how the experiences of Chinese hand laundries, once ubiquitous and now largely gone, were documented. Museum of Chinese in America Archives.
The Lower East Side Tenement Museum re-creates the apartments of former immigrant residents of 97 Orchard Street, such as the Levine family, who ran a dressmaking shop out of their home in the 1890s.

Immigrants who had been through the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1968) and survived it. When new immigrants arrived, they did not know about the Exclusion Laws. They were not familiar with the anti-Chinese/anti-East Asian racism of the U.S. So part of the NYCHP’s goal was to create that bridge to communicate back and forth within the Chinese New York community. It wasn’t a project that was meant to be just going out to the larger public.

For me, to be dialogue-driven is a work process where documentation, meaning, and re-presentation are acknowledged to be co-developed with those whom the history is of, for, and about. Conventionally, curators are trained to become experts of a collection already deemed valuable to a historical enterprise or university. When we wanted to explore the formation of New York Chinatown in the 19th century, we realized it was founded by the thousands of small hand laundries scattered in the New York metropolitan region. There was not documentation about this low-status, racially excluded community. There were not collections. There were no academics studying this experience, except for one. There were no Chinese American historical groups. This was a subaltern history best understood by those who lived the experience and came from it.

As young, college-educated smart alecks, we quickly became humbled. To be dialogue-driven was to admit what was actually going on and to demystify the knowledge formation process. Mike Frisch’s theory of “shared authority” is critical to this working process. Issues of power are always at stake. And fundamentally, the understanding of the significance of a past time/place from the van-
tage of the present moment, what Mikhail Bakhtin called chronotopes, are always at stake.

That one scholar—who did a brilliant ethnography of Chicago area hand laundries—was Paul Chan Pang Siu, a University of Chicago sociology Ph.D. student who was the son of a laundryman. When he sought to publish his dissertation, the University of Chicago Press turned him down. I'm proud to say that thirty-six years later I was able to get The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation published (1988). He passed away just months before the book came out, but Professor Siu was delighted to finally have his study gain the recognition it deserved.

Liz: I read your essay in college, and it was totally mind-blowing and inspirational to me. I was seized by the hidden histories that could emerge in what I understood to be your definition of a dialogic museum: one whose narrative is developed entirely through the diverse stories and perspectives of those who lived it, not as a master narrative written by a historian. This inspired me to try my own small dialogic museum project: a history of Hillhouse High School in New Haven composed only of objects donated by different generations of students, from the 1920s through the present, and the memories they wrote. What interested me most was what happened when they all came together to see the exhibition, and were so surprised to see that others had such different experiences at the same place: like many urban public schools, it had totally transformed from the fifties to the seventies to the nineties. This made me think that community-curated exhibitions provide the opportunity for another type of dialogue: exchange across

Following their tours of re-created immigrant apartments, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum hosts public dialogues on pressing contemporary immigration issues. Photo by Greg Scaffidi.
difference about the different ways people can experience the same thing, why they did, and why it matters.

But by the time I started working in New York in the mid-nineties, I assumed that uncovering marginalized histories was a basic responsibility of museums—that particular idea of “dialogue” was no longer radical in the field. But many museums began embracing the idea of opening a space for “the community” to tell their stories without raising the questions of power, access, and voice that were so central to NYCHP’s approach—questions of who was speaking, who was not, and what we mean by community—were not raised. In some cases, when the “public” were invited to shape the narrative, they could even reinforce existing inequalities. When I started at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, for instance, many visitors felt honored to have their ancestors’ experiences of working-class tenement life validated as American history for the first time in a museum. But many spoke out to distance themselves from new immigrants living in similar conditions. The idea of “dialogue” we pursued drew connections between groups with different experiences. But we also wanted to facilitate discussion on the deeper issues underlying social conflicts. This was harder.

So the museum’s president, Ruth Abram, decided to reach out to museums across the world to see if others felt that they had a similar mission. What started as a meeting among nine historic sites from radically different contexts has become, a decade later, an international exchange community collaborating on these issues.

From the beginning, the idea of “dialogue” brought museums in very disparate contexts together. The group decided to call themselves “Sites of Conscience” and to create a deliberate definition of a new kind of museum form. One of the main foundations of Sites of Conscience was this commitment to “stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues.”

Over the last ten years, “dialogue” has been the idea that binds us, and at the same time, what’s most hotly debated, in a wonderfully productive way. There are at least three different ideas, or layers, of a “dialogic museum” circulating, with different implications for sharing authority.

The first idea of a dialogic museum is one that promotes public discussion of a truth that has been forgotten or deliberately suppressed. This is a particularly critical goal for museums working to expose a truth that the state has denied for decades and make it incontrovertible—for instance that 30,000 Argentinians were disappeared, or that the US government authorized and practiced torture. Here the goal is to get people to recognize and talk about something that’s critical for their understanding of their society and their place in it, to make this truth part of an accepted portrait of who we are. In this “dialogue,” it’s public officials, the media, and perhaps
educators who are doing the talking, supporting a single story and establishing its credibility, so that they shape the way the nation collectively talks about the past. This is not so much about sharing historical authority, but seizing it—taking it out of corrupt hands and using it for social good.

The second idea of a dialogic museum is based on the kind of community curation pioneered by the NYCHP and theorized in your article. Here it seems “dialogue” is between academic historians and people with lived experience; the established exclusionary narrative and the individual story that challenges it; and between the different perspectives of each individual story. Face-to-face discussions among people with shared experience can also help to unearth new memories, or develop new collective understandings. This is sharing museums’ and historians’ traditional curatorial authority, tapping into the knowledge and perspectives of people who have been marginalized. It also shares the authority of a single narrative, embracing multiple perspectives that together create a larger truth.

The third idea builds on both of the first two, but goes a step further, opening the museum as a space for using new truths about the past as the starting point for discussion about their unresolved legacies, and what we should do about them. Here, “dialogue” is more literal, direct face-to-face discussion among visitors—tourists and those with direct experience alike—on questions of shared concern, such as Who is American? and What responsibilities do we have to each other? Questions on which, because of their different past experiences, they may have very different perspectives. Here, sharing authority is about serving as a forum for open discussion of the implications of the past for the present, as opposed to imposing a single conclusion or moral.

Salvaging the signage of the Mee Heung Chow Main Co. in 1992. Long a Chinatown fixture and supplier to New York-area restaurants, by this time it was one of the few old Chinatown stores and storefronts remaining. Museum of Chinese in America Archives.
Jack: I agree all three ideas are operative. The Chinese Exclusion Laws are not taught as a major issue in U.S. history and are unknown to the great majority of Americans. We've sought to collaborate with the bearers of this knowledge, Chinese Americans subjected to exclusion and racism, as the laws violated their human rights, to document their stories and then accurately contextualize them. And once affirmed, we've fashioned public programs for the larger public. This question of what social histories necessitate all three layers of dialogue is what defines a subaltern experience, in other words, to be legally and culturally non-beings, not just non-citizens, but in the case of Chinese in the U.S. during the Exclusion era defined as “alien ineligible for citizenship” or fundamentally un-American.

In effect, this has been the ongoing challenge of the Museum of Chinese in America—to keep all three dialogues alive with different constituencies. For MoCA that founding, internal Chinese American dialogue is incomplete. The fact of the matter is that post-Exclusion Era Chinese Americans continue to be impacted by perceptions of alieness or racialized otherness. The legacy? After so many years of social, cultural, and political marginalization, New Yorkers finally elected the first Chinese American to represent the Manhattan Chinatown/Lower Manhattan district in 2010—190 years after the first arrival. Can MoCA serve both the historical community defined by the struggle with Exclusion and the post-1968 immigration reform community who have enjoyed a new era of official desegregation?

