

2001 Rudy Bruner Award

**SILVER**  
medal winner



**LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM**

New York, New York

This is an excerpt from:

# PLACEMAKING FOR CHANGE: 2001 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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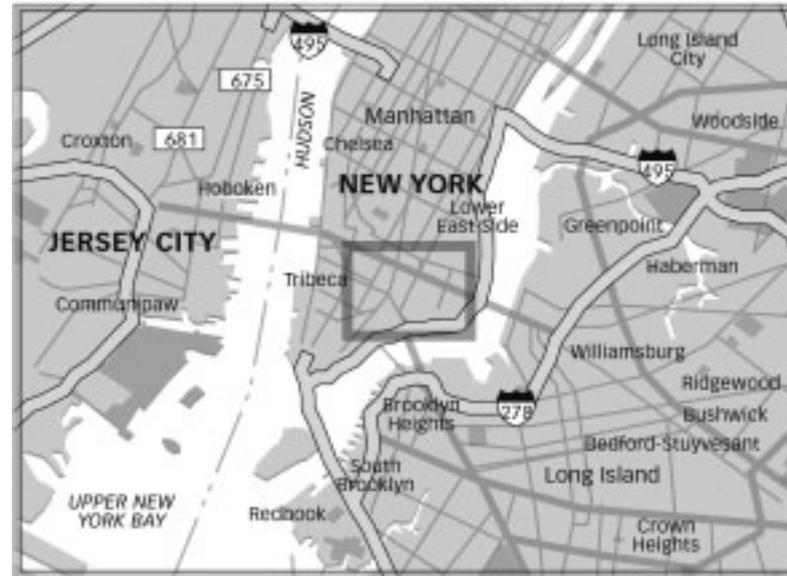
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Lower East Side Tenement Museum



Project location



Project location (detail)

## THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM AT A GLANCE

### SUBMITTED BY:

Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Katherine Snider, *Vice President of Public Affairs*

### WHAT IS THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM (LESTM)?

- An 1863 New York tenement building at 97 Orchard Street, restored and later designated as a National Historic Landmark.
- A not-for-profit organization whose mission is “to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a gateway to America.”
- A museum offering a variety of programs, including interpretive programs, educational programs, and community services.
- An example of how a museum can use history to promote public dialogue about a variety of issues affecting immigrant, urban working class, and poor populations.

### MAJOR GOALS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

- To promote historical perspective and tolerance of immigrant, migrant, urban working class, and poor experiences as exemplified on the Lower East Side.
- To use the history of immigration, as told through the stories of actual residents, to stimulate public dialogue about important contemporary issues.
- To foster dialogue and understanding amongst the diverse immigrant and migrant populations in the Museum’s neighborhood.
- To challenge the prevailing notion of the kinds of buildings that are worthy of preservation.

## CHRONOLOGY

1986

Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson establish the Lower East Side Historical Conservancy.

1988

The Conservancy discovers 97 Orchard Street and rents it as office space. The Conservancy also becomes formally chartered as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM).

1992-97

Orchard Street is placed on National Register of Historic Places.

1994

LESTM opens two apartments (Gumpertz and Baldizzi) to the public. The Museum is designated a National Historic Landmark.

1996

LESTM purchases 97 Orchard Street for \$750,000. LESTM and University Settlement create Familiar Strangers (English for Speakers of Other Languages class).

1997

LESTM opens interactive, living history of the Confino Apartment.

1998

LESTM opens apartment of the Rogarshevsky family. Orchard Street block is designated the city's Centennial Block. Museum building becomes a featured property of National Trust for Historic Preservation. Congress signs bill designating the Museum an affiliated area of the National Park Service.

1999

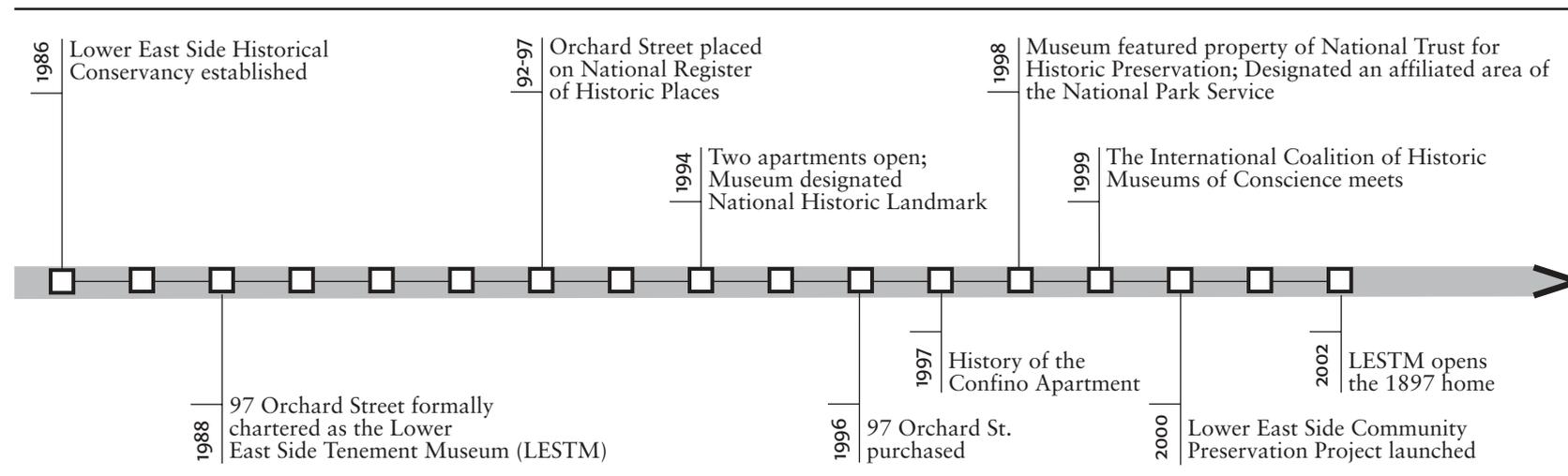
The International Coalition of Historic Museums of Conscience is formed largely at the initiative of Ruth Abram.

