
Introduction:

Archive, Memory and Space from the Perspective of Canberra

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Archives, memory and place are conceptually and practically distinct and yet deeply interconnected with each other, and with history. Together the various, interweaving relationships between the four, including their extensions into other fields, create dynamic networks and clusters of research and practice.

This understanding of the dynamic relationship between archives, memory, place and history was one of the central premises of a 2013 conference on the lived experience of Canberra¹ where the papers in this special section of *Public History* 2014 were first presented. Another hallmark of the conference was its interest in cross-disciplinary discussion based on four broad themes: histories and memories, spaces and places, expressions and interpretations, archives and collections.

Public History Review

Vol 21 (2014): 41-44

ISSN: 1833-4989

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Specific disciplinary focal points were provided through workshops such as ‘building an archival memory of Canberra’ convened by Joanna Sassoon. As a result papers that engaged with archives, memory and place did so from a number of disciplinary perspectives including visual, literary and performing arts, history, archives studies, archaeology and heritage. Their treatment of Canberra as a particular place, marked by characteristics such as the interplay between the local community and changing perceptions of its status as the national capital, varied between site, exemplar, reference point and subject.

More specifically, the three papers presented here were part of a discussion that included, amongst others, historical documentation of the Australian National University’s sculpture collection; a research project on archiving material created by a local theatre company known for its staging of dramatic events in public spaces; an investigation of local archaeological sites as archives; a discussion of archival material that provides clues to Canberra’s homosexual history; discussion of material that tells the story of community activism in Canberra in the 1970s; and the exploration of a building as an archive and memory of Canberra’s development as a community.²

As a small collection the papers here indicate the potential for future cross-disciplinary discussion about archives, memory and place in a public history context. They also suggest the potential – and perhaps challenge – of focusing the investigation through the lens of a particular place. Individually they show how an archivist, historian and visual artist approach the subject.

Jeannette Bastian, archivist and key note speaker at the Shaping Canberra conference, opens up the idea of an archive of place by taking the reader through an understanding of the relationship between archives and memory as well as the archival tools of provenance and custody, to the landscape itself as an archive. She provides a blue print for thinking about an archive of place and place as an archive, laying out a rich and productive seam of thinking for those working in disciplines that investigate, collect and create material that concerns memory.

Martyn Jolly’s paper provides a view of archives from the perspective of contemporary art and visual culture with a focus on ‘the archival mode’ that has recently emerged as a dominant arts practice. For those more used to making history from archival material, Jolly’s paper is both an introduction and an insight into other forms of making. He discusses two main approaches taken by artists working with archives: the creation of a private archive and intervention in an existing archive. His examples include interpretation of historical events and the different ways in which Indigenous artists have worked with archives to

connect with Indigenous cultures and interrogate colonisation. In the case of Canberra he discusses work based on national and local archives, suggesting some direct connections with Nick Brown's paper.

Nick Brown focuses directly on Canberra archives, discussing three repositories of archival memory that have grown through the functions and processes of national government, and the direct actions of Canberra communities. His documentation of the creation and management of these collections including the various types of material they hold, highlights both the complex distinctions between, and interdependence of, national government and local community in Canberra. It also draws out the relationship between the creation of archives and the sort of histories and sense or memory of place they enable.

Archives and public history are natural partners in enterprises that work to connect the past with the present. Historians have naturally deferred to the archives for their evidentiary building blocks, and have an inherent comfort with documentary evidence in visual and written formats, an increasing literacy with oral information and more recent recognition of the evidentiary values contained within and around material objects. However, the toolkit of archival information available to historians can be extended to include a more expansive range of 'non-traditional' sources. For example, in the book *Prisoner in the Garden*, the Mandela archive presents one option for thinking about what constitutes an archive. The authors suggest that:

While a conventional archive has a single location and a finite number of documents, the Mandela archive is an infinite one, located in innumerable places, it is also not confined to documents, but includes sites, landscapes, material objects, performances, photographs, artworks, stories and the memories of individuals.³

From this perspective, the Mandela archive contains a dispersed and infinite number of related objects in a wide range of tangible and intangible formats, and it paints a broad canvas of a cultural product called 'an archive'. The archival glue cementing the relationships between formats in this context, and what is documented is somehow connected to Nelson Mandela. This idea for thinking about an 'imagined' archive, where connected threads weave a filigree across space, form and time, has the potential for more universal application beyond a single person. Places are equally potent conduits through which the synergy between landscapes and memories are translated into public history. We hope that these three papers show the potential for,

and stimulate further discussions across disciplines that link archives, place, memory and public history.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ 'Shaping Canberra: the lived experience of place, home and capital', Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra 17-20 September 2013.
- ² These papers were presented respectively by David Williams, Gavin Findlay, Tracy Ireland, Graham Willett, Bob Eckhardt, Annie Kavanagh and Jill Lang, and Lenore Coltheart.
- ³ The Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A prisoner in the garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's prison archive*, Penguin, London, 2005, p35.