Issues and Methods in Public History (HIST 5237)
Introduction to Public History. Fall, 2016.
Professor Marty Blatt
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Class meeting: Tuesday, 4:30-7.
Office hours: Tuesday, 2:00-4:00 or by appointment.

Course Description

OVERVIEW

“Introduction to Public History” explores approaches to and applications of the historian’s craft outside classroom settings. What is public history? How and why has it changed over the past several decades? How have public historians related to the varying communities and events they have sought to explore? Where is the field going? To help us answer these questions, we will read criticism, policy, history, and theory, and closely examine a variety of public history projects. Class discussions and assignments will explore concepts of memory, heritage, place, and community, as well as current controversies, trends, and theories that continue to change the face of public history. Through guest speakers and on-site visits, students will gain a deeper understanding of the people, sites, and methods integral to public history. By the end of the term, students will have a new appreciation of the challenges and opportunities in this field, and will have developed more informed opinions about the philosophical, ethical, and practical aspects of applying the historian’s craft beyond the university.

COURSE SCHEDULE
Week One (9/13): What is Public History.
Week Two (9/20): Archives.
Week Three (9/27): Historic House Museums.
Week Four (10/4): Living History.
Week Five (10/11): NO CLASS. YOM KIPPUR.
Week Six (10/18): Developing History Exhibitions.
Week Seven (10/25): Monuments and Memorials.
Week Eight (11/1): Oral History.
Week Ten (11/15): Documentary Film.
Week Eleven (11/22): Curation.
Week Twelve (11/29): Historic Preservation.
Week Thirteen (12/6): Controversy and Public History.

Required Texts

- Erika Doss, Memorial Mania – Public Feeling in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)


Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999)

**Assignments**

- Each student should write during the semester (on weeks of your choosing) two AHR (American Historical Review, published by the American Historian Association) or JAH (Journal of American History, published by the Organization of American Historians) style reviews of books from the six required texts listed above. These should be approximately 750 words. Please read some AHR and JAH reviews to get a sense of the style. You should convey the book’s main arguments, methods, sources, and assess the book’s effectiveness and contribution to the literature. Please note that your reviews are not about if you “liked” the book but rather provide a descriptive and evaluative discussion of a book’s scholarly contribution. These should be provided to the instructor in hard copy.

- Each student should write one JAH style or The Public Historian (published by the National Council on Public History) style exhibition review of at least 800 words. Please read some JAH and The Public Historian reviews to get a sense of the style. You should present at the beginning the basic information – title of the exhibition, location of the venue, and curator. You should summarize the exhibition and then comment on its quality in terms of presentation, content, clarity, argument.

  You could review the Charlestown Navy Yard Visitor Center, the Battle of Bunker Hill Museum, the Frederick Douglass exhibition at the Museum of African American History, an exhibition at the MFA, or you are welcome to select another option. Just please be sure get the instructor’s prior approval for another option.

  This will be due by November 29.

- Each student will prepare, for the end of the semester, a 3-5 page final paper reflecting on the course. With that in mind, it would be a good idea to keep some sort of journal or log.

**Course Assessment**

Grades will be based on the following formula:

- Exhibition review.  20%
- Book reviews.  30%
- Final paper.  30%
- Class participation.  20%

**Course Policies and Expectations**
To succeed in this class you will need to keep up with the reading, participate actively in class discussions, and complete all assignments. If at any time you are having difficulties with the material or the assignments, or just need to talk, please feel free to come see me during office hours or make an appointment for another time.

Attendance and participation in discussions are critical and required and class discourse will be an important learning experience for all students. There are occasionally good reasons to miss class, like religious holidays, medical issues, family, or emergencies, but if you must miss something please contact me to make arrangements.

Participation consists of being on time for class, having completed all assignments prior to the beginning of class, being an active member in discussion sessions, and working on the exhibit project. You do us all a disservice by coming to class unprepared. The success of any seminar is directly proportionate to the effort by its members to create a lively, provocative discussion that investigates the week’s topic with energy. If anyone comes unprepared, the experience of everyone suffers as a result. Also, it is a signal to the rest of the room that you are content to coast on their time and effort, which is something no public historian wants to do.

