

Collecting with(in) the city

Publication
CAMOC & COMCOL
Conference
09–11 October 2024

AMSTERDAM X MUSEUM

imagine


ICOM International
Council
of museums

MI CAMOC ICOM
International Committee
for the Collections and Activities
of Museums of Cities

MI COMCOL ICOM
International Committee
for Collecting

Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL
Conference
09–11 October 2024**

Collecting with(in) the city
Publication is realized by:

Scientific committee on behalf of CAMOC and COMCOL

Andrea Delaplace	Leen Beyers
Annemarie de Wildt	Njabulo Chipangura
Danielle Kuijten	Rachel Roy
Flora Nguye Mutere	Sandra Vacca
Glenn Perkins	

Imagine IC

Danielle Kuijten	Jules Rijssen
------------------	---------------

Amsterdam Museum

Imara Limon

Project Manager and Final Editor

Roísín Douglas

Layout Design

Bo Gijzen

Special thanks to

All contributors and Patrick de Bruin for the visual identity of the conference.



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Words from the Hosts	8
Keynote lectures	12
Collecting Activism	26
Digital City Experiences	44
Practices of (co)curating	62
Working with artists	116
Decolonial practices	130
City identities and conflict	152
Oral histories revisited	174
City Identities – plural narratives	188
Senses	210
Folk Perspectives	266
Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions	284

Oral histories revisited

14 Henrietta Street: Your Tenement Memories Oral History Programme

Laura Keogh

Biography

Laura Keogh is the Head of Engagement with the Dublin City Council Culture Company. In this role, she is responsible for overseeing a variety of community-focused programmes, including the 14 Henrietta Street oral history programme. Laura's work involves collaborating with local communities and cultural partners and developing innovative ways to engage the public in cultural exploration.

Introduction

14 Henrietta Street is a social history museum of Dublin life, from one building's Georgian beginnings to its tenement times. The museum, located in the heart of Dublin city, connects the history of urban life over 300 years to the stories of the people who called this place home. (See figure 1)

14 Henrietta Street was built in the late 1740s by Luke Gardiner. Its first occupant was The Right Honourable Richard, Lord Viscount Molesworth and his family. Subsequent residents in the 18th Century included the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, the Bishop of Clogher, and Charles 12th Viscount Dillon. However, by the mid-19th century Dublin was increasingly becoming home to the poor. 14 Henrietta Street became a tenement in 1877 and remained a tenement for many years with the last residents living in it until the late 1970s.¹

Dublin City Council started the process of purchasing 14 Henrietta Street in the 2000s. After acquiring the building in 2008, they embarked on a decade-long restoration and conservation project to preserve and stabilise the house for future generations. The purchase and conservation of 14 Henrietta Street was a direct result of the Dublin City Heritage Plan 2002 – 2006² and the Henrietta Street conservation plan.³ 14 Henrietta Street is owned and conserved by Dublin City Council and run by Dublin City Council Culture Company who opened the museum to the public in 2018.

The Dublin City Council Culture Company continues to protect and share the history of 14 Henrietta Street, particularly emphasising personal testimonies and social history of the house. Their vision is to create a Dublin where culture connects all aspects of life, with a people-led approach to placemaking, cultural heritage programmes and buildings.⁴



Figure 1: Front door of 14 Henrietta Street Image by Ros Kavanagh

The museum's collection

14 Henrietta Street takes an innovative approach in telling the history of a building. This is reflected in the museum's collection. Rather than being solely made up of physical objects, 50% of the collection is made up of the building itself, 20% are physical objects, 25% is the oral history collection and 5% are artistic responses.

Central to the museum experience is the house, which is interpreted through objects, stories of former residents, and the tour guides' accounts of the everyday realities of the people who lived there. The museum is experienced through guided tours only. These tours of the museum bring to life the stories of the people who lived in the house, their changing circumstances, the impact of world affairs, and their experiences of family life and politics. These stories are communicated by the tour guides along with a carefully curated selection of objects, which are exhibited in recreated immersive rooms and supported by audio-visual and specially commissioned artistic responses which illuminate the stories further. (See figure 2)



Figure 2: Children from St. Mary's National School Schools at 14 Henrietta Street Photographer_ Ste Murray.

The design of the museum experience and the tours at 14 Henrietta Street welcomes the recollections of the people who visit it. As Black (2011) notes:

When people use museums, they bring their life experiences with them. Often, their encounter with objects in the museum brings back vivid recollections, half-remembered places and emotions which would otherwise have remained forgotten. It is commonplace for such memories to be discussed amongst the social or family group taking part in the visit. From the exhibits encountered and the memories evoked, new meanings are shared.

