

HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

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As more communities search for ways to preserve their heritage, one common solution is the utilization of historic buildings.

Two recent surveys of historic property museums and historic house museums point out that what seems to be a simple solution in saving a historic structure, is often fraught with difficulties. Many of these preservation projects are financed on shoestring budgets and face not only the typical problems found in most museums, but have the added preservation/restoration problems found in the maintenance of a historic structure.

A review of some of the recent literature (a selected reading list is provided), as well as some of the restoration problems encountered at the Oklahoma Historical Society's Drummond Home, are used as illustrative examples.

When considering a historic building, such as a house, as an option for a museum facility, a checklist of specific topics might be in order.

1. Purpose and Suitability

Exactly what is the building to be used for? Detailed planning for museum usage is essential regardless of whether it is to be used for changing exhibitions or for the interpretation of a specific time period. Hard questions should be asked about the building's suitability for current and future needs. What specific spaces are projected for the smooth operation of a museum (exhibition, administration, storage) and is there room for future expansion?

The Drummond Home was a desirable site to the Oklahoma Historical Society for a number of reasons. Its themes (Indian trade, cattle ranching and oil development) were all important subjects both regionally and state-wide. The donation of both the home and its intact original collections made it an excellent candidate for a period home interpretation. During its planning stage, office and exhibition spaces were set aside on the back porch. In addition, a bedroom, basement and small outbuilding have been utilized as storage and work space. Although adequate, temperature and humidity fluctuations in some of these areas still present problems.

Another important consideration should be the environment surrounding the structure. The Drummond Home is located in a residential setting in a small town. Situated in a block which still contains some of the family's outbuildings for livestock, its atmosphere is almost park-like with a small creek branch bisecting part of the property. The creek branch, however, has negative qualities. It has proven to be an attractive nuisance for neighborhood children as well as a potential flooding problem for the basement. The location of the site in a rural community an hour from larger metropolitan areas also is a factor in limiting visitation.

When considering the site's location, its susceptibility to theft and vandalism should be noted. What are the current zoning regulations and how

might they affect the project? Is there adequate parking for cars and buses? Is the site readily accessible to public transportation? What about emergency vehicles?

2. Structural Considerations

Probably two of the most important questions to be answered are 1) how important is the structure to your organization's purpose, and 2) what is the physical condition of the structure? Too often, a group contemplating saving a historic structure does not fully understand the scope of the project they are undertaking.

Will modifications made to the interior or exterior compromise the building's eligibility to the National Register? Are there structural problems that need to be addressed? Is the building's current structural stability up to its projected usage? Can it meet the fire marshal's standards as a public facility without jeopardizing its aesthetic qualities or requiring costly modifications? What about specialized access for the disabled? Will ramps or elevators be required? Can handicap accessible restrooms be provided?

What changes will be necessary for adequate climate control of the collections? Will new central heating, venting, and cooling systems be required? Will energy efficient measures such as insulation or thermal glazing be required?

When the Drummond Home was donated, it still retained its early gas radiant heaters as its principal source of heat. The most economical long-term solution for adding central heating and cooling was found in a ground-source geothermal heat pump. The heat pump did not compromise the house's high ceilings, it eliminated exterior compressors, and maintained temperature control in the 4500 square foot building. An added benefit was that because the system was a relatively new innovation, much of labor and some of the equipment were donated to the site.

Other problems encountered included a total lack of insulation on the upper floors and the necessity of thermal glazing of some of its windows to make the porches habitable year around. A french drain and sump pump were added to solve the occasional threat of flooding. Some structural reinforcement was necessary to the basement piers to prevent further settling caused by past flooding.

What about major health and safety problems in the building such as asbestos insulation of old steam pipes? Removal costs are usually quite expensive but absolutely essential in a public facility. The presence of lead-based paint on walls and woodwork must also receive consideration.

Will the building need to be rewired to bring it up to code? What shape is the plumbing in? If the structure is plastered, how extensive will the repairs be? Competent craftsmen for this and other skilled restoration work, such as repairs to stained glass, graining and other specialized crafts

are not inexpensive. What about the finishes in the building? Will they require stripping and appropriate refinishing?

Refinishing woodwork at the Drummond Home was labor intensive, but fortunately most still retained its natural finish rather than a paint overlay. However, extensive plastering repairs were required before the walls could be painted or wallpapered. Problems with exfoliating calcimine paint were encountered after plastering and painting was completed in two rooms. And the search for appropriate period wallpaper and the reproduction of paper for several rooms was both time-consuming and expensive.

3. Funding

When the Drummond Home was donated to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1980, it was during a period of economic prosperity. Approximately half of the restoration cost was privately donated. Both state and federal funds were available to match these monies. Even so, much of the interior finish restoration and some of the exterior landscaping was done by staff members to help cut expenses.

Renovation or restoration of a historic building is often a much more expensive project than many historical organizations anticipate. It is essential to ask at the beginning, where is the money going to come from?

