

“Crisis of Place: Preserving Folk & Vernacular Architecture in New York”: Annual Conference of the New York Folklore Society, co-sponsored by The Cooper Union

A report on consultancy and professional development effort pursued with support from the Consultancy and Professional Development Program of the American Folklore Society

By Gabrielle Berlinger, Kay Turner, and Ellen McHale

With generous support from the Consultancy and Professional Development Program of the American Folklore Society, the New York Folklore Society brought together 20 folk cultural experts to participate as panelists in a one-day convening around issues of folk and vernacular architecture preservation. The event took place on April 2, 2016 at The Cooper Union in New York City. Entitled “Crisis of Place: Preserving Folk & Vernacular Architecture in New York,” this gathering brought together folklorists, architectural historians, architects, historic preservationists, community advocates and activists, museum professionals, and graduate students from across the nation to present their academic and public-facing work related to questions of folk and vernacular architecture preservation.

Background

This day of intellectual, cultural, and social exchange came together in response to three serendipitously timed conversations. The first conversation occurred at the American Folklore Society (AFS) meetings of 2014 and of 2015, where panels around the divergence of the fields of folklore and vernacular architecture challenged the tension between the fields. At AFS in 2014, Michael Ann Williams chaired a panel entitled, “Where Have All the Folklorists Gone?: Vernacular Architecture Studies and Our Discipline,” featuring senior folklorists who had worked on vernacular architecture topics in their careers and could offer historical perspective on why the partnership between the fields had weakened. The following year, at AFS 2015, Gabrielle Berlinger chaired a panel in response to Michael Ann Williams’ panel, titled “Folklorists Doing Vernacular Architecture,” which featured three female graduate students then in folklore programs who were all working on vernacular architecture thesis projects. This panel focused on present-day scholars who are actively and successfully integrating folklore and vernacular architecture methodologies in their studies to merge these fields more than separate them. The conversations were animated and there was great interest in pursuing increased dialogue between Vernacular Architecture Forum members and American Folklore Society members.

The second conversation that helped realize the “Crisis of Place” conference occurred in the New York Folklore Society (NYFS) Board meeting later that year, when members expressed interest not only in reviving the annual NYFS conference, but re-envisioning the kind of intellectual and social work that it could accomplish. We wanted to organize a gathering in which issues of relevance and importance to the New York folklore community could be engaged by public advocates and cultural scholars from a diversity of related fields. We aimed to reach out and connect with neighboring allies to increase our visibility, awareness, and understanding.

The third conversation occurred at a public lecture hosted by the Bard Graduate Center where Gabrielle Berlinger, then a postdoctoral fellow there, met and engaged one of the

attendees, Stephen Rustow, in a conversation about vernacular architecture as an area of study within folklore studies. Rustow, then the Interim Director of the Architecture School at Cooper Union, was eager to discover that this field existed within folklore studies as he said that the term “vernacular architecture” had become heated in the Architecture School as of late. They agreed that a collaboration of some kind between NY folklore and Cooper Union Architecture would be productive for both fields.

The convergence of these three conversations in 2015 enabled the Board of the New York Folklore Society to imagine Cooper Union hosting a 1-day interdisciplinary gathering of scholars and practitioners to examine the current state, and indeed, crisis, of folk and vernacular architecture across the state of New York. Stephen Rustow was eager to co-sponsor the event. The aim was to gather a diverse group of cultural advocates and scholars to think together across disciplines about how to face impending consequences of increasing globalization, commodification, gentrification, and technological advance.

