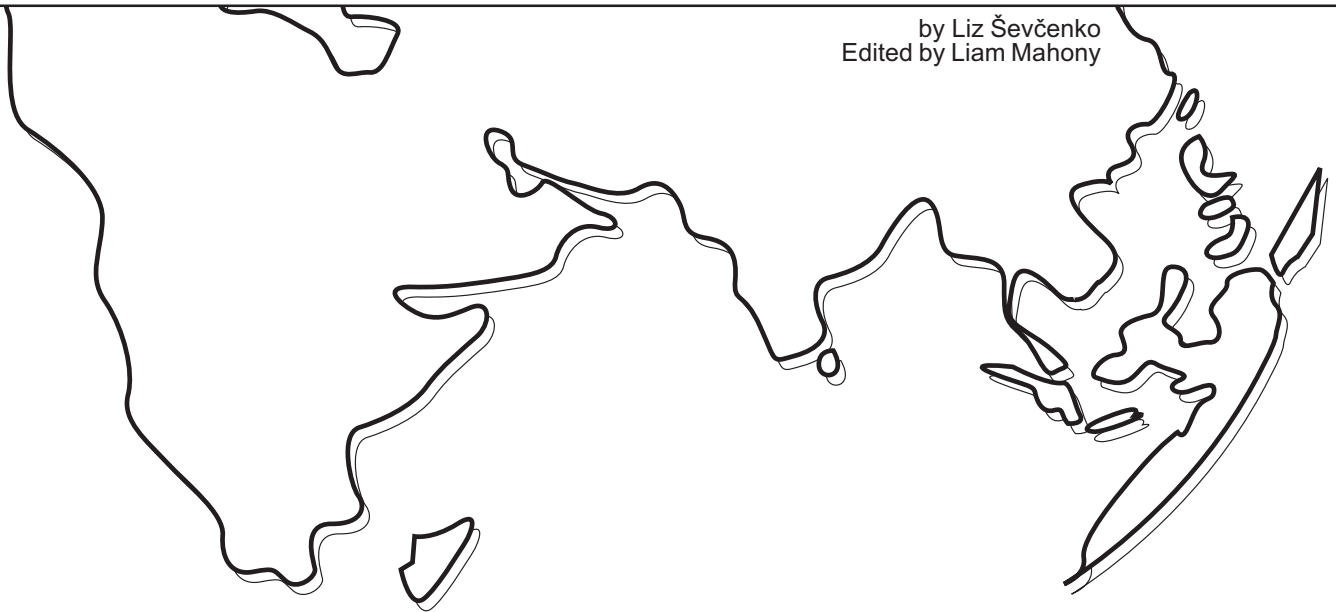


The Power of Place

How historic sites can engage citizens in human rights issues

by Liz Ševčenko
Edited by Liam Mahony



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Notebook Series Editor

Liam Mahony

Layout and Copyediting

Tricia Cornell

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Contact Information

International Coalition of Sites of Conscience
333 Seventh Avenue
14th Floor
New York, NY 10001-5108
Tel. + 1 646 755 6180
Fax + 1 646 755 6192
www.sitesofconscience.org
www.tenement.org

Liz Ševčenko

Liz Ševčenko is vice president of interpretation at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and secretary general of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. At the Tenement Museum, she develops internationally recognized programs for all ages that connect the dramatic stories of the neighborhood's immigrants past and present. She also develops initiatives to inspire civic dialogue on cultural identity, labor relations, housing, welfare, immigration and other issues these stories raise.

As secretary general of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, Ševčenko coordinates exchanges among historic sites around the world that develop programs and practices to address contemporary issues in historical perspective. Completing her doctorate in American history at New York University, Ševčenko has most recently published "The Making of Loisaída" in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*.

International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience

The Coalition (www.sitesofconscience.org) works to build the capacity of historic sites around the world to foster dialogue on pressing social issues and promote democratic and humanitarian values. It seeks to change the role of historic sites in civic life from places of passive learning to centers for active citizen engagement. It develops sites of conscience as places for communities to have ongoing dialogues about the meaning of their past and the shape of their future — as places to build a lasting culture of human rights. Connecting sites from Memoria Abierta in Argentina to the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia to the District Six Museum in South Africa, it supports consultations, workshops, conferences and joint projects among historic site directors, human rights organizations and NGOs. The Coalition is currently coordinated from the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.



September 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series. In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes an innovative tactic that was used successfully in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement, including nongovernment and government perspectives, educators, law enforcement personnel, truth and reconciliation processes, women's rights and mental health advocates. They have both adapted and pioneered tactics that have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have used tactics that, when adapted, can be applied in other countries and other situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on how the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire other human rights practitioners to think tactically — and to broaden the realm of tactics considered to effectively advance human rights.

In this notebook the author describes how human rights activists as well as the museum community can make more effective use of the spacial impact of historic sites to help educate people about social change and human rights. The Tenement Museum in New York City has joined with more than a dozen other institutions that have focused their attention on “sites of conscience”—places where terrible human rights abuse has occurred that should never be forgotten. Their goal is not only to remember the past, but also to use the emotional power of these places to catalyze critical thinking about the ongoing social issues of today, through dialogue and educational activities.

