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### Documents and Records

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# 3 Documents and records

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Colin Sterling

## DESCRIPTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

*Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. (Nora 1989, 13)*

How and why certain things come to be valued as heritage and other things do not has long been a central concern of critical heritage studies. This chapter introduces one of the key ways in which heritage value has been generated and sustained in the modern era, namely through the production, circulation and consumption of documents and records. Academics often describe heritage *as a process* whereby certain values and meanings about the past are produced *in the present, for the future*. Documents and records offer an excellent resource for understanding what exactly happens in this process, and what the limitations and possibilities are for thinking about heritage in this way. Such documents and records may include conservation reports, guidebooks, architectural surveys, visitor studies, interpretation plans, or any other official or unofficial written artefact generated in the heritage-making process. Some of these will be very technical; others may be creative or highly personal. Understanding how to analyse, contextualise and interpret such resources is important for many different types of heritage research, even those that do not explicitly focus on archives or other documentary records. The ‘Teaching’ section outlines some methods for dealing with these resources, while the ‘Praxis’ section indicates how researchers have critically examined documents and records in their own work. First, however, it is important to understand why documents and records have come to play such a central role in heritage thinking and practice.

In 2011, while working as a researcher for a heritage consultancy, I was given an unenviable task: review and assess an informal

library of reports produced over the previous two decades in relation to a medieval manor house and small museum managed by a local council in North London. On a sunny day in June I was shown to a dusty storeroom, where piles of documents, booklets, reports and folders were stacked on filing cabinets filled with yet more paperwork. I emerged at the end of the day with a spreadsheet going back several years, detailing the varied evaluations and recommendations written for and about the site. I doubt this was the kind of ‘archive’ Pierre Nora had in mind when he outlined his well-known theory of *lieux de mémoire* (‘places of memory’), but here was the detritus of the modern heritage industry: an accumulation of plans and studies documenting the administrative and technical processes involved in managing and – crucially – developing the site.

Although celebrated as a place of great historical significance for decades if not centuries, it could be argued that the heritage *value* of the manor house in question was to some extent produced and sustained through these records. This is not to say the varied buildings making up the site would have been left to fall into ruin without such mundane texts, but their status as heritage assets – with all the undertones of economic worth this term implies – did rely to a certain degree on the constant (re)production of reports, plans, policies and statements generated through many hours of official and unofficial labour (especially true in the context of a local government bureaucracy).

Conservation surveys, funding applications, policy briefings, expert evaluations, statements of significance: the modern heritage industry generates such documents and records at an increasingly frantic pace. In this, however, heritage practice merely reflects a much broader historical trend, namely the discursive and archival formation of modernity writ-large (Foucault 1969). As Françoise Choay outlines in *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, between the second half of the sixteenth century and the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a vast ‘iconographic apparatus’ emerged to help transform ruins and old buildings into ‘antiquities’ and ‘monuments’, with ‘a corpus of buildings, conserved by the power of image and text alone ... reassembled in a museum of paper’ (1992, 41). This form of knowledge production prioritised

recorded observations over oral tradition, a development comparable to the empiricism of the natural sciences, which aspired to a 'controllable, and thus reliable, description of its objects' (1992, 51). Documents and records are not *essential* for the production of heritage value, but they are emblematic of a particular form of heritage making, one in which lists, catalogues, surveys and registers play a central role.

Such processes ostensibly seek to document reality, but we must recognise that claims about documentary value and the need to record certain things also *shape* truth and reality. In this sense documents and records constitute heritage, rather than simply reflecting predetermined attitudes and beliefs. In Foucauldian terms, we would say that heritage documents reflect 'the local sociohistorical material conditions that enable and constrain disciplinary knowledge practices such as speaking, writing, thinking, calculating, measuring, filtering, and concentrating. Discursive practices produce, rather than merely describe, the "subjects" and "objects" of knowledge practices' (Barad 2003, 819). Documents and records then offer an important resource for critically examining such discursive practices as they operate in and on the world.

The epistemological roots of this method (really a suite of interconnected methods and analytical techniques, as I explain below) can be located both in structuralist concerns with 'hidden' systems of meaning and post-structuralist enquiries into the effects and limitations of such meaning-making processes. Researchers in cultural studies (Hall 1997), cultural analysis (Bal 1985, 1994), memory studies (Keightley and Pickering 2013), history (Edwards 2022), visual anthropology (Pink 2006; Banks and Zeitlyn 2015) and media studies (Stokes 2013) have drawn variously on textual analysis, visual analysis, semiotics and discourse analysis to (critically) investigate the production, circulation and consumption of diverse materials, from advertisements to family photo albums. Such work must also contend with the fact that most if not all cultural products combine different media, which means paying close attention to language use, imagery, materiality, design and the complex relationships between these elements. Furthermore, any individual 'product' must be understood within its broader

socio-cultural context. As Edward Said explained in one of the foundational works deploying this method:

*The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. (1978, 272, emphasis in original)*

Documents and records in this reading emerge as complex, multivalent research objects. They are open to a broad range of methods and analytical techniques, touching on questions of visibility, discourse, materiality, semiotics, narrative and many other issues besides. For students and researchers in critical heritage studies, information that falls under this category (e.g. reports, statements, guidebooks) will often form a starting point for wider investigations into the social and political dimensions of heritage, but there are benefits to dwelling on such material rather than taking it at face value. The key point here will be to understand the kind of work that documents and records perform in different heritage processes, how they actively shape rather than simply reflect certain values and meanings, and the role they play within broader heritage practices.

