

# History as a Catalyst for Civic Dialogue

**SESSION DESCRIPTION:** How can we tap the power of history to engage people in meaningful dialogue about today's civic concerns? Two projects that boldly call forth histories of slavery, marginalization, and displacement are the focus: the St. Augustine's Church Slave Galleries Project explores issues of marginalization on the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and Evoking History, an ongoing program implemented in conjunction with the Spoleto Festival USA, connects Charleston's past to current issues of race, cultural tourism, development, and gentrification. Participants will hear about approaches to dialogue through connections to restoration (Slave Galleries) and public art and education projects (Evoking History), and examine practical and philosophical challenges inherent in history-based civic dialogue. Among questions for exploration are: How can the search for truth in histories previously untold, hidden, denied offer opportunity for deep and honest dialogue? How can you offer one group's history to inspire dialogue and connections between other groups/communities, while maintaining specificity of ownership of that history? What practical (e.g., education, community development) and poetic roles can arts play in history-based civic dialogue? How do you allow a program to morph over time and maintain a sense of trust in the future during dormant or dry periods?

**PRESENTERS:** *Mary Jane Jacob, Evoking History, Spoleto Festival USA; Rev. Deacon Edgar Hopper, St. Augustine's Episcopal Church; Liz Sevcenko and Lisa Chice, Lower East Side Tenement Museum*

**RESPONDENTS:** *Glenn Wharton, conservator, research scholar, New York University; Rob Jones, National Conference for Community and Justice/Southeastern New England; John Kuo Wei Tchen, Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, New York University*

**SESSION LEADER:** *David Thelen, Indiana University, Bloomington*

## INTRODUCTION

**David Thelen:** History as a catalyst for civic dialogue provides us with both opportunities and limits. This work is about opening up history, using it to be better citizens. History is about objects, about real things that have happened. It's about what humans can do. We needlessly narrow what we call history by thinking it's only about the past. We also narrow it by making the context the actor (as opposed to making the individuals the actor); as in, "The depression caused great upheavals in society" instead of "First their neighbors were laid off. Soon no one in the house had a job, the plant wasn't hiring, and the grocer cut off everyone's credit."

Instead we could re-inhabit history, and see history the way people did as they lived it, re-experience it. We could use methods that don't just teach events and outcomes, but provide the context of the people who were there, so that we today can see what they saw, understand what they believed, know what they aspired to, and fear what they feared. People make their own history—it doesn't happen to them—in terms of constrained situations. By standing in the shoes of others, we can look at the environment and see its constraints better. And we can see new parts of ourselves and of our civic life by living in the personality and the situations of historical others by asking why they made the choices they did.

In South Africa, the Peace and Reconciliation Commission has established a working definition of historical truth with four components:

1. Forensic truth, based on concrete objects, the truth of the observer (but not the truth of the person experiencing it)
2. Narrative truth, the story of the survivor (there can be as many versions of this truth as there are storytellers)
3. Dialogic truth, resolving different experiences of the event face to face
4. Healing truth, the truth defined by its usefulness (it is instrumental for repairing people).

## SLAVE GALLERIES PROJECT

### HISTORY OF THE GALLERIES AND BACKGROUND ON CIVIC ISSUE

**Deacon Edgar Hopper, St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church:** St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church was built in 1828 for the city’s patrician elite. Today, it houses the largest African American congregation of any denomination on the Lower East Side. The congregation worships in the shadow of two “Slave Galleries,” haunting, box-like rooms above the balcony where African Americans were forced to sit for much of the 19th century. This rare artifact of racial segregation in New York stands as a stark, physical reminder of how and why boundaries of marginalization are drawn and contested.

Concerned that the African American population on the Lower East Side was diminishing as a result of gentrification, leaders of the church formed a committee, headed by Reverend Deacon Edgar W. Hopper, to preserve and interpret the Slave Galleries. They wanted to show physical evidence that African Americans were present in the neighborhood as early as the 1820s, and to leave behind a testament to African American struggles and contributions for the future.

In 1999, the Committee asked the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,<sup>1</sup> with which they already had a long relationship, to bring its extensive experience with research, preservation, and interpretation to the project. The Museum agreed to conduct fundraising, develop and direct a team of preservation architects, consulting historians, and researchers, and commit its own interpretive staff.

