

Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice

HIS 627/IAR627—Fall 2010

Tuesdays 3:30-6:20

MHRA 2209

Professor Benjamin Filene

office hours: Tuesdays 1:30-3:00 and by appointment: MHRA 2137

office phone: 336/334-5645

home phone: 919/932-7722 (call before 10:00 p.m.)

bpfilene@uncg.edu

Credits: 3 hours

Prerequisites: none; open only to History and Interior Architecture graduate students pursuing concentrations in Museum Studies or Historic Preservation (required of Museum Studies concentrators).

Course Description

This seminar explores the relationship between history and public audiences, focusing on the theory and practice of telling stories through museums and historic sites. It introduces you to the tools that public historians use to interpret the past, explores key dilemmas in public interpretation and community collaboration, and examines contemporary models for how to reach audiences in ways that make history resonant and meaningful to them.

Student Learning Outcomes

Through a mix of classroom- and project-based work, you will gain a richer understanding of the role of history in public life and of how museums and historic sites interpret the past for—and with—public audiences. Successfully completing this course will build the skills that you will need to thrive in the workplace:

- **evaluating and analyzing primary and secondary sources** thoughtfully, with attention to argument and point of view
- **using a finely honed eye and ear to recognize rich stories**—in sound, image, object, or text—and their potential impact on diverse audiences
- **synthesizing multiple sources** and points of view into compelling, relevant, and historically sound public presentations
- **speaking** with passion, clarity, and respect
- **writing** clearly and persuasively
- **collaborating** with energy, sensitivity, and an awareness of how much you can learn from community members and your peers
- **experimenting** fearlessly to build your skills and find the best ways to reach audiences

Teaching Methods

This seminar depends on active and engaged discussions that allow you and your classmates, individually and collectively, to wrestle with what it means to become a practicing public historian. The classroom will be a setting for engagement with multiple voices—not only the professor’s but those of the students, community partners, and historical “informants” revealed

through a range of sources. You are expected to complete reading assignments before every class meeting and arrive ready to share personal opinions on the material. Class sessions will regularly involve informal full-group discussions, oral presentations, small-group conversations, and on-the-spot analyses of primary sources. As detailed below, class participation is a significant part of your grade. In addition, you will engage with the course content through formal and informal writing assignments that invite you to apply the approaches we are discussing to original material in your own voice.

The course's core theoretical concepts you will try out in practice. This semester the class will complete a multifaceted project—tentatively titled “Look. Again. Elm St.”—that focuses on change and continuity in downtown Greensboro's urban fabric and sense of place. Each student will choose a single Elm St. building represented in an historical photograph. Students will then gather historical and contemporary images, piece together public records, and conduct original oral interviews to uncover stories about the people who made their lives and livelihoods in and around this building over time. Each student will create a mini-exhibition that shares these stories with public audiences at a “First Friday” gallery tour in downtown Greensboro.

Assignments, and Evaluation

You will be evaluated on

Class participation—15%:

attending class, doing the reading assignments, writing thoughtful and on-time weekly responses to the readings and “reflection journal” entries (see below), speaking up in discussions, representing the class and the school professionally in the wider community, and helping to foster a sense of shared exploration within the classroom

Weekly responses: Each week, short, informal reactions to that week's readings (roughly a couple of paragraphs) will be due. These must be posted on our class's Blackboard Discussion Board **by 8:00 a.m.** each Tuesday.

Analytical Essay—20%:

a close reading of a single object or image—*due October 5*

Oral interview archival Package—10%:

oral interviews, indexed transcriptions, and permission forms, delivered to community and institutional partners—*due October 26*

Exhibition Review—25%:

an analytical assessment of a public exhibition—*due November 16*

Final Project—30%:

a community-focused mini-exhibition, displayed to the public, and a “source book” documenting your research findings—*due December 7*

Grading scale:

A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; F=72 and below

If things go awry...

...it's your responsibility to tell me—right away. If papers are late without direct, prior approval from me, I deduct ½ a letter grade per day—no exceptions.

If your project is dead-ending or peer collaboration imploding, I need to hear about it *before* it's too late to resolve the issues.

LATE PAPERS:

No extensions on papers or projects will be granted without a dean's excuse. If a paper or project is late without an extension, I will deduct 1/2 a letter grade per day (e.g., A to A-).

Academic Integrity Policy

All students have a responsibility to uphold the standards of “*Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, and Responsibility*” detailed in the Academic Integrity Policy. Instances of cheating, plagiarism, misuse of academic resources, falsification of information, and facilitating of academic dishonesty are treated with utmost seriousness by the history department and dealt with severely by the University administration. The full policy appears in the *Student Calendar/Handbook* and at academicintegrity.uncg.edu. Per university policy, you will be asked to sign a copy of the Academic Integrity Pledge for each major assignment in this class.

