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Twentieth is the new nineteenth: Thinking about collecting and exhibiting the last century

Thanks to UMass Amherst Department of History Public History program for the invitation—especially Marla Miller and Jill Ogline—and also for pulling together such a thoughtful group of presenters and an impressively large audience. The museum field needs to get together more and talk about its problems and potentials; it's great that the folks at UMass have done it.

It's a pleasure to be here today, to kick off a meeting that addresses one of the most interesting challenges in the museum business today. Our field faces so many challenges, and it's often the most immediate –not necessarily the most interesting-- ones that take all of our time and energy. The topic of today's conference might not seem to be one of those immediate ones. (It doesn't seem to have much urgency as some of our other work... #.) It's a big topic, long-range, and isn't something that can be solved quickly, or even, ever. But I think you'll find—I hope you'll find—that thinking about this big and complicated issue, an issue that with no easy solution, may

nonetheless be a process that helps to solve others that seem more immediate. To give away my punch line: my talk today makes two points: #

- 1) collecting and exhibiting recent history lets us do all of our history better; and
- 2) collecting and exhibiting recent history is a way of connecting to your audiences. Considering recent history can reinvigorate your work and strengthen your institutions in many, many ways.

I probably need to explain my title a bit... Most of you have heard, for example, that red is the new black, or some such fashion statement... “Red is the new black” means: think differently about the fashions: times have changed. In the same way: Anyone in this room over 30 or so probably has had to make a conscious effort to think that the “last century” now means the 20th century, not the 19th—the millennium happened a long time ago. # The point of my talk is just that, on a larger level: museums need to make that conscious effort, too. We’re so used to thinking of the 19th century as *history*, the 20th century as *present*. But history moves on, and so should we. The 20th-century museum was based on a peculiar style that responded to 20th-century issues—in fact, I’ll argue, mostly to early 20th-century issues. The 21st century museum must respond to new issues. That’s the big point of this talk, and so much of today’s conference...

But the title also has a bit of an edge to it... Today, everything, it seems, is the new old. Google—a firm almost unknown in the 20th century, but defining the world in the 21st—reports 22.4 million uses of the term “is the new” And just to give you a sense of the universe, here’s a few of the ways it was used in 2005... # But the point is: the “new” doesn’t replace the old. Red doesn’t replace black. The “new” provides a new way of looking at the old. And after all, saying red is the new black calls as much attention to black as it does to red.

So I’ll be suggesting that while the 20th is the new 19th, that doesn’t mean that we will stop thinking about, collecting, and interpreting, the 19th—or for that matter, the 18th or 17th —centuries. Rather, we’ll add to our collections and exhibitions the more recent past, and by doing that, we’ll better call attention to, and better understand, the earlier parts of our history. Just as we all believe that understanding the past helps us understand the present, I want to try to convince you that understanding the present, or the recent past, helps us understand the more distant past.

#

The landscape of Massachusetts museums today

First, let's look at the landscape of Massachusetts museums today.

As an experiment: Stand up if you work in a history museum or historic house

Sit down if your museum focuses on the 17th / 18th/ 19th/ century

It's difficult to come up with accurate statistics because so many museums do more than one thing. But I've come up with a quick and dirty tabulation, dividing museums into three categories, and then dividing each category into pre-1900 and post-1900. Let me apologize in advance for the crudeness of the categories, and for any mistakes I've made in categorizing museums, and if I've left off anyone that's here—this is from the *Museum Directory*, and it's a very quick analysis. But here's what my chart looks like: #

Read numbers: 106 pre-1900 historic houses, five after that date

126 history museums with a general focus, or a pre-1900 focus;

24 20th century

Art museums are a bit more difficult: about 2/3 either general, or pre-1900, and about one-third with a modern focus. Though what modern means in an art museum is a different topic, altogether...

These numbers are rough, and I'm sure that there are many history museums and historic house museums that focus on earlier periods that have done some collecting and exhibiting in the 20th century. Just to mention a few: Military museums cover aspects of the century—WWII, for example, is pretty well covered, locally, by the Fall River destroyers and the private Museum of World War II in Natick, and by many local museums, especially at the 50th anniversary. Some aspects of 20th century technology are covered, for example at the MIT Museum, the Charles River Museum of Industry (Waltham, MA), the National Plastics Museum (Leominster, MA)—but surprisingly little, given the importance to the state. And some historic house museums and history museums like the National Heritage Museum mix topics from many periods. And in some cases there are museums in all six categories –PEM? But still, the numbers are compelling: we focus, in an unbalanced way, on the first half of American history. What do these statistics tell us?

