

**Inside International House: Project Methodology**

By

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## About the Project

*Inside International House* is a project combining photoessay, oral history interviews, a methodological paper, and archival research. It culminates in a website split up into three sections: photos, interviews, and reflections. This project has taken many different forms throughout the course of my planning, with my main issue being I had so many directions I wanted to take this piece in and had to make my ideas into something that would be comprehensive to a first-time viewer. I finalized the piece into the parts I was most passionate about: the interviews, the photos, and the prose that would tie it all together.

For a brief background on what International House New York is, the house is a living-learning community for people over the age of twenty-one, limited to those in graduate school, performing artists, and interns.<sup>1</sup> The age range is large, but most residents are in their mid to late twenties. The building operates very similarly to a university-style dorm or sorority house, with small individual rooms, common spaces, and a dining hall. It is located in the neighborhood of Morningside Heights, close to Columbia University, the Manhattan School of Music, and Union Theological Seminary.

The idea for the house came about in 1909,<sup>2</sup> when Harry Edmonds said hello to a Chinese student on the steps of Columbia library and the student responded that Edmonds was the first person to talk to him since he had come to New York. He then worked with his wife to create Sunday Suppers, where they invited international students from around the city to join them for

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<sup>1</sup> International House New York, *International House – NYC*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.ihouse-nyc.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> International House New York, “Our History,” *International House – NYC*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.ihouse-nyc.org/about-student-housing-in-ny/our-history/>.

dinner. Eventually the Edmonds sought funding from John D. Rockefeller Jr., who gave the Edmonds money to build International House in 1924.<sup>3</sup>

### **My Relationship to International House**

I moved into International House New York in August of 2025. I currently live in the South building, which contains identical 8’x10’ rooms with a shared bathroom as well as a dining hall and community spaces.<sup>4</sup> The space initially attracted me for two reasons, including the closeness to Columbia’s campus and the Notable Alumni page<sup>5</sup> of I-House’s website. While I did not recognize most of the names on the list, one stood out to me—Chinua Achebe, most famous for writing the novel *Things Fall Apart*<sup>6</sup>, one of my favorite books. So, that is to say, I mostly came to the house because of the alumni, something I began to consider more when creating this project.

One of the elements I wanted to base my project around was documenting what these future alumni looked like when they were just starting out. One conversation that spurred this interest was a talk I had at the Pub, which is one of the community spaces in the house, with an I-House staff member about how interesting it would have been to have an interview with one of our alums, Leonard Cohen, when he had been a resident. Before he was *the* Leonard Cohen and when he was in his mid-twenties, finding himself, simply “Leonard” to the residents around him.

If the current residents follow the trajectory of alums from the past hundred years, many of them will go on to be leaders of countries, world renowned artists, and outspoken

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Hall, *Living in the Future: International House, New York—75 Years*, foreword by David Rockefeller (New York: International House, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> International House New York, “Amenities & Rates,” *Admissions and Resident Life*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://admissions.ihouse-nyc.org/amenities-rates/>.

<sup>5</sup> International House New York, “Notable Alumni,” *International House – NYC*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.ihouse-nyc.org/alumni/notable-alumni/>.

<sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

humanitarians. Right now though, they are finding out who they are, slacking off on coursework to go to the Pub, and skipping meals because their internship salaries pay extremely little. What exists throughout the house in these residents, though, is hope. The hope of a better life for themselves, their countries, and their world. I wanted to capture this, the struggle and the hope of these twenty-somethings who will one day go on to save the world, but right now are just trying to make it through the days.

### **Interview Process**

My interview process revolved largely around tea. While I had previously worked in the oral history field, my job had always been to show up and interview the narrator. All elements of project design had been left to my amazing project manager Jessie Oldham, who coordinated location, addressed any technology needs, and above all, made sure the narrator had the most comfortable experience possible. For the first time, all of that was left up to me. I was terrified. I feared accidentally choosing uncomfortable chairs, giving a narrator confusing directions to our meeting place, awkward small talk introductions and exits.

So I started small. I bought an electric kettle. I couldn't guarantee that my narrators would feel completely comfortable, but I could offer them a cup of tea. Tea has been used as a conversational conduit for centuries, both in ceremony and in everyday conversations. I was inspired by oral historian Lexa Walsh, who created a series called *The In-Between: Tea Talks*<sup>7</sup>, where she centers conversations with narrators around tea ceremony. It also brought in a small element of reciprocity, showing my narrators I appreciate their contributions to my work. Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"*<sup>8</sup> was another oral history

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<sup>7</sup> Lexa Walsh, *The In-Between: Tea Talks*, 2017, *The In-Between: Tea Talks*, no. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (New York: Amistad, 2018).

work that sparked thought for me about food as reciprocity. Additionally, from a practical perspective, drinking tea gave my narrators something to do with their hands, so that they were not tapping or fidgeting, which would mess with the audio quality.