2000

LESTM's Lower East Side Community Preservation Project is launched with 200 neighborhood organizations. LESTM and City College launch Urban Museum Studies class.

2002

LESTM opens the 1897 home and sweatshop of Harris and Jennie Levine, Jewish immigrants from Poland.



## KEY PARTICIPANTS

Persons who were interviewed are indicated by an asterisk (\*).

### Museum Staff

Ruth Abram, \* *Founder and President*

Renee Epps, \* *Vice President for Properties and Administration*

Liz Sevchenko, \* *Vice President for Programs*

Katherine Snider, \* *Vice President for Public Affairs*

Kate Fermoile, \* *Education Director*

Lynda Kennedy, \* *Education Coordinator*

Steve Long, \* *Museum Curator*

Althea Davidson, \* *ESOL Instructor*

Jeff Tancil, \* *Web site Producer*

### Consultants

Andrew Dolkart, \* *Columbia University*

Judith Saltzman, \* *AIA,*

*Li/Saltzman Consulting Preservation Architects*

Pamela Keech, \* *Consulting Installation Curator*

William DuPont, \* *AIA, National Trust for Historic Preservation*

### Community Members

Reverend Harvey, \* *Rector, St. Augustine's Church*

Florence Li-Moldonado, *Chinese American Planning Council*

Michael Zisser, \* *Executive Director,*

*University Settlement House Society of New York*

Harriet Senie, *Director of Museum Studies, City College, CUNY*

### Government

Tom Dyer, \* *National Park Service*

Marie Rust, \* *Northeast Regional Director, National Park Service*

Kathy Hughes, *Department of Cultural Affairs, City of New York*

### Others

Frank Sanchis, \* *Executive Director,*

*Municipal Arts Society New York*

*(formerly at the National Trust for Historic Preservation)*

Students in ESOL class\*

Visiting students from public elementary school in Brooklyn\*

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### HISTORY AND VISION

#### Inventing LESTM

LESTM is the embodiment of the dynamic vision of its founder, Ruth Abram. Her experiences growing up in the segregated South as the daughter of civil rights lawyer Morris Abram and her work for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Women's Action Alliance contributed to the germination of this project. The seed for LESTM was planted when Abram found that strategies pulled from histories of the women's suffrage movement were helpful in her work for the Equal Rights Amendment. She realized that "useable history" could be a valuable part of social change agendas.

As a graduate student in American history, Abram started her first non-profit, Paraphrase. Through this organization, she "tried her hand at inviting the public to consider big questions through the presentation of history" and began to envision immigration as the common historical experience that could invite a heightened tolerance of ethnic and economic differences. Abram explains:

*All of us share the experience of dislocation, relocation and reinvention in our family histories...I hoped that through confrontation with ancestors who are held dear, Americans might be moved to a kind of national conversation about contemporary immigrants...and realize that today's 'strangers' hold something in common with the forebears we now admire.*



97 Orchard Street circa 1988

In 1985, Abram joined Anita Jacobson and others in restoring the Eldridge Street Synagogue and in developing walking tours of the Lower East Side and theatrical productions based upon the Jewish immigrant experience. It was in the search for office space for this venture that Abram’s vision of immigration as an “everyman” story found a home. The first floor of 97 Orchard Street had office space available. The upper floors of the building, however, had been mothballed since 1935, when the last residents were evicted so that the landlord would not have to make code-required upgrades to the apartments. The coincidental availability of space and relatively untouched urban history at 97 Orchard provided the impetus for the founding of LESTM.



Lower East Side neighborhood

### History of 97 Orchard Street

Located in the heart of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a neighborhood that continues to be a first home for many immigrants today, 97 Orchard Street housed some 7,000 immigrants from over 20 countries between 1863 and 1935. Still lined by classic tenement buildings, Orchard Street visually conveys how New York might have looked to a new immigrant. Many of the buildings in this neighborhood are original tenement structures, although their uses have changed. Much of the retail activity, especially on Sundays when vehicular traffic is banned, reflects the sidewalk merchandising and the intensity of street life as it would have looked 100 years ago. The Lower East Side has maintained much of its nineteenth century building fabric with 22 National Historic Register Sites and eight National Historic Landmarks located in the neighborhood.

In 1800, the Lower East Side was the center of New York society and commerce, but by 1860, the middle class had begun moving uptown, and the Lower East Side had become home to many newly-arrived immigrants. Immigration rates increased steadily, and by 1900, the Orchard Street block had a population density of 240,000 per square mile — more residents per acre than the most populated sections of East London or Bombay today.

Lucas Glockner, a German-born immigrant tailor, built the building at 97 Orchard Street in 1863 as a dwelling for himself and 19 other families. As one of the oldest buildings on this block, 97 Orchard Street predates the “Old Law” tenement buildings which had to be

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Lower East Side Tenement Museum



Hallway of 97 Orchard

built only to minimal public health and sanitation requirements. The building's simple Italianate façade was probably created by the architect to be a "trickle down," brick version of the brownstone Italianate facades popular in uptown row houses. A narrow, unlit, unventilated central stair led to the three-room apartments, four to a floor. A water spigot and privies were provided in the backyard and each apartment had a fireplace. Cold water pipes were installed in the apartments in 1895. The "Old Law" housing reform act, passed in 1897, required additional sanitation facilities but only addressed tenements built after that date.

