Small Stories in the Big Picture: "Open House: If These Walls Could Talk"

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When is a small story a big story? At the beginning of 2001, the Minnesota Historical Society set out on a five-year-long quest to find out. The journey culminated this January in the opening of a major new exhibition at the Minnesota History Center, "Open House: If These Walls Could Talk." The exhibit tells the story of a single, ordinary house on St. Paul's gritty East Side and all the people who made that house home—from the German immigrants who built it in 1888 through the Italians, African Americans and now Hmong who have followed: one house, fifty families, 118 years.

The exhibit will stay up for a full five years, but at every other level this project was about change—change over time, changing approaches to exhibition-development, changing definitions of "exhibition," changing assumptions about visitors and the museum's interpretive authority.

A Different Vision of History

The journey began with a vague feeling of restlessness. It found direction with the discovery of a single photograph. The restlessness was the product of success. I arrived at the Minnesota Historical Society in 1997, five years after the History Center, our flagship building, opened to acclaim. The hallmark of the first generation of exhibitions at the History Center was the notion of "universal themes." Assistant director Barbara Franco and her staff built the exhibition program around transcendent topics that offered every visitor a connecting point. The museum opened exhibitions on "Families, Communities and Work," then "Music, Weather and Transportation." For better or worse, everyone has dealt with these themes in their own lives. The exhibitions showcased personal stories about these topics from different time periods, ethnicities, and ages. Visitors responded with enthusiasm, and the History Center became something of a model for how to make history appealing to broad audiences.

A decade later, though, "universal themes" had become perhaps too comfortable a shoe. A warning sign was when audience surveys showed that visitors couldn't tell our various exhibits apart. While the individual stories were engaging, the overall mix had started to feel predictable. Part of the problem, many of us felt, lay in the overarching interpretive framework. The vastness of the exhibit topics encouraged vaguely sociological pronouncements: "All families deal with issues of grief"; "Music plays a role in people's social lives." Where is the tension in these formulations? The unpredictability? The sense of change over time? More to the point, where is the history?

"Open House" set out to capture history's inherent messiness, to tell a story that was not a straight line with predictable victors and ready-made lessons. In the fall of 2000, the head of our exhibits department, Dan Spock, and I brainstormed the notion of pursuing the history of a single house and following the story in whatever direction it took us. I was given three months to demonstrate how the idea would work. I spent two and a half of them looking for the right neighborhood. I wanted an area in the Twin Cities that was still intact, one that I-94 hadn't bulldozed through; a place that had seen significant change in ethnic composition over time, including settlement by recent immigrants; a neighborhood that didn't tell a simple story of gentrification or economic decline; and one that hadn't been researched to death.

The answer was Railroad Island, on St. Paul's East Side. Almost completely encircled by railroad yards, this neighborhood for generations has been a portal for new arrivals to St. Paul. From the 1870s through much of the last century, its residents came for jobs with the railroad and the nearby brewery. Over the years the neighborhood was dominated by Germans and Scandinavians, then Italians, then African Americans and Hmong. Today, Asians are the largest group, closely followed by African Americans. A mile and a half from the History Center, it is mostly absent from local history scholarship.

I had my neighborhood, but now I needed a house—and quick. I searched our library's photo database for images of Railroad Island. One of the very first pictures I found was a 1925 photo of a house with some sober-looking people standing in front of it: 470 Hopkins Street. I looked up that address in a few city directories and saw names suggesting different ethnicities. That was good enough at that point. But the example stuck! Five years later, I know the history of the people who lived in that one house far better than I know that of my own family.

A Different Kind of Story

Telling the story of 470 Hopkins Street's residents required that I try new kinds of research and new definitions of historical significance. I reached into the library deeper than I ever had before, and I reached beyond the library farther than I ever had before. At the outset all we had were names. Associate Exhibit Developer Ayesha Shariff and I combed through death certificates, birth certificates, wedding certificates, census records, probate records, police records, building permits, fire-insurance maps and commitments to mental hospitals. Gradually, people began to reveal themselves. The death certificate for brewery worker Charles Bourne (a 470 Hopkins resident from 1907-1917) lists "age and hard work" as contributing causes of death. The 1920 census record for Harry and Eva Levey states, "Mother tongue: Jewish." "54 hours a week. Wages—$9.00," says the entry for Doris Dahlstrom in a 1918 Survey of Women Employed Outside the Home. A survey of "aliens" conducted that same year by St. Paul's public safety commission demands, "If you have not taken out naturalization papers, why have you not done so?" The forms reveal halting answers: "Because I can not read and write." "Do not know to talk." "Unable to speak English." "I have no reason to give." Such snippets of information offered glimpses of the life experiences we were seeking.

