



TENEMENT MUSEUM

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Fig. 1. 103 Orchard Street, a five-story, 15-apartment building with a red brick façade, housed over 15,000 people from 1888 through the 20th century. Today, the *Under One Roof* exhibition is the third floor of the building.

From Neighborhood to Nation

The *Under One Roof* Exhibition at the Tenement Museum

Kathryn Lloyd

Discussions about immigration in the United States today are often framed around varying conceptions of “immigration then” versus “immigration now.” But what happened in between “then” and “now”? In 2013, the Tenement Museum began planning for a new exhibition to address this question and, in doing so, bridge gaps in understandings of immigration over time, and explore further how newcomers shaped the nation. We couldn’t have foreseen how necessary this exhibition would seem by the time we opened it in 2017, and we wondered how much building a bridge for visitors to “get across” from past to present could allow them to “get across” to each other.

We would develop the exhibition in a five-story tenement at 103 Orchard Street (fig. 1), on the same block of Manhattan’s Lower East Side as our foundational building at 97 Orchard Street, which opened as the Tenement Museum in 1988 to interpret the social history of the building’s former immigrant residents. Unlike 97 Orchard Street, which was only a residence through 1935, people lived in 103 Orchard Street through the 20th century. The building would enable us to physically interpret the decades after World War II, an era of American immigration history that receives far less attention in popular understanding. Many people are familiar with the fact that the United States experienced “immigration then,”

meaning the last large peak in immigration from 1880–1920, and that we currently experience “immigration now.” But the in between is often fuzzy. By interpreting families in the 1950s–1980s, we hoped to close a few existing gaps for the museum – between distant and recent immigration history, between our visitors and people in the past, and between the museum and the surrounding Lower East Side communities of people of immigrant and migrant origin.

When the new exhibition, titled *Under One Roof*, opened to the public in December 2017, guided tours brought visitors to the third floor of 103 Orchard Street and through the recreated rooms of apartment #7 to engage with stories of three real families who had lived in the building from the 1950s–80s: the Epsteins, Jewish Holocaust survivors from Poland and their American-born children; the Saez Velez family, Puerto Rican migrants; and the Wongs, a Chinese American family. The exhibition marked the first time the museum interpreted the recreated homes of non-European families, the first time we featured stories of refugees and migrants specifically, and the first time we told three families’ stories together in one exhibition. The families lived under one roof, physically, but we saw real opportunity to explore this as a metaphor – what can we learn from these families about how we negotiate space, diversity, and identity under the “roof” of the United States?

This question became even more important when, in the middle of our development process, the 2016 election and the anti-immigrant rhetoric surrounding it gave us another divide to consider – how do we address the history of immigration legislation and the influence of xenophobia and racism on that legislation? How do we do so in a way that invites visitors into the conversation? I’ll share here the ways that closing the gap in the

Fig. 2. The core of the exhibition is apartment #7, recreated and divided to tell the stories of the Epsteins, Saez Velezes, and Wongs in one continuous living space.

museum’s timeline and interpretation through *Under One Roof* helped us work on these goals, and brought us unexpected opportunities to deepen visitors’ experiences through personal stories, both their own and each other’s.

The Exhibition

Within the 900-square foot exhibition, which is only accessible through the museum’s signature guided tours, visitors move chronologically through apartment #7 after a brief introduction to provide historical context in an un-recreated space. We begin in the 1950s, when Mr. and Mrs. Epstein arrive in the Lower East Side as “displaced persons” (in today’s terms, refugees) from the Holocaust, in the minority as refugees in a neighborhood with a long history as a Jewish center. Next, we move to the 1960s, when Mrs. Saez and her two sons move in after arriving from Puerto Rico eight years earlier; then, to the 1970s to learn how Mr. and Mrs. Wong raise four children as one of the first Chinese families in the building. Today, the neighborhood is still home to many residents of Puerto Rican and Chinese heritage, and throughout the exhibition, our educators set the families’ stories in the historical and contemporary context of the neighborhood and the nation, and use oral-history excerpts from the families’ grown children to bring the spaces to life.

