

**“When is a piano not a piano?”**

*The West House Piano: a biography*

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**ARCH 1900: The Archaeology of College Hill**

With gratitude and love to residents of the Environmental Program House – past, present and future.

On the porch of the wood-frame house at 91 Brown Street sits an old upright piano, paint peeling.<sup>1</sup> Behind the trash and recycling bins, its back is exposed to the elements, and its front is barely more sheltered. Although it is at least fifteen years old, and has been sitting outside for close to ten, the flaking bright paint job is still visible, depicting a colorful assembly-line producing of ice cream, with banners reading “Ben & Jerry’s ice cream is music to my mouth!” and “Ben & Jerry’s music is ice cream to my ears!” The piano is a literal landmark – when West House<sup>2</sup> coopers give directions to the house, they usually say something like “We’re the big purple house on Brown & Meeting with the colorful piano on the porch!”

The West House piano has come to occupy a somewhat mythical status. No one can remember a time when it was played, or at least when “playing” it resulted in anything resembling music, although references can be found in the West House Songbook, including a parody of “Country Roads” written about West House – “Drunker than the drunkies, playin’ piano keys.”<sup>3</sup> Most of those keys do not work, and of the notes that can actually be struck, few are in tune. The imitation ivory has fallen off many of the keys. Over the years, the piano has been used as a cooling rack for pots of freshly-made salsa borracha, a display shelf for large wax sculptures and a repository for standard-sized bricks made of hard-baked bread, glitter and other coloring agents.

Yet despite the piano’s central place in the collective imagination of West House, little is remembered or known about its origins. This is partially due to the fact that as a student cooperative, West House experiences full membership turnover at least every four years.

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<sup>1</sup> See figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> West House is a student housing and food cooperative, administered by the Environmental Program House, which (as of fall 2014) also runs a sister coop, North House, at 111 Brown Street. Both West House and 111 Brown Street are owned by Brown University and are considered University housing; the Environmental Program House’s housing allotment allows it to allocate the rooms as it desires, a similar status to the Greek houses on Wriston Quadrangle.

<sup>3</sup>Reeder, Jason, ed. *The West House Songbook*, c. 2009.

“Traditions” can quickly become canonized just by happening coincidentally a few times. It can be hard to uncover the true origins of any part of West House’s physical or communal culture. Moreover, it is difficult to determine what counts as “true” tradition. As Randall Munroe aptly notes, “An 'American tradition' is anything that happened to a baby boomer twice.”<sup>4</sup> Substitute “West House” for “American” and “cooper” for “baby boomer” and the rest is history, as it were.

Thus, it is difficult to determine when the piano first arrived at West House. As far as I can tell, the first mention of it in any kind of documentary record is a brief note “The piano arrives today. Yay!”<sup>5</sup> in the West House Journal. The entry is unsigned and undated. Due to the nature of this journal (a loose-leaf collection of sketches, poems and other writings from West Housers over the years), it is difficult to determine when this entry is from, but based on the surrounding entries (including one which establishes that the piano had most likely arrived by September 13th, 2000)<sup>6</sup>, it was probably written sometime during the fall of 2000. Oral tradition has it that the piano originated at the Ben & Jerry’s on College Hill (now on Thayer St., previously on Meeting between Thayer & Brook) – hence the paint job. Most likely, West House discussed the piano at at least one house meeting prior to its arrival, but I have not been able to find the meeting notes that would tell us more about that process.

However it arrived, the piano quickly became a staple of the West House living experience. The West House listserv<sup>7</sup>, started in 2006, contains numerous mentions of the piano. An email from a West Houser traveling abroad remembered the scene in the communal living room: “...then maybe someone would plunk out a song on the piano, and

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<sup>4</sup> Munroe, Randall. “Tradition.” <http://xkcd.com/988/> (image alternate text). Accessed 24 October, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See figure 3.

<sup>6</sup> See figure 4.

