

This City Is An Archive: Squatting History and Urban Authority

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Abstract

Since the archival turn, archives have been widely portrayed as “dominating” institutions, which has led to even community archives being defined as “anti-authority.” It is the contention of this paper that this approach misses (1) the way in which DIY archives provide territorial authority for marginalized communities, and (2) the radical potential of such counter-narratives in seeing the city itself as an archive. Outlining both the role of archival authority in community archives and the use of an archival imagination in approaching the city, the paper considers possibilities for urban movements and campaigns, bringing together examples from the Resistance Project, 56a Infoshop, Advisory Service for Squatters, Occupy London, and the Remembering Olive Collective. An approach is forwarded which, in light of the participatory turn in archival studies, reframes the city as an archive, to encourage attentiveness to authority and to produce a capacity to aspire.

Keywords

archives, archival turn, colonialism, activist archives, squatting, social movements, Occupy London, capacity to aspire, counter-narratives, authority

An archive can take many forms: from national collections, records offices, libraries and museums, to corporate archives, online depositories, and personal keepsakes. Even the city *itself* is an archive. But across many iterations, what all archives share in common is a claim to *authority*, or a claim to “know better,”¹ through their accumulation, organization, and interpretation of significant materials. By selecting, collecting, preserving, and retrieving traces of the past, archives develop a normative narrative that continually re-members society, offering an “authoritative basis for who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.”² Their claim is to a truthful and objective history which underpins belonging, collectivity, and identity. However, since the archival turn of the 1990s, the authority of these narratives has been routinely questioned. As McKemmish³ argued, archives are “always in a process of becoming,” their authority is not as objective and value-free as might first appear, and their narratives are contingent upon decisions around *which* objects are significant, which should be preserved, and which have been rejected.

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The construction of historical narratives is key to archival authority, insofar as their re-collection creates assertions about the past, which in turn shape the present and future. Subsequently, archives have been used throughout modernity to underpin the territorial dominance of urban, national, and colonial projects. Yet it is the contention of this paper that archival authority should not simply be understood as a tool for “top-down” power. If “past’s play in the present is elective, interpreted and imagistic,”⁴ then the contingency of archival authority also presents an opportunity for counter-narratives, such as those presented by numerous DIY archives which are “becoming an increasingly visible part of activist practices, pursued alongside and simultaneously with demonstrations, workshops, petitions, and other tactics.”⁵ Such projects have been referred to as “interference archives,”⁶ “grassroots archives,”⁷ “autonomous archives,”⁸ and “radical archives,”⁹ but here I will use the term “community archives” to encompass any “independent grassroots efforts for communities to document their own commonalities and differences outside the boundaries of formal mainstream institutions.”¹⁰

The aim of this paper is, firstly, to recognize the role of archival authority in community archives, before then extending this imaginary through the (underused) approach of seeing the city *itself* as an archive. The first section will explore archival authority through urban, national, and colonial examples, demonstrating the use of such institutions to underpin territorial claims to knowledge. Since being deconstructed through the archival turn, such archives have largely been seen as dominating and oppressive institutions, but it is argued here that their authority also presents opportunities for community archives. The second section will critically reflect on such archival authority “from below,” offering examples of DIY projects which have sought to address the exclusionary tendencies of mainstream archives, as well as outlining the double-bind that many under-resourced community archives face in balancing the security and openness of their collections versus territorial control and authority. Finally, after outlining the possibilities and challenges of archival authority, the paper will go on to argue that seeing the city as an archive—in light of the “participatory turn”¹¹ embodied by community projects—can open up possibilities within the city, making us more attentive to the dynamics of authority within urban space, as well as the radical possibilities of urban counter-narratives.

Throughout the paper, I use ethnographic examples from my own research, including the activist archives at the Resistance Project, Advisory Services for Squatters (ASS) and 56a Infoshop; the urban movement Occupy London; and the Remembering Olive Collective. These examples were gathered on separate occasions under different research projects, and are only being redeployed here as illustrations, having each inspired the arguments presented below. My work with the Resistance Project was a small part of a project researching squatting in London, having spent some time volunteering as part of their open archival evenings at the Bishopsgate Institute in 2017 and 2018, sorting through and helping to catalog materials. I am grateful to contacts at ASS and 56a who gave me permission to spend time with their collections, including an afternoon leafing through folders and papers at the ASS offices, and another with their boxes stored at the Bishopsgate Institute. The research with Occupy London was part of a previous project¹² between 2012 and 2015, but is supplemented by a more recent Occupy Walking Tour I co-organized with Alexandre Frediani, as part of an exchange with activists and academics from Brazil and UCL in 2019. Finally, I first encountered the work of the Remembering Olive Collective at 56a and spent a day following their archival map around Brixton, reflecting on the building and traces I found on Railton Road.