Most class periods will be split between some lectures/presentations and class discussions based on readings/assignments. The instructor will suggest one or two main topics for discussion to give focus to your weekly reading assignment. Your response to that issue or issues and your ability to raise other questions based on the assignment will be the bases of evaluation of your class participation. Each of you should be prepared to make a brief presentation on the topic of the class as a way of starting each session.

Academic Integrity/Plagiarism

Employing ideas or phrases that are not your own without explicitly and sufficiently crediting their creator will not be tolerated. As a result, I urge you to err on the side of caution: take detailed notes, cite your sources carefully and consistently, and do not leave assignments to the last minute. If you plagiarize, the department’s chair will be notified and appropriate steps will be taken. To ensure that this does not occur, please review the University’s policy regarding academic integrity


SYLLABUS

Week One. September 13. What is Public History?

REQUIRED
Discussion Questions:
- How do you define public history?
- What experience(s) do you have with public history and how does the field interest you?

Week Two. September 20. Archives.
Guest speaker – Giordana Mecagni, Northeastern University Archivist.
We will meet in the Archives, Snell Library basement.

Suggested reading:
- Look at “Our Marathon” site. marathon.neu.edu

Discussion Questions:
- How does an archive’s collecting policy influence what is understood to be the historical record?
- How does the digital world change the nature of archives?

REQUIRED

- Patricia West, *Domesticating History*

Suggested Reading:


Discussion Questions:

- Who have been the major players in preserving historic house sites?
- How has the presentation of history at historic house museums changed over time in the U.S.?


Guest speakers – Kathy Mulvaney, Director of Education and Exhibitions, and Daud Alzayer, Revolutionary Characters Manager.

REQUIRED

- Tyson, *The Wages of History*

Suggested reading:


Discussion Questions:
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of first person and third person interpretation?
- Is living history an effective way to share history with the public?

Week Five. October 11. YOM KIPPUR. NO CLASS.

Week Six. October 18. Developing History Exhibitions.
Guest speaker – Sari Boren, free lance exhibit writer.

- Visit a history exhibition locally prior to the class. You could explore the Bunker Hill Museum or the Charlestown Navy Yard Visitor Center (Sari worked with me on both of these). Or you could look at the Frederick Douglass exhibition at the Museum of African American History.

Suggested Reading:

Discussion Questions:
- How has the interpretation of history changed at history museums in the U.S.?
- What are the challenges in trying to present interpretations of slavery in an exhibit?
- Regarding the exhibit The West As America, Betsy Broun, Director, National Museum of American Art, explains: “It was a learning
experience for us to understand how much our audiences expect us to deliver some neatly packaged truth they can believe in.” What do you make of this comment?

Week Seven. October 25. Monuments and Memorials.

REQUIRED

☐ Prior to this class session, visit a monument or memorial. Options include the Armenian Genocide Memorial on the Rose Kennedy Greenway, the Holocaust Memorial near Faneuil Hall, or the Sean Collier Memorial at MIT. Be prepared to discuss the site you visited.
☐ Erika Doss, Memorial Mania.
☐ Levinson, Written in Stone

Suggested Reading


Discussion Questions:

☐ The terrorism memorials are among America’s top tourist attractions. Why? Doss writes that memorial mania is overrun with references to heroism yet she argues that there is nothing heroic about being murdered in a terrorist bombing or aboard a hijacked plane. What do you think?
☐ Levinson concludes with a range of options regarding the Austin monument to the Confederate dead. Please select the one that makes the most sense to you and be prepared to make the case for your choice.

