

Collecting Change / Changing Collections

Report from a workshop on contemporary collecting, representation, and imagining future practice held on 17th July 2018 at the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies.

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Collecting is a learning activity.

Collecting can be thought of as a valuable learning activity that can help us understand and monitor changing environments—not just a process that creates outputs like collections, documentation, and exhibitions (pg.5).

There has been an increase in self-aware and ‘stunt’ collecting.

Both institutions and donors are keenly aware of the political nature of collecting and that accepting materials or funds can be seen as an endorsement of particular views, politics, and experiences (pg.4).

Active vs. passive collecting?

Active vs. passive collecting are often described as opposing approaches to gaining material, but either can be beneficial and involve a high level of collaboration with community groups and donors (pg.5).

Precarity and the future as a project plan.

Collections work is primarily structured around short-term projects. Does this help us create better futures? (pg. 9).

In the digital realm: What are archives and museums doing to ensure that access to cultural artefacts and knowledge remains freely accessible and aren't exploited by private companies, who can often be more effective than heritage organisations at archiving and data management? (pg. 11).

The right to research. In archives and museums, the right to research is a unique and impactful way collections management and care can increase informed and democratic citizenship in a globalised and networked world (pg.11).

Research Background

The research that formed the basis of the 'Changing Collections/Collecting Change' workshop is part of the [Heritage Futures](#) project, a 4-year research programme (2015-2019) funded by an AHRC Large Grant. Heritage Futures works across four universities and national and international heritage sector partners and takes as its premise that heritage is as much about how we create legacies for the future as it is about the past. The project works with and innovatively compares a much wider range of practices than are usually deemed to be heritage including [nuclear waste management](#), [crop diversity conservation](#), [deep space messaging](#), and [rewilding](#).

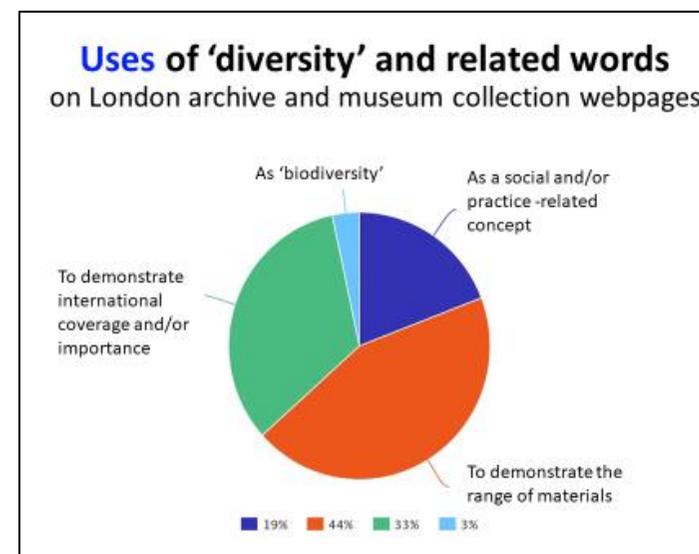
Kyle's PhD works on the project's diversity theme, and explores how contemporary biodiversity and social diversity are defined and collected to shape heritage futures in archives and museums in London. His research has asked: what does collecting diversity mean in practice for social history and natural science collections? And: does collecting materials from underrepresented groups have an impact on how collections are managed or accessed?



Presenting research on the day.

To answer the question about what diversity looks like in collections practice, it's necessary to look at how the word is defined and used in the sector. The initial phase of research involved a review of the websites of over 300 public archives and museums in London that collect contemporary material.ⁱⁱ From these, data was collected on how diversity was represented on webpages that related specifically to collections held.

Figure 1.



'Diversity' and related words only appeared on about a third (36%) of these pages, which speaks to how diversity can sometimes be thought of as a matter for education or outreach, but not a core part of collections holdings or activity.