**Liz Sevckenko, Lower East Side Tenement Museum:** The Lower East Side was the first home in the United States for many immigrants during almost two centuries. Why are questions about the past relevant to the current civic society of the Lower East Side? The Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s experience in this neighborhood is that history matters, and that if you are represented as part of the neighborhood’s history, then your identity group can make a claim to the resources in the neighborhood today. At the museum, we try to represent the diversity of the neighborhood’s history by preserving the homes of some of the 7,000 immigrants from 20 different nations who lived in one building: 97 Orchard Street. The community immediately asked who gets to be represented in the building and who’s left out? Then, a few years ago, a historic district was created to highlight many nationally-renowned Jewish landmarks and the neighborhood exploded. This congregation called it a “historic ethnic cleansing,” while others denounced it as “excluding Hispanics.” We realized that the historic places in the neighborhood—in addition to representing diverse people and giving them a place in the neighborhood—needed to be catalysts for ongoing dialogue among different people about the bigger issues that divide them. So we brought together community leaders, including people from this congregation, to share their histories in the neighborhood and their concerns about the community today. It became the Lower East Side Community Preservation Project, dedicated to preserving historic places in the neighborhood for community dialogue. St. Augustine’s invited this group to visit the slave galleries and share their responses as the church worked to preserve them.

### RESEARCH AND PRESERVATION

**Liz Sevckenko:** Traditionally, when historians and preservationists begin a project, their goal is to uncover new information about the past. From the beginning, this project was different. Our goal was to try to create a catalyst for positive dialogue about and among different ethnic groups today. A research project that begins from that starting point looks to: 1) humanize the experience and help people to imagine and connect; and 2) complicate the story and inspire people to ask difficult questions. Instead of *forensic truth* (see above), this project was about the *narrative truth* of those who had experienced the gallery, in order to humanize the visitors’ experience of history, and to complicate the story of slavery in order to get people to consider difficult questions (i.e., the galleries were built the year after slavery was ended in New York so how does change happen?). We think of the past as a set of questions, those we ask visitors and those we ask ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The mission of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a gateway to America. The heart of the Museum is a tenement building at 97 Orchard Street, home to nearly 7,000 immigrants from 20 different nations between 1863 and 1935, when it was closed to residents.

Putting a human face on the experiences of the gallery was extremely difficult, since the African Americans of the congregation were rarely given names in any documents of the period. They might be marked with a line, or they might not be mentioned at all. Further, this subject has almost never been studied in American history. Finally, we found one name: Henry Nichols. As a “free colored person,” if he had gone to this or almost any church, he would have had to sit in a “Negro pew” together with enslaved African Americans from the South whose owners were visiting New York, indentured servants, domestics, and others. What were some of the questions Henry Nichols would have asked himself? What was his relationship to people in the sanctuary? What did the Gospel mean to him? Would he have seen himself as very different from others? What difference did it make when slavery was abolished? What did “freedom” mean?

He would have heard a number of different arguments among African American New Yorkers about segregation. Some said blacks should go to white churches and refuse to sit in the Negro pews. Others said they should establish their own churches. What would he and the people he sat with here think? What was his vision for the future of the Lower East Side? What did the people sitting in the sanctuary tell themselves about segregation? Who tried to make change? How did change get made? By imagining what they would have done if they had been in that situation, we hoped this ‘question form’ of history would encourage people to ask *themselves* the tough questions.

We conducted this work through dialogues with historians, congregants, and community members. Debate arose about whether to call it a slave gallery and whether to say there were slaves there. At the heart of the question was ‘What did it mean for African American New Yorkers when a law was passed abolishing slavery in 1827? What was the experience of freedoms and slaveries of the people sitting in the gallery?’

Most preservation work tries to find and keep new information about decorative arts, or technology, or building styles. We asked our preservation architect to find something very different: human experience—because wood, paint, and nails have ghosts in them. The galleries themselves were our most powerful witnesses to the lives of African Americans here. What was it like to sit in the galleries? Could people see? Could they hear? Were they locked in? Did they have pews to sit on?

By carefully scraping away layers of material, we could better understand what it was like, and what the people who constructed the galleries intended. We discovered that the window frames were installed after the original design of the galleries, suggesting that originally they would have been open for people to see. Through paint analysis, we also discovered that pews were used in the galleries, suggesting how people would have sat there. What would it have been like to see but not be seen? What did it feel like to have formal church seats but be sitting up in that space?

Because preservation deals with physical remains, it is possibly the most sensitive of all the work we did on the project. Our preservation architect asked us to share her experience with you. The emotional response elicited by this project is of an intensity I have not encountered in any of my preservation projects. I have encountered not only excitement and pride, but also denial, guilt, anger, and hostility. This is why the preservation of the Slave Gallery is exciting, for it offers the potential to be a vehicle for healing.”

That’s why all along the way, the slave gallery committee led conversations among themselves, and among other members of the community, about what we were finding, what it meant, and directed what more we wanted to find. The exploration of the past itself became a conversation in and about the present.

