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Keepers of Ghosts: old signs, new media and the age of archival flux

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The Keepers of Ghosts project began when 10,000 records from a former sign-painting company were rescued from a demolition site in Melbourne's west. Beginning with the creation of an online archive, the project has since developed into an experimental research program of community outreach involving sign writers, shopkeepers, local history aficionados and people interested in 'ghost signs', or the remains of painted advertising signs. Here we discuss the project's investigation of the use of digital media to informally document and share otherwise-forgotten aspects of urban memory, and the proposition that the interplay between digital and physical archival activities can be harnessed to involve and connect diverse groups with shared interests, both at local and global levels.

Keywords: archives; collective memory; digital media; ghost signs; new media; old signs; urban exploration; urban memory

Around the world, many thousands of people are using cameras on mobile digital devices to document traces of their neighbourhood's past before these traces disappear. In this article we focus on one such practice: photographs and other documentation of painted advertising signs, or 'ghost signs', which cannot be physically archived or collected because they survive, tenuously, on walls, shopfronts and hoardings.

Once taken, ghost sign photographs are posted to image-sharing websites, online forums and other social media, where communities of interest proffer and discuss their own images as well as reposted 'official' material from collecting institutions. Such 'wild archives'[1] generated by 'everyday practices'[2] enable collective memory and local urban documentation practices to develop in ways beyond the current scope and

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resources of custodial archives, a process that has been aided by the increasing ubiquity and mobility of networked digital devices, and the increasing ease and affordability of data transfer.

Here, we see the embodiment of Malraux's prescient notion of 'museums without walls':[3] free and open spaces for presentation of content previously held privately or by archives, museums, libraries or galleries. Social media is used to re-present fragments and glimpses of social and cultural history in ways that resonate with those who remember this history, have a related personal interest or seek an interaction with the past through the content assembled and shared by a group. As Laura Millar states:

> records are also created and used as safeguards against fragile and unpredictable recollections. It is here that the consideration of memory slips from individual to collective remembering.[4]

The online systems deployed for these collective processes are many and varied, and are increasingly used in combination. They include media-sharing platforms such as Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo and Pinterest; online mapping systems such as Google Maps and Historypin; journaling systems such as Wordpress blogs and Tumblr streams; and dedicated online archival software such as Omeka.[5] Use constantly evolves as systems change and new services are developed. Combining systems through automated 'feeds' is increasingly being used to proliferate content accessibility and reach. For example, UK-based ghost sign aficionado Sam Roberts' Flickr feed of images is interlinked with a Wordpress blog, a Tumblr stream, Facebook page and Twitter profile.[6]

About the Keepers of Ghosts project

The Keepers of Ghosts project deploys an exploratory case study methodology[7] to examine how amateur digital practices, archives, current interests in urban history and memory, and community events can intersect in constructive and innovative ways. Undertaking a case study allows us to investigate a particular phenomenon in depth, the outcomes of which are not known in advance.[8] We have deployed the theme of historical painted signage to create the conditions under study: an online archive of signwriting documents and a related community intervention. This, as well as the fact that we are ghost sign aficionados ourselves, positions us, the researchers, as active participants in the research. Data generated by the project is currently being analysed and includes:

- a review of field practices: ghost sign photography and sharing; other amateur-driven digital history practices; signwriting history practices; online surveys undertaken with ghost sign practitioners;
- exhibition: semi-structured interviews with attendees, café owner and mural painter; attendance figures; comments in exhibition guest book;
- archival website: unique page view and visitor figures; site engagement via comments and additions;
- the researchers' process of undertaking the creation of both the archival website and the exhibition, as documented in a personal weblog (http://findingtheradiobook.blogspot.com).

One of the aims of this research is to better understand the motivation behind people's interest in ghost signs and related aspects of urban history. Indicative results to date

suggest that this interest stems from a variety of motivations: personal recollection of brands or locations, experience or interest in the craft of hand-painted sign writing as well as design and typography, a fondness for local history or a desire to better understand the provenance of the neighbourhood they inhabit.

