

DAVID HARTT  
BRENT LEGGS  
VICTORIA MUNRO  
CAROLINE O'CONNELL  
GRETCHEN SORIN

# THE POWER OF PLACE

## Revisiting Historic Sites, Historic Houses, and House Museums

Historic sites, historic houses, and house museums are often distinguished by distinctive architecture, decoration, collections, signage, or even scent. These varied places tend to elicit strong responses from visitors and passersby. Some are drawn in, others repelled, in part because they hold histories and project narratives that can be deeply intimate, subjective, or troubling. They have been witness to real lives and events, and yet the sum of the quotidian experiences of the people who inhabited them nods to something bigger and more complicated. The enduring presence of historic homes and sites in the United States, the fascination with them, and questions about what to do with them serve as the premise for this dialogue among professionals whose work intersects preservation, art, community, and scholarship. This conversation considers the limits of terminology; reimagines thematic, structural, and narrative future(s) for these spaces; and reflects the sense that historic sites, historic houses, and house museums are alive and brimming with narratives yet-to-be unearthed for new audiences. It also captures frustrations and hope for the ways in which public history can be reconceived through material culture.

DAVID HARTT lives and works in Philadelphia. He is an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His art practice explores how historic ideas and ideals persist or transform over time. His work is represented by Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; David Nolan Gallery, New York; and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

BRENT LEGGS is the executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and senior vice president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Leggs is a Harvard University Loeb Fellow, author of *Preserving African American Historic Places* (2012), and a 2018 recipient of the Robert G. Stanton National Preservation Award.

CAROLINE O'CONNELL What is a memorable experience you each have had at a historic site or house?

BRENT LEGGS Beloved in my memory is the home of Madam C. J. Walker, Villa Lewaro,

VICTORIA MUNRO is the executive director of the Alice Austen House, a nationally designated site of LGBTQ history and the only museum in America to represent the work of a solo woman photographer, Alice Austen (1866–1952). Munro is an art and art history educator, a maker, and a curator.

CAROLINE O'CONNELL is the exhibitions curator at the American Philosophical Society. Her work explores the intersections of design, material culture, and public memory. She previously served as first vice president of the Victorian Society New York and is an alumna of the Attingham Summer School, London, England.

in Irvington, New York. It's on the same street as Jay Gould's Lyndhurst Mansion and three miles from the John D. Rockefeller Estate Kykuit. Walker was a Black woman who became America's first self-made female millionaire and had the gall

GRETCHEN SORIN is director and distinguished service professor at the Cooperstown Graduate Program/SUNY Oneonta. Sorin received a bachelor's degree in American studies from Rutgers University, a master's degree in museum studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program, and a PhD in American history from the University at Albany. She has worked with more than 250 museums over three decades as an exhibition curator and education, programming, interpretive planning, and strategic planning consultant. Her most recent book is *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (2020). She is also cowriter and senior historian with filmmaker Ric Burns on the documentary film *Driving While Black: Race, Space and Mobility* (2020).

to integrate the most expensive zip code in the country. She partnered with the first Black licensed professional architect in the state of New York, Vertner Woodson Tandy, to design this grand Italianate mansion. Walking through the iron gate, the hairs on my arms stood up because I realized the quiet power of historic preservation. It helps keep her remarkable life real.

**VICTORIA MUNRO** I just came back from a meeting of a branch of the National Trust—the Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios. We were hosted at Manitoga, the estate of designer Russel Wright, in Garrison, New York. Homes that are artist-built as complete environments are really inspiring. Manitoga was designed around ideal ways of living, and was influenced by so many different cultures.

**GRETCHEN SORIN** When my son was sixteen years old, we took a trip with the 1772 Foundation to Charleston, South Carolina, which I recall with almost photographic memory because it was so powerfully upsetting. We walked into an outdoor room at a historic property that was surrounded by hedges with the grass cut to about an inch, and the guide said, “Imagine the ladies with their beautiful dresses playing croquet on this.” I had a splitting headache because nobody ever mentioned who cut the lawn. And as we went through the house, the guide kept referring to the “servants,” never once mentioning that they were enslaved people. From there, we went to Daufuskie Island to tour broken-down former slave quarters and sharecropper shacks, where there was no furniture and the grasses were so high the guides warned us to be careful of snakes. It was the best experience to be able to see these buildings, even in their unimproved state, and to show my son that this is where his people would



Guests along the terraces and around the pool at Villa Lewaro, Irvington, New York, 1924

have lived. Not to have a fairy tale presented at this elegant historic site that actually tells an inaccurate story.

**DAVID HARTT** By nature, I find all historic homes pretty creepy. The artificiality of the way a narrative is created and shared is very alienating. That informs my own approach: I try to find a way around the reification of particular narratives, and instead complicate them and move around the blockages that misdirect, misrepresent, or refuse certain ideas of participation.

