

Memory House/Desire House: Translations + Exchanges

Memory House/Desire House provided a vehicle for participants to explore the value and meanings of home across cultures through the interrelated aspects of exhibition design, architectural structure, ritual and performance. In addition, the cross-disciplinary and collaborative coursework sparked a series of translations and exchanges that engaged students and faculty in new ways and expanded their individual sensibilities and disciplinary horizons.

RONIT EISENBACH
University of Maryland

ORIGINS

Memory House/Desire House was one of two “Participatory Engagement” Projects highlighted in the 2013 Dartmouth Report, *Engaging Next Generation Audiences: A Study of College Student Preferences towards Music and the Performing Arts*.¹ The report reads:

In the past few years, much has been written about changing public tastes, increased demand for multi-sensory stimulation, and the expectation amongst younger cultural consumers for higher levels of interactivity in all forms of entertainment.² It is no surprise, therefore, to find campus [Performing Arts] presenters experimenting with programs that offer students and community members opportunities to get actively involved in making and interpreting works of art.³

Under the leadership of Executive Director Susie Farr, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland worked continuously to involve students in arts-based inquiry through partnerships with campus faculty and departments, visiting artists, and community organizations. Our collaboration began in 2009, when the Director of Artistic Initiatives at the Center⁴ invited me to develop a public engagement project around Kronos Quartet and Wu Man’s newly commissioned work, *A Chinese Home*.⁵ The resulting work, *Memory House/Desire House* grew to encompass a wide range of participants in an interdisciplinary collaboration. The work drew on themes from *A Chinese Home* and involved the audience as well as students and faculty from multiple disciplines in reflection. *Memory House/Desire House* grew out of two specially designed courses and ultimately developed into a public, participatory installation, performance, and exhibition. Student participants created personal *Desire Houses* that would later be inserted into the large bamboo structure that I designed with the assistance of UMD architecture alumnus Mike Fischer. The work culminated in an exhibition and a site-specific dance choreographed by Sharon Mansur, a co-instructor of the Winterterm course inspired



by the installation and project themes. The dance was performed at The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center as a prequel to the Kronos Quartet's performance of *A Chinese Home* and culminated in a public procession and ritual burning of a single Desire House.

The work proceeded at a time when in addition to the foreclosure crisis peaking in the US, we helplessly watched the destruction wrought by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The integration of these events into our study focused our efforts on exploring and communicating the power of domestic space and the meanings of home across cultures. We designed a multi-layered learning experience and arts-based inquiry to explore the question: *How might we acknowledge the value of "home" across cultures and recognize the impact of its loss to its inhabitants?*

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Figure 1: Courtyard interior with view to Skywell, entry at left, *Yin Yu Tang House*

INSPIRATIONS

The *Memory House/Desire House* installation drew its inspiration from several sources: the beauty and flexibility of bamboo, historic Chinese Desire Houses, the unprecedented loss of shelter witnessed at the time, and the organization, structure, and elements of the *Yin Yu Tang House* (Hall of Plentiful Shelter)⁶. The cultural significance, domestic traditions and transformation of *Yin Yu Tang* also inspired the musicians, Wu Man and David Harrington (Kronos Quartet's founder), and visual designer, Chen Shi-Zheng's creation of their musical work, *A Chinese Home*.

Yin Yu Tang was a late 18th Century Chinese courtyard house originally located in the Huizhou region of Anhui province of rural China. For seven generations, members of the extended Huang family lived in this house, but by the 1990's the last members of the family moved away and the house was abandoned. This was not unusual; the home was in an area of China that was rapidly losing population to the cities. In an effort to teach others about their culture and preserve the housing type, the Huang family chose to donate their home to a museum. In 1997, the house was dismantled, shipped and rebuilt inside the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts, where it is now on permanent exhibit. *Yin Yu Tang* now provides the American visitor with a window into the domestic culture, architecture and way of life supported by this unique housing type.

I had visited this house a few years earlier. The memory of the piece-by-piece deconstruction and reconstruction of this structure and my experience of its subsequent public exhibition outfitted with all of its domestic objects stayed with me. I was fascinated by the story of how a barren landscape resulted in a city of courtyard homes inhabited mainly by women, children and elderly men as the healthy men left and became wealthy merchants to support their families. And I remained moved by the power of the miniature bamboo and paper *Desire Houses* that were exhibited nearby. These *Desire Houses* were built by hand and ritually burned to thank one's ancestors for one's good fortune.