#### DIALOGUE PROCESS

**Deacon Hopper:** Why did St. Augustine’s decide to involve other community members? On the one hand, “marginalization” was a real issue facing the Lower East Side. On the other hand, we wanted to let the dialogues take their own direction and ask people to make their own meaning out of what they saw. It was very important to the congregation to preserve the Slave Galleries as a sacred site of African American people. But St. Augustine’s and the Tenement Museum believed that there were multiple heirs to the Slave Galleries’ difficult legacy. The Slave Galleries Project brought together more than 30 community preservationists—leaders representing African American, Asian, Latino, Jewish, and other ethnic and religious groups—with scholars and preservationists in a collaborative learning process based on facilitated dialogue and exchange. All along the way, they invited their diverse team of community

preservationists to comment on the latest research and make suggestions about how the story told to visitors could be made most relevant to their constituencies.

**Lisa Chice, Lower East Side Tenement Museum:** From one meeting to the next, dialogue questions were designed to move from sharing personal responses to imagining the range of reactions from each community. We started by asking people about how they felt. Then we asked, “What do the Slave Galleries symbolize that is meaningful to you and your community? How can the Slave Galleries be most relevant to the culturally diverse community of the Lower East Side? What kind of reaction do you think you might get from your community when visiting the Slave Galleries? And finally, we extended from conversations focused solely on the Slave Galleries and explored ideas for other Lower East Side sites that could be interpreted and offered to support community-building and collaboration.

In order to build the capacity of leaders in our neighborhood to inspire and facilitate new conversations all over the community, we offered a training opportunity for interested community preservationists who wanted to learn how to use local sites to facilitate dialogue about contemporary issues.

Fourteen community preservationists completed 16 hours of training. Working in teams of two, we challenged ourselves to pair across gender, ethnicity, and organizational affiliation. Partners co-facilitated practice dialogue sessions with members of one another’s communities and organizations. In three months, trainees conducted nine dialogues with groups of all ages and backgrounds, including at-risk teens from Chinatown, neighborhood seniors, and staff members from settlement houses and the New York Public Library. These dialogues were specifically designed around the experience of visiting a site. For example, Philip Cohen (Tenement Museum program director) and Minnie Currie (committee member) invited 12-year olds from the local Boys Club to the Tenement Museum. For these first-time visitors to the Museum, it was an opportunity to discover that the everyday experiences of immigrants are worthy of commemoration. They talked about the Boys Club, the local pizza parlor—places that are important to them. The boys asked whether African Americans lived in our tenement. They talked about places in their neighborhood that would help others understand or have insight into their lives and experiences.

#### OUTCOMES/IMPACT

**Deacon Hopper:** The best outcome was that through their participation in the Slave Galleries Project, more and more people in the neighborhood understood how important it is to take ownership of your history, and how taking ownership of the past can address issues of exclusion in the present. It allowed other community people to see what opportunities were there for them. In return, we received information about how to make the project relevant and inclusive to them and their constituencies. And we got wider recognition for our story and support for our project. We learned that yes, a space is powerful and can elicit responses. It’s funny how the responses differed according to age. Adults are guarded, teens are outraged, children immediately put themselves in the place of the enslaved people and start writing and sharing their reactions.

In terms of the Jewish historic district, that project drew the line around pieces of the neighborhood for the benefit of emphasizing the Jewish history and in a sense claiming the neighborhood. St Augustine’s Church cried foul (you can’t just divide the area up, accepting one building and rejecting the one next to it), and that feeling was part of the impetus for this civic action. The lines of the Jewish historic district were re-drawn after community input.

**Liz Sevchenko:** What does success look like? What are all the different outcomes, and how do you measure them? One very literal outcome was the expansion of the boundaries of the Lower East Side historic district.

Another was the fact that the group continued. The Slave Galleries Project has become a model for the field of historic preservation and human/civil rights. Community preservationists got a reputation after their work on the Slave Gallery and were invited to participate in two additional projects in the neighborhood. A group called Place Matters invited us all to work with public artists to mark places in the neighborhood that raise important issues in the community. The New York City Parks Department asked the group to advise who and what about the history of the Lower East Side should be marked in a new park. The themes of marginalization and exclusion have come up a lot in these projects: about segregation in public housing, the invisibility of day laborers, and gentrification. These projects have inspired ongoing conversations in which participants share their histories and talk about how to represent these issues in a way that will inspire ongoing dialogue in the community.

As Lisa pointed out, that is in itself a form of citizen engagement, the fact that working people take time to discuss and work together to shape the way the neighborhood's history gets expressed.

Does that count as inspiring citizen action? Is that our expectation or our goal? How can we acknowledge literal, measurable outcomes while still making meaning of the exchanges between people and the changes that happen silently within individuals? A question I have going forward is: How do we establish a goal/framework for fostering citizen participation that is focused enough to be productive but open enough to stimulate and capture all the possibilities.

