The Devil in the (Liberty Bell's) Belfry: The Transformation of Cultural Practice by Richard Rabinowitz

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I want to start this morning by sharing with you one of the most remarkable and prescient portraits of community life in American literature, a fable written right here in Philadelphia around 1840 by Edgar Allan Poe. It's called "The Devil in the Belfry."

"The finest place in the world," Poe begins, "is — or, alas, was — the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss." In this place, everything "has always existed as we find it at this epoch." Each house, Poe notes, "has a small garden before it, with a circular path, a sun-dial, and twenty-four cabbages. The buildings themselves are so precisely alike, that one can in no manner be distinguished from the other." The key activity of the borough's men, themselves indistinguishable from one another, is to wait carefully for the striking of noon on the seven-sided clock in the belfry of the town council house."

"Never was such a place for keeping the true time. When the large clapper thought proper to say 'Twelve o'clock!' all its obedient followers opened their throats simultaneously, and responded like a very echo. In short, the good burghers were fond of their sauer-kraut, but then they were proud of their clocks."

Everyone in Vondervotteimittiss, according to Poe, knows that nothing good can come from over the hills, and into this paradise of precise preservation there comes bounding one day "a very diminutive foreign-looking young man." This fiddle-carrying, snuff-sniffing character dances his way into the center of the tiny village without "the remotest idea in the world of such a thing as keeping time in his steps."

This devil rushes to the top of the belfry just as the town clock strikes twelve. '''Dvelf!' the burghers replied perfectly satisfied, and dropping their voices.

"'Und dvelf it is!' said all the little old gentlemen, putting up their watches. But the big bell had not done with them yet.

"'Thirteen!' said he.

"'Der Teufel!' gasped the little old gentlemen, turning pale, dropping their pipes, and putting down all their right legs from over their left knees.

"'Der Teufel!' groaned they, 'Dirteen! Dirteen!!- Mein Gott, it is Dirteen o'clock!!'"

Poe asks, "'Why attempt to describe the terrible scene which ensued? All Vondervotteimittiss flew at once into a lamentable state of uproar."

Suddenly all the boys in town are over-hungry by an hour, all the housevrows' cabbage is over-cooked by an hour, and all the old men's pipes have been smoked out for an hour.

"…sinking back in their arm-chairs, [they] puffed away so fast and so fiercely that the whole valley was immediately filled with impenetrable smoke."

Amid all this wreckage stands triumphant the devilish fellow, fiddling away out of tune and tempi. Poe ends his sketch with an appeal for a posse of "lovers of correct time and fine kraut" to restore Vondervotteimittiss to its ancient architectural and social uniformity.

Poe has not been the only Philadelphian to wonder what time it is in this place. Indeed, it must sometimes have felt of late as if a devil had got into the Liberty Bell's belfry, disrupting the 18th-century calm that had long settled over Independence Hall and its surroundings. Or not just one devil, but a whole slew of footnote-wielding historian/fiddlers, wrecking the old order of things by insisting that public history do what it had not often done before in Philadelphia: focus on the lives of individual ordinary people, even an enslaved African American women; treat the heroes of American history as morally complicated characters; address difficult, even controversial hot-button issues, in public historical interpretation; survey the long-term, evolving meaning of objects like the Liberty Bell, rather than confine attention to that single noteworthy moment of their original importance; and survey the history of historical interpretation, assuming that history is a dynamic and ever-evolving, revisionary, cultural activity.

These interpretive innovations to be adopted at the Liberty Bell/Executive Mansion pavilion are typical of the changes we see in the "content" of public historical interpretation over the course of the last generation. They are of course consistent with the re-writing of basic American historical narratives in classroom curricula, in popular media like television and film, in historical fiction, in museum exhibits and public art installations, and in a thousand harder-to-trace corners of American culture and society.

But, as Charlene Mires and Gary Nash have recently shown in their excellent books about the evolution of public memory and publicly enshrined historical space in Philadelphia, this is not the first time that we have reconstituted our narratives, or fought battles over what and how to interpret the past. Nor will it be the last.

