

Mixed Material: Investigating the management of archives in New Zealand museums

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Introduction

At least 47 museums in NZ hold what can be considered significant archives collections, these make up around 30% of the country's archival repositories.^{1 2}

With a third of New Zealand archives collections held in museums, this study investigated the way in which archives are managed in New Zealand museum settings, particularly in regard to convergence (or divergence) of archival principles and museum practices.

Although documentary heritage such as archives and manuscripts is an increasingly important component of collection management within a museum context, museum collection management practices have traditionally focused on the specific requirements of object management and preservation. The primary research question in this study asked; how are archival values maintained in the management of archives in museum collections? This study was specifically concerned with the founding principles of archives management, that is, provenance and original order as applied in a museum context. It was also concerned with the degree to which archival values were acknowledged and understood in a museum setting.

With very little literature currently addressing these issues, this research makes a valuable contribution to the dialogue around the management of archives in New Zealand. In particular, it provides an understanding of some of the challenges of working with museum archives collections in New Zealand, and the means with which archives collection managers negotiate some of the differences between archival and museum practice. This research acknowledges that despite these differences, the exchange of knowledge across disciplines can influence the development of new approaches to the means and methods by which New Zealand heritage is preserved and accessed.

When researching in an interdisciplinary area it is important to clearly define the terminology used in discussing both the findings and in data collection instruments. This research assumed the following:

Museum: This study adopts the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and Museums Aotearoa definition of museums. "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment".³

Collection: For the purposes of this study, collections are defined as groups of material – both tangible and intangible (for example, oral histories) – that are purposely acquired, organised, described and preserved and that form a meaningful whole. Collections differ from the archival concept of *fonds* in that their individual parts do not necessarily originate from the same source; their significance to the collection is not contingent on their provenance.⁴

Archives: are defined as records (produced either by an organization or individual) that are considered to be of long-term value and that are collected and organized by repositories.

Archival values: For the purposes of this study, archival values include both *evidential value*, described as "the value for providing evidence of the origins, structure, functions, policies and operations of the person or agency that created the records" and *informational value*, which is defined as "the value for reference or research deriving from the information the records contain, as distinct from their evidential value".⁵

Provenance: This term is used in two contexts; the museum context and the archives context. The museum understanding of provenance is defined as the complete history of ownership and association with a particular object or group of objects. In an archives context, provenance is defined as the agency, individual or organisation that created, received, accumulated or used the items during the course of their work or activities.⁶

Original order: is closely associated with the archival principal of provenance. Original order is defined as the intellectual order and arrangement in which archives were created, used and/or stored by their creator.⁷

Series: This term is used in place of *record series*, defined as a group of archives that are identified as a distinct group, on the basis of their shared function, subject, format or other relationship related to their

creation, receipt and/or use.⁸

Documentary heritage: is a broad term defined as cultural items of significance that are moveable; that consist of sounds, images and/or codes; that are able to be preserved and that are the product of a deliberate documentary process. Documents include both the carrier or container and the information it holds.⁹

Reviewing the Literature

The scope of literature dedicated to the management of museum archives in a New Zealand context is very limited and largely includes the results of quantitative surveys and bibliographic studies. This literature review discusses issues identified in both a national and an international context. It covers existing research on community archives, the development of museum archives collections and the systems and values by which museums and archives assess, organise and describe their collections. The review also discusses the dialogue and debate around collaboration and convergence.

Research of community archives

The Community Archives Survey Report 2007¹⁰ presents the findings of two surveys conducted by Archives New Zealand in 2007; the *Established Archives Community Survey* and the *Emerging Community Survey*. These surveys aimed to identify the requirements of archives repositories in New Zealand in order to develop a Community Archives Programme and consisted of self-completion surveys disseminated to 149 organisations. Over half of the questions were adopted from a similar survey conducted in 2007 by the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA). The surveys' key findings identified a lack of funding, skilled staff and storage space as the major challenges faced by New Zealand archival organisations. These factors were cited by organisations as crucial to the preservation and development of their collections. These requirements were identified by both established and emerging community archives repositories. In addition, just under half of the respondents from the surveys cited digitisation of their holdings as necessary in the continuous development of the organisation and had included digitisation projects in their plans for the next three years. Future planning also included the creation of more storage space, followed by improvements in storage facilities.

