Doc Chat Episode Twenty-Seven Transcript

Exploring 1930s New York City through Tenement Photography (May 6, 2021)

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome everybody to Doc Chat. We'll get started in a moment as everybody starts to make their way into the Zoom room. All right, we're going to get started. So welcome back to Doc Chat, everyone. I am Julie Golia, Curator of History, Social Sciences, and Government Information of The New York Public Library. For those of you who haven't attended yet, Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for the Research in Humanities that digs deep into stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In today's episode, Carmen Nigro, Managing Research Librarian for Maps, Jewish and Local History and Genealogy Divisions of The New York Public Library is joined by Dr. Annie Polland, President of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. A celebrated public historian, Annie is co-author of Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, which was the winner of the 2012 National Jewish Book Award. I'll also say that the Tenement Museum is opening up back to their wonderful and celebrated tours tomorrow. So I'll put the link to the Tenement Museum in the chat in just a moment. But today Carmen and Annie are going to be discussing a series of photographs taken by inspectors of the New York City Tenement House Department, which is a collection of photographs documenting the work of the Tenement House Department in New York in the 1930s. Our guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. They'll make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everyone is included in the conversation. Then once we begin the question and answer segment around 3:50, please use your Zoom's question and answer function rather than the chat to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, make sure to click that option before submitting your question. As we do each week, we like to learn a little bit more about who you are. So I'm going to launch a poll right now and I would love for you to please fill it out. And in the meantime, I'm actually going to pass it over to Carmen.

CARMEN NIGRO: Hi. Thank you, Julie. Welcome Annie. Thank you for joining us today. We're super excited to have you.

ANNIE POLLAND: Thanks for having me.

CARMEN NIGRO: Absolutely. First up, can you tell us as briefly as possible -- I know this is a hard ask. The context and impact of tenements in New York City history such as, what is a tenement and why did they influence the lives of New Yorkers so much?

ANNIE POLLAND: Oh, great question. And I know we only have a few minutes. I'll try to be brief, but in short I think, you know, there are very technical definitions of a tenement and they started to be defined in the 1860s. But I think the easiest way in the way that we use it most often when we're giving tours is a tenement is any building that has at least three separate residents each with their own kitchen. So the idea that there is some kind of privacy, it's not just a boarding house, but you have your own private kitchen. But then common space with regard to stairway hallway and so on. So technically any building in New York or most apartment buildings in New York would technically be considered a tenement, but we don't usually think of it like that. And in fact, because of tenements when real estate developers were trying to market to middle-class people and get them to live in multiple dwelling buildings they use the French word appartement to make that sound more enticing and exciting. But in terms of understanding New York history and understanding the social lives of people who -- the social historical viewpoint of the people moving into New York, so many people lived in tenements that it just becomes in some ways like the common denominator. So if you came from Italy, if you came from Eastern Europe, if you came from Greece, if you came wherever you came, you came from the Caribbean, the turn of the 20th century most likely you're going to live in a tenement. And I think those cramped constricted environments give a sense of the hardships that newcomers everywhere encountered once they got to New York. And then on another level they provide like a common denominator. Like everyone kind of has that experience. Like I think we're used to thinking about Ellis Island is like so many people came through Ellis Island and they're in that building, but really most people spent at most five hours or six hours at Ellis Island. Whereas the tenements were the place that you met America for good or for bad. So I think that's one way of looking at it.

CARMEN NIGRO: So speaking of the cramped conditions and the sanitary conditions, when the tenement reform movement came along, what were the roles of the inspectors and what types of issues were they looking for?

ANNIE POLLAND: So there were many laws that started to be passed starting in 1867 and then onward 1879. But the law that really had the most teeth, like the law that kind of did something about what was going on, was the 1901 tenement housing law act. And the reason why it was so important with that, it said that these laws are going to be enforced. And the way they would be enforced it was by a core of tenement inspectors that you can see pictured here who were going to go and see what was going on. And that these were going to be like independent investigators. They weren't going to have any special interest in it. Now to show you why they're so important, I just pulled a quote from Leslie's Sunday magazine from 1879, where they were mocking the idea of laws simply because they weren't enforced. And they said, this is, it's taken to describe an inspection process from the viewpoint of the tenement building. So this is the tenement building relaying the story and the tenement. I don't know if the tenement is male or female, but the tenement says, well, I was about built when an inspector from the Department of Buildings came to look at me. He was about to measure something when the contracting mechanic and my agent invited him across the street to drink a toast to my help. The agent said I would be all right and that he would become sponsor for me. The insurance agent came to