My interview process methodology is a combination of learning from oral history readings, as well as the real-life people who have shaped my practice. The most significant “father figure” of oral history to me is my former boss, Dr. Barbra Gannon. Dr. Gannon ran the Veterans History Project<sup>9</sup>, an oral history program that interviewed Central Florida Veterans of the United States (US) wars. My first introduction to oral history was a basic PowerPoint Dr. Gannon gave me detailing the beginner’s overview, but the real learning came from watching her interview. She always led with empathy, both inside and outside the interviews, displaying key elements of reciprocity and care. She created a resource closet for any student Veterans working or interviewing with us that had snacks, school supplies, and tools for outside the classroom as well.

One of the most important elements of interviewing I learned from Dr. Gannon is the key to not coming across as judgmental or dismissive of the narrator is to genuinely not be judging them during the interview. Many of the people we were interviewing had gone through extreme trauma and/or been criticized for being a part of the military, especially the Vietnam War Veterans.<sup>10</sup> While “stop being judgmental” sounds simple, I often found myself wondering in conversation, “Is what that person said true? Does this person align with me politically? Would I have done what they did if I found myself in their situation?” Now, I am not saying I have become an entirely objective interviewer because complete objectivity is just not possible, but coming to the interview with the mentality that my job is not to analyze, simply to collect, has made a world of difference.

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<sup>9</sup> University of Central Florida, *UCF Community Veterans History Project*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://vetstories.cah.ucf.edu/>.

<sup>10</sup> Tsung-Yi Lin, “Transcultural Psychiatry: A Review of the Literature,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 127, no. 4 (1970): 488–93, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.127.4.488>.

I have found it makes narrators more open with their stories, more comfortable, and more likely to be interested in further oral history experiences.

Other interviewers I take inspiration from are Zora Neale Hurston and Svetlana Alexievich. Both of these authors treat their narrators with incredible dignity and compassion, which I will not separate from their identity as women. For a long time, I tried to conform my identity as an oral historian to that of a very masculine idea of historical collection. Removing emotion, to me, seemed to be the norm of how historical information was collected, especially in my background in census-based archival work. However, Hurston and Alexievich do not remove themselves from the work. In Hurston's *Baracoon*<sup>11</sup> and Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*<sup>12</sup>, they are as much characters in the narrative as the people they are interviewing. Narrators want to connect, want to know if you have a similar lived experience, they do not just want to talk to a blank wall. For the narrator to let you in, you have to share a part of yourself as well. Additionally, Hurston and Alexievich do not shy away from experiencing the emotions of their narrator's stories with them. This is especially prevalent in Alexievich's work, where she is able to take on some of the emotional burden of her narrator's stories in order to provide relief to the narrator.

Through my work, I also consulted place-based practices and literature, especially the work of Keith Basso. In Basso's *Wisdom sits in Places*<sup>13</sup>, he says, "Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person." Analysis of the relationship between people and places comes in two parts at I-House—the

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<sup>11</sup> Hurston, *Baracoon*.

<sup>12</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (New York: Random House, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996

physical place of I-House and the memory and knowledge from home people bring to I-House. The international community of I-House encourages residents to celebrate their “home” country, or in many cases countries, through events such as Night of Nations, where residents can build booths for their country and celebrate with the community. Residents self-identify as members of their home, but also as residents of International House.

This brings up complex issues and sometimes debates between residents, especially when it comes to sovereignty. In the case of countries with complicated independence, some may claim to be from the dominant, legal state while others see themselves as members of the cultural state. For example, two residents from Papua could identify themselves as completely differently, one seeing themselves as Papuan and the other as Indonesian. So, that is to say, the idea of “home” for many residents is much more complicated than meets the eye.