Smith's paper, *Archives in Museums*,¹¹ also attempts to quantify the museum archives scene. It explores literature relevant to museum archives

and identifies some of the issues associated with their management. Smith identifies key similarities and differences in the ways archives and museum objects are documented – and refers to a lack of appreciation of archival values by museum staff. Perhaps more importantly, Smith observes that a focus on museum methods of documentation can restrict the ability of researchers to access archival material. Smith's research highlighted early opposition to the collecting of archival material in museum collections, as well as the efforts by archivists to keep museums, libraries and archival repositories separate. However, Smith goes on to note that museum archival collections are now commonplace in the collections of at least 25% of Australian museums. Smith includes in this figure both institutional records (created and kept by museums) and those that are acquired from external sources. Moreover, while interest existed in the field of museum archives during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been little sustained attention in North America, the United Kingdom or Australia. The literature that does exist, according to Smith tends to focus on the legislation surrounding archives, rather than their arrangement and description, or their relationship with museum objects.

A thesis written by Joanna Newman¹² identified the significant challenges facing community archives in New Zealand. These included a lack of qualified staff (with "qualified" being defined as having either formal or informal training), the day to day management of archival collections and the changing priorities of funders. In discussing the need for skilled staff, Newman highlighted the importance of treating community archives as records, rather than artefacts. In addition to this, Newman argued that staff must be able to arrange and describe holdings in a way that ensures that original order and provenance are maintained. More importantly however, Newman stated that community archivists require the appropriate skills and knowledge to carry out effective appraisal of potential acquisitions.

Archives in museum collections

Bauer explored the influence of museum practice on archival procedures, through the process of acquisition.¹³ Bauer describes the process with which many museums acquire archives as frequently ad hoc, rather than the result of a strategic acquisition practice or documentation strategy. Much of the archival material according to Bauer's study, finds its way into museum collections via the acquisition of individual items – or in small, sometimes unrelated, batches. More importantly archives are

also acquired alongside objects that are frequently the primary target of the transaction. As a result, the existence of archival material within museum collections is commonly *incidental*, rather than purposeful and strategic. Collections of archives may be fragmentary in nature, or exist as supplementary collections, rather than a coherent collection of deliberately selected groupings.

Collecting for New Zealand, a thesis by Chloe Searle, interviewed social history and pacific curators at Te Papa Tongarewa about their collecting practices.¹⁴ Searle found that while documentary heritage is acknowledged as important in providing context and meaning to three dimensional objects – and in fact, has its own inherent value – museums historically privileged objects over archives. In response to the question of which would be collected if curators were presented with the option of an object, or a photograph of the object *in use*, one curator responded:

“We’ve always privileged the object, so the object is first ... but context is really important and wherever possible we do try and collect people’s diary extracts, journal extracts or family histories ... But I think, sadly sometimes, ... we don’t always capture it because we’re so focused on collecting the object that the contextual information can fall a bit by the wayside, but our practice at the moment is to collect as much as possible.”¹⁵

A contributing factor to these outcomes may be the independent development of museums and archival repositories with regard to their respective disciplines and histories. Przybyla describes museum professionals and archivists working almost in isolation from each other, referring to independent bodies of literature and developing their respective methodologies and systems in order to support functions that are, at their heart, very similar.¹⁶ Even so, the line drawn between archival collections and museum collections can be unclear:

“...because of the difficulty of distinguishing between “documentary evidence,” “artifact,” and “object” – or fixing the line between archival and museum collections – institutional archives often contain commemorative plaques, buttons, pennants, ornamental seals... and any number of three-dimensional objects.”¹⁷