Controversies continue to explode fairly constantly in the landscape of American historical observance, notably around questions of how to remember the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Indian wars, and the 1960s. Accounts of these battles can be wonderfully entertaining to the noncombatants. It is easy to have a kind of Schadenfreude (a guilty pleasure in the pain of others) about the dethroned defenders of Lost Causes — "Confederates in the attic," old Stalinists, Afrikaner nationalists. Public historians look out at the landscape of public monuments as a ticking time bomb. When, we ask, will there be enough proud Mexicans in the population of New York City to question the enormous tomb of Gen. Worth, hero of the Mexican American War, in Madison Square? Or enough Asian or African New Yorkers to press for effacing the insulting figures of nonwhite peoples that adorn Theodore Roosevelt's memorial at the American Museum of Natural History?

My purpose, today, is to look beyond Philadelphia and beyond these controversies over who will be celebrated, and for what. I want to widen our examination to look at other aspects of the changing context of public history and cultural activity in the United States. I want to speak, particularly, about:

1. how we have redefined historical sites and collections and changed our sense of what is "original" and "authentic" and worth saving;
2. how the purposes of commemoration, observance, and interpretation have diversified and become more intertwined with a host of other social and economic goals, some of which have nothing to do with history;
3. how the strengthened role of design professionals and the new technologies available have altered the way we represent the past; and
4. how our modes of defining historical themes and contexts, and of story-telling and narrative art, are evolving.

STUFF, MISSION, DESIGN, NARRATIVE: these are the four issues I want to consider with you.

I have spent most of my thirty-six years of professional life in exploring the interplay between the work of history and many other disciplines — architecture, exhibit design, media technology, urban planning, economic development, literature, public art, pedagogy, organizational development, and local politics. It's been lots of fun to be a hard-hat historian, but I also think it's useful to know how to speak these other languages if we want to insure that the history we want will in fact be presented accurately, meaningfully, and effectively.

Collections and Sites, or "Stuff"

When I began my work, the worlds of history museums and historic preservation were still overwhelmingly concerned with architecture and artifacts of the highest aesthetic quality. Mostly my curatorial colleagues revered the pre-industrial period of hand-building. Premier attention still focused on objects largely unaltered by subsequent generations. Restoration often involved the removal of layers of evidence added by later residents or users, or even, as in the case of Colonial Williamsburg, Independence Mall, and other preservation projects, the demolition of dozens of 19th- and 20th-century buildings. History was still largely confined to artifacts within the glass case or the velvet ropes of the gallery or the period room, or within the fenced-in yard of the individual historic property.

Only the first murmurs were being heard of preserving industrial buildings, like the steel mills that Augie Carlino has fought for in the Pittsburgh area, or the housing of mill workers and other immigrant working-class Americans, or the objects, tools, clothing, and dwellings of enslaved, poor, female, and non-white Americans.

So much has changed. Representativeness and even ordinariness became criteria for historical study, preservation, and even landmarking, as at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities began to preserve the layers of history in its properties, beginning with the Codman House in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and the Bowen House in Woodstock, Connecticut. The National Park Service rediscovered industrial sites, beginning anew with Lowell, and even developed tours of the still-occupied public housing projects that surround the mills and canals in Lowell.

In many cities, historic districts, even of vernacular and fairly recent vintage, have been designated as landmarks. Tours of exemplary houses are giving way to neighborhood and district tours, which interpret the interstices between noteworthy buildings. Visitors to great houses and plantations now often want to poke their heads "below stairs" and in the "quarters" or "slave cabins" more than in ornate parlors and boudoirs. After the expensive restoration had cleaned away so much of the evocative power of Ellis Island's ruins, many of us began to advocate leaving spaces and buildings unrestored. For educational programs, even for historical verisimilitude, reproductions are now commonly used. Under Jim Deetz's leadership in the 1960s, for example, Plimoth Plantation initiated a different standard of authenticity; it became more important to show that fish was often eaten with the fingers in 1627 coastal Massachusetts than it was to exhibit precious examples of china behind Plexiglas.