look at me. My sponsor gave him an open hand with friendly invitation across the street and that is the less I have seen of him. So this is just a kind of humorous depiction of how everyone was just bribed and there was really no way to enforce a lot of these laws. So enter the tenement house inspectors, they were independent, they were civil servants, and they were going to uphold these laws and hold people to them. So you can see an image of the inspectors. And then you see under that what's called an I-Card. An I-Card there've been different interpretations of what I meant. Some people say that means improvement, others have said that means initial inspection. So the idea is that you go and you like draw a picture of what's there and that becomes on file. And you're able to mark what -- how the law had or had not been enforced. And so this is the I-Card for 97 Orchard where the Tenement Museum is, but I should point out that these documents aren't always completely accurate. So you can see in the backyard of this image the six, this kind of looks like a tic-tac-toe with lots of o's in it. That is supposed to indicate where the privies were. And so we at the Tenement Museum did an archeological dig in that section, in that corner to find the privies, we did not find them, but we found them in another. So sometimes, you know, these are best guess. People make mistakes, but overall the idea that there was this system, that there were people coming in to check that they were following up on complaints from tenants it gave that 1901 law that was so important. It gave it teeth.

CARMEN NIGRO: So the photos that we're looking at came, so they are all from the 1930s. So this is after the 1901 law started to be enforced. And we've seen a lot of impact from the tenement reform movement by this time. In fact, at this point in these photos, we're seeing vacant tenements and demolition projects in some of these photos, but they do also show the housing conditions and they are showing the inspectors at work. So this collection came to the New York Public Library directly from the Tenement House Department. It was donated to us in 1942, which was not long after they were taken. In fact, it's not long, you know, the great depression hadn't fully lifted at that time. And it's very much like kind of contemporary photographs of the tenement situation in that era. And since we're going to be looking at photos we're going to follow a handful of rules that the Library of Congress or the National Archives offers in their document analysis worksheets, which is to meet the photo, observe its parts, try to make sense of it and to use it as historical evidence. And the first few photos that I chose all have children in them. And Annie, just why do you think they might've used children in their inspection photos? Any idea?

ANNIE POLLAND: I have no idea, but I can try to. I mean, I wonder if part of it was like the inspectors knew kids would take them to the areas that they needed to see or that they were kind of accessing certain things. I think like this child looks a little bit like his family has been affected by the depression. And yeah, I mean, I just think also that when I first said the idea that the kids could allow access or would know the building really well, because kids tend to go into the different corners, they tend to explore. So I don't know if there was some kind of way that the inspector would want to befriend a child who could really show him or her the areas

CARMEN NIGRO: For me, I definitely feel like empathy, you know, versus like if you saw the same photo and there was no human being in it, especially not a child, you might not feel this

way or that way about the condition of the building, but seeing that this is actually somebody's living conditions and it's a child on top of that, I think definitely evokes sympathy or empathy towards the photo. So I'm going to zoom in on this guy.

ANNIE POLLAND: Yeah. And I would just add too that that would be in accordance with what a lot of the progressive reformers were talking about when they created these laws, right? I think, you know, a dominant view of the 19th century or earlier 19th century was that people got sick because of their moral problems or their moral vices. And that's what led to sickness. And of course the development of health and all of that went to disprove that. But I think the most important thing that progressive social reformers did is say that it wasn't the people, but it was the conditions that bred this and so that we have to attack the conditions. And so using children to kind of make that point like what kind of future are we offering children that was often an argument use. So.

CARMEN NIGRO: Yeah. And I like this little fellow here. He's kind of cheeky. He's looking at the camera directly, but you immediately notice like he's got oversized clothing on. So they're not like clothing that were specifically bought for him. He's got this huge belt that's like tied over his pants or rolled up so that they fit. He's got socks rolled down, probably filling in oversized shoes. So, you know, his presentation aside from the fact that he's very charming looking at the camera does tell you a lot about his living situation too.

ANNIE POLLAND: Right. And he's not -- the other thing I think that is important. This is a picture of a child outside during the day. He's not in school. I mean, this could have been an after-school portrait and so on, but that also says something.

CARMEN NIGRO: Yeah. And then if we look at the tenement area itself, the rear tenement, which is in tenement history is a huge part, with the yard and the tenements that were built behind street facing tenements. What do we notice about this?

