

Rethinking the Role of Gardens as Active Resources for the Spatialisation of Memory in House Museums: Best Practices at the Art Museums of Skagen

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*Rethinking the Role of Gardens as Active Resources for the Spatialisation of Memory in House Museums:
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One of the distinctive features of house museums refers to their ability to put visitors in contact with history through direct experience, that is, enabled by the activation of objects and spaces as communicative and socio-cultural catalysts. Unlike other institutions, these heritage systems perform this task through a spatialisation of memory, based on the signification of the museum building not only as a “container” but also as “content”.

The performance of this task is generally assigned to interior rooms, while the gardens that often complement these sites are managed as mere backdrops for circulation, rest, or other facilities.

This paper aims to problematise the recurrent use of house museum gardens as mere containers, and to shed light on their strategic potential not only as spatial but also as cultural resources. This goal is addressed through a qualitative, interpretive case study that provides evidence of this potential by examining the experiences developed in the last twenty years at the Art Museums of Skagen (a single institution incorporating three sites), which exemplify how gardens can contribute to the spatialisation of memory performed at historic sites.

Keywords: house museums; house museum gardens; spatialisation of memory; heritage activation.

Introduction

Many museums’ spatial programmes include green open spaces. Gardens may surround or anticipate the venue, mediating the relationship with the context and welcoming the public. When they are integrated in the layout of the building, they mainly serve as “decompression” areas for contemplation and respite, offering room for pause at the middle or end of the visit.

In most cases, they are complementary spaces which accommodate organised walking,¹ rest² or the congregation of audiences,³ as well as providing a pleasant backdrop for such facilities as reception areas or coffee shops.

Although they participate in the construction of visitors' experience,⁴ generally gardens do not have an active role in the exhibition or educational functions of cultural institutions – with the exception of those museums that include sculpture gardens or outdoor galleries dedicated to special artworks, arranged to be integrated within the sequence of visitable spaces.

Another exception can be found in house museums. Here gardens are often part of spatial systems that document the life of a prominent figure or were the theatre of meaningful events. Nevertheless, their potential in these contexts is rarely realised.

In recent decades, the advancement of an integrated approach to the management of house museums has promoted more attentive and comprehensive concern for all the features of a site,⁵ and the meticulous maintenance dedicated to buildings, furnishings, and collections has started to extend to landscapes. Nevertheless, these institutions struggle to assign to gardens a role more strategic than that of a mere facility, and to use them not only as a spatial but also as a cultural resource.

To provide evidence of the potential of these spaces, the paper illustrates the situated practices promoted by the Art Museums of Skagen, where gardens are managed not only to enhance connections with the city and to contextualise its venues but also as effective tools that contribute to preserving, displaying, and disseminating the history and the collection of the institution. This qualitative and interpretive case-study approach combines a literature-based conceptual discussion with an analytical reading of archival evidence, artworks, photographs and curatorial projects carried out by this museum, which is treated as a theoretically generative example. By shedding light on a series of experiences promoted over the last twenty years, this article investigates the strategies and constraints involved in activating outdoor green spaces within the “spatialisation of memory” performed by historic sites. At the same time, this exploration aims to foster the debate on the specificity of curatorial practices related to house museum gardens as heritage resources, since they require an interdisciplinary effort that differs from those applied to interior spaces.

Historic house museums' gardens: an untapped heritage resource

House museums are a special type of cultural institution, acknowledged for their considerable social and political significance which stems from the unique capacity to “evoke history and put the visitor into direct contact with it”.⁶ These sites are historical artefacts in which space–time coordinates are redefined, transforming the experience of walking through a place into an encounter with a system of tangible and intangible signs, capable of triggering a narration

¹ HILLIER, B., and TZORTZI, K. Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space. In: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by S. Macdonald. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, p. 292.

² HENDERSON, J. *Museum Architecture*. Gloucester: Rockport Publishers, 1998.

³ HUANG, H. The Spatialization of Knowledge and Social Relationships. In: *Proceedings of the 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium*, edited by Peponis et al. Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology, 2001, pp. 43.1–43.14.

⁴ As widely debated, the museum's experience results from the coalescence of all the various intellectual, emotional and sensorial stimuli collected from entrance to departure into a “single package in the mind of the visitor”, FALK, J. H., and DIERKING, L. D. *The Museum Experience*. Washington: Whalesback Books, 1992, p. 84.

⁵ LAWLISS, L. Preventive Conservation and the Historic House Landscape. In: *Preventive Conservation for Historic House Museums*, edited by J. Merritt, Jane, and J. A. Reilly. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, p. 117.

⁶ PINNA, G. Introduction to Historic House Museums. In: *Museum International*, 53(2), 2001, p. 4.

that immerses the public in an atmosphere of the past. Unlike other heritage institutions, the exhibition systems employed by house museums depend on the configuration of space – as visitors' experiences are defined by the qualities of the place through which they move (e.g., its layout, furnishings and decorative elements) – treating the museum building itself not merely as a “container” but as “content”. At the same time, the project of space corresponds to the project of time in such institutions, as spatial features and objects are turned into active display tools by fixing or reproducing the condition of the site at a specific moment in its history.

The distinctive task of house museums can thus be outlined in their capacity to perform a spatialisation of memory, as space is activated as a communicative and socio-cultural catalyst that conveys a narrative emanating from the experience of the interiors themselves.

Within cultural studies, the term “spatialisation” refers to the process of producing and locating social relations and practices in a social space, considered in both its physical and conceptual dimensions. This is “an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties”⁷.

