An Anarchist Guide to Historic Rooms and House Museums

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ABSTRACT: Historic house museums (HHM) and period rooms contribute to the national identity and a cultural memory. Traditionally they have stood as shrines to a person or concept - reminders for social continuity. Today, most HHMs are struggling for relevancy, and their place within the complex new structure of fast-paced, Internet based media. As a result of these cultural shifts, HHM and period rooms are having difficulty in finding new audiences, increasing fundraising, maintaining volunteers, producing relevant programming and planning for long-term stewardship.

These houses and rooms hold a unique position in modernity. They have been actual private domestic worlds encapsulated and re-presented as public narrative. These architectural fragments exist in the volatile world between the REAL and the IDEAL. This paradoxical existence contains the most potential for an authentic "reading" of these domestic realms.

Our research presents a methodology that makes visible a more holistic narrative of habitation. It begins with a critique and mapping of three HHMs and nine period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC. These recordings reveal a less than authentic experience characterized by a proliferation of *denied spaces*; the lack of the detritus of human habitation and the choreography it suggests; and, the absence of *preservation variation*. This cleansing of history denies the potential use of *Conjecture/Rumor and Gossip in narratives*; or the presence of *Simultaneity* and *Fingerprinting*. To address these shortcomings, we suggest through illustrative recordings and design proposals how the visitor experience can expand to include *Ownership, Overlapping,* and *Trans-position*.

The sustainability of HHMs will depend on a new methodology that makes visible a more holistic narrative of habitation, one that embraces a chorus of diverse voices from both inside and outside the museum. *The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* is a manifesto offered toward that cause.

KEYWORDS: Civic Engagement, Historic House Museum, Anarchist, Period Room

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, national leaders of historic sites gathered at the Rockefeller Estate of Kykuit to discuss the challenges being experienced by historic sites. They found that:

> America's historic sites offer unique opportunities for learning, for reflection, for inspiration. At their best, they can be powerful places that provide great value to their communities. They can offer programs, services, and experiences that are relevant to many of the most pressing issues of our day. America's historic places should be places to nurture the human spirit.

> Despite this potential, however, many of America's historic sites are experiencing declining attendance, financial instability, and poor stewardship, and they are increasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the societal changes around them. (Vaughn 2008)

1.0 CONTEXT

Museums must become more central to community life by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers. (Simon 2010) In the past 40 years, museum theory has focused on doing just that, creating a symbiotic relationship between museums and their surrounding community. If there was an unnecessary separation heretofore, it was because museums were originally established as temples of high culture, intended to reform and civilize the masses. (Moore 2000) This disconnect is due to the objectification of building design and artifact conservation, following modernist theories of architecture and art history, that have resulted in an artificial disjunction between historic buildings and their evolving context. (Hewitt 1984)

Museums must demonstrate their social relevance if they are to survive. Institutions need to become more knowledgeable about the needs of their visitors and be more adept at providing enjoyable and worthwhile

experiences. (Hooper-Greenhill 1994) Gretchen Sorin, Director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program advocates for, "engaging the community--whatever it happens to be in the process. Otherwise, it's *just us* guessing what is of interest or use to the community." (Sorin 2013)

Museums are places that empower their community by acting as informers and educators. (Watson 2007) Their outreach to their larger community is imperative, as they can change the world around them. (MacLeod and Watson 2007, Genoways 2006)

Museums should be portals for reflection for the outside world rather than a fortress of knowledge that people enter. They should be more than a collection of beautiful and rare objects, but rather be a place of dialogue and social gatherings. (Chew 2009, Pitman 1999)

The Kykuit attendees further stated that innovation, experimentation, and collaboration were essential to Historic House Museum (HHM) sustainability, acknowledging that success would be dependent on the leadership's willingness to change its structure, programs, and services. These national leaders specifically recommended that HHMs no longer think of the docent-led tour as the primary method for structuring the visitor experience, and that they should generate more varied ways to utilize their resources to enrich people's lives. Michelle Moon, Assistant Director for Adult Programs at Peabody Essex Museum agrees:

> One thing it means for the quality of tours is that people less inclined to be tolerant than you avoid them like the plague! Having the reigning model of historic house experience be the guided tour comes at a very high cost: we lose the potential support and interest of the majority of visitors who don't enjoy guided tours. That worries me most of all. (Moon 2013)

When Americans visit historic sites and museums, they want more than just information. They seek to make a personal connection with the people and spirit of earlier times. (Cameron and Gatewood 2003) Many want to pretend to be part of the past, through doing crafts or chores, or to be included in curatorial decisions that help determine the experience of their visit. (Magelssen 2006)

Figure 1: Embracing *Conjecture, Rumor and Gossip* per the AGHHM, Danielle Scesney proposed tying ribbons with hand-printed secrets to the fence of the Van Cortlandt House family vault, reinforcing it as a place where history was (and potentially remains) hidden.

