A Note from the Guest Editor

Over the past fifteen years historic house museums have been the object of lamentation and, in some cases, mourning. Article after article discuss declining visitation and revenue, boring tours, and a lack of connection to respective communities. In fact, Donna Harris’ book *New Solutions for House Museums* guides house museum trustees to explore adaptive re-use upon realization that their house museum is no longer viable. Historic house museum staffs feel assailed and somewhat confused about what to do, or if it is worth it. So many issues, so much hand wringing.

The power of these types of museums has convinced me that there is no more effective venue for connecting to people and issues in this profession. With misty eyes I watched Charles Boles, from rural Georgia, who was so moved by the verisimilitude of the ca. 1930 home of rural black farmer Amos Mattox as it was re-installed in Greenfield Village, that he hopped the low rope barrier, grabbed the hymnal off of the mantel, and began singing and praying. Lines between past and present, black and white, and North and South blurred. Few other museum experiences could have engendered such emotion.

I was once a furnishings curator at The Henry Ford. Now, I teach graduate students about the reinterpretation of historic homes that put message and visitor first. Enthusiasm often flags as we read about daunting challenges historic houses face. These include the inability to move the house from a less-than-ideal location; foregrounded narratives that only the story of the (once) dominant elite; large windows that bring in damaging light that cannot be removed according to best practices; small rooms that provide inadequate pathways and necessitate barriers; personal quarters for servants and the enslaved in areas difficult to access; and original furnishings that belong in the house but are subject to extensive handling and challenging climatic conditions. Particularly difficult is that balance between fulfilling our public trust regarding the preservation of our cultural heritage—artifacts—and presenting a story that deals with questions and issues worth discussion.

Whew. Some list. Students look at me quizzically wondering: Is it worth it? Should we even bother? Is there a future in this field? Should we try to deal with these daunting problems? If so, how?

Of course we should attack these challenges. Beyond their emotional potential to tell a story, these gems of local history can connect our towns’ stories to larger regional and national history pack the meat on the bones of our historical narratives. They put people we may know, or have some affinity for, into the story. These are the places that the most important discussions of peoples’ lives have occurred—conversations about feeling “different” from others around them, challenges of
eking out a living, dealing with disease, mental illness, and death, professions of love, hate, disappointment, and hopes and dreams for children.

However, finding case studies that share innovative methods for interpreting and caring for historic house museums are difficult to locate. So, this issue of *Collections* features case studies wherein staff have explored new ways of telling stories, installing rooms, caring for artifacts, and remediating challenging environments. In conceptualizing this issue, we looked for some good news, new ways of working and solutions to age-old historic house problems. These essays are diverse in every way, running the gamut from non-traditional use of historic homes and collections to reminding us all that “the other houses”—houses of worship—are extraordinary opportunities for the interpretation of non-mainstream groups. We include articles from the UK and Belgium as well as the United States. The authors working in large and small museums include graduate student interns, administrators, curators, and conservators from a range of historic house museums.

The first group of essays offers examples of historic homes that are installed to create opportunities for storytelling, convey a feel for a place or inhabitants, and aim to engage visitors. Janet Sinclair shares (UK) Stansted Park’s carefully-considered visitor access to artifacts keeps the items safe while evoking a place and time. Stansted Park put the servants front and center through music, smells, and evocative interiors that suggest a personality and an aesthetic augment interpretation. Similarly, Barbara Wood, of the UK National Trust, presents five case studies of historic sites for which the National Trust does not have extensive original furnishings. This relative absence of furnishings is, in some ways, liberating, and allows the National Trust to explore non-traditional presentation of the spaces, curation and interpretation of the sites in concert with their communities including adaptive re-use of these places. Particularly interesting is the National Trust’s policy of creating a “Spirit of Place” statement for each site which suggests “…the physical and spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to a place.” This “spirit”—provocative and evocative—can be conveyed through things other than original furnishings and offer an interesting statement to develop for historic sites elsewhere.

The next three essays stand separately. National Park Service (USA) curators Lauren Racine, Gregory R. Weidman, Lenora M. Henson, and Patricia West McKay, who work at four different NPS sites, offer a detailed guide to the decoration of an historic home for the holidays. Interpreting holidays in relation to mission, audience, primary sources, safety, and planning are all discussed as applied to their own historic sites. Siobhan Fitzpatrick, Curator of Collections and Exhibits at the Museum of Early Trades & Crafts, relates the adaptive re-use of buildings including historic houses as collecting museums. These buildings, then, are not primarily interpreted as historic homes but their histories can become a part of the interpretation. Fitzpatrick includes a valuable checklist of issues to consider if an historic home is being considered as a conventional museum. Barry Stiefel, Assistant Professor of Historic Preservation and Community Planning at the College of Charleston, re-
minds us that “The Other House Museum” which, in this case, is the historic synagogue, can help us understand Jewish history, culture, community, and spirituality when there are few historic house museums that interpret Jewish faith and culture. These houses of worship may include artifacts, tours, and exhibits, and are places open to all to “…learn about the past and reflect upon the future,” encouraging tolerance and understanding.

The final group of essays deals with the challenging historic environment of the house museum. Tom DeRoo, Conservator at Museum Plantin-Moretus at the University of Antwerp, illuminates the risks the historic house environment presents to collections through a baseline study of environmental conditions conducted at a sixteenth-century printing house and residence with original books and furnishings. He and his colleagues measured and assessed the potential threats in this historic home environment, offering data and describing remediation at the site with the hope of helping other historic house museums deal with these daunting issues. Similarly, Elaine Barone, a graduate intern working at Edsel and Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan, helps readers to understand the issues and terminology involved in upgrading lighting in an historic house. She compares environmentally-friendly lighting systems, lists their advantages and disadvantages, and discusses her work with lighting upgrades at Edsel and Eleanor Ford House as a case study.

The issue ends with an opinion piece from Karen Whitehair, Collections Manager at Montpelier Mansion, who asks if —despite their daunting challenges—the historic house museum’s time has come. We can and must tell stories with real things, in situ, within the community that cares about what we have to say about it, its people, and its change over time. The historic house museum is best poised to do this. These eight essays will, I hope, suggest opportunities for historic house museum professionals to consider as they search for the best use for these venues. Perhaps these essays may slow down the hand wringing, at least for a few minutes.

Nancy E. Villa Bryk
Assistant Professor, Museum Practice and Historic Preservation
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, MI
nbryk@emich.edu