The entire series of Tactical Notebooks is available online at www.newtactics.org. Additional notebooks are already available and others will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics newsletter, please send an e-mail to newtactics@cvt.org.

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture and grew out of our experiences as a creator of new tactics and as a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position — one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought-provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kate Kelnah".

New Tactics Project Manager

Introduction

Around the world, people instinctively turn to places of memory to come to terms with the past and chart a course for the future. From makeshift roadside memorials to official commemorations, millions of people around the world gather at places of memory looking for healing, reconciliation and insight on how to move forward. Memory is a critical language and terrain of human rights. It's here, through the process of preserving the past, that evidence of human rights violations is maintained and made public, issues this evidence raises are debated and tactics for preventing it from happening again are developed. In short, these places can be critical tools for building a lasting culture of human rights.

Our project is to take a fundamental human instinct and develop it as an identifiable, self-conscious tactic in the service of human rights and social justice.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum preserves a five-story building at 97 Orchard Street, home to over 7,000 immigrants from more than 20 different nations from 1863 to 1935. The Museum restores the tiny apartments of the diverse immigrant families who lived there and tells the stories of their daily challenges and triumphs in America. The human rights issues they faced — labor exploitation, racial and ethnic discrimination, poverty and immigration restrictions — are very much alive today. Located in a neighborhood that is today nearly 40 percent foreign-born, the Museum hosts public dialogues on immigration, welfare, housing, cultural identity and other related issues; teaches English and activism to new immigrants; and promotes immigrant voices and issues through changing arts programs.

The Museum believes that historic sites can be powerful catalysts for public awareness and action on human rights issues. To promote this idea the Museum initiated the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. The Coalition was founded in 1999 when the Tenement Museum brought together leaders of nine historic sites from around the world: the District Six Museum (South Africa); Gulag Museum (Russia); Liberation War Museum; (Bangladesh); Lower East Side Tenement Museum (USA); Maison des Esclaves (Senegal); Memoria Abierta (Argentina); National Civil Rights Museum (USA); Terezin Memorial (Czech Republic); Women's Rights National Historical Park (USA); and the Workhouse (United Kingdom).

The group pledged to work together to develop effective strategies for activating our places of memory as centers for dialogue on contemporary issues. Our goal is to transform historic site museums from places of passive learning to places of active citizen engagement. We

seek to use the history of what happened at our sites — whether it was a genocide, a violation of civil rights, or a triumph of democracy — as the foundation for dialogue about how and where these issues are alive today and about what can be done to address them.

We define sites of conscience as initiatives that:

- ◆ Interpret history through sites;
- ◆ Engage in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values; and
- ◆ Share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site.

The Coalition conducts program development workshops, staff exchanges and web-based resource exchanges. We also collaborate with leading human rights organizations to link our histories with current campaigns and inspire citizen participation in current struggles for truth and justice. The Coalition is currently coordinated at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Case study one: Sweatshops past and present

Each Coalition member museum developed a specific tactic for using history to address pressing human rights issues in their communities. Located in the birthplace and ongoing center of New York City's garment industry, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum took on the issue of sweatshops. Although there is no single definition of a "sweatshop," the word is associated with garment factories employing immigrant, often illegal, workers, laboring extremely long hours in difficult and dangerous conditions. For labor activists and garment manufacturers alike, it is an explosive term.

The mission of the Lower East Side Museum is to "promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences to Manhattan's Lower East Side, gateway to America." The Museum invites guests to enter the historic tenement building and tour the carefully restored apartments of families who actually lived there.

On one tour, we introduce two families struggling to make ends meet and be accepted in America during economic crises. Nathalie Gumpertz is a German single mother who struggled to raise her three children as a dressmaker after her husband disappeared after the Panic of 1873 (a ma-



The Workhouse

for economic downturn in Europe and the United States). She fought to maintain her right to speak German in the face of the first English-only law to be introduced in the United States. The other family, the Sicilian Baldizzis, went to great lengths to enter the country illegally, only to be forced to go on government relief during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Our newest tour introduces guests to two families toiling in the business that has been a source of promise and sorrow to immigrants for more than a century. Guests pick their way through piles of fabric to meet Harris and Jennie Levine, the Russian immigrants who opened a dressmaking shop with three employees in their tenement apartment in 1892 — creating the very type of space the word “sweatshop” was, in that moment, coined to describe.

After hearing of all the reforms that were introduced to eradicate the sweatshop, guests visit the Rogarshevsky family in 1918 and hear how Abraham, who worked as a presser in a new modern factory, nevertheless fell victim to tuberculosis, called the “tailor’s disease” or the “Jewish disease.”

We layer this historic home for immigrants with the expressions of immigrants arriving today, inviting immigrant artists to develop visual art installations, theater programs, poetry readings and digital art programs about their experiences and issues.