That context centers around how the 30 years after World War II are often neglected in the history of U.S. immigration due to the impact of the 1924 National Origins Act and the 40 years of highly restrictive, race-based immigration quotas it created. When the 1965 Hart-Celler Act opened the country’s “doors,” this time to people from China, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East, internal migration was also in full swing, with African Americans moving to New York from the American South and Puerto Ricans moving from the



archipelago to Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. These movements together transformed the Lower East Side into the most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood in New York City by 1970. Previously, the majority of the neighborhood’s residents shared a language or an ethnicity (it had been called Little Germany in the 1870s, the Jewish Lower East Side by 1900), but by 1970, no one group was in the majority.

The exhibition concludes in an immersive, interactive garment factory space, where visitors sit at sewing machines to activate

stories from the women who worked in Chinatown’s burgeoning garment industry in the 1980s. This concluding space ties together the three families’ stories, since the parents in each family worked in New York’s changing 20th-century garment industry. It also brings visitors purposefully out of a home space, where they can again consider broader national context. The museum’s decisions to interpret three family stories in one recreated apartment (fig. 2), and to include a contextualizing introduction and conclusion space, allow visitors the physical space to compare and

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contrast the family experiences, set them into bigger historical trends, and to reflect on the interwoven themes that emerge throughout the exhibition – intergenerational inheritance, cultural identity, belonging, women’s work, the realities of living across the hall from someone different from you. These themes, and the content to highlight these themes, were articulated through a multiyear process of evaluation and visitor testing that museum staff wrote into the goals of the project.

Content Testing Online

Our first goal for developing an exhibition focused on this time period was to find the themes that would increase potential for past-to-present connection-making around migration and American identity, for both our educators and our visitors. We also wanted to advance our use of digital tools to augment storytelling and create a deeper visitor experience, both onsite and as pre- and post-visit engagement, and achieve these goals through visitor-centered iteration. To do so, we pulled together an interdisciplinary team of historians, sociologists, digital designers, museum staff (including public-facing educators), architects, and an external evaluator. We had already been researching and working with the featured family members for several years, giving us hours of oral-history transcripts; with the museum’s focus on storytelling and connection-making, we knew that the backbone of the content development would be working with scholars, visitors, and educators to determine which stories from those oral histories resonated and illuminated larger themes.

To work towards these goals together with visitors, the museum received funding to create an online exhibition narrative where users could explore, through a linear narrative, the themes and content we were developing.

This website, 103orchard.tenement.org, was developed a full two years before the physical exhibition opened and gave us a platform to prepare our interpretation for the first rounds of evaluative visitor focus groups. Built with a Wordpress content management system, it was flexible enough to edit internally, and polished enough to use with the public. Additionally, this website met multiple exhibition goals: it extended the museum experience beyond an onsite visit, it offered a way to prototype exhibition media and narratives, and it connected our educators to exhibition content early in the process for training. Through initial focus groups around the digital exhibition website, we found what resonated with visitors, what needed refinement, and where the family stories tied to themes with universal potential.

Stories about Mrs. Saez and Mrs. Wong's membership in labor unions supported an exploration of networks of support for newcomer women; addressing the lack of a bilingual education program for Puerto Rican students in the 1950s highlights themes of inclusion and exclusion; and presenting all three of these families' experiences together through the stories of the adult children illuminated generational and neighborhood change.

Something else that formed a through-line for the Epstein, Saez, and Wong families' experiences was the mix of people in the neighborhood – memories were strong of their tenement hallway, school classroom, the corner store, the factory floor, and the local park as places where they shared space with others. In an urban neighborhood like this one, difference becomes part of the daily routine, what sociologists discuss as “commonplace diversity” – the idea that in super-diverse areas, differences in language, religion, ethnicity come to be viewed by residents as part of everyday life. Which, of course, isn't to say that means everyone gets along, that there

isn't tension or racism, but that difference isn't so different. On a micro level, the exhibition itself could even replicate the dynamic of a diverse neighborhood, where we're figuring out how to share space, and potentially learning about each other in the process. We hoped that we could extrapolate to explore this idea on a national level as well – what's needed to have a nation where difference is recognized, normalized, and honored? How do we all navigate living “*Under One Roof*” of the United States?

