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Observational Study: Tamiment Library and Tenement Museum

Though their names sound similar, the Tamiment Library and the Tenement Museum could not be more different in terms of presentation, user access to materials, utilization of space, types of visitors and how new technologies are employed to present information to visitors and researchers. The Tamiment Library is a New York University library that specializes in left wing political movements in America over the last century, whereas the Tenement Museum is a museum that uses guided tours of a restored tenement building to tell the stories of European immigrants into America around the turn of the 20th century.

The Tamiment Library is a special collections research library that caters specifically to historical researchers and is open to the public. I performed my research by posing as a researcher looking into newspaper documents relating to the Industrial Workers of the World. Tamiment Library is on the 10th floor of NYU's Bobst Library and to even enter the main building, one must have either an NYU ID card or a special pass with minimal security at the entrance. To access Tamiment's materials, one must first sign in and show some form of photo ID and then use a finding aide on one of their computers to specify which materials are needed. Then, the materials are located in the stacks by one of the librarians and brought out for viewing.

Although Tamiment is open to the public, most users appeared to be NYU students in their 20s or 30s who came alone. Conservative attire and behavior seemed to be very consistent across all the researchers there, as is to be expected of a library with one central viewing room. Visitors are required to check bags into a locker for the duration of their stay and there is a strict no cell phone policy in place

with clear signs at the entrance indicating such. Once visitors make their request for materials, they sit at either an empty table or a desk with a computer. Talking is also strictly prohibited unless whispering with a one of the library staff members as the viewing room is actually quite small.

My visit was conducted at about 2PM in the afternoon on a weekday. The library was quite busy at this time, with most tables and desks in use when I arrived. The library is regularly open from 10AM to 5PM on weekdays, so I believe that 2PM is one of their most busy times. As there is no food or water allowed in the library and it is on the 10th floor, I imagine that many of the researchers had taken a break for lunch and had just come back in to continue their work. I don't think opening is as busy, but I could believe that closing time is packed as researchers attempt to finish up their work before they need to leave.

Although the Tenement Museum has a multi-story apartment building for their visitors to walk through, it is only accessible by guided tour one floor at a time. I performed my research by attending one of these guided tours, of which there are at least five different ones at any given time. In order to access the building and any materials that are presented on the tour, visitors must first buy a ticket for a specific time either online or at the main store two doors down from the Tenement building itself. Tours meet outside of the store at the prescribed time and take about 45 minutes to complete.

Tours begin on the sidewalk just outside the old tenement building with a quick explanation of the tour itself and guidelines, such as no cell phone use inside the building, explanation of a low light environment, no touching of any of the furniture or walls once inside the building and no wandering off away from the tour group. The Tenement Museum does provide several tactile experiences, though, by providing samples of materials used in the building's construction and showcasing laminated duplicates of source materials that are passed around during the tours. For the tour I studied, they gave visitors

samples of the burlap that was used to cover the walls as well as census data and photographs of family members who lived in the apartments.

Unlike Tamiment, the Tenement Museum pulls in a much wider range of visitors, most of them tourists visiting New York from either the US or from around the world. Most visitors are not at the museum for intense historical research, but for recreation and to learn more about the city's past. Half of the visitors I encountered came with family members or friends and were quite happy to talk with me after the tour was over. Visitors were encouraged in an open way to ask questions and engage in conversation with each other not just on early 20th century immigration, but how it related to the modern day.

My tour occurred at 4PM on a Sunday afternoon, with tours occurring every 15 minutes, 7 days a week from 10AM to 6:30PM. Since most of the visitors seem to be tourists from out of town, this more flexible schedule is essential to the Museum's operation. Furthermore, when buying tickets I was surprised to see that nearly every tour was sold out days in advance, so I doubt that there is any one time the Museum is busier than others.

In comparing the two, it is surprising that although the Tenement Museum would appear to be the more hands on experience, there is no direct interaction to be had with source documents and the exposure to the building itself is very controlled and mediated through the tour guide. Conversely, although Tamiment Library is also very controlled, visitors get a much more direct experience with the artifacts and source materials with little to no mediation or interpretation by the staff. That being said, it really is difficult to compare the experience of walking through a restored, historical building and viewing archival documents. There is a visceral, personal aspect to the Tenement Museum that is lost at the Tamiment Librar, but the intensity of information one gets from a research library is much more than the Tenement Museum could ever hope to provide through its tours.