These illustrations, as isolated case studies, are not empirically generalizable, but are intended to speak toward the ideas I am developing here. They are all empirically limited to London as a context, but they are meant as a theoretical contribution to a much wider and multidisciplinary archival literature across archival studies; (post)colonial studies¹³; historical geography¹⁴; urban studies and planning¹⁵; political sociology¹⁶; and law.¹⁷ A further objective of the paper is also to contribute toward a “critical geography of occupation and the articulation of an alternative right

to the city,” responding specifically to Vasudevan’s¹⁸ call for an “historical perspective that reimagines the city as a living archive of alternative knowledge, materials and resources” and which reflects “a rich and sedimented history of practices and imaginaries that speak to the shifting conditions of possibility for the composition of a radical urban politics.”

Archival Authority in the City

This section emphasizes the role archives play in underpinning authority. Central to the power of the archive is its context and its physical location in space and time. The archive is only “a place where authority resides”¹⁹ because it is a localizable “site of accumulation of primary resources from which history is constructed.”²⁰ Through the selection, categorizing, preserving, and interpreting of resources in situ, the archive acts as a place of “commencement” and “commandment,”²¹ or a “centre of interpretation” which approximates Latour’s centers of calculation,²² shaping and creating “authoritative forms of memory”²³ within a given territory. Under modernity, this locational authority of archives has been a central tool for civic, national, and colonial projects, acting as a territorial center of power, alongside technologies such as the printing press, railways, the national census, and maps. For example, there is evidence that the central libraries which emerged in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century were explicitly intended as utilitarian vehicles, with the objective of “improving” the behavior and morals of urban populations. The aim was to constitute a “liberal public” in the city through the symbolic construction of a central archival building, adorned with the busts and portraits of liberal heroes of self-help²⁴ and adopting an architecture which created “that degree of discipline, half-light and austerity that gave the place something of the nature of a temple and a cemetery.”²⁵ The Library Act 1850 provided funds to develop ornate buildings, but allocated no resources for the collections themselves, seemingly prioritizing the building of an authoritative landmark “designed to exemplify civic identity and proper civic behaviour.”²⁶

National archives have played a similar role in the formation and legitimation of nation states. By offering a material site for national memory, they help to ground the “imagined community” of the nation²⁷ whether through amassing data on the “condition of the people”²⁸ or imbuing artifacts with heritage and cultural significance. National museums, galleries, and records offices assert an authoritative jurisdiction over historical knowledge, developing a “story of a nation’s origin, its history and myths” which “serve as a vital script for citizenship, guide citizens in understanding who does and does not belong to the nation, and their place in the world . . . [helping] people to come to know and experience themselves as part of a nation with a particular population, territory, and history.”²⁹ Such scripts and stories constructed through the authoritative claims of the national archives were claims to *know* history, based upon a unique access to, and interpretation of, primary traces and evidence. Yet these constructions were simultaneously based upon a selective bias, one which operated to exclude many traces which were deemed unworthy, insignificant, or unimportant to the dominant normative narrative being constructed. Far from an unbiased record of history, then, such archives are perhaps better understood as sites “for a particular kind of knowledge, particular styles of reasoning . . . [and] of status, of authority, of a certain right to speak.”³⁰

This bias is problematic given the power and reach of archival authority. Because archives inevitably involve processes of selection and interpretation, their discriminatory gaze “in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain [archives] . . . and the refusal of the same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable.’”³¹ This means that the historical scripts and stories upon which “we” base “our” urban and national identities are riddled with silences, exclusions, and biases, “marginalising, censoring, destroying, such and such traces through precisely such a selection, a filter,”³² shaping accounts of the past and our understanding of who “we” are today and tomorrow. Perhaps nowhere is this violence so clear as in colonial

archives.³³ For example, the post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa demonstrated how “colonial and apartheid authorities . . . consistently denied the existence of any legacies among Africans worth preserving, an attitude borne out in their insistence that Africans have no history.”³⁴ The TRC sought to retroactively address this imbalance by collecting new oral histories and opening-up Apartheid-era state archives to public access. Yet even this apparently progressive archival project was met with criticism based upon the new authority it was developing, with claims that even this ostensibly “open” and “inclusive” top-down documenting, cataloging, and storing by a mainstream institution represented a “closing-down of meaning.”³⁵