In house museums, heritage is spatially constituted through the activation of rooms and objects. These are set up to operate as vehicles that reenact and communicate stories, socio-cultural relations, and the “structuring structures” (i.e., Bourdieu's *Habitus*) that evoke the essence of the historical identity of the original owners or dwellers.

This process usually focuses on the activation of interior spaces and is not always extended to the gardens that may complement house museums. Their integration into the exhibition system is limited to a small number of cases in which outdoor spaces have played a particularly important part in the past of the site or in the vision of its inhabitants.

In some contexts, the garden may have been the theatre of important events or may have resulted from a specific project of the owner. When this role is acknowledged, this space is included in the musealisation process and arranged to be an eloquent part of the visit. This strategy can be observed, for example, at Claude Monet's house in Giverny: here the gardens were designed by the artist to serve as an open-air laboratory for his experimentations with light and colour, and today they are an integral part of the exhibition path.

In some other situations, gardens may have been conceived and arranged as display spaces by their original owner, and thus continue to perform their role after the musealisation of the site. This instance refers especially to artists' house museums such as Millesgården, outside Stockholm; Einar Jónsson Museum in Reykjavik; Musée Robert Tatin in Cossé-le-Vivien; and Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden in St Ives.

Nevertheless, in most cases, house museum gardens are not activated as part of the exhibition path. Generally, their contribution to the site's history is not made visible to the public: they merely serve as complementary spaces or pleasant backdrops for facilities or events.

The reasons behind the limited exploitation of this potential are varied and complex. Major difficulties clearly arise from the scarcity of funding that affects most of these institutions, many of which struggle financially. This condition also results in limited access to specialised skills and competencies, which represents a significant problem considering the highly complex nature of this task.

⁷ From Pierre Bourdieu's class, “Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus”, held at the University of Oslo on 15 May 1995.

Scientific and cultural issues can also restrain house museums from deploying their gardens as heritage resources. These institutions are expected to conserve or reconstruct authentic atmospheres which are difficult to manipulate, and the complexity of their set-up and management is exacerbated by preservation issues. Although emphasis is usually placed less on the value of individual objects than on the whole set of elements that define the place's identity, house museums derive their significance from the authenticity of the spaces and items on display.⁸ The concept of authenticity is not univocally defined and remains subject to multiple perspectives and negotiations. Furthermore, the practices that enable authenticity involve strict conservation measures that are needed to guarantee the accurate and truthful appearance of the material elements that characterise the place. These approaches are generally based on a "fossilisation" process⁹ that is incompatible with the very nature of a garden.

The conservation of a historic garden cannot be approached through the application of the same principles and practices developed for built heritage. While a building and its interiors can, to a certain extent, be "frozen" in time and space (by fixing all their components in a specific condition associated with a selected period in the life of the site), gardens cannot. On the one hand, the identification of appropriate and consistent conservation strategies is made particularly difficult by the rapid decay of many of their features, the distinctive use of living or relatively short-lived materials, and the complexity arising from the scale of the layout and the often-indistinct overlays resulting from its evolution. On the other hand, gardens being organic living bodies, their conservation requires embracing the processes related to the passage of time and their effects on space: if they are alive, they mutate, and preventing them from doing so would lead to their disappearance. This notion was introduced by the Florence Charter (1981), which originally acknowledged gardens as an important category of cultural heritage. Specifically, it identified them as "living monuments"¹⁰ whose distinctive character is defined by the nature of their main material, the plant: something that is alive, perishable and renewable.

A museum object is generally a movable, accessioned and relatively stable item that can be inventoried, conserved and displayed according to established procedures; its authenticity and legal status are primarily attached to its material integrity, provenance, and ownership. A living collection, by contrast, consists of organic elements whose value depends not only on material survival but on continuity, replacement, propagation and care.

In a historic garden, some elements – such as trees, dunes, propagated plants or documented flower species – may acquire an object-like significance within the museum's collection logic. Nevertheless, the garden as a whole is better understood as a curatorially shaped environment whose value does not depend on the conservation of a specific item but rather on the continuity of a spatial assemblage that conveys meaning through the interplay among people, selected objects, plants, paths, views, uses, atmospheres, and the memories they bear.

Accordingly, when this article describes gardens as part of the museum's "collection", the term is used primarily in a curatorial and interpretive sense. Some garden elements may indeed be accessioned, inventoried, listed or protected by planning regulations; others may instead acquire museological significance because they sustain the site's narrative, memory, use or atmosphere. The relevant question is therefore not whether the garden as a whole can

⁸ PAVONI, R. Towards a Definition and Typology of Historic House Museums, *Museum International*. In: *Museum International*, 53(2), 2001, pp. 16–21; DONNELLY, J. F. *Interpreting Historic House Museums*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002.

⁹ PINNA, Introduction to Historic House Museums..., p. 4.

¹⁰ MÜLLER-STRATEN, C. Botanische Gärten aus der Sicht der Museologie. In: *Englera*, 30, 2013, pp. 29–40.

be treated as a conventional museum object, but how its heterogeneous components can be documented, interpreted and protected without denying their living, processual and spatial character.

As every garden is a patent manifestation of the notion of the palimpsest¹¹ – a system resulting from the stratification of the material and immaterial consequences of entangled human actions and natural events – controlling and “fixing” its space-time coordinates is particularly difficult. Specifically, the conservation of these heritage systems requires a new understanding of authenticity, measured against the inherent differences between “artefact” and “naturefact”¹². The paper explores these topics by presenting the experiences developed over the last two decades in the gardens of the Art Museums of Skagen, with the aim to critically discuss the potential of this often untapped resource and to share some strategies to unfold it.

