

# Exhibition Studies: Issues and Ideas

## *Forty Students, One Semester:*

### *An Exhibition Challenge*

by Steven Lubar

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Creating history exhibitions is a complex process. Exhibition developers work with specialists in content, conservation, design and education. They share authority with the community. They worry about how the audience will engage. How best to teach this multifaceted process to students just learning how to tell stories with objects? That's the challenge I face in *Methods in Public Humanities*, one of the courses required of MA students in the public humanities program at Brown. The class, in addition to writing a variety of real-world documents—collection proposals, memoranda, press releases, exhibition labels—produces an exhibition as a final project.

This article describes this year's exhibition project. ***Remember the Old Times: Cape Verdean Community in Fox Point*** opened at the end of the semester to a delighted audience of Brown students, members of the Providence-area Cape Verdean community, and others, including the Cape Verdean ambassador.

#### **Making the Process Real**

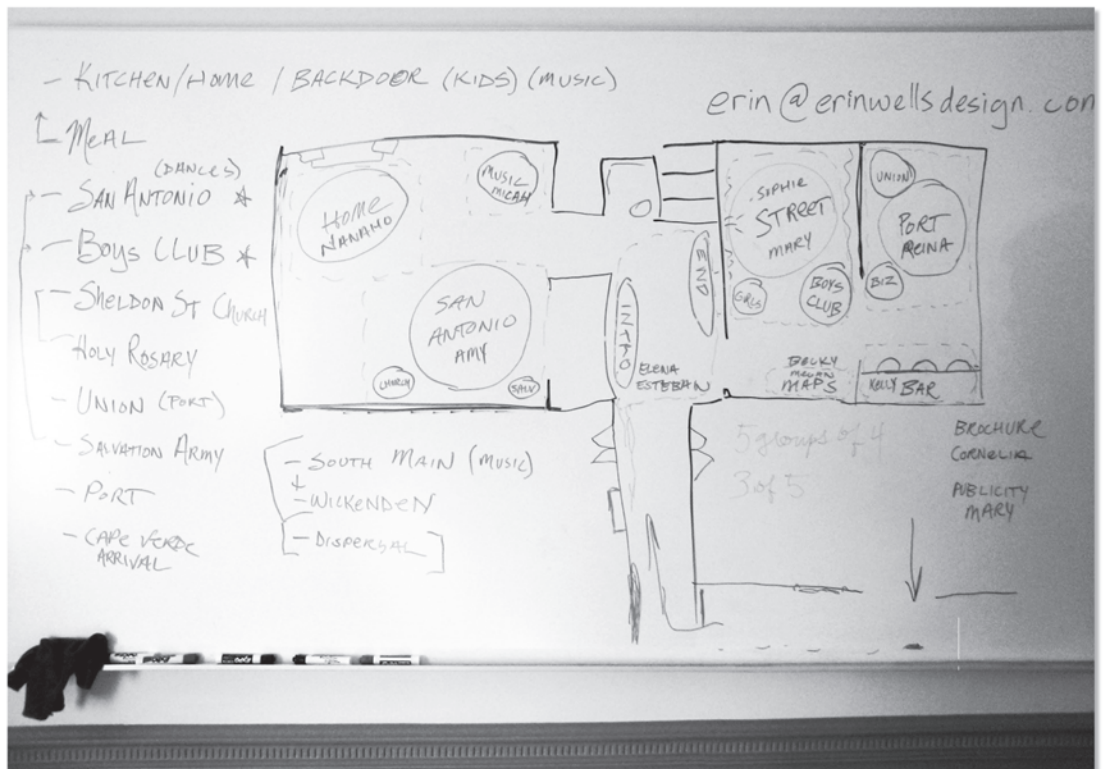
Brown's public humanities program prides itself on an inclusive approach to the field. The lines between museums and other cultural institutions are blurring, and we want students to be ready for jobs that might include after-school art programs, cultural tourism, government and private cultural development, as well as museum work. Museums are also changing, and future museum employees need to be flexible as they work across old disciplinary lines, and adapt to new ideas about community involvement, the ethics of artifact collection and use, and educational programming. Students in the public humanities program learn skills useful throughout museums, from

collections to exhibitions to education to community engagement.