The Tenement House Act of 1901, known as the "New Law," had a significant impact on 97 Orchard Street. In response to that law,



Apartment in original condition

hallway windows and gas lighting were installed to provide illumination in the stairwell. Interior windows were added to the dark interior apartment rooms to borrow light from exterior windows. Two toilets and a ventilation shaft were added in small closets on each floor by taking space from the eight-foot square bedrooms. Electricity was added later, sometime after 1918, as discovered from the patent year found on the meters. After the Multiple Dwelling Act of 1929 was passed, the Helpern family, the building's owner at the time, was faced with the expense of fireproofing the staircase and adding more toilets. Instead, the Helperns evicted the residents and closed the residential portion of the building. The commercial space remained in use until 1988 when Abram and Jacobson discovered the building.

Dissection of layers of decorations and repairs has revealed to researchers how this tenement changed over the years as a result of housing reform and decoration and refurbishment by occupants. These discoveries show that the original owner, who lived in the building, built it to a somewhat higher standard than many other tenements, providing hallway windows and outdoor privies connected to sewer lines before either was required. The tenement owners also adorned the street façade and public hallways with classical decoration. This contradicts some of the stereotypes that suggest tenement builders sought to maximize their return with little regard for the occupants. It also appears that residents made significant improvements to their apartments in spite of their poverty. One apartment had 22 two layers of wallpaper, suggesting that it had been replaced on average every two years. Layers of

paint and floor coverings also contradict prevailing notions of tenement dwellers' impoverished domestic habits. All such decorative enhancements were publicly deplored by housing reformers who tried to get all tenement interiors painted white in the belief that decoration was a breeding ground for vermin and disease.

### Designing the Museum and Its Programs

When Abram chartered LESTM in 1988, it became the first American history museum to give voice to the stories and lives of urban, immigrant, working people. On an early walk through the building, Abram found apartments where belongings had been left behind, suggesting that their occupants had left hastily. LESTM founders decided that they could have greater impact by portraying



Natalie Gumpertz apartment

PHOTO: Bruce Buck



Rogarshevsky apartment



Rogarshevsky apartment

the lives of families who had actually lived in the building than by offering composite representations of typical ethnic families. They therefore sought to reconstruct as accurately as possible the domestic and cultural life of specific individuals and their families, choosing people who lived in the building at different periods in history and under different household circumstances, with an eye toward accounts that would touch visitors' emotions.

The apartment of Natalie Gumpertz, who set up shop in her front room to support her children, represents the first household headed by a woman to be exhibited in a National Historic Site. The Rogarshevsky apartment portrays the Jewish custom of Shiva (mourning) for a father who has just died of tuberculosis. The Baldizzi's apartment is furnished to capture the upheaval on the day they were evicted as well as their illegal status and need for welfare support.

As an outgrowth of researching occupants' stories, reconstructing apartments and offering tours, LESTM extended its vision to the neighborhood. Abram's notion of "the usable past" has guided the variety of outreach programs LESTM has developed. These programs now extend to New York school students, recent immigrants, and others whose stories have not been told.

In addition to running the Museum and securing financial support for a variety of interpretive, educational and community programs (see below), Abram has reached out globally to find others who are engaged in efforts to rescue historic sites and provoke critical

discourse about the past and present. In 1999, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Abram brought together a group that included directors from the Gulag Museum in Russia; the Slave House in Senegal, the District Six Museum in South Africa, the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh, Terezin in the Czech Republic, The Workhouse in England, Project to Remember in Argentina, and the National Park Service (NPS) representing the Underground Railroad and Women's Rights National Historic Site. The group has formed the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, an organization of museums and historic sites that address human rights. The Coalition's goal is to "assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications." The coalition is establishing connections with world-wide human rights organizations to further reinforce its agenda to use the lessons of history. Work is currently underway for linked Internet sites.

### ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

In just 10 years, LESTM has grown into a sizable and stable organization. Of the more than 100 people at work in its programs, 25 are full time, 10 are part time, and the number of volunteers, swelling with new docents, is more than 70. Since its inception, Abram and her deputy, Renee Epps, have run the day-to-day operations. Recently LESTM reorganized its management structure and created several new senior positions in an effort to respond to its tremendous growth. Epps now serves as Vice-President for Properties and Administration, taking increasing responsibility with

the growth of staff as well as owned and leased space. Liz Sevchenko has recently joined the organization as Vice-President for Programs and Coalition Coordinator to run and expand its educational and interpretive programs. Katherine Snider, Vice President for Public Affairs, directed marketing and public relations for two years before moving into her current position. Her promotion reflects LESTM's awareness that it must creatively develop its public relations and fundraising to sustain its innovative programs.

LESTM's internal reorganization is more in line with its philosophy that every employee should have opportunities for leadership. This is most evident in the expectation that each staff member, including the president, regularly conducts tours. Staff members also take individual responsibility for programming and chairing weekly staff



Ruth Abram and staff

meetings. These gatherings are used for discussion of organizational issues and, more significantly, offer opportunities for staff development. Programs include presentations on neighborhood and ethnic history; field trips to nearby sites; workshops on writing, customer relations, and public speaking; and brainstorming for long-range planning. Every staff member is able to recite the museum's mission statement from memory.

Consultants on history, historic preservation, museum management, and financial and legal planning have also been essential to the LESTM operation. Many have been engaged since LESTM's inception, some working *pro bono* or making in-kind contributions. They continue to participate in interpretative projects and the



Presentation to staff

development of new programs. The NPS may make additional technical expertise available to the museum for investigative and interpretative services. The relationship between LESTM and the NPS may create a new model of public/private partnership.

In addition to researching and preparing interpretive programs, much of the organization's early work was intended to establish a solid set of historical documentation and credentials that would enable the museum to be recognized as an historic site. According to Frank Sanchis of the Municipal Arts Society, Abram realized that recognition by city, state and federal preservation agencies was critical to the financial success of the museum. Sanchis noted that Abram "single handedly got the museum the recognition it deserved by affiliating herself with the important organizations." This affiliation was needed to establish LESTM's credibility as an historical museum that was as significant as more traditionally defined landmarks. In 1992, the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places; two years later, it was recognized as a National Landmark. Its partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation followed in 1998, making LESTM's tenement the twentieth featured property of America's foremost private preservation organization. The tenement building at 97 Orchard Street became the first National Trust property in New York City and the first anywhere not owned by wealthy or famous Americans.

