In Private between Consentling Adults?
Conservation, Curatorship and Creativity in Nine House Museums

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Introduction

This paper raises the basic issue of how our approach to conservation might change, in accordance with the significance of the site, drawing on nine of the houses and museums in the portfolio of the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) of New South Wales (NSW). It provides an example of a values-based approach to heritage management in action [Smith, 2010].

A fabric conservation problem

Here is the kind of conservation problem that we, as professionals, all face every day in a house museum. Consider this fragment of the bobble fringe that is currently in the drawing room at Rouse Hill House to the north west of Sydney [1]. The fabric has now been conserved three times and is basically silk dust on a fabric backing. It needs conservation again. What should we do? Should we conserve it again? Should we preserve the original in a box and put in a replica? Should we put it in a box and put up something different or should we do nothing at all, leaving it to gently rot in situ?

There is of course no single answer to this question and no correct answer. But before we try to answer it for Rouse Hill, let us imagine that this piece of fabric is in a different house museum all together.
conserving interiors and buildings is all about what matters, and why, and to whom - what the GCI has dubbed a values-base approach. This approach cuts across the individual professional silos of conservators, architects, archaeologists, planners and architectural historians, and asks much bigger questions. It puts expertise second to understanding what matters and why. This paper will look at what it means to explore different values in historic house museums, how we actually make that process fun, interesting and worth talking about, and more importantly, whether or not we are brave enough as professionals to let go.

Fig. 1. Fragment of a bobble fringe from Rouse Hill House and Farm (Scott Hill). Published with the permission of the author.

Rouse Hill House & Farm is one of 12 properties open to the public by HHT - the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. Founded in 1980 with two house museums, it has grown over 30 years. As well as the properties open to the public, HHT also has another six properties that are currently in the process of being repaired using the model of a revolving fund for building preservation. Each one of its properties is different, with a different history, philosophy and approach to conservation.

Elizabeth Farm - a modern replica interior

Fig. 2. Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta. ©HHT
Let us imagine that the piece of fabric is at another HHT property, Elizabeth Farm at Rosehill to the west of the City of Sydney. Built in 1793 for pastoralist John Macarthur and his wife Elizabeth, this property was rescued by the Swann family in 1905. It remained in the hands of the delightful Misses Swan until they were no longer able to care for it, and then in 1968 it was bought by the government, eventually coming to HHT. Here the philosophy is brutally clear - whilst the building itself has been restored, everything inside that house is a replica. You can sit on the chairs, lie on the bed, eat at the table, cook in the kitchen. Nothing is old and everything can be touched. The reason for this is that there was almost no original furniture or material associated with the house to hand.

Had our fringe even survived at this property - and it almost certainly would not have -, it would have by now been put firmly away in a conservator’s box and replaced with a replica in keeping with the rest of the interior.

Elizabeth Bay House - an entomologist’s vision

Imagine that this same fragment had been originally associated with another property owned by HHT - Elizabeth Bay House. Conceived as the finest house in the colony by its builder - Colonial Secretary and entomologist Alexander Macleay who began construction in 1835 - it was designed by architect John Verge. Macleay lost his job, relied on his son to cover many of debts. The drawing room furniture was sold to the newly completed (and grander) Government House. Had our hypothetical fabric detail been part of Macleay’s interior, it may well have gone to auction with his other effects or, more likely, been discarded. When Elizabeth Bay House came into public ownership as a museum it was initially furnished with ‘appropriate’ antiques, however over time, HHT has sought to replace those with more authentic items, thus gradually recreating Macleay’s interior using historic information and inventories. Had we found a reference to this piece of fabric in such an inventory, we might have sought to acquire something of the right period with which to furnish the house.

Government House - a working State building

Government House is another HHT property. Built in 1836 to a design by the English architect Edward Blore (who never actually visited the site) the house was the residence of the colonial and later State Governors until 1996, when it was passed to HHT to manage as both a working state house and a museum/cultural venue. Our piece of textile would not have survived there - as well as acquiring furniture from elsewhere (including houses such as Elizabeth Bay), each Governor brought or contributed their own furniture to the house, often taking it away afterwards. Building on this tradition, one of HHT’s extraordinary achievements has been the creation of a stunning drawing room, drawing on the best of modern Australian craftsmanship in the context of a partly restored historic interior, led by Curator Ann Toy [Toy and Griffin, 2011]. I suspect what we might have done would be to create a modern reinterpretation of that fringe, in a new fabric, specially created by a modern Australian artist.
Another house in the HHT portfolio is Vaucluse House, the home of William Charles Wentworth and his wife Sarah [2]. The daughter of convicts, she was shunned by the Sydney society of Government House, but nevertheless created a spectacular place in a harbourside setting. When it took on the property, HHT took a conscious decision to focus on the period from 1827-1853, and using an inventory of the sale of Wentworth’s possessions, set out to acquire or recreate the taste and furnishing of the family and period, and in particular their souvenirs of the grand tour in Europe. By combining an understanding of Wentworth’s own philosophy with the auction inventories, HHT has tried to create interiors that give the visitor not just an impression of nineteenth century life, but an insight into the particular taste of an important colonial family. We would have ideally tracked down Wentworth’s original curtain detail through auction catalogues, but failing that might have used extensive research into the period to recreate something appropriate.

