Performances of Conscience
at Three Historic Site Museums

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The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience contributes to current debate about the role that heritage institutions can play as agents for social change. In particular, it proposes historic sites as key venues where dialogue about contemporary human rights issues can take place and help contribute to building stronger democracies, connecting past to present. On the one hand, this raises questions about the activation of competing interpretations of the past to create a critical civic culture. On the other hand, the project of the ‘Site of Conscience’ asks questions about what there is in the nature of visiting historic site museums that might particularly lend itself to creating an active citizenry.

Focusing on the latter of these two concerns, the thesis uses theatre and performance as a conceptual framework for understanding the controls and possibilities of a creative and empowering participation for public visitors at three of the Coalition’s member sites: the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, USA; The Workhouse, UK; and The Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia. Through reading performance into the visiting event, the thesis is able to respond to questions about how visitors negotiate the museum’s project to relate past to present with their own interests in visiting the past, not as a matter of competing narratives but of competing modes of encounter. How people experience their visit is foregrounded as a condition of political engagement.

The question then asked is how this negotiation of modes of encounter becomes a performance of the Site of Conscience and the effective achievement of the museum’s social agency. The thesis focuses on the uncertainties and gaps that emerge out of the intervening presence of a museum interpreting an historic site. In these circumstances, how control over the making of the visiting event is distributed becomes critical to its transformative potential. The thesis therefore asks about how visitor experiences of these uncertainties and differences become a negotiation of authority to represent the past and hence, how the past emerges in the present.
Declaration

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The three historic site museums on which my study is based are the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, an independent museum of immigrant life housed in an original tenement building on Manhattan Island, New York, USA; The Workhouse, a prototype Victorian workhouse, now a National Trust property in the historic Minster town of Southwell, near Nottingham, UK; and The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in the village of Kuchino, nestled on the banks of the Chusovoya River on the West side of the Ural Mountains in Russia.

These otherwise disparate museums are all brought together by their co-founding role in the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience and it is in light of this affiliation that my analysis of the three sites proceeds. The Coalition exercises its influence to varying degrees over the sites in terms of outreach work, public programming and interpretive strategies, as well as through its effect as a transnational network of knowledge transfer, staff training, and funding. It is not yet established enough to affect the three sites in terms of marketing. However, it is in relation to public visiting experiences at each site that the thesis investigates what it means for them to be a ‘Site of Conscience’.

The Coalition proposes distinct criteria for what constitutes a Site of Conscience: firstly, it sees them as an opportunity to connect past to present; secondly, to generate dialogue on pressing social concerns resonant with the
history remembered and nuanced by humanitarian and democratic values; and thirdly, to engage the participation of visitors in those issues. It is the Coalition’s primary purpose to establish a political role for heritage institutions and it is by these three means that it proposes such a role can be achieved through its public visits, amongst its other activities. Yet, it remains a work in progress for each site to understand how these aims might be achieved. In this respect, the question the Coalition asks is the same question that my research asks: How can the individual museum visit become a civic enactment of democratic process and human rights?

Where the Coalition’s agenda has focused on what heritage managers can do on each of these three counts, however, my research with and of visitors, as well as my own participation as a visitor at the three sites, suggests that the realisation of these three criteria that effect the Site of Conscience are not uniquely bound to management strategies. Rather the research suggests that the idea of the Site of Conscience can be usefully reassessed from the perspective of the visitor and what the visitor experiences during the museum encounter. The Coalition’s concept, as a deliberate attempt to change visiting practices, only makes sense where it is achieved through the individual co-operation of participants, be they public visitors (as is the case in this study) or targeted community and education groups. It thus makes similar sense to ask about what visitors are doing in the light of the Coalition’s agenda without necessarily using this as a measurement of its efficacy thus far.
Therefore, while it is as Sites of Conscience that the case studies are investigated, and whilst it is what they are trying to do as Sites of Conscience that establishes the grounds for my enquiry, it is because they are each shown from the visitors’ perspective to be much more than this particular conceptualisation of the purpose of visiting that the concept of the Site of Conscience is opened not just to critique but, more effectively, I argue, to re-evaluation. Specifically, in light of the fieldwork, the research question brings into relation museum practices with visiting practices in order to ask in what way can the Site of Conscience be defined by visiting experiences? Or, put another way, how does the site become a Site of Conscience through the way museum visits are made and performed?

It is now well accepted that heritage and museums are as much sites for visitors to exercise their own interests as they are for visitors to inculcate the interests of the heritage authorities, tying them into their social and political contexts (Smith 2006; Macdonald 2002; Falk and Dierking 2000; Handler and Gable 1997). In this sense, heritage sites are seen as sites where identity and ideology are performed (also, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Duncan 1995). However, rather than taking as its end point what these various uses of the sites may be – that is what is expressed in the performances – the thesis asks about the conditions of visiting that shape and affect those performances. These are the conditions of visiting in spite of the social contexts from and into which performances feed. Performance, in that sense, is understood as the creative encounter that takes place between visitors and museums in heritage venues. It is the mode of encounter and the conditions of experience from which meaning emerges.
Thus, the thesis compares what the interviews with and observations of visitors say about how the Site of Conscience might be achievable as against what it is the museums themselves are doing. Even where it appears not to have been manifested, the study seeks to investigate the dynamics of this transformative cultural experience. This is not a study of who is visiting and why, but how. It is a study of the conditions which create visitor participation. And, in this sense, set amongst the scene of the historic site museum, this is not a study about visitors but a study from visitors, contrasting their voices with those of the museums to find out about the makings of the visiting event and, by extension, the Site of Conscience.

As yet, though it has not gone unnoticed, no study has been made of the Coalition – either of its organisation or of its member sites. Furthermore, no detailed study has yet been made of the three case study sites – either as themselves or in the context of their affiliation to the Coalition. Whilst the Tenement Museum has emerged in various critical literature this is mostly by allusion and not close study, with the exception of Kugelmass (2000) and two unpublished MA manuscripts (Raison 2006 and Wallin 2006). The Workhouse is awaiting one critical study (Gröppel-Wegener forthcoming); whilst Perm-36 is undiscussed in the literature except briefly in Williams (2007). All other writing about the sites used in this study is written by representatives of the Coalition and the sites themselves.

I have been drawn to the sites because of what they, as Coalition members, are seeking to achieve with and through their visitors. Their effort resonates with work in Applied Theatre, where my practice and research was based
prior to this study. Applied Theatre or Drama is a relatively new discipline though its practices are historical. Despite its many forms, it is generally understood as ‘forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies’ (Nicholson 2005:2). The ‘benefit’ is variously defined, not least according to the circumstances where the practice takes place.

Prior to this study, I was involved in looking at Applied Theatre in transitional societies and from that I have brought to this project an interest, common to the Coalition, in cultural practice that facilitates the activation of civil society and creates opportunities for ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008). As a researcher and a practitioner, I have been concerned to address the conditions under which such opportunities are created and, in theatre, I have particularly been aware of the value that aesthetic approaches to “applied” work afford (Jackson 2005).

The emphasis in my research was to understand theatre as a mode of social change more than (simply) a tool for social change; and hence it was focused on theatre that was taking place inside, as much as outside, of theatre buildings and with non-mainstream audiences. By the same token, I have been interested to focus on what Coalition site members are doing to become Sites of Conscience through their public visits rather than their outreach work. My research here, in other words, looks at the normal work of visiting happening within the museum as effective of work more explicitly done outside of the museum, or in specifically arranged situations.
Museum studies, as I discuss in Chapter Two, has similarly been concerned with how social change might be achieved through visiting practices. Again, this is an historical interest of practice, though unlike theatre, it has been constituted by the explicitly civic and governmental role that public museums have exercised since their inception (Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995). Only more recently, especially in the light of critique emerging as the ‘New Museology’ (Vergo 1989) have efforts been focused on democratising museum practices and modifying them such that museums might become venues where visitors discover their own social agency as opposed to being acted upon to perform implicit civic rituals.

These new practices are calling upon new ways of interpreting the museum-visitor relationship and, more than Applied Theatre, this thesis is directed at contributing to that literature. The thesis thus represents a cross-disciplinary approach which, not unlike the Site of Conscience, remains more of a cross-disciplinary process. Trying to elucidate those elements of visiting practices that can contribute to the transformation of historic sites into Sites of Conscience, the ‘approach’ has involved cross-referencing ideas about participation in the museum with similar ideas about participation in theatre to understand the museum visit in terms of performance.

The process has thus been of evaluating the idea of the Site of Conscience through understanding visiting experiences in terms that at least begin or resonate with theatre. Specifically, I have been interested to ‘apply’ the notion of double consciousness that characterises theatre’s communicative
mode, a mode created through the play of self as other (Yarrow 2001; Emigh 1996; Barba 1995; Schechner 1977). Provoked by the play in performance, theatre becomes a specific, heightened event – ‘the theatrical event’ – in which ‘the performer changes our interpretative mode from observation to participation’ (Sauter 2000:171). As I discuss in Chapter Two, where theatre seeks to empower its audiences, that shift can be activated in various ways such that it becomes an intervention in the creative process and the audience are brought to see themselves as performers.

This transformation seems a particularly useful one to consider in terms of the Site of Conscience and the kind of change it proposes for visiting practices at museums. It is consistent with the Coalition’s purpose of ‘activating the past for civic action’ (Sevcenko 2002) – an idea I explain next in this chapter. More broadly, however, the theatrical schema offers an alternative conceptualisation of the museum encounter and the scopic othering practices that otherwise characterise the museum discipline (Bennett 2006, 1998). By challenging that regime, the theatrical offers a way to conceive the Site of Conscience as an experience in which visitors recognise their own role in completing the purpose of the museum but also one in which they recognise that role as a choice. It is thus that I consider the visiting experience as a visiting event.

In this study, I use theatre as a conceptual tool and less as an analytical tool. However, it does usefully steer my attention to the physical elements of the visiting experience as a complement and challenge to its discursive elements. Museums operate at a discursive level through the linguistic codes of text
and display. But there is an embodied, physical experience to visiting that, under certain circumstances, can interrupt and expose those discursive practices. The argument of the thesis is that choice emerges in the museum when experience is set at odds with expectations and visitors are put in a position of uncertainty (Macdonald n.d.; Peers 2007). That uncertainty marks, I argue, a shift in authority. Thus, to ask how the three sites become Sites of Conscience through the museum visit is to ask about the conditions under which such a shift of authority takes place and finally passes onto the individual visitor.

I suggest that theatre allows us to ask to what extent the transformative power running through visits at the historic site museum – as both historic site and museum – emerges out of the playful relationship between site, museum and visitor and not just as an effect of their separate agencies. Theatre and performance, in this sense, are creative and co-ordinated, arising out of the realisation of a common project. However, as participatory and improvised, they are also characterised more by process than completion, doubt more than certainty.

Between creative co-ordination and processual doubt, theatre proposes a model of complicity that is provocatively unstable and it is this state of being/learning/creating that the thesis seeks to investigate before defining any specific performances and, in particular, the performances of conscience that give the thesis its title. Thus, whilst the final objective is to consider how the museum visit might constitute a deliberate civic enactment and an act of citizenship, the core of the research and analysis has been to investigate the
processes and conditions that constitute the museum visit prior to that public performance.

In her investigation of the design and reception of the ‘Food for Thought’ exhibition at the Science Museum, Sharon Macdonald (2002) instigates a similar concern. Here, where she critiques the conceptualisation of ‘choice’ and ‘participation’ within the design, she argues that there is nothing intrinsically democratic about visitor interactivity, rather it matters how visitor activity is framed (2002:186-9). For her survey of the museum, she therefore argues that:

rather than just reading of ‘democracy’ or ‘empowerment’ from ‘activity’ or ‘choice-making’, it is important to try… to understand just how activities are conceptualised and performed by those involved, what kinds of questions are asked and, equally crucially, what are not (2002:219)

For the three sites in this study activity and democracy are seen as practical goals of the visiting event and not just a rationale for museum design. As such, the objective of this thesis is not to expose the gap between rhetoric and practice. Rather it is to explore the nature of that gap and thereby better understand what a democratic and empowering participation looks like.

Just as it is the process that is the focus of my research, applying theatre and performance to my study of the three case study sites has been characterised more by process than completion. It has been a process towards
understanding the Site of Conscience as a visitor performance. I assemble an idea of this performance in Chapter Two but it is really through the case study analyses in Chapters Three, Four and Five that its implications and possibilities emerge.

The project, as it stands, is more of a working through practice towards theory. Thus far, I have only focused on defining a practice for the Site of Conscience that interpolates ideas about the museum encounter with ideas about the theatrical encounter. A theory for the Site of Conscience only emerges through this interpolation. The impetus of this process is the argument that the Site of Conscience is an idea itself that requires visitors to perform and realise. Once performed, I argue, it addresses issues about how cultural activities contribute to and constitute political life and thereby responds to a wider investigation into the creative operations of civil society and the public sphere (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Crossley and Roberts 2004). But it is just the means by which it is performed that form the discussion here.

Performing the Site of Conscience is thus a particular interpretation of visiting practices that requires the reading of performance into the visiting experience. As far as possible, this reading emerges from visitor responses. Indeed, it is in foregrounding in these responses a value in experiences of tension, uncertainty and disappointment as much as evidence of change and learning that I argue the need for a modified concept, based in performance, of how heritage institutions can play a political role in their communities through the publics that use them. Therefore, renewing the museum, I
suggesting here, is as much about a ‘transdisciplining’ of the operations of social transformation as it is about a set of new practices. By this argument, the discrete elements, theatre and the museum, find common place as neither one nor the other but between each, by ‘the logic of the included middle’ (Nicolescu 2008).

In this introduction, I further aim to contextualise my own approach to the visiting event at the three case study sites. Firstly I do so by providing an overview of the Coalition’s mission and rhetoric, locating its work both within and outside of the heritage world. In this double position, the Coalition is both synchronous with current museum trends and also at odds with them. Looking at the points of difference, I show that, in its position as outsider, the Coalition challenges both museums and visitors to regard these institutions as venues of an explicit political participation and democratic action. The Site of Conscience is not inherent to any site but a potential intervention to transform it.

After this overview, I establish the research problem in terms of the way the Coalition proposes to achieve the objective of translating the visiting experience into an active engagement with social process, one that is a conscious act of visitors and not just as an implicit tactic of discourse and meaning-making. In their proposition, I identify two modes of visiting – history and dialogue – that ideally cohere when past is connected to present. But, as my discussion explains, the distinction also exposes the practical issue of how they do so in the visiting experience. This sets up the central
concern of the thesis as to how to conceive of the museum-visitor relationship such that visitors become, for themselves, agents of the museum’s social and political agenda and to see themselves as performers. I then set out the argument and structure of the thesis.

It should be noted that the introduction does not introduce the three case study sites themselves – it concentrates on the Site of Conscience as the focus of the thesis, which is, for the purposes of this study, to put aside the great disparities of social context beyond the visiting event. For that reason, an historical overview that describes both past and present uses of the sites is provided in Appendix A. Photographs are included in Appendix C. Each site is presented more or less according to the route of the tours.

As much as it is my own background and interest that has finally shaped the terms of my conceptual approach, the thesis also forms an ‘attached’ contribution to the ‘Performance, Learning, and Heritage’ research project at the University of Manchester. As such, there was a certain prerogative of the research to consider how the three disciplines interplay. In the event, and despite initial expectations, the research was only partially able to examine actual theatrical performance (at the Tenement Museum) – the focus of the main research project – and has instead found a critical space in considering the whole visiting experience at the three historic sites as a mode of theatrical production.

In this sense, I have not followed the focus of the larger project which has been on the effect of theatre interventions in the museum. Here, I am
considering how theatre can “intervene” in the museum to re-vision visiting practices at a conceptual level. Conceptualising the Site of Conscience has effectively been a process of intervening theatre and performance practices into museum practices.

Playing with the terms of the research project in this way is responsive to existing notions of the performativity and theatricality of museums and historic sites – as I outline in Chapter Two. However, it is also as a direct result of my fieldwork that the possibility of framing the museum visit in these terms has emerged. Without that research experience, I would not have been able to test the concept of the Site of Conscience; and it has only been in discovering the practical limitations of that concept that an application for a conceptual notion of the visit as a kind of theatrical production has become feasible. In the final section of the introduction, I therefore reflect on my research methodology. I draw out some of the difficulties of researching practice whilst bearing an alternative practice in mind and the consequential issues raised about enquiry and the reading of evidence.

1.2 Sites of Conscience

In 1999, a group of historic site directors from around the world came together to explore how their museums could serve as new centers [sic] for democracy in action...From [their] wildly
different perspectives, the group emerged with a common commitment:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting democratic and humanitarian values as a primary function.

With this statement, the diverse group challenged themselves and museums around the world to take responsibility for promoting public engagement in the contemporary civic issues that matter to them most—that is, promoting the democratic process. They called themselves the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. (Sevcenko and Russell-Ciardi 2008:9-10)

Thus is the founding story, as told by its then Director, Liz Sevcenko, and the Tenement Museum’s former Head of Education, Maggie Russell-Ciardi, of a coalition that, in the ten years since its inception, has grown from nine

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1 Aside from the three case study sites, the six other founding members are: the District Six Museum (South Africa), Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh), Maison Des Esclaves (Senegal), Memoria Abierta (formerly Proyecto Recordar) (Argentina), National Park Service (USA), and Terezín Memorial (Czech Republic).
institutions to seventeen accredited sites in ten countries across six continents; and, by 2008, counted over 140 institutional members, drawing on their services and resources through five regional networks, and a further 1860 subscribers in 90 countries (ICHSMOC 2008:1). It is a founding story, emphasising the oppositional strength of belief and commonality in difference, which has oft been repeated through the Coalition’s own literature (Abram 2002, 2001; Sevcenko 2010, 2004, 2002; Sevcenko and Russell-Ciardi 2008; ICHSMOC 2008, 2005; Brett et al. 2007) and remains the touchstone of its development and influence, as it has, albeit minimally, been recognised by other writers (Sandell 2007: 45; Peers 2007:xxxii-iii, 78-9; Williams 2007:149-151).

Under the aegis of human rights activism, the Coalition has nurtured its position on the outside edge of the heritage world, whilst at the same time trying to cultivate a new consensus within it. Through its member sites, it has focused attention beyond the museum walls and engaged in outreach programmes serving specific communities and addressing pressing social concerns, notably in post-conflict and transitional societies but equally in more “stable” countries where the issues addressed may appear to be less urgent (a factor which re-emerges throughout my analysis). At the same time, it has convened conferences and meetings to discuss and develop interpretation strategies that can further enhance the effect of its agenda for the general public visiting its historic site museums. True to its own story of origin, the Coalition’s work, through its member sites, has consistently been both outside and inside the museum, striving to make common cause out of diverse opinions and experiences.
A Site of Conscience is defined as ‘a place of memory—such as a historic site, place-based museum, or memorial—that confronts both the history of what happened there and its contemporary implications’ (ICHSMOC 2008: 2). Despite the elision, a Site of Conscience is not actually the place itself. It is the way its authorities ‘harness the power of places’ (Sevcenko 2004: 14) and make memory ‘an identifiable, self-conscious tactic in the service of human rights and social justice’ (Sevcenko 2004: 6, ICHSMOC 2008). These definitions are slightly troubling in their elision of site and how sites are being used. But they indicate that the Site of Conscience might first be considered not as the site but as an interpretive strategy that intervenes in the site, thereby making the place ‘do’ something in society.

1.2.1 Other heritage categories

Individual sites within the Coalition could be identified by other heritage concepts, such as the notion of ‘undesirable’ or ‘difficult heritage’ (Logan and Reeves 2009; MacDonald 2008, 2006; Bonnell and Simon 2007), which Sharon Macdonald, for example, ascribes to the Nazi rally grounds in Nuremberg. This is a category of heritage where, as Macdonald defines, ‘the physical remains of the past offer up an identity that many of those in the present wish to distance themselves from, even while, at the same time, recognising it as fully part of their history’ (2006:11). The Workhouse, in this study, as a site that evokes the darker side of the Victorian legacy in British identity, would seem, ostensibly to be a reasonable example of this.
Similarly, some of the sites in the Coalition (including The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in this study) fall into a group of ‘memorial museums’, which Paul Williams (2007) has identified as realising, what he dubs in his title, ‘a global rush to commemorate atrocities’. In these hybrid institutions – which are not so new a conception as Williams suggests, the Imperial War Museum (conceived in 1917, opened 1920) being an early example (Malvern 2000) – Williams notes that ‘there is an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts’ (2007: 8). At both kinds of heritage – difficult and memorial museums – simply remembering the past is not enough. They disturb conventional forms of public memory by a self-conscious affect of place. Such places present and expose a past that is too troubling to accept and incorporate readily.

Terence Duffy has also identified ‘the emergence of distinct “human rights museums” as related to a concept of creating a human rights culture’ (2001:10). Under this broad banner, he classifies a range of museums that extend beyond the specific concept of the Site of Conscience which are only based at historic sites.

If individual Coalition sites fit these other denominations, therefore, it is at a point of intersection rather than overlap with their identity as Sites of Conscience. Indeed, it is misled to assume that all Sites of Conscience are inherently sites of atrocity or ‘difficult’ histories – as exemplified by The Tenement Museum in this study, which, as a former home of immigrants, remembers hardship and success, prejudice and acceptance all at once. In
carrying a different remit for themselves, the Sites of Conscience include a wide variety of heritage institutions (notably sites that mark some triumphs of social justice) but crucially do not encompass by their definition the whole of each site as does the notion of difficult heritage or the status of memorial museum or human rights museum.

In this, the Site of Conscience exposes its first problematic for the thesis. The Site of Conscience is the mark of a particular commitment to using the historic site as a tool of human rights, democracy and social justice. It is a political agenda that the Coalition uses to provoke those managing heritage sites to, in turn, provoke those visiting them. Where the three other terms elucidate what it is visitors are coming to, the Site of Conscience refers not to a place but to an experience: to a particular process of learning and engagement, often against expectations and often not even a clearly identified aspect of the visit. Underpinning my research has therefore been the question as to whether a site is a Site of Conscience if its goals are not consummated by all those using it, including visitors.

1.2.2 Enacting heritage

All heritage has been understood as constructed – ‘a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past’ (Kirshenblatt- Gimblett 1998:149) – and thereby carries an agenda that ‘acts’ upon those who experience it. As such, the museum is ‘a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind, whether or not actual visitors would describe it as such (and whether or not they are prepared to do so)’ (Duncan 1995:1-2). The Site of Conscience is similarly concerned with how
heritage acts and thus is itself a particular mode of enacting the past that is for both museums and visitors to perform. However, its proposition is to make this an explicit action which visitors are prepared to do and are conscious of doing. The question this thesis asks is how can the Site of Conscience constitute such an action and an experience that visitors become conscious of and prepared to enact?

Sites of Conscience are recognisable as difficult heritage and, at least for Perm-36, are identified as memorial museums because they are similarly compelling, unusual, challenging and contemporary. In this they do share with both difficult heritage and memorial museums a constructed provocation of materiality – of remains – an unsettlement, or ‘dissonance’ that questions the link heritage makes between past and future (Macdonald 2006a:10-11; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). And, party to that, as Williams notes throughout his assessment of memorial museums, there is a need to play an emotional engagement against a reflective one, to use both the imagination and reason. For Williams, the contemporary memorial museum is characterised by ‘the strain between authenticity and evidence, on the one hand, and the desire to create an emotive, dramatic visitor experience, on the other’ (2007:21).

Dissonance and the play of subjective experience against objectivity are features of Coalition member sites. But the Site of Conscience is a deliberate effort to take the unsettling influence of the place and the way it fires both imagination and reason and to use it to present effect. The Site of Conscience is a connection between past and present that becomes a future-oriented,
political action. In this, the Coalition envisages the Site of Conscience going some way towards activating the public sphere, prompting activism and change through democratic action.

**1.2.3 A new role for heritage**

This prompts the point of critique that Williams makes of the Coalition’s project (2007: 149-155). His concern is with a pedagogy that associates the past with future action and insists that museums can serve to ensure against the repetition of past humanitarian crimes. As he explains: ‘Rather than simply promising “never again” as a general philosophical principle, the Coalition seeks to make it the basis of its member museums’ public programs’ (2007: 150). He would prefer that museums respect and allow for the unique incommensurability of these events rather than to turn them into a singular lesson about what we can do to achieve the goal of “never again”.

In bringing social responsibility and political vigilance to bear not just on the museum’s interpretation of the site but moreover on what visitors are asked to do there, Williams sees a levelling of distinct histories and a naïve claim that vigilance will work. In this, he notes the spectre of the nineteenth century museum and its ideals of social reform. In fact, he sees the inversion of nineteenth century practices, which worked through the distance of objectivity and contemplation, by a new emphasis on empathy and experience to engage the conscience of the visitor.

For Williams, focusing attention on social futures is a spurious instrumentality of the past. For me, it is a provocation of visitor practices
that requires further exploration. Further to the various discourses of knowledge and cultural difference that constitute the power and effect of these places as heritage, the Site of Conscience proposes the translation of that implicit power into an explicit political action. It is a re-visioning of the work of heritage, as Ruth Abram, Founder/Director of the Tenement Museum and initiator of the Coalition, originally put forward:

A new role for historic sites is emerging. We are working towards the day when historic sites will offer not only a deep sense of the aspects of history, but also a connection between the past and the implications for the present. We see historic sites as places of engagement where visitors motivated in finding solutions to chronic social, economic and political questions find guidance. We hope to make explicit what has merely been implicit: our sites are important not because of the stories they tell, but rather because they hold lessons so powerful that they could improve our lives if we would just listen. Such is the power of history (2001:9).

Given the high-minded rhetoric in which this, and much of the Coalition’s literature speaks, there is good reason to respond with a little of Williams’ caution. However, it is in looking to sites themselves and to visiting experiences taking place there that I have applied that caution, problematising this proposed transformation that turns implicit practices of understanding and meaning-making into conscious political acts.
1.3 Research Problem

For the Coalition, the past is complex and contested and, when seen as such, it complicates the present, creating political choices that are available now. Those engaging with the Site of Conscience – and for my purposes that is public visitors who have paid to visit – are encouraged to see the present as a place where they and the past act together and, with that new awareness, choose to act upon it.

This is an implicit action of engaging with the past which the Coalition has borrowed from historians David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, whose oft-cited survey of popular uses of the past (1998) concluded that ‘the point of engaging the past was to understand choices in the present to shape the future’ (Thelen, quoted in Sevcenko 2002:57). Whether or not the past appears as controversial or uncomfortable, the Coalition argues that it should be presented as such so those who encounter it find themselves with a problem to face. It puts pressure on the place of memory to become a symbol of struggle – or, to cite Thelen, a symbol of the public’s current political ‘choices’ – that persists till today.

There are numerous complications in this formulation that my study tries to address, each of which are concerned with the process of connecting past to present but especially focused on how experience is a medium for that connection. If the first element of the problem of the Site of Conscience is its status as a particular enactment of heritage, then the next set of issues concern the nature of this enactment. This is the focus of my case study.
analyses. But it is under the terms by which the Coalition came together to assert their challenge to museums and visitors as well as the ideas they propose about how to meet that challenge that the analysis is firstly framed.

1.3.1 Memory activists

After its initial convening in 1999, the Coalition was constituted in 2003 and registered (in the US) as an independent non-profit in 2007. Brought together initially under the instigation and direction of the Tenement Museum, the site managers found a common identity as self-described, ‘memory activists’ (Abram 2002: 126) and ‘activists of conscience’ (ICHSMOC 2008: 1), distinguishing themselves from conventional heritage roles.

The identity of ‘memory activist’ further problematises the Site of Conscience project as it implies that the project is an invitation, perhaps even a demand to others to be memory activists too. For the memory activist, the connection between past and present is all too clear and definitive of what they do in the world as well as how they do it. As Arseny Roginsky, director of Memorial, the Russian human rights organisation responsible for setting up the museum at Perm-36, put it: ‘to get everyone to think like Memorial is a kind of Utopia!’

Utopia apart, there is a motivation behind the Coalition that is to create social actors of a certain kind. This can be understood as a translation of the

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2 Arseny Roginsky, Director of Memorial, Personal interview 6 June 2007
cultural process of visiting into a social process; or, one which seeks the transformation of the visitor into a political actor (cf. Sandell 2002). This is of course ideological. But more than the re-shaping of meaning towards a particular discourse, the Site of Conscience asks visitors to discover and exercise their social agency for themselves. It is by means of this participation that visitors renew their commitment to a democracy based on the values of human rights. The Coalition speaks of the need for an ‘engaged, questioning citizenry that takes action to address new injustices as they appear’ (ICHSMOC 2008:4). This is in part action that takes place beyond the museum walls but equally it is an action within them. The historic place is itself affected by those citizens who use it. As Sevcenko, coalition director until 2010, explains:

We hope that historic sites interpreting a single moment or event will be continually renewed by citizens challenging the latest legacy of what happened there as it takes new form in their societies. (2002:63)

In this give and take between inside and outside, social actors are being formed and re-formed by the processes of connecting past to present. A ‘cultural turn’ in notions of citizenship that has characterised it as a process rather than a legalistic relationship and, as such, in constant need of its re-articulation (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Dahlgren 2006; Delanty 2003; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Gaventa 2002) supports the possibility that these are critical acts of citizenship in which ‘subjects constitute themselves as citizens (Isin and Nielsen 2008:2). In taking responsibility for creating this active citizenry,
Coalition member sites, (to follow through with the metaphor), are providing two things: a preparation for the performance but also a stage on which the actor can perform.

1.3.2 Museum as forum

In coming together, the founding sites articulated their common purpose in three ‘pledges’ (ICHSMOC 2008:1), which have become the basic criteria for acceptance into the Coalition as an accredited Site of Conscience:

- to interpret history through historic sites;
- to engage in programmes that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and
- to share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at our sites.

These are the means by which the memory activist and the Site of Conscience are “created” and enacted. Together, interpretation, dialogue, values and participation shape the objective to ‘transform historic sites from places of passive learning to places of active civic engagement’ (ICHSMOC 2005:2).

In practice, the extent to which each of the three sites in this study has developed initiatives within the Coalition’s rubric varies between them. Despite their founding role, for all three sites, adapting their work to the
Coalition’s principles is a work in progress. In all instances, the third pledge – involving the public – has been implemented, at various times, through specific programmes working with community groups whose contemporary experience might be informed by the past remembered at the site– as, for example, immigrants (for the Tenement Museum), Roma (for The Workhouse), or political activists (for Perm-36).

As far as influencing general public programmes and tours are concerned, practice is even more diverse. In terms of stimulating dialogue, the Coalition declares that ‘Historic Site Museums of Conscience should provide a forum for open discussion of pressing contemporary issues among diverse publics’ (ICHSMOC 2005: 2, also, ICHSMOC 2008:3, Sevcenko 2002, Abram 2001). To that end, they have established one common flagship innovation, the ‘Dialogues for Democracy’ – a prototype public programme in which visitors engage in a facilitated conversation with each other. The aim is that, by that involvement, the past becomes a perspectival guide to the present and that historic site museums, as Sites of Conscience, re-position themselves as civic centres constituted by values of democracy and human rights.

The concept of the museum as forum is not original to the Coalition (though their literature does not reflect this fact). Duncan Cameron first mooted the idea in 1971 in a seminal essay in which he argued that museums, faced with an identity crisis, needed to focus on a new social responsibility towards the ‘creation of an equality of opportunity’ (2004 [1971]:67, original emphasis). Contrasting the forum with the temple, he advocated the development of the former as a distinct place suitable for ‘protest, confrontation, the experiment
and the innovation’ (ibid.:70). In his vision, the separateness of the museum-temple and the museum-forum was critical.

In practice, we have not seen the return of the forum in the guise of the museum as a distinct place. But the idea that the museum should be a site of dialogue and debate is promoted by many. For some, dialogue is a technique for engaging ‘active’ citizens (Newman et al. 2005; McClean 1999); for others, it is the means for combating prejudice and social inequality (Sandell 2007, 2002; Peers 2007); for others still, dialogue is a way of recognising the mutual relationship museums have with ‘other’ communities, including their visitors, but equally source communities (Karp at al. 1992; Watson 2007; Clifford 1997; Peers and Brown 2003; Chadwick 1980). In each case, dialogue is asserted as a means to redress an imbalance in the production and transfer of knowledge, creating new cultural narratives and bearing an effect that has social and political consequences. The Coalition proposes all of these purposes and goes further towards Cameron’s proposition than these other initiatives by formalising, through the Dialogues for Democracy template, the idea of a physical space for debate and putting discussion at the core of their public programming.

The extent to which this is achieved at the three case study sites is varied, however. The Tenement Museum is the most advanced in this, developing public programmes for debate as an option to all visitors as well as incorporating an element of political discussion into their guided tours. At The Workhouse, there is a dedicated room, after the House tour is complete, for discussion but there are no staff to facilitate conversations and it remains
with each visitor to what extent they include this as an element of their visit, if at all. At Perm-36, guided tours potentially open discussions but this does not form part of the guide’s script. The ‘Dialogues for Democracy’ idea has instead been developed through festivals, training and educational events that take place both off and on site at specific times.

It is therefore quite clear how limited the Coalition appears at these sites to physically assert its intervention into the visiting experience. Visitors coming to any of the three case study sites are unlikely to be aware of the designation of Site of Conscience nor will they be prepared in anyway for participating in their objectives. The Site of Conscience is not yet established in the ‘museal consciousness’ (Crane 2000:2), and nor is the Coalition highly publicised at the sites: a sign with their mission is always somewhere but at these three sites it is placed in a corner where visitors may or may not notice it. Thus, for instance, on those occasions during my fieldwork when the designation was explained to visitors – either through a guide or, indeed, by me in interviews – the name tended to give pause for thought, sometimes evoking a sympathetic comprehension and at other times more uncertainty about its relevance.

If this shows how much the Site of Conscience remains a work in progress, it also better illustrates why my research was not solely into those interventions that are explicitly made under the Coalition’s influence. In being forced to look at the whole visiting event, however, it also meant looking to the particular enactment of heritage in wider terms too. It was
this practical limitation that has forced the thesis’ research question, can the act of visiting become a critical act of citizenship and, if so, how?

1.3.3 History and dialogue

Essential to my analytical response is how the Coalition proposes that history provides the tool for interpreting the past as a struggle and dialogue provides the space in which that can be expressed and discussed as a contemporary issue. Between what the Coalition understands as ‘history’ and what it understands as ‘dialogue’ problems emerge when looking at visiting experiences, however. Effectively, for the memory activist, history and dialogue are two modes of visiting which are inextricably linked and through that connection they perform democratic and humanitarian values. In practice, however – though, as I have said they have been interpolated to some degree – history and dialogue, as I explain through the case study analyses, remain as two distinct modes of visiting.

At all three sites, the only way to visit is on a guided tour and hence, as the Tenement Museum has experimented with, it can be through this facility that the lessons of the past can potentially be pulled directly into a contemporary conversation. However, as guides at the Tenement Museum typically acknowledged, these two elements of the Site of Conscience are readily at odds with each other during tours. In my analysis of each site, I investigate how this tension plays out. But to summarise: the difficulty arises since, for visitors, history is first of all an immersive experience in place. Even if, following Thelen and Rosenzweig’s argument, it is to become a resource for everyday life, here, at the historic site, gaining the sense of
distance to transform it into a “usable” objective account is an ongoing and incomplete process, one that visitors may not even wish to complete yet.

1.3.4 Making History Matter

This means that history and dialogue, from the visiting perspective, are more clearly distinguishable as two experiences – one an encounter with the past, the other an encounter with the present. This is not to say that some visitors as opposed to others do visit the sites in the spirit of the memory activist. But, as I try to make clear throughout my analysis, the focus of my whole project is not on what visitors do with their experience – it is not to measure the efficacy of the Coalition’s influence over the three sites. Looking through these personal objectives and performances, as well as at the practicalities of visiting, it is possible to isolate the tension between history and dialogue and identify the connection between past and present as a series of translations. Thus, for instance, there is the translation of the historical Other into the contemporary Other; the Other into the Self and the Self into the Other; inside into outside; silence into speech; interpretation into action; cultural into social.

These translations are identifiable as the mechanical workings of the Site of Conscience and are constitutive of its transformative effect. For the memory activist, they are inherent to memory. To see the present as an ongoing struggle constituted by the past is reflective of a particularly political historical consciousness. It is the assumption of – or the lesson learnt by – those who have established the Coalition, many of whom have worked in contexts where, as Sevcenko and Russell-Ciard put it, ‘there was almost no

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political space for projects of memory and the stakes for doing this kind of work were extremely high’ (2008:12). Under such circumstances, past and present do become politically bound together, as numerous studies of truth and reconciliation programmes and post-conflict/post-dictatorship societies show (Olick 2007, 2003; Jelin 2007; Edkins 2003; Wilson 2001; Taylor 1997).

As memory practices, these transcend the normative bounds of heritage-making, extending into the performance of post-national and cosmopolitan identities (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009; Levy and Sznaider 2006; Karp et al. 2006; Macdonald 2003).

But this is not the only way to use the past and the act of citizenship the Site of Conscience proposes is one which asks about the conditions under which visitors might take on such a reading of the past for themselves. Indeed, without asking about how visitors can come to choose to participate there can be no understanding of how that participation can be a critical act. Maggie Russell-Ciardi has argued that the challenge of the Site of Conscience:

cannot be done unless museums commit themselves to turning the conventional notion of what a museum is on its head, conveying to the public that they are not coming to museums to learn from experts, but rather to exchange ideas, teach one another, and decide for themselves why history matters.

(Russell-Ciardi 2008:52)
The difficulty inherent to making this transformation the responsibility of the museum is that, so long as it is proposed to visitors by the museum, it remains an invitation to enact heritage on their terms and subject to the kind of criticism of instrumentalism that Williams makes. In Chapter Three, I allude to the tension between what the Coalition wants and what visitors want from their experience as taking place across two different notions of history. But as Russell-Ciardi’s argument implies it is, more importantly, about different ways of visiting. The problem the thesis traces therefore concerns how visitors not only transform themselves but do so by taking the initiative to transform their relationship with the museum.

1.4 Argument and Structure

If, indeed, the Site of Conscience is an intervention that asks of visitors to translate the processes of meaning-making that constructs the historical Other into a democratic participation newly informed by that process, and by that means take it upon themselves to transform their visit into a political action, then the challenge is in part to overlook the intervention of the museum and normalise the relationship between site and Site of Conscience. The question thus becomes not just about how the act of visiting becomes a transformation of the Self but how it becomes a transformation of the museum.

As such it is necessary to ask: How do visitors both participate in the making of meaning and exercise a freedom from the social and institutional
constraints of that participation? How can the influence of cultural authority be recognised by doubt, signalling its own limitations? How does the experience of visiting, as opposed to the conversations it includes, enact and re-articulate human rights? How are freedom and equality, rather than definitive of the message, actually constituted by visitors in the communicative processes? How is social change the means as much as the ends of the museum visit?

To approach these questions, I have drawn from my background in theatre to identify a context in which participation can become a social and political action. Prior to exploring the theatrical context, however, I begin Chapter Two with a review of a range of authors within museum studies whose work offers some leads within the discipline to feed into my outsider’s perspective. Critical to their concepts has been an expanding influence of ideas within media theory about the active role visitors play in shaping knowledge and meaning through the museum encounter. Coupled with ethical and political concerns about representation and new concepts of citizenship, ideas such as ‘performance failure’ (Macdonald n.d.), the ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997; Peers 2007) and ‘radical trust’ (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Lynch 2009) open up the problematic of sharing or displacing authority, narrative responsibility and the relationship between visitors and the social and political Other that lie at the centre of my own approach.

These discussions do three interconnected things: Firstly, they suggest that the museum’s social agency can be performed through a loss of their cultural authority as opposed to its better use. Secondly, they therefore shift focus
from the effective use of communicative processes to a need to consider uncertainty within the embodied and affective conditions of visiting, making room to focus on the experience of visiting itself. And thirdly, they suggest that visitors can choose to carry through the museum’s social agency in their response to that uncertainty of experience.

It is from this point that theatre, despite the absence of theatrical presentation, becomes a useful tool for framing the museum visit. I begin looking at some elements of what has been dubbed ‘the transformative power of performance’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008), focusing on how theatre provides a medium through which both performer and audience are able to empower themselves as a particular effect of double consciousness. The essential element to this is in how performer and audience are engaged in the same communicative process but are at the same time conscious of themselves being within a particular mode of engagement. The transformative power of performance, I explain, has been considered in terms of how audience are able to remove themselves from the performance in order to step back into it and thereby change it or even end it. However, I add that it is equally the conditions of participation in which the fiction must first be believed that create the possibility of change and hence the possibility of the political act.

Given this background, I argue that the key element of the Site of Conscience lies in the way that visitors discover themselves as performers in the communicative event. To that end, I review ways in which visitors are both conceived of and recognisable as performers within the museum. Each of
these examples brings out some of the tensions that make the museum a performance event and a mode of theatrical production in which mind and body, objectivity and subjectivity, are always at odds. It is because of this tension that bodies and physical experiences are engaged in critical dialogue with the discursive element of exhibition. Moreover, understood as performance, this tension is identifiable as a state of uncertainty in which visitors are able to see their own role and thereby choose to participate in the museum project. The individual learning process, in other words, can become one which is dialogic, including within it the visitor’s own personal response and knowledge.

It is equally possible for visitors not to take on that shared authority – to remain an audience, if indeed an active one, and not step out of the communication between themselves and the museum. It is thus the objective of the last section of Chapter Two to conceive of the museum visit in which narrative responsibility emerges out of the encounter with the historical Other but is cajoled into performance through an uncertain relationship with the museum’s performance of it. In this way, I argue for a conceptualisation of the Site of Conscience which brings forth a contemporary responsibility towards the historical Other as an effect of uncertainty. The drama, as it were, which is being staged at the museum is one concerning who is responsible for telling the story, the museum or the visitor.

I therefore complement the theatrical frame with a description of the drama produced within it in terms of Bakhtin’s notion of ‘answerability’ and Foucault’s idea of ‘agonism’. In this relationship, the Other realises its own
voice through the receiving agent (the visitor in this case) rather than the performer (ostensibly the museum); and, at the same time, the visitor, as subject of power, has the exercise of their freedom within the participatory regime. Whilst, in the argument, it is the theatrical frame that creates the context for these relations, it is these relations which sustain the social function of the encounter. In these conditions, the question of authority emerges into an ethical and political relationship.

It is here that my conceptualisation for the Site of Conscience potentially overlaps with discussion about citizenship practices and the public sphere. However, at this point, that discussion is put off for the conclusion and, effectively, for future research, allowing the case study analyses to focus on the dynamics of the visiting event and the way the historical narrative emerges into visitors’ own narratives. The implication, however, is that the efficacy of the Site of Conscience as a venue for dialogue and change relies upon the way visitors enact the translation of past into present.

The case studies are analysed separately in the following three chapters, presented in the order by which I came to them. Whilst the argument of Chapter Two presents themes and concepts to unify an idea of the Site of Conscience for the three sites, I have chosen to discuss them separately in order to respect a sense in which the process of becoming a Site of Conscience is unique to each place and the specifics of the visiting event. The disadvantage of the approach is in how it limits the conceptualisation to work through the analyses towards the overall purpose defining the Site of Conscience. However, the intention is to allow each site to resonate with the
conceptualisation rather than answer it point for point. Following, in each case, the progress of the normal visiting experience, but also spending some time setting up the “performances” of the museum, the intention is to evoke how elements of the concept emerge from the relationship between what the museums are doing and how visitors respond to create the visiting event.

In Chapter Three, analysing the Tenement Museum, I am able to refer to an actual theatrical practice (a living history tour) but I do so only after re-establishing the research problem within the context of the particular site. Chapter Three, Part One, therefore looks at the Tenement Museum, and considers how it has responded, and the implications of these responses, to the difficulty of getting visitors to engage politically through their visits. I first present the case, through visitor feedback, that museum visits here are firstly immersive experiences and only potentially socially engaged. I then turn to the initiatives that the Museum has set up to influence those experiences and in so doing identify how it proposes an alternative mode of visiting that works through an alternative notion of history. This raises questions about how the assertion of this multi-voiced history is to subjectively constitute the site as heritage. Hence, rather than being a neutral presence, as the site managers propose, it is necessary to ask about how the museum is itself a particular claim on the site. In turn, the enquiry asks about the possibility of how this creates a tension between the two modes of visiting – with the past and with the present. I use notions of emplacing and spatialising practices to distinguish the two modes and to identify the implications that has for the processes of translation between past and present.
In the second part of the Chapter, I turn more directly to visitor encounters and specifically those in the living history tour. The advantage of looking at the living history tour, though it is a less common experience of the Museum, is how it brings to the fore the above tensions. In particular, it highlights how the relationship between the museum and visitors takes place around a possibility of communicative failure, where the two modes of engagement are always potentially incompatible and where, in the gap between place and space, visitors express a certain awkwardness or need to make the experience work. In the varied responses to the tour, it is possible to see how the constraints of play can be both frustrating and rewarding but at the centre of the game is a question of authority. It is here that I discuss the nature of participation at the Museum and how the possibility of failure in the experience both creates and constrains visitor opportunities for choice and freedom to act.

At the Tenement Museum, it appears that such opportunities are rare and slight because the presence of the museum is so overwhelming that finding gaps within its performance to see oneself outside of it is difficult. In Chapters Four and Five, I develop the idea that the museum intervenes in the processes of translation and thereby establishes authority as a key concern in how the processes are performed. In these chapters, I further show how, at The Workhouse and Perm-36 respectively, this is an intervention that comes between site and visitor. In these examples, there appears by this intervention to be a greater uncertainty within the visiting experience, provoking a clearer experiential and cognitive gap in which new
understandings might emerge. Who, what and how this “gap” becomes itself form key issues and a focal point of my analyses.

In Chapter Four, I focus on the difficulties raised by an experience in which The Workhouse has been interpreted in two ways, adding to an implicit uncertainty and absence within the place itself: Firstly, there is the intention of allowing it to speak for itself; and secondly, there is a more objective view of the historical idea of the place. In particular, I am interested in how in the first instance, following a Bakhtinian logic, the visitor might become more responsible for telling the story of the historical Other, thus constituting a dialogic sphere in which the past is an immanent presence. But then, through the intervention of the second, historical approach – in which the “issues” are brought forward – I argue that a choice is created between the two modes of interpretation.

The Workhouse provides a useful opportunity to explore how the encounter with the present is a more constant intervention into the encounter with past, despite the museum’s intentions. The challenge I set myself however in reviewing how the visiting experience here might constitute the site as a Site of Conscience is in asking how, by the same token, the past emerges into the present.

I take as my provocation the idea of the ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997), reinterpreted here through the visit of someone whose mother was born in the House. After a discussion of the museum’s practice, the analysis investigates – using a small sample of visitor responses – to what extent it is
as a negotiation of the museum’s intervention in the site that visitors find themselves articulating their political responsibilities. This involves looking at how the effort to look through or beyond the museum’s presence – rather than to respond directly to it – is a conscious and deliberate effort to translate past to present, engaging with the issues raised by the historical Other in the context of their contemporary world. In creating – unintentionally – uncertainty about its own presence, I argue that the museum provokes visitors to take greater responsibility for realising a coherent sense of past and present, taking experience into narrative.

Here at The Workhouse, visitors do engage with the issues raised by the past. But I question, based on visitor comments, how far the way that the museum cedes its authority effects a transformative participation and instead risks too much of the present seeping in. With this doubt in mind, I move towards the end of the tour. The journey through The Workhouse is intense and at times monotonous. It is only in the last moments that “something happens” and, as a final turn in the analysis, I look at the effect of this sudden rush of the past into the experience.

In Chapter Five, the emphasis falls on silence as an articulating principle of the Site of Conscience and represents an essentially subjective view of the visiting experience there and its transformative capacities. Where in the other chapters, I have tried to draw on visitor responses to establish how the dynamics of translation between past and present are in play, here the analysis draws very much on my own experience as a (repeated) visitor and visitor of visitors.
Despite the use of questionnaires and a limited number of interviews, this was the hardest site in terms of doing research. The silence of the site that became important to my analysis was self-evident to me: as a non-Russian speaker, it was easy not to hear the language in the text and the museum voices, to blur the sound of the museum’s performance. For most visitors, understanding this text is an obvious necessity. You have paid for it after all. However, in my foreignness, I could not quite share in that encounter. The museum’s visual text was as disorientating as it was illuminating; and, in my isolation from language, the silent sounds of the site beyond (and before) the museum broke through the gaps I felt in the museum’s performance. And it was in that silence that I found the past’s presence in the outside world – a place where silence remains.

Where the Coalition’s pledges propose two modes of visiting, this study tries to find ways in which they are already imbricated within the visiting experience, and where, without facilitation, historical interpretation is immanent to social action through dialogue. It is then to argue that the resources to ‘harness the power of places’ are indeed implicit to the act of visiting as the Coalition accepts but that, therefore, it is here that visitors must identify them for themselves – in their own response to the experience the museum provides. The research investigates ways in which the performance of the museum intentionally and unintentionally provokes such a recognition.
The implication of the research is that some modification of the museum performance might be made to account for that but that final responsibility falls on visitors to participate in the transformation of the museum through a recognition of its shifting authority. Thus, the thesis also has to face the question as to whether critical acts of citizenship, such as the memory activist performs, are indeed finally possible as performances for visitors to re-enact within the museum. The question is of course a challenge and critique of the Coalition. However, given that my research interest tallies with the Coalition’s, it is also a question about my own project and particularly my methodology.

1.5 Methodology

The cross-disciplinary approach which, I have suggested, characterises the thesis is one that has emerged through the whole process of fieldwork and analysis, and mostly as a result of finding myself not engaging primarily with theatre practice and yet holding onto theatre as my starting position. This was not designed as a cross-disciplinary research and the techniques of investigation were only loosely rationalised in advance. Indeed, the focus on identifying how the political role of the museum might be conceived as functioning through a theatrical frame has itself been one that I have come to articulate through doing the research rather than one I proposed in advance of it.
From the outset, the primary interest of the research was to investigate the three case study sites as venues for political engagement and the role they were playing in transforming public political consciousness. This was not to assume that they only worked as such. But it was to assume that, given that it was an explicit agenda of their affiliation to the Coalition, they were appropriate sites to carry out such an investigation.

Yet, as I have explained, in the very first instances of scoping the research, it became clear that an interpretation of the sites as Sites of Conscience would have to extend beyond the specific practices being introduced as a result of the Coalition’s initiative and involvement if I was to focus on their public engagement as opposed to their outreach work. They were simply too minimal and did not represent the typical visiting experience.

Instead, to question how the sites function as Sites of Conscience, it was also vital to ask how the visiting experience as a whole contributed to that role. This clearly required a fieldwork-based study but I never proposed doing a full ethnographic survey of one or more institutions. Indeed, I understood that the study could begin from visitors, and their short encounters, rather than the institutions and the shaping of their interpretive programmes.

To a degree, this followed the example of the Performance, Learning and Heritage project which required the response of visitors to fulfil its research question into the efficacy of theatrical interpretations. But where the larger project aimed to find out from visitors how theatre affected the visiting experience, the task in my project was to seek evidence of how a particular
effect – the activation of a political consciousness – was or was not being achieved. Unlike the larger project, I was not, in the end, asking visitors to comment upon a particular intervention or mode of interpretation but to find out from them (as well as other people and factors) how that intervention emerged in their experience.