On the pages where 'diversity' did appear (Figure 1), it could most often be understood as describing material variety, or to demonstrate the range of material in a collection. Relatedly, diversity next most frequently appeared as an indicator of the geographic variety within a collection, particularly to emphasise that the collection was important because of its geographic or material spread. Together these made up the majority of the ways that diversity was referred to in the context of collections. Diversity much less often appeared as a term reflecting either social diversity within the collection or diversity as a practice that impacted collecting or collections management.

At the Collecting Change/Changing Collections event, one curator related the story of a white male colleague who, after being told he needed to collect diversity, chose to only collect 'left-handed collections' because he thought collecting diversity was nonsense.ⁱⁱⁱ This response shows how easily efforts for collections to include diversity (i.e. historically underrepresented groups) can be sidestepped in favour of representing intentionally empty 'variety'. Because of this, we should think of collecting diversity as not only about increasing representation from different groups, but also about changing collections practices and ways of working.

Collecting diversity is not only about increasing representation from different groups, but is also about changing collections practices and ways of working.

This report does not attempt to define contemporary collecting, as workshop participants had very different experiences of the time frame of contemporary material. The impact of contemporary collecting (and consequently collections' representation) also varied across archives and museums for a variety of reasons. Important variables to mention are: size (the impact of new material entering your collection dramatically differs if the collection is very small or very large) and the relative nature of representation based on the context the organisation is working within (both locally, and disciplinarily).

The questions and provocations raised in this report are not intended to be exhaustive or applicable in every context, but hopefully provide a novel overview of key issues raised by stakeholders in the sector. Hopefully, as reflected by UCL MA discussion facilitator Rachel Tan, 'the workshop was a culturally and politically opportune one that brought us into a time and place of closer, clearer examination at the powers that shape contemporary collecting, the entities that wield them, and the agents that disrupt them.'

Making decisions about contemporary collecting

Q1. How do we know what is significant to collect now and keep for the future?

Determining significance

People use a variety of instruments, tools, and frameworks to help assign significance to the contemporary material brought into collections.

One of the most common ways of assigning material significance is by appealing to **representativeness** – something is significant because it is representative of a personal story, community, or identity. **Media headlines** are also a popular way of evidencing significance: many contemporary collecting acquisitions are justified as important because the person, issue, or object associated with them has received news coverage. While both 'representativeness' and 'media headlines' can be used to demonstrate that material is significant, neither are neutral justifications.^{iv}

Other frameworks for significance discussed were:

- **Trends:** analysing fashions, instinct, and the zeitgeist (e.g. LGBTQ ephemera or material related to migration).
- **Haphazard:** opportunistic, realistic, budget-based, and dependant on storage and resource.
- **Storytelling:** when something represents experience and emotion, or helps to put people back in the collection, intimate and daily objects.
- **Community-driven:** being in constant conversation with communities.
- **Past good practice:** 'When we're collecting we think about all the good collecting that was done in the 1980s and try to make choices that will feel relevant to our equivalents in the future'.
- **Hierarchical:** things are significant because they are locally, nationally, or internationally important, in that order.
- **Pre-set:** sometimes there's little room for making decisions about significance, i.e. an organisations' legal or other remit to collect some things (and not others).

The uncertainty of significance was also raised: we can't really know what will be significant in the future. If we think of our own personal inheritances—archives or objects from our parents and grandparents—these are as likely to be unwanted or unremarked upon as they are to be cared for and appreciated. Significance varies based on who's involved.

Self-aware collecting and 'stunt collecting'

Both institutions and donors are keenly aware of the political nature of collecting.

Some institutions have seen contemporary collecting and marketing draw closer together: staff are aware that high profile acquisitions can be good marketing. A workshop participant used the term 'stunt collecting' in reference to high profile acquisitions that are unlikely to be displayed or used due to the nature of their material. For example, four different London collections have expressed interest in collecting the 'Trump Baby Blimp', despite the fact that its size (either inflated or deflated) would make it extremely difficult to actively use or display.