Individuals like the Levines and the Rogarshevskys, whether they knew it or not, were at the center of national debates taking place from Congress to the corner store. Their stories provide a generative place from which to explore pressing questions we’re still grappling with today, like: Who is American? Who should help people with economic needs (the neighborhood, private charities, the government)? What are fair labor practices? What is a sweatshop? If we tell a single, static story of what happened in the past and force visitors to accept a single moral from it, then we do nothing more than reinforce conflicts taking place in the present. Instead, we believe it is the obligation of historic sites to engage communities in



Inside the Levine home and dress shop

dialogue around issues of justice past and present. And an engaged citizenry is the best weapon against human rights abuse.

At the turn of the 20th century, 97 Orchard Street stood at the center of America’s garment production — 70 percent of the nation’s women’s clothing was produced in that neighborhood — and at the center of America’s debate about sweatshops. On the Lower East Side today, there are more than 150 garment shops employing thousands of immigrant workers. The Department of Labor classifies nearly three-quarters of them as “sweatshops,” but the debate still rages over what a sweatshop is, what should be done to address labor abuses and who is responsible.

LOOKING TO THE PAST FOR PERSPECTIVE

What is the role of a historic site here? We decided to return to the moment when the word “sweatshop” was first introduced in the United States and open a space for addressing the history of rights abuse and reform in the garment industry. We found Harris and Jennie Levine, immigrants from Płocisk, in what’s now

PIECING IT TOGETHER: SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

Participants

Designers/Retailers

- ◆ Toys R Us
- ◆ Phillips Van Heusen
- ◆ Eileen Fisher
- ◆ Levi’s

Contractors/Industry Groups

- ◆ Kings County Manufacturers Association
- ◆ New York City Apparel Industry Compliance Association
- ◆ Garment Industry Development Corporation

Human Rights

- ◆ Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First)
- ◆ Human Rights Watch
- ◆ Columbia School of Journalism, Human Rights Reporting

Labor

- ◆ UNITE! (Union of Needle, Industrial and Textile Employees):
- ◆ International Labor Organization

Government

- ◆ New York State Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division



Poland, who opened a dressmaking shop in their apartment with three workers in 1897. From the outset, our goal was to make the restored Levine family home an ongoing center for addressing current sweatshop issues.

How exactly could we do this? What was the best role for a historic site in a human rights debate? To find out, we knew we had to carefully identify and collaborate with as many different constituencies as possible. So as the tour narrative was being shaped, and as the exhibit was physically being built, we held focus groups with anyone in the industry who would listen. We began with those with whom we had the closest contact, mainly unions and immigrant serving organizations in our neighborhood.

But what about other perspectives? During our outreach process, we were contacted by World Monitors, Inc., a small company that consulted with businesses on socially responsible practices, specializing in the garment industry. WMI worked with retail companies to ask: How can you prevent the egregious labor abuses in the garment industry, in factories from Los Angeles to Laos, while remaining economically viable? But after attempting to bring together New York retailers and contractors with unions and other labor groups working to improve factory conditions, WMI said they were at a dead end. Discussions were deadlocked: The same accusations were made in every meeting about who was really responsible for labor abuses, the same ideas were proposed for who should change what and the same arguments were made for why this change was impractical or ineffective. WMI felt that the Museum provided an opportunity to open a new conversation, to inspire new ways for different sides to communicate with each other — and that this new conversation might inspire new ideas and new commitments.

Together WMI and the Museum put together a list, a combination of their contacts and ours. We did the inviting, but used their name with retailers and others who might be suspicious of our politics.

In the first week of the exhibit's opening, we held a day-long roundtable among representatives throughout the garment industry, cosponsored by the Museum and WMI, that used our new exhibit as the starting point for dialogue about how conflicting sectors could work together to address abuses in the garment industry. Participants included Eileen Fisher, Toys R Us, Human Rights Watch, UNITE! (the garment workers' union), Levi's, the Kings County Manufacturers Association and others.

The day began with a visit to the restored Levine family dress-making shop. Packed in an intimate circle, leaders of conflicting sectors of the garment industry today — workers and manufacturers, retailers and

union organizers — listened to the story of how this Russian immigrant family slept, ate, raised a family and turned out hundreds of dresses in a tiny 325-square-foot space during the 1890s. They then moved forward in time to 1918, to the home of Abraham Rogarshevsky, a presser who, together with his daughter Ida, a sewing machine operator, worked in a large loft factory outside his home.

After taking an intimate look at the daily lives of these two families, the group gathered in the Museum's cozy "Tenement Kitchen," with its mismatched chairs, no central conference table and no official place cards bearing delegates' names. Through a series of dialogues facilitated by a Museum staff person, participants were divided into small groups containing at least one representative from each sector (labor, designers, contractors, etc.). Together they discussed the experiences of the two families and then used these examples to analyze how change was made or why it wasn't and what were the consequences. Finally, they returned to a large group discussion about what perspective these stories from the past can provide for the industry today, specifically about how different sectors must work together to address persistent abuses. The format of the dialogues — for instance, the size and composition of the small groups, as well as the wording and sequence of the questions — was carefully designed by Museum staff.