We don't define objects and sites so much chiefly by their physical resemblance to others any longer as by their role in the stories we want to tell. We would often rather have an object that helps dramatize a moment in the past, even if it cannot be authenticated to that exact time and place, than an object with perfect provenance whose meaning is less evocative.

Many historic sites and museums are rethinking themselves as evolving, organic, never completed. Researchers comb institutional and public records to discover the history of acquisition and demolition, the history of adaptation and re-use, the history of valuing and de-valuing. What stories do we want to read into the history of the intersection of High and Sixth streets in Philadelphia? Is there one, or many? Or, how do we want to construe those special sixteen acres on the Lower West Side of Manhattan? Do we mean to look only at the morning of September 11, 2001, or at the era of the World Trade Center, or at its many meanings stretching backwards and forwards through natural, cultural, and political history?

These questions threaten to dethrone the architectural historian and museum curator, the antiquarian and archivist, as the arbiters of what is saved and recounted from our past. The new regime is led by historians / playwrights of memory and its representation. The Ancien Regime enshrined curatorial knowledge as the unique treasure of cultural institutions, and defined interpretation as the dissemination of that knowledge to the less-knowing public. Today, more often, in the most ambitious settings, interpretation is redefined as a dialogue with the public's pre-existing interest.

Mission

This conflict over the meanings of sites and collection objects has been deeply contested, though usually behind institutional walls. (Or in the pages of Hilton Kramer's New Criterion.) Curators and connoisseurs, and the strictest preservationists, have constantly defended the need for so-called objective standards of aesthetic judgment, lest the precious coin of cultural attention be squandered by profligate over-valuing of what is currently faddish or "politically correct."

But, for better or worse, this has been the losing argument. The ideal of cultural stewardship by an autonomous elite of connoisseurs, whether they were self-appointed and based in personal ownership or recruited meritocratically through education and training, has been fatally wounded in the past three decades. The cultural landscape has evolved quickly from tolerating to embracing to depending upon its public educational and recreational role. Of course, cultural institutions still are appreciated for their intrinsic worth, but they are increasingly justified by their value in achieving other social goals — like producing new knowledge, educating young and old, remedying social ills, expressing community identity, or stimulating tourism and economic development.
In the 1960s and 1970s, foundations and government programs began to support the idea of a democratic or egalitarian access to a culture, but that culture was still largely defined in elite terms. (I recall when I worked at the NEH in the 1970s that Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island was well-known in the debates surrounding the establishment of the Endowments for talking about the importance of giving shoemakers a chance to read and talk about Plato.) This ideal has surely been remarkably successful. More and more interpretive information now supports the presentation of the most sophisticated fine arts or classical music; wall labels and program texts have grown longer and longer, and public programs (pre-concert lectures, gallery talks, and packaged courses for locals, Elderhostel groups, and tourists) expand. For all the complaints about the "dumbing-down of America," it is now possible for me as an independent non-academic scholar to gain access to knowledge and art much more easily than it was thirty years ago. Fears of the demise of the educated layperson are greatly exaggerated.

We can easily forget how quietly the work of culture used to go on. Newspaper ads for museum exhibits or public broadcasting were non-existent, and reviews quite rare. Sometimes, in the days before Thomas Hoving and his banners, it was hard even to tell from afar which building was the museum and which one the national bank or the federal courthouse. Travel sections of magazines and newspapers in the 1940s and 50s did not often celebrate the attractions of America's historic downtowns. (Controversies over historical interpretation were not front-page news.)

