

# Open House *Journal*

## A Vision of History

“Do you think Pang Toua and his family would like turkey, ham, or cheese?” I nervously ask Fong. I’ve been reduced to asking a consultant for advice on sandwich selections; even lunch becomes a mini-drama when you’re working across cultures. Fong Heu, my translator and a world-class culture-straddler, smiles patiently and gives me just what I need, a decision: “Let’s go with ham.”

Pang Toua Yang’s family, Fong, and I have been brought together by a Minnesota History Center exhibit project, *Open House*. It will tell the story of a single, existing dwelling—Pang Toua’s house at 470 Hopkins

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museum and the idea that their story will be featured within it? Cheerfully, I observe that it’s a good sign that they are interested in coming. “Well,” Fong says evenly, “in my culture once we invited them, they pretty much had to come”—a system of mutual social obligation that any Minnesotan bearing a hot dish would recognize.

In the week before the Yangs’ visit, I obsess about details, from the lunch menu to transportation to little gifts for Elizabeth and Michael’s young

Fong arrives. We go next door, where Elizabeth and Michael live—apparently their kids aren’t coming after all—and then we all pile into the ridiculously large state-owned van I’ve brought.

At the History Center, conversation gets somewhat easier. The ham sandwiches are devoured, and the exhibits are met with quiet interest. Through Fong’s translations, the family converses with other members of the exhibit team. We make a point of showing them an exhibit on music in Minnesota that includes a handmade Hmong instrument called a *qeej* and video footage from a Hmong nightclub in St. Paul. Pang Toua and Mai are more impressed by the exhibit about Minnesota’s notorious weather, in which a huge fabric tornado spins. They have their picture taken in front of it.

Next, we go behind the scenes, underground to where the Historical Society’s artifacts are preserved in state-of-the-art, controlled environments. Pang Toua and Mai are shown our Hmong objects—woefully few—and learn, through Fong, that we

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“the family is you.”*

Street on St. Paul’s East Side—and the people who have lived within its walls, from the German immigrants who built it in 1888 to the Italians, African Americans, and now Hmong who have followed. At our first meeting a month before, Pang Toua and his wife, Mai, agreed to cooperate in this odd venture. Thrilled at their generosity, Fong and I decided we should give them a sense of what they’re getting into by inviting them to the History Center. They agreed to come, along with their daughter (and landlord) Elizabeth and her husband, Michael. What will they make of the

children. On the day itself, my nerves seem more than justified. Fong and I had arranged to meet the Yangs at their house at 11:00 A.M. That morning Fong leaves me a message saying he’ll see me there at 10:45. Confused, I call back. Yes, Fong says, we said 11:00, but they will expect us to come and mingle first. So, I arrive at 10:45. Their teenaged daughter lets me in with complete indifference. Pang Toua and Mai don’t say a word to me either. The only sound is from the TV, where a documentary about the Mayans drones. It feels like hours later but is probably only 10:46 when



are eager to do more to document the Hmong experience in Minnesota. Mai, who has been almost silent to this point, suddenly says, “So when we’ve lost our traditions we can come here and learn them from you.”

After the museum tour, we head back to Hopkins Street for a more extended look at the house, perhaps an object of more interest to me than

bedroom off the kitchen, Pang Toua has changed into more casual clothes. I see trays of green seedlings in the room, but Michael is unable to identify them. A back door leads out to the snow-covered garden. An internal stairway off the kitchen, which leads to the upper-floor apartment (occupied by another family), is completely blocked with objects—an im-

sense of the distance they have come? Or has part of them never left? *Is* their world contained by 470 Hopkins Street, or is part of it elsewhere? To me, the house is a powerful framing device, but I doubt it contains their core. Can a museum exhibit do justice to the layers of experience that Pang Toua and his family carry with them? Can it convey

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to them. Walking in, I’m immediately struck by the warm rush of a strong food aroma that I remember from my first visit to the house—boiled chicken, maybe, but with an unfamiliar pungency. A large pile of shoes overflows a bin by the door, and I add mine to the sheet of plastic next to it. Pang Toua and Mai immediately move back into their lives, so the job of showing us around falls to son-in-law Michael. The tour is short because the unit only has four small rooms, all crammed full. In the living room-dining room-kitchen area, Mai and her teenaged daughter are serving a rice-and-vegetable mixture from a huge bowl to grandchildren while the TV continues to blare. To the side is a tiny bedroom for the couple’s teenaged sons, and behind that is another (formerly an enclosed porch) for their daughter. In a back

provided closet. Another small space alongside the kitchen, probably once a side porch, holds more overflow objects, including a large freezer.

Later, I ask Fong whether he thinks Pang Toua and Mai will stay in this house. “Oh, I think they will be there a long time.” Then I raise the question I really have in mind: if Elizabeth owns 14 properties, why does she put her parents in such a small, cramped space? “Well it’s part of our culture to save the worst for ourselves,” says Fong. “But it’s not herself; it’s her family,” I say. “In our culture,” Fong says, “the family is you.”

Heading back to the museum, I think about how far Pang Toua and Mai have traveled—from mountain farm to refugee-camp tent to this house that, in my mind’s eye, is all tangled sheets. How do they make

the complexity of how people construct a sense of place? A home is four walls, a collection of bodies, of objects, of sounds, of smells, but it is also an agglomeration of memories, imaginations, and daydreams, and these can be translated only imperfectly. Perhaps the answer is to focus on telling stories as richly human as possible—stories rooted in time but cutting across it, grounded in place but reaching beyond it, elicited with clumsy good intentions but, sometimes at least, brought to life over a good ham sandwich. □

*Benjamin Filene is an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society. This is the second in a series of essays about the exhibit Open House, which opens at the Minnesota History Center in November 2005.*



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