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Response Paper #2

On a cold and grey January day, I visited the President Woodrow Wilson House for the first time this semester. John Pucher, the Manager of Business and Operations, showed me around the house. But rather than a traditional tour of stories about the Wilsons and their possessions, John gave me a memorable “behind the scenes” look at the work that goes into the stewardship of a historic house museum. He showed me the restoration work (funded through an emergency grant) being conducted in the library and upstairs bedrooms to fix plaster that had recently endured water damage. The library is a grand room with a distinctive portrait of President Wilson and an impressive bookshelf. But this time, many of the items had been moved out and the remaining furniture was covered in plastic for protection from the ongoing work. It was exciting to see the room in this new, not so elegant, light that highlighted the preservation aspects of a historic property. More recently, I viewed the completed restoration. John showed me how part of the plaster wall was not restored, only cleaned up, with the brick masonry wall still exposed. I enjoyed seeing this and hope this continues to stay visible. Many people today don’t know about construction and repair (including myself), so this is an additional learning experience that goes far beyond President Wilson’s legacy.¹

Other historic house museums have taken a preservation-centric approach. In a chapter about cultural tourism in *Reimagining Historic House Museums*, one “principle” discussed is

¹ Although I like this approach, the authors of the *Anarchist’s Guide To Historic House Museums* dislike it, saying, “This practice is almost worse than seeing nothing at all because it reads as a concession to those people who are not satisfied by the decorative arts and interior decoration” (174). I disagree. I do not know why you cannot celebrate a home’s interior design *and* the preservation elements.

“Focus on Quality and Authenticity.”² In this subsection, the author references, “Behind the Velvet Ropes” and “Details & Joinery,” public tours that take place at the well-known Arts & Crafts style Gamble House in Pasadena, California.³ These tours are focused on the “details” (workmanship, in an integrity sense) at the home.⁴ Reading this reminded me of a trip to Drayton Hall, a National Trust for Historic Preservation property near Charleston, South Carolina, in 2019. The Palladian style plantation home does not have any furniture or added interior design. This allowed me to focus on the beautiful moldings, plaster, paint color, fireplaces, and staircase. I enjoyed this preservation-centric “tour” of a historic property and I was inspired by the tour guide who mentioned the preservation efforts at the home, which almost had an investigative quality to them. Shortly thereafter, I applied to the historic preservation graduate program at Goucher College. The *Anarchist’s Guide To Historic House Museums*, by Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, actually references Drayton Hall as one of “the proponents of stabilization.”⁵ There are lessons here for the Wilson House. It would be great if the National Historic Landmark not only inspired future historians and political leaders, but also future historic preservationists, through a stronger promotion of historic property stewardship.

The Wilson House obviously has a fabulous collection of artifacts, but a greater focus on the home’s design (and the efforts to preserve it) would be appreciated, especially since the home was designed by Waddy B. Wood. Wood designed many buildings in Washington, especially near the Wilson House in the surrounding Kalorama neighborhood. To its credit, the Wilson

² *Reimagining Historic House Museums, New Approaches And Proven Solutions*, ed. by Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 120.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, *Anarchist’s Guide To Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2016), 159.

House has established a walking tour of the neighborhood (with an accompanying brochure) that invites guests to visit and learn about Wood's other buildings in the neighborhood.

This historic preservation focus is endorsed in the *Anarchist's Guide*. Vagnone and Ryan write, "Make the aging and preservation of the HHM an integrated part of the narrative."⁶ They add: "Realize that there is an authenticity in acknowledging the age of your HHM [historic house museum]."⁷ I am not sure if the Wilson House is planning to mention the water damage when regular tours resume after the pandemic, but I think it would be an interesting narrative to explore. The property is over 100 years old and preserving it is tough. Even a president's home requires a lot of work! Similar to how the Wilson House is being honest about President Wilson's legacy on race, this honesty can also extend to stewardship challenges. In addition to this, historic preservationists could become more involved with the Speakers Series. This would broaden the important issues being presented and discussed in this program.

Finally, on this topic of historic preservation, is the important story of Edith Wilson, who lived in the home from the 1920s to the 1960s. She was instrumental in the Wilson House's long-term preservation by the National Trust. I believe the house is moving in the direction of embracing her narrative, which is fantastic. It would be nice if the house could move beyond the narrow period of significance focused on President Wilson's short time at the house. Edith lived in the house through the Great Depression, World War II, and the advent and growth of television. On this latter point, I asked my mentor a month or so ago, "Where did Edith watch TV?" He was not sure and neither was his colleague, who is more familiar with the house due to a familial connection. I think guests would enjoy seeing the home during the post-presidential years. Maybe the old-fashioned television was rolled up next to the fireplace in the library or

⁶ Vagnone and Ryan, 162.

⁷ Vagnone and Ryan, 165.

maybe she even watched her favorite programs (*I Love Lucy?*) in the dining room! Supporting this concept, the *Anarchist's Guide* says, "Create an interior environment that suggests daily life cycles," and, "Include an expansive list of characters in your HHM narrative. Reduce the focus on a single inhabitant."⁸ Therefore, this story of "daily life" and multiple narratives could also be expanded to include Edith's preservation efforts.

In closing, the Wilson House can embrace strategies from the historic preservation profession: a focus on the home's design and long-term preservation, preservationist involvement in the Speaker Series, and a more flexible period of significance with multiple eras and narratives (and to be honest, historic preservationists themselves struggle with being creative on this final point). Also, with the small amount of research I conducted on grant opportunities, it looked like there may be money available for preservation speakers and education initiatives through the National Park Service. Inspiring more historic preservationists through new programming would be an admirable goal for the Wilson House.

⁸ Vagnone and Ryan, 142, 138.

Bibliography

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