Historic house intervention and challenging the Rembrandt Rule

Anna Jug

As early as 2002, Richard Moe was asking the question: are there too many house museums?¹ The number of historic sites within Australia currently stands at somewhere around four hundred, with house museums making up a modest percentage of this number. But in the UK and US, the figures skyrocket into the thousands. Ask any house museum operator what their biggest challenge is, and they will invariably answer it is getting people to make that first visit. The fact is, most of these museums run on limited means, and although marketing might be considered the strongest tool in any museum's arsenal, static room displays that have not changed in the last decade simply isn’t working anymore. Well into the 21st century, audiences are calling for the digital, the tangible, and the dynamic from a museum experience. The most successful house museums are creatively engaging their buildings and collections to develop forward-thinking programming that entices people from all walks of life, but especially the local community, to make their first visit. There are some that have been doing it, and doing it well, overseas for some time – think historic Royal palaces – but these organisations tend to have excellent resources and a ready audience. What the majority of historic sites fight a losing battle against is appealing to a younger generation, and the evidence points to a shortfall in diverse programming and inclusive interpretation that people find engaging, and want to keep coming back for more.

In the case of house museums, attendance levels affirm the need to conserve the building and its collection as one entity. The ongoing conservation and general upkeep of the grounds and building requires funds, hence one works to benefit the other. Without visitors, the house would not only be invalidated as an attraction; it would receive the funds required to remain open.

There has been a wave of change making its way through collection houses in Australia. Taking note of what is going on overseas, these museums are creating modern and inclusive programming in a bid to attract new and returning audiences. Antiques dealer William Johnson donated his house in East Melbourne and his collection to the people of Victoria in 1986. Today, the collection takes precedence over the building and is known as The W. Johnson Collection (TJC). In line with Johnson’s vision for his collection, the museum has become a laboratory of display. The House of Ideas’ program runs from June to September every year, where a guest or collective is invited to create work in response to the collection. Incorporating their work with collection items, they produce installations that challenge the traditional display in a house museum. In 2016, Melbourne-based Barking Spider Theatre produced the multi-media installation House of Dreams, inspired by Carl Jung’s dream theories and the building itself. The installation was a unique sensory experience, incorporating sound, light and movement; achieving the concept of ‘the layering of one age through the optic of another.’² In contrast, the program that runs between February and May, Mr. Johnston and His Collection, invites a guest curator to rearrange the permanent collection inside the Geelong-style interior of the home. The two annual programs ensure that returning visitors are confronted with a collection constantly in flux, a living collection, continually changing in time, as any domestic space would do normally.

The Rembrandt Rule

Despite the rigorous efforts going into changing public perceptions of house museums, it is proving difficult to escape the association between house museums, velvet ropes and the ‘Do Not Touch’ signs of old. There are some radical points of view on this subject. Some, such as James Vaughan, assert that in order to make house museums more appealing to the public, staff need to re-evaluate objects in their collections; he presents this as ‘Rethinking the Rembrandt Rule.’³ Vaughan asserts that some objects in house museums have been taken out of context since the house’s ‘museification’, and prohibited from acting out their function and, instead, treated as if they were a Rembrandt, preserved behind ropes or put on display behind glass. While some heritage museums have adopted this philosophy, it is not possible to gain a richer visitor experience, does this approach have to end at the collection – what about the building?

Architectural historian Victoria Newhouse muses, ‘a building’s history is as important as the history of the objects it contains.’⁴ Nowadays, this is more true than at the historic house museum. The building itself has been “museified”, essentially put glass to be frozen in time.

