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*Spaces that Tell Stories: Recreating Historical Environments* by Donna R. Braden.

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Anyone who has spent time working in a museum knows the hard work that goes into making an engaging, educational space. It is always exciting when a such a space “clicks” for visitors. The idea of history coming alive may be cliché, but it is also a useful concept for trying to define what makes a good historical environment. *Spaces that Tell Stories* explains how to create one. Donna Braden walks the reader through the steps of brainstorming, planning, and implementing a historic environment, drawing on thorough research and her own experience as a curator. Readers should walk away feeling that a well-designed historical environment is possible through Braden’s instructions.

*Spaces that Tell Stories* demonstrates the importance of and gives instructions for creating a narrative for historic sites. Braden’s expertise and passion for her subject are evident. She draws on her work as a senior curator at The Henry Ford as well as the roots of her interest in historic sites and other moments of her career throughout the book. Braden explains that “the most engaging and memorable historical elements combine, at their essence, historical accuracy with a cohesive, unified narrative” (17). This is not achieved through hacks or secret tricks, but through solid planning and research. Although rich in detail and background, at its core *Spaces that Tell Stories* is a how-to guide for museum professionals who want to create a historical environment and do so correctly.

The book is divided into two parts. The first two chapters make a case for the importance of historical environments and provide a history of such sites. In addition to traditional museum examples, Braden brings in other sources of inspiration for historical environments, notably Disneyland. Disney park designers, or “Imagineers,” create extensive backstories for the parks and carefully plan the feel and flow of their spaces. Although some historians have lamented the “Disneyfication” of historical sites, Braden makes a strong case that there is also room for the best of their design processes in a museum setting.

The second half of *Spaces that Tell Stories* explains the planning and design process for historical environments. The book balances instruction with example—each chapter has case studies from sites that successfully created immersive historical environments. Two that Braden most relies on to illustrate the steps of historical environment creation are the J. R. Jones General Stores at Greenfield Village in Michigan and a recreation of a 1973 back-to-the-land commune. By using the same sites as examples for each step of creating a historic environment, Braden effectively takes the reader through a coherent process.

*Spaces that Tell Stories* excels in showing how each step of creating a historical environment is critical, from planning to research to implementation. The second chapter on researching for historical environments was particularly useful. Braden

gives an extensive explanation of the pros and cons of different sources. Historical research can be overwhelming—having a succinct guide to different sources and their potential usefulness is a wonderful way of making the project more accessible. This is also a chapter in which the real-life examples were critical. The three examples were for different enough projects to demonstrate the universality of Braden’s method. The historical sources for a nineteenth-century general store and a back to the land commune are wide-ranging, but the process of creating research questions and finding appropriate sources is consistent among sites.

Although the real-life examples were useful for envisioning a project from start to finish, they at times detracted from the overall flow of instructions. It would have been nice to have a synthesizing final checklist of the steps described. Additionally, the beginning and end of chapter summaries bordered on unnecessary at times, but these are small quibbles for a book so rich with helpful advice and detail. Whereas *Spaces that Tell Stories* is meant to provide a broad framework for all sorts of historical environments, it would have also been strengthened by more discussion of what to do with sites that tell difficult history. For example, the last chapter talks about Heart Mountain Interpretive Center, a re-creation of barracks that held interred Japanese Americans during World War II, but this is a brief discussion. An explicit mention of considering potentially traumatic history would have been an asset to the steps for framing a project.

*Spaces that Tell Stories* is a must-read for anyone trying to create a historical environment from scratch, or for anyone looking for a refresher on best practices. Braden combines practical advice with a thorough background section and bibliography to create an indispensable resource for museum professionals, volunteers, and other interested in what makes a well-designed historical environment. I came away from reading excited to apply what I learned to my next project and enjoyed reading the work of someone so invested in connecting people with the past.

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