At the same time, I wanted the research to attend to embodied and affective modes of encounter and to investigate how these fed into any political “learning” that was taking place. I came with certain assumptions about the importance of these elements to the process, and it was important that the research asked both about the way visitors were connecting the historical narrative to narratives about today but, along with that, how they experienced the museum physically and emotionally.

From this point, therefore, the focus steered towards understanding the Site of Conscience from the visitor’s perspective and therefore as a potential ‘use of heritage’ (Smith 2006) as opposed to an assessment of the efficacy of the museums’ programming and approaches. Some broader survey of each site was required in order to be able to discuss the role played by the museum. But, in particular, my interest was to find out about the sensual and embodied aspects of the encounter, alongside the narrative aspects, with the intention of seeing if and how they interpolated to political effect.

To that purpose, a qualitative research was designed for each site, gathering data from museum staff, visitors and also ‘from’ the site itself but focusing on visitors above all (for a timetable of the fieldwork see Appendix B). Access
to each site was arranged in advance but the logistics of running interviews with visitors as well as staff was negotiated on arrival. In each case, this was neither difficult nor problematic: both staff and visitors were consistently generous with their time and interest. The research also included some archival work at the Tenement Museum and The Workhouse where there were records of interpretation decisions and the historical development of the buildings as heritage sites. These documents have been referenced where used. There are also a number of public documents museum staff have produced explaining these processes.

1.5.1 Fieldwork

Research took place at various times between December 2005 and October 2007. I was able to visit both the Tenement Museum and The Workhouse each on three separate occasions, although the research at the Tenement Museum focused on a prolonged period of two weeks in January 2007. Timing of this research was not fixed by any specific event and, compared with the summer months, this was a quiet time for the museum. However, all scheduled tours ran, if not always to capacity, and there was a constant flow of visitors. Previous visits had been a one-off scoping visit in December 2005 – at the very beginning of my PhD – and a further pilot research over two days at the end of June 2006.

Unlike the Tenement Museum, which is open all year round and constantly busy, The Workhouse closes over the winter and can be quiet during the week. The convenience to me of a UK location, coupled with the fact of these limited periods of visitor entry, determined a different research period.
therefore chose three busier weekends during school holidays to attend: in October 2006, April 2007 and October 2007. These had been preceded by an initial visit in August 2006.

I visited Perm-36 initially between May and June 2007. The timing of this visit was also selected based on key events that were due to take place and would potentially bring more visitors but, as it turned out, they were cancelled. I returned to the museum for their Pilorama Arts Festival which took place over a weekend at the end of July.

Over the course of the extended visit at the Tenement Museum, I observed 22 tours, held 20 group interviews (each comprising between 5 and 12 visitors), and collected 141 questionnaires. I conducted interviews with members of the administrative staff – including, the museum director, the head of interpretation, head of education, marketing staff, educator co-ordinator and educators.

Over the three weekends at The Workhouse, I carried out 40 interviews with 74 visitors and collected 139 questionnaires. Of the visitors that I met, there was one who I contacted two years later. I also carried out interviews with staff members, including the house manager, two seasonal workers, 3 volunteer stewards, and the Regional Director of the National Trust. I later had email correspondence with the researcher who was responsible for much of the interpretation.
I researched at Perm-36 for an initial period of three and half weeks. I did not visit the museum everyday during that time, and there were many days when there were no visitors. In total, I observed 9 tours: three school groups, one adult group and the rest being private visits both international and Russian. There was also a visit from a BBC film crew. I was able to hold short interviews with a few visitors who spoke English but these were not extensive. I collected 51 Russian questionnaires, which I had prepared in English but then had translated by a member of the museum staff. Five of these were completed by adults and the rest by students from the school groups. I also interviewed seven members of staff. Research from the return visit in July has not bee included in this study.

1.5.2 Staff interviews

Interviews were carried out with staff – both frontline (‘onstage’) and administrative (‘off stage’) – following the model set by the Performance, Learning and Heritage project. Without the affordance of time, it was not possible to learn about the workings of the museums to the extent achieved by those ethnographic studies to which I have previously alluded (Peers 2007, Macdonald 2002, Handler and Gable 1997). Indeed, unlike those studies, it was never the intention of the research to map how the three museums work in their entirety as producers of cultural knowledge but only to look at those aspects of their work that are active at the point of visitor contact. An ethnographic study would have been much more effective at exposing all the possible aspects of the museum that contribute to the visiting event. In comparison, this study has become highly selective
referring to aspects of the museums’ work which can directly inform the playing out of the relationship between museum, site and visitor.

To a degree, the staff interviews serve less as a resource now so much as to establish a small archive of knowledge about three institutions that had not previously been researched by an outsider. The literature which I cite about interpretation practices at the sites is all written by staff members and this has been my main source of input for discussing the museum’s role. This is a significant limitation of the survey, which, in covering three sites, has not enough space for the views of the various staff members, not least guides, with whom I talked.

1.5.3 Visit observations

Observations were made of the site ‘in play’, and involved following visits over several days. On the one hand, guided tours made observations quite straightforward: it meant that I could remain an aloof observer and yet anticipate more readily the performance that visitors were being given by the museum – visitors themselves being given very limited choice about the route or focus of their attention. Where tours were given by human guides (Tenement and Perm-36), I could join a group very easily. At The Workhouse, where it is a personal audio guide, I mainly spent time observing in individual rooms, finding it more difficult to track individual visitors.

In all situations, however, observing visits taking place was the primary source for establishing the problematics of the enquiry. Thus, whilst being
guided appeared to make the visits more manageable to observe, this aspect of visiting was finally responsible for complicating the relationship between museum and visitor. It threw into relief how often the site emerged as separate from the museum when seen from the visitor perspective. By being guided, it became clear that the independence of each visitor was a vital point of implicit negotiation that required attention.

The very point of observing visits introduced a clear set of subtle variables that, the more they were observed, the more difficult they were always to capture. Where there are human guides, a whole host of factors of live performance affect the visiting experience, such as intonation, register, interaction, pace, storytelling abilities, charisma, size of group, and time of day, to name just a few. At The Tenement Museum where there are more than 30 possible guides, these variables multiply exponentially. Meanwhile, where the tour is given as a personal audio guide (The Workhouse), the control this gives to each individual visitor to edit the tour (by stopping and skipping tracks) leaves the exact performance each visitor receives an impossible presentation to gauge.

At Perm-36, where language was a barrier to following the narratives of the Russian tours, my observations turned to a much closer attention. I kept time of each section of the tour, taking note when visitors asked questions (without being able to know what the questions were about) or showed signs of particular interest or disinterest. Thus, more than a distanced view of the

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3 As a matter of policy, all staff have to give tours, even if the freelance ‘educators’ are the only staff specifically engaged for that purpose.
landscape of the tour, I moved towards (or tried to move towards) a more internal diagnostics of the choreography of visiting.

Given that my final analysis is of all three sites, it has been impossible, in this study, to account for the range of variables associated with the museum performances that I observed. Despite my interest in the intimate moments of encounter between museum, visitor and site, a small study that looks at three sites cannot do justice to the detail of observation I developed through the fieldwork. Paradoxically, it was only through doing the fieldwork that the significance of these details to my thesis truly emerged. In particular, it was because my attention was necessarily limited at Perm-36, that the possibilities of observation began to emerge. It was here that the gap between site and Site of Conscience took on a productive form within the communicative process and that there emerged aspects of the visiting experience that could be extrapolated and discussed even when not articulated by visitors.

In this way, the final analysis really only represents an initial response to the observed aspect of the fieldwork, a working through of the implications of this first-hand encounter without analysing it in all its detail. Furthermore, caught between a breadth of input and a growing interest in detail, the two remaining aspects of the fieldwork research – data gathering from visitors and my own experience of visiting – take on a more problematic relationship. If the observations represent the centre point of the research, making sense of those observations is a result of the relationship between my role as researcher and my role as visitor. My own experience as a visitor as well as
that of researcher has continually played an important role in framing
questions about the visiting experience at all three sites. However, this did
not hinder an initial attempt at least to conduct an objective research into
other people’s experiences.

1.5.4 Visitor Research
For each site, and again following the example set by the Performance
Learning and Heritage project, a mixture of questionnaires and semi-
structured interviews were prepared for visitors. Together these sought to
directly capture key narrative moments and emotional states that contributed
to the formation of visiting experiences. They were also aimed at allowing
visitors to elucidate a critical or outside view of their experience that would
reveal those aspects that made them aware of how the experience provoked
them to make connections between past and present, and between this as a
specific cultural activity and the political dimensions of their everyday lives.

As discussed earlier, the research did not purposefully seek to contextualise
these factors of the visit with personal information about visitors. Following
key studies of visitor learning, the research took as given that experiences
within the museum are significantly shaped by biographical factors as much
as institutional contexts, especially in terms of how and where importance
and meaning are ascribed (Falk and Dierking 2000). However, rather than
seeking to track these connections myself, I was only concerned to include
biographical detail in the surveys where visitors volunteered them as
relevant information.
In other words, just as it would be impossible to account for every subtlety of
the live performance in the final analysis, I anticipated in setting up the
visitor research that the scale of the study would not include the variability
of visitor types and backgrounds to explain any particular effect. Instead, the
questionnaires and conversations with visitors were aimed at revealing ways
in which visitors shaped their visiting experience, through the material,
spatial, temporal and embodied aspects of the visit.

The key challenge for the visitor research, however, was to create a balance
between allowing visitors to talk freely about the experience whilst asking
them to reflect on it in these specific ways. Questionnaires were a good way,
not only to reach a large number of people, but also to provide a structure to
their responses. Yet, once I had used them, and always concerned about
being too instrumental in my research, I felt more comfortable referring to
interviews in order to get at the more personal intonations and stresses that
interviewees could communicate. For that reason, some experimentation was
done with the questionnaires – altering both the style, and the way they were
to be completed. In the end, however, limited use was made of the
questionnaires – again implicating an archive of material awaiting further
analysis. In this study, a relatively greater attention has been afforded to the
interviews, except for Perm-36 where the possibility of interviews was very
restricted.

Interviews were most useful in the way they allowed visitors to raise issues
for themselves and focus attention on aspects of their visit that they felt were
most pertinent. The intention of these interviews was for them to be as open-
ended as possible and, in the best of circumstances, prompt a free discussion between visitors. Willem Sauter (2000), in his discussion of researching theatrical events, talks about re-creating the informal conversations that friends have after a show. Although I proceeded without such a careful organisation and a preparedness to draw on a smaller selection of visitors, I did try in effect to capture a sense of that informality, even if the differing circumstances of each site determined that the practical management of these interactions had to be quite adaptive and always take place within the museum building and still part of the “show”.

Interviews at the Tenement Museum took place with entire groups (between six and fifteen people) as they finished being taken around the museum. These were held in an educational room within the museum itself (as opposed to the visitor centre where there was no additional space) and participants were invited to sit down there to discuss their visit. Though entirely voluntary, it was quite normal for most of each tour group to participate and this was helped by the way I always introduced myself at the very start of the tour and then was passed over to by the guides at the end. Interviews lasted, on average, between 40 and 50 minutes.

As such, these formed impromptu focus groups, in which there was a good deal of response and interaction. Conversations often began before I had fully introduced my research interest and, even if similar issues arose between focus groups, each conversation followed its own trajectory. This meant that often my prompts were a response to visitor comments, asking
for further expansion, as much as they were clearly instigating the discussion topics.

As a result of that openness, more often than not, discussion turned on the historical narrative – talking about the quality of life for the inhabitants of the tenements they had just heard about, personal reminiscence or recall of family histories, and the difference between now and then, both for immigrants and in America more generally. In amongst those discussions and where I asked for further comments were the observations about specific parts of the visiting experience and how it had worked on them.

Whilst this approach facilitated a fairly natural and very generous participation on the part of visitors, its openness – certainly in retrospect – was possibly more useful to visitors, as a way of debriefing themselves on their experience and sharing their views and opinions, than to me. Perhaps the interviews would have yielded a more accessible set of specific data on the visiting experience had I asserted my role as the researcher and been more strict with the questioning. It also would have helped to have used a much smaller research pool.

In the different situation of The Workhouse, the open approach was more effective. Here, interviews were with individuals or small groups – depending on how interviewees had come to the museum. In no instance was a group larger than four and often an interview would be with just one member of the visiting group. These interviews took place, standing up in the final room of the House – the designated ‘Site of Conscience’ room – into
which visitors typically (though not always) drifted before exiting. Interviews lasted around 20 minutes. With so few interlocutors, my line of questioning became more directional even if I allowed and encouraged digressions where visitors wanted to discuss certain subjects. As a result, I was able to elicit more reflection on the experience of visiting – those aspects, for instance, that surprised or disappointed expectations, unsettled or confirmed perceptions – without first discussing the story the museum tells and its personal resonances.

At Perm-36, I was only able to do interviews with a few English-speaking visitors. Unfortunately, the museum had lost both of its English-speaking staff due to illness shortly before I arrived. Whilst I was able to recruit the help of their German intern, for most of the time I was dependent on my observations and questionnaires. However, there was one further resource – not available at the other sites – which I was able to access and utilise: the visitor feedback book. There was just one volume and that dated back to 1997. It had entries in a number of languages: predominantly Russian but also English, Dutch, Italian and French, though visitors had come from other countries too. It was not always on display and it was only on occasions when staff invited visitors to add their comments that it was made available. In the end, it has only been of limited use. I only became aware of it towards the end of my visit and whilst I transcribed most of the English and French entries, I was limited (by the photocopying machine) in the number of copies I could make of the Russian entries. These I have since had translated.
1.5.5 Limitations of the research

It is interesting and epistemologically critical therefore that this final fieldwork, in which access to other visitors was so limited, became so significant in shaping the conceptual approach for the analysis. When I first visited the Tenement Museum in December 2005, I was, by chance, invited to join their living history tour with a school group. I was immediately struck by the way the visit was choreographed not only as a site-specific performance but in the way it utilised physical and narrative thresholds as shifting points to mark the progress of the experience towards new understanding in the visitors. At The Workhouse, when I visited in August 2006, I was similarly intrigued by the structure of the visit and the way that here, visitors were essentially isolated from each other and distanced from the place by the mode and style of interpretation. In each of these instances, I took from my own experience an objective enquiry into the experience of others.

Yet it was not until Perm-36 where, as a researcher, I was myself positioned so evidently as an outsider within the visiting experience – not just aware of how the visitor can be displaced and therefore an observer of that process but displaced myself – that the relationship between a political consciousness and these displacements of self rose to the fore. Only in the moment where I as the researcher cohered with a visiting experience that came closest to enacting the political resonances of the historical narrative did the dimensions of that visiting practice emerge. Without intention and without any advanced conceptualisation but simply under particular circumstances, the methodological approach took a subjective turn, one that came to
question in part the earlier approach but also helped to focus on the importance of detail in individual experiences.

It was only in these last stages of the fieldwork and the early stages of analysis that the gap of uncertainty between the visiting experience and the model of the Site of Conscience emerged as a critical element of the transformative functioning of the Site of Conscience. It was only at this point that elements of the experience and aspects of the site itself that had not always appeared or been addressed in visitor narratives became more important. It was, at this point, that the limitations of the research methods became clearer as the interests of the analysis sought much more detailed and individual responses that might reveal important moments of doubt or uncertainty that by the end of the visit may have been resolved.

Understanding the visiting experience has become the particular interest of visitor studies – a discipline that has developed over the last twenty years alongside interest in media consumption, public learning and accountability of public institutions (Hooper-Greenhill 2006; Macdonald 2005, 2002; Bicknell and Farmelo 1993). As these commentators have demonstrated, the discipline has sought the use of a wide range of research methods to get inside the minds and bodies of visitors. Narrative (Roberts 1997, 1993), ethnographic (Peers 2007; Macdonald 2002, 1993; Handler and Gable 1997) and phenomenological (Lois and Silverman 1996) approaches have all provided effective means of revealing not only the meanings visitors give to their experiences but also ‘the disjunctions, the disagreements and ‘surprise outcomes’ of cultural production’ (Macdonald 2002: 8).
Whilst not enough experimentation was given to the research methodology to draw a best practice from these many examples, I have, during the fieldwork and then again throughout the analysis, tried to listen closely to the depictions and insinuations of the more dissonant aspects of visiting that are sometimes, but certainly not always, explicit in visitor responses. These are the aspects that have most usefully served to reveal visitor agency within the museum and, especially important for the direction in which this study has moved, to expose where visitors are recognising that their own act of visiting can, by its excess, choose to feed the intentions of the museum.

My methodological approach was not really designed to capture the subtlety and nuance of the multi-layered experience that I was interested in. But it was open enough to allow some of that to come through. As such, through the case study analyses, I have tried as far as possible to foreground visitor voices prior to developing the argument, such that they can – as social research ought to – set the agenda for the interpretation. But, to a great degree, the research has been limited by choosing two sites out of three to which I could not easily return.

It has, in the end, also been limited by the choice to research across three sites in three very different locations. Where this has served usefully is where one has thrown light on the others; and yet the project has not followed a comparative approach because of the great disparity between contexts. Only the individual site analyses seemed appropriate where a sense of being at
each place had such a central role in evoking the processes of encounter and participation that I have been interested to convey and analyse.

In terms of reading off the material gained through the visitor research, there remains an underlying tension provoked by my role as an analyst doubly interested in processes of social change and also my interest in theatre. The degree to which, from those details in visitor feedback, it is reasonable to extrapolate towards the overall argument – that there are certain conditions of an improvised cultural production under which visitors take on responsibility for the historical narrative, displacing the authority of the museum and connecting past to present in an act of citizenship – is of course a contention for the conclusion. But I am aware that both my interest in and approach to visiting experiences are as much a challenge to visitors and their narratives as they are a response to them.

Given that my interpretations were inevitably informed during my relative isolation at Perm-36, it may not be surprising that my ideas of a theatre-like museum encounter – or, perhaps, it is a museum-like theatre encounter – in which the displacement of Self and double consciousness is key might not best fit the experiences of others. However, it was apparent early on in the research that the research itself was provocative of how visitors understood their experiences. Simply explaining that I worked in a Drama department and was researching Sites of Conscience was ‘interesting’ (to quote many visitors) enough to make them think twice about their visits and their relationship to the museum.
This kind of effect is not so foreign to social research and shares an epistemological position with critical realism and its emphasis on empowerment of subjects through research (Bhaskar 1997, 1989). But the research itself has not become a feature of my analysis and this was not an explicit agenda when I began. What it may have alerted me too, however, was that in trying to make sense of the Site of Conscience from the perspective of how visitors describe their experiences, I was in search of a visiting practice that was still to be formed and that, as a consequence, I was always implicating myself into the research subject.

One final observation: that of discipline. In 2007, after my fieldwork, three critical texts emerged that have particularly shaped the field of my enquiry – Laura Peers, ‘Playing Ourselves’; Richard Sandell ‘Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference’; and Paul Williams ‘Memorial Museums’. Each text emerged from a different discipline – anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, respectively – and as such presented three different models of what my own project might have become. One of the challenges of this research has been to work between disciplines, though it has felt much more like a movement away from my home discipline in theatre to elsewhere. A major part of that challenge has therefore been to identify a starting point and a place from where I can relate myself to the subject material – a challenge both of methodology and analysis. Though theatre remains an important frame for my approach, rather than truly finding a resolution to that challenge, the thesis reflects a sense of travelling, perhaps displacement and even a searching for somewhere to begin.
2.1 Introduction

On one occasion, when I was asking visitors at the Tenement Museum about its designation as a Site of Conscience, one person responded, saying:

I would have thought the conscience...I don’t know this idea, I understand what they’re trying to do but the word conscience to me means something that happened that was, you know, you should think about it twice. [20/01/07]

He was not sure that conscience appertained to the Tenement where, as far as he was concerned, ‘mostly what went on in here and even with my own relatives, they were pretty happy...they were not sad’. And yet, the Museum, is quite certain that here, like anywhere, there is good reason to ‘think twice’ about the past.

On the one hand, this is about an interpretation of history. But the question – what does it mean to visit a historic site museum with one’s conscience – is one which would seem to go beyond a judgement between good or bad experiences. Admittedly, the thesis does not approach the subject of Sites of Conscience from the perspective of moral philosophy, nor from a perspective of human rights or the politics of memory. But in taking a certain view, it raises the idea that to visit with a conscience is to think twice about visiting.
As museums look to develop their role as social agents, and in particular their role in promoting effective and positive intercultural exchanges, questions are necessarily raised about the relationship between museums and their publics. There has been much re-thinking around the processes of communication through which museums transfer knowledge and, in turn, through which visitors receive and interpret it. Within those discussions is a growing awareness of the uncertainty of communication and the way that visitors themselves are put in situations where they become aware of their own participation within the processes of knowledge construction and transmission.

This chapter looks firstly at various scenarios in which the museum-visitor relationship is being understood in performance terms. In these instances, performance describes both an implicit and an explicit mode of participation; but where it is the latter, the relationship itself takes on a new quality of uncertainty. Communication becomes unstable and liable to failure raising the idea that it is in this state that visitors become more actively engaged with the messages being transmitted and the way they respond to them.

The interruption of the normative flow of communication resonates with certain theatres that seek not just to entertain but also to empower their audiences. Historically, these theatres have experimented with techniques in which the certainty of the theatrical communication, in which there is a complicit participation in believing the fiction of the stage, is challenged. At this point, the reality of the action is revealed and hence its contingency and changeability.
Connecting these experiments to the uncertain and unstable encounters at museums is the common interest in sharing authority. To a degree, any communicative act shares authority over the message as the message bearer can never control exactly how the receiver interprets it. However, in these heightened moments of communication breakdown or play, there is a more explicit commitment to recognising the import of one’s own role, as performer (whether as sender or receiver) in making meaning. Indeed, meaning itself becomes open and accessible.

It is in these moments that visitors or audience are provoked to think twice: not just about the past or the action being presented but about their own role in the communicative event. They have the choice to see themselves as performers and capable therefore of being creators in the world around them.

In this chapter, I set out a framework for understanding the processes by which visitor encounters at the historic site museum might emerge into new ethical relationships and political perspectives in the contemporary world through such moments of uncertainty and performance. Essential to my conceptualisation is the importance of the coincidence of past and present and that any translation between the two emerges out of the heightened experience in which they share time and place. Whilst processes of translation inevitably feed into contexts and knowledges from the everyday world beyond this moment of encounter, it is to the dynamics of the moment that my thesis is drawn.
Understanding how visitors have been conceived of as performers of the museum allows me to consider how authority is always at play within the museum-visitor relationship, even as they share a commitment to the common project defined by the logic of the museum. Just as empowering theatre audiences involves challenging the conventions of communication on which theatre is premised, so too is it possible to think about the museum as a place where change is co-produced. Where museums are seeking to effect their social agency through the actions of their visitors – such as in the Site of Conscience – the possibility that intervening in the communication flow has a transformative role to play emerges as new way to think through the empowerment of visitors.

The chapter establishes this argument through various examples of practice. In the final section, I theorise the dynamics of public engagement at the historic site museum. I propose a way in which those dynamics are the particular interplay between a responsibility towards the historical Other and the relations of power in which that intimate encounter takes place. This establishes a framework for approaching the visitor encounters at the three case study sites, or more precisely, the contours of the drama in which the Site of Conscience unfolds and in which visitors might be drawn to think twice about their role in making it.
2.2 Museum Performances

In the following section, I review ways in which museum studies has looked at the museum’s social agency in terms of visiting practices. This is a selective review of the literature but it helps to draw out the key themes that can support my own conceptualisation. It is in the nature of this particular cross-disciplinary research that it joins a conceptual flow from performance into museum studies. At the outset of my project, I had intended to travel in the opposite direction, hoping to inform theatre practice with concepts of the museal and the museological. In the event, this has not been the case. But in this section I do turn to those within museology who are already using performance to identify, understand and conceptualise new practices. From that consultation, I identify the possibilities for considering the visiting event as a mode of theatrical production. I argue that there is room for a further conceptualisation of the museum encounter which places a theatrical frame around the discourses of knowledge production, othering techniques and social relationships that are in play there.

Questions about the conditions under which visitors might perform certain civic responses in and through museums have underpinned the work of the public museum since its inception (Bennett 2004, 1998, 1995; Duncan 1995). This has been understood in governmental terms and as part of the power of museums ‘to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths’ (Duncan 1995:8), thereby re-creating citizens through what Carol Duncan calls ‘civilizing rituals’.
Since the time that this critique of the museum emerged through the 1980’s and early 1990’s (especially Karp and Lavine 1991; Vergo 1989), museum studies has been concerned with revitalising the democratic possibilities of exhibitionary practices. Museum educationalists and ethnographers have been particularly successful in highlighting the active role of visitors in interpreting museum exhibitions and historic sites (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 2006, 2000, 1999; Macdonald 2002; Falk and Dierking 2000; Hein 1998; Handler and Gable 1997). Media theory has also contributed to understanding the ‘active audience’ (Macdonald 2002:219; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Silverstone 1994). These studies have been instrumental in exposing the need (if not always explicitly advocating) for new pedagogies of display and new concepts of knowledge transfer. Hence, a new discipline of visitor studies has emerged with an agenda ‘to improve the lot of visitors’ (Bicknell and Farmelo 1993:7) though not without raising concerns about the expertise and precision of the museum’s work (Hein 2000; Weil 1999).

In the context of ‘global transformations’, museums have been forced to acknowledge the diversity of their visitors as much as to recognise a new responsibility towards those they represent (Karp et al.: 2006, 1992; Peers and Brown 2003; Sandell 2007, 2002). Contestation and multiple viewpoints are immanent to visiting practices – an idea particularly well established through ethnographic museum studies such as Handler and Gable (1997), Katriel (1997) and Macdonald (2002) and now taken up, as I discuss in this section, into conceptualising the museum’s social agency (Sandell 2007; Peers 2007; Lynch and Alberti 2010; Lynch 2009). Reid’s (2005) exploration of the ‘Manege Affair’ is one example that shows the political potential of the
public’s differing viewpoints. Under such terms, the museums have needed to revision their role as mediators of cultural difference. Tony Bennett sets the agenda for the contemporary museum out well:

The challenge now is to reinvent the museum as an institution that can orchestrate new relations and perceptions of difference that both break free from the hierarchically organized forms of stigmatic othering that characterized the exhibitionary complex and provide more socially invigorating and, from a civic perspective, more beneficial interfaces between different cultures (2006:59).

Bennett is speaking here of the reform of the governmental museum and the way contemporary museums are trying to transform themselves into ‘differencing machines committed to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding’ (2006:46). Bennett understands that museums are able to re-structure social relations by operating through, what he calls, ‘the logic of culture’. His argument is that ‘museums are best understood as distinctive cultural machineries that, through the tensions that they generate within the self, have operated as a means for balancing the tensions of modernity’ (2006:56).

For Bennett, the logic of culture attests to a system of self-formation by which culture ‘inscribes our identities in the tension it produces between inherited and shared customs and traditions, on the one hand, and the restless striving for new and distinguishing forms of individuality, on the
other’ (2006:52). This generates a division within the self by which individuals see themselves as separable from the mass of non-reflective behaviours of which they are a part and, in that apartness, see themselves as capable of transformation.

The logic of culture, as first discussed by William Ray (2001), provides a dynamic model for self-formation through culture, based as it is, not on a flow of information but on a shifting movement and tension between habit and originality, society and self, the unconscious and the conscious. However, as Bennett argues, the museum has intervened in this self-action through its discourses of otherness, westernising and genderising ‘the counterfoils against which processes of self-differentiation and self-development might be developed’ (Bennett 2006: 55). The challenge is thus to experiment with new modes of exhibition that can engage the logic of culture within a contemporary context of diverse publics and social divisions based on race and class.

The Site of Conscience, I would argue, envisions new forms of ‘othering’ in its historical interpretation and ‘beneficial interfaces’ as taking place between visitors in their public dialogues. The challenge they are faced with is bringing forward the historical Other into those exchanges, such that what takes place is a genuine inter-cultural encounter in the present, where the various translations of past to present are successfully performed.
2.2.1 Linguistic performances

From the many experiments by which museums are shaping their inter-culturalism to create new, democratic forms of civic enactment, Richard Sandell has been a leading expert in analysing the means to do so (2007, 2002, 1998). Sandell’s work follows very much in the vein of the Coalition’s rhetoric and indeed, Duncan Cameron’s early insistence that ‘[w]here museums, be they of art, history, or science, have the knowledge and the resources to interpret matters of public importance, no matter how controversial, they are obliged to do so’ (2004 [1971]:70-1). Sandell is an advocate of the social responsibility of museums and has brought to critical attention many concrete examples of where museums are pursuing this course (Sandell 2002; Dodd and Sandell 2001). His analyses of Anne Frank House and St Mungo’s Museum (Sandell 2007) are aimed at filling a gap in knowledge about how visitors receive and respond to anti-prejudice messages in exhibitions and how they take that into their everyday conversations about difference.

For Sandell, ‘social responsibility emerges from discussion around the interplay between notions of social inequality and cultural authority’ (2002:4). The museum occupies its own position as a maker and shaper of discourses of difference. Hence, as Sandell argues, it has the potential to influence how people think and talk about others and especially to counteract prejudice. In his view, the socially and politically constitutive power of culture puts pressure on museums, as distinct makers of cultural meaning, to follow precepts of social justice and human rights in their exhibitionary practices (2007:103; also, Ashley 2006).
From his investigations, he is able to characterise museum visitors as neither "prejudiced" or "unprejudiced" but rather as struggling to manage anxieties about difference’ (2007:174). It is in this state that they participate as active interpreters of the museum’s messages. Whilst he recognises that museums are neither wholly oppressive nor emancipatory in their influence, they can use their perceived cultural authority, through interpretive devices and cues, to guide visitors through their uncertainty and reframe social conversations. By this means museums achieve their social agency. As he argues:

Museum exhibitions present audiences with authoritative, credible and permissible ways of thinking and talking about difference. These ways of thinking and talking have more than symbolic significance – they shape normative truths, social relations and material conditions; they can inhibit, or potentially nurture, possibilities for equity, mutual understanding and respect (2007:175)

The basis of Sandell’s argument is that prejudice is produced in discourse and hence it is through discourse – or, as he refers to it, ‘linguistic performances’ (LeCouteur and Augoustinos 2001, quoted in Sandell 2007:18) – that it can be challenged. The freedom visitors have to make their own conclusions is all the more reason why, for Sandell, museums should rise to the challenge of shaping them. The diversity of the museum public and their participation in a diffuse and expanded sphere of cultural influence or ‘mediascape’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) becomes a provocation to
museums to use their cultural authority to assert democratic and humanitarian values into public discourse.

The connection to the Coalition and reflections of ‘history’ and ‘dialogue’ are evident here and Sandell provides a useful conceptual framework for their work. However, in his emphasis on ‘thinking and talking’, this conceptualisation is also an alert that Sandell understands the influence of museums to manifest itself within a particular experiential realm. The ‘thinking and talking’ model is effective where display can be authored and the object of display can be manipulated. But how does this transfer to the historic site? Certainly, the museum, as the Coalition proposes, can enter here as a defining authority, able to make the place real again through its own narratives. But more room also needs to be given to visitors’ own work in making the place real. Their encounter is not just cognitive and discursive, it is somatically and emotionally influenced. The tension between the active audience and the authority of the museum, which for Sandell provokes the museum’s choice in ‘taking sides’ (2007:177), is not just about discourse it is also about affect and emotion – the subjective encounter – and further account of this needs to be taken in any model of ‘beneficial interfaces’ (Bennett 2006:59).

Tamar Katriel’s study of Israeli settlement museums (1997) is a useful analysis that reveals some of the difficulties of this level of tension. Again, her focus is on the discursive practices that museums author and manipulate – this time in service to forming national identity rather than combating prejudice. However, here where the museum’s performance is live, through
the use of guides, the possibilities for modifying the cues and devices that frame conversations are greater than in Sandell’s examples. Hence, Katriel’s study is very sensitive towards the emotional aspect of both visiting and guiding and as such recognises that meaning is not just achieved through thinking and talking.

Hers is a rich study into the personality of the museum’s authorial control. (Many of my observations in the fieldwork similarly began with specific performing practices. But these have largely been lost in the final analysis which draws away from these still vital details to establish a broader view of the process of meaning-making. Some performative devices are discussed but not focused upon, not least as that would force too fine an analysis not truly possible across three disparate sites. In that way, performance is not so explicit for me and nor is it the presentation of a particular actor. But more importantly performance is an event, more like Sandell’s, in which different and contesting voices are brought into play).

Where she suggests how learning can be personal and embodied, Katriel’s study goes less far in understanding the role that affect can play in creating dissonance and debate. Dissonance for her is embedded in ideological difference and her settlement museums become sites of contestation only when opposing discourses enter the field of communication. This is less nuanced than in Sandell’s formulation where the museum visitor is available to change and where contestation is nurtured in the assembly of difficulty within the exhibition. Indeed, in focusing on the museum’s performance, Katriel’s study is more concerned with how ‘tour guides concretize and
usually multiply and reaffirm the meanings and values encoded in the master-narrative that grounds the museum project as a whole’ (1997:144). Thus, while her work is consistently engaged with how museums lose as well as gain their authority over their visitors, the rhetorical range she elicits as a means to provoke (new) understanding is aimed at achieving visitors’ passive acceptance rather than evoking a sense of their own personal narrative choice.

The Coalition also has its master-narrative whose meanings and values are to be reaffirmed through the museums’ performances. But the Site of Conscience is one in which visitors, making the translation between their experience in the past and their experience in the present, constitute for themselves the master-narrative. Contestation is necessarily a part of who they “become”, even if it is to reaffirm an identity they already recognise. Thus, where Katriel’s study points to ways in which the museum can effect civic practices, it does not go so far as to show how to achieve the kind of civic action that constitutes the Site of Conscience. Indeed, to refer Katriel’s performances of the past to the Site of Conscience would be to suggest that the likelihood of its achievement is small.

In his work, Sandell shows how museums can unsettle expectations and shift prejudices through the effective use of its cultural authority. Katriel, on the other hand, shows how the museum can use its authorial practices to accommodate differences to some degree but is finally always liable to a failure of communication where those differences cannot be incorporated into its narrative. Both Sandell and Katriel are interested in how museums
exercise their authority through verbal performances but use that to focus on ways in which messages are successfully communicated. Any change in the museum is a change by the museum for the visitors.

### 2.2.2 Performance failure

Sharon Macdonald (n.d.) has also taken performance as a tool for understanding the communicative processes at heritage sites but instead of success, looks to failure as its most interesting characteristic. In this, she offers a paradigm of performance – now, (more than the verbal), as a relation between body and text – that better elucidates the transformative potentialities of the Site of Conscience.

Where Sandell and Katriel are concerned with the conjunction of message and the making of meaning, Macdonald becomes aware through her fieldwork at Nuremberg Nazi rally grounds that these are not inherently linked in performance. Carefully depicting a tourist experience full of potential and actual dissonance, difficulty and disappointment, Macdonald demonstrates how ‘the possibility of performance failure’ (n.d.:7) is constitutive of the attempt by tour guides to deliver their ‘preferred readings’ (Macdonald 2006b:123; Hall 1980). Communicative failure is a notion that I take forward into my analysis of the Tenement Museum in Chapter Three. But in this, she signals two things that are of particular relevance to developing my own concept of the transformative capacity of the heritage encounter: Firstly, that when the message is successfully received, against the odds, there is a genuine sense of shared discovery and understanding. Secondly, she shows that the performative nature of
heritage encounters characterises them as taking place in a field of uncertainty.

For Macdonald, as she shows across much of her work, contestation and difference are as implicit to the way heritage and museums shape knowledge as is their capacity to ‘play out’ received or hegemonic discourses. The embodied aspect of performance helps to reveal that the transmission of meaning in any communication, let alone at heritage sites, cannot be guaranteed and that it fundamentally relies on finding (or else constructing) a common ground in which sense is made.

In this, Macdonald’s use of performance goes some way towards returning the sociological use of ‘performance’ to its theatrical use, contributing to what Marvin Carlson has identified as its status as ‘a contested concept’ (1996:1). It is this which I take forward into my further conceptualisation. In theatre, performance is about a relationship in which performer and receiver accept fiction as reality, not because it is reality but in order to accept a means to communicate realities that are otherwise difficult, if not impossible to do so – notably death. It is in the demand for complicity that performance’s transformative power has, in part, been identified but, moreover, its demand to be complicit in an experience first before (or separate from) understanding and reflection (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Sauter 2000; Yarrow 2001).

It is the uncertainty of performance communication and this ‘unsettlement’ (Jackson and Kidd 2008:70-72) between experience and meaning that I
particularly take forward into my concept and analysis from Macdonald’s work. But the uncertainty of communication is indicative of another vital aspect of the heritage encounter that needs to be accounted for: the challenge of identification.

It is interesting that Macdonald’s example is of a scenario of undesirable heritage where beneath the possibility of performance failure is the fear of over-identifying with the historical Other – the Nazis. At play here is the question of authenticity and the shared concern amongst the various performers not to authenticate the Nazi project. The site works as a problematic for Macdonald because it was, in its original form, a place of ‘staged authenticity’ (MacCannell 1989, 1992) that aspired to create a specific sense of collective consciousness. The question both guides and visitors at the site today have to ask is how to re-enact that sham without thereby authenticating it in the present. Performance is a risky but useful tool for that precisely because it can ‘go wrong’ (Macdonald n.d.:11). Answering critique of the use of performance, Macdonald shows how there is nothing more authentic in depicting the embodied aspect of culture but it allows authenticity to be both played out and doubted. In this, performance is better equipped than text to negotiate identity where there is a need to retain a choice not to identify.

The Coalition’s project proposes a different relationship with the past, seeking to complicate the historical Other (through history) such that choices about how to identify with them are opened up (into dialogue). This play of identification with the historical Other is key to translating that encounter
into a dialogic engagement in the present and hence is not quite explained by Macdonald’s performances. Macdonald’s encounters (because of where they take place) create, out of their performative uncertainty, a possible shared identity – or ‘communitas’ (Macdonald n.d.:8) – in relation to an antithetical Other and thereby a need (finally) to dissociate with the play of the Other the encounters provoke. The risk of over-identification with the historical Other is one recognised by all participants. For the Site of Conscience to work, on the other hand, the play of identification cannot be so readily resolved. What matters is that playing with the relationship to the historical Other creates an uncertainty that opens discussion rather than confirms existing attitudes.

For my three case studies, difficulty is not inherent in the place – as I discussed earlier – it is in the way it is realised and peopled. It is this which makes the dialogue at the Site of Conscience intercultural. For the Site of Conscience, the translation between past and present is not firstly about political ideology (as it is at Nuremberg) but about cultural difference. Moreover, this means that the problem of authenticity is not the key element at play in performance. Since the relationship with the Other is firstly one of cultural difference as opposed to political difference, ‘authenticity’, I would argue, evolves into ‘authority’ as the troubling dynamic (Bhabha 1985).

Admittedly, this may be only half the story as clearly part of the challenge of Nuremberg is that for some visitors – though not participants in the tours – as Macdonald elsewhere (2006) indicates, is that it is also a site for Nazi sympathisers to indulge their ‘over-identification’.
2.2.3 Contact zones

Authority can also be shown to be at play in Macdonald’s performances, but, in this particular way, the “performances” at the three study sites in this thesis share something more explicitly with those encounters between white visitors and Native American living history interpreters that Laura Peers (2007) has investigated at historic reconstruction sites in Canada and the US. Indeed, it is Peers (not me) who makes the connection with the Coalition (2007:xxxii-iii; 178-9). In the Site of Conscience she sees the attempt to engage visitors through dialogue as a means to rethink power relations both past and present as a useful guide for achieving better understanding between the American mainstream and the Native American minority.

What is interesting in her work, however, is how dialogue with the present begins in dialogue with the past. The historical enactments, in which Native American interpreters perform characters from their own history, provide an opportunity, as visitors discover against expectations, to complicate the contemporary relationship between the two communities. This is achieved by effectively replaying the historical contact between whites and the indigenous population, before hegemony of the immigrants had been achieved and when social relations were still being negotiated. These re-enactments reconstruct a time when the relationship between immigrants and natives was unsettled and unformed. It does this partly in terms of chronology but, as Peers’ argument goes, it also does this through the authorising influence of the museum, which gives authority over the hegemonic narrative over to the minority and otherwise excluded group.
As such, rather than claiming the need for museums to utilise their cultural authority responsibly, Peers is able to posit the idea that, in the presence of the past, what matters is a constant negotiation of authority over the meaning of place. ‘These sites,’ she argues

are always works in progress, continually revised through contestation, negotiation, and compromise. This struggle takes place between Native and non-Native staff, interpretive and administrative staff, administrators and government agencies, and visitors and the site in all its human and material manifestations. The expectations and meanings of historic sites may originate from each of these groups, but are revised in the communicative process that takes place between them all (2007: xxiii-xxiv)

To encompass the dynamic of this social network of cultural actors, Peers draws on the idea of the ‘contact zone’, a concept previously applied to museums by James Clifford (1997:188-219) but originally defined by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) as ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other’ (Pratt 1992:4, quoted in Peers 2007:xx). As I discuss in Chapter Four, the translation of the term to the museum is, in Clifford’s version, essentially focused on the relationships taking place between the institution and its source communities, not least because of its expectation that contact represents an ongoing relationship. However, by including visitors in its dynamic of cross-cultural engagement, Peers recognises that
even the short-lived, one-off visits can play into the negotiation of ‘ongoing stories of struggle’ (Clifford 1997:193).

Two things stand out from her account: firstly, that the site itself is changed by those meeting there; and secondly, that the most effective of those meetings are fundamentally live and improvisational. She notes that ‘[t]he most powerful moments that happen at these places occur when non-Native visitors encounter Native interpreters, when the face-to-face nature of this encounter brings conflicting myths and histories into direct proximity’ (2007:xxxi). Dialogue (in the Coalition’s vein of a negotiation of difference) is not an additional aspect of the visitor experience. It is intrinsic to an event of cross-cultural exchange, positively generated from a conflict of interest between people representing themselves.

The museum becomes a site firstly where competing interpretations of the past are played out rather than a means through which a singular meta-narrative or message is communicated. And secondly, because of its improvisational quality, it is at the same time, a negotiation of contemporary relations between mainstream and minority communities. The museum is no longer just communicating historical interpretation; it becomes a place of dialogue. In this, it serves well as a model for understanding and conceptualising the Site of Conscience.

Like Macdonald’s past encounters, critical to the power of Peers’ contact zone is its quality of uncertainty and playfulness. And like Macdonald’s encounters, Peers demonstrates how performance embodies an uncertainty
which allows for the discomfort of identifying with the historical Other to be played out. Only here, in opposite circumstances, rather than forming a complicity over not authenticating the Other, there is a more positive option to authenticate the Other. In the contact zone, being able to identify is essential to the intercultural dialogue.

2.2.4 Performing authority

Uncertainty in this instance is not only an indication of the possibility of communicative mis-readings, it is the product of contested readings coming into contact and by their immediate interaction displacing the authorial control of the museum that brings them together. This is a significant revision of the museum’s social agency that needs to be synthesised with the conceptualisation offered by Sandell. Where Katriel extends Sandell’s rhetorical formulation and Macdonald reveals the potentialities of an immanent dissonance within heritage performances, Peers offers a scenario in which the possibility of communicative failure generates intercultural dialogue where the authority of the museum effects its own exclusion.

However, under these circumstances, it is necessary to look again at the risk in performance failure. Where the risk for Macdonald was in the potential failure for guides to have communicated their ‘preferred readings’, the contact zone modifies the tension between the active audience and the museum’s cultural authority, putting it in terms set out by Pratt’s original formulation, namely one which emphasises ‘co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power’ (Pratt 1992:6-7). Ostensibly, this translates
to an inequality between visitors and Native Americans in which the risk in communication failure is not common on each side: for the interpreters, it would represent a rejection and further exclusion, whilst for visitors it would constitute an ineffective historical encounter in which nothing was learnt.

But what shifts this apparent imbalance and makes this an empowering interaction – a ‘beneficial interface’ – is the transfer of authority in which Native interpreters now speak for themselves but with the authority of the museum. This implicates visitors into a possible process not only of recognising Native Americans to be represented but moreover to tell their own story as part of the national or hegemonic narrative on their own terms. It is this possibility that Peers recognises as bearing a capacity to change the relation between marginalised Other and mainstream in a fundamental way.

In thinking about how to conceptualise the Site of Conscience, it is precisely this transfer of authority and the implied recognition of the Other it facilitates that seems important to carry forward. Irit Rogoff, writing of different circumstances, has put forward the same basic need where museums are working in contexts of cultural difference. Speaking of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, where the German museum has sought, to some degree, to redeem the national identity by bringing into presence a particular part of it that historically it cut off, she notes that it is not adequate enough to represent the absence. Rather, she argues, ‘the encounter with cultural difference cannot be done by representing a loss or an absence, but needs to come about by the museum acknowledging and enacting a loss of some part of itself’ (2002: 64). This, I would suggest, is what is achieved where Native
Americans are genuinely – and that is a proviso which sits at the heart of Peers’ critical study of the historic sites – handed authority to represent themselves. I would suggest that the same enactment of loss constitutes part of the achievement of the Site of Conscience.

Two issues are raised by this, however: Firstly, Sites of Conscience take place at sites where the historical Other can be both recognised as already having authority to speak – predominantly the case at the Tenement Museum – as well as not – predominantly the case at The Workhouse – or indeed, as well as both (a contested authority) – as at Perm-36. Given this range of authorial positions for the historical Other, in trying to at least propose a general schema for the Site of Conscience, I would argue that what links them is the possibility of transferring authority, in any of these cases, to the historical Other to speak for themselves and not through the museum’s representation. By this transfer, visitors would have to negotiate their relationship to the Other directly.

The second issue is that the difficulty of presenting this case is in whether it is possible to have contemporary representatives of the historical Other to represent themselves at the sites. Certainly at the three case study sites in this research, this is limited: At Perm-36, there is, but only on the rarest occasion, opportunity to be guided by an ex-prisoner. At the Tenement Museum, as I discuss in Chapter Three, second generation immigrants have been recruited as guides but they do not represent the communities of the historical Other. As such, as narrators of the historical narrative, they only represent the museum not themselves. At The Workhouse, there is no use of
the contemporary ‘inheritor’ of the workhouse population, be that a welfare beneficiary or a welfare officer, to narrate the story. As such, at these sites visitors do not meet the representatives of the historical Other who carry forward their ‘ongoing stories of struggle’ in the present.

For this reason, it is necessary to further conceptualise the enactment of loss. For now it must fall to both the museum and the visitor, or the playing out of the relationship between them, to achieve the same enactment of loss. And it is here where a state of uncertainty replaces actual presence of the Other as the principle for the conditions in which the Site of Conscience can effect the transformative transfer of authority.

Uncertainty has been given renewed ethical force by key contemporary social thinkers, identifying it as a point of resistance and mobilisation as much as a danger to human life (Baumann 2007; Wolff 2008; Butler 2004). It thus has good grounds as an articulating principle for a contemporary museum that might be ‘based on the idea that shared authority is more effective at creating and guiding culture than institutional control’ (Lynch and Alberti: 2010:15).

Both Macdonald and Peers show that uncertainty in the communicative event creates a choice to identify with the historical Other. Moreover, they show that in that choice the past is brought forthrightly into the present. To choose to identify is to take on the story of the historical Other, not to accept it passively or as already part of one’s own story. It is to have crossed the gap of otherness if not to become their representative in the present, at least
to include them in your own narrative. At Nuremberg, this is not the choice most want to make; at Peers’ sites it is a choice to listen and pass on the stories of the interpreters, a choice that is easier to make. But in both instances it is a choice to be made in the uncertain moment of encounter.

2.2.5 Limits to transformation
The Site of Conscience only seeks to translate history into dialogue, that is it seeks only to create the choice of identification such that it is a problem to debate in the present. The question the case studies pose is if this is enough to effect a transformation; and it is a question that Tony Bennett (2006), with different inflection, has raised more broadly of the dialogic innovations within museums, especially those that are derived out of the contact zone model.

On the one hand, the contact zone has served as a valuable paradigm for both practice and critique since Clifford’s first articulation of it (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Witcomb 2003; Macdonald 2003; Ames 1999). Bennett has noted, in his review of the museum’s contemporary role as a site of intercultural understanding, how the literature around contact zones meets with ‘the kind of exhibition practices that are needed to break with the discursive and sensory ordering of the exhibitionary complex’ (2006: 64). Significantly, it complements what he understands as the need for a dialogism that accents indeterminacy, de-centring, and a fluidity of authority (2006: 62-63). Again it is uncertainty and the flow of authority that underpins the dynamic of cultural exchange and its potential to transform the museum.
However, Bennett raises the concern that these new practices, so long as they operate within the same logic of culture as the governmental museum, only serve to distinguish between social groups – between those in the cosmopolitan elite, who are ‘open to all forms of otherness’ (Hage 1998:201, quoted in Bennett 2006:65) and those who are not – where the cultural capital required to engage with the practices is not evenly spread across the social body (Bennett 2006:65). Bennett’s praise for new dialogic forms is thus tempered by his concern that they cannot break through the ‘extraordinary inertia which results from the inscription of social structures in bodies’ (Bourdieu 2000:41, quoted in Bennett 2006:66) and hence they are at risk of rendering museums less accessible to the mechanisms by which ‘socially majoritarian behaviours and values are routinely reshaped and transformed’ (Bennett 2006:66).

My interest has not been to identify, in terms of either social or cultural capital, those who do transform, or participate in the transformation of, the historic sites into Sites of Conscience and my research therefore does not tackle this concern head on. However, it is my contention – at least at this point, whilst still at the conceptualizing phase – that the Site of Conscience may need to go further than just creating the choice to identify with the historical Other and that some greater pressure needs to be made within the visiting event if these encounters are to effect change at a more fundamental level.
On that basis, it is necessary to return again to Peers and the contact zone encounters that she is able to identify as being (potentially) transformative at a societal level. It is her argument, as well as mine, that to understand that potential it requires a consideration of the theatrical conditions under which her encounters took place. At the historic re-enactment sites, Native interpreters were not just representing themselves, they were ‘playing themselves’ (Peers 2007:xxiii), not necessarily in role (‘playacting’) even if elsewhere on site there is that kind of first-person interpretation going on. The dynamic of the moment comes from the overlaying of the real on real within a ludic context, creating a situation Peers identifies as ‘dark play’ (Schechner 1993:38), ‘in which one is no longer certain that what one knows is true’ (Peers 2007:147). Under these circumstances, visitors are drawn into a scenario in which choosing to communicate with the historical Other is a condition for recognising the contemporary Other. It is the uncertainty of play, in the encounter with the past, that catches the visitor as they seek out a successful learning experience, only then to discover that they are participants in an encounter with the present. Where habitus may remain an obstacle to transformation, this ludic context suggests a further refinement of dialogic practice that might keep it accessible and engage it directly with habitus (cf. Yarrow and Cameron n.d.).