The Program and the Participants

The day was organized in the following format: an opening plenary dialogue, “Looking Back in Time and Forward in Space,” followed by the first panel, “Graduates on the Ground – Invited Students Present Recent Case Studies,” a lunch break, then the second panel, “Crisis of New York Places: Folklorists, Vernacular Architects and Communities Working Together to Preserve and Promote Local Histories of Place,” and the Closing Plenary and Roundtable Discussion, “New Horizons Ahead: Averting Future Crises (Smart Phones Will Not Be Enough).” The opening plenary dialogue featured Dr. Michael Ann Williams (Western Kentucky University) and Dr. Andrew Dolkart (Columbia University). Following them, five graduate students took the stage: Matthew Singer (Penn State University), Caitlin Hays Black, (Penn State University), Sydney Varajon (Western Kentucky University), Virginia Siegel (Western Kentucky University), and Max Gideonse (The Cooper Union). This panel was moderated by Gabrielle A. Berlinger (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) and Zoe van Buren (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). The second panel featured an array of public and academic scholars: Joseph Sciorra (Director for Academic and Cultural Programs, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College), Molly Garfinkel (Director, Place Matters, City Lore), Magali Regis (NYC Community Garden Coalition, Sustainable Architecture), and Cynthia Falk (Cooperstown Graduate Program). This panel was moderated by Chris Mulé (Director of Folk Arts, Brooklyn Arts Council). And the final closing plenary, again, showcased the work of a diverse group of cultural advocates: Hanna Griff-Sleven (Director of Family History Center & Cultural Programs, Eldridge Street Synagogue), Maria Kennedy (Coordinator of Folk Arts, Arts Council of the Southern Finger Lakes), Nancy Solomon (Executive Director, Long Island Traditions, Dave Favalaro (Director of Curatorial Affairs, Lower East Side Tenement Museum), and Julie Tay (Vice-President and Executive Director, Menci Society of the Arts). This panel was moderated by Kay Turner (President, American Folklore Society).

Brief bios of the participants are included at the end of this report.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Across the day’s diversity of case studies and methodological approaches, several key questions guided the conversation:

- ◆ What is the folk and vernacular architecture of New York State? What makes it “folk” or “vernacular?”
- ◆ How are the conditions of urban and rural life in 2016 challenging traditional architectural practices among various ethnic and regional communities?
- ◆ Who is sustaining vernacular design and construction in the face of globalization and gentrification, and why?

From each speaker, we heard details about how local, city, state, and national government bodies, legal restrictions, and preservation standards control financial and political dimensions of the sustainability of vernacular spaces and structures. We also learned about myriad community initiatives, local advocacy efforts, and individual actions that have galvanized greater support for and protection of vernacular spaces and structures. Examples include a presentation by Cynthia Falk of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Material Culture (SUNY Oneonta), who spoke about the Town of Schoharie’s recovery after experiencing devastating flooding caused by Hurricane Irene, and architect, Magali Regis of the NYC Community Garden Coalition, who spoke about the community garden movement in New York City and its role in building community.

In his welcoming remarks to commence the day’s program, Stephen Rustow, Professor of Architecture at The Cooper Union, concluded that, “despite the many efforts to safeguard and protect the vernacular that have been organized in the last decades, the idea of a Crisis of Place, the subject at hand today, is not an exaggeration and conferences like this one seem both necessary and timely.” This interdisciplinary convening of scholars and practitioners offered a model structure for how to address issues of vital importance to folklorists as well as professionals of allied fields. The graduate student from Cooper Union was elated to learn of folklore and vernacular architecture scholarship that resonated with his interests at the Architecture School, and numerous other participants found meaning in shared struggles and accomplishments across the varied disciplines and professions represented. In post-conference discussions, members of the New York Folklore Society expressed hopes that future annual gatherings would similarly bring together such diverse groups of invested professionals around issues of common interest. In this way, such events may raise the visibility of folklorists and the field of folklore at large through new partnerships that will advance our efforts with greater success.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Gabrielle A. Berlinger is an Assistant Professor of American Studies and Folklore, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the Babette S. and Bernard J. Tanenbaum Fellow in Jewish History and Culture. She received her PhD in Folklore Studies at Indiana University-Bloomington and was an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow for the “Cultures of Conservation” initiative at the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan. Over the past decade, Gabrielle worked in applied arts and cultural education organizations in both public and academic sectors in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Indiana, New York, and Israel. Her work

focuses on the nature and significance of vernacular architecture and common landscapes, as well as the role of ritual in the formation and fragmentation of multicultural societies. Gabrielle's dissertation, based in a multiethnic, working-class neighborhood of South Tel Aviv, Israel, was an ethnographic study of the temporary ritual dwellings built for the annual Jewish festival of Sukkot. In New York, she conducted a project at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum to document the preservation process of the Museum's 19th-century tenement building. This study brought together issues of historic preservation, social history, and museum anthropology in the reconciliation of material and cultural conservation needs.