**Rose Seidler House - one architect’s vision**

For Rose Seidler house built in 1948-1950 by architect Harry Seidler for his parents Rose and Max who lived there until 1967, many of the textiles and fabrics in the house are original, and all date to a narrow period. The house is one of the purest examples of mid century modern architecture in Australia and therefore the aim has been to recreate those values, following post-1967 changes. In terms of presentation to the public, the primary
story here is the legacy of an individual architect - his design, thinking and influences. The furniture is arranged as Seidler designed it from 1950 to 1967, and much was original including the chairs, either bought or built to Seidler’s design by Paul Kafka. Some of the furnishings have been reproduced from original samples - something that is particularly challenging with textiles. The original curtains have not survived, so the current orange and blue curtains are reproductions in a light dress fabric - we are seeking to replace them with a more appropriate and durable fabric that better withstands light damage.

Susannah Place - exploring working class lives

At Susannah Place, a group of working class cottages in the Rocks, HHT has taken different approach, barely touching the fabric, but doing our best to tell the stories of the often overlooked working-class families who lived, played and worked there. In the 1970s there were major plans to redevelop the Rocks area - and the story of resistance to these changes by a range of groups including vocal trade unions - remains one of the great and inspiring examples of heritage preservation. The tenants of this row of terraces were caught up in the battles, but nevertheless they remained under threat. Neglected and in poor condition, they remained derelict until 1987 when they began to be restored. The philosophy here was to use oral history, photographs and surviving layers in each of the houses to re-create the lives of individual families of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only the barest minimum of new work has been done, and the aim is to let the building fabric tell its own story. Were a hypothetical scrap of curtain fabric to have survived - we might spend time tracking down the oral history of the fabric, telling the story of the individual who put it there as part of the wider project to document as many of the inhabitants as possible. Our approach to conservation varies across the terraces - there is a recreated corner shop, whilst other areas have been left as they are.

Fig. 4. Susannah Place Museum. ©Catherine Clark
Meroogal - the women’s story

Ordinary lives also form the dominant narrative at Meroogal, a small house of 1886 at Nowra to the south of Sydney, where - unusually - several generations of women made their home. Here the collection is as important as the house, and the fact that the collection remains in situ within the building is of overriding significance. The other layer of significance is the fact that it is such an ordinary house - it is intimate, friendly and inviting. The women who occupied it were not wealthy, but created familiar, comfortable domestic interiors. Here the scraps of fabric and furnishings from all periods of the house throughout the last century have been retained in situ. June Wallace, the last of the family to live there, was very conscious of the historical value of the house and its collection, and as custodian took care to retain its character, copying earlier curtains as well as possible. Had she found our hypothetical curtain detail, she might either have kept it or tried to copy it.

Fig. 5. Meroogal. ©Catherine Clark

Throsby Park - a market solution for old buildings

Of course not every historic building should or can be a museum - in fact this is anyone involved in the management of historic house museums is well aware - is perhaps the least sustainable use for a historic building. HHT operates a revolving building preservation trust, which currently has six properties. Buildings are bought, repaired, and sold on, and the funds invested in future projects. Currently two properties have been sold, and four properties are underway as projects. One of these projects is Throsby Park in the Southern
Highlands to the south of Sydney. Throsby Park is a fine house on a 75 hectare estate, that includes a cottage, the homestead of 1834, stables and outbuildings. The estate was granted to naval surgeon Dr Charles Throsby in 1819 and the house built by his nephew. Today the house is being repaired prior to offering a longterm market lease. The collections associated with the house are being reviewed in order to establish which might stay with the property under a new arrangement and which are of sufficient public significance to remain on display. Had a fabric of original textile survived, it would almost certainly have been put into our own research collection as a reference piece to be available to the public, rather than remaining in the house where under a new leasehold arrangement it would be unlikely to be conserved.

Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection - a resource for you

The HHT also holds a core resource, the Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection. Focusing on the history of buildings, gardens and interiors in NSW, it holds fabrics, fixtures and fittings as well as books and sources. There is a climate controlled store where textiles and other collection items can be properly held and stored in contrast to the conditions in many of our houses. Our hypothetical curtain detail could be put in one of the boxes in the store and would remain protected from light and other damage. Our emphasis here is on making information as widely available as possible, so it is likely that the drape would be photographed, digitised and added to our online collections resources, perhaps as part of the alphabet of historic interiors that we are developing, and might through that means become available to a much wider global audience as a resource for the general understanding of the history of interiors.