At 14 Henrietta Street the fabric of the building allows visitors to see the lives of the people who previously lived there, from the plasterwork and grand staircase of Georgian times to the layers of paint and the remains of the wallpaper from its later years. The rooms of the museum that are dressed to recreate a particular period of time, create a different opportunity to connect with objects that have a familiarity in people's own lives from the more recent past.

On the guided tours, visitors are welcome to join in and add their own personal recollections, creating an equal exchange between the visitors and the guides, acknowledging the many versions of the stories being told. This exchange allows new meanings to be shared and provides visitors with an opportunity to connect personally with the lives of those who lived in 14 Henrietta Street.

Oral history collection

14 Henrietta Street's oral history programme, *Your Tenement Memories*, plays an integral role in the museum through gathering the living memories of tenement life in Dublin. By listening and talking with visitors, historians, local residents and their families, and through the knowledge of others, the museum continues to discover new stories, gathering memories and adding to the museum's collection and visitor experience.

In 2015, the museum initiated a series of memory evenings held both in 14 Henrietta Street and in local community spaces. These events invited former residents to share their memories of tenement life, marking the inception of the museum's oral history programme. Subsequently, a team of historians and academics worked alongside these former residents to research the museum's narrative. This ensured that the human stories were given as much prominence as the documented historical facts from the outset.

Your Tenement Memories is a collaborative project with the people of Dublin, which has enabled the museum to engage with individuals and communities across the city and its suburbs. In order to find participants for the programme, the museum issued an open call which invited people to come to 14 Henrietta Street to share their memories. This was extended to the libraries in the suburbs of Dublin, where many people who lived in the tenements had moved to. The museum's coordinators and tour guides documented hundreds of written initial accounts of memories through this process. In phase two of this programme, participants were selected based on specific criteria⁵ and invited to attend a second interview which was audio recorded.⁶

The audio recordings, which become part of the museum's collection, provide a wealth of information, both through what the participants tell and also how they tell it. As Shopes (2002) notes:

What is needed then is an understanding of oral history not so much as an exercise in fact finding but as an interpretive event, as the narrator compresses years of living into a few hours of talk, selecting, consciously and unconsciously, what to say and how to say it.



Figure 3: 14 Henrietta Street Launch former resident Peter Brannigan and Lillian Rowley Quinn Photo by Julien Behal Photography

Your Tenement Memories audio recordings capture the performative nature of the interview; the accents, the laughter, the emotions involved. The silences, the pauses and the inclinations of people's voices tell as much as the stories they are sharing. This enables the museum and its tour guides to understand the details of tenement life but also importantly preserves these accounts for future research purposes in the museum's collection. (See figure 3)

Bidzinski et al. (2017) define oral history as "the act of interviewing individuals about historic events and activities to which they were witness or involved in order to gain a more comprehensive - and personal - view of the past." Your Tenement Memories is particularly interested in participants' personal view of the past. It focuses on the daily lives of the people who lived in Henrietta Street and in tenement Dublin more widely. These personal accounts tell us about family, childhood, education, religion and many other facets of people's lives. As Blair and Reynolds (2023) discuss in relation to oral history:

The theory and practice are constantly evolving, and numerous case studies demonstrate that its inherent subjectivity should not be seen as a limitation but a strength. We all have the truth of our lived experience and that must always be respected.

The subjectivity of the oral histories collected also enables the people who visit the museum to connect to these stories. Each guided tour of the house offers visitors a unique and nuanced understanding of its past, even though the overarching narrative remains consistent across all tours. This is achieved through the guides' personal research and augmented by the museum's oral history collection which provides a valuable repository of first-hand accounts and memories

that add depth and authenticity to the tours. By actively collecting and incorporating these personal stories, 14 Henrietta Street ensures that diverse perspectives on tenement life are represented and shared. This not only enhances the tour guides knowledge but infuses the tours with a genuine and relatable quality, allowing visitors to connect to the past on a more personal level. Therefore, the tours are a multi-faceted exploration of history, offering visitors a truly unique and memorable experience.