A further motivation, perhaps connected with some of those above, is a desire to explore urban spaces. Although this interest has long been documented in the work of artists and theorists from Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin to the Situationists and Michel De Certeau, it currently appears to be undergoing a popular resurgence.[9]

Project history

Indeed, it is this same interest in urban exploration that led to the discovery of a cache of signwriting documents spanning 1915–1958 by one of the authors. In February 2012, Stefan Schutt discovered a pile of abandoned documents at a demolition site in inner-western Melbourne. The pile contained records of a former signwriting company, Lewis & Skinner (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

The documents included job sheets, drawings, photographs, painted mock-ups, instructions to sign writers, invoices, and letters to and from clients. Over the following year, 10,000 documents were scanned and uploaded to an online archive[10] built using a customised version of the open source archival system Omeka. It was a thankless task for the two workers undertaking the scanning of these less-than-pristine papers.

A grant from a local foundation provided limited resources to undertake the technical development and refinement, and the scanning and uploading work. However this funding did not cover detailed checking and proofreading, nor the inclusion of detailed metadata beyond basic job and geolocation details (something that Omeka is designed to support). A project decision was made early to privilege comprehensiveness of uploaded content over comprehensiveness of metadata, with a view towards seeking additional support later to undertake finessing.

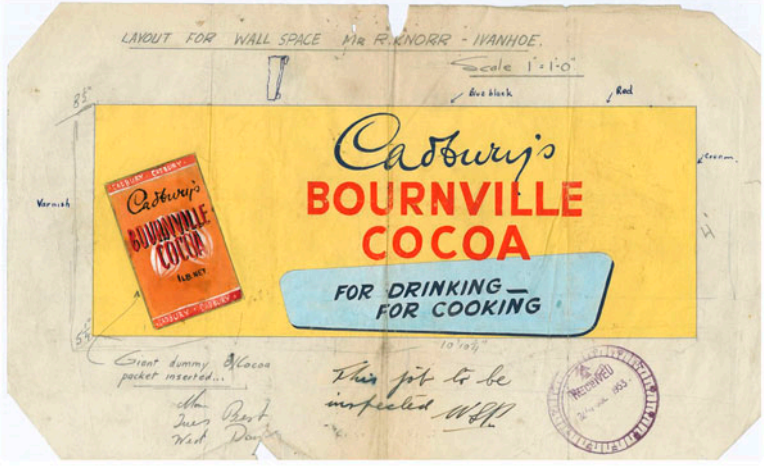

Figure 1. Layout for wall space, Ivanhoe, R Knorr, 9 February 1955, digitised document from the Lewis & Skinner archive (http://lewisandskinner.com/items/show/2596).

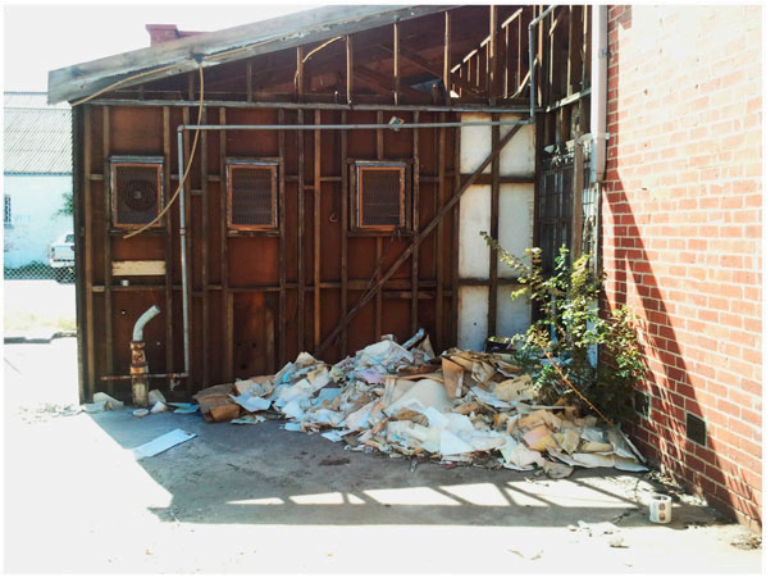

Figure 2. The 'find' records of Lewis & Skinner in situ at the Footscray demolition site, 2012, image by Stefan Schutt.