To add another layer, then, is perhaps the most daunting challenge. The formation of an organization that can juggle these multiple dialogues which also operates in a humble dialogic fashion. The conventional hierarchy of 19th- and 20th-century decision-making, with the curator ruling the collections roost, creating a “permanent” interpreted exhibition, then handing it off to educators to bring in schoolchildren, has long needed upending. In the late 20th and early 21st century, the difficulties of fundraising have forced an additional top-down layer—that of the tyranny of constant fundraising, fundraising boards, and private donors and their explicit and implicit agendas. Can a participatory social history be fostered in this era of flat public-sector support and the growing dependence on benevolent donor wealth? Unfortunately, the wealth of laundry-worker stories—basic human stories, truly—doesn’t pay the bills. Yet their wealth, now embodied in MoCA’s collections, cannot be simply taken for granted. Both Exclusion-era and post-Exclusion-era stories and dialogues must go on.

What are the tensions around dialogue in museum spaces? Morality in museums: Dialogue vs. truth-telling
Liz: One major shift in my own personal understanding of dialogue came from the intense debate among Sites of Conscience in different contexts about the relationship between dialogue and truth-telling. I was trained that there was one liberatory way of dealing with the past, and that was to understand it not as an objective reality that one could apprehend with the right sources, but instead as something that's continually constructed and reconstructed. It was very challenging to me to meet people who were struggling so hard to establish objective facts: that someone had been raped, or that thirty thousand people had been disappeared, or that six million people had been killed—and most importantly, by whom.

These were truths that had been denied vigorously by powerful forces for so long that it was critical for people to absolutely understand them as fact, not as a construction of anything. These were museums based on the primacy of truth. For them, dialogue meant ensuring that people were talking openly about truths that had been silenced. The idea of opening dialogue from or about different perspectives smacked of moral relativism.

For other Sites of Conscience, dialogue meant debating different perspectives on the past. The foundation of their notion of dialogue was an acceptance of the past as something inherently constructed in the present by different individuals and through different individuals’ experiences.

Both forms had a goal of developing critical thinking about dominant narratives, but one sought to replace a false narrative with a true one, and the other sought to encourage analysis of how narratives are constructed in the first place. I think both forms are equally important in the US and in international contexts, and create a really productive tension. So far the sites have begun to connect about an idea of dialogue that affirms the forensic truths of the past, while opening debate on the implications of those truths for the present and future.

Jack: In the US, too, we know that histories are contested, but there are certain realities we’re hoping to document. How many Native Americans were here before European contact? How many died from disease, wars, and violence? How many enslaved Africans died on the ships, from violence on plantations?

How can we honestly look at all that and accept it all? I mean, we read it in the textbooks, but do we really understand the fullness of these interactions in all their human dimensions? Given that it is not in living memory, how can we own that past and recognize it?

Liz: And then do something with that recognition. I also feel that asserting a truth that’s been uncovered or demanding a recognition may not always complete what we’re trying to do. The question is, “Why is it so important to recognize what happened, and how can it shape how we go from here?”
In 1984 the "Eight Pound Livelihood" exhibit at the State Museum in Albany and the New York Public Library and the press coverage it received helped build the foundations for the Museum of Chinese in America today. It began as a project documenting the history of Chinese laundry operators, who were excluded from other jobs and ran tens of thousands of "Chinese hand laundries" throughout North America.

In New York City, these small shops created the need for a commercial district to supply their needs—hence the development of what was later called "Chinatown," Museum of Chinese in America Archives.

A museum could say it's about encouraging that kind of recognition or making it impossible not to recognize something once you've been through the museum. But the opportunities lie in creating space for people to confront the implications of their recognition in their own way, without instrumentalizing that recognition for some narrow lesson that the museum itself determines. And exploring those implications must be done together with people with other perspectives. That's where dialogue comes in for me.

Jack: But, in fact, these moments of genuine documentation and genuine truth-telling represent a different kind of dialogue than simply: I can say something, and then it's your turn to say something, and then it's your turn. That's how dialogue is oftentimes seen in this culture, right? Everybody has a right to say some-thing. And everybody's right is the same.

Liz: Right, and that raises a question we're always wrestling with in the Coalition: in our debates, what's up for debate? Should a museum set limits on what people have a right to say? In other words, what is the moral or political role of museums in dialogue?

When we say "dialogue on contemporary issues" a lot of museum folks hear "the museum taking a stand on a contemporary issue," and say they can't conduct dialogues because the museum can't advocate for a particular position. It's disappointing that so few people can imagine that a museum could raise a question on a current issue and have an open dialogue on that question that invites diverse perspectives—when so many museums are doing so very successfully—which is totally different from a museum taking a stand.

But of course if museums are going to raise sensitive questions, they do have an obligation to protect the visitors they invite into dialogue by creating a safe container. Some museums set boundaries to protect forensic truths—to correct people if they make patently false claims—or to protect people against hurtful comments.

Jack: Two quick comments. Did the Nazi exterminations of Jews, Romas ("gypsies"), gays, lesbians, and others happen? Certainly, despite what fringe anti-Semitic Holocaust deniers still maintain. Is anti-Semitism a shifting, constructed racist practice that is a bit
different from place to place, and changes over time? Yes. As historians, scholars, and informed publics we have the responsibility to keep both truths alive. A book, an exhibition, a dialogue are always engagements of a present moment with explorations of various understandings of contested pasts—such productions mark a publicized knot of that present-past exploration. And as the present shifts and we gain more visceral distance, we lose certain opportunities of understanding and we also potentially gain greater perspective. In democratic participatory cultures, better, more rigorous interpretations emerge and ideally become widely accepted as more truthful. Yet, the ongoing challenge reemerges: what happens when certain truths are quickly glossed over and yet their ongoing inequitable consequences live on?

**Storytelling and sharing authority in the dialogic museum**

**Jack:** The dialogue-driven museum is not simply a technique, and shared authority is not simply a technique. These practices raise foundational questions of history and also trust. How can we trust what’s being written by a historian? What are the sources? Are the sources based in archives that are truly resonant with the lives of people who are victimized by some of these laws or on the other side of power?

I think historians have an important role to play in contextualizing individual stories; in helping to parse out what likely happened, what’s the difference between a mythical recounting of an event or a policy and something that is more complex and more accurate. But it’s not simply the historians who have the authority here. It’s also people who have lived the experience. And what about those communities of people who did not have that power to document and archive their perspectives, to develop historians and institutions that would then represent their point of view?

This is the foundational question of authority and trust: what’s the basic stuff that historical explorations and meaning can be made from? And when you have two very different perspectives and two very different parts of the power struggle, how do we, in a dialogic context, sort these questions out? Can there be a trusted public venue? This is particularly challenging online, where anyone can blog about anything. Just like we all need to learn "street smarts," we all need to learn history smarts.

**Liz:** I feel like the most common way museums have worked to become dialogic and share authority is to create a space for people to come and share your story, to have your experience validated, to give people a place in history. This has amazing transformative potential in the context of something like the NYCHP. But based on my experience at the Tenement Museum, I think it’s also important to recognize that creating a space for
untold stories does not necessarily challenge existing power structures; in fact, it can reinforce them. Honoring the story of a second-generation Ukrainian who grew up in a tenement and believes Chinese immigrants are un-American may validate working-class struggle but also racism. The conclusions people draw from reading other people’s stories or telling their own can be all over the map. It can confirm their worst prejudices; promote tolerance; or have no effect at all. The conclusions people draw from reading other people's stories or telling their own can be all over the map. It can confirm their worst prejudices; promote tolerance; or have no effect at all.

So what’s a museum’s role here? I think museums have to be very deliberate and reflective about how they are serving as spaces for story exchange, and to what end.

