

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY: A TOOLKIT FOR MUSEUMS

LATIMERNOW

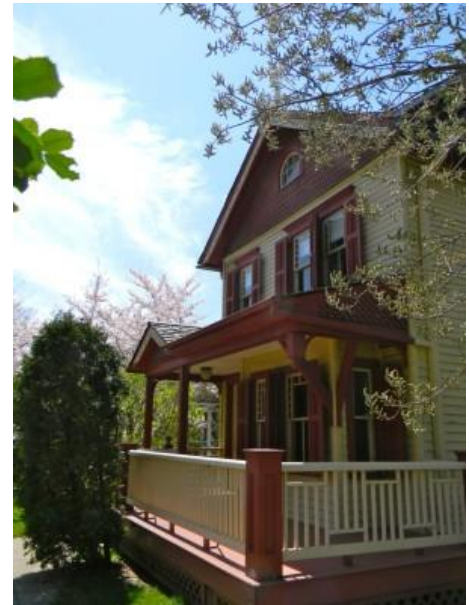
About the Latimer House:

The Lewis H. Latimer House, located in Flushing, Queens, New York, was the home of Lewis H. Latimer (1848-1928), the son of runaway slaves and an extremely important inventor and electrical engineer. He is best known for working with Thomas Edison — Latimer invented and patented the carbon filament, which made it possible to create mass-producible light bulbs. Lewis H. Latimer is a significant inventor – not just because he’s African American, but because he played a critically important role in the formation of lighting and electricity.

About the initiative:

Last year, New York Community Trust gave LatimerNOW a \$100,000 grant for a two-year project to take the Latimer House, which has not been an economically or programmatically successful historic house museum, and experiment with Anarchist Guide concepts that push for historic house museums and sites to rethink their relevancy and how they project their information through engagement with communities.

It encourages historic houses to work from the community-up and reject traditional museum practices (blocking off furniture, locked drawers, telling only one individual’s story).



Goals:

- Break out of the traditional ways of doing things
- Harness collective wisdom and history
- Make resonant and relevant connections with and across communities

Process:

1. Research the neighbouring community:

The LatimerNOW project started with significant demographic research in the community of Flushing, Queens, which guided who was recruited for the advisory team, and surfaced a lot of information about the community. The members of the project team collectively speak seven languages and are from a handful of different cultures, identities, and experiences.

2. Community engagement & assessment:

The first year of the LatimerNow project was about community engagement and assessing the collections in the house. Understanding the needs and interests of the community guided their programming and helped to explore new ways to interpret the narrative of the historic house.

3. Programming & Implementation

The third phase is about figuring out how to implement these ideas, engage the community with real programs and events, and start to see the shift in making the Latimer House an important presence in Flushing.

Progress so far:

Lessons from research:

The primary narrative of Latimer House is the incredibly important legacy of African American inventor, Lewis H. Latimer. But, after doing demographic research, they realized that less than 2% of the population of Flushing is African American. And 85% of the population is first- and second-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants.

The research has shaped the project's big question: How do we take – and not lose – an important African American legacy and story, and intertwine it with stories that will speak to the Mandarin-speaking Chinese population in Flushing? Without the research, they might have created programs directed at the African American community, or at people who are interested in inventors and inventions, and that would automatically reduce the potential audience.

Lessons from community engagement process:

In most historic house museums, it's thought that the more narrow and focused the narrative, the better, but that can actually be limiting. This process has helped to identify common threads and build connective narratives that might not be so immediately obvious, which opens doors for a much wider range of people in the immediate community across cultural experiences..

The stories of Latimer's wife, his daughters, and his grandchildren, and what they ended up doing, have now become relevant. For example, the site also has history as a boarding house – one of Latimer's daughters rented out the upstairs to African American women who were attending college. So the house could provide a space to explore what it meant for a young woman going to college in the mid-20th century, which could offer a resonant connection to young people today who are pursuing educational opportunities.

Lessons from programming:

LatimerNow recently held a pilot event called Latimer Lounge, where they invited poets, artists, and performers of different ethnicities and languages to gather at the Latimer House for one evening. Participants spoke about the idea of creativity in all aspects of life, like in the culinary arts, for example. It was a successful test to see if people were interested in gathering together in that way, and it worked – they had a full house. Latimer Lounge is just one way they're trying to connect people across experiences by stretching beyond Lewis H. Latimer's life narrative to explore simply how he was a creative person: an inventor and poet, among other practices.

