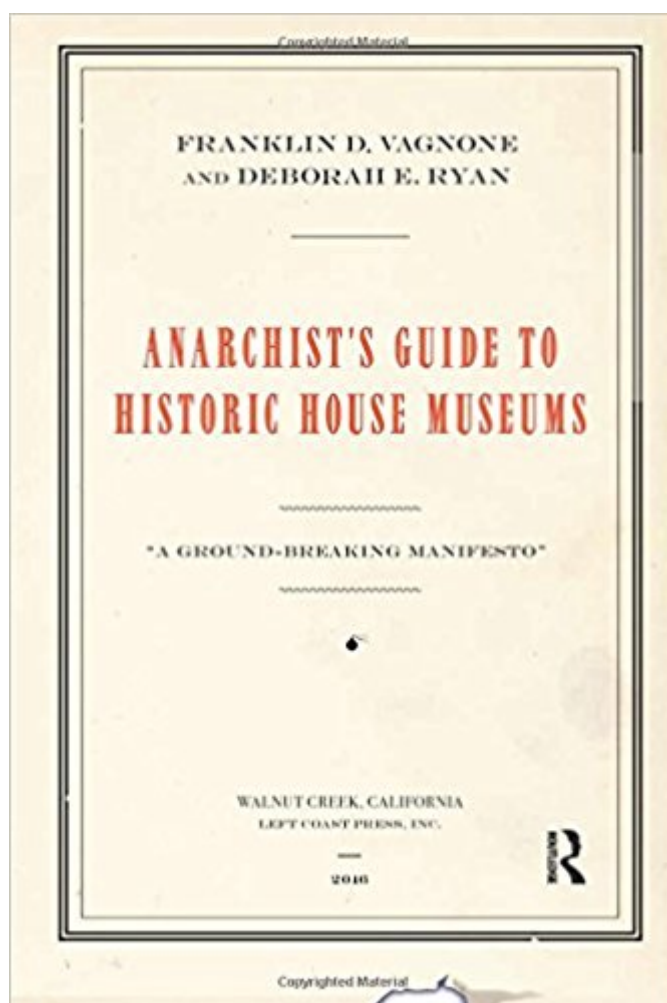


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# Anarchist's Guide To Historic House Museums



## Synopsis

In these days of an aging traditional audience, shrinking attendance, tightened budgets, increased competition, and exponential growth in new types of communication methods, American house museums need to take bold steps and expand their overall purpose beyond those of the traditional museum. They need not only to engage the communities surrounding them, but also to collaborate with visitors on the type and quality of experience they provide. This book is a groundbreaking manifesto that calls for the establishment of a more inclusive, visitor-centered paradigm based on the shared experience of human habitation. It draws inspiration from film, theater, public art, and urban design to transform historic house museums while providing a how-to guide for making historic house museums sustainable, through five primary themes: communicating with the surrounding community, engaging the community, re-imagining the visitor experience, celebrating the detritus of human habitation, and acknowledging the illusion of the shelter's authenticity. *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* offers a wry, but informed, rule-breaking perspective from authors with years of experience and gives numerous vivid examples of both good and not-so-good practices from house museums in the U.S.

## Book Information

Paperback: 262 pages

Publisher: Routledge; 1 edition (November 30, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1629581712

ISBN-13: 978-1629581712

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #51,012 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in Books > Business & Money > Industries > Museums #5 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Museum Studies & Museology #12 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Library & Information Science > Library Management

## Customer Reviews

"The tone of the book is blunt, but I think that is necessary. The whole historic-preservation industry is so deeply rooted in either a 'Jackie Kennedy' faux-gentility or a dead-white-men's 'this is how history is done, boys!' approach to everything." — Ulysses Dietz, Chief Curator and Curator

of Decorative Arts, The Newark Museum "I enjoyed reading this book very much. It is written in accessible language, making complex matters very approachable. The authors have also provided a lot of concrete examples, so there is little guessing at what they are trying to say. Virtually anyone in the cultural world could take this book and find elements that are relevant to his or her work." — Lisa Ackerman, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, World Monuments Fund "If you are a traditionalist, you might think that Vagnone and Ryan are heretics, blasphemers or, at the very least, bomb throwers. You may be right. Many of the ideas in this book go against the standard rules of museum practice. But this is, for many historic house museums, a time of crisis, and crises require bold action and creative thinking. The Anarchist's Guide encourages us to think differently, to challenge conventional procedures, to put visitors first, to take risks." — From the Foreword by Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, The Cooperstown Graduate Program "A book that is precisely what the doctor ordered for a patient on life support. It is not overstating the situation to opine that Vagnone and Ryan, in the "Anarchist's Guide," have launched an important campaign for change that might well determine the future of the past by starting a discussion that is long overdue." — Taylor Stoermer, The History Doctor "The Anarchist's Guide is a timely reminder to think long and hard about what and who museums are for, and about what expertise this requires. Connoisseurship alone does not a great museum make. It is the careful balance of objects, buildings, and people that brings it to life." — Katy Barrett, Royal Museums Greenwich, Apollo Magazine

