Museums and Exhibitions
Professor Marty Blatt
Email: m.blatt@neu.edu
Class meeting: Thursday, 4:00 – 6:30.
Office hours: Thursday, 2:30 – 4:00.

Course Description

“Museums and Exhibitions” will explore issues and conflicts in contemporary museums and exhibits in the 20th and 21st centuries. We will examine how city museums have adapted what they do and their institutional identities. The course will analyze in depth the development and significance of the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We will assess the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum and its lasting impacts. The course will also feature multiple sites visits, including the Museum of Fine Arts, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute, the Gardner Museum, and the Royall House. Guest speakers with exhibit development expertise will discuss how best to prepare an exhibition. Assignments will include writing critical reviews of exhibits. By the end of the term, students will have an understanding of critical issues and controversies in modern museums, a better ability to analyze exhibits, as well as detailed knowledge of the process of developing exhibitions.

Course Schedule
Week One (1/14). Museums and Civic Engagement.
Week Two (1/21). Enola Gay exhibit and the limits of dialogue.
Week Three (1/28). Museum of Fine Arts site visit.
Week Four (2/4). Future of History Museums.
Week Five (2/11). Role of Professional Organizations in Museum Development.
Week Six (2/18). Edward M. Kennedy Institute site visit.
Week Seven (2/25). Changing Landscape of National Museums in Washington, DC.
Week Nine. Enjoy Spring Break!
Week Twelve (3/31). Sari Boren, free lance exhibit writer - guest speaker.
Week Thirteen (4/7). Royall House site visit.
Week Fourteen (4/14). No class. Work on review and reflection paper.
Week Fifteen (4/21). Gardner Museum site visit.
Required Texts:


Assignments:

- A pair of students will be responsible for facilitating class discussion in one class session. You should prepare a written outline of key questions/issues to be addressed. You will hand in your outline, which can be in bullet format, in hard copy on the day of class for which you are responsible. You should identify issues, questions, problems, dilemmas, conflicts, and ways to spark conversation. Be prepared to facilitate class discussion.

- Each student should write during the semester (on a week of your choosing) one AHR (American Historical Review) or JAH (Journal of American History) style reviews of a book from the required texts listed above. This 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 you will provide a descriptive and evaluative discussion of a book’s scholarly contribution. The review should be provided to the instructor in hard copy.

- Each student should prepare during the semester one exhibit review using the JAH and Public Historian exhibit reviews as models. You could review a permanent exhibit, including the Museum of Fine Arts, the Harvard Art Museum, the Constitution Museum, the Bunker Hill Museum, the Charlestown Navy Yard Visitors Center, Dreams of Freedom, or Old South Meeting House. Or you could look at a temporary exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of African
American History, the Institute of Contemporary Art, the National Heritage Museum, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Public Library. Word count could vary but length should be at least 750 words.

- Each student will administer public history surveys designed by the instructor for visitors at Freedom Trail sites. The results of these surveys will serve to inform the history of Boston National Historical Park currently being prepared by Seth Bruggeman.

- Each student will write a 3-5 page reflection on what you have learned about museums and exhibitions. This should include engagement with the readings and site visits. What did you know about museums and exhibitions entering the class and how has your thinking changed? What class discussion worked best for you and why and which class discussion was the most problematic and why? What reading(s) worked best for you and which reading(s) were most problematic? How do you assess the site visits? You don’t need to repeat here what you will say in your book or exhibit review. Just give me a quick reference to your review in this context. Which speaker did you find most compelling and why and which speaker was the weakest and why? Please assess your experience in conducting the visitor survey.

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 mishaps, 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, and being an active member in discussion sessions. 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

- The National Park Service and Civic Engagement, workshop report, December 6-8, 2001, New York City
- Survey instrument.

Discussion Questions:
- What are the different meanings of civic engagement?
- How have museums sought to evolve, in the words of Ron Chew (Museums and Civic Dialogue), from “an inward-looking citadel into an active town hall?”

- Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, History Wars
- Read Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6

Discussion Questions:
- What did curators seek to include in the exhibit and how different was the final product?
- What impacts did the exhibit have on public history going forward?

- Visit the exhibit prior to the class session at the MFA.

Discussion Questions:
- How is knowledge of world history essential to constructing this exhibit?
- What do you imagine visitors take away in terms of the history presented versus the viewing of beautiful objects?

- Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go?*

Suggested but not required:

Discussion Questions:
- Are you optimistic about the future of history museums?
- How do you evaluate the notion of shared historical authority?

Week Five. Feb. 11. Role of Professional Organizations in Development of Museums.
- Guest speaker: Nina Zannieri, Director, Paul Revere Memorial Association. Nina has served in leadership roles in American Alliance of Museums (AAM), American Association of State and Local History (AASLH), New England Museum Association (NEMA).
- Review the websites of AAM, AASLH, and NEMA.

Discussion Questions:
- How valuable a contribution do you think these organizations make to the work of their member institutions?
- How difficult is it for staff in local organizations to get involved in regional or national programs? Are some staff resistant to doing so because of their commitment to daily operations?

Week Six. Feb. 18. Visit to Edward M. Kennedy Institute. For public transportation, take Red Line [Ashmont] to JFK/U MASS stop and take # 2 shuttle bus to Institute. Guest speaker – Tara Munro. Please plan to arrive by 3:45 to pick up your tablet which enables you to participate in the museum activities. We will participate in the vote of the
day program in the recreated US Senate chamber at 4 and then tour the exhibit panels outside the chamber. Tara will then show us the Kennedy office which she helped to design and install. We will then sit with her to discuss her work at the Institute.

Discussion Questions:
- What do you think of the heavy reliance of the Institute on tablets and electronic interactivity? Is this a museum in your view?
- When I visited, staff repeated several times their gratitude for visitors coming out to Columbia Point. How does this location impact visitation?

  www.americanlatinomuseum.gov
- National Women’s History Museum.
  www.nwhm.org

Discussion Questions:
- What do you think of the location of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and the fact that it predated museums dedicated to Indian and African American history in DC?
- We are seeing a proliferation of ethnic and gender based museums in DC. Is this a sign of progress or rather an indication of divisiveness? What are the origins for these developments?


Week Nine. Enjoy Spring Break!

- Edward Linenthal, Preserving Memory
- Visit the museum website.

Discussion Questions:
- What do think about the different types of Holocaust memory that Linenthal identifies – burdensome, treacherous, murderous, hopeful?
• What surprises you or disturbs you about the internal debates/struggles that went into the development of the museum?

Week Eleven. March 24.
Changing Role of City Museums.
• Catherine Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*

Discussion Questions:

• How and why have city museums changed?
• The Brooklyn Museum of Art weathered the storm of controversy over the exhibit *Sensation* much more effectively than the National Air and Space Museum with the Enola Gay exhibit. Why?

Week Twelve. March 31. Sari Boren, free lance exhibit writer.

Discussion Questions:

• Please bring to class examples of what you consider to be history museums with excellent text panels and those with very poor panels. Be prepared to explain your assessments.
• Was “putting a book on the wall” ever a good thing? How has modern electronic culture impacted the attention span of visitors?

Week Thirteen. April 7. Jen Pustz. Site visit to Royall House.

Week Fourteen. April 14. No class. Work on review and reflection paper.