



Ross Miller

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY: *If This House Could Talk...*

BY CATHIE ZUSY

Modern life disconnects us from where we live and whom we live beside. Also, with all its distractions, it steals away the time for reflection we need to put our lives, and our family's lives, within a broader context, one that is essential to making good decisions. Our idea for *If This House Could Talk...* (ITHCT) was born out of a desire to get our community talking to each other about stories that they, themselves, would write. We wanted to give people a voice and to create a stronger sense of community and community memories in the process. We wanted neighbors to realize that they were part of the continuum of history. We wanted to bring the marvels and idiosyncratic nature of humanity to the forefront.

In initiating *If this House Could Talk...*, we sought to strengthen people's connection to our community and to the continuum of its history. Another goal was to strengthen the community by connecting neighbors to neighbors, people to places, and current residents to past residents. We launched the program in October 2009 in the one-half-square-mile Cambridgeport section of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The project, which focuses on neighborhood stories, is one that could easily be reproduced in many localities. Our inaugural program achieved these goals, with handwritten storyboards about a structure's history posted at over seventy homes and storefronts. A volunteer-run effort, the entire campaign cost less than \$100.

DEVELOPING THE EVENT

ITHCT was part of a larger Cambridgeport History Day, organized by the Cambridgeport History Project (CHP), an ad-hoc group of neighborhood, history, and art organizations, brought together by a local city councilor, a journalist, an artist, a writer, and me, a curator/educator. The

The morning of October 3 signs sprouted all over Cambridgeport. Balloons made them more visible.

To further spread the word, we issued press releases to the local paper; posted to the neighborhood blog (<http://c-portneighborhood.blogspot.com>), listservs, posters; and hung a banner at a local school. Additionally, we placed simple kiosks at a local park, at a school, and at block parties and farmers' markets. The kiosks heralded: "Houses are

Going to be Talking all over Cambridgeport October 3 and 4!" and made available take-away inserts and blank signs. Our higher-tech marketing was a link on the Cambridge Historical Society website (www.cambridgehistory.org). All publicity materials sent potential participants to the website or to my personal phone number and e-mail address since I was the event organizer. (We believed one central human contact was necessary to link sign writers to resources and encourage them to follow through with posting their sign and, ultimately, submitting their sign text for the historic record.) This personal connection and spirit of fun encouraged busy people to make time for this.

The website featured project guidelines and updates, including information about how to get a sign, how to develop text, how to be included on the list of placards, how to be part of

the electronic record, and how to participate in the larger Cambridgeport History Day. The website also listed contact information, resources, and sample text. The night before the event, we posted to the website the list of locations and, a week later, the actual text. All of these documents remain as resources on the historical society's website.

To make participation easy, we delivered to participants *ITHCT* guidelines, together with signs and stakes, upon request. The guidelines included photographs of samples and a list of resources for research-

In addition to *ITHCT*, Cambridgeport History Day included a rededication of a Revolutionary War fort and a tour of the neighborhood led by the the head of the local historical commission.

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ERIE
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This house, built by the Gooch family in 1868, was a single-family, originally. In 1883, Joshua Gooch applied for a permit to build a stable in the back. A long-term resident remembered our barn as the place where horses and buggies were quartered for a pre-automobile taxi fleet.

Peter, one of the owners, re-halbed the stable floors and found a pit, lined in soapstone with a soapstone bench. Was it a steam-bath? No one seems to know.

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day, very much like a traditional New England Home Day celebration, featured Revolutionary War reenactors at a local fort, a neighborhood history tour, and various activities, including a potluck, at the local park.

The group hatched the original idea in February, eight months before launch. Soon the project gained a moniker and a visual template. We first identified prospective writers. Over the next months the concept matured. We decided to initially post eight "teasers"—sample signs planted three weeks before the event. Soon we'd recruited a group of volunteers—among them a history professor, a historic preservationist, and a professional writer—to begin researching and writing. We wanted the placards to be interesting, accurate, varied, and not too intimidating. These teaser signs, posted on streets with high foot traffic, included handwritten text about the subject it featured and a printed insert describing the project: "What happened in your neighborhood 2, 20, or 200 years ago? For one weekend, October 3-4, residents will post signs in front of their properties telling interesting tidbits from their contemporary or historic past. For supplies or ideas contact ____." The insert told people how to get materials and where to get further information about the project. Since these would be posted for many weeks, they had to be sturdy and waterproof so we took the green approach and used the backs of old laminated campaign placards; they worked well.



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ing one's house. We included the hours of the local historical commission's library and we pointed to the website, *Cambridge Buildings and Architects*, by Christopher Hail, a Harvard librarian (<http://hul.harvard.edu/huarc/refshelf/cba/index.html>). We also provided a project timeline (when to post, when to take down, and when to submit text for the electronic record), and contact information. We encouraged people to write in permanent markers and to keep their text to four to five sentences.