Living, self-aware donors shifts the traditional relationship between donors and institutions. Donors are also aware that the collection of their material can be seen or publicised as an institution's endorsement of their experience, views, and/or politics, even if this is not the institution's intention. This can benefit either or both the institution and the donors, but it can also cause issues, for example when donors object to how their materials are used. One example of the latter was in August 2018 when more than 40 artists removed their work from a Design Museum exhibition on activism after the museum allowed an arms company to hire their space for an event. The artists concerned decided that they did not want their work on display in an institution that implicitly endorsed arms manufacture, and publically withdrew their work before the exhibition had finished its run.

Active vs. passive collecting

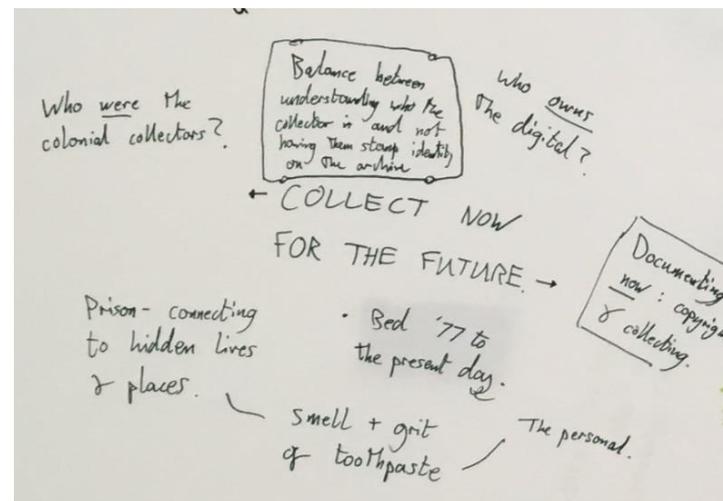
'Active' vs. 'passive' collecting were two prominent ways of diving approaches to contemporary collecting.

Active collecting refers to the organisation seeking out material in some way, while passive collecting refers to letting audiences, communities, and/or

individual donors approach the organisation with material. Although active collecting is sometimes held up an ideal, both approaches have different strengths, and either can involve a high level of collaboration with community groups and donors.

In terms of active collection, people spoke about recognising:

- How museums can be skilled at collecting some materials in some areas, but may require work in others. One participant said that in their collection, 'the stories of men in suits wash up whether you pursue them or not', so they put more of their collecting energy into other areas.
- Personal experience and agenda in collecting: balancing between understanding who a collector is while not having their identity stamped too deeply upon a public collection.



A section of collaborative mind-mapping, including drawing out the significance of artefacts at Islington Museum's Echoes of Holloway Prison exhibition.

In terms of passive collecting, people spoke about the value of being responsive to communities' ideas and desires around what should be collected, rather than the organisation's priorities. This works particularly well in a context where long-term relationships with communities and individuals have been established.

An ecosystem of collections

The aspiration to be a universal collection that represents an entire area, system of life, or culture has largely been abandoned. At the same time, ephemera and ephemeral items, not often part of traditional collections meant to represent these stable universals, play a larger role in contemporary collecting.

One alternative way of thinking about collections considered at the workshop was as an ecosystem: a network of institutional (and non-institutional) holdings connected by features like geographic area, types of material, or interest.

The digital realm is one example of collecting and collections in a connected ecosystem. Digital material also raises questions about the boundaries of the collections, authorship, and ownership:

- How should you collect or source aspects of viral culture and memes, which by their nature are rapidly modified and widely circulated, and where original context may be impossible to find?
- What happens to records and continuity when the digital version of older print materials are not collected? For example: although the London Transport Museum has extensively collected Underground tickets and oyster cards, but not oyster card data on contemporary ticket machine software. Is there anything lost by not collecting these digital materials, or not?

Declined collections are also a kind of ghost ecosystem of collections. Some participants spoke about the potential usefulness of having a register showing where collections have been declined from, in order for archives and museums to be aware of what's has been offered to similar institutions and to help the material find a home elsewhere.