A noteworthy case: the Art Museums of Skagen and their gardens

Art Museums of Skagen is the institution responsible for conserving, researching, and displaying the world’s largest collection of works by the Skagen painters, members of the artists’ colony that settled in the northernmost town in Denmark at the end of the nineteenth century.

Located in Jutland, at the point where the Baltic Sea meets the North Sea, Skagen was a small fishing village with neither harbour nor railway. Its remote and scenic landscapes offered opportunities to practise *en plein air* painting and to draw inspiration from the unique and rugged natural setting and the picturesque life of the fishing community.¹³ The outstanding qualities of the place quickly attracted several young artists from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts – such as Michael Ancher (1849–1927), Holger Drachmann (1846–1908), Carl Locher (1851–1915), Viggo Johansen (1851–1935) and Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909), who were later joined by other prominent authors, composers, singers and actors from across Scandinavia.

Skagens Museum was founded in 1908 by some of the artists themselves, with the aim to exhibit and promote the work of the colony that had started to form in the previous decades around the town’s inn, Brøndums Hotel. Initially set up in the late Krøyer’s house in 1911, the museum did not have a purposely designed venue until 1928, when a new building by architect Ulrik Plesner (1861–1933) was realised on a site donated by the Brøndum family next to their hotel – where Havehuset (the garden house)¹⁴ and Krøyer’s Studio already stood. This area comprised one of the oldest gardens in town, planted with trees and bushes along the edges, covered in grass and complemented by flowerbeds, creating a lush context markedly different from its surroundings. Skagen is a relatively narrow isthmus shaped by the movements of the sea, and for centuries the landscape of this windswept place has been

¹¹ MEINIG, D. W. Introduction. In: *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, edited by D. W. Meinig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 6.

¹² In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011), while defining the term “artifact”, Risto Hilpinen uses the term “naturefact” for naturally occurring objects used intentionally for some purpose, hence lying in between natural elements and artefacts.

¹³ Skagen was a place where people were seen as having an almost “pre-rational contact with nature and tradition”. VARNEDOE, K. Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Progress of Scandinavian Art. In: *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880–1910*, edited by K. Varnedoe. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982, p.18.

¹⁴ Havehuset is one of the oldest buildings in the area, functioning as an annex to Brøndums Hotel; in 1880 it became Anna and Michael Anchers’ first home.

harsh and dominated by drifting sand. The difference between the flourishing nature of this “oasis” and the townscape was emphasised by the construction of the museum building and its annexes, added in 1982 and 1989, both designed by architect Jacob Blegvad (1921–2010). Recently, between 2014 and 2016, a major intervention by Friis and Moltke Architects led to the removal of the out-of-date extensions and to the construction of a large new body, the Skifer Wing. This intervention expanded Plesner’s building without altering the original structure (which has been designated as worthy of preservation with conservation value 2) or imposing any substantial transformation to the system of open spaces, aside from the establishment of some outdoor facilities aimed at welcoming the visitors.

In 2014, Skagens Museum merged with two buildings that had served as homes and studios for some of the best-known figures among the colony – Anchers Hus¹⁵ and Drachmanns Hus.¹⁶ Their integration into the collection of the institution widened its mission and scope, and led to its name being changed to Skagens Kunstmuseer (Art Museums of Skagen).

Today the institution is composed of three venues: the art museum and the two house museums. Each site includes gardens which are managed as composite heritage resources. The active role of these outdoor spaces extends beyond accommodating specific activities (e.g., public events) and facilities (e.g., coffee shops) or connecting the buildings with the city, as they also contribute to the conservation, exhibition and enhancement of the museum’s history and heritage.

This role is only partially referred to the outdoor display of some of the statues from the collection. As this museum is housed in three historic buildings in which the institution and its collection originated, the gardens are an integral part of the heritage system that bears witness to the life and work of the Skagen artists’ colony.

Gardens represented an important source of inspiration for artists who enjoyed *en plein air* painting. But by accommodating gatherings and shared activities (such as meetings, parties, games, clay shooting and fireworks), they also helped forge personal and professional bonds among the members of the group and fostered those dialogues and exchanges that nurtured the development of their artistic research. These spaces thus played a key part in the formation of the colony’s identity.¹⁷

This aspect also relates to the way the artists used gardens to define their position and gaze. In the early phase, in the 1880s, they depicted themselves or one another only inside their own properties, which were represented as flourishing, almost idyllic spaces – in opposition to the landscape characterising the village, that was harsh and desolate. This contrast was not merely an invention: it reflected the real condition of the town during the colony’s time, when gardens were “lush like a primeval forest”,¹⁸ forming an actual oasis within a land invaded by sand and shaped by wind. Nevertheless, this difference has been emphasised to separate different spheres: the harsh landscape was associated with the harsh life of the local community (Figure

¹⁵ This was the house of Anna and Michael Ancher from 1884, and it became an important location for the Skagen artists’ life and work. After the death of their daughter, Helga Ancher, in 1967 the building was opened as a museum for the public to enjoy the rich and well-preserved collection of artworks, furniture and the family’s private belongings.

¹⁶ The house where painter and poet Holger Drachmann lived with his wife Soffi Drachmann (né Lasson), from 1902 until his death in 1908, was opened to the public in 1911, to display the property and its contents in their original conditions as a memorial museum to this iconic figure.

¹⁷ BØGH JENSEN, M. Photographic Self-fashioning: The role of photography in community-formation by the Skagen Painters. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 17(1), 2025, pp. 1–18.

¹⁸ CLAUSEN, C. C. Stenografiske Interviews: Michael Ancher. In: *Hver*, 8, June 27, 1909, p. 668.