Andrew Dolkart is a Professor of Historic Preservation and the Director of the Historic Preservation Program at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. He is a historian specializing in the architecture and development of New York City, with particular interest in the common, yet overlooked building types that line the city's streets. He is the author of several award-winning books, including *Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development*, *Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street*, and *The Row House Reborn: Architecture and Neighborhoods in New York City, 1980–1929*, which won the Society of Architectural Historians' prestigious Antoinette Forrester Downing Award in 2012. He is currently working on a book on the architecture and development of New York City's Garment District.

Cynthia G. Falk is an Associate Professor of Material Culture at the Cooperstown Graduate Program, a Master's degree program in museum studies sponsored by the State University of New York College at Oneonta. Falk is the author of the books *Barns of New York: Rural Architecture of the Empire State* and *Architecture and Artifacts of the Pennsylvania Germans: Constructing Identity in Early America*. She contributed to the volumes *A Shared Legacy: Folk Art in America* and *A Peculiar Mixture: German-Language Cultures and Identities in Eighteenth-century North America*. Falk serves as the co-editor of *Buildings & Landscapes*, the journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and is an elected Trustee of the Village of Cooperstown. Falk did her undergraduate work at Penn State University, earned a MA in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, and completed her PhD in American Civilization at the University of Delaware.

David Favaloro is Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City. He is primarily responsible for interpreting the history of the tenements at 97 and 103 Orchard Street, with an emphasis on research and exhibit development. He also oversees the museum's preservation, conservation, and collections management programs. He received his MA in Public History from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Molly Garfinkel is the Director of the Place Matters project for City Lore in New York City. Place Matters is a public history and community advocacy initiative of City Lore. She has worked in cultural resource management, museum education, exhibition curation, and traditional arts presentation. Her research explores Western and non-Western building traditions, theories of cultural landscapes, and histories of urbanism and city planning. She holds an MA in Architectural History from the University of Virginia.

Hanna Griff-Sleven is the Director of Cultural Programming and Intern Programs at the Museum at Eldridge Street in New York City. She received her PhD in Folklore and American Studies from Indiana University. While studying at Indiana University, she was the Director of the Folklore Archives, as well as an adjunct professor at Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis. She served as a lecturer in the American Studies Department at Grinnell College, as well as being the director of the oral history project, “Toldot Iowa” (the oral history of the Jews of Iowa). After working as an Assistant Professor in the Inter Cultural Program at Sanyo Gakuen University in Okayama, Japan for several years, she worked as an oral history consultant at the Museum of Southern Jewish Experience. Prior to working at Eldridge Street, Hanna was a Program Officer in the Folk Arts Program at the New York State Council on the Arts. Dr. Griff-Sleven is an adjunct lecturer at the Eugene Lang College of The New School for Social Research, and an adjunct Associate Professor at The City College of New York and New York University School of Continuing Education.

Maria Kennedy is the Folk Arts Coordinator at The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes in Corning, New York, a regional arts council serving four counties. Before coming to The ARTS Council, Maria worked at Traditional Arts Indiana and the Institute for Digital Arts and Humanities at Indiana University as a graduate assistant. She has also worked at Oliver Winery and Conner Prairie Living History Museum. Maria completed her joint MA in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology and the School of Journalism at Indiana University and is currently a PhD Candidate in Folklore at Indiana University. Her dissertation in progress is titled, “Finding Lost Fruit: Natural and Cultural Heritage in the British Countryside,” which examines the interplay of cultural heritage and environmental conservation in the context of agricultural land, focusing on orchards and cider making as a case study.