To gain these skills, it is important that class projects be as real as possible. That way, students can see how theories play out in real life, and learn by doing, and by making mistakes. Students work with community members, and with a professional designer and the John Nicholas Brown Center's curator. They're given a real timeline and budget and—most important—a real audience. Students appreciate the difference this makes. One wrote: "Even though this was essentially a 'class project,' the professionalism and structure turned it into something much more valuable."

To produce an exhibition and at the same time keep the educational function paramount, a clear structure is essential, with intermediate projects that build up to the final project. Students need to make real decisions, but with enough guidance that the project stays on track. And there should be assignments that require that students reflect on their work.

Our exhibition on the Cape Verdean community of Fox Point had four groups of stakeholders. Students come first: learning is Brown's most important product. But the project also had to serve the community, and so students had to work with community members to gather and present artifacts and images and stories in a respectful way. They had to keep the audience always in mind, to create an engaging, educational experience. The fourth group of stakeholders: the professionals engaged in the process: administrative coordinator, exhibition designer, gallery curator. Students needed to learn to work with them as colleagues, to respect their expertise and their time.



An early version of the bubble diagram for the exhibition, the product of a long meeting led by designer Erin Wells. Courtesy Erin Wells, Erin Wells Design.

### Working with the Community

Fox Point is a residential neighborhood near Brown. Like many poor areas next to large universities, it's not been treated well. A century ago Fox Point was a vibrant community of Cape Verdeans, Portuguese, and Irish. Today, after highway construction, the demise of the port where many of the men worked, university expansion, and gentrification, those communities are, mostly, gone.

We were fortunate to have a scholar from the Cape Verdean community to collaborate with us. Claire Andrade-Watkins, a second generation Cape Verdean American who grew up in Fox Point and went on to a doctorate in African history and a career as a professor and filmmaker, has produced documentaries about the Cape Verdean community and heads Brown's Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity's Fox Point Cape Verdean Project. She shared the materials she had collected and introduced students to other members of the community. She also made a strong case for "first voice" interpretation. Cape Verdeans, she told the students, are capable of telling their own story.

This balance between the stories a community wants to tell and the topics that exhibition creators from outside the community think important is a key one in modern exhibition practice. The practice of sharing authority is never easy. In their many meetings with community members, students found divergent points of view. They found a few topics that some community members preferred remain untold. Balancing sources of information, and the interests of community and audience, proved a significant educational experience. One student wrote that working with the community taught him "to navigate the question of authority," and to "watch what I say carefully."

For some students, the challenge of exhibiting a community raised philosophical and political concerns. One wrote that she struggled to balance her belief "that community members should have the most power in representing themselves" with her role as an outsider. But, after a successful meeting with a community member, she "realized that sometimes the community and exhibit organizers can work together very well."

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Part of the Home section. On the walls are objects found in many Fox Point homes; on the table reproduced recipes for visitors to take with them. Courtesy Steven Lubar.

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### Collections, Research, and Writing

Because *Remember the Old Times* built on a long history of Fox Point study the students could focus on interpretation, not new research. Three ongoing projects provided much of the material. Dr. Andrade-Watkins had produced a documentary on the community, and her Fox Point Cape Verdean project collects images, archives, and artifacts. Students in Dr. Anne Valk's Fox Point oral history project have interviewed about sixty Fox Pointers. And local resident Lou Costa, working with Brown students, has made several thousand pictures available on Flickr.

But artifacts that could recreate the physical spaces of the community and bring the exhibition alive were not easy to find. We bought materials at local Salvation Army stores and on eBay, giving students a chance to learn about building collections as well as acquisitions. They learned how to research everyday objects: What kind of table was in the kitchen? What beer at a local bar? And they learned to make judgment calls: what was "good enough." If we couldn't find a 1940 bicycle for a scene, would a 1950 model do? Searching eBay and Craigslist for collections

to tell stories is good training for curators and exhibition developers. Indeed, it might even suggest a new model for museum collections.

