

VOL 28 (1) SUMMER 2019 \$15.00

Australian
Museums
and Galleries
Association
Magazine



Historic house intervention and challenging the Rembrandt Rule



TOP: Fulham Palace, renovated façade 2018. Photo: Jamie White.

ABOVE: Anna Jug.

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 figure. 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, the reality has many scrambling for inexpensive alternatives. With public and private funding becoming increasingly scarce, the time has come for a re-evaluation of the function of house museums, their purpose and, in the extreme, whether they should all be open to the public at all.

While that last dilemma may be more prevalent in the US and UK, given the over-saturation of the market, competition for heritage tourism within this country has never been greater. The concept of 'edutainment' has permeated even the quaintest of rural heritage museums. Today, visitors demand more for less, and the same guided tour around dusty, 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 not receive the funds required to remain open.

A very particular type of heritage site, the historic house museums holds a valuable place amongst museums, yet they are often overlooked. They add another dimension to the significance of our cultural

heritage, a living record of the history of a place and time. The term *house museum* encompasses any type of dwelling in a variety of forms, from a hut through to an operational palace. What house museums have over any other museum or gallery is that authenticity factor of 'the real deal'. Other museum types may try to recreate the atmosphere of a lived-in space with vignette displays, but when a visitor steps inside a historic house, they both metaphorically and physically step inside history. The narrative they share is beyond what may be expressed in written form; they are significant in a tangible sense. How is it possible to capture the smell, or the light in a room as it suffuses through original lead-paned windows?

The Australian authority on house museums at home and abroad is Dr Linda Young, whose research and creation of house museum categories has gone a long way in enabling house museums to 'self-identify', within what Young wonderfully refers to as a 'species' of house museum.^[2] The categories Young has created identify the initial motivation for a house to become a museum; an artist's, writer's or hero's house holds significance for who their inhabitants were — identities that live on in collective memory long after they have gone. These houses are 'museumised' purely for the function to become a shrine for its former inhabitant(s).

Aside from the function of historic building conservation, house museums have satisfied the public's desire to delve into the private lives of famous figures. Seeing how a writer or politician lived their private life has been a source of continual fascination since the late-nineteenth century, emerging at the same time as the rise in photojournalism, which for the first time put photographs of private homes on display.^[3] Today, the fascination continues, from the quasi-pilgrimages to Graceland, where visitors flock to see the Grand Piano where Elvis wrote his songs, or to the childhood home of the Brothers Grimm, hoping to catch a glimpse of what inspired their fairytale universe.

Perhaps one of the most unique species of historic house is the *collector's house*. Such collections were meticulously assembled without any official collection policy; the significance of each object is a reflection of its collector. These houses are often transformed into museums at the bequest of their owners, who deemed their collections too valuable intact to ever be separated. Today notable examples include Sir John Soane's Museum in London, which was passed into the care of a Board of Trustees after its owner's death; and Isabella Stewart Gardner's Museum in Boston, which she herself created with the intention that her home one day become a museum.

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 dynamic and inclusive programming in a bid to attract new and returning audiences. Antiques dealer William Johnston donated his home 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. Johnston Collection (TJC). In line with Johnston'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 are 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'.^[4]

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 Georgian-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'.^[5] 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 and been able to gain a richer visitor experience, does this approach have to end at the collection — what about the building?

Architectural historian Victoria Newhouse mused, 'a building's history is as important as the history of the objects it contains'.^[6] Nowhere is this truer than at the historic house museum. The building itself has been 'museified', essentially put behind 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 additions, 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,

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1. Richard Moe, 'Are there too many house museums?', *Forum Journal*, Vol. 27 (1), Fall 2012, pp. 55-61

2. Linda Young, 'Is there a museum in the house', *Historic House Museums in the US and the UK: A History*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
3. Emery, Elizabeth, *Photojournalism and the origins of the French Writer House Museum (1881-1914)*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 3.
4. Trevor Keeble, 'Introduction' in Keeble, Trevor; Martin, Brenda and Sparke, Penny, *The Modern Period Room: The construction of the exhibited interior 1870 to 1950*, London: Routledge, 2006, p.2.
5. Vaughan, James, 'Rethinking the Rembrandt Rule', *Museum (The American Alliance of Museums)*, March/April, 2008.
6. Victoria Newhouse, 'Is "The Idea of a Museum" Possible Today', *Daedalus*, Vol. 128 (3), Summer 1999, p. 324.