2.2.6 Theatrical frame

Thus, I would suggest that although the contact zone has brought new innovation in terms of dialogue and ‘shared authority’ (Lynch and Alberti 2010), recognising that the dialogue emerges from the encounter with the (historical) representation is essential to its radical possibilities. Bernadette
Lynch and Samuel Alberti, who are concerned with the conditions of participation, nonetheless focus, like many innovations drawing on the contact zone, on the processes of contemporary negotiation between mainstream and the marginalised other, as opposed to the encounter with the displayed Other, the object or the past. Just as the Coalition’s agenda proposes, a dialogue with the present needs to emerge from the dialogue with the past.

This therefore calls for further conceptualisation of the theatrical nature of the contact zone. In the absence of theatre itself, it is necessary to think about the conditions of play in which visitors choose to participate, seeking a successful communication and find themselves taking up the story of the historical Other for themselves. The question I take forward into my conceptualisation is how to understand the museum as a place of uncertainty that signals performance as the mode of communication. In that uncertainty, authority comes into play and the visitors’ imaginative encounters with the historical Other become a choice of identification, when the past emerges in the present. This would offer a more specific definition of the Site of Conscience from, as it were, the visiting perspective, that relies above all on the visitor’s individual choices to enact the loss of the museum and to perform their relation to the Other.

Karen Till (2008), in her work on memory artists and activists, has presented the case where just such a transformation begins to occur. Describing both site-specific performances and museum practices that are socially-engaged, she shows how these can unsettle experiences – and thereby knowledge – of
place, creating dialogue between diverse audiences. Ordinary sites become ‘wounded’ places (2008:107-9), sites of contestation, experienced as multisensual and multivocal, altered from their conventionally conceived state ‘as passive surfaces or objects imprinted by the past’ (2008:104).

Here, the theatre is not always a conceptual frame but can be the event, an experiential frame therefore put around place. But for Till, the same frame is placed around sites where they are inter-subjectively imagined; and in her examples of such re-framings she includes the Coalition and its work. In her examples, she encourages a way to look at a historic site museum as a site where meetings “take place” such that ‘through this particular place, the living [come] into contact with past lives and [begin] to imagine more socially just futures’ (2008:101). Taking forward her examples, I seek to conceptualise those meetings as they might be produced through the museum visiting event.

2.3 Performing Museums

It has therefore been the absence of live theatrical presentation within the normal visiting experiences at the three case study sites that has particularly complicated my research but also prompted consideration of the relationship between theatre and the transformative capacity of museums. Rather than looking at how performance effects transformative exchanges, I have proposed to conceive visits as theatrically performed in order to investigate how sites become Sites of Conscience.
I have already identified how performance introduces uncertainty into communicative processes and thereby effects and sustains a transfer of authority. Where performance is not explicit, it becomes necessary to consider what the conditions of performance are that create uncertainty and how these can therefore be brought into play in the museum. In this section, I briefly consider examples of theatre that has been developed as a tool of social change and empowerment. From these examples, it is possible to identify how audiences can be implicated into the creative act of the performance, interrupting and taking control of the uncertainties and impossibilities which it otherwise mystifies.

I then consider various ways in which the visitor has been conceived as a performer, starting with the more obvious scenario of the living history site. However, I then look at how a ‘performing museology’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000) proposes a way of introducing the same interruption into the museum but raise the concern that at the historic site museum such an approach is complicated by the overflow of the real beyond the museum’s control. In this overflow, I argue, the relationship between museum and visitor is itself constituted of interruptions and suggests, therefore, that it is within the playing out of the relationship that the choice to transform the site into a Site of Conscience, bringing the past into an urgent contemporary dialogue, emerges.

The performative nature of both the cultural and social has entered into the critical canon even to the point of saturation (Macdonald n.d.; Carlson 1996).
Using “performance” to explain cultural and social phenomena has, as Marvin Carlson reminds us, transformed it into a ‘contested concept’ (1996:1) in which no single use can lay claim to its meaning. However, he does draw on one attempt at an over-arching idea, one which is useful to elucidate here, that:

all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action. Normally, this comparison is made by an observer of the action…but the double consciousness, not the external observation, is what is most central. (1996:5)

Performance is inherently for someone; and, on that basis, those studies of museums that have used the performance paradigm, such as those already cited, keenly observe how museums effect and cultivate similarity and difference between performance and audience, even where the audience are themselves performers, (also, Longhurst et al.2004; Bagnall 2003; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The distance between the performance and what the performance represents is critical to the museum’s epistemological regime and in that gap they play out processes of identification and discourses of knowledge (Smith 2006; Bennett 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).
In turning to theatrical performance as a model, however, this study seeks to focus on the ‘consciousness of doubleness’ not only as a mechanism of performance’s completion but, more usefully, as an epistemological space in which participation in the performance can become a choice. Interrupting the flow of comparison between the action and the model it represents, recalls the reality of the action and hence its contingency upon the conditions in which it is performed to make sense. Double consciousness is put to work.

The final argument of this chapter is that, in the absence of a theatrical performer at the historic site museum, it is the visitor’s individual attempt to recreate the historical Other that is the performed act. In the case study analyses, I look at exposing this as real and contingent upon the circumstances in which it is performed to give it meaning forms part of the toing and froing within the visiting experience generally. In the process of transforming site into Site of Conscience, however, this becomes a particular demand for the visitor. Just as the Other ‘playing themselves’ brought the challenge to visitors to accept the Other as part of their own narrative of identity, so, in seeing themselves performing the Other, visitors are potentially challenged to accept the Other as part of their own lifeworld.

2.3.1 Empowering theatre

In trying to understand how the relationship between museum and visitor can be a transformative process for both participants, emphasis, I argue here, would need to fall on the operation of double consciousness as the condition in which comparison is made. I propose this on the basis of similar discussions about the empowering capacities of theatre. Experimentation
with using theatre as a tool for social change has an extended history but became a particular concern of theatre practitioners in the early twentieth century, notably by those who saw classical, Western theatre as an operative of hegemonic control.

In these experimentations, particular concern has been for how theatre can intervene in, rather than reproduce social process by utilising the gap between the performance and what it represents as a new epistemological space. Two practitioners stand out from these experimentations: Augusto Boal, for whom the gap allows for the action on stage to be altered in order to change the ideal it represents – performed in a theatre form he called Forum Theatre (Boal 1979); and Bertolt Brecht, for whom, the action is revealed – by playing the gap through a performed distancing effect – as only making sense by the acceptance of belief in it, thereby provoking the audience to question all action as only making sense in the context of its historical and hence changeable conditions – performed in a theatre form he called Epic Theatre (Brecht 1964).

If these examples demonstrate how the comparative effect of performance can be put to work, they also demonstrate how that effect is only achievable through exploiting the double consciousness that allows the action to be both itself and a something else it is trying to be. Classical theatre in the West exploits the pleasure gained via the actor’s skill to unify the two and thereby unify the awareness of doublessness; theatre that seeks to empower its audience is most effective when it exploits the awareness of doublessness as a creative tool for perceiving reality as changeable.
James Boon and Jane Plastow (2004) have identified a primary motivation for those working with theatre towards social change:

by enabling people to discover and value their own humanity, both individually and in relation to others, they seek to empower those involved to claim the status of creative, thinking beings who have agency over the shaping of their lives and those of their families and communities (Boon and Plastow 2004:8)

Creativity and reflection are the goals of a theatre that seeks to expose reality as conditional and contingent; but these are not just theatrical achievements. Arthur Koestler describes the creative act as a ‘bisociative pattern’ during which ‘two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact’ (1989:45), the effects of which run along a continuum through the ‘triptych’ humour-discovery-art. Thus, at one end is the spontaneous explosion of the aggressive-defensive laugh; and at the other, the self-transcending, gradual catharsis or ‘earthing’ of the ‘participatory emotions’ (ibid.:89). But both are produced, in Koestler’s formulation, by the contrived meeting of two, independent cognitive discourses or expectations.

In terms of critical thought, both can flow into new knowledge (‘discovery’) – though Koestler does suggest that humour is intrinsically more immediate and less reflective and that it is in the aesthetic recognition that something of the universal or infinite has been revealed that thought and understanding are engaged (ibid.:88). Still, his essential argument lies in this, that:
habits are the indispensable core of stability and ordered
behaviour; they also have a tendency to become mechanized
and to reduce man to the status of a conditioned automaton.
The creative act, by connecting previously unrelated
dimensions of experience, enables him to attain to a higher
level of mental evolution. It is an act of liberation – the defeat
of habit by originality (ibid.:96).

Habit and routine – habitus – are, for Koestler as for many others, a form of
oppression that denies the human potential to reflect on and discover their
reality. ‘Creative, thinking beings’ know the freedom to transform the
everyday. Through their actions and interactions they seek out and perceive
an original ‘situation or idea…in [the coincidence of] two self-consistent but
habitually incompatible frames of reference’ (Koestler 1989:35). This can
dissipate in laughter or melt into the deeper emotions. But ‘the act of
creation’ itself is the way we come to a realisation or exposition of the
arbitrary conditions under which our habits are made even as we follow
them. It releases potential to see our lives again and threatens the safety of
our routines. It makes for a doubleness of being, a self-consciousness that
can objectify the subjective. It is the ability to see and know the world as a
place of many possibilities and is thus the ability to empower oneself. The
‘creative, thinking being’ is not necessarily someone who makes new choices
and changes but rather one who is aware of their choices even as they act:
who is in a constant state of ‘becoming’.

That creativity should a) firstly be recognised in the reaction it receives from
others and b) potentially empower by acting at the meeting point of two planes and that the intersecting of these planes should be unstable or at least present instability makes theatre a particularly appropriate medium for its enactment (Yarrow 2001; Schechner 1988). Theatre, perhaps unlike the plastic or visual arts and even dance, is peculiarly dependent on the reaction of an audience for its creative achievement (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Rancière 2009; Sauter 2000; Grotowski 1975:32; Soyinka 1990:42); and, unlike the (dialogic) novel, it is experienced with others.

But it is also achieved through the meeting of different, essential pairs of planes or matrices: between fiction and reality, between actor and spectator and between Self and Other. Performance has been understood as a transformation based on the tension, or extension between such pairs: daily and the extra-daily (Barba 1995); the Self and Other Self (Emigh 1996); the worldly and the non-worldly (Nair et al 1993) – and in classical writings it lies between the ordinary and the aesthetic. Each of these express a movement in perception which both the performer and the performance nurture and which in classical Western theatre tends to be a one-way movement away from the everyday.

In the theatre of empowerment, what matters is interrupting such a completion. One of Brecht’s significant influences was his exposure to Chinese theatre, which, at least from his perspective, played with the relationship between the real, ‘everyday’ identity of the performers and their characters, setting up a two-way flow between the realms (Brecht 1964: 91-100). This ‘ontological juggling of self and other’ (Emigh 1996: xix) brings to
consciousness the arbitrariness of the action on stage and it is this that Brecht experiments with as a meta-theatrical device to turn the audience’s attention to reflecting on the narratives that control actions in their own lives. Essentially, Brecht’s distancing effect is to recall to the audience that the action is but also it is not what it is. As Terry Eagleton explains:

> For Brecht, the whole point of acting was that it should be in a peculiar sense hollow or void. Alienated acting hollows out the imaginary plenitude of everyday actions, deconstructing them into their social determinants and inscribing within them the conditions of their making (1985:633)

Such a self-voiding is resonant with my earlier discussion of Irit Rogoff’s call for the museum’s ‘enacting a loss of some part of itself’ (Rogoff 2002:64); and it is, I am arguing, in the interruption of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1975) between two states of being that such a loss is performed.

Richard Schechner re-introduced the term ‘not-not-me’ (Winnicott 1971) to describe the particular, in-between state of the actor in performance, an experience of self ‘not directly but through the medium of experiencing the [elements of not me-ness]’ (Schechner 1985:112). For Schechner, this is ‘a field of limitless potential, free as it is from both the person (not) and the person impersonated (not not)’ (1981:88). Rustom Bharucha’s (1984) critique of Schechner’s inter-culturalism, in which he challenges the idea that the state of in-betweenness is universally equivalent, brings further to light that the performer’s state is one between two states of reality, one real and one
possible and the creative act, which is locally realised and received, is the process of bringing these different matrices together.

Where theatre experiments as a creative tool for social change, or indeed where, as performance art it seeks to provoke and unsettle (Fischer-Lichte 2008) is in its intervention that recalls the everyday, the normative reality of the acting itself. By intervening in the shared understanding that what is performed is not real and recalling, instead, that it is real, these theatres provoke in their various ways the desire in the audience to act, whether that is to change the action on stage, the social conditions under which everyday actions become meaningful or to stop the stage action completely. But firstly they intervene by bringing awareness to their audiences of the possibility of change and the availability of choice.

This marks a change in the cognitive and/or experiential position of the audience. Watching performance is a participatory mode of engagement. Under normal circumstances, the complicity performance requires puts actor and audience into a mutually dependent relationship. Erika Fischer-Lichte explains:

The individual participants – be they performers or spectators – experience themselves as subjects that are neither fully autonomous nor fully determined by others; subjects that accept responsibility for a situation which they have not created but which they participate in. (2009:391)
Intervening is to turn the responsibility around and assert that all participants are creators of the event. Audience are now to see themselves as actors, whether of the narrative on stage (for Boal) or in the social world (for Brecht). That is, they are to see themselves as engaging with an otherness ‘that performance is not but which it constantly struggles in vain to embody’ (Carlson 1996:6; also Roach 1996:3). Boal gives this new status a name – the ‘spect-actor’ (1992:xxx) – but his is just one formulation, one where the other is an ideal of one’s own life and in which the stage becomes a ‘rehearsal of revolution’ (1979:141). For some, where this falls short of acting in the social world, this may not actually be enough (Womack 2000).

Interrupting the flow of performance is to interrupt the terms on which communication is made possible and hence to create choice about how individual audience members participate. Breaking into the complicity that makes classical, Western theatre possible requires disbelieving the fiction and exposing the real within it, bringing to the fore the doubleness of performance and thereby sharing control of the creative act.

In thinking, therefore about theatre’s transformative effect as a model to take into the study of the museum visit, it is the idea of interruption and self-interruption in processes of communication and learning that I take forward. It is to consider the interruption of the equivalent flow of experience in which different cognitive and experiential matrices are brought together. For the museum, a set of dissociative matrices comparable to the theatre might be proposed: Self and Other, reality and constructed reality, the object and the context into which it is (re)placed (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:17-79),
inside and outside. Identifying such matrixes and tensions forms a central part of the case study analyses, although I have not specifically categorised the analyses as such. However, for the Site of Conscience, it is how these tensions might correlate to the particular translation of past to present, history and dialogue that matters. Where the Coalition envisions the inherent connection between these, it is where the connection is exposed as contingent and a choice in the face of the real that theatre offers an alternative conceptualisation based in the visiting experience.

2.3.2 Performing Museology

It is through the case study analyses that the thesis tries to identify means by which visitors come, firstly, to see themselves as performers and, secondly, in that moment, to discover a choice to take forward the narrative of the historical Other into their own. In so doing, the thesis as a whole participates in a critical discussion concerning alternative museological strategies and visiting practices that, as Tracy Davis has noted of her examples, ‘promote self-reflection and a conscious performance by the visitor of the meaning of the place’ (1995:16, original emphasis).

It is this emerging discovery by visitors that they are performers in the museum that matters, I am arguing, for the Site of Conscience. What it means to act here is precisely the question of the thesis, and what a performance looks like is for the case study analyses to discuss. But as performance, these are to be constituted by a double consciousness, an awareness of the act of visiting itself, which interrupts or is raised by the interruption of the communicative flow and allows for the communicative
participation to become a choice. Here, I look at some ways in which museum encounters are understood to create and provoke visitor performances.

1. Living History

In this, the living history site, where a full re-construction of the past immerses visitors in the play of the past, does, inevitably, offer a useful model for understanding the visitor as performer. Whilst I have already identified a problematic of the research to be the absence of live theatrical interpretation within the normal visiting experiences at the three case study sites, there is a sense in which, within that void, there are certain dynamics of the living history encounter that remain in play and useful for the investigation.

Later, I turn to investigate the implications for these in terms of the Site of Conscience through my analysis of the one theatrical interpretation available to me in my fieldwork: the living history tour at the Tenement Museum. Here, I look briefly at the living history site to highlight some of the ways that model a dynamics of encounter in which the visitor’s performance comes to the fore through the uncertainties of communication.

Living history takes various forms and the study of it, as both museum and theatre, has identified how it thus variously alters and informs the two disciplines that it unites and those who operate within them. Fundamental to the visiting experience is how ‘[t]he playful and serious collision of two
worlds gives the historical re-creation its special dynamic’ (Snow 1993:148).
Stephen Snow, in his analysis of Plimoth Plantation, identifies a dynamic of
two worlds, past and present, within the interpreters themselves, which, by
the different historical contexts, exist there in a playful tension (ibid.:148-
152). But the tensions and contradictions are equally projected onto the
visiting experience.

Authenticity and possibility are constantly at play in the living history
experience. Here, through the performances of both actor/ interpreter and
visitor, ‘living bodies in the present promise a more “real” experience of the
past than what visitors would get from viewing a collection of historic
objects’ (Magelssen 2006a:21). The paradox that the artifice of the present
should be more ‘real’ than the original object emerges in the event where the
subjunctive or imaginary world temporarily encompasses the indicative or
‘real’ world (Schechner 1985:92-93). Hence, both the real and the imaginary
belong (temporarily) to the same order.

As Tony Jackson and Helen Rees Leahy (2005) report of their findings with
children at two museums in England, the artifice of live interpretation is
memorable as a way of ‘seeing it for real’. The reference to ‘seeing’ in this
case is revealing of the hegemony of the visual within the museum space
(where this research took place) and it is different in the historic site. Whilst
the theatrical is still fashioned within the logic of the visual demonstration of
in situ display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:189-203, Jackson 2000:204), the
mode of encounter is explicitly performative and hence ‘[b]odily experience,
not simply visual markers or physical characteristics becomes the guarantor
of authentic witness to events of the past’ (Magelssen 2006a:22). The means by which that guarantee is made is through performance styles that are improvisatory and environmental, where the spontaneous and the casual become ‘an integral part of the texture of the experience to which you have now become connected’ (Jackson 2000:206).

At Plimoth Plantation, what emerges as most significant about the theatrical surrogacy of the live and present bodies for those of the past is that it ‘provides a structure for the visitors’ experience that defines and signals the ‘rules of the game’ they [the visitors] are being asked to play, even if it does not control what they actually do’ (Jackson 2000:204). In other words, the visitor enters the ‘as if’ world of the living history site or live interpretation on certain terms that will engage their participation even as the visitor’s choice in what to do there (with their body, their senses and with their language) is managed by their independent negotiation of those terms.

Whilst, as Snow notes of Plimoth, ‘audience-participation is the fundamental mode of actor-audience interaction’, it is also a theatre in which ‘the audience…largely organizes its own time and space’ (Snow 1993:174). For Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett this introduces a new ‘performative pedagogy’ that is experiential first:

Immersed in an experiential situation, the visitor uses all her senses to plot her own path, at her own pace, through an imagined world…Learning here is all process and discover. It is partial, negotiable, polyvocal.’ (1998:195)
The freedom that the living history site ascribes to the visitor allows them to be in two places at one time: their own present and the present of the historical site. The degree of that ascription, as I discuss in Chapter Three of the living history tour at the Tenement Museum, is affected by the subjectivity of the interpretation: first, second or third person. As such, the interpretation plays with its own authority, variously allowing for the rules of engagement to be challenged by the visitor. This is just as in the theatre, where the audience is free to break from the “willing suspension of disbelief”. Except that at the living history site, the real world of the visitor’s everyday, by their physical presence “on stage”, is a material part of the make-believe.

In first-person interpretation scenarios, such as at Plimoth Plantation, unless the “really real” of the visitor’s present appears within the artifice of the “real” past’s present, there is no creation of an epistemological space. Whilst it is necessary for the visitor to accept the representation as possible, unless they have the capacity to be themselves, outside of the representation and in the everyday where the representation (as a living past) is impossible, they cannot engage with and learn from it. The control that the reconstruction and its agents can claim only exists if, in exercising it, they provoke a resistance in the form of the visitor’s double being, within and without the museum’s performance. In other words, the active role of the visitor is not just to understand, it is also to doubt and question.
The risk of communication failure is everywhere at play at the living history site and on occasion this uncertainty of experience can emerge into the narrative, as when visitors protested angrily against re-enactments of slave auctions at Colonial Williamsburg (Magelssen 2006b). Here, the logic of the institution’s presentation committed to its own historical accuracy did not allow for the voicing of resistance (whether internal or external) amongst the slave characters, leaving visitors uncomfortable about their lack of representation.

As with Laura Peers’ historical re-enactments, where the living history site thus reveals its usefulness as a model of interaction for the Site of Conscience is in where the realisation of the past emerges as a pressure on the contemporary social world. This is all the time possible, however, in the instability of a heightened reality played across the gap between past and present. It is, in part, the way the historic site museum differently plays across this gap – through its live (but non-theatrical) and mediated interpretations – that the possibilities of the Site of Conscience need to be investigated.

2. Performing Museology

Given that this research is investigating the performative role of the visitor where there is no clear signalling of a theatrical engagement, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000) has usefully defined the contemporary museum as a genre of theatre. Identifying three particular museological approaches, this new ‘performing museology’ constitutes a significant shift in how museums have had to question ‘what they are as a medium and their role in
In the first instance, she proposes the Expo model as representing a set of ‘paradigmatic shifts’ placing experience before information, feeling before knowing, and stories before objects as well as emphasising more flexible pedagogies and dramatic museum designs. These new museums are ‘a new kind of information space, one that puts information into space and into relationship with the visitor’s body’ (2000:4). They seek to create a total experience in which visitors ‘come to the museum to find themselves’ (ibid.:9). This includes a category of museums she calls ‘museums of conscience’ in which history must be represented in its complexity and difficulty if it is to meet the diverse identities of its public.

In the second instance, are those museums that, finding their collections and methods of display obsolete, have decided to put themselves on display. In this, a ‘performing museology makes the museum perform itself by making the museum qua museum visible to the visitor’ (2000:11). This has been developed into a further model in which the museum becomes a ‘project’ a process in which visitors are now recognised as producers. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in its best form, the performing museum is reflexive and about itself and draws visitors into doing the same. She gives two examples, which both offer insight in terms of the Site of Conscience, inasmuch as both, though in different contexts, deal with difficulty. Both allow difficult matters to be discussed through the co-production of display and interpretation: it is the mode of engagement not the subject that brings the issues to the surface. In the instance of the ‘Gun Sculpture’ – melded from decommissioned
weapons donated by private and public sources – the project worked ‘as a catalyst to take concrete steps in stopping violence, starting with weapons, and as a space of witnessing, debate, reflection, and memory that is global in its reach’ (2000:13).

Where these new museums and techniques represent a paradigm shift is in their new relationship to the visitor. Just as at the living history site where the knowledge regime is participatory, so too does the performing museum catalyse visitors into an active role that participates in the creation of the visiting experience, if not the museum itself. This opens museums up to a participation that registers ‘their constituencies neither in their older museum mode of citizen as someone to be reformed nor in the newer one of customer expecting good service…[but as] producers’ (2000:13). At its best, it puts the visitor inside the process of authentication that museums perform (see also, Casey 2005, 2003).

In these new practices, it is possible to see how museums are achieving a level of performance into which visitors are equally cast in a performative role. But in this they contrast with the historic site museum where ‘putting information into space’ is directly at odds with the relationship the historic site has with visitor bodies. It is important to see that historic site museums, and certainly the three case study sites, are engaged in the kind of transformations of the museum that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes (and defines). They, too, are interested in the efficacy of a total environment to get closer to the experience of the historical Other and to gain a feeling for, as much as a knowledge, of the past.
At the same time, however, the museum is never able to contain the historic site and where this is the case, the determination to re-create the past both includes and excludes visitors. The historic site museum has a past to display that, like the museum’s artefact, is both objective and incomplete but, unlike the museum’s object, it is already and always in its own environment. Hence where Kirshenblatt-Gimblett considers the museum as ‘a new kind of information space’, there is a layer of resistance within the fabric of the historic site that cannot permit simply of this transformation. The past encompasses any attempt to put the information of the historic site into space – even if that is attempted through reconstructions, interpretation and the intervention of exhibition as it is (in differing forms) at the sites on which my analysis is based.

In other words, the museum’s performance is constantly challenged and contained by the unmistakable presence and realness of the past which it (in producing the heritage of the site) is only trying to confirm. In this, the museum is always at risk, unintentionally, of putting itself also on display. In looking at how visitors come to see themselves as performers at the case study sites, the possibility of reaching beyond the frame of the museum becomes a useful point of exposure. Visitors perform twice: in the shared project of experiencing the past with the museum, and in doing so, in the process of making a museum of the past.
3. Performing the Museum

Other performance-based analyses of the visiting event investigate the embodied agency of the visitor within their relationship between museum, object/site and visitor (Garoian 2001; Patraka 1996; Davis 1995). These are all aimed at breaking open visiting practices from their subjectivization by hegemonic assumptions of museum culture in which the real is codified. Sometimes these investigations suggest that the visitor as performer consorts with the logic of the museum (Davis), and at other times they claim that the visitor is a disruptive presence which ‘produces a crisis of knowledge that is essential to the learning process’ (Garoian 2001:236). For Vivian Patraka, the ‘live, performing bodies’ (1996:99) of visitors perform tactical, spatial practices that open up the hegemony of place and the singular narrative. In each instance, these ‘bodily actions’ (Davis 1995:36) enact responses to the embodied inscription of the museum’s authority on visitors.

Charles Garoian’s (2001) articulation of the dialogical relationship between museum and visitor is a multi-levelled depiction of learning processes in performance terms. His objective is to challenge the monologic performance of the authoritative museum – in his case, the art museum – by introducing ‘a performative museum pedagogy that re-positions viewers as critical participants and enables their creative and political agency within museum culture’ (2001:235). He posits learning as taking place at perceptual, autobiographical, cultural, interdisciplinary and institutional levels; and, at each one, involving a negotiation between personal subjectivities and the public codes and discourses that museum culture inscribes on their bodies.
At these five levels of encounter, ‘the body is intertwined with the architecture of the museum, the artifacts on exhibit, and other individuals who are encountered in the galleries’ (2001:241); ‘viewers learn to intervene in the historical content of museum culture with their memories and cultural histories’ (243); they learn ‘the academic and aesthetic codes’ (244) of museum work; they ‘interconnect and traverse...various contexts of knowledge’ (246); and finally ‘learn to participate in the cultural work of the museums’ (247). All are expressions and discoveries of visitor agency within the museum.

Garoian’s pedagogy is a useful rendition of the ‘active audience’, whose performances are not solely discursive and whose critical position is one exercised in relation to the way knowledge is constructed and shared as much as the information within it. Visitors invoke themselves and are invoked into the discourse mind and body. As such, they ‘perform the museum’, acting out a two-way relationship that changes both museum and visitor, interconnecting their two histories together (2001:247). These performances are implicit but, understood as a way of learning and communication, are described here in order to inform museum practices. These are not the explicit performances of intercultural dialogue invoked at the Site of Conscience and nor are they the self-conscious performances of an empowered audience. But they do indicate a mode of dialogic experience that complicates and explains some of the processes through which encounters with place, object and person are able to manifest a creative and critical visitor participation.
For Tracy C Davis, particular museum exhibitions invoke, through the display of reality, a physical relationship between the visitor and the artefact or site such that the visitor is deployed as the only actor ‘in a performance about the underlying meaning of the place’ (1995:15), where the place is the museum, along with the artefact or site. Davis argues that through force of its disorientations, its mixture of cognitive and affective learning, its fracturing of identities and other liminal influences, the museum targets the visitor ‘in an interactive role that requires engagement with the subject matter and ideology’ (1995:37). Ultimately, these techniques ‘activate the museumgoer to perform the relationship between the artifacts and their setting’ (ibid.:37).

Taken as a permutation of Garoian’s pedagogy, it focuses on the perceptual aspect of the museum encounter. But here, Davis recognises that the museum is an intervention between visitor and the real thing, not just a singular narrative of that thing. As such, her performer is one who is conscious of performing, and performance is an act of visiting rather than an implicit process of learning. She is interested therefore in an exhibition technique that relies ‘on tension between the visitor and the displays, while encouraging the triumph of museum logic’ (1995:15). Across a range of examples, this tension is often brought out by an exposure to the world (the ‘real’) outside the museum – the world that it tries to display and explain but at the same time exists beyond it.

Pre-empting Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s ‘performing museology’, Davis looks at examples where the visitor’s encounter is ‘with the ideology and its mise-en-
scène…rather than merely an observation of items in display cases’ (ibid.:16).

In this, visitors are faced with the choice between believing the simulacrum of display or, self-consciously, noticing it. Choosing to notice them is to be ‘confronted with a choice about our own social responsibility for social change and culpability in social stasis, and enabled to continue the project that the museum historicizes’ (ibid.:29).

Her survey of practices culminates in the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, where she turns to the display of shoes taken from victims of the death camps, in which the ‘odor invades visitors’ bodies and in so doing cements concept to experience’ (1995:35-6). Knowledge is not transmitted here as information because of the sheer scale of demand each individual item makes to be understood. And yet, rather than revealing the limitation of display to communicate meaning and hence leaving the visitor alone in a creative state of ambiguous crisis and emergency, she celebrates how, in performance, the bodily action of the overwhelmed visitor transfers the presence of the real to a cognitive grasp of its meaning. The visitor succeeds in the logic of the museum, whilst at the same time engaged in an experience that exceeds it.

Vivian Patraka’s (1996) analysis of the same museum similarly follows on from Davis’ ‘spatial theses in sophisticated interactions’ (Davis 1995:16). Patraka’s performances are more deliberately a resistance to the entombment of reverential awe that ‘hard-wires’ visitor responses to the Holocaust. They enact a self-consciousness of visiting, an awareness that there are others who are also visiting and a recognition of the impossibility to know and
remember the atrocity. For Patraka, it becomes incumbent on the museum to cajole these performances into action and hence to alert people to their own role and stake in the programme of knowing the Holocaust.

Museums are performance spaces for Patraka because of the way visitors constitute ‘live, performing bodies’ (1996:99) and because museum designers ‘produce a space and a subjectivity for the spectator’ (ibid.:99). In the specific location of the Holocaust Museum, visitors are under pressure to shift from being spectators to witnesses and in this ‘are asked to become performers in the event of understanding and remembering the Holocaust’ (ibid.:99-100).

Patraka is particularly concerned, following de Certeau (1984), that such responses are articulated within a multi-vocal ‘space’ available to ‘contestation and multiplicity of association’ and not attached to the specificities of ‘place’ in which ‘meanings are uniquely determined’ (Patraka 1996:90). Whilst she is quick to recognise the dangers of unhooking the discourse of the Holocaust from the locale of its actual happening, she advocates for a performance space that is contestable and tactical, one which foregrounds the historicity of the individual visitor-subject within the context of the more rigid place of performance that is “more about the spectacular or the quest for the Real” (1996:100). Extending Davis’ idea of engaging with the mise-en-scène of the museum’s ideology, Patraka spatialises these performances of the real.

Patraka’s dichotomy between the freedom of space and the monumentality of place brings into open contest two modes of visiting. Following de
Certeau’s work, this analysis is committed to re-instigating the autonomy of the individual, particularly in light of the Foucaultian project of describing the civic mechanisms of discipline and control. Given the governmental logic by which the public museum has been defined (Bennett 1995), Patraka’s performance analysis is a critical understanding of how visitors might become operators of ‘multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised’ (de Certeau 1984:96). For Patraka, evidence of such ‘spatial practices’, not least within the all-encompassing context of the museum as theatre, suggests how visitors might be able to discover a greater freedom to respond and thereby move the project of the museum beyond the confines of its walls and the limitations of its discourses.

Taking the performance analysis to its logical conclusion, visitors are set on a path that extends through and beyond the museum walls but along the way depositing a fixed moment where the museum stands. This double action – in which the spatialising tactics of the visitor are facilitated by the museum for its greater purposes – is also the subject of Rebecca Schneider’s critique of the monumental (2003). The monuments she “borrows” also from de Certeau are outdoor monuments: not ones you enter, ones you pass by. Her monuments share a discursive niche with the archive in their common gathering of and around the edifice, the document, the permanent. Both her monuments and her archive try to write out the live, the transient, the passer-by only to discover that they are dependent upon these, indeed they are propped up by them. In a transformation of received assumptions, she identifies, still through de Certeau, that it is from the touch of the live body
in motion that that which survives it, and wishes it into disappearance, actually succours. Turning again to the real, the everyday, the ordinary in relation to a heightened encounter, Schneider argues that:

in reading the detail as a practice, in play – we shift our focus to movement, to moving through, and in shifting to movement, change becomes not only possible, but the condition of any myth of stasis (the monument's secret). (2003:3)

The fate of the museum, as monument, as fixed point, as place lies in the hands (and bodies) of those who encounter it and walk through it – a passing by in the flow of their daily lives. The mutuality of dependence is expressive of a simultaneous interruption: the monument that interrupts the daily flow and the daily flow that interrupts the monument. In this sense, whilst what stands as place for the monumental agent, performs as space for the passer-by, the opposite is also true: the monumental is space until transfixed by the passer-by’s emplacement: ‘Change becomes…the condition of any myth of stasis’.

4. Discussion
In each example of museum practice above, visitors are understood as performers of the learning process and by that means as participating in the meaning-making event. They are not an ‘audience’ – whether active or passive – but, with their bodies and minds, they are experiencing the museum and putting something of themselves into it. The shift, in this, from
the ‘active audience’ might seem slight – where the active audience is understood as ‘constructively appropriating cultural products in potentially myriad ways’ (Macdonald 2002:219) – except that here “appropriation” is the wrong verb. The theatrical frame puts visitors within a shared knowledge environment and, as such, performance becomes a negotiation of authority and empowerment through visitors recognising and articulating their role in constructing meaning.

Importantly, the examples highlight that these are not everyday events and, as performances, these are spaces in which either what the museum is “doing” becomes apparent, or what the visitor is doing becomes apparent, or, indeed, as a result of one or other of those appearances, what both “actors” are doing become apparent. In other words, a double consciousness of experience is invoked. In these examples, this is not contrary to the museum project; and, thus, the museum can be understood as theatrical in that visitors become aware of a complicit relationship in which they can see themselves both within and outside of the communicative process initiated by the museum.

It is unclear, in Garoian’s case, whether his performances refer to an implicit performance only, in which case the role of a double consciousness in his processes of learning would be doubtful. Similarly, in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s Expo model, the total environment in which visitors find themselves does not necessarily yield to a doubling of self-awareness or self-positioning. Indeed, none of the examples argue that this is the way that all visitors visit – an argument that is insupportable and not being proposed in
this thesis. What they do do, however – Garoian and Expo included – is to advocate for a performance-based experience in which the limitations of the museum are consciously revealed within the communicative process in order that visitors can exercise some authority within its production of knowledge.

The examples above demonstrate how visitor encounters with the real can be in tension with the discourses of the museum and yet participate in a mutual project that extends into the social world. In doing so, they highlight useful tensions – Koestler’s dissociative matrices – across which the performances are made. It is these tensions which, once exposed, are able to activate a double consciousness and potentially put it to work. For example, we see inside-outside (Davis); space-place (Patraka); past present-present present (Living History Site); everyday-noneveryday (Living History Site/ Davis); private-public (Garoian); real-constructed. It is these dissociative matrices, I am arguing, which constitute the visiting event as a creative event, one which contains a transfer of framed information and cultural knowledge. Whilst they do not explicitly rationalise the case study analyses, these tensions are the kind of variables around which the discussions of the various visiting events are constructed.

It is across these tensions that uncertainty enters into the communicative process. Whilst this still gives the opportunity to resolve the uncertainty by overlooking it and not doubting the communication, once these tensions are exposed, there is a choice created as to whether to continue to participate or not. In the instances above, we are seeing performers who choose to participate. But making that choice is a recognition and articulation of their
agency in the making of new meanings. Learning, in these instances, is not about receiving a particular discourse it is about choosing to put oneself into the museum’s narrative, thereby recognising one’s own authority and responsibility in its project. At its most socially engaged, this can have a politically transformative effect (as Davis’ example and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s ‘project’ suggest).

2.4 Performing the Historic Site Museum

When visitors become performers in the museum, I am arguing, they discover an agency within a newly conceived participatory regime. Ostensibly this is a regime ‘which they have not created but which they participate in’ (Fischer-Lichte 2009:391) but in discovering that they are a part of it, I suggest they also can discover their role as a producer. The historic site museum – as historic site and museum – does, as I have already alluded to, add further layers of complication to the way visitors are able to discover themselves as performers or re-discover the terms on which their participation is conceived.

It is for the case study analyses to identify if and how, in practice, these negotiations take place. But there remains a need to briefly conceptualise the performance visitors might discover themselves performing; that is, to articulate a model of the learning process that can best support public encounters at the historic site museum. This cannot be a full survey of how learning has been conceived for the museum, though there is an implicit response to constructivist and visitor-centred models which, to varying
degrees, support the polemic that ‘the museum is only alive when it is open and visitors are present’ (Hein 2005:359). Whilst this represents an extreme view, it is a useful provocation for a performance-based analysis of the Site of Conscience where the visitor’s agency, at an individual level, is being promoted as the medium for the museum’s social purposes.

It is my argument here that the historic site museum is a split personality: on the one hand, alive with the personnel and human guides who moreover have repopulated it with its former inhabitants. On the other, it is – like Jacques Lecoq’s ideal stage designs (2000:155) – a space that anticipates action. Abandoned by the people who lived and breathed there, it holds a void waiting to act upon those who will act in it again. Thus, where the museum intervenes to ‘harness the power of places’ (Sevcenko 2004:14), the historical encounter happens in relation to and not just mediated by the museum.

This points to potential contradictions within the museum performance – contradictions that become the point of instigation for my site analyses – and recalls the two modes of experience the Coalition proposes as constitutive of the social function of the Site of Conscience: the engagement with the past (historical interpretation) and the engagement with the present (dialogue). Laura Peers’ application of the contact zone proposes a formula for how the two are overlaid through play. But, in this, she posits a power relationship in which history and dialogue are immanent to each other that needs to be reconceived where there is no self-representation by the (historical) Other.
In advance of looking at the case study sites themselves, it is how this is immanent to competing performances that needs to be explored. Given the prerogative of the Site of Conscience to make dialogue an explicit action within the present tense of the visit, attention has to be given firstly, to how alternative narratives of the past can emerge; but secondly, how these emerge both as a provocation of the museum as well as a claim to authority by visitors. Where in Peers’ contact zone, the museum concedes authority in advance of the visitor encounter, at the historic site museum, where there is no face-to-face encounter with the Other, that concession must be made in the course of the visit.

2.4.1 Answerability

In Edward Bruner and Phyllis Gofrain’s study at the site of the mountain fortress, Masada, near the Dead Sea, in Israel, he claims ‘dialogic narration’ as the process by which contradictory performances of established stories both empower the storytellers and change society (Bruner and Gofrain 1984). Bruner argues:

An ongoing discourse emerges from the exchange of authoritative and challenging tellings and, in turn, supports a historically situated debate over the interpretation and uses of the story (ibid.:56).

Peers draws on Bruner to recall, in a similar fashion, that every narrative is contested and that there are always ‘alternative voices telling their stories’ (Peers 2007:32). The telling of stories, whilst, on the one hand, ‘a construction
of self’ is, at the same time, ‘a construction of society’ (Bruner 1984). It both individualises and socialises the narrative.

As story, performance and narrative together ‘are responsive to and interactive with themselves, with communities and their histories, and with the self’ (1984:73). Bruner draws his notion of the dialogic of narration from Bakhtin, who saw language as open-ended, ‘an uninterrupted process of historical becoming’ (Bruner ibid:1). From Bakhtin, he is able to find a sense of the individual exploring their own historical contingency whilst creating a dynamic social world.

I too place Bakhtin’s dialogic at the centre of the transformatory potential of learning at the historic site museum. It is a useful (and by now almost doxological) frame for giving back to the social the opportunity of change, where ‘[t]his dialogic freedom creates in storytelling a field for the contesting of views and of power” (Bruner 1984:57). In this argument, it is the heterogeneity of individual voices that constitutes public discourse and a society always being articulated and created by its members (cf. Hirschkop 2004).

But Bakhtin is also concerned with the concrete circumstances of how individuals experience events, indeed how an event comes to hang together out of perpetual movement – what he calls the architectonics of any given communicative act (Bakhtin 1993, 1990). This brings Bakhtin into the real place of engagement, and also brings forward the receiver into the action, allowing for the discursive connection between any given communicants to
take on a more material form. The social world is constituted not just by the exchange of voices – the storytelling – but by the affective environment in which stories emerge as meaningful experiences.

For Bakhtin, the storyteller is one agent in these situations but equally present, and active, is the receiver (Bakhtin 1990, 1981:282; Shepherd and Hirschkop 1989). Whilst Bruner encourages us, based on Bakhtin’s dialogic, to consider the playfulness of telling stories as an action upon the social through its situatedness, Bakhtin himself also alerts us to the situated awareness of all human subjectivity (Bakhtin 1990). The difference is subtle but important: it distinguishes between a space of cognition (and change) being opened up by the narrative, on the one hand, and by the situation of being addressed on the other.

Outlining his architectonics at an early point in his career, Bakhtin is particularly concerned with repudiating Kantian transcendentalism which conceived of an a priori understanding of the world separate from ‘the most immediate reality’ (Bakhtin 1981:85). Bakhtin argues against ‘theoreticism’ – that is, doctrines which entail ‘the principled split between the content-meaning of an act and the historical reality of its being’ (Bakhtin, quoted by Hirschkop 1989:7). This is perforce precisely the same point that Bruner is making, except that Bakhtin has a small advantage over him: he can think in terms of art and the novel, in terms of aesthetics.

Even where the ‘act’ is not art, the doing of it (its ‘being’) always looks towards the kind of wholeness that art achieves (Bakhtin 1990). As such,
Bakhtin defines a dialogism, not only in the story and its telling (which he does) but also and more inclusively in the activity of its reception. Architectonics comes to theorize the shared work of culture – ‘the struggle to effect a whole out of the potential chaos of parts’ (Holquist 1990:xxiii).

When Bakhtin is taken away from speaking about the novel, however, it is necessary to explore points of active understanding which are happening in a real place where there are multiple architectonics for the imagination. Tony Jackson (2007, 2005) has explored this wider application in terms of Applied Theatre, where he argues out the dichotomy between the instrumental and the aesthetic. For him, the dialogic ‘refers to the whole complex process from original conception through to reception and follow-up’ (2005: 113). The heterogeneity of the moment thus expands in such a way that existing dialogues are brought into focus and new ones added.

In the same vein, Susan Sci has argued (invoking, in this case, Dewey (1934) and not Bakhtin) that ‘the individual’s aesthetic experience at a public memorial is the foundation of the commemoration’s rhetorical significance’ (2009:42). Rather than mystifying the event of remembrance, she posits ‘aesthetic negotiation’ as a cognitive and critical practice of civic engagement. For Sci, aesthetic negotiation is ‘a form of embodied reasoning during which individuals assess the political significance of their immediate aesthetic experiences within the wider socio-cultural world (2009:41). The meaning and in particular the social agency of memorials emerges, in that sense, out of a wide set of stimuli and resonances, rooted in experience.
An ‘architectonic perspective’ of the historic site museum must similarly take into account the role of the visitor as one who responds to the concrete situation in which they find themselves addressed. By that I mean an endorsement of the museum encounter as an active experience, in which the co-ordinates of experience – time and space – are conceived both in their materiality and as relations between things and people.

This is the essential contribution of Bakhtin: that, beyond Kant, he did not limit time and space to the intuitive means by which humans perceive reality. The fundamental principle of Bakhtin’s dialogism is that each individual occupies a unique position in the world, which is historically situated and from which they gain their unique perspective, or point of view. The visual metaphor is Bakhtin’s own, but his thesis concerns speech – the physicality of language – and specifically the ‘utterance’, which bears the hallmarks of the speaker’s social and historical location. The specificity of place (and hence subjectivity) is equalled only by the inherent paradox of the argument, that every unique perspective is only ever partial and must predicate other such points of view in order to make possible a complete vision of the world.

Across his career, and in the light of this paradox, Bakhtin developed his dialogism as language in discourse. But at the early point of his writing, what was to become recognised as the heteroglossia of communication, was conceptualised within the singular ‘act’ of language, what he named the philosophy of the deed or the act of answerability (1993, 1990). Here, the ethical burden of communication solely rests within the ‘responsible
consciousness’ (1993: 29) of the subject in whom speech takes on its situated awareness, speaking in response to its partiality.

The search for completion that underwrites the aesthetic is an ethical stance in the act of answerability that constitutes the self. ‘For Bakhtin, the answerably performed act is the foundational feature of the self within the self-Other architectonic’ (Murray 2000:138). The field, as it were, of communication encompasses the relationship with others and it is to this relationship that the speaking subject responds.

But this only reinforces the moral agency of the subject who acts according to the actual conditions of his presence: ‘he understands the ought of his performed act, that is, not the abstract law of his act, but the actual, concrete ought conditioned by his unique place in the given context of the ongoing event’ (Bakhtin 1993:30, original emphasis). Answerability is thus the drive to speak in the moment of being addressed.

In other words, self and, through the self, society is constructed not just through the telling of the story, as Bruner puts forward, but equally because the telling constitutes a response. It is by this argument that the actual situation of address becomes so fundamental to understanding the dialogic potential of any public encounter. For Laura Peers, it was the specific context in which Native Americans were ‘playing themselves’ within a ludic environment that generated the transformative capacity of the face-to-face nature of the contact zone. The answerably performed act was created under these conditions.
At the historic site museum, the face-to-face encounter with the other is replaced by a split address: from both historic site and from the museum. Thus, it is necessary to investigate how the visitor’s listening involves completing the sense of the whole from this double situation. Especially where their own sense of self is dependent on this completion, there is an urgent movement towards cohesion between the two addresses. Thus, we need to ask how visitor imaginations are constantly engaged in this process.

However, the split also indicates a tension in the communicative process, implicating a theatrical relationship and the possibility of interruption. In one instance, we can look for where it may be that visitors participate in the communication unquestioningly and the address of the historical Other through the place and that of the museum cohere satisfactorily. The visitor’s sense of the whole would be sustained through their continued participation in a situation that they accept they have not created but are partially responsible for.

But equally it seems possible that they would not cohere: that the museum’s address comes from a different historical reality, a different concrete situation, than that of the past and their difference is exposed. Under these conditions, the visitor’s individual situated awareness of self would be at risk of splitting as the immersion in the past also takes place as an encounter now. Under these conditions the architectonics of the answerably performed act would be at a greater risk and, my argument proposes, we would see the
need to articulate one’s own voice in order to maintain a sense of the whole as being greater.

In looking at the three case studies, the split between the two addresses is the starting point for understanding how visitors might see themselves as performers within the museum. Doubt and uncertainty provoke the recognition that they are not just audience to the address but performers with an option of authority over the telling of the narrative. Moreover, the choice bears ethical implications if the sense of Self is dependent upon to whom visitor’s are “answerable”. To take responsibility for the narrative is potentially to take responsibility for the historical Other in place of the museum. It is to enact a loss of the museum’s authority, on behalf of the historical Other.

2.4.2 Agonism
If this is the potential drama visitors would find themselves performing through the historical encounter, it only represents, however, half the action of the Site of Conscience. In the Site of Conscience, the immanence of dialogue within the historical encounter is invited to become an explicit conversation in an encounter with the present. In this way, it is necessary to recognise that the museum’s address is itself doubly split – not only mediating and performing the past but equally performing the present. The provocation to respond – that is to not just accept the satisfactory sense of the whole which the museum, on the one hand, facilitates – would be a provocation within the museum’s own address.
So far, I have argued that for the past to be activated, it is the visitor’s recognition of an alternative telling of the historical narrative that is the visitor’s own to tell that begins a potentially transformative dynamic as in Bruner’s situation. Visitors will bring to the historical encounter their own personal and public narratives with which to measure and respond to the history that is presented (Bagnall 2003). But the argument of answerability is that every telling is a recognition of the address of the Other in its specific historical moment and it is this responsiveness – or responsibility – which the Site of Conscience seeks to harness.

Under these conditions, it has to be acknowledged that the visitor’s choice to respond to an historical Other outside of the museum’s performance of the past, even where it emerges as an enactment of a shift in authority, would also be a response to the museum’s performance of the present and a choice to participate within that second communicative relationship. Conversely, where visitors do not see the limitation of the museum’s performance of the past and accept a coherence between the place and the interpretation, they would not be responding to the museum’s performance of the present that interprets the past as contested, unresolved and provocative of debate.

The argument here is that the tension between the two modes of encounter the Coalition proposes as generative of the Site of Conscience constitutes a performance itself about authority within the communicative event. It is to say that the interplay of past and present is at once an aspect of (museum) control and an aspect of (visitor) freedom, and that the two are mutually constitutive. Furthermore, it is to argue that, as a result of this interplay,
transformation can only occur within the processes of the visiting event, even if its repercussions are to be felt and enacted in the everyday world beyond. This means that the performance that visitors perform – and might come to see themselves performing – would not only be the play of authority over the historical narrative but about authority within their relationship with the museum. As such, the conditions of the Site of Conscience are not only rooted in the dialogic relationship with the historical encounter beyond the frame of the museum, they also need to be conceived in terms of the relations of power within the museum, with which the answerable act is in its own playful tension.

In his essay, ‘The Subject and Power’, Michel Foucault (1982) sets out his ideas about the relational nature of power in order to clarify how, through various operations within culture, people are transformed or objectified into subjects. The particular need to do so arises in the light of pathological forms of power which, though extreme, are not unique nor discrete historical phenomena but rather rooted in the political rationalism of the Enlightenment.

Thinking through rationalising processes in various fields of social life, Foucault proposes a model of enquiry based on exposing relations of power taking points of resistance as a starting point, understanding ‘power relations through the antagonism of strategies...[and] the forms of resistance and attempts to dissociate these relations’ (1982:780).
As Foucault understands it, contemporary political struggles are not against specific institutions of power but rather a form of power that governs individuality, through privileges of knowledge. These struggles centre on refusing determinations of who we are. It is this which reveals the relational nature of power, that permeates through society and everyday life,

categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him (ibid:781)

By these relations, the subject is not only subject to the control of others but is also self-subjugating, ‘tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (ibid:781).

This he calls the governmentalism of power, ‘a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others…it acts upon their actions’ (ibid:789). Thus, crucially, power always recognises and is premised upon the freedom of its subject as one who acts. Only on that basis, is it an attempt to constrain, pattern or modify the possibility of those actions – or, in Foucault’s terms, to ‘conduct’ others and put in order the possible outcomes of their actions.

The influence of Foucault’s governmentality has been significant in museum studies, though especially through the work of Tony Bennett (1995). More recently, Bennett (2007) has re-iterated the
governmental model, arguing for attention to be paid to the work that
culture does through the specific assemblages it produces. It is these
concrete mechanisms that make different cultural work distinctive
and provide the means through which it ‘acts on the social through
“the working surfaces on the social” that it produces’ (2007:32).
Focusing on the way museums, in their specific fashion, bring
together their objects into spaces and thereby organise and act on
visitors as social actors resonates with Sandell’s advocacy of new
interpretations of objects to reframe conversations about prejudice or
the performances of museum guides who weave stories around
objects to shape public discourse and identity (Katriel).

