

**DEMHIST: the Genesis of a Committee**  
*Giovanni Pinna*

From November 20-22, 1997, the international conference, “Abitare la storia. Le dimore storiche-museo” (“Living History. Historic House Museums”), took place in Genova, Italy, in the great *palazzi*-museums, the Palazzo Reale and the Palazzo Spinola.<sup>i</sup> For the first time in an organic way the conference considered the theme of the historic house museum, that is, in which way these residences are to be managed as museums, and what significance should be given to noble *palazzi*, royal palaces, homes of illustrious people, and rich middle class houses which have come down to use with their original furnishings, and which, therefore, are witnesses to the spirit of those who lived in them, and the historic, social and cultural role which they had when they were inhabited. Brought together for the first time in the ballroom of the Palazzo Reale of Genova were the directors and conservators of a large number of historic houses: the royal palaces of Naples, London, Madrid, Milan, Venice, Turin, Capodimonte, Versailles, the Villa Reale of Monza, the Palazzo of the Quirinale, the Genovesi Palazzo Spinola, Palazzo Rosso and Palazzo del Principe, the palaces of Rosemborg and Aamalienborg, the Galleria Borghese, the Het Loo palace of Apeldoorn, the Palazzo Pitti and the Museo Stibbert of Florence, the Bagatti Valsecchi and Poldi Pezzoli house museums of Milan, the Museo Cerralbo of Madrid, and the Castello di Miramare of Trieste. The objective of the conference was to consider the historic house museum in all of its aspects: from museology to organization, from conservation to security, from didactic activity to communication systems.

The conference produced a document in which the ICOM Italian National Committee was asked to propose to ICOM the creation of an international committee dedicated to historic house museums.<sup>ii</sup> As president of ICOM Italy, I accepted the proposal, and, on December 1, 1997, I proposed the creation of the new committee to ICOM’s Executive Council based on the prospectus written by Rosanna Pavoni, director of the Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Milan, and Farida Simonetti, director of the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola, Genova.<sup>iii</sup>

The Italian proposal was accepted, and the creation of the new committee was ratified on October 9, 1998, during the 18<sup>th</sup> General Conference of ICOM at Melbourne. A few days later, on the twelfth of the same month, the new committee held its first meeting still in Melbourne at 6:30 P.M. during which the name “Historic House Museums/Demeures historiques-musées/Residencias Históricas-Museo” and the abbreviation “DEMHIST” (from the French version) were chosen. This was an administrative meeting dedicated principally to establishing the rules by which the committee would be managed. Since it was impossible to elect the governing board at that point, I was nominated President *pro-tempore* with the responsibility of organizing a formal meeting for the following year during which the regulations would be discussed and approved, and the governing board would be elected. Vladimir Znamenov, director of the Peterhof State Museum-Reserve, suggested that the meeting could take place in St. Petersburg as his and his museum’s guests; the proposal was accepted.

The conference in St. Petersburg took place from June 27-July 2, 1999, without a scholarly theme since the goal of the meeting was to discuss and approve committee regulations, to elect the governing board, and to lay the foundations for future work during a discussion of the ideas of possible goals to pursue. More than 50 museum professionals from 12 countries who were interested in historic houses were present at this first meeting.<sup>iv</sup> The thirty voting members of the committee then had the responsibility to elect the governing board of DEMHIST.<sup>v</sup> During this first meeting, the offer of Farida Simonetti and Luca Leoncini, directors of Genovese historic houses, to host the committee’s conference in 2000 was accepted.

Although no pre-established scholarly theme was addressed during the St. Petersburg conference, nevertheless, it was a marvelous opportunity to visit many splendid historic houses, such as Peterhof, Tsarskoie sieldò, Pavlovsk, and Oranienbaum. It also made it possible to realize the

extraordinary effort of the Russian government and museum directors to restore these vast structures.

