

Shared Aspirations and Community Identity: How Re-imagined History Museums Can Matter in a Post-Industrial City

In 1974, when Daniel Bell popularized the term “the post-industrial society”, he hypothesized that the coming wave would erode the link between community and geographic proximity, and be replaced by groups of more scattered, but like-minded, individuals. (Bell 1974)

Made possible by advances in telecommunication and the widespread use of the Internet, his predictions are proving to be correct. However, from a neighborhood/city perspective, this evolution has not always been good or benign. Thriving Main Streets were abandoned when local mills and factories shuttered and shipped their work offshore, while shopping malls closed as consumers increasingly embraced the 24/7 ease of online spending. Some sectors of cultural institutions have suffered as well.

CRITICAL CONTEXT

There are over 15,000 Historic House Museums (HHMs) in the United States. The organizational health of most of them is in decline. Frozen in a pre-determined “period of interpretation”, many are viewed as irrelevant and unresponsive due to their growing inability to maintain a purpose in their community, especially as the neighborhood changes around them. HHMs have become outdated, autonomous, and insular, a detrimental condition in this post-industrial time characterized by easy communication and collaboration. (Vaughn 2008) All too often, HHMs are places where a well-intended docent points at portraits, and gestures into barren rooms while sharing a seemingly fact-based, exclusive narrative about the great deeds of the great, white men who once lived in the home. There are few signs of habitation or the complexity of family life, and any opportunity for a shared, meaningful, and human connection across generations disappears.

The critique of HHMs is not new. In 1998, the Philadelphia Athenaeum’s symposium focused on the challenges then being faced in HHMs, as did Moe’s influential 2002 article: “Are there too many house museums?” (American 1998 and Moe 2002) Their shared ideas came together in 2007 when national leaders of historic sites gathered at the Kykuit National Historic Site to discuss these and other challenges being experienced by their institutions. The attendees stated that innovation, experimentation, and collaboration would be essential to HHM

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Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums: Finding the Poetic in Other People's Homes

Engage mind/body/neighborhood/city/world
 Don't talk about your stuff - ask about theirs
 Avoid the bait-n-switch and "one-offs"
 Don't be afraid to fail

AGHHM Category	Concepts	Tactics
SHELTER (architectural) <i>the building of the home</i> 	wealth location politics age authentic operations	Be honest about the illusion of authenticity Embrace contemporary vistas and neighborhoods as a form of condition preservation Stop treating everything like a Rembrandt - because everything is not (unless you actually have one) Use multiple theories of preservation in the same historic house museum (not purist) Remove all "black holes" in the physicality of preservation of the building and grounds. Recognize the ebb and flow of the physicality of a structure (use as well as maintenance) Trace building materials from origin through use (labor/social/cultural) Consider "universal access" as a part of preservation
HABITATION (physical) <i>the furnishing of the home</i> 	EATING (taste) COOKING (smell) SPEECH & HEARING (sound) HANDS & FEET (touch) SEEING (visual) life cycle health garments daily cycle gender social	Create environments that are natural and about habitation appropriate to the narrative Create environments that reflect all day cycles (sleep/wake/ day/night/light/dark) Utilize complex and non-pure collection relationships (multiple eras represented) If appropriate, embrace clutter objects as part of the curated interior (clean/mess) strive for a "N.U.D.E." expression of habitation (Non-linear, unorthodox, dactylic and experimental) Believe in the intelligence of the guest Create habitation from several viewpoints at once (adult/child/servant/slave/dog/visitor) Create habitation through "movements" not stage-sets Pay particular attention to "USE" as a determining factor in curated interiors
COMMUNITY <i>the home within its context</i> 	representative persons and lives historic and current events historic and current economies gender	Be welcoming (signage, languages, social & cultural interests) Investigate the neighborhood "Six football fields" around the HHM (languages/ethnicities/culture) Locate "Reverse Affinity Groups" - find out what is wanted and provide it Undertake a strategy of "Seven Touches" and send visitors away with a parting gift Capitalize on all forms of personal "fingerprinting" - use social media as a form of conversation/dialogue Set up a citizens advisory group - listen - substantively modify historic house uses as needed Set up one day a month as a "community day" and spend it outside of the HHM
EXPERIENCE (behavioral) <i>the home-life</i> 	social and personal seasonal social order and activity	End the passive tour - choreograph the experience to represent real life De-centralize the experience to allow visitors to feel a sense of ownership Kill the silence - engage all of the senses in creating an holistic experience Eliminate all denied spaces by making the movement through the house as real as possible Fully consider tactility of the building and the collections Fully embrace the concept of simultaneity, conjecture, rumor and gossip to expand the experience