#They tell us something about what people interested in history and in a position to do something about it thought was important or interesting or threatened when these institutions were established, or their missions defined. To dissect that a bit:

#1. People interested in history and in a position to do something about it.

Not everyone. Not a random selection of people. Not a group representative of the audience for history, or the general public. But a relatively small, mostly elite, self-appointed group, usually with their own interests at heart.

#2. thought was interesting or important or threatened. Not folks doing a poll about what the public cared about, or what would sell. What **they** thought was worth remembering, and saving. Things that spoke to **them**, that were part of their history, perhaps, or part of the history they thought others should know.

#3. At the time these institutions established, or their mission defined.

Consider established, first: Whether that was 1876 or 1976 or any point in between, or, in a few cases, since then, for the most part, it's not today, or very recently. The historical landscape of New England museums today was set in the past, and it has not changed as rapidly as the times have changed. When the ICA opened this year, the newspapers said it was the first new art museum in Boston in nearly a century. We are living with the museums our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents established. That means we have to think about the second part of that statement-- redefining their mission. We need to think about the best way to pick the history we need for today and tomorrow, not the history we needed yesterday.

#

Some history of history museums

Let me start with a story from exactly 100 years ago this year, to look at the ways in which the present shapes the understanding of the past—and how that continues to shape our presentations of the past. In 1907 the Essex Institute—one of the precursors of the Peabody Essex Museum—established what may have been the first period rooms in a museum in the United States. # George Francis Dow, secretary of the Institute, knew about the new European fashion of period rooms, of using them to tell social-history stories. His rooms at the Essex were an 1750s kitchen and an 1800s bedroom and parlor.¹

The Essex Institute period rooms were part of a larger trend that shaped New England museums and historic houses for the last century—one we are still trying to get over. That, of course, was the colonial revival, the attempt to rescue a tasteful history from a scary new world of immigrants, on the one hand, and modernity, on the other. Conservative art critic Royal Cortissoz, speaking of the Metropolitan’s new American Wing, # argued that it proved that “these ancestors of ours” were “people of good breeding and consequent good taste.” Historian Edward N. Kaufman notes the “peculiar and

paranoid” style of the American Wing, and quotes further from Cortissoz in the official guidebook: #

Traditions are one of the integral assets of a nation... Much of the America of to-day has lost sight of its traditions.... Many of our people are not cognizant of our traditions or the principles for which our fathers struggled and died. The tremendous changes in the character of our nation, and the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic, threaten us and, unless checked, may shake its foundation. ²

“The American Wing ,” claimed one of its patrons, would provide "a setting for the traditions so dear to us and invaluable in the Americanization of many of our people to whom much of our history has been hidden in a fog of unenlightenment.”³

What was this past that museum curators so yearned for? It was a pre-industrial past, an imagined rural America of “traditional handcrafts and village ways of life,” overlaid with a cult of hagiography for political leaders and the revolutionary war. It was a yearning for an imagined era of artisanal decorative arts before they were destroyed by the “mass production” of the 1830s.⁴ It was a reaction against change, against immigration and industrialization. The same sensibility can be found in other museums, in

historic houses, and in living history villages. #As the Old Sturbridge Village website puts it: its founders were interested in “preserving and cherishing pieces of the past against the powerful currents of change in early twentieth-century America.”⁵

American history and decorative art museums and historic houses and historic villages are built on this foundation of quicksand, this moment of history rewritten for reactionary purposes.⁶ This isn’t to say that some of them haven’t changed greatly, or included more history, though a survey in 1979 found that few had changed much.⁷ Thomas Schlereth points out the consequences: #

“it is not surprising that historical museum villages have been...addicted to promulgating a view that the American past has been one success story after another.... an inevitable and triumphal evolution of democratic principles, a glorious series of technological advancements, and a continual rise in the American standard of living and material progress.”⁸

#I want to take three points from this quick history. #First, our collecting and exhibiting reflects our politics, like it or not.