Figure 3. Detail of found records of Lewis & Skinner, 2012, image by Stefan Schutt.

For professional archivists, the incompleteness of Dublin Core metadata[11] may be problematic, but the choice was clear to the project team, and outlines one of the important issues involved in archival work: time and resourcing choices. In this case, project resources were geared towards providing as much basic and useful navigational information for the online public as possible. The records include descriptive titles with details of content and date, and the mapping provides location information. They are browsable and searchable via suburb, thematic tags and free text, but are a work in progress in terms of their accuracy, with occasional spelling and notation errors.

As the records were found dumped at a demolition site, we have no notion of original order or corporate knowledge of the organisation's history. Our research to date has only uncovered cursory location information about the Lewis & Skinner company. Although the sign painters interviewed as part of the subsequent exhibition program knew of the company, they were unable to shed any light on provenance information, although they have provided us with some leads.

The completion of the scanning and uploading of documents to the Lewis & Skinner archive was followed by a community outreach program. Designed to bridge the gap between the archive as a collection of inert documents and the living neighbourhoods represented in the archive, a community exhibition took place in October 2013 (see Figure 4), preceded by an academic seminar on ghost signs in March of the same year. A week-long exhibition of selected archive documents was held at a cafe close to where the documents were found.

During that week, a large Lewis & Skinner logo was progressively painted as a mural on the wall of the cafe by a local sign-painting artisan, with other sign painters joining in to help (Figure 5).

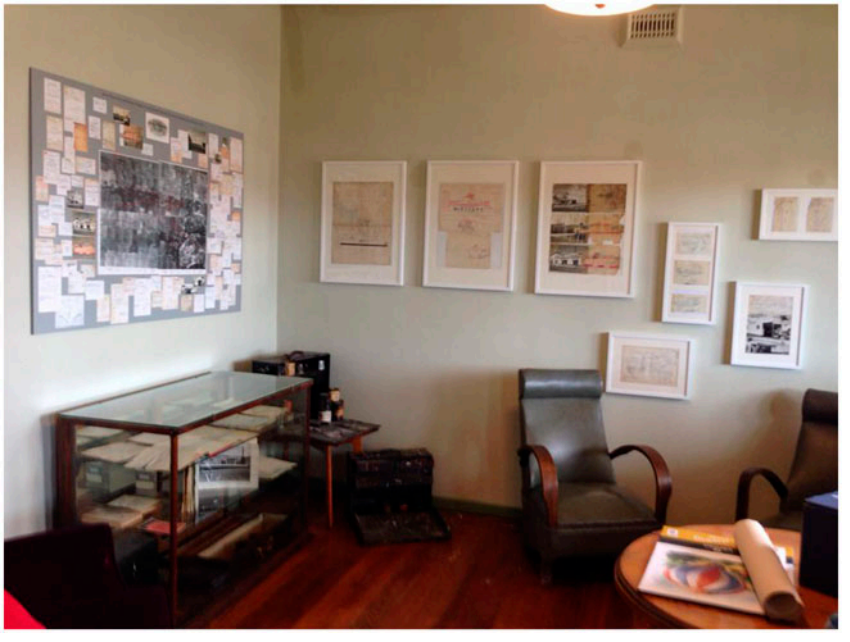

Figure 4. Partial view of the Lewis & Skinner exhibition in Seddon, 2013, image by Stefan Schutt.

Figure 5. Live sign painting of the Lewis & Skinner logo by sign writer and artisan Tony Mead and a volunteer sign painter at the exhibition in Seddon, 2013, images by Lisa Cianci.

The exhibition was preceded by the delivery of personalised postcards to residents at local premises represented in the archives, inviting them to share their stories about the sign, and to visit the exhibition (Figure 6).

The exhibition and sign-painting event created significant media coverage including television news reporting, radio interviews, newspaper and online articles, and was supported by the State Library of Victoria.[12] The project team counted 218 attendees through the week, although many more people visited during the evenings when the exhibition was also open, and the closing celebration which marked the completion of the logo sign painting.