Abram's overture to the NPS was perhaps the most propitious in terms of potential fiscal and technical support. The *NPS Special Resource Study*, which evaluated 97 Orchard Street by NPS criteria

for historic significance, suitability and feasibility, concluded that LESTM:

*represents an outstanding example of a surviving tenement associated with immigration and immigrant ways of life, a sub-theme not fully represented in the National Park Service. It also has exceptional value in representing the theme of housing reform, as well as its particular architectural style, and provides excellent opportunities for public education and enjoyment.*

The NPS report proposed that LESTM be designated an “affiliated area” rather than a unit owned and operated by the NPS. In its recommendations, the NPS recognized the unique nature of LESTM’s programs and its own inability as a federal agency to operate such innovative programs. It wanted to cement a relationship that would enhance the telling of the whole immigration story from the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island to LESTM. The NPS has found LESTM innovations useful in its own efforts to broaden its interpretive programs, make its resources relevant to a wider audience, and expand its existing sites to better reflect the diverse stories that can be told. Marie Rust, who oversees 65 parks in the region, finds that her staff members often miss opportunities to relate to issues and concerns beyond their parks’ boundaries. She hopes that the association with LESTM will foster new ideas and collaborations among New York City parks.

This new “affiliated area” status also confirms LESTM’s national significance and provides an advantage in raising money and attracting visitors. It does not, however, guarantee annual federal

dollars. The final agreement with the NPS will assure LESTM’s autonomy as an “affiliated site” and will likely include partnership on a wide range of operational and programmatic initiatives as well as representation on the management council of the National Parks of New York Harbor. The draft agreement recommends expansion of the site’s boundaries to coincide with the Lower East Side National Historic District to provide critical context for interpretive programs. Finally, the proposed agreement supports acquisition of the adjacent tenements to provide support space. It notes the need for new administrative offices and better transportation between LESTM and harbor sites.

LESTM’s relationships with the NPS and the National Trust have already led to increased publicity and attendance. LESTM is currently serving 85,000 visitors annually, representing 37 countries and all 50 states. The vast majority of visitors are from New York City (largely because of its popularity among school groups), except during the summer months when the number of national and international visitors increases. The museum hosted 24,000 school children in 2000, up 12-fold since 1995. In early April of 2001, the museum was completely booked for school groups through the end of the school year; other group tours were scheduled six weeks in advance.

## DESIGN AND EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT

The physical setting of LESTM includes both the tenement building (the museum) and separate spaces in the neighborhood for a visitor center and offices. One side of the first floor of the museum is used

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Lower East Side Tenement Museum

as a class/conference room; the other side and basement, for support and collections space. Most visitors start their experience at 90 Orchard, across the street from the museum, in an antiquated 100-square-foot corner retail space that includes a gift shop and a long narrow room that serves as a gallery, a theater, and classroom for interpretive programs. Administrative, research and support functions are housed two blocks away on an upper floor at 66 Allen Street.

The museum is an on-going design and rehabilitation project. The architects, Li/Saltzman, started work on the building in 1988 before it was purchased. Judith Saltzman said that her technical consultation was to help preserve the structure as a vehicle for revealing the social history of the Lower East Side. She also remarked that her firm's dedication to this effort was related to immigration stories she and her partner had in their families.

The restoration challenges have been both technical and interpretive. Making the building weather-tight and structurally stable required considerable reconstruction but had little impact on the historic fabric of the exterior and interiors. Safety features such as sprinklers, additional exits, emergency lighting, and mechanical systems, however, were necessary interventions that could not be hidden. Instead, they were carefully placed to minimize impact on the authenticity of the original tenement. Working in phases over several years and keeping the scale of change modest, Li/Saltzman was able to limit the extent to which the building was altered to comply with codes. Saltzman made sure to engage the New York

City Building Department early in the process, to inform it of LESTM's mission to preserve the 1935 character and solicit its sympathetic review.

Accessibility for people who cannot climb stairs was a major problem that could not be resolved satisfactorily. It was not feasible to add an elevator, and widening the interior hallways would have fundamentally altered the spatial configuration of the tenement apartments. Even though historic buildings are not required to be in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act, LESTM has made a concerted effort to avoid messages of exclusion by offering other accommodations through programs and interpretive materials. Much of the architects' work was done in collaboration with Steve Long, the Museum's curator; Andrew Dolkart,



Baldizzi apartment

architectural historian on interpretive issues; and William DuPont, Graham Gund Architect with the National Trust. Saltzman notes that the process was always dynamic, enriched by many points of view and sometimes contradictory data, and that it challenged some of her assumptions as an architect.

As LESTM staff developed the museum's interpretive programs, it found itself forging new and innovative strategies for research and outreach. Conventional research methods were often fruitless because the lives of poor urban immigrants have generally gone unrecorded except for births, deaths, and residency. Many photographs and descriptive materials that were traditionally used, such as those by Jacob Riis, were published to support housing reform and immigrant re-education programs and may not



Window in Baldizzi apartment

accurately reflect all facets of tenement life. The curators looked for other sources that could capture apartment interiors in a “natural” state. For the Rogarshevsky apartment, for instance, researchers uncovered crime scene photographs in police archives from a murder that took place there in 1918. These revealed specific decorative details that had not been seen elsewhere. For the Baldizzi unit, LESTM was contacted by the family's only living relative, who described it in detail and provided a number of stories and artifacts, helping to recreate an authentic interior. The curators used traditional genealogical techniques to locate descendants, but they have discovered just as many through publicity in ethnic and neighborhood newspapers. LESTM staff and its consultants pride themselves on the rigor of their preservation research and note that their goal of presenting the “usable past” requires accuracy.

## INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS

LESTM has developed a broad array of programs extending its mission to promote tolerance by drawing connections between the past and the present. Due to the demand for school-age educational visits and the increasing success of community outreach programs, LESTM now has four full-time staff members in education and four more in public programs.

### Public Programs

*Guided Tours:* LESTM feels that it is the stories of the immigrants, more than the artifacts or architecture, that move people and therefore only allows access to the tenement apartments through a guided tour with a docent. Groups are taken first to the apartment in

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Lower East Side Tenement Museum

“ruin,” preserved as it was found. The guide uses elements of the setting such as layers of wallpaper and paint to make transparent the process of research and interpretation that produced the restored apartments. Tour groups then visit the apartments of the Gumpertz family, German Jews in the 1870s; the Rogarshevsky family, Eastern European Jews in the 1900s; the Baldizzi family, Italian Catholics in the 1930s; and the 1897 home and sweatshop of Harris and Jennie Levine, Jewish immigrants from Poland. The groups typically have 10–15 people, similar to the number of occupants in some of the units at 97 Orchard Street, viscerally conveying to visitors the experience of crowding.



Visitors gathering for tour

***Interactive Living History:*** The fifth apartment, occupied by the Confino family, Sephardic Jews from Turkey in 1916, provides an interactive, living history experience. Victoria Confino, the 16-year-old daughter, played by an actress, engages school groups and guided tours in a conversation about her life as a recent immigrant. This interpretive experience has been the subject of considerable research and experimentation. Visitors are specifically asked to take on the role of newly arrived immigrants seeking information that will help them settle into American life in the Lower East Side. This unique approach, called “two-way role-play” by one of the actresses, was developed after visiting other sites with “first-person interpreters.” According to evaluations, children have been far more comfortable and engaged than adults by this improvisational museum encounter.

**Education Programs**

***School Tours:*** Every day LESTM hosts school groups, engaging children in age-appropriate exercises that have been carefully developed and evaluated by the education staff. This year LESTM served 24,000 students in 941 programs. Just over half of these youth are from New York City; 64% come from public schools. Groups of children from Canada, England, France, Germany and Australia have also visited. Typically, a package of materials is sent to teachers to help integrate exercises into their curricula before and after the visit. These assignments cover topics such as immigration and diversity, ethnic communities, similarities and differences between the past and the present, tenement housing, leaving home, cultural traditions, architecture’s social role, urban density, and oral

history. As part of the introduction and preparation for the Confino apartment, for example, students are asked to adopt the role of new immigrants arriving at the Lower East Side from Ellis Island, needing information on how to survive in their new country.

*Other School-Age Projects:* Education programs help LESTM to reach beyond the walls of the museum. The new connection with the NPS has allowed LESTM to link to other sites that represent chapters in New York immigration history. LESTM staff piloted “After Ellis,” a new children’s program at Ellis Island, and trained NPS rangers to run it. The program simulates immigrant processing there in the nineteenth century as well as “settling in” at the tenement building.



Visitors in original apartment

Amplifying its mission to promote tolerance and to use history as a tool for understanding present-day social issues, LESTM developed the “Net Worth Project” to address socio-economic class prejudices among children. Its simple message is that a person’s worth cannot be determined by his/her material wealth. Approximately 500 young people have been involved in the initial phase. Working closely with both public and private schools in New York City, LESTM has documented changes in perception after a Museum visit. For instance, evaluations have shown that, after exposure to these programs, the number of negative associations with the word “poor” measurably decreased among visiting school children. Building on this investigation, LESTM is drafting a guide for teachers who wish to promote sensitivity and respect among students of different economic levels. Eager to diversify its visitor base, Lyndhurst, a National Trust site in Irvington, NY, has funded a partnership with LESTM to extend this program to another 500 youth that will visit both sites.

The most recent undertaking for school children is a project to illuminate housing reform issues for urban dwellers. The “Housing Inspection Program,” developed initially by the City’s Housing Preservation and Development Department, will provide New York school children with the lists of building code requirements given to inspectors in 1901 and 1910. They will have an opportunity to assess the conditions in the museum apartments as well as in their own homes, with an eye toward improving housing conditions today. Written reports will be sent to city housing agencies.



ESL class at museum

**Urban Museum Studies Program:** LESTM has initiated a new program with City College to offer graduate training in the museum profession to the college's predominantly working-class and immigrant student population.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

While LESTM is respected for its work in promoting economic development and awareness of ethnic heritage, its staff is also determined to have neighborhood residents perceive the museum as more than "just tourist-oriented." The Lower East Side is currently 30% Hispanic and 33% Asian, with 60% of the residents speaking a language other than English. Immigrants in the neighborhood often have to wait for up to three years to gain access to free English

classes, and LESTM staff has worked to address neighborhood needs. The University Settlement Society has teamed up with LESTM to offer more ESL classes in the museum, using its resources in immigrant history as material for teaching English. This first foray into community outreach helped define how LESTM identifies needs and uses its resources to give voice to neighborhood constituencies.

In addition to learning English, students in this new program are getting a first-hand understanding of how to manage as an immigrant. For example, one class used the story of Natalie Gumpertz setting up her business as a seamstress to understand how to enumerate one's skills on a resume. Some students are trained to lead museum tours in English as well as in their own language. One group of ESL students realized that "terrible things happen to immigrants because they do not have the right information," such as knowledge about the minimum wage. As a result of this conversation, the Museum approached *The New York Times* and St. Martin's Press about publishing a guide for newcomers to the City. In 2003, the guide will be published in English, Spanish and Chinese and will include a list of resources that have been vetted by immigrants themselves.

Other outreach efforts include:

- **Walking Tours** of the Lower East Side, which help visitors understand the history and diversity of the area today as a context for the museum tour.