However, the course of the discussion of this chapter has been to
emphasise the actions of visitors on whom the government of the
museum is acting. It has, in other words, focused on the underside of
governmentality, on the subject and ‘the virtue of their acting or
being capable of action’ (Foucault 1982:789); or, simply, the freedom
which appears ‘as the condition for the exercise of power’ (ibid:790).
This, I would argue, is the advantage of a theatrical frame which
allows attention not only to be drawn to the museum’s structuring of
the event but also the performances of visitors.

Similar arguments have been presented elsewhere. As Helen Rees Leahy
(2007), has pointed out, the logic of government tends to recreate the
museum visitor as a docile subscriber to power and overlooks alternative
knowledges or ontologies that the visitor brings with them. These she
particularly locates in the bodies of visitors whose form and movements reveal a materiality of behaviour that can resist as much as reinforce the epistemic conservatism of those who have constructed the space in which claims to knowledge are being made. The physicality of the museum visitor provides, for Leahy, archaeological evidence of an ontic participation that can challenge and transgress the assumptions on which the museum’s knowledge regime is founded.

Where Leahy imbues the embodied evidence of resistance, Andrea Witcomb (2003) returns us to the dialogical. Discussing a programme to bring public voices into the curating of an exhibition, Witcomb finds in the intercultural contact zone a better model for explaining the practice of engaging communities directly in the programme of museum cultural production than in a concept of governmentality used by Tony Bennett. For Witcomb, the governmental model denies the autonomy of each participant-producer, and the range of interests (of which the government/museum is just one) they present. However, she is quite clear in the description of her work with the Portuguese community in Australia that, as the host of the project, it was within the frame set by the museum that the contact of communities was both made and displayed.

The negotiation between the educating museum and the participants personal lives concerned imbricating the subject community into the objectifying realm of the museum. This was not to be critical of the achievements of a curatorial process that clearly promoted genuine dialogue. But just as Witcomb seeks to ‘temper’ Bennett with the possibility of
dialogue, she herself recognizes that social change is the strategic discourse of government and that the educational role of the museum is not simply facilitation but also one of definition and control.

It is thus with visitor participation at the historic site museum that the process of becoming a Site of Conscience involves a genuine and potentially transformative dialogue taking place within the civilizing control of the museum. It would be a playing out of the whole set-up of Foucault’s power relations and not just the mechanisms through which power is exercised that matters. Foucault describes this whole as the particular relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit…At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an “agonism” – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation’ (1982:790).

The contact zone serves as a useful model to challenge the idea that face-to-face confrontation can be paralyzing. But only where authority has already been dispersed and as yet unsettled. For the museum, the theatrical frame not only draws attention to the embodied and dialogic but, moreover, envisages the relationship between museum and visitors as a complicit relationship. As such, it is able to reflect on how that complicity gets
deliberately subverted, revealing the audience’s capacity to act both bodily and dialogically. It is to understand the participatory relationship as unstable and in a state of constant provocation, where the government of conduct can be a possible revelation of the freedom it organises.

2.5 Conclusion

It is the difficulty as much as the evidence of making this work that the case study analyses identify and investigate. The Site of Conscience seeks to shape individuals in a new form – the active citizen – thus provoking the question about how such subjection can also be a form of empowerment. This is the problem that Bennett (2006) lays out for museums more broadly. The argument presented here is that for that to be the case the museum must itself be transformed through the completion of its own project. In the absence of an actual theatrical intervention to do so, I have proposed the theatrical frame to fill (if that is possible) the void.

The discussion of theatre that seeks to empower its audience raised the idea that, where the conditions of participation in the classical theatre rely on the pleasure of disbelief, the double consciousness that enjoys that pleasure can be turned round to recall the realness of the action on stage, keeping apart (without breaking) the dissociative matrices which the creative act conjoins. In that, audiences may of course be turned away. But the complicity of the communicative relationship can be regained when audiences see themselves as performers and capable of transformative action. In a similar fashion, museum visitors perform the logic of the museum but in doing so are
playing an instability in the normative communicative relationship, inserting themselves into the storytelling and meaning-making process as co-producers of the visiting event.

In that sense, the visitors experience would take place between the instrumentalism of government and the resistance of the individual. In the theatre this is the product of a specific assembly, to use Bennett’s terms, of tensions, beginning with the play of Self and Other in the actor. At the historic site museum, I propose it begins with the dissociation of museum and site, instigating a dialogic relationship with the past within a relationship of control and resistance.

It is this uncertain gap and state of in-betweenness that is the field of my enquiry – the dialogic determination of Self emerging into the instability of, what Foucault calls, ‘the relations of strategy’ (1982:793-5). The possible resolutions of this uncertainty are, in principle, multiple though in practice they are always historically situated. In its ideal form, within this field of uncertainty there is an activation of the conscience, or a thinking twice, in which individuals re-negotiate their relationship with the Other and resist their own subjectivity, or ‘refuse what we are’ (Foucault 1982:785; Dibley 2005). If such a goal goes beyond the experience of most visitors, then it is probably because the conceptualisation has not sufficiently taken account, as Bennett (2006:66) partially warns against, of the obstinacy of habitus that, even where it might resist, does not change. But still it is the prerogative of the task of the thesis to draw attention to the play of resistances that visitors enact through the answerable nature of their historical encounters and,
through these, reveal the relations of power and hence the possibility to transform them.
3.1 Going inside

To visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum at 97 Orchard Street in Lower Manhattan, New York, visitors must join a group tour. At the time of my research there in 2007, there was a choice of three around the building itself – these form the focus of my analysis – and a fourth, walking tour of the neighbourhood. Whether they have pre-arranged their tour or are coming on a whim, visitors must first go to the visitors’ centre at 108 Orchard Street where they buy or collect tickets. There is often a queue and over the desk hangs a blackboard with the names and times of tours that are available. A sheet of paper describes the Getting By and Piecing It Together guided tours (very minimally), explaining their theme – ‘surviving financial crisis’ and ‘the garment industry’, respectively – and naming the families whose apartments have been reconstructed. The Living History Confino tour, which is only available to the public on weekends, is not included on the descriptive sheet provided on other days. This tour is described elsewhere as interactive and hands-on, where the visitor will meet a costumed interpreter in a “living history” apartment – “perfect for kids and families!”

Visitors often choose between the Getting By tour and the Piecing it Together tour according to their own schedules or if they have previously visited the Museum and been on one of the tours already as much as for the theme. Visitors choosing the Confino tour on the weekend tend to be families,
though, it should be said, not exclusively. It is also offered as part of a package in which visitors go on one of the other tours and then visit the Confino apartment.

The visitor centre is where tour groups gather before the tour. As they wait, there is a bookshop, a gift shop and a twenty-minute screening of a History Channel documentary on immigration. This ostensibly takes a similar narrative approach as the Museum, focusing on individual stories from different generations but it also includes a wider historical narrative – one that is only implied in the museum tours. Not all visitors will watch the film though it is somewhere to sit as you wait. Tours start every 20 minutes – they last one hour – and the guide will make a general announcement to gather their group outside of the centre on Orchard Street. Most groups gather successfully though on a couple of occasions some members seemed to have been lost before the tour began! It may be that they joined another tour but numbers are restricted to 15 and groups were often full.

The guided tours start with an orientation on Orchard Street lasting about 15 minutes. The Getting By and Piecing It Together tours have as standard two introductions: the first in which visitors say who they are and where they come from, and then a second in which the guide chooses between saying a little about the area of the Lower East Side and/or the mission of the Museum. This tends to take place on the opposite side of the street to the tenement house at 97 Orchard Street where the Museum is based. The group then cross the road to the outdoor steps of the house where the educator gives an explanation of the house: when, how and why it was built and who
it was built by. This is also where the house rules are laid out (no touching, no photography, no gum).

Whilst the details and approaches do vary between educators in all these tours, there is a common register of delivery for the most part that marks this preliminary session as a point of giving information. The Confino introduction is laced with a little more opportunity to engage the imagination whether through the use of black and white pictures or through open questions. However, in all cases, there is an emphasis here on information, a setting up explicitly in the present in preparation for the journey into the recreated past.

Given the indicative mood of this first section of the encounter, there is in every tour a following section that marks the transition into the main part of the tour which – whether it is the guided tour or the Living History tour – allows for a shifting between the indicative mood of the everyday present and the subjunctive mood of the performance of the past. I identify this as a particular moment because I feel it is very important and I think it is important to note how it is managed. For the two main tours, groups climb the front steps to the main entrance on the ground (American first) floor where tickets are collected – marking that this is the real beginning of the tour.

Tightly packed into the narrow corridor, the group become a little bit more like an audience. The guided tours congregate in the hallway towards the front on this same floor, by the original staircase and a long time is given to
this introduction. This is the point at which visitors are most encouraged to begin to use their imagination: the hallway is identified as being the least altered part of the house following the museum’s acquisition of the building. But educators also point out that its original atmosphere was the hardest to re-invoke as it would have been a darkened public throughway until gas lighting was introduced, and throughout the building’s occupation smelly and dirty.

Visitors cannot touch the walls but they can touch the banister – both of which are original; meanwhile the burlap ceiling and two pastoral paintings are pointed out. One of the paintings has been cleaned, the other remains blackened, allowing the educator to ask the visitors why this might be so. This encourages visitors to reflect both on the conditions of the air and also the design and thought of the original builder; and the educator asks a visitor to turn off, briefly, the (new) electric lights to give an impression of the darkness. (In fact, as a couple of visitors noted, there is so much other light from other electric lights and the now glass doors that there was very little darkness at all). On these tours, the narrative of the hallway shifts between two features: the construction and the atmosphere, one appealing to historical knowledge and the other to an emotive imagination, helping visitors to create a sense of place through both.

After this, the Getting By and Piecing it Together tours continue on their own paths through the building. But in these first moments, a fundamental dynamic has been established for the tours: the tension between, on the one hand, an objective, historical account of the building, some of its residents
and the context and conditions that shaped their lives; whilst, on the other, an emotional, subjective experience of a place and some of the day-to-day struggles and dramas for which it was the setting between 1864 and 1935. Whilst this opens up many questions about how this tension is played out and the various effects it has on both museum and visitor performances, the focus of this short survey is to ask how this tension contributes to the political project of the Site of Conscience and relating the past to the present. Specifically, the chapter asks about how this shifting between the distanced view of the past and the immersive recreation of the past can both facilitate and compromise the way visitors connect the historical experience of immigration with a responsibility towards immigrants now.

The question follows along the line of the argument that the way visitors encounter the historical other is as significant in terms of how they respond to others in society as is the discursive constructs through which information about the historical other is framed and presented. Rather than paying attention to the narrative the Museum dictates and how it is dictated, the questions I am asking here are more concerned with how the historic site becomes an experiential place where visitors – coming as members of the public, with their own interests and motivations – create a relationship between themselves and the ‘character’ of the immigrant, between their museum experience and the experience of being an immigrant. There are many factors both within and outside of the museum encounter that also contribute to that relationship. But the question I am asking of the Tenement Museum is how specifically the interplay of the subjective and the objective – the emotional and the cognitive – accounts for the way the visiting
experience works to create a political consciousness around the issue of immigration.

To that end, I first report a range of visitor responses to various facets of the visiting event, focusing on how, for them, the past relates to the present. These provide the grounds on which the tension between objective and subjective ways of knowing are evidenced. They also highlight some of the performative aspects of the visiting experience although these are more specifically picked up in my later discussion of the Living History tour. The important factor for my analysis is that visitors show how they are self-consciously engaged in a process that is both immersive and distanced.

I next turn to the Museum’s own attempts to connect past to present and how they are developing practices of the ‘memory-activist’ that manifest a neutral space for dialogue and debate. Looking at how these are being implemented also across a tension between objective and subjective knowledges, I show that, where visitors play out the tension in terms of their relation to the historical Other and their experience of the past, the Museum is concentrated on an experience in the present, based on an idea that history is an unfolding process of negotiating our contemporary world.

Rather than provoking an historiographical discussion, I translate this difference in the next section into terms discussed in the previous chapter, positing the difference as one between spatial and emplacing practices. Taking issue with the Museum’s claim to neutrality, I suggest that the Museum disguises its own interest in place by presenting it as a democratic
space. As such, I argue, this limits the capacity of its new initiatives – those which it has devised under the rubric of the Site of Conscience – to connect the interest of visitors with their own.

This opens the way for an exploration of how the visiting experience does provide an opportunity for visitors to engage in the political project of the Site of Conscience. By looking at the Living History Confino tour, I develop a conceptualisation of the visiting experience as one in which visitors are both insiders and outsiders to the experience, what I refer to as the intimacy of a guest. Given that visitors are playing between two realities, the present and the past – and indeed require the historical re-enactment to be objectively true in order for their visit to make sense – this role of being both inside and outside is more problematic than in other Living History interpretations.

Responding to visitor feedback, I argue that rather than being engaged in a game of impossibility – where past and present meet – visitors on this tour are placed in a situation that is much more at risk as a meaningful experience. ‘The possibility of [communicative] failure’ (Macdonald n.d.:7) is actually fundamental to the situation; and it is because there is this constant provocation of failure that the need to participate is not just a matter of free choice. From the visitor responses, I consider how this lack of freedom is in part an obstacle to widening knowledge but how it also contains within it an ethical imperative both to the historical Other and to the immediate need to make meaning out of the experience.
In the last two sections, I try to apply this particular provocation to the overall project of the Site of Conscience and to relate it back to the tension I describe between spatial and emplacing practices. Specifically, I interpret the experience in the Confino tour as being either in two places at once or in no place at all. Whilst it may be an achievement of a very particular kind that would make visitors open to this unstable positioning or state of double consciousness, in such terms it implies a way in which the Museum’s interest in space and visitor interests in place might coincide.

Taking forward the idea that motivation in the Confino tour goes beyond a self-consciousness of participation – the possibility of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s ‘performing museology’ – to rely upon, as well, a sense of crisis or risk of failure, I consider two short examples where the Museum is already attempting to inculcate the two together. However, recognising the limitations in these attempts, I finally contrast them with two, even shorter examples of incidental moments from two particular Confino tours. These moments invite a further translation of the space-place tension in terms of the ‘matrix in which we act’. In seeking still to consider how the purposes of visitors and those of the Museum can coalesce, this formulation suggests a way in which the visiting experience might generate a situation where the historical conditions that give meaning to the present (the object of the Museum’s interest), and the present conditions that give meaning to the historical experience (the effective object of the visitors’ interest) are found to elide with each other.
3.2 Visitor Experiences

Given that visitors must typically wait to begin their tour, and then wait again through the introduction before entering the tenement building itself, there is a certain anticipation built up about what the experience might hold. Despite that the Museum is now a well-established presence on the museum circuit in New York, and that many will have booked their tours through the Museum’s website, it is still very common that visitors have found out about the Museum through word of mouth. Inevitably, they come equipped with some expectations but the building itself is striking for how it is not prepossessing at all, as one visitor admitted:

I didn’t know which building we were going to, so I think that’s a good thing and a bad thing. Not a bad thing, but it’s kind of like, it was kind of a surprise… the fact that I couldn’t pick out a Tenement Museum that was preserved shows that the area hasn’t changed, you know. [19/01/2007]

In that sense, the museum hides its treasures quite modestly and, as this visitor implies, keeps itself unnervingly between the contemporary and the past. One visitor touched upon the nostalgia of this in-betweenness:

I kind of looked at it as kind of a – um…going to a cool furniture shop…At first, it was like “oh, this – I want to buy one of these buildings. I would turn it – this would be great”, you know. [19/01/2007]
In this, curiosity comes with a little distance – selfishness as he described it – where nostalgia is not necessarily so personal. Interestingly, this first impression soon changed and, as is more common, the building and its contents began to create a more familiar picture. For some this is because the tenement is a building which they are familiar with in American lore. For others, it is in their own family heritage. One woman summarised this common connection:

I wouldn’t say that I was surprised. I definitely felt as I was walking in that I was walking in to the experience of my family members walking in. [19/01/2007]

The treble repetition of ‘walking in’ is indicative of the performative aspect that underwrites such visits and is fundamental to my analysis of the visiting experience at the Museum. The physical enacts the memorial such that there is a further layer of self-consciousness about the enactment. The visitor was aware of her own action as well as the action of her ancestors. Curiosity is filled with interest; and the building itself, for all its modesty, also promises a world of experience that makes going in, from off the street where it sits quite unremarkably, a special occasion. One visitor put it, with a certain understatement but nonetheless capturing the importance that what lies inside is a multilayered, lived experience.

Yes, it’s sort of opened up a world that I was very curious to find how it existed. [16/01/2007]
The visit already promises itself as an immersion into an alternative reality. When I first visited the Museum, I was very struck by the series of thresholds that we crossed to go back and forth into time – from a contemporary museum space (the visitor centre), to a contemporary, daily space (the road, or an educational room), up the steps and through the door, into the hallway, in and out of reconstructed apartments, lastly into an unreconstructed apartment (the ‘ruin’ apartment) and finally back out onto the street. Other visitors also make much of this movement through space, even if they do not speak of it in terms of the more scholastic notion of thresholds with its ritualistic connotations that I recognised (Turner 1982).

Once on the tour, there is only restricted movement in and out of the three apartments that are visited, up and down the stairs and across hallways. But this still lends a physical dimension to the narrative. One visitor recalled a tour she had been on previously remembering (slightly inaccurately) a progress through the levels of the building and how each level took the visitor to a different time period. For her, this was fundamental in making the visit

like a living museum where you get such of a picture, as opposed to just walking through somewhere and just looking at things out of context. [20/01/2007]

But this effect is not just that of a progression through space. The journey inside the building is felt as a journey into a living world and that sense of a
populated place is achieved through the use of evidence and its appeal to the imagination. The visitor added:

And I think what’s great about this museum is that one didn’t have, say, an actress, but they had so many artefacts from that particular family. And they had court documents and city rec – public records – and then they had tape recordings of a descendant talking about her family.

Through the personal stories of individual families and immigrants, the historical accuracy serves the purpose of visitor desires to experience the lives of others and to immerse themselves in that past. For most visitors, the uniqueness of the museum is in its capacity to bring history alive, which involves, in itself, a constant playing across the tension between objective and subjective ways of knowing.

Where I may have been sensitive to the structural elements of the tour that dramatize that tension, visitors were very conscious of the interplay between fact and their imagination in the process of realising the past. Some of this stems from the use of clearly documentary evidence. One family’s descendants are traced to a man who lost his life in the 9/11 bombings – a connection that weaves a discursive power potentially at odds with the Museum’s concern about attitudes to today’s immigrants but one which is also able to bring the past ‘home’. On the Getting By tour, visitors hear the voice of Josephine Baldizzzi, one of the last tenants of the building. In the recording, she gives a personal description of each item in her home that
have now been restored to their original place. Here the object and room in which the visitors standing come to the fore – living again. Through the address of their disembodied owner, the replica, everyday relics are brought physically back to life and visitors can almost replace her absence with their own presence. As one visitor explained:

Because – people, it’s all just stuff until you put a voice to it, you put a connection. [19/01/2007]

Without actors, visitors are typically working hard to populate the building with its former inhabitants, engaging them bodily as well as cerebrally:

It just gives you such a really nice grounding … to be up here, you know, to smell and see and to be able to touch and really kind of have, be not completely immersed in the world but somewhat to kind of bolster up what you’ve read, those ideas and stuff [17/01/2007]

Here the tension between ways of knowing the past reveals itself as an intimacy rather than an immersion. But the important thing is connecting history to place:

And I thought having the documents and the photographs was very effective. It really made it, you know it connected people to the space. [19/01/2007]
In the allusion to space, this visitor identifies a key difference in the Tenement Museum to the museum generally. Where museums are conventionally recognised as working spaces for objects detached from their original location, this museum, as a historic site, is more than a diorama, or as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 19-20) calls it, an ‘in-situ’ display. With every piece of evidence, the object of interest grows to fill the space provided for it, threatening even to overspill it and reclaim its original place. Indeed, it provokes the desire in visitors to do that for themselves and re-place the past.

As I develop my argument, this further tension between the museum as ‘space becoming place’ will play out a new problematic for the Site of Conscience. But the key element of visitor responses is the interest in – if not the consummation of – connecting, familiarising and placing. For some embodying the past is not always achieved or achievable in the moment. As one visitor said:

So I’m just – that’s hard to make that leap, to put together that density of humanity with these empty rooms. You know, that you sort of have to dream about it later, you know, let it sort of sink in and try to imagine. But that’s – the museum can’t do anything about that. It’s a problem of the imagination. [18/01/2007]

Where this visitor saw it as her own limitation, others see it as the Museum’s:

It’s vivid enough one way and just it’s impossible to do certain other things, I guess, so. [18/01/2007]
Indeed, one visitor felt the interpretation was as impersonal as reading a history book. But this was quite an exception. There were more comparisons with reading a novel or watching a movie.

You know it’s like reading a book. He told the stories and I had my own mental image of the people and the events and the way he described him getting up at 7, going through that door and down the corridor and then never coming back. I mean I really looked down that hallway and thought, you know, he walked right down there. And I thought about those things that he described [17/01/2007]

This visitor went on to re-tell the story, re-enacting the re-enactment, creating as it were, if only momentarily, a performance culture in which embodied experience is passed on as knowledge, in which ‘the voices of the dead may speak freely now only though the bodies of the living’ (Roach 1996: xiii). Whether felt in the mind or the body or both, for most visitors the proximity of the past is the most powerful element of the experience:

It brings you very close to the reality, instead of just a book. And I think that’s what this does… it felt as if you were walking into the apartment when they weren’t home. [17/01/2007]
Such proximity is an in-between state, a tension between being wholly there and being wholly detached. The question both the Museum and my analysis asks is how the imagined presence of the past and the proximate state it brings can yield to a perspective on the present day. For many, it is more the personal connection that provokes consideration for immigrants today. One Italian visitor for whom the figure of Josephine Baldizzi resonated very directly said:

I saw a lot of similarities and, you know, oh if I lived here I would have done that too. Like I kind of was able to place myself a little bit more... I could look at every place and say oh, that could have been my uncle’s whatever, or you know. It makes me, I think it humbled me in a lot of ways. Because I think we, as Americans, get very high on our horse and we also, with immigration problems now, you know and – not that opinions will change but I have different perspective to look at them...My family, my Italian family, yells at the Mexican immigrants all the time: “oh they should, they should not be” – I’m like we wouldn’t be here right now if that happened, you know, like don’t – so. I think more people should do this tour and make that connection. [19/01/2007]

But just because there is a personal connection does not mean that a political one is inherently made.
I really came to the museum for a glimpse of the past and as I said for this connection to my family. I don’t know a lot about the museum, I don’t know if in fact part of their educational agenda is to educate people about the larger issues of immigration and then to hopefully educate people in the right direction, or what I consider the right direction, toward more tolerance and more understanding and respect…. I saw this very much as a historical thing and a personal thing for me. [19/01/2007]

This visitor was open to the possibility that the Museum is a venue for political conversations and indeed, other visitors were similarly open. Asked if the experience challenged his views on immigration, this visitor said:

Well I wouldn’t use the word challenged. Just, I mean it’s a way of like getting a window on it. I mean coming from immigrant parents … you know, who came, lived in this city, makes it vivid. It’s just a way of kind of seeing it kind of more clearly. [18/01/2007]

What is clear from all visitor responses was that the Museum had not clearly articulated a message or political stance. Most felt that they were left to make their own conclusions and in that, the immersive experience resolved itself as objective knowledge:
I didn’t feel there was a – I felt it was informative but I didn’t feel there was any particular point that the guide was trying to make. Because a lot of it he left us, up to the group to decide, talk about. [18/01/2007]

Some were quite clear about the limited power of the experience to really change opinions:

It’s one point if you’re interested in social history, it’s a nice thing to see. Is it a defining historical education? Of course not. It can’t be, by its nature.’ [18/01/2007]

Another was even more blunt:

Well I’ve never - since this is my third time – I’ve never walked out of here thinking “what can I do to make the life of a current immigrant less difficult?” [20/01/2007]

Even if one experience does not necessarily give to another, the possibility still remains. One visitor saw a missed opportunity:

I think that the place does invite those kinds of reflections. I do think, however, that the museum could have, could make much more of it. You know, I think maybe the focus is a lot on the historical re-creation of the exact period. [20/01/2007]
Such responses are clearly a provocation to the Museum, which, as a Site of Conscience and as I discuss below, regards its purpose as turning the historical re-creation into a resource for change. These responses were not uniform and other visitors did make the connection that the Museum seeks between the historical and contemporary experience or, as one visitor put it, becoming ‘more aware and more active, socially active, politically active’ [16/01/2007]. But it is very much in the spirit of these mixed responses that the museum has developed its own work as a Site of Conscience and especially it has been responsive to the last challenge that, where the place invites political reflection, the museum needs to do more to bring it out.

It is to the Museum’s initiatives that I turn next. The range of visitor responses represented above would be of little surprise to them. As an institution as well as in the practices of the educator-guides, the task of exploiting the point of connection between visitor and the figure of the historical immigrant such that it brings forward the contemporary connection is at the forefront of their work. There is no simple rule to explain how that connection takes on a political responsibility in the present – and the factors involved in that extend beyond the visiting experience. However, it can be noted from all the responses that there is a shifting dynamic in the degree to which, on the one hand, the historical Other and their physical world remains at a distance – a precise historical re-creation – and, on the other, visitors begin to implicate themselves with that character and into their place such that the past becomes a lived experience.
For some, the social and political context of the historical immigrant is too different from the contemporary situation to allow for a comparison of experience. In these instances, the perceived separation by time represents an immediate challenge to the political project of connecting past and present. Against that, both in recreating the past and in providing an objective historical account, the Museum narrative tries to bring out the emotional and practical continuities between past and present conditions. However, I am going to argue that perceiving continuity is only in part a question of historical narrative. The visitor responses suggest that of equal importance is the experiential conditions in which past and present threaten to coincide as the historical Other becomes a living reality in the visitor’s imagination. On this basis, it will be necessary to ask how the separation of time might be collapsed through experience and how the possibility of objective distance is turned not on the Other – historical or contemporary – but upon the visitor and the way they take the Other into their own story.

3.3 Museum Responses

If visitors seek primarily to enter the past, the museum, certainly as a Site of Conscience but even prior to that formalisation, has practiced with another purpose in mind. If entering is the first step for visitors backwards in time into another world, the particular concern of the Museum is the journey back in the other direction. Since 1988, when the museum was founded, the agenda of bringing the past forward into the present to inform and shape social and political futures has always been an intrinsic motivation behind the interpretation there (Abram 2002, 2001). In 1991, before the tenement
building at 97 Orchard Street had even been purchased by the museum, the
Museum’s founder and director, Ruth Abram explained her overall mission:

I wanted a way to promote tolerance, to challenge stereotypes,
to ask for a world where adults can protect children, where
women’s contributions are acknowledged and appreciated and
certainly not used as the basis for exclusion. I wanted a way to
provide role models for those who might not have them in their homes or neighbourhoods – at least not just the ones they
needed. I wanted a vehicle which could place history at the
disposal of everyone in a respectful, non-rhetorical way and encourage discussion and debate (1991:11-12)

Over the next ten years, the museum developed its tours around
reconstructed apartments in the building that emphasised individual stories
of families that lived there in order to illustrate the immigrant experience
from various perspectives and establish the site as a ‘common ground of immigrants from everywhere’ (Abram 1991:12).

For Maggie Russell-Ciardi, Director of Education until 2007, this approach
was fundamental to the raising of both a tolerance and a political
consciousness of immigration. She argues that by ‘allowing the interpretation
of its site to include multiple, personalised narratives, the museum has laid
groundwork for visitors to engage in dialogues on those issues’ (2008:40). In
general, the museum regards its practice as constantly affirming a
commitment to narrative nuances, challenging both good and bad
stereotypes, providing balanced accounts and representing ‘good history’ all in the service of the public’s yearning for ‘the truth’ (Abram 2002:135). At the same time, it has, in its methodology, always engaged directly with its public, making the building accessible only through its guided tours.

The commitment to multivocality, historical truth and dialogic pedagogies is the museum’s commitment to the present as much (if not more than) the past. In fact, this is cause for argument between educators who have different views on where the commitment should lie – a fact I discovered through my research but do not explore here. But certainly it is the policy of the management to use the past for present purposes more than it is to contain its separation from the everyday.

For the Tenement Museum, this begins with the personalisation of the past (Raison 2006). It is the personal connection that the museum at least in its early inception took for granted as the basis of its political project, sharing the respect and affection for ancestors with immigrants today (Abram 2001). This objective – to transform nostalgia into a positive political tool and appeal to the personal nature of history to evoke a personal responsibility in the present – remains at the core of the Museum’s public programmes and is the basis of its defining role in the Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience.

It is the work of a new museum professional: the self-described ‘memory-activist’ (Abram 2002:126). Defining the museum’s work as neither heritage nor social work but somewhere between the two, Abram and her staff have adopted the rhetorical weight of personal motivation and human rights to
drive their project forward. In this they have inflected historical objectivity with a purpose. Being between heritage and social work is to critique each of them – determining the ends of the first and the means of the second. It is to cast visitors as beneficiaries and citizens as creators. It is to make the personal public and civic and the public/civic personal.

The ‘easy’ option in this is to identify that space between as neutral – as neither heritage nor social work it can be characterised by its non-being. Indeed, to characterise it as ‘history’. However, personal connections and motivations have been the drives of memorial practices in the USA since the Civil War (Wallace 1981). Where such personally driven projects to use the past claim also to provide for its truthful representation, some degree of critical interrogation is invited in, even where the truth is deliberately identified as open and negotiable. The ostentation of private passion modifies the possibility that historical truth emerges in a neutral space and is arrived at through a negotiated process such that it now appears as the demand of a particular interest, an interest that is necessarily historically situated. How that interest shapes the terms on which ‘truth’ is revealed becomes an area of critical concern. Where that interest equates truth with justice and equality, the need to observe the process of its articulation is ever more important.

In other words, in turning now to the work of the museum, it needs to be borne in mind that the intention of the memory-activist to use history to achieve social change comes at the risk of eliding objectivity with a subjective validation. Central to the museum’s development of practice is indeed their
assertion of playing a neutral role in the facilitation of discussion about the relevance of the past to the present. The visitor responses above bear witness to this attempt (and an appreciation of this attempt) not to represent a particular viewpoint or purpose but rather to encourage the formation and articulation of visitors’ own opinions. And yet, it is here where the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity becomes ever more complicated. If the museum claims to present, from a neutral position, an objective account in order to provide a resource with which visitors can personally confront issues in the present, that objectivity is itself infused with a subjective purpose. Having looked at how visitors are, in their encounters at the museum negotiating between subjective and objective experiences, I now consider how the museum plays across this tension; and, in the same way, raise the question as to how this can be a source of political facilitation.

3.4 Museum conversations

Over the years, the Museum has introduced a general change in technique for guiding: shifting away from the information heavy, guided lecture, they have been applying an enquiry-based learning approach, one which includes more open-ended questions with visiting groups (Abram 2007:66-68). In their manual for educators, the Museum explains:

The educator leads a tour by sharing his/her knowledge, but also by asking visitors a series of carefully crafted open-

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ended questions designed to elicit dialogue and opinions about the key economic, political, and social issues raised\(^5\)

From being a learning process about a personal connection to the past, the methodology at the Museum has evolved towards confronting the apparent failure on the part of the visiting public to connect with the present and provoking the imaginative leap across time in order to force the contemporary conversation.

The feedback from my research above suggests that it has yet to really mature as a technique. But the use of enquiry-based learning is, as Abram (2007:67) points out, a training for the visitors as much as it is for the educators. It is a shift from personalised pasts to personalised uses of the past, with an emphasis on getting the public to share their responses. Whilst the idea of dialogue is embedded in the Museum’s own history, it is only in recent years, as visiting numbers have increased and the concept of the Site of Conscience emerged, that the process by which conversation occurs has been re-assessed and the need asserted to actually see debate and democratic participation taking place. Here, something more than the historical education has been sought.

The changes to the tours over the years have focused on developing encounters that are ‘interactive, participatory learning experiences’ specifically focused on the humanizing effect of open dialogue (Abram 2007:

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\(^5\) The manual was, until 2009, available on the museum’s website, www.tenement.org
One particular example stands out from the literature written by the museum about their work:

On February 14, 2002, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum invited an unusual group to pay a visit to the recreated 1897 home and factory of Harris and Jennie Levine. Packed in an intimate circle, leaders of conflicting sectors of the garment industry today—workers and manufacturers, retailers and union organizers—listened to the story of how this Russian immigrant family slept, ate, raised a family, and turned out hundreds of dresses in a tiny 325-square-foot space. Why did these people, who spend most of their time attacking or avoiding each other, want to come together to talk here? As one participant put it, “the Museum provides a neutral environment that facilitates discussion among all of us in the garment industry. The tour is extremely balanced, making people from all sides of the issue feel included. The environment here puts everyone a little off-balance, in a way that really opens discussion. It provides a wonderful opportunity to look at all these issues together.” After a day-long summit about what new perspective could be gained by looking at the garment industry in the past, the participants emerged with new ideas about how all sides could work together to prevent sweatshop conditions in the future.

(Sevcenko 2002:55)
This event was instrumental in shaping the idea of the Site of Conscience. It was also formative in preparing the way for the Coalition’s flagship concept, Dialogues for Democracy. In 2004, the Tenement Museum introduced their version of the Dialogues, Kitchen Conversations. This grew out of an existing programme in which Lower East Side immigrant residents were brought together at the museum to share with each other their experiences and advice. As a public programme, it has been offered as an additional hour at the end of the tour during which visitors can sit around a table and talk politics in the light of the historical tour as part of a facilitated discussion.

For Russell-Ciardi, speaking on behalf of the museum, the public version of the Kitchen Conversations programme ‘was perhaps the most transformative decision by the institution, one that moved it from being an increasingly democratic institution to an institution undertaking civic democracy-building’ (2008:47). The difference that this programme offered, as opposed to the reshaped tours, was the direct encounter that was made possible between visitors and their differing emotional and rational responses to the history presented. Leaving the immediacy of the historical context behind the museum was able to take on a new definition for visitors as ‘a space to exchange ideas about the ways in which the new information they were learning did and did not resonate with their previous understanding of the issues (Russell-Ciardi 2008:47).
This profoundly challenges visitor expectations of what a museum is and what kind of learning and encounter it provides for. Through the careful control of the facilitator and a respectful sharing of reaction and opinion, visitors are offered an opportunity to express themselves and perhaps even learn from each other’s experiences and arguments. Change has been evidenced in some instances, though equally (and perhaps as important if we perceive a wider political apathy) it is an occasion simply to declare and rehearse one’s political position. In either case, visitors are performing a democratic action that may go so far as to shape their stance on immigration policy (Abram 2007).

The Kitchen Conversations programme has taken the idea of an enquiry-based learning into a new sphere of interaction and extended the visiting experience to a point where the demand to exchange views is an encounter of its own. It deliberately shifts the attention of participants away from the intimate encounter with the past to a new intimate encounter with each other in the present. The Kitchen Conversations represents a taking leave of the past in order to interrogate the present.

My own concern is principally with the guided tours through the apartments and I only did limited research with visitors who attended a Kitchen Conversation. However, the introduction in October 2009 of a revised version of the Kitchen Conversations – Getting By: Past and Present – in which the conversation is integrated into a guided tour, suggests that the Museum is further extending the reach of this model of participation. It also
highlights how the tour is being understood as much as a facilitation as an instructive, historical account.

Inasmuch as it represented a new direction for the Museum’s approach to interpretation, the Kitchen Conversations has neither been received nor implemented without controversy (Abram 2007). However, where Abram understands this controversy as a concern either about the politicisation of the museum or about the ethics of allowing prejudiced opinions to be expressed, there seems to me to be a deeper concern about the way that the interest of the Museum is disguised at the very point at which it appears to yield authority to the participants.

Ostensibly, the programme opens the floor to everyone to offer their own interpretation of how the past can be used in the present to shape opinions. However, in order to do so, the Museum is responsible for setting the terms of engagement – a set of rules read at the start of every conversation, headed ‘Sharing and Hearing’, ‘Spirit of Inquiry’ and Diversity and Individuality’ (see Abram 2007:60). This is not just a free conversation; it is a lesson in good democratic behaviour. For the facilitator, this mission to encourage democratic participation requires ‘exercising the discipline it requires to take no stand’ (Abram 2002:70).

The difficulty at least of the Kitchen Conversations is that the programme is modelled on the very different scenarios of firstly, new immigrants, with common interests, sharing time and space; and secondly, more specifically, the Valentine’s Day meeting between garment industry representatives. In
Sevcenko’s own words, the group of visitors that met that day were ‘unusual’. They were invited to participate, fully aware that their visit had an explicit purpose, one in which they were all predisposed to comply. Even if this was individually their first visit to the museum, they were members of, what Richard Schechner would call, an ‘integral audience’ (2003:220), defined by their pre-existent identification with the event, obliged (by invitation) to be there, connected to each other through the producer of the event, ‘necessary to accomplish the work of the show’ and (to a certain extent) themselves dependent on its happening. In terms taken from the study of citizen participation in Development Studies, this was ‘an invited space’ (Cornwall 2004, 2002) with a certain degree of regulation and control. This was no guarantee of its success, of course – and, as Andrea Cornwall argues for her own situations, ‘participation is always an ambiguous and unpredictable process’ (2002:52).

The achievement of that meeting is no less because of these conditions. However, it was a very different scenario to those in my research where I followed and spoke with only public visitors – ‘accidental audiences’ in Schechner’s terms. For these visitors, there is inevitably and unavoidably a lot more groundwork to cover before the kind of fully engaged, productive participation can be reached. Indeed, it is hardly to be expected that they should really attain that level of learning and change. Hence the inclusion of ground rules and other techniques to bring the group together. But also these techniques are there to replace the lack of a shared sense of purpose and urgency to take part and cooperate.
It is only by the Museum’s demand and interest that an agenda exists on these occasions – and where, in the tours, the educator chooses not to provoke conversation, it very rarely (if ever) emerges out of the visiting groups own initiative. Thus, where it does happen, rather than being given the tools to make change happen, they have taken part in an organized activity not of their own making – which is precisely the concern that Cornwall and others using participatory methods in community development projects are trying to avoid (Hickey and Mohan 2004).

It is interesting to consider the earlier visitor responses in the light of the museum’s stated mission. Where visitors feel they have been unprovoked, this effectively represents a failure of the museum to achieve its purpose; and yet, at the same time, it appears to have been successful in creating an opportunity for a range of opinions to be formed and not to have insisted on a singular interpretation of the connection between past and present. The ‘failure’, if that is what it is, is interesting less because visitors have “not got the message” but because it reveals the limitations of the Museum’s political project – limitations that the Museum is constantly striving to explore and reduce and that also mark the current edge of visiting practices.

At present, I would suggest that the point of limitation and the gap within the visitor-museum relationship is in a different way of reading history. The overall direction of the Museum’s project has become to use the past to interrogate the present rather (perhaps) than the other way round. Russell-Ciardi summarises the concept:
We have to present [history] as dynamic process, as something that is made and remade by each of us as we reflect on the relevance of history in our own lives today, as a tool for challenging what we think we know about the present (2008:51).

For visitors this is an ambivalent demand that, without explicitly demanding it, requires all participants to perform with the Museum in its particular play of past and present. In fact, as the Kitchen Conversations programme highlights, this play reconstitutes the past so that it becomes both object and context – or in Russell-Ciardi’s (2008:47) words, ‘new information’ and ‘space’ – in service to the present. In the example given by Sevcenko (2002), where the museum brought together parties from the garment industry, the past becomes a ‘setting’, in her words, a ‘tool’ in the present to leverage some space for dialogue.

As with the visitor comments, there is a subjectivity invoked within the objective presentation of the past but the striking contrast between the Museum’s ‘play’ and the visitors’ ‘play’ is that where the visitors’ play is an experience of the past, the Museum’s is an experience of the present; where visitors bring the past into their minds and bodies, the Museum disembodies its educators as neutral facilitators; where visitors strive towards a complete picture of the past, the Museum sees a process; where visitors ‘place’ themselves and others through their discovery of the past, the Museum makes a ‘space’. For the visitor, the objectivity of history is the end-point of
their subjective encounter with the past. For the museum, the objectivity of history is the starting point for an encounter in the present.

3.5 Visitor Places, Museum Spaces

Returning then to the question raised by the visitor comments, I want in this next section to consider the critical value of turning attention within the museum encounter to the way visitors use the experience as a way to place themselves in relation to the past and the historical Other. But I want to do so in the light of the Museum’s alternative interest: to create a space for dialogue. I would argue that the effect of the Museum’s focus on the present and the dialogic exchange of multiple viewpoints on issues of contemporary immigration is a distraction from visitors and their experience in the historical reconstruction.

For the museum, experiencing the past and learning about the past is, as I have explained, just a starting point for their own project of looking at the present. Indeed, the Kitchen Conversations programme – at least as it was run during my research – literally puts the visit in the past, casting it as a resource for the discussion. In looking to its own role as a facilitator – and in their assertion of ‘site’ as ‘space’ over ‘place’ – the Museum is suggesting its own mode of interacting with the past. It is, as I have shown, proposing an idea of history that is different to many visitors.

That visitors do not yet seem to feel the pressure of this alternative mode of visiting is not at issue here. Indeed, that is itself indicative of another
concern: that the pressure to perform in the Museum’s activism is always at the risk of disguising the Museum’s subjective interest in having visitors do so. The Museum makes clear in its publicity that it seeks to use the past ‘to promote tolerance and historical perspective’ and the foundation of the Museum is discussed in the standard educator’s narrative. At the time of my research, however, educators were very much struggling with how to actually manifest the Museum’s agenda in their tours. Often the direct question – asking visitors to explain how their encounter with the historical immigrant might change or inform how they understand the pressures facing immigrants today – was met with a silence. This silence implied an unreadiness to participate.

Such an unreadiness may be explained by a range of factors – the language used, the particular dynamics of visiting with strangers, the timing of the question – as much as the more prosaic concern about introducing a different concept of history. However, it is the readying of visitors to participate that constitutes the task of the museum as it moves further towards developing its identity as a Site of Conscience. This in itself is the prerogative of the reformist institution. But it is also an opportune moment to suggest that in their different ways of understanding history, visitors have a role to play in choosing to participate in the Museum’s programme.

It is important first of all, therefore, to highlight the falseness of the Museum’s claim to neutrality. Their neutrality is not to disavow their visitors of their agenda but rather to present themselves as having no bias of their own. Yet, such ‘political’ neutrality is itself a discursive positioning and
claim on the past and unless visitors can see it as such there is a risk that their participation cannot be self-empowering. Over time and under the influence of constructivist learning paradigms and the sociological critique that the past is a resource that is used in everyday life to inform our decision-making processes – a theme quoted by Abram (2002:128) and Sevcenko (2002:57) from historians, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s survey of popular uses of the past (1998) – the museum has adapted its commitment to ‘truth’ to suit an ideology in which the true representation of the past is only what we take to be true for us now. What is true to the Museum now is the need for a democratic participation and a public discussion about immigration and this is what it asks its visitors to perform. To perform its democratic vision is to participate in a much-needed public dialogue but it is not to question that need and thereby to decide (or not) to participate.

Personalised histories and personal motivation contribute to the idiosyncratic nature of the museum and it is to the personal opinion of the visitor that it turns for a response. To do so, however, the museum reverses its journey back in time to depersonalise and make common to every American the stories being told. As Jack Kugelmass argues (2000) this comes at some risk.

The Tenement Museum was initially a lure for those interested in exploring and preserving a Jewish heritage, which has been inextricably linked in the American imagination with the Lower East Side (Diner 2002, Diner et al. 2000). ‘Whilst it tries to present history’, Kugelmass argues, ‘the Tenement Museum is unwittingly disturbing a site of Jewish heritage’ (2000:199, original
emphasise) – the distinction between history and heritage marking the
tensions between the museum makers’ needs and their public’s. The
‘disturbance’ has in some instances been controversial with the Jewish
community who would rather not share “their place” in America and
Kugelmass’ general point is that the Museum is inextricably bound to that
particularistic desire to lay claim to this part of America. Kugelmass argues
that even with its intention to pluralise and problematise this singular
communal claim on the Lower East Side, the Museum inevitably contributes
to its further invocation.

In shaping that argument, however, Kugelmass points to the fundamental
difficulties of the Museum’s project to make common the immigrant
experience here. Translating its personalised stories into an idiom that
speaks of ‘tolerance and historical perspective’6 is its own ‘claim on the turf’
(as Kugelmass puts it). The Museum has its ‘own strategy of ownership’
(2000:199) which ‘elides the unique history of individual groups’ (2000:197)
in favour of the story of a common experience.

Kugelmass makes the vital argument that it is not possible to efface ethnic
distinction and still assume it is the history (objective truth) not heritage
(partisan truth) that speaks: ‘good social history and good politics do not
necessarily mesh…[and thus the Museum] replicates a nostalgic trope
stemming, in part, from the life stories it has collected that, in other respects,
it seeks to subvert among the members of its audience [i.e. especially its
Jewish audience]’ (2000:197-8). Hence, the Museum is only indulging

http://www.tenement.org/about.html, accessed 17/01/10. This is also
written in all their publicity as part of their mission.
another nostalgic vision of the future by giving the past a purpose (cf. Smith 2006).

That the museum claims to present ‘history’ but, by that very claim is presenting, as Kugelmass distinguishes it, ‘heritage’ then what emerges as critically most important in the encounter between visitor and museum is that the site becomes a place into which to project oneself. This is what is attempted in the Museum’s invitation to participate in a dialogue. However, unless visitors can voluntarily make their own ‘claim on the turf’ – and not just contribute to a debate about the present – their participation is being governed by the Museum’s interest and discursive power over the construction of meaning. Participating in their open dialogue is a participation in this discursive regime, even as it is an articulation of a personal viewpoint.

This might be illustrated by the explanation (or justification) Russell-Ciardi proposes for the Kitchen Conversations. She explains that they remember and replicate the kind of discussion that those who originally inhabited the building (and whose stories are told in the tours) held between them:

The history that shaped the building and residents at 97 Orchard Street was a history of people coming together to debate how immigrants should live and work, challenge conditions that they believed to be unjust, create a shared vision for a better future, and work to make that future a reality (Russell-Ciardi 2008:43).
In this vision, visitors are now carrying the mantle – or inheriting a tradition – of democratic activity not from the great architects and founding fathers of America but from the multicultural pool of outsiders who were striving for recognition and citizenship. This is a highly potent and radical proposition. However, there is a problem here: Russell-Ciardi’s ‘history’ is a particular – one might say romanticised – vision of the past. The idea therefore of replicating that past in the present is merely an image of that vision. The visitor’s action comes to be, through the museum’s use of metaphor, an idealised enactment of the present with no real need for the past – if the past itself is not critically presented.

A similar case might be argued of the Museum’s initiative to introduce the voices of contemporary immigrants into the tours. The intention of this initiative was not so much to democratise the representation of the past but rather to facilitate a conversation about how it is that contemporary immigrants themselves make the connection to those who came from different places before them. The initiative has had various stages of implementations: Firstly, the Museum, having been involved in training Chinese immigrants to act as guides around Chinatown, began hiring immigrants – mainly second-generation – to lead tours around 97 Orchard Street. This was supported by a programme inviting immigrant artists into the Museum’s theatre and exhibition space, and thereby providing a further possibility for the general public to engage directly with the contemporary experience (Russell-Ciardi 2008:46-7).
Inviting the contemporary experience into the Museum’s public performance ostensibly challenges visitors on at least three fronts: by presenting the human face of today’s immigrants, it defies the prejudicial instinct to “other” that experience, to see it as so different to one’s own that it is subject to a different set of assessment criteria. Secondly, it effaces the related prejudicial instinct to “other” the past as ‘a foreign country’ by bringing history up to date and helping to make the comparison between visitors’ own immigrant ancestry and the current arrivals. Finally, on quite a different level, it can work to expose the distinction between narrative and narrator, giving over the Museum’s unidentified authorial voice to a particular speaker and thus stimulating an awareness of why that narrative might be told.

The argument of this chapter is that without this last element the first two lose their critical possibility: that to elide the contemporary immigrant experience with the historical experience assumes their connection, when it is the connection itself that needs to be discovered and interrogated. With no extended research into how visitors receive the history from educators who introduce themselves as second-generation immigrants, I cannot comment on the actual effect. But many of the tours where I did research were led by these educators and the fact that no specific comment was made about this in the feedback sessions suggests that their identity was never presented as an explicit provocation towards understanding the historical story.

The Museum does not help by expressing concern that visitors should not regard the immigrant educators as experts in all immigrant experiences (Russell-Ciardi 2008:46). On the one hand, this is to take the responsibility of
sustaining the presence of multiple viewpoints and not allowing a single view to assume authority. But, as a result, the Museum struggles to expose the possible negotiation needed between the immigrant view on the past and the Museum’s presentation of the past. Unlike the personalized historical narratives, the authenticity of the individual educator should not, it seems, assume the same authority for the visitor as the researched history.

Consequently, rather than presenting a real point of resistance into which visitors are implicated, educators are themselves always a part of the coherent and authoritative account the visitor desires. This leaves unsaid the reason why their presence is important and why it is that remembering this history demands more than being grateful for the sacrifices of the past and the benefits of the present.

Both the way that the past is being interpreted as a model for the present and the way that contemporary immigrant voices are being co-opted into the Museum’s presentation highlight how the move towards a more democratic vision of the museum risks making assumptions on behalf of visitors and the way their visit achieves a political consciousness. Where the chief concern of the Museum is to develop practices that prepare visitors to draw connections between past and present in a dynamic process of re-visiting the present through history, there would seem to be a need – given that visitors do not yet seem to be provoked by the museum encounter itself into making the connection – to interrogate the point at which the past emerges in the present. It is the Museum’s own agenda to perform that emergence but for visitors who come with their own agenda, the point of meeting is within the subjectivity of the historical encounter.
It is this mutual ground of experience – where both visitors and Museum share in the desire that the past should become present – that I explore in the remaining part of the chapter. It is my argument thus far that the tendency is for the Museum to bring an objective and complete image of the past into play with the subjectivity of the present, whilst it is the preference of visitors to bring forward the past such that it plays between a complete experience and an objective truth in the present. In the first instance, the spatialising practice de-contextualises the past in order for it to be a flexible tool in the present. In the latter case, the desire to know the past is an emplacing process that creates context both for the visitor and the historical Other. In turning attention to the playfulness of the Living History tour, I am interested to explore ways in which the visiting experience allows for a spatial practice of de-contextualisation without leaving the past behind and therefore from within the visitor’s processes of emplacement. In other words, I am interested in moments and aspects of the visiting experience that intervene in the processes by which the past becomes a living history.

The predominant practice of dialogue at the Tenement Museum opens up questions about the idea of translating the past to the present and what happens to the past in the process of that translation. The past is not an abstract here: it is specifically located in place and person and it is moreover the primary object of encounter for visitors. Yet in trying to move their visitors beyond a nostalgic gloss on the past and towards a critical understanding of the present, the museum has shifted the emphasis on the intimate process of encounter with highly personalized historical accounts to an intimate encounter with other visitors (and the educator) in the present.
The museum has thus inevitably focused attention on its own interventionist role as opposed to ways that it can allow the visitor’s encounter to take on the responsibility for itself. In so doing it has overlooked the importance of allowing visitors to interrupt the narrative and ask why are we doing this? Despite engaging in constant re-evaluation of their programmes, the Museum currently comes short – at least in the research that I did – of challenging visitors to unpick the purpose of telling the past, and exposing its own prejudice for doing so. Instead, the pursuit of an equitable society has focused on claiming a neutral identity that merely facilitates the encounter between alternative narratives (Abram 2002, Sevcenko 2004, Russell-Ciardi 2008).