What these examples demonstrate is that archival institutions have a power which stretches beyond their doors, walls, and shelves, an authority which iteratively shapes *and is shaped by* location and context. By claiming an authority to determine the correct historical narrative of a territory, they construct normative “systems of enunciability” which form a “basis for cultural memory and the urban”³⁶ and “grid historical narratives.”³⁷ These systems shape identities in the present, and collective outlooks on the future, while simultaneously excluding and silencing those who are unrecognized by the selective gaze of that authority. The result has been “symbolic annihilation” where “members of marginalised groups . . . are [made] absent, grossly underrepresented, maligned or trivialised”³⁸ and, subsequently, archival authority has “largely been conceived of as domination.”³⁹ And yet, if this authority is indeed contingent and “always becoming,” then understanding archives solely as *domination* is to limit their potential, particularly in light of the upsurge of community archival projects. Currently, many researchers continue to position archival authority as only a characteristic of mainstream and formal archives, to frame community archives as “anti-authority” and argue that “both activist and community organising posit that action is needed to make social change and that there is a need to push against authority to accomplish it.”⁴⁰ I suggest, however, that this anti-authority approach overlooks the way in which community archives, in the same way as mainstream institutions, also rely on claims to authority, albeit with an aim to build counter-narratives based upon “post-custodial”⁴¹ principles of participation, inclusion, and negotiation.

Participatory Turn: Community Archives and Authority

This section develops the role that community archives play in constructing counter-narratives, challenging the dominance of those histories produced by mainstream archival institutions, to build authority from the margins. Moving with and beyond the critical and deconstructive work of the archival turn, the “participatory turn” has argued not only for the importance of access, reflexivity, and inclusion in existing archives; but for the recognition of grassroots community projects which directly challenge dominant archival practices. Mirroring the way in which archives have been used to bolster city, state, and colonial authority, memory-work can also shore up campaigns and movements which are being denied legitimate voice, and can be “used strategically and directly in contemporary social struggles . . . [to] intervene in dominant discourses, claiming the authority and rights to represent themselves.”⁴² By virtue of their potential to give substance to collective identities and construct the authority of communities, such archives are being increasingly used to address silences and unsettle mainstream histories via “an explosion of multiple/alternative archives that seek to remedy erasures of the past.”⁴³

Across numerous papers, Michelle Caswell has identified at least three characteristics which give community archives political potential. First, by increasing opportunities for access and participation, community projects facilitate *self-representation*, which “can catalyse a profound ontological change, from a position of loneliness and despair to one of solidarity and hope”

allowing marginalized individuals and communities to assert with authority: “I am here.”⁴⁴ In giving communities the opportunity to directly access, construct, and interpret archives, the potential is there to construct a new “societal memory, with their own voice, becoming participatory agents in record keeping and archiving for identity, memory, and accountability purposes.”⁴⁵ By establishing a territorial authority which is similar to urban, national, or colonial archives; community archives can support communities to develop counter-narratives about their territory from below. They therefore also support a second characteristic of *identity construction*, by offering “empirical evidence for a community to assert its existence in the past . . . that we were here.”⁴⁶ Such projects use history to support an alternative narrative in which a community directly recognizes themselves, rather than relying on formal institutions. The potential here is for community archives to be open to wider contributions and interpretations, supporting those groups which are marginalized by normative re-collections and re-membling, to construct their own identities. In other words, “establishing collaborative practices . . . enables the community to have agency whilst simultaneously challenging traditional modes of governance found in mainstream archival institutions.”⁴⁷

While self-representation and identity construction are based upon principles of improving participation in history through community archives, Caswell’s third characteristic of *empowerment* suggests an authority which they share with mainstream institutions. In addition to the “I am here” (self-representation) and the “we were here” (identity construction), empowerment asserts an ongoing claim to territoriality—“you belong here”—which “may refer to the physical location of the community archive, or the imagined community itself coalesced around identity.”⁴⁸ In other words, the capacity of the community archive to empower is founded on a locational authority, a claim by the community to “know better” their own history and geography, against the mainstream (archival) narratives which does not recognize them. The problem, however, is that community archives therefore also must rely on moments of selection, ordering, and interpretation, to create empowering and meaningful (counter)narratives out of a deluge of historical data. This makes them vulnerable to the double bind of the archival gaze, because as “each classification system opens up new avenues in the materials . . . it closes off others . . . it is impossible to approach the data in a way in which it can be made to speak neutrally, objectively, and once and for all.”⁴⁹ This presents a challenge for community archives. On one hand, their aim is to facilitate self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment through an inclusive and open construction of marginalized histories. Yet, to present a (counter)narrative and speak with authority, those archives must also be selected, organized, and interpreted, risking a repetition of the inequalities and exclusions of mainstream archives which they had set out to address. There are, however, examples of community archives which have sought to directly address the archival gaze at the core of their practice.