Franklin Vagnone has professional experience in preservation, architecture, design, landscape architecture, archive formation and management. He was the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (PSPL) for four years and managed four Historic House Museums. In 2008 Vagnone became the Executive Director of the Historic House Trust of New York City, where he managed 23 Historic House Museums. Vagnone has won numerous awards, including two Lucy G. Moses Awards from the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Award of Excellence from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network, and the Award of Merit from the Museum Association of New York. He serves on numerous nonprofit boards, such as the Greater Hudson Heritage Network and the Advisory Board for the national organization Partners for Sacred Places. His expertise and knowledge are utilized as a grant reviewer for the New York State Culture and Arts Panels. In addition to his passion for architecture and preservation, Vagnone also paints and sculpts, regularly writes on his blog TWISTED PRESERVATION, moderates the international LinkedIn Discussion group The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums, and tweets about

museums on @Franklinvagnone.

Let me be clear (where have we heard that before?). I am neither an academic nor a museum professional and only came across this book by accident. However, as a layman I'm very much interested in museums in general, including historic houses and communities, of which my wife and I have visited many and worked for both as a professional (my wife, as a history museum exhibit and program director) and volunteer (myself, as an art museum docent). Let's also be clear that the Guide is not a comprehensive "how-to" on running historic houses. Most notably it does not deal with financial issues or with mission concepts, at least not directly. Rather, focus is on the "visitor experience" and how to draw audiences to historic houses. If I had to pick one phrase to describe what the authors think of most historic house operations today, it would be "too anal" (as borrowed from Freud). The heart of this small book is 132 pages of practical thinking and examples of how to make historic houses more attractive and welcoming to visitors, both by reaching out to the communities in which they live, and by providing memorable experiences to their clients (visitors). Those pages are book-ended by sections that formalize the authors' approach, yet overall the writing and ideas are readily accessible to those outside the academy, for whom the book has obviously been written. The authors point out that historic houses are seeing declining visitor numbers, and their purpose is to help these institutions reverse that trend. They also admit that while some of their ideas are research-based, others are mere conjecture, and they invite the museum community to contribute to their ongoing "anarchist" project. Although the "anarchist" tag is catchy, I'd say Ryan and Vagnone are radical rather than "anarchic." I hate to use this phrase because it's become a cliché, but what they are really asking house museum people to do is "think outside the box" (house). Ideas are divided into five categories: (1) reach out to, which means become involved with, the surrounding community; (2) focus on communications, understanding that communication with visitors is a two-way street (what your visitors tell you is just as important, if not more so, than what you tell them); (3) somewhat related to the number (2) as I see it, make the historic house a shared experience in which visitors are invited to participate in the house experience through their experiences; (4) take a holistic approach to the house and its objects/artifacts (and its history, implicitly); and (5) loosen up and take a practical, realistic approach to preservation and hard assets. I hope this is a fair summary. Clearly (again) not all that the authors suggest is going to translate perfectly to every historic house -- some might think, "Whoa, we can't do that," and in some cases they'd likely be right. But, think hard about all this "stuff," that's the message I get. Finally, I'd add that many of the authors' suggestions, such as encouraging your tour

guides or docents to go NUDE, are translatable to other kinds of museums. Now, if that doesn't make you want to read the book, I'm not sure what will.

Great source for ideas about reframing cultural heritage institutions. Definitely focused on Historic House Museums, but a lot of what's being talked about could be applied to archives, special library collections, historic sites, non-history museums. It's a whole series of little case studies about why we need to stop being so darn precious about everything and aim for relevance to visitors. The way it's organized is a bit off-putting-- for someone who still habitually "guts" books like I learned to in grad school, this book was a little challenging at first. But after reading it through, you get to the point about a third of the way in where you can jump around a bit. Would definitely recommend.

This should be required reading for all docents at all HHms everywhere. I am so thrilled and excited to begin implementing the suggestions in the two Historic Homes I am involved with!!!

I'm a Museum Studies student and I really enjoyed seeing all the case studies in this book. While it is focused on historic houses, I believe that many of the suggestions are applicable to all museums.

Very helpful book by an experienced expert on house museums. Our Group is working on a house museum relating to Dr. James Still; his life and times in Medford, NJ. in the 1800's. Nice to know we are not alone and that many others out there have the same concerns and challenges.

Must read for anyone involved with an historic house museum - this is the roadmap for survival -- and it's fun, too!

Most historic house museums are managed in ways that are socially and financially unsustainable. The best way to address this deepening crisis, Vagnone and Ryan contend, is by creatively engaging one's neighbours on their own terms. Through their classes and workshops the authors have tracked visitor experience with amazing specificity by way of video mapping; movement and activity diagramming; Imagination, Excitement and Energy Graphs; Sound Mapping and Anarchist Tags. The book is full of innovative techniques for visitor engagement, and includes a chart for evaluating the state of your museum in historic site in 32 categories. Strongly recommended for all cultural institutions seeking innovative ways of fostering new audiences. Full review here: <http://www.smallmuseums.ca/museum-anarchist-toolkit/> Author interview here:

<http://www.smallmuseums.ca/audiocast-1-museum-anarchism-masterclass/>

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