An ecosystem approach that more effectively shares information about declined material might also be able to address common issues that were raised, which included: what to do when you're offered a high volume of similar or identical material, and wanting to feel able to say 'no' to collections (but offer alternative donation sites).

Collecting as a learning activity

Biological recording and zoological species identification are not always included when talking about contemporary collecting in the archive and museum sector. However, they provide a different and novel way of looking at the activity of collecting and what collecting is for. What if we thought of collecting as a learning activity that helped us to understand and monitor changing environments?

The Angela Marmont Centre for UK biodiversity (AMC) at the Natural History Museum's helps to build and share expertise in biological recording and UK species identification through its training and resources. The AMC particularly supports people to learn how to identify the UK's cryptic taxa, which include pollinators, biocontrol insects, and lichen, which are all important for managing and monitoring the quality of the environment. Unlike most of the UK's species, the majority of the cryptic taxa can't be identified without collection because of their size and obscure features.

Since you can't learn to identify these species without collecting them, collecting at the AMC is primarily a way to build expertise in identifying species, rather than a process with an expected collections output (e.g. acquisitions, or an exhibition). While some specimens might enter the museum's collection, others will be used temporarily or taken home. These more fluid types of collections practices have commonalities with other forms non-custodial collecting in social history, but also have a long tradition across the field sciences.



Fieldwork at the Angela Marmont Centre, learning how to identify the insect group Hymenoptera.

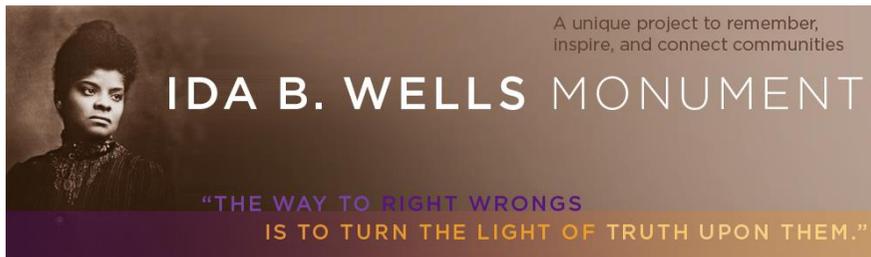
Workshop object stories

Workshop participants brought an item or an image of something that they had recently collected or had the potential to be significant in a contemporary collection. These items provided specific examples that helped to anchor discussions about collecting.

Ida B. Wells Monument flyer

UCL PhD student Hannah Ishmael, who researches the development of Black archival organisations in London, chose a flyer from a campaign to create a monument to Ida B Wells, a journalist and civil rights activist in late 19th-early 20th century America.

Image credit: idabwellsmonument.org



For Hannah, the flyer was compelling partly because of its context. There are currently 70,000 Confederate statues in the south and only 5 of women. The ephemerality of the flyer, and potentially the campaign, also raised questions: if the monument isn't built, would this project be remembered, or deemed worth remembering? The potential shift between monument and archive also recalls Hannah's work and research with the Black Cultural Archives, whose original name was (and officially remains) the African People's Historical Monument Foundation because of its initial aspirations to collect and curate museum-type collections as well as archives.

Mars 2020 Rover and MOXIE

Sarah Dry, trustee of the Science Museum Group, brought in an image of NASA's Mars 2020 Rover and MOXIE, one of its' accompanying instruments that will attempt produce oxygen from Mars' atmosphere, and perhaps one day render the planet colonisable. Although MOXIE could easily be presented as an unequivocally positive and 'cool' technological artefact, it was brought in order to raise questions about the broader social and political in which it might be understood.