There is definitely the StoryCorps model, which argues that creating an open space for the exchange of stories with absolutely no comment or mediation allows amazing, unpredictable things to happen. But I think museums do have the potential to do more than just validate everyone and everything, and instead to tease out some of the power dimensions or the political questions that people's stories raise. This is absolutely not to take everyone's very nuanced experiences and stick them into some teleological narrative. Rather, it's to respect that complexity by drawing connections and raising questions that help people see something different in the familiar. It's to link stories together in interesting ways, both ones that are totally different from one another and ones that have amazing resonance that the individuals might not have realized. And then, perhaps most important, just ask the questions of, Why do you think they're different? Why do you think they're the same? Why does it matter?

How has your thinking about "dialogue" and museums evolved? What are the issues you're struggling with now? Complicating who dialogue is between

Jack: Since my initial ideas of dialogue in museums, the questions for me now are, What kinds of spaces are we creating? How are we curating spaces for people to have more in-depth reflection and deliberation, instead of creating a binary of one stark position versus another and asking people to choose one? We’re talking about a more complex, more internal self-reflection, asking, “Why do I think this way?”

When we think of dialogue between ourselves and others, we should think about how “otherness” is in some ways within ourselves as well. We tend to have surface notions of what kinds of people are like us—whether it’s defined by narrow notions of skin color or hair color or whatever it may be—and then who is outside of that. The more interesting question, in this encounter between the self and the other, is: What’s really going on? Within oneself? Between our notion of the self and an other? But especially across differences and across cultures?

Liz: I agree! I think the word dialogue, for most people, connotes an exchange between you
as this coherent person and somebody else outside you. But one of the big goals of many Sites of Conscience is to provide a space for each participant to recognize and reflect on their own assumptions. The questions facilitators ask at the sites encourage people to have a dialogue with themselves, to question themselves, as a starting point for having any encounter with others. But it's a constant dialectic: it's about what kind of reflections you can have about yourself when you're confronted with a very different perspective. The facilitator starts by asking each person to share their personal experiences and then reflect on how those experiences shaped the opinions or perspectives they are bringing to the table.

**Dialogue in museums: Is it better to feel strange or familiar?**

**Jack:** How do museum spaces play with those tricky boundaries between self and other? Part of the virtue of a museum is that it's a contained space—as opposed to other spaces of encounter, like neighborhoods or schools—in which a certain kind of concentration of focus is enabled.

**Liz:** Museums can serve as safe places to confront difference. It can be done in a way that cuts off opportunities for real engagement, or in a way that provides possibilities for exchanges that wouldn't otherwise happen. A museum can sort of neatly label all of the kind of "foreign" things people want to learn from, in a contained environment. Or it can be a place where you would come within your own neighborhood to meet and have discussions with other people that wouldn't take place in some open-ended kind of space, like out in the street. On the one hand, I think our ultimate goal is to make museum spaces an extension of everyday life—places for ongoing engagement with the concerns of everyday life. But our dialogue facilitation trainer always stressed that dialogue is an incredibly unnatural process; and that actually, that's a helpful thing. "Artificial" doesn't have to mean uncomfortable: it can just offer a space for people to explore things in a way they're not able to in other spaces—where they may have circumscribed roles they feel they can't break out of—in order to delve into sensitive questions in deeper ways. But at the same time, if you make dialogue into a totally strange experience, then it will feel alienating to people and no one will want to do it, or no one will open up. So it's a balance between building on the familiar while tapping the possibilities of what's different about museum dialogue.

**Jack:** Early on at the NYCHP, we seized on the idea that reunions are really great spaces for dialogue. All groups have reunions of different kinds. They are a familiar form of making sense of our experiences. But usually reunions are organized in a very thin way that doesn't allow for the more meaningful explorations you're actually seeking at the reunion—to explore those past-present questions that are always there.
At Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, a former apartheid prison has been preserved as a historic site and museum, developed in collaboration with former prisoners and guards. Photo by Oscar G.

Liz: That’s a great example: should museums replicate existing forms of dialogue, or create a totally artificial space that taps into familiar vocabularies of dialogue, but structures it differently, to do the things that the organic forms don’t?

In Johannesburg, Constitution Hill—a prison museum trying to open new conversations on justice in South Africa today—calls their dialogues *lekgotla*, a word that recalls Botswana village council deliberations, tapping into a reference to a sort of indigenous form of democracy. When I was still there, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s dialogues were called “Kitchen Conversations,” and were held in a space with mismatched wooden chairs, conjuring images of friendly family exchanges. But both *lekgotla* and Kitchen Conversations try to open more space for equality and exchange than an all-male village council or a hierarchical family table actually have.

Other sites try to break away from existing spaces for exchange altogether, as part of their effort to subvert what they see as a repressive culture or system: the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh wanted to teach the founding of the Bangladeshi Constitution and its principles of human rights and democratic engagement to students in rural villages. But the culture of learning and exchange in the classroom was so hierarchical that they would bring a bus with a portable exhibition and set it up in the schoolyard, creating a space for more open exchange among students.

One size does not fit all: Adapting different forms of dialogue for different ends

Jack: Part of the question is, how long are museum tours and how much time do you get to spend with visitors? Can enough trust develop over a short amount of time that they can begin by having identified where they or their
own family may fit into a larger story; and also open up to thinking about other people's experiences? Is there a way of bringing them into some kind of sustained dialogue past the one visit, given staffing and other resource constraints?

Liz: I think it's also important for institutions to think about dialogue as a tool that can be used in very different ways for very different ends. There's a whole range of achievable goals from modest yet still very powerful, to more ambitious, that can be sought through the adaptable tool of dialogue. The most successful institution I think is one that integrates dialogue in a whole bunch of different ways and doesn't just have everything be didactic, and then this one little space for dialogue.

For example, traditional interpretive planning for exhibitions is organized around themes, which are usually expressed as a series of factual statements, or learning objectives. The Tenement Museum began developing its interpretive plans around questions—questions rooted in the history being interpreted, but equally urgent today—like Who is American? and How are we responsible to each other?—and organized its tours to raise those questions with visitors, including training educators to pose some of those questions during the tour.

If the principle is to pose questions, to allow visitors space to respond to them and to learn from each other's responses, then this can be achieved in all kinds of ways. Exhibitions can invite visitors to respond to questions in written posts, talk-back booths, or voting mechanisms. Educators can pose questions during tours. Short exercises can be conducted during school programs (the Tenement Museum, for one, has about twenty minutes to spend with each school group). The museum can provide one-time, hour-long, facilitated, face-to-face dialogues for walk-in visitors. And going deeper, it can also offer a six-month or ongoing series of dialogues for community leaders or people sitting on different sides of a significant divide, to explore their histories and the issues before them and actually forge ways to work together. Each of these different forms will have different goals, different audiences, and different expectations for outcomes. But they all complement each other.

**Change over time: Adapting different forms of dialogue for different moments**

Jack: I just want to point out the work of Eric Yamamoto, a legal scholar at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa. In *Interracial Justice, Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America*, he theorizes from efforts people have made to dialogue and communicate across racial divides. He focuses on instances of flashpoints between groups literally at each other's throats.

We tend to think of these flashpoints as exceptional moments; but they embody ongoing simmer-
ing tensions that are happening between these crisis moments. How do we then begin to have dialogues between moments of crises, if we think of crises as not so much some exceptional, rare kind of occurrence but as eruptions of unresolved issues?

Yamamoto talks about four phases: recognition, responsibility, reconstruction, and reparations. Each leads to a deeper stage of trust-building, contributing to a fuller and fuller mutual understanding; but also going from simply strictly recognizing and understanding, empathizing, to actually trying to create concrete ways in which understandings change; real investments begin to happen so change happens.