Christopher Mulé is the Director of Folk Arts for Brooklyn Arts Council (BAC). Prior to formally joining BAC in 2014, he served as the Deputy Director and Director of Folklife at Staten Island Arts (formerly COAHSI). In addition to BAC, Mr. Mulé serves on the Board of Directors for the Ghanaian Association of Staten Island, a Liberian service organization called Napela, and as the Vice President of the Board of Directors for the New York Folklore Society (NYFS). He earned his MA in Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Magali Regis, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, is an architect practicing in New York City with a focus on sustainable design, historic preservation, and adaptive reuse. She is also a community gardener and garden activist, working for the past 15 years to preserve New York’s communal public spaces from looming development. Magali serves on the board of the New York City Community Garden Coalition, an advocacy group representing over 600 community gardens and 20,000 gardeners.

Stephen Rustow is Professor of Architecture at The Cooper Union, joining the faculty of the Irwin Chanin School of Architecture in 2004. He was the first architecture professor to hold the Ellen and Sidney Feltman Chair, in 2006 and 2007. Professor Rustow was previously a lecturer and studio critic for six years in Columbia University’s Paris Studio program and has served as an invited juror at Columbia, Princeton, Yale, Harvard and UP 3 and 8 in Paris. His written criticism has appeared in *Praxis*, *Casabella*, *JSAH* and the *Revue du Louvre* among other

publications, and he has lectured widely on subjects related to the design of museums including lighting, exhibition design, and the role of the museum in urban development. He is the founder and principal of Museoplan, a consulting practice that works with arts institutions and design professionals to plan, program, and design the installation of cultural collections. Recent projects include the Museum of Urbanism in Hangzhou, China; the Yuan Museum in Beijing, China; the National Museum Center of Sofia, Bulgaria; the Museum for African Art in NY; and the Galleria Gabbiano in Rome, Italy. Professor Rustow completed an undergraduate degree with high honors in Anthropology and Studio Arts at the University of Rochester and received Master's degrees in Architecture and in Urban Planning from M.I.T., where he was awarded an Institute Fellowship. He was an invited participant in the inaugural semester of Giancarlo de Carlo's ILAUD, and, concurrently with his graduate studies, a Fellow of the National Science Foundation. Professor Rustow is a registered architect in the state of New York and holds certification from National Council of Architectural Registration Boards; he is a member of the American Institute of Architects and a past member of the Ordre des Architectes in France. He is also an urban planner, a past member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, and a member of the American Planning Association.

Joseph Sciorra is Director of Academic and Cultural Programs at Queens College's John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (City University of New York). As a folklorist (PhD, University of Pennsylvania), Sciorra has conducted ethnographic research on vernacular expressivity and published on religious practices, material culture, and popular music. He has curated exhibitions such as "Sacred Emblems, Community Signs: Historic Flags and Religious Banners from Italian Williamsburg, Brooklyn" (2003) and "Evviva La Madonna Nera!: Italian American Devotion to the Black Madonna" (2002). He is editor of the scholarly journal *Italian American Review* and of *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives* (2011), co-editor of *Embroidered Stories: Interpreting Women's Domestic Needlework from the Italian Diaspora* (2014) and *Graces Received: Painted and Metal Ex-votos from Italy* (2012), and author of *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art* (2002) and *Built with Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* (2015). He is currently working on a co-edited anthology about post-World War Italian immigration to the United States.

Nancy Solomon is a folklorist and Executive Director of Long Island Traditions. She holds an MA degree in American Studies and Folklife from George Washington University. She is the author of *On The Bay: Bay Houses and Maritime Culture of Long Island, West Meadow Beach: A Portrait of a Long Island Beach Community*, and *Long Island Traditional Architecture: A Teacher Resource Guide*. She is an adjunct professor of anthropology at Hofstra University. Nancy has lectured extensively on the history and traditions of Long Island's fishermen and baymen and traditional architecture. She has been working on Long Island since 1987 and for Long Island Traditions since 1995.

