Public historians may think that there are no more new ways to illuminate house museums, especially after much scholarship has pointed out unannounced biases, unconsidered roles of gender, class and race, and tendentious choices to lock buildings in specific temporal-material fixes. House museum curators may assume that the critical unpacking of their sites that has inspired new docent scripts is best left internal in an era in which museums of all kinds, but especially historic sites, are feeling the pinch of funding and attendance. Both will be relieved by Heidi Aronson Kolk’s new volume, *Taking Possession: The Politics of Memory in a St. Louis Town House*, which inscribes an alternate critique of house museums while also suggesting that they are relevant to urban history in unexpected ways—should they lean in.

Kolk offers a deep read of the Campbell House in St. Louis, an 1851 Greek Revival town house that is the last remnant of the city’s first private street, and a relic of once-elite family whose history encompasses Irish immigration, Western expansion, the fur trade that caused St. Louis to exist, the creation of a private bastion of the antebellum elite, Victorian social life, and an intriguing and colorful familial decline. The house caught the eye of antiquarians, historians, and preservationists after the last descendant willed the property to Yale University in the 1930s, suggesting likely demolition for investment property. At the time, the city was clearing its oldest blocks for what would become the site of the Gateway Arch, a symbol of America’s Western history, thus raising a contradiction of this public act of remembrance: St. Louis destroyed the actual physical ties to what its new icon would enshrine. The Campbell House, with its intact interiors full of furnishings that had been scarcely changed since the 1880s, was a talisman of the past being materially severed.

The ultimately successful act of preserving the house and its contents did not just contrast with the city’s clearance of the riverfront for the Gateway Arch, however. It coincided with a rising era of urban renewal practices that dislocated the lives of thousands of Black and poor St. Louisans, whose own homes were rendered into dust to make way for expressways, housing projects or, worse, empty space never fully redeveloped. Kolk delves into the larger paradox of saving a house imbued with nostalgia for a lost elite against the backdrop of mass demolition and dispossession. This dialectic drives the opening introductory chapter and recurs throughout the book, as Kolk makes the case that the Campbell House is a compensatory project for people who are avoiding a larger erasure of heritage.

Kolk explains the book as one that “considers side by side the material histories of life and death, remembering and forgetting, owning and disowning” (7) that
often are employed to venerate the house and its often mythologized-contents—including the matriarch’s kitchen receipt book and the patriarch’s ambiguous buckskin suit—but rarely have been raised to ask what narratives the house fails to articulate or embody. Readers may be familiar with historic house sites like the Whitney Plantation or the Lower East Side Tenement Museum that have deliberately been interpreted to examine the lives of laborers and enslaved people—the everyday occupants widely acknowledged in public history to be omitted from narration and interpretation of typical house museums. Kolk seeks to transcend this sort of revision by interrogating the Campbell House’s own existence as an object of heritage with systemic removal of the heritage of the workers and the oppressed—much of it of the same age as the Campbell House. This interrogation can seem stilted at first, when drawn into relationship with the nearby site of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project. But it becomes a tour de force when it addresses the politics of historic preservation, which came to venerate many places like those lost in the urban renewal era when such preservation suited the interests of mostly white rehabbers and homesteaders. Kolk’s reading of the Campbell House within the practices that led to its preservation is most effective, and most dire for public historians. The larger politics of redlining and demolition are one thing, and can be scorned without requiring further action. The immediate micro-politics of preservation itself are far harder to digest in the post–Black Lives Matter landscape, and not avoidable for historians, curators and practitioners. Here is our reckoning.

Lest Kolk’s push seem polemic or the work of a cultural studies scholar gone too far, readers should know that most of this volume consists of close readings of material evidence—artifacts, photographs, and the house itself. Kolk has a forensic intellect that is at times dazzling in its focus, especially in the chapter analyzing the staged dinner party featuring President Ulysses S. Grant (an actual guest of the house, and a former St. Louisan). Kolk’s read of the party and its funding by a magazine show us that the politics of material culture are granular.

Kolk is commanding while positioning the Campbell House within St. Louis’s larger geographic inequalities, but truly excels when narrating how the Campbell House has served as a metonym for the complex and contested national past. The only gap in Kolk’s analysis is examination of the founders of the organization which rescued the house and made it into a museum. The layers of intentions and omissions that follow beg for some look at verifiable accounts of what the Campbell House was supposed to do originally. What it has done, and what it can do, are presented meticulously. Ultimately, the suggestion that the house can be understood only within the framework of St. Louis’s twentieth-century production of uneven and unequal geographies of heritage is not an attack, but a reminder to the Campbell House and other house museums that the willingness to expand interpretations can lead to relevance to pressing contemporary historic questions, such as race and power.

Michael R. Allen, Washington University in St. Louis.