**What’s next?**

*Liz:* It’s extremely heartening to reflect back on the time since I first read your essay and to see how much these ideas of dialogue, civic engagement, and sharing authority have taken hold. From my experience working with hundreds of museums trying to implement these ideas, it’s clear that there’s still an urgent need for diverse tools and training on how. But I think we also need to keep the conversation alive about why. In some cases, I feel like the urge to share authority becomes a little tendentious—“we should engage visitors so that more visitors are more engaged.” The moral, ethical, or political dimensions—and potential—of the many very different ways of sharing authority are always there, but are not always confronted or tapped into. What is the larger social goal we have as museums, and how, on our small scale, can we contribute to it? What are the transformative possibilities of dialogue we seek—what are we trying to make happen? How can a change in museum practice actually contribute to social change in society?

This doesn’t require museums to take on changing the world by themselves. Museums can think of themselves in relation to other spaces, institutions, and practices in the wider society. What kinds of exchanges among people in the wider society do we want to reinforce, by replicating them at our museum? What new kinds of exchange do we want to introduce, because they’re not taking place in the wider society? In either case, what are the institutions or spaces we can partner or connect with to give what we do more impact?

Another aspect of dialogue that could provide more support to museums, but also increase their impact, is if sharing authority is reimagined as instilling collective responsibility. Sharing authority doesn’t need to mean asking museums to do more with less. If a museum is collaborating with a community on developing an exhibition, then there needs to be both a collective ownership of that exhibition and a collective responsibility for maintaining and promoting it. And creating that sense of collective responsibility could be a powerful catalyst for broader social action.

*Jack:* So what’s next? How can we learn from our various efforts, from our various subject positions,
and develop more powerful models to reorganize cultural work, human rights, and knowledge production? High-culture Euro American modes of organizing spaces are too constricting. How can we create much more democratic, participatory research, meaning-making, and cultural productions across local, linguistic, and cultural divides? In person and using new media? The issues of growing inequities in the US and internationally continue to haunt globalization and sustainability. These are the urgent questions.

Our dialogic work, whether in museums, educational institutions, online, or wherever honest curation can happen, is now more important than ever. We have to continue our local/global work, bring together folks doing this work to learn from each other, and democratize conventional top-down practices wherever we are.

I am now most excited about using new social media to create heightened dialogues even as we walk the streets of New York City. At the Asian/Pacific/ American Institute and with my students, we’re experimenting with “augmented reality” uses of smartphones and GPS tablets. The new MoCA space is located nearby, where Robert Moses sought to build the crosstown expressway that would have wiped out all we love about lower Manhattan—Little Italy, Chinatown, the Jewish Lower East Side, Soho, etc. A coalition of community organizations and individuals such as Jane Jacobs successfully fought Moses’s grandiose plans for “slum clearance.” Today that same neighborhood is confronted with a different kind of displacement—that of urban hipsters and Wall Street brokers seeking to live in what Sharon Zukin refers to as an “authentic” historic inner city. And complicating Chinatown, but also all of Manhattan, is the investment of foreign monies into the NYC real estate market.

The contestation for the rights to the city now and the current moment’s relation to past fights is what New Yorkers don’t yet have the dialogic spaces and context to understand. Do we need brick-and-mortar history organizations to engage with these issues? Perhaps our smartphone and other new technologies are better suited for these new dialogues to come. I believe this is the future form museums will have to take on—a provocative remix of the real and the digital.
Works Mentioned:


Reccomendations for Further Reading


“Sites of Conscience: Reimagining Reparations.” Change Over Time 1, no. 1 (2011): 6–33


Works by Other Authors


Moving Pictures was an open film competition and, really, a leap of faith. The Minnesota Historical Society invited short submissions—no more than ten minutes—from professionals and amateurs alike, and of all ages. The only requirement was that the film be a documentary about a member of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation.” The festival was held annually from 2006 to 2009 by the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), as part of a five-year multifaceted project dedicated to exploring the lives and legacies of the World War II generation in Minnesota. The project involved lectures, publications, school programs, and a major exhibition that opened at MHS’s flagship building, the Minnesota History Center, in 2009.

Each year as I scanned the pictures in the film festival program, I was always struck by the photographs—the faces of those in “starring roles” as well as those behind the camera. Taken together, these photos reveal at least two generations—the first, who came of age during the Depression and World War II, and a second, later generation who answered our call to document through film the lives of the men and women who have been called our “greatest generation.” The intersection of these lives produced an extraordinary body of work—more than 150 short films.

From the beginning, we at MHS made a strategic decision to democratize the film component of this project by inviting contributions from the general public. Two factors influenced our decision to share authority with so many. The first, which was not in our favor, was time. We weighed how quickly members of the generation were passing away. We also weighed the limited number of our own
The Riverview Theater box office in October 2007 on the evening of the $10,000 Awards Program, replete with red
staff who could make a more traditional, long-form documentary compared to the nearly limitless number of potential storylines to consider. It was daunting, given that more than 300,000 Minnesotans served in the war, to say nothing of the stories from the home front. At this time, coincidentally, Ken Burns, a documentarian rich with resources, was trying to defend many of his own omissions about World War II prior to the release of his epic The War. The second factor, which was in our favor, was technology. The increasing availability of the software and hardware needed to make films suggested that we could call upon a cadre of mostly first-time filmmakers to cover the geographical distance we could not cover on our own. We had faith that this growing community of filmmakers would accept our call for entries as a labor of love. Essentially, we were looking for volunteers. We did not pay anyone to make a film, although we did offer other indirect incentives (access to our film and photo archives, free filmmaking workshops, one-on-one consultations with leading filmmakers, our promise of their film appearing on the big screen, etc.) and cash awards totaling $10,000 for the winning entries.

While the expertise of the filmmakers varied widely, they all shared a love for their subjects. The father-daughter team of Tom and Ali Drube, who shared their story of Ali's grandmother, was representative of the many novice filmmakers. The other entrant represented here, Matt Ehling, is an accomplished filmmaker and owner of ETS Pictures. He crafted a beautiful retelling of his grandfather's service in the war.

Each year, a September submission deadline yielded an October festival that showcased the short films, filmmakers, and their subjects. At the screenings, audiences were encouraged to cast their votes for the Audience Choice Awards while a panel of historians and film instructors convened in advance of the festival to judge the best films in five cash categories ($5,000 Best Film; $2,000 Best Coming of Age Depiction; $1,000 Best Collaborative Effort; $1,000 Best Film by a First-time Filmmaker; $1,000 Legacy Award).

Nationally, there is nothing else like this film festival. Simply put, it has been the product of collaborations—between organizations, between individuals, between young and old. The generosity of many funded the festival and enabled us to annually award $10,000 in prizes. Our libraries, schools, theaters and even the Mall of America hosted dozens of statewide screenings. And finally, our partners at Comcast and Twin Cities Public Television collaborated with the MHS to ensure that the films were available to a wide and varied audience.

Along the way, we were reminded that the World War II generation is passing at an alarming rate. In fact, we lost several of our
leading men and women over those years. But in these films you can see them traveling back through time and memory, becoming “forever young” through the historical photographs used by our younger filmmakers.

We also learned that it would be a mistake to believe that reliving these sixty-year old stories always came easily. As one of our leading ladies told me, she didn’t sleep so well after working to recall traumatic times of Depression and war. Still, one of the best experiences of this festival was to be drawn into a short film, to see someone filmed at their kitchen table or in their backyard, and then to find them sitting next to you in the theater.

Many of the filmmakers reported that they had always meant to do something like this—to document the life of someone dear to them—and that this competition provided the incentive to finally do it. The cash award sets this competition apart from many festivals, but ultimately the most rewarding part was in the doing. One of the filmmakers put it this way:

I showed my Dad the film last night and it made him cry. It was a powerful moment between us, so I must say I have already won something that is most precious.... I am emotionally raw from it in a way that I have not felt with my work in some time. I know the work I am most proud of over the years is the work that has come from the deepest places in my soul, and this film certainly found a new place at the top of this list.
Ultimately, our strategy to democratize the filmmaking process proved empowering: filmmakers responded with passion and purpose that far exceeded our expectations. We collected many more stories, and garnered a far wider audience, than we would have had we just made a single, long-form documentary.