Perhaps due to the diverse media coverage, a variety of different audiences was noted. A large contingent of current and former sign painters travelled from distant suburbs and regional Victoria to reconnect with their craft. Older visitors keen on local history also travelled long distances. Local residents attended, including families and local notables, as did young creatives attracted to the 'vintage' aesthetic of the graphic records. One local family had received an invitation in their shopfront letterbox, and came with stories of the 1950s Cadbury chocolate sign that had only recently been broken by vandals, and whose fragments they still kept. Another lived in a local building adorned with a ghost sign we had previously used to advertise a seminar (see Figure 7). The exhibition generated significant engagement and useful research information for us, plus a business and publicity boost for the cafe owner, who was himself a local with an interest in history.

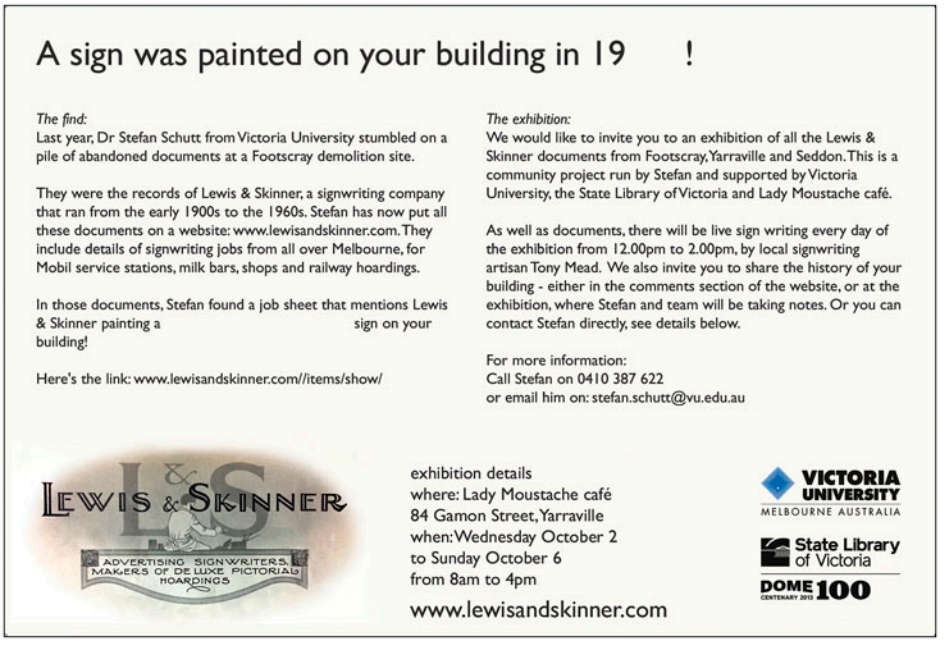

Figure 6. Template of personalised invitation given to residents of sites where Lewis & Skinner signs were located, 2013, produced by Lisa Cianci.

Figure 7. An example of a ghost sign – Capstan Cigarettes/Temple Bar Tobacco located in Yarraville, Melbourne, 2013, image by Stefan Schutt from his blog, available at http://findingtheradiobook.blogspot.com.au/2012/11/another-beauty-from-yarraville-plus.html, accessed 28 November 2013.

The nature of wild archives

Although social media systems are increasingly streamlined, the administration of online history groups nevertheless requires a great deal of volunteer-driven dedication and work.[13] This is perhaps why ghost sign assemblages tend to fall into a state of inactivity after some time. An example is the Melbourne-based ghost signs website 'Our Fading Past',[14] which is no longer actively maintained and has become a static digital archive itself. This raises the issue of who owns or controls these archives, and whether anyone will save or document these online archives in the wild?

