

# | Place-based Education in an Urban Environment<sup>1</sup>

by Maggie Russell-Ciardi

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## What is place-based education?

Place-based education can be defined as any educational approach that uses the local environment as the context for teaching and learning. The primary goal of place-based education is to inspire students to take an interest in their local community and to galvanize students to take action to build a better future for that community.

Generally, in the United States, when most people think about place-based education, the place that they have in mind is a rural, not an urban one. This is because most of the place-based education programmes developed to date have been in rural settings. As David Gruenwald writes in his article 'The Beast of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place': 'In recent literature, educators claiming place as a guiding construct associate a place-based approach with outdoor, environmental, and rural education. Place-based education is frequently discussed at a distance from the urban, multi-cultural arena.' However, place-based education does not need to be limited

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to rural settings. Educational institutions in urban settings can use place-based education to interest people in the issues that shape urban life and to spark civic engagement with urban issues.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City is one urban institution that has been able to develop place-based education programming that effectively engages people from diverse backgrounds in dialogue about contemporary urban problems. Place-based education has been an effective tool for the Tenement Museum to promote civic engagement with urban issues, because it provides an entry point for exploring shared experience, for creating a narrative about the meaning of community, and for connecting people with the issues that shape the communities to which they belong.

A belief in the power of place is at the heart of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. This belief informs its mission, all of the education programmes the Museum offers, and its relationship to the community in which it is located, the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

The Lower East Side is one of the most famous immigrant neighbourhoods in the United States. Historically, it was home to European immigrants. Today, the neighbourhood is home to immigrants from China and the Dominican Republic, among other countries, as well as migrants from Puerto Rico. Approximately 60 per cent of Lower East Side residents speak a language other than English at home. The languages spoken include four mutually unintelligible Chinese dialects.

The Lower East Side is also predominantly a working-class neighbourhood. Historically, new immigrants were drawn to the Lower East Side because of the availability of tenement housing, which was among the most affordable housing options in the city. Today, the affordable housing continues to attract people to the neighbourhood. The median annual household income in the section of the Lower East Side where the museum is located is approximately \$25,000. More than a quarter of the people live below the poverty line, but only about half of them receive any kind of public assistance.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum was founded in 1988 with a mission to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences in Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America. This mission statement grounds the museum in its local community and obliges the museum to interpret the stories of that community. More than this, it reflects a belief that by telling the community's stories, the museum can accomplish a social mission of promoting tolerance.

The museum also believes that the importance of the story of the Lower East Side reaches far beyond the geographical borders of the neighbourhood. Increasingly, other countries worldwide are witnessing unprecedented numbers of immigrants in their cities and are grappling with how to respond, and so the story of the Lower East Side, which was one of the first neighbourhoods to witness a massive influx of immigrants, has international significance.

### The museum and immigrant experiences

The museum's founders wanted to tell the story of the immigrants who had arrived in New York City in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And they wanted to present and to interpret this story in such a way that visitors would make connections between the experiences of those immigrants and the experiences of immigrants who arrived in the United States only very recently. The reason they believed that this was important was that in the United States there is a great deal of nostalgia for previous generations of immigrants and, among many communities, a great deal of hostility towards recent immigrants. The museum hoped to challenge the assumption that there is something significantly different about today's immigrants by calling attention to the many similarities between immigrant experiences past and present, and by introducing Americans to the many things their immigrant parents or grandparents had in common – before they became 'Americans' – with the newest immigrants who are struggling to get by and to adjust to life in the United States today.

The museum wanted visitors to examine critically their views on contemporary immigration and to engage in dialogue about the central questions surrounding American immigration policy, such as, who should be able to enter the United States, who should be granted citizenship, and what resources should be made available to newcomers.

The challenge, though, was that there was not one single immigrant experience, but that there were as many immigrant stories as there were

immigrants. And these immigrants came from different countries, different backgrounds, different social classes and different experiences. How could we create a narrative that did not simplify these diverse experiences, but that managed to explore what was essential, universal and enduring about the immigrant experience?

The founders of the museum agreed that no matter what the background and experience of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants who came to the United States, most of these immigrants did have one thing in common: the place where they lived. Almost every immigrant who entered New York City between 1830 and 1930 lived at one time or another in a tenement building in the Manhattan neighbourhood known as the Lower East Side. The power of place, though, even goes beyond connecting people across national origin, language and religion. Place also connects people across time. Living in a tenement building in the Lower East Side is an experience that unites generations of immigrants, whether they came from Russia in 1905 or from Hong Kong in 2005.