Collecting oral histories gives participants the opportunity to tell their own truth and to describe things how they remember them. There are often differences in how things are remembered when family members are interviewed, based on the age of the person. Quite often the difficulties of living in tenement Dublin were not so apparent to younger members of the family who remember their childhood fondly playing on Henrietta Street with their friends. All accounts are valued as the participant's truth, and each brings to light a different facet of tenement Dublin. As Bidzinski et al. (2017) discuss, "The conversation an oral history generates - as collaboration between narrator and interviewer - can round out and even challenge perspectives on the past." This dialogue enables participants to revisit and dig deeper into their memories in a different manner and can often lead to insights which challenge their own previous views on the past.

Conclusion

14 Henrietta Street protects, shares and adds to the cultural life of Dublin city. Through its innovative approach to collecting and presenting history, the museum invites visitors to connect with the past on a personal level. Its oral history programme, Your Tenement Memories, continues to open up the museum to new views of the past, inviting the people of Dublin to become part of the museum and to participate in recounting the history of tenement life. By valuing the subjectivity of these accounts, the museum allows for a more inclusive understanding of Dublin's past, enabling collective memory to shape our understanding of history.

Notes

- 1 Further information on the history of the house is available here <https://14henriettastreet.ie/about/history-of-the-house/>
- 2 Available at https://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-05/dublin_city_heritage_plan_2002_2006.pdf
- 3 Available at https://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-05/plean_caomhantais_shraid_henrietta_street_conservation_plan.pdf
- 4 Dublin City Council Culture Company Strategy 2019-2024 available at <https://www.dublincitycouncilculturecompany.ie/content/files/DCCCC-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf>
- 5 Participants were selected based on where the tenement they lived was located, with number 14 and Henrietta Street being the priority, and when they lived there.
- 6 Participants sign a participation and recording agreement and have the opportunity to request any changes, redactions, omissions and/or edits needed before signing final consent.

References

- Abrams, L. (2016). *Oral History Theory* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Black, G. (2011). Museums, Memory and History. *Cultural and Social History*, 8. 415-427. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275820607_Museums_Memory_and_History/link/5fcb6617299bf188d4f606e6/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnNOUGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19, accessed 27 February 2025.
- Blair, W. and Reynolds, C. (2023) Dealing with the legacy of the past: oral history and museums in Northern Ireland. *Oral History*, 51 (1), 114-127
- Bidzinski, H., Giesbrecht, J., Hinthner, R. L., Reilly, S. (2017). Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*. 37.
- Cento Bull, A. and Reynolds, C. (2021). Uses of Oral History in Museums: A Tool for Agonism and Dissonance or Promoting a Linear Narrative?. *Museum & Society*, 19(3), 283-300. <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v19i3.3520>, accessed 27 February 2025.
- Shopes, L. (2002). Making Sense of Oral History, *History Matters: The US Survey Course on the Web*. <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/oral.pdf>, accessed 27 February 2025.

Oral histories revisited

Reactivating Oral Histories In Washington, D.C.

Miriam Doutriaux

Biography

Miriam Doutriaux is head of collections at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, where she oversees the preservation, documentation and interpretation of collections and leads efforts to involve local constituents in collections stewardship. Previously, she was the exhibition curator for pre-Columbian art at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum. Doutriaux holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and a BA from McGill University. Research interests include the history of collecting and the ways identity connects with material culture.

Narratives of Community

Dianne Dale grew up in southeast Washington, D.C. in the 1940s, and remembers many movie theaters, among them the Carver Theater. “The Carver Theater was ours. We grew up with that movie theater. And we could go there on Saturdays for nine cents and stay all day and watch Lash LaRue [Westerns]”. A fourth-generation Washingtonian, Dale lived in the middle-class African American neighborhood of Anacostia. The movie theater she frequented in her youth eventually closed, and in 1967, the building was renovated to house what is now the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, a place Dale described as “our museum”, where “you just stopped in to say hello to somebody that you knew who worked there” (Dale 1992).

Della Lowery moved to Anacostia from Massachusetts, and recalled “there were houses on the street that had no running water and had no electricity. [...] And I was amazed, because I thought of Washington, DC in terms of being a major city, not expecting to find those kinds of conditions in 1950.” The community grew quickly in the wake of a federal program of “urban renewal” that displaced residents from other parts of Washington, DC, but it retained a neighborly character. Interviewed in 1971, Lowery reflected that “It was a very cooperative neighborhood and still is really. It's always been that way. That's one reason I'm still living there” (Lowery 1971).