Perhaps the most rewarding outcome was an unintended one. Those in the starring roles and those behind the camera came to serve as amazing ambassadors for the Minnesota Historical Society. They helped spread the word in communities across the state, spoke to their local newspapers, e-mailed their friends and gathered their families. Through their experience, they gave voice to why we do what we do. No marketing message or public relations campaign is as true as their authentic appreciation for the opportunity we afforded them. It was endorsement of our commitment to preserve Minnesota’s history—a history and commitment we all share.

My heartfelt thanks go out to the generation who so evocatively shared their stories and to the generation of filmmakers, including Matt Ehling and Tom Drube, who so lovingly recorded it.
Remembering Grandma Lucy
Tom Drube

My impression of history prior to my involvement with the Minnesota Historical Society came from watching the History Channel. I felt that history was reserved for the fantastic, that such stories and data were the reason for history museums. I fully bought into the tired cliché that those who didn’t understand history were destined to repeat it. History, in this more serious context, was reserved for policy makers and social leaders. I had license to treat it as an escape and entertainment. I could draw on it when I wanted to as one might enjoy a game of golf or a fantasy movie at the theatre. This would change when my daughter Ali brought home a flyer from an event she participated in as part of her history class at school.

The flyer called on normal folks like us to make a ten-minute film on someone from Minnesota’s greatest generation. When Ali’s grandma Lucy had passed away, a movie much like that had been prepared as part of the memorial service. It seemed like a remake might serve a purpose for both Ali’s school projects and as a means for us to work together.

My mother’s story is anything but fantastic, as it was typical for a large number of folks growing up in the 1920s and ’30s. As a youth she was in and out of various sanitariums in Minnesota as she battled tuberculosis. She spoke very little about this time as I was growing up, but as I became an adult she spoke more freely. Eventually a musty shoebox of pictures was shared that showed her as a young girl and what was “home” for her in her formative years. She was at the Ah-Gwah-Ching Sanitarium for Consumptives near Walker, Minnesota, as a teenager. Several years before she passed away, I accompanied her to a class reunion in Ortonville, Minnesota. On the return, we stopped at the then-vacant Riverside Sanitarium, where she had finished her recovery. It was there that she revealed that she had met my father there when he was a patient. My father, much more private than even my mother, had never shared this information. Large gaps in understanding where I had come from slowly began to have the fog lifted from them, and now I had a chance to lift them for Ali.

We started with the VHS tape put together for Mom’s service and the box of pictures. Sorting through them we realized that we had an opportunity to make this seem even more real for Ali by visiting her grandmother’s first sanitarium home. Ah-Gwah-Ching is a nursing home now, but when Lucy was there it was full of TB patients. We
Ali behind Building B at Ah-Gwah-Ching, as featured in the short film.

Grandma Lucy at Ah-Gwah-Ching when she was a patient there, (left) at the same doorway as Ali and in bed.
took a summer road trip to Walker and photographed the site. With
the nearly seventy-year-old photographs in hand, we were able to
replicate the shots for a then-and-now effect. One such picture was
to include Ali sitting on the very bench that my mother had sat on
decades ago. Comparing the two, I can see my mother’s teenaged
face smiling at me through Ali’s.

In order to get our dates right, we visited the Minnesota History
Center in St. Paul. After several hours of online searches, we came
across several boxes that stored Ah-Gwah-Ching records. In one was
the original patient-admittance record book. There, in the original
handwritten ink, was my mother’s name, the date and time of her
arrival, and the names of those dropping her off. A chill went through
me, as though I was transported in time. And then another revela­
tion: immediately next to her name was my Aunt Florence’s. I had
not known that she, too, had been admitted to the “San.” Yet another
layer of fog lifted.

Both my mother and her sister were subsequently discharged,
but my mother was readmitted. Shortly after being readmitted there
was yet another discharge and readmittance, which we had trouble
understanding. We then visited the death certificates for my mother’s
family and verified that her mother had in fact died of TB and that
her older brother Leo had also died from the infection, although his
was meningitis tuberculin. My mother had always professed that
Leo did not die from TB, but rather meningitis, but that was appar­
tently only half true. My grandfather’s death certificate verified that
he passed while Mom was at Ah-Gwah-Ching, which explained the
short discharge, as she was permitted to leave to attend his funeral.

Ali and I spent priceless hours discussing Lucy’s time growing up
and how it may have shaped who we were as a family. Ali quickly
realized that the TB that had killed several in her grandma’s family
and had almost killed her grandmother was also what had brought
her grandparents together. Without the tragedy of the TB, Ali would
not be here. She also grew to understand that the defining charac­
teristic of the greatest generation was not the circumstances that
they endured, but rather the hope they had for a better tomorrow.

It was around these themes that we began to assemble our film.
Like all projects, the approaching deadline for submittal was a
necessary threat to make sure something got done. We knew that
we would essentially be creating a narrated slide show, so we orga­
nized the presentation into sections and began to write a narrative.
Since Ali was to narrate, she was the final editor on the choice of
words. In the end, we had a bit of trouble with the sound and were
ever reminded of how much we missed the opportunity to capture
Lucy’s story in her own words. We would learn, however, that the only
important thing is the story itself.
Completing the film with Ali was more rewarding than I could have imagined, and yet there was more reward in store. The evening of the film presentations challenged my long-held feelings about history. I came to realize how important an audience was for a story. Each contributor to the film festival was given this gift of a venue for their work to be seen. As such, the day became more of a conversation than a presentation. I found myself more intrigued with the simple, honestly delivered stories of my peers than I could ever be by the History Channel. I remember the film by Roger Bindi. His subject, Terrence Brennen, tells how he worked all summer for 50 cents, only to lose it as he ran home. I remember Samuel Hendersen's film showcasing his grandfather, whose wit in telling simple stories of managing a farm drew me in. These stories were very personal and so very familiar in their human connection. These people's lives were built on a collection of interpersonal relationships that I could understand because they were not that different than my own. It became apparent that our technical shortcomings could not undermine the impact we could have by simply making a film and telling a story. In the end we also were rewarded in knowing that the stories would be preserved at the History Center and as such would not simply be lost.

In the end, my attitude toward the History Center changed. I no longer saw it as a museum of the spectacular, there for my amusement, but rather a library of our common bonds. I was not a customer demanding to be entertained, but a part of it. We were the history. While I don't reject the tired cliche that we must understand history so as not to repeat it, I now see both the role of our history museums and
my own in documenting who we are in a much different light. Each of us has an obligation to future generations with our stewardship of the past. We have a basic need to feel safe and to belong. If we feel separate from other groups, we push ourselves from them and our ability to relate as people fades. If we feel a part of something larger, we tend to communicate and draw closer.

History, it seems, has a half-life. What we remember diminishes with time. By documenting what we know, we preserve the truth for more generations. This increases the number of generations that can, in turn, find that sense of belonging. The History Center has continued its campaign to collect real and personal stories in the years following our submittal of My Grandma Lucy. Each year I have been eager to participate again. Each year I have found a personal subject within my own family in hopes that our story will resonate with the others in the festival. Each year I look forward to the conversation.
From Book to Film—The Artifacts of Wartime History

Matt Ehling

The book was a thin volume—light gray and gently worn at the binding. On its title page, the following was written:

This is a testimonial without names, and with just one number: The 60th.

My grandfather Bill served in the 60th Infantry Regiment—part of the First Army’s Ninth Infantry Division. Bill joined up with the 60th in England, shortly after the Allied assault on Utah Beach. The next day, he found himself in combat in Europe. He remained there until well after the war was over, as part of the American occupation army.