User-driven social media – or perhaps more fittingly, *sociable media*[15] – also incorporate content from institutional collections. An example is the Facebook page 'Lost Melbourne',[16] which began in late 2012 and has since attracted a following of over 30,000. Lost Melbourne's followers post mostly digitised old photographs and film. Part of this content is sourced from institutional collections and sites such as 'Trove'[17] and part from followers' own collections. The content posted generates lively dialogues and even controversies.[18] Followers also use the page to request information from other followers about artefacts, places or people. Lost Melbourne has rapidly become a nodal point for collective memory about a city and its people. As Paul Ricoeur states: 'the archive is not just a physical or spatial place, it is also

a social one'.[19] Through the medium of Facebook, which is predicated on online social interaction, the 'everyday practice' of repurposing archival content drives the creation of memory narratives from a variety of viewpoints. As we have seen in recent archival literature, archivists are seeking ways to utilise technology to 'open up archives as social "spaces of memory"'[20] – an emergent practice that amateurs have adopted, it seems, with gusto.

Ghost signs: mapping an international phenomenon

People have been interested in ghost signs for some time. Professional aficionados such as the US-based photographer and writer Wm. Stage[21] produced ghost sign books in the 1980s, coinciding with the decline of the sign-painting industry. In the 1990s, New York-based Frank Jump[22] became known for his documentation of the city's fading signs. Meanwhile, groups of current and former sign writers, such as the international organisation Letterheads,[23] have been active throughout in keeping the craft alive by running websites, forums and dedicated sign-painting weekends and conventions. Currently, the Sign Painter documentary and associated book[24] are generating significant worldwide interest.

During the consecutive development of the World Wide Web, social media and mobile technologies, interest in ghost signs exploded. One of the topic's many social media groups on Flickr[25] now has over 25,000 shared items posted by over 2000 members at the time of writing. Alongside this, recent years have seen a valorisation and resurgence of handmade craft of all kinds, as well as a concern for what has been called 'urban memory',[26] which is seen to be connected with a contemporary 'crisis of memory' in Western societies, 'a fear that the material traces of the past might be swept away, taking memory with them'.[27]

Academic interest in the ghost signs phenomenon is brewing. Through the Keepers of Ghosts project, we have formed links with a range of individuals and groups currently involved in the study of ghost signs and related digital archival practices and possibilities,[28] particularly 'the possibilities afforded by networked and digital technology … [to] … provide more spaces for public interaction for archives to directly contribute to memory production and propagation'[29] through tactics including crowdsourcing and dynamic online mapping.

A central question raised by such investigation is whether or not collections of ghost sign photographs (or, indeed, scans of ghost sign ephemera or other photographs of changing urban traces) could be considered archives. Here we refer to the three attributes of archives as defined by Verne Harris, Research and Archive Director at the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory. These attributes are described as 'one, a trace on, or in, a surface; two, a surface with the quality of exteriority, and; three, an act of deeming such a trace to be worthy of protection, preservation and the other interventions which we call "archival"'.[30] Interestingly, Harris defines deeming in this context as 'almost without apparatus and certainly without professional or disciplinary authority. Anyone can deem.'[31] Under this definition, it would suggest that the answer to the question is yes. And although such collections may not conform to more traditional notions of the archive, they do demonstrate the multidisciplinary broadening of archival theory and practice – to 'enrich the discourse' – as recommended by Jacobsen, Punzalan and Hedstrom.[32]

But such a broadening is not without its problematics. Questions raised by our research include: how does the renewed interest in urban exploration and memory

interact with concepts of the archive, including current discourse around the archive – memory nexus? For instance, does documenting physical sites count as evidence of their existence, or as the symbolic representation of collective memory? And how should we regard the transient nature of 're-presentation' of ghost signs? Imagine a digital photograph of an old sign. After it is taken, a copy is uploaded to a social media website. Here it is searchable by tags and surrounded by Global Positioning System (GPS) map references, comments and links to related content. What, then is 'core' content, and what is context and metadata? Who 'owns' which data, and for how long? Who maintains it? What happens when the 'variable media' system[33] on which it is stored changes or disappears? And is there ever a point at which a 'definitive' record can be deemed to exist, and if so, by whom?

