

If This House Could Talk . . . :

Letting the Community Tell Its Story

by Cathie Zusy

Cathie Zusy, an independent museum curator and community activist, was developer and leader of the If this house could talk . . . project in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 2009 to 2011. She may be contacted at cathzusy@gmail.com.

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If this house could talk. . . (ITHCT) debuted in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in October 2009, when 70 signs about local history popped up around Cambridgeport (a one-half-square-mile section of Cambridge), to the surprise and delight of hundreds of residents (fig. 1). The signs were up for nine days, and many signmakers were so proud of them that they were reluctant to take them down. People had written about who built their house, or lived there; their pets; their gardens; strange guests; local wildlife—whatever they wanted (fig. 2). The exhibition was ephemeral, and yet it has had lasting impact. Over the past three years, Cambridge’s ITHCT has inspired projects like it in large and small cities across the country and in Canada.¹

ITHCT is a nimble and responsive exhibition that the community curates with the guidance of local history experts. Professionals provide historical and material resources, encouragement, and organization. Residents and businesses craft handwritten signs that often include drawings, copies of old newspaper clippings, maps, or photographs. ITHCT signs have also been mounted at parks, schools, and houses of worship.

In this article, I will first describe how three communities have made the project their own and then share what we’ve learned from the six (so far) incarnations of ITHCT. This is not a “how to” article; for that, go to www.ITHCT.wordpress.com.

Site #1: Hatching and Developing the Idea in Cambridge

As a way to engage the community in local history, public artist Ross Miller

and I developed ITHCT in 2009, with the support of the Cambridge Historical Commission, the Cambridge Historical Society, a local writer, and a history professor, as part of Cambridgeport History Day—a New England “Old Home Day” of sorts. Miller came up with the house-shaped template, and it was either Miller or Henrietta Davis, then



Fig. 1. With If this house could talk. . . the neighborhood itself becomes the exhibition. Courtesy of Ross Miller

Cambridge’s mayor, who conceived of the prompt, “If this house could talk. . .” The idea was to have the community create an exhibition of itself, along the streets of Cambridgeport, guided by us.

Making this happen required writing model “teaser signs” to inspire participation, creating guidelines and lists of historical resources, assembling materials (paper, string, balloons, and wooden stakes), creating sign distribution centers, publicizing the event, and producing a database of participants and sign locations and sign location map.

When the 70 signs sprouted all over Cambridgeport that first October, we

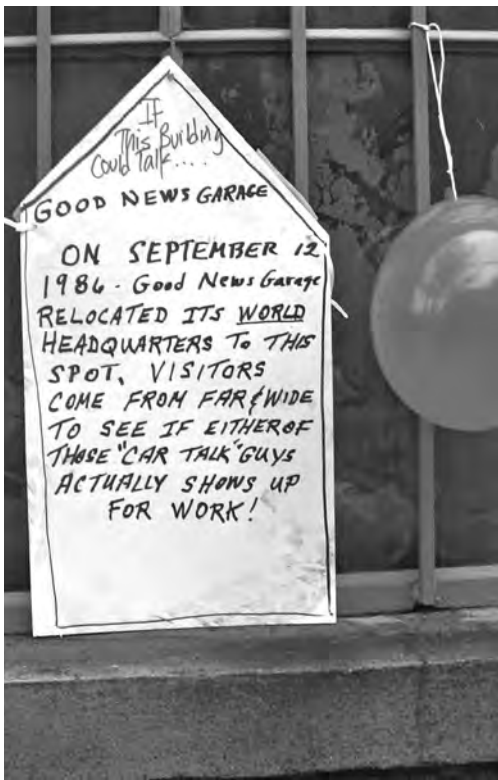


Fig. 2. The signs of local luminaries—such as those posted by the hosts of the popular National Public Radio show, “Car Talk”—inspire broader participation and make the event fun. Courtesy of Cathie Zusy

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were thrilled, for we had no idea until that morning exactly how many people would post them or what they would look like. Neighbors loved it. It was an opportunity for self-expression, a kind of physical “YouTube,” as Miller has described it. What we soon realized, though, was that most of the sign writers were highly educated and owners of single-family homes—a much more homogenous group than we had anticipated.

We wanted to hear from more, and more diverse, voices. So, the next year, I presented the project to the tenants’ councils at two local public housing complexes; created signs from interviews with longtime residents who were reluctant to write signs themselves; and went door to door inviting businesses and churches to participate. We also added more “curated” signs (written by history professionals), at local parks, schools, streets, industries, and even at the site of a former velodrome. This time, 112 signs popped up, including 12 signs in low-income housing, four at churches, and

one at a biotech company: a biochemical engineer had approached us and asked to participate.

