American Urban History Museums Unite

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CHICAGO. October 1990. The city's pre-eminent historical society. A convocation of professionals representing the nation's museums that deal with urban history. Excitement, anxiousness, a sense of being overwhelmed, a sense of common purpose. A lot of talented people.

This stream of consciousness reflects some of my impressions of the Venues of Inquiry Conference, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Common Agenda (a program of the American Association of State and Local History), and organized by the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Va. These 100 or so museum professionals sought to develop and understand the implications for the general public in our interpretation of the collections of urban history museums. I had the honor of being involved, serving as a panelist commenting on several of the papers presented.

The conference's sessions focused on examining museums as sources for the study of urban life, as interpreters of the past, and as social instruments. Each session explored, with different emphases, the intersection of these varying faces of museums with their audiences, collections and scholarship. It is about time for urban history museums to come together, because the challenges which face us are daunting. Most of our institutions that have evolved into urban history museums started out, like the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, as libraries and archives relating to "Americana."

One paper described these institutions' museum holdings — the three dimensional objects, the material culture, that fill major exhibitions — as "accessories for genealogical club houses." Objects were "venerated but not acquired for interpretive purposes." As time passed, though, many institutions found themselves in the position of being uniquely qualified to fill the need for city (in our case, regional) history museums. But to properly accept this challenge, we must have collections which reflect more of the experiences of more of the people whose history makes up the city and its region. In the words of Amina Dickerson of the Chicago Historical Society, "Museums can be a place to 'see yourself,' and in seeing yourself, a place to gain a context, a sense of place and possibility."

This broader view of whose experiences, and of what kinds of experiences, ought to find a place in urban history museums places a good deal of strain on institutions like ours, which must now aggressively "fill in the gaps" in our previous holdings if we wish to mount meaningful and appealing exhibitions. As our members know, we are striving to do this in a number of ways. Our collections efforts with the Jewish, African-American,
and Italian-American communities, and just recently, with people of Croatian, Polish and Slovak heritage in our region, are indeed bringing in the material culture and archival records which log the presence of all these groups in our history.

Another challenge to urban history museums has to do with our physical plants. If “inclusiveness” of people and presenting a broad range of historical experience are our goals, and if collecting strategies are devised to reflect this part of our mission, then space becomes a huge problem. From the architecture of old-time historical societies, which often scream elitism, to storing to make available for use the large volume of materials needed to illustrate the historical themes we feel are important, many buildings now expected to serve as urban history museums are often wrong for the mission.

This is certainly the case with our institution, and the Society has confronted this situation over the last few years in a bold and decisive manner. (Even without a reinterpretation of our mission, we’ve been out of space for years.) The need for an exciting new facility to serve as the region’s collective memory has driven us toward the Pittsburgh Regional History Center, which we expect to open in 1994. Located in the former Chautauqua Ice Company building in Pittsburgh’s Strip District, the 160,000-square-foot facility will address some of the major issues dealt with at the Chicago meeting. It will provide adequate space for the continued evolution of our collections, and it will give us the space to educate and entertain the broadest possible slice of the public.

Finally, it is our goal that the new building will be attractive to everyone. We hope that everyone across the region will see something of themselves, their families and neighborhoods and communities, in our archival and museum collections, our exhibitions and our programs.