#Two, we are the creatures of our history. More than almost any other institutions, museums are constrained by their past. Especially as storerooms fill up and budgets shrink, we find it all too easy to stop collecting, to stop looking for new objects to save and new stories to tell and new ways to tell them. But that story is all too often one from an era when museums were built as bulwarks against change. They were conservative, not just in a political sense, but also in the objects they collected and the stories they told. To stick with that past not only means buying into a particular philosophy, but also to miss out on so much that is exciting and new and relevant.

#But the third point is the most important: we don't want to repeat the mistake of a century ago. We are once again in a time of immigration and rapid technological change, and it's easy to imagine a new wave of museums hoping to turn back the tide, looking for a new imagined good old days of, say World War II; we've seen that in recent years. Museums should learn from our own past about the problems of using history as a bulwark against the future. To embrace our diverse communities, we need to embrace a kind of history that includes them, that they find useful.

After all, why should anyone care about that early history, told in that way, today? More generally, why should we care about the 19th century at all?

Yes, there are a few historians and history buffs who for some reason find it fascinating—I'm one of them-- but frankly, there aren't enough to keep the museums and historic houses open. Yes, there are lots of kids in schools that have to take a test in American history, and some number of them—fewer all the time—will be forced to go to museums on school field trips.

A bigger part of the answer than I think most of us would wish is nostalgia, a kind of homesickness. I'm fascinated by the rise and fall of the agricultural museum. In the post-war era, when so many “living history” farm museums were formed, agriculture was just the right distance from us to be a subject of nostalgia. Grandmother still lived on the family farm, or once had, perhaps, and visiting the museum felt like visiting the old family place. But another generation or two has passed, and that link has been broken. Sturbridge Village's 1830s was a nostalgic stand-in for a 1930s farm; that connection made sense to OSV's founders, and to its first generation of visitors.

But there's a new nostalgia we might contrast with this agricultural nostalgia. As grandma's farm was to the post-war generation, the house in the city or the inner suburbs—is to the post-baby boomers. #The John F. Kennedy Birthplace in Brookline is restored to its 1917 appearance, its tours

telling of a time when “life was so much simpler” and highlighting “nostalgic symbols of time past.”⁹ Nostalgia is also the message at more recent 20th century house museums. The most famous one in New England is the #1950s House at Shelburne Museum in Vermont. The “popular hands-on 1950 House,” the museum website tells us, “evokes post-WWII optimism and prosperity. Visitors experience everyday life in Vermont's last years before television throughout the one-story, 1,000-square-foot ranch house. ... The house is furnished with authentic artifacts, including a wringer washing machine in the basement and a 1939 Chevy in the driveway.” #Other 1950s houses also play the nostalgia card: The 1950s All-Electric House at the Johnson County Museum of History, in Kansas, speaks of the 1950s as a “nostalgic era.”

[Cartoon: it seems we can be nostalgic for almost anything] But nostalgia isn't history

Connecting to the more recent past by making our exhibits better, and more complete

There's still nostalgia, but what we're nostalgic for is changing. # We need to take that into account. But more generally, I'd like to suggest that for museums to make most people care about the 19th century, or even much of the twentieth, there's got to be some connection to the 21st. I hate to use the

word “relevant,” but that’s the word we need to keep in mind. What’s in it for me? What do I get out of it? Does it bring beauty to my life? Does it help me understand the world I live in? Does it give me something to talk about with my kids, or my parents? Occasionally, does it offer an escape? Somehow, it’s got to connect to my world.

And one way for history museums to connect to contemporary visitors is to connect to contemporary themes, to bring the modern world inside the museum. Collecting and exhibiting recent history is a way of connecting to our audiences. All of the audiences that museums have a hard time reaching—young people, recent immigrants and their families, people of color—might well find that recent history—or older history with a contemporary interpretation-- is more meaningful than the too-easy colonial history that the industrialists who established the Met’s American Wing yearned for, or the Victorian age of more recent yearning. While museums might have forgotten the reasons that the elites thought it valuable to establish museums and build collections of period rooms a century ago, the aura of that non-inclusiveness still pervades too many of our collections and spaces. “Not my story,” it’s easy for a lot of us to say. And that means that there will nothing there to connect with for all too many potential visitors.