The Palace of Versailles hosted DEMHIST's board meeting on February 24, 2000, which was held in order to plan the committee's future scholarly activities, and to establish the themes for upcoming conferences. At that time, I proposed a working document to the board in which I had sought to identify some strategic thoughts. In it I also proposed some possible actions, and highlighted a series of themes which I considered important.<sup>vi</sup> During the same meeting, Rosanna Pavoni presented a census and classification project of historic houses which is discussed in her article contained in this same volume.

At Genova, the conference took place from November 1-4, 2000, in the prestigious Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola and the Galleria di Palazzo Reale. This time a scholarly theme had been chosen: "Historic House Museums Speak to the Public: Spectacular Exhibits vs. a Philological Interpretation of History." The intent was to discuss the way in which historic house museums introduce themselves to their visitors. This is an extremely important topic which concerns the historical identity and cultural role of house museums, as well as the financial problems linked to their survival. Which of the many possible interpretations of their historical and social identities should historic houses present to the public? Is there a danger of betraying their identity by trying to make themselves more accessible to the public through the use of new approaches, such as employing actors, or staging performances? Are we endangering historic house museums' traditional educational purposes in our attempts to attract more visitors, thus hoping to raise revenue in order to solve the museums' financial difficulties? These are the principal and difficult questions addressed by more than forty specialists from fifteen countries, including the president of ICOM, Jacques Perot, who spoke as the director of national museums and of the châteaux of Compiègne and Blérancourt.<sup>vii</sup>

During the annual assembly of the committee which took place immediately following the conference on November 4, 2000, the substitution of two committee members had to take place: Pascal Torres Guardiola and Göres Burkhardt were no longer eligible for various reasons. In their place two new members were elected: Magaly Cabral, director of the Casa de Rui Barbosa of Rio de Janeiro, and Julius Bryant, director of Museums and Collections of the English Heritage, London. The possible themes of the 2001 conference to take place in Barcelona from 1-6 July in conjunction with the 19<sup>th</sup> General Conference of ICOM also were discussed. Finally and importantly, the assembly accepted the proposal of Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, director of the Museo Casa del Virrey Liniers in Alta Gracia (Argentina), to create a working group of DEMHIST for Latin America (DEMHISTLAM). The coordination of the group was entrusted to the same Mónica Gorgas with the wish that a close collaboration with Magaly Cabral would take place.<sup>viii</sup>

As I suggested in the document which I presented during the meeting of Versailles, I am convinced that the success and usefulness of a scholarly committee, such as DEMHIST, depends largely on the capacity which it has to make known and circulate the ideas which are expressed during its official activities, ideas which are born thanks to the encounter of diverse professions, and which develop through the collaboration between different traditions and experiences. Thus, it was found indispensable to bring together the contributions presented at Genova in this volume which has been made possible by a special financial contribution to our committee from the Executive Council of ICOM to which, therefore, go our sincere thanks.

In Rosanna Pavoni, *Historic House Museums Speak to the Public: Spectacular Exhibits versus a Philological Interpretation of History, Acts of the Annual Conference, Genoa 1-4 Novembre 2000*. DEMHIST, Milano 2001, pag. 7-12.

<sup>i</sup> Luca Leoncini and Farida Simonetti, *Abitare la storia. Le dimore storiche-museo. Restauro. Sicurezza. Didattica. Comunicazione*. Acts of the International Conference, Genova, 20-22 November, 1997, Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Giovanni Pinna, "Dopo 'Abitare la storia,'" in *Abitare la storia. Le dimore storiche-museo. Restauro. Sicurezza. Didattica. Comunicazione. Acts of the International Conference, Genova, 20-22 November, 1997*, Luca Leoncini and Farida Simonetti, eds., Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 1998, pp. 200-201.