## PRAXIS

The types of documents and reports I am interested in here – and that might form the basis for a heritage research project – are distinct from, though often connected to, archival records. As Sven Spieker explains in his book *The Big Archive*, it is important to differentiate between paperwork that circulates within administrative systems and still serves some organisational purpose and the archive proper, which in its original formation ‘confined itself to the storage of those records that had been taken out of circulation because they were no longer needed for the dispatch of ongoing business’ (2008, 21). Doing research about heritage may involve going into archives to reconstruct historical processes

and narratives, but when said processes are part of ‘ongoing business’ the resources in question often have a very different character: disorganised, ad-hoc, informal and frequently quite banal.<sup>1</sup> Such material precedes and exceeds the archive, forming a documentary infrastructure that offers partial evidence of heritage making in action.

The questions that might be asked of specific documents and records in any heritage research project will depend on the overarching aims and objectives of the study. For example, an interest in the visualisation and marketing of a particular site may lead to a very different set of questions from a study focused on the role of local communities in managing or protecting the same location (although there are likely to be overlaps between such research agendas). Here it is worth remembering that a research methodology will typically be built around three core elements: a distinct research question (or set of questions); a strategy for how evidence will be gathered/generated and analysed to address this question; and a theoretical framework that places the study in context and provides a point of departure for the analysis and conclusions. The second element is where precise research methods come into play, which should always respond to the specific questions being asked. In the case of work focused on documents and records, we might ask: Who produced the documents, and to what ends? What claims do they make about heritage, and what specific tools do they use to build such claims (‘tools’ here may include photographs, visualisations, charts, diagrams and of course text)? How have the records circulated through different channels, and what impact have they had on the world? Answering such questions will often require a diverse range of methods, where a close attention to distinct documents and records forms part of a broader research strategy encompassing other types of evidence and modes of analysis.

Within my own research on photography and heritage I have often found that the best approach is to draw on multisited methods that try and capture the different ways meaning flows and accrues around diverse documentary processes and resources (see Sterling 2014, 2016, 2020). A useful structure for such research can be found in Gillian Rose’s work on visual methodologies,

which outlines three ‘sites’ at which the meanings of an image are made: ‘the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences’ (2007, 13). While this approach is specifically addressed at visual material (photographs, films, paintings, sketches, maps etc.) the framework is clearly applicable to a wider range of documentary sources, including the kinds of practical literature described in the previous section. This is because any document goes through a similar process, from production through to circulation and interpretation. Moreover, as Rose suggests (2007, 13), each of these sites opens onto a further set of attributes that may be investigated to develop a critical understanding of the material in question, which may be summarised as *technological*, *compositional* and *social* (Rose calls these ‘modalities’). Here it should be noted that rather than corresponding to a particular phase or moment of meaning-making, these modalities form an important aspect of analysis at each site. For instance, the production of photographic images in the nineteenth century and the (re)use of those same images in the twenty-first century can both be understood in relation to specific technological apparatuses (chemical, digital or otherwise), deployed within particular socio-cultural contexts (e.g. colonialism, tourism, decolonial exhibition practices; see Sterling 2021 for further details). The same may be said of any image and – by extension – any documentary material.

Let me give an example. Nominating a site for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List requires the production of a detailed dossier. This will include a wide range of historical and contextual information, supported by technical drawings, photographs, maps, visualisations and diagrams. Such documents effectively distil the knowledge, opinions and interpretations of various actors gathered over a long time span (often several years) to satisfy criteria outlined by UNESCO and the three advisory bodies of the World Heritage Convention (ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN). Analysing the dossier itself – corresponding to the site of the image in Rose’s framework – may involve close reading, visual analysis, discourse analysis or some combination of these methods. It may also mean considering the dossier as a material object, paying attention to ‘shape and volume, weight

and texture' (Rose 2007, 219).<sup>2</sup> This approach will only allow you to gather a certain depth of evidence, however. The site of production, on the other hand, opens out onto a much broader set of issues and methods, especially interviews or ethnographic research with the people involved in commissioning and writing the report, and background research into the social, political and economic conditions under which the dossier was produced. Finally, the fact such documents are written with a very particular audience in mind underlines the importance of the site of reception and interpretation. How is the dossier ultimately read? Through what networks does it circulate and how is it put to work in different contexts? Again, these questions may be addressed through a range of methods, from quantitative surveys to participant observation (Meskell 2013, 2018; see Melhuish, Degen and Rose 2016 and Rose and Degen 2022 for an example of how Rose herself applies such methods).