The Resistance Project was established on the initiative of activists from the 1990s alter-globalization movement, and who continue to be active in many campaigns today. The aim is to crowd-source an open, online, people’s history of resistance in the United Kingdom and, at open evenings at the Bishopsgate Institute, they borrow scanners and video digitization equipment, inviting the public to bring their archives. But rather than archiving the material themselves, the Resistance Project uses these evenings to teach people *how* to archive, so that they might select their own meta-data, labels, and tags, making their own decisions on how to order and apply significance to the photos, newspaper clippings, zines, leaflets, posters, and videos. Their free booklet “How to Archive Online” (Figure 1) invites people to “share and save your precious protest materials with the Resistance Archive” and offers guidance on how to use the digitization software. In the process, they go some way to decentralizing the selection, categorization, and bias, of the archival gaze:

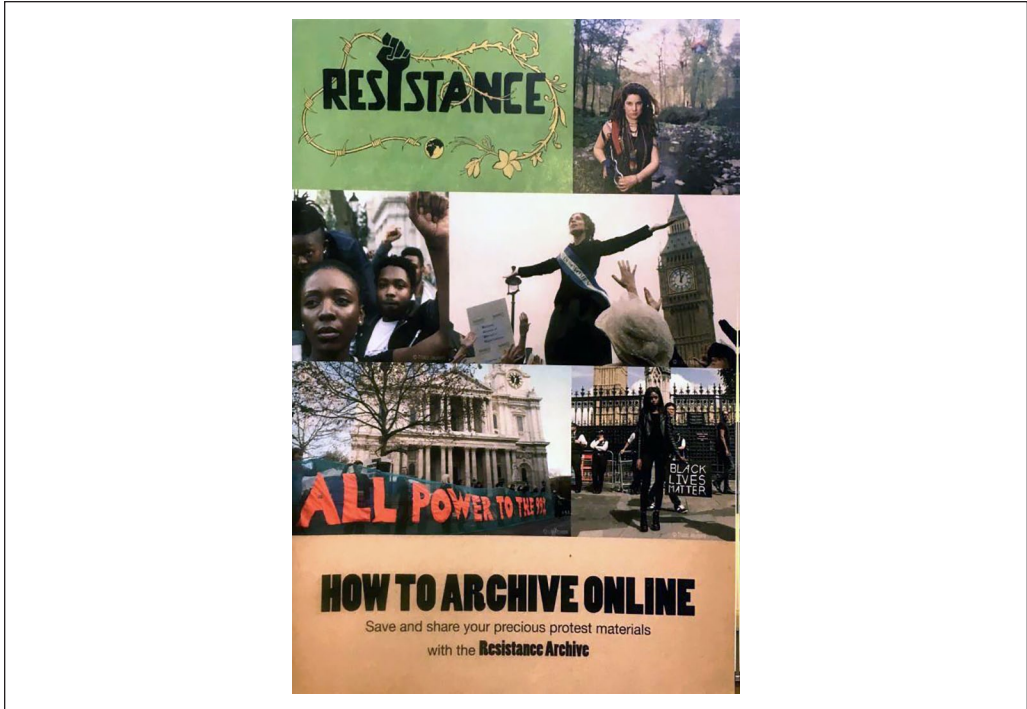


Figure 1. Front cover of the Resistance Project's instructional booklet "How to Archive Online."
Source: Author.

Are you storing protest materials from you or your family's past? Photos, videos, flyers, newsletters, and other disobedient objects? This guide to online archiving has been written for the Resistance Project, a collective dedicated to preserving, collating, and distributing radical protest and campaign materials. By showing you how to put your precious items online in an accessible way, this guide will help you to make them safe, useful, and inspirational. The plan is to make sure that radical history is told from the point of view of the people who made it happen.