The turning point in the research, though, came when we began to make direct contact with people who had lived in the house. We found Michelina Frascone at the weekly meeting of a sewing circle at the local community center, five blocks from Hopkins Street. She had moved

into the house 70 years before, at age 11, having sailed with her mother from Naples. It had taken Michelina's father ten years of work as a railroad car-repairman in Minnesota to earn the money to send for her and her mother.

Through Michelina, we found Dick Krismer and his wife Angie, house residents from the 1950s and '60s. In that period, Dick had worked in the holding pens of the South St. Paul stockyards—"babysitting the pigs," his children called it. Dick had a more stark description:
"Until the Humane Society stepped in, they used to take a shackle, flip it around and hook it, pull 'em right up, and the pig would be hanging upside down live, squealing. When you have in a closed area 500-600 pigs, all squealing and stuff like that, that's where I lost my hearing. My hearing is real bad."

It took years of searching to find descendants of Albert and Henriette Schumacher, the German immigrants who had built the house in 1888, the same year they opened their family pharmacy in St. Paul. Eventually a trail of death certificates—and a series of cold phone calls—led to California. Albert and Henriette's great-great-nephew and niece, McMillans now, were astonished to find out that their family was German—but they did still feel some kinship to the Schumachers. Jerry McMillan recalled that his great-aunt Martha, a conservatory-trained pianist who gave lessons in 470 Hopkins, had been petrified to play for people. Jerry himself has a grand piano in his Long Beach trailer home and practices constantly, but, he told us, he too has debilitating stage fright.

Probably the most moving contacts we made were inside 470 Hopkins Street itself. On the snowy afternoon when translator Foung Heu and I first knocked on the door of the house, we didn't know what to expect. The fact that the house had seen changes was clear from the outside. The spacious front porch shown in the photo had been enclosed. The third floor, where Michelina Frascone's father had cured sausages, was gone, destroyed in a 1971 fire. Every remnant of Victorian ornament and flourish on the facade had disappeared, replaced by smooth pink siding. When Pang Toua Yang answered, we fumbled through our unusual request, trying to explain our interest in this house, in his life, in all that came before. Pang Toua was understandably puzzled, but he generously shared his story—of becoming a soldier in Laos at age 15 and joining the American side in the Vietnam War; of fleeing in fear when American troops withdrew from the country; of his village being burned in retribution, his wife wounded and their parents killed; of spending years in a Thai refugee camp before, finally, giving up on ever returning home; of emigrating to St. Paul and building a new life. "When we first arrived here, I wanted to return," Pang Toua told us. "But I couldn't go around the world. When you live somewhere and can't return, you end up making it your home. Wherever you end up, that is your country."

In some ways these are just a random assortment of vignettes—one scoop's worth of human experiences from the past. But in their specificity and authenticity, these stories animate the lives of all the ordinary actors who have lived America's history. Dick Krismer's failing hearing demonstrates the dangers of industrial work better than any statistical survey of on-the-job injuries. Pang Toua's wrenching journey from Laos to Thailand to Hopkins Street represents the refugee experience better than any pronouncement by the exhibit developer ("Displaced from

their homelands, refugees struggle to adapt to unfamiliar settings"). "Open House" makes history personal—rooted in time and place, yet accessible across time and place.

A Different Kind of Collaboration:
Even as our research was yielding riveting stories, we were sensitive to a built-in tension within "Open House." We were mining rich material from the East Side to build an exhibit at our downtown History Center. Would East Siders feel we were lifting stories from them instead of collaborating with them? We had formed a Community Advisory Group that was offering periodic input, but we wanted the neighborhood to share in the spirit of discovery and reflection that lay at the heart of the project. To that end, at the same time as we were sleuthing for information about 470 Hopkins residents, our education department and I launched a series of neighborhood-based initiatives:

- **ViewPoints (summer 2002):** A dozen East Side teenagers spent three weeks documenting their neighborhood through photography. The project culminated in an exhibit that traveled to the neighborhood YMCA, elementary school and bank branch before arriving for long-term display at the Minnesota History Center.
- **Memory Map (March-October 2003):** Society staff took an oversized street map to festivals, community centers, retiree groups and public markets. At every stop, current and former residents annotated the map with their personal recollections of neighborhood locations—their favorite swimming hole, the site of their first kiss, the icy corner where their car flew off the road. The project culminated in the installation of the map for long-term display at the History Center, with an opening reception attended by more than 400 neighborhood residents.
- **History Happened Here (April-May 2003):** In a five-week curriculum, an education department teacher and I explored local history with 60 fourth- and fifth-graders at HOPE Community Academy—the nation's first Hmong charter school, located in Railroad Island. The group studied the history of the neighborhood around their school, located their personal histories within it and created mini-displays about their own family histories that hung on temporary display in the History Center.
- **Voices from Railroad Island (2001-2005):** The neighborhood branch of the St. Paul Public Library agreed to be a local repository for transcriptions of the three-dozen interviews conducted in the course of exhibit research.
- **Hop on the Bus (2002-2003):** The History Center provided under-served community groups in Railroad Island with free bus transportation to the museum's programs and exhibitions.