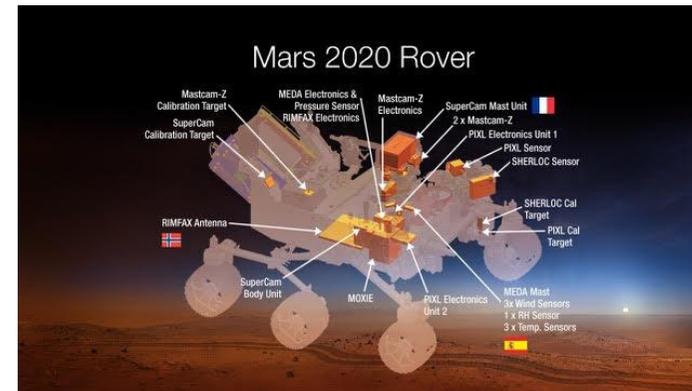
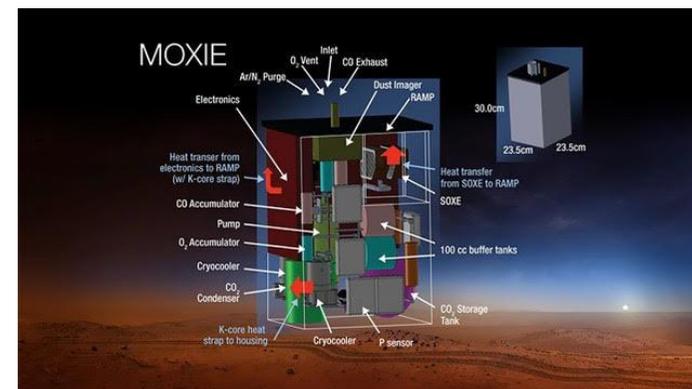


Image credit: nasa.gov

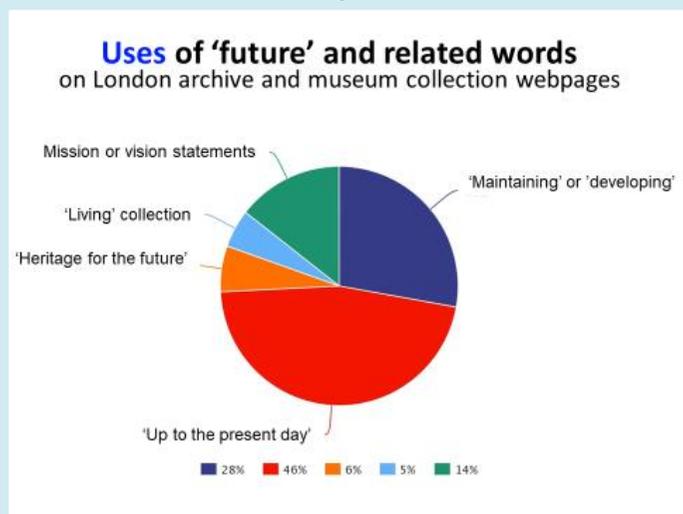


MOXIE then is an ambivalent artefact for a museum collection: does it represent an exciting new era in the exploration of space or is it a tool that will embark us on an uncontrolled alteration of the Martian atmosphere akin to what has happened on Earth? What does it mean to collect such an object? Is it worth preserving for the future?

Exploring future scenarios for collections

Although it's increasingly recognised that archive and museum collections are engaging in building legacies for the future, research by the Heritage Futures team and affiliates has demonstrated that heritage practitioners do not think about the future very much, and when they do, they generally assume it looks more or less the same as the present.^v Using the same database of collections as cited in the Research Background, the PhD survey research confirmed these findings in London archives and museums.

Figure 2.



Slightly more than half (58%) of the archives and museum websites in the data set mentioned the future or related words. However, Figure 2. shows that the future appeared only in the broadest sense, usually to indicate that collecting at the organisation continued 'up to the present day', or that the collecting is generally maintained. These categories, making up 75% of use, are all predicated on a smoothly continuing present. For example, an expression like collecting 'up to the present day' is invariably not literal, but its use as a placeholder suggest that it can be assumed that the collection will continue in more or less the same way. This raises a provocative question: if we expect collections to remain more or less the same, then do we really expect drives for diversity and representation to make an impact in the future? For many, things remaining like the present is not a comfortable or ideal state.