Weeks Eight. November 1. Oral History. Special program- Opening of German Embassy exhibit – (Re)Building communities - Jewish Life in Germany Today. Location – on Northeastern campus, to be determined. Speaker – Molly Blatt, a 96 year old former Jewish citizen of Heidelberg, will speak about her Jewish community in Heidelberg before fleeing Germany in 1938. She will also reflect upon her return visit in 2001 as part of a program for the former Jewish citizens of the city. She will discuss her impressions of efforts by Heidelberg to remember and commemorate its former Jewish citizens.

REQUIRED

View interview with Molly Blatt by Marty Blatt.

Discussion Questions:
- How has oral history brought into history those groups who might otherwise have been hidden?
- How has oral history empowered individuals and been employed for advocacy?
- How is oral history different from storytelling? Is it?


REQUIRED

- Cathy Stanton, blog post. Posted in Blackboard.

Discussion Questions:
- How does the NPS separate interpretation from history? How does this impact the presentation of history?
- What role does timidity play in the agency?
- What national parks have you visited? What examples of strong and deficient public history have you seen?

PLEASE NOTE – NEW ENGLAND MUSEUM ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE TAKES PLACE NOVEMBER 9-11.


Discussion Questions:
- What are the most effective documentary films you have seen and what makes them strong in your view?
- Contrast how feature films and documentary films treat historical subjects. Both must radically compress narratives and dramatize certain individuals and events to stay within a prescribed length.


REQUIRED

Discussion questions:
- What are the responsibilities of a curator? Do these vary from one public history organization to another?
- How are collections policies defined?


REQUIRED
- Andrew Hurley, Beyond Preservation
- Prior to this class, visit Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, and the Liberty Hotel.

Suggested reading:


Discussion Questions:
- How has historic preservation evolved from principally guarding the national heritage to a strong emphasis on restoration as a mechanism for the economic health of inner cities?
- What value is there in preserving the architecture of segregation? How has historic preservation not worked effectively to sustain structures related to African Americans and other minority groups?


REQUIRED
- Linenthal and Engelhardt, History Wars. Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6.

Discussion Questions:
- What did curators seek to include in the Enola Gay exhibit and how different was the final product?
- How did the tension between historical analysis and commemoration play out in the Enola Gay controversy? How does the Enola Gay situation demonstrate that public history is political?
- What impacts did the final Enola Gay exhibit have on public history going forward?
- In the “culture wars,” how has the term “revisionism” been employed? If history is interpretation, then should we not expect revision to be a constant in the field?

APPENDIX

There are several public history resources with which all students should become familiar. The National Council on Public History constitutes the major professional association that engages most public historians. The web site contains a wealth of information regarding job opportunities, professional conferences and workshops, publications and other resources. Students should also subscribe to the H-Public listserv (a discussion group), which provides similar services.

Other more specialized web sites also exist that concern various aspects of the public history movement. Historic preservation students at several universities banded together to establish PreserveNet in 1994, which is based at Cornell University and which contains news, job postings, calls for advocacy, and internship opportunities for preservationists.

The American Association for State and Local History, which seceded from the American Historical Association in 1940, constitutes the organization of choice for many local historians, historic site managers, and history museum workers.

The Society of American Archivists, which broke away from the American Historical Association in 1936, serves as the principal North American organization for the archival profession.

The Oral History Association, established in 1966, maintains a consciously international focus and generates scholarship concerning the relationship between human memory and history. It publishes a journal, Oral History Review, and operates the H-Oral listserv.

The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, founded by the late Roy Rosenzweig, constitutes the principal source of information for historians interested in digital projects and also operates the History News Network.

The National Council for History is a Washington-based, non-profit educational organization that provides leadership in history-related advocacy, acting as a
clearinghouse for news and information concerning history legislation and political developments. All students should read its updates.

Public history organizations and web resources:

- PreserveNet.  www.preservenet.cornell.edu
- American Association for State and Local History.  www.aaslh.org
- Center for History and New Media.  www.chnm.gmu.edu
- National Coalition for History.  www.historycoalition.org
- American Alliance of Museums.  www.aam-us.org
- National Park Service – Cultural Resources.  www.nps.gov/crm
- National Trust for Historic Preservation.  www.nthp.org