Yet even with the extensive support for re-imagining and especially community engagement, HHMs have been slow to adapt. Some suggest that is a consequence of many HHMs being run by well-meaning and hard-working volunteers. Many are elderly, educated, wealthy white women with conservative views of what history encompasses. They follow in the footsteps, or are members themselves of patriotic societies like the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), or the Colonial Dames. Both organizations were founded in the 1890s with a mission *to teach patriotism by erecting monuments and protecting historical spots, by observing historical anniversaries, by promoting the cause of education, especially the study of history, the enlightenment of the foreign population, and all that makes for good citizenship.* (Butcher-Younghans 1993) For many involved with HHMs, it is a mission that needs to be revisited, but a significant challenge to undertake. As Carol Ward, Deputy Director at the Morris-Jumel Mansion asks, how can, "I get tour guides who have been at a site longer than I've been alive to buy into these new ideas?" (Ward 2013)

2.0 THE ANARCHIST GUIDE TO HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

HHMs must demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life. They must look at familiar issues from new perspectives and using new methods. (Donnelly 2002) *The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* (AGHHM) calls for the holistic de-construction of the HHM and the re-establishment of a paradigm from the perspective of **human habitation**. Offered as an evolving graphic manifesto, the AGHHM contains 21 measures within four thematic categories:

• Community engagement and information exchange
• Physicality and inter-activity
• Visual expression of habitation
• Condition and preservation

Students in the School of Architecture at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) and Cooperstown Graduate Program in New York have been testing the AGHHM for the last several years. Their work began with comparative mapping of human habitation in their own homes, and of the Historic Rosedale Plantation House (built 1815) in Charlotte. Later, they deconstructed the visitor experience at the Van Cortlandt House in the Bronx, Wyckoff Cottage in Brooklyn, and nine period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC and offered proposals to improve community engagement and historical interpretation through an Anarchist lens.

2.1 Community engagement and information exchange

HHMs should be re-conceptualized as places that bridge the past and the present, and bring together diverse communities by taking on the role of depositories of social history, shared memories and shared identity. (Matejková 2009). The AGHHM suggests *embracing the neighborhood politically, contextually, and programmatically.* To meet those goals and reach out to the three very distinct but diverse neighborhoods that surround the Van Cordlandt House, UNCC architecture student Danielle Scesney proposed parking food trucks at the estate once a week. (Fig. 2) Through food and drink, her intent was to introduce a shared history of immigration, and increase awareness about the estate's once thriving wheat fields, and the bread and beer the Van Cortlandts produced from it.

Figure 2: *To embrace the neighborhood politically, contextually, and program-maticly* per the AGHHM, Danielle Scesney proposed parking food trucks at the Van Cortlandt House once a week.

The AGHHM suggests *ending the romanticizing of history and embracing conjecture, rumor and gossip* Similarly, Kathryn Boardman, Adjunct Instructor at Coopers-town Graduate Program states that HHMs should…

> Push the envelope - but just be aware that some stories are not ready to be told because the board, family and supporters of a site are not ready to have them told. History as we would like it to be gets in the way. (Boardman 2013)

A short walk from the Van Cortlandt House, but hidden from view on a heavily treed hill is the fenced, family vault. As would be expected, members of the Van Cortlandt family were buried there, although their remains have long since been moved. More importantly, is the belief that the vault was where NYC's founding papers

were hidden and kept safe during the Revolutionary War. It was a place where history was hidden, and remains largely so today. Embracing the vault's history as a place where secrets could still be kept, Scesney expanded her food truck proposal, suggesting that each vendor wrap their food or drink with a ribbon on which a secret, a bit of conjecture, or rumor about the Van Cortlandt Family was printed. (Fig. 2) On the back of the ribbon, customers would be encouraged to write their *own* secrets and tie them to the fence of the vault for safekeeping. While there, they could read the other secrets left behind, and come to better understand the human frailty of their neighbors, whether past or present. (Fig. 2)

The AGHHM encourages the development of opportunities for *Ownership*, an emotional or physical take-away from a visit, and *Fingerprinting,* a physical or digital mark left by a visitor. UNCC architecture student Steve Craton proposed attaching Ipads to Scesney's food trucks, inviting patrons waiting in line to take headshots of themselves, which would be inserted into digital replicas of the portraits hanging in the house of the Van Cortlandt family. After entering the house, they would then search for the portraits and learn more about the family members they were *replacing* through written material posted nearby. The technology to undertake Craton's proposal already exists and is incorporated at www.bbcamerica.com/copper/mugshot-yourself, the website for the BBC America crime drama series *Copper*, set in NYC in 1864. At http://www.takethislollipop.com an equally engaging online *Ownership* process scrapes visitors' Facebook pages and inserts their personal photos into a video.