- *Community Space for Immigrant Art*, offers the use of LESTM's storefront windows and gallery space to support local talent and amplify immigrant stories. The building's basement, a nineteenth-century beer garden, is used almost every weekend for performances by local theater groups and dance troupes as well as for readings by local authors and poets. LESTM has partnered with the New Immigrant Theatre Project on dozens of performances in the last three years and features crafts of contemporary immigrants as well as a vast array of published materials on New York housing, immigration, and ethnicity in its shop.

LESTM is also supporting the preservation of the larger Lower East Side community. It was instrumental in obtaining listing on the National Register of Historic Places for the Lower East Side Historic District, which consists of 443 buildings in a 31-block area. Listing on the National Register holds symbolic significance, demonstrating that an area considered by many a slum is worthy of preservation. LESTM has not sought the more restrictive city Landmark status for the area because of opposition from local landlords.

LESTM aims for broader influence through the development of its interactive Web site, [www.tenement.org](http://www.tenement.org), which receives over 200,000 "visitors" each year. The site provides basic logistical information on visiting the museum, becoming a member, and weekly and monthly special exhibits and programs. It also includes:

- Stories of the former residents and a virtual tour of the museum's five recreated tenement apartments.

- Historic information on tenements and housing reform laws including an Urban Housing History module.
- Descriptions of research in the building, including a detailed slide show of wallpaper layers that reveals new insights into immigrants' domestic lives.
- An opportunity for users to upload photographs and stories that might be of interest to those concerned with immigration.
- Digital Arts in Residence program for both adults and teens to create web-based exhibits on LESTM issues.

## FINANCES

LESTM has a current annual operating budget of \$3.1 million: slightly more than 50% (\$1.6 million) comes from corporate, foundation and government grants; more than 20% from individual contributions and memberships; and just over 30% from earned income. Half of LESTM's budget supports programs, exhibits, education, library and archives. Marketing and program administration divide the other \$1.5 million more or less equally.

LESTM has demonstrated success in securing foundation support, including significant grants from the Rockefeller Foundation (for the International Coalition for Historic Site Museums of Conscience), the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, the Altman Foundation, and the New York Times Company Foundation.

## LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM SUPPORT AND REVENUE

|  | 1998-1999          | 1999-2000          | (BUDGETED)<br>2000-2001 |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>CORPORATIONS</b>                    | 95,313             | 131,866            | 182,000                 |
| <b>FOUNDATIONS</b>                     | 338,223            | 874,536            | 1,207,800               |
| <b>GOVERNMENT</b>                      | 136,207            | 215,110            | 228,000                 |
| <b>INDIVIDUAL DONOR AND MEMBER</b>     | 363,178            | 81,756             | 342,000                 |
| <b>SPECIAL EVENTS</b>                  | 256,917            | 329,066            | 335,000                 |
| <b>GIFT SHOP + OTHER EARNED INCOME</b> | 22,369             | 191,507            | 336,200                 |
| <b>TOURS, SCHOOLS, AND GROUPS</b>      | 68,672             | 443,577            | 485,000                 |
| <b>FEES AND INTEREST</b>               | 1,582              | 23,461             | 22,500                  |
| <b>TOTAL:</b>                          | <b>\$1,282,461</b> | <b>\$2,290,879</b> | <b>\$3,138,500</b>      |

## EXPENSES 2000-2001

### PROGRAMS, EXHIBITS, EDUCATION, LIBRARY & ARCHIVES

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| LIBRARY, ARCHIVES, PROGRAMS, AND EXHIBITS | \$43,550           |
| MUSEUM SHOP AND PRODUCT DESIGN            | 208,000            |
| PRINTING AND PROMOTION                    | 83,020             |
| PROFESSIONAL AND CONSULTING FEES          | 541,720            |
| PROGRAM EVALUATION                        | 25,000             |
| SALARIES AND BENEFITS                     | 675,385            |
| TRAVEL, CONFERENCES, MEMBERSHIPS          | 48,600             |
| <b>SUBTOTAL:</b>                          | <b>\$1,625,275</b> |

### MARKETING, COMMUNITY RELATIONS, & DEVELOPMENT

|                                  |                  |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| PRINTING, PROMOTION, EVENTS      | 67,520           |
| PROFESSIONAL AND CONSULTING FEES | 54,000           |
| SALARIES AND BENEFITS            | 534,525          |
| <b>SUBTOTAL:</b>                 | <b>\$686,045</b> |

### PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & SUPPORT

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENTS                     | 61,000           |
| INSURANCE, INTEREST, FEES, CONTINGENCY, & DEPRECIATION     | 108,292          |
| OCCUPANCY  | 151,000          |
| POSTAGE, SHIPPING, SUPPLIES                                | 62,000           |
| PRINTING AND PROMOTION                                     | 31,000           |
| PROFESSIONAL AND CONSULTING FEES, TRAINING AND RECRUITMENT | 13,000           |
| SALARIES AND BENEFITS                                      | 401,057          |
| TELEPHONE AND FAX  | 30,000           |
| <b>SUBTOTAL:</b>   | <b>\$857,349</b> |

**GRAND TOTAL EXPENSES** **\$3,138,669**

LESTM has also obtained support from the city, state and federal governments. The National Endowment for the Humanities funded research on former tenants and the National Endowment for the Arts is currently providing support for the Origins Theater Project. Underwriting from the New York State Council on the Arts partially funded LESTM's *Historic Structure Report* and is now funding the development of the sweatshop apartment. Renovation of 97 Orchard Street began with \$500,000 from the New York State Urban Development Corporation, and the city's Department of Cultural Affairs contributed more than \$800,000 for capital work. In fiscal year 2001, LESTM's education programs, sweatshop project, and Web site were supported by \$150,000 from the City of New York, \$27,000 from the New York State Council on the Arts, and additional \$20,000 from the state budget.