Workshop discussion on the futures began with the card game [The Thing From the Future](#), developed by The Situation Lab and adapted by Heritage Futures for the heritage and conservation sectors. In the game, players create scenarios that might emerge around a specific artefact over a particular future time-frames, contexts, and moods. This encourages players to investigate their assumptions about time frames in heritage (a decade, a generation, a millennium) and explore alternative futures for heritage materials.



Participants play The Thing From the Future card game.

'Interestingly, many of the scenarios or objects that we came up with tended to paint a negative image of the future, perhaps revealing how much we are influenced in our ideas about the future by contemporary science fiction literature and films. One participant asked: **If we see our future in such negative terms, how can our collecting practices speak to some of these fears?**'

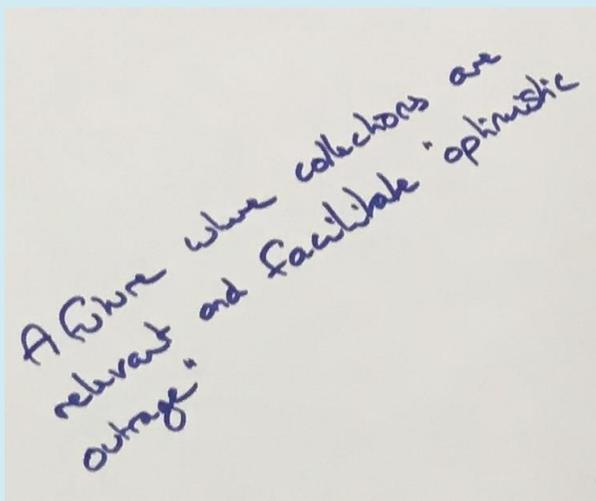
– Constance Wyndham, PhD student facilitator

Q2. What kinds of futures do we want for our collections and how do we communicate these visions?

Facilitating inclusive personal and imaginative journeys

There was a strong desire to improve access to collections, in order to be able meet a variety of needs and make collections a truly shared resource. Principles raised included:

- Affirming the values and experiences of audiences
- Encouraging playfulness: 'collections should activate creativity and future imaginaries in people and for society'
- 'Lived experience being raised to the top level'
- Using digital and virtual reality to create emotional connection



Participant contribution: 'A future where collections are relevant and facilitate optimistic outrage'.

'Giving life to objects which have lost function'

- Aspiring to collecting meaningful objects, and valuing collections care in a variety of contexts
- Dictating preservation by the need for and usefulness of the material
- Collections for helping to understand and be part of collective memory

Instruments of change and activism

Archives and collections can be used to ask questions of our social reality and model research and learning processes. They can encourage and support explorations of collections, past collectors, and being collectors ourselves.

Building a strong ethical base to research and inquiry can be used to inspire change in attitudes and influence future politics. It's important for archive and collections staff not to be complacent or 'bubble-bound'.

'Accepting the death of things and the disintegrating of materials as inevitable'

- Can we tell histories of the future which are histories of maintenance, care, decline, and persistence? Is the future always a space for novelty and the new?

Archiving as a holistic approach, not just documentation

Archivists spoke about the potential for intervening in formulaic practice by intervening in and annotating archival records in more flexible ways. Digitisation has also prompted longer term thinking about oral history usage rights, and the necessity of educating people to make decisions around depositing and consent.

Transdisciplinary integration

Many participants aspired to make greater connections between science, art, and culture, working both within collections and internally across different organisational teams or departments.

Precarity and the future as a project plan

The impact of government austerity policies on funding make it hard to plan the future. Future planning in the archives and museum sector is dominated by project planning and the timescales of funding bodies.

Does structuring collections work primarily around short-term projects help us create better futures? The Heritage Lottery Fund asks for 10-year plans, but this is on the longer end, with 1 to 2-year exhibition timelines on the other.

Based on this, some participants struggled with the alternative futures raised by the scenario card game. Since their work only deals with the future that's immediately in front of them, the longer timelines felt very abstract.

What are our organisations' orientation to time? How long does it take to accession, collect, display, engage? How do we deal with the desire for quick wins with public money, when impact may be hard to measure and/or longer term?