**O’CONNELL** Some definitions might be grounding. What constitutes a historic house and what are the implications of that distinction? How do we identify sites that we should consider to be of historic import?

**LEGGs** The African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund’s view is that preserving African American sites is an act of racial justice and should be considered a civil right. Representation matters, and historic African American places deserve care, investment, and stewardship. We have been thinking about how to redefine the term “historic house.” When the public hears it, they may think: house museum, velvet ropes, a one-time visit. So, we talk



Alice Austen and her friend Trude Eccleston, August 6, 1891

more about “historic sites” instead. Our work is about activating sites that have been witnesses to Black life, humanity, resilience, activism, and achievement, and we view the use of historic landscapes and architecture as a tool for building a national identity that reflects America’s full diversity.

**SORIN** I love that definition, because I have never thought that historic house museums in this country told the history of America. Most of them are about great wealth. They are not about telling the stories of the people who settled or built this country. It is almost like visitors are voyeurs, exploring what it is like to be a super-rich person.

**HARTT** I agree wholeheartedly. Specifically with this idea of isolating a particular history within all the struggling histories that a space is witness to. When I participated in *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, exploring “Black space” was a difficult prompt because it negates the porosity of social life in America. My way around it was through film, because it captures extended moments in time. And through that I could define space as

being contingently Black. The idea of history being singular and located in one space is actually contrary to its essence.

**MUNRO** I like that you brought up those elements of cinema. The first time I visited the Alice Austen House in Staten Island, I was told to put three dollars in a wicker basket and show myself around. I probably spent less than ten minutes there, and when I left, I didn’t know that Alice was a photographer or that she was queer. As a queer artist who utilizes photography myself, that might have been really meaningful. In fact, she lost her wealth and possessions and was evicted from this home, but that story wasn’t present at all. As queer and marginalized people get older, maintaining a sense of rights or independence is important. The objects in the house were true to the period, but they didn’t even belong to the Austens; the house was groaning under the weight of them. Now, as director, being able to free this house from an object-based interpretation and pivoting to work with a collection of over eight-thousand photographs is a phenomenal way to connect with people. It can be an emotional experience for visitors who have come previously, particularly for the queer community, who understand that her story has been suppressed. Docents and staff had been told never to mention Alice’s partner name, Gertrude. We own this unfortunate institutional history because we can learn so much from it.

**LEGGs** Oftentimes, there is a romanticized version of history presented, a limited interpretation that does not tell a site’s full story. As we start to reimagine the usefulness of historic places, for me, it is about creating community. How can we create more equitable and inclusive interpretations that can engage new audiences, whether those be activists, artists, or social justice leaders?



HARTT One of the things I attempt to do with my work is to reconsider the site to represent aspects that aren't contained within the dominant narrative. Sometimes that means stepping outside the historical bounds of the space in terms of what is being preserved, and sometimes it means inviting something in that contaminates the narrative but is necessary to connect to a contemporary audience. It is about not being afraid of stories that may not be central, but that can provide a vantage point that is deeply meaningful to a visitor. I was invited to do a project with Frank Lloyd Wright's only synagogue, Beth Sholom, in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, and after finding that the building was actually the congregation's second home, it got me thinking about different ideas of community. Their original building is now a Black Baptist Church. My project was in some ways speculative; it explored the capacity of a building to actively host another community and demonstrated a space's capacity to absorb and embrace different possibilities. It is enriching to think about an architectural site as something that goes on living beyond us. Despite our attempts to preserve it in a particular moment, it always has this potential.

SORIN So many historic sites are in neighborhoods that have changed. The Dyckman Farmhouse in Upper Manhattan is a Dutch farmhouse in what is now a Dominican neighborhood that really has no use for an eighteenth-century farmhouse, but they do have a use for a cultural center and for a programming space that can provide music, art, and dance. What are the contemporary uses for these places? This is how museum studies has not served us well. We treat objects better than we treat our audiences and staff. We revere every object as precious and put barriers around it. But we want people to experience these spaces!

HARTT It's funny, but I still have this wonderful appreciation for period rooms—the weirder, the better. They are ripe for respectful interventions by contemporary artists. I would love to do more, because they really do produce a fantastical idea of a particular moment in time.

SORIN Yinka Shonibare created an incredible installation at the Newark Museum of Art in the Victorian-period dining room, complete with people whose feet were up on the tables and oyster shells all over the place. It was sexual, fun, and absolutely hilarious. I think artists can reimagine and actually animate these spaces.

MUNRO It's interesting when artists are invited into historic house museums, because they can be inspired by a collection and by very unconventional spaces, like rooms with original wooden beams, closets, and fireplaces to work around. Sometimes we take two to three years to allow artists the time to create, but the house museum is a really rich place for artists to work. And I think we have an opportunity to create safe spaces for people. We can utilize our unique position as a museum to be welcoming to different groups. The Alice Austen House is a nationally designated site of LGBTQ history. But because we're



Installation view, *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)*, Beth Sholom Synagogue, a Frank Lloyd Wright–designed National Historic Landmark, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 11–December 19, 2019

not a Pride center, we're able to work with students and bring them to the site without outing them, creating this amazing space to celebrate identity.