LESTM maintains a strong relationship with city agencies, the mayor, and state and congressional legislators. It has made a number of government officials honorary trustees and has enjoyed the participation of elected officials at the city, state and federal levels. LESTM's consultants have been loyal supporters, providing \$78,000 of their time as in-kind contributions in 2001.

LESTM has developed a number of fundraising strategies at the individual level as well, including annual fundraisers that focus on an ethnic group represented in Lower East Side history. A committee raising funds to renovate an Irish family apartment has received a pledge for \$250,000. LESTM is successfully targeting donors among New York's social elite, many of whom have

immigrant roots, including former mayor Ed Koch. Another fundraising venture makes the first floor of the museum available to trustee-sponsored fundraising dinners as well as to groups of up to 30 people for private dinner parties. LESTM hosts around 40 such parties annually, primarily for individuals looking for a unique venue.

LESTM is looking more strategically at its long-term financial growth, realizing that it needs to increase the size of its corporate gifts, which are generally in the \$10-\$20,000 range, as well as the level of unrestricted giving, which currently comprises only about 10% of its total revenue.

Finally, LESTM has discovered a new avenue of fundraising as a result of its leadership in the International Coalition for Historic Site Museums of Conscience. The Open Society Institute awarded \$60,000 for the Coalition's Web site to recognize this new groundbreaking partnership between a cultural institution and human rights concerns.

## IMPACT ON THE CITY

LESTM has become an important part of a series of local sites, developed by the NPS, that together tell the story of immigration to America. The NPS plans to develop interpretive programs and transportation to better integrate these sites, linking Ellis Island, LESTM, and other such projects. Marie Rust of the NPS is planning to create a special superintendent position to serve as a liaison between the city and NPS to give these landmarks greater

visibility and to improve partnership opportunities with city government.

According to Sanchis, LESTM has also had an impact on cultural institutions in the city. It has “opened up a world that few understand with any clarity and offers a whole different twist on the development of the city.” Abram’s successful community programming and her linking of interpretive programs to LESTM’s geographic and demographic context have challenged more traditional museums and historic sites to question their assumptions about their relationship to the city.

LESTM has also taken on the role of advocate for the Lower East Side, encouraging awareness and pride, qualities that have long been missing for many with roots there and for residents still struggling to survive in a new world. LESTM, it might be said, takes care of the Lower East Side’s “soul” while the Business Improvement District (BID) works for its economic interests. Abram’s vision is that both must work together if the Lower East Side is to survive as a destination for new immigrants entering the country. According to the NPS:

*This larger context [the ethnic working-class neighborhood] is critical because no single building can adequately reveal the cultural, spiritual, and ideological dimensions of daily life. The Tenement Museum is situated in an environment that continues to reflect and illustrate the problems of immigrant life.*



## FUTURE PLANS

LESTM has seen 100% growth in visitors in the four years between 1997-2001. This increase far exceeds both LESTM's projections and its ability to expand programs and facilities to meet demand.

LESTM is now forced to turn away potential visitors because the tours sell out in advance. The number of tours is limited by the capacity of the building and by the speed with which new apartment exhibits can be researched and funded. Fire codes limit the museum to two restored apartments per floor, eight in total. With four apartments now complete, the plan is to open the sweatshop apartment in November 2001 and an Irish family apartment in 2002. Without major expansion, the museum has capacity for only two more apartment exhibits.

The senior staff is well aware of LESTM's need to grow. The staff's effort is currently focused on acquiring the adjacent tenement building, which shares a wall with the museum. The acquisition of this site would provide LESTM with much needed space for consolidating its operations in one location and enlarging its visitor center and program space. It would also allow LESTM to install an elevator to make the museum accessible for people with limited mobility and gain horizontal access to the upper floors of the building, relieving the museum of limited occupancy restrictions. Additional space would also permit LESTM to expand temporary exhibits, which are now generally limited to its storefront area. LESTM has also accumulated information and artifacts that would enhance visitors' understanding and contribute to the growing interest in the history of the Lower East Side.

LESTM staff is working to ensure a balance between its museum and "non-typical work" and is meeting this spring with the Board of Trustees to engage board members in that planning. A new board chair has been appointed to provide leadership in developing a ten-year plan. While the museum building has limited capacity, outreach to the community is potentially unlimited if it is managed strategically. Community programs have grown stronger under the management of Liz Sevchenko, who was promoted from consultant to vice president of programming two years ago. LESTM is receiving particular attention and recognition for combining human service outreach with museum stewardship. As the NPS and others draw on its progressive ideas about public dialogues and civic responsibility, LESTM undoubtedly feels pressure to maintain the financial and logistical success of that model.



Confino apartment

PHOTO: Mike Lilliard

LESTM has developed plans for a \$15 million capital campaign, including \$5 million for an endowment. The capital campaign will focus on LESTM's need to expand, anticipating the purchase and renovation of two additional buildings. The staff is predicting increases in earned income with the arrival of a new director of retail sales, more ticket sales with another apartment opening, and increased targeted membership development. The Altman Foundation has provided seed money and connections with licensors for the museum shop to develop more "tenement product" as a way to increase its sales revenues. Membership has grown from 400 to 650 in just two years. More direct mailings are planned to membership lists from organizations such as the National Trust.

LESTM's affiliate status with the NPS, as described above, will be an essential aspect of its future financial planning, especially to secure funding for a visitor center and restoration of adjacent facades. NPS plans to seek baseline funding of \$250,000 for LESTM in tandem with increases in allocations to other Manhattan sites to provide staff resources for partnerships on immigration. Through its affiliation with the NPS, LESTM will be eligible for an additional year of funding from Congress.

## ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS

### HOW WELL THE PROJECT MET ITS GOALS

*Promoting historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on the Lower East Side.*

LESTM has developed an impressive array of creative programs to help both children and adults understand the immigrant experience of tenement living. The interpretive activities have been artfully researched and designed to capture a range of circumstances that engage visitors from every walk of life. In the adult tour groups, visitors ask questions and offer information related to their own histories. In school group tours, fourth graders engage in activities that simulate immigrant arrival. The degree to which the docents describe the historical research and interpretive challenges embodied in the apartments also encourages visitors to reexamine history through a different lens. The exit surveys conducted by LESTM indicate that guests rate the tour experience very highly.

*Promoting tolerance through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on the Lower East Side.*

The success of LESTM's efforts to promote tolerance is much more difficult to assess. This year LESTM hired a consultant to conduct a more formal study to establish how well the school programs are meeting this mission. Building on work done by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, LESTM is in the process of defining indicators of tolerance. This is

an ambitious task that should contribute to understanding tolerance measurement. In the meantime, the compelling reports of attitudinal change from the Net Worth program serve as evidence that LESTM is having a positive impact.

*Using the history of immigration to stimulate public dialogue about important contemporary issues.*

While the tour proved to be a powerful experience — a visceral comprehension of tenement conditions — the connections with contemporary conditions of immigrant struggle, exploitation and overcrowding that exist elsewhere in the neighborhood were not explicitly made to visitors. According to a 1993 NPS study, Chinese workers labored in about 500 garment sweatshops in the neighborhood and an estimated 40 percent of the city’s Chinese residents live in overcrowded conditions, often ten to a room. The museum believes “that it is easier to consider an issue when it is presented in an historical context because it appears less threatening.”

In LESTM’s interpretive and educational programs where innovative materials and strategies draw out explicit connections between immigration and contemporary life, the concept of “the usable past” is clear. The staff’s ability to see possible links and build new connections is exemplary and ambitious. The “Around the Kitchen Table” program brings people together to share immigration experiences. It provides a social service for immigrants and an opportunity for staff to have personal contact with contemporary

immigrants, thus helping LESTM keep its primary mission in focus.

The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, conceived and led by LESTM, vividly demonstrates the value of “the usable past.” Proposed linkages with human rights organizations give this idea a specific interpretation that leaves no doubt of its social and political message. It has the potential to spawn many more museums that examine history from a critical social and political perspective.

*Challenging the prevailing notion of what kinds of buildings are worthy of preservation.*

LESTM’s redefinition of what is worthy of preservation has already had national impact and is provoking organizations like the NPS and National Trust to rethink their programs. LESTM has certainly made its mark in demonstrating that buildings associated with the lives of the masses are an important part of American history and as worthy of preservation as any mansion of the rich and famous.

*Telling the true stories of real people.*

According to Pamela Keech, consulting curator who works for a number of historical and natural history museums, LESTM is the first museum in the US to exhibit the household material culture of the urban poor and working classes. The oral histories collected from residents and their descendants have been instrumental in dispelling the stereotypes about cleanliness in tenement apartments. The untouched apartment lets those who experienced tenement living

recreate and momentarily relive their own memories. For some, these are long repressed or forgotten components of their family history; for more recent immigrants, it can help normalize their current struggles.

LESTM has also made innovative use of living history presentations by asking visitors to role-play along with the interpreters who are in period costumes.

### SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS ON LESTM

The Selection Committee saw LESTM as a unique and unusual kind of urban project, one that set out to change our understanding of cities from a mere physical landscape to one that is also cultural, social, and economic. Committee members noted that LESTM was created as part of a plan to change the way urban dwellers think about their common roots and, in so doing, find connections that are common to many ethnic groups. As such, it is a “spectacular achievement with long-term community significance.”

The Committee also noted that while LESTM did not significantly change the physical attributes of the Lower East Side, it did transform the experience of the neighborhood. The museum and the programs it sponsors have become a significant presence in the area. “Really good urban places change the way in which you think about cities,” the committee noted. “This place has done that by virtue of giving you a rich and multi-layered understanding of the cultural landscapes of those who are newly arrived.”

In the view of the Selection Committee, LESTM’s newly-forged relationship with the NPS is one of its the most lasting and replicable achievements. LESTM’s impact on the values and approach of this huge bureaucracy will have important repercussions across the country.

The Selection Committee also noted that preservation is “an inherently interpretive act, and this landscape is much more powerful because of its authenticity.” Understanding how a city has evolved socially provides a critical context for current residents, particularly in light of LESTM’s goal of making common social threads useable for social change.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Abelson, E. S. (2001, June). Review of ‘Urban castles: Tenement housing and landlord activism in New York City, 1890-1943.’ *Journal of American History*, 88 (1), 253-254.

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**SILVER MEDAL WINNER**

Lower East Side Tenement Museum

“Lower East Side Tenement Museum (Newest historic site of the National Trust)”. (1999). Preservation 51, NO. 1 (January - February): p83.

Horn, D. “The Tenement Museum- On Manhattan’s Lower East Side you can visit a haunting re-creation of a life that was at once harder and better than we remember”: (2000) American Heritage, 51, NO. 2 (April).

Lower East Side Tenement Museum: Special Resource Study. (1995). National Park Service, North Atlantic Regional Office.

Plunz, R. (1990). A History of Housing in New York City. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Related Rudy Bruner Award Winners**

Readers who are interested in The Lower East Side Tenement Museum may also wish to read about these gold and silver medal winners from previous years:

Parkside Preservation, Philadelphia, PA (1999)

The Times Square, New York, NY (1997)

Project Row Houses, Houston, TX (1997)

Cleveland Historic Warehouse District, Cleveland, OH (1997)

Center in the Square Roanoke, VA (1997)

Lowertown, St. Paul, MN (1995)

*(For full bibliographic citations of Bruner Foundation books, please see Introduction. Information on all RBA winning projects is available at [www.BrunerFoundation.org](http://www.BrunerFoundation.org).)*

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