Greige Room 04

The Archive of Non-Order
a conversation with Drew Smith
Edited by Mary Dahlman Begley

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On November 29, 2018 Greige Room researchers Mary Dahlman Begley and Drew Smith met with Amanda Wick, chief archivist for the Charles Babbage Institute at the University of Minnesota Archives. This collection is kept in the archives at Andersen Library, a cheerful atrium office building with radial symmetry atop caverns cut into the limestone cliffs along the side of the Mississippi River.

The University archives are open to the public, as a condition of a land grant university. The Morrill Act of 1862 allotted federally-owned land to each state for the establishment or advancement of universities "built on behalf of the people," per President Lincoln. In Minnesota, it is important to acknowledge the land was taken from the Dakota and Anishinaabe peoples and the University of Minnesota benefited from that theft. The archives hold a particular spatial and temporal purpose in that narrative: the caverns occupy the cliff along the Great River, for the purpose of constructing and protecting the ideas of today for the people of tomorrow. Archivists take this duty seriously and thoughtfully. Wick highlighted her role in constructing a representation of history that is accurate in its narrative yet accentuates under-represented voices.

The Charles Babbage Institute (CBI) is dedicated to preserving the history of information technology. CBI archive includes 300+ distinct collections which, when contained in Miracle Boxes measuring one cubic foot, extend for one mile. The two caverns at Andersen Library contain more than 1.5 million volumes, both archival collections and storage for Inter-Library Loan services. Space is highly contested in these caverns. Wick spoke of a constant re-organizing of all collections to catalog new materials and, if possible, make more room. Assistant Archivist Christopher True of the Northwest Architectural Archives stated that the caverns are now full to their capacity.

As non-experts in the history of information technology, the Greige Room set out to interrogate the nature of the archive at CBI. Markus Miessen's articulation of crossbenching suggests that the external observer may glean new knowledge about a disparate subject and can perhaps implement new spatial practices by observation and analysis. This collision of knowledge, present at the gap of not knowing, may be a productive space of conflict - the conflictual archive. In this collaborative research issue, Greige Room will use the framework of a conflictual archive to respond to their research trip to the CBI Archives.

Greige Room would like to thank Amanda Wick, Charles Babbage Institute, and Drew Smith.

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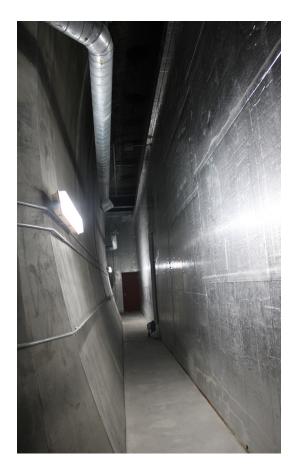
Welcome to the Greige Room, Drew.

Wow! Thanks for having me, it's a true honor to be in a publication of such esteem.

Your interest in Markus Miessen's idea of crossbenching inspired this topic. How does crossbenching connect to archive, in your understanding?

Crossbenching is a practice of not knowing, where individuals proactively inject themselves into situations, disciplines, or problems as uninvited outsiders, who, without any self interest, have the potential to implement and develop new ways of producing space. Crossbenching produces knowledge in the blindspots between disciplines. For example, a poetry student might apply their process to

water treatment, or a math teacher could get involved in housing policy.

Miessen is interested in the archival space precisely because archives have the power to construct and preserve knowledge and were often built up around specific topics or disciplines. Thus, the archive has the ability to define the edges of any given topic or field. It seems, especially according to Miessen, that the notion of crossbenching and the predominantly modernist mode of archiving produces knowledge in very different spaces- one produces ~~a territory an edge~~ *a boundary* and a space between one and the other: a border.

The act of archiving establishes a boundary around a field of knowledge, and crossbenching requires crossing a border. The physical boundary of the archives at Andersen Library is a hard edge, as we saw in the interstitial space between limestone and climate controlled storage.

Archivist Amanda Wick brought up ideas about how the new search technology is affecting

disciplinary bounds. How do the new realities of archival space change the territories of knowing?

It's not just the boundary produced between the building and the limestone caverns, but also the walls between the different archival spaces. Decisions on what to keep on hand are made by the individual archivists who administer their own collections. While the physical material is stored within the contested space of the cavern storage, the act of archiving is performed within clear and strategically placed boundaries.

