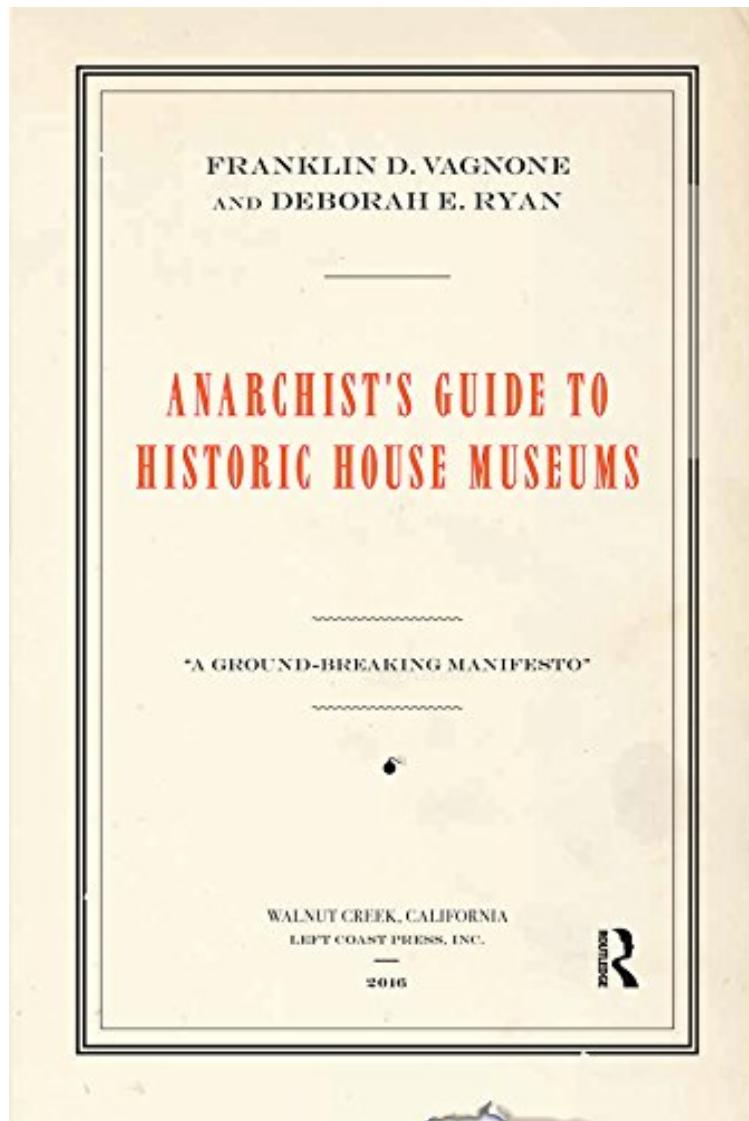


## Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums

*Franklin D Vagnone, Deborah E Ryan  
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**Franklin D Vagnone, Deborah E Ryan : Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums:

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful. Mega Thought ProvokingBy Carl E. Johnson Jr. 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 cliche, 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. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. EYE OPENING, EXCITING, INSPIRINGBy Lady DeborahThis 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!!! 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Helpful for Museum StudiesBy Kylie HewittI'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.

In these days of an aging traditional audience, shrinking attendance, tightened budgets, increased competition, and exponential growth in new types of communication methods, Americarsquo;s 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 shelterrsquo;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.

"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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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 MagazineAbout the AuthorFranklin Vagnone (Principal – TWISTED PRESERVATION: Cultural Consulting) with a strong background in the creative arts (Architecture, Design, Sculpture), is a Public Historian who has been labeled a "domestic-archeo-anthropologist", has over 25 years of transformational leadership in non-profit management, financial oversight, fundraising, strategic planning, board relationships, award-winning cultural program creative place-making development. He has a thoughtful combination of philosophical and practical experiences that have allowed him to consult, lecture, and teach internationally for an extensive list of universities, cultural sites, museums, and community-based membership organizations. While Executive Director of major historic house organizations in Philadelphia and New York City, his leadership has been recognized through, 2015 Museum Association of New York Individual Achievement Award, Two Lucy G. Moses awards from the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Award of Excellence from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network, Award of Merit from Museum Association of New York Award, and a Grand Jury Medal from The Philadelphia Preservation Alliance. Franklin maintains the blog: Twisted Preservation, and the series "One Night Stand" overnights in historic house museums, which to date, has readers in over 85 countries - (<http://twistedpreservation.wordpress.com/> ), and also moderates an international discussion group – The Anarchists' Guide to Historic House Museums. He has co-authored The Anarchists' Guide to Historic House Museums (with Ms. Deborah Ryan) – a book about innovative concepts for historic cultural sites. The book, now in its 3rd printing since November 2015, was voted best Museum Education-related book of 2015 by Museum Educators' Monitor, and became #1 bestseller (Museum-related) on for February 2015. Deborah Ryan, RLA is an associate professor of architecture and urban design at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, USA, where she founded the Charlotte Community Design Studio as the community outreach arm of the university. As director of the Mayor's Institute for City Design: South and the Open Space Leadership Institute, she led symposia that taught local leaders how to face growth issues in their communities. Ryan has also served as a faculty member at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, USA, and as a visiting critic at Columbia University, USA. Ryan designed and developed Wikiplanningtrade; as an online site for increasing civic engagement in the community planning process. She has published and lectured widely on the subject of community engagement, and in 2013 she was named a Senior Edward I. Koch Fellow by the Historic House Trust of New York City to lead civic engagement efforts for the LatimerNOW project.