

## Hearing Voices in Open House: If These Walls Could Talk

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Open House: If These Walls Could Talk tells probably the smallest story ever told at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). It focuses on a single, ordinary house on St. Paul's gritty East Side and 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. Its scope is small, but the exhibit, which opened in 2006 at the Minnesota History Center, from the start embraced big possibilities—to define a new approach to storytelling in a gallery; to extend the boundaries of "exhibit" beyond the building's walls; to design a gallery that feels like a real place, one completely open to visitor discovery; and to inspire visitors to take on the mantle of historian. In the end, though, the most elaborate exhibit project ever undertaken at MHS demonstrates the power of a simple message: sometimes the smallest voices speak most forcefully of all.

### *Foundations*

If *Open House* succeeded, it was able to do so because it represented not just a new direction but also the culmination of what had come before at MHS. Opened in 1992, the Minnesota History Center was cutting edge in its determination to make history personal and relevant to visitors. 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. Everyone, for better or worse, has wrestled with these themes in their own lives. The exhibitions showcased personal stories about these topics, and brought weight and texture to these stories through innovative use of media. In *Minnesota A-Z*, "V" was for "Voices." *Homeplace Minnesota* added dimension to these voices by melding them with artifacts and stage sets in an object theater. Gradually, the exhibit settings became more elaborate and the media more fully embedded. *Our Gathering Places* (about African American life) featured a fully appointed barbershop in which object-theater vignettes appeared behind the mirrors. *Sounds Good to Me: Music in Minnesota* offered a foxtrot-able dance floor ringed by vinyl booths with working tabletop jukeboxes. The History Center became known as a place that made history appealing and accessible.

### *New Windows on the Past*

A decade after trying it on, 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 lay in the overarching interpretive framework. The vastness of the exhibit topics encouraged vaguely sociological pronouncements - "All families deal with issues of grief" or "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 bluntly, where is the *history*?

Inspired by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York, we began thinking about expressing our social history pluralism in more singular ways. After all, the History Center's visitor studies showed that audiences were responding to the personal nature of history. Why not offer them the chance to connect to fully individualized people from the past? 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. We would set out to capture history's inherent messiness, to tell a story that was not a straight line with ready-made lessons.

From the outset, we saw the potential for community partnerships in this approach. Over the years, MHS's Education Department had done marvelous programming—from traveling to schools (Historians in the Classroom) to inviting visitors to discuss objects with in-gallery interpreters (History a la Carte) to presenting costumed characters in the galleries (History Players). Usually these programs launched after an exhibit opened. But here was an opportunity to apply some of these same techniques at the front end of the exhibition process.

From the start, the project included a conception of the visitor experience. Inspired by the Holocaust Museum's *Daniel's Story* and, again, by MHS's own visitor studies, we were eager to expand visitor choice. If we wanted visitors to feel like participants in the process of historical discovery, then they needed to be able to enter the "open house" and explore—and they needed to be rewarded with surprises. These three goals—an obsessive attention to real stories from a real house, a grassroots effort to engage the house's neighbors on their own turf, and a freewheeling commitment to activating visitors as explorers—drove our work for the next five years.

But first we needed a house. I began by looking for a promising neighborhood. I wanted an area that was still intact, one that I-94 hadn't bulldozed through. I looked for 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 rail 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, Germans and Scandinavians dominated the neighborhood, then Italians, then African Americans and Hmong. A mile and a half from the History Center, it had been mostly overlooked by local history scholarship.

If selecting a neighborhood involved thoughtful research, finding the house proved to be almost as simple as opening a phone book. I began by searching our library's photo database for images

of Railroad Island (<http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources> ). One of the very first pictures I found was a 1925 photo of a house with some sober people standing in front of it: 470 Hopkins Street. I looked up that address in city directories and saw some names suggesting different ethnicities. At this early stage, that seemed good enough; I could use this house as an example to test out the approach. But the example stuck! Five years later, I know the history of the people who lived at 470 Hopkins far better than that of my own family.

### *Out of the Woodwork*

Telling the story of 470 Hopkins Street's residents required new kinds of research. 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. City directories showed that Albert and Henriette Schumacher, German immigrants who built the house in 1888, opened a pharmacy in town that same year. Church records showed that Henriette died in 1894 of "sugar sickness"—diabetes—after ten months of bed rest. 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. "Mother tongue: Jewish" states the 1920 census record for Harry and Eva Levey. These were the traces of human experience 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."

Probably the most moving contacts we made were inside 470 Hopkins Street itself. On a snowy afternoon, translator Fong Heu and I knocked on the door, not knowing 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, we would learn, 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; and 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."

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 people 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 historian. Here were personal stories rooted in time and place, yet accessible across time and place.

### *Good Neighbors*

Even as our research was yielding riveting tales, 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, we launched a series of neighborhood-based initiatives including:

**ViewPoints:** 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:** 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:** In a five-week curriculum, an education department teacher and I explored local history with sixty fourth- and fifth-graders at HOPE Community Academy—the nation's first Hmong charter school—located in Railroad Island. The students 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:** 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:** The History Center provided underserved 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 how the neighborhood remembered its history. More importantly, they sparked engagement and goodwill within the community, forging personal and institutional relationships. East Siders became not only the subjects of an exhibit but history makers themselves.

