
Records, Memory and Space: Locating Archives in the Landscape

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In 1989, my family and I experienced a powerful category five hurricane with winds reaching 160 miles – 250 kilometres – per hour. This was on a tropical island in the Caribbean – a highly hurricane-prone area – where the weather was always warm, the trees always in bloom and the landscape lush and green. Like typhoons in the Pacific, hurricanes move at varying speeds and often they can stall and almost stop while their winds relentlessly pound and destroy everything within their reach. Such was the case with this particular hurricane, Hugo, which lingered over the island for more than twelve hours. When we finally emerged from the ruins of our house we found an unfamiliar world. Not only were buildings destroyed, telephone poles torn down, power lines blown away, but all the leaves had been stripped from the

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trees and bushes, flowers had disappeared, even the grass was all gone. From a familiar green and colourful vista we were now in an alien brown and black landscape.

Over the next several months as we walked and drove around the island, particularly on those roads close to home, we felt disoriented and kept losing our way. Familiar landmarks, both natural and man-made, had disappeared. We could not adapt to this new environment. We felt disturbed and uncomfortable. The lack of green leaves and the black twisted fallen branches turned the once-familiar trees and bushes into strange and unfamiliar objects. The roads were crowded with small birds, refugees from the leafless trees with no place to hide.

As the months passed, our feeling of disorientation did not re-adjust, change or dissipate. We continued to feel uncomfortable and lose our way. It was not until almost a year after the hurricane when leaves and flowers began to reappear, trees grow back, power lines were restored and the birds began nesting again, that a feeling of comfort and personal stability began to return. Our internal landscape, our very personal memory map, our inner archive, our 'maps made in the heart,'¹ once more harmonized with our physical surroundings – restoring a sense of place and most importantly *our own* sense of *our* place.

INTRODUCTION

Landscape and place were pivotal themes in the centennial 'Shaping Canberra' conference held at the Australian National University in September 2013. The contours of the pre-colonial terrain as well as its later purpose-built configurations permeated much of the discussion, as did motifs of archives – as maps, records, and traces – and memory – as personal, collective and cultural. The relationships between collective remembrance, personal identity and historical trace emerged as tightly bound to geography and the sense of place.

'Constancy of place,' writes sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, 'is a formidable basis for establishing a strong sense of sameness. Even as we ourselves undergo dramatic changes both individually and collectively, our physical surroundings usually remain relatively stable. As a result, they constitute a reliable locus of memories and often serve as a major foci of personal as well as group nostalgia.'² Connecting our external location with our internal sense of ourselves, implicitly suggests that the reverse is also the case. As in the case of the Hurricane Hugo and the subsequent sense of dislocation, when the place is no longer constant and our physical surroundings no longer stable, our personal memories as well as our collective memories undergo traumatic unease. Or as

Cuban author Antonio Benitez-Rojo writes, 'One's identity is, in more than one sense, one's sense of one's place. Who I am is a function of where I am or where I think I am.'³

The connections between memory and landscape, their relationship to archival records as deep, broad testimonies over time in a wide variety of formats and manifestations, and the implications of these relationships for personal and collective identity, is the focus of this essay first presented as a keynote address at the Shaping Canberra conference. How records help to define our place within a landscape, ground our ability to locate ourselves and our communities within the larger topography and fuel our collective identity and sense of our cultural selves is explored here from the perspective of archives.

Linking archives, memory and landscape, this article considers a series of questions and attempts to address some of them: How do archivists and scholars who concern themselves with archives think about place and its relationship to records? Why and how is place archival? How are those archival relationships expressed and what do they signify for the people inhabiting that space? What are the memory implications of the relationship between place, archives and community and how are traditional archives both the products of place as well as influencers themselves upon the landscape? And as the presence of the National Archives in Canberra suggests, the archives of place also cannot be divorced from the politics and power structures of place. Questioning whose archives and whose memories define the narrative and whose story of place is being told and privileged is also central to this discussion.

Expanding the sense of place beyond the personal to the communal, historian William Turkel notes that, 'deciphering the material evidence of human imprints on the earth – or 'reading the landscape' – is 'a humane art, unrestricted to any profession, unbounded by any field.'⁴ The landscape, therefore, can itself be considered as a text that is continually shaped and re-shaped, a collection of information amassed and redefined over centuries and millennia, layered records of the relationship between the land and its occupiers.