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sustainability, acknowledging that success would be dependent on the local leadership's willingness to change its structure, programs, and services, and generate more varied ways to utilize their resources to enrich people's lives. But unfortunately, the well-meaning Board and staff leadership of most HHMs, with expertise primarily in museum studies, history and collections management, are generally ill equipped to think in ways that embeds their mission within a neighborhood context. Consequently, the civic engagement expertise of urban designers can be an asset in moving towards that goal.

THE ANARCHIST GUIDE FOR HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

Through our work with dozens of HHMs, we have come to similar conclusions about their contemporary relevancy, and developed the *Anarchist Guide for Historic House Museums (AGHHM)* as an alternative to the traditional museum perspective on the operations of HHMs. These traditional best practices hinder innovation, experimentation and civic engagement as they were developed from the perspective of artifact and collection management rather than visitor experience. Consequently, the *AGHHM* advocates for the holistic re-examination of the current HHM model from one that is inwardly focused on a curated collection of artifacts, to a new paradigm of real-life, tangible habitation that builds on the shared interests identified by reaching out to a larger community in context.

We use of the term "Anarchist" not to be sensational, but rather to reflect the systemic and fundamental changes needed to address the dire extent of problems most Historic Homes now face in the post-industrial era. We seek to politely rebel against the well-meaning but increasingly irrelevant rules that typically

Figure 1: The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums. Source: Vagnone and Ryan, 2013.

define the Historic House Museum experience. As Olivia Cothren, Program Manager of the NYC Historic House Trust, writes, “It’s great to honor our past and our relationship with preservation, but it seems to me that what’s needed is an independent re-definition of the historic house with a focus on changing-not preserving-their dusty, staid image.” (LinkedIn 2012)

We advocate for a comprehensive strategy from a shared authority that reorients HHMs towards a more diverse audience borrowing state-of-the-art community engagement, experience and habitation tactics from urban design, public art, film and experiential theater. (Ryan and Vagnone, 2013) This more inclusive re-orientation of HHMs is demarcated through an evolving list of 24 concepts and 30 tactics organized under four themes of Community, Experience, Habitation and Shelter (Figure 1). When addressed simultaneously, these themes can produce a new genre of historic house museums that is an expression of the community and embraces the visitor experience through tactile engagement.

Over the last four years, the *AGHHM* has been developed through and tested in architectural studios, museum studies programs, and preservation classes at the Cooperstown Graduate Program, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, NYU, and Columbia University. The methodology of these initial studies was comparative and focused on the analytical, emotive, and behavioral mapping of habitation in HHMs and personal contemporary dwellings. (Ryan and Vagnone, 2013)