In 2011, we created an ITHCT committee, with each member focusing on drawing out a different group of neighbors or signs relating to a specific theme. One hundred eighteen ITHCT signs resulted, including seven signs from our neighbor, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). That year, too, we added another dimension to our neighborhood exhibition—five “pop-up performances.” These featured local actors at the actual site of historical activity—for example, a rower with a scull at a boat club, and an assembly line worker with a Model T at an old Ford factory.²

Since 2011, with a community of activists that grew out of ITHCT, I’ve been leading a project to revitalize Magazine Beach, a local 15-acre riverside park. ITHCT has continued, however, led by volunteers working with the historical commission and historical society. There were 81 signs in 2012, 38 signs in 2013, and 52 in 2014. While passersby continue to enjoy happening upon the signs—especially newcomers—the sign makers seem worn out. Perhaps doing ITHCT once or twice in a community is enough—at least for every five to ten years. Novelty is important. If the project doesn’t change or grow, it becomes one more thing to do rather than an inspired event.

Site #2: 500 Sign Writers in Inner-City Calgary

In 2012, the Calgary Heritage Initiative (CHI) organized Century Homes Calgary, modeled after ITHCT, as part of Historic



Fig. 3. Calgary's event celebrated the city's first building boom, when the railroad came to town. This bungalow was built in 1913. Courtesy of Cynthia Klaassen

Calgary Week. The goal of the project was to celebrate Calgary's old homes—most of them about 100 years old, built during Calgary's first boom—with the hopes of ensuring their preservation. The CHI was concerned about losing historic homes to new development, a problem in many inner-city neighborhoods.

CHI president and lead organizer Cynthia Klaassen recounted that “the project caught on faster than a prairie grass fire.” Over 500 households participated, doubling the number of researchers using historical records and resources at local archives and libraries. The signs, most with an architecture and preservation focus, are pictured in a legacy database managed by the Calgary Public Library, and at www.centuryhomes.org (fig. 3).

Calgary's success was in large part because of strong leadership and a network of well-established community (neighborhood) associations, which have local government support. A \$40,000 budget helped, too.³ In contrast, Cambridge's project was a volunteer effort that cost \$100; Sacramento's (which I

describe next) was mostly volunteer and cost \$1,000.

A committee of ten volunteers, who together donated more than 1,000 hours, was critical to Calgary's success. They took care of fundraising, marketing, communications, community recruitment, and overall project management. They also organized community engagement sessions including research seminars, a roundtable about house styles and historic paint colors, and social media (Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter). In addition the committee recruited community coordinators who organized and supported participants in two dozen neighborhoods, distributing information and materials and arranging local walking tours.

Calgary's project received the Governor General of Canada's award for Excellence in Community History Programming “for fostering community pride and enhancing civic memory.” Klaassen and her team are now in the process of publishing a blueprint for the project with the aim of spreading it to other Canadian cities.⁴

Site #3: Creating Colorful Signs in Sacramento

Sacramento's program, mounted in three neighborhoods (covering 25 blocks total) in 2012, was shaped by five workshops led by artists, storytellers, and archivists over a six-month period. "Five Blocks Square" showed how to map a neighborhood; "How to Read a House" explored how to do historical research; "Voices" focused on gathering oral histories; "Going Beyond the Bare Bones" explored how to flesh out the story using improvisational theater techniques; and an ITHCT workshop taught how to write and illustrate the signs. As a result, many of the signs included illustrations and read as stories (fig. 4).

The overall project was called Five Blocks Square, inspired by architect and urban theorist Andres Duany's observation that the average person won't walk more than five blocks before getting into his or her car. The goal of the program was to get people to examine and discover what was in their local area.

Sacramento's ITHCT benefited from being one of many programs celebrating local history and art. It was organized in association with the Sacramento Old City Association annual house tour, an artists' studio tour, and a local stage production of Sacramento writer Joan Didion's book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. There was cross-promotion between all of these events, and the result was greater participation. About 30 people made signs; hundreds of people discovered them; over 200 participated in workshops; hundreds attended the play; and almost 1,500 attended the house tour. The project also benefited from well-coordinated marketing efforts, including

two websites—ifthishousecouldtalk.wordpress.com and fiveblocksquare.wordpress.com.