In light of the foreclosure crisis taking place in the Washington D.C. area and across the nation at the time, the question of domestic space seemed increasingly relevant, and while we devised the project originally as an inquiry into the nature of home, dwelling and habitation across cultures, the work expanded to include a meditation upon and response to the trauma of losing one's home. We began to imagine a project that would incorporate student-built contemporary *Desire Houses* that would engage an audience and participants in some form of public ritual acknowledging the power of home as well as people's sense of loss and displacement.

Bamboo, a material used in the construction of buildings and household objects all over Asia was a major source of inspiration. In Asia bamboo is valued for its usefulness and beauty: in the United States the same material is considered a nuisance. The delineation of space with line found in a variety of bamboo structures including, the Chinese Desire Houses, Asian bamboo scaffolding and the ephemeral Chinese bamboo Opera houses is reiterated in the *Memory House Installation*. And as it turned out that there was plenty of bamboo available on the University of Maryland campus and we were welcome to it.

PEDAGOGY

While our client, the presenter, had one agenda, the team of faculty members I gathered shaped the opportunity to address our own specific disciplinary and shared pedagogical goals. From the perspective of Architecture, the project created an



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opportunity for students to learn and draw out themes from a different type of precedent, a Chinese Courtyard house, a relatively unused material in the US, bamboo, and a different type of experience -- dancing and building an habitable multi-purposed structure out of non-conventional materials. For Sharon Mansur, our colleague from Theater, Dance and Performance Studies, this was an opportunity for dance students to work outside of a conventional stage in a space they would help construct. It was also a forum for Sharon to engage "non-movers" to help them gain an appreciation for non-verbal communication and to explore movement and space through an embodied experience. For Harold Burgess, Director of the College Park Arts Scholars Program, a program composed of freshman and sophomores interested in a range of artistic disciplines, here was an occasion for the students to engage professional artists, to work as artists themselves, and to witness how the same content can be interpreted in many ways and serve as a source for new work that communicates important ideas to others.

After deciding to make the *Desire House* project an integral part of the College Park Arts Scholar's Fall 2009 colloquium course, Harold Burgess and I designed the course's practicum project around a reinterpretation of this Chinese tradition. Sixty student arts scholars, who had a shared interest in the visual and performing arts, participated. Working in teams, these students created a unique set of Desire Houses carefully crafted with bamboo and tissue paper. In doing so they each explored their personal interpretations of the meanings of home and reflected upon the housing crisis, the variety of dwelling structures and cross-cultural ideas of home. The students also created two-sided Wishtags -- a newspaper advertisement for a foreclosed home glued to one surface, and a personal hope or desire related to housing on the other. During a fall residency, the members of the Kronos Quartet visited the students as they constructed their Desire Houses in the Architecture Building. The quartet discussed the project with the students and offered feedback on their constructions. The students and musicians discussed that while each work shared an initial source, in the end each Desire House had its own character and emphasis.

Figure 2: *Foreclosures R US*, Initial Collage, Leslie Katz, Winterterm.



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Figure 3: *Desire House* exhibited in *Memory House* Installation at the Center, Nick Aiello, Winterterm.

In January 2010, Dance Artist Sharon Mansur, joined Harold and I to co-teach a special Winterterm course, *Memory House/Desire House: Design, Build, Construct* which aimed at preparing the public presentation that would take place prior to Kronos' performance. The course attracted undergraduate and graduate students in Architecture and Dance and several volunteers. The group created a second set of Desire Houses, developed a performance and constructed the bamboo Memory House installation for the Center's Grand Pavilion. In this intense three-week course, architecture students took on a new role as dancers, and dance students became visual artists and builders.