We dedicated the weeks prior to *If This House Could Talk...* to delivering placards and stakes, encouraging participation, and developing the list of participating houses. The morning of the event, we walked the neighborhood attaching balloons to signs to add cheer and make them more visible and set up a booth at a local park. Our tables had location lists, an official map of the neighborhood's historic sites, blank signs and markers for newcomers inspired to participate, and reproductions of historic maps of the neighborhood. We also mounted a large map of the neighborhood with pushpins designating houses. That afternoon, other community groups set up activities nearby and later that evening neighbors joined us for a potluck supper.¹

THE SIGNS THEMSELVES

Because our project operated with zero budget and we did not foresee securing funding in the current economy, we scavenged for the heavy paper, string, balloons, permanent magic markers, and stakes we needed. Our signs were peculiarly sized because a local paper company donated the paper. A local printer lopped off the corners to create a house shape and punched holes at the roof crest so that we could attach strings to them. Volunteers cut old fir strapping into stakes, wrote *If This House Could Talk...* at the top of each, and attached string.

We intentionally left content for *ITHCT* open-ended. People could write whatever they wished as long as they reflected the story of their own residence. Participants took tremendous pride in their work. Many included reproductions of historical maps, photos, and even newspaper articles. The end results were signs that served as creative expressions of their makers, as well as vignettes of history.

These placards recorded both architectural and human history over three centuries. My family's highlighted a couple who lived in our house twenty years ago. Jill Bloom wrote Harlequin romances and books advocating for children with special needs and her husband, Ron Mooradian, made soft-case covers for musical instruments in the five-bay garage out back. Another sign explained that a local builder had erected the stately mansard-roofed house, circa 1880, as a wedding gift for his wife.



Michael Schaffer

KEEP IN MIND

- ✓ *If This House Could Talk...* is an ephemeral event. The signs pop up one morning and disappear a week or ten days later.
- ✓ Present *ITHCT* as easy and fun. If people get caught up in the excitement of researching and writing their signs, or of discovering others' signs, they will participate.
- ✓ Give people sample text and guide them towards historical resources, but don't tell them what to write and don't edit. The idiosyncratic nature of the event gives it its charm. As artist Ross Miller noted, it's sort of a physical YouTube.
- ✓ The nature of *ITHCT* is low budget and grassroots-y. It does not require fine graphics or an expensive website designer. You do need clarity, though, and a defined visual look.
- ✓ *ITHCT* should be part of something larger. Ours was part of Cambridgeport History Day, which included a rededication of a local fort, a historic walking tour, and the publication of a neighborhood history map. The "hard" history of these activities framed the "soft" history of *ITHCT*.
- ✓ The neighborhood potluck dinner on the opening day was essential. This was an opportunity for neighbors to connect about their discoveries of the day.
- ✓ While *ITHCT* can cost less than \$100, be prepared to spend hundreds of hours managing it.
- ✓ While this is a volunteer-driven project, it requires expertise, contacts, and commitment to succeed. Put leaders of neighborhood art and history organizations on your project team. Invite artists to help shape your event and professional historians and writers to draft the teaser signs.
- ✓ Link to the website of a local community group and update your information regularly.
- ✓ Have a central contact. Keep a list of who requested signs.
- ✓ Create distribution points—places in the neighborhood where people can pick up blank signs and guidelines.
- ✓ Update your sign location list the morning of the event if possible.
- ✓ Publish an electronic record of the project. The knowledge that this would happen motivated many to take extra care in researching their house and drafting their text. Attribute each sign text to its author.
- ✓ And it's best NOT to attempt this during a political campaign year. Otherwise, too many signs!



Catherine Zusy

Philip Clendaniel discovers a sign about the late Henry Nadelli, the former resident of 175 Pearl Street who gave dahlias from his garden to passersby.

Yet another house reported members of the Coolidge family living there throughout the nineteenth century, notably Flavel, a brushmaker, and his wife Ann Wilds, both former members of the celibate Shaker sect.

Other signs detailed building costs. Several structures had been made of reused timber, while others had served as boarding houses—including one Barack Obama Sr., lived in while he was studying at Harvard. There were descriptions

of time capsules found in walls, and of how some houses were built on filled-in tidal marshes. Signs recorded neighborhood activism in the 1960s as well as architecturally sensitive restorations and green building endeavors. One evocative sign told of the frugality of two WWII families who shared an apartment as they worked at the local arsenal. One couple worked the night shift and the other the day shift so that they could trade off using the bedroom and living spaces.