“That Song Made Me an American”

As we tested content narratives with visitors, we worked on how to transpose those stories into an immersive physical space enhanced by digital tools, to bridge the physical and digital. A goal of the exhibit was to integrate digital interactives into the exhibition space of the recreated apartment, and together with designers from Potion Design, we determined we wanted digital tools that would help us amplify multiple perspectives, offer more complexity, and enhance visitors' sense of immersion in a recreated space. We had begun to understand these digital-age storytelling “superpowers,” among others, during the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Digital Storytelling Conference, hosted by the Tenement Museum in 2016, in which the 30 participants worked to develop a digital-age storytelling toolkit which then informed our approach in this exhibition.¹ We also wanted stories that would determine the technology, not vice versa. Interestingly, some of the most resonant stories were actually **about** technology – Bella Epstein remembers begging her mother to buy her a Paul Anka record so she could listen to the song “Diana” in her bedroom, an experience which she

1 Digital Age Storytelling Toolkit, from the Tenement Museum and National Endowment for the Humanities; evaluation report by HG&Co, <http://digitalstory.lestm.org/>.



COURTESY OF POTION DESIGN



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Fig. 3. (top) A suitcase-style Steelman record player sits on a desk with school supplies. It is fitted with new technology to play a recorded memory from Bella Epstein Seligsohn about the music in her family's apartment.

Fig. 4. (bottom) A television set stands next to a plastic-covered couch in the Saez Velez living room. Educators can access three different videos of the family by changing the channel.

recalled, “made her an American”; José and Andy Velez talk about Spanish-language TV channels keeping them bilingual; Alison Wong recalls learning English from watching Sesame Street. These memories guided our decision to put oral history recordings on a record player (fig. 3) and a television set (fig. 4) that can be played by educators using the same actions that Bella and José used to hear a song or watch a show 50 years ago. With the help of a sound designer, we also threaded the apartment with soundscapes, bringing into the space recorded media and street sounds from the time period, as well as conversations in Yiddish, Spanish, and Taishanese (the first language of the Wongs and other Chinese residents).

When considering digital tools for our concluding, contextualizing space, we continued to let the stories and visitor interest lead the way. After a few ideas for digital interactives didn't feel connected enough to the Lower East Side, we realized that we had the opportunity to feed visitors' curiosity about the 1980s Lower East Side garment industry, where Mrs. Wong and her coworkers supported their families by sewing popular styles of women's sportswear. We decided to recreate a small-scale garment factory, and conducted rounds of content testing to help us understand how to foster curiosity and connections within a recreated garment factory, a space which, unlike an apartment, might be unfamiliar to many visitors. Inspired by exhibitions like *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* at the Minnesota History Center, we looked for ways visitors could discover individuals' personal stories on their own, through objects. We brought video interviews

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into industrial sewing machine tables through Raspberry Pi computers and small projectors placed beneath the tables, and linked audio and video stories to objects like rice bowls, kids' toys, and a pay phone. Visitors engage physically with the objects in a similar way that Mrs. Wong and her coworkers would have (fig. 5), touching a sewing machine or a rice bowl, picking up a payphone. We did not measure specifically how this exploration supported empathic connection-making, but many visitors commented on the intimacy of hearing the stories in this space, intimacy supported by using objects as anchors and activators of the stories. This work builds on exhibitions like *Open House*, demonstrating the power of interpreting multiple families over time in one space while giving visitors the chance to discover stories through interacting with objects. We found that visitors' personal connection-making was particularly amplified through the marriage of the digital with the physical.

Museums in Our Own Homes

Just as we invite visitors to take a seat at the sewing machines in the garment factory, we invite them to make themselves more comfortable by taking a seat at historic seating throughout the apartment space. Entering Mrs. Saez's living room, for example, visitors can sit on a plastic-covered couch and chair (fig. 4). This often elicits audible memories about the plastic-covered couches of their past: sleepovers at grandma's house, the back-of-the-leg summer stickiness. The material culture of the 20th century fills the exhibition's recreated apartment – Little Golden Books™ and 45s (vinyl records) in the Epstein bedroom, a teal typewriter and 1970s floral-print bed coverings in the Wong girls' bedroom, CorningWare™ dishes and animal figurines in the Saez Velez living room, many of which actually belonged to Ramonita and were donated to the museum.

Fig. 5. The concluding space of the tour is a recreated 1980s garment factory, where visitors explore stories of the Wongs and former workers through video and audio placed in objects throughout the space.

Similar objects might be present in visitors' past homes, current homes, family members' homes – or in the case of younger visitors, present in stories from older people in their lives. These objects also take on special resonance because of the work of our project architects to retain many original features of the apartment the families “live” in. These include signs of change over time – a mezuzah (Jewish prayer scroll) and a Christian cross hang on the same door, separated by 12 inches and 40 years.