In the last thirty years, however, culture has become the hottest activity in the public realm. A historic site or a local museum had always, reassuringly, been a place where you could be sure that nothing was happening; it was a zone of contemplation removed from the hubbub of the surrounding street. By the early 1970s, these had become performance centers — with street musicians and impersonators of historical characters on their steps, chamber music and salsa groups in their galleries, opportunities for shop and eat

everywhere. The public flocked in. These success stories fed a hunger among board members, directors, senior development, and public information staff for rhetorical justifications of the importance of cultural activity to the wider society. Corporate sponsorship of specific exhibits and programs, thematically unrelated to their core businesses but offering positive cachet, grew with the “blockbuster” phenomenon beginning in the mid-1970s. (The King Tut tour was a milestone.) Private philanthropies and public agencies also responded, offering support to cultural institutions so that they could reach out to school groups, offer free evenings (which had, of course, been unnecessary before they charged admission), and then encouraging programs for “under-served” and unconventional publics. They wanted cultural institutions thereby to act as agents of a social inclusiveness which was being subverted at the same time by the widening of economic inequalities in the larger society.

No longer viewed as dusty and irrelevant corners of the public landscape, cultural activity was put forth as a key element in local economic revitalization. Studies of the economic impact of cultural attractions, which started as arguments for public funding of the arts and history in the late 1970s, have become more and more important in the urban and institutional planning process. Virtually all new or expanding cultural facilities in the United States have required major public investments — incorporation of cultural facilities into downtown redevelopment plans, use of public land, capital funds for construction, and even operating subsidies. They could only be justified politically by their benefits to the widest possible community, and hence the development of the idea of heritage tourism as a nostrum for the declining economic value of the traditional downtown in all but the largest American cities.

When culture becomes part of economic revitalization, it also serves to redefine communities. No longer anchored by locally owned banks and department stores, center cities use public buildings and historic sites as new icons of community identity. (Indoor malls and branch bank headquarters don’t do the trick, we discovered twenty years ago.) In many American cities, changing political leadership has forced a remapping of the geography of public culture. (A classic example is in Birmingham, Alabama. When Richard Arrington was elected mayor in 1980, there was virtually no African American presence in the public cultural life of the city. The project to create the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, with a museum devoted to telling the story of the 1960s struggle in the city, was in a sense a continuation of the city’s civil rights and political battles.)

The effect of these changes on the nature of cultural activity itself has been profound. While many interpretive programs did and do not explicitly devalue the expert knowledge, they have subtly undermined the didactic and autonomous authority of the cultural institution. As their public educational role grew in importance within and outside organizations, skilled professional educators began to adapt public programs so that they were actually more likely to be effective with school audiences, with nonacademic educated laypeople, and eventually with quite special audiences. Soon, visitor-, viewer-, and listener-centered programs emerged. The “curriculum” of the interpreter, like that of the progressive educator, has become focused on the learning process of the visitor, not the program content. In the most progressive circles, this ideal

has evolved further, toward the idea that cultural institutions should become hosts of a process of “co-creation” with their communities. Where the first community advisory boards aimed only to widen cultural audiences (if not, in reality, to defuse potential conflicts over the representation of African American culture and history, for example, in exhibits developed by professionals), the new participatory model invites communities to share in the making of the exhibit content and format. (Perhaps the best model, in my mind, is the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle.) Sometimes the “repurposing” of cultural institutions, as the jargon of management theory has it, means applying it to altogether different functions. Cultural organizations develop after-school and summer camps, literacy and anti-drug programs, and other efforts to redress social ills in the wider community. The Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance aims to promote intergroup relations, and Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is devoted to combating racism. Today, museums and libraries view themselves as sites of “civic engagement,” or safe places where diverse community groups can meet and confront shared problems.

All this has complicated the task of planning and managing cultural activity enormously. Greater diversity in the menu of program offerings has been balanced by a market-driven need to package cultural encounters into time-framed experiences, to brand them, and to sell them like commodities. In what is now called the “Experience Economy,” we learn to speak of “dwell time,” premium packages, and tie-ins with local businesses. Surrendering autonomy by promising non-educational outcomes may also often mean losing control of the evaluative process. When we ask such questions as, how is the visitor’s behavior changed? how many jobs are generated? or how is the community improved? we risk putting too much pressure on institutions with slender resources.

