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Response Paper #1

Over the past month as a Spring Scholar at the President Woodrow Wilson House, I have been able to more fully explore the historic house museum issues of management and operations. I am realizing that these topics encompass *all* aspects of a historic site, from grants and fundraising to facilities management to collections and interpretation. Staff have to administer every function of a historic house museum, and oftentimes staff are only a limited number of individuals. During this time, I have seen preservation in progress through plaster repairs and restoration in the works through landscaping updates. I have attended three Tuesday lectures at the biweekly Speaker Series and completed a biography on President Woodrow Wilson (*The Moralists* by Patricia O'Toole) – both of which have given me important background information and context on past and current issues. I have researched potential grants and assisted with the writing of a grant application. And finally, I have attended one of the quarterly Advisory Council meetings and gotten to know one of the Advisory Council members through a mentorship program, which allows for an open dialogue of learning.

I have also been reading some literature on historic house museums. These readings have prompted me to make connections between the practical and theoretical elements of a historic house museum, like the Wilson House. *Reimagining Historic House Museums*, edited by Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy, covers various topics in historic house museums and how they can be adapted for the modern world. I get the sense that historic house museums have operated in an established way for many decades, and new issues – such as limited fundraising and lack of community engagement – are arising that need to be addressed with new

(“reimagined”) methods. This is partially why I was drawn to the Wilson House, which is the home of a significant American president who accomplished great things in both domestic and foreign policy, but who also has a terrible legacy on race issues that is being exposed once again due to recent events.

This text takes a rather conservative approach to these new methods, while another text I am reading, *Anarchist’s Guide To Historic House Museums* by Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, really pushes the reader to think outside the box. Both have valuable insights and draw on comparative examples from around the nation (and world), which is always helpful. For one, I like how the former text covers the basics of a historic house museum. This has introduced me to thinking more about the audience experience, fundraising and endowments, and managing various stakeholders and volunteers. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on historic house museum boards. At the Wilson House, the board is called the Advisory Council (AC). As was pointed out to me, it *advises*, as the Wilson House is a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and they have the final word.

The AC works closely with Elizabeth Karcher, the executive director, which is typical of the relationship between a nonprofit’s volunteer board and its staff. I was particularly drawn to this chapter, given my background working at a professional association nonprofit with its own board and my interactions with the 54 state societies that correspond to the national organization where I work. Each state society has its own CEO and board, and I have seen how, as the chapter puts it: “The paid executive director carries out the board’s vision for the organization and oversees program development, communications, and record keeping. He or she is responsible for fund-raising, managing other staff, working all special events, and acting as a

spokesperson.”¹ Whether it is a state society for certified public accountants or a historic house museum devoted to a former president’s legacy, nonprofit volunteer boards and staff have certain dynamics that are not necessarily found in the for-profit world.

Therefore, given my interest and background, I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know my mentor (and AC member), Edward Gerber. He has an extensive knowledge of the Wilson House’s history, as well as the intricacies of the AC, the members of which are key stakeholders of the historic property. I was overjoyed to be able to attend the March 2021 quarterly meeting of the AC. Karcher gave an excellent presentation on how the Wilson House staff and volunteers dealt with the difficult issues that arose in 2020. This was done through thoughtful and relevant programming and events. In the words of the above text, I would say that Elizabeth and her staff conducted a “reimagining” of the Wilson House. When the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment (granting women the right to vote) collided with COVID-19, the exhibit, *Suffrage Outside*, seamlessly moved to the home’s Rear Garden and had impressive attendance. I am particularly impressed with how they have directly addressed issues of race and social justice, in reaction to recent events around the nation in 2020. They have brought in various scholars who have brought a voice and perspective to the nation’s African American experience. This is not easy to do, considering President Wilson’s legacy on race, and I think this Speaker Series would surprise many people who have preconceived notions of the Wilson House.

Beyond relevance and the need to be a voice for underrepresented communities, the Wilson House isn’t necessarily under any obligation to address these social justice issues. The property could safely stick to discussing what Wilson did for the economy (the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Trade Commission) and for the world (the League of Nations), as well as

¹ *Reimagining Historic House Museums, New Approaches And Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 52.

his health problems and Edith's (his second wife) efforts to preserve the Wilson House through the National Trust. Vagnone and Ryan write about the need to "regularly study the demographics and social life of your immediate community," and the need to "locate communities of neighborhood residents who are not visiting and engage them."² This is a little complicated since the Wilson House is in the Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District, a rather high-end neighborhood of Washington, DC. Next door to the Wilson House is Jeff Bezos' home and around the corner is former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama's Washington house.

As I learned from Gerber and witnessed at the AC meeting, there are four ambassadors on the board, which is a clever form of engagement by the Wilson House. Kalorama is home to many embassies, so the Wilson House has thoughtfully included these stakeholders in its management. On the other hand, when writing a paper last semester on the Wilson House, I reached out to two long-time residents in my co-op building in Kalorama Triangle (one historic district over from the Wilson House). Neither resident had ever been to the Wilson House. Why is this? This is anecdotal, but still illuminating. It might have been done before, but it would be fantastic to engage local neighbors to sit on the AC, and maybe even reserve one or two seats for a local neighbor (in Kalorama and/or surrounding neighborhoods) who does not work in foreign affairs or a related profession.

Vagnone and Ryan touch on this historic house museum/community "disconnect" that can occur.³ They write, "We have worked with Historic House sites that struggled to pay for rack cards at hotels, train stations, and airports, all the while making no effort to advertise to their own neighbors."⁴ Now, of course, advertising to locals and tourists is different from engaging

² Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide To Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2016), 54, 59.

³ Vagnone and Ryan, 55.

⁴ Ibid.

individuals to sit on the board of a historic house museum, but both involve stakeholders. Besides, having a local voice on the board could help shape the property's direction and engagement practices to different audiences. Local, long-time residents have different perspectives of historic properties than someone in the foreign service who may not live in the neighborhood beyond a certain period of time. I also realize that board members must be involved in fundraising, including through individual financial contributions (something referenced in Turino and Van Balgooy⁵). Nonetheless, I think it is important to have at least one AC member who is providing a valuable community perspective instead of (or in addition to) financial and networking value.

Also, "immediate community" for the Wilson House needs to encompass all of Washington, DC and move beyond Kalorama and Embassy Row. How can the house bring in stakeholders from across Washington, from Brightwood and Petworth to Waterfront to Anacostia? And beyond the AC, how can the Wilson House engage these communities? The Speaker Series definitely seems to be a good start. And maybe this series can lead to more geographically-dispersed – on a city scale – AC members. Finally, the Board could include individuals from relevant organizations (if not already done so), such as the prominent Wilson Center. This would also foster new partnerships, which would influence and shape programming, like the Speaker Series.⁶

As I continue in the scholars program for another two months, I plan to continue thinking about these important issues and making connections. I am now most curious about the historic house museum credentialing process and how I can assist with that (as it is one of my

⁵ Turino and Van Balgooy, 50.

⁶ Another "marking" (basically an objective) articulated by Vagnone and Ryan: "Create strong and flexible partnerships with community organizations" (63).

independent study objectives). I also plan to work with Gerber on creating a mentorship framework for future scholars.

Bibliography

Harris, Donna Ann. "The Essential Role of Boards in Reimagining House Museums." *Reimagining Historic House Museums, New Approaches And Proven Solutions*, edited by Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy, 43-54. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

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