And connectedness is important. Harold Skramstad, former director of the Henry Ford museum, and one of the most thoughtful writers on museums, writes

Connectedness is nothing more than the process of a close, continuous, long-term connection between an organization and its audience. It is only through being connected to audiences in a close and continuous way that the museum will be trusted.¹⁰

There are many ways to be connected to our audiences. Skramsted is talking about the diversity of a museum's staff; but I would suggest that this applies to diversity of collections, as well. One way of diversifying collections is to bring them up to date, to collect from the new communities.

Let me give you some examples of ways in which 19th-century stories might connect to their 21st-century audiences, some ways they might be relevant.

1. Connect the old story to today's concerns.

- a. The New Bedford Whaling Museum might see its story as whaling. That's pretty much a dead story. It's been almost 150 years since there been a whaler out of New Bedford. But the story of whaling—the story of resource use, and then resource abuse—the story of sustainability, or more accurately, the ways in which unsustainable harvest leads to the death of an industry—is one with many

contemporary echoes. The most obvious one is the fishing industry today; one might imagine learning something from the decline of the whale fishery that is useful to understanding the contemporary decline of the fishing industry. More generally, the failure of the whale industry might tell us something about the nature of industrial and technological change today, and tomorrow.

b. Another example: The history of the New England textile industry was--and is--the story of immigrant labor. The context of immigration has changed, as has the story around it. But why not play up the continuities? I admit I was shocked the first time I heard someone at the Slater Mill describe Samuel Slater as an “illegal immigrant.” But he was, of course, and that simple description opens up the story to diverse contemporary audiences in wonderful ways.

2. Tell a longer story, not a shorter story.

In many areas of New England, exhibiting the last few decades lets us complete stories we've been thinking about and collecting for a long time.

One might argue that there are three big stories that comprise the history of nineteenth century New England: the economic stories of trade and industrialization; the people-in-motion stories of immigration and of movement from farms to cities; and the environmental stories of the

changing use of natural resources. These are the stories that so many of New England's museums tell, or could tell. ((ASK for show of hands)))

They are also all stories that don't end in the 19th century. Telling them as they are so often done is like telling a joke but forgetting the punch line; what makes them interesting is how it turned out, or turned out differently. Or as Paul Harvey says on the radio: "And now, the rest of the story."

So, industrialization doesn't end with the rise of the textile mills; it ends with their decline, with deindustrialization, and then with the ways in which the New England economy has rebuilt itself. Immigration is not an Pilgrim, or an Irish, or a French-Canadian story. It's also a Mexican, African, Caribbean story. New England's population doesn't just move from farms to cities; it moves from cities to suburbs. There's more to the environment than the damming of rivers to power mills, or the hunting of whales; there's an ongoing story of the way those dams shaped our twentieth century attitudes toward the places we live, and the lessons of sustainability that we might learn from whaling and apply to fishing and lumbering today.

In short, the 19th-century stories we've learned to tell so well in museums are better, more complete, stories, when we tell them in contemporary context.

They don't simply have a contemporary appeal that way, especially to those that don't have families that lived through them; the historiography is better if it addresses issues that we care about today. Continuing the story to the present not only makes it more connected, it also makes it better history.

Take advantage of the long view to say not only what happened, but what effect it had. Make the story relevant by telling the whole story, by bringing it up to date. Some examples:

- a. Industrialization, the major story of 19th century New England, is a story that is coming full circle with deindustrialization. You can see an example of this in the recent redone conclusion of the National Park Service exhibit at Lowell. # It asks questions that help to finish off the 19th-century story of the city: “What happened to the textile industry?” “Opportunity or Oppression?” “Made in America?” “What can be done?” # The new conclusion not only brings closure to the exhibition; it brings closure to the history of the city—by opening it up in new ways. These are questions we care about, today, separate from our visit to a history museum, and by asking them it makes the history part of our contemporary lives. # Perhaps it would have been better to ask them at the start of the exhibition, not at the end. The same questions can bring not just the present, but the past, to life. They're also questions that might attract a new audience, that will

give recent immigrants, or recent arrivals in Lowell, a reason to be curious about the earlier history.

b.. Historic houses are the obvious case where it's all too easy to tell a too-narrow story. A house may have been built in the 18th century, but it continued to exist for long after that. There's not reason that they whole visit needs to be focused on one moment; tell stories from throughout the house's history, up to and including the moment it became a historic house. #The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York is a good example here.