1), in contrast with the “domesticated” spaces of the artists (Figure 2), who wanted to appear as neutral eyewitnesses in order to preserve the authenticity of their images of the naïve good-natured local population.

The role of the gardens in the physical and conceptual construction of the Skagen painters’ cultural landscape is therefore crucial to understanding this artistic phenomenon.

Activating the gardens of the Art Museums of Skagen as communicative and socio-cultural catalysts: strategies and projects

Drawing on the relevance of the three historic buildings that house the Art Museums of Skagen, a specific institutional objective is to expand visitors’ experience beyond the enjoyment of artworks and to integrate the narrative layers conveyed by both indoor and outdoor spaces.

This task was extended to the gardens around the year 2000 through the joint efforts of gardener Steen Bundgaard Sørensen and director Annette Johansen. This concept was further sharpened after the art museum merged with the two houses in 2014, through the vision developed by the new director, Lisette Vind Ebbesen.

The following sections illustrate the strategies and projects that have been developed over the last twenty years to enable the gardens as active cultural resources, thereby contributing to the spatialisation of memory promoted by the institution.

Conservation (and perpetuation): saving and promoting iconic “naturefacts” as memory tools

The conservation of historic gardens presents particular challenges that revolve around the need to bring together cultural, ontological and ecological perspectives which often appear to address contrasting notions. Although in the last decades preservation principles and practices have embraced the idea of “process”,¹⁹ the conservation paradigm is generally pursued by stabilising the assets’ presence in space and time. On the other hand, as living monuments, gardens cannot be fossilised in the way house museums are; their survival can only be guaranteed through an approach that acknowledges them as living natural systems. Their conservation must therefore be based on protecting their capacity for transformation, considering evolving technical needs and procedures, and managing threads generated by ongoing phenomena (such as climate change or the spread of diseases and pests caused by wind and water, global trade, or human intervention).

The critical issues implied in the preservation of historic gardens do not necessarily entail the complete loss of all the traces and identity features presentifying the memory of the past of the site. The gardens at the Art Museums of Skagen still contain numerous elements that bear witness to meaningful phases in the physical and cultural formation of the place. This is the result of particularly attentive management which ensued from the acknowledgment of some naturefacts as part of the heritage system preserved by the museum. This recognition led to the development of specific projects focused on their preservation, such as the integration of an expert gardener on the staff since 1997. A conservative approach to some elements of the gardens was also fostered by their being listed as heritage resources in documents issued by various governing bodies. Both municipality and district authorities impose special conditions governing the management of naturefacts, especially in the Skagen area, where some features stand out due to their particular bond to the context’s history. For example,

¹⁹ PEREIRA, H. N. Contemporary Trends in Conservation: Culturalization, Significance and Sustainability. In: *City & Time*, 3(2), 2007, pp. 15–25.

regulations advocate the protection of the naturally formed dunes,²⁰ a representative trait of the local windy and sandy landscape. In the gardens around the art museum and Anchers Hus, some sand formations have been attentively preserved,²¹ immersing visitors in an experience of the place that transports them back to the time of the artists' colony.

Great importance is also attached to the conservation of historic trees, which the Municipality's plan for the central area describes as elements "of particularly great importance for the cityscape".²² This attentive management allows contemporary audiences to see elements in the gardens that can be observed in paintings and historic photos. For example, most of the trees surrounding the eastern and southern sides of the art museum's inner park have remained unchanged, such as the old pear tree that still stands at the centre of Anchers Hus' front garden.²³

This tree is a living witness to the life and work of the Skagen colony. As documented in several artworks, pictures and diaries, it was party to many private and collective events.²⁴ Due to its position, in the middle of the public frontage and alongside the path that leads to the house, over time it became a focal point of the heritage system (Figure 3, 4). When Anchers Hus was integrated into the Art Museums of Skagen, it became one of the particularly valuable assets of the collection. Accordingly, over the last decade, it has been the object of specific projects aimed at guaranteeing its preservation (Figure 5). Such efforts cannot not be merely interpreted as compliance with regulatory requirements; rather they represent a curatorial choice, based on the acknowledgment of the role that this tree plays in shaping visitors' experience.

Further evidence of this stance is offered by the programs being formulated for this plant's future. Despite efforts to preserve its health, its age already significantly exceeds the average lifespan of this kind of pear tree, so it is likely to die at some point in the not-too-distant future. The museum has already started to address this problem and, after consulting various experts, is planning to replace it through a cloning process.²⁵

This is one of the possible strategies exemplifying how to address the problem of iconic elements that may disappear due to their organic nature, taking a conservation-oriented approach based on the merging of ecologic and cultural stances.

With regard to trees, which may be long-lived but can also be threatened by unforeseen factors (such as disease, decay or harsh weather conditions), the work carried out at the Art Museums of Skagen includes various experiments. A further response to this challenge is exemplified by the case of a large horse-chestnut tree that once stood at the entrance of Drachmanns Hus and suffered severe decay due to borers. As it leaned dangerously over the house and it could

²⁰ The District conservation plan *SKA.200.C2* states that: "Terrain adjustments of more than +/- 0.5 m may not take place", addressing the need to avoid any alteration for naturally formed dunes (p. 27).

²¹ When the expansion of the museum took place from 2014 to 2016, a natural dune formation near Krøyer's studio in the garden of Skagens Museum had to be removed to allow machinery and building materials to pass. The dune was subsequently restored.

²² See pdf Lokalplan, *SKA.200.C2* (pp. 12–13).