Three years later, a small commemorative volume entitled Follow Thru was mailed to my grandfather. Written by Morton J. Stussman of the U.S. Army, the booklet chronicled the exploits of the 60th Infantry’s "Go Devils" in pictures and in text. This book soon joined the other artifacts that Bill kept from the war years, including his dress uniform and a pair of German officer’s swords. It was through this collection of items that I came to know the history of the Second World War.

I had other relatives who fought in the war. Many on my mother’s side had served, mostly in the Pacific. Some talked reluctantly about their experiences in combat. Some would not talk at all. Bill never hesitated in this way. As a child, I spent many summers at his farm, and heard long tales from the European campaign. For me, his stories, his uniform, and his book were not conduits to history—they were history. They made the war indelibly real, and established a connection with that time period that has never left me.

In the late 1990s, I decided that someone in the family needed to preserve my grandfather’s stories. One fall afternoon, I packed a microphone and audio recorder into my car and drove south to my grandfather’s farm. Around his kitchen table, we shared tales from his wartime experiences: the Battle of the Bulge, the taking of the Remagen bridge, the assault that killed every man in his unit except for him.

The tape sat on a shelf in my office for the next several years; an archival record of family history. Its main use, I assumed, would be in the years to come, when Bill was no longer with us.

In late 2006, I came across a notice for a film competition that the
Minnesota Historical Society was sponsoring. They were soliciting short films and videos about the experiences of the fabled “greatest generation” of the 1930s and ’40s.

After the publication of Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* compendium a decade before, my grandfather had mentioned to me that its celebration of World War II veterans was gratifying because such sentiments had not been widespread when he returned from Europe. Most people in his small, rural community wanted to forget and to simply move on. It would be fitting, I thought, to use the Historical Society’s contest as a way to craft a public tribute to my grandfather’s service—the kind that he had never received.

Slowly, I built a film around the audio recording of Bill’s stories. The final production, entitled *Coming Home*, was screened at the Minnesota History Center in the fall of 2007. Its emotional impact was clear. My grandfather’s taut storytelling delivered the audience to the war’s front lines, and presented an experience that was not easily forgotten. The recorded recitation of his tales won the competition’s top prize in 2007, and led to two years of screenings across the state.

The film’s impact on Bill has been marked. Its broad exposure—through the Historical Society and on public television—has led to many instances where strangers have stopped him in public to talk. Sometimes they have asked questions about his service. Mostly they have thanked him.

Much mythology surrounds the Second World War. This is understandable, for these myths rest upon truly astonishing events in American history. For the most part, the combatants in that war were
Three generations of the Ehling family—including World War II veteran Bill and his grandsons and filmmakers Mark (left) and Matt (right), and Matt's son Joseph—were represented at the Minnesota History Center when their film Coming Home earned the Best Film Award in 2007.
not professional soldiers. They were farmhands and factory workers. They were given six weeks of basic training and a rifle, and were placed on a boat bound for combat. A handful of years later, they had defeated Fascism across the globe.

On its own, an individual’s oral history cannot provide a complete picture of such an event. Nor can it always extract accurate details from decades-old memories. However, its value lies in providing a visceral connection to a historical moment. For the generations that cannot experience the original event, oral histories, video compilations, and other artifacts can bridge great distances and make the intangible real. This is what my grandfather’s war stories—and his book—did for me. Perhaps his short film has done the same for others.

Recently, the book passed into my hands. A couple of years after the film first screened, my grandfather approached me at a family gathering. In his hands was the slim gray volume I had read as a child. “You should have this,” he told me.

I first set eyes on my grandfather’s book many years ago. There have been births and funerals since. Now, I have a son of my own. One day, when he is old enough to understand, we will head south to my grandfather’s home town. We will sit on a bench in the late afternoon and read from the book.

Inside, amidst photos of combat and dead men, one can still see the scrawl of my father’s colored pencils in the margins—remnants of his childhood attempts to write. The pages have yellowed, but the pigments are still vibrant. The book’s sole color photograph is reproduced on page twelve. It is a picture of a graveyard, bathed in the day’s waning light. Underneath it, the following is written:

"It was a tough grind, cruelly out of proportion for sports loving youngsters when pitted against bitterly fanatical men who knew no rules. And yet they won."^2

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1 Morton J. Stussman, Follow Thru (Stuttgart: Chr. Scheutele, n.d.).
2 Stussman, Follow Thru.
Since 2006 the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) has held a Public Perspectives Exhibition Series in its Independence Community Gallery, providing a forum for Brooklynites to have an active voice at BHS by presenting community-curated exhibits. Topics have included Chinese immigration, Italian Catholic culture, storefront façades, gentrification, and affordable housing. The following is a conversation between Deborah Schwartz, director of the Brooklyn Historical Society, and Bill Adair, director of the Heritage Philadelphia Program, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, reflecting on the BHS's community-curated exhibitions program.

Bill Adair: Can you tell me how the Public Perspectives gallery got started? I know this is something that you initiated when you came to the Society. How did it begin, and what was the thinking behind it?
Deborah Schwartz: I knew that it was important for the Brooklyn Historical Society to signal to Brooklyn's incredibly diverse and complicated communities that this was a place that was for everyone, that the history that was told here was not just a very narrow slice of history. We are located in a very beautiful, very well-to-do neighborhood in Brooklyn Heights, surrounded by beautiful 19th-century brownstones, and frequently people perceive this to be the Brooklyn Heights Historical Society rather than the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS). So the question was what do you do to change that, and so I began to think and talk with my staff and trustees about what we...
could do, what kind of project we could construct that would really allow us to give a welcoming signal.

And that’s really what the Public Perspectives project was born from. Theoretically we wanted to say to people that we don’t think we always have the definitive version of history here. And as a practical matter, we certainly don’t have the time or the resources to go into the nooks and crannies of Brooklyn and pull out all that history, reveal it to people, and help them think about it and be engaged with their own history. We need their help—their input. So we then set up this project, and fortunately we had a couple of funders who were very excited about it. The concept was to put out an open call to people in Brooklyn who had ideas about how to tell history—what history they wanted to tell, sometimes in a very small way, a very small slice, and at other times a more ambitious look at pieces of history related to Brooklyn. We worked very hard to create a set of guidelines that we thought were smart, that would be clear to people, not so complicated that they would be put off by it. We were trying to reach all kinds of people—definitely not just people who already knew how to curate exhibitions. We knew that we were going to put in a certain amount of time and energy to facilitate these projects once they were chosen in order to make good projects, and off we went.

Bill Adair: So how does this process play out?
Deborah Schwartz: The first thing we did was we set up an advisory group; it changes year after year, but the group basically consists of historians, folklorists, artists, and, at this point, somebody who has been through the process before—

Bill Adair: From the Brooklyn community?
Deborah Schwartz: Professionals from the community, including a traditional art curator who is part of the process. The advisors rotate, so there are always some people who have been through the process before and others who are new.

Bill Adair: Any society staff on that advisory committee?
Deborah Schwartz: There is nobody from the society on that advisory group.

Bill Adair: That sounds scary.
Deborah Schwartz: There are two staff members who facilitate the process, so they bring in the proposals, they review them, they put them together, they send out packets to the advisors in advance. And they are there in the room as the advisors are making their decisions, and there’s a very clear set of criteria. What are we looking for in these shows? The criteria are broad, but very clear. The staff is there to remind the advisors about the criteria and the priorities of the program.

Bill Adair: So you send out a call for ideas.
Deborah Schwartz: There’s an RFP—a form that people have to fill out. It’s on the website so anybody can see it at any time, and that form requires certain compo-
You have to articulate the idea you have. You have to show us some images. You have to give us a sense of what your preliminary checklist would be. There are certain kinds of proposals that are disallowed. You can’t be one individual artist, because we knew we would get lots of proposals like that, and that’s not the point of the project. The advisors review all the proposals, and then they come together for a day, and they sit in a room together, and they review things. And they pick three proposals for the year, and have backups in case for some reason somebody falls through on us. And then their work is done. At that point we make contracts with the groups and decide on a schedule.