Julie Tay is a lifetime translator and educator, and a self-styled musician and advocate of traditional and folk arts, particularly as it relates to representation and access among immigrant Chinese in New York City. Since 2003, Tay has served as Executive Director of the non-profit Mencius Society for the Arts, securing on its behalf continuous public funding, including NYSCA's "Special Arts" and "Arts in Education" and the NEA ArtsWorks award towards the Silk & Bamboo Heritage for Chinese music. Since 2010, as Founder and Director of the Asian

Cultural Exchange (ACE Forum), based in New York's Chinatown, Tay's work is very focused on language consulting, translation, interpreting, as well as niche market research and outreach services pertaining to Chinese language and culture. An ethnographer by vocation, she has made numerous live and media appearances, including a 2013 radio interview on WQXR 105.9 FM on Voices of the Lunar New Year, performance and interview in the Ebru.TV Series, Roots & Rhythm (in 2009), and in 2001 an interviewer credit to the post-9/11 documentary initiative, *Harmony & Spirit – Chinese Americans in New York*, which aired on WNET. Tay's long-term research interest is in oral traditions and urban folk associations. Beginning this spring 2016, she is slated to lead "Sizhu in Urban New York" under the NEA's Challenge America award—a mixed-aged musical performance project dedicated to driving public engagement in outdoor spaces. Tay earned her MA in Anthropology (1994) from the City University of New York, and a postgraduate Diploma in Education (1987) from the National University of Singapore. Tay began teaching translation at NYU in 2013 and is currently Clinical Assistant Professor with the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting at the NYU School of Professional Studies. Collaborating with former student Gao Siyang, Tay has just secured a book contract to co-translate and edit the award-winning *Rang Ni Bu Shengbing (How Not to Get Sick)* by Dr. Liping Liao—a Chinese compendium on traditional Chinese medicine for popular readership, published by Shenzhen Haitian Publication, 2013.

Kay Turner, an Independent Scholar and Public Folklorist, is an Adjunct Professor of Performance Studies Department at New York University, and President of the American Folklore Society (2015–2018). She is a Fellow of the American Folklore Society and a winner of the Benjamin A. Botkin Prize for Public Folklore service. She directed the Brooklyn Arts Council's Folk Arts program from 2000–2014. Turner worked with Brooklyn traditional artists, practicing in a range of disciplines—music, dance, material arts, narrative, and other verbal arts. She initiated a number of field research-based projects resulting in public programs such as "Praise in the Park: Musical Expressions of Faith;" "Local Eyes: Folk Photographers in Brooklyn;" "Williamsburg Bridge 100th Anniversary Celebration;" "Folk Feet: Celebrating Traditional Dance in Brooklyn;" "Brooklyn Maqam: Arab Music Festival;" "Days of the Dead in Brooklyn: Diverse Traditions of Death, Mourning and Remembrance;" "Black Brooklyn Renaissance, 1960–2010;" "Once Upon a Time in Brooklyn: Traditional Storytellers and Their Tales;" and in spring 2012, "Half the Sky: Brooklyn Women in Traditional Performance." In 2011, Turner completed a seven-year long, annual September 11th Memorial series, which included the 2006 exhibition of over 300 photographs in "Here Was New York: Twin Towers in Memorial Images" and culminating in 2011, with a reconsideration of the importance of ephemeral memorials in the legacy of September 11th. In October 2011, she held the first annual Brooklyn Folk Arts Day, a gathering of over 125 artists, local organizations, funders, elected officials, and professional folklorists interested in preserving and presenting Brooklyn's traditional culture. Turner began her public folklore adventure in the mid-1980s in Texas, where she served as interim director of the Folk Arts Collections at the San Antonio Museum of Art and co-founder (with Pat Jasper and Betsy Peterson) of Texas Folklife Resources (TFR), one of the first stand-alone, non-profit arts organizations in the nation dedicated exclusively to regional folk arts and folk life. During her tenure at TFR, Turner co-curated "Art Among Us/ Arte Entre Nosotros;" "Mexican American Folk Art of San Antonio;" "Hecho Tejano: Six Mexican-American Sculptors;" and "Handmade and Heartfelt: Folk Art of Texas," which toured Texas arts institutions, bringing the work of 80 traditional Texas artists to public attention. Turner also