²³ This tree is present in the 1889 drawing by Anna, *The pear tree, autumn*, figure 3; considering it was absent in a photograph from the housewarming-party in 1884 (inventory number HAFF2869, Art Museums of Skagen), we can assume it was installed soon after the arrival of the Anchers.

²⁴ Several photographs show it was decorated during some festivities (inventory numbers HAFF1423, HAFF1425 and HAFF886, Art Museums of Skagen).

²⁵ The tree has been grafted by Blomstergården in Viborg, where one of the country's largest copy collections of living materials from historic fruit trees is located. Therefore, when the pear tree falls, it will be substituted with a new one with the same DNA.

not be saved, it was cut down in March 2020. Although the tree was not listed, its presence was acknowledged as an important part of the site's identity, hence its loss became the object of a special project through which its essence has somehow been preserved. Its wood was saved and transformed by an expert woodturner into small decorative birdhouses, bowls and wine corks that were sold in the museum's shop. This project also became an opportunity to disseminate the history of the tree and the heritage site through the publication of detailed articles in local newspapers.

These experiences show that a conservative approach in historic gardens requires a highly critical and contextual development: it cannot result from the application of a formula but requires specific evaluation of each situation, reconciliation of multiple variables, and definition of tailored strategies and choices. The work carried out at the Art Museums of Skagen offers useful insights into this topic. It exemplifies possible strategies that enable the conservation of iconic elements that play an important role in visitors' experience – not only by reviving specific stories and promoting the overall historic identity of the place but also by leading visitors through intellectual, emotional and bodily immersion in specific space–time coordinates, fostering more incisive processes of interpretation and the construction of deeper bonds with the heritage system.

At the same time, these projects validate the idea that conservation can take place in a historic garden only if it coexists with transformation, and that this coexistence does not necessarily disrupt the authentication process. The special conditions of such “living” heritage assets require museum professionals to experiment with new approaches that are consistent with the notion of continuity that is intrinsic to the site's ontological identity.²⁶ Natural elements that shape the artists' gardens have continued to change since the time of the colony: trees have grown, flowers have been replaced, fences and furnishings have been updated. In continuation of this transitional nature, when managed with critical thinking, open spaces can find a certain form of authenticity.

Reenactment: reconstructing the cultural landscape of the artists' colony

Unlike the strategies used to manage the interior spaces of a house museum, those enabling the preservation of a historic garden draw on the notion of “conservation through transformation”. This is based on the fact that many of its components undergo a lifecycle and it is not possible to maintain them on site unless their mutation is incorporated into the process. This notion is particularly important with regard to certain assets, such as bushes and flowers. Their nature is characterised by a limited lifespan, hence their presence can be conserved only through renewal involving partial or complete replacement (e.g., most flowers wither in wintertime and reemerge in spring; others die and must be resown).

If such elements have a meaningful part in narrating the identity of the place, their regeneration may become the object of a reenactment strategy, intended to repeat or reperform past actions in a way that recalls or, in some cases, reproduces a historic scenario.

Reenactment has a long-standing relationship with museographic practice. Its potential lies in the possibility to activate a special interplay between space, content and narrative through the construction of meaning, engaging visitors in an evocative experience that allows them to relive spatial conditions, rituals or events from the past.

²⁶ POULIOS, I. Moving Beyond a Values-Based Approach to Heritage Conservation. In: *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 12(2), 2010, pp. 170–185.

This strategy is generally used to conserve and display intangible assets and manifestations, but it also has possible applications in the enhancement of living heritage systems. In house museum gardens, in particular, it can be applied to those elements that have disappeared due to their lifecycle, the memory of which can be revived through strategically designed reproductions that reintegrate them into the space and allow them to contribute to shaping visitors' experience.

While any substitution inside a house museum may have highly critical implications, the regeneration of some naturefacts does not nullify their validity as heritage resources, since both the disappearance and replacement of the original ones were not accidental but inherent consequences of an authentic natural cycle.

Elements such as bushes and flowers that were present in the gardens at the time of the artists' colony have a limited lifespan. It is therefore not their "body" that makes them part of the heritage system but rather the contribution they made to the construction of the local cultural landscape, as documented through photographs and paintings. In fact, the scenes depicted by the Skagen painters often include flowers in both indoor and outdoor settings. This is actually a manifestation of an identity trait of the life and work of the artists: their gardens contained numerous flowerbeds, and interiors were usually decorated with lush compositions in arranged baskets and vases.

Flowers have always had a strong connection with the domestic-cape of Scandinavian cultures.²⁷ The Skagen colony showed a special appreciation for them also as a source of inspiration.

Visitors walking through the rooms of the Art Museums of Skagen may notice that flowers are a recurrent presence in the artworks on display. At the turn of the century, director Annette Johansen launched a project aimed at reintroducing into the institution's open spaces the flowers that had inspired those works (Figure 6, 7). After their identification, based on evidence found in paintings, photos, letters, diaries, receipts and other documents, bushes of clematis Jackmanii, Alba Maxima rose,²⁸ rhododendron, yellow iris and poppies began to appear, first around Skagens Museum and, after the merger, in the house museums' gardens. The presence of these flowers complements the work of the galleries by contributing to visitors' emotional and bodily immersion in the museum's contents.

Unlike the remaining historic trees, which are direct witnesses to the artists' lives, the validity of these flowers as heritage resources does not lie in their coexistence with the colony. Rather, their rootedness in the cultural landscape is made explicit by their presence in the artworks, validating their "cool" authentication.²⁹ This connection is also communicated to the public through thematic guided tours and informative panels contextualising the role of specific flowerbeds within the site's history. The cultivation of flowers changes throughout the seasons and varies each year under the careful planning of the museum staff. These changes contribute to bearing witness to the memory of the artists' colony, as both paintings and photos show

²⁷ LINDHEIM, T. Hagen i naturen – og i kunsten. In: *Drømmen om en hage*, edited by Tone Sinding Steinsvik, Sverre Følstad and Sandra Lorentzen. Åmot: Blaafarveværket, 2017, p. 24.