Figure 1: Community members and staff associated with the DC Women Speak project gather in front of a banner printed in their honor. Audi Field, Washington, D.C., August 2024. Photograph by Joseph Campbell. Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

Dale and Lowery are among hundreds of local residents whose narratives offer a history of Washington, D.C. rooted in the city's neighborhoods and communities. Archived at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum (ACM), they are the result of a steady effort to record oral histories since the early 1970s. Initially recorded on audio reels and cassette tapes, and eventually in digital format, the interviews are a key part of the museum's practice and have long informed exhibitions and programming. The interlocutors, subject matter and format have varied over time, but the conversations have sustained and encouraged a museology guided by community voices and intent on sharing and reflecting local perspectives. They also preserve a record of an evolving city where residents have made homes, founded businesses, gathered for celebration and mobilized for change. In recent years, digital tools and platforms have opened new opportunities for sharing, interpreting, and activating this rich record. The museum's DC Women Speak project invites online exploration and renewed engagement with oral histories collected over the past five decades. (See figure 1)

Recording Unsung Histories

The Museum launched its first oral history project in 1970, in an effort to capture the remembered history of the Anacostia neighborhood. At a time of emerging interest in African American history in the United States, the museum's director articulated an ambitious and transformative goal: to rectify gaps in Washington, D.C.'s historical record, particularly with respect to the presence, role and contributions of Black Americans, and "to inspire a sense of pride and to heighten the aspirations for dignity and self-assurance of every person, no matter his station in life" (Kinard 1977:x). The museum undertook to document the neighborhood and city through extensive archival research and on-the-ground evidence gathering. It was among the first to use a "unique and exciting technique [...] that is part of the black experience: the taking of oral history from the people themselves" (ibid).

In a series of public meetings, the museum's historian Louise Hutchinson recruited dozens of local residents who agreed to be interviewed about their community. Narrators answered a series of formal questions about their work, local businesses, churches, schools and city services, but also reminisced about earlier times and offered their opinions and perspectives on current issues. The project captured a broad range of voices, including those of African Americans but also white Americans, professionals, business owners and laborers, longtime residents and newcomers to the neighborhood. The conversations flourished in no small part due to existing ties between residents and staff, and excitement about the Museum's mandate of direct engagement with the community. Eventually, narrators saw their stories incorporated into exhibitions on display in the museum's gallery, such as *Evolution of a Community* (1972) and *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930* (1977).

Other projects followed, with a focus on different neighborhoods and other topics. One gathered the stories of Black immigrants to the Washington, D.C. region. Curator Portia James worked closely with first-generation residents from South and Central America and the Caribbean to

document their experiences of arrival and integration in a new environment. Conversations in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole explored questions of race, culture, identity, and belonging. James developed the project into the exhibition *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D. C.* (1993). In keeping with the museum's practice, however, she centered the oral history process as a goal in its own right. It was through conversations with and among members of varied cultural communities that the exhibition took shape. The museum hosted forums for discussing culture and identity, and deliberately modeled for other museums and cultural institutions a collaborative approach to understanding and interpreting immigration.

Oral history has always been created in relationships, between the interviewer and interviewee, often delving deep into personal memories and evoking new reflections. Even when conducted with the goal of data gathering, the engagement is social, personal and collaborative. At ACM and other city museums, the subject matter is close at hand and many curatorial projects are a reason and context for conversing with neighbors. In project after project, discussions with other residents of our city serve to develop content, inform the structure of exhibitions and programs, and even inspire new avenues of research. Importantly, they also impact our neighbors who articulate their thoughts, share their lives and accomplishments, reflect on new topics and find validation of their stories. In the past, these conversations retired when oral history entered the archives, but this is changing in the digital age.

Rediscovering the Narratives

Until recently, most of the museum's oral histories collected in the pre-digital era remained on physical media stored in boxes in the archives. They were consulted occasionally by researchers, by appointment, but remained little known outside of academia. Most narrators in previous decades expected this. How could they have anticipated a world in which archives were digitally open to the world 24/7? Once the project was completed, once the exhibition closed, so too the voices left the public sphere. In many cases, narrators' interactions with the museum became less frequent, or stopped altogether as subsequent projects moved to address different topics and engage other communities of people. Many of the interviews faded from memory, except for the occasional citation in a publication or exhibition.