c. The New Bedford Whaling Museum is doing an exhibition on needlework in New Bedford, from 18th-century samplers to sail making to the garment industry. Why not conclude with the raid, a few months ago, on the leather goods factory that employed undocumented workers? That's a piece of that history, too. Not only does it provide perspective—what better way to help people to ask the question, “what's changed,” but it would give the museum an opportunity to include more recent New Bedford immigrants, and attract them to the museum.

d. More generally, why not consider the long-term environmental story as part of the exhibit? The dams built for New England's mills

are still there, still causing environmental damage. Including the environment is an easy way to bring the story up to date.

e. Finally: Make the story of the institution part of the history you tell the public. I find the public is often interested in this look behind the scenes. It makes you more believable, more open. Some of the most interesting historic house museum exhibits of recent years have been focused on the history of the alterations in the house as new historians have examined it and learned new things. Admitting your mistakes makes you seem more honest. And it makes for a great learning opportunity.

Collecting the more recent past.

To tell these stories of the more recent past, we need to rethink our collections—and our collecting. Not only do we need to look at our existing collections differently; we need to collect new collections, and to collect in new ways.

Collecting the recent past is not easy, but it's essential. Anna Steen, secretary of SAMDOK, the network of Swedish museums for contemporary collecting, writes that

“museums must collect contemporary culture, despite the seemingly overwhelming problems this brings. It is too easy to maintain that the contemporary world is so chaotic, so impossible to fully comprehend, that one cannot make decisions regarding what is important or significant... But not to rise to this challenge is to convert the museum into a mausoleum, a monument to a past age, completely out of touch with its own time.¹¹

But it is a challenge. Collecting the recent past is not the same as collecting the more distant past. Not only is the type of evidence different—think radio and television, oral histories, and new materials—but the relationship of the museum with the subject is different, too.

Gaynor Kavanagh suggests that “the histories of the twentieth century are produced from a very different evidence range. They are in many respects oral histories... verbal rather than written accounts...” This is both good—“this material can be intrinsically interesting” and it is “more accessible than ever before” but it also has drawbacks. “Things are not so clear-cut.” But most interestingly, including the voice of those who lived through the history provides a challenge to the historian as narrator, pitting “control through construction” against “personal empowerment through control.”

Both are problematic, of course, but together they can yield a useful tension.

12

Collecting the recent past can be a challenge. Here's some advice.

1. Collect stories, not just artifacts. Sometimes, just collect stories. One of the great advantages of collecting recent history is that it's possible to ask the maker, or the user, to tell you about it. Just think of how excited we would be to be able to interview some of users of the older artifacts in our collections. With objects of recent history, we can! #

A recent project organized by the Museum Loan Network gives advice on how to do this. The Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects website warns:

The methods and processes of collecting, preserving, and presenting objects of cultural heritage and oral histories can be demanding, complex and site specific.

Objects and stories are recognizably distinct from each other, yet when connected, the power of both the object and the story can be amplified and channeled in many directions. Tapping into the stream

of information and knowledge fed by objects of cultural heritage and by human experience, requires respect for their potency and mindfulness of the work required to provide responsible stewardship.

The site goes on to list 10 considerations for collecting stories around artifacts. Each of these is spelled out in some detail, and the complexities of working with individuals and communities to collect and to tell their stories is detailed in a sophisticated way. It's not always easy to collect stories, but it's worth it—to the point where it will seem before too long, that not collecting the story along with an artifact, when it's possible to do so, will seem like bad museum practice, I think.

2. Collect differently. Form collecting consortia, and work with collections differently. While many museum curators want to collect the 20th century, they know better than anyone else the difficulties: lack of space, lack of staff, lack of funds... the basic lacks of modern museum life. Museums have to collect the 20th century differently than they have earlier collections. The 20th century is the age of mass production, of mass consumption. If the 18th century is symbolized by the local and by the craftsmen, and the 19th by the regional and by batch production, the 20th is the age of national and international markets and mass production.