Turning in these next and final sections to the Living History tour I look at ways that the historical Other might escape its historical context but not in the form of an objective fact or historical map for the present but rather as the subjective presence of the visitor. This is a very specific rendering of the way the past connects to the present but it suggests an alternative mode of seeing through the political role of the Site of Conscience.

Most interesting about the Living History tour is the way it disturbs and challenges the relationship between museum and visitor and its shared activity of realising the past. As I go on to argue – and bearing in mind Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s notions of a ‘performing museology’ (2000) – it also provokes an investigation into alternative ways in which it can be the prerogative of the visitor to assume responsibility for including the social and political outsider into a sense of their own identity. This does not deny
the Museum its role but rather would set up a scenario in which participation in the Museum’s spatial practices is predicted in visitors’ recognition of a need to participate. This, I am suggesting, can happen at a different stage of the visiting experience to that proposed by the Tenement Museum’s creation of new dialogic spaces. Specifically, I want to argue that it is in the moments when visitors become aware of their role in realising the presence of the historical Other that they come to question their own presence in the museum and are more available to interpose for themselves the key political question: “Why and for whom are we visiting the past?”
3.6 Intimacy of a Guest

I would argue that rarely on the guided tours are visitors made to feel uncomfortable or ‘out of place’. The only time that I heard from visitors a sense of disorientation or uncertainty was from those who had visited on the one Living History tour that is offered at the Museum. In this, visitors visit the apartment of Victoria Confino, a Jewish teenager from Kastoria in Greece, living at 97 Orchard Street in 1916. Here, visitors’ sense of comfort is put more to the test not because it takes on a wholly different approach to the rest of the Museum. Rather it takes the immersive experience through to its logical conclusion whilst, at the same time, maintaining the interest in gaining a distanced and complete view of a moment in time. As such, I would argue, it encompasses the dynamism of history as process within the search for a definitive sense of the past.

In looking at the tour, I want to consider how these subjective and objective relationships with the past interplay, often without providing as satisfying an experience as in the guided tours. However, it is important first to note that the tour also illuminates our understanding of the relationship between the Museum and visitor through which the interplay of objective and subjective experiences is generated. Rather than guide or educator, or the guise of the neutral facilitator, the Museum explicitly defines or recognises its role as a host, inviting visitors as guests to share company, stories and of course conversation. As a host, the responsibility is to be welcoming if, at the
same time, asserting ownership and control of the experience. As guest, one wishes to feel at home but is always aware of one’s outsidedness to the place.

For visitors on the Confino tour the invitation to come in is not given by the educator on the front steps of the building, as it is on the guided tours. There is one introduction – as opposed to the two on the street outside the building – though this can also take 15 minutes. This typically takes place inside in the theatre space that occupies one of the former, lower-ground shop-fronts. Like the other tours, there is also an opportunity for group members to introduce themselves and for the educator to give a potted history of the building and the area. However, the introduction additionally explains what is going to happen on the tour, describes the character – Victoria Confino – who the group is going to meet and offers some prompts as to questions the group might like to ask her. Crucially, the briefing session gives the group an identity as an immigrant family with a designated mother and father. The group are expected to play in this role as their visit to Victoria Confino is to take place in 1916. The premise of their visit is that they are a family just come off the boat – the group decide from where – and are seeking advice on accommodation on the Lower East Side. The questions that they are prompted to ask are therefore questions that they would ask in this role.

Visitors are then taken through a back doorway, up the twentieth-century fire escape and onto the same floor as the main entrance but at the back end of the corridor through the house. There is a logistical explanation for this: the front doorway is narrow and the corridor and hallway no wider; there are two or more tours going on at any one time and not everyone can use the
entrance space. But this peculiarity does not go unnoticed by visitors. One visitor who had, on a previous visit, gone on a guided tour said:

the Confino apartment itself was really effective but approaching it through that – I know you have to do these things logistically – but approaching it that way, you don’t get the feeling of going into the bowels of a mostly dark building [20/01/2007].

Another advised to a different group:

I would strongly urge people to take the other, at least one other tour, before doing what we did today… To get a little more background on the physical structure of the building [20/01/2007].

In response, another member of that focus group added:

Yeah, because I didn’t feel like I got much besides the apartment and like the, you know, the individual experience of like what do I do, how do I, you know, adjust, but not where are things like, you know, how she interacted with other people or just the general like group dynamics of it.
Others even commented that they ‘felt cheated’ and that ‘we haven’t seen the museum at all’ or at least, as someone else qualified, ‘that’s what you feel like’ [21/01/2007].

These are comments from after the experience, at the time there is still a sense of possibility and discovery. It is important therefore to note at this point that where visitors might join the tour just as interested in the historical account of 97 Orchard Street as they are in the Living History experience, the discovery is going to be a negotiation of how to engage with Victoria in order to get to the history they are seeking. For some, this is indeed preferable. As one visitor explained:

…at least speaking for myself, I’m not interested in accumulating tremendous amounts of information, it’s really more the evocative quality which I think is important and you can, I’m sure, in the bookshop or, you know, on a website, you can get tremendous amounts of information to get all the layers of history that are involved here. But to get the emotional power of it, this is so effective. [20/01/2007]

As the group enters through the back door, no description is given of the history of construction, modification and reconstruction. Instead, the group are already in role. Once they have entered off the fire escape, the educator also assumes a role for herself, that of an agent for the local resettlement office. Having entered into the corridor, the educator, as resettlement officer, ushers the mother and father characters to come forward to the front of the
group before knocking on the front door of Victoria Confino’s apartment. Since the corridor is narrow, the group must form a line at this point and those at the back may be less engaged than those nearer the front.

After a short delay, Victoria opens the door and on her answering the educator introduces herself as being from the local resettlement office. She explains that she is with a new immigrant family who want to ask some questions about living arrangements and the neighbourhood. Victoria shows some resistance, feeling a little vulnerable and, depending on how playful the actress is feeling, may need some convincing not to insist that the group come back when her parents are home. For many visitors this can be a genuinely exciting and tense moment in which the role-playing takes on a surprisingly realistic quality.

Inevitably, though, the group is always allowed in. This is the moment of invitation and, despite being the guarantor for Victoria’s safety, the resettlement officer leaves the group as the visitors enter the apartment, explaining that she will return to collect them shortly. From this point on, a degree of responsibility is placed on the mother and father to carry the role-play. Without the educator-guide, they become the representatives of the family according to the set up of the scenario: it is according to their lead that the extent to which the imagined situation is seen through or to what extent it is relaxed in favour of an easier out of role engagement. But however they lead the group, Victoria remains consistently in role and uses questions to encourage and support the group through their role-playing. Often times,
she eases them in with jokes about their strange clothing or the unusual size and make up of the family.

From this point on, she will continue to play the role of a teenager but will have to negotiate her other, contemporary role as an educator in the museum. The success of this negotiation is greatly dependent on the characterisation the actress chooses for Victoria. With a two hundred page manual to digest, the character is always very thoroughly researched and the actresses performances invariably of a high quality. But every actress (at the time of my research there were five available for the role) plays her differently. When she is played as a nervous or shy teenager, for example, conversation can be a little difficult although with some groups this can work effectively to bring out their confidence.

There are certain set pieces – offering to play the victrola, or the useful tip to use a slice of ice in the gas meter to avoid spending money – that the actress can rely on to spur conversation and visitor participation. Most tours have a period of uncertainty before the visitors really grasp the opportunity in the spirit in which it is set up. There is a natural threshold moment to help the group through this when Victoria invites them into the kitchen. The apartment is small – about 350 square feet – and finding spaces enough for the average group of twelve to fifteen visitors is fun enough when they first enter. Getting up to move into the second room inevitably allows for a milling around that relaxes the focus of the group.

One visitor was particularly observant of the shifting dynamics:
One of the things that I noticed was that at the very beginning she was very shy and quiet and reluctant to talk, and then about a third of the way through she just brightened up and became much more comfortable and, you know, from then on seemed much more able, interested in talking to us. But I liked that because it had a very, made it more realistic. [20/01/2007]

As with any real life encounter between strangers and especially in a private home, it is only really in these moments of shift and relaxation that participants can make room for themselves in the scenario. Indeed, it is only in these moments, when some assessment of the situation can be made and the intensity of engagement is dropped, that the intimacy of an unknown relationship gains its complete expression. Gazing at photos, leafing through books, playing with toys – the visitor is free to be in the context of the past, accepting, that is, the suspension of disbelief, whilst not entirely losing themselves to it. It is an intimate space between past and present made possible not only by the presentness of the past (as live performance) but also the pastness of the present (the “other” place of the visitor’s performed imagination).

The tour ought to come to an end (after 45 minutes) when the resettlement officer returns to collect the family. This does not actually happen every time and sometimes, Victoria has to find an excuse for asking them to leave. Either way, visitors rarely ever carry through the role once the end is signalled. An interesting comparison can be made with the other two tours on which
visitors are not really asked to “perform” until the end. Despite open questions and the interactive set up on street, only at the end are visitors asked directly to share their response, which at this point is in answer to questions about the contemporary resonances of the stories they have heard. At the point at which visitors return to the everyday, they are encouraged to return talking about the issue. Though in this the educator tries to reconfigure the terms of the group from being a shared experience of the past to a democratic experience now, as an ending it is often awkward and does not typically allow for a complete conversation. Hence, the Museum’s idea of stepping into a Kitchen Conversation where that performance can continue.

These different endings reveal two different interpretations of hospitality as practiced at the museum. In the guided tours, the identity of the visitor is as one who, having been through an immersive but temporary experience, is now returning to the everyday world. In the Confino tour, the museum acts through Victoria true to the etymological root of host, which is both as a stranger and a receiver having power of strangers. The visitor, as her guest, is treated similarly as a stranger.

In the first scenario, the museum performs deference, encouraging visitors to feel equal ownership of the space, respecting their identity as citizens with open access to this knowledge. But it belies the relationship expressed by Victoria, in which visitors are welcomed in to a place that is not theirs, over which they have no control but in which they may temporarily feel at home.

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7 [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/host](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/host), accessed 22/12/09
This relationship defines equality as a matter of negotiation and cultural performance. It is an uncertain relationship, caught between propriety and fear. It is of course the relationship between host country and foreigner.

The intimacy of the guest as opposed to the visitor is an intimacy that touches on the transgressive and the taboo – Victoria is a fourteen year old breaking the (cultural) rules of her parents not to allow visitors in whilst alone – and hence one which is never quite resolved: only on the rarest of occasion will the actress break character and allow her guests to become visitors again. Only on the rarest of occasions does she return her guests to their own everyday world.

3.7 Possibility of Failure

The effect of this playing through to reality and the intimacy of engagement is variously received between visitors. In discussing these differences, however, I want to show that what stands out is how they all indicate the challenge and uncertainty with which that engagement is enacted. Visitors may judge the experience by different criteria and, as such, regard it as a success or failure but, overall, this in itself indicates that the experience is more intensely uncertain and precarious as a cultural event than the guided tours which rarely disappoint.

Sharon Macdonald has highlighted how ‘[b]odily performance is...a more high-risk approach than is the textual or purely verbal’ (n.d.: 7) and demonstrates, through her case study at Nuremberg, the uncertainties of this
mode of engagement. For museum professionals, such uncertainty may seem an unnecessary risk of interpretation. In my argument, it is the uncertainty and awkwardness of the encounter that not only creates a critical space in that visiting experience but also helps illuminate other kinds of critical space within other visiting events elsewhere in the Museum.

At the core of this uncertainty is the fact that visitors are put in role. This is an unusual form of second-person interpretation which, as Scott Magelssen (2006b) points out, remains an undeveloped form. From the outset of the encounter, this dramatises the impossibility of the situation. Victoria will comment (with large groups) on the size of the family and how hard it will be to find an apartment for all of them. She will baulk at her guest’s clothes and suggest something more appropriate to wear when visiting landlords. In each case, the actress is able to integrate the anomalies of the present within the logic of Victoria’s limited experience of the world and yet also reflect the diversity of the world of New York in 1916 to which she is herself still quite unaccustomed. Further into the conversation, anachronistic questions from the visitors can be passed off as linguistic or cultural misunderstandings.

With such playfulness, however, comes the pressure on visitors to follow through and sustain their role. For many visitors, this demands a level of participation that they were not expecting and, as such, it requires a negotiation of what kind of activity this is. Few people are prepared to be in a theatrical production; and even then, it would be unclear as to what kind of theatre this is. For, as Scott Wallin (2006) notes, it resonates with a variety of
forms that each call upon very different modes of participation and as such contradict each other in terms of what capacity visitors are meant to be there: as audience or actor, visitor or guest, leader or follower.

Wallin is correct to note in his assessment of the Confino tour that in its combination of naturalistic, Brechtian and environmental theatres, the tour may not quite manage to marry the emotional experience with the objective perspective to establish any useful empathy with the immigrant experience. His concern is that, whilst the experience can work successfully as entertainment or as an instrument of learning, it fails in its attempt to bring the two together as a means for visitors to acquire a deeper appreciation of the complexities of immigrant life.

For Wallin, the specific failure of visitors on the Confino tour to make that leap is at least in part a result of the confusion felt by visitors between on the one hand naturalism and empathy and on the other epic and reflection. As one visitor said to him: ‘Are we there to learn? Or are we there to perform?’ (quoted in Wallin 2006:38). Within the overall context of the museum’s purpose, the living history encounter may not lead the visitor towards the political issue of immigration but, as the evidence from the other tours suggests, this is not inherently forthcoming in the other encounters either. Thus, it may be that this question of learning or performing may be a question that visitors might ask of the Museum’s other public programmes, as well.

Wallin goes further in interrogating this issue, concluding that:
The main limitation in the Confino role-play is that the “newly arrived immigrants” literally don’t know their lines. While this power imbalance encourages conceptual learning, it limits the emotional development of the scene since the visitors are constantly confronted with the blatant fact that they are incompetent as first person interpreters. (2006:43)

In my conversations with visitors, there was a far greater ambivalence around this difficulty of getting into role. For some, there was certainly a sense of incompetence. For instance, one woman, who was cast in the role of the mother, compared herself to the actress:

I wasn’t always there with the role but she was really there...She was there in that time. I didn’t always put myself in that role where I belonged. I didn’t put enough into the role [or] add too much to it. [20/01/07]

For others, the actress’s performance set a challenge that introduced new possibilities of experience:

1: And there was a moment where it was very awkward, you know where, at the beginning, where we were learning our role, what we were supposed to do -

2: Yeah.
and it felt like, well, yeah, we’re having a unique experience here that no one else has had because we jumped in and made it our own. [20/01/07]

In other instances, it was more the risk of a failed experience that prompted visitors to perform. As one visitor explained:

Because like especially – because I wonder and people are, like, it would be awkward if no one was asking questions and we were just sitting here, like, you know .... So – that’s uncomfortable. [20/01/07]

Thus, where, for Wallin, the role-play effected a power imbalance that compromised the success of the drama and the learning, responses in the feedback I received suggested that it is also a constant provocation to participate and hence forces a specific learning through the frustrated play of the drama:

The other thing is that instead of really paying attention to what she is saying you are concerned about what you are going to be saying.... I question sometimes if that dynamic is the best way to do it...but I do think it has some interesting aspects to it. You are forced to really think in the logic of the time. [20/01/07]
Another visitor was even more appreciative of how the role-play can be both educational and entertaining:

You get it all too and you don’t even realise that you’re getting it. That’s the, you know, you’re trying to play a role and you’re asking questions and when it’s over you got it and didn’t realise you did. That for me is the most effective learning. [20/01/07]

Not only, therefore, do some visitors benefit from the challenge set by the demand to act in the first-person, most visitors I spoke with found that it was only because the actress insisted on complete historical coherence in the playing of the situation that the experience could be sustained as educational. Again revealing the immanent risk in the exercise, one visitor commented:

These role-play experiences can be magnificent failures, so I think having someone that good also made it work otherwise it could be very phoney and not good at all. [20/01/07]

Another made clear the importance of the historical accuracy to the effect of the encounter:

Yeah, I think if it wasn’t real, if she were fiction, then it would be a very different experience. [20/01/07]
Although, there is no further explanation from this visitor about what constitutes that difference, it is interesting that for her the reality of the character outweighed the fiction of her own role. For others this was not the case:

It is, you know – I mean, it does intimidate you … a little bit
I think to be placed on that, in that fictional scenario, you know. [20/01/07]

Between the two perspectives lies the tension between whether the encounter is a move towards an objective historical learning or a subjective experience of the past. When seen in this light, the ‘power imbalance’, as Wallin recognised it, becomes invoked within the shifting position of the visitor rather than simply about an oppositional relationship between them and the Museum. It is, I would argue, the way that the uncertainty of the situation is taken up into an ontological play of self – moving between a historical reality and a contemporary fiction (which is itself an experiential reality in the present) – that a critical space begins to open. For some this is manifested by the titillating pleasure of seeing oneself in the position of the historical Other, though it is interesting how this quite easily slips into an assertion with political inflection. As one visitor explained:

I found this, although a little bit uncomfortable also, but I found it very nice to be sort of forced to do that. Because I think well, everybody, everybody comes from immigrant experience if you
go back far enough and I find that fascinating and I’ve always wanted to try and put myself in my ancestors’ shoes and so, in a little tiny way, this was a chance to do that. [20/01/07]

Another visitor, after my having introduced the notion of conscience into the discussion, added:

I think with this moral conscience thing you just need effective ways to get in under people’s skin. So, with the drama – and the making all of us into part of the drama – helps to make it more real. [20/01/07]

Moving towards the reality involves both the presence of historical accuracy and the emotional, subjective means of approaching that.

In that sense, thinking about how the visiting experience can effect a shift from past to present and implicate visitors into the process of activating the relationship between them, it is not the titillating pleasure of play nor the moral argument that interest me. Whilst these positive experiences illustrate the value of mixing the objective with the subjective – the distanced with the immersive – I would suggest that these responses do not actually contradict Wallin’s concern – or the concern expressed by the visitors he spoke with. Rather they highlight that what is a limitation of the approach is also an opportunity. Instead of separating learning from performing – instrument from entertainment – it places them in an antagonistic relationship. There is a pressure to participate, to maintain the conversation, which necessarily
means that you are in the scene but also outside of it thinking about how to construct it. I would argue that it is the difficulty in this of getting ‘under people’s skin’ and the trips along the way that matter rather than the empathetic moment itself.

Indeed, in other examples, it is the obstacle of historical accuracy that more precisely opens up an awareness of the issues at hand:

She didn’t touch on the prej – I mean she did touch on the prejudice issue, but I thought that might have gone further. I don’t know how, but it might be something to think about – the very touchy issues, is there a way to play that out? Because she got into the greenhorn thing, the prejudice against us, as well as a minority among minorities. But that would have been interesting if they ever elaborated more on the…find a way to play out some of the really difficult things. [20/01/07]

Sometimes, the historical reality just created an awkward point in the conversation:

I think with her being so convincing that if she was just a museum guide there are things that you wouldn’t have felt. Like I asked about the water closets and felt like, you know, that you didn’t want to… because she was so in character that you, you know, it would have been embarrassing to ask at that time. [20/01/07]
But here again accepting Victoria as real places an ethical responsibility on
the visitor. That in turn manifests itself as an obstacle to finding out more of
the historical detail. This can be frustrating but for this visitor it was more
an instance of enjoying the authenticity of the moment. Another visitor
agreed, saying: ‘You didn’t want to be offensive’; whilst someone else, in a
different conversation in which the issue of Victoria’s prejudice arose, stated:

I think I would like to have heard more about that but I was a
little embarrassed to ask about it in role and out of role, even,
you know. [20/01/07]

This is one peculiar achievement of the tour: that there is a success in finding
the limit of the learning – a success in finding a historical truth but realising
that it is only a partial understanding, and even, in the latter case at least,
finding that that provokes an ethical relationship to historical knowledge.
The idea that certain knowledge even of the dead – to whom Victoria returns
once visitors are out of role – ought to remain undisclosed takes the intimacy
of the guest to a further level of responsibility.

Underlying these various realisations of the limits of the experience –
whether seen as a positive or a negative – is, I would argue, always the
possibility of failure. With the actual impossibility of the historical meeting
comes the risk that the event will have no meaning. Once the action is set in
motion, the negotiation between how far to immerse oneself in the scenario
and how far to maintain a distance follows an imperative to recoup meaning
in the encounter. Visitor feedback also revealed that concern through the expression of a common feeling that being properly prepared for the tour was essential and that the success was highly reliant on how the group cohered around the task of keeping in role. But in response, I would suggest, there is equally much to be commended for the experiential risk that the encounter simply will not work and become meaningless.

It is, I would further argue, this possibility of failure that marks out the Confino tour as an unusual experience. Whilst it has common features with other Living History sites, it differs in many ways. Firstly, visitors who take this tour are aware that it is just one way – and indeed a minor way – of visiting the site. As the earlier comments about the frustration of not having seen the whole site suggest, this can implicitly feed into a sense that the tour is not quite satisfactory. Secondly, visitors on the Confino tour are far more constrained by their role-play than is the case in conventional Living History encounters.

In the role-play scenario of the Confino tour, visitors are almost told what questions to ask – indeed in the introductory preparations they are explicitly given these as prompts – and the exercise is similarly almost to find out definitive answers. The ‘almost’ is a reminder that visitors are aware of the partiality of the advice they are being given and hence the partiality of the historical knowledge they are gaining. However, the objective of the play is to limit that partiality to a complete understanding of Victoria’s history and to grasp a whole sense of that particular and personalised past. This is not to deny questions about the wider society and conditions in which her life was
made. But, as the visitor comments suggest, the situation does compromise the visitors’ capacity to ask about these things.

Moreover, whilst visitors on the Confino tour do have to suspend their disbelief of an impossible encounter between past and present as at other Living History interpretations, by being in role, they also have to go a step further and participate in that false reality. As such, their freedom to enjoy the impossibility of the situation from the relative comfort of their own, contemporary Self is always under pressure and at risk. By the same token, they are also no longer authors of the narrative – as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes of the Plimoth Plantation visitor – but characters within it. Rather than having the certainty of their own Self to create the narrative of the past, they must rely on the Museum to hold the narrative. Their responsibility is to coax the Museum into disclosing its knowledge of the past.

Meaning, in other words, can no longer be derived from the theatrical play of possibility/impossibility that drives the learning at Plimoth Plantation and elsewhere. In role, the encounter has to be unquestionably possible for conversation and learning to ensue. If its possibility is doubted and Victoria’s authenticity questioned, the experience results in nothing happening. As one visitor explained when asked if he ever felt like testing the actress in this way:

Yes, but then it would have been us having fun and that’s not what we were there for. You know, it would have been – then it would turn into a comedy show, you know. [20/01/07]
At other Living History sites, the learning follows from the visitor’s free choice in their relationship with the historical characters. Here at the Tenement Museum, again it is the risk that the experience will lose its capacity to have meaning that drives visitors to participate. This is less an exercise of free choice so much as a necessity to perform within the logic of the Museum. Where the rules of Living History conventionally constrain actors to remain time-bound and give visitors the freedom to interpret their narrative in the present, here in the Confino tour, visitors are bound by the same rules as the actress intervening before they can step outside and make their own sense of the encounter.

Ostensibly, as a second person interpretation, the Confino tour offers, as Scott Magelssen has argued, ‘a potential for programming that may exceed first- and third-person interpretation in historiographic and performative pedagogy’ (2006b: 292). Yet, it is again a more constrictive programme than the formulation that he envisages. Magelssen’s hope is for a second-person interpretation in which visitors do not just perform historical tasks (currently its dominant form) but also actually take on named characters from the past. For him, this means he envisages that participants will have, in a Boalian fashion, the radical option of changing the narrative of the past and engaging more directly (and hence critically) with the social conditions that formed it.

This is indeed a form of interaction that the Museum could develop in its Confino programme, appropriate to its purposes. (Some visitors even suggested it as a way forward for the museum, raising the idea that visitors
could, with a more preparation, take up the role of Victoria’s family). This would of course involve a much longer session and for the moment the visit in the apartment always lasts 45 minutes. But the limitation to this is not only with time (which is, as the visitors themselves recognised, problematic). More substantially the obstacle to this lies in the Museum’s insistence on the presentation of personal stories. By their inscrutable and well-researched truth, it would be ethically inappropriate to consider it as alterable. Furthermore, in the presentation of an everyday meeting between a host and her guests, there is no narrative to change. In Boal’s terms, the Confino tour invites visitors to join the oppressed rather than transform the circumstances that make them so.

Everything points to a constraint on the freedom of visitors and yet it remains, in many cases, an effective, creative and even, at times, transformatory encounter. It is for this reason that I read into the visitor feedback the significance of the possibility of failure – that the event might simply not work. Even if the visitors are constrained by the rules of the game, the possibility for the game to happen remains in their hands. One visitor explained the success of the tour, thus:

It was really very creative making us into actors too. Because then you’re taking it – I found I took it even more seriously at that point, and it became even more real. [20/01/07]

The importance of the event becoming real underlies the visiting experience at the Tenement Museum. If it does not accede to this status of reality, it is
not serious and the centre falls apart. But the reality is not just a theatrical reality, accepted implicitly by all and permitting of meaning to be made. The reality is also an historical, documentary reality authenticated by evidence – a reality, that is, that ethically and epistemologically demands for it to be believed. The possibility that that demand will fail is the powerful and political drive behind the cultural event. To accept this historical truth is the demand of the Museum but the prerogative of the visitor to choose.

3.8 Between Museum and Theatre

Whilst it is the peculiar conditions of the Living History tour that I have used to develop the argument so far, I want in this next section to consider how it illuminates a transformational dynamic that also sustains visiting experiences elsewhere in the Museum. I have already discussed how visiting experiences are a constant play across the tension between objective and subjective knowledges. The Confino tour brings this out further in its insistence that visitors immerse themselves in the past in order to gain an understanding of a specific history, and also in anticipation that this will create a newly distanced perspective on their own lives and those of others in the present. This shifting of epistemological viewpoints I have now identified with a shifting sense of Self-as-Other but also located the play within an agonistic relationship of mutual dependency between Museum and visitor, where the Museum establishes the rules of participation but visitors, as a result, withhold a freedom to fulfil the demands of the game. Finally, I have alluded to both the objective-subjective tension and the
alternating interests of the Museum and visitors in terms of spatial and emplacing practices.

The Confino tour adds further detail to these terms when understood as the possibility of failure. The explicit objective of the tour is very much to emplace knowledge: it is an immersive experience to meet (and thereby re-place) an authentic historical person in their original home. However, this place of historical encounter is only sustained by visitors agreeing to accept the historical reality over and above their own – to play the game of role-play. In this displacement of Self, this play creates a secondary subject position outside of the reality of the historical encounter, in an epistemological space from which visitors are able to see themselves from a distance taking part in the guise of the Self-as-Other – an inversion of the Living History site where this really is taking place within their reality.

This distancing of the Self is part of the playful nature of culture (Winnicott 1991 [1971]; Schechner 1985; Emigh 1998; Sauter 2002). However, given the historical chronology of playing in the Confino tour, the distanced Self is more evidently located within the specific realm of the contemporary, left, as it were, within the visitors’ genuine reality – their own place in the world. Hence, under pressure to participate in a reality that is objectively true but subjectively sustained – and thus inherently at risk – visitors are themselves exposed to a de-contextualisation of their own reality. Once inside the past, their own, everyday world becomes the outside of experience: a space, that is, without context. At the same time, given that visitors are only temporarily and by goodwill relieving themselves of their daily Self, their
newly spatialized everyday world is always preparing to be re-placed. This is what constitutes the risk to the historical encounter – the insistence to remain as the daily Self. And thus it is that visitors might find themselves in the precarious and unstable condition where they are either impossibly in two places at one time, or in no place at all, simply ‘in space’.

In fact, I can make no claim that visitors do experience such a condition, nor do I argue that it is a necessary condition to achieve. Such a condition, I would suggest, is not new nor previously undescribed. Rather it might be comparable with various states of being discussed in literature ranging from John Keats’ (2002:41 [1817]) ‘negative capability’ to Martin Heidegger’s (1966) ‘Gelassenheit’ to Jacques Lecoq’s (2000:38) ‘disponibilité – highly creative and inherently unstable states of readiness that are open to uncertainty and irresolution. But as such it is perhaps unsurprising that I have no visitor evidence to suggest it is a state that was definitively recognised by those participating in the Museum. Instead, it is to the conditions within the visiting experience that ideally might produce that state of being – or, more simply, a recognisable experience of uncertainty and openness – that I finally turn.

Thus far, I have distilled those conditions from visitor comments that imply a consciousness of the risk to meaning prompted by participation in the Museum’s programme. But in turning finally to think about how the Museum might take responsibility for nurturing those conditions, I want to highlight specific moments in my observations where the encounter might
be seen to be exposing the transformative potential of this aspect of the visiting experience.

These moments help to elucidate the play of spatial and emplacing practices taking place at the Museum and the critical importance in the way they emerge from each other. If we take the political project of the Museum as a Site of Conscience to be to transform the place of the past into a dialogic space for the present, then it is possible to regard the current initiative of Kitchen Conversations as making the spatial engagement a distinct one from the emplacing practice. This is quite clearly a deliberate attempt to de-contextualise the past such that it becomes a space for discussion in the present. But the general interest of the Museum is to bring the two practices together – hence the recent announcement of integrating the Kitchen Conversations into a guided tour but also the changes to the guided tours that have been developed especially over the last five years or so.

The analysis of the Confino tour suggests that this involves a complicated process (that may not happen quite so formulaically) of first emplacing the past, thereby de-contextualising the present, which in turn, raises the stakes of the emplacing process, recognising that it is not finally tenable and, in the inevitable return to the present, trying to sustain the ethical responsibility to the past even as it becomes de-contextualised again.

In its playing with reality and possibility and in its shifting between ways of knowing, the process proposes a theatricality to the museum but an experience, nonetheless, that is neither theatre nor museum. Thus, the
capacity of the Museum to create a transformative experience – where political opinion is formed and re-formed – may first be understood as becoming a specifically new venue for change to take place. Between theatre and museum – experience and information, play and reality – the Museum implies that the Site of Conscience may be a hybrid institution, a new cultural technology. This possibility is evident in visitor responses as much as it is definitive of the Museum’s practices. It is also a prediction of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s ‘performing museology’ that sees in the theatricalisation of the museum the possibility that all museums could become ‘museums of conscience’ (2000: 9).

Many visitors were quite clear in their feedback that the Tenement Museum provides an unusual experience. Some wanted to compare it to Living History sites; and, certainly for the most part, people distinguished the Museum by the possibility of immersion in the past. As one visitor explained:

That’s why for me the Tenement Museum is so special, in that you can see the rooms rather than as a museum, like they don’t have the barriers or the interpretive panels and the typical things that you see in a museum. [20/01/07]

An extended conversation with one group comparing the Tenement Museum with Ellis Island, the national monument to immigration, yielded some debate about what might distinguish the Tenement Museum from other museums. Again, there was a focus around the possibility of
immersion and the absence of ropes and information. There was also, for one visitor, a feeling that Ellis Island recalled a generic history and as such provided a less personal experience. One couple, who had visited Ellis Island before it was interpreted, recognised that there had been a potent effect in ‘being able to walk through the rooms and listen to the ghosts’ which they now felt again at the Tenement Museum.

In response to these observations about the powerful intimacy of affect in the visiting experience, another visitor went further in noting how the Tenement Museum afforded the opportunity not only to visit the past not ‘as a museum’ – that is, as an immersive as opposed to a distanced experience – but to actually see the Museum as a museum. Comparing the Confino tour with the other tours, she explained:

And especially on the other tours, when they bring you into the un-restored rooms so you see it as it was left in 1930s, which to me is really important. Because it’s, so many museums focus on one time period, 1820, or 1870 or so on. Everything else is blown away. So you don’t get that continuity of time that you do here. And I think that’s the value of this, in that they have multiple units that they can interpret to different time periods, different families, and they still have the one that’s completely bare that shows, okay, this is what we had to start the museum with, in a sense. So you’re not just looking at the experience of the immigrants, but you’re also looking at the evolution of a building as a museum.
And how do you interpret that. To me that’s special because there aren’t that many across the country at all. [20/01/07]

Making the connection between the history of use by immigrants as a home and the later continuity of use as a museum is indeed an element of the narrative the Museum educator’s present. But what the visitor’s comment brings out is that it is not just the story that matters but the opportunity to contemplate the historicism of one’s own experience of visiting the site as a museum. This is the possibility to perceive the Museum as a venue of cultural production and as itself a historic site – ‘the museum qua museum’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000: 11), the historic site qua historic site. It is, moreover, the possibility to see oneself as a performer in and producer of the museum.

To be able to see that one’s own presence as a visitor is historically situated – that is, to participate in a ‘performing museology’ – is a critical aspect of recognising one’s ethical responsibilities to the museum’s object. In the Confino tour, this self-awareness is initially prompted in any case by the role-play. Elsewhere in the Museum, the cue for this is subtly given in the play between objectivity and subjectivity but, as the visitor points out, is given greater clarity in the two empty apartments. These ‘ruin apartments’ have been kept as they were found in 1988, fifty-three years after their residents were evicted and after minimal use as storage for the businesses that continued in the building after that time. In one, a handful of found objects are displayed as a self-consciously limited attempt at being a traditional museum. In both, the history is brought up to date and educators
are encouraged to use the spaces as an opportunity to bring out the contemporary, political resonances of the past.

However, as my analysis of the Confino tour suggests, if there is an ethical imperative in the self-consciousness of visiting, the momentum of responsibility is sustained by uncertainty and an almost visceral risk of meaningless in the experience. Bringing the historical narrative forward to the present day does not inherently expose the potential for contradiction in the interplay of history and experience and the urgency to recoup meaning. Indeed, in the terms that I have been using, the shift between placing the museum within the history and making the museum a space for debate there is a need to implicate a sense of crisis if they are to invigorate visitors into sensing the need and choice to participate in that shift.

There is written into the script of the guided tours a rhetorical provocation of this kind: in the Piecing It Together tour, the group is brought in the end into the home of the Rogarshevsky family, Mrs Rogarshevsky being the only person to live in the building after 1935 when it was officially closed to residents. The scene is set in 1918 as a house of mourning for Mr Rogarshevsky, a tailor, who has just died of Tuberculosis – ‘the Jewish disease’. It is in the context of this death – presented as unjust – that the group, at the end of the tour, are asked about what they know about current conditions in the garment industry.

The Getting By tour takes a different approach, leading the group to the ‘ruin’ apartment. Pointing out through the window into the everyday world of
today from this derelict space, visitors are asked to consider the future of the Lower East Side, emerging out of its disreputable past into a gentrified quarter in which housing is now unaffordable for immigrants. In this liminal space – caught between the past and present – the rhetoric insinuates, should we not act quickly with our consciences on behalf of the new wave of struggling immigrants?

These rhetorical tactics use the emotional sense felt through being in the place to imagine the need to respond. Sometimes they gain a response but, as I explained earlier, they are also often received in and by a silence. Silence in itself is not a negative response. Silence might be a desired effect of a Site of Conscience but a silence that is waiting to speak. As such, these tactics raise two issues for the interpretation: Firstly, there is the question of timing. Placed at the end of the tour, the actual demand to speak now often fails. Visitors recognise that the experience is complete and the need to bring forth their opinion, let alone to consider how it can be changed, if it is there at all, is something that is left as a further point for reflection, in time beyond the visit. The visitors are already leaving the place behind and the contemporary issue remains a factor of the place. In that sense, the interpretation, because of its timing, has not transformed place into a space for the visitors as visitors. The silence is the silence of the empty auditorium.

The second issue is a matter of motivation and where the sense of urgency to speak is felt. The immediate need to participate in the Museum’s memory regime requires, I have said, a hermeneutic gap – a precariousness of meaning – which visitors feel uncomfortable with. The rhetoric of death and
dereliction – of loss – tries to achieve this at the end of the guided tours and works to effect, I would argue, where it translates to the felt experience of visitors. Thus, for instance, where visitors genuinely feel in the ruin apartment that ‘their’ world has been evacuated, the spatialization of place assumes this dramatic quality.

In other words, if the loss is felt to be their own, visitors may be more likely to choose to demand. But whilst the narrative insinuates by metaphor a threat to meaning, it actually locates the precariousness of life in the immigrant – both historical and contemporary. As such, the weight of the crisis falls on the museum’s object and not on the visitor as subject. Where this is the case, the interpretation is always in danger of too much instrumentality, characterising conscience as guilt. In such instances the silence is more likely that of a resistance or an un-readiness to participate.

I draw out these examples from the guided tours because they highlight how the Museum on these occasions is trying to make the connection between past and present through the power of the place and the visitors’ emotional and embodied connection to the physicality of represented space within the building. For some visitors this can work but the feedback given at the start of the chapter reveals how the need to respond is not typically felt. Indeed, in trying to coax the translation from past into present out of this intimacy of encounter, the educator is always at risk of going beyond the visitors, helping too much and demonstrating the way between the two worlds rather than making the decision to go there the visitor’s own. On the other hand,
the position of neutrality that they also play may not create the sense of urgency the Museum seeks to effect.

3.9 The Matrix Within We Act

In 1981, the historian, Michael Wallace, surveyed the effect of capitalism on popular connections to the past in America, arguing that museums there – especially the reconstructed villages established by magnates Henry Ford (Greenfield Village) and John D Rockefeller Jr (Colonial Williamsburg) – had been complicit in incorporating ‘selections and silences of such an order that they falsified reality and became instruments of class hegemony’ (Wallace 1981:88). As a result, he admonished that:

The museums did nothing to help visitors understand that a critical awareness of history – although not a sufficient guide to how to act in the present – was an indispensable precondition for effective action, and a potentially powerful tool for liberation (1981:89).

The Tenement Museum, though strangely an inheritor of the American drive to preserve the national identity specifically against the perceived erosion of its core values and a true understanding of its ideology of liberty, has clearly tried to turn that tradition around and grapple with Wallace’s concern. Starting with the need for truth, its first struggle has been how to turn nostalgia into a tool of social change. Laura Peers draws the same parallel

The challenge the museum faces is in not going too far, that is claiming that an awareness of history is more than a precondition of and is, contrary to Wallace’s proviso, in fact a guide to contemporary social action. The difference is important as a guide sets the route through the present, whilst a pre-condition is a preparatory state from which one can proceed, with confidence, in a direction of one’s own making.

This distinction between pre-condition and guide is fundamental therefore to the conception of the visitor encounter and the playing out of the relationship between the Museum and the visitor. It mimics the shift in the Museum’s practice from an experience of the past to an experience in the present. If the Museum is in any risk of going too far in helping its visitors, this would be on account of it being too determined in its purpose, and thereby setting both the agenda and terms of engagement.

Currently, this danger shows itself as a shift in authority from the agency of the represented past onto the individual facilitator and educator. This is a paradoxical shift given that the project began as a way to resign the authority of the Museum over to a multi-vocal narrative only to find that to get its visitors to engage in a certain way it has needed to reinforce the control its educators exercise within the museum-visitor relationship.
The question this paradox raises is if it is inevitable or if there is a way to elicit a response to the past in the present tense that does not require the deliberate coaching of the museum; if, indeed, the motivation for visitors to participate is emergent in their encounter with the past and not in an alternative performance of a democratic ideal, defined by the Museum, in the present.

The concluding advice Michael Wallace gives to museums is that they:

‘should walk that difficult line between, on the one hand, fostering a definition of the present solely in terms of the past, and, on the other, disconnecting the past so thoroughly from the present that we forget that people in the past produced the matrix of constraints and possibilities within which we act in the present’ (1981: 92).

It is the middle-ness of this path, between a past past and a past that is only present, that the Museum might be deemed to have struggled to follow. The path can be interpreted in two ways: as asking visitors to immerse themselves in an historical world without losing sight of their present day – the pre-condition – or vice-a-versa to glance to the past from the present – the guide.

The premise of most of the Museum’s current innovations has been to follow the latter of these options and yet it began life following the former. As such rather than remembering that the people of the past produced the conditions
of the everyday present, it appropriates the past as a condition for the non-
everyday encounter within the Museum. To go further, the Museum uses
the people in the past to produce ‘the matrix of constraints and possibilities’
within which visitors act in the Museum’s staging of the present.

This is a tension – not a resolved issue – that plays across the whole
Museum. It is most apparent however in the Confino tour where the
restraint to speak in role is an authoritarian control of the visitor’s
relationship with the past for the purposes of learning in the Museum; and
yet, at the same time, it is a way for the visitor to be immersed in the past, to
engage the otherness of Self and to get ‘a feeling of living with these people’
[visitor feedback 20/01/07]. Far from controlling the relationship with the
past, by this token, the Museum’s performance is improvised and dependent
upon the visitor. In these terms, visitors do not forget that people in the past
produced the conditions of today’s world; they embody the production of
that matrix.

In performance theory, Michael Kirby (1965) introduced the idea of matrixed
and non-matrixed performance. The terminological coincidence to Wallace’s
text is more than just semantics. Kirby’s non-matrixed performances
represented a new theatre – a theatre of events and happenings in which
performance was not defined by its physical and cultural context. These
performances were an attempt at ‘blurring art and life’ (Kaprow 2003) to coin
a phrase of Allan Kaprow (a major contributor to Kirby’s new theatre), and,
in this, still today provide a model for cultural interventions in the everyday.
A non-matrixed performance is viewed by its audience as live art. But as an embodied activity of the performer, it reveals the presence of conditions which give meaning to everyday actions precisely by their absence. By voiding the actions of the context that gives them meaning, they become purely present but also expose how actions are given meaning by the context of their eventfulness. In other words, non-matrixed performances reveal by their absence ‘the matrix of constraints and possibilities’ of which Wallace speaks.

The usefulness of relating Kirby’s matrixed/non-matrixed performances to Wallace’s historical matrix is in the way it sheds light on the spatial dimensions of the interplay between the felt experience of the Museum and the objective history it presents. Museum visits are matrixed performances of a social kind, gaining meaning from the context of historical constraints and possibilities of a particular cultural institution. Visiting the Tenement Museum becomes or moves towards being a matrixed performance of an aesthetic kind. In its final form in the Confino tour, ‘details of “who” and “where” the performer is are necessary to the performance’ (Kirby 1965: 25) – Kirby’s definition of matrixed performance. Between these two matrixed performances, however, lies the avant-gardist displacement of a non-matrixed performance in which either one matrixed performance is discovered in the other’s context. In those moments, not only are the performance contexts out of place, they are also identifiable as negative space unable to provide meaning for the actions they encompass.
Two particular, incidental and explicit moments in the Confino tour will serve to illustrate this possibility although it is always an implicit possibility for every visit. On one occasion, during a tour, the wig being worn by the actress playing Victoria began to slip off her head. At first she tried to carry on, trying to stop it slipping completely. But it soon became impossible and the actress quickly excused herself from the apartment only to return a couple of moments later with the wig securely fastened. On a different occasion, Victoria – as part of her script – was describing the locality around 97 Orchard Street and in doing so pointed out the window of the apartment to the overhead railroad running along Allen Street. People looked out of the window but they could not see what she was talking about because the railroad was taken down in the 1930’s (that is 15 or so years after this meeting was taking place but 70 odd years before the visitors arrived) and they did not know it had been there in the first place.

Visitor responses to these moments were inevitably different: the first occasion made for a period of extreme discomfort as the wig was slipping and everyone knew that no-one could break character to help the actress but nor could they improvise in character as this too would have been an admission that there was an understanding between the actress and the visitors where, given the rules of the game, no actress could actually exist. Once she left the room, there was an immense sense of relief and suddenly a whole range of conversations opened up: some about the wig and the actress, some about Victoria; some visitors looked at the display, others at the door and their watches. On the second occasion, there was no moment of relief: visitors could not ask about the railroad because, again, they were
tied into the past and therefore were not (according to the rules) allowed to not see the railroad. To do so would have required stepping out of character and an end to the game. So, the subject of conversation moved on and this bit of information was quietly swept under the carpet – just a brief unexplained anomaly amongst a whole range of other learning successes.

On the guided tours, such moments of inconsistency or confusion are unlikely to take place as any doubt, it seems at least, can be answered and accounted for. On the Confino tour, this ought to be the case – and is the case if everything goes to plan and is kept literally within the apartment. The world there is as intact as the world of the guided tour. But here, on these incidental occasions, it is possible to see the same set of rules create moments of crisis in which everything becomes out of place. In these moments, past and present elide and the conditions by which visitor performances – whether their social or aesthetic performances – are given meaning are potentially exposed.

The argument here is that the set-up of the Confino tour essentially asks visitors to perform in the Museum’s way of creating a complete story of the past. At the same time, however, it opens up the possibility to doubt or see beyond the completeness of the story. This is especially the case where the actress’s performance fails or meets its limits. At these moments, visitors are exposed to the uncertainty of the event and the alternative idea that both past and present, as much as they appear as complete, are also merely a constant re-construction in which one chooses to believe and create. These are the only moments when the museum’s authority is shaken and yet, of course, the
museum’s logic wins out and visitors cannot turn that into their own answerable act in speech.

I would suggest that a) even if it is not an exposure that is generally experienced elsewhere in the museum, it is always a possibility, and b) this is an important political awareness. What gives this possibility of doubt its political importance is that it is constituted by a moment of risk, a risk that threatens the cultural value and meaning of the museum encounter and with that the relationship that is being built up with the historical Other. If the pre-eminent experience at the Museum is one in which the historical Other is being familiarised and located in their original place, what happens if the very grounds on which the historical Other becomes present to us are shaken by doubt and the place we give them momentarily disappears?

In theatre, this threat is the basis of the contract between performer and audience and it is the dynamic that sustains it as a meaningful cultural event. Only by accepting the pretence as real can the event proceed and have value. In certain circumstances, this means accepting that even political realities can be different – black can be white, the past can be the present, the Other can be the Self. What is interesting about bringing this possibility to the museum is how it might make of this contract of complicity a concern of historical reality.

By acknowledging how theatre exposes not only the constructedness of the museum but also the conditions of the everyday, the foregoing analysis raises further questions about how the agreement to participate is one that
not only gives meaning to the actions of the contained theatrical event, but also transforms that theatrical event into an historical and museological writing of personal and civic narratives. Having articulated an argument about the relationship between theatrical and historical realities, the enquiry needs to turn attention to how, in the museum, the theatrical risk is political not because it temporarily alters the possibilities of reality but because it is contributing to the inherited legacy of identity and knowledge. It opens questions about how the museum becomes a venue in which inherited narratives can be re-formed by the precariousness of encountering the historical Other and by which a loss of authority can be enacted. And specifically how the risk of that becoming a meaningless experience becomes an awareness of a need to alter one’s historical sense of Self.

The Tenement Museum creates opportunities for visitors to play out this risk. In the event, however, it is a risk that largely gets avoided because the encounter with the historical Other overwhelmingly gives a sense of completeness, of a living reality. The logic of the Museum’s performance concentrates on histories that are ethically bounded and unalterable and as such bear their meaning at a personal and emotional level. The invocation of a subjective experience of the past in this instance replaces a worry about subjectivity in the present. The next two chapters take up the issues raised in the last analysis of the visiting experience at the Tenement Museum and further analyse how the risk of encounter can form part of the objectivity of visiting. In particular, I examine how, at The Workhouse, the encounter creates a responsive space out of the place, a space, that is, in which the narrative of the historical Other emerges in the narratives of visitors. In my
analysis of Perm-36, I focus more on the quality of silence in which the readiness to respond is discovered.
CHAPTER FOUR – THE WORKHOUSE

4.1 Uncertain Beginnings

Visitors are most likely to arrive at The Workhouse by car and via the town of Southwell with its surprising 900 year old Minster and visible, Victorian affluence. The house itself is an isolated spot beyond the town, sitting almost majestically amongst fields and its own grounds, insinuating the aura of a Great House and yet visibly lacking that grandeur. It has an uncertainty, an awkwardness about it – both attractive and foreboding, imposing and slight, familiar and yet strange, established and yet displaced.

In conversations afterwards, rather than noting its relative position to the town that it served, visitors seemed more sensitive to its sense of isolation and independence, though in diverse ways. One visitor (who currently works as a psychiatric nurse) was impressed by the openness and sense of space, considering it a positive characteristic of this historical welfare institution, at the same time that he recognised the negative motivation. Comparing the hospitals where he now works, he commented:

I know there was also isolation – that you were putting these people away from society – but there are parts of that could be built upon [21/04/07]

Others alluded to the suitability of the house for regeneration into modern apartments, its countryside aspect being a particularly desirable feature.
From the opposite perspective, another saw the cruelty in having that same open space made inaccessible by (and a further sign of the harshness of) the workhouse idea. Whilst another visitor comparing the place to social housing today saw it as ‘another kind of ghetto’ [22/04/07], as if the space beyond the house was negative space, a fence between worlds.

The spectrum of “views” expressed solely on the location of the Workhouse reflects the range of contexts and perspectives that visitors may bring to the site. Place as a factor of the meaning-making experience pre-exists any articulation by the institution, even if it will become, during the course of the experience, a fundamental resource for the museum’s interpretation. Whilst, for example, The Workhouse is identified by its designation as a National Trust Property – and most visitors come precisely for that reason – it is typical, both within the Trust and amongst visitors, to recognise it as an unusual member of their portfolio. As a heritage site, it is striking for the way it doubts what heritage is.

This is not to say that it resists visitor expectations: many visitors said that they were unsurprised by the building. It holds a recognisable identity even if it cannot be identified. The workhouse is a known institution – pre-eminently through literature and especially Charles Dickens’ novels. Yet, given that their history ended in 1930 and, prior to that, they were places

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8 The Workhouse does not refer to itself as a museum but as a historic site. I use “museum” throughout to identify it merely as shorthand. Hence, it is not capitalised.
9 The results of a visitor survey carried out by the National Trust in 2008 for The Workhouse revealed that 69% of visitors are Trust members and 95% have visited Trust sites before. However, for 90% of visitors this was their first visit.
essentially to be avoided and feared, only a handful of visitors will ever have actually entered one. It is thus familiar and yet strange. Present to social life but profoundly a present absence. It lies at the very edge of personal and social consciousness. For the Workhouse, because these have not been answered before, there are more likely to be some genuine questions raised about the physical presence of the building in its location: why is the building here? How does the location of the building affect how I feel about it? How do I place this presented absence?