Trans-position is the transfer and replication of historic exhibitions in non-museum spaces like retail and service settings with an acknowledgement that there is a role for *both* authentic and re-created rooms in conveying history. (Gordon 2008, Matejkova 2009) *House Stop* was a proposal by UNCC architecture exchange student Paula Benitez-Ruiz to create a replica of a room from the Van Cortland House in a

Figure 3: Employing *trans-position*, Paula Benitez-Ruiz proposed replicating a room from the Van Cortlandt House in a shipping container and using it as a bus shelter and coffee shop.

shipping container, and to move it throughout the city for use as a temporary bus shelter. Once off-loaded from a truck, the container would fold open and the public would be invited in to use the room as it was originally intended, while enjoying coffee from a small, embedded café. (Fig. 3)

2.2 Condition and preservation
Ignoring the growing diversity of the American public, and relying solely on outdated, traditional practices can result in HHMs being pretty boring to all but the most ardent history fans. To broaden interest in the museum to a wider demographic, the AGHHM suggests *embracing the concept of simultaneity*, or the overlapping of a series of narratives, rather than just that of the head of the family. The museums' usual emphasis on white, male political leaders is partially because many of the HHMs were created at the end of World War I, when there was a rise of nationalism and a enthusiastic allegiance to the U.S. Unfortunately, this myopic focus led to the omission of most other members of family, and of the servants that also called the house a home.

When visiting Rosedale, UNCC architecture and dance student Steve Craton became uncomfortable with the lack of attention given to the slaves that contributed to the running of the plantation. Taking offense after learning that the room
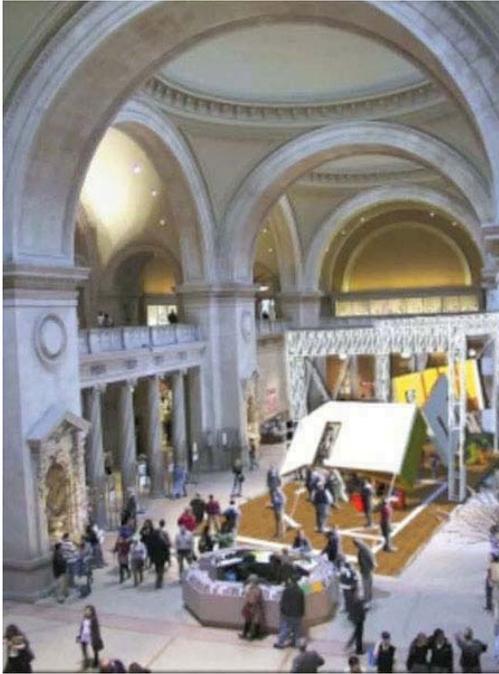
Figure 4: Robert Miller II proposed deconstructing the Fitzhugh Room and relocating its walls to the Met Entry Hall where they would be hung askew and presented as the art.

Where the kitchen slaves slept was now being used for storage, and that their presence was almost entirely omitted from the house's narrative, Craton performed and recorded an interpretive dance of restraint and bondage in their closet-sized bedroom.

The AGHHM encourages *preservation variation*, and argues for *complexity* as expressed through the detritus of human habitation. Others have also critiqued the sterile preservation of objects in museums, and the restoration of HHMs to their *original* condition, often stripping them of the essence that conveyed their historic use as a home. While preservation must contain an element of renewal, nostalgic sentimentality should be avoided. Restoration should be concerned as much with the future as it is with the past, while also preserving and communicating a spirit as well as a form. (Mansfield 2001)

The Fitzhugh Room (ca. 1758) is a beautifully paneled, painted empty period room at the Met, completely devoid of both detritus and furniture. In *Wall as Art,* UNCC architecture student Robert Miller II proposed deconstructing the room, and relocating its walls to the Metropolitan Museum of Art Entry Hall where they would be hung askew and presented as the art curators purported them to be. Doing so would allow both the front and the back of the walls to be visible, exposing their structure and illustrating a broader range of *preservation variation*. (Fig. 4)

2.3 Physicality and inter-activity
Tactility is the physical connection to artifacts. HHMs privilege visual experience even though touch is crucially important to many visitors' experiences, and offers an accessible and inclusive way of engaging with museum collections. (Candlin 2010) The Director of the Cage Center reports that her institution allows unrestricted access to *everything* including Gage's original desk.