New Media in the Public Sphere

This much more highly pronounced public face of cultural institutions has been accompanied by an enormous revolution in the use of interpretive media. At one time the designer’s role was limited and largely subordinated to the curator or art historian. If one reads articles about design in professional museum journals in the 1950s and 1960s, they speak about using lighting, surface texture, wall color, and casework to help display original objects. In outdoor settings, the role of the landscape architect was, similarly, to create transitions between the “secular” landscape of everyday life in the present moment and the “sacred” landscape of the historically preserved.

The major design innovations of the past thirty-odd years have erased the boundary between the visitors’ space and “History Land.” Outdoor history museums like Plimoth and Sturbridge became more and more immersive. The arts of theater design allowed for the re-creation of powerfully evocative environments inside museums, starting most powerfully with Jean Jacques Andre’s salmon cannery, gold mine, and railroad station at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. Up through the 1970s, slide shows and films were used largely as orientation programs in museums, or to present moving image footage as documentation of (say) how machines operate. But, more recently, the whole

landscape of the gallery has been evolving into a video program, punctuated by moments of live encounters with actual three-dimensional objects.

The designer and artist have been the reigning voices in this re-conceptualization of the cultural landscape, but their dominance is giving way to that of the video producer. Moving images can be delivered almost everywhere, now, at a scale ranging from tiny hand-held devices to building surfaces as large as those in Times Square.

Immersive experiences, with which our publics are familiar through their visits to theme parks like Walt Disney World, fit more easily into the tourist-oriented marketing of cultural activity. They can be tremendously provocative to the historian, asking us to document aspects of ordinary culture with a care that curators in the past seldom took. But there are also profound dangers in the way media decisions are influencing how we interpret the past at historic sites and history museums.

Stories

For most of this century, interpretive installations indoors or out focused on categories of people, on types, even stereotypes. New Deal murals often showed a succession of idealized Indians, pioneers, farmers, immigrants, and workers. Many state and local history museums developed core exhibits that displayed a parade of types. In Lincoln, for example, the Nebraska State Historical Society organized its history in a series of alcoves and mini-galleries devoted to the Pawnees, the Sioux, then the Trappers, the Pioneers, the Sodbusters, the Cornhuskers, the Constitution-Writers, the Railroaders, and so on.

All this was given a jolt in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of public support for humanities interpretation. More highly thematic, rather than chronological, arrangements, were much more likely to pass muster before review panels at NEH and the state humanities committees. Academic advisers became part of every project, and they frequently pressed exhibit developers to lay exhibits out as a series of major and minor themes. Documents, images, and artifacts were now supposed to support the exposition of overarching ideas — industrialization, urbanization, westward expansion, ethnicity, technological change, work, family, community life.

And then, in the mid-1980s, the world changed, seemingly in one instant. Themes went out, stories came in. For me, the emblematic moment came in working at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The museum had assumed that it would assign one apartment to each of New York's major ethnic groups — African Americans, Irish, Germans, Eastern European Jews, Italians, Chinese, and so on. Our first effort was to ask scholars specializing in the history of each group to create a composite family portrait reflective of that group's experience in New York. Well, after the German and the Irish groups reported, it was plain that historians are not very good dramatists: both groups featured an intermarriage between Protestants and Catholics, an industrial accident in 19th-century New York's dangerous trades that crippled the old man, the dangerous activity of a son in the city's politics or social conflicts, and a daughter's dangerous liaison across ethnic boundaries. It looked as though the museum would become an endlessly repetitive soap

opera of immigrant tribulations, masking a lot of ethnic stereotyping, when suddenly we were rescued by research in original documents. Serendipitously, genealogist Marsha Saron Dennis discovered Nathalie Gumpertz's 1883 petition to have her husband Julius, missing for nine years, declared legally dead, so that she could cash in on his East Prussian inheritance. Nathalie, God bless her, had actually lived at 97 Orchard Street and had solicited the help in searching for Julius from people we "knew" from other research (the building's original builder and owner, Lucas Glockner, for one). Nathalie could be located in two censuses, shifting from "keeping house" when the family was intact in 1870 to earning a livelihood for herself and the three surviving daughters as a "seamstress" in 1880.