So the museum decided to take as its starting point for exploring immigrant experiences one very specific place, a tenement building, located at No. 97 Orchard Street in the heart of the Lower East Side. 97 Orchard Street is a five storey multiple-family residence that was constructed in 1863 and was home to an estimated 7,000 people between 1864 and 1935, when it was closed as a residence. The building remained unoccupied until 1988, when it was acquired by the Tenement Museum.

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### Place-based education programmes at the Tenement Museum

To date, the museum has identified approximately 1,700 of the former residents of the building and re-created the apartments of five families who actually lived in the building. The museum offers guided tours of the re-created apartments and educators tell visitors the family stories. The tours are organized thematically; the theme of each of the tours is an enduring social issue that has impacted upon the lives of immigrant families in the past and continues to be relevant today.

The theme of one tour is immigrants in the garment industry. The tour starts with two family stories and uses them to provide historical perspectives on the problem of sweatshops in the garment industry. The tour visits the apartments of two families who made clothes for a living at two different time periods, the Levine family in the 1890s, when the garment industry was just beginning to develop, and most garment production was done inside tenement apartments, and the Rogarshevsky family in the early 1900s, during the factory era, when garment workers were beginning to organize to address the problem of sweatshops. The tour explores the evolution of the garment industry in New York City through the eyes of these two families and compares their experiences to the experiences of immigrants working in the garment industry today.

This theme was selected because the Lower East Side was the birthplace of the modern garment industry (in 1900 there were over twenty garment shops on the block where the neighbourhood is located) and because there are still a significant

number of garment shops in the Lower East Side today, many of which are considered to be sweatshops by the Department of Labor.

The museum complicates the history it presents by not limiting its interpretation to one perspective on the issue, but by incorporating the diverse perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders with very different relationships to the issue being explored, and by exploring how these perspectives have changed over time. The tour about the garment industry examines the perspective of the garment manufacturer, the small business owner, the workers, consumers and reformers. The tour starts with an audio recording of these stakeholders sharing their views about the state of the garment industry in New York City, and then the educator takes visitors back in time to the year 1897 and examines the views that these stakeholders held about the industry at that time.

The museum involves visitors in the interpretation by asking them a series of open-ended questions throughout the tour on their own knowledge, beliefs and opinions about the issues raised. For instance, on the tour about the garment industry, educators ask visitors questions such as, 'Do you think the conditions for immigrant garment workers were better 100 years ago or today?' And 'Do you think it is acceptable for the garment factory owners to pay below the minimum wage if they can find workers who will work for those wages?' Visitors then engage in dialogue with the educator and with each other, sharing perspectives, discussing personal experiences, and exploring the reasons they feel the way they do about these issues.

Another tour called 'Getting By: Immigrants Weathering Hard Times', visits the apartments of two families who lived during economic depressions, the Gumpertz family in 1873 and the Baldizzi family in 1935. The tour explores the evolution of public opinion about what assistance immigrants in need should be entitled to and who should be responsible for providing it. On this tour, visitors discuss whether immigration status should be a factor in determining eligibility for government benefits, as well as what role they themselves can play in helping immigrants in their own community who are in need.

A third tour visits the re-created apartment of the Confino family in 1916. Visitors take on the role of a recently arrived immigrant family and interact with a costumed interpreter playing the role of 14-year-old Victoria Confino who was a Sephardic Jew in a neighbourhood that was predominantly Ashkenazi. They learn about her efforts to adjust to life in the Lower East Side, and her experience forging a new Sephardic-American identity. They then discuss issues of cultural identity and debate what it means to be American, and whether it is better to retain one's own cultural heritage or to become 'American'.

When school groups participate in the Confino programme, they also engage in a corresponding activity in which they are asked to consider their own views about what American culture is and who should be able to become American. They are asked to work in small groups to create a definition of 'American' that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and that takes into consideration the fact that the country is made up

of peoples from diverse races, cultures and religious backgrounds.

After selected tours, visitors return to a 'kitchen space' and take part in a dialogue called 'Kitchen Conversations', led by a trained facilitator, about contemporary issues that the tour raised for them. In recent dialogues, visitors have discussed issues ranging from immigration enforcement to how to ensure fair working conditions for immigrant workers, to bilingual education, to whether immigrants should assimilate themselves into American society or retain their own cultural heritage. The facilitator's role is to help visitors make the connection between immigrant experiences past and present, to challenge the assumptions that visitors may have about contemporary immigrants, and to inspire visitors to take action to shape the issues raised by the historical site in a variety of ways.

