Preserving Difficult Histories
Introduction: Reframing the Historical Narrative at Sites of Conscience

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Presenting painful history to the public is difficult, as historians, museologists, preservationists, and activists well know. The complexity arises due not only to the nature of the subject matter—so often the shameful, the hidden, the utterly regrettable—but also to the perspectives, prejudices, and weaknesses that audiences bring with them to the experience.

Sites of Conscience, which include museums, historic sites, and memorials that use the past—both distant and recent—to spark action that confronts today’s human rights abuses, know this predicament all too well. As the only global network that connects these distinctive spaces, we at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience help sites navigate this terrain every day. We know that history is not just about examining objects—a Confederate flag, a Native American artifact, a gas chamber—but about recognizing the lives those objects touched. Historical objects and sites tell humanity’s most fraught stories. Not only do they stand as painful reminders of our failure to live up to our ideals then but also of how we continue to fall short of them now.

This has not been lost on the preservation community. For many years we have confronted this predicament by emphasizing just how multilayered history is and, increasingly, by working to ensure that all stories, not just the best known or the most prevalent, are told. It is through no small effort that figures, from abolitionist and suffragette hero Matilda Joslyn Gage to enslaved children whose names we don’t know, are remembered in the American narrative. And yet we would be remiss—particularly at this difficult time in U.S. history—if we did not pause and acknowledge the limitations of our approach. For however well intentioned it may be, this multidimensional methodology still pits lesser-known stories against dominant narratives.
FLIPPING THE NARRATIVES

Of course, traditional narratives are often necessary, or at least relevant, to telling lesser-known stories. And sharing multiple stories does not necessarily mean depicting all of them as equally important. Yet we must recognize that, in and of itself, telling multiple stories is not sufficient to ensure that we are using history to build an equal and just future. At this critical moment, we must ask ourselves whether it is time to take a more dramatic approach and turn the tables on conventional historical perspectives. What would a history that truly defined, prioritized, and amplified the most difficult stories look like? Could we have a Monticello, for instance, that spoke minimally of Thomas Jefferson, focusing instead on the story of Sally Hemings, whom he enslaved? What would that say about history? About us?

This approach should be more than a thought experiment. Over the course of our nearly 20-year history, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience has come to recognize the value of flipping the narrative. Our members around the world have broken new and important ground by privileging survivors’ stories. Engaging history from the bottom up, so to speak, not only brings relief to the victims of its most painful chapters but also engenders empathy—and thus develops ethical values—in everyday audiences. Activating history in this way enables it to perform its most honorable duty: to bring peace in both personal and cultural contexts.

VILLA GRIMALDI

Since our founding in 1999, this victim-centered approach has been a central tenet of Sites of Conscience—beginning with one of our founding members, Villa Grimaldi. Located on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile, the site presents the 1973 coup d’etat—and the 17 subsequent years of a brutal terrorist state that detained and “disappeared” thousands of citizens—not through a series of staid facts but through the stories of those whom the regime once victimized and silenced. The space is part memorial and part inspiration for contemporary activism.
The site itself was one of the epicenters of secret detention and violence during the military dictatorship. Approximately 4,500 people suspected of opposing the regime were kidnapped from their homes or from the street, blindfolded, and brought to Villa Grimaldi. Once there, they were detained, interrogated, and tortured. Four were executed, and 226 went missing. It was later discovered that many were drugged, strapped to railroad ties, and dropped from helicopters into the sea. Since the bodies cannot be found, hundreds of Chileans don’t know whether their relatives, last seen alive at Villa Grimaldi, were indeed among those victims.