PILOT PROGRAM

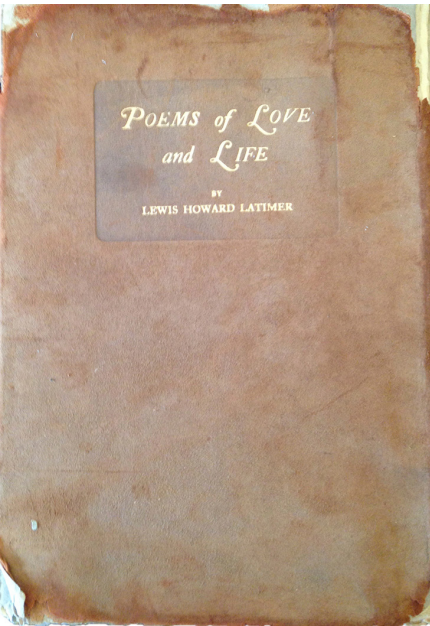
In 1942, Virginia Lee Burton wrote and illustrated *The Little House*, a wonderfully romantic book about a pretty but modest house built in a rural landscape by a man for his family. Years later, the nearby city grew out to and surrounded the house with rumbling traffic, tall buildings and very busy people. The house suffered from inattention and fell into disrepair, until the great, great granddaughter of the man who built it, stumbled upon the house and remembered it as her family’s old home. Feeling sorry for the house in its now urban context, she and her husband arranged for the house to be moved out of the city back to the quiet and peaceful countryside. There the house was painted pink and restored, re-sited on a hilltop covered in daisies and surrounded by apple trees, in a newly romanticized version of what it once was.

Many Historic House Museums project a similar, nostalgic vision of their own history, and suffer from a similar lack of authenticity. Just as Burton’s House was saved and moved because of the great granddaughter’s distress, a similar narrative can be told regarding the *AGHHM* test project site, the Lewis H. Latimer Historic House Museum located in Flushing, NYC.

Funded by a \$100,000 grant from the New York Community Trust, a pilot program is now underway to test the Anarchist Guide’s habitation-oriented concepts. The city’s twenty Edward I. Koch Fellows have undertaken the study. They collectively speak seven languages and were chosen for their broad skill sets in theater, arts, civic engagement, finance, museum studies, communications, preservation, and collection management. Organized in four teams, each group of Fellows is focused on one of the four *AGHHM* themes of experience, community, habitation and shelter.

UNCOVERING A RENAISSANCE MAN

Lewis Latimer’s life story (1848 - 1928) was one of achievement. The fifth child of escaped African slaves, he was a civil war veteran and self-taught draftsman. He rose through the ranks of an attorney’s office from a delivery boy to a patent



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Figure 2: A rare edition of *Poems of Love and Life* by Lewis Latimer, found in the Lewis Latimer House Attic, 2013.

consultant. He is probably best known for improving the light bulb by perfecting its carbon filament while working with Thomas Edison. But Latimer was not just an inventor. He was a true renaissance man, and a devoted husband to Mary and father to their two daughters, his love for them made evident through the poetry he published.

The Koch Collections Team Fellows found evidence of Lewis Latimer's interests and passions after they sorted through hundreds of boxes and suitcases left untouched for years in the Latimer house attic. Through their careful investigation, they found hundreds of pages of sheet music, opera programs, and a few Edison Phonograph Cylinder Records, leading them to believe that the Latimer home was a place of music. Historic photos revealed that there was a piano in the parlor, and his granddaughter Dr. Winifred Latimer Norman remembered an organ in his studio. Latimer also played the flute and attended the opera with Mary.

The Fellows further surmised that the Latimers' home was a welcoming center of conversation, a place where black men from the neighborhood gathered for fellowship, perhaps as an outgrowth of Latimer's Unitarian practice where he was a leader of the Flushing congregation. Active in the community, he also taught English as a second language.

Once Lewis and Mary passed, the daughters inherited the house. Perhaps to revive the fellowship of a bygone day, offer a much needed community service, or simply help pay bills, they converted the family home into a rooming house for female students. Eventually, the house was sold to new owners with no relationship to the Latimer family, and it fell into disrepair. When threatened with demolition to make room for a new development, Lewis Latimer's granddaughter Winifred led a successful campaign to save the house, at which time, it was moved a half-mile away from its original location and sited in a small New York City park.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Rather than blending into this new location, the single-family, Queen Ann(ish) style Latimer House grew increasingly more foreign, as the people who moved into the neighborhood were more likely to speak Mandarin than English. Within a half-mile of the house is the second largest Chinatown outside Asia, centered around the third busiest intersection in NYC at Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue.