²⁸ LEHMANN, M. H. A Masterpiece – In Retrospect. In: *The Book About 'Roses'*, edited by Skagens Museum. Skagen: Skagens Museum, 2025, pp. 8–29.

²⁹ As conceptualised by Erik Cohen and Scott A. Cohen, "cool" authentication is a formal expert-driven validation based on institutional proof and aligned with objective authenticity (while, on the contrary, "hot" authentication is informal, subjective and based on shared belief or emotion among a certain group of people). COHEN, E. and COHEN, S. A. Authentication: Hot and Cool. In: *Annals of Tourism Research* 39(3), 2012, p. 1296.

that most of the plants in the gardens underwent numerous transformations. The curatorial value of the flowers thus lies in the continuity of species, iconography, cultivation practices and visitors' perceptions.

The strategy of reenacting iconic elements from the past life of these spaces has been recently applied to the kitchen garden at Anchers Hus – an element that had disappeared over the years. According to the available documentation,³⁰ it probably lay behind the original building, near the back door from the kitchen, and was removed in 1913 following the construction of the extension. Subsequently, the area underwent significant modifications and was left as a lawn for a long period, with wild vegetation along its borders. After the house was merged into Art Museums of Skagen, the site was redeveloped with the idea of reviving the presence of the kitchen garden, which was eventually inaugurated in Spring 2021.³¹

This reenactment differs from that relating to the flowers, because the absence of clear evidence and documentation made it impossible to design a form and position that closely resembled or were consistent with the original state. The reproduction of the kitchen garden was the result of a reinterpretation: because of its role in narrating the history of the place, the reactivation of this feature was considered more valuable than its material authenticity. Consequently, this reenactment was based on reconciling cultural, ecological and practical parameters – especially those relating to its form (a modern circular layout that is easier to manage) and position (at the centre of the back garden).

This type of spatialisation of memory corresponds to what has been defined as “constructive authenticity”. This notion is based on the idea that an “authentic experience” can be produced not only by original objects and spaces but also by those that do not possess inherent authenticity, provided that they can still evoke the spirit of the place and produce a “perceived authenticity” shaped by points of view, beliefs, perspectives or influences.³²

Staging: engaging visitors through experiential museographic strategies in the gardens

Art Museums of Skagen is developing various strategies to activate its gardens as display spaces through the spatialisation of elements that played a key part in constructing the identity of the place but cannot be conserved or fixed over time. Some of these projects are based on the reconstruction of items that have disappeared (for example through the reinstallation of flowerbeds or the kitchen garden). Others experiment with the staging of significant experiences, enabled through special spatial arrangements aimed at engaging visitors and deepening their understanding of the historic cultural landscape.

This strategy draws on the widely debated idea that to make the visit a transformative experience for contemporary audiences, museums must offer visitors immersion in highly stimulating environments, potentially enabling interactions.³³ Although this museographic trend is mainly being explored through new technologies, the first-hand experience of a

30 Evidence was found in letters (Fabritius 2018) and in the unpublished memoirs of the maids in the house (in the archive at Art Museums of Skagen).

31 The new kitchen garden was established by the museum in collaboration with the people who ran the nearby café; currently, it is curated by people from a local restaurant who integrate the harvest into their plates.

32 WANG, N. Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience. In: *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 1999, p. 351; BJERRE, A. Managing, Interpreting and Negotiating Authenticity in a Historic House Museum. In: *Nordic Museology*, 37(2), 2024, pp. 38–56.

33 BLACK, G. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

space activated as a narrative tool (as occurs in house museums) remains a powerful means of producing resonant impacts.

Being located across three historic sites in which spaces, objects and atmospheres are closely connected to the institution's contents and mission, Art Museums of Skagen has many opportunities to use this strategy. In the gardens, this is implemented through special arrangements designed to engage visitors through evocative gestures, rituals and atmosphere.

One application of this strategy involves arranging spaces to recreate specific historic events and to involve visitors in their reenactment. For example, on Helga Anchers' birthday (19 August), the garden in front of her house is decorated with Japanese paper lanterns, as her family used to do at the time of the colony.³⁴ This tradition is now reproduced every year, turning this setting into a means of staging specific memories and allowing the public to encounter them in an "eventful" way.

Other projects involve activating thematic locations that enable visitors to "take part" in the artists' colony by "entering" some of the famous scenes depicted in the paintings – many of which are set up in the gardens. For example, in 2017 a table³⁵ was installed on the left side of the front garden at Anchers Hus. This was not mere furniture, it was a device inviting the public to recreate the scene depicted in Peder Severin Krøyer's famous 1888 painting *Hip, Hip, Hurrah* (Göteborg Konstmuseum), of which the museum owns a study. The artwork depicts a lively group of artists raising their glasses around a festive table amid greenery. Krøyer's inspiration came from the house-warming party that Anna and Michael Ancher held in their garden in 1884.³⁶ This painting was selected for staging not only because of the visible and strategic position of its location (next to the entrance to the house museum, where visitors can stop without disrupting circulation) but especially because of its programmatic significance: it highlights the artists' conviviality and constructs a sense of community, since it does not depict those who were present at the party but rather those who belonged to the colony.³⁷ In other words, this painting is not an emblem of a particular celebration but of the Skagen colony itself, and its reenactment is meant to situate visitors among the artists through the interactive spatialisation of a memory.

