

THE DEMHIST CATEGORISATION PROJECT FOR HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS. Progress Report and Plan, by Julius Bryant and Hetty Behrens, 2007.

1. Why do we need Categories?

Categorization is a tool we can use to increase the professionalism of the historic house museum sector. We need categories in order to manage different houses to their different strengths. Putting your historic house in order- into one of the categories- is the first step to understanding what you have got, and how significant it is.

Categories also help us to evaluate potential museums, to see if redundant historic houses *should* be established as museums. Categories are tools that facilitate comparisons between similar house museums, to enable us to identify exemplars and establish standards. Within each category, similar museums can more readily network internationally. In times of crisis categories can also help managers to discuss the real value of house museums with their stakeholders, to make professional judgements as to which 'failing' house museums should close down, or be maintained, by comparing like-with-like. The use of internationally defined categories can also help curators to recognise the difference between the 'core' *raison d'être* of the museum and a current interpretation policy. For example, a museum founded to commemorate a great man or woman may, over decades, have become a decorative arts museum or art gallery, without taking a formal decision to change its role from its founding mission.

Of course, one house can occupy several categories, as it offers the visitor a choice of thematic approaches in its presentation policy. But to direct resources effectively the curator, manager and stakeholders need to have a shared understanding of the aspect of the house that is the most significant. Evaluation against recognised categories is the most transparent way to make such choices as to the priority theme for presentation.

2. Phase One: establishing the need for the project and issuing questionnaires

Demhist, the ICOM committee for Historic House Museums, was born at the world conference of ICOM in 1998. At its first assembly (St Petersburg, Russia, 1999) Professor Rosanna Pavoni presented the outline for a Categorization Project for Historic House Museums. The project seeks to create a system for classifying types of historic house museum along homogenous museological lines. The project was presented, along with the first questionnaire, during Demhist's first annual conference (Genoa, 2000). A total of 135 questionnaires were completed and returned. The results of the project to date were published by Prof. Pavoni in 'Order out of Chaos: the Historic House Museums Categorization Project' in *Acts of the Annual Conference DEMHIST*, ed. R. Pavoni (Milan, 2001) and elsewhere. This marked the end of Phase One. Following the Demhist meeting in Malta, where a set of six categories was agreed, a member of the Demhist Board, Linda Young, published an article: 'Is there a Museum in the House? Historic Houses as a Species of Museum' in *Museum Management and Curatorship* (March, 2007).

3. Phase Two: defining categories and using the returned questionnaires

At its meeting in Malta in 2006 Demhist decided to form a working group to evaluate the project to date and clarify its way forward, with the goal of making data available on the Demhist website. Julius Bryant and Hetty Behrens were appointed as the Categorization Project Working Group, with the brief to plan the way forward. The following plan was agreed at the Demhist annual meeting in Vienna in 2007. The Project Plan has the following stages:

1. *Review the Category Definitions and produce a definition for each one.* The categories are defined by a building's purpose, not by building types. A historic house museum is distinguished from other types of architectural museum by its residential function. The Category definitions adopted in Malta were reviewed at the Vienna meeting in 2007. It is expected that they may continue to grow, particularly as Demhist gains members from Asia. They are currently as follows:

- i. Personality houses (writers, artists, musicians, politicians, military heroes, etc)
- ii. Collection houses (the former home of a collector or a house now used to show a collection)
- iii. Houses of Beauty (where the primary reason for a museum is the house as work of art)
- iv. Historic Event houses (houses that commemorate an event that took place in/by the house)

- v. Local society houses (house museums established by a local community usually seeking a social cultural facility that may reflect its own identity, rather than for an historic reason)
 - vi. Ancestral homes (country houses and small castles open to the public)
 - vii. Power houses (palaces and large castles open to the public)
 - viii. Clergy houses (monasteries, abbots' houses and other ecclesiastical buildings with a former or current residential use , open to the public)
 - ix. Humble homes (vernacular buildings such as modest farms valued as reflecting a lost way of life and/or building construction)
2. *Test the proposed categories and definitions* against the 135 completed questionnaires, to see if they are complete. If any houses from the forms do not fit under any of the categories new categories may need to be added. (For example, Demhist needs to decide whether to include former prisons now open to the public among its members).
 3. *List the houses from the questionnaires under each of the categories*, as examples. Highlight those house museums that are already members of Demhist. The category definitions and lists of examples will then be published on the Demhist website.
 4. **Phase Three: choosing exemplars, publishing guidelines and a new questionnaire**
 1. *For each category, identify three museums* (each one should be in a different country/language to facilitate access) that provide models of excellence and best practice for each of the categories. The choice of exemplary house museums will be discussed in workshops at Demhist annual meetings, initially among groups drawn from historic house museums in the same category. It is not necessary that each example is a current member of Demhist, but it is hoped that, when they are told that they have been chosen as exemplars, they will want to join ICOM and Demhist..
 2. *Produce written guidelines* for house curators to help them decide which category their house belongs to. The process of determining the museum's category can be an opportunity for a house museum's curator, director and stakeholders to build consensus and so develop a corporate mission. These guidelines will be developed at the annual Demhist meetings and published on the Demhist website.
 3. *Rewrite the questionnaire* to incorporate the new set of Categories, and publish it on the Demhist website in English and other languages for use by members and potential members.