To address this disconnect between time, place and culture, the Koch Fellows employed the *Anarchist Guide* Community Tactic to *Use social media as a form of conversation* and quickly branded the project *LatimerNOW*, set up a blog and a project webpage. (<http://latimernow.org>)

To address the *Anarchists Guide* Community Tactic to *Investigate and analyze the neighborhood surrounding the HHM*, the Koch Fellows Community Team began by preparing a cultural site analysis for the half-mile radius surrounding the HHM and found even more diversity than first assumed. Koch Fellow Ran Yan, a native Mandarin speaker from China wrote:

Many think Flushing is all about food, which isn't entirely incorrect. For me, as a Chinese person living and working near Flushing, there used to be a time when I only went there to have "authentic" Chinese food with friends and maybe visit a local karaoke bar. After attending a few public events there, I started to look at the neighborhood with fresh eyes.

I was invited to by a Chinese-American friend to *Hello Taiwan*, a concert

with a night market. It was the fourth of a series of annual events that began in 2010, and this year it was dedicated to raising funds for the victims of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. At the concert there were bands with members from Brooklyn, Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as an equally diverse audience, who were drinking Taiwanese beer or bubble tea. I found this to be very moving, both literally and figuratively, as I discovered this new side of Flushing that welcomes rock music and the Taiwanese culture that I'm not very familiar with.

As 2013 drew to a close... I learned of a Beijing Opera performance to be held at the Queens Library in Flushing on Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter). At the performance my friend and I were surrounded by middle age and older Chinese people talking to each other in northern Chinese dialects (Beijing Opera is popular in northern China). My friend and I were among the few younger Chinese, and the even fewer young people who weren't Chinese. However, age was forgotten soon after the performance began, as I was struck by the beauty of it.

At the same time the event was as much a performance as it was a gathering opportunity for the older Chinese patrons to see their friends and connect with fellow opera enthusiasts. For me it was more than a simple performance in that a thousand miles from home I was blown away by my own country's tradition that had always been at once familiar yet strange.

There appears to be no necessary connection between the concert and the opera, but together they reveal the hidden diversity under the umbrella of the "Chinese community" in Queens and clearly demonstrate that Flushing's cultural life is much more than a Lunar New Year parade. The extremely rich sub-cultures there have their own groups, organizations, and local traditions, and thus seemingly "private" public lives, but when you reach out to them, you'll find in Flushing a community open to share its cultures with anyone who seeks them out. (Ryan Architecture Studio, 2013)

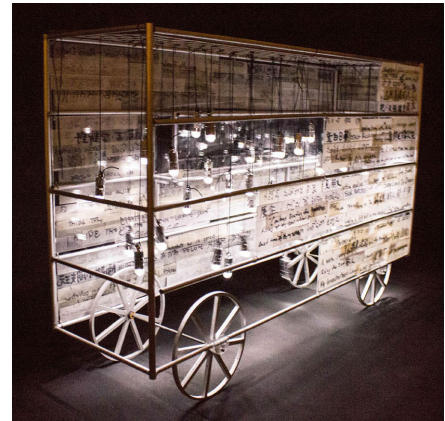
After visiting Flushing, UNC Charlotte architecture student Monica Whitmire echoed a similar perspective.