This device engages the public in an "Instagrammable" experience, which marks the point at which interpretation may slide into theatricalisation. Its curatorial legitimacy relies on transparency: participants are guided through the experience by museum staff so that they understand which elements are historically documented, which are reconstructed and which are interpretive invitations.

Beside staging specific events or scenes, this strategy can also guide visitors towards a more engaging understanding of distinctive features of the heritage site. At Drachmanns Hus, for example, it is used to enhance the understanding of the area's history through immersion in a purposely designed spatial experience.

When the house was built, the area was on the outskirts of town, characterised by large spaces between dunes and cottages. As documented by photos and postcards, when Drachmann

³⁴ This tradition is documented by many photos (e.g. inventory numbers HAFF886, HAFF1423 and HAFF1425 in the collection at Art Museums of Skagen).

³⁵ This is a modern reconstruction; at some moments in time it accommodates a tablecloth with explanatory texts and a glass top over it to protect it from the weather.

³⁶ FABRITIUS, E. P. S. *Krøyers Hip, hip, hurra! Et kunstnergilde*. Copenhagen: Vandkunsten, 2005.

³⁷ BØGH JENSEN, M. *At male sit privatlin. Skagensmalernes selvskenesættelse*. Skagens Museum: Skagen, 2005, pp. 93–94.

bought the property, the garden was a natural park.³⁸ Over time, the surrounding context changed drastically, but the vegetation inside the garden continued to grow. After the merger with Art Museums of Skagen, the area was only partially cleared and some of the lush volumes of spontaneous plants were conserved, to recall the original nature of the site. In particular, on the southwest side, a large portion of the overgrown vegetation was preserved and narrow walkways of mowed grass were carved through it.

Walking through this space provides the public with an intense bodily and emotional experience. This area displays a form of “controlled wilderness” that preserves the memory of the wooded landscape associated with the site’s history. The contact with a “wild” space – something that is unexpected in the context of a museum visit – is intended to immerse the public in an original atmosphere that recalls the past and stimulates curiosity and enjoyment. This spatialisation of memory exemplifies how landscape design can enable the experiential display of a heritage site’s values and can be interpreted as a laboratory for expanding knowledge and enhance audience engagement.

(Ecologic and cultural) propagation: spatialising memory beyond the historic site

In addition to strategies based on spatial arrangements that enable past and present times to coexist, Art Museums of Skagen is experimenting with a further approach to reviving and disseminating significant memories of the artists’ colony. One of these involves using flowers that are rooted in the institution’s history, exploiting their inherent capacity to “travel” through time and space.

Flowers can not only be endlessly revived but also transferred to other places, for example, when grown in vases or cut and gathered into bunches, where they can act as tokens of remembrance. When planted and cultivated in different gardens or houses, plants and flowers can become living keepsakes that establish and continuously nurture a connection with the museum.

The latest project exploiting this concept consists of creating seed bags that visitors can buy in the museum shop to reproduce the same landscape they see in the paintings. In 2024, the institution started a collaboration with Brede Havekiosk to produce three different collections, associated with three artworks conserved in the galleries.³⁹ When sown in visitors’ homes, the seeds are meant to grow a piece of history in a pot.

The first experience was carried out in 2020, when similar seed bags were produced to propagate the *Staudevalmue* (*Papaver orientale*). This special flower has long been cultivated in the Ancher’s garden – as reported by many drawings, including “Helga and the poppies” (ca. 1886), currently on display in the house museum. Because the flower continues to be cultivated at Anchers Hus, gardeners were able to collect and package its seeds.

Another project involved the reproduction of *Pelargonium*, a distinctive flowering plant that was (and continues to be) a recurring presence on the windowsill of Skagen houses. Gardeners were able to propagate the plant from the cuttings taken from a specimen cultivated at the museum, whose origin can be traced back to the time of the artists’ colony. This *Pelargonium* was initially cultivated by Ingeborg Østergaard (1886–1969), the daughter of Skagens Hotel’s owner, to whom Drachmann had written several letters, referring to her as “Skagens Rose”.

³⁸ The house had a small plantation, today protected as a forest reserve (*fredskov* in Danish), as a neighbour.

³⁹ Anna Ancher’s *In the vegetable garden*, and Michael Ancher’s *The girl with the sunflowers* (1893) and *Anna Ancher returning from the field* (1902).

Since the early 2000s, the museum has collaborated with a local school to sell the propagated plants on Mother's Day.

As a process, the propagation of plants (and in particular of flowers) has always been a widespread practice. This project therefore not only gives visitors the opportunity to grow a piece of the colony's history in their houses, it helps revive an old tradition that formed part of the artists' life and involves the public in a form of "cultural propagation".

Learning from Art Museums of Skagen: the potential of house museums' gardens as active heritage resources

The work carried out at Art Museums of Skagen shows a range of possibilities to unfold the potential of historic gardens as active heritage resources, while also expanding the critical reflection that remains necessary in relation to their curation and use. This insight may contribute to acknowledgment that these spaces possess a special "voicefulness"⁴⁰; although often overlooked, this quality may offer new opportunities to enhance interpretation, exhibition and dissemination practices in house museums. Ultimately it may even help overcome some of the assumptions that constrain their operation in contemporary scenarios. Some possibilities seem to emerge from the distinctive nature of these assets that cannot be preserved by applying the same principles and practices that "fossilise" interior spaces and rather require the development of a new approach. The diverse heritage attributes of gardens could thus contribute to envisioning and enabling more engaging ways of revisiting history.⁴¹ Potentially, they might also pave the way for innovative curatorial practices that transcend the boundaries of traditional interpretation and master narratives.