<sup>iii</sup> *The text is as follows: Les demeures historiques, conservées et ouvertes au public en tant que telles - c'est à dire avec la décoration et les collections originelles, même si appartenant à plusieurs époques, réalisées par les propriétaires des lieux - qui n'ont donc pas subi de transformations destinées à leur permettre d'accueillir des collections d'origine différente, constituent une catégorie muséologique tout à fait particulière et variée.*

*Catégorie particulière parce que les demeures historiques répondent à des règles muséologiques et à des techniques muséographiques différentes de celles qui règlent les autres musées.*

*Catégorie variée, parce que les demeures historiques peuvent inclure des lieux de dimension et de genre très différents, qui vont des palais royaux, aux maisons des grands hommes, aux ateliers d'artistes ect.*

*Le Congrès International "Abitare la storia. La dimore storiche-museo", qui a eu lieu à Gênes du 20 au 22 novembre 1997, a mis en évidence:*

- *la spécificité des demeures historiques par rapport aux autres types de musées,*
- *la nécessité d'établir les limites et de définir de manière scientifique l'essence de la demeure historique pour arriver à une classification fondée sur des critères historiques, culturels, de conservation et d'usage,*
- *la nécessité d'étudier la muséologie relative aux demeures historiques pour pouvoir créer des règles d'organisation scientifique et de gestion de ces lieux de conservation ainsi que pour favoriser la connaissance publique du patrimoine,*
- *la nécessité de se pencher sur les problèmes muséographiques relatifs à la conservation, à l'ouverture au public, à la communication et à l'usage culturel particuliers des demeures historiques.*

*La demeure historique n'est pas comparable aux autres catégories de musées, aussi bien du point de vue muséologique, que muséographique. En effet:*

- *la demeure historique conserve, expose et reconstruit des milieux réels qui ne peuvent être transformés que très partiellement sous peine d'abolir l'essence même de la demeure historique,*
- *le musée "demeure" ne peut donc avoir d'autre politique d'enrichissement que celle de réunir les ameublements, les objets et les collections originelles relatives à une ou à plusieurs périodes historiques traversées par la demeure même,*
- *le mélange de meubles et d'objets pose la question de méthodes de conservation cohérentes avec cette variété, un problème que ne connaissent pas d'autres types de musées,*
- *la structure de la demeure historique, l'impossibilité de modifier les espaces et de toucher aux meubles et aux objets exposés posent des problèmes originaux quant aux normes de sécurité, à la circulation du public et à la protection des collections exposées,*
- *la signification de la demeure historique, qui privilégie la valeur non de l'objet en tant que tel mais de l'ensemble des objets en rapport avec l'esprit de ceux qui ont habité la demeure, pose des problèmes de communication avec le public tout à fait particuliers.*

<sup>iv</sup> The countries represented were: Azerbaïdjan, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the United States, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Russia.

<sup>v</sup> The governing board of DEMHIST elected was composed of President, Giovanni Pinna (ICOM Italy), two Vice-Presidents, Nina Vernova (Peterhof State Museum-Reserve, Russia) and Miguel-Angel Recio Crespo (Patrimonio Nacional, Spain), Secretary-Treasurer, Rosanna Pavoni (Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Italy), and members Göres Burkhardt (Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Germany), Véronique Van Caloen (Groot Kastell Van Loppem, Belgium), Pascal Torres Guardiola (Musée National du Château et du Trianon, Versailles, France), Jeanne Hamilton Watson (Oregon-California Trails Association, United States), and Wit Wojtowicz (Zamku in Lacut, Poland).

<sup>vi</sup> The text of the "proposal for discussion" is as follows: *I am of the opinion that the work of the DEMHIST committee should be to analyze historic house-museums in order to identify their characteristics, and to discuss the problems connected to the management of this particular form of museum. This analysis should, on the one hand, provide a better understanding of this form of museum, and, on the other hand, facilitate the individuation of solutions to management problems for as broad a range of house-museums and subjects as possible.*

*The identification of the themes and problems inherent in the museology of historic houses can be effected only if one defines the objects to which these themes and problems refer. Further, this is possible only if one defines the nature and the function of the historic house-museum within its social and cultural context. The definition of the nature and function of the historic house-museum certainly is one of the most sensitive duties that the DEMHIST committee could undertake because it is indispensable to achieve clarity in this sector in which public institutions exist alongside private ones, foundations with exclusively cultural goals exist alongside ones focused on a commercial use of their*

historical patrimony, and in which ancient and historic structures dedicated to studious interpretation exist alongside coarse reconstructions.