Re-contextualising the archive: digital and physical activations

The physical Lewis & Skinner documents might be conceived as a finite, incomplete collection of records, but the digitisation project has opened up this collection as a 'living archive'[34] with all its potentials and ambiguities. It is now a collection that is continuously 'activated': edited and updated; exhibited; and re-visualised.[35] The meanings and understandings of the Lewis & Skinner documents have evolved with the ongoing generation of new contexts. GPS location data in the Omeka system has facilitated visits to former sign sites by users, leading to contemporary photographs of sites being added to the archive by way of the Omeka comment facility. As Tom Nesmith states, 'to the extent that an object (or record) can be known at all, it can only be known over time, as it goes through these processes of contextualization and re-contextualization, and more of its relationships with other records and actions are understood'.[36]

The accessibility of records in the Lewis & Skinner archive has also made it possible to develop Victoria University student projects, located in Melbourne's inner west. Thus far, two undergraduate groups (within the Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Visual Art) have taken part via Omeka's 'exhibit' functionality. Interestingly, although the lack of surviving Lewis & Skinner signs proved disappointing to some students, most were still motivated by the project to research, visit and document other ghost signs. All agreed that their perception of local environments had changed, and in some ways, their everyday practices. Students commented on how they now look up at buildings as they walk through older urban areas, sometimes taking photos with smart cameras and 'blogging' their findings.

Such outcomes could not have been envisaged by the creators of the Lewis & Skinner records. For Eric Ketelaar, such activation of records assists the development of cultural identities: 'the meaning of a record or of any other cultural artifact must be understood in two different ways – first, the meaning *of* the record and second, the meaning *for* someone or *for* an occasion'.[37]

Other project activations involved the physical exhibition itself. This included creating a 1.2 x 2.4 metre map visualisation featuring 1945 aerial photographs of Melbourne's west overlaid with sign-painting job documents from the Lewis & Skinner archives. Lines pointed to the locations where the signs were painted (see Figure 8). Another activation was the live painting of the Lewis & Skinner mural, which took place for two hours daily during the exhibition week, and was inspired by other sign-painting 'performances' in the US. These activations were very different in form, but

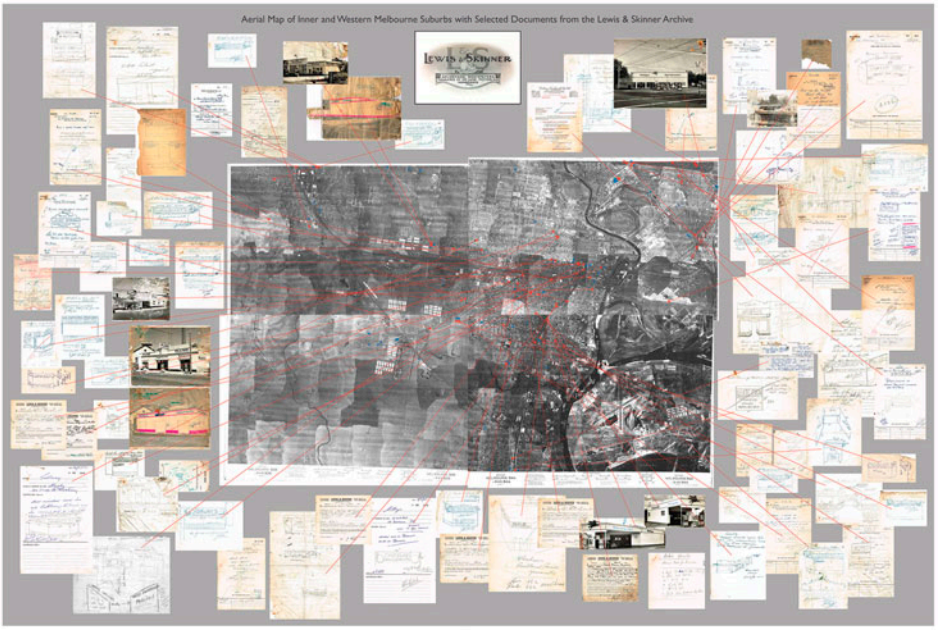

Figure 8. The 'Big Map' – visualisation of Lewis & Skinner records mapped to old aerial maps of Melbourne's west, 2013, visualisation produced by Lisa Cianci.

each generated engagement with the archives in particular, with the craft of signwriting, and local urban history in general.