What was so captivating to me was the *transparency* of it all. The fruits, the vegetables, the fish, all of it was so fresh and available...It reminded me of peeling the skin back from a clock, the process of how Flushing works behind the scenes is much more intriguing than the products themselves. Watching a vendor artfully prepare the noodles you are about to taste becomes so much personal than when it is bought at the supermarket. Flushing to me was just so immersive and so tangible; there's really no other place like it. (Ryan Architecture Studio, 2013)

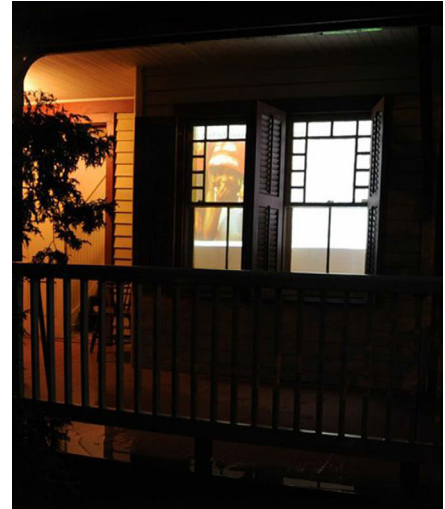
Other members of the Community Team began developing neighborhood partnerships by using *Anarchist Guide* Tactics and began *Participating in Community Days outside the HHM* as a precursor to *Setting up a Citizen's Advisory Group*. To build new audiences for the Latimer House, they identified, invited and engaged members of *Reverse Affinity Groups* (people with interests other than history or preservation) to the HHM around a series of small gatherings they called the Latimer Lounge.

LATIMER LOUNGE

The first Latimer Lounge event was held in April 2014 during National Poetry month. The event was themed *Creative Spark* with the intent to identify the shared



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Figure 3: *What Brightens Your Day?*, 2013 a Mobile Engagements Urban Intervention (MEUI) proposed by UNC Charlotte architecture student Monica Whitmire, built on her initial observation of transparency in Flushing. In an attempt to find the common ground across cultures, neighbors were encouraged to record their thoughts on tracing paper and post the strips on a lit cart harking back to Lewis Latimer's best known invention.

Figure 4: The first Latimer Lounge event as seen from the outside of the Lewis Latimer House. The presentations were projected on a sheet inside the home's windows to share the program with the surrounding neighborhood. This use of transparency was inspired by Whitmire's *What Brightens Your Day?*



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Figure 5: *Carried Away*, 2014 a Mobile Engagement Urban Intervention (MEUI) by Deborah Ryan.

Figure 6: *Story Case*, an MEUI proposed by UNC Charlotte architecture student Casey Smithling, 2014 featuring an oral history recording area built from steamer trunks and pictorial panels.

experiences of Flushing’s creative people (from poets to comedians to chefs) and introduce Lewis Latimer as a renaissance man in general and a poet in particular. To *Be welcoming* as the *Anarchist Guide* prescribes, the Fellows created invitations in English, Mandarin, Korean and Spanish. Announcements for the events were online, posted around the neighborhood, placed on community calendars, and left at neighborhood centers to *Employ a strategy of continuous contact*.

Attendees were welcomed with food and drink and invited to lounge on large pillows scattered around the parlor. To encourage the sort of free flowing dialogue that occurred in the house while Mr. Latimer was alive, the event was structured via a traditional Pecha Kucha format, a fast-paced, multiple speaker program in which each presenter had just 20 slides and just under seven minutes to share their creative work and ideas. Among the highlights of the event were performances by New York City Youth Poet Laureate Ramya Ramana, who shared her original poem *Miss America*, a piece sparked by the racist twitter backlash that Nina Davuluri received after becoming the first Indian-American to win the Miss America title. Sami Abu Shumays, a musician and practitioner of traditional Arab music, engaged the audience in call and response improvisational verses to illustrate the universality of music especially when sung together. Comedian Sana Khan entertained by sharing hilarious stories about the identity crisis she faces as a non-practicing Muslim and U.S. born Pakistani-American. HHT Administrative Coordinator Cequyna Moore read some of Lewis Latimer’s poems then asked the participants to complete passed out cards with a prompt in both English and Mandarin asking, “What sparks your creativity?” Koch Fellow Courtney Cohen read an emotional tribute to Dr. Winifred Latimer Norman, the recently deceased 99 year-old granddaughter of Lewis Latimer whom she had known and admired from childhood.