<sup>7</sup> The listserv contains all current house residents, as well as out-of-house food coopers. Many alums remain on the list for some time after graduating. It is the primary means of intra-house communication, aside from weekly business meetings.

someone else would come downstairs and give people hugs and then leave to go do something awesome with their night.”<sup>8</sup> At this point in its history, the piano served as a functional part of West House, supporting group singings and providing a physical centerpoint for those participating.

This email also hints at the next phase of the piano’s existence at West House: its status as a symbol of the house to house residents and members of the broader Brown community alike. We shall see more direct evidence for this later on, but the seeds are already there – the piano figures prominently in the traveling cooper’s account of West House living, recounted from far away with some fondness and nostalgia.

The piano was still in the living room by the end of the semester, as the next few mentions of it discuss the expense required to have it tuned.<sup>9</sup> At house meeting on October 1st, 2006, it was decided that the piano should be moved out of the living room and into the garden.<sup>10</sup> This is significant not only because of the physical migration of the piano, but because it marks the piano’s transition to a symbol of the house, rather than a functional component. “When is a piano not a piano?: When it is colorful and unwanted, and on our porch. Then it is a garden ornament.”<sup>11</sup> Here is a literal statement that the piano no longer functions primarily as a musical instrument. Moreover, placing a piano outside, exposed to weather, is a clear indication that its use as an instrument is regarded as secondary to its physical symbolism – it is common knowledge that leaving an instrument outside will cause it to become rapidly nonfunctional.

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<sup>8</sup> “Biking in Italy.” Message to West House listserv. 4 April, 2006. Email.

<sup>9</sup> For example, on May 7th, 2006, piano tuning was listed as an expense to be investigated given a surplus of house funds. (“this just in - meeting minutes, actually important.” Email to West House listserv. 7 May, 2006. Email.)

<sup>10</sup> “West House Meeting Minutes 10/1.” Email to West House listserv. 2 October, 2006. Email.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

We can find traces of the piano's role as a symbol of West House before this transition (from a January 2006 coop recruitment email: "P.S. Aside from fun people and good food, you can look forward to a beautifully decorated, out-of-tune piano!"<sup>12</sup>), but once the piano was placed on the porch, it was conclusively no longer a musical instrument. Then the controversy began.

A few days after the decision to move the piano to the garden, a cooper wrote to suggest that it instead be donated "to someone who wants a piano instead of becoming a garden decoration."<sup>13</sup> The response to this email (written by the secretary, who had sent out the original meeting notes announcing the piano's move to the garden), is indicative of an internal struggle over the piano's function:

We discussed this fairly extensively at the house meeting (sorry if my minutes gave it short shrift), and decided that given its lack of playability (or reparability), and given our space constraints, it was not worth it to keep it in the living room as a piano. However, many co-ops nonetheless have a strong attachment to it and strongly objected to it leaving the house completely, so as a compromise we voted to keep it in the garden, where it would be much funkier than one's average garden ornament. If there are objections being raised to the consensus that was reached, we can bring it up again at the next meeting; but for now, let's stick to what was decided.<sup>14</sup>

There was no further discussion on this thread. At meeting the following week, the house reaffirmed its decision to take the piano out of the house. The use of the phrase "fairly extensively" in the above email, and the tone of the meeting minutes from the following

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<sup>12</sup> "West House Open Dinner!" Email to West House listserv. 29 January, 2006. Email.

<sup>13</sup> "piano." Email to West House listserv. 4 October, 2006. Email.

<sup>14</sup> "Re: piano." Email to West House listserv. 6 October, 2006. Email.

meeting, indicate that the issue was discussed at length.<sup>15</sup> The piano's transition from instrument to symbol was not a smooth one – clearly, different coopers had different feelings about the issue. When Gosden & Marshall wrote that an object's "...meanings change and are renegotiated through the life of an object"<sup>16</sup> they were not necessarily referring to literal negotiation, but it seems that is what occurred in West House at this point. Furthermore, Gosden & Marshall's observation that "Changes in meaning need not be driven by the physical modification or use of an object"<sup>17</sup> clearly applies here.

