

FROM ARCHIVE TO RETROSCOPE AND BEYOND – PUSHING FORWARD RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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This paper presents a chronology of image digitization projects undertaken by the University of Brighton Design Archives and discusses the relationship between this work and archival description in a conventional sense. It suggests a coalescence of, and describes a tension between, information management standards and the curatorial and user innovations that networked archives might provoke.



The Golden Egg Restaurant, London, 1966. (University of Brighton Design Archives).

The intention of this paper was to discuss the outcomes of a collaborative project between the University of Brighton Design Archives and the independent web resource, The Retroscope. However, the project is yet to attract funding and so the following takes the form of a discussion setting out the thinking behind the project and its background. It focuses on ideas about location; of archival photography as described in hierarchical arrangements; as distributed electronically in the form of digital surrogates; and, ultimately – doubling back on itself, so to speak - as the representation of things in the real world at a

particular time and place. It suggests a coalescence of information management frameworks and curatorial innovation of a radical order.

I first saw analogue photographs from the University of Brighton Design Archives represented online in 1999. It was an extraordinary feeling to see these digital images. 100 or so photographs from the archive were scanned for a project in Scotland, the Scottish Cultural Resources Network (SCRAN), and four things struck me immediately: the greater value of our material when located alongside that from other archives and museums; the immediate visibility of photography usually accessible by appointment only; the scale of the potential audiences who could now see it; and, significantly, the importance of place. The latter requires some elaboration.

The photographs contributed from the archive to the SCRAN project depicted Scottish products displayed at the 1947 Enterprise Scotland Exhibition held in Edinburgh. The supporting caption information on the back of each print was incorporated in the metadata of the corresponding digital file and this included the name and address of the manufacturer of each represented product. It became immediately apparent that this information could present a map of manufacturing in Scotland in the postwar years, and that this location data would be of considerable interest particularly to local and business historians. The photographs that had been acquired as part of an archive of design now became re-activated in a new digital environment, with material from other collaborators and as part of a project with a mission to reach wide audiences. Since then, however, the issue of location has re-appeared consistently, sometimes as a dilemma, and more recently as a great opportunity. This paper maps this process.

In a similar way to the initiative described above, subsequent educational digitization projects in which the Design Archives participated involved delivering sets of images scanned from our photographic holdings that were then added to an amalgamation of material from different sources principally the Visual Arts Data Service and more recently, the Joint Information Systems Committee Media Hub. In the agglomerated pools of data offered by these services, we envisaged our images appearing in the results lists of varied research enquiries and reaching audiences with whom we would not have engaged alone. However, an issue that soon became apparent centred on the context of each digital image. For unhitched from the analogue parent, it was difficult to understand the place of the photograph in its home archive; indeed, its archival arrangement – to use the proper term - was never explained. These images were orphaned, detached from their original context and offered-up as separate digital objects.

It became clear then, that the dynamism that digital surrogates of archive photography enjoy is both a blessing and a curse. Indeed, in some ways they seem too free, in that they are removed from their archival hierarchy and presented in a flattened 'chocolate box' thumbnail arrangement, from which the viewer cannot navigate back in order to understand the object in its home environment. In other words, the viewer cannot understand which print or negative is placed before or after it; or how long the sequence is and what its overall purpose was; or, which series or collection group it forms a part of. This is precisely what the International Standard of Archival Description ISAD(G) was established to explain. Building on established principles of archival practice, it is an information architecture that is a flexible matrix, that accommodates a vast array of different multi-level scenarios, from small collections relating to the life or work of an individual, through to the complex structures of huge government departments and their transforming shape over time. Yet though fluid, the ISAD(G) standard has limited possibilities for correspondence or creative linking, in other words, establishing relationships between different archives, and matching a detail in one with detail in another. While the field 3.5.3 'related units of description' can act as a link to associated records, the item, for example a document or a photograph in

its file, or the file itself, and the series in which it sits, and the collection group to which it belongs, remains largely as a self-contained whole. These relationships might be visualized as a tree with numerous main branches, off which smaller branches stem, eventually leading to clusters of foliage made of individual leaves, yet the tree stands separate from others, rather than within a forest, close to and intertwined with its neighbours. Thus, while an ISAD(G) record might sit alongside other archive descriptions, it does not really provide a means of extending beyond itself (in a more creative sense). Despite this, it is undoubtedly the best mechanism for explaining the arrangement of archives and adopting this standard drives a level of consistency at an international level.

At the Design Archives we describe each of our eighteen archives according to the ISAD(G) standard and we deliver these descriptions through the Archives Hub, an online portal to agglomerated archive descriptions relating to British university archives, and other archives outside the sector, numbering 180 institutions in total. As part of the Archives Hub, our multi-level descriptions of each archive unfold beautifully before our eyes replicating how the material was originally generated or collected. By clicking on 'full record', the top-level collection description can be seen to have several sub-sections or series that then, as one clicks on the folder icons, reveal further nested sub-sections, and each of these, further files within, that can be opened-up, right down to item level, i.e. we can see, for example, the place of the photo in the file alongside all its neighbours. Even more of a development is the way in which, during the past year, the Archives Hub has introduced the capacity to attach digital images to item-level records, so we can see the photo alongside the description of it. This means it is now possible to attach the Design Archives images produced for other digitization projects (by this time we had amassed a collection of over 6,000), to the correct place in the archival hierarchy, so viewers can see their proper arrangement. This re-attaching of the orphaned digital images to their archival context represented, certainly for the Design Archives, a dramatic alleviation of the symptoms of disassociated digital objects. Yet, this being the case, it raised another idea for it makes clear how the viewer cannot jump from the item level record to explore the greater context of what a particular photograph or document represents. We see the micro-geography of its archival arrangement (its local context as object) but however detailed the scope and content description, we cannot appreciate what this image represents in time and space, i.e. the macro-geography of what it represents, we cannot put it back in its place in the world.