Three aspects of our work created the conditions for effective dialogue on issues in the garment industry and other immigration-related issues. First, by discussing current issues in the context of the 19th century, we created a sense of distance that allowed certain conversations to happen that would have been too difficult otherwise. Second, by looking at the stories of individual, real people, we brought difficult, abstract issues down to a human level, a scale on which they could be productively discussed. Third, we brought people together in an emotional setting for dialogue that, in the words of one participant, "set everyone a little off balance," shifting people out of their normal, rigid, stances and allowing them to look at these issues in a new light.

What resulted? The group developed a report with ideas and commitments in two areas: how different sectors could work together locally and who else they were going to bring to the Museum.

Inspired by this summit, nearly a dozen garment industry organizations brought their staff for tours and dialogues around the question, "How can we work together?"

Many of the participants voiced their desire to reach consumers. More than 100,000 consumers come to the Museum every year. To raise their awareness and engage them in the issues of how their clothes were

made, we built the industry participants' conversation into the Museum's exhibit itself. Now, before entering the Levine home, visitors hear the voices of participating workers, retailers, union organizers, manufacturers and inspectors giving their different perspectives on their experience with sweatshops today. A gallery guide provides them with references to organizations and campaigns addressing the issue, encouraging them to get involved.

Since the garment industry summit, the Museum now hosts regular public dialogues with trained facilitators. After their tour, visitors can now choose to share their personal experiences and their reactions to the personal difficulties of the families of 97 Orchard Street, as a starting point for exploring larger immigration-related issues. We compose some of the groups ourselves, such as when we bring together community leaders or local immigration policy-makers and advocates on different sides of a neighborhood debate. And some groups come to us because they want to wrestle with an issue internally. We've had groups as diverse as Lower East Side librarians, local garment workers union members and German senators working on immigration policy.

This tactic — to use history and historic sites to foster dialogue on contemporary human rights issues — only works if it is sustained and engages many different constituencies on many levels. For example:

- ◆ The museum offers English classes to recent immigrants, inviting them to "meet" their historic counterparts and explore their parallel experiences as newcomers in the United States. "I not only learned English," one graduate said, "I learned that I was not alone." Using this historical perspective, students discuss how to change their own futures. One class was inspired to de-

velop a multilingual resource guide by and for new immigrants.

- ◆ After neighborhood leaders participated in dialogues at the Museum in which they shared personal histories and discussed contemporary community issues, they decided to form the Lower East Side Community Preservation Project. This coalition of Chinese, Latino, Jewish and African American leaders of libraries, churches, synagogues and immigrant organizations works together to identify and interpret local historic sites as starting points for dialogue on shared community issues. Their latest project was a walking tour of the neighborhood designed to raise public awareness of the cultures, experiences and unresolved social justice issues in the neighborhood. This tour has become the Museum's official walking tour.
- ◆ "Inspect This!" is a program in collaboration with New York City's Department of Housing and Preservation that invites school children to learn about how housing standards and conditions change over time and how they can take action against violations in their own homes.

Building an international coalition of sites of conscience

The Tenement Museum's idea that historic sites could be centers for addressing contemporary issues was initially met with resistance. Most other museums, and funders of museums, compared their collections of Wedgwood or Vermeer to that of the Tenement Museum, which includes a few hundred buttons, a laundry ticket and a mummified rat found in our ceiling, and couldn't see how we had much in common. When we approached human rights and social welfare agencies, they said, "You're a *museum*," by which they meant something that was self-indulgent, precious

and a big waste of time. So we felt caught between two worlds and began to fear that we would not survive unless we abandoned our mission.

We put out a call to museums around the world describing the role we felt historic sites could play in their societies and asking if anyone else felt the same. Eight responded: the District Six Museum (South Africa), re-

The environment here puts everyone off balance, in a way that finally opens discussion. It allows us to look at all these issues together.

Gareth Howell, International Labor Organization

The Museum provides a living sense of what a shop was like, allowing visitors to enter the world of the people who lived and worked there. That is real value added for our compliance efforts.

Marcela Reubens, Phillips Van Heusen

Sweatshops are an extremely complicated issue and we adults, after all our work, have not figured out a solution. The Tenement Museum's exhibit on the garment industry will get our youth aware and thinking about these issues from an early age. That way, we can hope that they will be the ones to find the solution.

Dik Fong, Kings County Manufacturers Association

I want to show this exhibit to teenaged consumers. They should know how their clothes are made and be aware of the consequences of their choices — what it means if they shop for bargains. This exhibit makes people aware of the work and human cost of making clothes.

Lana Cheung, UNITE! Local 23-25



membering forced removal under apartheid; the Gulag Museum (Russia), the only Stalinist labor camp to be preserved in Russia; the Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh), excavating killing fields and memorializing the genocide of the Bangladeshi people during the Liberation War of 1971; the Maison Des Esclaves (Senegal), an 18th-century slave transport station; the National Park Service Northeast Region (USA), representing the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls and other sites; Memoria Abierta (Argentina), commemorating the “disappeared” during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s; Terezín Memorial (Czech Republic), a labor camp used to model the “humane practices” of the Nazi regime to the Red Cross; and The Workhouse (England), a 19th-century building designed to house people in need.