Here are some of the ways to collect differently. Share collections: Not every museum needs an identical example; consider ways to share collections of, say, the artifacts of 20th century domestic life. Samdoc, the Swedish pioneer of contemporary collecting, established “pools” that museums join. Not every museum needs to collect everything. Samdoc is a model worth considering. Another way to share; The Museum Loan Network. The MLN encourages sharing between museums by making a database of artifacts available for sharing available.

3. Collect for exhibits, not necessarily for the ages. A few years back I shocked an audience at the Mid-Atlantic Museum Association by telling them to buy on eBay. That advice probably isn't so shocking anymore. SO: Buy what you need on eBay. Keep it if it meets your collecting plan. If not, sell it back. Museums traditionally accession everything they collect, and, for very good reasons, make it difficult to deaccession collections. But sometimes we need to take advantage of opportunities before we're certain that museums should commit themselves to perpetual preservation. Museums should come up with a category of temporary acquisition, a category that allows museums to collect for exhibitions, but not preservation. Many museums have a category of “non-accessioned

artifacts,” used mostly for education collections or as props in exhibits. Perhaps this category should be expanded to include “too soon to tell” artifacts. Collect them now, when they are available, and, in the fullness of time, accessioned them, when and if that seems wise. Otherwise, they could be used up, or disposed of. Consider ways to add some flexibility to your collecting.

4. Collect contemporary. Collect not just the 20th century, but the 21st. Contemporary collecting can pay dividends for museums not only by keeping the museum up to date with community history; it can also provide great publicity, and show that the museum cares about the same issues that its community does. That can be everything from food -- # -- so the most important issues of our times.

#Some of the most innovative and interesting collecting today is the work done by museums in New York and Washington after September 11, 2001. Immediately after 9/11, a group of museums in New York and Washington met to share responsibility for collecting. They collected not just artifacts but images and stories, and they collected widely, not certain what they would keep at first. The material was used for some outstanding immediate exhibitions, and will serve to document a key moment in history in a way

that would otherwise not be possible. You could only collect these materials immediately; there wouldn't be a collectors market for them.

#Another organization that's long collected contemporary history is the United States military. The Army Center of Military History has, since WWII, dispatched teams of historians and curators to collect artifacts and oral histories on the battlefield. The artifact teams work with oral historians and artists to document a war as it happens, to collect materials for Army museums and Army histories. They do a remarkably good job: the language in the official regulations is good: “provide a balanced, documented, historical collection for long-term preservation, available for research and analysis.”¹³

My suggestions for bolder and more thoughtful collecting fits well with the new emphasis on collections planning promulgated by the American Association of Museums. The recent AAM Guide to Collections Planning calls collections planning an “essential ‘best practice’” for museums, with greater urgency than ever. Collecting policy, according to the AAM, is an essential part of collections stewardship—and of accreditation. The development of collections, it says, should be driven by the museum's

mission statement. Further, “considerations regarding future collecting activities [must be] incorporated into institutional plans.”

The first step in establishing intellectual control over the museum’s collections is to establish an intellectual framework for the institution. It’s easy, the AAM points out, to keep doing what you’ve always done; or for individual curators to collect what they think appropriate. The AAM urges museums to move beyond “ad hoc, idiosyncratic collecting to strategic, integrated collecting; from simply building the collections to shaping them; from asking ‘does it fit within the collections?’ to asking “what should be in the collections.””¹⁴ # “Collecting policies,” according to the new AAM guidelines, “need to be replaced by strategies which adopt a more long-term, holistic, inclusive, integrated, cooperative, sustainable, rational and thoughtful view of the purpose of institutional collecting.”¹⁵

Conclusion: New collections, new exhibitions, new people

Let me sum up some of the reasons that museum should collect and exhibit the 20th century, and the even more recent past in three ways: with a warning, with summary of its potential, and with a look into the future.

First, the warning. This is from Richard Longstreth's cri-de-coeur on the failings of recent history preservation has much that might apply to museums. He worries about

the inclination to resist considering new kinds of resources, especially those dating from the mid twentieth century, not because they lack significance, but because they are unknown entities to those who must pass judgment on them Such closed-mindedness is especially disconcerting since preservation has been a driving force behind the work of opening new realms of exploration and informing professionals and the public alike on areas long neglected. As it matures, the historian-preservationist's approach seems to be becoming somewhat brittle, even reactionary.