Intervention on historic buildings can be fraught with extreme opinions, and it is possibly the most polarising issue in the heritage community. Buildings, especially houses, are a patchwork of additional modifications, architectural materials, styles and stories. Houses are working objects that have the ability to be repurposed, which is what happens when they are transformed into a museum. Overseas, 1. Linda Stang, Ut pictura poesis: the House Museum (The American Alliance of Museums, 2008), 3.
2. Linda Young. ‘Is there a museum policy; the site’s purpose and, in the extreme, whether they should all be open to the public at all.
additions and modifications to heritage buildings are, while regulated, a common occurrence. In the south of London, Fulham Palace is a jigsaw of architectural styles, dating between the mediaeval period to the mid-nineteenth century. Demolitions and additions are part of the narrative, and magnificent restorations of many of these elements have been undertaken, most recently of the superb Tudor-era courtyard. However, behind the windows of this façade, the rooms have been repurposed to include office spaces. For the lean price of £70,000 a year you could rent an office space in a building that was once home to the Bishops of London. These spaces are discreet and harmoniously co-exist with the restored elements of the building that function as a museum, as well as a repurposed exhibition space and cafeteria.

Carrick Hill, nestled into the foothills of Adelaide, is a liquorice allsorts of architectural styles, boasting the oldest staircase in Australia inside a 1930s building. On their honeymoon in 1935, Bill and Ursula Hayward purchased the Tudor-era oak panelling and staircase from the demolition sale of a stately home in Staffordshire. Transporting it all to Adelaide, they built their new home, constructed from local sandstone, around these finishings. The resulting interior provided an exciting contrast to the collection of British, French and Australian Modern art they amassed, a combination completely unique to the couple's collecting habits and taste. While the gardens remain open on weekends and public holidays, the house museum has closed its doors for the first time since they opened to the public in 1986. A significant redevelopment project will transform some elements of the building, making it accessible to all for the first time, as well as opening up spaces previously unseen by the public.

The impetus for the redevelopment is a sorely-needed access lift. As a publicly owned museum, the Carrick Hill Trust felt that because some in the community were impeded from accessing the entire museum's offerings, the notion that the museum was serving its purpose must be called into question. The vision of the Carrick Hill Trust is in line with what the Haywards envisioned for their property. They lived in the home together for thirty years and changed things accordingly. They weren't afraid to refurbish, as they did the bedroom in the 1950s; it was an inhabited space and the changes were absorbed into the building's narrative. Richard Heathcote, Director of Benefaction and driving force of change at Carrick Hill, agrees that the Haywards were of the ethos that their living space should not be preserved in a wrapper: 'Every time a new picture came into

their collection they shuffled everything!' In fact, the Haywards' intention for their bequest was that the collection be the centrepiece, rather than the building. The house was donated as a vessel to hold the collection in, but it is clear in the bequest that the house could be used for any variety of purposes. Their intention that the collection should remain together, perhaps housed at the state gallery, was clear. That the house could then become government offices or perhaps accommodation for visiting dignitaries demonstrates that the Haywards had no qualms about the house requiring refitting for different purposes.

Fortuitously, when Bill Hayward passed away in 1983, the South Australian Labor government of the time decided to retain the collection within the house, and in doing so granted Carrick Hill the title of house museum. As such, all objects within the home became collection items, including the linen, lamps, and extraordinary collection of flower vases Ursula used to display her orchids. But despite the 'lived-in' quality these ephemeral objects contribute to Carrick Hill's sense of authenticity, a house museum really be 'authentic' and continue to live on in time?

From 1986, two important elements of Carrick Hill's sense of authenticity, can a house museum accommodate exhibitions of Carrick Hill's own fine art collection as well as loans from other institutions. This exhibition space of museum calibre will accommodate exhibitions of Carrick Hill's own fine art collection as well as loans from other institutions.

Read more about house museums in past magazines

Annette Welkamp, 'Courage is grace under pressure: The Victor Horta House Museum in Brussels', Museums Australia Magazine, Vol. 22(2), Museums Australia, Canberra, Summer 2013, pp. 30-34.

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When it comes to intervention on heritage buildings, opinions will always be passionate. It is important to consider that there are elements of a building fundamentally worth protecting; those iconic features that are unique to that site. In Carrick Hill's case, these elements are the magnificent Waterfall Staircase and oak paneling on the ground floor and landing. Without these, the building would not only look different, it would lose its identity. Making a museum like Carrick Hill – a 1900s sandstone building – more accessible by installing a visitor lift aligns with the vision of the Haywards, who would prefer that all of the public be able to enjoy their collection rather than focus on how they were served their gin cocktails. The collection is the treasure, and it won't be long before visitors can discover it again.  