

Life in the Lower East Side

Tenement Museum, March 4th 2015

Meeting with:

Miriam Bader, director education
Rachael Grygorcewicz, director visitor services
Colin Kennedy, visitor services
Emily Mitzner, chief of staff

Introduction museum

The Tenement Museum is located in New York's Lower East Side in Manhattan. Since the 19th century, people arriving in the city from all over the world found their first place to live in this neighbourhood, after their arrival in the United States. They rented an apartment in a tenement. Tenement Museum tells the story of thousands of people and their home at two special places: a welcoming visitor centre and shop at 103 Orchard Street and the authentic tenement at 97 Orchard Street.

The tenement building was built in 1863. The inhabitants had to leave in 1935. In between those years about 7000 people lived here. In 1988 the building was (re)discovered and since 1992 it is accessible as a museum. The museum can only be seen by guided tour, with a facilitator. The tours are based on a theme and tell the story of the people that lived and worked in the building. The guides use the personal environment of the inhabitants to tell the history of the tenements. Groups consist of at least one visitor and maximum fifteen visitors. The tours are popular and always take place.

The museum wants to connect the past and the present by focusing on personal stories and objects from daily life, and the use of history and modernity. The museum wants to collect contemporary migrant stories as well, as migration is an important theme for the museum. Attention for ethnical and cultural diversity is inherent for mediation in the Tenement Museum.

www.tenement.org

Mission of the museum

The Tenement Museum preserves and interprets the history of immigration through the personal experiences of the generations of newcomers who settled in and built lives on Manhattan's Lower East Side, America's iconic immigrant neighborhood; forges emotional connections between visitors and immigrants past and present; and enhances appreciation for the profound role immigration has played and continues to play in shaping America's evolving national identity.

<http://www.tenement.org/about.html>

Meeting at the Tenement Museum: most striking elements

1. Team of the museum

Each Wednesday the Tenement team meets for breakfast with coffee, juice and bagels - from a hundred years old store nearby. This reflects the way the museum works: it is rather small, the atmosphere is informal and public and staff are equally important. There are about twenty five people in the team and a little over sixty guides, museum educators or facilitators. The latter work about three days a week and receive a substantial, methodical and specialized training. They get a lot of information, they observe each other and give one-to-one tours. The formation is made to measures. Sometimes it's organized internal, sometimes external experts are invited.

All staff members, not only those who work in the education department, have to guide a group of adult visitors or do service in the visitor centre. It is important that the team and the public connect. The different departments work closely together. Co-operation, connectedness and flexibility are crucial, as contents can evolve, based on the collection and what happens in society.

2. Stories

The approach of the Tenement Museum is personal, the museum is about real people. The tours tell stories about the people that used to live at 97 Orchard Street. There's room for dialogue and exchange. This is already announced at the phone when a group makes a reservation. The guides use the method of storytelling. At the beginning of the tour, the guide announces: "Feel free to share your stories and experiences". The guide invites the visitors to ask questions, to comment and to critically reflect the past and the present. The guide tells a well constructed story around a theme, such as sweatshops, stores or economic crisis. The apartments are authentic, or are equipped as rooms from the 19th or early 20th century. The guide focuses on one family that lived in the house in a certain period. During a tour the guide tells stories about several families because at one point they moved to a better house and neighbourhood. In front of your eyes, the historical evolution is shown in the different rooms. The fate of the inhabitants is linked to history. The guide is flexible and adjusts the story, taking into account the visitor's perspective. Tours for schools take into account the curriculum and the environment of children and teens. In that sense, tours are customized. Often, the guide starts a tour with the question "What brings you here?". This is much appreciated by the visitors.

3. Discovering a time capsule

When the founders of the Tenement Museum found the former tenement at Orchard Street in 1988, they discovered a time capsule. Tenements were the cheapest and worst houses. In the Tenement Museum you can discover the authentic layers in the building, as an archeologist: layers of paint and wallpaper on the wall. Some of the paint and the wallpaper is based on historical examples. Furniture and objects are real and bought elsewhere, or are made to look old.

The tours also contain many layers. The building is one of the most important pieces of the collection, but the guide also uses documents and pictures, and objects such as toys or utensils, each telling a story, during a tour. The guide uses copies of old photographs from the families in the buildings and from Jacob Riis who is famous for his social documentaries, and reproductions of historical documents such as census lists. Visitors can touch certain authentic objects such as a flatiron, and the guide uses materials for certain instructions for school kids. The guide stimulates the visitors to smell, feel, hear and experience the surroundings. The Tenement Museum uses oral history in their research as well as in their tours. Visitors can listen to extracts of interviews, or to old music. *Meet the Residents* is a special program where visitors meet with a costumed interpreter playing a resident of the tenement. These tours add a special layer to the visitor's experience.

Schools can prepare their visit with lessons and activities available on the website, or they can explore the themes more closely afterwards in class. The Tenement Museum also offers workshops such as role playing, political discussion, creative activities or historical research based on the family history of the students.

Tenement Talks is an evening series of lectures, readings, panel discussions, films and other programs that provide historical and contemporary perspectives on the culture of New York City.

4. Expansion

Working with and for the local community is very important for the Tenement Museum. The museum also wants to tell the stories of the people that moved to the Lower East Side in the second half of the 20th century, with among others immigrants from China and Puerto Rico. It is important that the tours also tell the stories of local visitors. The guides pay attention to the contemporary situation and stimulate the visitors to reflect on modernity as well. In the near future, the museum wants to collect and preserve more local stories through interviews and using oral history, to make the visiting experience even more personal and relevant. They can use a digital tool such as the Warehouse on the website from Red Star Line Museum. These stories will be mainly used in the guided walks in the neighbourhood.

5. Diversity

The museum wants to reach out to people from New York that do not speak English. Most recent immigrants live in Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens or the local area. Local schools can visit the museum for free sometimes.

The Tenement Museum has a special program for Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages classes called *Shared Journeys*. The program provides a context for English language learning, helps students place their own immigration experience within a broader historical and political framework, and promotes critical engagement with civic issues.

The museum also is a participating venue for a citizenship program supporting immigrants on their path to become an American. Tenement Museum offers

multilingual consultation sessions with attorneys and paralegals. New citizens are naturalized in a ceremony at the museum.

Learning and outcomes

- the use of stories of real and common people during tours, no fictional historical characters
- connect personal stories with history
- maximum fifteen visitors in one group to stimulate dialogue and exchange
- staff from different departments from the museum are involved in education, mediation and public services
- there is a lot of attention for substantial and methodical personal training of the guides and museum educators
- focus on co-operation and connectedness
- the team of the museum can try new things based on the collection and on contemporary evolutions
- members of staff provide guided tours once in a while
- tours are customized depending on the visiting group
- tours and programs are multilayered and therefore varied
- attention to the local community and to the expectations of visitors
- connecting past and present
- guides and museum educators work for the museum part time; their job is considered important and the approach is professional; their formation is ongoing and personal