HISTORY BEGINS AT HOME.
The Historic House Trust is a not-for-profit organization operating in tandem with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Our mission is to provide essential support for houses of architectural and cultural significance, spanning 350 years of New York City life. These treasures reside within city parks and are open to the public.

TIDYING UP A COMPLEX HISTORY:
In this issue, we take a fresh look at the Lott House, which has undergone numerous changes since its construction in 1720. Through the lens of photographer James M. Graham, we confront a jumble of time periods to represent the long, complicated history that we grapple with in preservation, finding beauty in the mix.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST
The Ethics of Dust Stabilization As Preservation

“Is there not something suicidal, or at least amnesiac, in the impulse that dictates that an act of restoration should be so sly as to be invisible?”
—JORGE OTERO-PAILO

Contemporary art goes Dutch
Emergency repairs to Latimer House
Wyckoff Farmhouse greets the Dutch Prime Minister
Projects typically are constrained by a host of factors, with their structures and materials complicated by often substantial changes over time.

In this newsletter, we take on this broader perspective and present a spectrum of creative ways of meeting some of the challenges that complicate preservation. From the philosophical idea of preserving dust to contemporary artists’ reimagining of our Dutch heritage to HHT’s tangible, daily preservation efforts at the Latimer House, we consider the complexities of deciding how best to interpret the past.

It is with our feet firmly planted in the present—with its cultural codes, technology, and knowledge—that we make our decisions about the past. While the end result may be a perfectly restored 1790s room, the steps getting there are complex and influenced by our world of today. As you’ll see in this newsletter, preservation is as much about the present and the future as it is about the past!

For information on corporate membership call 212-360-8282.

PRESERVATION ACROSS TIME: AN INTERVIEW WITH JORGE OTERO-PAILOS

REIMAGINING THE LOTT HOUSE

BY VICTORIA C. KORAN, GUEST WRITER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES M. GARAM

The Hendrik I. Lott House underwent a major exterior restoration over the past five years. Its interior, however, remains a jumble of peeling wallpaper, rusting hinges, and weathered wood. Messy, yes, but at the same time each crumbling layer represents a different era in the 200-year life of the house, offering us a glimpse of trends and technologies past. As we consider how—and when—to interpret the house’s interior, we face the question that confronts all curators of historic homes: how will the public ultimately experience it?

A preservationist who has dedicated his career to answering that question with some of the most exciting avant-garde theories and dazzling artistic interpretations is Jorge Otero-Pailos, an architect, founder/editor of the journal Future Anterior, and professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. HHT turned to him for a different perspective on preservation.
About the Lott House

The house (interior) has never been restored. As thrifty people, the Lotts recycled existing building materials and sometimes even finishes to suit their needs. As a result the house retains a great deal of old fabric under the later finishes. No one has ever restored the house back to any particular period nor have any theories of preservation ever been imposed on this house. It is an original and extremely valuable study document. In its own fashion, it is a primitive house.

Preservation Across Time: Reimagining the Lott House (continued from page 3)

Citing John Ruskin (1819-1900) as an influence, Otero-Paños believes that the accretion of dust and the environmental signs of aging—what Ruskin dubbed “time stains”—are worthy of consideration, even preservation. Using the terms of the debate that began in Ruskin’s day, Otero-Paños considers himself an “anti-scraper,” one who favors minimal intervention, even allowing ruin when appropriate—a preservationist versus a “scraper,” a conservationist who would rather efface all natural signs of aging, even if it involves hypothetical reconstruction.

“Today,” continues Otero-Paños, “the default position is to do a lot of scraping. The interesting thing about scraping has been the idea that we can somehow take buildings back to their original condition, which is paradoxical. The scrapers are projecting themselves back into that time and using that pursuit of ‘purity’ as an excuse to do something totally different [to the site]. But what they are often bringing back is their own agenda for fabricated symbols.” For example, the structures built by Neoclassicists of many eras, from the forefathers of our nation to Mussolini, have deliberately referenced the monumental white aesthetic of the Parthenon. Each structure was meant to associate the builders with a self-serving, idealized version of ancient Greek society, and yet the original temple complex actually was brightly painted.

While such cultural reimagining is common, Otero-Paños raises the issue that every preservation project amounts to an intervention, that even a simple cleaning is an artificial manipulation that potentially reverses the past, wipes away centuries of environmental impact, and erases the people who interacted with the structure over the course of its existence to delve into these competing impulses—is it possible to both protect and destroy at once?—Otero-Paños conceived of his “Ethics of Dust” preservation-as-art series, the title appropriated from an 1866 Ruskin book. His 2009 Venice Biennale catalogue of these works raises the following questions:

“If the wall were to be cleaned, and if cleaning were a journey, then which point in time past would be the destination? Is restoration a ‘one way’ or ‘return’ journey? What is the difference between healing, cosmetic surgery, forensics, and a mortician’s efforts to arrest the inevitability of decay? Is there not something suicidal, or at least cosmetic surgery, forensics, and a mortician’s efforts to arrest the inevitability of decay? Is there not something suicidal, or at least

On the other hand, can the act of cleaning be done so as to retain a memory of the cleaning, and of what was cleaned? Can cleaning atone for the erasure it produces?”