Thus, even at this first moment of the visiting experience, I would suggest that visitors are confronted with an element of uncertainty; and, indeed, this is further marked by the grey cut-outs of children placed by the interpretive team along the path from the car park to the House entrance. These ‘ghosts from the past’, as Alke Gröppel-Wegener (forthcoming), puts it, are ‘the first indication that the interpretation at this National Trust property might be unusual’ – a communicative event, I suggest, that will constantly strive to work with and against absence. In this instance, the absent children are re-presented as shadows. In the car park, that incomplete presence is both haunting of the place and gratingly out of place. Exactly how they work – as one or the other or as both – is dependent on whether they are suggestive of the past or too clearly of the present. However they are received by other visitors, I agree with Gröppel-Wegener that there is something unusual in their presence and would add that there unusualness is another uncertainty that comes, in this instance, more clearly from the way they evoke their own absence.
Uncertainty and absence are key themes in the following analysis of what constitutes visiting experiences at The Workhouse. Unlike the Tenement Museum, The Workhouse is not a place that is very familiar and nor is it a place that generally invites familiarity. Whilst some visitors come with family histories of workhouses, these are histories that have typically been repressed and untold, or else correspond to the threat the institution of the workhouse cast over people’s lives. Where at the Tenement Museum, visitors are engaged in a process of seeing themselves in the place of the historical Other, connecting past to present in this way at The Workhouse is simply more difficult. There is no nostalgia for the hardships of workhouse life. The uncertainty and absence of The Workhouse is, in this sense, already derived from its dissonance as an ‘undesirable heritage’ (Macdonald 2006a) – an inheritance that is only uncomfortably recognised as part of the community’s past.

In looking to the site as a Site of Conscience, the analysis is, as I have earlier established, concerned specifically with the way narrative dissonance (though, in the case of the Tenement Museum, also in part a narrative consonance) is taken up into an active political consciousness of and dialogue about the present. As ‘undesirable heritage’, The Workhouse quite immediately raises a need for a more conscious effort of this kind to make narrative sense of the past. As I discuss of visitor feedback, it cedes itself, far more readily than the Tenement Museum does of contemporary immigration issues, to a reflection on social welfare today and how society cares or “deals with” its poor and needy. Visiting experiences here are much more likely to transform the site into a Site of Conscience.
However, in looking at the way the visiting experience at The Workhouse is designed and received, the research suggests that a vital element of that translation from past to present – site to Site of Conscience – lies in how the museum cedes authority over the telling of the narrative. In part, it is in the nature of undesirable heritage, where multiple viewpoints are more likely to contend with any singular narrative, that authority over it is dispersed (Macdonald 2008, 2006a, 2006b). But this analysis takes evidence from visitor feedback that suggests that it is not just a matter of the uncertainty of the historical legacy that generates multiple viewpoints.

As Laura Peers account of the museum as contact zone has shown, authority can be put into play through any uncertainties within the construction of the visiting experience itself – a point supported by Macdonald’s report of performance failure at Nuremberg (n.d.). Extending the argument that a failure of performance presents a risk to meaning, the evidence from The Workhouse suggests that it is equally a spur to a more active political engagement. In thinking about how The Workhouse functions as a Site of Conscience, the analysis investigates to what extent it is as a negotiation of the museum’s intervention in the site that visitors find themselves articulating their political responsibilities. As at the Tenement Museum, this serves as a critique of the Museum’s assumption that their presence is invisible and objective but it also suggests that their presence becomes much more of an unintended and subtle dialogic participant than that of the facilitation at 97 Orchard Street.
In preparation of that argument, however, the analysis looks at the way The Workhouse is a venue, if not of theatre, at least of storytelling; and how the emergence of stories is a formative aspect of making of visits firstly, a dialogic experience and secondly, one in which authority becomes unstable. To that purpose, I first turn to the instance of one particular visit made by a woman whose mother, as she was coming to confirm, was born at The Workhouse. Comparing (slightly unscrupulously) this visit to the example James Clifford (1997) gives of an encounter between Tlingit Elders and the staff at the Portland Museum of Art, I draw on his idea of the museum as contact zone to highlight the potential for the visiting experience to evoke personal re-tellings of ‘ongoing stories of struggle’ (Clifford 1997: 193) that surpass and alter the work of the museum as an interpreting institution. The implication of the analogy is that any heritage institution, once it presents a past to the public, becomes responsible for the untold stories it has now made accessible. But, more than that, the institution may find its own authority effaced by other storytellers who have personal claims on the past.

The visit is unusual and just as I highlighted how, at The Tenement Museum, the unusual example of the Valentine’s Day meeting between different members of the garment industry was a difficult model to use in developing the possibility of dialogue in public visits, here too there is a limitation in using this one visit to suggest how the general visiting experience might be understood in the terms proposed by the contact zone. For visitors more generally, the invocation of a reciprocity – that element that, in the contact zone, challenges the otherwise unequal intercultural relationship between those doing the representation and those being represented – is only
functional when they sense a responsibility to the visited, as is the case in the singular example given. As the example further shows, in such instances, the museum needs to all but disappear as an agent in the historical encounter.

The example initiates the argument that the dialogism of the site begins not in the conversations that it prompts but in the reserve of stories it potentially brings forth. This is an idea that The Workhouse has experimented with in its interpretation of the site and in applying the National Trust’s notion of the ‘spirit of the place’. It is the premise of the interpretive team, as I further explain, to allow the site to speak directly to visitors and, to that purpose, they have taken specific steps to respect the authenticity of the building itself, leaving rooms empty and using only an audio guide to lead visitors through.

I explain how this approach enjoins the immanence of dialogue in Bakhtinian terms, introducing the idea that the public sphere is here constituted not just by rational communication but by a *heteroglossia* that is emergent in the affective engagement with the presentation of the past. This is a useful expansion on the way the Tenement Museum has primarily interpreted the Coalition’s dialogic project in terms of conversation and debate. It subtly reinforces the possibility of a democratisation of authority that the Tenement Museum otherwise expressly seeks whilst also maintaining an important sense, derived from Bakhtin’s notion of answerability, that such democratisation occurs in the moment and place where and when those stories emerge.
However, this is not the sole mode of interpretation and the museum seeks more explicitly to inform visitors by overlaying the ‘spirit of the place’ with explaining the idea behind The Workhouse – another example, like the Tenement Museum, of balancing objective and subjective ways of learning and knowing. In doing so, however, rather than complicating an otherwise nostalgic view of the past, this intervention serves in some way to redeem the otherwise difficult and undesired. This is a risky approach, on the one hand challenging expectations and on the other potentially making the hardship that makes the site undesirable more acceptable, its uncertainty more certain. The risk is, on one level, a risk of discourse. Given the presence of another mode of interpretation, however, the risk is equally in the way it interplays experientially with the first approach.

The analysis looks to visitor feedback to explore the tensions between these two approaches and how they can contradict more often than support each other. Thus, it is significant that, from visitor responses, it appears that engagement with the past at The Workhouse has actually been complicated by the interpretation and the presence of the museum. In making these curatorial decisions, it appears that the lived past of the site is not always so obvious and accessible to visitors, as visitors shift not only between the two modes of engagement but also between two ways in which the site is made present and dialogic.

This is not to say that it persistently fails to communicate. Rather, I use this feedback to question how the curating actually sets up a far more explicit and controversial relationship between visitors and the museum, making
visitors aware and critical – though in different ways – of the National
Trust’s presence and the way the visit is directed and designed by them. The
question this then raises for my own project is to ask if this dynamic might be
understood as one which adds urgency to the need to take a personal
responsibility for narrating the undesired and untold story of the historical
Other. Further developing my argument that experiential risk is fundamental
to the transformation of site into Site of Conscience, I ask of the visiting
experience if the political response gains momentum from the tension
between an historical rationalisation of uncertainty on the one hand and
feeling an absence of representation where historically there has only been
absence, on the other.

Both the historical objectivity and the feeling of an absence express
themselves in visitor responses in various ways – and it is for that reason
that, beginning this chapter from a point just before the visit officially begins,
I have already pointed to the way that absence forms part of the visiting
encounter: Firstly, the uncertainty of location, whilst metonymic of the
excluded narrative/narrative of exclusion, generates a variety of
contemporary resonances that can be both personal and political. All,
however, signify absence of a kind – whether that is an absence of space in
hospitals today; an absence of freedom for former residents; an absenting of
place through becoming a social barrier; or an absenting of the museum,
replaced by a vision of contemporary apartments. Secondly, I have
suggested how the uncertain presence of ghostly sketches in the car park
pressurises visitors to enter into a very specific realm of experience, hovering
in their absence, between past and present. In other words, between these
two early elements of the visiting experience, there is a sense in which the site inherently makes multiple viewpoints available but the museum, in trying also to facilitate that multivocality, is creating uncertainty around its own presence.

The chapter extends the argument, developed through the Tenement Museum case study, that visitors find themselves in the uncertainty between two realities to consider how here, at The Workhouse, the visiting experience also happens between the uncertainty of the site and the uncertainty of the interpretation/museum. At the Tenement Museum, I was interested to pursue how the play of realities invoked a splitting of the Self between two places. Following two further aspects of the interpretation – the audio guide and the “twist” in the final two rooms – this analysis looks at how visitors are more actively engaged with the problem of achieving coherence. Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of answerability, the analysis looks towards a more promising resolution of the tension between objective and subjective knowledges. Finding in the completion of the tour a moment when all participants – site, museum and visitors – coalesce, the chapter asks if and to what extent it is between the two uncertainties of site and museum that visitors discover a present reality characterised by a sense of their own authority in – and responsibility to – the telling of the story.
4.2 Contact Zone

On the 14th October 2007, I was sitting in the research room, (a part of the original laundry building), at The Workhouse in Southwell, Nottinghamshire. Whilst I was leafing through the archives of notes and correspondence, mostly between National Trust officers, concerning the early plans for the restoration and interpretation of the early Victorian site, a middle-aged couple were brought into the room to speak with one of the House’s volunteer historians.

Earlier, I had been given some warning of this possible arrival by one of the duty staff. Some time before that day, the couple had contacted The Workhouse because they had a suspicion that her mother, who had recently died from cancer, had been born there. I had been told that they were expected to visit the House and then come by the research room to look at the records from the time of the mother’s birth in 1930. I had been advised that I may be asked to leave the room as similar occasions in the past, when the records disclose the personal history of close family members, had been highly emotional and deserved their privacy.

In the event, the woman, I shall call her Ulrika, was already quite effusive when she entered the room: she came in explaining that whilst taking the tour of the House, she had been approached by another member of the public who had learnt from a volunteer steward that she was there to trace a member of her family. This second woman was visiting with her husband who had himself been born in a workhouse, not at Southwell but in Lincoln.
Her husband was not open to talking about his childhood and, it seems, had come to Southwell slightly under duress. Nonetheless, his wife made the approach and when told the maiden name of the woman born there, the man stepped forward and said ‘Meet one!’ He was, it turned out, a possible relative. He had the same surname and was perhaps a half-brother of Ulrika’s mother, child of a former marriage to the mother’s father – but he was not willing to explain or explore the connection. That there had been family members of a former marriage was something Ulrika had grown up knowing. But she had never met anyone and her own mother had never wished to talk about that part of her life associated with the workhouse. This chance encounter was the first with this unmentioned part of the family. Thus, by the time she came into the research room, Ulrika was already in a state of high emotion.

Having shared all this in my company, I offered to leave the room. She was soon to find that The Workhouse not only had the original log recording her mother’s birth but that they had been left, by an anonymous member of the public, a copy of her birth certificate. Ulrika had one copy of her mother’s birth certificate; but discovering this copy was, as she later described it, ‘a mystery that we have never been able to solve’ [29/10/09].

Earlier during the tour of the House, she had visited only ‘half-listening, half in a world of her own, trying to imagine – if my mother was born here – did she sleep in this bed? Did she walk this corridor?’ [29/10/09]. At one point, she asked a steward where the infirmary was. Looking out of the window, beyond the area made accessible to the public, she contemplated the place
where her mother may have been born. Then later, having left the research room, the historian actually took them into the building itself and showed them the two rooms used for birthing. Actually standing inside the derelict, not yet conserved, uninterpreted building, in her mind she stepped aside from being there herself, her thoughts turned to the everyday world. She hoped that it would at some point be restored because she was sure ‘there are other people out there like myself’[29/10/09]. The couple took a lot of photographs inside and in the grounds outside. They sat for some time. Finally, she took consolation from her husband’s counsel, to ‘take away [from her mother’s story] how she came into this world and how she left it’ and to think of what she made of it instead. But still, sitting there, she did not want to leave.

Two years later she remembered the day in detail, a day, as she said, ‘mixed emotionally’, one that ‘gave me a lot of leads’ in the search through her family history, a day that provided some answers but also provoked new questions which she intends still to follow through at some point. It was an experience that ‘opens your eyes. It makes you think a lot differently.’ Since then, she had taken notice of the former workhouse in her own town, Grimsby – a building she had previously not known about. Since then, she looks in a new way at those queuing for the drop-in centre a couple of doors down from her work. Before she would have thought ‘Why don’t you get off your backsides and get some work’ [29/10/09]; now she thinks how their needs do not place them outside of society and her own political responsibility but rather drawn within it by the new association with her own mother’s one time needs.
I choose to begin the chapter with Ulrika because I wanted to begin somewhere close to where James Clifford (1997) begins his essay, Museums as Contact Zones. Here, he reports on a meeting in the basement of the Portland Museum of Art, in Portland, Oregon, between a group of elders from various native Tlingit clans, the curatorial staff of the museum and other experts. They had come together to discuss the Northwest Coast Indian collection but soon found that the objects were left to one side, their place taken over by stories and songs, told and sung by the elders. These were traditional tales but given, in their telling, contemporary resonances and allusions. Clifford observed that, presented in the context of the museum basement, the ‘stories and myths suggested by the old clan objects end up as specific histories with pointed meanings in current political struggles’ (1997:190). Moreover, directed at the audience of museum staff, the demand was quite clear: they were to be responsible not so much for the objects they held but for the ‘ongoing stories of struggle’ which the objects ‘called forth, brought to voice’ (1997:193).

Clifford, in conclusion, argues that ‘[w]hen museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political and moral relationship – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull’ (1997:192, original emphasis). He borrows the term, ‘contact zone’, from Mary Louise Pratt (1992), who uses it to reformulate the notion of frontier in colonial encounters. The contact zone is ‘the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions
of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’ (Pratt 1992:6-7, quoted in Clifford 1997:192). The place of contact is no longer the edge of Western expansion but a new site of meeting between social groups, typically where there is an uneven distribution of power. Where the museum is identified as this site of meeting, it is refashioned as a place where the articulation of subaltern voices can ‘pull against established hierarchical legacies’ (Clifford 1997:214).

The research room at The Workhouse is a far cry from the basement of the Portland Museum of Art; and not only does The Workhouse store merely a negligible number of objects, it certainly does not interpret them as works of art. The cross-cultural translations that define the contact zone for both Pratt and Clifford are positively cosmopolitan in comparison to the historical encounter at The Workhouse. And yet my experience there – a witness to Ulrika’s unfolding story – bears at least some superficial resemblance, enough at least to reflect on what might be taking place across a range of visiting experiences at The Workhouse.

In her encounter with both the objects and place, Ulrika demonstrated a shifting perspective that was personal and yet publicly oriented. It was a shift in perspective on the world at the same time that it was about herself. Guiding her through that was an attention paid not to the museum’s collection and presentation but to what lay behind it: the derelict infirmary first seen through the window; the other people out there like her “seen” from the infirmary. The birth certificate and record book were genuine object discoveries for Ulrika but above all they were cues – ‘leads’ – to further
provoke her own telling of the story of her mother’s birth and childhood. And thus it was with the place as a whole: it only had meaning for her as a family site, “its” history a misnomer, an aspect, she noted in her later interview, she could not pay attention to at all. Objective knowledge was decentred by her presence and personal investment. In place of the past was an emergent present, growing out of and bringing to light, not just her own sense of self but, within that, an ongoing struggle for the voices of the poor, past and present, to have their fair representation.

If the visit was unusual, it nonetheless brings to the fore how the historical encounter can serve to realign relationships between different social worlds. Where the contact zone is more explicitly an intercultural meeting between two communities, this meeting, between Ulrika and the part of her mother she never knew, is evidently more personal. But it does participate across realms of experience that demand of each other different ways of understanding the world. Ulrika may only have just been learning about her role as a representative, where the elders in Portland came bearing their stories and prepared to speak. Hers was a story with no tradition of being told; and this was an initiation for her into the responsibilities of acquiring such a legacy. But in becoming a representative, she was taking into her own story the story of others she had previously excluded. As a listener becoming storyteller, she was acquiring a new sense of the whole in which she speaks and acts. In that sense, she was the audience for her own performance. Sitting in the grounds at the end of her visit, looking back at the house, not wanting to leave she may have been watching herself discovering the place, or maybe awaiting the curtain call to know the show was over.
As an example, therefore, of connecting past to present at The Workhouse, it proposes one way in which the site becomes a Site of Conscience through the visiting experience. Moreover, it exemplifies how that can be a transformation that takes place to the exclusion of interpretation and a kind of disappearing of the museum. The opportunity it opens for thinking through other visiting experiences is to ask how they too are encountering the historical Other as a reciprocal relationship of listening and telling, of finding a place for the distant experience in their own social world. This is not to draw towards a conclusion in which all visiting experiences will be productive of a shifting relationship with the contemporary Other as Ulrika’s appears to have been. Rather it is to ask first about the varying dynamics of a pre-conditioning stage of connecting to the past and the ways in which this involves a negotiation of the experiential conditions that make that connection possible. The argument remains that in these dynamics are the making of a political consciousness in the present. If we take Ulrika’s journey to be the direct trajectory of the Site of Conscience, then it allows for an analysis of the obstacles and opportunities that characterise other visitor journeys that might potentially take them to a similar destination.

4.3 Spirit of Place

Beginning that analysis, I turn first to the interpretive decisions that have been made by the National Trust and The Workhouse team. The decisions made for 2002 when the House was first opened to the public remained current at the time of my research. They represent predominantly the
practices of the National Trust. Despite developing the site at the same time as playing a role in the development of ICHSMOC, the concept of the Site of Conscience – as Leigh Rix, project director for The Workhouse and Director of the National Trust East Midlands Region, explained to me [13/10/07] – provided additional rather than foundational principles for the interpretation. Susanna Smith, researcher on The Workhouse project during the development stages and at the time of opening, further explained:

The Coalition was a useful sounding board to compare ourselves with because, although The Workhouse belongs in the portfolio of National Trust properties and has much in common with all our built sites in terms of interpretation for visitors, it was also a new area and addressing the more controversial or painful parts of the history was a challenge.10

There is at the very end of the visit, once the tour of the House is finished though still within the building, a ‘Site of Conscience’ room in which the contemporary resonances are directly addressed. However, for the rest of the tour, it is the historical encounter that is catered for.

As a historic site, The Workhouse building does of course pre-date its use as a public heritage site. The National Trust, on purchasing the property, made necessary modifications to the site to suit their needs to both preserve and interpret the historical legacy they felt they had inherited. This involved some reconstruction and some demolition of additions to the building that

10 Private email correspondence with Susanna Smith 28/01/09
‘detract[ed] from the main story’\textsuperscript{11}, as well as the appropriation of certain buildings for offices, visitor reception and other visitor facilities. These modifications should not be downplayed as interventions, except in the sense that they were carefully and deliberately designed to reveal the place in which they intervene and not to usurp it.

Not only is it a policy across the National Trust to utilise existing buildings in preference to the construction of new ones, the particular approach at The Workhouse was to rely on the very fabric of the building, its spaces and materials, to convey the essence of the place, its history and its significance to today (Smith 2001:21, Woodcock 1997). The approaches to both conservation and interpretation were rooted in an idea that evidence of the original organisation of space is a powerful and affective resource for accessing the lives of others. The Trust perceived a narrative power in the building’s architecture alone: the several sets of stairs, in particular, that enforced, by design, segregation of the differently classified residents teaching through shock because of its cold functionality in a social programme of care. As such, they have brought the building to life through a minimalism that verges on an absence. No electricity has been added, (visiting is only possible in daylight); and in the original strategy (though it has not yet come about) anything like a museum, containing collections of objects, was to be housed in a separate building.

\textsuperscript{11} This quotation as well as the overall explanation I give here of the Trust’s approach to the site is taken from Sarah Woodcock’s Restoration Strategy Statement, 15 September 1997. Curator Files, Pre-Opening March 2002, The Workhouse archives.
Critically, and most effectively, most of the rooms in the House have been left empty. In some of the empty rooms, a scale model has been left with model furniture for visitors to play with how they imagine the space may have been laid out and used. Downstairs, flagstones and wall-paint have been restored to how it would have been in 1824 (when the building was constructed) or shortly after. Upstairs the dark green and grey paint from later years remains in the flaking condition that the Trust found it, revealing its many layers. Marks on the floor where beds stood are clearly visible. But there are no beds replaced here. Any modification is strictly done according to the historical record. As part of the policy that the building should communicate its history for itself, the Trust are unwilling to speculate about how it may have been where there is no certain proof. Only once the tour goes beyond 1824 into the later Victorian era and then into the twentieth century are furnishings and detailed reconstructions introduced.

The “minimalist” approach is in part a commitment to careful preservation but also accedes to another objective. On the one hand, the simplicity is in compliance with the National Trust’s purpose of caring for the historic environment and for insuring that such preservation still retains a sense of the lived life of its buildings. But the terms on which the Trust pursues its work have modified since 1907 when its purposes were formally articulated under an Act of Parliament. Since then, there has been a reinterpretation of the original purpose of ‘promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty and historic interest’ to a programme that though still focused on protection
also recognises change and ‘is about revealing and sharing the significance of places’ (Staniforth 2008:1).

In other words, there has been recognition that preservation is a value statement in itself; and, in promoting public access to and appreciation of historical places, the Trust is also more explicitly aware of the need to share and discuss the meaning these places have for society today. The institution’s decision to preserve and interpret The Workhouse was part of that recognition and the simplicity of interpretation was regarded as the most effective way to follow through with that new orientation.

This shift from ‘permanent preservation’ to ‘sharing the significance’ developed through the 1990s during which time the Trust began to produce for each of its properties a ‘spirit of the place statement’ to underpin their work. These statements speak about the intangible legacy a building and its contents convey to those who encounter it and consequently the statements direct both conservation and interpretation, implying that it is in the spirit of place that the two practices come together. The statements are recognised as a product of expertise and research.

The argument I want to present here is that the interpretive policy of ‘the spirit of the place’ extends the purpose of sharing historical significance such that it transforms historic sites into Sites of Conscience, generating a dialogic

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12 From 2001, the National Trust moved to a policy of preparing A Statement of Significance. These they define as ‘short documents [that] summarise the importance of our holdings in terms of conservation value, landscape, aesthetic qualities and their value to people’ and are produced in consultation with local and other interested groups (see www.wicken.org.uk/intro_significance.htm).
space in which past and present meet and grapple with each other. The
spirit of place is as Simon Woodward has argued, a highly personal response
to place, the set of feelings an individual experiences whilst present there,
representing a deliberate investment in their relationship to it (2008:3).
Woodward argues that ‘the actual spirit of the place is not a consistent
attribute of that location but a personal response to all that the visitor
perceives’ (ibid.). The idea is not just, therefore, about explaining the
significance of a site but moreover it is an appeal to individuals to respect
and incorporate the multiple experiences (both past and present) that find
and have found significance there.

This has a very different connotation for understanding the historic site as a
dialogic space. The immanence of dialogue and its foundation in the
anticipation of response is theorised in the Bakhtinian dialogic which itself
forms an alternative to the Habermasian depiction of the rational public
sphere (Hirschkop 2004; Habermas 1996). Whilst still linguistically
constituted, the Bakhtinian sphere does not rely on the rational structures
within ordinary language to emerge. Rather it is in a process of
‘novelization’ or ‘re-dramatization’ that the language that we use can be
represented and critiqued, and we can reconstruct our own voice, similar to
the Freirean programme of ‘reading the world’ (Giroux 1985). ‘The task,’
Bakhtin writes,

consists of forcing the thing-like environment, acting mechanically
on the personality, to speak, that is, to disclose within it a potential
discourse and tone, to transform it into the semantic context of a
thinking, speaking and acting (in this sense creating) personality
(Bakhtin 1986:164, original emphasis).

The notion of ‘the spirit of the place’, I suggest, attempts to force the same
disclosure through the agency of the visitor – though in this case it is of the
historical environment acting upon her or him.

Though Bakhtin may not have been in the forefront of the architect’s mind,
there is a remarkable resonance in the ‘spirit of the place’ statement he wrote
for The Workhouse when the National Trust first acquired it. In the
statement, he writes:

The key to protecting this gloomy spirit of the place rests
in the sensitive handling of and low-key approach to the
presentation. We have to use an invisible, non-invasive
touch simply to coax out the full feel of the existing fabric
with no additions to detract from the essence of the
building and its ghosts, allowing them to speak, through
the building, to the imagination of the visitor.\textsuperscript{13}

Not only is there a symmetry with Bakhtin’s public task, it is an excellent
example, I would suggest, of how this is put to work in the conservationist’s
implicit and often inadvertent commitment to a human rights agenda. Knox
is here simply drawing on the principles applied to elite homes that seek the

\textsuperscript{13} Tim Knox, Spirit of the Place Statement, attached to memo dated 8
September 1997 from Leigh Rix. Curator Files, Pre-Opening March 2002, The
Workhouse archives.
true expression of a place and finding by that approach, in the case of quite a
different building, an interpretation that gives new respect to those who
were originally given none.

The ‘invisible, non-invasive touch’ ostensibly prepared for the display of
private wealth and enterprise, here redeems a tenderness of humanity that
might have been overlooked and buried when the building was in use. That,
in its statement, it becomes incumbent upon the visitor to complete that
process of redemption is, of course, apt to my argument here. In evoking the
many voices of the past, the approach invites visitors to restore to presence
those who were historically marginalised and denied social and also political
recognition. At root, it is in the discovery of the visitor’s imaginative
relationship to the site that dictates how it might later come to be used in a
dialogue for social change.

4.4 Idea of Place

For the conservationist, an invisible touch is a standard practice but here it
has more than a purpose to restore to an original condition. The experience
of the expert becomes an evaluation of what ought to be made possible for
the visitor. On the one hand, this is a very open statement that implicates the
visitor as an active reader and creator within the interpretive process. At the
same time, in instructing the approach to conservation and to the
presentation of the place, it adheres to one interpretation and is quite clear
about what kind of feelings and experience visitors should have.
The ‘non-invasive touch’ sets in motion a clear direction for the visitor’s experience and understanding of the place.

This is an inherent paradox of interpretation and further highlights how Bakhtin’s dialogism sets an important challenge to the political project of the Site of Conscience. In this instance, the conservationist’s statement is both an invitation for personal responses and at the same time an instruction to ‘reveal the spirit of the place to the onlooker’ (Woodward 2008: 6). The ‘spirit of the place’ is both something to be discovered and something to be revealed. And between revelation and reception there is a message that intervenes in the personal response.

The argument is that a direct connection can be made between the experience of the place and the way the building is able to inform current debate. In “coaxing” the building to speak for itself, the Trust also expects that it will convey the concept on which it was designed. Thus, the building, though it may speak for itself, is nonetheless an opportunity to tell a particular story: Leigh Rix described the opportunity in 1997, shortly after the house was purchased, as ‘a unique opportunity to preserve a nationally important building and present it in a way which evokes the story of the poor in the country and those concerned with their welfare’. The visiting event is not, after all, simply about the place, its objects and the people that once resided there. It is about an idea of how society deals with its unemployed, its homeless, its aged and its disabled. Preservation of the building is merely

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the starting point for a project that extrapolates a quite specific meaning to it. There is an historical objectivity that wants to put ‘the spirit of the place’ in perspective.

In this way, the Museum aims to bleed the multi-vocal experience of historical encounter into a contemporary debate. Visitors are encouraged to see the ‘spirit of the place’ in terms of a system of social welfare for us to judge its merits. Summarising the point to be made, Mark Newman, reviewing the site for the National Trust, explains: ‘The whole concept [of The Workhouse] is a remarkable fusion of social compassion in the utter absence of the personal variety’ (2000:39). The implication is that both building and interpretation will together cohere in the visitor’s imagination such that personal and social compassion become the grounds for the contact between past and present. Debate about the present follows from this meeting but it starts in the minds and bodies of individual visitors.

As Alke Gröppel-Wegener recognised on her visit, the Trust’s interpretation ‘uses the existing (real) space to guide the visitors’ imagination to experience the building and concept behind the 19th century workhouse’ (forthcoming:10). However, it also does more. In pushing forward the historical narrative, the interpretation is not just bringing forward the past, it is also problematising it. The ghosts contribute as witnesses but the museum has interposed some specific interventions in anticipation of encountering the building inside. After the uncertain approach, the visitor is given a substantial prelude to the tour of the house and in this prelude the pedagogy of the site is most clearly delivered.
On arriving at the building, visitors are greeted by a facilitator who talks them through a scale model of the building. She does this with enormous energy, drawing in her audience, playfully classifying them according to the same rules that those turning up at this workhouse in the Victorian era would themselves have been classified: by age, gender and physical ability. It is a playful interaction – done only with words rather than physical re-ordering of groups – but with a serious message. Anticipating the disorientation felt once inside, the model provides an overview by which to rationalise the felt experience. Transferring that rationalisation onto the visiting groups is to personalise the system. Just as the conservation effort was designed to implicate the visitor into the process of interpretation, so this immediate interaction is designed to put the visitor into the building. But it is to do so on certain terms – or grounds – of personal compassion.

Next, having paid their entrance fee and picked up their audio guide, visitors enter a small courtyard where there are holdable cut-outs with brief biographies of some fictional workhouse arrivals: a farm labourer with a broken leg, a family made homeless, etc. Visitors wait here until a door opens – (hauntingly it opens by itself) – giving access to a small cinema room. This is where visitors watch a short video with the words of Thomas Becher – the Reverend who proposed the system and design of The Workhouse – spoken over various re-enacted scenes of the Victorian poor, filmed on site. In the guise of writing a letter, Reverend Becher explains his ‘Anti-Pauper System’. Visitors leave this room with his words – ‘An empty workhouse is a successful workhouse’ – sounding (perhaps confusedly) in their ears. The
somewhat clichéd images of the poor are a slightly soft critique of Becher’s reasonable argument. Here is the input of ‘social compassion’ – the objective narrative which troubles the personal compassion, showing that by design it was to help the deserving and not reward the undeserving.

Entering into the main courtyard of the house, visitors pick up their directions from the audio guide but prior to commencing the tour itself, they pass through the Wash House, where again, visitors are encouraged to follow their own classified path through – men and women separately – whilst a recorded voice on a loop calls out names and orders them around.

This series of thresholds initiates the visitor into the frame through which they are encouraged to view the House. Anticipating the experience of the original space, these interventions establish a narrative which proposes, on the one hand, a progressive system for the relief of the poor and, on the other, a strict regime of segregation.

This dichotomy presents the place as a problem – not a resolvable problem but one to debate. Susanna Smith explains:

> We were not trying to push a particular political argument (which would suggest we knew what the solution is!) but to give people all the facts, some of which may have fitted with preconceived ideas and others perhaps didn’t.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) Private email correspondence with Susanna Smith 03/02/09
Yet, to open the debate is also to intervene in the immanence of dialogue in the felt experience. More specifically, it is actually to put at risk the voices of those ‘ghosts’ especially (and paradoxically) those of the poor – the Workhouse residents – who thus far are characterised by their silence and lack of agency. Where ‘the spirit of the place’ emphasised initially a sense of allowing those voices finally to be heard, here such self-representation is denied them. Meanwhile, just as in the Living History tour at the Tenement Museum, though without the same constraints of play, visitors are already cast in a role about whom they know very little, if anything at all.

The interpretation, unsurprisingly but significantly, intervenes at the expense of uncertainty: it gives objective clarity to an uncertain past; structural certainty to an uncertain building and it brings into the present historical absences against the principle of letting them speak from their own place. In this intervention, it is not (directly) the epistemic control over the place and the past that I highlight. Rather my concern is with how it adds a layer to the experience that plays with the presence of the Museum in a way that is different to the first approach to interpretation. The scale model of the building, the storyboard cut-outs, the film, and the segregated pathways through the Wash-House are all very different and very present interventions, dramatising the concept and design of the workhouse system more successfully than bringing to the fore the life of those poor who entered the system.

After walking through the washhouse, the building becomes the focus of the story and the dramatisation of the idea is transposed into the dramatisation
of the place, through the use of the audio guide and the presentation of a radio play. The play forms the central part of the audio guide, which is essential for visitors to understand the site, as there is no written interpretation at any point throughout the house. In some rooms, it is possible to ask questions of volunteer docents though they typically say that they are only rarely approached.

The decision to have an audio guide was a result of the policy not to make any additions or contemporary modifications to the building. The idea of the radio play within that came about because ‘[i]t seemed the best way to bring the people back to those rooms and to assure the quality of acting for every visit’. Of course, not only is the quality of the performance guaranteed by the recording but it also plays on the idea of the building speaking directly to the visitor’s imagination. Through the play, the building’s ghosts are also effectively asked to testify to the system. The voices are not restricted to those of the residents: the ghosts that are evoked are staff as well and there are positive voices from the residents as well as critical voices expressed by the staff. Despite its dramatic plot, its didacticism is also quite evident, adding to the museum’s story and the provocation within that to make a judgement about the system.

Where the radio play intervenes, in the first instance, therefore is in establishing a point in history from where visitors are invited to assess the system. The play takes the visitor through a (particularly dramatic) day in the Workhouse set around 1824, meeting the master and mistress, the

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16 Private email correspondence with Susanna Smith 28/01/09
schoolmistress, and various residents all from the perspective of an agent for a landowner who, interested to find more about and judge the merits of the new workhouse model, has made a surprise visit. With no time to ensure all things are in order, the master must do his best to show the House off. It is as much a judgement on his management as it is on the system and his personal stress carries the story through. The contemporary museum visitor is clearly asked to identify, however, with the historical visitor – the landlord’s agent – even if they may also be stirred by the infidelity of the master and the saintliness of the schoolmistress who he asks to run away with!

Despite growing out of the ‘spirit of the place’ statement, the radio play presents its own way of intervening in the self-representation of the building’s ghosts, not only dating them but giving them their voice and personhood. Where possible, characters and text have been adapted from records, and scenes take place in the room where visitors are standing. But the play achieves a sense of historical authenticity as it forms just one part of the audio guide. The guide mainly consists of the radio drama but there is also information given by both a guide and experts – conservationists – in the present who together explain more about the building’s fabric, condition and restoration, speculating over details of the original use of space and its transformation over time.

There is indeed a multiplicity of voices, providing contexts for each other: Further to the characters of the play and the modern-day experts, the audio guide necessarily has its own guide – a neutral voice speaking practical
instructions in the moment of the visit. This neutral voice contrasts with the ‘neutral’ voice in the radio play: the landowner’s agent coming to inspect and assess the merits of The Workhouse and its system, with whom the contemporary visitor is likely to identify. Thus, not only is the past multi-voiced but the various voices of the present are implicated into one across-time narrative.

Within the audio guide itself, therefore, the interplay of ‘spirit’ and ‘idea’ is brought to the fore. The voices interact across time and with that a dialogue effectively takes place between site and museum. Having considered how the spirit of the place approach endeavoured to minimalise the museum’s presence in order to allow voices to speak, this first raises the question about how visitors receive and make sense of the mixed approach and what elements of the experience they take into their responses to the site. But in so doing it is to ask about the nature of the dialogic space that visitors come to participate in – one which is immanent to the uncertainties and absences of the place or one which emerges from the presence of the museum and, indeed, the National Trust’s intervention or indeed one which is of the visitors’ own making out of the dialogic gap played between the place and museum.

4.5 Questioning Visitors (1)

It is the inherited assumption of the museum that the building provides the raw material through which visitors engage with the issue of social welfare. Susanna Smith reported shortly before the house officially opened to the
public, ‘how visitors to the site naturally make such connections or ask such
questions with only the unprepared building as stimulus’ (2001:23); and
much later she recalled how ‘we learned that many aspects did not need to
be spelt out because people engaged with the history and making those
comparisons was part of the experience we could let them have’. 17

There is of course an implicit recognition of control over visitor “freedoms”
in this; and if, prior to the official opening, visitors were able to gain this
perspective directly from a genuinely ‘unprepared building’ that is no longer
the case. With the presence of the museum’s elucidation of the story, it is no
longer possible to compare between visitor responses that engage purely
with the building as opposed to those who respond to the interpretation. But
it is also a limitation of my research – despite efforts with the questionnaire –
which did not really succeed in breaking into the constitutive parts of
visiting experiences. In first taking the response of just four visitors, I am
going to make some effort retrospectively to do that.

It is impossible for four informants to fairly represent the variety of
experiences the interviews (and questionnaires) recorded. In selecting these,
however, I draw attention to those who, like the visitors to whom the
interpretive team responded in designing the visit, were making connections
between past and present. This was indeed a common response; and whilst
it is evident in all responses that this was strongly affected by personal
contexts – a factor that visitor research has made foremost in understanding
museum experiences (Falk and Dierking 2000; Macdonald 2002; Hooper-

17 Private email correspondence with Susanna Smith 28/01/09
Greenhill 2006) – the effort here is to read into the shaping of responses the
effect of the intersecting modes of engagement.

In the first instance, it is evident that, for one of the four informants, relating
past to present was above all a process of historical contextualisation.
Having said that the reason for visiting was simple curiosity about a local
National Trust site, this visitor explained:

The other thing I was interested in is – is looking back into
history really because it is history of how things were and how
things were approached, whether they be a problem – a
problematic and someone dealing with the problem. [21/10/06]

That The Workhouse becomes a way of dealing with a problem as opposed
to an experience for those who resided and worked there is indicative of a
stronger connection to the museum’s telling of the story than the building’s.
Indeed, prompting this interest in the problem was the surprise at how
orderly and clean the environment appeared to be. The visitor had
previously assumed workhouses to be ‘hot and steamy’. Here, the logic of a
system designed to help those in need radically shifted the perspective on the
building and presented it as an intelligent and forward thinking model for
social welfare today. Whilst the visitor took note of the inhumanity of
segregation – to which the building’s ‘spirit’ was deemed by the
conservationist to be its powerful testament – he put that aside in his
discovery that the purpose was to provide shelter and food – the very least
that ought to be provided for the homeless and helpless today.
If, for this visitor, the building yielded its ‘gloomy spirit’ to a principle of care, for others the difference between the two was itself more generative of the problem of social welfare. At one level, The Workhouse presents itself as a feasible concept but its imperfections are more difficult to square than in the first response. For one visitor, this became the difficulty of finding a solution:

Throughout the whole thing I was just thinking about what the solution was and there isn’t a solution, there isn’t a single solution. [22/10/06]

For another, the focus shifted towards attitudes. This visitor was more explicitly focused on the designer of The Workhouse, Thomas Becher, than on the design. Personalising the building in this fashion brought to the fore an awareness of how solutions are informed by beliefs and opinions.

I was expecting to look at the past and see what it was like. It’s an issue in the back of your mind at certain times. But I wasn’t expecting this one to bring it so obviously to the forefront of your mind. But it is definitely the case that going round here [i.e. the whole place] you start thinking about our current attitudes to benefits and unemployment. [21/10/06]

To look at the past and see the present is the intention behind the Site of Conscience.
Looking at the examples above, it is a historical perspective that the museum has offered these visitors in order to make the connection. But where in the first response the surprising perspective on the past made it amenable to the present, in the latter two it was more an instance of the surprising appearance of the contemporary resonance. What is interesting then in these second two responses is how the visitors, whilst prompted to think about the contemporary issues, were also disappointed with how the past was presented. Both visitors felt not enough was done to bring the building to life. For the visitor who was ’just thinking about the solution’, the audio guide helped create an atmosphere such that ’being in the place as well – I was imagining the place’. But he further added how he would have liked more reconstruction:

because it looked like you walk into the room, it looked like any new apartment, coz it looks fresh and everything else.

Similarly, the visitor who was not expecting the current attitudes to benefits and unemployment to come ’so obviously to the forefront of your mind’ said – alluding to the later rooms where there is more reconstruction:

It was very evocative having the empty room but I just felt it’d be nice to have one workroom as well as the one dormitory as it would have been like – because there were lots and lots of empty rooms and if you are going to reconstruct them and build them as new and re-plaster them, why not get some furniture in there.
For these visitors – and many others – the attempt ‘to listen to’ the building and to allow ‘the spirit of the place’ to communicate is actually compromised by the non-invasive touch which, far from being invisible, is (paradoxically) quite transparent. The “newness” of the rooms, which for the interpreters was a way of making the past present, is more effective at bringing the present present. This is notably in two different ways: for the first visitor, it made the place feel contemporary; for the second, it made the museum’s work (and by implication the experience) functional, actual and present. I expand upon the latter of these shortly but for now it is enough to suggest that being able to see through the museum’s attempt not to be seen interrupts the direct encounter with the place and, in its place, evokes the contemporary resonance.

In these three responses, therefore, it is possible to see how past and present not only connect through the narrative but also in the way the clean emptiness of the rooms unsettles expectations of the past – whether to a point of discovery or disappointment – and brings focus to the idea rather than the spirit of the place. In the first instance, the surprising cleanliness of the building cohered with the present as a new sense of the past; in the second two instances, the absence of reconstruction did not satisfy expectations of the past and at the same time forced the issue into a contemporary context and into the language of problem and solution.

In each case, the response to the rooms is quite opposite to the intentions of the spirit of the place – the rooms (as is explained and even noted by these
three visitors) are clean because part of the servile work of inmates would have been to re-paint the walls regularly. And, in thinking about how this affects the dialogic realm in which the contemporary is reflected upon and discussed, it does seem significant that thinking about the solution and thinking about those whose lives were impacted upon by the solution can become so separated within the experience.

The idea that further reconstruction may have better grounded the past is itself a suggestion that perhaps the last two visitors would like to have had a greater sense of the many voices emerging out of the gloomy spirit. But certainly what is missing in these responses is any personalisation of the poor. Social compassion may be invoked but personal compassion seems untouched despite a desire and interest to connect with the poor – not least in the case of the first visitor who, seeing The Workhouse as a solution for today, recommended it as one who had not received social help for herself when it was needed.

This raises the issue that rationalising the place provokes rational responses and introduces concepts over feelings. This is not to diminish the historicization of the place. It is to point to a risk that is epistemic and discursive on the one hand but experiential on the other. It may be an issue, for example, for the Trust that, in some instances, visitors re-employed the Victorian distinction between deserving and non-deserving poor to discuss the welfare situation today. Certainly, it seems concerning (from my own political subjectivity) that in each of these instances the people about whom the debate is for become depersonalised as ‘them’, ‘some people’, ‘the poor’.
This is not an argument that I am having with The Workhouse, however. Rather, it is to point to the possibility that the nature and ‘population’ of the dialogic sphere which the visiting experience manifestly generates is reflective of the struggle to make sense of an experience in which, to put it bluntly, head and heart are put at odds. It is, additionally at this point, to highlight that it is in this struggle that the museum is potentially exposed and questioned and consequently becomes a greater presence within that dialogic sphere against all its intentions.

4.6 Questioning Visitors (2)

If the three examples so far have suggested that in the uncertainty of experience, where place and interpretation do not at first cohere, ‘the spirit of the place’ gets lost (and desired), the fourth example shows the exact opposite. (I give a slightly extended account here as a step towards sharing the detail and subtlety of visitor responses where previously they have been truncated). This visitor was clearly affected by the place and the atmosphere it evoked, which she described as ‘chilling’ [21/10/06]. For her, like others, ‘the spirit of the place’ made her wonder how anyone could imagine this as a reasonable solution at all: the horror of the place defined the idea of the place: ‘But I just think it’s so disgusting [laughter], the whole idea… Shutting people away in here. I mean as soon as I came in I wanted to know how do you get out? That was the feeling really’. The interview continued:

V I can’t think of the abuse that might have taken place. It just horrifies me beyond belief.
JC Did you listen to the audio-guide?

V Yes. Yes, they were good.

JC Yeah, yeah. Did you –

V Well, not all the way through all of them. But, um -

JC Yeah.

V Yeah. No it’s a chilling place really. Except it’s painting which – I mean it’s worse at the very top.

JC Mm.

V I think it’s all too creamy.

JC Right.

V That seems to be –

JC Did there, was there anything that surprised you? Did that sort of surprise you – the clean walls and things.

V Was it clean like this, really though?
JC    Um, well, that’s, well they believe so, yeah.

V     But not that nice matt middle-class house type paint?

The visitor’s disbelief in the presentation seems allied to a distracted attention throughout the visit but the distraction is not a lack of interest or connection. It is the imaginative encounter with the place that governs her understanding of the idea of the system and not, it would seem, the museum’s work. The museum uses the audio and the paint to tell an historical story; her story emanates directly from ‘the spirit of the place’, something which for her might have been painted over. The interview continued:

JC    And did you, um, so did you feel you learnt something new?

V     From here?

JC    Yeah.

V     Yeah, I mean I just think coming to a place like this, you just can’t think how they isolated people. [sotto voce] And they still would I think. Because if you think of something similar: if you were an asylum seeker or a refugee, you could easily end up in a workhouse.
V It’s like people they don’t want, they want to shut away for ever.

JC Yeah.

V I mean I do, I think – it’s a mirror. I mean, this type of thing still kind of exists and people would quite happily have it exist!

In her moment of political extrapolation, the visitor invites the ghosts of the past to become asylum seekers in the present, and for an injustice (for her) of the past to reflect back an injustice in the present. Unlike the other visitors, for her, The Workhouse is not a reasonable if inappropriate model for today. It was and remains quite unacceptable. But still, the connection between past and present is as strong as it was for the other visitors. Indeed, the connection is filled with human rights’ activism: the poor and the ordinary are barely there because they never really are there. Hers is a politics against the former regime of social control and at the same time a scepticism against the contemporary regime in which attempts are made to redeem the victims.

Seemingly, she makes the connection precisely as the museum envisages it: the ‘gloomy spirit’ speaking to her (political) imagination and thereby critically discovering the personal effect of the idea of the place. And yet, her disbelief in the interpretation suggests that the intense engagement with ‘the spirit of the place’ was actually in spite of the museum’s presentation, and not produced by it. This really expresses itself when she speaks in hushed
tones of the way asylum seekers could end up in a workhouse. In this moment, the visitor performs a secret act, an act of subversion projecting onto the museum and the other visitors their difference of opinion: they are the ones that ‘would quite happily have it exist’. In this moment, she implies that the idea of the place is something that has not been adequately represented and that the spirit even questions the authority of the museum to do so. The museum is another dubious attempt by the establishment to replace that which it lost.

The key themes that come out of all four visitor responses are firstly that, where the museum has envisaged a coherent experience in which ‘the spirit of the place’ speaks to the idea of the place, visitors are much more caught in a position of negotiating between the two. Thus, where Susanna Smith and the interpretive team noted during their preparations how visitors quite independently recognised the contemporary resonances within the building, it now seems necessary to question to what extent this dialogic sphere is being constituted through contact with the historical Other. Certainly, the issue (and dialogue) is raised – and, in this, these four visitors are very representative. But to what extent this shows how the visiting experience recognises a responsibility for the immanence of the past within the present, is not so certain.

Where I am proposing this as the transformative potential of the Site of Conscience, that responsibility is not being articulated in this feedback. Instead, there is a suggestion that the presence of the museum interrupts the direct historical encounter and interpolates the dialogue. This in itself may
be of little surprise but I am interested in how this then alters the transformative potential of the visiting experience and the nature of the dialogic sphere it generates, shifting the focus of responsibility around such that it is now on the immanence of the present in the past and not the other way round.

4.7 Untransformed

In making the political connection, visitors are not just choosing between a subjective and an objective encounter with the past. They are bringing into the equation the way the museum performs and negotiating with the presence of the museum and the uncertainties it creates within the experience. With that negotiation, there is a clearer presence of the visitors’ own selves – an awareness of their own act of visiting – and rather than being drawn into the museum’s logic, a sense of distance from the museum is afforded.

Ostensibly, it is this which creates the opportunity for a new responsibility to be discovered. However, thinking back to Ulrika and the contact zone, where the encounter with the past unsettled and altered her personal narrative, the museum did, by the visitor’s own “overseeing”, not only become distanced but effectively disappeared. The overseeing was both a literal looking but also a sense of personal control over the historical encounter. By that means, the effect of the dialogic sphere was embodied and seemed to become a practice in the everyday.
For the four visitors cited here the opposite happens: the Museum is further invoked and I would suggest that it is for this reason that the examples do not indicate that visitors are, in the context of their ‘negotiations’ with the Museum, taking on responsibility for the way the past impacts upon their own lives in a new way.

Indeed, I would suggest that for these visitors that is yet to happen. Here, there is a sense in which a new perspective might be possible as a result of the experience but in fact not one of these four visitors felt that their perspective had been changed. The first visitor, talking about what worries her about today said:

This to me has reinforced it…I think it rubber-stamps things…I think it really has enforced my beliefs

The second informant, when asked, using his own phrasing, if the visit had changed his view about the current welfare ‘solutions’, said:

No, I have always had the same view about poverty and how you try to solve it.

Similarly, the third visitor said: ‘I wouldn’t say it has made me think about things in a new way’; whilst the fourth was, by her own admission, reaffirming her own views on society. Instead of the historical context coming into play as a new presence, it is more a matter in these instances of
how far the contemporary Other is already a presence in their lives and how that determines their political participation and discovery.

In all cases, it is inevitable that personal contexts are responsible for the way meaning in the visiting experience emerges: for example, the last visitor I referred to goes on in her interview to talk about how the experience takes her back to her student days and invigorates a desire to re-read *The Great Hunger*\(^{18}\): she wants to be the rebel who sees residing Victorian values needing challenging still today; or the first visitor, whose opposing interpretation of the system came out of her own history of single-motherhood and current work with the homeless.

But more than that I would suggest that out of the uncertainty of the experience there is a tendency for the present to speak before the past. In other words, rather than the past disclosing its demand on the present by creating a new context for it, the present has been disclosed as the context for the past and as such allows for the present not to change. This is not to say that a dialogic sphere has not been opened up but that its make-up is not strictly as the museum has envisaged it, precisely because of its efforts to envisage just such a transformation.

Indeed, it is a very common feature of visitor feedback in general that accounts of the experience become ‘peopled’ by the present more explicitly than by the past. In part, this is about trying to make connections to one’s

\(^{18}\) Cecil Woodham-Smith’s classic account (1962) of the Irish Potato Famine in which he lays blame for the devastation on the British and their Victorian values.
own life:¹⁹ ‘my father-in-law was a GP who visited patients in the workhouse’; ‘Mum talks about the workhouse’; ‘We are of a certain generation who can remember this. We grew up in two worlds’. It is a kind of playing with the possibility of knowing for themselves the life of the workhouse. However, it is also to distance the proximity of the original experience since it is not one which can be claimed lightly, whether on the grounds of ethics, imagination, taboo or otherwise. The personal connections bring the past into a contemporary social network and through these people it becomes present and alive.

In that personal play of distance and proximity, visitors are mapping a personal world in which the voice of the historical Other has an ethical presence. But it is not evidently a world in which the visitor’s own sense of Self is directly affected by that presence. Typically, visitors talk of the importance of bringing children to The Workhouse – ‘Some of the modern teenagers would do well to see what it was like’. There is recognition of responsibility and a need to be changed by the past but again it is put at a distance.