teaches courses on gender, theory of time and performance, ghosts and their ontology, ephemerality, and oral narrative theory in the Performance Studies Graduate Program at New York University. She holds a PhD in Folklore and Anthropology from The University of Texas at Austin. Among her publications are *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (Thames and Hudson), an extended treatment of her dissertation on Texas-Mexican women's home altars in south Texas and *Baby Precious Always Shines: The Love Notes of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas* (St. Martin's Press). Turner's essay "September 11 and the Burden of the Ephemeral" was published in *Western Folklore* in 2009 and her latest book (with Pauline Greenhill) is *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (Wayne State University Press). Kay remains dedicated to her own artistic pursuits in singing, songwriting, collaborative performance works, and alternative curatorial initiatives.

Tom van Buren, President of New York Folklore Society. (2015–2017), is the Director of the Folk Arts Program for ArtsWestchester, the arts council of Westchester County, New York. A folk arts and music presenter with extensive public sector folk arts experience in field research, performance programs, and media productions, he earned a doctorate in Ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland (2001), writing on the practice of music and dance in the Francophone West African immigrant community of New York City. His areas of cultural expertise also include expressive cultures of the Caribbean and the Middle East, as well as the wider topic of cultural migration and transnational communities. From 1994 to 2003, he worked on cultural programs related to immigrant communities of the New York metropolitan area for the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, including concert and festival productions and audio-visual documentation projects. From 1996 to 2000, he was Project Director of the Dominican Community Cultural Initiative, which founded the Quisqueya en el Hudson Festival in Washington Heights, New York. He was co-editor/compiler of the *Global Beat of the Boroughs* CD series for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, for which he also produced two other albums: *Badenya: Manden Music in New York City* (2002) and *Quisqueya en el Hudson: Dominican Music in New York* (2004). Since 2003, he has produced public programs for ArtsWestchester, including concerts, festivals, and material arts exhibitions, featuring primarily immigrant community-based artists of the lower Hudson Valley. He has also curated exhibitions of material arts, including "Folk Arts of the Spirit," presenting folk religious expressions in 2007; "Set in Stone" (2008) that presented field research conducted over the previous decade, beginning with work done by folklorist Amanda Dargan; "From Shore to Shore: Boat Builders and Boat Yards of Westchester and Long Island" (2013), in collaboration with Long Island Traditions; and "Hatitude: the Milliner in Culture and Couture" (2014). He has also directed performing arts seasons for ArtsWestchester since 2009, and three years of the White Plains Jazz Festival.

Zoe van Buren is a Folklore Studies graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She interned with Arts Mid-Hudson in 2013. She was born in New York City and earned her BA in Anthropology from Vassar College.

Michael Ann Williams is Professor of Folk Studies at Western Kentucky University, and Past-President of the American Folklore Society (2014–2015). Dr. Williams has also served as 1st Vice-President of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and as Editor of the Vernacular Architecture Newsletter. Her book, *Homeplace*, won the VAF's Abbott Lowell Cummings

Award. Her other works include *Great Smoky Mountains Folklife* and *Staging Tradition*. Dr. Williams heads the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology at Western Kentucky University, where she has taught for 30 years. She is a University Distinguished Scholar at WKU and a Fellow of the American Folklore Society. Her current research interests include international Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies and the use of the “traditional cultural property” designation in the National Register of Historic Places. She holds a BA in Anthropology from Marshall College, and a MA and PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests have included social and symbolic use of space in vernacular architecture, government policy and its impact on Appalachian communities, and cultural representation and the staging of tradition. Recently she and her graduate students have worked on an oral history project documenting the former logging town of Ravensford, North Carolina, part of a larger cultural resource documentation effort accompanying a transfer of land from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.