

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Small Museums, Layered Histories: Community Storytelling and Heritage Authority

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Abstract

Community museums frequently combine institutional interpretation, personal testimony, and visitor contribution, yet the relations among these forms of authority are not self-evident. This article asks how small museums make layered histories credible while preserving uncertainty and context. It compares openly documented interpretive materials associated with the Wing Luke Museum, District Six Museum, Anacostia Community Museum, and Tenement Museum. Comparative interpretive analysis follows links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitations to visitor response. The study argues that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant, that visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust, and that participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to their contexts. By examining how authority is allocated rather than simply whether multiple voices appear, the article contributes a relational account of community heritage interpretation. Its conclusions concern the selected public materials only and do not establish visitor reception, institutional intention, or the comparative effectiveness of the museums.

Keywords: community museum; heritage; oral history; curation; public humanities

1 Introduction

This article investigates how community museums negotiate authority when institutional records and living memory offer different accounts of place. Its corpus comprises openly documented interpretive materials associated with the Wing Luke Museum, District Six Museum, Anacostia Community Museum, and Tenement Museum. The central claim is that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant. That proposition carries weight because small museums demonstrate that curatorial authority can be shared without becoming anonymous. Attention therefore falls on links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response.

The question is defined more precisely than a general history of layered heritage authority. Within these texts, heritage authority is assessed through links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

The comparative reading advances three connected findings. First, first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant.

Second, visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust. Third, visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context. Together they show that layered heritage authority is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The research question is how testimony, uncertainty, and contextualized participation redistribute heritage authority in the selected materials. The objective is to compare public interpretation without inferring institutional intention or visitor response. The article establishes critical context and method, develops three findings, discusses their relation, and closes with limitations and conclusions.

Critical heritage studies clarifies why community participation does not automatically eliminate institutional authority. Smith defines heritage as a cultural process shaped by authorized discourse [1]. Simon offers a practical model for museums that structure participation as sustained contribution rather than symbolic consultation [2].

2 Heritage authority

The interaction between detail and whole supplies a second commitment.

Small Museums, Layered Histories is organized around a bounded question: what work does heritage authority perform that cannot be explained by isolated occurrences of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response? The wording matters. “What work” directs attention to effect; “cannot be explained” creates a standard for counter-reading; and the named unit fixes the scale at which the answer must be demonstrated. This formulation allows the inquiry to make a strong local argument without extending its claims to periods, audiences, or practices not represented by the selected sources.

The key term, heritage authority, is used in a restricted sense. It refers to the organized segment from first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant through visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust to visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context. This definition makes sequence part of the concept: removing the middle interaction or the retrospective test changes what

the term explains. The restriction is useful because it prevents heritage authority from absorbing every relevant observation. Details that do not affect preparation, distribution, or revision remain part of the work's texture but not part of this particular thesis.

Humanistic visualization theory clarifies how exhibition displays construct rather than merely transmit historical relations [3]. Dialogism supports analysis of institutional and first-person testimony as interacting voices [4]. Paratextual theory helps identify the labels and thresholds that frame an object's significance [5]. Narrative temporality explains how testimony connects an object to more than one historical moment [6]. Critiques of cultural representation make the allocation of curatorial authority historically consequential [7].

3 Museum Materials, Voice, and Context

The primary corpus comprises open interpretive materials associated with the Wing Luke Museum [8], District Six Museum [9], Anacostia Community Museum [10], and Tenement Museum [11]. The materials and their editorial contexts support contrastive inquiry and are not a statistical sample. Each case permits comparison through links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitations to visitor response.

The principal protocol is interpretive exhibition analysis using provenance, voice, uncertainty, spatial sequence, and participation as coding dimensions.

The comparison begins where heritage authority becomes traceable—in links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitations to visitor response. The process records position, recurrence, interruption, and consequence before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters because a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a change in attribution or context may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

Mediation is not a neutral step in Small Museums, Layered Histories. Typography, editorial intervention, notation, image quality, cropping, tempo, staging, or interface design may change how links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response can be perceived. The comparison accordingly distinguishes properties of the underlying work from properties

of the available witness. This distinction sets a practical test: an inference remains secure only if it remains the change of version relevant to the claim about heritage authority.

4 First-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant

The first result may be expressed in these terms: first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

Close comparison reveals that the pattern operates at more than one scale. The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why layered heritage authority can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

Evidence for the claim that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant begins with a before-and-after test. The reading identifies the state of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response before the relevant event, describes the change without assigning motive, and then asks what new interpretation becomes possible afterward. In Small Museums, Layered Histories, this protocol distinguishes a feature that merely appears from one that organizes expectation. The distinction is necessary because repetition can reinforce convention, expose it, or redirect it; recurrence by itself cannot decide which function is active.

