

## Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What's Wrong

*By Gerald George*

**F**ive thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand—nobody knows how many historic house museums there are in America. However, since at least the 1960s, they have mushroomed in numbers and popularity to become collectively a major part of the cultural landscape, however uncoordinated.

Patriotism may have inspired the first ones, such as Mount Vernon, which continues to draw thousands of visitors as a George Washington shrine. The desire to document architectural history also led to preservation of many museum houses such as those in the collections of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Pressures on communities to maintain visual identities, commemorate anniversaries, and increase tourism, additionally have fed the expansion. Much of the last half-century's growth in historic property museums involved saving an elegant mansion or the home of a historical notable as an expression of community identity and pride; as a rousing project for commemorating some local, state, or national centennial or bicentennial; or as a means of attracting tourists with dollars to spend in hotels, restaurants, and stores.

But now that so many buildings nationwide open their doors each day to the museum-going public, are they truly providing all the education, delight, and financial return that their founders anticipated? Among preservation professionals, there seems a nagging sense that the answer is negative. So strong is that sense that two organizations—the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)—jointly convened a conference to try to understand what may be wrong with the historic house museum movement and what to do about it.

On April 8 through 10, 2002, twenty-seven individuals variously involved with historic house museums assembled in Tarrytown, New York, at the Pocantico Conference Center on the grounds of Kykuit, the historic estate of the Rockefellers, which, itself, is in part a house museum. They came at the request of Terry Davis, executive director and CEO of AASLH, and James Vaughan, the National Trust's vice president for stewardship of historic sites, to deal with a question that Vaughan, who also chairs an AASLH Historic House Committee, put this way:

*In the increasing competition for visitors, members, and financial support, many, if not most, historic sites are struggling for survival, and the quality of preservation and maintenance of many such sites has declined precipitously. In addition, the quality and appeal of the traditional historic house interpretation does not successfully compete with other contemporary sources of educational leisure time activities. Is it time for new models, new standards, or new approaches?*

An informal study commissioned by the Trust in 1988 indicated the existence then of at least five thousand historic property museums, averaging approximately one and a third for every county in the country. However, 54 per cent had no more than five thousand visitors annually; 65 per cent had no full-time paid staff; and 80 per cent had annual budgets no larger than \$50,000. Though no subsequent study has been undertaken, participants in the conference believed that historic house museums today are at best no better off, and suffer extensively from deferred maintenance, questionable preservation practices, and high costs per visitor.

Moreover, the group complained of redundancy in the kinds of historic house museums (mostly mansions) and their collections: “too damn many spinning wheels,” as one participant put it, and too few examples of 20<sup>th</sup>-century lifestyles. In addition, within the houses, historical interpretations often seem repetitive, boring, and questionable. Their characteristic “period rooms, guided tours, and don’t-touch environments,” in one participant’s words, seem “tired and antiquated,” disconnected both from current issues and from their own communities.

In fact, many participants believed, many historic house museums are failing. “This industry is overbuilt,” one said, and though museums “die slowly,” often not recognizing their declines at first, some do disappear. Low salaries in the museums that do pay staff have led to considerable turnover. Competition from other leisure-time activities is reducing their “market share.” Many house museums do not keep up with education trends or with other changes around them. And the “entrepreneurs with vision” who took the lead in creating many house museums have “lost their sizzle” and become “stuck in processes” with “less sense of what’s possible.” House museums with “one foot in tourism and one in education,” run by boards who think “the gate can save us,” may survive yet still be unsuccessful.

Nonetheless, participants in the conference lauded historic house museums as embodying “powerful assets” of great potential value. They can be “emotionally powerful settings” that contribute to the “stability, pride, and sense of place” of their communities. They “give an immediacy to history that you can’t get elsewhere.” They are “unique places that don’t change like everything else.” They allow people to “step back in time,” understand the continuity of communities, and feel in touch with something “authentic.”

They also can provide “rich and diverse learning environments” for people of all ages. A historic house becomes a museum when interpreted to the public, “when education is added.” They employ

unique educational tools and processes, preserving human experience, encouraging empathy by explaining lives and emotions in other eras, and helping visitors understand their own relationships to larger communities. Because they are real things from the past instead of abstractions in textbooks they can affect the feelings and understandings of visitors *viscerally*—a word that emerged often in the discussion. As conveyors of values they can be empowering. At the same time, historic house museums can be entertaining and fun, offering opportunities for “legitimate fantasy.”