As a result, archivists may find themselves in conflict with museum staff, such as curators and collection managers, in a bid to retain control of archival material. Regardless of importance to the provenance and

original order of the archival record group, there is the distinct possibility that material of a non-documentary nature such as the medals discussed above may be claimed by museum staff in other departments within the institution. Photography is an area particularly prone to issues of collection control in GLAM institutions. This conflict is illustrated by Ann Abid, who shares her experience of justifying the retention of a photograph album in the archives, during an exhibition of taonga Māori at the St Louis Art Museum:

“... Several Māori people visited the museum to see the exhibition. We showed them the photographs, and they were actually able to identify some of the people and were very excited about seeing them. At this point the museum administration thought that perhaps the photographs were too important to be left in the archives [additional emphasis added] and should be moved to the photograph department and be treated as art. What this would have meant, of course, was that they would be separated from their original placement in the album and treated out of context as individual objects”.¹⁸

A lack of robust collection management policies demarcating collecting areas within the institution – and the relationships between those areas clearly contributes to a working environment in which archivists and curators can hold opposing views on the management of mixed materials within either the archive or museum collection.

Assessing significance

The museum practice of collecting is of course influenced significantly by certain values that are placed on objects in their identification as good examples of material culture and heritage. The broad concept of significance is one that is applied to objects in assessing their suitability for accession into museum collections, and can be broken down into specific values that are sought after in the process of building and refining museum collections.

Russell and Winkworth define significance as the “historic, artistic, scientific and social or spiritual values that items and collections have for past, present and future generations”. Their publication, *Significance 2.0*, further identifies four comparative criteria, which can be used to assess an item’s degree of significance. These include “provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition or completeness and interpretive capacity”.¹⁹

Provenance is a concept that is also referred to in reference to

archival principles, although there are notable differences in the way that the term is applied in museum and archival contexts. The Australian Society of Archivists describes provenance as being concerned with the “administrative origin” of a record or group of records.²⁰ In this respect, the concept is not only related to the individual, department or organisation that created and maintained the records, but also to the purpose for which they were created and kept. It is also closely related to the principle of *original order*, which attempts to preserve the original arrangement of records. By organising archives in this way, the relationships between records – and between records and their creators – are maintained.²¹

Archival theory further identifies the value of archival documents as being inherently connected to the two concepts of *evidential* value and *informational* value. Bearman describes evidential value as “the property of records to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations and other activities or events that are of importance to an organization”.²² The internal records preserved and managed by organisations as institutional archives highlight the ability of documents to secure the rights and responsibilities of individuals and organisations. Bearman goes on to identify the informational value of records as a secondary concern in assessing the significance of institutional archives.

The value of the actual contents (or information) of a document to future research is less of a factor in the appraisal of records for those repositories that are concerned with the questions of *how* and *why* a record was created. However, Bearman asserts that informational value is of particular significance for those repositories such as special collections libraries.²³ It can be argued that museum archives – those that are generally interested in collecting archives for both their research value and their evidential value – also fall into this category.

Arrangement of collections

Ambrose and Paine make some useful observations with regard to the organisation of museum collections. They describe these collections as being traditionally divided or categorised according to academic discipline.²⁴ This has resulted in departments and sub-collections such as ethnology, archaeology, social history, fine art and decorative arts. (It is this form of categorisation in which the historic relationships between museums and universities is most evident.) However, while acknowledging these traditional methods of classification, Ambrose and

Paine also warn against the restrictions inherent in the categorisation of collections:

“Collections analysed in this way may restrict opportunities for more interdisciplinary presentation and interpretation. The opportunities to use collections in a variety of ways and to view them from different standpoints can be lost through compartmentalisation. Academic study of collections... should not preclude alternative ways of using and interpreting collections.”²⁵

Sub-collections may also be delineated according to the physical object, for example, ceramics or photographs – or according to their original function, for example, weapons, transport or kitchen utensils. While the artificial grouping of objects according to material categories is useful when considering their physical requirements for long term preservation, at an intellectual level the benefit of a typological series arrangement may limit the ways in which they can be interpreted.²⁶

