This is an author produced version of a paper published in 2016 22nd International Conference on Virtual System & Multimedia (VSMM). This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the published paper:

Nilsson, Elisabet M.. (2016). Prototyping collaborative (co)-archiving practices : From archival appraisal to co-archival facilitation. 2016 22nd International Conference on Virtual System & Multimedia (VSMM), p. null

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1109/VSMM.2016.7863184>

Publisher: IEEE

This document has been downloaded from MUEP (<https://muep.mah.se>) / DIVA (<https://mau.diva-portal.org>).

Prototyping collaborative (co-)archiving practices

From archival appraisal to co-archival facilitation

Elisabet M. Nilsson

School of Arts and Communication (K3)
Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University
Malmö, Sweden
elisabet.nilsson@mah.se

Abstract—This paper presents a series of prototyped collaborative (co-)archiving practices developed within the interdisciplinary research project Living Archives. The aim is to explore co-archiving practices for involving underrepresented voices in contributing to our archives, and to create conditions for accessing intangible heritage resources beyond traditional methods. The methodological approach is design research, and participatory design. Six co-archiving practices are presented, designed to invite the user groups to collect, store and share their memories and cultural heritages. We argue that the co-archiving practices prototyped assume an inclusive and a democratic approach. They allow for the involvement of many senses when accessing and generating archive material in an open, but still highly structured way. Applying such co-archiving approach could potentially result in more representative archives, and support archivists interested in going from a focus on archival appraisal to co-archival facilitation.

Keywords—*co-archiving; underrepresented communities, design research; participatory design; prototyping; intangible cultural heritage; activist archivist*

I. LIVING ARCHIVES – URBAN ARCHIVING

Living Archives¹ is a research project at the School of Arts and Communication (K3), Malmö University exploring archives and archiving practices in a digitized society. The project aims to research, analyze and prototype how archives for public cultural heritage can become a social resource, creating social change, cultural awareness and collective collaboration pointing towards a shared future of a society. It is an interdisciplinary project with a number of active research strands and a wide range of collaborating partners.

As argued by Derrida [7]: “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation”. This statement serves as a starting point for a series of interventions conducted as part of the Urban Archiving theme in Living Archives. How to give voice to the marginal? How can we involve the underrepresented in contributing to our archives, and in sharing the story of our times from their point of view? How to create conditions for accessing intangible heritage resources beyond traditional methods?

The aim of the research interventions presented in this paper is to explore and prototype collaborative (co-)archiving practices for involving more people in contributing to our common archives. Our focus has up to now been on underrepresented, marginalised urban communities, but recently also on newcomers seeking asylum in Sweden [2][3].

II. LEARNING FROM OTHERS

To address the underrepresentation of marginalised communities in archives is nothing new [9]. Already in the 70's critique towards the “bias in the documentation of culture” [6] was put forward. North American archival scholars were debating the failure of being able to “provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time” [6]. Instead of continuing to document the “well-documented” archivists were encouraged to become “activist archivists” striving to represent the whole variety of people and communities existing within society [6]. There was a call for compiling more representative archives of society by going from biased archival records to more representative records of human experience. Despite serious attempts at addressing these shortcomings there seems to be little change achieved over the past decades [6][9].

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an overview of the archival state-of-the-art around the world. However, to at least give a small glimpse of the progress since the 70's two cases are presented, outlining thoughts and ideas that can be helpful in contextualising a co-archiving approach.

The first case is a study focusing on representations of black women in archives, the relationship between archives and power, and the notion of the archive as being a tool of social control [9]. Black women have historically been misrepresented in society, pushed to the margin, and not listened to by the dominant culture [9]. There are of course many reasons behind this fact, but one aspect that the study puts an emphasis on is the claim that the misrepresentation of black women is connected to recruitment problems in the archival profession. It ought to be acknowledged that the archival profession is still culturally homogeneous, and as human beings we handle materials differently if we are the subjects of a collection and can relate to it, or not [9].