Can money be raised for restoration and maintenance of a museum through a special fund-raising appeal? Through governmental agencies? Foundations? Remember that competition for cultural funding is always difficult, particularly when the economy is in a downturn.

Will the museum charge admission or include memberships as part of its fund-raising strategy? Will it be necessary to lease part of the facility for profit or to share the facility with another non-profit organization? Can operations expenses be met through special programs such as tours, special or seasonal events? Will rental of the rooms for meetings be considered? Will the buildings or grounds be available for use on special occasions and what compromises will this make to the integrity of the site? Is a gift shop planned?

Since the Drummond Home is part of a state agency, much of its funding depends on the action of the State Legislature. Admission is not charged at state-supported sites but voluntary donations are encouraged and this money is in turn dedicated to specific projects at that site.

Site and community size and limited staffing pose funding constraints when considering some fund-raising options such as a gift shop, community fundraising and use fees. Like most museums, the Drummond Home must also scramble for alternative funding sources to help with its current operations as well as for future projects.

4. Collections

The Drummond Home was donated with almost all of its original furnishings intact. Family members had lived in the home until 1978 and had made few changes through the years. Original furnishings, personal items and family memorabilia, including extensive household records, were critical in making the house an accurate period interpretation.

If a historical organization accepts a building with this focus in mind, a number of questions should be considered. Are a substantial number of the original furnishings available to make an accurate period interpretation? What kind of documentation is available to substantiate the restoration?

Furnishing reports, which utilize a variety of sources to justify restoration methods and materials, are essential for accurate interpretation. Are photographs, drawings, inventories, bills, letters or other first-hand accounts of the site available? Although oral history and secondary sources are often used, care must be taken to verify information which is not contemporary with the time of interpretation. Is a professional archaeological survey or excavation an option?

Is there adequate funding for acquisition of collections not currently available? Will there be ample storage space for collections not on exhibit so that they may be cared for in a manner consistent with museum standards? Is there personnel available to make sure the collections are cataloged and that other museum registration methods are implemented?

Decisions will have to be made concerning restoration work needed for items in the collection. Any conservation work or refinishing must be undertaken in a historically accurate and professional manner. Consult with someone who is experienced in the care of museum collections before attempting any work on artifacts.

During the restoration phase, the contents of the Drummond Home were inventoried and most of the collection to be exhibited was cataloged. Extensive cataloging of unexhibited collections still remains to be done, but with limited staffing, the backlog continues to present a problem.

5. Maintenance and Operations

Too often the focus of a restoration project does not extend far enough beyond its conclusion. Day-to-day operations continue to generate a need for adequate funding as buildings weather or unexpected problems associated with older buildings surface.

Adequate staffing of the site often proves troublesome. As the excitement of a new museum wears off, interest may fade. Are volunteers to be used as the primary staff in the museum's operation? If not, what sources are available to help in the funding of paid staff? The knowledge that regular operating hours will be maintained is essential if public visitation is to be encouraged.

Are there plans for a friend's group to help with special projects? Will there be a program for docent training?

Recruiting docents for the Drummond Home has proven to be a persistent problem. The retired elderly are often unable to muster the stamina needed when giving tours where several sets of

stairs are involved. As more and more women enter the workplace, the pool of potential volunteers continues to shrink. In a small working-class community, this leaves only a small number of eligible matrons whose numbers are gradually declining. It presents a problem with no easy solutions.

Is there a special exhibition space to continue generating community interest at the site? A regular newsletter? An outreach program to the schools and community? What plans have been made to attract out-of-town visitors or to continue to publicize the site and upcoming events?

Conclusion

An old joke among owners involved in renovating their historic home is that whatever you think it will cost will probably end up double your original estimate! There seems to be some substance in this comment in that historic restoration of older buildings almost always uncovers problems that one doesn't anticipate.

This checklist was compiled primarily to help local historical organizations realize some of the problems that historical building museums entail. Taking a long, hard look at the historical organization's goals, and how the restoration project can accomplish them, may forestall many difficulties down the road. Structural problems and the funding to make the necessary changes and repairs are often major stumbling blocks in completing a project. A clear understanding of the preliminary research and appropriate collections needed is also an important consideration. And finally, adequate planning for the continued maintenance and operation of the site is crucial for the museum to continue successfully. If these items can be addressed before a project has begun, its successful completion is assured with much greater certainty.

Selected Reading List

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Articles on interior and exterior restoration of buildings appear regularly in the *Bulletin for the Association of Preservation Technology*, *Historic Preservation Magazine*, *Old House Journal*, *Preservation Briefs*, and *Technology & Conservation*.

* available through the Oklahoma Field Advisory Service Reference Library

**available through the State Historic Preservation Office. Oklahoma Historical Society

***available through the Oklahoma Museums Association

(Author's note: most periodical/magazine articles may be obtained through interlibrary loan services at public libraries.)