

A Shared Mobility: Community Curatorial Process and the Philadelphia Public History Truck

by Erin Bernard

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The Philadelphia Public History Truck (fig. 1) is a mobile museum project that aims to defy cultural access issues of cost, location, and process by partnering with Philadelphia grassroots neighborhood organizations in a yearlong exhibition cycle. The collaborative project locates the authority of inquiry within the community's concerns. Using oral histories and material culture items owned by Philadelphians and shared during a public event series off the truck, History Truck does two things: it not only saves stories of otherwise marginalized voices and adds them to Temple University's archives, but it also listens to and examines these sources as driving points for an interdisciplinary exhibition within that year's selected neighborhood. At the end of the year's work, the exhibition travels the city in the truck and pops up for citizens to explore.

I came up with the idea for History Truck in 2013, just months before I entered Temple University's M.A. (public) history program. At the time, I was working in an outreach position at the Painted Bride Art Center, and I had a "magic" moment while walking with Theodore Harris, an artist friend of mine, among the ubiquitous food trucks within Temple University's campus. I had little experience as a public historian at the time, but my experience with outreach had instilled in me a sense of who entered cultural spaces, who spent money for admission to cultural spaces, and, even more, who was part of the narrative of cultural spaces within Philadelphia. I had not yet read Michael Frisch's landmark publication, *A Shared Authority*, in which he describes the nature of joint authorship in oral history and the need to originate questions within the community to do public history effectively. I did have a vision, though, that I could best serve Philadelphians—in an immediate way—through a mobile public history project, one that would be a catalyst for exhibitions on community-generated topics. The exhibitions, I decided, would use archival research and community objects in any interpretive form necessary to resonate with audiences.

It was clear that the History Truck would be nothing without a community partner invested in the mission . . . or a truck. Initially, I reached out to community organizations in the larger North Philadelphia area because I felt a civic duty, as a Temple University student, to serve this underserved community. My hope was to make the process of the project a reality in beta form, so that I could gather material for a grant proposal. Jeff Carpineta, then president of East



Fig. 1. Public historian Erin Bernard and civic activist Jeff Carpineta of the Philadelphia Public History Truck. Photo by Laurie Beck Peterson, 2014

Kensington Neighbors Association (EKNA), responded to me immediately.

Once the hotbed of Philadelphia's textile industry, East Kensington now is challenged with vacant lots and buildings as well as homelessness and drug use. In the media, these issues often overshadow the voices of an increasingly diverse neighborhood of Irish, Latino, and Vietnamese families, and, more recently, an influx of artists searching for affordable housing near the elevated train line. The prospect of focusing on East Kensington also pulled on my heartstrings; my own grandmother grew up within the larger neighborhood of Kensington and had shared stories of running back from the corner store to tell her mother—a seamstress and pianist for silent films—when she had phone calls. It felt a bit like home to walk Kensington Avenue.

I remember taking a deep breath and telling myself to speak intelligently before calling Jeff so that I would not mess up this chance to work in East Kensington. Once we were on the phone, he spoke as if we had been friends for a long time. He asked, “What’s your vision here, Erin?”

Jeff paused for a good amount of time after I spoke, and then he said, “I would like to share my truck with you.” I was speechless and confused. My thoughts ranged from, *This man has a truck? How could that be?* to *Why would this man who has never met me let me use his truck? Is he a murderer?* to *Could this be my dream come true?* and *Oh man, now I actually have to do this project.* Once Jeff offered to share his vehicle, I invited additional East Kensington partners to participate, including the Little Berlin