After the presentations, participants moved from the parlor to Latimer’s home studio, where food and drink were available and two mobile art installations were set up to further record people’s ideas. The first installation was encased in an old steamer trunk, the type of which Lewis or Mary Latimer might have used in their trips across the Atlantic on one of his business trips. On a fold down tray (used once to secure clothing) an iPad was attached and attendees were invited to respond to prompts written on cards in both English and Mandarin: “If you could do anything now, what would you do and why?” or “If you could go anywhere, where would you go and why?” While still under construction at the time of the Latimer Lounge, the trunk will include books the Latimers might have read that revealed their interests, music they were practicing, Lewis’s flute, Mary’s knitting needles, her hats, his reading glasses, pictures of their family, pillboxes, clothing, and other domestic items needed for the weeks-long journey. All the items will be displayed in a sort of touchable cabinet of curiosities as a means of drawing commonalities over time, place and the shared experience of travel and immigration.

The second installation entitled *Carried Away* was created inside a briefcase removed from the Steamer Trunk. The piece was an assemblage of items that hinted of Lewis Latimer’s Life: copies of his patents, drafting tools, flute sheet music, poetry books from the period he was alive, his own handwritten, unfinished poetry, a picture of Mary, and an instruction card written in both English and Mandarin with the prompt, “If there was a briefcase filled with artifacts that described my life and interests, it would contain _____.” Attendees were asked to leave a written response or a digital recording as well as take one of Latimer’s business cards and leave one of their own. The purpose of these installations was

to gather, display and share the personal aspirations from Latimer's community, whether that was defined geographically, or by a shared interest in creativity in general and poetry in particular.

The works were inspired by person-powered Mobile Engagement Urban Interventions (MEUIs) created by UNC Charlotte architecture students. The intent of the MEUIs was to provide an opportunity for a community conversation in and out of the Latimer House. Many of the student proposals were modeled after Michael Graves and Ralph Appelbaum's New Jersey Hall of Fame Mobile Museum albeit at a more modest scale, or reminiscent of the Wunderkammer inspired Museum, NYC's one room exhibition in a former freight elevator.

Precedents for the MEUIs also included *Participatory City: 100 Urban Trends from the BMW Guggenheim Lab*, the Street Plans Collaborative's Tactical Urbanism 2: Short Term Action, Long Term Change and specifically Candy Chang's *Before I Die* and *Career Path* community walls and walks, where participants individually share their life choices within a larger artistic frame.

In a post-industrial society where individual ideas are valued over seemingly anonymous artifacts, it is important to empower private citizens to embrace preservation personally rather than corporately as members of a "save this house" group. Citing the influence of television shows like *This Old House*, Laura Roberts, President of Roberts Consultants, an organization that assists cultural organizations to be valued public assets, relevant to their communities' needs and challenges wrote that, "Once someone owned and lived in a historic house, the whole enterprise became personally relevant in a way that a historic house museum could not." (LinkedIn)

Ruth Taylor, Executive Director at Newport Historical Society wrote that all cultural institutions should think about how their value to the community can be put in economic, political, and forward-looking terms. "We study history not because of some squishy notion of improving ourselves, but because it helps us make better decisions -- in war, in business, in politics, and in our lives." (LinkedIn) Perhaps Chandler Battaile, Director of Development at Stratford Hall in Washington, DC summarizes how Re-imagined History Museums Can Matter in a Post-Industrial City through Shared Aspirations and Community Identity by suggesting that these sites should still pass a good "smell test" answering questions like:

What difference does this place make today?" or "What can we learn from this place today?" If the answer isn't moderately compelling (as part of a mission statement) it might be time for some soul searching. (LinkedIn)

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