

*New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*, Donna Ann Harris, AltaMira Press, Plymouth, 2007.

*New Solutions for House Museums* is the most recent in an established series of practical and pertinent technical handbooks on history and on museums, published by the American Association for State and Local History, Tennessee. This timely and accessible work offers scenarios and solutions to a key issue facing historic house museum managers – when the preservation of their site to the level that their historic buildings needs and deserves becomes unsustainable and necessitates a change in the perception and use of their asset, the historic house museum. The target audience is identified as the board and staff members of non-profit house museums, those who are struggling with insufficient financial or human resources to achieve this critical level of preservation. Although the examples used in the scenarios are of volunteer and small town-run house museums in the United States, they are readily adaptable to non-profit house museum organisations of other sizes and in other countries. The reader is urged, as a responsible manager, to use material from the case studies to help determine the sustainability of the house museum for which they are responsible.

**An unsustainable site is defined as one where regular, predictable income exceeds 50 per cent of the yearly operations.** If this sounds familiar, then the onus is on you to make your house museum to 'begin working today to chart a new future for your precious resource.' A health check list is provided, probably similar to one used in periodical property operation reviews, to ensure that our house museums are in good health.

The book is divided into two parts.

Part One is Assessment and Decision Making. This focuses on the responsibility of the house museum's board, including legal and ethical issues and the importance of maintenance, recognising the historic building as the house museum's main asset, and as a community asset held in trust for the public.

Harris discusses the difficulties of organisational change and offers a step by step process of sensible, practical and empowering actions for undertaking this change. For example, one of the solutions to the disposal of sale proceeds from selling the house museum is a revolving loan fund to buy threatened historic sites, place easements on them, and sell to private owners. She argues that the transition from public to private ownership promises to benefit the houses, as their maintenance is guaranteed; and to benefit the local preservation community with new funds to continue the organisation's preservation mission for the future.

Part Two is Solutions and Case Studies. This focuses on providing a range of possible ownership and reuse solutions of house museums that have made a successful transition to a new owner or use, to provide inspiration and

reassure the managers that their problems are not unique; and to show that there are good solutions pioneered by other non profit making organisations of different sizes. These include short and long term leases, asset transfers and mergers, sale to a private owner with easements and sale to a non profit stewardship organisation.

The actions that Harris recommends are considered, and based on two years research of fifty house museums in the USA in unsustainable situations. She takes a pragmatic approach to 'preserving' historic houses, advocating that the long term preservation of the house is the key objective and that conserving and interpreting it as a historic house museum open to the public is only one way of achieving this. She acknowledges and then gently cuts the ties that bind the individual manager or the board to their emotional engagement with the museum, to enable them to refocus on the long term preservation of the building in the community. This is a difficult and sensitive operation, and one that is handled with insight and determination.

Whilst not necessarily '*new* solutions for [old] house museums', this publication brings together a number of workable solutions for a contemporary issue of concern. The sustainability of house museums, and museums in general, is under discussion in Australia. Museum sustainability in a changing climate was the topic of the May 2007 Museums Australia National Conference, with a session devoted to house museums.

I would like to have seen more emphasis placed on the importance of preserving the interpretative components of the historic house museum, such as detailed documentation of the interiors, the collection, the garden and grounds, and the narratives of the occupants; and on confirming a rigorous deaccessioning process for the 'heritage' to be maintained in the 'asset' and for the future. Otherwise, timely, concise, practical, well researched, targeted to an audience who might find professional assistance useful, and written in everyday language, this is a handy management tool.

Note: This project was the result of a Mid Career Fellowship by a private New York-based Foundation granted annually to leaders in historic preservation and related fields to undertake research and publications vital to the field. Australia would do well to follow this productive lead.

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