ANNIE POLLAND: Well, it's not a very well-maintained yard. It looks like there's a lot of patchwork, right? You know, it really reminds you that no tenement is the same. I mean, there were tenements that were built at the same time as others and share similar characteristics, but there's a lot of variation among tenements. And again, some of that has to do with laws that were built that would then tend to have them be built in different places or according to different lot sizes, but you also just get the sense of each tenement tells its own story of the type of patchwork that happens. And in our own tenement at 97 Orchard, you know, we see scuffs, we see different things. We know that a woman named Fannie Rogachefsky was the janitress of the building and that some of the fixes to the building would have been done by her as well. So there's ways that, you know, people are leaving their marks on the building as they're maintaining them and maintaining them in different ways, in different decades of the tenements life.

CARMEN NIGRO: You can totally see the patchwork repair here. The fact that there's a ladder instead of stairs up to that door, but we also can see that it's very much lived in, there are curtains there. This is an active home for people.

ANNIE POLLAND: Well, and it looks so fun. You understand why that kid would be there? It looks fun. I mean, it's like they're designing playgrounds now that are supposed to be more rough and tumble because they're better for kids than the like sanitary ones that we have, but like this, you get this sense of exploration and creativity that also could be built around from the viewpoint of a child.

CARMEN NIGRO: Well, let's look at another photo. This one's an interior view taken in 1936 of two children sleeping on cushions on the floor. And I think this one just the empathy card is huge. We don't have our cheeky fellow like making nice contact with the photo. Like you want to go in and scoop these kids up and help them out. So what else are we noticing about this photo?

ANNIE POLLAND: Well, I mean, I will say that a lot of the other tenement has pictures I've seen of interiors tend to have like much more decorated spaces, you know, even if it's humble furniture or even if it's humble dishware they're decorated. And so this to me, the cabinets are empty. There's really minimal furniture. I wonder, I mean, it makes me wonder whether like they've all packed up and they're moving the next day. And this is like what the kids are just like, there's one last night and so they're sleeping like that. And then they're going either that or this is a extremely impoverished household.

CARMEN NIGRO: I do have another photo where the home is more filled. So here we are looking at this windowless room. Windows were a huge part of tenement reforms. A windowless room with a parent and several children here.

ANNIE POLLAND: And this strikes me as odd as well, because according to the 1901 housing laws, so this is already 30 years later, you really shouldn't have these. This looks like a basement apartment. And you could only have a basement apartment if the ceilings I think it was like seven feet from floor to ceiling throughout. And that you had a certain number of feet above ground and you have a little bit here, but this is so dark that it seems to go against what the laws were intending to do. So I'm just curious about, is this something that they took a picture and because they realized like this is wrong and they have to document it and make sure that this goes away?

CARMEN NIGRO: But it still [inaudible] in 1936, this is supposed to be over?

ANNIE POLLAND: Yeah.

CARMEN NIGRO: Right? Yeah. And then I have this last photo of children are these children that are up in the upper left-hand corner and you can see that they're playing on the fire escape.

And, you know, playgrounds were not as common and I'm not even sure if the playground movement had started quite yet. But this is their yard. This is their yard for their tournament is the fire escape. So we see their play conditions as well or maybe just to escape the heat. Windows in the neighborhood are open.

ANNIE POLLAND: Even in neighborhoods that would have playgrounds like Lower East Side has fewer park from 1899, 1900. But, you know, you can't always make it over to the playground. And there are certainly the comparison, if you did a comparison of playgrounds as opposed to factories per neighborhood in the tenement districts it would be so low. So your play areas have to become improvised and the fire escape is the perfect place. So we know obviously rooftops, fire escapes become places extra places for kids, but also for other work, like women put furniture that they weren't using out there or would keep things cool by putting it on the fire escape. So these fire escapes, like it gave you a couple extra feet of living space, you're going to use them for sure. And I think, you know, one of my favorite descriptions was from I think late 19, 20th century about this neighborhood, the Lower East side. And they said on Fridays because they were trying to describe the preparations for the Sabbath that women would most likely be under in charge of. But they said that every fire escape in the front of the building was covered with all the sheets and the tablecloths that were being dried because that was the washing day. And it was almost as if the facades of the tenements had all gotten dressed up. So, you know, you see the signs of life and different patterns of what's happening both on a weekly and a seasonal basis through looking even just at fire escapes.

CARMEN NIGRO: All right. So before we run out of time, because there's so much to talk about let's look at these inspectors. Now they're the photographers, they're taking pictures of themselves at work. So I'll go through some of these pretty quickly just so we can see them all. But here's an inspector making notes in a rear yard of a vacant tenement. Here's another one. This is not a vacant tenement, but you'll see inspector behind the broken fence. This one is one of my favorite. This guy is in like superhero pose almost standing with his arm on his hip. And he's inspecting the basement heater. And then speaking of privies and outhouses, here's the tenement inspector having a look at the outhouse building. So what are these photos about these inspectors? What are we noticing? I know I went through them very fast. I'll go back to any you like.