But in any interrogation of the links between archives and social phenomena, a cautionary note is also in order. Any interrogation is likely to be a multi-faceted process with ambiguous results. Archives themselves are not neutral but rather subject to the contexts in which they were created, the perspectives of the creators and the circumstances under which they are interpreted. As communities construe their own spaces, their members often refer to archival records to support their

interpretations, while others, standing outside a particular community or even within the same one may read those same spaces and those same records in very different ways. Whose interpretation takes precedence is continually challenged and under siege; the predominant stories and the master narratives compete with the less acknowledged minor narratives for recognition. The archives, the records we have created about ourselves and the records that others have created about us, are always contested terrain.

Adding to this ambiguity, it is also important to note that throughout history, records are often cast in both benign and sinister roles, used to support and undergird community memory as well as to dominate and restrict a population.⁵ In these dual roles, the archive may appear as a two-faced mask with memory and cultural heritage on one side, and control on the other. Ironically, the same records can serve both roles at once – and often do – as any visit to a national archives with its exhibits of treaties and constitutions reflecting both the winners and the dispossessed demonstrates. But at the same time, these very portrayals also reaffirm the power of archives in defining and locating peoples and nations.⁶

However, they are read and interpreted, archives are not the unbiased records of events. The fact that they are written by a person or a government to record or reflect particular events or transactions inevitably signals that they are always written from a point of view, out of a particular context, through a distinct lens. But that lack of neutrality does not mean that some truth, or many truths are not there.

HOW ARCHIVISTS THINK ABOUT ARCHIVES AND PLACE

Archives and archival theory are inherently implicated in the sense of place and location and, by inference, in identity and cultural memory. How have archivists traditionally understood and expressed these multiple relationships? And how have the postmodern definitions of ‘the archive’ that have gained significant purchase within academic disciplines over the past two decades influenced this understanding?

Archives are often thought of first as physical places, often buildings, sometimes spaces within buildings. The term ‘houses of memory,’ to describe the archives was coined in 1991 by then president of the International Council on Archives, Jean-Pierre Wallot. By ‘houses of memory,’ Wallot referred to the treasures of our past contained within archival institutions, where, he maintained, archivists are the holders of the ‘keys to collective memory.’⁷ He suggested that archives could be both physical spaces and memory spaces. As physical spaces, they stored

and held their contents, as memory spaces they were the containers of the collective memory of their use and their users and of their own creation and institutional past. As both physical and memory spaces they stood as symbolic representations of particular values or ideas.

More recently, historical geographers writing in the archival literature have noted that, 'it is, after all, its very physicality – its location in Cartesian space, its shelving, the cataloguing systems, its quietness and capacity to promote a sense of solitude, and not least, its ambience – that helps to "define" an archive.'⁸

Academic interest in 'the archive' developed largely in the late twentieth century, initially inspired by the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Archives Fever*.⁹ For these scholars, as for archivists, the physical image of a memory house also seems to be an apt metaphor for an archives, one that arises naturally from Derrida's tracing of the word 'archive' to the Greek word 'arkheion' meaning the house or domicile of a superior magistrate where legal documents were housed.¹⁰ Disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and history have taken a variety of views of the 'archive,' for example envisioning it as a 'sealed, special kind of place from which authenticity and history is judged,' one that, 'combines notions of power, durability, origins place and authority,'¹¹ or as giving 'physical existence to history, for in them [archives] alone is the contradiction of a completed past and a present in which it survives, surmounted. Archives are the embodied essence of the event.'¹²

Although there is a growing archival literature exploring the connections between archives and memory,¹³ archivists have not tended to engage directly with the relationship between archives and place or landscape perhaps because 'place' and location is implicit both in archival theory as well as within the archives (both the physical archives as well as the archival records) themselves as sites of both history and community.¹⁴ But in addition to buildings, place and archive are connected physically in other ways. The first 'place' that the word 'archives' often conjures, for example, is a cobwebbed attic or a damp and mouldy basement. Historian Carolyn Steedman, in her parody/nod to Derrida, equates *Archives Fever* with the dust raised by the scholar working feverishly in the Archive. She writes, 'Archives Fever Proper lasts between sixteen and twenty-four hours, sometimes longer... You think in the delirium: it was their dust I breathed in.'¹⁵

Even though today 'archive' has acquired a multitude of other shapes and formats, we still tend to think of archives as old documents – often static, dead, and generally of value primarily to historians and genealogists, located in physical spaces. In reality, while records or

archives are of course those traditional primary documents, manuscripts and photographs, they are also the current emails, digital images, blogs, tweets and facebook pages that we personally create every day, as well as the electronic files, forms, data and records created by the state. Rather than static entities, archivists tend to see all records – both personal and state generated – as dynamic, part of an ever-evolving continuum, always in a state of creation, open to new interpretations and offering new dimensions of meaning depending on who is reading them, under what conditions and where. This is particularly true in Australia, where archivists have been at the forefront of developing archival strategies around the virtual and evolving relationships between records and society.¹⁶

