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# The choice we face on our historic houses

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Recent [commentary](#) on the state of Como House points to a larger issue: the condition and preservation of Victoria's great heritage of historic houses and their gardens. Como House and other publicly accessible ones - Rippon Lea in Elsternwick, Labassa in Caulfield, Villa Alba in Kew, and Werribee Park - exemplify Melbourne's immense prosperity in the second half of the 19th century.

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These houses are the lucky ones that were not demolished or ruined beyond saving, but this was not achieved without a struggle. These "happy few", surviving with vestiges of their original interiors and surrounding estates, form a vital part of the state's architectural and cultural fabric. Incontestably, they should be conserved for the future. Their preservation has been largely due to the diligence and dedication of committed volunteers, who recognised their significance before wreckers and developers could get to them. In many cases, management by the National Trust has been the key to their survival.

It goes without saying that, like all abodes, these mansions and gardens are expensive to restore, preserve and maintain. Despite some government assistance at various points, most require major funding to secure their future and to present them properly.

As the Como House debate illustrates, resources must be allocated to the preservation of these buildings if we are to restore rather than totally rebuild them. The cost of preserving historic houses and their interiors will only increase as they age and require greater maintenance and as conservation scholarship informs their restoration. Inevitably, more buildings deemed worthy of preservation will be added to the list.

There are many points to consider. Should we be constructing so many new buildings if we can't even preserve the past? Should we not determine now which of the many architecturally significant houses being constructed today will warrant preservation in future decades, and how to preserve them? And what of the new generation of private museums (some still occupied by their creators)? Who will fund them in 50 years' time? Preservation must not be seen as the preserve of 19th-century houses but must include the finest examples from our own era.

Grand, dilapidated mansions are only one aspect of Melbourne and Victoria's architectural heritage. Many other significant if less imposing residential buildings form part of our heritage. The problem, put simply, is that by the time most houses are left to the state, the National Trust or whichever body is empowered to look after them, they are run-down and financial support is unavailable.

The owners of these buildings have created them and resisted the opportunity to sell them to developers. Why should they, or their descendants, be expected to pay for their upkeep after their death? Private support has guaranteed the survival of many of our major houses, but this cannot be left entirely to individuals or the private sector.

What are some models for the maintenance of historic houses? Belgrave at Mornington, built in 1863, was left to the people of Victoria with a substantial endowment to enable its preservation. The Johnston Collection in East Melbourne exists due to funds from its founding benefactor. The modernist house designed by David McGlashan in 1963 for John and Sunday Reed at Heide now forms part of the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where it is used for exhibitions and so has its preservation assured.

The campaign to save Robin Boyd's own house in Walsh Street, South Yarra, built in 1958, led to its purchase by the recently created Robin Boyd Foundation. Boyd, though a great modernist and provocateur, lamented the destruction of so much great 19th-century residential architecture.

What of other houses that are not mansions but have great merit? Think of Napier Waller's house in Ivanhoe, built in 1922. Napier Waller was Australia's finest mural artist. His works are such a feature of Melbourne: the Myer Mural Hall and the mosaic facade on Newspaper House in Collins Street are two of his best known.

Waller's fascinating timber house and contents were left to the state in 2002, with an expectation that they would be preserved. Funds having been insufficient, the house now requires major restoration.

In New South Wales, the government's Historic Houses Trust manages several houses to the highest standards. Founded in 1980 to manage Vaucluse House and Elizabeth Bay House, it now runs several houses and museums across the state. Something of this nature - with government and private representation and funding - is needed in Victoria. Such a body would bring an overall vision to our architectural heritage. It would foster the preservation not only of historic houses but also of our best modernist and contemporary architect-designed houses. It would assist their owners to develop models for their long-term survival.

The common link between the mansion that sits above Como Park and Robin Boyd's modest Walsh Street house is not that they are old, but that far-sighted people have recognised their value and fought to save them. Now it may be up to government and society to contemplate their future.

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