'Collecting for credibility – if we don't collect more inclusively then what we collect isn't useful or meaningful'

— Ellie Miles, Documentary Curator, London Transport Museum

Making Change in Collections

Q3. How does change happen in our collections and wider organisations?

Change requires both bottom-up and top-down work

Participants spoke of a willingness to take risk at lower levels in an organisation, but risk aversion at high levels. People at lower levels are celebrated when they take successful risks, but forced to bear the costs when they don't work out.

Consequently, people discussed the importance of embracing failure in practice as well as in theory. The development team at London Metropolitan Archives has seen itself as an experimental laboratory, where failure is allowed, and there is an understanding that you might achieve different outcomes than you originally intended. The size of organisations and teams can have a big impact. Change and communication across large organisations can be slow. More often than not, instead of pushing high profile 'stunt collecting' marketing, PR departments won't make collections news as a priority for dissemination.

Archive and collections staff often aren't able to do marketing on top of their work and also often don't have the skills to do so. Embedding collections and engagement across organisations is a key goal.

- What is the relationship between collections change and organisational change?

'One contributor commented that change in collecting practices within institutions is often dependent on the power and charisma of individuals within the organisation to enact change and we discussed both the benefits and pitfalls of charismatic leadership in institutions.'

— Constance Wyndham, UCL PhD student facilitator

Do we want to change collections and their management?

Participants brought up historic houses and their collections as an example of where change can be particularly difficult, as what people see at the site is always supposed to remain the same.

Archivists spoke about the having conflicted relationships with change in highly structured collections: are box order or depositor order ever mixed around or given to others to curate? What might be gained by doing so? Catalogue standards and protocols affect the questions we can ask of them. There was a recognition that this was an opportunity for creativity and change, but that the 'bedrock' and continuity of current management systems is also important.

Although digital collections management often replicates traditional systems, participants' emphasised that cataloguing doesn't have to reflect the organisation of physical collections.

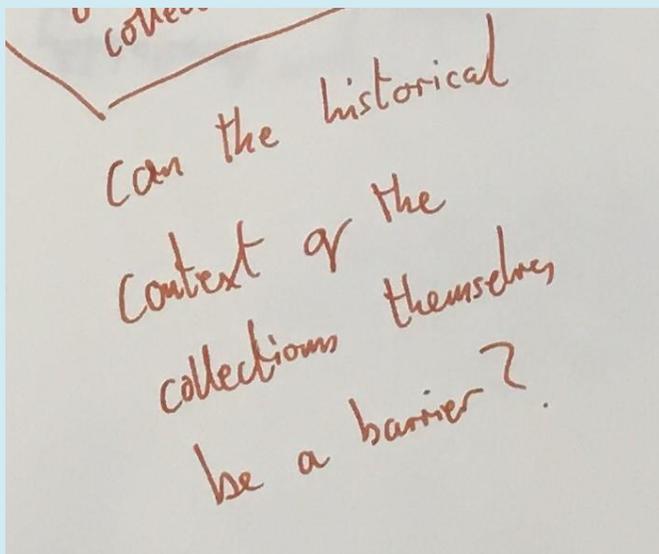
- Why are artists brought in to make collections interventions; why aren't people working in collections encouraged to do so?
- How do you formalise changes in collections which are otherwise linked to tacit individual knowledge? How is or can change be instituted in archival and collections training?

Changing with stakeholders

Sometimes heritage organisations' perception of who their audience is holds them back. Some participants argued strongly for having faith in your audience, instead of being scared of upsetting a narrowly imagined segment.

If organisations aren't willing to genuinely engage stakeholders in change processes, they risk creating 'changeless change'.^{vi} Including stakeholders in change processes help people buy into change, but it's important to encourage inclusive rather than exclusive feelings of ownership. Exclusive feelings of ownership can lead staff and volunteers to be controlling of people's engagement with archive and collections or block change.

