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Time is running out for America's historic houses

For every financially viable house museum, many more are struggling

By Julia Halperin. From *Art Basel Miami Beach* daily edition
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Thriving: Villa Vizcaya, Coconut Grove, Miami

As attendance continues to plummet at historic houses across America, experts are warning that the field has become overcrowded and unsustainable, and that the number of these types of museums should be drastically cut. There are more than 80 historic house museums in Florida alone, according to the database Museums USA.

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But some, such as Villa Vizcaya in the Coconut Grove neighbourhood of Miami, are thriving. Attendance at the Italian Renaissance-style estate, built by the industrialist James Deering in the early 20th century, has risen 74% since 2005. With a modest increase in government funding from Miami-Dade County and revenue from increased facility rentals, Vizcaya is one of the few historic house museums to expand its budget in recent years. In 2014, the museum is scheduled to begin restoration of the estate's staff quarters, which have long been closed to the public.

Other house museums in Florida are not as fortunate. The Frank Lloyd Wright designed Lewis-Spring House and the 110-year-old Munroe House, both located in Tallahassee, were classified as highly endangered by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation last year. The Jackson Rooming House, a segregation-era boarding house in Tampa Bay where both Ella Fitzgerald and Martin Luther King have stayed, is on the verge of collapse. The city deemed it a safety hazard but granted local preservationists a 60-day extension on November 21 to raise \$50,000 for the necessary repairs. "The future is still unknown," says Matthew Depin, an engineer in charge of the project.

Struggling with debt

Meanwhile, dozens of houses in other parts of the country, including the Sanford-Bristol House, one of the oldest homes in Connecticut, and President Woodrow Wilson House, the South Carolina boyhood home of the former president, are struggling with debt, declining attendance or physical deterioration.

Most historians and preservation experts say that house museums cannot

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survive as they are now. "A lot of historic buildings have huge deferred maintenance problems," says Elizabeth Merritt, the director of the Center for the Future of Museums, part of the American Alliance of Museums. Retrofitting historic buildings with proper climate control can be prohibitively expensive. "The investment in physical infrastructure may not correlate with income potential," Merritt says. "Just because they are historic structures that should be saved doesn't mean they should all be historic house museums."

There are estimated to be between 8,000 and 15,000 historic house museums in the US. In 2002, the average institution spent \$40 on each visitor but took just \$8 in return, according to Stephanie Meeks, the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "If we had 20% to 25% fewer house museums, we'd still have an adequate number and a better chance of stability," says James Vaughan, the director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which oversees 40 historic sites and museums. State austerity measures have forced the organisation to cut its budget and staff by 50% since 2009 and get rid of its \$8m annual grant programme. "Now we're competing for funding with organisations we used to give money to," Vaughan says.

Merge, diversify or sell

Local landmark listings can legally shield properties from destruction, and some museums are merging to streamline their operations and bolster their budgets (the AAM cites more than ten successful mergers in the past 15 years). They can also be converted into event spaces, as long as this does not violate the original deed to the property. For example, Chesterwood, the home of the late sculptor Daniel Chester French in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, could become an artists' retreat. "In ten years, I hope it's not a house museum at all... I hope artists are sleeping in it," says Estevan Rael-Gálvez, the vice-president of historic sites at the National Trust, which runs the house.

Another option is simply to sell. Non-profit organisations and government agencies are increasingly allowing private individuals to buy estates that have become too expensive to run. This summer, the National Trust sold its Beaux Arts headquarters in Washington, DC, to a private buyer who plans to spend \$30m on renovations. Restrictions on the deed often require owners to maintain historic aspects and, according to Historic New England, 26 former house museums in the area have been sold to private owners with such restrictions over the past 40 years. "There's nothing wrong with private ownership of historic properties," says Morrison Heckscher, the chairman of the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "If the owners are required to preserve the buildings, why not let them?"

Houses that are committed to the museum model are prepared for an uphill battle. "Any historic house museum will tell you that its board and members are, frankly, old," says Diane Viera, the vice-president of Historic New England. "We have to figure out how to make it interesting to young people. It isn't their job to find us."

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RICHARD SELDEN, BALTIMORE

Is it that "attendance continues to plummet" or that there is "a long, slow decline in visitation" (according to Donna Ann Harris's linked story, which focuses on funding cutbacks as the issue)? There needs to be less simplistic analysis--from a marketing point of view, mansion museums have scarcely anything in common with 18th-century house museums, for one thing--and more situation-specific solutions (as noted in the 'Merge, diversify or sell' section). Having worked with many heritage organizations, I don't agree that "We have to figure out how to make it interesting to young people." Every site has stories to which a certain number of people--of all ages--will respond. Social media is a promising and cost-effective way to reach the people who share these special interests, but not if the authentic voice of an organization is lost in a desperate effort to sound Millennial (recent tweet: "Get drunk on #DIY this weekend!").