Hyde Park Barracks Museum - the archaeology of a building

Of course another site that was lived in but was not a house is Hyde Park Barracks, built around 1819 to a design by architect Francis Greenway to house convicts, and later used to house Irish immigrants. Beneath the floorboards we discovered a huge collection of fabric and other organic material, hidden there by occupants or dragged there by rats. If found here, our scrap of cloth would have been treated as an archaeological artifact - numbered, photographed, added to the archaeological collections database, and put away in a bag in a box, to be written up in a monograph on the archaeology of the building.
Values-based conservation in practice

Taken together these case studies illustrate a whole series of theoretical scenarios for conserving a fragment of textile - we can leave it in situ, make a modern reproduction, put it in a library, digitise it, treat it as an archaeological item, or reinterpret it in a very modern form. HHT has used these approaches at various times in each of its different properties.

And the decision is of course based on our understanding of what matters and why. What matters at Elizabeth Farm is the experience of living and using in an old house, at Vaucluse House the headspace of a strong-willed nineteenth century couple, at Elizabeth Bay house the idea of Alexander Macleay, at Susannah Place the working class story, at Rose Seidler the design ideas of one architect and at Government House the tradition of a working state building. For our library the driving philosophy is one of providing a global intellectual resource. For Hyde Park Barracks it is the archaeology of space. For Throsby Park our concern is to sustain the house through finding a market solution.

These issues - of how we think about and conserve and present collections and historic house museums - how we articulate significance and make good decisions keep us endlessly occupied and engaged as heritage professionals. As the Historic Houses Trust of NSW developed through time, the whole philosophy and idea of each property - what it was and set out to do - is in itself a microcosm of the history of ideas about conservation over the past 30 years. From out and out restoration, to the wholesale ‘anti-scape’ [3] of Rouse Hill House and Farm, and from a fascination with all things Victorian to a recognition that modern may be cool - and from the stories of great men to articulating the history of working class people, and women, or
threading the missing indigenous story into each property, our ideas change, and with them, the approach to conservation.

Added to that, each HHT property is the creation of its past curators - at Government House Curator Ann Toy’s extraordinary sensitivity to presentation and her particular aesthetic set the standard for the beautiful drawing room; Scott Carlin’s intuition and sense is woven into the interiors of Vaucluse House, whilst the restoration of Elizabeth Bay House has the unmistakeable stamp of heritage architect Clive Lucas. Curator James Broadbent drove the Ruskinian philosophy at Rouse Hill, Robert Griffin and Emeritus Director Peter Watts the good new design in a historic context of another HHT property, The Mint. The legacy of the Historic Houses Trust is a legacy of individual vision, perception and sensitivity, as much as it is the legacy of the houses and collections themselves.

But today this is not enough. The real challenge for us at HHT and house museums in general is of course that a museum is possibly the very worst - and certainly the hardest - way of sustaining a historic building in the long run. Conserving our scrap of fabric requires skills and resources. And generating those resources requires people to be interested in and care about and want to visit historic house museums.

Most of HHT’s houses came to the Trust in the 1980s, at the end of a period of passionate heritage campaigning, sparked in the 1960s by the loss of key early houses, and in the 1970s by the well-known campaigns to save historic buildings in The Rocks. When our houses first opened visitation peaked - as people were fascinated by Australian history heritage and buildings. People were also discovering older buildings as families like my own moved from the modern suburbs to inner city Victorian terraces. Another peak of investment in the run up to 1988 and the Bicentenary helped maintain interest in, and infrastructure for, museums. HHT had the luxury of creating these places because of that wider context of political and social support for the idea of historic houses.

As time moved on, HHT responded to the challenge of generating new audiences by developing a wide range of creative programs and activities designed to bring new audiences into house museums. Concerts in Government House, jazz and carols at Vaucluse House, a stunning ‘50s Fair’ at Rose Seidler, a Festival of the Olive at Elizabeth Farm, all helped to bring new generations of people into older buildings. A thriving education program at each property taught children to bake scones, understand the life of a convict, learn decorum at Government House, or experience a historic schoolroom at Rouse Hill. These were ways to keep properties alive and generate new audiences for a generation that no longer wanted to stand behind a red rope.

And HHT found new ways to generate income other than simply waiting for visitors; a retail offer, drawing on our stunning interiors and fabrics to create unique products, and became more commercial, offering venues for hire for weddings, corporate events and other activities.