Shifting to the colorful culture of the 1970s and 1980s, another sign told about a night at a local gallery. Here is an excerpt:

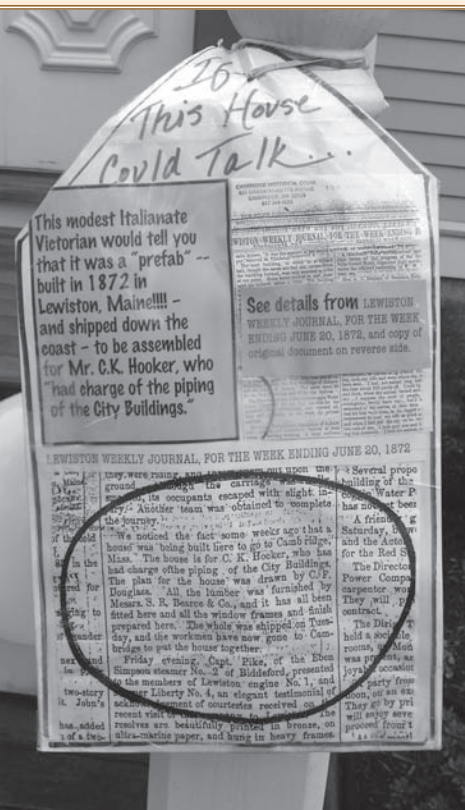
One time, in the spring of 1987, the Cambridge police had to come here to shut down an art opening that got a little wild. *The Twatones*, a local female a cappella comedy troupe, got the crowd a little noisy by playing a little game: every time the word “art” was heard, everyone had to yell. When the song “Too Much Art” was sung, and the party across the street joined the crowd, well, that’s when the whole thing got canned... I even remember Marianne Faithfull, the British singer who dated Mick Jagger, was here for that one. This was all hosted at the Brinkerhoff Gallery, named after a local navy Sea Captain Wilbur Brinkerhoff, who died at sea during the naval Battle of Guadalcanal, in 1942.

A sign for a condominium building claimed that it had long been filled with social activists. Added by hand: “AND, YES!!! Regular people, too!” One of our local luminaries, Ray Magliozzi of NPR’s *Car Talk*, noted, “On September 12, 1986, Good News Garage relocated its World Headquarters to this spot. Visitors come from far and wide to see if either of those ‘Car Talk’ guys actually show up for work!”

Both the writers and the readers seemed to enjoy the project. One sign writer commented, “What surprised us

was that our quest for information sparked many interesting conversations with our neighbors about all the houses up and down the street, and about the people who used to live here.” Other neighbors emailed, “It’s a great way for newcomers (and old timers) to understand the rich personal history of the neighborhood” and “Great project—I feel closer to my neighborhood and neighbors.” Children responded as well. One five-year-old boy was intrigued that a toymaker

Many signs included reproductions of old newspaper articles, photographs, and maps. This one reveals that the elegant villa behind it was, in part, prefab, made of Maine timbers.



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and a schoolteacher lived in the neighborhood. My eleven-year-old son was impressed that both John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., had spoken at the church where his Scout troop met. At the close of the project, as I walked through the neighborhood gathering teaser signs, people thanked me/us for the project. One man stopped his station wagon in the middle of the road, rolled down his window, and yelled, “I loved reading those signs!”

REFLECTIONS

We plan to repeat Cambridgeport History Day, including *If This House Could Talk...* October 2-10, 2010. Our goal is to include more people of color, people who grew up in the neighborhood, and schoolchildren. We also want to involve more houses of worship and businesses. To achieve this we will meet early on with local community and business leaders, and we may leaflet door-to-door a month prior to the event.

We also may include more curated signs, adding placards about local professors, writers, and scientists. And we want to add signage about public parking, public housing, city water, and sewage systems—things we take for granted but were not always there. We might integrate some census research as well. There was a purity in the first event, however, that we don’t want to compromise. Mostly, we want our neighbors writing the signs. If anything, we want a wider range of voices.

Finally, in 2010 we hope to publish a map of signs, rather than just publish a list of sign locations. This will be challenging, because many sign writers notified us the day before, and others not at all. One doesn’t know until it happens if the event is going to take off. That is part of the fun of it, though, the delight one finds in coming upon a nugget of local history.

CONCLUSION

While there are a few other websites that encourage people to post information about community (www.cornerstory.org) and interesting places (www.waymarking.com), *ITHCT* is the only physical manifestation of these ideas that we know of. We hope that others will set up their own *ITHCT*.

Each event will have its own look and feel, depending upon who plans it, what resources they have available, and the unique character of their community. In time, we hope that *ITHCT* will encourage conversations and a community spirit across the country. ☉

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¹ See www.wardmaps.com, a Cambridge company that has originals and reproductions of maps from all over the world.