The museum also offers neighbourhood walking tours that visit sites that are not featured on traditional walking tours, but that shed new light on the issues that have shaped – and continue to shape – the neighbourhood, and which raise important questions about contemporary urban issues. One tour stop is an Asian Studies high school where students are educated in English and Chinese. At this stop, educators engage visitors in debates about bilingual education. Another tour stop is a synagogue. Here educators tell visitors about how, when the rabbi died in 1905, the funeral procession was harassed by Irish workers who were angry about the arrival of Eastern European immigrants in the Lower East Side because they considered it to be their own exclusive neighbourhood. This leads to discussions

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about the inter-group tensions that arise when the demographics of neighbourhoods change and about strategies that have been developed in visitors' communities for improving inter-group understanding and collaboration.

The goals of these place-based education programmes are:

- to help visitors explore their own personal connection to the social, economic and political issues which impact the lives of immigrants and migrants;
- to highlight the important role immigrants and migrants have played – and continue to play – in shaping our society, exploring specific examples of how they, both individually and collectively, have transformed the communities in which they live and our nation as a whole;
- to promote meaningful dialogue about and critical engagement with the enduring issues that have impacted upon the lives of immigrant and migrant communities, and to provide a forum for visitors to consider the role they can play in shaping those issues today;
- to help people from diverse backgrounds make connections with and learn from one another.

There are five guiding principles that have been essential to the success of the museum's place-based education programmes. Other museums interested in using place-based education to promote civic engagement with urban issues may want to consider adopting them at their own institutions.

The first principle is to present and interpret the history of sites whose importance is not widely recognized or acknowledged, but that provide a new perspective on history. Before the Tenement Museum was established, 97 Orchard Street was probably considered to be an unremarkable building, and the stories of its residents unimportant. But the founders were convinced that because the building's stories represented a part of history that was unrepresented in traditional historiography – the history of poor and working-class people – it would provide an important new perspective on history. The importance of the building has since come to be recognized, and 97 Orchard Street was the first tenement building to be designated a National Historic Site.

The second principle is to explore ways in which the sites are connected to larger social issues that are not just relevant in the local community where the museum is located, but in other communities as well. The Tenement Museum does not just tell the story of its building and its residents, but connects those stories to larger issues – such as fair working conditions and access to public benefits – making the stories relevant for all visitors, regardless of their backgrounds or where they come from. Visitors have been very responsive to this interpretation and have often made connections on tours between what they are learning about 97 Orchard Street and similar issues that are playing out in their own communities.

The third principle is to complicate history, that is, to tell the history of the sites that the institution interprets from a variety of different

perspectives, with a particular emphasis on perspectives that have been under-represented in traditional historiography. The Tenement Museum does not just tell the story from one point of view, but relates a complicated and nuanced history from the perspective of a variety of stakeholders. The museum has found that an approach presenting issues in a way that is not overly simplistic, but is transparent about the fact that they were contentious issues in their day, sheds light on why similar issues today may still be contentious and makes visitors more engaged in exploring the complexities of those issues.

The fourth principle is to involve visitors in the interpretation. The museum should provide visitors with a forum in which to play a role in the interpretation of the sites by sharing their perspectives on their history as well as on the contemporary relevance of the larger social issues they represent. The Tenement Museum does not present itself as the sole authority on the issues it addresses, but, in keeping with its polyphonic representation of historical issues, it is transparent about the fact that there are multiple perspectives on contemporary issues, and that visitors have their own knowledge, beliefs and opinions about those issues. Treating visitors as partners in exploring why history is relevant and in making sense of contemporary issues encourages them to become engaged with the issues and empowers them to take ownership of those issues.

The fifth and last principle is to inspire visitors to take action. This means to encourage them to shape the social issues impacting upon their communities and to provide them with examples of ways they can bring about positive

change. The Tenement Museum is committed to providing a forum for visitors to think about, once they have begun to examine critically complicated social issues, what they can do in their own lives to shape the issues in positive ways. This is an essential component of promoting engagement with those issues, because it leaves visitors with a sense that they can and should take action to improve the lives of their communities.

Museums in urban areas should consider claiming place-based education as a guiding construct. They should consider exploring possibilities for interpreting the history of sites in communities whose importance is not widely recognized, but that represent a story that has not been told and that sheds new light on enduring social issues. Any museum located in urban areas can look to their local communities for sites around which they can develop effective place-based education programmes using the five principles outlined above. This approach will certainly spark dialogue about pressing urban issues and will promote civic engagement with those issues.

## | NOTE

1. Sections of this article were published in the article 'Learning in Your Own Backyard: place-based education for museums', which appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of *Exhibitionist*.

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