When we met for the first time, we were surprised to find that most of us were not people with traditional museum backgrounds. Rather, we were activists who had come to believe that our best contribution could be made through history and, specifically, through historic sites. Many had amassed evidence and documentation of human rights abuse and were faced with the challenge of using it to build a broader public consciousness of what happened. Pasting our photographs and documents up on a wall was not enough. We wanted to activate this memory and galvanize our

communities to make change.

By the end of the week, we had formed the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience with the following declaration:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.

This statement established a new role for historic sites in the world, partnering us with the international



Former Navy School and torture center that will become the new Museum of Memory in Buenos Aires

movements for democracy, human rights and social justice.

We established strict criteria for membership in the Coalition as a way of challenging ourselves and other museums around the world to meet our civic obligations. We should not only interpret the history of our sites, but

- ◆ Engage in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and
- ◆ Share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site.
- ◆ How? Each site developed its own application of the tactic, producing a program designed to inspire our visitors to use what they learned and felt at our sites to think and participate in new ways about important issues we face today. Each site’s program defines larger civic questions for visitors to consider and strategies for engaging them in dialogue around these questions.

Sites of conscience and the activities we organize can serve as powerful new tools in at least four processes in the defense of human rights: a) truth seeking and building a culture of “never again;” b) reparations; c) reconciliation; and d) civic engagement, or democracy building.

Case study two: Seeking truth

Memoria Abierta (Open Memory) is a coalition of human rights organizations in Argentina that has amassed a powerful archive of documents, photographs and sites associated with human rights abuses during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. Memoria Abierta hopes to use this material to stimulate citizens “to make a commitment to solve the problems of our country.” Further, the project transformed the ordinary landscape of Buenos Aires into an ongoing series of public events reminding people of what

COALITION FOUNDING MEMBERS:

District Six Museum (South Africa): remembering forced removal under apartheid

Gulag Museum (Russia): the only Stalinist labor camp to be preserved in Russia

Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh): excavating killing fields and memorializing the genocide of the Bangladeshi people during the Liberation War of 1971

Lower East Side Tenement Museum (USA): interpreting immigration past and present in a neighborhood that has served as the gateway to America to newcomers from all over the world

Maison Des Esclaves (Senegal): an 18th century slave transport station

National Park Service (USA): representing the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls and other sites

Memoria Abierta (Argentina): commemorating the “disappeared” during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s

Terezín Memorial (Czech Republic): a labor camp used to model the “humane practices” of the Nazi regime to the Red Cross

The Workhouse (England): a 19th-century building for the indigent

happened under everyone's noses in the recent past. These events are designed to inspire every citizen to take responsibility for ensuring that the abuses in Argentina never happen again. Memoria Abierta has mapped the ordinary places around the city — gas stations, grocery stores, schools — that functioned as torture centers, transforming the whole city into a site of conscience. They have recorded the stories of those who were detained, those who lived or worked right next door and were unaware or unwilling to admit what was happening and those who resisted. This material will form the basis of a new Museum of Memory to be installed in the former Navy School that served as the headquarters for political violence in Buenos Aires. The museum will ask visitors, "What are the steps a society takes to make horror seem normal? When I see an injustice happening, does it involve me? How am I responsible or implicated?"

Case study three: Reparations

In Cape Town, South Africa, the District Six Museum created an ongoing, community-based center for remembering and recovery that served as the basis for material compensation for victims of apartheid. In 1966 the racially integrated neighborhood of District Six was razed to the ground to make way for a new "whites only" development. The only buildings left were houses of worship. A group of former residents covered the floor of a Methodist church with a detailed map of their destroyed neighborhood and invited their neighbors to place their homes, streets, stores and community spaces on it. This memory-mapping project became the foundation for land reclamation claims. The museum organized and hosted one of the Land Courts on its site. Former residents sat in chairs directly on the map of their old neighborhood, as the court granted them, in the words of one, "our land back, our homes back, our dignity back."¹ Since then, the museum has developed exhibitions on the histories of smaller neighboring communities destroyed under the Group Areas Act, including Kirstenboch and Two Rivers, to publicize and support their unresolved land claims.

Case study four: Reconciliation

Sites of conscience can also serve as powerful catalysts for negotiation and reconciliation.

The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Siberia is the only Stalinist labor camp in Russia to be preserved as a historic site. The museum preserves the barracks where thousands of people from the former Soviet Union were imprisoned for anything from minor work infractions to political opposition from the Stalin era through the 1980s. Nearly everyone knew

¹ Audio recording of Land Court proceedings, District Six Museum

At first we conceived of [the museum] as a place to store documents and then as a place from where we could disseminate information — to reveal what had happened and to display items that proved it so. Because one of the realities we were dealing with was that people didn't believe us... you would start to talk about how your children had been taken away and they would answer, "You're lying"... even our relatives and people who knew us well, who knew my children said, "Are you sure? Aren't they in Europe? Maybe they just left." And I thought, "How can they say that? How can they believe that?" You wanted to die... and so I thought that if there were so many people like this that I had to show them, to throw the truth in their faces so that they wouldn't keep believing. And so we thought a place like this would reveal the truth and prove that everything we had been through and everything that we were talking about was real.