The students and I shared the task of developing, detailing and building the *Memory House* Installation that I had designed.⁷ The *Memory House* Installation would house the student's Desire Houses and scholar's WishTags, be integrated into the performance and re-present *Yin Yu Tang*. Built of bamboo, the structure reinterpreted elements of the *Yin Yu Tang* house such as; its post and beam skeletal structure; the Spirit Wall placed at the entry to guard the inhabitants from evil spirits; the Sky Well, the open courtyard to collect rain, frame the sky and serve as the home's heart; and the decorative hand-carved wood screens that encircle the balcony and both reveal and conceal the occupants who peek down into the Sky Well from above; and the collection of rooms that ring the Sky Well and house the smaller family units that make up the extended family. The collection of Desire Houses displayed in the completed structure recalled the balance between the individual and community reflected in *Yin Yu Tang's* design. Just as *Yin Yu Tang* housed multiple branches of the same family and supported multiple activities within its over arching courtyard structure, so too did the *Memory House/Desire House* project embrace and nest the student's individual contributions and strategies together.

SHIFTING CONTEXTS

The Haiti earthquake occurred during the start of the Winterterm class, reinforcing the importance of one's home across cultures and the fragility of shelter, as we empathized with the dispossessed. As a result this groups' Desire Houses reflected the sense of loss brought on by the dreadful destruction in Haiti – concurrent with the overwhelming foreclosure crisis evident in Prince George's County at home. Our heightened awareness of the effects of the loss of home, whether local, or far away (ironically often conveyed through media entering our homes), on people's lives and culture contributed to the desire to create a shared work that related to our immediate community while at the same time conveyed a sensitivity to the crisis facing people far away.

These themes were explored further through the ritual dance choreographed by Mansur that intersected with the exhibit and installation in The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's Grand Pavilion. The *Memory House/Desire House* procession embraced the human interaction of space, structure and environment. The origination of the choreography, developed in tandem with the building of the structure, led to a daily exploration of inhabiting and adapting to a continually evolving space. This process influenced the transitory nature of the processional where performers move freely between the temporary installation structure and the permanence of the grand lobby's architecture blurring the boundary of motion and rest.

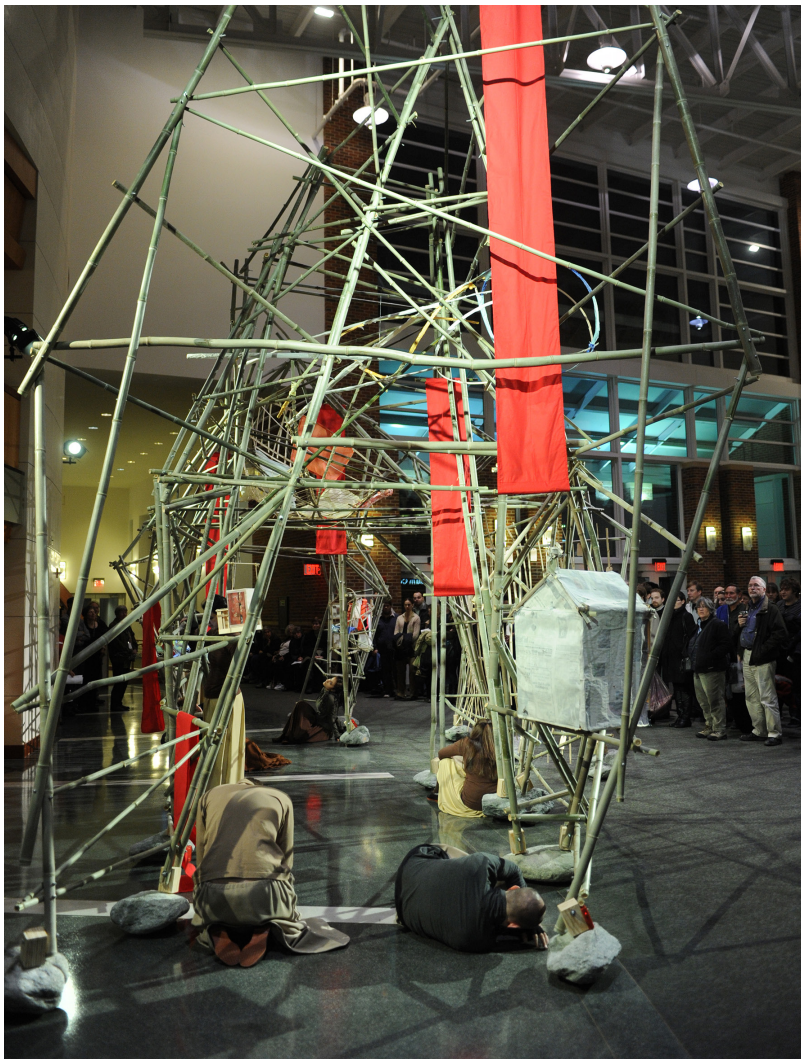
In addition, the group harvested bamboo from the campus and learned to work with the material-- detailing the connections, laying out footings and pre-building the structure in the School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation building. Just as *Yin Yu Tang* was dismantled, tagged, moved and reassembled, so too was

