

# Building Upon a Strange and Startling Truth

LISA CHICE

## SURFACING ASSUMPTIONS

When our consultants for the Slave Galleries Project introduced us to dialogue, facilitator Tammy Bormann said that dialogue is a way “to surface” the assumptions that inform our beliefs and actions. As Community Preservationists, we dutifully wrote this in our notes to help us understand how this was going to be qualitatively different than other forms of discourse. “How,” we wondered then and ask ourselves now, “does civic dialogue serve as tool for forwarding the historic preservation and restoration of the slave galleries?” “How has it benefited the Lower East Side community as a whole?” “How does new awareness of old assumptions contribute to a community’s sense of itself?”

If you enter St. Augustine’s Church through the main entrance and then proceed to the pews in the sanctuary, you face the altar and pulpit with balconies overhead on either side of the church. Once seated in the main sanctuary, you have to turn 180 degrees in your pew and look up beyond the balconies and the organ over the entrance, to see the windows of the slave galleries on either side of the organ. As St. Augustine’s congregant and Slave Galleries committee member Rodger Taylor wrote in his Critical Perspectives essay about the project, the congregants always knew that those rooms were there, but they were never talked about. You have to look for these spaces and whatever you know or assume you know about the spaces will dictate how you distinguish and perceive them. On several occasions during our project, I learned that some long-time members of the church were entering the slave galleries for the first time. In contrast, visitors to the Lower East Side who have never set foot in the church but who have heard about the “slave galleries” through press or word of mouth will come to the church’s doors, completely unsolicited, and demand to be shown them. The assumptions and expectations people have about seeing the galleries run the gamut.

Visitors come to the church with various assumptions about the existence of slavery in the North, the impact of manumission and how long enslavement persisted, the Christian church, freedom, choice, suffering, and the legacies of racism, to outline just a few. In his Critical Perspectives essay, historian Jack Tchen explores some of the most complicated assumptions, including ones that may make Americans disinclined to look at history: “Our fixed notions of the past numb us from feeling and understanding the continuity of unresolved and uncontested issues into the present.” It would be impossible to map every participant’s original assumptions, his or her interceding thoughts, and the final impact that the Slave Galleries Project dialogues may have had on him or her. However, for those members of St. Augustine’s who had never been in the galleries, the communal effort to reveal the story and give voice to the ghosts behind it may have helped them move beyond internal barriers, or at least led them to a more direct relationship with this history.

## **THE SPACE THAT WRITES THE QUESTIONS: SLAVE GALLERIES AS DIALOGUE STIMULUS**

The role that the Slave Galleries Project committee members took on as hosts to civic exchanges heightened their sense of how powerful this space could be to those beyond their own community, including to young people. The church members were riveted by two different youth performance pieces inspired by the galleries: One youth theater group researched, wrote, and produced a play. In another instance, poetry and spoken word pieces were composed by youth immediately following a visit. The space inspired questions that were expressed in these creative works, which made possible a different level of intergenerational dialogue than might arise in conventional dialogue. Following the poetry performances, youth and adults asked each other such questions as: Are older generations still too reluctant to confront their histories? Are youth too flagrant in their use of the N-word, a very hurtful and derogatory term to many, especially from previous generations? Do youth or young activists truly understand what their forbearers had to struggle against?

The honest, less guarded reactions of children and young people have shaped the way the tours of the slave galleries are delivered. Young recent immigrants or children who have not lived through civil rights struggles may need to be engaged through targeted questions to bring the experiences of those who lived so “long ago” to bear on their own life experiences. Children and adults alike may need help understanding the setting of the galleries: some have never been in a Christian church or may be uncertain about seating arrangements, baptismal rites, and other religious practices. Dialogue helped the Slave Galleries committee and committee chair, the Reverend Deacon Edgar Hopper, to understand their own assumptions about bringing people into the space and how the space should be presented to resonate with different audiences, including youth.

Deacon Hopper often recounts his experience with one impassive young visitor, a Hispanic teenager who had not spoken or reacted throughout his entire visit. Finally, Deacon Hopper asked the boy whether the story of the slave galleries would be interesting to his friends and how it could be presented to them. The boy became animated with ideas of how to create a multi-media environment that would be stimulating to younger people. The enthusiastic response strengthened Deacon Hopper’s resolve to develop meaningful ways to connect specifically with young people as well as how to interpret the space for a wide range of visitors.

“Let the space write the questions,” suggested one adviser to the Slave Galleries Project. The galleries, a physical artifact of a complicated history, allow visitors to construct knowledge through the experience of being in the space. You do not have to be told that African Americans were not considered an accepted part of the congregation when you feel how removed you are from the service in that enclosed space. You do not have to be told that you are not free to come and go when you experience the narrow winding steps up to the galleries.

In some dialogues, church members who had been in the galleries before said that they observed different physical aspects of the space in subsequent visits. As agents of this initiative and witnesses to the process of history being uncovered, they could begin to deal with a range of emotions and assumptions each time they entered the space or engaged in a dialogue about it. When modern day protective screens were removed from the windows during the architectural research, one committee member said, “There was more air. I felt more like a part of the parish—like it was less oppressive and somehow at odds with how I should feel.”

The current structure of the slave galleries tours encourages visitors to ask questions and to balance known fact with what they see, hear, and feel—to come to their own understanding of the space.

## **FINDING EQUITY AND EMPATHY ACROSS MULTIPLE AGENDAS**

Deacon Hopper expressed concern that at times the project was outer-directed. The Slave Galleries committee knew that they had the option of pursuing this project without involving partners (the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and other members of the Lower East Side Community Preservation Project and Animating Democracy). Rodger Taylor's essay documents these sentiments and the fundamental passion and commitment within the congregation. Before the congregation agreed to host community dialogues, they needed to be convinced that the community dialogues would forward the Slave Galleries Project. In retrospect, the dialogue agenda took considerable time and energy that some believe might have been better spent on raising money for the physical restoration. How, in fact, have the dialogues helped or hindered the restoration process?