Ilda Milducci, Argentine Historical and Social Memory Foundation

someone sent to the Gulag. Prisoners were forced into a massive labor system that fueled the industrialization of Russia.

The Gulag Museum invited former prisoners and former guards to give each other "tours" of the site from each of their perspectives. The dialogues forced these individuals to confront each other as human beings and allowed them to take significant steps in their personal recoveries.

But the Gulag Museum also realized that to build a functioning democracy in Russia, they would need to do more than heal the rifts among a few individuals. In Russia, a poll reported that 53 percent of Russian citizens interviewed supported Stalin's policies and practices. Fourteen percent felt that Stalin did both good and bad for the country, while only 33 percent felt he had committed any human rights violations. Facing war in Chechnya and other government repression, the museum was struggling to activate the memory of the Gulag system to raise awareness about the threat of totalitarianism and the consequences of a passive citizenry.

So the museum serves as an educational center about the Gulag system and about the role of individual citizens in creating and sustaining human rights and democracy. After visitors walk through the barracks, cells

When we were told about the museum we thought, "A museum? How can we build a museum?" It seemed somewhat antiquated. How could our problem be kept in a museum? Well, we went anyway and we saw a proposal for something that we had never thought could become a museum... and we changed our minds.

Mabel Penette de Gutiérrez, Relatives of Persons Disappeared and Detained for Political Reasons



Former residents mark their homes on a map at the District Six Museum

and interrogation rooms of the camp, a facilitator leads visitors in a discussion about the future of democracy in Russia and what each one of them can do to guarantee it. The Museum does special outreach to school children, integrating the experience into local curricula.

Case study five: Civic engagement

The Workhouse in England preserves a rare surviving example of a Victorian “solution” to poverty: structures that once loomed on the outskirts of every town as threats to the “idle and profligate.” In this vision of helping the needy, people who could not support themselves and were forced to take shelter in the Workhouse were separated from their families and forced to do menial work. After touring the segregated quarters and labor yards of the Workhouse, visitors enter an exhibit titled, “What Now? What Next?” It compares the classification and segregation of Britain’s poor from the Victorian era through the present. The Workhouse invites policy-makers and advocates such as representatives of Britain’s welfare system and the international leadership of Oxfam, people struggling on public assistance today and anyone else who walks through the door to address the following questions: Where would the people of The Workhouse be today? How have things improved, or become worse? What solutions to poverty and its related issues may we try in the future — is there anything new that has not been tried before?

Challenges

DIVERSE UNDERSTANDINGS OF DIALOGUE WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP

The Coalition itself has been a spirited forum in which to debate how historic sites can serve as democratic institutions and demonstrate democratic processes. At the heart is a debate over what democracy looks like and what is the most effective way to achieve it. Coalition members come from a wide array of political contexts. All sites interpret experiences and events that relate to pressing issues today but some, like Memoria Abierta, are living in the immediate after-

math of these events, while others, like the 18th-century Maison des Esclaves (Slave House) in Senegal, are looking back on a longer legacy. This difference in distance informs how different members view the role of their site in their society, what they see as the most urgent democratic project and how they seek to engage their audiences.

Some sites, particularly those representing governments, like the U.S. National Park Service, or larger institutions, like the British National Trust, were concerned that being a site of conscience was too “political.” By “political” they meant explicitly advocating a specific position on a contemporary issue, such as who should receive public assistance and for how long, or who should be allowed to immigrate to the United States. Instead, these members resolved to serve as open forums for dialogue on all sides of contemporary debates, taking care to pose questions with a variety of possible answers. For many, that meant including multiple perspectives in their narratives, as in the Tenement Museum’s audio introduction to its “sweatshop” exhibit, featuring the voices of workers, contractors, designers and union organizers. For others, it meant inviting participants from a variety of perspectives to exchange experiences at the site, such as when the Gulag Museum brought together former prisoners and former guards to meet and tell their stories, or when the Japanese American National Museum invited both an Immigration and Naturalization Service agent and a former internee to speak on racial profiling.

For other sites, multiple perspectives smacked of moral relativism. Directors of the District Six Museum, Memoria Abierta and the Liberation War Museum are just a few of the members based in human rights movements. Their projects are an integral part of larger truth-seeking efforts, related to proving that crimes against humanity occurred, bringing perpetrators to justice and establishing truth commissions. These sites’ specific goal within the larger human rights effort is to develop a public consciousness or acceptance of certain facts as indisputable. Exposing the total abrogation of democracy and developing a strong public memory of this abrogation is their highest priority in their effort to build a democratic culture. These sites leave the truths of human rights violations unquestioned, but offer the future of their countries as an open debate, inviting visitors to consider a variety of ways they can participate in shaping it.

TRAINING STAFF TO CONNECT PAST AND PRESENT

Even within the Tenement Museum’s own staff and volunteer corps, some resisted the idea of addressing contemporary issues explicitly and engaging visitors in open-ended questions. They felt most comfortable being the authorities on the past, telling a single story

that visitors would simply listen to. We needed to provide significant training to our front-line educators, as well as redefine what “education” at the Museum would mean. So we rewrote our scripts to include larger civic questions and time to discuss them and offered a monthly training in different dialogue techniques.