From that point the museum's interpretation has focused on the lives of real documented historical figures, not fictionalized composites. Their stories are far more unpredictably interesting than those our historians had predicted, underscoring the truth of historian David Thelen's dictum that "each of us is larger than the groups to which we belong." A few clues about a real character in the past spark a hunt for documentation and interpretation that is more exciting, even for casual visitors, than the most well-rounded tale from the hands of Disney's "imagineers."

The turn toward more recent history, the expanding interest in oral history, and the use of new media technologies have altered the voices in public history presentation. In many sites, the historian and the curator are progressively more silent, and the historical witness — whether captured on tape or re-created through artful scripting — gets a chance to tell his or her own story. While this is an extremely positive development, it also carries a danger. In the Ken Burns-style of narrative, no one steps out of the flow of testimony to evaluate its credibility or to judge its importance. Public history has to find ways to "footnote" its wariness about any single account of the past.

Public history no longer retreats from recent or even current events. Jim Crow, Japanese-American internment, the Civil Rights movement, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cold War, recent Asian and Latino immigration, the women's movement, and, of course, the Holocaust, have all become subjects of interpretive installations, memorials, and public educational programs. "Nine-Eleven" was being incorporated into museum collections and interpretations within a week of the disaster.

As Ed Linenthal's book about Oklahoma City puts it, historical memorializing begins even as the events commemorated are still not finished. The stories in the American landscape no longer have happy endings, or in fact endings at all. More than ways to achieve "closure," museums and memorials are ways of keeping the past alive.

In the public history-telling, the dominant narrative has in the last two decades focused on the ultimately redemptive struggle of individuals and families against obstacles in the social, political, or economic sphere. Visitors are invited to walk in the footsteps of historical characters who faced challenges recognizable to us today. Empathy with the past becomes the primary method of learning.

The aversion to themes and the use of immersive media technologies now often over-personalizes the story. At times the public history landscape feels like it may become a spatial equivalent of a whole year of soggy television mini-series. Just as in television scheduling, we know that by the time we reach the last interpretive panels, we are going to hear some inspiring message about the enduring power of the human spirit. But without broader synthesizing themes, these stories can feel too fragmentary, and their import to us too repetitive.

A question, however: Will the new rightward turn in American culture bring us another round of a national-pride narrative like that we enjoyed in the 1950s? In such stories, individuals are still the focus but the credit for their success is often attributed to "the essential character" of the American system or the American people. Funding sources, especially those controlled by government agencies, are increasingly eager to use public cultural activity (as they are social studies education) as a training ground in patriotism. Stay tuned.

Effects of all these changes

All these changes have transformed the work of public culture, in ways that are both fascinating and troubling to me. Planners preside over a historically rich landscape that now has much more at stake and hence many more stakeholders.

Everyday we open our doors to a wider diversity of visitors and users, participants and patrons. They come with an ever-wider variety of motives. Many, perhaps even more in these days of the U.S.A. Patriot Act, are still coming to affirm basic loyalties by making obligatory pilgrimages to historic sites, usually with children in tow. On the other hand, we now also have more critical — even cynical — visitors, who view everything presented to them as cultural artifacts that express hidden purposes. I would guess that the largest portion of our public, however, are now what I would call experiencers, who are game for whatever adventure we can promise so long as it provides an enhanced sense of self and a chance to have positive experiences with friends or family.

How do we make sense to these different publics? Or to the scholars, professionals, and students we attract, or to the unengaged casual visitors driving by and those who don't come but who insist that our sites, which they may know only by "hearsay," are anchors of their idea of local and cultural identity? (No Revisionist Historians in My Backyard!) How can help each of these people to find the appropriate "time" on their personal historical watches in the same place?

Plainly, a different attitude toward site and interpretive planning is called for. Some elements of almost every site now have to be treated as shrines. These are zones of reverence and remembrance, and they often need some way for pilgrims to touch them or leave behind an offering. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington revealed a deep passion among Americans for this sort of liturgical connectedness to moments and objects associated with pain and sacrifice, and similar altars have sprung up in hundreds of sites since.

