History Dis-placed: Expanding the Narrative of Historic House Museums

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History Dis-placed: Expanding the Narrative of Historic House Museums concentrates on the unique histories and challenges of house-museums through a time of unprecedented crisis and change. In addition to being historic landmarks, house-museums can be sites of civic engagement and reflection, centers for activism and cultural discourse, and places for public events and gatherings. In the digital age, house-museums have had to renegotiate these identities and interactions with contemporary audiences through innovative practices. Together, the chapters in this volume collectively assert that HHMs can survive as important sources of local history, building support in the local community. These are museums that are challenging us to think differently, overturning conventional paradigms, and taking risks.

Historic House Museums are becoming spaces not just of memory, but of activism, dialogue, and cultural regeneration. These changes reflect a growing awareness among museum professionals that the “living history” techniques once popularized in the field may reinforce romanticized or incomplete narratives. Today, interpretive strategies must look beyond static domestic tableaux to explore how the house - as both a physical and symbolic space - contains multiple, often contested, histories. As Vagnone and Ryan assert, “The breath of a house is the living that takes place within it, not the structure or its contents” (2016, 21).
This volume addresses the evolving interpretive practices within historic house museums through four interrelated thematic sections: Visionary Programming, Beyond These Walls, Virtual Vitality, and Sites of Social Justice. Together, these sections reflect a growing movement within the field to reimagine not only what stories are told, but how, where, and for whom they are told. Each section explores a facet of this interpretive shift, offering case studies, theoretical insights, and practical approaches to reframing the work of house museums in the twenty-first century.

Visionary Programming
The first section, Visionary Programming, explores how historic house museums are implementing bold and innovative approaches to interpretation. Moving beyond traditional period rooms and didactic tours, these programs often prioritize collaboration with artists, scholars, descendant communities, and local stakeholders. Through immersive installations, performance-based experiences, and participatory storytelling, such programming seeks to foster emotional engagement, critical reflection, and a deeper sense of connection between past and present. The case studies in this section examine how curators and educators are reconfiguring house museums as sites of inquiry, experimentation, and shared authority.

Beyond These Walls

While the historic house itself remains a central interpretive anchor, many institutions are increasingly working to contextualize their narratives within broader spatial, social, and historical frameworks. The second section, Beyond These Walls, highlights efforts to extend interpretation beyond the physical boundaries of the house. Contributors consider how museums are addressing issues such as land dispossession, enslavement, migration, and community memory - often through partnerships, neighborhood-based initiatives, or landscape interpretation. By reframing the house as part of a larger network of historical and contemporary relationships, these approaches challenge insular narratives and reinforce the museum's role within the public sphere.

Virtual Vitality

The third section, Virtual Vitality, addresses the increasing use of digital technologies to enhance access, engagement, and interpretation. As early as 1994, John Driscoll asked questions that remain salient today: what can we do with a digital museum? Is it possible to create a pro-active and creatively engaged audience? How can museums present a digital image of an object that functions as an artifact? And, for the purposes of the volume, how can house museums, despite digital and virtual programs, retain the intimacy and aura that differentiates them from other museums? While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual tools across the museum world, many institutions have since embraced the digital realm not as a substitute for physical visitation, but as a space for new forms of storytelling, education, and collaboration. From virtual tours and online exhibitions to digital archives and interactive platforms, this section explores how house museums are leveraging technology to reach wider and more diverse audiences. Contributors also reflect on the epistemological implications of digitization: what is gained, what is transformed, and what is lost when interpretation moves beyond material culture and embodied experience.

Sites of Social Justice

The fourth section will provide case studies that expand upon the research of Marianna Clair. Clair, in 2016, began to look into the connection among the appreciation of local heritage, the creation of activists in local communities, and how to educate citizens about social issues. An example is The Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side of New York City. The museum presents and interprets a variety of immigrant experiences on the Lower East Side, but also draws on connections between the past and the present to underscore national conversations about immigration. But, as outlined in "House or Home? Rethinking the House Museum Paradigm", the creation of new house museum over a century ago was to "protect and enshrine American virtue" that was guided by assimilation politics and beliefs. Thus, this chapter will address all types of historicized political activism (Potvin, 2010).

Together, these four sections articulate a vision of the historic house museum as a dynamic, inclusive, and socially engaged institution. Rather than serving solely as vessels of preservation, house museums are increasingly positioned as active participants in contemporary cultural and political discourse. This volume demonstrates how reimagined interpretive practices can make these sites more relevant, equitable, and responsive to the complexities of the histories they are entrusted to tell.

In this Call for Papers, we ask for contributions that examine how Historic House Museums are

navigating decolonial practices, confronting difficult pasts, and opening space for marginalized voices in innovative new ways. The book explores a variety of themes, as they relate to the four thematic sections noted above.

Contributors may address the following:
• The role of descendant communities in shaping interpretive direction
• New exhibition models for underrepresented histories
• House museums as civic spaces for protest, reflection, and healing
• Digital storytelling and participatory interpretation
• Theoretical frameworks for understanding domestic space as contested ground

Please submit abstracts of 250-500 words and a two-page CV to co-editors:
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Reference:
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