Within these so-called contested spaces are what is most interesting for a crossbencher. They are spaces of conflict that have the productive potential of fulfilling Chantal Mouffe's notion of **Agonistic Pluralism**. Ultimately, the archival storage in the limestone caverns fails to produce productive conflict - the nature of its contestedness was mainly directed through a competition for funding and space for collecting more material. But, most interestingly, the space with the highest capacity for productive conflict is not physical, but digital. The speed and accessibility of online searches has been incredibly popular with archive visitors. In the archive search engines, users now have the ability to search multiple archives at once. This liberates the archive user's browsing experience from an architecture complicit in hierarchical disciplinary structures, enabling an organization of archival material that produces a culture of suggestion. To Miessen, the culture of suggestion uses non-order as a potential trigger for new links and relationships.

Wick described this new digital accessibility as a search paradigm, which you attach to the possibility of finding new links across disciplines and topics. This flattening of the finding aid, as opposed to previous browse paradigm by which physical card catalog or material organization must be searched, allows for the culture of suggestion.

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Returning now to productive conflict - Wick directed us to Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz' archival theory about archive as a reflection of power structure. In their thinking, archives are "not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed." This, and your articulation of contested space, seems to suggest conflict for the makers of the archive. What about the visitors? How could an archive user experience agonistic pluralism?

Yes. Those are terrific points. Wick was quick to point out that her job often was less about collecting and more about throwing away. Moreover, Schwartz also debunks the "myth of objectivity,"asserting that the production of an archive is full of bias, mistakes, competing interests, and chance. This is very much a space of conflict and one that needs to be continually challenged and maintained. Because

A pile of office machines, ca. 1910(?)

From Charles Babbage Institute Newsletter, Fall 2018 Featured Photo

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the archive is produced primarily by archivists, the visitor will always be navigating the aftermath of the complexities of archival decision making. Interestingly, the curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist is working with Miessen to produce a new kind of archival space out of his immense collection. The ambition is to develop a conflictual archive about "mistakes and collisions." Using **non-order** as both a browsing and spatial strategy, this open framework is capable of becoming a productive stage of "dispute and struggle."

I wonder if an archive adhering to this framework will turn into anarchic piles of papers. Non-order may still require maintenance. Archives are used by researchers - often underfunded and short on time. Now, researchers flip through boxes quickly, photographing each page with their phone for examination later. This, in combination with a search paradigm, flattens the hierarchy of organization - if you can input a word and, whether the organization is ordered or non-ordered, find the object of your search, perhaps deprioritizing the way archives work.

Wick introduced two principles of archival theory: provenance and original order. **Provenance** evaluates and makes known the creator of the material, the subject, and the user. **Original order** maintains the same vocabulary and organization as the creator intended. What is the implication of these principles on the archive as a productive space of conflict?

I think word non-order implies an intentionality. In reality, it's nearly impossible for humans to design anything that's random - even randomizing algorithms are specifically designed. For example, for a project I used a script to randomly generate 50 points on a plane. I ended up cycling through various iterations until I decided which one appeared to be the most random - in the end, it was not random. Therefore, in an archive, non-order negates any

sort of apparent rationality. By preventing predictability, the archive can create surprise and, thus, novel links between materials and new research possibilities.

Original order potentially does produce conflict by undermining the agency of the archivist, it still has a coherent internal logic that does not produce surprise or new links in the way a spatialized non-order or search function.

Our goal in this research of archives was to test our understanding of spatial organization, as students of architecture, against the organization of knowledge, in archives. What did this test of crossbenching reveal in the unexpected blind spots between compartments?

The physical space that the archives at Andersen Library occupy is of note - Andersen is a large, 90s era building overlooking the Mississippi constructed above a vast limestone bed. The limestone caverns beneath the

building have a stable temperature that is nearly identical to the conditions needed to house the material in an archive. So, the architects and engineers basically placed a ventilated metal box inside a bored out cavern to store all the material. Wick playfully described it as the "bat cave." The built reality shows the importance of the archive's role in protecting its material, in addition to its role at place of storage. While the archive constructs and maintains knowledge, it also guards millions of dollars worth of objects. Fortunately for potential visitors, the archive at the Andersen Library is public - in that way, the knowledge constructed by the donors, archivists, and administrators contributes to enriching the commons.

The 17th century architect, Balthasar Neumann attributed architecture to organization. If the archive is about organizing material, architecture is no different. Miessen, as a crossbencher, works within the physical space of an archive to organize the material to facilitate productive conflict as visitors encounter conflicting knowledge. Vahan Misakyan describes architecture as the facilitator of program that catalyzes activities that are cyclically being reenacted.

The archive is an assemblage of archival material, institutional funding and labor. The decay of earthly objects and the value imparted on those objects by archivists, visitors, disciplinary methods, and culture make necessary the creation of a safe place to store human artifacts. This system of objects, processes, and knowledge is the 'architecture' of the archive that enables the activity of archiving to take place everyday. By looking at the archive as a larger system, it allows the architect not just to consider the archive as a physical and discursive place - but as an architecture that produces the act of archiving.