### **Transcription and Archival**

For transcription, I used a tool called Otter AI<sup>14</sup>, which uses artificial intelligence (AI) to transcribe the interviews. Before I started my transcriptions, I asked all my narrators what their thoughts were on me using AI to transcribe, and all of them consented and did not have any preference on what tool I used or if that tool had safety measures, such as storing the transcript offline. All of my narrators knew their interviews were going to be online, so the idea of using an AI to transcribe those stored online made sense, since that was where they were going to end up anyways. My narrators were all extremely open to the AI transcription process, which I think has to do with a few demographic elements. Two of my narrators work in Science Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, where AI is used much

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<sup>14</sup> Otter.ai, *Otter.ai – Real-Time and Shareable Meeting Notes*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://otter.ai/home>.

more commonly, and three of my narrators are Generation Z, so this technology is less foreign to them than it would be to older narrators.<sup>15</sup>

The largest deciding factors for my choice in AI transcription tool were price point and recommendations from other oral historians. I have previously used Zoom transcription and Descript, the former being not very reliable and the latter being out of my budget. Otter AI provided a significantly better transcription experience than Zoom transcription, at a lower price point than Descript. Something notable about all of these models is that they are not skilled at recognizing non-English words or place names, which is especially difficult when doing a project like this that is so internationally-centered. I personally found out of all the options Otter AI worked best for recognizing places and human names.

After using AI to create a transcript, I went in and audit and copy edited the transcripts using the Incite style guide<sup>16</sup>. I chose this style guide because I am a fellow with Incite, so it is the style guide I have the most familiarity with. Additionally, this style guide addresses many specifically oral history related questions that popped up. This guide allows revisions for clarity, while also keeping the sanctity of the narrator's speaking style, another element that was especially important to me when I was choosing a transcription style.

I chose to archive my work in the International House Archives<sup>17</sup>, which are only available for viewing upon request of the archivists. First, the archivists have been incredibly helpful to me throughout this whole project and getting to know them personally has enabled me

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<sup>15</sup> C. K. Y. Chan and K. K. W. Lee, "The AI Generation Gap: Are Gen Z Students More Interested in Adopting Generative AI Such as ChatGPT in Teaching and Learning than Their Gen X and Millennial Generation Teachers?" *Smart Learning Environments* 10 (2023): Article 60, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-023-00269-3>.

<sup>16</sup> Columbia University Center for Oral History Research, *Oral History Transcription Style Guide* (New York: Columbia University, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> International House New York, "Archives," *International House – NYC*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.ihouse-nyc.org/about-student-housing-in-ny/archives/>.

to trust them with my narrator's stories. Second, I got approval from my narrators for their stories to be housed in this archive, as they all find International House to be a safe place in many capacities and expect that to be true of the archives as well. I have also archived the work on my personal website and the Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) website, for both of which I received consent from my narrators. I chose this method of archival because in the digital age, I feel this is the best way for viewers to access the stories of my narrators, especially since the International House Archives are invite-only.

### **Photography Methodology**

For this Project, I shot on a digital camera, a Canon R6. I also used studio lighting for my photographs, in addition to natural lighting. I took a Documentary Filmmaking class in the fall through OHMA, where we used digital cameras, so I felt most comfortable with equipment similar to that of what I had used in class.

Much of my photographic inspiration for this project was found in the 1990s Japanese Onnanoko Shashin, or "girlie photo" movement. I will note here that this was a term created by outsiders of the movement, while the photographers of this movement mostly rejected this term, however it is the commonly used way to refer to this wave of photography.<sup>18</sup> The most significant artists in this movement were Hiromix<sup>19</sup> and Yurie Nagashima<sup>20</sup>, who captured

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<sup>18</sup> Leonel Martínez, "Hiromix: Shaping the Identity of '90s Japanese Female Youth," *Sabukaru Online*, accessed April 19, 2026,

<https://sabukaru.online/articles/hiromix-shaping-the-identity-of-90s-japanese-female-youth>

<sup>19</sup> Shashasha, "Hiromix," *Shashasha – Photography & Art*, accessed April 19, 2026,

<https://www.shashasha.co/en/artist/hiromix>.

<sup>20</sup> Shashasha, "Yurie Nagashima," *Shashasha – Photography & Art*, accessed April 19, 2026,

<https://www.shashasha.co/en/artist/yurie-nagashima>.

everyday life of women in Japan. This was revolutionary because at the time, men were primarily behind the camera. Women only existed through the viewpoints of men, which oftentimes sexualized them and ignored any indication of an inner life. Hiromix's "Seventeen Girl Days"<sup>21</sup> was a series by a then-teenage Hiromix, who photographed everyday elements of her life, including her room, showing a glimpse into her inner life.