Archival appraisal is central to the archivist's work, and according to some even *the* essence of the work. There is inherently power in the practice of appraisal – what to include

¹For more information about the project, see: livingarchives.mah.se

in a collection, and what to leave out? The argument put forward by Warren [9] is that *if* more black women are put in situations where they are allowed to manage archives, and collections on black women in particular, more representative archives of human experiences would be archived. It would also be an opportunity for the women to contest the official narrative told by someone who is not connected to the embodied experience of being part of the culture that is being captured and archived. As emphasized, power over the archive equals control of the narrative [7].

Another case to learn from puts its attention on archival science education, and the importance of creating a social justice framework for archivists to relate to [1]. Four goals relevant to the archival discourse are outlined:

- “to provide a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is more equitable
- to seek vehicles for actors to express their own agency, reality or, representation
- to develop strategies that broker dialogue between communities with unparalleled cultural viewpoints
- to create frameworks to clearly identify, define, and analyze oppression and how it operates at various individual, cultural, and institutional levels (emphasis in original)” [1].

Both Warren [9] and Dunbar [1] put light on the role of the archivist and how to encourage archival professionals, if not to become full activist archivists, to at least to have a more inclusive approach by also inviting the “archived” to be part of the archiving process. An argument put forward is that opening up the archiving process by inviting more people to contribute to our archives would result in more representative archives.

III. RESEARCH APPROACH AND PROCESS

The research approach we undertake is design research, which is based in action research and often driven by a critical agenda, exploring alternatives and operating by interventions in existing cultural settings. It is characterized by:

- “*Prototyping* and design are part of the research activities
- Research involves *real-world settings and people*
- The research process is *iterative*
- Design research produces *design knowledge* intended for designers and practitioners”. [10]

Our research process was guided by principles and methods from the field of participatory design (PD), which also has its roots in action research traditions [8]. It can in short be described as a diverse collection of principles and practices aimed at creating alternative futures, supporting democratic changes by involving the users in collaborative (co-)design processes. This direct involvement of the users is one of the central principles of PD. Instead of designing *for* the users, the designers and/or researchers work *with* the users in a process of joint decision-making, mutual learning and co-creation [8]. A co-design approach changes the role of the designer from being a traditional designer as we know it, to someone

facilitating the design process engaging the users in exploring and prototyping design solutions [5]. However, in order to take on this active role the involved users must be given the appropriate tools to express themselves.

Accordingly, prototyping and design interventions have been part of our research process, conducted in real-world settings, inviting the users to be part of a co-design process. The involved user groups have been urban gardening communities, neighbourhood communities, and young newcomers. Besides researchers in the Living Archives project, other involved collaborators are masters students, artists, and civil servants at the city council. The outcome of the research process is a series of prototyped co-archiving practices. The prototypes are used both as practical examples of what a co-archiving practice might entail, and as a contribution to the discussion of what the “archival mission” might include.

IV. PROTOTYPED CO-ARCHIVING PRACTICES

Up to now, we have prototyped six co-archiving practices designed to invite the marginalised, and/or underrepresented to collect, store and share their memories and cultural heritages [2][3][4]. The prototypes presented in the following sections are: *Eat a Memory*, *Plant your History*, *The Memory Game*, *Soil Memories*, *Mosaic of Malmö*, and *Designing an archiving practice using comedy*.

Our first prototype is *Eat a Memory*, which is a co-archiving practice where eatables from urban gardens are used as a means to share and access memories and cultural heritage. A joint meal in the form of a potluck is applied as a platform to generate and record new and diverse histories of people and places. Through the act of cooking and eating, memories are performed, shared and stored in different formats of a more or less tangible kind: as a taste, a smell, a recipe, a visual representation, and audio. At the gatherings the participants prepared their dish, and served it along with a background story. The sharing of memories is channelled through more than one sense. It allows for communication beyond words and invites everyone to “speak”, through their food, regardless of their level of language skills.