In discussing differences between the ways in which libraries, archives and museums organise their collections, Darnell identifies the founding principles that define archival work as respect for *provenance* and *original order*, and a focus on *collective description* and *levels of control*. She describes this focus on collective description as being markedly different to the traditional approach of museums to collection arrangement and description:

“*Collective description* is the antithesis of museum cataloguing, which is to describe each object individually. Archivists describe records in hierarchical and interdependent groups ... before getting to the individual item. The value of most ... records lies in their being part of a larger body of material.”²⁷

Descriptive practice

The ways in which records are arranged and described in an archive can provide insight into the values that staff place on them those collections, whether this is historic, social, evidential or informational. Delaney explored the findings of a survey carried out in June 2008 to investigate the use and understanding of archival descriptive standards. The author identified two broad approaches to description of archives; one based on a *bibliographic* tradition and the other on a *recordkeeping* tradition.²⁸ New Zealand archival institutions have developed in both directions, although notably Archives New Zealand adopted the Australian Series

System (from the recordkeeping tradition) in the 1980s.

Delaney's study asked participants who were responsible for archives within museum or gallery collections whether archives were described differently to other collections in the organisation. The response from museums and galleries varied. 58% *did* describe archives differently; 33% *did not* describe them differently and 8% responded that some were described differently. When asked about the type of collection management system used to describe archival holdings, 17% of respondents (almost all of the museums) responded that they used a museum collection management system, either PastPerfect or Vernon.

Bauer also acknowledges key differences in descriptive practice between museums and archives. Bauer's work *Archives and artifacts: Do fences make good neighbours?* draws on similar observations to those identified by Darnell.²⁹ Bauer describes the cataloguing process within museums as one that generally focuses on description of a single physical object. This contrasts to an archival approach which focuses on multiple items, grouped by shared provenance. Bauer notes that this series-level, or collection-level description also places emphasis on the intellectual, rather than the physical object. The problem according to Bauer arises when museum staff do not have an understanding of archival principles:

"As a result, when non-archivists have been responsible for the description of manuscript materials, fields such as scope and content, biographical and historical notes, or subject headings are omitted or constructed in a way that makes them unusable in DACS-compliant catalog records. Information about the historical context about an archival collection may have been collected elsewhere—usually in lengthy biographies created by the curators who acquired some of these collections—but it has not always been adapted for collection level catalog records".³⁰

Libraries, museums and archives all use controlled vocabularies and authority files in ensuring consistent description during cataloguing. In acknowledging these different approaches to collection management, writers have sought to develop taxonomies and controlled vocabularies that may be used across multiple types of repository. Chaudry and Jiun sought to develop a cross-domain taxonomy that would meet the needs of heritage institutions such as museums, libraries and archives. Chaudhry and Jiun's 2005 paper highlighted the physical format of collection items dictating the type of repository in which they are housed and preserved – museum, library or archival repository.³¹

Waibel and Erway emphasise that these controlled vocabularies are frequently used across domains – irrespective of the institution in which they were developed. For example, an archival repository might utilise the Library of Congress Subject Headings in developing a finding aid – or a library might employ the Getty Research Institute’s Art and Architecture Thesaurus.³² Waibel and Erway argue that rather than inter-disciplinary collaboration being founded on the exchange of descriptive records, it could be based instead on the joint development of the authority records themselves. They assert that these institutions are essentially interested in describing the same basic concepts – for example, places, names, object types – and that these are able to form the basis of a set of authority records and controlled vocabularies that can be utilised in the descriptive practice of libraries, museums and archives alike.

Collaboration and convergence

The literature on collaboration between libraries, museums and archives includes opposing perspectives and opinions regarding the advantages of such approaches – and raises questions about who ultimately benefits from integration.