ANNIE POLLAND: I mean the first one reminded me of the I think we were talking about before the, one of the photographers for the 1930s when they were taking pictures of every lot and block, right? With the kind of the hat and the nice cloak. And I mean, it also tells us that they were going two at a time, if there was another inspector there to take the photo, you know, if there was a photographer, always with the inspector. And yeah, I mean and it was a good job in the 1930s too.

CARMEN NIGRO: Yeah. Especially in the depression. I really do like this one of the basement inspector. I just think he has this like I saved the day, look at this basement. I inspected it, now it's going to get better because I saved the day. That's my thought on him, but you really can

see the condition of the building, especially this part of the ceiling coming down. All right. So Julie's back. So that's my sign that we wrap. I just have a slide here about putting the photos in context with other historical documents and the items here are a map of the city of New York that shows the ethnic and tenement population. And then this over here is page one of the Jacob Riis papers. So those might be some, you know, types of historical evidence that you can use in tandem with photography.

ANNIE POLLAND: And that was so important. I have here with me The Tenement House Problem, the big collection of studies that was done at the turn of the 20th century by Lawrence Veiller and Robert De Forest. But even before then in 1899 as a way to gain attention for the need of a housing law, they staged an exhibit at the old Sherry's building in Fifth Avenue, an old restaurant building taking the tenement uptown and having all sorts of like diorama's and charts to like use all this evidence to make the case that these laws were needed. So there was always the sense that the tenement dwellers themselves couldn't solve these problems. They were out working in the factory; they were taking care of their families. It needed to be middle class, upper class people who were going to take the initiative to organize to try to save this. And again, you just -- this book is chock-full of charts and maps and all of it to kind of show why change was needed.

CARMEN NIGRO: So Julie, what kind of comments and questions are we getting?

JULIE GOLIA: Lots of great questions and actually Annie that's a great segue into the first question I want to share, because it's one that one that I had as well, you guys are talking about. Nora asks when I hear about photographs of the Lower East side, I immediately think of Jacob Riis. Of course, to what extent do you feel that Riis's work influenced the work of the tenement house department? I think that's a question that immediately comes to mind -- different periods, but I did see a lot of stylistic similarities there.

ANNIE POLLAND: Yeah. That's a really good question. And I'm not an expert on this, but one thing I would say about Jacob Riis photos is that he was taking them with an eye towards convincing the public, that drastic action needed to be happening. So as a result, you're getting one view of tenement life. And I think tenement dwellers often had another view, right? Like, you know, that they were making the best of what they had and they were doing a lot to make these individual homes nicer. So you would get, you know, there's a great book called Spirit of the Ghetto that came out in the first decade of the 20th century as well by Hutchins Hapgood who was a progressive journalist and there were drawings by Jacob Epstein I think. And the drawings just depicted much more natural -- people in their -- both the drawings and the sketches, the narratives were showing people with much more agency than I think the Jacob Riis photos. So the Jacob Riis photos were so important because they're showing how bad the conditions were, but they need to be used -- they need to be taken with a grain of salt as well in terms of understanding the lives of the people who came after.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah. And actually related question, who was the audience for these photos? Actually, that's a fantastic teaching question. And Nora says it's weird to think of a government agency taking on this progressive reformer role of taking pictures designed to shock you into action. Shouldn't they be the ones actually taking action on fixing them?

CARMEN NIGRO: I think it's them saying, look at us doing our job like kind of, this is the great depression programs could be cut. They're saying what a good job we're doing and this job still needs to be done. That's what I feel about this particular set of photos.

ANNIE POLLAND: And they're gathering -- at this point, they're gathering evidence. They're gathering evidence to do that work. So I think they would view that as taking action. It couldn't just be that story that I told earlier from 1879, that was being mapped by Leslie's magazine. Once you have the photos and someone's coming in to take a photo, you know, that however many drinks the contractor bought you across the street, it doesn't matter. The photo is the real evidence.

JULIE GOLIA: Well, and I think these show I think so saliently that this is like a high tide point for like the valorizing of data in governments, right? Like as much data as you can collect and inform whether it's maps, like these are or larger policy decisions, this was a huge thing at this time.