ESTABLISHING A SAFE SPACE FOR PARTICIPANTS

To organize the garment industry dialogues, the Tenement Museum had to assure participants from all sectors of the garment industry that their voices would be heard and respected. Designers and retailers were apprehensive that they would be used as foils, while workers and union organizers were concerned we would gloss over the serious problems plaguing the industry. When we initially invited these groups to participate in shaping the exhibit, we asked them to come to preliminary meetings with others in their sector. These meetings allowed them to feel that their voice would be heard and respected by the Museum and made them feel more comfortable having subsequent meetings with other groups. Nevertheless, a participant from one designer company came to preliminary meetings and even agreed to be interviewed for the audio program but was then reprimanded by his superiors and had to pull out of the project altogether.

Outcomes

Sites of conscience have been significant factors in the recognition of human rights abuse in their countries, in bringing perpetrators to justice and to creating precedents for accountability to ensure abuses will not happen again. But, most importantly, they have begun to develop a culture of human rights and peace to bring together a broader citizenry that will actively oppose human rights abuse in the future. Through the efforts of the Gulag Museum in Russia, the local government in Perm and the national government have supported the introduction of information about the Gulag into school curricula. After many years, they have also publicly supported the Gulag Museum’s efforts and publicized their work. In Argentina, Memoria Abierta’s copious documentation of the testimonies, documents, photographs, sites and other evidence of abuses, as well as their tireless pressure to make this evidence public in a museum, contributed to the creation of an official commission to investigate the disappearances.

The movement is growing, both in size and, happily, in the range of issues we explore. We now include more sites as-

sociated with victories, like the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site and the Women’s Rights National Historical Park. Other new members include the Japanese American National Museum, on the site of a Buddhist temple where Japanese Americans were rounded up before internment in places like Manzanar as well as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, the place of his birth, and the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, the place of his death. This new geographic and thematic diversity opens up still more opportunities for civic engagement, as well as opportunities for exchanges among staff on how to deal with sensitive issues.

As activists we are looking for ways to ensure that historic sites become vital parts of the civic life of their communities. We must make their stories meaningful to people in the present day. Individual sites, as well as large networks, have asked the Coalition to work with them to help their leadership and membership identify how sites might identify important contemporary issues their site raises and foster dialogue on them.

ADVISING ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER MEMORIAL

Perhaps no memorial project is more contested or has more international interest than the development of the World Trade Center site in New York City. Recognizing the Coalition’s rich experience with memorializing tragedy and interpreting difficult issues, its experience creating effective and forward-thinking civic spaces at sites of destruction, several developers of the site came to speak with the Coalition about the challenges they faced. The Coalition engaged in important exchanges with the Lower Manhattan Devel-



The Gulag Museum at Perm-36



opment Corporation, the entity responsible for developing the site; Daniel Libeskind, the master planner; and the Freedom Center, a team developing a museum at the site. We discussed issues such as making memorializing a democratic process, using historic fab-



The double staircase at the Slave House in Senegal

ric to create a civic space and designing a museum as a center for dialogue.

Transferring the tactic

Whether you are a small grassroots victims' group or an established human rights organization, whether you have a traditional museum or no museum at all, if you seek to harness the power of places of memory to inspire dialogue and citizen action, keep the following in mind:

- ◆ **Use the power of place.** Connect visitors to the specific history of your site; understand and use the ways the spaces make people feel to help them connect to the broader issues you are trying to raise.
- ◆ **Make the process part of the product.** Controversy is too often avoided as something damaging to an institution or a project; in fact, engaging conflicting perspectives is one of the greatest opportunities for sites of conscience. Involve stakeholders from different perspectives in the development of the project. The process of developing the story and experience is a productive starting point for dialogue about the contemporary issues at stake. Involving different perspectives at the outset ensures that these perspectives will be raised in the exhibit and that different groups will participate in dialogues after the project is completed.
- ◆ **Develop different forms of dialogue** that can engage people with different amounts of time to spend, different cultural backgrounds, different personalities, etc. In addition to offering an in-

depth dialogue program after the tours, sites are developing ways to generate discussions among visitors during the tours. Others are also developing other ways to stimulate dialogue and address contemporary issues through the web, printed material and other media.

- ◆ **Manage visitor expectations.** To prepare visitors for the sensitive issues they may encounter, sites work to communicate their commitment to addressing contemporary questions through information on web sites, at visitors centers, by distributing maps of the site that indicate where visitors will encounter material on the present day and by training front-line staff to speak to visitors before they go on the tour.
- ◆ **Serve as an open forum.** Raising both sides of an issue and encouraging debate stimulates citizen participation more effectively than teaching a single story to a passive audience. But museums must find ways to do this without becoming moral relativists or appearing to excuse or condone perpetrators.
- ◆ **Serve as an ongoing forum.** Memorials must be active places where issues are constantly debated, where stories are told and retold. The site and program must be flexible enough to accommodate the ways the meaning of the past changes for each generation, to be constantly reinvented. A static narrative or permanent sculpture will foreclose dialogue and become obsolete in short order.
- ◆ **Focus on individual human experience** as a starting point. This helps visitors to connect the story to their own personal experiences and imagine what they would have done in each situation. This kind of imagining is the first step in inspiring people to take action.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Groups that are exploring how a place of memory could help address a human rights issue in their communities might begin by bringing key constituencies together for a discussion of the following questions:

1. Identify a place associated with the history of a conflict that is still unresolved today. (This place could be somewhere a human rights abuse occurred, a human rights victory occurred, or an issue of rights was debated. It could be a place that already has a museum or a memorial or a place that does not.) What happened there?
2. What do you think people would feel or learn by visiting this place? What perspectives would it give them on the current conflict?