VanderBerg credits the pervasiveness of the internet with a change in users’ attitudes towards information retrieval. The ability to locate information from a single online source, regardless of where the original document is stored, means users have become less tolerant of the traditional boundaries between archives, libraries and museums. VanderBerg believes that the push for convergence and collaboration amongst these institutions has largely come about as a result of these user attitudes. VanderBerg identifies major digital collaborative projects across “memory institutions” – but in doing so, stresses that the benefits of collaboration are often considered too simplistically. He especially emphasises the point that advocates of convergence make assumptions about the distinctiveness of each institution – and in doing so, tend to ignore their shared history. VanderBerg argues that given the relatively recent separation of libraries, museums and archives, it may be more appropriate to refer to a *re-convergence*.³³

Commentators such as Trant³⁴ and Fleckner³⁵ advocate cross-disciplinary education programmes as an important means to achieve some form of convergence. Trant also advocates a rigorous re-thinking of the traditional institution-centric approach to sharing information with users.

Robinson stresses that policy-makers can be overly enthusiastic about

merging museums, archives and libraries under the banner of “memory institutions”, without thoroughly considering the appropriateness of this title, and the unique elements of each institution’s unique relationship with the public:

“Within converged collection environments, whether physical or digital, these basic philosophical differences between museums, libraries and archives around provision of access to collection information are yet to be convincingly resolved. The question also remains as to whether, for the sake of differentiation and variety, they should be.”³⁶

Wellington³⁷ addresses these issues by proposing that convergence/collaboration be layered. According to research undertaken by Wellington, the benefits of integrated practice reside only in certain layers of the organisational strata. Collaboration and convergence in the public service areas, in the development of advocacy and outreach, in some programming and elements of shared resourcing offer the most benefit to integrated operational models. According to Wellington, maintaining operational separation in the deeper levels of the integrated memory institution (collection management, institutional space, professional identity etc.) is paramount for the integrity and effective operation of the individual gallery, library, archive and museum mandates.

Summary of the literature

The literature reviewed highlights interesting points with regard to the management of museum archives collections. In particular, it highlights the need for appropriate training in archives management, especially for those responsible for community archives or small repositories. What also appears evident, is a lack of research being carried out in the area of museum archives management. While manuals and guidelines have been produced relating to the preservation of documentary heritage, as well as the legal responsibilities surrounding archives and records management, there is a distinct absence of research-based literature exploring the unique challenges faced by those responsible for caring for archives in museum collections. This is certainly an area that would benefit significantly from further study.

The promotion of increased collaboration amongst museums, archives and libraries also features strongly in the literature, with advocates referring to commonalities that exist across the information management sector, as well as the public’s changing expectations regarding information retrieval. The dialogue surrounding collaboration

– and ultimately, convergence – also includes some persuasive arguments to consider these issues more thoughtfully. Any plans to bring these organisations closer together should be founded on a very clear understanding of their distinct as well as combined histories – and how convergence will benefit communities of researchers, visitors and users, as well as the institutions themselves.

Methodology

The primary research question for this study was: *How are archival values maintained in a museum setting?* This founding question identified the purpose of the study and firmly identifies archival values not simply as principles to be understood on a purely theoretical or intellectual level – but principles that should influence the systems and processes by which documentary heritage material in museums is managed.

It appears to be taken for granted that we know what museums mean when they refer to archives collections. However museums – and the archivists they employ – hold a range of perspectives on how archives should be defined, what attributes they might have and their relationship with other parts of the museum's collection. This study examined the means by which the values associated with archives were supported in a museum setting by exploring *what (if any) processes or procedures are employed in order to preserve these values?* Given that museums and archives have distinct histories and have developed as distinct (but related) disciplines, this question was also concerned with the challenges or limitations experienced by museum archivists in preserving these archival values.