These sacred precincts often have to be separated from the arenas of story telling themselves, where visitors may immerse themselves in the trials of historical figures. In another place, we may imagine a forensics laboratory, to use a currently fashionable analogy from television, where students and teachers can critically explore the background of the story, examine objects with many different methodologies, and posit and evaluate alternative explanations. Meanwhile, a participatory theater or a simulation environment may allow children to re-enact the historical reality on their own terms. And all of this needs to be comprehended as a totality, and as a menu of offerings, by observers and visitors waiting to take the plunge.

Furthermore, the historic site may no longer be much disconnected from the fabric of the living city. Consider the wide range of physical and emotional possibilities at sites like Ground Zero. It will be a hallowed ground, a burial site, a learning center, a work place, and a consumer emporium. This seems like an impossible burden. But remember how complicated over time have been the cathedral squares of European cities. Worship, promenade, commerce, courtship, play, and art all converge in sites allowed to be diverse. People will, if the design is done right, permit quite different modalities, what linguists call register, to share the public spaces they love.

Every environment that aims to be high noon on every watch, to be entirely of one moment in time, or to privilege only one kind of decorum, makes the contemporary visitor feels like an intruder from another world. In these post-Jane Jacobs days, the ideal urban landscape is one that allows multiple motives, multiple activities, to co-exist. And more than co-exist, to change in response to our presence. A design that communicates its own immutability in the modern city invites its own disturbance and destruction.

The same openness to diversity and change is necessary in the process we employ. How can we integrate all the forms of professional expertise we need? Do we have enough seats at the table for all the specialists and stakeholders we want to include? Who will convene and synthesize the competing claims of the site's historic preservation and interpretation? In my experience, our conventional planning process closes down too many opportunities prematurely. We are still are trapped in a kind of industrial-era linear and sequential thinking. Different kinds of questions are raised and settled, one after the other, and there is great resistance and lots of impatience about re-opening them.

Usually we settle on goals first, even before we know what kinds of possibilities might lie in the offing. Then we commission our research, settling on key themes and selecting important artifacts or site factors. At this point, the design phase becomes central, and then fabrication and implementation. With an opening date in view, the emphasis shifts toward programming, audience development, and operations planning.

What's worse is that project management often hands off responsibility from one group of players to another all through the process. Designers may not get involved until all the artifacts and themes are identified, researchers and curators are dismissed before design is done. And most problematic, community representatives are not called in at all, and then

often only to help drum up an audience — or even worse, only to disarm any potential PR conflicts. An alternative process is needed. What might work to develop a mechanical, simple, and replicable solution will not yield something that is organic, complex, and unique. And that is what the work of public culture must be. The making of an exhibit or a museum or a park is first of all the making of a community. Such projects are best viewed as an evolution of one synthesis after another, each incorporating many factors — Goals Resources, Themes, Design Concepts, Interpretive Media, Community Connections, Audience Needs, Financial and Political Realities. Only by seeing the whole terrain can any participant be expected to embrace the cause of all. Let me end by asking the biggest question, what are we seeking to achieve in the practice of public history? Or, why do we want to know what time(s) it is in this place?

We care about the past because it is the only way we can expand the present. The historian works by converting phenomena into evidences, occurrences into episodes. Paying attention and respect to the passing details of the world enlivens us.

As a thought experiment, think if we could interview one another and trace the way all of us have come, individually, physically and culturally, to be together this morning. That information would allow us to turn this assembly from a professional confab into a rich and complex story. To welcome one another, to listen to one another's story, to trust in our ability to make linkages between your story and mine, is to turn mere traffic, the movement of molecules, into connectedness, culture, and historical narrative. We need to do that with the characters we study, and with the people we welcome to our sites.

Let us confess it, we are all of us the devils in the belfry and all of us the anxious burghers of Vondervotteimittiss. No one clock will toll out everyone's story.

Is that a melody I hear in the fiddling? Thank you for listening.