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

LEFT: *House of Dreams* with Barking Spider Visual Theatre [12 July 2016–20 Sep. 2016]. Photo: Lutz Photography.

Interpreting and developing historic houses



LEFT: Carrick Hill façade.
Photo: Carrick Hill.

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 should the house require 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, lampshades 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, can a house museum really be 'authentic' and continue to live on in time? From 1986, two important elements of Carrick Hill were refitted – the garage became a café, and a large portion of the upstairs space that was deemed insignificant became offices. 'The administration was placed in the servants' rooms', explains Heathcote, 'that's an important thing, because it reflects the fact that [at the time] nobody thought the servants'

histories were very important, and now they do.'

There are a number of improvements being made to the museum as part of a \$2.6 million redevelopment. The lift will take visitors from the ground floor through to the guest bedrooms (regularly transformed into an exhibition space), from which visitors will be able to access the entire first floor, including the bedrooms and morning room. Accessibility here also includes the reinstatement of the two bathrooms in the guest wing, which have been inaccessible to the public, that will be repurposed to become functioning bathrooms once more. The exhibition space will also be extended on this floor into what is currently administration offices, increasing the exhibition space by fifty percent.

The lift then takes visitors up to the second level, an attic space which has never been seen by the public before. The Carrick Hill Trust engaged stakeholders, including government and architecture firm WalterBrooke, to transform the attic into a purpose-fitted exhibition space known as The Long Gallery. This exhibition space of museum calibre will accommodate exhibitions of Carrick Hill's own fine art collection as well as loans from other institutions and contemporary artists.

But is changing the direction of a building's use adding to or distracting from the narrative? Bill and Ursula Hayward were great supporters of young artists. Their art was contemporary and was not being collected by the major galleries. They supported emerging artists by purchasing their work, and it was

very much their philosophy that their collection be a source of inspiration. Jeffrey Smart fondly recalls in his autobiography *Not Quite Straight*, 'Adelaide produced quite a few eccentrics and they were welcomed at Carrick Hill'.⁷ He visited their home as a young man, enamoured with what he called 'the best private collection in Australia', and like many others, benefited from the Haywards' generosity and prestigious connections. The notion that the building might require some modifications in order to remain a cultural hub in South Australia would undoubtedly have their wholehearted support.

In the case of adding the lift within the walls of the house (a requirement dictated by government), this type of intervention is routine in overseas heritage buildings: Hampton Court being one example. The question is: What elements of the house will be changed irreparably. 'It is reversible', Richard Heathcote says of the redevelopment, 'but the original, authentic finishings will be lost.' This is already the case in much of the space we are redeveloping. The cleaning maid's room, the servant's stairs and first floor Administrator's office, which was originally the bathroom and cleaner's room, was already repurposed for administration. That space now becomes stairs. On the ground floor, the butler's pantry and what was the boiler room will be repurposed, plus the servant's lounge, which has until now been serving as the gift shop. The intention for the Trust's master plan is to remove administration services entirely from the house itself, and create an external facility to accommodate these needs.

Is this all progress for progress' sake though? The hard-won funding and multitude of generous donations indicate that this project will lead to a new era at Carrick Hill. The potential benefits of the purpose-built exhibition space include taking the museum's program in a new direction. The intention to extend the visitor experience and develop a broader range of programs are both efforts towards appealing to new audiences. For the museum to accommodate more variety in activities and events will, without doubt, make it a more valuable community asset.

There is undoubtedly scope for a revitalisation of what these historic institutions offer to visitors in many areas, from educational programs to the daily guided tours – a revitalisation that will see new visitors attending and old ones returning. Enticing visitors to return to the institution is important for reasons that go beyond the monetary contribution they make, since when people become emotionally invested in the museum this marks it as an integral part of a community. They in turn show support to the museum by becoming involved as members or volunteers, and both are the lifeblood of a museum.

Should some heritage buildings be treated like a Rembrandt? Absolutely. Should Carrick Hill? Probably not.

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 Waterloo Staircase and oak panelling 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 1930s 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. □

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Citation: Anna Jug, 'Historic house intervention and challenging the Rembrandt Rule', *Australian Museums and Galleries Association Magazine*, Vol. 28(1), AMA GA, Canberra, Summer 2019, pp. 30-35.

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Linda Young, 'Why are so many writer's house museums in England?', *Museums Australia Magazine*, Vol. 19(4), Museums Australia, Canberra, May 2011, pp. 26-30.

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.



7. Jeffrey Smart, *Not Quite Straight: a memoir*, Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1996, p. 125.