In each case, I would argue that this connecting with and distancing from personal experience and responsibility is a form of extending the dialogic realm generated by the visit. It is different to other forms of ‘cognitive and emotional mapping’ that, for example, Gaynor Bagnall (2003) has discussed as taking place at heritage sites. On the one hand, the processes of understanding described here do tally as evidence of visitors performing

¹⁹ Quotations are extracted from interviews carried out at The Workhouse between 21st and 23rd October 2006
‘who they are, or who they want to be’ (Bagnall 2003:95) according to their own life histories. Visitors are, in that sense, mapping the cultural landscape of the visit to their own experiences, measuring to what extent they (and their reminiscences) are adequately represented in the museum. But, more than that, this dialogic mapping extends the measurement to those who are touched or (by the visitors’ own reckoning) ought to be touched by the historical Other. Rather than making of the museum a stage for their own consumption of heritage, as Bagnall’s argument establishes, visitors are here creating a space where others come to balance their lives against the past.

Where the dialogic sphere is thus composed of a contemporary population, it is, I am arguing, suggestive that the visiting experience has not been transformative even if it is politically engaged. Using the example of Ulrika, I have argued that transformation occurs when the Self becomes answerable to the story of the Other. Here, in these more “usual” dialogic spheres, the Self displaces responsibility onto others in the contemporary world, taking responsibility only for re-engaging these others with or putting these others newly into contact with the past.

But, I am also arguing, that that displacement of self-responsibility is not just the effect of visitor preference or the assertion of personal context over historical context as the map for the relationship between past and present. I am arguing that the peopling of the cultural landscape of the visit with others in the contemporary world as opposed to others from the past is further evidence that the visiting experience has not been effectively peopled by voices from the past; it has not forced ‘the thing-like environment…to
speak’ (Bakhtin 1986:387) – or not enough that the historical environment acts upon the visitor more than the present one.

In the gap between the personal life of the visitor and the way the life of the historical Other is presented by the museum there is a sense of the historical Other who demands appropriate representation. This is the first call for a response to the historical absence of representation and the uncertainty of the place. But where visitors are given to either drawing positively from or exposing the limitations of the museum’s representation, the need to be responsible themselves for that representation is rationalised and distanced. As with the ‘ghosts’ in the car park, the possibility to see them as out of place, put there by the museum, is to rationalise their presence and not to embody their absence.

4.8 Listening and Looking

There is a paradox in this which I have already discussed: that it is the museum’s conception to remain as absent as possible in the visiting experience, allowing the building to speak for itself and “merely” adding a historical objectivity to its story. Where there is a paradox, there is uncertainty and hence the possibility of both failure and success. If I have just argued strongly that the voices of the past do not, in the cases cited, precipitate the dialogic sphere generated through the visiting experience, it needs to be shown that this is “not simply it” for all visiting experiences. It needs to be shown that this is just one effect of an uncertainty of experience; and that it is equally possible that the museum can remain in the background
(and even disappear) and, moreover, that this is a possibility in which visitors express and discover an interest. It needs to be shown that even where attention is brought to the presentation of the past, this does not simply resolve itself in the de-vocalisation of the historical Other and the loss of the powerful effect of its very present absence.

In turning in these final two sections to the audio guide in its entirety (not just the radio play) and to the final two rooms of the tour, I want to point to a way in which the visiting experience does constitute a dialogical encounter between past and present in which ‘the spirit of the place’ does exercise, through visitors, more authority over the idea of the place, or at least, in which they grapple more effectively. Indeed, it is to further show that, unlike in the unusual case of Ulrika – for whom the concept and structure of the workhouse were superfluous to the transformative contact with the past – it is the uncertainty of the interplay between spirit and idea that visitors can move towards a realisation of their responsibility to the historical Other as it emerges in the present. These two final aspects of the experience demonstrate this potential differently – indeed are opposite examples of the same effect. But, in that they overlap within the visit itself, this opposition is part of their shared effect.

Visitors are evenly split –between each other but also within themselves – about the success of the audio guide: the National Trust’s visitor survey from 2008 found 56% of visitors responding in favour of it. Positive responses that I received included comments such as:
It told you exactly where you were and what you were looking at [22/10/06];

and,

I liked the conversations as they bring the rooms to life and your imagination to life [21/10/06].

On the other hand, many find it just the kind of distraction that the non-invasive touch was promising to overcome. One visitor told me,

I had to really block out everything else to just listen to what was being said [21/10/06].

Another was more critical:

I didn’t like the audiotape. I don’t like the stories. I like the facts. Because I think you’re so busy listening to it that you’re not looking at the building. Where generally you would be looking, you’re so busy listening to what they’re saying on the – I just did the facts and I stopped it. I think all the stories and the people talking are distracting and everyone is listening and no-one is looking [22/10/06]

The contradictions between these responses highlight the ambiguity of the audio guide’s capacity and effect, on the one hand facilitating being able to
see and on the other hindering visual encounter. The evenness of positive to negative feedback is, I would also suggest, indicative of a further layer of uncertainty within the visiting experience. It is an uncertainty that is usefully captured in this last feedback cited and the way the visitor finds in the audio a division between listening and looking. In this bifurcation of the visitor’s attention, there is a potential risk of unsettling the visitor’s own sense of presence.

The contradictions between these responses highlight the ambiguity of the audio guide’s capacity and effect. On the one hand, it facilitates being able to see and on the other it hinders the visual encounter. The distinction it forces in the opinion of the last visitor quoted between listening and looking is a particularly useful one bringing out the fact that the guide introduces different modes of visiting which may or may not appeal and may or may not coalesce the place and its story.

The audio guide would seem to be premised on the possibility of a unified presence. There is an idea implied by the use of audio that the interpretation might speak through the visitor’s physical presence, and that they come to embody the multiple perspectives voiced in the recordings spoken directly into their ears. Through the audio guide, the visitor becomes the unifying location for both the spirit and the idea of the place, for both the building and the museum’s interpretation. Moreover, as an ambulant experience, it pulls the locality of the visitor into their body, not just their minds. The multiple voices of past and present are physically embodied and always on the verge of being performed.
But this does not work for everyone. Few people will hold the space so forthrightly as to suggest they are acting as a vehicle for the voices to be in the room. Most people will saunter around the room, moving to its outer edges, leaning on walls – as if to observe the action going on in their ear – or looking out of the windows. My research did not go into enough depth as to be able to pattern visitor movements through the space. However, these marginal places were often taken up, especially when the room is empty, suggesting that visitors are generally only marginally present, not quite completely inhabiting – or re-inhabiting – the space. At other times, when there are more people around or else a piece of furniture to draw you towards, visitors obviously moved around these too, again distracting the body from being purposefully and performatively (in the sense of ‘actorly’) in the space.

At these specific times, when there is an object to look at or interact with, it is possible to assume that people are, in their minds, bringing together what they are listening to with seeing and being in the room. At other times, there are plenty of alternative ways of looking. When looking out of the window, are they looking at the building and its grounds? Contemplating the world outside? Is it their world they are seeing or are they seeing the outside from the insider’s perspective, the view of a former resident, the master of the house, the visiting agent? Or indeed the conservationist? Are they seeing their world from this other perspective or trying to see this other world from their own? Or are they seeing each other? Unlike the living history site, the voices from the past remain disembodied, hauntingly “found’’ in the
visitor’s mind, but, perhaps they are also “witnessed”, strangely, in the bodies of other visitors who are seen silently and privately passing through. Strangely, that is, because “I” too am a visitor – and perhaps therefore “I” too am a ghost.

There is a freedom in being able to listen and look separately but, as the visitor above pointed out, it is not always a positive freedom. Indeed, if it potentially takes one so far as to doubt one’s own presence – am I ghost? – then it is unsurprising that many visitors will try to negotiate it more systematically.

Which is what the audio guide also allows visitors to do. As the visitor who disliked the audio explained, it is quite possible to take control and select out those parts of it that are a distraction. In so doing, of course, visitors are not only taking control of their own presence, they are also taking control of the museum’s presence too: choosing ‘the facts’ is to authorise the museum as the objective interpolation; choosing the story is to allow it to let the building speak. Moreover, this is not to cut one or other mode of engagement out of the experience but to choose what one wishes to take responsibility for. Thus, for example, the first visitor who enjoyed being told ‘exactly where you were and what you were looking at’ also found the place ‘very moving’ and ‘eerie’. She was particularly affected by the way

you could feel the people: you sort of touch the walls and you think who has touched these walls before.
And similarly for the other visitor who disliked the audio, a multiply-voiced space was still opened up by being in the building:

Just the fact that people had passed through it previously and that I am looking through a window that so many others have looked through before -

The audio guide is a nexus of both collaboration and resistance for the visitor because neither authority nor authenticity is disguised within it. The visitor is free to negotiate it even to the point of having final control over its buttons: Nearly all visitors said that they navigated for themselves what they listened to, stopping and fast-forwarding as they chose. The audio acts – like the apparent gap between the spirit of the place and the idea of the place – as a constant provocation to the visitor to recall their own present, the present of the visiting event but all in the service of trying to be there completely. It does this functionally and practically – as the visitor pushes the buttons for the tour to continue and in an order of their choosing; visually – by both freeing and intervening in the visual encounter; and finally, also, audially, as it shifts between times and voices, fiction and fact, ‘neutral’ and person.

Thus, the audio guide gives visitors the opportunity to exercise control over the visit and over the presentation of the past as well as to engage within a dialogic sphere where past and present are in constant contact. Combining authority within the museum space and a multi-voiced narrative, it places the visitor at the centre of the encounter between time-spaces. Indeed, the very effect of the audio guide is to make the physical journeying around the
site essentially private and individual – an engagement closer to reading a novel than watching a play. The text of this novel is doubled by the audio’s physical independence from the place and the visitor is consequently positioned between the story and the place – between the idea and the spirit – as the ‘gap’ that keeps them apart.

4.9 The Complete Experience

This ‘gap’ between story and place, present and past, idea and spirit is a clearer experience and more sustained unsettlement of Self than that described in the rare moments of self-displacement at the Tenement Museum. As the visitor feedback suggests, however, it is not necessarily a satisfactory or satisfying space in which to find oneself. Whilst I use it to further my argument about the importance of experiential uncertainty in the Site of Conscience, it is vital to note that it is an uncertainty of the visiting experience that, for most visitors, always requires some resolution.

The possibility of the audio guide is that the resolution is in the unity of an embodied experience of the dialogic encounter between past and present over which visitors have final control. In other words, it is the possibility of gaining a third person perspective of the multiply-voiced dialogue in which one is a participant and then becoming responsible for constructing the narrative that will give it a meaningful context. It is by these means that a public sphere on Bakhtinian terms can emerge (Hirschkop 2004). However, the earlier evidence suggests that that third-person perspective is no more than the perspective from one’s own world and it is not a new view of one’s
own world from the perspective of the dialogic encounter, which would constitute a more transformative experience.

Thus, I want to suggest that another possibility of the audio guide is in its effect to shore up a frustration of incoherence. It is because it provides a mechanism to sustain the uncertainty of the experience that, without having final control of the situation, it nonetheless anchors the potential chaos of parts until such time that they can come together in a genuinely mutual elaboration of the dialogic sphere. And given its time, the audio guide does actually lead visitors to this.

Ostensibly, this would appear as the two rooms that lie just beyond the audio tour. The first, a history room, outlines the history of social welfare, where it is possible to locate a former workhouse near you, listen to oral testimonies of life in The Workhouse and try on some shoes and clothes based on those worn by residents. Downstairs is the second interactive room – the Site of Conscience room – in which there are newspaper articles about homelessness, and other social welfare issues of today; a computer quiz, asking people what their policies would be if they were politicians; pictures of Victorian residents and their contemporary equivalents, with an explanation of how they are being cared for today, titled, Where Are They Now?; a feedback board; and finally a photographed scene from a pub, of a man and a woman talking and two empty speech bubbles above their heads, inviting visitors to fill in their words.
These additional two rooms deliberately bring the story of the poor in the country and those concerned with their welfare up to date. In different ways, they extend the links that most visitors have been making throughout the tour: firstly, in terms of historical narrative, filling in those gaps that have not been represented earlier and providing more context to the particular history of this building; and secondly making explicit the objective of debating the current situation.

However, prior to these rooms, in the very last two rooms during the audio tour of the House, the curators have made a very powerful decision: after presenting twenty empty rooms, they suddenly introduce furniture. The rationale is explained that at this point in their narrative they have left the radio play behind and with it 1824 and can now represent rooms with more evidence as to how they would have been used. The first is a late Victorian dormitory with bedsteads and clothes to try on. It is the first stage in which the embodied encounter takes on a reality, the body can begin to perform. Visitors are even allowed to try out the beds. The second is the recreation of a bed-sit from 1977 – the last time The Workhouse was in use.

In 1977, the barely modernised Victorian building provided council accommodation for single mothers and their families. There was no visitor I spoke with at The Workhouse who was not surprised by how recent this history was – of course, I did not speak to any residents or social workers of the time. But just as striking as the recent history is the immediacy with which the past appears in a Technicolor vision and with the added effect of
being the first room in which the visitor hears the (recorded) voice of an actual resident of the building.

Most find being in the room, to quote a few visitors, ‘very moving’, ‘very emotional and very recent’, ‘scary’, ‘horrible’, ‘it brings it all back’. The proximity of the past is matched by the strange irony that any desire for the complete picture comes true at this last moment of the presentation. As the result of storing up this desire, this shocking history comes as an experiential relief. A shocking relief, that is, because this history is now for real where before it remained deliberately distant in time and space, forcing the imagination to act.

In this totalizing form of encounter, the room inhabits the various time zones which before the visitor was negotiating: it ‘exists’ in the past; in its relative contemporaneity, it exists in the everyday world of the visitor, sharing a part of their own history; and it is part of the present moment of visiting, it is a happening now. Quite suddenly there are no gaps between these temporalities, the personal story of the visitor is encapsulated here, as is the historical story of the building, as is the spirit of the place – all the voices of the past caught here as that culmination, in the end of the building, the moment that society had reached a point that could no longer tolerate its use. One visitor – who, as referenced earlier, was keen to have had at least one more room reconstructed – made clear the effect of this bringing together:

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20 Quotations are again extracted from interviews carried out at The Workhouse between 21st and 23rd October 2006
It was a shock *in this house*: It wasn’t a shock in the sense that I knew that kind of place existed. But *in this house*, to imagine what it must have been like...[21/10/06]

The suddenness of the 1970’s makes the strangely familiar even more familiar, that what was thought to be recognisable, now really is. It is a shocking connection, in which distance conflates almost entirely but mostly by the suddenness after such barrenness. The colour, the voice, the objects, and the end. All the time it had seemed that the journey into darkness was a journey into the past but in this final moment of coming face-to-face, body-to-body with the horror the visitor discovers that the darkness is where they are now.

At the Workhouse, contestation is everywhere residing in ‘the spirit of the place’. It is this which constitutes it as an ‘undesirable heritage’. But visitors really have to look for it there. The cream paint on the walls might speak of the banal work carried out by residents in the 1820’s but it is more likely to speak of a clean and airy atmosphere; the gloomy spirit of the upstairs where the dark green paint has been left brings you closer to it; but generally the multiple viewpoints are represented in the audio guide – and hence not directly attributed to the place – and visitors struggle to bring the lived experience of the place into a close encounter with the concept which governed it. This struggle is of course the process of understanding that the museum provides.
However, here, in the 1970’s bed-sit where the past is realised with authentic objects and an oral history, the past speaks directly with a normally unheard voice. It is the final accomplishment of memory, of being really there in the past. Before that it was possible to doubt, to move in your mind between inside and outside but now the strangely familiar actually brings the stranger to a point of familiarity. Here more than elsewhere, a dialogic relationship with the other – the beneficiary of welfare support, the single mother and the historical other – transforms ‘into the semantic context of a thinking, speaking and acting (in this sense creating) personality’ (Bakhtin 1986:387). Here, the uncertainty of the absent presence becomes shockingly present and certain. And, whilst this is achieved through reconstruction, the museum appears finally to disappear, the past bursting through its authorial control.

The visitor’s repetition of ‘in this house’ carries the force of an historical distance that was not meant to allow for the historical repetition the room attests to. That people are so commonly ‘moved’ by the disclosure suggests that the past may finally have shifted perceptions even of the present that cannot now be deemed innocent. To what extent that emotional effect translates into an urgency to respond is dependent, I would argue, on how far the complete reconstruction finally creates a sense of the architectonics of the communicative event – a sense of the whole that gives meaning to the dialogue between visitor, museum and place. Where the audio guide has kept a coherent sense of the past and present somewhat in process, in the complete picture of the final room, visitors may find the sudden materiality of the communicative situation finally brings together the address of the historical Other with their own situated awareness. But this is also a matter
of timing. Whether there is criticism of the museum’s lack of other reconstruction or where a complete picture has been formed of the building prior to the last room, there is an implication that the coming together comes too late – that sense has already been made and that perhaps the address of the past has not been clear enough to effectively emerge as a new presence in the contemporary world.

The possibilities and doubts that I have discussed of the visiting experience at The Workhouse and what it suggests about the transformation of site into Site of Conscience are not conclusive in anyway. However, there is clear evidence that the visit does have the capacity to generate a dialogue on contemporary issues without the explicit intervention of a Dialogues for Democracy programme – which is represented only in the last (and often missed) room once the tour is over. The extent to which that dialogue is effective of a transformative influence seems minimal from the visitor research that I have carried out. But it provokes further discussion in my last case study about the possible tension between an assumed context in which the past has contemporary meaning and the reality of visiting where the materiality of that context is fundamentally to be found in the silent gaps before and after words.
5.1 Present Silences

Arriving at Perm-36 felt like arriving into uncharted waters. It is impossible to generalize about how other visitors feel as they approach the high, green metal gates of the former prison. But the setting and the location for me signified the uncanny peacefulness of an isolation and silence that is only found in the noise of the living presence that now places it, and puts it on the map.

The former prison camp of Perm-36 is in the village of Kuchino, a small cluster of ten or so homes, all built in the wooden style of the Russian rural cottage, on the banks of the Chusovoya River. There is one grocery store and, between the two sites of the prison – that were the main camp and the special camp – is a home for mentally disabled boys.

There was an implicit discomfort in the presence of the home, which was built here sometime between 1989 and 1992, shortly after the fall of Communism and the erasure of Perm-36 by former KGB officials. But it was also an explicit interruption into those first moments of the museum encounter: the residents of the home freely wandering around this end of the village, some greeting visitors as they came out of their cars; others standing by, an unexpected throng of rejected youths. Music, usually from a radio station playing a mix of Russian and American pop, blared from their Tannoy system at all times of the day, puncturing the initial silence and then
a constant subversion throughout the Museum tour. To enter the Museum, though it was not at first apparent, it is in fact the home’s security personnel who released the lock on the metal gates to let me into the historic site.

The unexpected interjection of a specific community isolated from today’s wider society made the uncanniness of the isolation and silence of the green metal gates rise uncomfortably to the surface. Ostensibly, the gates appear as a haunting image of a past whose subject is silence: a silent history rarely told by those who experienced it, or admitted to by the state, or talked about now; and a history of silencing voices of dissent. This silence presents itself for the attention and learning of visitors and it is this historical silence, in its isolation, that visitors are able to witness and to speak from and about.

As such, these gates are firstly symbols of a history hidden and undisclosed, awaiting its audience and interpreters to enter. But in the interjection of the boys, the isolation and silence the gates conceal were given a different, unexpected referent. Admittedly, without any knowledge of the status of the mentally disabled within Russia – and without wishing to cast aspersions on the care they receive – the gates, in the presence of the boys, brought to my mind a repression and marginalisation that do not derive from an austere history, but which are repeated today. The isolation of the prison camp and the history of internment seen in the gates reflected back onto their contemporary institutionalisation. Their interruption came from a particular community of the present, a community who, by their presence here in this place, would seem to represent a silenced community of their own.
The presence disturbs at a number of levels. At first, it would seem to raise the question: do we, the mainstream society, still keep those who we do not want in a place such as this, beyond our imagination? In that instance, the past comes as a lesson, finding its metaphor in contemporary society, transferring its meaning by association and provoking a civic consciousness. Here, the periphery manifests itself again as the centre’s Other. And for those who have come to help redeem those heroes who were once degraded in this place, it is a salutary reminder that those who are placed beyond the city limits, may one day come to represent an emancipation from our system that put them there.

This is the kind of association the Museum authorities, who see their work as continuing in the human rights tradition of those they remember, might well encourage visitors to make. But such a transference, though possible, is not so simple in practice: standing in front of the gates, the past and present are not so discrete as to truly render a straightforward reflection. Their interaction at this point has an embodied form – before and outside of the formal museum visit – which is more antagonistic than cooperative.

If, at one level, the presence of the boys is an opportunity for a human rights lesson in the present, it is only through a process of historical imagination that re-places them and includes them within the narrative of the site. However, such incorporation runs counter-intuitive to the very physical experience of encountering the boys. Indeed, the repetition of othering and marginalising, as opposed to inclusion, forms an almost inescapable hazard of the visit. Even where a visitor may in their minds try to incorporate the
boys into their determination of the past, they themselves remain stubbornly on the outside, living remnants of an ongoing and unacknowledged for present.

It is a first hint that the past is not complete but that it is troubled by a present in which it still resounds, the same distant noise, easily silenced. Troubled because, in its museal form in the present, the past excludes (against its own historical legacy) far more easily than it liberates. The gates to the Museum are not just an entry point for the visitor invited in to be a witness, they are also a boundary to where the boys can wander. In their casual presence – at the end of the village, along a dirt road – the space around the Museum feels like a border zone, where the excluded are left to roam, stateless, without the formal recognition of one who is allowed to pass through.

5.2 Coming into Sight

It may be that few visitors will allow the immediacy of this particular intervening present to enter with them into their visit. The issue is one, however, that I raise because of the way it troubles the project of the Site of Conscience. By injecting a distortion into the experience of the past, this early interruption reveals a space of disorganised and unacknowledged for feelings that lie at the edge of the Museum’s rationalised sphere of activity and what may be expected of the visiting experience. In that unintended disturbance, responsibility potentially shifts to the visitor to restore the silence of the ruins along with the silence that is not past but is a new presence now: that is, to connect past to present. Yet, precisely because it
happens outside of the Museum, it puts that process, as a project of the Museum, in danger, proposing an alternative focus. Not just authority but the story itself – about whom is this visit? – is immediately unsettled.

Indeed, if the Museum is to pay attention to any present disturbance, it is more emphatically from those (exclusively the young) who are themselves visitors but, having been brought to the place for its pedagogic benefits, effectively express the sense of civic duty by their disrespect for it. It is this youthful constituency who represent, for the Museum, the urgency of remembering the past.

Unlike the boys outside, this teenage provocation is the majority Russia that vociferously resists and rejects the darker parts of the nation’s past. They come to the Museum, typically as school groups, prepared by their teachers but unprepared in themselves to accept, or simply accept, the need for this history to be told. Some come with questions; others arrive (as evidenced while I researched there) shirtless – in a perfect mimicry of President Putin’s topless holiday snaps – drinking vodka from bottles in brown paper bags, speaking on mobile phones and smoking on the steps of the camp’s former barracks. This is the Russia that is reinstating Stalin as a national hero (Adler 2005) and for whom human rights are lost to the need for a strong national identity.

This is the Russia whom the Museum ultimately seeks to identify and reform. It is a Russia, led by the government, that, even if it does not reject the repressions of Communism, regards them as ‘a necessary evil in response
to a cold war started by America against the Soviet Union’ (Ostrovsky 2007:67). 21 The challenge this Russia presents to the Museum is not just to make the silences heard but to make the hidden visible. Where the challenge from outside is a provocation to doubt the presence of the Museum itself, here it is to reinforce its purposes. This is the face-to-face confrontation that the contact zone brings into play, that puts forward the ‘forgotten but not gone’ (Roach 1996:2) and seeks their re-membrance in the minds and bodies of the forgetful.

If these visitors, at the end of their visit, were to look again at the boys on the outside with new questions, then the Museum will have gone further still to incorporate the meeting of two presents. But, here we see how the historical situation of the historic site museum troubles the Site of Conscience the site seeks to become. To make present the past for those who do not see it is to speak to one present, to the immediate exclusion of another. For me, this creates a particular tension – that potentially plays across visitor experiences throughout – between the audibility of the site and the visuality of the Museum. As at the other two sites in the study, visiting involves a listening and a looking. But here their attentions are reversed: to look is to follow the direction of the Museum, whilst to listen is to hear the site, as it was but also as it is now.

On entering the compound, there is no visitor centre, no shop and no plan of the site. You are not given any of these familiar cues as a visitor. Instead

21 In 2007/8, the Kremlin endorsed a new book on Russian history. Putin is quoted as telling schoolteachers: ‘Russian history did contain some problematic pages...[but] we can’t allow anyone to impose a sense of guilt on us.’ (Ostrovsky 2007:67)
having walked through the front gates into the short fencing zone before the second gate to the prison camp proper, the visitor is met by one of the museum guides – without whom it is not possible to visit. In this border zone, or no-man’s land, initial greetings are exchanged; and from there, the visitor, whether they are part of a group or alone, is taken to the site’s administration building. Straight ahead is a bedraggled mixture of derelict, reconstructed and half-reconstructed buildings and outhouses. The path through it is rubble strewn and unkempt.

The path to the museum office is off to the left. This is better landscaped, a section of it forming a tree-lined alleyway, passing through a large and more structured area of barrack buildings. These are of different standing: one large and concrete; one wooden and seemingly original; another wooden but clearly reconstructed; and another in a state of destruction.

The walk to the office, which is just a couple of minutes, has, as it were, an improvised feel, it being outside of the tour itself. Later visitors learn that this was the passage for prisoners between their sleeping quarters and their work, a highly regulated passage that may have been dragged out by guards to last as long as two hours. At this point, however it is often carried out without explanation and often in silence. Though this is an opportunity to ask questions of the guide, these tend to be practical and about the nature of the visit. What people notice or feel at this time is undirected. They are, at this point, just passing through.
During the time of my research in the summer of 2007, there were only two guides available at any one time and thus, it was a special occasion to have more than two tours running simultaneously. Since most visitors are expected ahead of time, coming either as part of an organised tour or else having contacted the Museum in advance, the staff are generally prepared and waiting. Some public visitors will make the trek unannounced and for them there will be a certain amount of organisation prior to beginning the tour, depending on whether other tours are in progress or due to begin.

This is how I first visited, and there was some initial doubt about whether there was time or not to fit us in – which would have been a great disappointment not least considering how out of the way the Museum is to get to. On other occasions when this happened, there was similar confusion but never was a visitor turned away. There is an entrance fee (RR50, about £1), which does not include paying for the Museum’s guide, which is a further RR500 for independent visitors. You do receive a printed ticket, but no printed information.

From this point on, the tour, no matter who takes it, follows a standard script and is structured along a certain route. Tours last around 2 hours and follow a route through the exhibition rooms housed in some of the reconstructed barrack buildings, into the Sh’zo or concrete punishment block, (which was the only building left largely intact by the KGB’s demolition team), and then

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22 I had travelled from the nearest town, Chusovoy, a 45-minute bus ride away. Most visitors however are likely to have arrived direct from the city of Perm – a stop on the trans-Siberian railway – which is about a two and half hour bus ride away plus a walk from the main road, or else slightly quicker by car.

23 In 2007.
outside through the internal gate and guardhouse into the industrial zone. This work zone is where prisoners (once logging was finished as the labour) made small parts for domestic irons. The outbuildings (and the reconstructed toilet block) are now used by workmen working on the site. It is the more dilapidated area (compared with the residential zone), though during the time that I was there a fence and the internal checkpoint building were reconstructed and work had begun on a further wooden building.

In time, it is anticipated that the whole camp will be rebuilt. In the meantime though, the difference between the dilapidated industrial zone and the mostly restored residential zone is very striking. At this point, visitors are (because of the distinction) witnessing the process, a coming into being of the Museum. And in the mixture of built and half-built, the museum and site are dissociated, creating further unsettlement and disorientation. This disorientation disturbs a simple reception of the narrative and potentially forces visitors to engage with the complexity of how the past evolves in the present. Indeed, how the past does not simply provide a rhetorical metaphor with which to rationalise the present. But instead how the past bears a metonymical relationship to now, as an emergent part of it.

Coming into sight is both a challenge for the Museum and one for visitors, who are implicated into the process as much as observers of a complete performance. As with the other sites, there is a listening and a looking required that are easily divided as distinct ways of realising the past. Thus it is that the noise of the present silence subsides as the silent past emerges into view.
5.3 Coming into Site

It is a Monday afternoon. I am photographed standing in one of two exhibition rooms that have been designed for the Museum at Perm-36 (see Appendix D). The room is in a reconstructed barrack that formerly held 250 inmates. I am seen (on the right of the picture) observing a young Danish couple (in the centre of the picture) receiving an explanation of the history of the penal system under Communism, as told by one of the Museum’s part-time guides (on the far left of the picture), and illustrated by a selection of objects, photos, charts and other signs that are on display. The Russian guide’s narration is being given to the Danish couple by a local translator (second from left) in English. We are approximately three-quarters of our way through the tour.

The picture, with its criss-cross of gazes and contemplation, would seem to capture the so-called museum effect defined by Svetlana Alpers (1991) as ‘a way of seeing’. Even the researcher is implicated in putting on the ‘pressure’ as Alpers puts it of ‘attentive looking’ (1991:27). It is a pressure, she argues, that has enlightening and educational benefit for the viewer as it transforms all before it into objects of visual interest. This transformation, she implies can be poetic in its focus but political in its effect, as cultural objects when placed in a museum display, acquire a new value based on their visual distinction alone as opposed to their embedded value.
However, it is not within her thesis to reflect on those who do the seeing, or
the extent to which their activity is actually a negotiation of just such a
valuation. Slowed down by still photography and also in the researcher’s
gaze, a certain agency in bringing about the museum effect can be passed
onto the looker. That the camera, in this example, should comment on the
museum as a visual space, and a way of seeing is perhaps unsurprising. But
it is also useful to use as a record of just how visitors are putting this into
practice.

The exhibition design at Perm-36 has certainly commandeered the
technologies of display that emerge from the visual genealogy of the
museum: glass cabinets of abstracted objects briefly labelled; text, maps,
photographs and charts around the walls; signs dangle from the ceiling
bearing the names of headline names and keywords from the GULAG story;
larger relics, such as a wooden window pane or the plank from a prison bed,
‘re-placed’ in their context through a diorama reconstruction. In the other of
the two history exhibition rooms, a large display at one end shows the
development of the camp over its 41-year history from 1946-1987. Panels on
the side give further information about the camps regime and highlight six
well-known prisoners whose stories represent the struggle for human rights,
particularly in the period from 1972.

Thus, just as much as the narrative of repression might present a challenge to
the visitor, so too might the display itself. The multiple modes of visual
representation are a feast for the viewer and the museum experience
effectively becomes a practice in a variety of reading techniques. With the
diversity of material, a diversity of visual proficiencies are catered for – though it can also become such a medley that the eye often must select those images that appeal or stand out as especially readable. In such a small space, the eye is inundated with images to receive and pass on for interpretation. It is not just the objects that have been isolated for visual interest but the whole space has been overlaid, written upon, filled for the visitor’s gaze.

Moving out of the exhibition rooms, the visual cues are continued through the various building reconstructions, which are there to make visible the physical structure of the camp where it had been destroyed after its closure in 1988. Indeed, in its accumulation of visual interest, the Museum embodies the homophony of the words ‘site’ and ‘sight’: for whilst it is the location of this Museum that explains its existence, it is, in the words of at least one visitor, “important to see it with one’s own eyes”.

But to see it is not necessarily to understand it and the Museum particularly struggles with creating a sense of where this place is. If the location explains the site, it explains it as a place without co-ordinates, as a displacement and an absence. Overlaid on that, the peculiar conditions of the historic site museum make visiting into a complex action of locating and re-locating a sense of position in both time and space. Perm-36 is particularly notable for this confusion since it is an unfinished mixture of ‘found’ site, reconstruction, replaced objects, displaced objects as well as an exhibition space, a memorial, and, as I have explained, partly an adjunct to the home for mentally disabled boys next door.
It is this which creates the enigma of the visiting event. Perm-36 is not a simple memorial which marks the place: it is also a space. The site is pulled in two directions: as guides help map out the landscape, give the site a name, instil it as a place, they also dis-place it with their contextualisations and objectivity. One result, as far as the visiting event is concerned, of this tension is a disjuncture between the visual display of the exhibition (the educational work) and the visuality of the site itself (the restoration work).

Not all of the Museum collection’s one thousand items are drawn from relics of the camp at Perm-36. The Museum is also the repository of objects found at other GULAG sites where archaeological surveys have been made, most notably at Kolyma in the Magadan district 2850 miles away. Indeed the third gallery in the barrack building containing the historical exhibitions is devoted to a photographic display of these expeditions.

With this tension, the visual is put under pressure. Indeed, the conflicting purposes arise as a conflict of interest the result of the peculiar circumstance of locating a museum within a historic site where each creates the context for the other. Both the museum display and the historic site, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has shown, derive their value from a ‘poetics of detachment’ (1998:18). However, there is a confusion of display techniques: all objects in the Museum are subject (as fragments) to the ‘in context’ display that puts them in historical order. Some objects in the Museum (and this distinction between objects here can be confusing for and feasibly overlooked by visitors) are placed within the ‘in situ’ display of the site itself, its environmental remains and reconstructions providing the elements of their
setting. Their ‘excision’ in this regard is barely complete as they still remain, to all intents and purposes, where they were found.

But still, by dint of their display they establish a diorama in the physical landscape of the site. As a ruin, the site is itself also a fragment within the ‘in context’ display of the exhibition. Yet in its mimetic capacity of the in situ display, epitomised in the reconstructed buildings, it comes simultaneously to represent itself – no longer a fragment but a copy of the absent whole from which the objects it contains gain their metonymic value. Thus, by the intervention of the Museum, the place itself is made both present and not present, both an object of specific visibility (in context) and simultaneously a subject of invisibility (in situ). To look here can be to displace and to disorientate oneself further.

The challenge is not lost on the Museum. The 2002 annual report of the Memorial Center of the History of Political Repression, Perm-36 (the NGO responsible for running the Museum) explains:

One of the most complicated problems, which the Museum founders are facing, is that of the [sic] converting the former camp into the Museum. That problem, as well as the one of organizing expositions and exhibitions in the former camp, have always been in the center of attention of the Museum founders and have been more than once discussed on various levels with attracting [sic] various specialists.
The camp and the Museum answer quite different purposes. It is necessary not only to preserve the former camp, but also to closely adjust it to the needs of the visitors, so that they would be able comfortably pass through the whole territory, and the employees could completely and vividly demonstrate the visitors the obvious peculiarities of the camp life, as well as those that are not evident in the material culture of the camp. The employees are to give the idea of the scale and the significance of such phenomena as GULAG and political repressions of the Stalin and post-Stalin periods.

Taking into account the fact that the museum “Perm-36” is the only GULAG Museum on the whole of the post-Soviet area, and will probably remain the only museum-camp, it must reflect not only the history of the camp “Perm-36” itself. It must show general regularities of such significant phenomena of the native history of the XX century as GULAG and political repressions both as a whole and some of their chronological and territorial peculiarities and evolutions.

What is most interesting here is that they expressly recognise a tension between the camp and the Museum – they ‘answer quite different purposes’. As far as the directorate are concerned, preservation (and restoration) of the camp does not readily correspond to its role as a centre for education. This is partly on account of the needs of the visiting public but also because of its
function as a national (and international) focal point for a far more wide-reaching history.

The division of purposes is similarly (and fundamentally) reflected in the funding the directorate receive: money for the restoration has always come from the local government. They do not support the educational work: that has relied on the sponsorship solely of international funding bodies. Educational work includes both outreach workshops and exhibitions as well as the exhibitions at the Museum.

This aspect of the Centre’s work, it has become clear, is controversial. The recent arrest (October 2009) of an academic for researching the fate of German prisoners of the GULAG illustrates the political conditions under which any enquiry into this history occurs. Just as I was leaving Perm in August 2007, the directorate were facing a difficult decision: the local government had ‘forgotten’ to include in their annual budget funding for the Museum’s restoration work. The council’s proposed solution was to takeover all the running of the Museum in order that such oversights should not be repeated and its funding could then be guaranteed. Despite the desperate need for their support, it was impossible to judge at what price it should be taken.

The division between the camp and the centre – the site and the Museum – goes to the heart of the whole project of Perm-36 and it has its impact on the visiting experience. Specifically, it raises further questions about the restoration. In the process of bringing the site back into its place and into

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24 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/15/russia-gulag-historian-arrested
visibility, the Museum disturbs the still remains. It introduces new matrices of cultural production that deliberately and unintentionally unsettle the present and also deliberately and unintentionally unsettle the past. It introduces new relations of power that are not just between Museum and visitor but between Museum and site, asking it to tell a story, through a mimicry of its original form, that is not entirely its own to tell. The Museum confronts the site in its own contact zone relationship, forcing it to perform in the present.

5.4 Disturbing Remains

After passing through the exhibition spaces, visitors are taken into the Sh’zo (punishment cell), which, though mostly original, has had its tables and chairs replaced. By far the majority of visitors describe the Sh’zo as the most powerful moment of the visit. As soon as you go into this squat concrete block, you are immediately struck by its coldness – a coldness that seems to have remained throughout the years of use and decay. It was built in 1949, a replacement for a wooden prison block that was burnt down. There are just three cells, a shower room and an officers’ room. The wooden bunks, heavy doors with spy holes and the history of how the system of punishment provide a palpable experience of what it meant to be here and it is here that visitors seem to get closest to the suffering of the prisoners and (to a lesser degree) the hardship of the prison staff. Compared with the dryness of the exhibitions, here is a chance for visitors not just to see but also to feel.
The Sh’zo therefore marks a turning point in the visitor’s experience. Often visitors climb onto the bunks for a photo, peer through the spy hole, close the door on those they are visiting with. The playfulness, though seemingly a sign of disrespect is also clearly a physical attempt to negotiate the difficulty of being so close to pain, humiliation and torture.

It is a similar though less interactive experience when visitors are taken to see the layers of fencing. As an example, in response to a questionnaire question asking if at any point the visitors felt like they were in the past, one responded: ‘This feeling appeared almost at once when we saw the fence and visited the punishment-isolation cell’. At that point of final awareness, it is absolutely necessary to create a little distance. Once the real appears, a proximate distance is required, a “liminal presence” that is both inside and outside the moment of encounter and the visitor consciously and explicitly performs.

It is clear why such playfulness may not be sustainable throughout the course of the visit, since it puts at risk (quite literally when one sees the visitors take over the space in the Sh’zo) the authority of the Museum and puts to the test the respectable silence that visitors are expected to perform in front of the past. It also puts at risk the comfort of the visitor. Even if play seems fun and exploratory it is also dangerous; and the Museum is ever mindful of the emotional perils of exposure to the reality of the past.

On more than one occasion that I was there, the guide cut short the time spent in the Sh’zo on account of it being ‘too cold’. The Museum’s role – the role,
that is, of the Museum’s performance – therefore is recognized as one of making approachable the unapproachable. This means both bringing it to the fore and holding it back at times that it might not be too overwhelming. It means giving access to the place and contextualising it within a frame that can order that exposure. In doing so, it is negotiating the conditions in which the visitor can take up their performance.

When visitors first arrive, they are largely uncertain about what they see; or, more precisely, they do not see anything to be uncertain about. One questionnaire respondent stated:

From outside, the buildings did not evoke anything strange.

Another saw:

The usual old buildings, like those in remote, depressed regions. Amazingly spacious.

As they walk through the tour, the vision changes:

From outside they look like dwelling houses/block of flats.
But inside is dreadful!!

Reminded one of the usual buildings of Stalin’s time. Inside was far more interesting.
By the end of the tour, a whole picture has been drawn:

After travelling through the whole village my impression was:

“now this looks more like a prison”.

You must not divide up the excursion into parts, because only an excursion which gives a full overview helps to create a picture, to convey the atmosphere of the camp “Perm-36”.

After the Sh’zo, visitors are walked out of the residential half of the camp complex, passing back through the internal gate they had come through on first arriving. Now they learn that here prisoners would have waited for up to two hours and more in the morning, at lunch and in the evening. This was the border into the ‘industrial zone’. This section, which was incorporated into the prison complex after 1954, is now the derelict wasteland the visitor saw ahead of them when first entering the site. Whilst work is carried out on reconstructing this area, the only part of the industrial zone to which the attention of visitors is directly brought is the nine lines of fencing laid over (and under) an area 23 metres wide, which made this camp possibly unique in having no escapees during its entire lifetime. Despite being described by the guide as evidence, the fences are mostly a reconstruction and the watchtowers at each corner were brought here from elsewhere.

This brings the walking tour to its end. To end at the fence and the watchtowers is as if to ask visitors to look again, now from the inside, at
what they had first seen from the outside – to look again at what the outside world only ever saw. It is, of course, to ask them to look from the prisoners’ view. But what is it that they see?

For the most part, by the end of the tour, visitors have seen (and felt) something of the life of the camp and in conclusion they typically declare their support for the project of preservation. Representative of many contributions, the Chairman of a Local Council wrote in the visitors’ book:

The Local Council of the Ilinskij Municipal Region expresses deep gratitude to the staff of the Museum “Perm-36” for preserving our history, and for [making it] possible not only to see everything with one’s own eyes, but to feel and experience those terrible years, and the most important thing is not to allow them to be repeated.
A deep bow to you for this!!!

In this final exchange, there is a strong tendency to consummate the relationship with the Museum in only one way: To have made visible that which was previously invisible and unknown is generally accepted as the achievement of the visiting event and at its conclusion visitors hand over responsibility for that to the Museum.

The visitors’ book is a testament of consensus raising the visible over the invisible, the visual over the silence in a complete picture of the past. As a
matter of course, visitors hand over to the Museum the authority to do this both out of gratitude and encouragement.

Such ritualistic closures make a moot point of the critical possibilities of the Museum. The assumption behind them is that learning is the gaining of knowledge and not of an awareness of knowledge or the process of making meaning. It is an assumption of, the ‘archive’, that set of ‘supposedly enduring materials’ (Taylor 2003:19) and the ‘monumental’ (Schneider 2003) that are responsible for cultural transmission. It is, in effect, a self-denial of the active role they have taken in making meaning out of the visiting event. And yet if, in the final gesture, visitors pass over the power of knowledge, that in itself implies (at the very least) the possibility of their previous agency and active role in the visiting event. At the end of the visit, if the commitment appears as one concerned only with the archive, it has, nonetheless been made through the ‘repertoire’ (Taylor 2003) of visitor performances.

What appears to happen at the point of closure is that visitors resign their own presence in favour of the Museum’s. At the point of return to the outside and to the everyday, they cut the past loose and leave it in its place. By the end, visitors have come to merge the information with the somatic contact to generate an image of the prison and life there. They conclude with finally putting onto the map this far off, unknown, disappeared place. This is the civic achievement of the Museum’s intervention, its primary purpose to restore and hence preserve a memory against invisibility. The support for
preservation is to encourage the available manifestation of truth in the world but it is also to keep it as an object at a distance from the everyday.

5.5 Right to Silence

It is however an ambivalent achievement. It is a paradoxical inversion of the prisoners’ prerogative which was to always remain on the outside and in the everyday throughout their time on the inside. The oft-told story is of how Sergei Kovalyev – former inmate, human rights activist and a champion of the Museum – complained to the camp commandant that the temperature of the barracks was below the mandated level. After several weeks of argument and regular correspondence with the authorities outside of the camp, the heating was adjusted. For his pains, Kovalyev was sent to the Sh’zo for insubordinancy where he never enjoyed the warmth he had won for his peers.

It is that determined spirit of freedom, whereby the prisoner never stopped living in the outside world where justice was made, that the Museum is ideally seeking to cede to its public. Moreover, the civilization of this site transforms it into a space where a narrative of suffering and freedom can be rehearsed to return hope to the public sphere. It does so by reclaiming the eradicated place for the public but in so doing sets apart those for whom the place is an actual, everyday home. Imagining the site as a past everyday for the prisoners forgets that it exists as part of the everyday now.
The challenge of the Museum is not simply to provide an objective means of knowledge – a place to retreat to on occasion, where society can be safely put back in touch with a repressed trauma. The Museum’s desire is to affect the consciousness of the public and to do so requires the presence of the past in the everyday. It is to encourage the public to think differently about the present and to use the awareness of the past to see the present in a new way.

The objective is that the public themselves assume responsibility for the telling of the story beyond the visiting event and to keep active the repertoire of visiting performances, to be aware of one’s own role in history and its meaning now.

This resolution – to encounter oneself – was the desired effect proposed by the Museum’s designer, Oleg Trushinov. He has been quoted as saying that he tried ‘to create an experience that would help visitors “start an inner dialogue” and allow them to understand and accept their past’ (Baxter 2003). There is no further evidence to suggest how it is that he understood his design to achieve this effect and I was unable to speak to him directly. It is a communication that may in part be stimulated by design but it is moreover a communication that emerges, through the individual visitor’s own concern and sense of responsibility, out of the gap that exists between the Museum’s design or intervention and the place itself.

Each visitor’s act of memory – certainly an act of understanding and acceptance – has its explicit performance in the outer dialogue with the faces, bodies, objects, and words of other people that have been imposed through the design and presentation of the Museum as well as other visitors who
have convened at the Museum. This is not necessarily a direct conversation in the manner of the forum. But in contrast to it, the implicit, inner dialogue emerges, I would argue, from the interstices of communication, where the lived experience encounters uncertainty and the unexpected.

The argument of this chapter is that the resources for doing that lie in the spaces and moments before and outside of the museum-visitor relationship, in the provocation from the present. These resources appear in the impertinence of outside presences but also in the disjunctures between a site that has been subject to spatialising practices and re-placements, and in the process of a silence becoming envisioned and textualised. These resources are the reminders that the past is merely a mirage in the present. It is exactly those resources however that are inevitably lost in the consummation of the relationship. The negotiation of space and place reaches its agreement.

Interrupting the drive towards museumification is the present which brings to the fore that it is a process that is not complete and perhaps can never be complete. It is to stand in front of the fences – the familiar image and symbol of oppression – and to bring to mind that they are not original, that the watchtowers have been brought here and to turn to see the wasteland in which these are set, the wasteland that was the first sight of the visitor as they entered the gates.

The wasteland is capable of reminding visitors of how little was known about the camp in the time of its use, of its erasure and then again of how little they knew of the camp when they arrived. It can be a reminder that the
image they now have in their mind is an imposition on a desolated landscape, facilitated by the Museum but nonetheless their own. Indeed, it is to see the Museum as providing a canvas on which the visitor’s imagined recreation can be drawn.

There is an ethical duty in making this a place and putting it on the map but it is a decision of the conscience to reject that in favour of the present, of the unfinished narrative, of the solitude in an unidentified land, and to be – in the words of Ukrainian poet Vasyl Stus, the last known death at Perm-36 in 1985 – ‘not really here’. The risk in this is that the Museum disappears and its valuable authority in revealing and narrating the hidden past. But what replaces it is the space of the place itself. It is to re-place the silence where the Museum has disturbed it.
CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

I set myself the challenge to identify, through a new conceptualisation, the dynamics through which historic site museums are able to become Sites of Conscience. This was to extend and critique the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience agenda and programme for doing so. The basic definition they use to explain the Site of Conscience is to indicate the process of connecting past to present and it was this process that the thesis set out to investigate in the visiting experience.

Drawing on the terms that the Coalition established in their constitutional documents, I proposed that fundamental to the creation of the Site of Conscience was the successful integration of historical interpretation, dialogue on contemporary issues, rooted in democratic and humanitarian values, and participation of visitors in those issues. Above all, I took from the Coalition’s statements that the Site of Conscience is not an inherent quality of place nor limited to a set of interpretive techniques. It is an intervention into historic sites that is achieved through the co-ordination of the relationship between museum and individual visitors that takes place there, constituting the visiting event. The proposition of the Site of Conscience is that through the act of visiting, the museum achieves its social role and creates opportunities for critical acts of citizenship performed by visitors (and other participants) in the historic site.
Finding a starting point in existing theories of visitor participation and transformative practices at the museum, I set out a conceptual framework drawn from my experience in Applied Theatre as well as the Bakhtinian notion of ‘answerability’ and Foucault’s notion of ‘agonism’ that took as central the following: the play of self as other; the self-consciousness of visiting, or double consciousness; a narrative urgency to respond; and a relationship of constant provocation that effected a constitutive freedom to visitors within the complicit relationship that performance creates. Together, these variables place authority and uncertainty at the centre of the visiting event and therefore propose a means through which visitors and museum negotiate the movement towards an intercultural exchange that can have transformative effect.

In these terms, I have been able to look for ways in which visitors themselves become responsible for the telling of the historical narrative and for translating between past and present. Each case study has been an attempt to show these processes unfolding but also to reveal the contextual limitations to the creation of new forms of visitor participation. By drawing on performance and focusing on the act of visiting, the contention within the conceptualisation was that this taking on of a narrative responsibility engaged the physical and experiential aspects of visiting as well as the discursive. This much, I would argue, has been shown across all three sites. The importance of the embodied encounter both with the buildings and places themselves but also the museums’ interventions has been highlighted as a critical aspect of the encounter.
Within that proposition, however, was the lightly mooted idea that by this physical enactment of the heritage text, the transformatory potential of the Site of Conscience was one which engaged with *habitus*. This set high expectations of my research and the limitations of my findings in this area, in the case study analyses, quite palpable. Whilst I have identified aspects of the visiting experience at all three case study sites that reflect the kind of performances the conceptualisation proposed, rarely have I been able to identify moments of transformation that would see through the logic of the Site of Conscience I put forward – a logic in which it is the museum that firstly gets transformed by visitors taking on their answerable responsibilities.

This appears to be the result, in each case, of the way that the relationship between the museum and the visitor impacts upon the relationship between the visitor and the past. Nurturing a sense in which the performance of visitors can individually enact a shift or loss of authority is, as the conceptualisation established, a complex negotiation of the historical encounter within a set of power relations. Transforming the museum as a result of that negotiation is not just about the assertion of the individual visitor’s responsibility towards the past, it is also about a set of expectations that do not need to re-define what kind of a cultural activity the event is.

At each site, some indication that visitors do challenge the authority of the museum has been demonstrated. These small examples included: a subversive intimation (The Workhouse); a seeing through the limits of the museum’s presence (The Workhouse, Tenement); imagining the museum as
not a museum (Tenement); and actively turning the museum into a stage for playful interactivity (Perm-36). In each case, these emerged out of a tension between the subjective encounter with the historical Other and the objective intervention of the museum. However, in none of these instances did there appear to be an immediate sense of seeing anew their social responsibility. Linking visitor performances, where some claim to an alternative authority is made, to political consciousness requires further work.

I return to this momentarily but first it is necessary to acknowledge that between the embodied encounters with place and museum and those encounters in which the authority of the museum was, if only temporarily, compromised, there do appear in the case studies a range of encounters that resonate with the dynamics of uncertainty and authority. It is these which I outline in the summaries below. Common to all of these is a sense in which the historic site museum is both an experience of emplacement and displacement, of being inside and outside the immediate reality and, of course, vitally being in both a past reality and a present reality. Even if these experiences are seen to be constrained by the relations of power in which they take place, the thesis still provokes the question how these experiential resources can be differently activated in the project of the Site of Conscience.