The special ontological conditions and conservation requirements of gardens also give rise to new needs concerning how heritage sites address different scales of time. To preserve their history, they must remain alive "in the present". This principle implies that their management must respond to contemporary and emerging challenges, including those generated by climate change, the biodiversity crisis and mass tourism. The strict connection between past and present that is inherent in the curation of house museum gardens could become an opportunity to promote new interpretations and uses of heritage. Specifically, it could enable the development of new visions of the past, activate the past as a tool for rethinking the present, and even support the search for "stories that matter",⁴² which is one of the greatest challenges facing historic house museums today.

The living nature of historic gardens may also foster the development of a new "syntax" for organising visitors' experience. While relationships between objects and people in galleries are usually orchestrated through "staged encounters", the experience of open green spaces calls for a more open construction.

Gardens thus seem to be an ideal setting to provide visitors with the possibility to "practice their own forms of often quite unpredictable agency".⁴³ Accordingly, they could become laboratories for enhancing museum practices – as exemplified by the Skagen case.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that activating gardens as heritage resources entails methodological, curatorial and operational risks. Visitor-oriented staging can simplify

⁴⁰ RUSKIN, J. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. New York: Dover, 1880 (1989), p. 186.

⁴¹ LASC, A. et al. *Revisiting the Past in Museums and at Historic Sites*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁴² WEST, P. Of Babies and Bathwater. Birthplace 'Shrines' and the Future of the Historic House Museum. In: *Born in the U.S.A.*, edited by S. C. Bruggeman. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, p. 264.

⁴³ BENNETT, T. *Making Culture, Changing Society*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

complex historical narratives or privilege visually appealing scenes over more nuanced forms of interpretation; successful garden programmes may reinforce touristification, while increased use may place additional pressure on fragile material and botanical systems, thereby accelerating physical wear, generating ecological stress, and expanding maintenance costs.

Another issue requiring more explicit theoretical articulation concerns the status of authenticity in the activation of historic gardens. In such contexts, authenticity cannot be reduced to the survival of original material fabric, nor can it be assessed according to the same criteria ordinarily applied to interiors, furnishings or movable objects. Since gardens are living, processual and continuously transformed environments, their authenticity emerges from the interaction of several registers: material authenticity (when historic elements such as trees, dunes, paths, or spatial relations survive); biological or processual authenticity (when continuity is sustained through cultivation, growth, decay, replacement, and care); documentary authenticity (when elements grounded in paintings, photographs, written sources, or inventories are reintroduced into the site); and experiential or constructive authenticity (when contemporary interventions evoke historically meaningful atmospheres, practices, or relations without claiming to restore an original state). These registers do not operate interchangeably and should therefore be clearly differentiated. Material and documentary evidence provide the strongest curatorial basis, processual continuity is specific to gardens as living heritage, while constructive or experiential forms of authenticity require particular caution, especially because their mediated character must be made explicit. In this sense, the activation of historic gardens depends not on the recovery of a single authentic condition but on the careful organisation of different degrees and modes of authentication, each of which must be critically justified, documented and communicated to visitors.

The experience developed at Art Museums of Skagen represents a model of good practice whose development was facilitated by special conditions: the presence of three historically resonant venues, the availability of a rich visual and textual archive, a direct and demonstrable relationship between artworks and garden spaces, continuity in horticultural expertise and care, and the institutional capacity to invest in long-term maintenance. Institutions with limited staff, smaller gardens or weaker documentation may need to adopt these strategies selectively, or adapt them into more modest and context-sensitive forms.

This qualification does not diminish the relevance of the Skagen experience. On the contrary, several of the strategies presented have a considerable degree of methodological transferability – particularly those related to conservation and propagation, as they may be adapted wherever gardens contain documented natural features, historic plant material or reproducible living elements. Reenactment and staging, by contrast, are more dependent on the density and reliability of the available evidence, the ecological tolerance of the site and the management of visitor flows.

What may be transferred most productively from Skagen, therefore, is not the specific formal configuration of each intervention but the curatorial logic underpinning them: the identification of garden elements endowed with documentary, mnemonic, or experiential value; the selection of an appropriate mode of authentication; and the explicit mediation of the interpretive status of each intervention.

The Skagen case thus points less to a replicable model than to a critical threshold. Garden activation can enrich the spatialisation of memory only when it resists the temptation to convert the past into an easily consumable environment, and when it remains anchored in

documentation, ecological care and interpretive transparency. Its significance lies not in resolving the tensions among conservation, experience, and public appeal, but in making those tensions productive.

Supplementary Figures



Fig. 1: Michael Ancher, *Woman planting seed potatoes* (1910) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM1197.



Fig. 2: Two artists and a friend resting in the garden in front of Havehuset, where Skagens Museum later was built in 1928. Peder Severin Krøyer, *Michael Ancher, Helene Christensen and Anna Ancher in Brondum's Old Garden* (1885) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM25.



Fig. 3: The main entrance of Anchers Hus (1905 ca.) © Art Museums of Skagen, HAFF2737.



Fig. 4: Anna Ancher, *The Entrance to Our Garden* (1903) © Art Museum of Skagen, SKM63.



Fig. 5: The entrance of the front garden at Anchers Hus (2024) © Art Museums of Skagen.



Fig. 6: Peder Severin Krøyer, *Roses* (1893) © Art Museums of Skagen, SKM1851.



Fig. 7: The Alba Maxima rosebush growing in front of the Havehuset (2026) © Art Museums of Skagen.

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