> You're invited to sit down at it, help us figure out words we can't decipher in one of her letters, and write her a note, which you leave in a cubby hole in the desk. People treat it as a sacred space, one woman sat there for over an hour. We can do it because, guess what? I own the desk. And I'm not giving it to the Gage Center until I prove my point - that when you trust people, they will respond in kind. We're new, underfunded, understaffed, and in the nearly three years we've been open, we've not had a single thing walk out the door. But people leave us fascinating comments on our walls, where they are invited to write on an entire whiteboard wall in each of the rooms. (Wagner 2013)

Figure 5: Courtney Hathaway pro- posed relocating 15 Period Rooms along the open corridors in the Charles Engelhard Court of the Met's American Wing. *silence, and engaging all the senses.* Baird employed sound as his mapping medium, and intermixed the sounds of his own life, and those he presumed once filled plantation. It is a haunting recording that emotionally links the past and present through the shared experience of sound.

In *The Dollhouse*, UNCC architecture student Courtney Hathaway proposed to relocate and stack fifteen Period Rooms along the open corridors in the grand, light filled Charles Engelhard Court of the Met's American Wing. (Fig. 5) The rooms are currently located in a difficult to navigate, maze like arrangement behind a beautiful but imposing, classical stone façade that overlooks the Court. Moving them in front of but perpendicular to the facade would significantly increase their visibility and accessibility within an already active space. Further, she proposed moving some of the original furniture in the relocated rooms to the Met's Visible Storage area, and replace it with reproductions. Doing so would allow visitors to actually experience the rooms as they were originally intended: as parlors, living and dining rooms. In the spirit of full participation, Hathaway further specified that the floor level Period Room replicas should replace the generic seating in the existing café.

When music enthusiast and UNCC architecture student Seth Baird visited Rosedale, he found the absence of music and conversation to be what most differ- entiated his life at home and his experience at the HHM. The AGHHM recommends *killing the*

2.4 Visual expression of habitation
Overlapping is the design of a visitor experience that layers different life cycles and eras, and it was the basis of UNCC architecture student Aracelli Bollo's proposal for the Met's Haverhill Period Room (ca. 1805).

Figure 6: Aracelli Bollo proposed the use of black screen technology to project images of visitors into a Period Room.

Entitled *Projections on the Past*, she proposed using black screen technology to insert visitors' own images into the Period Room. Her plan would place a black bed on a black screen, and a black wingback chair in front of a black screen in the arrival hall of the Met, and visitors would be photographed sitting or lying on them as they would in their own home. After a delay long enough to allow the visitors to find their way to the Period Room, she would project their images into the Haverhill Room. She also proposed filling the rooms' windows with real time images from the streets of NYC, layering inside and outside, and the present with the past. (Fig. 6)

Unveiling reveals hidden operations that can be either architectural or social. In *Living is Not Still*, UNCC architecture student Angie Scharrer proposed replacing a wall in the Met's Baltimore Room (ca. 1810) with a large video screen that appeared to reveal an adjacent room where the owner's guests could be seen dancing to a mix of period and contemporary music. To further set the scene, Scharrer also proposed broadening the sensory experience by piping in simulated cooking smells from the adjacent but unseen kitchen, and by playing a tape of the house's maids preparing to serve dinner while gossiping about the guests.

3.0 THE MANIFESTO
HHMs hold a unique position in modernity. They have been actual private domestic worlds encapsulated and re-presented as public narrative. These architectural fragments exist in the volatile world between the REAL and the IDEAL. This paradoxical existence contains the most potential for an authentic *reading* of these domestic realms.

The sustainability of HHMs will depend on a new methodology that makes visible a more holistic narrative of habitation, one that embraces a chorus of diverse voices from both inside and outside the museum. *The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* is a manifesto offered toward that cause. It was written in response to four general statements:
• HHMs can be boring.
• HHMs are too narrowly curated.
• HHMs promote selective propaganda and can be socially out of touch.
• HHMs are expensive to preserve and maintain.

The AGHHM encourages the celebration of physicality and inter-activity by choreographing the visitor experience to convey real use, allowing them to roam freely through the building and collections, and by engaging all of their senses. HHMs should focus on the expression of habitation through the creation of environments that are complex, messy, full of human detritus, and reflect daily cycles. Community engagement and the exchange of information are essential to long-term sustainability. These actions should embrace conjecture, gossip and rumor through complex narratives, and include all forms of personal fingerprinting made available through social media. HHMs should embrace multiple theories of preservation, be honest about the illusion of authenticity, and celebrate simultaneity.

HHMs are already doing many of these things, but they are often done as one-offs, rather than as part of a coordinated strategy. The intent of the AGHHM is to provide a relational framework to promote on-going, though sometimes seemingly disparate efforts within each HHM.

Critiques are easier than solutions to produce. The chart in Figure 7 presents a graphic metric attempting to bridge the two processes. Intended as a self-assessment tool, the goal would be to color in increasingly larger circles and increasingly more pie pieces as the quality and quantity of the Anarchist efforts grow at each HHM. With each new project the graph evolves just as historic sites do. It is intentionally left incomplete, waiting for more public input.

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Figure 7: The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums Graphic Manifesto.

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