The enthusiasm of individuals who help create and maintain historic house museums can itself be a resource. Some house museums are created in support of causes such as civil rights and social justice—“We are saving souls,” one historic house director at the conference said. Moreover, in many kinds of house museums those in charge “want people to be as understanding and enthusiastic about history as they are.”

So why do many house museums fail to use their assets effectively? What inhibits their development? The surprising answer from many of the professionals at the conference was professionalism.

Pressures to professionalize may “take the life out of historic house museums.” Defining “success” as meeting certain professional standards forces them into a mold, pushes their focus away from their audiences and communities, makes them formulaic. Sometimes even “professional” collections managers come in and get rid of “inappropriate” things despite significance to their communities. Only a relative handful of historic house museums have gained accreditation from the American Association of Museums and an effort to adjust accreditation standards to such museums seems not to have helped. Grant-making agencies may be reinforcing unnecessary standards. “One size fits all” encourages mediocrity as well as conformity in a kind of museum for which some museum standards are inappropriate. As one conference participant frequently asserted, “we need graduated

standards rather than one high bar.” Setting up as a museum can create a set of professional expectations that lead those in charge to step back and do less creative, audience-related work than they otherwise might.

Conference participants seemed equally concerned that historic house museums, however valuable to their communities, often fail to connect with them. Efforts are inadequate to tap into new constituencies or keep up with the needs and interests of old ones. Historic houses that tend to be “mom and pop” operations think all they need is to show people through and tell a “triumphal,” linear story full of fixed names and dates rather than interpretive understanding, a story unconnected with current scholarship, or changing interests. Period-room interpretations get “stuck in a rut.”

Conference participants also felt that those who run historic house museums often inhibit themselves. Rather than “listening to the market,” internal stakeholders with personal agendas tend to become threatened, territorial, and treat the house museum as a place to “hide out.” One participant asserted that “the best and the brightest” seldom come into the historic house field,” and many who do are averse to risks. It is “hard to operate in a community that has secrets,” and changing a museum can be a fight; it is easier to complain of the limitations of audiences. However, the group generally agreed, disrespect for one’s public can be a major inhibitor.

What, then, can and should be done to help historic houses make good use of their many assets and overcome their inhibitions? The conference participants took no votes and issued no declarations of consensus, but they made many recommendations, which can be summarized under the following points.

*1. Partnerships can help improve both outlook and income.*

The historic house world tends to be balkanized. House museums need more partnerships, collec-

tive organizational structures, and joint ventures to break down their isolation and provide opportunities for enlarging their outlooks and developing operational economies. One participant even advocated “mergers, acquisitions, and hostile takeovers.” But historic houses that are part of larger organizations also often need help. Such help can come from professional associations and from collaborating with universities, drawing on student interns and history teachers’ expertise, for example. In addition, they may need more help from programs offered specifically for museum development by the National Trust and the American Association of Museums with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (the Museum Assessment Program). Moreover, museums need opportunities to learn from each other about things they have found useful and successful. The associations themselves can collaborate in meeting needs. At the conference, representatives of AASLH, which has many history museum members, and the National Council on Public History, whose members are trained historians working outside the classroom, worked on plans for closer communication. The conference itself was a joint product of AASLH, with its museum focus, and the National Trust, which focuses on historic property preservation.

*2. Historic house stakeholders can use help to consider multiple options.*

Many things can legitimately be done to preserve a historic property besides making a museum of it. The “living city approach,” in which historic buildings are “adaptively reused” for businesses, offices, and homes, has long been advocated by the National Trust. And buildings that are not museums can nonetheless be educationally interpreted through markers, publications, and special programs. A historic building, if well maintained, can help anchor a community’s identity and pride simply by being there to see, however it might be used. Moreover, different buildings have different values. Some of great interest to architectural historians, for example, are preserved as “documents” for professional study rather than as public museums. The question to ask, as one participant

put it, is what use is “highest and best” for a building, looking at the needs of different “audiences” as well as at the building itself. Professional associations and other sources of help can identify positive alternatives to museum use of a building and enable people to feel legitimate in exercising other options. People with house museums that are struggling can also be helped to recognize that it is okay to “close the doors gracefully” and seek alternative uses.