We focused on details to physically represent the building's evolution, chose objects important to the families, and emphasized visitor comfort through ample and period-appropriate seating. These considerations, respectively, offer another emphasis on change over time, inspire visitors to share stories of their own objects, and immerse them more fully in the recreated space through seating. With these conditions, we found that many visitors seem to take these stories and make them “their own,” bridging the divide between them and the museum. In summative evaluation surveys, 85 percent of visitors said they related to the exhibition content in some way. In analysis of that data by ethnic demographic, this relatability held true both for visitors who shared an ethnic background with one of the families, and for visitors who did not.

Complicating through Questions

We learned early in formative focus groups and surveys that visitors were drawing conclusions about common humanity, the role of hard work, the strength of the mothers in each of the families. While these reflections are powerful, and speak to the efficacy of telling three families' stories over a broad time period, we knew we needed to further deepen and complicate the stories to avoid



an oversimplified, “we’re all the same and everyone got along” effect. At this same juncture, we realized that the lack of an oral history recording in the Wongs’ bedroom left that space feeling cold, so we made changes that worked to course correct for both concerns.

We decided to add a couple of oral history excerpts from the Wong children, including one from Kevin Wong talking about how he was asked by his fifth-grade teacher to choose a name from a list of “American”

names, ultimately becoming Kevin. What is an “American” name, and why is he asked to choose one? We also swapped out a video on the television set to add a story about Andy Velez serving in the Air Force in Vietnam, raising questions of how Puerto Ricans are represented in the U.S. armed forces. These two stories offer points of connection while addressing the impact of racism, language, and citizenship on one’s experience, and serve as potential antidotes to nostalgic feelings. Our educators also found that a simple



PHOTO BY JULIE STAPEN

question like, “What comes to mind when you think of the 1960s?” can further complicate nostalgia. That line of inquiry helps us explore dominant and non-dominant culture, and keep at the forefront the fact that even if we all had a plastic-covered couch, we all experience a time period differently because of who we are. This is what we had been interested in finding: the connection between one’s own memory and someone else’s very different memory of the same era, and a way to arrive at our current moment through a past time period. Key to these explorations is the broader context, particularly around immigration legislation – without that context, it is too easy to flatten and conflate the individual experiences. At the end of the exhibition, we show visitors a photograph of the families today (fig. 6), through which we highlight the individual and ongoing nature of these stories. We continue to explore through programming the ways to work with and through nostalgia to consider others’ experiences, and are considering next

a study of our exhibitions’ affective outcomes for visitors.

Evaluating Impact

“So this just kind of opened up my conception of what immigration means.”

—a visitor interviewed during evaluation

After years of iteration and relationship-building with the families, we knew we wanted to understand visitor experiences at a deeper level than onsite post-visit evaluation would allow, and we decided to invest in telephone interviews for the summative exhibition report. HG&Co, our project evaluators, designed an unstructured interview instrument that gave visitors the opportunity and time to reflect organically on the exhibition. Coding these visitor reflections indicated 13 different themes, most common being immigration as an ongoing process, personal and family connections, the strength of the women in the

Fig. 6. Members of the Epstein, Saez Velez, and Wong families standing on Orchard Street at the exhibition's opening party in summer 2017.

families, and the changing cultural make-up of the Lower East Side. About one-third of visitors reported talking to family or friends about the exhibition afterwards. There was evidence that the balance of three stories created a wide range of entry points for people with different lived experiences, and the interwoven themes supported complex visitor reflections, in some cases two months after the tour. Visitors also reflected on current immigration debates, the workings of a diverse neighborhood, their own family stories, and the stories of others – a few surveyed visitors mentioned the tour being enhanced by what other visitors shared during the experience.

Perhaps even more important, and not addressed in our formal evaluation, is how this exhibition process affected the museum – in filling gaps in our timeline, between immigration “then” and “now,” we are better able to address how immigration was never just one way in the United States. This allows us to participate more fully in our current national conversations on migration and American identity, bridging divides between “museum work” and the work of addressing our country’s urgent issues, and to explore our role in doing so. Telling more recent stories also recalibrated the museum in relation to the city’s current immigrants, migrants, and refugees, becoming more clearly a museum for their stories. Critically, and to our delight and surprise, by emphasizing change over time, neighborhood identity, and personal lived experience, *Under One Roof* brought us into deeper conversation with visitors about their experiences and their communities, as so many of us try to understand how to live “under one roof” in this ever-evolving nation.

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