ANNIE POLLAND: And they were effective. I mean, I think they were within 10 years after the 1901 housing law act all the bathrooms were improved or most of them were improved. Like there were just so many things that somehow they got done and you could always say it wasn't enough and the conditions continued to be bad, blah, blah. But like there was an effectiveness that played out.

JULIE GOLIA: A couple really interesting questions here about the inspectors themselves. Pam asks, were there women building inspectors? Which is a very interesting question. And then Laura asks, what recourse did tenants have if inspectors found issues with the buildings? Like were people evicted on a regular basis?

ANNIE POLLAND: Great question. So we actually -- [inaudible] This is typically for middle school students that they come and they take on the role of a tenement house inspector. They say the oath of a tenement house inspector. They're given the law and they go into the tenement building to inspect and they meet with a tenant, a custom interpreter playing a tenant and a custom interpreter playing a landlord who give them their side of the story. And then the tenement house inspectors have to kind of weigh in. And so you're hearing like different perspectives on why things were the case. But so, yes there were women and also and the tenement house inspectors tended to be kind of people from more middle class backgrounds, right? So you wouldn't necessarily have children of the tenements themselves grown up, but it was -- I mean, it could vary, it could depend, but that's mostly they wanted to have initially people who had a college education, although that wasn't required it was something they look

for. And then I mean this is just a description from a 1910 textbook for potential inspectors. They said a tenement house inspector should be sober, vigilant, honest, conscientious, and constantly bear in mind that the proper performance of his duties depend on -- that upon the proper performance of his duties depend the welfare, comfort, health, and the very life of the community in his charge. They must conduct themselves in a quiet, civil, and gentlemanly manner. Again, so even though there were women, they were using male terms here. But yes it seems like they took the role pretty seriously. However, the roles weren't well paid. And so you tended to have a pretty high rate of turnover.

JULIE GOLIA: Here's the question that I feel like both of you in your different organizations and positions probably get a lot, which is to talk about the difference between a tenement and a brownstone or generally an apartment building? Is there a good solid answer to that question like a real concrete answer to that question?

CARMEN NIGRO: Well you have the like dictionary definition of tenement and the legal definition really, but then you also have like the colloquial use of tenement. And I think most of us when we talk about tenements, we're talking about the colloquial use, which is evocative of like a shabby rundown, very cramped housing situation. So a brownstone, you know, is like upper class home. Like a lot of them have servants' entrances below the steps and, you know, were intended as single family homes even though many of them have been subdivided now. So quite different in terms of living conditions.

ANNIE POLLAND: Right. And I think you nailed it perfectly because this idea that brownstone or townhouse that's a single family home and privacy was so connected to what middle class values were. And then the tenement is just shared so much sharing, so little privacy that ran counter to it. But, you know, there's a lot because a lot of the inspectors both for tenement houses, but also for the various crime progressive era crime investigations had middle class people, a lot of times they were defining what middle class should be in contrast to the behavior and the conditions that their findings. So there's a relationship.

CARMEN NIGRO: The school lunch program was intended to Americanize the palette of school children, you know, they would go home and eat their ethnic foods.

ANNIE POLLAND: Yeah. Stay away from pickles. Pickles apparently was the source of all evil.

JULIE GOLIA: That's an awful note for us to end on. And let's just clarify that that is not true.

CARMEN NIGRO: I will eat pickles immediately.

JULIE GOLIA: This is such a wonderful chat so much so that we didn't get to a bunch of your questions and forgive me, but we'll do our best.

CARMEN NIGRO: Send me your questions,

JULIE GOLIA: That's right. The wonderful thing about having a fantastic librarian as our speakers, that you can send them to Carmen or to Milstein and that's what we do. NYPL we help answer your questions and help you support research. So thank you so much Carmen, thank you so much Annie. So links to these collection items all of which I included in the chat as well will be included in a blog post that we'll send out to all of you when it's up. That also will have a video of this wonderful episodes. This will go on NYPL's blog, where you can also find previous episodes of Doc Chat. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode will feature NYPL's Jason Baumann and writer and curator, Hugh Ryan, who will look at photographs and documents and analyze the criminalization of queer people in the mid-20th century, discussing intersections between civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, and opposition to the prison industrial complex and all in just a half an hour. So you can register for this in the link that I'm about to put into the chat. And then you can also, I'm going to pop that in there. You can also look for past episodes, explore future episodes in these links and then make sure to sign up for our research newsletter and follow us on social media. Carmen, Annie, thank you again for a wonderful episode.

CARMEN NIGRO: Thank you so much. This was great.

ANNIE POLLAND: Bye.