## EVOKING HISTORY PROJECT

*Mary Jane Jacob, co-curator of Spoleto Festival USA, gave a slide presentation illustrating many of the works and activities from a forerunner program in 1991 and Evoking History in 2000–2003 and ongoing. The notes below don't attempt to reconstruct the slide presentation, but instead offer description of Evoking History and its dialogue elements. For more information about Evoking History and the report, Reflections on Evoking History: Listening Across Cultures and Communities visit [www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/spoleto.pdf](http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/spoleto.pdf).*

Spoleto Festival USA's Evoking History program looks at the contested sites of history in Charleston, South Carolina and the crucial issues challenging communities in the region. The program brings together artists, the festival, and the community to think deeply about the area's heritage. Charleston's culture is interwoven of diverse strains—black and white—of conflicted *and* shared values, and of deep ties to the past and reverence for ancestors in communities black and white. Its stories have a local origin, and a national role in American history, and a resonance with histories of subjugation, loss, and pain the world over. The program's task was enlarged to represent the community voices, which had had no previous representation in the Spoleto Festival. Convened as “stakeholders,” they greatly contributed to the final form of the artists' work and to the meanings they held. Thus, their words, along with those of colleagues and the artists, were recorded in *Evoking History: Listening Across Cultures and Communities*. It documents a diverse range of participants in year one (2000-2001): teachers, local museum people, artists, and a diverse range of citizens outside cultural fields; and national stakeholders from artistic, academic, museum, criticism, and aligned arts fields. Their commentaries follow an 18-month series of dialogues (July 2000-June 2001).

Dialogue was generated through two primary mechanisms:

- (1) Stakeholder forums. Stakeholders are individuals from different walks of life who are critically engaged at the nexus of art, history, and society and who each have a stake in Evoking History, whether it be of aesthetic, historical, civic, or social interest, professional, or family heritage-based. Stakeholders came together for periodic, issue-based discussions. These allowed program organizers and artists to listen to local constituencies, while enabling community members to meet and hear each other, in many cases for the first time. These meetings also were a means of identifying shared questions and concerns. For the stakeholders conference held during the festival, the local stakeholders were joined by national stakeholders, who undertake this type of work in their own communities and professions. Artists and curators also endeavored to relocate these issues within the critical discourse around contemporary art making, thus, shaping the final form of the artists' projects.
- (2) The artists' working processes and the artworks themselves. Artists made numerous site visits, and held one-to-one meetings and small group sessions, focused around a related series of critical questions. The consortium of local persons who worked intimately with each artists in year one continued to be involved in the Evoking History program in year two, taking on other roles and working in other capacities. They were joined by others, and together these local citizens informed the evolving stakeholders process. Importantly for other members of the public outside the creative circle of artists and collaborators, the artists' projects had an articulateness that conveyed the concerns invested in them and, thus, widened further the conversation.

## RESPONSE TO THE PRESENTATIONS

**Glenn Wharton, Museum Studies program, NYU:** Both projects re-enliven the past. They ask what version of the past should be told.

Preservation, restoration, conservation—these three terms have been used interchangeably, whereas within my field the differences are significant.

I see the implications for the King Kamehameha sculpture restoration project on the big island of Hawai'i, on which I worked. It was an Animating Democracy project. We could have allowed participants to re-inhabit the past. We could have brought artists in to offer new perspectives on the past (as in Charleston). But then there's this other process that we used that I'm calling "participatory conservation." I get people from the place to do the technical part, doing the physical work, get them up on the scaffold removing paint. This is another way—to use objects to get people connected to the past.

**Rob Jones, National Conference for Community and Justice:** I see the use of basing the discussion on history. It could be more powerful than traditional identity politics, moving from "Hey, we've all been marginalized!" to placing ourselves in the place of our forebears, "What was happening to our people in 1848?"

**Jack Tchen, Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, NYU:** It's hard to build vocabulary together when you are beginning dialogue, but when we examine a place, we experience things that bring us together. It's hard locally to figure out connections that we might share because we are cut off from historical analysis (and many things are intentionally forgotten or taboo). How do we gain access to specialists with deeper levels of knowledge (the historian, the conservator)?

*The points and questions below were brought up after a time of small group discussions:*

- Can outsiders help explore another group's history?
- When we re-inhabit the past, how do we keep the sharing of historic knowledge from being a talking head experience? How can we use art and creative techniques, like process drama, to reinhabit talks about history and keep it from being static?
- Memory is the first creative act!
- Resist the walls between us and the past (don't use "re-" in front of every word).
- Use history to move forward. You learn new things about the past all the time and our relationship to it is always changing. Our job is to make a place where that is understood. The past is not over. History is unfolding right now; how do we connect with that notion?
- How do you sustain efforts such as those we heard about today over the long-term? How do you keep momentum going?
- How do you get away from the "mythical past," i.e., the good old days that never were?
- How do we get past the b.s. of public dialogue to deeper more meaningful dialogue and how does history help us do that?
- There is potential in working across boundaries of scholarship, of exploding notions of academic scholarship [as these projects have demonstrated].