However, even though it was decided that the piano should be moved to the garden, it was apparently still on the porch on November 6th, when the Assistant Director of the Office of Residential Life emailed a West House resident to ask that all items be removed from the porch, including the piano.<sup>18</sup> This email was forwarded to the listserv, along with a proposal that the piano be moved in the following days. However, given that only a month later, the house was described in a recruiting email as having "dance parties, unlimited hot chocolate, falafel, a poster of Ghandi, a piano on the porch - if we don't have it, you don't need it!"<sup>19</sup> it seems unlikely the piano was moved in November, unless it was immediately moved back. Another recruitment email, mostly copy-pasted from the first, was sent on February 9th, 2007, and again mentioned the piano on the porch.<sup>20</sup>

As these emails make clear, the piano was beginning to take on the role of a public symbol of West House. Its colorful paint job and obvious signs of use symbolized some of the things West Housers loved most about the community – creativity, sharing and vibrancy – as

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<sup>15</sup> "As of now, we intend to forge ahead with our piano plan (see last week), much as Columbus heroically [sic] forged ahead across the Atlantic despite danger and threats of mutiny." ("West House Meeting Minutes 10/9." Email to West House listserv. 10 October, 2006. Email.)

<sup>16</sup> Gosden, Chris & Yvonne Marshall. 1999. "The Cultural Biography of Objects." *World Archaeology* 31 (2): p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "FW: West House porch." Email to West House listserv. 6 November, 2006. Email.

<sup>19</sup> "Come Live With Us in West House!" Email to West House listserv. 10 December, 2006. Email.

<sup>20</sup> "Open House at West House!" Email to West House listserv. 9 February, 2007. Email.

evidenced by the many loving references to the piano. We see further evidence of the piano's role as a symbol in an email sent around the time of the 2007 Commencement ceremony, when West House members were organizing a reunion for alumni who had been coopers as Brown students. "We're still at 91 Brown St., on the corner of Brown and Meeting, and just to make things easier, we now have a Ben and Jerry's piano on the porch," read the email, sent to the listserv for current house members' reference.<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 2011, West House faced an existential question: whether to move the coop to Plantations House on Bowen Street. Ultimately, the necessary support to uproot and replant the house could not be gathered, so the coop remained where it was. The piano factored into this decision, as the (long) meeting notes from one of the many discussions of the moving issue reveal ("we build interest through our funky piano on our porch"<sup>22</sup>). That the piano was by this time so central to the physical identity of the house as to merit mention in a discussion of the best location for the coop shows how a physical symbol can carry deep meaning and arouse strong emotions.

In May 2008, Residential Life had again asked that the piano be moved.<sup>23</sup> This was to become a pattern – Residential Life or Facilities would ask that it be removed from the porch since it was an "eyesore" or a fire hazard, and inevitably the house would delay, stall<sup>24</sup> or simply forget. For their part, Facilities never followed through on their intention to remove the piano themselves. In a February 7th, 2013 meeting, the Associate Director for Administrative Services in the Office of Residential Life asked me (in my capacity as Common Space Coordinator for West House) if the piano could be removed once and for all. Prior to this

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<sup>21</sup> "alum invite." Email to West House listserv. 20 May, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> "long minutes." Email to West House listserv. 14 November, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> "some random stuff which you should read out of love for all things west house..." Email to West House listserv. 14 May, 2008. Email.