To the extent that that project contributes to new practices of public democracy and the engines of civil society, these dynamics go some way to participating in contemporary discussion about the nature of the public sphere. Whilst this debate has not framed my own approach to the Site of Conscience, the approach is consciously reflecting concerns about citizen
participation that draw out the need for a broad-based nurturing of civic competencies whilst moving beyond the dominant notion of deliberative democracy as the target for these competencies (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Dahlgren 2006; Delanty 2005; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Stevenson 2000). Moving away from “talk and space” notions of public dialogue, the emphasis on performance, embodiment and place is to open a pathway towards a looser (i.e. more cultural) definition of civic competencies and the imagination of a public sphere that is not strictly linguistically based. My contribution to this conversation is only tangential at this point. But in terms of thinking through the Site of Conscience and its ambitions for dialogue, it is useful to recognise these cultural movements in the definition of citizenship and human rights.

6.2 Disciplinary Concerns

The issue raised above concerning how far the evidence points towards the discoveries of a new sense of Self or the creation of a civic identity remains a troubling aspect of the research project as a whole. The focus of the thesis has been to identify dynamics of encounter in which visitors and museum are jointly engaged in a process of changing and challenging perceptions of political realities. The force of the argument has been that change begins in the way the visiting event opens up the possibility of change, the possibility to intervene. It has thus been to argue against an instrumentalism of practice and in favour of a theatricalisation that renews the governmental mechanisms of the museum.
The degree to which the case study analyses have been able to test and investigate this has been limited. This limitation has, I would suggest, been largely on account of methodology and the product of a process in which the research was defined in the wake of the fieldwork and only after the data collection had been completed. Indeed, the attention of the analysis stage has re-focused the research question from asking what the material can tell about the visiting event to a concern about what framework, and in what disciplinary context, is the material to be read. Yet, this has not been a process that emerged through the data; and, thus, it has either emphatically revealed the gaps in information and the need for further engagement in the field; or it has revealed how the generation of the concepts needed to be more empirically grounded. Either way, a better methodology would be required if the research is going to successfully identify the Site of Conscience as effecting a new kind of cultural event.

Paul Williams (2007) presents a similar concern in the conclusion to his study of memorial museums. His wide-ranging overview of an international phenomenon successfully highlights how these hybrid institutions ‘are a significantly different and more important proposition for a variety of reasons...[and] crystallize a whole raft of issues currently topical not just in museum studies, but in the humanities more broadly’ (2007: 190). As such, he argues, the field of enquiry remains a tantalisingly open book, unable to support the attention of any single disciplinary or theoretical approach and he invites a pluralistic debate about what constitutes these new forms and practices.
Likewise, I have grappled with how best to render up the idea of the Site of Conscience. Where Williams presents this as an open challenge to different theoretical frameworks, in the instance of my own research, this has also translated into a problem of methodological practice. For the problem of which methodology to work within is also a problem of what is to be studied. Where I have understood the Site of Conscience, in contrast to the memorial museum, as a product of the visiting event, my attention has been focused on the space the actions of visiting and the actions of the museum create between them. It has been neither a study of the museums nor of their visitors but the particular nature of the relationship between them as it emerges in the visiting event.

The premise was that I would learn from one, the visitors, about what it is the other does. Ostensibly, I asked about the nature of the visiting event from the visitors’ perspective. But, at the same time, what it was about the visiting event that visitors could reveal was pre-determined by the terms of the institutions’ intentions for their encounter. Thus, by definition, the event itself is a product of neither one but the particular combination of both. The limitation of the study has therefore been in the degree to which it is possible, (especially after the fieldwork had been done), to interpret that combination without a full empirical enquiry into what both museum and visitor had brought to the event. The difficulty of the analysis has not just been a matter of which framework best suits the material, but whether there is a framework that can conceptualise the point at which the two parts meet without having to know everything about the parts.
To define the Site of Conscience as a process of transformation is to open up the questions – where does the process begin and where does the process end? The advantage of using a theatrical frame has been to identify the process as having its own beginning, middle and end. It has been to identify the Site of Conscience as an occasion of heightened communication in which matrices of experience and cognition, which normally would be discrete, can be brought together in a creative act. The potential in this is to identify a new event and recognise transformation as the potential of that discovery rather than the achievement of effects in the everyday world beyond. The limitation is that the new event needs much clearer definition and the force of a clear disciplinary approach to the way data is gathered and analysed. In other words, this may have been a more incisive research, if I had examined visiting events at the three sites with a clearer definition of Applied Theatre research and its disciplinary constraints, rather than the cross-referencing of disciplines I have followed here.

6.3 Three Historic Site Museums

On the basis of my approach, I presented each case study site to give a sense of the visiting experience, which in each instance, being guided, has a set structure. This has made reading across the three sites less easy. But my intention is that, in these final summaries, some of the common themes and qualities that I have identified as playing their part in the Site of Conscience should come through. It is in the spirit of other conclusions – namely Sandell (2007) and Peers (2007) – but also in response to the research questions, that I
use these summaries to present the implications of my research and move towards an agenda for future practice.

1. At the Tenement Museum, I was interested by the difficulty the museum has in making the site into a site of dialogue. Across the range of visitor feedback, it is apparent that either the contemporary resonances are not felt at all or where they are this is something the Museum has not managed to bring out as much as possible. Visitors are struck and typically impressed by the historical knowledge and objectivity, as well as the absence of any particular message the museum guides present. They are, however, equally impressed by the immersive environment that makes the Museum so powerful an experience.

The discussion of the Tenement Museum focused around the intersection of the two modes of engaging with the past – through an historical objectivity and through an immersive subjectivity. The two interplay throughout the museum tours but come into a particularly interesting scenario in the living history tour. Here, where visitors are put into role in order to meet a person who once lived in the building, the tension between historical reality and the imaginative encounter becomes a defining feature of the relationship between museums and visitors.

Here, we see the logic of the museum played out to its extreme: the immersive experience, through the characterising of visitors in role, becomes a commitment to the reconstruction of a past reality, in which the emphasis on the historical accuracy sets limits to the freedom of the visitors
participation whilst, at the same time, creating a situation in which their participation is essential for the communicative event.

At one level, the encounter can be played out without any sense of the experiential drama I come to describe as definitive of its political possibilities. But however the experience is received – and for some visitors it is disappointing and frustrating, whilst for others it is creative and powerful, and again for others it is both at the same time – the situation is predicated on a shared commitment to making this fictional encounter an education into the historical reality. What emerges as most important here is that participation demands an acceptance of the authenticity of the representation and hence, that the actress’ performance is enjoyed because of the authority of historical accuracy more than the playfulness of the meeting between past and present.

The presence of the museum’s authority is explicit in the way rules are necessarily implied to the visitors’ participation, as indeed elsewhere there are “house rules”. But here these are more evidently the rules of the relationship between host and guest, a relationship which is at once an invitation to enter the private world of the host but at the same time to reciprocate by not exploiting the potential danger such an intrusion might otherwise arouse. In such a relationship, the uncertainty of communicative success, which underwrites the fictional set-up, is circumscribed and transferred to the museum’s control. If visitors choose to opt out of the game, there is nowhere else for them to go; and indeed the scenario establishes that their exit is dependent upon a member of the museum staff to collect them.
This circumscription of the risk of communicative failure is essential to my understanding of the museum as a whole and how it creates obstacles to the ready translation of past into present. The risk is constitutive of the event but insofar as it demands that visitors play their part, it also insists that they are not themselves. This typically creates a sense of awkwardness that, as my discussion indicated, can render the experience for some only ever a partial success – whether because visitors do not know what to do or because they are unable to gain the epistemological advantage of being outside of the reconstruction, as at living history sites.

Indeed, by the rules of the game, visitors cannot be in the past and the present simultaneously. They can only really be in the hybrid zone of the real past in the fictional present, or otherwise in the real present. The third option is to be in a highly unstable space between past and present where neither has any contextual matrices to give them meaning. This is an ideal state of creativity but it is not one, except in the rarest of moments, that the Museum successfully facilitates. These rare moments are created when the authority of the Museum comes momentarily into doubt and are less successful when the Museum tries to instil a sense of crisis into the narrative.

If partial success is one outcome, my argument is that the potential of this heightened encounter is restricted so long as it continues under the Museum’s authority, and where visitor participation (once inside the experience) and representation of the historical Other cannot be as authentic/authoritative as that of the Museum. The reward is only possible
once visitors consciously choose to accept the invitation to participate in the museum’s project and the historical reality it is making – a choice for which, as the feedback suggests, many visitors do create the cognitive space. Ostensibly, visitors are co-producers but they are only co-producers in effecting the historical reality the Museum is there to perform for them. They have a freedom to subvert the situation but in fact that would only compromise their experience. In fact, they are quite bound to follow the script and to learn from the Museum.

Thus, it is that the commitment to the historical Other – which is pre-determined as an ethical commitment because the historical Other here, as elsewhere in the Museum, is a real individual – is a commitment to their place in the past. Translating that commitment to the contemporary Other or indeed to the issue of immigration raised by the historical narrative necessarily must happen in a separate reality – the reality of the present.

It is this which returns the discussion to the Museum in general. The paradox of their approach is that it makes a distinction between past and present, more than it imbricates one over the other. By asserting itself as neutral and objective the Museum establishes a gap, not least in the personal performances of staff, between the historical reality and the real subjectivity – the situated awareness – of those encountering it. On the one hand, this is to make it the visitors’ own choice to connect past and present and how to do so. But, by keeping them apart, the Museum is compromising the ease with which the historical Other is able to emerge through the subjective encounter of the visitor into the contemporary debate. Within the relations of power
through which the Museum acts upon the visitors, the act of answerability is not performable.

It is clear that there is a polemic to my interpretation. But firstly, this is a critical polemic concerning the capacity of the Museum to achieve its goals as a Site of Conscience; and, secondly, it is not an argument to say that visiting practices are so uniquely determined. (I do not have enough evidence to argue that one way or another). Visitors can, and do, of course make their own connections through the visiting event but it is not just the active interpretation of the visitors that is responsible here. It is the way those interpretations are invited into the Museum and allowed to participate.

The specific purpose of activating the past and bringing into contemporary issues through the participation of visitors remains a challenge for the Museum. And here I am arguing that the challenge is only increased by asserting authorial control over the telling of the past. Where the visitor feedback does work is to reveal how far the Museum is seen as responsible for creating a complete and authentic image of the past and not for the way it troubles the present. In other words, just as visitors commit to the living history tour, the most successful visits, from the visitor perspective, are those where the authority of the Museum is confirmed and performed.

2. At The Workhouse, greater attention was given in the analysis to the way that the museum’s mixed approach to interpretation creates a more sustained awareness of the museum’s presence in the site. It was clear that the minimal
approach exposes the museum even as it tries to allow the building to speak for itself. Where this appears to problematise the experience, visitors tend to interject with their own interpretation. Uncertainty and absence are evidently at play in the making of the experience but what is interesting here is how these are conditions of the encounter with the present far more than of the encounter with the past.

The example of Ulrika sets the challenge for the museum to disappear to allow the untold stories of ongoing struggle to come through to the visitor directly. But for other, more typical visitors, it is quite the opposite that seems to happen. It is the present that keeps appearing and intervening. Indeed, in forming a dialogic realm out of the experience, visitors populate this with people in their own lives and society around them far sooner than with the historical figures. Thus, where at the Tenement Museum, visitors’ role in performing the past more readily excludes the present, here, the present comes between visitors and the past.

Through the use of the audio guide, a number of modes of engagement are made possible but just as it aims, like the empty rooms, to draw out the voices of the past, it is also a constant provocation to recall the act of visiting, bifurcating looking and listening and prompting visitors to edit the narration. Indeed, at The Workhouse, there is almost a reversal in the relations of power, whereby it is the visitors who have control to act upon the museum.
This action alone does not in general translate into a transformative action, however, allowing instead for the reassertion of existing perspectives. My argument is that this is an effect of the performer’s authority being derived from the relationship with the museum – the interpretation devices and narrative – and not from the relationship with the past. By these means, the museum is able to draw visitors into the issues raised by the history and to provoke debate; and, to all intents and purposes, the experience prepares people effectively for a participation in discussion – one which rarely takes places but may indeed contribute to shaping new opinions as well as reiterating old ones.

This leaves unresolved, however, in what way the dialogic sphere can emerge through the act of answerability – where the response comes forth from the intimate call of the Other’s story as opposed to the less troubling provocation of the museum’s present absence. In that present absence, the museum leaves to visitors the role of creating a unified sense of the experience. Only in the final room of the tour, where there is a full reconstruction, does the museum reverse roles allowing the past to break through and unsettle the control of the visitor by its immediacy. Here the constant presence of the absent museum dissipates, overwhelmed by its own presentation. Here, visitors are moved, shocked and disturbed by the transformation of the empty past into a total presence. Here, visitors are asked to see themselves as performers on a stage not of their own making.

Next to the Tenement Museum, The Workhouse registers a very different playing out of the dynamics of the Site of Conscience. As I have stated from
the beginning, there are too many other factors involved that the research leaves unaccounted for or unexplained to simply compare the two approaches as better or worse. But, in looking at them together, the objective of the study is brought more clearly to attention: to identify elements that are in play during the visit, and only during the visit, that condition the translation between past and present.

As much as The Workhouse, like the Tenement Museum, clarifies the importance of those narratives and contexts that visitors bring with them to the encounter, it also helps to elicit that the play of authority has an experiential quality that determines how effectively the past comes to bear on the contemporary. At The Workhouse, the museum’s approach to interpretation brings to the fore the relationship between museum and visitor in a far more apparent demonstration of their attempt to be absent. Thus, where, at the Tenement Museum, visitors are invited in to the historical encounter by performing the Museum’s logic, at The Workhouse, visitors are afforded the capacity to resist and control how the narrative is told and understood.

The relationship is less premised on a risk of communication failure. Instead, uncertainty emerges when the museum makes its presence felt and consequently prompts visitors to ask if its intervention is appropriate, effective or authentic. Yet, as a result, the present is far more reachable and becomes a far more explicit way for visitors to engage the past. Where at the Tenement Museum, the gap between past and present is an inhospitable and unsustainable space between realities, here, it is the location where visitors
find themselves. The significance of this difference comes out in the third case study.

3. At Perm-36, the opening encounter with the boys of the mental home exposes, far more explicitly than at the other two sites, how the Museum is not just an intervention in the present but, more importantly, an awkward intervention. The dissonance of heritage – as opposed to its undesirability – which for the other sites is less apparent to visitors, rises immediately to the surface. Here, the presence of the Museum creates new relationships with those whom it shares a location. This kind of critique of heritage is not usually so clearly brought into the visiting experience and here it unsettles the Museum before the Museum has even apparently begun.

Indeed, it is a sense of interruptions before the Museum that underwrites the interpretation of this site. It is both implicit and explicit in the visiting experience that there is doubt and uncertainty within the presence of the Museum, a drama that is played out through the half-reconstructions and lack of visitor centre or formal entrance. All the more apparent is that the Museum has moved into the site; and all the more evident is that it is the Museum that here occupies the gap between past and present. Of course, this is the more natural mediating position for the museum but the dynamics of the other two sites have played with that positioning as they bring uncertainty into the visiting event through the presence of the visitor. Here, it greets visitors ahead of any communication.
By this, the visiting experience is also destabilised. The analysis was a subjective account of this instability and displacement but it borrows from the other analyses certain tensions which constitute the performance of this uncertainty. Listening and looking are again bifurcated. But at Perm-36 their attentions are reversed: on the basis only of my own experience, I suggest that now visitors look at the Museum and listen to the site – where the site is the present, the music from next door as well as the abandoned remains. Here, in my own experience, the limitations of the visual are constantly brought into focus as the medley of stimuli clash and contradict as much as they cohere around the one subject of place.

It is the difficulty of placement that dynamises the visit for me. It is a reflection of my own displacement but also the historic displacement of prisoners and the awkwardness of a prison in the middle of nowhere. It is this tension – and the question where are we? – that I suggest makes the visitor performance here. It is firstly a tension observed in the performance of the relationship between Museum and site. But, in the moment that visitors finally enter the real (or what they perceive as the real) – the punishment block, and then the fences – the provocation for them to perform comes forward.

It is because visitors are firstly audience to the play that it is far more apparent when visitors do see themselves as performers, taking on a playful role as they assert themselves in the relationship to the historical Other, squeezing through the Museum’s ongoing claim to tell the story. To what extent, however, that this translates into recognition of the change one’s own
actions can perform is seemingly limited – though further research would be required to assess this. In the end, visitors seem to return authority to the Museum, almost consecrating its purpose and ascribing the role of priest and guardian of the truth. This is not necessarily to displace their own responsibilities but it is certainly, at the very least, to give credibility to the Museum’s role to represent them.

This is the effect of the Museum’s positioning between past and present, its uncertain presence. At the most obvious level, visitors seek to give back to the museum its social agency, to confirm its presence. In this, they compromise the project of the Site of Conscience, which asserts that it is for them to see through the Museum’s political purpose. As elsewhere, it is a question of how willing visitors are to take on responsibility for the telling of the past and how far instead they see this as the authority of the Museum. Here, that play of authority is performed differently however. Unlike the Tenement Museum, it is quite directly in the hands of visitors to question the authority of the Museum. But, unlike at The Workhouse, this is not a provocation of an interpretation that deliberately seeks to allow the building to speak to visitors. The interpretation at Perm-36 is the Museum’s absolute claim to authority, to represent the historical Other in whose spirit it perceives – and whose body was conceived – its own work. But it is through the pressure of the site itself and the uncontainability of its presence that the Museum is constantly performing, through that interpretation, the potential loss of its authority.
On these terms, Perm-36 finds itself between the Tenement Museum and The Workhouse: on the one hand, its authority is typically restored by those who visit it by choice and hence risks a separation between past and present in their minds. On the other hand, it displaces authority in its need for visitors to take control of the uncertainty and pay heed to the historical Other, risking the easy interruption of their own present and not harnessing the power of place to challenge views and change opinions. Between the two other sites, Perm-36 also invites the visitors in to construct its project but a) without insisting on rules of engagement with the past and b) without an unresolved discussion around the issues raised there. The argument of the analysis is that the site, against the Museum, more effectively unites these two foundations of the Site of Conscience, history and dialogue – in its isolation and present silences. It is the site, as both present and past, heard beneath the noise of the Museum, that can engage a transformation of both Museum and visitor.

6.4 Performances of Conscience

It was only in the articulation of this final experience at Perm-36 that I realised a definition for the performance of the Site of Conscience. In the displacement of the Museum, the past and present emerged together in my imagination provoking the demand to respond as the action of a freedom to define my own political subjectivity.

If this can be deemed to constitute a particular ‘performance of conscience’ it is in the way it engages the performer in an experience of isolation.
Conscience, as understood as the ability to live with oneself, is only tested when one sees oneself as outside of, isolated from or threatened by the community of which one is a part, in the absence or removal of any normative moral framework. The performance of conscience, as I define it, is the movement out of a momentary and unintentional re-enactment of such an isolation and danger back into oneself and into the world. It is, as such, a reclamation of one’s humanity and as such a reclamation also of one’s fundamental human right, the right to have rights, without which one is in total isolation or loneliness (Arendt 1953:323-4, 1951; Rancière 2004). As such, I would suggest, such a performance constitutes an ‘act of citizenship…those moments when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens – or better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due’ (Isin 2008:18). Such acts of citizenship are in contrast to active citizenship as they cannot be reduced to activities that merely execute existing civic norms embodied in status and habitus (ibid.:15-40).

The thesis has been a way to unravel the journey to that point of realisation, to try to trace and identify the mechanics at play that can make such a performance possible. The teleology of such a retrospective research has been the final limitation to the spirit of enquiry in which the project has been carried out. This singular performance of conscience has guided all efforts to ascertain how it is that heritage encounters can effect their social agency through visiting experiences in terms proposed by the Coalition. The process of conceptualisation has been an attempt to break down its constituent parts in order to be able to apply its possibility across a whole range of visiting
experiences. It is, however, for this reason that the overall project too often exceeds the subject material about which it speaks, putting it in the shadows of the overarching interest.

This does raise concern about the use of evidence, and especially the testimonies of other visitor performances, in a project that aims to draw on them not simply to express their own value but their value in terms of understanding a performance that they are not themselves evidence of. In this way, however, the thesis as it has been presented here, stays true to its own journey. It now needs to be taken as a starting point for a more effective research into what it is that others – both museums and visitors – are doing and what these practices can explain, more fundamentally, about the performance of the visiting event. The threads of this research are laid out here and the implication of the research is that the resources of the performance of conscience are not unique but do find themselves at play within other experiences of the historic site museums studied here.

But in order for those resources to be better explicated a closer, phenomenological and more longitudinal study is required in which the proposed tensions of visitor performances could be more clearly evidenced within visitor, as well as museum narratives, of the visiting event. Further understanding is required as to whether and, if so, how visitors conceive of their visits as occurring between experiences of, for example, inside and outside, self and other, everyday and non-everyday, private and public, cultural and social, place and space, theatre and museum or indeed other tensions that may emerge from their narratives – before the translation of
past into present. Such a study would, above all, benefit from a more specific focus in terms of the detail of response and number of sites. It would also benefit from a better integration of concept and analysis.

The richness of visitor narratives and, those of staff involved in the visiting event, has not been duly respected here and this has largely been on account of trying to identify and explain a process of transformation in terms set by the notion of the Site of Conscience and not, therefore, in terms set by visitors and indeed guides themselves. The argument of the Coalition is that they seek to make explicit implicit practices of relating past to present. The argument of this thesis is that closer attention has to be paid to the implicit processes in order for the explicit practice to work. But with that particular argument to put forward, the implicit processes have not been given a detailed enough enquiry of their own.

This leaves open the question, however, how far research into cultural encounters can itself make a contribution to processes of social change. Karen Till (2008) argues that by researching those who, in their practice, are challenging established concepts of place and memory, it is possible to ‘begin building responsible research agendas that contribute to more socially just futures’ (2008:109). Similarly, Laura Peers argues that by recognising that ‘much of what really goes on at historic sites have very little to do with the past’ (2007:170), research itself advocates for new strategies of empowering both those who are represented and those who come to learn about them. Meanwhile, Richard Sandell also raises the importance of the social agency of research through demonstrating in his work that value-based exhibitions
‘offer interpretations…that can be as complex, multifaceted and challenging as any other’ (2007:196). On that basis, he challenges arguments that defend the objectivity of museums against fears of didacticism and social engineering, to insist on the inherent importance to ‘make explicit to audiences the values which the museum stands for’ (ibid.:196).

In a similar fashion, I hope that my research, in focusing on historic site museums that are seeking to engage their publics in social process, has managed to raise questions about how that can be done. In particular, in recognising that museums can be venues where cultural authority can be challenged and played with as much as asserted to good purpose, I hope to have shown, from the perspective of the visiting event, that museums may have to take uncertainty more into their awareness of what they do. Just as Sandell proposes that the line must shift where it is museums declare their values, so I am asking if there is a limit to how far the museum’s authority can be questioned. How far can visitors be given an experience in which their responsibility is encouraged and provoked? To see their participation twice and activate a double consciousness? Not just to engage with the discourses of difference that museums construct but to experience difference and otherness itself? And to take that experience – as one that exceeds the authorial limits of the museum – into their own everyday worlds? How are can visitors be engaged in a transformation of the museum as a first point towards making changes beyond it? Creating new cultural events between the theatrical and the museological?
Across museum studies, closer attention is being given to difficulty and contest in museums and heritage and the complications of the intercultural meetings they create. These studies reveal how bringing the repressed and the marginalised into museums and historic sites re-invigorates the messages these cultural encounters can portray. They also move towards considering how difficulty can be translated from message into experience, and how the experience matters (Bonnell and Simon 2007; Simon 2005; Williams 2007; Macdonald 2008; Logan and Reeves 2009; Karp and Kratz 2000). Difficulty provokes ‘a way of living with and within history as a never-ending question that constantly probes the adequacy of the ethical character and social arrangements of daily life’ (Bonnell and Simon 2007:81). For those who see difficulty, therefore, as an aspect of the museum’s social agency, the objective becomes one of positioning visitors in such a way that they take from the ‘troubling experiences of others’ (ibid:68) a new sense of their own lives that changes their thoughts and actions.

To think of the museum in theatrical terms has been to think of the gaps in experience and the interstices of knowledge. It is within these uncertainties of communication and the displacements visiting performs that difficulty and contestation emerge into experience. The three historic site museums in this study suggest that such uncertainty is part of the practice of visiting sites. Just as museums are being encouraged to take sides, to recognise their role as cultural authorities, so in this am I encouraging museums to provide opportunities for visitors to use their sites to explore alternatives, to become creative, thinking beings made aware of their capacity to change reality through their historical encounters. This may well involve museums doing
less to shape opinions and doing more to unbalance their own sense of authority.
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APPENDIX A

The following provides an historical survey of the three case studies that explains both their original and current usage. It is the two contexts – and the issues they raise – that ostensibly lend the sites their political presence within the cultural landscape. These issues have not been the explicit focus of the case study analyses, which has been on the playing out of the communicative relationship between museum and visitor. But they are presented here as indication of further complexities to the visiting experience if not specifically to the dynamics of performance which the body of the thesis investigates.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

At its inception, there was political motivation behind the discovery and development of the tenement building that became the focal point of my first case study site, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York. Ruth Abram, ‘activist turned historian’ (Abram 2001), was looking for an original tenement building to house ‘a museum that honoured [sic] America’s immigrants25. More than a collection of objects or the preservation of an architectural record, she clearly wanted a space in which personal stories could come alive26. But her interest was not in the past: The question that preoccupied her concerned the present and in particular the moral integrity of the American nation fearful of difference and diversity in its immigrant populations. To overcome this barrier to democratic reconciliation, she sought a place where the historical commonality, to most Americans, of the

25 http://www.tenement.org/about.html, last accessed January 2010
26 Personal interview (21/01/07). But also see the museum’s publication, A Tenement Story (1999/2004)
immigrant experience could be revisited. She hoped that ‘through a confrontation with ancestors who are held to be dear, Americans might be moved to a kind of national conversation about contemporary immigrants’ (Abram 2001: 4). This admixture of national and civic patriotism, nostalgia, public debate and confrontation with the past was the premise of her project before the building was found.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is located at 97 Orchard Street at the heart of this ‘immigrant quarter’ in Downtown Manhattan, New York. The building is a five-storey brick tenement much like the others on its block and in the neighbourhood. Built in 1863 by Louis Glockner, a successful German tailor and landowner, it provided accommodation in twenty, three-room apartments (each around 30m$^2$) and, in the basement, two shop fronts. His tenants (including Glockner and his family) would initially have been mainly Catholic Bavarians or Irish who both constituted the largest part of the new immigrant population in New York at the time. The building design was an improvement on existing housing for multi-occupancy – which before 1867 was unregulated – though still it was without internal plumbing or lighting. These changes were introduced during the 1890’s in the wake of growing public concern about the living conditions of the city’s poor.

By this point, ownership of the building had passed between various landlords, as the ethnic constituency changed and population figures soared. In the 10 years to 1890 alone, 60,000 Jews from Eastern Europe settled on the Lower East Side, making the area typically known from then on as the ‘Jewish Lower East Side’ – though they were joined by a large Italian
migration as well (Miller 2004:31). By 1903, the block on which 97 Orchard Street stood was officially recognized as the most densely populated in the city with over 2000 residents. 1901 had seen the introduction of the “New” Tenement House Law, replacing the “Old” Law, which had been instituted barely 22 years earlier. The building at 97 Orchard Street today reflects the changes these laws demanded, such as the indoor toilets and internal windows. But when, in 1934, in the midst of the Depression, a further law was brought in effecting the requirement of fire-escapes and fire-proofing the public corridors, the cost to the current owner was beyond his means. He was forced to evict the residents and close down the building – leaving open only the shop fronts, which now occupied the ground floor as well as the basement.

By 1934, 97 Orchard Street had been home to an estimated 7000 people from more than 20 countries. Comparable to the changing circumstances of The Workhouse, it had transformed from being a modern design to one that could no longer meet the statutory demands for multiple-family dwellings. As such, it had been a first-hand witness to the immigration boom which was to centralize New York’s place in re-defining the American (Blake 2006). And it had come to bear the marks of both the dream and the reality for those who arrived to the Lower East Side out of both fear and ambition, presenting a testimony of how they were received and dealt with and how they coped and finally assimilated into the nation’s story.

Given the historical (and personal) intensity (and foreclosure) of that experience, there is a very different dramatic appeal in the Tenement than
that found, almost by chance, at The Workhouse. This appeal is founded in the complex mythology that encompasses the globality of New York and America’s assumption of world power with the specificity of the individual dream and struggle to survive and prosper. I would suggest that that, in itself, has supported a different idea of how the past inspires its political interpretation. However, it could equally be said that the premise on which Ruth Abram and her co-director moved into the place pre-empted that intensity. To a degree, despite the fact that this tenement was an unusual historical remnant, its upper floors having been left untouched since its abandonment in 1935 or used merely as storerooms for the shops below, what remains is a backdrop, barely on show. There are two ‘ruin’ apartments, which, with a little cleaning up, reveal how the site was found by the museum directors in 1988.

Indeed, the Tenement Museum’s story is not told first and foremost through the story of the building. Rather it focuses on the stories of six individual families who lived at 97 Orchard Street at various times whilst it was open to residents, reconstructing six apartments to represent a moment in their lives: the Moores family (Irish-Catholic, 1869), the Gumpertz (German-Jewish, 1873), the Levines (Polish-Jewish, 1897), the Confinos (Turkish-Jewish, 1915), the Rogarshevskys (Lithuanian-Jewish, 1918), and the Baldizzis (Italian-Catholic, 1935). Only in the last case is their first-hand testimony to the exact layout and design of the flat. The rest have been pieced together partly from architectural research in the building and partly from a generic historical knowledge. But the stories themselves have been derived from archives and family histories. Presented under thematic headings, the family histories are
personalized accounts of some of the challenges facing new immigrants and also those they pose for the broader establishment and populace. Instrumentalism is certainly at work in these reconstructions.

Visitors to the museum must choose their theme – day-to-day living, or working conditions in the garment industry – as they can only visit on a guided tour of three apartments (including a ‘ruin’ apartment). This is for practical reasons – the building is too small to cope with open visiting. But it also fits with the pedagogy of the museum’s interpretation since it both relies on the power of storytelling and stimulates discussion. In Chapter Three, I discuss in greater depth how this functions in practice and where it leads the visitor’s relationship with as well as their understanding of the past. But, however this approach can be critiqued, it has proven a huge success with visitors. Numbers have risen exponentially, the financial year-ending 2008 seeing 135,975 visitors and this year already up from that by about 40%.27

The museum has itself also grown since its founding in 1988. There is now a visitors’ centre across the road at 108 Orchard Street, which includes a gift and bookshop; and a suite of administrative offices at 91 Orchard Street. The museum also now owns the property at 103. The museum currently employs 40 full-time staff and 41 educators (guides), facilitators and costumed interpreters. They offer 224 public tours per week: 14 on Monday, 26 each day Tuesday – Friday, and 40 on each of Saturday and Sunday. The museum also offers walking tours of the neighbourhood. On top of that, there are organized group tours which may number a further eighty in any given

27 Sarah Pharaon, personal communication 01/12/08.
week. These tours are often with school groups but the museum also runs specialized tours for new immigrants. *Shared Journeys* is one of several community learning projects taking place on-site that have been developed to give adult and teenage English Language students a historical context for their own experience and a means to engage in civic issues. *Tenement Inspectors*, whilst aimed at younger participants, is also a way for new arrivals to tour the building whilst reflecting on their own housing conditions; and *Windows at 97* provides a showcase for immigrant artists. Finally, the museum offers a ‘flagship’ programme, *Kitchen Conversations*, which is a post-tour discussion of contemporary immigration. This is available both to organized groups and members of the visiting public.

The emphasis on the diversity and contemporaneity of the Tenement/Lower East Side experience is something that has developed across the twenty years. From my own personal recollection, the museum began very much as a heritage site of the Jewish experience, even keeping opening and closing times according to the Jewish calendar. Given that the building itself closed to residents in 1935, its particular history does not directly speak of the waves of immigration since then to the area, most notably from China, Puerto Rico, and Bangladesh. As the mission of the institution has been better tuned, so too has the narrative it tells in terms, at least, of which communities it feels it represents. At the same time, it has become the leading proponent, within the Lower East Side Preservation Coalition, of an ongoing project to make of the Lower East Side a landmark district recognized by the New York City Preservations Commission. The museum itself, since 1998, is an affiliate site of the National Trust for Historic...
Preservation and of the National Park Service, forming a link with other New York immigration sites, Ellis Island, Castle Clinton and the Statue of Liberty. Most recently, it has launched a new website, www.immigrantheritagetrail.org ‘to allow visitors to create their own walking tours of immigration-related historic sites, cultural organizations, neighborhoods, and even immigrant-serving businesses in Lower Manhattan’. 28

These creations and expansions affect the museum in many ways that externalize its political role: whether that is as a conflict with other landowners (see www.tenementnuseum.com for an example of this); or its own workers – the freelance educators the museum employs to lead their tours formed a union during the time of my research, ironically, to demand better working conditions; or indeed with new immigrants, who, partly as a result of the museum’s re-discovery of the area and a concomitant gentrification, have been forced out into suburban districts such as Queens’ by rising rental prices. (Guidebooks now recommend the area for its hotels, boutiques and stylish delis as much as for its cheap market stalls: from what was ‘one of the most unalluring neighbourhoods’ in the late 1990’s (according to the Rough Guide of that time) bearing the soubriquet “Bargain District”, it is now chic and expensive). In developing a strategy for the museum as an agent of social change, it is itself an engineer of more self-interested change in a present which it is less successful at historicizing.

The Workhouse

The Workhouse, the oldest construction of my three case study sites, is a historic building owned and managed by the National Trust – an independent, charitable organization (in the UK) that protects and conserves great houses, industrial monuments, nature reserves and other sites of national interest making them accessible to the general public. Despite the range of places under their stewardship, The Workhouse is an unusual property for them inasmuch as its history of poverty and destitution and the negative stigma historically attached to the institution does not fit the typical expectations of the National Trust property (or place) with its attributions of wealth, grandeur or beauty. The decision to acquire The Workhouse in 1997 represented a significant reassessment of values for the Trust and a challenge to conceptions of the nation’s heritage and what constitutes its historical interests. Indeed, the Trust itself has described the purchase as “one of the organization’s most ambitious and controversial projects in recent years” (Newman 2000: 39). As such, it does raise questions about wider changes – and perhaps concomitant effects – within The Trust, in terms of policy but also in archaeological practice and site acquisition. Here, I provide a brief historical context of the site’s public interest:29:

The Workhouse is located on the outskirts of the market town of Southwell in Nottinghamshire. The town is ancient and affluent, and most striking for its little known, yet majestic Minster cathedral. The house currently receives around 15,000 visitors a year who, not unusually for the National Trust, are predominantly Trust members (69% in the 2008 official visitor survey). It

29 Information for this is mainly from Morrison (1999). However, for more specific detail regarding the workhouse at Southwell, I have also drawn from http://www.workhouses.org.uk/ and the National Trust guidebook of the site.
employs three full-time staff, two seasonal staff and a number of volunteers to assist the public. It offers a number of educational and out-reach programs, having worked with local community groups, including homeless and Roma travellers.

The significance of inheriting The Workhouse for the nation in 1997 would, as suggested above, seem to emerge out of wider debates within the critical field concerning heritage, representation and access, whilst also falling in, as it did, with a political climate change in Britain that was marked, also in 1997, by New Labour’s ascendance. Both of these contexts would make sense of the turn to a marginalized history that concerns social reform, welfare and justice. And yet the especial importance of this particular building, which strengthens the case for its preservation and interpretation, only emerged with the influence of serendipity.

The house, a Grade 2* listed building, was purchased with emergency funds when, having been left derelict for twenty years, it was finally to meet the fate of many other British workhouses, facing redevelopment as residential apartments. Only later, in a Royal Commission survey of 1999, was ‘The Thurgarton Hundred Workhouse’ (technically in the smaller village of Upton) officially recognized as having a special role in the development of workhouses and social welfare reform (Morrison 1999). This historical importance was derived from the date of its construction – 1824 – at which time the rationale for its innovative architectural design represented an experiment that would soon serve as a model for the expansion of the workhouse system throughout the country.
Workhouses pre-dated this one by nearly 200 years. The 1601 Poor Law had made it the obligation of parishes, at the expense of local ratepayers, to provide relief to the aged, disabled, and unprotected children and work for the able-bodied where no formal work was available. During the 17th and 18th centuries, this developed into an unsystematic set of provisions that in each locality may have comprised a selection between a workhouse, poor-house, hospital, orphanage, alms houses and out-relief as well as being closely involved with houses of correction. Experimentation with providing work to able-bodied adults as a condition for receiving relief and extending such places to educate and train children were practiced with varying success and over time workhouses (despite the continuity of the name) provided less for the unemployed and more for the unemployable.

At the same time, relief, that was initially provided on the basis of Christian charity and on the understanding that ‘the poor are always with us’ gradually became more controversial and a greater political concern. In 1723, Knatchbull’s Act instituted the first workhouse test by which able-bodied people refusing entry to the workhouse could be excluded from any relief. Under Gilbert’s Union Act in 1783, workhouses were better organized and humanitarian, funded by grouping parishes together. But, focusing on the impotent pauper, this now meant that the able-bodied were to be refused entry from the outset. Instead they were to be given work in the community, their subsistence being subsidized where necessary by out-door relief.
Workhouses by the beginning of the 19th century were largely discredited but political action seemed necessary. The spiralling expense of poor relief was accompanied by a changing attitude amongst the elite who began to discriminate more explicitly between the ‘deserving poor’ and ‘the idle and profligate’ able-bodied poor. Both factors were behind Reverend Thomas Becher’s experiments for Southwell where in 1808 he established a parish workhouse for 84 inmates, both able-bodied and not, in which an order of strict segregation was enforced – not only between sex and age groups but also between those to whom due compassion could be shown for their circumstances and those on whom a fundamental reformation was required. The by-line for his design was: “Inspection, Classification and Seclusion” in order that relief would be provided fairly but according to a moral code. Although under the Gilbert Act workhouses were not supposed to be used for accommodating the able-bodied, Becher’s determination to re-design poor relief caught the spirit of the times.

Whilst the initial experiment in Southwell was not well-maintained (until it was then re-initiated by Captain George Nicholls, later a poor law commissioner, in 1821), the success of this house on both counts of economy and ethos recommended itself to replication: firstly, and under Becher’s direction, to the workhouse of the new Thurgarton Hundred Incorporation in 1824, purpose-built at Upton for 158 inmates. Incorporating design features from previously existing workhouses, such as the supervisory hub (influenced by Bentham’s panopticon plans for criminal and pauper management), the Thurgarton Workhouse added a labyrinthine set of staircases to ensure for certain separation between categories of resident.
Becher wrote up his plan in an 1828 pamphlet entitled *The Anti-Pauper System*, and proceeded to become influential in the entire re-working of the Poor Law.

In 1834, the New Poor Law was passed by parliament instituting a number of the innovations Becher had designed and making them universally enforceable through new Parish Unions under the direction of the Poor Law Commissioners and their assistants. Ironically perhaps, the assistant commissioner for the Thurgarton district criticized the more generous (or perhaps haphazard) aspects of relief at Upton and lobbied for a new union of parishes to include the town of Southwell, whose name the union (and its workhouse) now bore. Where Becher may have inspired change on principles of paternalism, the Poor Law Commissioners saw in his designs an effective system of deterrent and punishment.

The pioneering history of The Workhouse at Southwell was enough to recommend it for special consideration in 1997. However, its more or less intact survival till that time added a new dimension to its value since this could be attributed to its substantially outmoded, obsolete and anachronistic usage right up until 1977. By this time, as the 1999 Royal Commission report bleakly points out, most workhouses had been so far adapted to other purposes or else destroyed that their original construction was essentially lost. Their time had come and gone. Throughout the 19th Century, the regulated, professional workhouse took on the reputation for which it became better known and later depicted, most infamously in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. However, for the Southwell Union Workhouse improvements to
living standards were also brought in. Though the unemployed once again received forms of assistance outside, increases in staff provided better for the old, the infirm and the disabled.

In 1913, workhouses were renamed in an attempt to overcome their former stigma. The one at Southwell became known as Greet House. After this time, a new specialist hospital was built there. With the Local Government Act of 1929, administration passed out of the hands of a Board of Guardians drawn from the local society into the hands of local authorities; and, finally, in 1948 the National Health Service Act overruled the 1834 New Poor Law to create the system of care and relief which still operates today as the Welfare State. It was at this time that most workhouses disappeared or were incorporated into state hospitals, or old age homes. Greet House was largely deemed unsuitable for contemporary usage, so the older residents were moved into two infirmaries which had been built on site in 1871. But the council did continue to use the women’s quarters to accommodate single mothers and their children. They were the last residents to leave a mark on the building.

Between these two dates then, 1824 and 1977, an impressive and imposing story of social welfare emerged with a unique and even terrifying clarity. It spoke of 19th century modernization and reform where typically Victorian austerity was perceived; and, at the same time, the lingering shadow of that austerity well into the 20th century. It was this sense of the longue durée that eventually would present a case for the preservation and interpretation of the site – not therefore just as a remembrance of things past but as an overtly political project of reflective social history. It is this project that remains a
challenge for the National Trust ten years on from its initial instinctive and controversial move.

The Gulag Museum at Perm-36

My third case study site – The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 – is the youngest construction, built in 1946. The site was first conceived as a museum and memorial to victims of totalitarian repression by a group of local historians in 1992, when the tide of public opinion was in favour of the universal and the collective. Now, this former Communist prison for political dissidents stands out as an explicit challenge both to collective memory and official discourse that celebrates the strength of Russia in the heroic, the individual, and the iconic leader. Stalin, who was responsible for the original building of this camp along with all other GULAG prisons, is even having something of a popular comeback (Adler 2005, Ostrovsky 2008). Given the rising concern for freedoms of speech and human rights under the Putin regime, the mere public accessibility and presence of a place that calls upon a duty to remember the repression of these freedoms and rights puts its visitors in an active dialogue with the past and its relevance to today. It is, as it were, seen inside-out, where the internal displacement of time and place is a conscious action in the external world of everyday politics, just as it was for the prisoners who suffered there. More than the other sites I have studied, this

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30 Arkady Ostrovsky reports on the new history textbook for schools championed by Putin. It addresses its readers with the inscription: "Dear friends! The textbook you are holding in your hands is dedicated to the history of our Motherland... from the end of the Great Patriotic War to our days. We will trace the journey of the Soviet Union from its greatest historical triumph to its tragic disintegration." Reclaiming the past is political, see ‘The rewriting of history’ in The Economist November 10th 2007, but also for the trends in consumerist nostalgia for the Soviet past, see Holak et al. 2007.
one comes into being through its visitors. There is a Chekhovian tragedy in the precariousness of its existence.

In 1991, the prison compounds were leveled by a retreating KGB. Previous to that, a Ukrainian television crew had come snooping about the tattered remains in search of the final resting place of Vasyl Stus, a Ukrainian poet and dissident who had died there either through neglect or torture in 1985. The need to cover the tracks of abuse clearly extended into those early years of emancipation. Until 1987, this prison had been one of just two that kept political dissidents in Russia and one of the last forced labour camps to be used under the Communist regime. By 1992, a group of historians and members of the local Memorial Society chapter in the city of Perm were looking for a site to remember the history of political repression.\textsuperscript{31} Preserving this site became that project. It was decided that preservation, given the state in which the KGB left it, meant reconstruction and between 1994 and 1996, when the site was first made accessible to the public, the first structures were restored and others preserved.

In 2006\textsuperscript{32}, the number of independent visitors made up a total of around 1500 but came from all over the world as well as from Russia itself. The museum is however busier than all that – school excursions accounting for about another 3500 visitors – though there were still several days, even in the summer months while I researched there, that there were no visitors at all.

\textsuperscript{31} Memorial is an international human rights movement that emerged in the years of \textit{perestroika} – though, if you read their website, (www.memo.ru/eng/index.htm), it appears as more than a movement: it is a condition of remembrance.

\textsuperscript{32} Statistics were provided by the museum during fieldwork in 2007.
Whilst it does now get recommended by guide books and is signposted from the main road, the museum remains a work in progress with signs outside those buildings yet to be rebuilt declaring by which date they hope they will be done. Over the years, they have called upon young students from political parties to participate in summer restoration projects and for the rest of the year have employed local workmen – including, in some cases, former prison staff – to complete the work. In the meantime, the museum has developed around these reconstructions: some of the buildings now housing permanent exhibitions, others forming outdoor evidence of the camp, its design and how it was used, whilst still others remain derelict. This all relies on funding which is constantly subject to shifting agendas and controls whether in the case of their foreign supporters (all US NGO’s) or the local government of the Perm region. Restoration itself also comes with its risks: a fire in 2003 destroyed a great deal of hard work, and though an official report precluded any further investigation, arson was widely suspected (Perm-36 2004).

There are two compounds to the museum but in 2007, when I researched there, just one was open to visitors due to the fire. When restoration began, it was in the open compound, known as the Strict Regime Camp\textsuperscript{33}. The restoration – of fencing and watchtowers, based on records of another camp in the region – was done quickly and with basic materials simply to give a sense of the place for visitors. In fact, the original camp (LITK-6) built here in

\textsuperscript{33} There is a great deal of confusion in the museum’s literature and displays over the (English) names of these compounds – which is the strict regime camp, which the special, which, of either, is also called the high security camp. The distinction is however historical being instituted in the 1960’s to discern between the ‘dangerous’, repeat offenders and those incarcerated for the first time. Here, I refer to the original camp as the Strict Regime Camp and the second compound as the Special Regime Camp.
the small, isolated village of Kuchino in the Perm Region in 1946 would not have been made any more solidly. Its intended use was as a temporary logging camp for 1000 convicts and buildings were constructed by the prisoners using some of the wood they logged with little skill or motivation. The camp at this point consisted of four barrack buildings, a hospital, washhouse and punishment block (or Sh’zo) surrounded by barbed wire fencing.

Such forced labour camps sprung up all around the country under Stalin to support his vast construction drives and were never expected to outlast the forests the prisoners were cutting down. As such LITK-6 would never have maintained a physical presence, a vanished crime against humanity like all the others. However, this site was also deemed the most appropriate place to store the logged wood and it soon changed status to a mechanized logging camp (MLITK-6), one of very few that was used to garage machinery. Due to the improved (though still basic) infrastructure, the camp was unusually maintained after Stalin’s death. From 1954, under Khrushchev, it became a prison for police and security officials who, with typical totalitarian irony, were being purged for their role in sending people to such camps before. The labour changed from logging to building small parts for domestic irons. Because of the new prisoners’ perceived inside knowledge of the system, it was deemed necessary to further enhance the security measures. The workshops outside of the camp area were now incorporated within a single, larger compound, measuring around 250m², with an internal checkpoint between the residential and industrial zones and multiple layers of barbed wire fencing, surrounded by timber fences and supplemented with alarms.
and other signalling equipment. Of course, as such, it needed a new name, thus becoming SITK-6. There is not a single example of escape from this camp throughout its history.

In 1972, under Brezhnev, the penal system received a total reshuffle out of which the same camp became BC-389/36 or Perm-36, one of three prisons in the area (the others being BC-389/35 and 37, not wooden structures) but different in that the others were for the punishment of criminals as opposed to so-called traitors and political dissidents. Its new official designation was supposed, however, to conceal this basic difference. It was these people, who spoke out against the system and its government, who were now deemed the necessary recipients of the state’s harshest and most secure penal regimes. It was also at this time that the second compound was developed as the Special Regime on the site of the original logging store, about five hundred yards along the road. This provided for 24-hour surveillance of just 58 inmates, more solitary confinement cells and a more intricate system of self-disciplining between prisoners. Meanwhile, one of the wooden barracks at the Strict Regime Camp was taken down and replaced by a brick administration block. Other ‘improvements’ were made, notably a central heating system, though, as the museum’s literature wryly points out, these were not really to improve living conditions but rather to improve security, the older system giving a network of hiding places where prisoners could leave messages for each other.

It is both this original story of mass repression and the later one of selected repression that the museum now tells and commemorates, through its
exhibition and guides. As such it weaves together two histories; but also two threads of our understanding of human rights – one that speaks of an incommensurable suffering of unnamed millions and one that speaks specifically of the denial of civil and political liberties. Importantly, the subject of the former is the human being, and the subject of the latter is the citizen. The visitor is consequently implicated into that double weave too, on the one hand encountering the inhumanity, the bare life of those made rightless, on the other, engaging with, those who Arendt calls, the stubborn idealists who defended the impossibility of that impoverishment and insisted on the inalienability of human rights. Whose oppression the visitor must bear witness to – the rightless or the idealist – is the first discrepancy the museum inadvertently proposes and by force of that pressurizes the visitor to shift between engaging their own conscience – as the only guarantor for those who have been stripped of any meaningful place in which to express their opinion – and engaging in reasoned debate with the conscience of others, those who, by reason alone, defended the dignity of their opinion.

Whilst it is the commitments of the visitor that my analysis focuses upon, it is important to recognise that for the museum, the work is further reaching. The compunction to remember that motivates reconstruction, preservation and narrativisation of the site, also demands that the organization looks beyond the geographical limits of the isolated site itself. Getting to the museum is difficult and necessarily the management must consider an interpretive community for their work greater than their visitors. To that purpose, the museum is in fact just one part of a larger NGO, the Memorial Center of the History of Political Repression “Perm-36” which was
constituted out of various other bodies in 2001. This undertakes both educational and advocacy activities, some of which do take place at the museum – such as the annual Pilorama summer arts festival – but most take place in the community. Since 1999, (and well before a permanent exhibition was installed in one of the restored barrack buildings on site in 2003), a mobile exhibition has toured to schools in central and outlying towns and villages of the Perm area.

Despite the destruction wrought by the KGB and the years of weathering endured by poorly built, wooden structures, the site at Perm-36 is, like both The Workhouse and The Tenement Museum, unusually still present. According to the museum (and there is no reason to question this) it is the only surviving example of a so-called “wooden” GULAG camp (that is, one from the Stalinist era) on Russian soil. Its importance as a historical remain was recognized in 2003 when the international organization, World Monuments Watch, placed it in their top one hundred of endangered sites. In 1992, what remained of the Strict Regime Camp was just one of the four barracks built in 1946, as well as the Sh’zo, the infirmary, the bathhouse and laundry, the camp administration building from the 1970’s, the water tower, and the lavatory (also built later in 1979) – all of these being in the residential camp area where the prisoners lived. The industrial zone was more derelict – and remains so – but one can still see the workshops, sawmill, and toilet block. In the Special Regime camp, a similar state of disrepair was found and, whilst it was completely reconstructed, since the fire in 2003 it has returned to a state of semi-ruin/semi-renovation.
## APPENDIX B

### Dates of Fieldwork

**2005**

December 19  | Initial scoping visit to Tenement Museum

**2006**

June 28-July 1  | Pilot research at Tenement Museum including observations and interviews with 3 visitor groups

August 3  | Scoping visit to The Workhouse

October 22-24  | First research at The Workhouse including observations, visitor interviews and questionnaires

**2007**

January 8-24  | Primary Research at The Tenement Museum including observations, group interviews, staff interviews

April 21-22  | Second research at The Workhouse including observations, visitor questionnaires, staff interviews

May 17-June 11  | Research at The Gulag Museum including, observations, visitor and staff interviews, visitor questionnaires

October 12-15  | Third Research at The Workhouse including observations, visitor interviews, interview with Regional Director, photographs