For all its positive attributes, preservation is in danger of narrowing rather than expanding our perspective on the past. Most of the time and money that go into survey and other forms of documentation are consumed in what have become standard exercises in data gathering and evaluation. The idea that preservation should be an engine for discovering new and important things about the past seldom is accorded much attention at policy- and decision-making levels.¹⁶

Then the summary: what we gain from it. We need to collect and exhibit the future

- To acknowledge the vast changes in American society in the past few decades.
- To connect us to the communities we should be serving
- To prepare museums for the next generation.
- To tell the whole story

And finally, the look ahead, at what we might gain:

Matthew Roth, an industrial archeologist in Los Angeles, gave a recent article a most provocative subtitle: “Who will love the Alameda Corridor”¹⁷

(The Alameda corridor is a post-WWII industrial district in Los Angeles#.)

He describes the ways in which seeing images of Lowell mills spoke to him of his youth, his memories of growing up in Cranston, RI. There is a new generation he says—his students in Los Angeles—who see the Alameda corridor as their Lowell. Or should see it that way. “Who,” he asks,

can see in these objects and places something significant about herself? Who can not only analyze these environments place them in meaningful relationship with the stories of historical actors who populated these factories? Such historical actors are likely to be darker-skinned than our accustomed subjects, likely to speak Spanish

or Korean or other languages besides English, and more likely to see the Alameda Corridor as a place of hope in their own lives, rather than as a destination for the runaway shops of the formerly industrialized northeast.

Those students he says, might respond to the images of the factories of the Alameda corridor with the “combination of recognition and curiosity that the Lowell images kindled in me.”

If our museum collections and exhibitions can open up our nation’s past to these new Americans, and not close it down, as did the history exhibits of a century ago, we can take credit not only for moving museums forward, but moving the country forward. And there’s no higher goal for our history than that.

#Thank you.

¹ (There's a museum in California that claims earlier rooms, and there were rooms set up at the 1876 Centennial, and European rooms at art museums.)

² Edward N. Kaufman, "The Architectural Museum," in *Museum Studies*, pp -289

Quote is from Royal Cortissoz

³ Quote from R. T. Halsey, in Marshall Davidson, "Those American Things."

⁴ Correspondence from Briann Greenfield

⁵ <http://www.osv.org/education/OSVisitor/OSVHistory.html> Accessed 5-19-07

⁶ Edward N. Kaufman, "The Architectural Museum," in *Museum Studies*, pp -289.

⁷ William Seale, in *Recreating the Historic House Interior*, (AASLH, 1979), says the overstuffed, overdraped colonial revival style of the 1920s shaped historic house restorations for the next 50 years.

⁸ Thomas J. Schlereth, "Collecting Ideas and Artifacts,: Common Problems of History Museums and History Texts," in *Museum Studies* p. 336

⁹ <http://www.nps.gov/jofi/planyourvisit/things2do.htm> accessed 5-13-07

PIECES CUT FROM TALK

This talk, like this conference, has two parts—collecting and exhibiting. That's the way museum work is so often considered, and in that order. But one of the lessons we learn from considering recent history is that the line is not as hard and fast as it might look, as it often looks for an earlier era. In fact, that's one of the lessons we can take from considering recent history and apply to the further-ago past: collections and interpretation goes hand in hand, each helping the other along. So I'll focus first on collecting, and then on exhibition; but remember, they talk to each other at every step of the way.

¹⁰ Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century" *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, from the issue entitled, "America's Museums," Summer, 1999, Vol. 128, No. 3.

¹¹ Anna Steen, "Samdok" Tools to make the world Visible," in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, p. 196.

¹² Gaynor Kavanagh, "Collecting from the era of Memory, Myth and delusion," in *Museums and the Future of Collecting* By Simon J. Knell. Published 2004 Ashgate Publishing, Ltd

¹³ Arm Museums, Historical Artifacts, and Art, Army Regulation 870-20

¹⁴ AAM Guide to collections planning, p, 6

¹⁵ Simon Knell, "altered values: searching for a new collecting," in *Museums and future of collecting*, p. 15

¹⁶ Architectural History and the Practice of Historic Preservation in the United States Richard Longstreth, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 58, No. 3, (Sep., 1999), pp. 326-333.

¹⁷ Matthew W. Roth, "IA and the 20th century city: Who will love the Alameda Corridor" *IA*, 26:1, 2000