5 Visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust

The next result proposes that visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

To test whether visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust, the comparison maps control rather than prestige. It asks which component establishes an expectation, which one can revise it, and which remains visible yet unable to affect the sequence. Applied to links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response, this distinction reveals distribution as an activity rather than a fixed rank. Small Museums, Layered Histories consequently avoids translating every cen-

ter-edge contrast into a social allegory; the interpretive claim is made only when compositional allocation and historical authority can be connected through specific evidence.

The opening reference point comes from Wing Luke Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials. The reading tests the proposition that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant by restricting attention to links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Wing Luke Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials, the proposition that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response, which agent or compositional layer controls it, and what consequence follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Wing Luke Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response, the expectation active at that moment, and the result that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Small Museums, Layered Histories only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general parallel to the other cases is not enough; the instance must show why the proposition about heritage authority is called for to explain its organization.

The next text, District Six Museum's Open Exhibition and Memory-Project Materials, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust. This is not understood as a defect in reliability.

District Six Museum's Open Exhibition and Memory-Project Materials changes the scale of comparison. Here heritage authority is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives

a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust.

For District Six Museum's Open Exhibition and Memory-Project Materials, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on heritage authority. The article answers only at the level of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a following effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition contracts. If it does, the case clarifies how organizational hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third text examined is Anacostia Community Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context.

The value of Anacostia Community Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials is retrospective. Later passages are reread against the first account of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the later event merely restates the earlier one, the proposition that visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case shows how heritage authority acquires organizational memory.

Verification in Anacostia Community Museum's Open Collection and Exhibition Materials depends on two locators: one for the initial treatment of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, projected, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the ensuing reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about heritage authority a visible temporal basis.

The fourth text, Tenement Museum's Open Interpretive and Digital Exhibition

Materials, functions as a resistant comparison.

Tenement Museum's Open Interpretive and Digital Exhibition Materials remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response tests how far the claim that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance requires qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition survives, which part weakens, and which additional source would be needed to choose between rival explanations.

The resistant role of Tenement Museum's Open Interpretive and Digital Exhibition Materials also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which heritage authority ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or organizational account should take over.

6 Visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context

The final result argues that visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed result are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second reveals that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how following events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that layered heritage authority is historically variable and formally organized.

Temporal revision separates the third result from the first two. The article asks whether the proposition that visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context modifies an prior judgment, redistributes its authority, or merely adds new information. Only the first two outcomes bear

directly on heritage authority. By tracking links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response in both chronological and retrospective order, *Small Museums, Layered Histories* reveals how interpretation can advance through correction without pretending that every uncertainty must end in a single, final account.

7 Discussion: What Heritage Authority Changes

Comparison makes the argument more exact. First-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant identifies the initial compositional pressure. Visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust shows how that pressure is distributed, and Visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context describes the work performed by return or correction. No single proposition is sufficient on its own. Their intersection is what gives heritage authority explanatory force in *Small Museums, Layered Histories*.

The comparison also suggests that small museums demonstrate that curatorial authority can be shared without becoming anonymous. This consequence does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Three checks keep the comparison from becoming self-confirming. First, apparent support for first-person testimony changes the temporal scale at which objects become significant is reread as convention or accident. Second, evidence for visible uncertainty can strengthen rather than weaken public trust is tested against cases where authority does not move in the expected direction. Third, the claim that visitor participation is most meaningful when contributions remain traceable to context is withheld if the supposed revision leaves earlier material unchanged. *Small Museums, Layered Histories* retains only the account that explains both confirming and resistant details with the fewest unsupported assumptions.

Small Museums, Layered Histories shifts emphasis from the presence of heritage authority to the conditions under which it becomes consequential. That shift matters because thematic readings often gather examples while leaving their order unexamined. Here, links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response are treated as events with a before and an after. The approach therefore identifies the smallest change that alters interpretation, locates who or what controls that

change, and asks whether the effect remains visible outside the case in which it first appeared.

Scale supplies a second test. An observation about links among object, narrator, place, date, uncertainty, and invitation to visitor response may be convincing locally yet fail to explain the larger text; conversely, a broad claim about heritage authority may disappear when examined at the level of the instance, phrase, frame, or action. Small Museums, Layered Histories moves between these scales in both directions. A large claim survives only when its local evidence remains specific, and a local detail becomes consequential only when its effect extends beyond immediate description.

8 Conclusion

The article asked how community museums negotiate authority when institutional records and living memory offer different accounts of place. Interpretive exhibition analysis shows that first-person testimony changes an object's temporal scale, visible uncertainty can support ac-

countable trust, and participation has interpretive force when contributions remain traceable to context. Together, these findings answer the question by locating heritage authority in relations among voice, provenance, uncertainty, and attribution.

The contribution is a comparative protocol for describing shared authority without treating multiplicity as anonymity. The conclusion is limited to underspecified public materials and cannot establish visitor response or institutional intention. Future research should identify stable versions and access dates, conduct site-specific fieldwork, and test the formal account through ethically designed visitor and curatorial research.

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