The way both Hiromix and Yurie Nagashima see their girlish aesthetics not as an isolating element to be tucked away to be accepted into a larger male-dominated field of photography, but instead a tool to show their unique viewpoint, is something I tried to emulate in my own work for this project. Additionally, I was interested in how they used objects to connect with the inner worlds of their subjects. Their pictures were often messy, showing how unpolished a person's most vulnerable self can be.

The composition of the photos were not the only element of the process I took into account, I also looked towards the ethical considerations of photography in this context. First, it was important to me in this project design not to make the main focus of my photo series an "Othering" of cultures outside the American society in which I was producing my work. This is an issue with many travel or international photographers, as oftentimes these photographers are framing cultural practices as strange or archaic.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, this can also create scenarios in which non-members of a group wedge their way into practices that are not theirs to share or even to participate in. *National Geographic* has a long-spanning history of this, something addressed

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<sup>21</sup> Canon, "Hiromix (1995 Grand Prize)," *New Cosmos of Photography*, accessed April 19, 2026, <https://global.canon/en/newcosmos/gallery/grandprix/1995-hiromix/index.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Erin L. Haney, "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism — and When It Still Is," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html>.

in their 2018 issue dedicated entirely to race.<sup>23</sup> The aim of this type of photography is often to bring groups together, but oftentimes the result instead was that the subjects of these photos felt othered by the composition.

International House also has a tendency as an organization to emphasize cultural differences through photos, usually through a ‘college brochure’<sup>24</sup> method. This method chooses to photograph gatherings that emphasize the diversity of the house, rather than photographing groups that are all of the same ethnic makeup. This is what led me to the dorm room concept, looking for something that would highlight the similarities of residents rather than the differences. At the same time, the way people decorate and live in their room is a reflection of their culture, their personality, and their identity. I felt that this was a way to introduce the idea of the wide array of people living at International House, while not defining or separating any of my models based on culture or ethnicity.

### **Reflection Methodology**

The written, prose part of this thesis was the part of my work that has stayed constant throughout my planning. I knew I wanted to write a perspective of I-House that was separate from the existing literature, which is primarily written by I-House itself. I went into this section with very specific ideas of what I wanted my narrators to talk about—a plan that of course, did not work because the great part of an oral history interview is the unexpected stories.

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<sup>23</sup> Camila Domonoske, “National Geographic Turns the Lens on Its Own Racist History,” *NPR*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/21/594895122/national-geographic-turns-the-lens-on-its-own-racist-history>.<sup>24</sup> Anya Kamenetz, “A Campus More Colorful Than Reality? Beware That College Brochure,” *NPR*, December 29, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/29/257765543/a-campus-more-colorful-than-reality-beware-that-college-brochure>.

I went in with a very critical lens, looking to explore the less-talked about aspects of I-House. Specifically, I wanted to talk about the holes in the origin story of I-House, the Chinese student who Harry Edmonds meets and creates the idea of I-House from<sup>25</sup>. I also wanted to talk about the legacy of Henry Kissinger<sup>26</sup> being on the board of the house, and how that functioned when his legacy is so cemented in the international war crimes he committed. However, when I tried to include questions about these topics in my interviews, I ran into one major issue—I was not interviewing historians. I had spent so much time in the archives, I assumed everyone at the house had the deep historical knowledge that I did, as well as the interest to talk about these topics. This of course, was not the case, and I had to pivot both my interview and writing methods.

Since my interviews looked less at the history of I-House, but I knew I still wanted to touch on that topic, I turned to the archives for my written section. I had been deeply inspired by the work of Svetlana Alexievich, who came to oral history writing with a “collage” style of writing. She would do hundreds of interviews, and then take sections and find where they fit in the overall story of her narrators as a whole. This collage-style is something I wanted to emulate in my own work. I pulled from the archives and my own interviews to compare what my narrators were saying with what was there historically. I found some contradictions, but most significantly I found overlap. It was a less critical lens than what I was expecting, but I found that my narrators were deeply touched by living in a historical building and there were many

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<sup>25</sup> *The New York Times*, “Harry Edmonds, Who Established International House, Is Dead at 96,” July 8, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/07/08/archives/harry-edmonds-who-established-international-house-is-dead-at-96-a.html>.

<sup>26</sup> International House New York, “Henry A. Kissinger (1923–2023),” *International House – NYC*, published December 1, 2023, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://www.ihouse-nyc.org/henry-a-kissinger-1923-2023/>.

common threads between the way they spoke about the house and how residents and staff spoke about the house 100 years ago.

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