In these pieces, Otero-Paños restores a section of wall while preserving the very signs of aging he is removing. Seeking to bring literal and figurative transparency to a laborsome restoration process that typically happens after-hours, hidden from public view, Otero-Paños photographs the whole procedure as part of the artwork. Using a scaffold before an old wall, Otero-Paños uses chemical solvents and latex to gently peel away the topmost layer of “time-staining” detritus. The latex traps the accumulated dust, dirt, and soot and creates a throne-of-Turnus-like impression of the original surface. He then mounts the latex panels so they can be illuminated, achieving a sculptural effect that is at once surreal trompe-l’oeil and enigmatic.

Back to the question of when in time to locate a historic house when restoring its interior? Being non-doctrinaire in a cultural moment when there is no master theory, Otero-Paños believes in the creative potential of unique context. As he claims in his Biennale catalogue essay, “We are not just working on monuments but also includes these kinds of performance pieces, ceremonies if you will, that happen during the process of visiting historic sites. Preservation organizes how one visits. In fact, I define preservation as the organization of attention. It’s the kind of attention that is all about distracting. It’s distracting you from looking at that which you are not supposed to be looking at.”

This theme of performance art organizing—or distracting—our experience of a historic structure was put into practice at our own Hendrick I. Lott House through James M. Graham’s commissioned photographs. While the exterior of the house has

The wallpaper, however, with its pattern of a large rose is actually was brightly painted.

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HHT AT WORK
This summer’s rains took their toll on the Lewis H. Latimer House. A half-inch gap between the chimney and the house was discovered and rain poured down between them.
Conservation Committee member and Director of Historic Preservation at Beyer Blinder Belle Richard Southwick developed drawings of proper weatherproofing, called flashing, for the chimney. With an Emergency Preservation Grant from the New York Landmarks Conservancy and additional funding from our own Emergency Maintenance Fund, we hired a contractor to replace wood siding and insulation, secure the chimney to the house, and install proper flashing.

PRIME MINISTER OF THE NETHERLANDS VISITS WYCKOFF

In celebration of the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s historic voyage and New York City’s Dutch heritage, the Wyckoff Association and the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation welcomed Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende to the Wyckoff Farmhouse Museum in Brooklyn. Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe and Wyckoff Association Chairman E. Lisk Wyckoff hosted the Prime Minister for a house tour, colonial cooking, a song sung in Dutch by schoolchildren from local P.S. 119, and an unveiling of the plans for the 19th-century Wyckoff-Durfling Barn to be reconstructed at the site as an education workspace. The first barn raising in Brooklyn in more than 150 years!

The Wyckoff Farmhouse was home to generations of this Dutch family, and as the oldest structure remaining in New York City, is a testament to our lost Dutch heritage. Wyckoff descendants and Wyckoff Farmhouse Association board members welcomed the Prime Minister’s party, which included Consul General of the Netherlands in New York Hugo Tajos Scheltema and Dutch Ambassador to the U.S. Renée Jones, as well as Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, Assembly Member Joseph R. Lentol, and HHT Executive Director Franklin D. Vagone.

At Bartos-Full Mansion, a Greek Revival home in the Bronx, contemporary Dutch design mingled in a thoughtful contrast with the 19th-century collections in the house. The Soft Tree Trunk (1999) designed by Alex van Mishu and Ilona Huvenaars was created out of coated soft polyurethane foam. The Old Stone House in Brooklyn hosted a multi-media installation by Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukács entitled Heart is Where the Home Is. The artists explored how several contemporary Dutch families still farm the land their forbears have owned for generations, just as many of Brooklyn’s Dutch descendants did even into the 20th century. This film still is from the Brouwers Family, 2006, 4-channel video, courtesy of Galerie Akinci, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

PRIME MINISTER OF THE NETHERLANDS VISITS WYCKOFF
CAN WE “PRESERVE” CHANGE? SHOULD WE?
BY JONATHAN MELLON, HISTORIC HOUSE TRUST RESIDENT ENGINEER

A 1840s GREEK REVIVAL style house in Savannah, GA altered in the post Civil War period to reflect prevailing architectural tastes of the time... An 1860s Federal style house in Brooklyn Heights with an entirely reworked façade from the Victorian period... Although the history of the United States is relatively a short one, the historic properties that have been preserved provide us with a timeline of the architectural styles that have dominated from one period to another; some lasted for decades, others for a fleeting few years. Since the beginning of the preservation movement in this country, one of the central questions that has been asked is what do we mean when we say a property will be preserved? Virtually every structure has seen some alterations over the years, from such small changes as the replacement of a wooden shingle roof with a slate one, to more prominent alterations such as the addition of the wraparound porch at Gracie Mansion. When a property is preserved, efforts have been made to have it reflect its period of significance; the time when it was occupied by an important individual or when an important event took place there. Yet housing in on a specific moment in the building’s history often leads to difficult decisions about the interior and exterior restoration, as well as the collection of objects that will be displayed. This issue has been thrust in to the ever-evolving national preservation discussion with the recent restoration of James and Dolly Madison’s Montpelier in Virginia.