*3. Houses that become museums can use encouragement to consider multiple models.*

The museum and preservation professionals who created accreditation may be well advised to “craft a message” telling historic house museums that it is all right not to be accredited and not to meet grant-agency or other standards; that is, that closely serving a living community with creative programming, which can vary according to changing community needs, is a higher goal than professional correctness. Some “bare minimum standards,” however, do apply. They are that a historic house museum must have a building, an organization committed to preserving it, a program that has something to do with it, honesty and authenticity in that program (“tell as much truth as you can bear”), a governing board, a public constituency or community to which the museum is open, and input from that community.

*4. House museums can use encouragement to go beyond “the usual story.”*

For one thing, acknowledging the *whole* story rather than just the pretty parts makes the museum a more effective—and credible—educator. And interpretation profits from being transparent; that is, from identifying the choices and values that underlie it while acknowledging that other interpretations are possible and that interpretations change over time as thinking and circumstances change. Our understanding of history evolves. Nevertheless, whatever the story, audiences need to see themselves in it; that is, what the interpretation of the house says about the lives of others needs relevance to theirs. Interpretive lines may therefore vary depending on whether visitors are young or

old, familiar or new. Interpretation also can be acknowledged as evolving rather than fixed, opening up “hidden history,” and sometimes creating a context in which people are enticed “to figure things out for themselves.” A corollary to going beyond the usual story is to go beyond the kind of historic house most often museumized: greater variety in the kinds of properties preserved and interpreted will enrich the aggregate.

*5. House museums can use help to rethink their interpretive programs.*

House museums can give visitors a sense of “the power of place,” why a historic property matters, what is unique about it, who was there, and what contexts and connections it has, all supported by scrupulous research. The interpretation can explicitly convey consciously chosen “core cultural values” that the museum is interpreting in the contemporary world and provide multiple perspectives that encourage tolerance and diversity. The interpreters can “construct remarkable narratives” with great impact involving “mystery, surprises, ‘a-ha’ moments” and “key details that trigger memory and self-reflection.” The site can be a catalyst for debates and dialogs if one has the courage to address difficult issues and fill in the “gaps in our stories.” Whatever “social constructions” the story bears, they should be acknowledged to visitors, the reasons for them explained—including how they differ from earlier interpretations—and regularly evaluated. Just as visitors may be invited to use the site for discussions, the interpretive messages may be taken beyond the site to provoke thought and action within the community at large.

*6. House museums can use help to realize that funding is not the entire problem.*

Success may require financial sustainability, but sustaining a historic house museum does not make it a success, nor does the sheer number of visitors. Attracting visitors pays off only if something good happens to them. As a conference participant observed, a historic house museum can be sustained by being just “a nothing museum with a big endowment.” Success can come in part from

attracting as many visitors as the house and staff can handle but also from what they take away if it is not just “an accretion of factual information” but a “deep experience” with insight “into issues in which people are interested,” an experience that may change ways of looking at the world, attitudes, and even behavior.

*7. House museums could profit from new tools for evaluation and development.*

Participants in the conference called for developing and disseminating several kinds of information. A “situational analysis” could provide dependable data about historic house museums including what they need. Factors that contribute to sustainable programs could be identified (the National Park Service has undertaken such an analysis of its sites). Historic house museums also could benefit from access to “health indicators,” “strategic business models,” performance measurements, and information on “exemplars” in the field, “best practices,” and “good options.” Someone could provide a profile, using a journalistic approach, of “the process of death” in vulnerable house museums to identify cautionary factors; or fellowships to encourage museum developers to visit successfully established sites. And, agreement was extensive at the conference that standards and expectations need redefinition with an eye more to alternative use options and audience connections than to previous professional canons.

That last statement summarizes what came out of the conference of greatest probable import. The Trust and AASLH plan to expand the discussion about whether and how historic house museums need “reinvention.”

In the meantime, participants had little more than returned home before reading in their newspapers the announcement from Mount Vernon that this venerable grandfather of historic house museums plans to raise \$85 million for a new “museum and orientation center.” Why? To bring “the experience of visiting the first president’s home into the multimedia age,” reported the *Washington Post*; “to bring a younger demographic to the estate and

give this group some visual and aural excitement along with all the history.” The *Post*’s report ends by attributing this quote to Mount Vernon’s executive director: “We are clearly going off in a different direction from other historical sites.”

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