

New solutions for house museums; ensuring the long-term preservation of America's historic houses by Donna Ann Harris

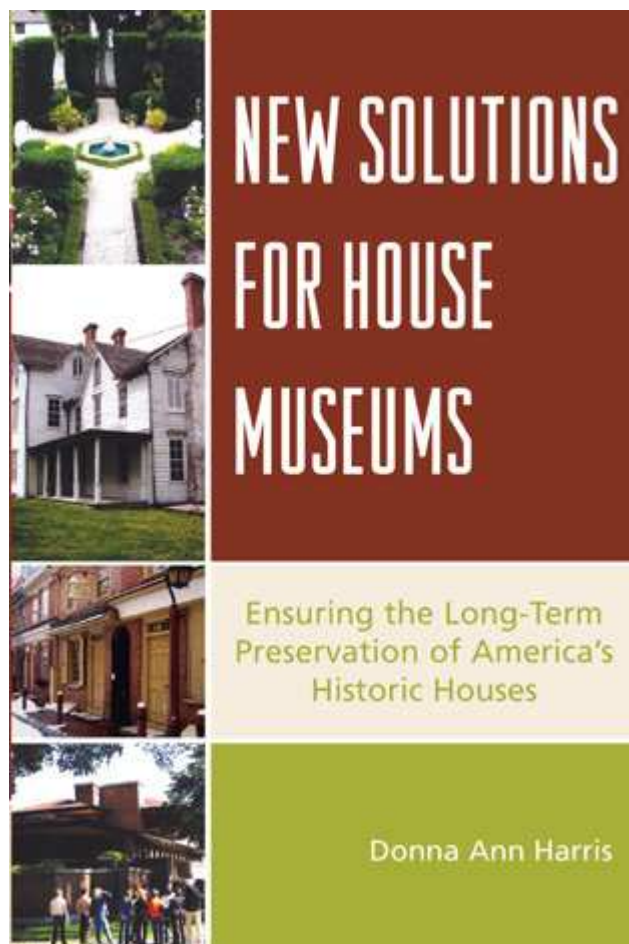
Reviewed by [David Reynolds](#)

New Zealanders have long great joiners. Check Museums Aotearoa directory you'll find we've been quite effective at establishing small museums - eclectic mix of and local history museums, where building housing collection, sometimes pioneer cottage country house but just as often an adapted post office, dairy factory, court, school or fire station, is also major artefact in the collection (or should be).

We acquired the heritage bug big time in the late '60s (in the first big search for national identity?) - when we baby boomers decided it was not so bad living in quaint former slums and set about buying cheap Victorian housing and adapting it to late 20th Century needs. We were quite good at that, and came to believe we could just as easily restore the old gum store at Maungakaka or the runholder's 'big house' in Canterbury and open them successfully to the public. Interest in house museums was higher back then, when the Historic Places Trust was first acquiring and opening significant early houses as museums. Many local history groups followed suit and at a rough count, 40% of small museums with MA membership are house museums or collections of domestic buildings relocated in more or less 'historic' villages.

Today the performance of small museums in attracting repeat or new visitors has dropped back to a fraction of what it was thirty years ago. Few house museum operators attract enough visitation and funding to maintain and renew interpretive programmes and displays at regular intervals. Dependency on grant money is a fact of life and only the very lucky may have an endowment to ensure that their building envelope is sound, weatherproof, and maintained at appropriate intervals. For those managing the quarter of museums identified in the 2007 Museum Sector web survey, operating on annual budgets of less than \$5000, this book could be a revelation.

Historic preservation consultant Donna Ann Harris undertook the research for this AASLH study at five US institutions, and has produced constructive guidelines aimed at board and staff members of historic house museums owned by not-for-profit organisations struggling with insufficient funds or personnel to sustain their site at the level that the historic building needs and deserves. Harris's message is prudent and pragmatic and the



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