### *Throwing Open the Doors (and Removing the Couch Covers)*

In exhibit design, too, the *Open House* team wanted to invite visitors to make meaning out of the past. We wanted to avoid anything that invited passivity: glass cases and velvet ropes; fictionalized dialogue and generic stand-ins; or pat narratives and easy answers. We envisioned visitors as detectives, uncovering clues and piecing together evidence to assemble conclusions. We made two vows: we would design a space that rewarded curiosity, and we would not make anything up.

But how would that commitment to truth-telling translate into the gallery? After all, the "real" house remained on Hopkins Street, busily occupied by Pang Toua and his family. Moreover, since the house's occupants had moved so frequently, we had no objects from the fifty families that had passed through. Even the house's floor plan was a hopeless tangle of transience, as the structure had evolved from single-family (1888) to duplex (1907) to triplex (1945). In this situation, what did our pledge to keep it real mean? After much discussion, we reached a bottom line: in this exhibit, our artifacts—our vehicles for authentic connection to the past—were the stories. We were aware of the cultural construction of narrative, the murkiness of personal memory, the distortions inherent in the act of display. Nonetheless we committed to offer visitors the chance to connect to other people's lives on their own terms—without the historians and curators inserting themselves into every conversation. We had no illusions about renouncing our roles as mediators—every inch of the space would be planned and every sentence edited—but we resolved to trust visitors to focus on content that interested them and make meanings that mattered. We would showcase, jewel-like, people's stories. Everything else was up for grabs.

First to get tossed aside was the period room. Yes, such recreations look real, but so do corpses. We wanted spaces that pulsed with life. The rooms would look realistic but the focus would be on the people who had occupied them. Next to go were exhibit labels. They broke the mood, we decided, and, in most cases were written for us more than for visitors. ("Butter dish, ca. 1900." Can't visitors tell that? If not, won't they have more fun figuring it out themselves?) We needed words, but we rejected the instinct to enumerate every thing and spell out every concept. This was to be theater, not dissection.

Suddenly, we were free to engage in anything-goes exploration and—dare we admit?—play in designing our stories. Graphic designer Terry Scheller resolved to break down the boundaries between graphics, objects, and settings—words could appear on the floor, on sheets, on milk bottles. Designer Brad Thiel worked to create spaces that felt room-like with nothing beyond visitors' reach—no vitrines or plexiglass barriers. Designer Earl Gutnik set out to furnish the space with props that would convey time and place—from wall calendars to couch cushions. Media developers Mike Mouw, Jesse Heinzen, and Dan Beck pushed to embed media in every

corner yet make them invisible—goodbye touch-screen computers, hello "tangible interfaces," where touching objects makes them come alive.

The end result of all this experimentation (and prototyping and visitor-testing and wrong turns and more prototyping and testing) was an exhibit gallery both fanciful and true to life. *Open House* tells stories of 470 Hopkins Street through a series of rooms arranged in sequence over time, with 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. But the barriers quickly slip away. In the sitting room, inserting slides into the magic lantern projects images of the Schumachers and their journey from Germany to St. Paul. Opening the lunchboxes on the kitchen counter reveals stories, photos, and tools representing 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-repair-man. Touching an illuminated silver dollar in the 1960s bedroom launches home movies and the Krismers' story of saving coins for their family vacations across Minnesota. Sitting on the couch in the 2005 living room causes the view out the window to dissolve into scenes of Laos and the Thai refugee camps, visions from the journey Pang Toua Yang's family took to America. Quotations from oral histories curve across slices of bread, run across aprons, are cranked out on sausages through the meat grinder, and dance in lights across walls.

As visitors move through time, certain resonances surface. The dining room table features the 1940 citizenship exam, in Italian and English, and Michelina Frascone's recollections of its terrifying importance. The living room features the 2005 citizenship exam, and Pang Toua's recollections of its terrifying importance. Inside each room, a label framed like a window ("A Look Outside") offers a glimpse of the world beyond the house, the historical context within which Hopkins Street residents built their lives.

Strategically placed within each setting are the primary sources that undergird the stories—death certificates, building permits, neighborhood newspapers, census documents, naturalization papers. There are forty-two separate places to sit within *Open House*—chairs, stools, couches, loveseats, benches, and beds. Rather than racing across the gallery to the next flashing light and the next button to push, visitors handle the tools of historical research, uncovering layers in the room around them. At every turn, the exhibit demonstrates that the visitor can be an historian. Your story matters—just as the stories of these ordinary Hopkins Street residents matter—and you yourself can piece together that story. Go home and interview your grandmother! Take a second look at that dusty abstract from the sale of your house and decipher the names on it! The past is yours!

Never was that sense of ownership more intensely apparent than at the Family Festival marking the exhibit's grand opening. Part block party, part family reunion, part Grand Central Station,

nearly 3,000 people came, one of the History Center's most highly attended days ever. Michelina Frascone, eighty-six, arrived at 8:45 a.m. and sat down at the table in "her" kitchen, the one that tells the stories of the families who lived in the house in the 1930s-1950s. There she remained until 5 p.m., regaling visitors with stories, listening to their reminiscences, and dispensing hugs and kisses. In the next room, Angie and Dick Krismer likewise set up shop in the bedroom that tells their story. Pang Toua Yang and Mai Vang spent most of their visit in the room that recounts their migration from Laos to Thailand to St. Paul, as did the Chang family, the newest arrivals to the Hopkins Street house—they had come to America three months before.

The house at 470 Hopkins Street—that narrowest slice of history—had opened up and allowed everyone to find themselves in its story.