Special Needs

If you require accommodations for special learning needs, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Disability Services, located within the Elliot University Center (334-5770)—and please let me know!

Books to Buy

- Falk, John H. Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience, 2009.
- McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, 2005.
- Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2003.
- Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, 2000.
- Schwarzer, Marjorie. *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, 2006.
- Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 1996.
- Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*—not available at UNCG bookstore. Can access or buy at <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/buy/> or buy at amazon.com.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 1995.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

SETTING THE STAGE

August 24—Introductions—Histories, Stories, Publics;

Before first class:

Read about the National Council on Public History's debate about "What Is Public History" (including Cathy Stanton's summary) at the NCPH website:

<http://www.ncph.org/WhatisPublicHistory/tabid/282/Default.aspx>

Read some of the actual Listserv postings about "What Is Public History" from May, June, and July 2007, archived here: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Public>.

Assignment: Come to class with two comments that interested you.

Schlatter, N. Elizabeth. "Introduction: Why Work in a Museum." In *Museum Careers: A Practical Guide for Students and Novices*: 9-15. [**BF will hand out**]

Dibble-Dieng, Meadow. "A Modest Proposal." *Brown Alumni Monthly* (September-October 2004): 30-33. [**BF will hand out**]

Guillory, Ferrel and Andrew Holton. "We Ain't What We Used to Be." *Durham Herald-Sun* (January 4, 2009): F1, F3. [**BF will hand out**]

August 31: Whose History? Who's History?

--**GUEST:** Linda Evans (Community Historian, Greensboro Historical Museum)

Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (2000): Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and Afterthoughts (everything *except* Chapters 2-3).

Conn, Steven. "Museums, Public Space, and Civic Identity." In *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (2010): 197-232.

September 7: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 1: Hearing Stories?

--**GUEST:** Lynda Kellam, Data Services & Government Information Librarian, UNCG

Cronon, William. "Why the Past Matters." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84 (autumn 2000): 3-13. [**BF will distribute**]

Thelen, David. "Individual Experience and Big Picture History." *History News* 55 (winter 2000): 10-13.

Filene, Benjamin. "Searching for Florence." *Minnesota History* 57 (fall 2000): 130-139.

Fripp, Gayle. "Introduction." In *Greensboro Neighborhoods* (1998): 2 pp.

Covington, Howard. *Once Upon a City: Greensboro North Carolina's Second Century* (2008): 1-28, 133-135, 142-147, 223, 237-242.

Brown, Marvin A. *Greensboro: An Architectural Record* (1995): 27-36, 63-69, 118-119.

[In class activity: evidence as stories; stories as evidence]

September 14: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 2: Seeing Place

--CLASS MEETS ON ELM ST.

Jacobs, Jane. "Introduction." In *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961): 3-25.

Suarez, Ray. "Jane Jacobs and the 'Battle for the Street.'" In *What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs*, Stephan A. Goldsmith and Lynne Elizabeth, eds. (2010): 15-23.

Cowan, Rob. "The Fine Arts of Seeing: Profession, Places, Arts, and Urban Design." In *What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs*, Stephan A. Goldsmith and Lynne Elizabeth, eds. (2010): 87-95.

Stilgoe, John R. "Beginnings." In *Outside Lies Magic* (1998): 1-19.

Stilgoe, John R. "Main Street." In *Outside Lies Magic* (1998): 131-155.

Jacobs, Allan B. *Looking at Cities* (1985): 1-107.

Optional:

Jacobs, Jane. "The Uses of Sidewalks: Contact." In *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961): 55-73.

Assignment: Walk Elm Street with "live eyes" and identify a story hidden in the built environment to share with your classmates.

READING THE EVIDENCE

September 21: Objects

Prown, Jules David. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" (1982). In *Material Life in America, 1600-1680*, Robert Blair St. George, ed. (1988): 17-37.

Hebdige, Dick. "Subculture and Style." In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (2002) [1979]: 1-19.

Corrin, Lisa G. "Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves." In *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, Lisa G. Corrin, ed. (1994): 1-22.

Conn, Steven. "Do Museums Still Need Objects?" In *Do Museums Still Need*

Objects? (2010): 20-57.

Updike, John. "Personal Archaeology." In *My Father's Tears and Other Stories* (2009): 16-26.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination (ca. 1984) . [**BF will hand out**]

Take audio walking tour of downtown Greensboro (focusing on Elm St. locations)

Optional:

Schwarzer, Marjorie. "The Collection." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (2006): 69-119.