The dialogues provided a means of developing an audience and support-base for the long-term project. The partnerships increased exposure and made it possible to invite audiences within a controlled format before formally accommodating public tours. Now, as a result of the dialogues, the committee has documented evidence that the space can serve as an educational and civic resource that will be valuable as they seek support for preserving this historic space.

Since the dialogues took place in the context of important ongoing civic issues in the neighborhood such as housing and education resource allocation, there were times I could look at a group of dialogue participants and identify those who were at odds in an outside issue. The results of the Slave Galleries Project dialogues may not have gone towards direct resolutions of the civic issues, but the opportunities to be exposed to different views and consider multiple perspectives does seem to have opened communication channels within the community. This was even true with facilitation trainees from the different groups who applied the dialogue principles to relationships within their own organizations with noticeable results.

Both St. Augustine's Church and the Tenement Museum have had in mind that the project would have a ripple effect throughout the community: The Slave Galleries committee has wanted to serve as a role model and inspire various communities on the Lower East Side to take ownership of their own history. Deacon Hopper has cautioned that people who do not take ownership of their history are in danger of being erased. He, in particular, very much wanted to see the direct intense collaborative approach used on the Slave Galleries Project replicated with an Asian American site and a Hispanic community site. As this has been a vision since the beginning of our collaboration, he has viewed it as an unfulfilled obligation to those who have participated from the Community Preservation Project. When the project organizers at St. Augustine's and the Tenement Museum organized the dialogues and decided to offer facilitation training, the idea was that participants would take their facilitation skills back to their own organizations and create dialogues around local sites of significance within their own communities.

In order for the Slave Galleries Project dialogues to be a role model for other community projects, it is useful to make a realistic assessment of the factors that have contributed to its success: The dialogues rode on the momentum of the Slave Galleries Project, based on interest in and commitment to preserving the slave galleries. The dialogues benefited from the structured time frame provided by the formal facilitation training. The process required time for

planning and execution. It required access to a space. In the long-term, the Slave Galleries Project dialogues have required ongoing financial support to organize and administer. With a more realistic assessment of the challenges in beginning and sustaining these types of dialogue or preservation projects, other projects may be more likely to succeed.

The success of the dialogues has finally relied on community participation, particularly the participation of the community preservationists. The dialogues wouldn't have been as effective if there had been a great deal of attrition from meeting to meeting as may often be the case in volunteer community committees. I have thought about why these very busy community members remained committed and kept coming back.

It seems that the community preservationists were motivated to a collective effort to counter misconceptions about slavery as well as other misconceptions about their own communities and the Lower East Side. Jack Tchen and Rodger Taylor both devoted parts of their essays to address the public's lack of awareness about slavery in the North. Clearly, there is a need to look at race issues within our society and to identify how these issues divide us and plague our communities. And yet, unfortunately, civic exchange about race is too often precipitated by a negative incident or a confrontational situation. When St. Augustine's opened their preservation project to other groups, it was inherently an invitation to various groups to look together at the treatment of African Americans and the pervasiveness of racism. This dialogue wasn't driven by conflict. Instead it was part of an affirmative project that galvanized participants. As a dialogue participant and organizer, I was able to see many different ways that the slave galleries resonated with people of different backgrounds and how it allowed for exchanges that were unique from any other forum.

Although the slave galleries have been the stimulus for what might be considered healing or cathartic dialogue across different backgrounds, I have been wary of overplaying the slave galleries as a metaphor for other instances of hidden oppression in history. I have feared that this might somehow be an unfair appropriation of the meaning the slave galleries have as a concrete artifact from one particular group's history—the experience of African Americans who were enslaved and subjugated. Ultimately, I think that this will be an ongoing issue for stakeholders. The dialogues have demonstrated how much other groups wanted to bring in their perspectives. At the same time, I can understand the person who advised the committee not to talk about other groups in a way that dilutes the African American experience.

## A NEW HISTORY

Before he brings people into the space, Deacon Hopper prepares the visitors with a meditative moment. They are asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves as enslaved African Americans. Then they are told to enter the galleries in silence.

Often, we have started post-visit discussions by asking, "How did the space make you feel? Was there a time in your life that you felt similarly?" Storyteller Lorraine Johnson-Coleman wrote for *Critical Perspectives*, "The story always reveals itself to us with the silent backdrop of how we live and how we believe in the moment."

In their essays, Rodger Taylor and Jack Tchen reference the church's centennial celebration in 1924 and the pageant that was held depicting the freeing of the slave, Uncle Tom, from bondage. When we read the pageant script today we are disturbed by this unenlightened celebration of an emancipatory act that fails to deliver. It occurs to me that we have become a successive

generation of community members trying to commemorate a history and deal with themes of racism, trying in different ways to put ourselves inside the story and the individual slave's experience. I wonder how our relationship to the space will be different from that of future generations and whether our efforts to preserve the story will have the anticipated results for future generations.

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet  
Traveling through casual space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we learn  
A brave and startling truth

Maya Angelou

Two hours into the first slave galleries dialogue a Slave Galleries Project committee member stands to leave. She says, "Normally I would just leave quietly, but after hearing what everyone had to say, I wanted to say good night to you all and also give everyone a copy of this poem that I had that reminds me of the things we have talked about tonight." The slave galleries have proved to be an unparalleled catalyst for discussions about a broad range of issues that affect us today. The history of the slave galleries and how they have been used is still unfolding as the community continues its pursuit of a strange and startling truth.

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