this structure. However unlike *Yin Yu Tang*, the installation was designed with the relocation in mind; the structure broke down into 14 panels and the foundations were carefully tagged and located so that they could be easily reassembled in the Grand Pavilion. Despite the hitch caused by two major snowstorms that closed the University for a week, *Memory House/Desire House* was installed at the Clarice Smith Center the week before the February performance and remained

in the space for three weeks. Once the dance and architecture students had reassembled the installation the two groups added their Desire Houses to the structure.

TRANSLATIONS + EXCHANGE

The faculty anticipated that this interdisciplinary group would work together as a creative team and created a pedagogical environment to support this collaboration. We hoped that the students would be willing to take on roles as both novices and experts and be open to the ways that the experience of engaging their bodies and minds in new ways could lead to an expansion of their individual sensibilities and disciplinary horizons. On several occasions it seemed that the two groups held different disciplinary positions and simultaneous exposure to another way of thinking about space and making helped in the development of innovative solutions to specific challenges.



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Figure 4: Performance Night, The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, *Memory House/Desire House*

It soon became clear that we faced a major temporal and spatial challenge. In the space of three weeks in a site that was not the final venue, we intended to develop and build the *Memory House Installation* structure while developing a site-specific movement work that would ideally be integrated into the not-yet-built installation where the performance would take place. Both tasks required a combination of imagination, skill and planning. We discovered that the concept of “mockups” familiar to both dance and architecture (while employed and understood quite differently) could serve as a useful strategy for to solve both problems. We were able to develop the dance without the installation in place by building a full-scale mockup out of 2x4s in the Architecture Building that traced the *Memory House’s* volume and by holding rehearsals in the Clarice Center’s lobby with props outlining the installation’s footprint. The architecture students learned from Mansur and the dancers how to hold the sensation and dimension of space in their bodies and to carry that with them from place to place as they rehearsed. They learned that their bodies and imagination could contain the mockup of the dance as emotional and muscle memory. The 2x4 mockup allowed the dancers the opportunity to develop a site-responsive work for an environment that was not fully there, something they rarely had the chance to practice.

We noticed a second example of this kind of exchange as we watched the students struggle with the footing design. Two challenges were identified. First the project was to be built in one location, moved to another and would sit *upon* rather than *in* the ground, the solution had to be mobile and steady. Secondly, since each bamboo members would meet the footings at a different angle, the connection had to be flexible. A blackboard was set up to collect ideas. The solution drawn by one of the architecture students showed a “hinged” ankle with a “webbed” foot labeled with the note: “center of balance - flow of weight and energy.” A large rock light enough to be moved, but heavy enough to stay in place was outfitted with a threaded rod and wooden block constructed to accept the unique angle of each bamboo post. Did this successful solution flow from observing the dancers in the class? Or perhaps it came from this student’s heightened awareness of his own body’s structure from the movement work he was participating in? Hard to know for sure, but at the time, it certainly felt that this “eureka moment” was made possible by the coincident experience of these two ways of knowing.

PERFORMANCE

On the night of Kronos Quartet’s College Park performance of *A Chinese Home*, architecture and dance students from the January seminar led the audience in a pre-show site specific dance event in the Grand Pavilion, featuring live bamboo flute music by DC area musician Matthew Olwell. Prior to the start of the performance audience members wandered through the structure examining the Desire Houses and reading the Wishtags hung on the Spirit Wall. The performers flowed around and through the audience, inhabiting the installation structure individually and collectively, and eventually culminating in a ritual procession that drew the audience up the stairs to a nearby outdoor courtyard behind the Center. The dancers carried several Desire Houses from the exhibit and ceremonially burned one they had selected in the courtyard to meditate on the value and meaning of home across cultures. In this way we honored and followed the Chinese tradition of offering a Desire House as a gesture of thankfulness and good fortune to one’s ancestors in the sky above. In the Eastern tradition, fire has a positive power as the burning enables material to transform into smoke and reach those who are now beyond our grasp. Yet, the meaning was twofold, since fire in Western culture is generally equated

with destruction, we also acknowledged the loss of home that was vividly felt by the group as we followed the foreclosure crisis and watched the Haiti disaster unfold.⁸