For archivists, finding the synergy between archives and landscape begins with context and relationships, about the *places* in which the archival records were generated and about *locating* the records in space, time and authorship. Who created these records, where, when and under what circumstances? Whether it is the family scrapbook, government memoranda or a database of vital records, without a frame of reference, the records are meaningless. Provenance or ‘the context of creation’, are the terms that archivists use to describe these relationships and they are crucial, in both their physical and intellectual manifestations, to determining how archives are located within the larger social framework. Core archival principles also reflect this concern, with context becoming a critical factor on many levels of organizing and describing records. In the relationship between archives, memory and place, it is through understanding contexts and locations that the actions and events reflected through the records create a coherent and trustworthy narrative.

In my home state of Massachusetts, for example, state law mandates that town records must remain in the towns in which they were created. No matter the age of the records or of the town, records cannot be sent to the central state archives. Massachusetts has 351 towns, many of them established in the 1600’s. Each of these towns, no matter the size, include a Municipal Clerk’s office where vital statistics – births, deaths and marriages, land transactions, construction permits, sewerage lines and other town activities are recorded and maintained. Few of the towns have archives buildings. Town records may be, and often are, kept in basements, in offices building, or even in the Town Clerk’s home. While, on the one hand, the *placement* of these archival materials presents a continuing preservation concern for archivists and historians, on the other hand, their *placeness* within the environment that created them assures not only that they will remain among the population whom they

are about, but that they will also remain within the environment in which they are most meaningful and where they continue to tell the narrative of the town.

PLACE IN ARCHIVAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

Keeping records close to the place where they were created has long been a central archival practice reflecting both the practical recognition that records not only mirror the place and population that created them, but also that it is through the records of their communities and groups that people develop and hone their collective memory and their own sense of place and identity. Historical societies, community archives and local history rooms in public libraries all reflect this relationship between people, place and archives. 'Place,' notes public historian Delores Haydon, 'is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid. It carries the resonance of homestead, location, and open space in the city as well as a position in the social hierarchy.'¹⁷

Archivists call the principles underlying context, custody and provenance. Custody refers to the succession of families, or persons or government offices who own or hold a collection of materials from the moment they are created.¹⁸ Being able to demonstrate an unbroken chain of custody or ownership in a court of law, whether it is a land claim or some other type of suit, is critical to establishing the integrity, authenticity and reliability of a particular group of records. The location or the persons who physically hold the records in a specific place is an essential element in the legitimacy of the records themselves, in the validity of the records as evidence. For example, generations of birth records of the citizens of those small Massachusetts towns held in the same place in which they were first issued not only establishes a chain of community identity, but also constitutes legal evidence. These records may enhance collective memory but, importantly also support inheritance claims.

Provenance, closely related to custody, refers to the person, the family, the branch of government or the organization that created the records. In a wider sense it can refer to the community or society in which the records were created. Knowing where and by whom the records were created is critical to understanding what they are about. Locating archives within particular and specific context connects them to the actual events that they reflect. Without context, without these relationships, records become useless piles of paper or random collections of electronic bits.

The archival principles of custody and provenance, and the context of creation that they reflect, are not just abstractions but practical ways of conceptualizing the relationships and connections between people and their surroundings. And the practical results of analyzing those relationships from that perspective can have profound results. Archival context can do more than just describe the landscape, it can be instrumental in demonstrating habitation and territory.

An Australian example of the impact of this relationship is the Single Noongar Claim, the currently active land claims of the Noongar people of Western Australia. In 2006, the Noongar people successfully pursued their legal title claim to the land that they had inhabited for centuries. They pursued this claim through the generations of records carefully created by anthropologists and welfare workers. The validity of the Single Noongar Claim rested on proving that the Noongar peoples had continuously maintained their cultural connections to the land over time. Primarily an oral culture, this indigenous community produced few written records of its own, but the records of these many visitors, created consistently in a particular place about the same people, became evidence of their unbroken connection regardless of the fact that they had moved around within the same place.¹⁹

This intertwining of archives and place, where the physical evidence of movement and location intimately connects the landscape and the people who inhabit it suggests that the landscape itself may be the archive. The land becomes a recording medium, an embodiment of the context of creation.

MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE

If archives are intimately connected to physical spaces through custody and provenance, nowhere is that context of creation made more explicit than through maps. Indeed, maps and their innate recordness make the connections between archives and place clear and explicit.²⁰ Vital to establishing both physical and intellectual relationships to place, maps provide us with mental and physical models, locating ourselves to ourselves, to one another, and to a global network. In maps, 'the plotting of point observations, which is the essence of cartography, reveals patterns in the physical and human landscape... the map is thus a model, or simplification of reality, and like all successful models it helps in the extraction of understandable patterns from complexity.'²¹

Through digitization, maps have become even more powerful plotters of points and patterns, memory makers and keepers, shaping our realities. In our digital era, archivists – and indeed everyone else –

have tools that take full advantage of all the spatial and temporal implications of place, context and records. Geographers also envisage the location implied by the archives as no longer being in physical space. Withers and Grout have written: 'Yet what is crucial is the fact that making data available via new information technologies has the capacity to displace the physical sense of an archive as we have historically understood the term, by allowing an archive to exist and to be accessible in "virtual space".'²²

Taking full advantage of both the physical and virtual map archives, overlaying maps from different generations, even centuries and combining them with written records produced in and about that place, for example, enables deep and rich interpretations of archaeological sites, economic and population movements and historical events. Maps can add physical substance to oral histories by pinpointing the location of narratives and thereby enhancing an understanding of that narrative by placing it within an environment that can be immediately and visually comprehended. Maps locate collective memories within the populations and surroundings that created them. 'A sense of place encompasses more than just recorded history. It's not just that 'something happened'; it's that 'something happened *here*' – in this particular location,'²³ writes archivist David Dwiggin discussing the relationships between maps and records.

At the same time, while maps may help to locate events, maps as archives and records significantly impact interpretations of place. Through the defining of boundaries and the delineation of spaces, maps impose borders and mark barriers, assisting in both the control and the definitions of populations.

The 'archive' of maps, both as boundary-definers and population records has been powerful and compelling shapers and controllers in colonial imperialism. For example, the deliberate and comprehensive gathering and storing of data about their vast and far-flung Empire, primarily by mapmakers and surveyors, was key to the success of British colonialism. The late twentieth-century historian Thomas Richards described an 'imperial archive' that he defined as 'a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire.'²⁴ Because the archives also defines the borders and sets the boundaries, maps were – and are – crucial instruments in delineating and imposing colonial power. In this way, maps are also instruments in effecting those benign and sinister aspects of the archives discussed earlier. Subject to the cultural and political winds of the times in which they are created, maps impose their own definitions on the topography. Because a map is

to some extent only an abstraction of reality, it is subject to the perspective and preferences of the map creator. Maps establish the boundaries and the borders that keep people in as well as out; that include as well as exclude. Maps may place us, but they also let us know our place, and as records, often keep us in our place.

CONTENT AND LANDSCAPE

The *contents* of archival records also make useful and important connections with the landscape as archive – diaries, vital statistics, photographs combined with maps and oral histories can often explain physical and natural phenomena, why a building appears in a particular place, why mining was carried on in a certain district. In particular, this combination of records is notably effective in constructing and understanding the collective and cultural memory of a place – in particular, a well-populated place.

Hayden observes that: ‘Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories because natural features such as hills or harbours, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes.’²⁵ Information in archival documents also helps link field observation with oral tradition in understanding landscape questions. Geographers write about ‘the explanatory power that obtains from a cross-fertilization of archival information and field observation.’²⁶

At the same time, archives, both as physical buildings and physical documents, also make their own statements about the landscape. As mentioned earlier, the presence of Australia’s National Archives in Canberra, similar to the presence of the national war memorial, immediately identifies Canberra as the site of the Australian national narrative, the official memory as well as a centre of national energy and political gravitas. While the location of the National Archives in Canberra helps to define the city as the capital, the very existence of the archives in the capital re-affirms the power of the records, both as history and heritage as well as evidence of government authority.

CULTURAL MEMORY

‘*Things* are at the heart of the process of constructing an archive of a place,’²⁷ observes a geographer tracing the historiography and collective memory of a particular landscape over generations. How is cultural or collective memory connected with the archives of place?

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’ insight in the early part of the twentieth century that collective memory is a social construct and that

individuals view the past in the present through multiple social frameworks became the foundation for modern collective memory studies. Halbwachs wrote that: 'While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember... every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in time and space.'²⁸ Although Halbwachs published his classic *Collective Memory* in the 1920s, and while memory studies has a long history beginning in the nineteenth century,²⁹ it was not until the 1970s that the 'memory boom' exploded and memory studies emerged as a legitimate pursuit.