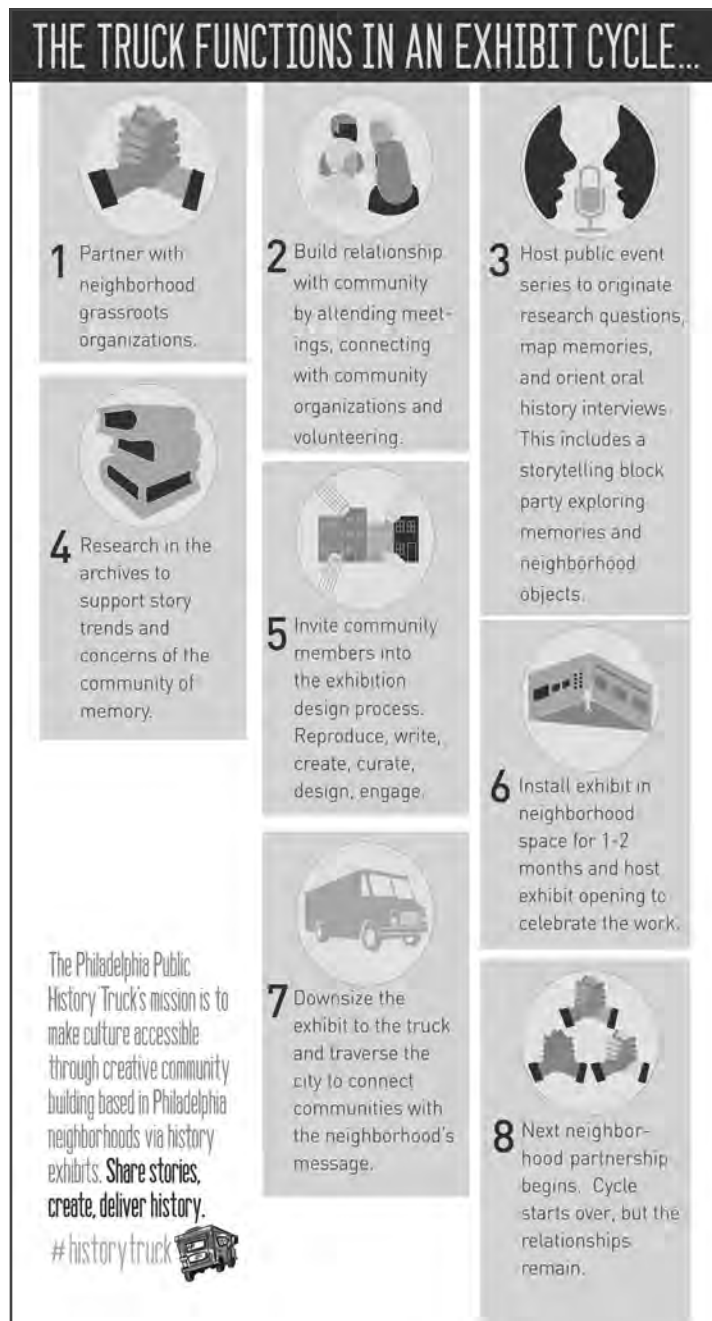


Fig 2. History Truck's exhibition cycle is displayed at every public event and in all forms of the exhibition, both to orient participants and to demonstrate transparency. I developed the content; recent exhibition design grad Jordan Klein designed the chart.

curatorial art collective (of which I was part), the St. Francis Inn Ministries soup kitchen staff and guests, and members of the Kensington Community Food Co-op. I then spent time deciding exactly how an exhibition cycle might function (fig. 2).

The first public event in East Kensington was simple. We took the truck to a vacant lot leased by Little Berlin on a First Friday—the evening when galleries citywide open new exhibitions to the



Fig. 3. In collaboration with community partners, History Truck hosts Storytelling Block Parties in underused spaces. We conduct oral history interviews in the truck while attendees map and share memories over a meal. Photo by Jill Saul, 2014

By being present on the block . . . I was able to learn what memories occupied the minds of residents and what stories they wanted to understand better.

Philadelphia public. We invited passersby to stuff knit stockings with their questions about the neighborhood’s history, eat pie and cider, and map their first memories of the neighborhood (fig. 3). I chose knit stockings as the stuffing agent because it alluded to the textile industry history of Kensington; it also afforded me the later ability to “unpack” questions literally and figuratively. The memory map was suggested by History Truck’s East Kensington volunteer exhibition designer Jordan Klein, a recent graduate of the University of the Arts’ MFA in museum exhibition planning and design. As for the food we shared, this is something we do for two reasons. There is something communal about sharing a meal with someone, which leaves space to share memories and reflect on the past. It also is a sure audience pleaser, and in the case of the neighborhoods where History Truck works, affording food is a common challenge.

