

## **Observational Study: Louis Armstrong House Museum & Fales Library and Special Collections**

Syreeta Gates

On Friday, February 15, 2019 I visited the Louis Armstrong House Museum located at 34-56 107th Street in Queens, New York. Four days later I visited Fales Library and Special Collections, which is housed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of NYU's Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, located at 70 Washington Square South in New York City. These two cultural institutions stand in deep contrast to one another; this is borne out most evidently in their respective atmospheres, accessibility, and patronage. In short, the difference between the Armstrong Museum and Fales Special Collections can be described as a contrast between intentionality and exclusivity, with the former representing an environment that is intentionally inviting, and the latter representing one that is sterile and exclusive.

### **Atmosphere**

The Louis Armstrong House Museum is located in a residential area, and as a result, people have to venture there intentionally as opposed to casually. On the Friday morning that I visited, 107<sup>th</sup> Street was lined with yellow school busses filled with elementary school-aged children excited to enter. The outside of the building boasted signs and flyers inviting anyone passing to attend upcoming events. Inside, I immediately noticed the gift shop as well as a small exhibit space. The only multimedia was a kiosk and television where a video introduction to Armstrong's life and work played continuously on demand.

The amount of young people present certainly contributed to an overall festive atmosphere – a live musician singing renditions of Armstrong's popular songs to a group of

kindergarteners also added to the museum's charm. Because the Armstrong museum is a national historic landmark, the artifacts are enclosed in glass cases, and visitors are asked not to touch walls or furniture.

Fales Library and Special Collections is the Armstrong Museum's atmospheric opposite. In order to enter, a staff member must buzz you in. The physical space consisted of four small tables. There is no multimedia nor any moving images whatsoever. The only images are of presumed dignitaries who all happen to be old white men. The static images are veritable signposts of a generally static and non-welcoming atmosphere.

### **Accessibility**

While Fales Special Collections requires no special clearances for admission, the institution's accessibility is clearly limited. The space is open to NYU students and other "qualified" researchers, though qualifying criteria is not specified. Further, even as an NYU student, I can't say that I felt welcome there. Like most archival collections, visitors must make a formal request for materials and then make an appointment to come in and view them. Staff were as accommodating as their job descriptions require, but not necessarily inviting or supportive of a patron's specific research endeavor.

The Louis Armstrong House Museum is deliberately accessible to students, scholars and researchers, as well as the community in which it is housed. Museum staff are enthusiastic about their work; one staff member spoke personally to me about how his love for Louis Armstrong led him to first volunteer at the museum before being hired officially. In my interaction with staff, they showed interest in my research trajectory, and they

offered multiple additional resources, including the Schomburg Center, that might further my work. This is in spite of the fact that I didn't have any identification with me!

## **Patronage**

Patronage is intricately tied to accessibility, as the measures taken by an institution to promote and ensure accessibility will ultimately determine the cross-section of people that frequent the facility. At the Armstrong Museum, I observed a body of visitors diverse in age, race and nationality. In fact, I'd conjecture that they receive international visitors fairly often – I noticed two while waiting to tour the museum. At Fales, patronage was limited to a small, exclusive few. During the time I spent there, I observed a group gain access through an entrance separate from the main access point, however, their comfortability with staff and with the space overall led me to believe that they were somehow connected and had probably been cleared for access at some point prior.

Everything about the Louis Armstrong House Museum says, "Come on in!" This is an institution eager to proliferate its patronage and allow access to as broad a range of people possible. In contrast, Fales Special Collections seems designed for and eager to maintain its exclusive status. Not only is this evidenced through patronage, it also reverberates in each institution's online presence.

## **Critical Questions**

There were two main questions that arose for me during the observation process. For one, neither of these environments had uniformed guards even though they house materials of great value. This caused me to question the connection between security and

accessibility. Conventional wisdom would indicate that maintenance of a secure environment requires that specific measures (such as guards and entrance systems) be taken, though these measures may impact accessibility. Interestingly, the Armstrong House Museum is able to maintain the integrity of its valuable pieces without employing more visible security measures.

Secondly, I was somewhat shocked to find that the Armstrong archive collections are not housed in the same space as the museum. The collections in this archive, including the Satchmo, Institutional History, and Jack Bradley Collections, are located on the campus of Queens College. I'm interested to learn how Queens College came to manage the Armstrong Museum and related archive.