

[Stanton on Dolkart, 'Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street'](#)

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Andrew Dolkart. *Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street.* Sante Fe: Center for American Places, 2006. Illustrations. ix + 142 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-930066-57-1.

Reviewed by Cathy L. Stanton (Union Institute & University) **Published on** H-Urban (August, 2009)
Commissioned by Robert C. Chidester

Between the Lines of Brick and Mortar

The title of Andrew Dolkart's fine architectural history, *Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street*, rather coyly avoids letting on that the tenement house in question has a much better-known identity as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Founded in 1988 and a National Historic Landmark since 1994, the Tenement Museum has become something of an icon as a site of socially conscious historical interpretation and civic engagement. And this creates something of a paradox, which is reflected in Dolkart's title: this is an exceptional, well-known site dedicated to unexceptional vernacular histories of "ordinary" people and buildings. Overall, the book negotiates this paradox neatly, with a meticulous and unsensationalized exploration of both the brick and mortar and the social history, although its final section reveals some of the interesting tensions between the building's earlier life and its current incarnation.

Dolkart, a professor in Columbia University's School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, specializes in the architectural history and preservation of his native New York and has been involved in documenting the history of 97 Orchard Street since the inception of the Tenement Museum. This book was published by the Center for American Places, which has produced a multidisciplinary list of works focusing on built and natural environments, often with a visual or vernacular perspective. Although *Biography of a Tenement House* investigates its site from the early nineteenth century to the present, its central focus mirrors that of the museum--the "period of significance" between the construction of the building in 1863-64 and 1935, when its residential use ended. The book's exploration of this period is largely structured around the various tenement laws that attempted to come to grips with the crowded and unhealthy conditions in the densely populated Lower East Side, famously documented by the photographer Jacob Riis and campaigned against by a steady succession of social reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dolkart draws on a variety of resources, including the usual census and other demographic records as well as genealogical and archeological studies, secondary sources on housing laws and regulation, and city records from tenement inspection efforts. Throughout the chapters, he also makes a fine-grained analysis of the fabric of the building itself, which gives him a basis for informed speculation about how things like municipal reform efforts and social re-positionings were reflected in the day-to-day realities of those who inhabited this densely packed building. Subtle changes in floor covering or ventilation and sanitation arrangements are read as texts containing information about tenants' lives;

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conversely, the author notes that undertaking this project opened his eyes to the potential uses that an architectural historian might make of family histories, such as those collected by the Tenement Museum as a basis for much of its interpretation. The writing is accessible and clear, and the book is well illustrated with both black and white and color images. In addition to undergirding the museum's own interpretation, the book's methodology and clarity of presentation would also serve as a solid model for those learning to produce similar socially oriented studies of the built environment (for example, for cultural resource studies or National Register nominations).

To some extent, social history is overshadowed by bricks and mortar here. Dolkart's comfort zone remains firmly within architectural history, which is admittedly his primary focus in the study. The one place where this feels unbalanced is when the story reaches the transformation of the tenement into a museum in 1988. Up to that point, Dolkart is attentive to the social and economic contexts in which the various alterations to the building were taking place. Once the site becomes a museum, however, there is an abrupt change in register as Dolkart switches to a discussion of interpretive and preservationist decisions and away from the kind of larger contexts that he acknowledges in the earlier time periods. Preservation and interpretation are certainly relevant topics to consider, but those decisions, and the development of the museum itself, were not of course detached from political, economic, cultural, and demographic changes in the neighborhood and the city (not to mention the museum world and the historical discipline). Given the recognition in museum studies, art history, and related disciplines that museums themselves are inescapably embedded in their social settings, it would have been nice to see Dolkart give at least a little attention to the question of who lives in the Lower East Side now and how the building and the museum fit within contemporary flows of people and capital in New York's present-day cultural economy and real estate market.

As it is, the book imposes a kind of "museum effect" on its subject, removing the building from its everyday context just as the structure itself is shifted into the realm of display.[1] This question is particularly striking in light of Dolkart's own discussion of a two-week exhibition in February of 1900 in which a tenement reform group used models, photographs, and other techniques of display to expose the living conditions in tenements and to try to provoke outrage and legislative action among the public and politicians. Dolkart has no difficulty situating that piece of exhibitionary practice within the social and economic currents of the day; it would have been interesting to see him do the same with the museum whose creation prompted his research. As it is, the book treats the building's pre-museum life as conceptually separate from its current use. But there are, of course, complex continuities--for example, relating to the role of museums and other cultural institutions, even those that represent dark or difficult histories, as agents of gentrification in formerly depressed neighborhoods--that might have added another dimension to this well-researched, well-written study.

Note

[1]. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, among others, has written about the "museum effect" by which objects are removed from everyday circulation and rendered spectacular or extraordinary. See *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 54.

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