Interest in the project from other neighborhoods in Sacramento (there are over 40) has been so great that lead organizer Maryellen Burns and colleagues are writing a book about it featuring replicable workshops, handouts, photographs of signs, and additional interviews and research. Sacramento's workshops also live on, as team members still present them to libraries, community centers, and neighborhood associations. And the committee that ITHCT brought together continues to meet monthly over coffee to discuss art, literature, and local issues.



Fig. 4. Sacramento's signs, inspired by artists and storytellers, were colorful in word and look. This sign features bright green trees, red printing, and flowers in shades of yellow and lavender. Courtesy of Maryellen Burns

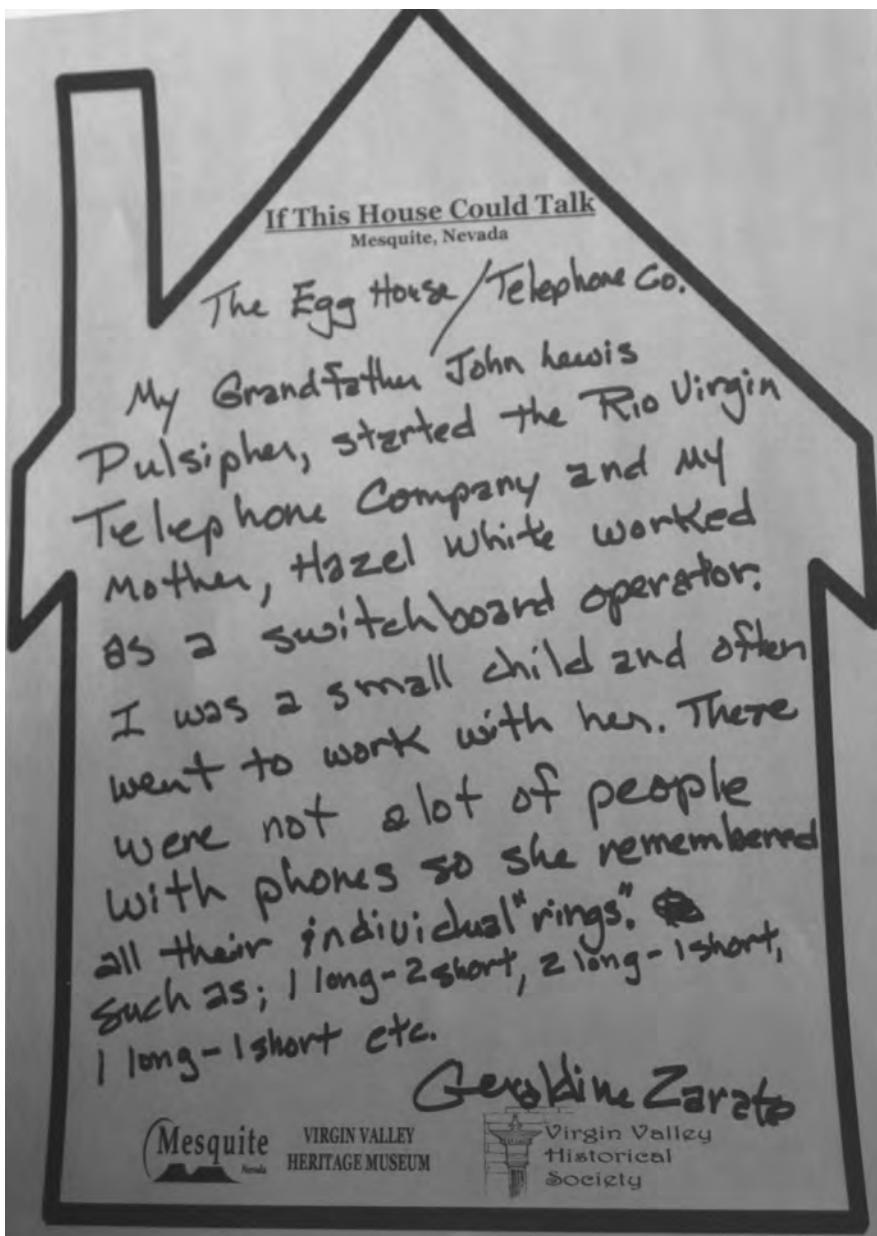


Fig. 5. Mesquite's signs featured snippets of oral histories from longtime residents. Courtesy of Erika Kuta Marler

ITHCT gets people talking, connecting, and adding to each other's stories, and can even compel civic action.