Beginning in 2001, the Montpellier Foundation began an exhaustive assessment of the property. They opened up walls and floors to perform a thorough examination of the house’s physical evolution and scrutinized newly found architectural plans for the house. The house had been altered significantly by major additions and countless other changes by its most recent owners, the DuPonts. After the analysis, the Foundation and its partners reached the decision to restore Montpelier to the period of Madison’s presidency. The subsequent restoration work was a turning back of the clock—visitors today encounter a site that closely resembles Madison’s house of 200 years ago. While the course of action taken at Montpelier is certainly an understandable one, and an extremely well documented and executed one at that, it is also one that raises a host of important questions. The restoration of Montpelier did not just consist of repairing clapboards to their historic color or removing modern windows—it essentially removed much of the house itself. While these later additions certainly were not related to Madison’s experience in the house, they did reflect its evolution over the years, representing a parade of architectural styles and changes.

A similar issue, albeit on a much smaller scale, was encountered recently at one of our own houses with the restoration of the dining room at Van Cortlandt House. In 1896, it was restored, and has since seen a series of continuous alterations that have sought to enhance and capitalize on the earlier restoration efforts. This project focused on the restoration of plaster and woodwork in the dining room, but it was expanded when structural problems with the fireplace became evident. What began as a relatively simple restoration project resulted in a series of some surprising discoveries.

Upon removal of plaster on one wall, a long since forgotten doorway was discovered, which may have led at one time to a summer kitchen. Adjacent to the door were remnants of the wood paneling that originally covered the whole wall. A number of layers of wallpaper also were uncovered on the wall, which, along with the doorway, had been preserved beneath the plaster. As was the case with Montpelier, the decision was made to restore the dining room to how it would have looked during its period of significance at the turn of the 19th century. The plan calls for the restoration of the doorway, for the wall to be covered with wood paneling, and for the other walls to be covered in early 19th century reproduction wallpaper.

As part of the project, however, the original layers of wallpaper that were uncovered will be preserved beneath the new wallpaper as a record of the house’s evolution.

Still, as was the case with Montpelier, the decision to restore the room to a particular period ultimately results in hiding the marks of change over the centuries from the visiting public. At Montpelier the extreme decision to remove later alterations has forever removed the opportunity for visitors to observe and engage with the changes that shaped the house over the years. At Van Cortlandt, with the original wallpaper safely documented and preserved underneath the new layer, that opportunity still exists for future museum curators to expose and in turn shed light on changing popular tastes of the New York elite.

But what if we had complicated this project by not simply restoring the room to present a recreation of the past? What if we had simply left the blocked-up doorway, adjacent woodwork, and layers of wallpaper exposed? This approach has become a hot topic of debate in the preservation community. Would it disrupt visitors’ experience of a historic site, or challenge them to think critically about change over time? These are important issues that remain to be resolved by preservationists in the coming years.
Preservation Across Time: Reimagining the Lott House

(continued from page 9)

been meticulously restored with great attention to historical accuracy—i.e. using period-appropriate wooden roof shingles, reconstructed wooden and copper-lined gutters, paint color replicating 1920s photographs—the interior is still in the condition of its donation to the city. In continuous use for centuries, the house over the years got new flooring, hardware, fixtures, and wall paper as needed, but never a total redecoration. The last residents were sisters who left the building in the late 1980s, bequeathing in the interior a jumbled chronicle of their lives and those of their ancestors.

When we invited photographer James Graham to do an on-location shoot, we encouraged him to play off of the house’s history and authentic collapse of evolving periods. As each caption indicates, a model may be wearing a 1970s dress while holding a 1920s dusting brush, in a room from the 1830s addition with wallpaper from the 1850s. Otero-Pailos also has pointed out that all too often, in both the preservation and domestic spheres, the hard physical labor of cleaning defaults to women because of sexism. Subverting the Cinderella trope, Graham’s annual performance in Central Park, and tickets to V.I.P. seating for the New York Philharmonic’s annual performance in Central Park.

Thanks to our partners on this project:

WARDROBE: NYC VINTAGE & POCKETBOOK

MAKEUP: DANIELA SHACHTER

MODELS: CHANTAL AND IEVA @ MARYLIN

Thanks to our projects on this project: PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES M. GRAHAM

WARDROBE: NYC VINTAGE & POCKETBOOK

Special thanks to:

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE, READ ABOUT:

Preservation on a micro level—the ethics of dust, contemporary Dutch artists reinterpreting our houses, emergency repairs to Lewis H. Latimer House, and the complexities of discovering historic evidence during restoration.

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