In order to develop this idea, an example might help. In the archive there is file of photographs relating to each edition of the periodical 'Design'. The February 1966 issue of the magazine included a feature 'Eating Can be Fun' with some highly evocative colour images of the Golden Egg restaurant located in London's Leicester Square. In 2001 some of this photography was digitized and included in an online learning resource, one of seven published by the Design Archives as part of the project 'Designing Britain'. [Fig. 1] Authored by Matthew Partington, the photograph of the interior of the restaurant was included in a study of British crafts of this period, and the project placed this image in a new context, it had escaped, so to speak, from the box of 1966. How, now, might this action be developed beyond conventional research methodologies? Might there be a way to re-conjoin other digital objects relating to Leicester Square in 1966? Might there be a way to place this object alongside other represented moments, and see what else was happening at the same time, in the restaurant, or across the road, or elsewhere in London, and if we had a photograph of a visit to the restaurant, or a scan of a diary entry or of a receipt, could there be a way to bring these objects together? Could there be some type of digital environment, a matrix or mesh, which facilitated the space and time curation of digital objects? Might there be a way to create a more poetic navigation of digital objects beyond the frames of information management? Indeed, how could we use the indispensable organizational frame of ISADG as a jumping off point? While images or items accessible from a portal harvesting data from many collections might be

searched by time and place 'Leicester Square, 1966', it still would not be possible to perceive the spatial relationship between them. And it is the spatial that is, it seems to me, a critical element in how the past is perceived. Jorge Luis Borges, in 1941, wrote of time in a spatial sense and in a way that presages the potential of digital environments, 'That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contain *all* possibilities.' Indeed, the theme of time and space is taken up in various places in his writing as a means of challenging perception, and it is this concept to which, I believe, Chris Wild is alluding when he describes his project, the Retroscope, as a 'perception'. And it is to this that we now turn.

By 2011, to recap, the Design Archives had created several thousand digital images from one of the largest libraries of industrial design photography in the world. Now, in the process of being added to their respective archive descriptions on the Archives Hub, the digital images are no longer disassociated from their context. But continuing to repurpose and re-arrange these images to enhance their research and learning potential remained an ongoing ambition. Early in 2010, a proposal entitled 'Design Mesh', with the aim to reconstruct electronically one of the pavilions of the 1951 Festival of Britain site as a frame for positioning digital archive objects, was discussed with the staff of the Visualisation Unit at King's College London. Though nothing more came of the idea as a collaboration with the Design Archives (the project was taken up by students later in the year) a colleague who learned of this proposal arranged a meeting with Chris Wild who was busy working on an idea called The Retroscope, a 'visual time machine' that intends to offer a way of surfing time online by integrating images, moving images and sound in chronological and spatial arrangements for people to explore, add to and curate.

The Retroscope is a development of the Retronaut website which since it was established in 2010 has had more than 1.4 million page views per month. While the Retronaut site delivers content (largely images and film) from one source at a time in a conventional editorial format, the aim of the Retroscope is to bring material from different archives together and to facilitate the potential coalescence of their holdings in a dynamic user-driven environment. The project has attracted the interest of many leading archives, including Getty's Hulton Archive, the Bridgeman Art Library, the Central Office of Information and the BBC. Attracting a great deal of attention, it was described by Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture as 'the next big thing' and by John Mitchinson, Director of Research, QI as 'one of the richest uses yet for the web'. This was exactly the type of project that could move on how the digitized material from the Design Archives was searched, rendered and indeed, curated. Collaborating with the Retroscope suggested a way in which a University collection could work outside the educational sector to extend its visibility and currency and to make more porous the perceived boundaries between conventional educational environments and other, more public, less formal, venues for learning. Indeed, joining forces with The Retroscope would present a high profile opportunity for Design Archives resources to reach audiences unimaginable alone. We were curious about the advances in digital curation this might bring about, and the convergences between things that have led separate lives until now. What might this mean for arts education and research and for cross-sector dialogue? How could the placing of archival data in a shared spatial and chronological delivery environment (as opposed to the rigid conventions of archival hierarchies) inform new thinking in the arts and humanities? How might a collaboration of this kind provoke research challenges and opportunities? Already, as part of the JISC-funded Media Hub project we had started to add location data to our metadata and were interested in the possibilities of mapping and GPS technology. In 2010 we received funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council for a doctoral project with the Chartered Society of Designers which centred on mapping membership data. What would happen, we wondered, with an information architecture, a tool such a Retroscope, that invited user participation in such a way that the unofficial would meet the unofficial. Here, it seemed, could be a project where none of the outcomes are prescribed, or could be predicted, where dormant

possibilities might emerge. Indeed, the National Archives in the UK, are busy considering the possibilities of mapping, or 'space exploration', among its suite of 'Labs' projects where various rendering options are being trialed. Will it be the case then, that the common elements of these systems, connected by their locational data, might one day converge, that the Retroscope could overlay the National Archives map, or the National Archives 'Digital Vaults' project in the United States, and that others could overlay these, and we could experience those multiple, forked stories, that excited Borges seventy years ago, that have inspired our sense of possibility, and which technology is now partly able to facilitate.

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