In 2021, the Anacostia Community Museum launched the DC Women Speak project¹ to digitize and catalogue hundreds of audio recordings so as to preserve and facilitate access to the remarkable narratives they hold. Among them were those associated with past exhibition projects including *Evolution of a Community* (1972), *Anacostia Story* (1977), and *Black Mosaic* (1993). ACM's archivist, Jennifer Morris, led efforts to create digital copies of the recordings and detailed descriptive records of their contents in the Smithsonian online virtual archive. The project was designed to facilitate discovery, so the records include subject tags identifying topics, persons, institutions, cultural groups and places mentioned. These act as access points for anyone conducting a keyword search online. Likewise, project archivists developed biographical

information about each interviewee, using museum records or researching genealogical or census records. Reparative cataloguing seeks to create more accurate and inclusive descriptions of collections by adding contextual information or replacing outdated or harmful language. A conscious effort was made to note individual characteristics such as race and gender in contexts where it seemed relevant, and to name all women, even those previously recorded as Mrs. [Husband's Name].

An associated *DC Women Speak* website presents curated stories of community drawn from the interviews. Online visitors can listen to women like Dianne Dale and Della Lowery share their thoughts and recollections in 4-7 minute narratives. Each story is illustrated with historic photographs and includes contextual information and a short bio, as well as a link to the online record for the full interview. The website also offers the possibility to explore stories thematically by selecting from categories including food, family, education, arts & culture, health, activism, migration, and race & identity. The stories are remarkable and varied, a tribute to the generations of interviewees who were willing to share their voices with the museum and their city.

Renewing Ties

The very public nature of the website and online archive created an important opportunity to reach back out to the original narrators. They had shared and allowed publication of their personal stories in a pre-digital era but might find the prospect of their voices being broadcast online unnerving or possibly unwelcome. Words spoken in a different era can land differently when heard in a new context. The project team therefore developed an updated list of contacts for original narrators or their family members and set out to introduce our work. Very quickly, our emails or phone calls turned into conversations of their own. Many narrators expressed curiosity and joy at rediscovering decades-old interviews and reflecting on their younger selves. One octogenarian described her recovered recording as a treasured memento of a period of her life she had forgotten. She found new motivation to share her life story with others. Family members expressed gratitude for recordings they had not known existed. One daughter wrote “I was very moved by seeing my mother’s photo, and some of my “other mothers” photos [...] The project “DC Women Speak” highlighting women who helped raise me, was soooo moving and brought back so many memories.”

In tandem with these expressions of excitement and deep appreciation, the speakers also shared new information with museum staff, and helped correct or clarify the museum’s records. New portrait photographs illustrate several of the stories. A disagreement over the details of a story led to a discussion about the inherent subjectivity of oral histories, and the potential for multiple perspectives of a place or event. In many cases, women also shared new stories inspired by the ones they had encountered. The new documentation has enriched what was already a very diverse and democratic set of records.

The project has also had unanticipated impact beyond the original group of narrators. A local high school used the *DC Women Speak* website to encourage students to reflect on the significance of personal stories and the power of community in our city’s history. It hosted an exhibition of student artworks inspired by the DC Women’s narratives. The museum also received a request from the Washington Spirit professional women’s soccer team to honor the narrators with a banner at a home game in August 2024. This served as an occasion to gather in person at the stadium, for what became a de-facto reunion of project participants, a multigenerational cross-section of people connected to oral history projects the museum had conducted between the 1970s and the 1990s. In the words of Dianne Dale, who attended, “it was fun!”

Digital tools and platforms create opportunities to expand accessibility and increase engagement with historic collections, and they also have the potential to renew conversations and stimulate new interactions. The *DC Women Speak* project was launched with the goal to invite online exploration of oral history narratives held in the archives. It became an opportunity to share powerful stories of community, to cultivate interest in local history, and to renew ties to past interviewees and their families. At the root, a remarkable decades-long endeavor to record voices, experiences and perspectives of Washington, D.C. continues to inspire and connect.

Notes

- 1 The *DC Women Speak* project was funded in part by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative Pool administered by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.

References

- Dale, D. (1992) Oral history interview (ACM 25th Anniversary Oral History Project, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution).
- Kinard, J. (1977) ‘Foreword’. In L. D. Hutchinson, *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930*, pp. ix-x. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lowery, D. (1971) Oral history interview (Evolution of a Community: 1972 Exhibition Records, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution).

ISBN 978-2-487970-26-7

AMSTERDAM X MUSEUM

imagine
ICOM

ICOM International
Council
of museums

MI CAMOC

ICOM
International Committee
for the Collections and Activities
of Museums of Cities

MI COMCOL

ICOM
International
Committee
for Collecting