

Balancing Act: Providing Access While Preserving Historic Spaces and Traditions

Ann Stegina, Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, introduced the session of three New York City museums in non-traditional spaces and how they preserve the historic structures and the collections within them. The Intrepid is documenting the un-restored spaces of a WWII aircraft carrier to provide virtual access to those areas. The Tenement Museum is developing proactive approaches to documentation and preservation in a historic building where visitors pose the most risk to the environment. At the South Street Seaport a collections type was defined to assist in the preservation of 19th century shipwrights, printing skills, and traditions. Although these are unique settings, the approaches and methods used can be applied to other museums.

The Intrepid was decommissioned in 1974 and opened as a museum in 1984, but a complete inventory and documentation had not been conducted. In 2011 the Intrepid received an IMLS grant to document the entire ship. Ann described the documentation process as “spelunking” because they often crawled into small, dark spaces while wearing head lamps. They used a color coded map and did a walk through of each space with the operations team in advance of the documentation.

Becky Bacheller, also of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, explained that as no previous inventory had been conducted, the team needed to develop new forms and processes from scratch. The basic log sheet included the space and compartment name--sometimes available from the original navy labels, the name of the cataloger, decks, frames, names, dimensions, objects in the room, as well as particular notes about safety conditions of the compartments. Teams of 2 equipped with OSHA filter masks, gloves, flashlights, point-and-shoot cameras, maps, folders for archival materials, and tape measures. They photographed every component of the compartments including graffiti, sailor art, lockers, and bunks as “Found on Board” (akin to ‘Found in Collection’), describing the location with ship directions (forward, aft, port, starboard). Each compartment and its contents and the photographs thereof are recorded in the site’s module of TMS, a process that takes far longer than the spelunking.

According to Ann, the number one complaint from visitors is that the public cannot access all of the spaces. Fortunately, an IMLS grant laid the foundation for their next step. The Intrepid received a Regional Economic Development Council Grant from the NYC Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation Office to complete 3D scanning of the ship. Oral history testimony, and augmented and virtual reality components are being added to their exhibitions and online collections, opening up many possibilities for the future.

Danielle Swanson, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, related how the stories of the residents of 97 Orchard Street are told through guided tours of restored (repaired and rebuilt with reproductions) and ruined (preserved as a time capsule of 1935 when the residents were kicked out) apartments on 5 floors. Tours leave from the visitors' center in 15 minute intervals, accommodating 244,000 visitors 2016. The sheer volume of visitors caused increases in the deterioration and failures of the paint and plaster in the building. But as admission fees comprise 75% of the museum budget, there is resistance to rescheduling tours. The tours also created a conflict of doing collections work.

In 2003 the museum received a Getty grant for architectural study. The central stairs were reinforced, and stair runners were added, as were string barriers to the ruin rooms. In 2006 they developed a conservation management plan, but staff did not feel empowered to enact it. A 2011 IMLS Museums for America grant included a structural study, a 15-year plan for preservation, and, importantly, included training the staff on what to look for and how to respond to change. One day a month the museum would close one floor and fully document any damage or failures, and monitor conservation needs of the halls, bathrooms, stairways and the 4 apartments on each floor. Detailed photographs of plaster and wallpaper failure are taken and compared via iPad for comparison to the last monitoring. Objects are cleaned, and floor boards and carpeting are replaced while maintaining the integrity of the original. The public is educated about the intervention steps that are being taken, and the program serves to advocate for the preservation of the museum. Tour guides serve as extra "eyes" and report any noticeable changes or problems encountered. The preservation action plan, maintained, as a spreadsheet, keeps staff accountable for completing each task. According to Danielle, there is no such thing as too much documentation. The Tenement Museum prioritizes mission-specific conservation and building relationships with conservation experts.

Martina Caruso, South Street Seaport Museum, explained that among the 26,000 objects that tell the history of New York as a port city, the South Street Seaport has a Working Collection. The Working Collection differs from an educational collection or props in that while the objects are regularly used to teach historical skills, techniques, or traditions, they are neither reproductions nor broken, and often have high value. The objects were designated with a "W" but this designation was not explained in their Collections Management Policy (CMP). The Museum started in 1967 and the W collection was established in 1973. In 2017 Martina reviewed the CMP written in 2010 and clarified definitions for each of the collection types and subdivided the Working Collection into Waterfront and Printing History Collections. 70% and 80% of these collections respectively are in working use but are not under the care of the collections manager/registrar. Many have been "fixed" by well-intended but untrained volunteers.

Martina has instituted professional development training and tours of the collections for the volunteers to introduce them to museum standards for handling and caring for objects. She has prepared hand-outs with provenance and historical information, restoration projects, handling requirements, and other rules for the volunteer staff to share with visitors. Martina relies on the visitor services staff at the Pilot House, Printing Press, and the captain on the Lettie G. Howard Schooner (an active ship that sails each summer), to be the “eyes” of the collection as she only does on-board condition checks quarterly.

Martina provided final takeaways that apply to each of the participating museums as assets when balancing the care of collections with visitor access - documenting the collections, building and preserving institutional memory, developing a collections care culture for all (volunteers, and non-collections staff), building a team that understands the full collection, regularly updating policies and procedures, and providing preservation and conservation instructions.

Submitted by Jobi Zink, Registrar, Rosenbach Museum & Library