In 1996 a group of Villa Grimaldi survivors founded the Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi (Villa Grimaldi Peace Park Corporation) to preserve the site and use what happened there to promote a culture of honoring human rights. Most of them were concerned with evoking—showing rather than telling—the experiences of the victims. For example, colorful mosaics created from pieces of pavement found at the site are scattered throughout the park, but always on the ground because perpetually blindfolded detainees rarely ever saw anything else. Some of the mosaics have been reconstituted into plaques, which are also installed on the ground, to recall the structures that once stood there—for example, “torture room.” A rose garden has been re-planted at the spot where blindfolded women prisoners remembered smelling roses as they were marched to and from interrogation rooms. The Corporación invited the families of these women to plant the rose trees, each dedicated to a different victim.
Villa staff draw direct connections between the history of the site and contemporary challenges, such as the violence and exclusion that immigrants and indigenous people face today. The Corporación strives to maintain the relevance of the site across generations in the interest of continuing to champion human rights.

**TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE**

For the past decade, Sites of Conscience have also played an increasingly crucial role in transitional justice processes. In post-conflict regions, these sites are often trusted to address the needs of communities transitioning from conflict. Unlike more traditional and formal judicial mechanisms, Sites of Conscience focus on engaging the participation of local civil society organizations, survivors, and governments. Through memorialization programs, they create an inclusive, grassroots approach to history and memory, providing victims with the opportunity to take the lead in sharing their stories and unleashing the power of those narratives to heal. The Coalition’s [Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation](http://www.globalinitiative.org) is a consortium of nine organizations that together serve as a new mechanism for multidisciplinary and integrated response to the transitional justice needs of societies emerging from periods of conflict and authoritarian rule.

Our Sri Lankan member, [Herstories](http://herstories.org), supports an oral history project called the “[Herstories Archive](http://herstories.org/archive).” Between 2012 and 2013, the auto-ethnographic project collected 285 auto-ethnographic oral histories from women in postwar Sri Lanka. 

*PHOTO COURTESY OF SHARNI JAYAWARDENA*
personal narratives of mothers from the north, south, and east of Sri Lanka. Through telling their stories, the women share their family histories, their experiences of civil war, and their hopes for the future. The project seeks to highlight women’s stories of resilience, courage, and hope, which are too often marginalized or left out of history. Through hand-written letters, photo essays, and videos, the archive recovers these lost accounts, thus challenging the idea of a single, dominant narrative in postwar Sri Lanka. In the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere, the Coalition’s work reminds us that history is made not of dust but of flesh and bone, presenting each of us with the opportunity to define what matters, what is essential to ensure a just and ethical future.

This issue of the Forum Journal provides many more examples of preservationists and social activists using the power of place and narrative to shine light on frequently overlooked histories. California’s Tule Lake National Monument is still being planned, but interpretation at the site—which, even among the camps that held Japanese Americans during World War II, was a disturbing, punitive “segregation center”—has already begun. Tours of the extant structures help visitors imagine the confinement, isolation, and social rejection that prisoners experienced there—a timely warning in the midst of the recent backlash against immigrants.

Meanwhile, the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., has assembled from scratch a collection of artifacts to “fill the silences” of American history. Using objects from the notorious Angola Prison in Louisiana, several of the museum’s exhibits trace a system of cruelty and control that, instead of ending with the abolition of slavery, has evolved into an epidemic of racist mass incarceration.

And in 2018 the last remaining building of what was once an extensive Chicago public housing complex will become the home of the National Public Housing Museum. Residents of public housing have been the driving force behind the museum since its inception, seeking an opportunity for accurate self-representation. The museum will feature narratives and artifacts from their lives, continuing to
provide a fuller picture of this diverse group not only to counter stereotypes but also to confront public policy failures in search of a better way forward.

The diversity of sites and institutions featured in this issue and the breadth of their work underscore the unique capacity of preservation to spur political and social change by reframing traditional narratives and evoking strong emotional responses. To that end, our work must authentically portray difficult histories, confront painful pasts, and amplify underrepresented stories. Every time we choose to record the story of a young refugee from Syria or help a victim of the war in South Sudan create a bodymap—a life-sized representation of a human body upon which survivors write and draw their experiences of trauma and conflict—we are reminding the world that the most vulnerable among us are the bearers of a unique and vital message about the disastrous consequences of injustice and the significance of the ongoing struggle for human rights. FJ

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**TAKEAWAY**


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