<sup>24</sup> In one instance, coopers distracted Facilities staff who had come to remove the piano by offering them freshly-baked cupcakes. ("[fun] Happy Birthday Becca!" Email to West House listserv. 10 April, 2013. Email.)

point, I had been lobbying for Facilities to perform a good deal of maintenance work on West House, including replacement of the disintegrating linoleum kitchen floor. In late February, I emailed West House to express my interest in “trading” the piano for work on the kitchen.<sup>25</sup> Responses were immediate and varied. Some coopers felt that this was an acceptable tradeoff and some did not. Some proposed alternate arrangements, including moving the piano to the garden – ironically the same proposal passed (and never acted upon) by the house some eight years prior.<sup>26</sup> One cooper remarked that we had decided the previous semester to disassemble the piano and turn it into flower boxes.<sup>27</sup>

Personal replies sent to me (as the originator of the thread) and not the listserv illuminate some of the questions at hand in the discussion of whether to grant Facilities permission to move the piano. One cooper explained that “this is a decision we are actively making as a co-op - to move something that’s been there for longer than any of us remember.”<sup>28</sup> Here, the piano’s longevity and lack of remembered history actually served to increase the gravity associated with making a decision about its future. It was agreed that we would discuss the topic of moving the piano at the following week’s meeting.

The decision was that current house members had until spring break to move the piano to the garden and plant flowers in it.<sup>29</sup> After that point, I was to ask Facilities to remove it. On April 2nd, after spring break, I emailed the house to inform them that I was giving Facilities permission to take away the piano.<sup>30</sup> On April 8th, I did so, and began planning for the kitchen floor replacement, which took place on May 6th.<sup>31</sup> At the risk of undertaking a subjective self-analysis, I regard this as the third phase of the piano’s existence at West

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<sup>25</sup> “[BUSINESS]: Piano.” Email to West House listserv. 27 February, 2013. Email.

<sup>26</sup> “Re: [BUSINESS]: Piano.” Email to West House listserv. 27 February, 2013. Email.

<sup>27</sup> “Re: [BUSINESS]: Piano.” Email to West House listserv. 27 February, 2013. Email.

<sup>28</sup> “Re: [BUSINESS]: Piano.” Email to the author. 28 February, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> “Meeting Minutes 3/3.” Email to West House listserv. 3 March, 2013. Email.

<sup>30</sup> “Piano.” Email to West House listserv. 2 April, 2013. Email.

<sup>31</sup> “West House piano.” Email to Richard Hilton. 8 April, 2013. Email.



House: its use as a bargaining chip. By this time, the piano was clearly falling apart, and while it retained its “ceremonial” function as a landmark, it was increasingly clear that Facilities was interested in removing it. As Common Space Coordinator, I decided to see what we could get out of them in exchange for the piano, even though we technically had no authority over whether or not it remained. This exchange illustrates how objects can become conduits for social relations, serving not only as the physical medium by which exchange takes place, but actually impacting the nature of the relations undergirding the exchange.

Given Residential Life and Facilities’ five-year tradition of promising to take away the piano and not doing so, it may come as little surprise that the piano remains as of October 2014, despite another email in July 2014 promising its imminent removal.<sup>32</sup> West House’s then-Residential Life Coordinator forwarded that email to me, remarking only semi-jokingly “How are we going to identify West House now?” The piano still serves as the outward face of West House to the Brown campus.

The rhetorical question posed to the West House listserv so many years ago, “When is a piano not a piano?” is actually a perfect exposition of the central question of an object biography such as this. At what point is an object more, less, or simply other than itself? What does it connote? Who gets to decide? Especially in a cooperative living community, these questions are constantly being reevaluated and negotiated, and the reevaluation and negotiation leave behind documentary and physical evidence. Through an often-unintentional collective decision-making process, objects become part of lore, lore becomes tradition and tradition becomes ritual. The documentary record of the West House listserv is a veritable treasure trove of differing opinions on the meaning and significance of the piano.

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<sup>32</sup> “Fwd:” Email to author. 31 July, 2014. Email.

Why biographize a piano? Because the piano is not a piano. It is a window – a window into the conflict, irreverence and love that makes West House what it is.



Figure 1: the West House piano on 23 October, 2014.



Figure 2: the author with the piano, 28 April, 2014.