3. Imagine using this place to negotiate a conflict. What individuals or groups would you bring to this place? What would they see and do there? What questions would you discuss with them?

4. How would you present the story of what happened at this place — what would people see and do there?

5. How would you commemorate what happened in a way that allows for ongoing dialogue and future reinterpretation?

6. What questions would you discuss with people here? How would you engage them in dialogue around these questions?

7. What difference would it make to have this dialogue at this place? How do you think remembering the history of this place could help to negotiate the current conflict?

8. What challenges do you think you would face in developing this place as a center to address contemporary issues and to engage people in dialogue? How would you overcome these challenges?

9. What is the potential impact of using this place as a center for ongoing dialogue on human rights issues? How can the experience of visiting this place help promote peace and negotiate the current conflict in a way other strategies cannot? In other words, what difference does it make?

These museums of conscience offer a unique and much-needed complement to our efforts by making clear the outlines of historic abuse and social problems so that we may recognize it when and where they take shape in contemporary society.

Ken Roth, Human Rights Watch

Coalition sites are working to build a new society — a human rights culture, a new consolidation of democracy.

Alex Boraine, International Center for Transitional Justice

Historic sites have great potential to bring these issues forward in an accessible way to make them personal. The human rights community has a lot to gain by being part of the Coalition.

Michael Posner, Lawyers Committee on Human Rights (now Human Rights First)

Conclusion

We are dedicated to creating new forums where societies can come together and come to terms with events that have changed them forever. The legacy of conflict is not static, but continues to evolve with each passing day. After the critical stage of legal or political redress, there needs to be an ongoing mechanism for reconciliation and remembering. Each of us in our own contexts needs a place that will be there after the courts have disbanded, after perpetrators have been removed from power, after reparations have been awarded. Historic sites are critical forums for ongoing dialogue on past traumas and their legacies. They are a permanent place for democratic engagement, which itself helps to ensure against future suppression of human rights. The Coalition was formed to make sure that every society that needed it would have the capacity to make its places of memory significant resources for lasting justice and reconciliation. I hope you, too, will harness the power of place in your work to build cultures of peace.



Appendix 1

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIONS: HOW HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVES CAN PARTNER WITH SITES OF CONSCIENCE

This tactic focuses on stimulating dialogue and inspiring citizen engagement on human rights issues. It aims to create the conditions for action. It requires partnership with a human rights organization or project. Examples of past collaborations include:

- ◆ **Human Rights Watch** and **Lawyers Committee for Human Rights** worked with the Coalition to develop its web program, www.sitesofconscience.org. The web program links online tours of sites of conscience to human rights campaigns on related issues today. Human rights projects are invited to submit links to the Coalition on work related to any of the issues raised by our member sites.
- ◆ The **International Center for Transitional Justice** partnered with the Coalition to promote the development of sites of conscience as an integral part of the process of transitional justice. Through the work of a shared freelance project manager, we are piloting a set of resources for local human rights groups and NGOs, including: a presentation offering an overview of how different memorials around the world have contributed to transitional justice efforts; a workshop that helps participants imagine activating a site of memory to address the unresolved issues in their societies; and a workbook of case studies and resources on developing sites of conscience. The presentation and workshop have been piloted in Sierra Leone and South Africa and is now being piloted in Peru.
- ◆ **Amnesty International USA** asked the Coalition to conduct workshops at its annual meeting on how human rights workers can use sites of conscience to further their campaigns, particularly in their new economic, social and cultural rights initiative.
- ◆ The Coalition conducted workshops for fellows in the **International Institute for Mediation and Conflict Resolution's** Latin American Symposium, introducing sites of conscience as new forums for conflict resolution in the region.

Appendix 2

RESOURCES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION

The International Coalition offers individuals and organizations a variety of opportunities for learning and exchange, including:

- ◆ An online newsletter featuring the latest news and practices from sites of conscience around the world,
- ◆ Online forums on sites of conscience issues,
- ◆ Staff exchanges and consultations on developing sites of conscience and
- ◆ Learning exchanges of all sizes, from small workshops to large conferences.

Please contact coalition@sitesofconscience.org for more information, or see our web site at www.sitesofconscience.org.



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Online you will also find a searchable database of tactics and
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The Center for Victims of Torture
New Tactics in Human Rights Project
717 East River Road
Minneapolis, MN 55455
www.cvt.org / cvt@cvt.org
www.newtactics.org / newtactics@cvt.org