Clearly this multisited approach will not be suited to all documentary material. The key point, however, is to recognise that no matter how unassuming, the meaning and value afforded to all documents and records will be contingent upon similar processes and structuring mechanisms. Choosing which analytical site to focus on, and which modalities to prioritise, represents an important step in developing a broader research methodology around such evidence.

## TEACHING

How might such questions and concerns be addressed in the classroom? Consider the stack of material described at the start of this chapter. Individually, the varied documents I encountered in the storeroom could be read in quite a straightforward manner, as sources of evidence about the kinds of heritage activities undertaken at the site in question. This would allow for a detailed historical narrative to be compiled, one that would no doubt satisfy research focused on the development and (potential) implementation of certain approaches at the site (in terms of conservation, interpretation and visitor management, for example). Critical



heritage studies, however, typically seeks to answer a wider set of questions related to the political, social and ethical dimensions of such work. To what extent can individual documents and records speak to these issues? How might such evidence – as part of a broader research methodology – address the multifaceted dynamics at play in any heritage process?

As a distinct category of evidence, documents and records point in multiple methodological directions at once. This, however, will be true of most sources, which may be approached through a variety of methods depending on the research question(s) to be addressed. Teaching students how to engage with such material may nevertheless benefit from a few key starting points. For example, looking at different specimens of the same type of document (e.g. conservation plans, World Heritage nominations) may help to demonstrate the range of choices that go into the production of even the most banal report. Here, students might focus on issues such as layout, language use, images, authorship and typographic design. Bringing concrete real-world examples of management plans, statements of significance, surveys and other heritage-related documents into the classroom also helps to demonstrate the kinds of work that students themselves may well be asked to undertake in the future. Understanding how such resources are planned, designed and produced can ground abstract discussions of heritage value creation and meaning-making. They are also perfect arenas in which to apply complementary methods related to discourse and visual analysis (see Waterton 2009). While heritage processes cannot be reduced to issues of representation and discourse, recognising how certain claims are made and subsequently codified within official texts – especially policy documents – is often revealing. At the same time, working backwards and forwards from specific documents to consider issues of production, circulation and interpretation is vital to address the work that such material performs in the world. Indeed, heritage practices are often determined by the technocratic demand to produce highly specific documentation for particular audiences, from funding bodies to local community groups. Identifying how and why such documents emerge, and the

role they play in establishing and supporting specific arguments about heritage, will represent an important point of departure for many research projects.

It is often difficult to determine with any great certainty the direct impact that certain texts – be they official or unofficial – have on broader material and social worlds. There is not always a clear line between what is written down or illustrated and the bearing such records have on reality. Like most social and cultural phenomena, heritage processes typically unfold through complex and nebulous feedback loops rather than straightforward mandates and effects. Nevertheless, looking at and analysing documents that relate to such processes can help to trace the diverse ways in which heritage is created, negotiated and contested across different social and cultural contexts. Indeed, we might think of such resources as nodal sites where specific ways of thinking about and mobilising heritage are made manifest and put into practice. Such processes do not begin and end with the document. Instead, it is better to see the document as a moment of crystallisation where certain ideas and agendas are placed in a particular configuration, which may be unsettled again by the reader or the next iteration of the same document. By critically analysing such resources students can extract valuable information about how heritage meanings are generated and evolve in relation to distinct social, cultural, political and economic conditions. Here I see an affinity with Ann Stoler's commitment to reading 'along the grain' of colonial archives (2009). This approach, which requires 'a less assured and perhaps more humble stance' to archives (2009, 50), attends to the conventions, expectations and principles through which colonial power impressed itself on diverse social worlds (and indeed continues to do so). As Stoler writes,

*I treat archives not as repositories of state power but as unquiet movements in a field of force, as restless realignments and readjustments of people and the beliefs to which they were tethered, as spaces in which the senses and the affective course through the seeming abstractions of political rationalities. (Stoler 2009, 33)*

This approach requires careful, patient and meticulous work, something that will also apply to any critical analysis of material still circulating as part of ongoing heritage processes. The difference with this latter category of material, however, is that researchers and students often have the benefit of following their emergence and effects in situ, as they move through the world and become entangled with various social phenomena. The rationalities and realignments of heritage praxis may be usefully unpacked by attending to such sites of evidence.

## NOTES

1. Many archives are also like this, of course, but their fundamental ‘business’ pertains to the production of historical knowledge rather than the continued functioning of a particular project or administrative unit.
2. On this note it is telling that the official guidelines for preparing a World Heritage nomination include the following advice: ‘Some nominations are provided in an elaborate and special box. While packaging the information in a box can be practically convenient, it is the quality of the information which is important, not the quality of the packaging’ (UNESCO 2011, 97).

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