REFLECTIONS

Memory House/Desire House brought over sixty students and three professors together to create a haunting exhibit and a collaborative learning experience that explored fundamental notions of home and the effect of loss in three different realms – China, Haiti and Prince George’s county – and the home’s survival and its ongoing source of sustenance through people’s memories and desires. These artistically inclined students, who rarely intersect through their coursework, benefited from combining their creative energies and from the opportunity to witness the final result. The student-made Desire Houses and Wishtags enriched the bamboo structure, which in turn provided a new context for the small, personal creations. Together, the students shaped a moving reflection on the importance of Home across cultures and the tragedy of its loss.



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It was a meaningful experience for the students. Art Scholar students received direct feedback from internationally renowned visiting artists, attended the event and enjoyed seeing their projects in a public venue as part of a larger event. Architecture and Dance students had the opportunity to work with peers and professors from different academic backgrounds and learned to approach artistic construction functionally as well as expressively. The participatory nature of the project allowed students to develop a strong sense of ownership, through the creation of personal Desire Houses, construction of the installation and participation in the performance. As envisioned, the students were important cultural contributors to the overall event and created a unique complement to the performance of *A Chinese Home*.

The campus and community reacted favorably to the installation, exhibition and dance performance. Despite the fact that the performance coincided with two major snowstorms in the Washington D.C. area, half the concert audience came early for the pre-show ritual, entering the installation and reading the student Wishtags. Faculty and students commented on the striking nature of the dance event sharing their thoughts with faculty long afterwards. The installation was extended for two weeks and as a result, more people viewed and interacted with the bamboo structure and learned about the Desire House project while passing through the Center. Mansur extended the work’s educational value by taking students in

Figure 5: The performance culminated with a public processional and ritual burning of one Desire House, *Memory House/Desire House*

her *Dance Improvisation Course* to the Grand Pavilion to experience and inhabit the bamboo structure twice during the spring semester. This site-specific dance opportunity enhanced their studio experience. The overall project was memorable for the Center, the students and the community. The Music, Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies Faculty and Center staff still report occasional references to the installation and its lingering impact. Significantly, the project served as a means to cross campus lines and build lasting relationships between the Visiting Artists, Faculty and Clarice Smith Center staff that were involved.

Memory House/Desire House explored and extended the potential of Design-Build projects in several ways:

- 1) The project created a meaningful collaboration that brought together internationally renowned musicians, and students and faculty from multiple disciplines;
- 2) Participating students were engaged as both novices and experts, required to stretch both within and beyond their own disciplines. For example, the students constructed a very large structure out of an unfamiliar material that they harvested themselves and they also performed in front of an audience. For one group the former was more comfortable, for the other the latter, for all individuals could claim they engaged in experiences that extended their horizons;
- 3) Students learned about the creative process and experienced how one source of inspiration could spark the work of individuals in very different creative disciplines offering multiple ways for an audience to engage the content that they were about to confront again in the performance of *A Chinese Home* that followed;
- 4) The project demonstrated how ephemeral environments and performances that bring together multiple disciplines can highlight, awaken and spark conversation about important issues nestled within the built environment. In this case, the project created an opportunity for public reflection around the meanings of home across cultures and created a shared experience to mark the trauma of the loss of home that many were experiencing at that time. As noted earlier, *Memory House/Desire House* was selected as one of two exemplary case studies of “Participatory Engagement” in the Dartmouth report *Engaging College Students in the Performing Arts: Case Studies in Good Practice*. It is interesting that the researchers for the Community of Performing Arts Presenters’ conclusions valued similar things:

Memory House/Desire House was a unique hands-on experience for UMD students and faculty and part of the Clarice Smith Center’s consistent efforts to increase student engagement and build interdisciplinary connections on campus... The participatory nature of the project affords students a personal window into the creative process and illustrated the dynamics of collaboration, the importance of being open to new ideas, and the value of reflecting on issues and ideas through multiple lenses.⁹

Creating more opportunities for active participation is the frontier of arts participation and pedagogy, and an urgent challenge for artists, designers, curators and arts presenters. In fact, the link between active involvement and successful student engagement is a theme across all of the case studies, not just this one... These case studies provide evidence of the significant learning outcomes that arise from hands-on participation guided by experienced faculty and professional artists.¹⁰

In hindsight, the success of *Memory House/Desire House* from the perspective of the Performing Arts Presenter and the Faculty resulted from a shared set of values with similar yet different goals. The Presenter's desire to expand the listening audience through an open creative engagement with other branches of the University, the faculty's desire to expand their pedagogical and professional palette, and the students' desire for an alternative and meaningful experience resulted in an alignment. This alignment motivated all involved to reach beyond their traditional disciplinary horizons to overcome the formidable challenges posed by such a complex inter-disciplinary project and to seek the benefits that participatory engagement and shared action could bring.¹¹

ENDNOTES

1. See: Julia L. Floberg and Alan S. Brown (May 2013), 'Case Study #5: Participatory Engagement,' in *Case Studies in Good Practice: Engaging Next Generation Audiences: A Study of College Student Preferences towards Music and the Performing Arts*, pp. 69-76. Research commissioned by the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College. Funding Provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. http://media.dartmouth.edu/~hop/Case_Studies_in_Student_Engagement_Full_Report.pdf.

Note: As part of the Andrew Mellon Foundation effort to investigate student engagement in the arts, after projects were selected, data for the report, was collected from numerous sources although the report does not directly cite these contributors. Participants were interviewed and information and text was submitted and collected by a student intern. In our case, the description of the Memory House project and ideas are largely the author's with valuable input from my colleagues, Sharon Mansur, Harold Burgess, and Susie Farr. Conclusions related to the impact and the importance of these case studies for the community of Arts Presenters are those of the Researchers.

The second Case Study was developed by Tri-C Presents at Cuyahoga Community College in 2010 who received a two year Creative Campus Innovation Grant to engage in a two year, campus-wide exploration of the Epic of Gilgamesh

2. Active participation is a priority of the James Irvine Foundation. See *Getting In On the Act: How arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation*, 2011, including case studies.
3. Flobery & Brown, p. 61.
4. Floberg & Brown note the unique partnerships and engagement efforts nurtured by Farr and the Center's staff (p. 61). Ruth Waalkes initiated the project during her tenure as Director of Artistic Initiatives. Paul Brohan saw the project through when he assumed that position. Kyle Kweder created the can-do attitude at the Center that made it possible. I am grateful to these colleagues for their vision and support.
5. Kronos Quartet + Wu Man, *A Chinese Home*, 2009. http://kronos-quartet.org/projects/detail/a_chinese_home.
6. Berliner, Nancy, Yin Yu Tang, *The Architecture and Daily Life of a Chinese House*. Boston: Tuttle Publishers, 2003. See: <http://www.pem.org/sites/yinyutang/>
7. Many thanks to Mike Fischer for his assistance with the installation design and John Kucia for his invaluable project assistance.
8. See *Memory House/Desire House* Performance video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azd3pwjKw6k>
9. Floberg & Brown, p. 75.
10. Floberg & Brown, p. 62. Arts-based interdisciplinary programming, and the benefits of arts-based learning, are explored in "Placing the Arts and the Heart of the Creative Campus," a 2012 white paper by Alan Brown and Steven Tepper, available through the Association of Performing Arts Presenters website at www.APAP365.org
11. *Memory House/Desire House*, resulted from a partnership between UMD's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center; School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation; School of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies; Kronos Quartet; Ronit Eisenbach, Associate Professor of Architecture, Harold Burgess, Director of the College Park Arts Scholars, Sharon Mansur, Associate Professor of Dance and our wonderful students. We are grateful to everyone whose support and energy made this project possible.

Photo Credits: 1. *The Architecture and Daily Life of a Chinese House*; 2. *Leslie Katz*; Figs. 3-5 *Stan Barouh*.