**Bill Adair:** How does the budget work?

**Deborah Schwartz:** We have stipends for the groups. The stipends can be used in any way they want for putting up the exhibition. They can buy framing supplies, they can pay designers with it, they can do whatever it is they feel they need. They can’t have any more than we give them—it’s $2,000. And we make it clear that there’s not going to be more if you come back to us and say, “Oops.” And then we provide funds for a postcard announcement and an opening reception for the exhibition. The guest curators design the postcard and then we send it out to our patrons and members, and they send it out to their own mailing lists. This is a crucial piece of audience building for BHS.

Part of what organizers have given us in their original proposal is some sense of ideas for public programs that they want to run in tandem with the exhibition, and that’s an important criterion.
for judging the projects. We want to see that it’s people who are interested in engaging with the public beyond the actual exhibition experience.

So the process is interesting, because once we’re really rolling up our sleeves and doing this, the community groups have learned a great deal about what it means to put up an exhibition. And we, the staff, put a lot of energy into it, not to shape their exhibition or their ideas as much as to shape what they know about the possibility of the exhibition as a medium.

**Bill Adair:** So you see the staff’s contribution as technical assistance rather than conceptual or content assistance?

**Deborah Schwartz:** Right. I think one place we get a little closer to conceptual input is that we give the community groups the option of including things from the collection. Some people are savvy enough and come in thinking about the artifacts. They’d like to use X, Y, and Z from the BHS collection. Other people haven’t even thought about that, and we will present this as an option. If they say no, it’s totally fine. So it’s not very interventionist.

**Bill Adair:** So any content is acceptable?

**Deborah Schwartz:** The one place I’ve seen my staff be a little bit heavy-handed is on the occasion when somebody has come in with an idea that turns out to be more of a book on the wall. We had somebody who had been writing a dissertation on a topic and wanted to do the show. Great topic, great show, fabulous work, fabulous history, but the person did not know how to translate that. So we put a lot of energy into that, helping the curator to think about how to represent some of these ideas using artifacts and images and less text.

**Bill Adair:** Design and fabrication of an exhibition is such a big deal in contemporary museums, so how much are the groups involved in design and fabrication?

**Deborah Schwartz:** It really varies. Ultimately, they are the ones who put up the show.

**Bill Adair:** Physically?

**Deborah Schwartz:** Physically. Again—we are present. Sometimes they ask for our advice about designers or art handlers and that’s not a problem for us—but they have to pay these people from their stipend and the groups themselves are doing the work and making decisions.

**Bill Adair:** When you founded this program did you have as an explicit intention the goal of sharing historical and curatorial authority with your audiences?

**Deborah Schwartz:** Very, very much so. It was absolutely the purpose of this, to signal to people, “This place belongs to you. We as an institution and as a professional staff don’t know everything there is to know about Brooklyn’s history, about your history, about your church’s history—whatever it is. And we are interested in honoring your assessment of that history.” And we do not assume that we are actually going to completely agree with everything that gets put out there, but we insist on a pretty
rigorous process. If we see that somebody's ideas seem very sloopy or unformed, that's not likely to be one of the exhibitions our advisors would select.

Bill Adair: What about offensive or potentially offensive ideas? Or even controversial? Have you faced that yet?

Deborah Schwartz: The current exhibition [summer 2010] is about a particular set of subsidized, affordable housing in Brooklyn, now in the throes of a lot of political controversy with huge financial implications for the tenants and the developers. This exhibition was put together by some of the tenants who are also very vocal activists. It's their point of view, and we knew that, and we're totally okay with that. We've had people do a project around Atlantic Yards, where the new Nets Stadium will be built—also highly controversial. These are all very hot topics in Brooklyn.

Public Perspectives projects are about giving a lot of voice to a lot of different people, and it took me a while to make sure that I was ready for any confrontations, should they come. So far, any confrontations I have had have been very private. People call me up and say, "Why'd you do that show? That's not right." And the most interesting thing for me is that I get to say, "This is part of a program that is very deliberately about letting people have voices here. And it's not your voice—it's okay that it's not your voice. It's their voice, and that's very clear in the exhibit, in the way it's set up," and so far that works.

Bill Adair: Were you looking at other models of similar practice when you developed this program, or do you think it's really a new kind of model? How radical is this kind of practice, where you turn over the exhibition content to your audience?

Deborah Schwartz: I actually don't think it's radical. I think there've been versions of community-driven galleries in museums for decades. It's interesting to me, however, that there haven't been more of these recently. I think this work is largely being done on the Internet these days.

But I've had a couple of colleagues call and say, "I'm taking your idea. Is that okay?" and I say, "Of course it's okay. It's fabulous." We weren't looking at a particular model when we began this program. As a practical matter, we were mostly building from scratch.

Bill Adair: Has there been pushback from the staff or the board at all in terms of the process or any of the content?

Deborah Schwartz: No. The staff and board have been very happy with this project. The only issues that have come up have been around the amount of physical space that we give it. And that is the dilemma of being a small institution, because when we turn over space for a big chunk of time to these shows, it means there's something else we're not doing. So the board is eager to see us show off more of our permanent col-
lection, and they are totally right about that. We have a gorgeous and fascinating permanent collection. The felt need to continue Public Perspectives AND show more of the collection has led us to create a new configuration of the first floor of the building and the lower level, and probably a year and a half from now we'll have another really nice exhibition space carved out of the building. This will include a better gallery space for Public Perspectives.

Bill Adair: That's a real commitment on the part of the institution.

Deborah Schwartz: Yes, and that's very exciting. There's no question we're very different from a brand new history center with a new large facility. So we've got to be really creative about how we think about our space and how we use the space.

Bill Adair: Do you think the project has truly worked as a community building exercise? Do you think it's worked in terms of building new audiences, maybe even bringing new members? Do you think it's built a sense of community between the institution and the neighbors or among community members? How has that played out?

Deborah Schwartz: I think it has definitely served to bring new people to the Historical Society who have not been here, hadn't known about the place. A major dilemma that so many museums face— if you do something that resonates for a group of people who have otherwise been alienated, does that instantly turn them into regular, engaged members? A little hard to tell. A little hard to track. I do think a lot more people know we're here. They know our resources now. We've built important relationships through this program.

Bill Adair: You have many tentacles out there in the community now as a result of Public Perspectives?

Deborah Schwartz: That's right, but it's a little hard to quantify. I don't think that we've done everything we can to keep these folks close to the organization. On the other hand, we've had people who participated in Public Perspectives who then turn out to be regular members of our freelance education staff—they do talks and tours and have become actively engaged in the institution. That gives us a great feeling.

Relationships, programs, connections, networks—that is very appealing and it's what a small history center such as this one can and should be at this moment in time, with the limits we have on space, on resources, on staff. We've found a way to be vibrant for people.

Bill Adair: I think many people in the public history field are wondering right now about these kinds of projects. We're all interested in them and noticing this trend among ourselves, but are our audiences noticing it? Does it make audiences more attached to an institution, or could it make them more suspicious of an institution? If we're sharing authority with our
visitors, then the other visitors that come in are being asked to hear from peers rather than historical or curatorial experts. Is that something that they want?

**Deborah Schwartz:** These are really important questions and we haven’t yet done any systematic evaluation. I think it’s time to do that. It probably needs to be a longitudinal study in that you can’t do it for just one show. You’ve got to do it for three, four shows or you won’t really get a sense because the shows are so different from one another. Sometimes we hear “I’m not sure I like the point of view of that show,” which is one way that people talk about it. They know that it’s a very distinctive point of view, and it’s not one they share. We are very deliberately sharing authority with some of our visitors and we need to evaluate the impact on everyone. We need to do that study.