Our next event, the “Storytelling Block Party,” was more complicated to plan. To approve a street closure, the City of Philadelphia required a resident-initiated petition signed by 80 percent of the block’s property-owning residents. On the ground level, Buddy Kamp, a lifelong resident, was happy to assist me in making this happen by coordinating with Juan Rivera, the block captain. We gathered all but

two signatures on the block (those two simply because they were not home). I asked EKNA to fund most of the food, a local ice cream shop to donate ice cream, Kensington Community Food Co-op to share their bean bag toss game, my former boss to deejay, another neighbor to share the EKNA grill, a team of volunteers (including my sister and fellow public history graduate students) to staff the event, and my mom for the use of her Honda CRV to trek things from my apartment in New Jersey to Philadelphia.

It was a huge community effort to plan and execute this day of memory collecting, which included pinning “memories,” written on muslin strips, onto a neighborhood map. But it was a success—we not only collected oral histories and community objects for an exhibition, but we also made genuine relationships of trust with those we were serving—and all the food was gone! By being present on the block with Kensington residents—who attended because they knew about the event either from neighborhood word of mouth, from me during one of my days volunteering or doing interviews at the St. Francis Inn, EKNA announcements, History Truck fliers, or media coverage—I was able to learn what memories occupied the minds of residents and what stories they wanted to understand better. Most people spoke first about the Buck Hosiery mill fire in which two firefighters were killed in 2012; secondly, they expressed curiosity about “other activists who cared about the neighborhood before us.” It was out of these concerns that our research purpose and narrative was born—*Manufacturing Fire*—an exhibition

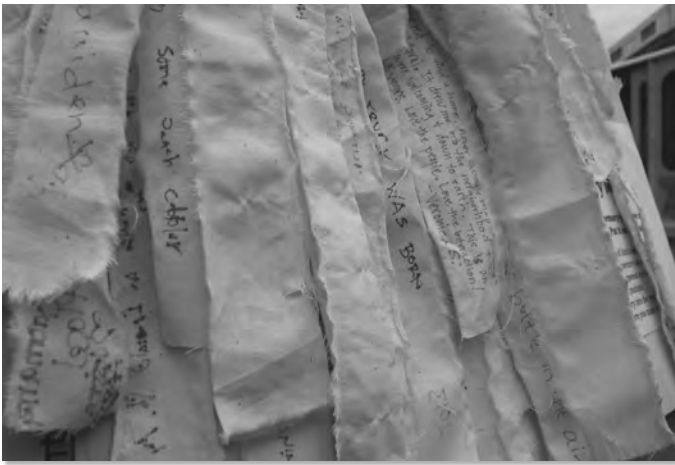


Fig. 4. At the Storytelling Block Party, participants wrote their first memories of the Kensington neighborhood on muslin, then pinned them onto “their” location on the memory map. The responses were so numerous that they covered the map entirely. Photo by Meghann Hickson, 2014



Fig. 5. The memory map was transformed into First and Flames. Watercolor on drop cloth, zippers, textiles, cray-pas, and matchboxes mounted on carpet, 5 x 7 ft. Collection of Erin Bernard; photo by Erin Bernard, 2014

on postindustrial textile mill fires and community activism in East Kensington.

The next step in the exhibition cycle was to develop the stationary and mobile versions of the exhibition. First, we conducted research. Undergraduate research assistant Grace DiAgostino and I explored local archives, where we discovered a nuanced and longstanding narrative concerning fire in Kensington that spoke not only to industrial history but also to racial boundaries. In response to this research, we developed interpretive methods that would best present the narrative, in as traditional or abstract a form as needed to share stories effectively. In some instances, we used text panels, archival reproductions, and community-submitted objects. But we also “made” objects to interpret oral histories in tangible, conceptual ways. Sometimes this object-making process was collaborative; sometimes I ventured down this path as an artist. I also invited artists and historians whose work supported the exhibition narrative of *Manufacturing Fire* to submit pieces to the show.