A qualitative research strategy was applied to this study. Asynchronous semi-structured email interviews were carried out with seven archivists working in museums around New Zealand. The Directory of Archives in New Zealand identifies institutions around the country that hold significant archives collections. Of those institutions 47 are museums. This study collected data from those museums that employed staff members who were specifically responsible for managing the archives collection in that institution, that is, archivists, archives managers and curators of archives. Any archivists that may work in museums that were not listed in the Directory were not included in the sample. In doing so, the study aimed to gain insight from those museum professionals that have a working knowledge of archival systems and principles – and whose input would reflect a cross-disciplinary awareness.

The selection of participants in this way also aimed to produce data

from a variety of organisations with respect to key characteristics such as collection size, staff size, geographic location and type of collection. Given the small number of potential interviewees across the country, this approach to sampling was heavily influenced by the willingness of museum professionals to take part in the study. Given the small size of New Zealand and the corresponding number of museums holding archives collections, it was difficult to guarantee anonymity in this study. It was determined that the identity of participants would be kept confidential during and following the completion of the research. Email interviews were carried out over the course of three weeks in May 2013. Participants were generally very forthcoming with information, and several provided institutional and personal documentation to support their responses.

It was considered that some museum archivists may have different understandings of archival terms, particularly with regard to *provenance* and *original order*. In order to mitigate this problem, the interview question regarding archival values included a brief explanation of what was meant by the terms.

A thematic approach was applied to data analysis. This approach focused on the identification of patterns across the data set, including recurring topics, ideas and statements. Conversely, it identified idiosyncrasies between interviews, which served to highlight the experience of the individual archivist – and acknowledged any relevant issues that were not addressed by interviewees. Finally, the analysis sought to make connections between interview material and key concepts or issues described in the literature.

Discussion of Findings

As noted, the research literature on the management of museum archives in New Zealand is limited. As such, this study serves to provide a broad introduction to an under-researched area. This approach to the discussion of findings focuses on a range of key themes identified from the data rather than an in depth exploration of a small selection of the more prominent themes.

Museum Archivists

There was a surprising degree of commonality with regard to the pathways that led participants into the museum archivist role. The majority of research participants had gained significant skills and knowledge in managing archives through on the job training, rather than formal qualifications. A couple of participants had supplemented this

with certificates in archives management and preservation. With regard to prior experience and training, there was strong evidence of museum experience and museum related degrees. One archivist started employment at the museum as a guide before moving into an archives assistant role and eventually taking on the position of Archivist. Interestingly, two of the archivists had library backgrounds. This combination of experiences illustrates a strong connection between libraries, archives and museums – and demonstrates an understanding amongst employers that the skills and knowledge necessary for archives related work are considered transferable between institutions in the sector.

The primary roles undertaken by the study participants were archives acquisition, arrangement and description and administration of research services. Several of the participants also cited exhibition related tasks and retrospective cataloguing of archives as a significant part of their role. The issue of cataloguing backlogs was a common challenge shared by collections staff across museum departments. Interestingly, some of the archivists were not greatly involved in the appraisal process.

Museum archives collections

In describing their collections, all but one archivist referred to location as being a major focus and determinant of what is collected by their institution. This focus on location was to be expected; certainly in the Directory of Archives in New Zealand the presence of museums whose collections are *not* based on a specific geographical location is the exception, rather than the norm. The archivists interviewed as research participants displayed a rich, in-depth knowledge of their respective collections and were forthcoming about the strengths and weaknesses of their collecting areas. Archives collections discussed by the participants generally included a combination of community archives, photographs, audio visual material, maps and plans and organisational records.

The distinction between the archives collections and other collecting areas in the museums was generally defined in two ways. Firstly, comments were made on differences in *physical format* – that is, archives were variously described as being made up of paper-based or audio visual material. Secondly, comparisons were made with regard to *use* – that is, archives consisted of reference or research material, one study participant stating, “the archive collection differs from the ... other collections ... in that it is primarily comprised of research based documents”. In addition, as in the case of three responses, items in the archives collection were described as *supporting other collecting areas* of

the museum. One participant also highlighted differences with regard to working relationships amongst museum staff – particularly the autonomy of the archivist role, “... my day to day work is relatively independent from that of my colleagues, who are involved with the museum side of things”.