**Bill Adair:** The value that the society now places on sharing authority with its communities—it’s got to emanate from the leader of the institution, right? Certainly one of your roles as director is to clarify and communicate the value system of the institution. How do you set the tone for shared authority with your board, with your staff—and, of course, your audience?

**Deborah Schwartz:** We’re a very small staff, and so we’re in the very wonderful position of being able to communicate very efficiently and deeply in small groups—there are fifteen of us here. So when an idea is gestating, you throw it out to your colleagues and you have a healthy discussion and debate about it. It’s not that everything is done as a democracy. But there is definitely a sense that we’re in this thing together and everyone has a voice. I think the staff that’s here is drawn to the vision that we’ve developed since I’ve been here.

When we were looking for a new archivist—a professional who is charged in part with the job of protecting the collections—we asked candidates about their interest in public access—not just access to scholars, but to lay people. We told them about Public Perspectives. I asked people how they felt about working in an archive where young teenagers were just as welcome as anybody else to come in. I listened very carefully to the answers, and we now have an amazing staff here who totally loves what we’re doing. So, you put the right people in the stew pot together, and it’s not that hard. I haven’t felt as if we were dragging people kicking and screaming into this process of sharing authority.

Quite frankly, I also have some very trusted funders that I run things by. That makes a big difference, too, if somebody’s going to invest in your value system. We’ve had very good luck with funding Public Perspectives. People understand it. It’s not hard to explain. Our track record is pretty interesting, and so it continues to have legs. It might at some point get tired, and that would be okay. You have to pay a lot of attention and
know if you’ve spent an idea.

**Bill Adair:** You mentioned that several other institutions are doing community curating projects like yours but are doing them online. Quite a few organizations are beginning to experiment with sharing curatorial authority online, but doing it in real space is a very different thing. How important is it to you that these exhibitions be real space projects and not virtual projects?

**Deborah Schwartz:** Very important. The reason that I think we care so much about doing this physically is because we want to signal to people that this building in this particular place is full of surprises, is not what you expect it to be. It is a place that really is co-owned by the community. And you can’t do that by just having it play out online. That is about the physical place. And even though I may complain at times about having too small a place, it is very important that some of our space physically be turned over to the public so that their voices can be heard.

**Bill Adair:** Do you think it validates people’s stories and histories to have them presented here in this grand building?

**Deborah Schwartz:** I hope so. For us it’s about saying, “We really want you to know that this is here for you. You might not think it’s here for you, you might not even know it’s here, you might never have been in Brooklyn Heights, but come check us out, and here’s a really good reason to come check us out.” So that’s an agenda that is somewhat self-serving. But I also think for an institution like this one to be a gathering place for the community is a very good way to use this building. And you can’t do that, obviously, if it’s all virtual.

**Bill Adair:** Has the program evolved or changed in response to the feedback you’ve gotten from the participants?
Deborah Schwartz: There are a few things that have changed. We clarified some things about what we were looking for. We gave people more time. We changed the makeup of the advisory committee a little bit. We found some new places to publicize the program. And we put the shows up for a little bit longer now than we did at first. But I think otherwise the project has been pretty steady. I think the staff has learned a lot about what to expect. We’ve had what I think are really instructive moments that were not always easy: with community curators not meeting deadlines, or showing up late for meetings. People who don’t work in the field don’t always understand (or care) about deadlines, and don’t have any idea about the consequences of delays. Occasionally this is really hard on the staff and they get frustrated. But the process of give and take, of learning to know and respect stylistic and cultural differences and expectations is all a part of what it means to share authority. So, it turns out that we are teaching our community curators how to make exhibitions, but we are also learning about tolerance and openness ourselves. The process requires an adjustment for staff. And I think that makes us a more interesting and community-engaged institution.

Bill Adair: So there have been some cultural barriers. Do you think there might be ways in which this curatorial process doesn’t translate cross-culturally? What about language barriers?

Deborah Schwartz: We have not yet had a group participate in Public Perspectives who was not English speaking, and we haven’t really figured out how to address that. I think we know that we have some serious limitations in what we could respond to, and so then the question becomes how do we find the resources to pay translators, etc. I would say one of my real disappointments was when we did a Public Perspectives exhibition about the history of the Chinese immigrant community in Brooklyn. We worked closely with the Brooklyn Chinese-American Association and they helped us with publicity, and we brought on a Chinese speaking intern who translated exhibition texts into Chinese and who wrote a press release in Chinese. But with the exception of the opening we didn’t get a lot of the Sunset Park Chinese community here. And that was a big disappointment. There are probably a lot of reasons why that didn’t work, some of which we might have been able to rethink and some of which in retrospect is not so surprising. I think it’s partly about, again, a lack of resources—not being able to put full-page ads in Chinese in the local Chinese newspapers and things like that. That could’ve made a difference; we’ll never know for sure.

Bill Adair: How far do you think that the society could go, and institutions like this—in terms of sharing authority with visitors? Are there next steps? Are there other boundaries and barriers between staff and visitors that are still to be broken down, do you think?
TIVOLI  A PLACE WE CALL HOME
Deborah Schwartz: Yes, I think we will always be looking at interesting ways to share authority, to use a constructivist approach to what we're doing, not just in education, but in everything we do. I think it's very interesting, appealing, smart, a little unpredictable in the good sense, and fits well in a place where, even if you wanted to run a really old-fashioned, authoritative place, you actually aren't terribly well-equipped to do so. So, am I always seeing exactly where it's going to go next? No. But I pay a lot of attention to the lessons that you can learn from each of these things that we do. I think we are always asking how we want to position ourselves in a world in which we are looked to as some sort of authority.

I think we do keep pushing the boundaries. I hope we will always push them, because I just think it gives us such incredibly interesting results.

Bill Adair: So you've never had a sense that you've opened a Pandora's box? That this very open process is leading you to potentially uncomfortable places and you're going to lose control completely? Where's this authority sharing going to end? Certainly a lot of organizations fear that.

Deborah Schwartz: In fact, I actually think it's almost the inverse of that. The more we do this, the less fearful we get. What happens is a relationship gets built between the staff and the group, and there is a lot of back and forth. By the time staff and community have been working together for several weeks there is a lot of trust on both sides.

The staff and community groups use each other as sounding boards. You see curators do this with each other all the time, right? In the end, there's not really a lot of fear here. Maybe someday we'll run into a really tricky spot, but not so far.

Bill Adair: So all of the Public Perspectives projects have been a success?

Deborah Schwartz: Of course it depends on your definition of success. We're obviously very focused on process—our engagement with the groups, the evolution of their thinking and knowledge about how to put up an exhibition. And sometimes those lead to final products—exhibitions—that are fabulous, and sometimes they lead to exhibitions that are less than fabulous. And so the question is—Is it okay that in the end the audience who's coming to see this project has a less-than-fabulous experience of an exhibition? Because we have chosen to cede our authority to some extent, we live with a certain discomfort—knowing that there are going to be times when the process of creating these exhibitions is better than the end product. That may be the most controversial part of this. That may be the part that for some people is just simply not acceptable—particularly people in the history and museum fields. And I have had those arguments with people.

Bill Adair: But for you it's okay?

Deborah Schwartz: For me it's
Okay, and for this institution it’s okay. It also isn’t the only thing we do. There are moments when we assert our authority and there are other moments when we take an institutional back seat. In the future we may want to take up a topic that comes to us originally through Public Perspectives and we’ll present a different version—our version of it—complete with scholarly advisors and authoritative narrators. A lot of fabulous ideas have come out of Public Perspectives that I could imagine revisiting any number of subjects with additional resources and expertise. Wouldn’t it be fascinating to see some of the Public Perspectives stories played out using utterly different methodologies?

Bill Adair: So there’s still room for the traditional curator-curated exhibition at the Brooklyn Historical Society?

Deborah Schwartz: Of course—a little.