Archives in flux

We have observed several issues relating to online documentation of ghost signs: some sites fall into disuse; online images are not always well documented with accurate and specific location or date capture; those documenting old signs don't necessarily use standard archival descriptors or the metadata may not be accurate; and there is no way to determine data veracity or authenticity other than community self-moderation via comments, tags and other inbuilt system functions.

Our research has raised a range of related questions for further investigation. What kinds of community-based strategies might we deploy to keep separate silos of thematically related content connected, relevant, authentic and accessible? Is there a role for collecting institutions and professional archivists and curators as stakeholders in wild archives? Or conversely (as we are now observing), should institutions aim to make their holdings available to the public in new yet controlled ways, thereby 'taming' wild archival practices? Can partnerships that involve jointly accessed data, such as the Powerhouse Museum's agreement with Historypin,[38] address the thorny issues of legacy, provenance and openness?

Further potential for investigation can be found in possible interactions between physical environments, layers of place-based digital presentation and crowdsourcing of content. Not much, for instance, has been written about combining mixed reality[39] with archives. Heritage projects utilising augmented reality[40] (AR) and GPS are emerging,

such as the National Trust Victoria's 'Lost 100' iPhone app. This app 'superimposes images of demolished buildings over what is at the location now, by augmenting the iPhone's existing camera function': past meets present through the window of a smartphone screen.[41] Users can further augment this content by adding their own images and stories via linked Facebook and Twitter platforms. The Museum of London's 'StreetMuseum: Londinium',[42] as well as the GPS- and app-driven Indigenous tour of the Murray – Darling basin 'Ringbalin: River Stories',[43] provide further examples of the meshing of place, history and culture via digital content and AR technologies.

Our experimental activities using the Lewis & Skinner records have revealed the potential of hybrid methods of presentation, re-presentation and re-contextualisation – yet we have only scratched the surface of possibilities inherent in such different worlds colliding and collaborating. As Millar tells us, 'technology does blur the lines between "here" and "there" and "then" and "now"'.[44] However, Keepers of Ghosts is not only about past and present. It is also about future potential: reinvention, renewal and the recursive process of archive and memory interacting, and producing hybrid practices. But like any bright future promised by technology, we also need to keep a careful eye on the things that may be lost in the process, and take appropriate archival safeguards. The famous statement by the recently departed prophet of modernity, Marshall Berman, still applies today:

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.[45]

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Telematics Trust, Victoria University, the State Library of Victoria, Lady Moustache cafe, artist Carey Potter and sign writer and artisan Tony Mead for their assistance in realising the Keepers of Ghosts project.

Endnotes

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39. The term 'mixed reality' encompasses the 'virtuality continuum' from the 'real world' to the completely virtual, immersive environment. Paul Milgram, 'A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays', *IEICE Transactions on Information Systems*, vol. E77-D, no. 12, December 1994, available at <*http://www.eecs.ucf.edu/~cwingrav/teaching/ids6713_sprg2010/assets/Milgram_IEICE_1994.pdf*>, accessed 28 November 2013.
40. The term 'augmented reality' describes the imposition of a computer-generated image onto one's perception of the 'real world' thus creating a hybrid experience.
41. National Trust Victoria, 'Melbourne's Lost 100 iPhone app', Australia, 2013, available at <*http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/vic/national-trust-victorias-lost-melbournes-lost-100-iphone-app*>, accessed 28 November 2013.
42. Thumbspark Limited, 'StreetMuseum: Londinium', UK, 2012, available at <*https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/streetmuseum-londinium/id449426452*>, accessed 28 November 2013.
43. Ringbalin River Stories Project, 'Ringbalin: River Stories', Australia, available at <http://www.ringbalin-riverstories.com/>, accessed 28 November 2013.
44. Millar, p. 108.
45. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin Books, New York, 1982, p. 15.