The reasons for this explosion are multiple but came about at least partially through the recognition that certain human actions and collective aspects of events could not be completely explained by traditional historical sources alone. Memory studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had focused on memory in the formation of national identities. Memory in the late twentieth century became a path to studying the undocumented and under-documented aspects of history. It continues on this path today. The tools of memory studies – memorials, monuments, rituals, performative expressions, commemorations, landscapes, folkways, artefacts, oral testimony – have also been particularly effective in broadening an understanding of those communities which, for a variety of reasons, often stand apart from the documentary mainstream.

Location and landscape are critical tools for both personal and collective memories. As a Canadian historian Brian Osborne observes: 'Places are defined by tangible material realities that can be seen, touched, mapped and located'. And for this reason, 'sense of place, as a component of identity and psychic interiority is a lived embodied felt quality of place that informs practice and is productive of particular expressions of place.'³⁰ For archivists, place is a natural tool through which records may become meaningful. Halbwachs' emphasis on memory as communal suggests ways in which archives elucidate these memories collectively through the lense of place.

While the records created about a place may influence the way a place is envisaged and how they fit it into cultural memory, the way a particular place is imagined may also influence the records created about that place. Colonial letters, diaries and government reports are replete with such 'imaginings', demonstrating that cultural memory often depends on the cultural lense of the recorder. What frame creates the context, whose hand constructs the records, what landscape are we looking at? Records, therefore, become potent definers of places and

spaces, with the power to shape and control how the landscape is perceived, and, by implication, whose memories prevail and whose are forgotten or set aside.

WHOSE PLACE? WHOSE ARCHIVES? WHOSE MEMORIES?

In the synergy between archives, place and cultural memory, the extent to which the landscape itself is the memory frame, the 'context of creation,' is an important consideration. Current scholarship, in particular geography and archaeology, no longer sees spaces and landscapes as neutral. Rather, 'cultural landscapes are looked upon not only as products of human intervention in general but also and in particular as the result of human desire to leave an imprint of control and power.'³¹ While man-made landscape markers such as memorials can be approached and interrogated as single isolated artefacts, their full meaning as records is best comprehended within the context of their placement within a larger environment.

In 1979, the Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) adopted the Burra Charter in an effort to help define and identify places of cultural significance. The charter states that: 'Places of cultural significance enrich people's lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences. They are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience.'³²

Several years ago on a trip to Aberystwyth, a small seaside town in Wales, I came upon a monument on a small hill on one side of the town. With its angel of peace on the top and its list of names around the sides, it was instantly recognizable as one of many commemorative World War I monuments erected in hundreds of towns and villages after the Great War of 1914. It was visually arresting but otherwise unremarkable – until I read the dates and counted the names of well over a hundred young men – many with the same surnames – killed in action. In this small village, families had lost many sons and an entire town had lost a generation. Within the landscape of this remote and peaceful town beside the sea, the tragedy of the War, symbolized by the memorial, became visceral and real. Considering memorials as contextualized archival records in themselves adds an additional dimension to an understanding of these remembrances where 'the process of memorialisation is frequently not well documented in the archives, and thus can sometimes be overlooked when the history of the memorial is being written.'³³

CONCLUSION: READING THE TEXTUAL LANDSCAPE

The landscape is both a text and a context. The meaning of the text invariably depends upon the reader or interpreter. And of course the records of the land send different messages to different groups of people. In an environment often overwhelmed by the dominant cultural narratives, absorbing the nuances of a textual landscape that embraces the histories and stories of all its varied inhabitants over time offers opportunities to access the minor narratives. Archaeologist Clayton Fredericksen, considering the input of the Tiwi community as he interprets the historical site of Fort Dundas/Punata in Northern Australia, writes: 'narratives relating to a place are linked in space to form a culturescape, a physical place composed of localities where the events of the remembered past took place.'³⁴ He considers context and the textual landscape of local knowledge, acknowledging 'the legitimacy of community prerogative to nominate those parts of the physical and metaphysical past that are relevant, and to have the final say in how places and objects are managed [or if they are managed at all]'.³⁵

In thinking about the relationships between archives, memory and place, it is important to recognize that pieces of the text of the landscape are specific to each of its multiple populations over time. The indigenous peoples, the settlers, the farmers, the city dwellers – all are implicit parts of the entire text. The landscape may be a cultural frame for memory but it is also itself a memory text. How it is read depends on the persons doing the reading. The broader the reading, the broader becomes our understanding of the landscape and its many peoples.

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