The challenge of taking the stories and turning them into artifact, image, and text was something new to most of the students. Unlike most student papers, which are individual work, with no real audience, exhibition writing is done in teams, with a very interested audience—much better training for the real world. "Writing 100 words with 3 other people is indescribably tricky; each sentence, each word, each turn of phrase and punctuation mark was a potential point of contention," wrote one student. "I had at all times to keep in the forefront of my mind who my audience was going to be, and their role not only as consumers, but also probably as community members and stakeholders in the exhibition's subject matter." "This collaborative aspect," wrote another, "was the most challenging and the most rewarding part of the project for me." And another: "In other classes I am used to writing for a guaranteed captive audience, a professor who must grade my work, but for this assignment I had to consider what would be interesting—not only factual."

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### Organization, Design, and Fabrication

Organization is the key to producing a show in a short time with a large group. We decided early on what the main categories would be—we would have sections on Home, The Street, Community Organizations, Music, The Port, and Bars—so that students could break into groups with a clear focus. A leadership team, one or two students from each group, met once a week or so, taking responsibility for coordinating the sections and the work of the other students.

It's essential that students learn something of the real-world practicalities of exhibition production. Some of the students were hesitant at first—they're not used to courses that require manual labor. But the hands-on aspect—dealing with artifacts—is a key part of the educational exercise. As one student wrote,

The actual implementation of the exhibition ... brought up really exciting questions about exhibition. For example, the wallpaper we were adhering to the walls: it is authentic (from the 1940s), which means it has been sitting in a closet turning brown and deteriorating for over sixty years. It would certainly not have looked this old on the walls of a house in the 1940s, but it is a real artifact. What does it mean to display something that is "old"? To show what it would have looked like then or what it does look like now? And how does that question change when the object is part of the scenery for the exhibition and not the direct focus of the section?

There's nothing like the real thing, and a real decision, to make students think!

Working with a designer and curator put the students into an organizational structure that was new to them. They needed to sort out who did what, when to simply accept the decisions of the professionals and when to argue for their visions, how to get things done. This negotiation is one of the hardest things for new museum employees to learn, and there's nothing like experience to teach this essential lesson.

What were some of their decisions? They decided on the categories of the exhibition first based on research, then on the space available, and changed them again based on further work with the designer. They chose important



*The Bar section, a reproduction based on images and including copies of historic newspaper articles and photographs, is tied to the Port section. To the right: the interactive map where visitors can tag locations in Fox Point with the stories. Courtesy Steven Lubar.*

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community organizations by balancing the interests of community members, the work of academic researchers, and the artifacts and images they could obtain. They determined the important settings based on pictures, and then worked with the designer to understand what was necessary to symbolically present them, and with the curator to find or create objects that made their points. Throughout, they referred to exhibitions they had read about, or seen images of in class.

#### **What Did Students Learn?**

Students’ final reflections on the exhibition, written just as it was opening, focused on two topics. One, noted earlier, was about the challenges of working with the community. They also saw its benefits: “I got a real joy in seeing the approval with which members Providence’s Cape Verdean community met the exhibition this evening.”

The second was about the importance of organization, of planning, of working together to get things done, of collaborating and coordinating with each other, with the other stakeholders, and of the necessity of meeting

the demands of budget and schedule. “The primary lesson I have learned from my work on the exhibition,” wrote one, “is the necessity of organization and communication. [One must] articulate a plan from the beginning, delegate work, and follow through. Yet this exhibition has also taught me the value of being flexible.” Another student: “This was also an exercise in learning to live with imperfections and accept completion as a valid goal.”

But the most important outcome, I think, was this: students came to see exhibitions not as a final product that simply appears, but rather as the outcome of a set of decisions, decisions made by people based on knowledge and expertise, as well as compromise and cooperation. Only by undertaking a real-world project, and dealing with all of the messiness it entails, can students understand the challenges of museum work—any work, really—and see that it is the product of people, not institutions. This is important not only for future museum professionals, but also for future museum visitors.

Oh, and doing exhibitions is also the most fun part of taking—and teaching—the course! ☀

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