[In class: writing exercise]

September 28: Images

Davidson, James West and Mark Hamilton Lytle. "The Mirror with a Memory: Photographic Evidence and the Urban Scene." In *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (2005 [fifth edition]): 210-233.

Willumson, Glenn. "Making Meaning: Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum." In *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds. (2004): 62-80.

Silvia, Paul J. "A Brief Foray into Style." In *How to Write a Lot* (2007): 59-76.

Assignment: After reading the above, find a photograph that interests you and bring it to class along with some ideas about how to "read" the image. You could try the library at around call # TR650, where books on photographic history are located.

5:00 p.m.—Meet with Arthur Erickson, Genealogy Librarian, at Greensboro Public Library

For final project: historical image selected (from Greensboro Historical Museum?) and to some names located (via city directories) associated with your building

October 5: Oral History

Portelli, Alessandro. "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event." In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (1991): 1-26.

Davidson, James West and Mark Hamilton Lytle. "The View from the Bottom Rail: Oral History and the Freedmen's Point of View." In *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (2005 [fifth edition]): 177-209.

Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (2003).
Introduction and Chapters 1-4, 8, and Appendix 1

No Blackboard Posting

Assignment: Complete certification at
http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/menu_soc.html
PRINT OUT and turn in certification of completion.

Artifact/image essays due

October 12: No class (fall break)

TELLING THE STORY

October 19: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995): xvii-xix, 1-30, 108-153.

Wallace, Mike. "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," In *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (1996): 133-157.

Kingsolver, Barbara. "The Spaces Between." In *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (1996 [1995]): 146-157.

Lowen, James W. "In What Ways Were We Warped?" In *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*: 1-10.

Schwarzer, Marjorie. "Introduction." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (2006): 1-27.

Oral History Interview Completed

October 26: Exhibiting History

Luke, Timothy. "Politics at the Exhibition: Aesthetics, History, and Nationality in the Culture Wars." In *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (2002): 1-4.

Clifford, James. "Museums as Contact Zones." In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997): 188-219.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (2005 [1993]): v-xi; 1-67.

Engelhardt, Tom and Edward T. Linenthal. "History Under Siege." In *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (1996): 1-7.

Schwarzer, Marjorie. "The Exhibition." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of*

Museums in America (2006): 121-169.

Interview transcriptions due

November 2: Learning in the Museum

Falk, John H. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009): 9-213 and 239-251 (everything *except* Chapters 9 and 11).

Hein, George. "The Constructivist Museum." *GEM News* [Group for Education in Museums] 1995: 6 pp.

Ansbacher, Ted. "What Are We Learning? Outcomes of the Museum Experience." *The Informal Learning Review* 53 (March-April 2002): 1, 4-7.

Optional:

Russell, Bob. "Experience-Based Learning Theories." *The Informal Learning Review* (1999): 6 pp.

November 9: Exhibit Evaluation—Class meets at Greensboro Historical Museum

No Blackboard postings this week

Serrell, Beverly. *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (2006): 3-6, 17-29, 41-46, 52-60, 91-109.

Chambers, Marlene. "Critiquing Exhibition Criticism." *Museum News* (September/October 1999): 31-37, 65.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 68-80, 163-166.

Assignment: After completing the above reading, fill out Serrell's framework (pp.42-45) for Greensboro Historical Museum's *Voices of a City*

November 16: Exhibit Design

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 92-102; 115-149.

Wagner, Sherry Kafka. "Telling Time: The Process of Communicating History Interpretation in Exhibits and Sites." New York Council for the Humanities conference paper (1984): 9 pp.

Braden, Donna, Ellen Rosenthal, and Daniel Spock. "What the Heck is Experience Design?" *Exhibitionist* 24 (fall 2005): 14-20.

Bruce Mau Design. "An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth" (1998): 6 pp.
Available online at <http://www.brucemaudesign.com/#112942>.
(For a psychedelic version, check this out: <http://www.ludosabato.com/mau/>.)

Exhibition Reviews Due

November 23: In So Many Words: Exhibit Text

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996): ix-xv; 1-49; 65-100; 112-114, 125-130, 189-206.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 103-114.

Read 3 (or more) of the 128-word short stories at <http://www.storybytes.com/view-length/0128-words/index-0128.html>

In class: Review drafts of final projects

November 30: Visitors as Co-Creators

Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum* (2010): 183-300, i-v, 1-126, 184-300, 350-352.

Carson, Cary. "The End of History Museums: What is Plan B?" *Public Historian* 30 (November 2008): 9-27.

Friday evening, December 3: Final projects due

—publicly displayed at First Friday, Greensboro (tentative)

December 7: Final projects due, including exhibits and 3-ring "source books."
(No class session)