Contrary to how archives and collections work is portrayed, workshop participants reflected that you might not always want the most passionate individual in the job, as sometimes these qualities make people resistant to change or opening up. There are benefits to inviting stakeholders who can bring more dispassionate analysis.



Participant contribution: 'Can the historical context of collections themselves be a barrier [to change]?'

Reflections

Collections, privatisation and data commons

One provocation brought up during the final discussion was that digital heritage collections are actually much worse at archiving and using data than private companies like Google, Facebook, or proprietary databases and image galleries. What does this mean for organisations that aspire to widen public access to resources and information online?

Practitioners spoke about the importance of sharing information and commercial skills when negotiating contracts and entering into digitisation partnerships with private companies in order to protect their material. One curator described looking for photographs of the exhibition that she had commissioned and only being able to find them for sale online.

Although there's an expectations of a commons licence for public material, this might not always be the best option for communities, artists, or other depositors. Issues of trust, privacy, and people's livelihood (should an artist have to agree to commons licencing of their work?) at play.

Do we want to collect?

Although the workshop had a presumption toward continued collecting, it was also emphasized that it's okay not to collect. Participants advocated for balancing collecting with providing access to current collections.

In a similar vein, participants also questioned that it was necessary for collections to inform the future, or to be collected with the future in mind. Not every collection needs a function, and in truth many collections can be, at least partially, a product of chance. Overcommitting to having collections that are 'useful' for the future potentially means over-rationalising them and restricting potential for future creative encounters.

The right to research

Within the heritage sector, collections work is sometimes devalued in comparison to producing exhibitions, high-profile programming, or curatorial research.

However, the management of archive and museum collections is incredibly important for providing direct access not just to physical materials, but also to what scholar Arjun Appadurai has termed the 'right to research'.^{vii} Contemporary collecting and collections management mthe ability to facilitate this right.

Instead of defining research as a specialised professional task, research can be thought of as a universal capacity to make disciplined inquiry into the world around us. Appadurai argues that increasing this capacity has significant potential to increase informed and democratic citizenship in our globalised and networked world.

This report has highlighted how collecting can be thought of as a valuable learning activity that helps us to understand and monitor changing environments, not just a process that creates outputs like collections or exhibitions. Participants spoke of this aspiration in terms of using archives collections to engage people with their lived experience and to provide people with the tools to ask questions about their social reality.



Plenary reflections. Photo by Harald Fredheim.

Notes and References

ⁱ Report text and photos by the author unless otherwise credited.

ⁱⁱ The data for this analysis was primarily gathered from the National Archives 'Find an Archive' database (previously known as the Directory of Archives, or ARCHON). This represents the largest and single set of data publically available for public archives in London which is kept up to date. Because of its comprehensiveness, it also captures the majority of museums in London (through their organisational archives, special collections, and libraries) as well as public libraries with special collections and archives, and organisational archives (both for profit and non-profit). However, additional research was done through other databases and online to make sure all relevant public museums and archives were included. Any archive, public library, museum, or organisation with an archive or museum collection that had an interest in representing or relating to contemporary publics and environments and allowed public (i.e. not only specialist or professional) access was included. There was only a small selection of biodiversity related collections in the sample, partly because they are not always included within more culture and social-heritage focuses listings of archives collections, and partly because some are geared toward more specialist access. For further information about this data, please contact the author.

ⁱⁱⁱ While 'left-handed collections' are not necessarily an illegitimate way to approach aspects of diversity (for example, as part of a historical look at accessibility in schools) the curator in question did not approach it in this spirit.

^{iv} For instance: is material that is not representative insignificant? Is media coverage always a neutral arbiter of public significance?

^v Hogberg A., Holtorf, C. and S. May. 2018. No future in archaeological heritage management? *World Archaeology* 49(5). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2017.1406398>

^{vi} Fredheim, H. 2017. Endangerment driven heritage volunteering: democratization or changeless change? *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24(6). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1399285>

^{vii} Appadurai, A. 2006. The right to research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(2). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600750696>
Appadurai also returned to this topic in the book *The future as cultural fact: essays on the global condition* (2013).