These smaller projects served the "Open House" exhibit by revealing the context within which Hopkins Street residents lived their lives. More importantly, though, they sparked engagement and good will within the neighborhood, forging personal and institutional relationships that will last for years to come. East Siders became not only the subjects of an exhibit but history-makers themselves.

A Different Kind of Design
Like the exhibit's development, the design of "Open House" involves visitors in making meaning out of the past. Visitors become detectives, uncovering clues and piecing together

evidence to assemble conclusions. In the gallery, the stories of the residents of 470 Hopkins Street are told through a series of rooms arranged in sequence over time, each room revealing stories about a different family or cluster of families. A sitting room set in the 1890s is salted with stories of the Schumachers; a kitchen represents the several Italian families—Michelina Frascone and her relatives—who lived there from the 1930s-1950s; a living room depicts Pang Toua Yang's family and their lives in the house today.

When visitors walk into these rooms, they feel as if they have entered another time, with period furniture, wallpaper, flooring and lighting. The exhibit achieves a still deeper level of immersion, though, by imbuing these spaces with the presence of the people who lived in them. Through images, documentary evidence, multiple media, hands-on activities and theatrical devices, visitors "meet" the residents who occupied these rooms. Pulling open the desk drawers in the sitting room reveals family photos and personal letters from Schumachers. Opening the lunchboxes on the kitchen counter uncovers the stories of the manual laborers who headed off from 470 Hopkins each morning to the brewery and the railroad shops. Sitting at the dining-room table triggers a media piece within the dinner plates that recalls a Thanksgiving Day tragedy: the train accident that killed Michelina's uncle, a track repairman. Reaching for the money jar launches home movies of family vacations that the Krismers paid for from that jar. The third-person omniscient voice appears only fleetingly. The storytellers here tell their own tales—in audio and, creatively applied, in text. Key quotations from oral histories curve across slices of bread, run across aprons and dance in lights across walls. Strategically placed within each setting are the primary sources that undergird these stories: death certificates, building permits, neighborhood newspapers, census documents, naturalization papers, citizenship exams.

Even as it presents stories, the exhibit matter-of-factly reveals the building blocks—the sources—of these stories; in every room visitors handle the tools of historical research. At every turn, in other words, the exhibit demonstrates that you, the visitor, can be a historian. Your story matters—just as the stories of these ordinary Hopkins Street residents matter—and you yourself can piece together that story. The ultimate goal of the exhibit is for visitors to go home and interview their grandmothers or take a second look at that dusty abstract from the sale of their house and decipher the names on it.

A Different Kind of Legacy?

In the end, then, the most expensive and elaborate exhibit ever undertaken at the History Center is about personal connections. We want visitors to draw links between the stories they encounter in the exhibit and their own lives. How far have we traveled, then, from the premise of "universal themes"? What will be the legacy of this project?

In some respects, "Open House" is almost by definition a singular, idiosyncratic venture. We wouldn't want every exhibit within our galleries to focus on a single place, person or moment in time. "Open House" does not represent a turnabout in direction for MHS as much as the flexing of a new set of muscles. Now when we build stories, for instance, we have a new appreciation for the power of telescoping: narrowing and broadening the view can reveal connections and patterns that might otherwise be invisible. Likewise, as we plan our exhibits, we have new recognition not only for how lengthy and elaborate a project's development can be, but also for how much resonant work can come out of a faster and looser process: the ViewPoints and

Memory Map projects, completed in just months on tiny budgets, left powerful marks in their own rights. In addition, as we envision community partnerships, we have new understanding for the fact that an exhibit project should be evaluated not only by the gallery product that comes out at the end but also by the relationships that are built along the way: they predate the exhibit, suffuse the exhibit itself, and will ultimately outlast it. Finally, as we design exhibits, we have a new sense of how far we can go in embedding stories in environments and in using technology to put first-person voices in the foreground: we know that resisting the omniscient interpretive voice can sometimes in itself be a highly effective interpretive technique.

No doubt we won't deploy these lessons in the same ways in all subsequent projects. The next major exhibits at the History Center may bear no resemblance to "Open House," at least at a glance. At a deeper level, though, that's the point. "Open House" opened doors to future possibilities that we had sensed but perhaps not fully recognized. Charting the dramatic transformations that one ordinary house experienced across 118 years has given us new perspective on change itself—as not just a necessary evil but the fuel that can sustain a vital institution into the future.