Assessing value

One of the core questions of this study related to the values that archivists seek in appraising potential archive accessions. The majority of participants referred to geographic location as the primary consideration when deciding if items were suitable for the collection. Their comments were illustrated with reference to collections policies that were focused on preserving local history and heritage, and on the commitment of museums to their respective towns, cities and/or districts. One participant stated, “it really takes knowing the collection, the local community and the history of the area to know what to accept and what not”.

In describing the assessment process for potential additions to the collection, one archivist referred to the criteria outlined in Russell and Winkworth’s publication, *Significance 2.0*. Again, these criteria are identified as *historic significance, aesthetic significance, scientific, research or technical significance and social or spiritual significance*.³⁸

Other comments regarding the selection of material included the subjectivity inherent in the appraisal process. Also of note were several references to a curator-led process:

“The curatorial staff... determine the significance of archives as they relate to the overall collections.”

“Our curators add to the collection, including the archives, based on our collecting policy.”

“The Archivist ... only comment[s] on matters such as our ability to store the item, its condition, whether there is any duplication ... and any copyright ... issues”.

The reference to archives collections that exist in support of other collecting areas can be directly linked to further comments by archivists which highlight a perception of archives as having a secondary status within museums. This is discussed in the following section.

The use of archives in museums

During interviews archivists discussed two ways in which archives in their collections were used, that is, for research or reference and as part of

exhibitions (both physical and online). These two usages clearly reflect the value that museum professionals – including those responsible for managing archives, as well as their colleagues in other departments – place on archives.

The reference to archives as a research tool appeared most frequently, and was certainly the way in which archives collections were distinguished from other collections by some of the participants. However, while research value was considered one of the primary characteristics of archival material, the fact that *other* values – particularly interpretive value – tended to go unrecognised was a source of frustration for some archivists:

“Another difficulty is the presumed limited display potential archives tend to have. Objects and images are easier to interpret for museum exhibitions so tend to be displayed more; whereas the display potential of archives [is] often overlooked.”

“Archives are either approached as museum objects to be preserved and handled infrequently or reference material to be used, photocopied, etc.”

These statements capture the tension between contrasting perceptions or assumptions regarding the value – and therefore use – of archival material in museums.

Inherited systems

In describing her work with museum archives, Michelle Ganz, Archivist at the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum, highlighted the discrepancies amongst multiple legacy numbering systems as a major issue.³⁹ The task of gaining a sense of the previous numbering and cataloguing practices carried out by former staff is described as one of the most frustrating, yet paradoxically rewarding, aspects of the role. She describes the challenge of creating a usable collection from over a century of “chaos” as one that has pressed her to find innovative solutions in her work.

The need to take stock of the systems that had been implemented by previous archivists or collection managers – and to develop and improve those systems – also emerged as a theme in this study. One participant identified the need for retrospective appraisal and cataloguing of archives in order to bring the collection into line with current policy and procedures. Similarly, another described retrospective arrangement and description as an important part of the role and commented on the detrimental effects of previous arrangement systems on the information

held about the collection:

"The collection is currently arranged in a variety of ways. The early system was as a research collection with any new donation being split into subjects ... This still operates well although original order and donors [have] been lost."

The challenges of reconciling historic collection management practices that are frequently inadequate, if not damaging – and the protection of the intellectual integrity of the collection – are challenges archivists appear to be committed to addressing in their everyday work.

Arranging and describing museum archives

Some form of series system was implemented within most of the collections that were managed by the research participants; several archivists maintained comprehensive finding aids that allowed searches from collection level right down to item level or smaller. The reference to levels of description made by Darnell and Searle also came through in the interviews, particularly in regard to the focus of museum registrars and curators on the object, rather than the *collection*. This was raised as archivists identified the challenges in maintaining archival values during the description process:

"[The challenge is] the balance to be struck between cataloguing and numbering archival items as museum objects and [describing] and [numbering] in a relational way as archival items".