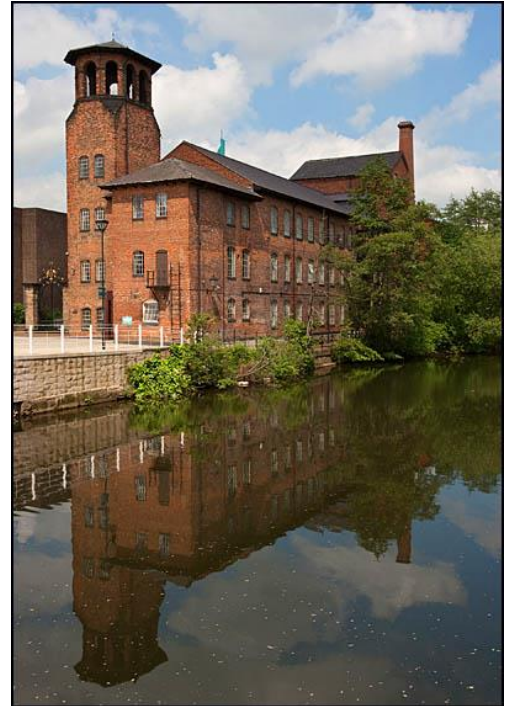
Not being afraid to fail:

The Anarchist Guide views historic houses as spaces that embrace flaws and mistakes – and thus, they actually allow for more vulnerable and honest interactions between people of varied cultural identities and experiences. LatimerNow has embraced this and declared that they don't know if they're going to succeed or fail – they're going to try stuff and when it doesn't work, they'll try something else. Their project proposal even had a section called, "We're Going to Fail," where they talked about failure being built into this whole process. Historic house museums and sites feel like they always have to have the right answer, especially when it comes to engaging their communities. And the point is, there is no right answer, but they're going to experiment together with the community.



About Derby's Silk Mill:

Derby's Silk Mill, located in Derby, UK, is the site of the world's first factory and keeper of globally significant stories of innovation, creativity and engineering. As a building of great historical importance to the city, Derby Museums is keen to conserve the most valuable aspects of the site, while modernizing the building and evolving the entire space into a museum and environment that best serves the needs of the people of Derby.



About the initiative:

The Re:Make project is a unique approach to developing a museum – encouraging visitors and volunteers to become citizen curators, designers and makers; learning new skills or applying skills they already have to support the redevelopment of Derby's Silk Mill.

Goals:

- Become a Museum of Making that inspires future generations of makers, creators and innovators
- Community members having a personal experience and interacting with the museum
- Utilizing the space so that it is meaningful and accessible to the community



Process:

From September 2013 volunteers have been invited to take part in an exciting community rebuilding project 'Remake the Museum. This project has been supported by funding from The Happy Museum Project and Arts Council England and has enabled members of the public to become citizen curators, taking part in organized sessions, helping design and build new displays, furniture and fittings for the ground floor from scratch. Participants have learned new skills, met new people and had a direct input into the future of one of the city's most well-loved icons.

1. Project Kickoff
2. Workshop 1 – Working in groups, the participants were asked to think about who would use the Silk Mill, what it would be used for and why those visitors would use it. Combining those three aspects of thought, the groups were asked to invent a scenario for a prospective visitor.
3. Workshop 2 – Participants were invited to discuss, plan and present their ideas of 'A Day at The Silk Mill.' Thinking about who could be part of the day, what could take place and how the space could work in the situation, the groups came up with a range of scenarios to be used as ideas for future programming at The Silk Mill.
4. Re:Veal Launch party!
5. Program Implementation

Phase 2 will repeat this process to generate ideas for how to use the other spaces at the Silk Museum.

Progress so far:

Lessons from community engagement:

Having so many people contributing their ideas produced ideas that the project team never would have thought of otherwise. It's then meaningful for the community participants as well as it's their thoughts and ideas. People's attitudes towards what a museum is have shifted. There is a sense of community ownership of the museum.

Involve community members in all facets of the project:

Re:Make hosted furniture making workshops where innovative furniture was built that can be used for seating, for display purposes and positioned in a tessellation to form a solid structure and surface. They also held workshops to educate on the importance of signage and way finding and invited participants to make the signs for the museum. Another workshop idea came from a participant who suggested to have lockers in the space, allowing makers to keep materials and tools secure and also display the project they're working on.



Range of programs/projects implemented:

- Signage & Wayfinding workshops
- Object Preparation Session – community invited into the process of cleaning, documenting and photographing the objects for display and storage.
- Prototyping workshops – Groups are asked to pick a product, create a rough design as well as thinking about how it used and where it would work in the space. Using a range of materials including card, wood, foam and plastic the sketches are made into rough prototypes.
- School Partnership Maker workshops