LEGGs "Identity" is a powerful word. I think about how we can use historic homes and sites to reconstruct national identity. I'm inspired by the structural shifts that happened at James Madison's Montpelier, a site associated with an American president, the Constitution, and also a site of enslavement. Through descendent engagement, archaeology, and a strategic commitment by the organization, they amended their by-laws, secured 50 percent representation at the board of trustee level by descendants, and created a new model for descendant leadership. If historic preservation can play a role in helping to create structural paradigms and shifts in an industry, that could be a model for other professions and industries.

O'CONNELL There is a housing crisis in the United States right now, fueled by a lack of inventory and significant wealth disparities that make homeownership inaccessible, but there is also intense interest in real estate and old homes captured through media representations of "fixer-upper" culture. How do you think this comes to bear on our work?

HARTT Your question deals with the concept of taste, but also with fantasy—the tendency to construct an idea and live in a moment, regardless of whether or not it existed. I made a film installation called *Stray Light* [2011–12] about the Johnson Publishing Company, which was so important in terms of developing a speculative idea of Black taste—imagining something that, quite frankly, didn't exist. The influence that their publications *Ebony* and *Jet*

had in taking Black taste somewhere new is reflected in the interiors developed for their corporate headquarters. When I first visited, it was like nothing I had seen before. It was enthralling, sophisticated, and such a leap, perhaps, from directors John and Eunice Johnson's own past. I think it is important to mention that for all the forces looking to preserve something, there are other forces trying to move things in a new direction. Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't the test kitchen from the Johnson Publishing Company headquarters go to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture recently?

O'CONNELL Yes! They acquired it in 2023.

LEGGs I have been thinking about the intersection between the cultural reckoning that is currently happening and this cultural renaissance. I'm optimistic that, through culture, media, and various forms of public engagement, we are beginning to build a national ethic for the preservation of historic places, neighborhoods, architecture, and the social fabric of community. But there is a balance between intervening in historic spaces and modernizing them, between retaining historic fabric and architectural integrity to tell a story and preserve an important American identity versus rehabilitating historic places for modern uses. It is beneficial that more folks value historic places and are curious about them; our movement is expanding. We just want to make sure they have the tools to be careful stewards.

O'CONNELL So, what's next? How can historic sites be more relevant to and reflective of this country and its inhabitants, of the communities where these places currently exist, as well as where they may have once stood?

MUNRO We just launched our Queer Ecologies Garden Project. It celebrates the historical site because Alice was the founding member of the Staten Island Garden Club, which was a clever way for her to create safe space for her and her friends to be together without male chaperones. We are planting nonbinary and symbolically significant plants and allowing students to participate in the selection process, creating a pathway for year-round engagement. We're incredibly excited.

SORIN Each of us has identified ways that we are trying to change the paradigm. Mine is to teach people who are going into museum work, and I am happy to say my students are now working with Victoria! I have a reverence for objects, but not all objects, and I think it is very important for us to think first about community and audience before these objects that we are preserving. My program has focused on people who don't go to museums and why. How do we start to engage people, and how do we ask them what their needs are? I'm very inspired by David and thinking about how we can best use artists and people who are bringing these creative perspectives to our institutions.

HARTT You know, I didn't go to an art museum until I was a college student, and I was recently invited to participate in a 2025 exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal, the city where I grew up. That invitation brought up all these feelings about identity and what it means to return to a changed environment. I'm developing a polyphonic heritage story about how all these complicated ideas of identity influenced me. I was born in 1967, a critical moment in the history of the city, when the World's Fair and Olympics were there—the whole city had this new car smell. I would

dream of living in one of these new buildings downtown, which is now the Marriott Chateau Champlain hotel—a fantastic modernist tower designed by Roger d'As-tous. For the exhibition, we're producing an eye-shaped, precast-concrete window panel from the building, at 4/5 scale, and installing it on my mother's front lawn, memorializing her suburban house through the position of this facade element. It's an attempt to collapse ideas of site, history, and identity to show that they meet in these unpredictable ways.

LEGGS Through the Action Fund, we are increasing the economic and social value of historic Black spaces, reimagining how we talk about the values of historic preservation, even using words like "community assets" and "historic assets" instead of "historic homes" and "historic sites." Another priority is using historic Black spaces to set a new precedent for stewardship planning and modeling. The work is helping all Americans to find home in historic spaces, to create room for culture, belonging, and discussions about American ideals, and to facilitate access to these spaces, to nurture community. If historic places can facilitate connections that bolster racial reconciliation and help social justice values thrive, that, for me, is utopia. That's the future of our movement and work.