"The registrar does not understand the archives are different from museum items and tries to impose museum standards of cataloguing..."

This bias towards item level description and description of the physical object when dealing with museum archives illustrates a core difference between the two disciplines.

Collection management systems

Collection management systems can have a hugely significant effect on the ability of archivists to effectively manage their collections. I believe capturing all levels of information about archival material – the relationships between items, access and reproduction rights, reference services, information regarding provenance as well as location and preservation of the physical object – is crucial to archives management.

Amongst the seven archivists interviewed, four different collection

management systems were in use. The majority were utilising collection management systems designed for museum collections (Vernon CMS, Ke EMu and PastPerfect) and one was using a library management system (DB Textworks). None of the archivists reported using collection management systems designed specifically for archives management. At best, participants had mixed views of the collection management systems that they used. In several cases, archivists identified their collection management systems as one of the biggest challenges in managing archives in a museum setting.

The overall impression was that archivists “make do” with the systems they have acquired. Some had adapted the way information about archives was recorded to fit into the available fields, others had adapted the actual collection management systems to improve their functionality for archives management:

“... how archives are described into it has been adapted to suit the system”.

“... the database fields have been ‘massaged’ to cope with archival descriptions”.

“... it has needed to be extensively customised over the years to cope with unpublished items”.

“... it is not well suited for archival collections where items are related and require series lists and similar organisation”.

This frustration with systems designed to aid collection management processes clearly highlighted a need to further explore the software options being made available to museum archivists.

With regard to the publication of collections catalogues online, one archivist identified this as an important solution to the most significant challenge in managing archives in a museum setting – that of access. Given the research value of archives collections, the inability of archivists to provide adequate levels of service to researchers in a museum environment is a pressing issue. The commitment to address this problem through the digitisation of archives and the publication of reproductions online echoes some of the findings of the Community Archives Survey Report 2007 in its identification of collection digitisation as a major priority for archives repositories.

Relationships between museums and archives

There was a common perception amongst archivists that the collections they managed were of secondary importance, compared to other museum

collections. Comments regarding institutional attitudes towards archives collections illustrated the frustration experienced by archivists:

"For a collection which is one of the most frequently used and publicly accessible of all the collections in the Museum, [archives staff have] often had to fight for adequate resourcing in terms of collection care and management".

"The Archives tend to be seen as a poor relation to the museum".

Strong parallels can be drawn between these views and Smith's observations regarding a lack of understanding and appreciation of archival values amongst general museum staff as well as the experience of St Louis Art Museum archivist, Ann Abid. Comments made by participants regarding the lack of recognition of their collections included assumptions regarding acquisitions, the purpose of archives collections, and inadequate resourcing.

While acknowledging these tensions, archivists also highlighted the common interest shared by museums and archives in preserving and making accessible heritage information. Most of the research participants also acknowledged the concepts (such as provenance and preservation) shared by museums and archives. One theme drawn from the interview data demonstrated that these commonalities could provide the basis for closer relationships between museum and archives collections and the staff managing them:

"... It is well worth investigating how to make this link stronger and how to encourage both types of collections to be appropriately preserved and made accessible to the public and researchers".

"The challenge we face is for our ... Council to recognise the importance of continuing to preserve the history of [the district] and people and maintain this museum and archive facility as one unit".

This last statement reinforces Wellington's arguments that there is collaborative strategic advantage for integrated or partnering institutions in developing advocacy and outreach programming.⁴⁰

Also featuring prominently in the literature on collaboration, Jan Paris identified preservation as a key concept that is shared by archives and museums.⁴¹ However, as noted by Yakel, museums tended to be focused on preserving the *materiality* of the object, whereas archivists were concerned with the preservation of *content* and *context*.⁴² Paris concluded that the most important consideration in the appraisal and

management of heritage items is that the meaning of the object is preserved. This shift in focus towards the preservation of meaning is one that would benefit from the unique perspectives of museums and archives.

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