Today there are new challenges. There are a plethora of things to do and visit in Sydney. Museums, contemporary art galleries but also a whole range of other experiences and places. Every park in Sydney has a food festival or vintage fair, retailing is a commercial challenge, and lots of other places in Sydney now have great restaurants in authentic historic places. HHT competes with graffiti festivals at the gritty industrial heritage space of Cockatoo Island, fine dining amongst the military remains of North Head, public parks and venues that make former railway sheds and water tanks into creative spaces. The kind of heritage that we have - old houses - are pretty unexciting. So what do we do? How do we re-enthuse people about the idea of the house-museum?
Call the experts

In order to solve the problem of finding a way to conserve our scrap of fabric in the long term, we have not turned to conservators, the architectural historians or heritage specialists but to the brand experts. As curators we know what we like, but what do others think? We went back to first principles and spoke to our volunteers and visitors, our staff, members and non-members, people who had visited and those who had not.

The results were quite confronting. Some people loved our sites, but others did not. ‘They don’t offer enough to keep me interested’. ‘Not enough to do’. ‘No reason to come back’. ‘Can’t interact with/ touch artefacts’. ‘Old fashioned, not contemporary’. ‘Not good food or shop’. ‘Not social places’. ‘They talk down to me/too cerebral’. ‘I feel apprehensive, disengaged, confronted, frustrated, bored’. Not all of the feedback was like that - and there was plenty of good feedback - but there was enough to tell us that the niceties of how each site was presented that had so absorbed us, was utterly lost on the majority of visitors.

Six months and a lot of workshops, discussions, research and butchers paper later - we now have developed the beginnings of a new brand position. It has helped us to connect what we have - real houses, real collections, with some current trends that are remarkably relevant.

Think vintage. Think revival. Think crafts. Think the fascination not with old houses but with interiors and living. We love and crave experiences - and that is something that house museums can provide that other kinds of museums cannot. We love poking our noses into other peoples lives. We are knitting and pinning; we are fascinated with food and things hand made. We are social home-loving doers.

The end result is a new way of talking and thinking about ourselves and our museums. It has told us that we need to be more welcoming and sociable, we need to let people discover things rather than talk to them, we need to play on the things people care about now. Some of this we are already doing, through blogs and programs, some we are not. It is also helping us to make difficult decisions with scarce resources about what we do - and do not do.

It seems a long way from a scrap of fabric to a brand position. But ultimately if our role is to ensure that these places are still here in a hundred years’ time, people need to care about them, and people will only care about them if they feel a sense of fascination and connection and ownership.

Yes conservation philosophy and approach matters, but what matters much more is not that we talk to ourselves, but that we look outwards and connect. Instead of debating restoration philosophy, we have a core brand molecule with purpose, signatures and behaviours. Yes, we need to continue to research history but we also research our audiences; we occasionally produce books but also need to see the web and screen media as our future, recognising that 70% of our audiences come that way. Our curators are still here, but as well as house curators we have curators of digital images and online collections.

Conclusion

And the answer to that piece of fabric at Rouse Hill House & Farm? We may well leave that bobble fringe in situ until it rots. Rouse Hill House & Farm is one of the few houses I am aware of that has such an intact collection and interior [4]. As you are aware textiles almost never survive. It means that this house may become rather like the Lascaux caves - fragile, only open to visitors sometimes. But its core value lies in that intactness. We will have to use the web, digital collections and other initiatives to create access to it. And in order to sustain the property and find new audiences we will have to find a whole range of new things to do
there, perhaps making better use of the farm buildings, and finding ways to connect to the 1 in 11 Australians who now live in the burgeoning suburbs around it.

House museums are a hard ask in the modern world. So many of them are the product of a particular time, place and political philosophy. In Australia it was the colonial revivalism of the 1960s and 1970s that spawned many of our properties coming into Government ownership; note that in South Africa today resources are being thrown at the often humble houses of key African National Congress personalities. I wonder how they will fare in future years when politics, and the world, has moved on?

At the end of the day, our role is to do our best to hand onto future generations what we have inherited. To quote William Morris:

‘We ought .... to treat with the utmost care whatever of architecture and the like is left us of the times of art. I deny that it can ever be our own to do as we like with; it is the property of the world, that we hold in trust for those that come after us’ [Morris, 1884]

If that involves brand consultants, and audience research, so be it.

Endnotes
[1] Construction of this property began in around 1813 and was completed by 1825 for Richard Rouse, the son of an Oxfordshire carpenter who originally came to the colony in 1801. Today the house is open to the public and contains an extraordinary collection of items from the family from all periods of its history. It has not been restored.


[4] Other parallel’s include the National Trust’s Calke Abbey in Derbyshire, which has been retained in a state of decline.

References:


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