Through a definition of the nature and duties of a historic house-museum, one arrives at an existential definition of the institution, itself. However, in order to be able to define house-museums, and the exclusions and inclusions that this will bring about, it is indispensable to have an ample knowledge of the varied world of house-museums, and, for this, it is necessary to do a census of existing typologies. The next step would be the identification and the study of those museological themes and problems connected to historic house-museums which need more research and solutions.

In view of the above, therefore, I propose five themes for the DEMHIST committee's work. These five themes may be confronted at the same time, keeping in mind, however, that a logical sequence of events does exist, as will be seen:

1. a census of the existing historic house-museums, and the creation of a catalogue of their typologies,
2. a study of the nature and functions of the historic house-museum,
3. a definition of the historic house-museum,
4. an identification of the problems to discuss,
5. a discussion of each identified problem or theme, and a search for solutions to propose.

Thus, as far as the committee's work is concerned, for the moment it seems best to act along three lines:

- to institute a work group charged with realizing the catalogue of the typologies of historic house-museums,
- to institute a work group charged with studying the nature and the functions of historic house-museums in order to arrive at a definition,
- to organize meetings of the committee about the problems (broadly conceived, in order to apply to as great a number of historic house-museums as possible) related to the management and the socio-cultural significance of historic house-museums.

As far as identification and study of the problems are concerned, these activities may be done in the course of other meetings: during the annual scientific meetings of the committee, in publications solicited by the committee, and in work groups organized for the discussion of specific themes. The results of this work could be disseminated by the committee either in printed form (for example, like the study booklets already produced by ICOM), or as official resolutions adopted by the committee, and distributed to museums, directors, and governing bodies.

Finally, I would like to propose a series of themes (broken down into five categories) regarding historic house-museums which may serve as a point of departure for discussion. Once they are thoroughly integrated and examined, these themes may constitute a foundation for the future work of the committee:

#### **General**

1. Definition and typology of historic house-museums,
2. Symbolic, social, cultural, and political significance of historic house-museums,
3. Historic gardens in historic houses,
4. Ethics nelle acquisizioni e reimpatrio

#### **Conservation**

5. Problems of conservation and restoration in historic house-museums,
6. Ethical problems relating to the total reconstruction and distortion of the original significance of an historic house,
7. Security

#### **Exhibition and Visitor Management**

8. Communicating with the public,
9. Interpreting historic house-museums: how to select history,
10. Exhibition of history and society in historic house-museums,
11. Tourist impact and visitor management in large historic house-museums,
12. Visitor management in small historic house-museums,

#### **Organization and Management**

13. Personnel professionalism, organization and management,
14. Financial resources and profitability of historic house-museums,

#### **Living Historic House-Museums**

15. Management and organization in a private historic house-museum,
16. Using historic house-museums for institutional events.

<sup>vii</sup> The fifteen countries included: Belgium, Brasil, Columbia, Denmark, France, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Holland, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Russia, the United States, Sweden, and Switzerland.

<sup>viii</sup> The letter of October 20, 2000, proposing the institution of DEMHISTLAM is reproduced here as received:  
Dear Mr. President:

In accordance to our conversations during your recent visit to Alta Gracia, I am pleased to propose you the organization of a branch of Demhist Committee for Latinamerica, that we could call DEMHISTLAM.

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The Museology of historic houses in this region present specific problems, that differs from the ones in Europe. It would be necessary to identify the cultural role of house Museums in the context of Latinamerica and search for appropriate solutions.

I can take the responsibility of conforming a group of people whose initial aim could be to prepare the most complete list as possible of historic house Museums, and to send, translated into Spanish, the Precataloguing form for Historic Houses.

Once this work were done, we can organize a meeting with representatives of different house-Museums, to define the subsequent paths and to elect the authorities of this Sub-committee, of course under your advice, and supervision of DEMHIST INTERNATIONAL.

I will be waiting for your opinion an suggestions.

With my best regards,

Mónica Gorgas