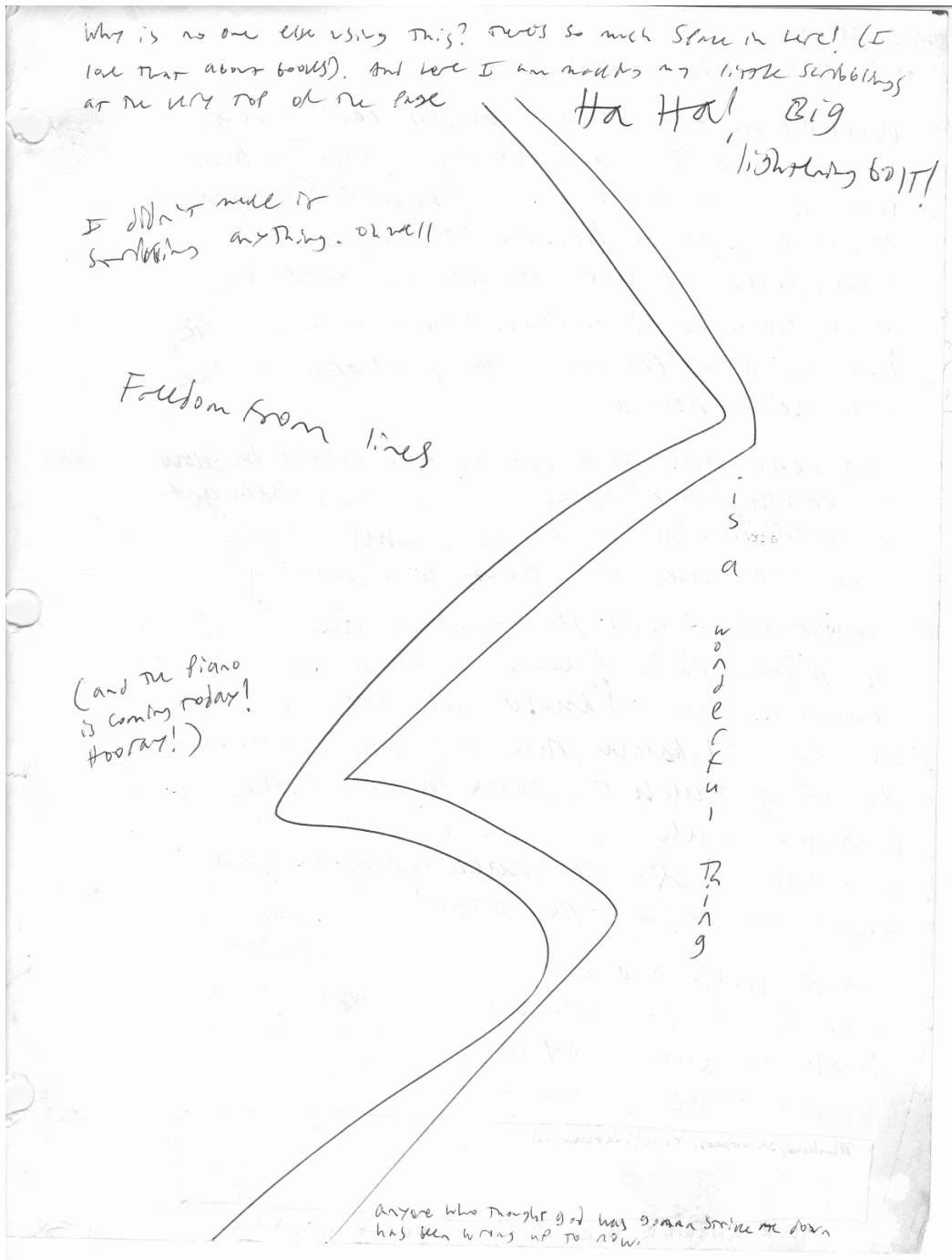


Figure 3: the first mention of the piano in the West House Journal (undated).

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9-13-2000

Erin (sp?),

Thank you so so much  
for the piano!!

- Ben

Ben,

Thank you so so much  
for the butterflies-to-be!!

- Riana

Figure 4: entry establishing that the piano had most likely arrived by September 13th, 2000.