Smaller Projects

It's important to note that while the above ITHCT sites are in large cities, smaller projects can have a big impact. ITHCT projects have been mounted in Meridian, Idaho (population 78,000); Mesquite, Nevada (population 16,000); and Fairfield, Connecticut (population 59,000). Meridian's, organized by 81-year-old Lila Hill and colleagues at the local historical society, inspired a walking tour with QR codes; these linked to film clips of Hill talking about Meridian's old buildings and businesses. A local third-grade teacher used it as

the basis for a history project with such success that Meridian is now developing a professional development training program, with college credit, for third-grade teachers in local history—the first of its kind in Idaho.⁵ In Mesquite, ITHCT inspired Virgin Valley Heritage Museum Coordinator Erika Kuta Marler to record the stories of old-timers, many of them children of the original settlers. Signs there featured excerpts from the oral histories (fig. 5). And in Fairfield, the Fairfield Museum and History Center used ITHCT to help celebrate the community's 375th anniversary.

Lessons Learned

Why does the simple idea of ITHCT excite people? Because people like to be part of this community talent show, to discover their neighbors' stories, and to learn about their neighborhood as they walk through it. They also love the Easter egg surprise element of the project. The signs just pop up, and then they disappear. ITHCT gets people talking, connecting, and adding to each other's stories, and can even compel civic action. Cambridge's project has led to a campaign to revitalize a derelict park.

If you're considering creating your own ITHCT, there are some important things to keep in mind. ITHCT requires these components:

- an experienced project director—someone known in the community. ITHCT is built on relationships. Talking houses require talking people, and residents will only participate if they understand that they're being invited to take part in something meaningful.

ITHCT challenges traditional museum hierarchies and methodology, and the result is a vibrant public history happening.

- strong partnerships. Typically, neighborhood associations, historical, preservation and arts organizations, libraries, local theater companies, and schools are part of the project team. You'll need their help, their expertise—and their contact lists.
- committed volunteers.
- a larger program. ITHCT works best when it is one of a set of connected events.
- walkable area(s). You can't discover your neighbors or neighborhood by car.
- participation that is easy and fun. While ITHCT needs to look effortless, it's not. Encouraging broad community involvement requires a lot of groundwork.

ITHCT forges relationships with the built environment and among neighbors by taking the exhibition out of the museum and unleashing the ideas and energy of laypeople—facilitated by professionals—on the neighborhood. Also, why not encourage more voices? The official, didactic voice can grow tiresome. You do relinquish control with ITHCT, but people are pretty thoughtful about what they post in front of their house or business and on the electronic record of the event—it represents them. The project can also incorporate art, theater, and even music (though as far as I know the latter hasn't been tried yet). And why not? History exhibitions should reflect the full gamut of life.

ITHCT challenges traditional museum hierarchies and methodology, and the result is a vibrant public history happening (fig. 6). Consider trying it yourself! You are welcome to use the name and our template; just let us know about your project so that we can post it to the website. ✨



Fig. 6. Sign writers are proud to share their stories. This sign, at Cambridge's Village Grill & Seafood, told how the owners had traveled thousands of miles from Greece to start a business and to live the American dream. The sign says that their best dishes are "delicious pizza" and "fresh baked haddock," delivered from Georges Bank three times a week. Courtesy of Cathie Zusy

Endnotes:

¹ Other communities have learned about the project from articles about it in *History News* (2010) and *Preservation Forum* (2011), the National Trust's blog (2011 & 2013); presentations at conferences of the American Association for State and Local History (2012) and the Connecticut League of Historical Organizations (2014); and from visiting our websites www.cambridgehistory.org/ifthishouse and www.ithct.wordpress.com. The first includes our sign text and map and the latter, articles about ITHCT, templates, and photographs and information about all of the projects mentioned in this article.

² Mass Humanities funded these historical vignettes. The committee, and writer and producer Michael Schaffer, researched the engaging scripts. We engaged actors from a local theater company.

³ The money was used, at least in part, to hire a designer, develop a website and database, photograph 900 signs (500 in 2012 and 400 in 2013), purchase yard signs and banners, and fund the post-event "House Party of the Century" (held at a local school).

⁴ Klaassen has presented *Century Homes* Calgary at two national conferences in Canada. As a result, Medicine Hat, Alberta and Ottawa, will both soon mount a similar event.

⁵ The third-graders' presentations of properties also inspired Meridian to fund 53 third-grade classes to tour the Meridian History Center. (Meridian is the fastest growing town in Idaho.)