First and Flames is one example of this type of collaborative art-history “object.” The project built upon the original memories pinned into the block party map by creating a watercolor rendition of the 1862 *Smedley’s Atlas of Philadelphia*, and placing on it years (created by EKNA secretary Amy Miller) to designate spots of fire, matchboxes (made by me) to

designate spots of community activism, and key words from the original memories on muslin. The entire map was placed on a carpet to allude to the neighborhood’s carpet industry with the memories on muslin for review separately on key rings (figs. 4 & 5). This piece was featured in the stationary version of *Manufacturing Fire* as well as on the sidewalk of Philly streets during the truck’s pop-up events. This interdisciplinary exhibition (fig. 6) included sound clips from the oral histories, physical, touchable interpretations of community stories, and the objects shared at the public events. I wrote text, Klein designed the look and feel of the panels and the vinyl lettering, and our team of volunteers installed the exhibition at Little Berlin, whose gallery



Fig. 6. The stationary version of *Manufacturing Fire* at Little Berlin gallery included a reflection space for visitors to review *History Truck*’s process, a community corkboard, photographs from recent block parties, a curatorial library, and a place to comment on local buildings perceived as being susceptible to fire. Photo by Erin Bernard, 2014



Fig 7. Kaycee Itohan Osadolor, 2014-15 undergraduate research associate, helped interview community constituents in North Philadelphia at a block party and peace rally at the Philadelphia Urban Creators' "Life Do Grow" farm in November 2014. Photo by Jill Saul, 2014

Endnote:
¹For more on Asian Arts, visit <http://asianartsinitiative.org>. For more on Taller Puertorriqueño, visit <http://tallerpr.org>.

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is in a repurposed textile mill just two blocks from Buddy Kamp's home in the heart of East Kensington. He, along with the soup kitchen staff, artists, history enthusiasts, and Kensington residents visited the gallery to top the audience toll for the opening night—some 200 people. I then used every opportunity we could—with limited funding and a shared vehicle—to take the show on the road and engage Philly residents who might not know about Kensington's history but would want to learn more. All the while, I was also working on a grant proposal with my advisor, Dr. Seth Bruggeman, to connect the project to Temple's Center for Public History. Much of this process was a learning experience as valuable as the formalized classes of my public history graduate program.

History Truck is not without challenges, though. As a project willing to embrace pluralistic modes of interpretation—from community objects to text to collaborative artwork—History Truck presents exhibitions with wide-ranging and sometimes uncommon public history material. This abstract way of working affords adaptability and flexibility, but this way of creating can also seem vague to those who first interact with the project. Additionally, the varied interpretive approaches of the truck can seem foreign to more traditional museum practitioners. Still, even with these seeming stumbling blocks, the entire process could work well for brick-and-mortar museums looking to connect better with audiences and reinterpret their collections with

community input and artist partnerships. In fact, considering the current funding landscape for arts, culture, and the humanities, we would do well to work together to sustain projects like History Truck to build authentic relationships with local constituents. I can imagine these partnerships in two forms: embracing History Truck at the university level to teach students how to work with one foot in the academy and one foot on the street, or at the institutional level, partnering curatorial and outreach staff to devise community-driven exhibitions.

While I grapple with my master's thesis this spring, History Truck is focusing on the neighborhood of North Philadelphia (funded by the Barra Foundation through Temple University's Center for Public History), and we are exploring the possibilities of History Truck as a part of the graduate program's curriculum (fig. 7). The next two years of work (after North Philly) are scheduled for the Philadelphia neighborhoods of Chinatown North and Fairhill. We plan to kick off the first year with the research for, and creation of, a visual memory map installation on the Pearl Street alley behind Asian Arts Initiative. The second year, we will focus on the chance to gather new oral histories and compare them to Taller Puertorriqueño's well-established and unexplored collection of Latino-Philadelphian oral histories from the late 1970s.¹ I do intend to pursue my doctorate and work at a larger institution, but for now, I am devoted to the idea of History Truck. "We don't do anything without an idea," the filmmaker David Lynch once said, "and when you catch one, it's such a thrill that you instantly fall in love." For me, History Truck is just such an idea. ✨