Fig. 1. A table of shared performed memories at a community gathering.

In *Plant your History* we explored the notion of urban gardens as performed memories and how gardens manifest the

cultural heritage of communities and residents in a neighbourhood, and thus may be viewed as living archives. Together with urban gardeners we looked into how their personal histories could be planted in a garden, and in what ways a garden can share stories beyond words about them, their family and their community. By using the urban garden as “language”, the storytelling was opened up for people who otherwise might be excluded due to a lack of language skills.

Fig. 2. Urban gardeners planting histories.

The Memory Game is a card game and an archiving practice developed in collaboration with an artist collective. It is designed to work as a dialogue platform, and as a framework for collecting, storing and sharing memories and cultural heritage. The game can be played by anyone who wishes to generate a poetic archive based on individual memories, which in the end are merged into one piece of joint memory.

Fig. 3. Memory gaming.

The game consists of a deck of cards with an image on one side and a blank reverse side. In the first round of a gaming session, the participants are asked to take an empty card and write down or draw a memory relating to a selected topic. In the second round, they play the game. All the cards are collected in a game box, each participant picks a card, reads it in silence, places it on the table next to another related card, and then reads the flowing text out loud. The gameplay builds upon an associative play between the players. A network of performed memories eventually emerges, in the end forming one common tale.

2015 was the International Year of Soils (appointed by The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). The prototype *Soil Memories* is a tribute to soil as a carrier of cultural heritage, life and memories connecting the present to the past and to the future. The materiality of soil offers a tactile and sensory starting point for talking about notions of being, belonging and home. The practice can be described as an act of collective storytelling.

At a Soil Memories gathering, the participants bring a scoop of soil from a place that is important to them. All

contributions are collected in a big pot, forming a new mixture of “land” consisting of fragments from the participants’ individual histories. The participants are also asked to share their memories of the place where the soil is taken and how it relates to its new “home”. In the end a symbolic archive of land is formed, which may only be accessed via the flowers that are planted in the pot at the end of the intervention.

The student-driven interaction design project *Designing an archiving practice using comedy* explored the potentials of using comedy for generating stories about intangible cultural heritage and identities. The first design concept was based on the use of comedy as a cultural icebreaker, so that newcomers to the Swedish culture would post questions about Swedish culture into a web platform. This content would form an archive that Swedish comedians could use for creating comic plots explaining their own culture.

As part of their explorations the interaction design students signed up for an improvisation workshop. That experience culminated in a workshop design initially intended to be an ethnographic study on acquiring the newcomers’ experiences to share with a local comedian. However, the practice of the workshop became so effective that the result in itself became a viable co-archiving practice and formed the basis for the prototype, which is a workshop format for accessing humour as an intangible cultural heritage source.

Mosaic of Malmö is another student-driven interaction design project prototyping co-archiving practices for capturing the everyday lives of human beings that go beyond the tangible to sources of intangible cultural heritage expressed as: smell, colour, facial expressions, voices and memories. Instead of trying to capture a person as a whole unit, fragments and different facets of an individual are collected. The five different areas, and/or senses listed above were used as a starting point for prototyping a series of practices for collecting fragments of an individual. In the next step the collected fragments were put together, forming a mosaic of people living in Malmö today.

To present such a collective view may potentially uncover differences and similarities between generations, ethnic groups, communities living in the city, and represent Malmö as being as diverse and multifaceted as the city is. The collection of fragments is thought of being a living archive with more fragments constantly being added. Besides prototyping the series of co-archiving practices, the students also designed an archive exhibition concept where the mosaic could be experienced both online, and as a physical installation.

Fig. 4. Mosaic of Malmö: a design concept for an archive exhibition.

V. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Based on our experiences from participating in the interventions we argue that the co-archiving practices prototyped assume an inclusive and a democratic approach. They allow for the involvement of many senses accessing and generating archive material in an open, but still highly structured way. Most of the practices are independent of language ability, and cultural heritage sources may be shared with or without using words. Because of how the practices are structured, each participant is secured a time slot for sharing their memories, the talkative as well as the less talkative.

We also suggest that the prototypes can be seen as an intimate kind of archiving practice generating archive material on intangible cultural heritage in a concrete way, but without losing its immaterial and sometime poetic nature.

A challenge encountered in our work, and a question put forward by professional archivists is how the collected material should be turned into solid archives in terms of storage and dissemination? Up to now our focus has been on the first part, prototyping archiving practices for how to give voice to the marginal by using an inclusive approach. The interventions have generated a lot of archive material, and the next question is how does this material relate to contemporary archive systems? This needs to be explored in tight connection to an archival institution, and with professional archivists, preferably in a co-design process involving all stakeholders, both the archiving ones and the “archived”.

As already mentioned, besides being co-archiving practices that can be iterated and put in use, the prototypes presented may also contribute to challenging the role of the archivist. Dunbar [1] and Warren [9] argue that archivists need to be encouraged to work in a more inclusive way in order to reach more representative archives of human existence.

What parallels can be drawn between the practices of a co-designer and an archivist interested in going from a focus on archival appraisal, to *co-archival facilitation*? An interesting thought to play with is to think of the archivist as a *co-archivist* facilitating the archiving process by seriously engaging the subjects (the “archived”) in the shaping of the archives. Similar as to the PD context, such an approach would require that the subjects participating are given appropriate tools to express themselves in whatever format that is needed.

As expressed by Dunbar [1], an important archival mission is to “seek vehicles for actors to express their own agency, reality or, representation”. An archivist creating conditions for co-archiving practices would become an (accidental) activist archivist, and be part of developing ways to democratise the access to and participation in our archives – and in the end, in writing our common history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Hannah Weiser, Jody Barton, Katarina Thorstensson, Ligia Oprea, Mau Struckel, Ondrej Mynarik, and Rebecca Göttert, Interaction Design Masters students at K3, Malmö University, The Malmö City Archives, Mitt Odla, Rochester Institute of Technology, and members of the Living Archives project. This work was funded by the Swedish Research Council.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anthony W. Dunbar, “Introducing critical race theory to archival discourse: Getting the conversation started,” *Archival Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 109–129. 2006.
- [2] Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Jody Barton, “Co-designing newcomers archives: discussing ethical challenges when establishing collaboration with vulnerable user groups,” *Cumulus Hong Kong 2016: Open Design for E-very-thing — exploring new design purposes*, Hong Kong, 2016.
- [3] Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Veronica Wiman, “Gardening communities as urban archives and social resource in urban planning,” *Nordes 2015: Design Ecologies, Challenging anthropocentrism in the design of sustainable futures*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2015.
- [4] Elisabet M. Nilsson (2015, December 9). The Smell of Urban Data: Urban Archiving Practices Beyond Open Data [Online]. Available at: <https://medium.com/the-politics-practices-and-poetics-of-openness/the-smell-of-urban-data-476a460b0a59#.2pebhjm5b>
- [5] Elizabeth. B.N. Sanders, and Pieter Jan Stappers, “Co-creation and the new landscapes of design,” *CoDesign International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 5-18. 2015.
- [6] Ian Johnston, “Whose History is it Anyway?,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 213-229. 2001.
- [7] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- [8] Jesper Simonsen, and Toni Robertson, *The Routledge Handbook of Participatory Design*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.
- [9] Kellee E. Warren, “We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archival Science Professions and Their Connection to the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles,” *Library Trends*, vol. 64, no. 4, pp. 776–794. 2016.
- [10] Åsa Harvard Maare, “Designing for Peer Learning : Mathematics, Games and Peer Groups in Leisure-time Centers,” Ph.D. dissertation, Lund University, Lund, 2015.