The passing reference to the "Disobedient Objects" exhibition—which ran at the V&A Museum in London from July 2014 to February 2015—is no coincidence. The Resistance Project was motivated by the V&A's display of radical history to take back authority, framing their project in terms of a collective endeavor to (re)claim the narrative. Through developing this history, they hope to directly inform struggles continuing today, with both the Resistance Archive and Resistance Exhibition (which emerged from the project) aiming to disseminate a counter-narrative. Yet, by providing opportunities for people to archive themselves, this is a narrative which attempts to be both authoritative *and* remain reflexive, negotiable, and less susceptible to exclusion and bias. In this way, the open archiving events and the creation of an online collection provides a basis for their own authority, while staying ever-open as "a living archive, whose construction must be seen as an on-going, never completed project."⁵⁰

The slogan for the Resistance Project, "Be Part of the Future—Learn from Past," encapsulates the connection being sought with ongoing movements. Such projects, it seems, expand "the intellectual or cultural horizons that shape our grasp of personal and social identities and histories: where we come from and where we are destined" simply by "organising the fragments of the old world in ways that can renew the world we inhabit."⁵¹ Objects which are donated and/or digitized act as testimonials for direct action and campaigns today,

seeming to draw a performative and authoritative “continuity between the past and present-day struggles.”⁵²

To construct that narrative and present its authority in the present, however, the location of the archive is once again crucial. Connection to place can directly affect “the relationship between community members, their sense of responsibility for their environment and, ultimately, collective memory.”⁵³ Not only is location therefore essential to allow easy community accessibility and control over narratives stemming from that collection, but the site of the archive is also symbolic as an authoritative landmark (much like central libraries). Yet, in contrast to mainstream institutions, community archives often face inherent challenges for staying “in place,” as their comparative lack of resources tends to make them fragile, precarious, and difficult to maintain. One solution is to collaborate with mainstream archival institutions. But this comes with a risk of ceding “control over access and cataloguing . . . [which] can lead the archive to slip away from the originating collectivity”⁵⁴ in a way which “can troublingly invoke or maintain legacies of oppression, colonisation and displacement.”⁵⁵ The British Museum, for example, was widely criticized in 2012 when it attempted to gather placards, art, and other materials from Occupy London protest camps even before they were under threat of eviction, leading many to complain that the City of London sponsored archive was attempting to prematurely assign the protest to history.⁵⁶

One example of the challenge to stay located is the 56a Infoshop in Elephant and Castle, Southwark. Situated on the end of a terrace of tenements and facing newly built condominiums opposite, 56a was established as a squatted social center, but were eventually forced into a contract with the local authority to keep using the space, accepting a token “peppercorn rent” arrangement. It currently has a food co-operative, bookshop, bike workshop, meeting space, and information center, as well as an extensive archive which has been repeatedly mobilized by a plethora of local campaigns as well as research projects on London’s history of squatting and housing struggles.⁵⁷ Located at the center of the borough, the archive has been an authoritative focal point for recent housing struggles in Southwark, such as campaigns against the decanting and demolition of social housing on the Aylesbury Estate, during which the collection offered contemporary campaigners a counter-narrative of the territory and its rich heritage of resistance to gentrification and social cleansing.⁵⁸

Against the dominant narrative of privatizing land, regenerating social housing, and encouraging the investment of capital into the borough, the 56a archive presents an empowering counter-narrative. Yet it also might be seen as in a particularly precarious position. From having to accept rent conditions (which are at risk of rising to an unaffordable level in the future), to the risk of vandalism or property damage on an openly left-wing center, the former squat is perhaps not best placed for preservation. Recently, 56a have attempted to address this through “scanathon” events to digitize and preserve the collection online, as well as building relationships with more formal institutions such as the MayDay Rooms, who describe themselves as an “active repository, resource and safe haven for social movements, experimental and marginal cultures and their histories.”⁵⁹ Sponsored by a member of the Sainsbury family (known more for supermarkets than radical archives), the superior resources of MayDay rooms, as well as its ostensible radical objectives, make it an attractive place to potentially store the 56a archives. Yet they are also located across the Thames on Fleet Street, Central London, surrounded by newspaper companies and stockbrokers, raising questions of location and context, as well as the extent to which they would remain accessible for localized counter-narratives south of the river, should the archives be moved there.

The archive at Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) faces a similar conundrum with its relationship with the Bishopsgate Institute. Unlike 56a, many of their archives have already been moved down the road to the institute, which was founded in 1895 and is based on a financially secure trust income. Yet the neighborhood around Bishopsgate has changed drastically in that time, with a business district now surrounding Liverpool Street Station and the gentrified Spitalfields market. The ASS archive, on the other hand, has had its fair share of precarity, and

has moved multiple times since the 1970s. In both their previous and current premises, the archive has been repeatedly damaged by fire (believed to have been right-wing arson attacks) while the roof in their current Whitechapel offices, at the time of writing, is leaking and in much need of repair. As a constant reminder of their precarity, they keep on display a melted red telephone which was rescued from the charred rubble of an arson attack, as well as a faded-gray folder (Figure 2) which can always be found stacked on top of everything else.

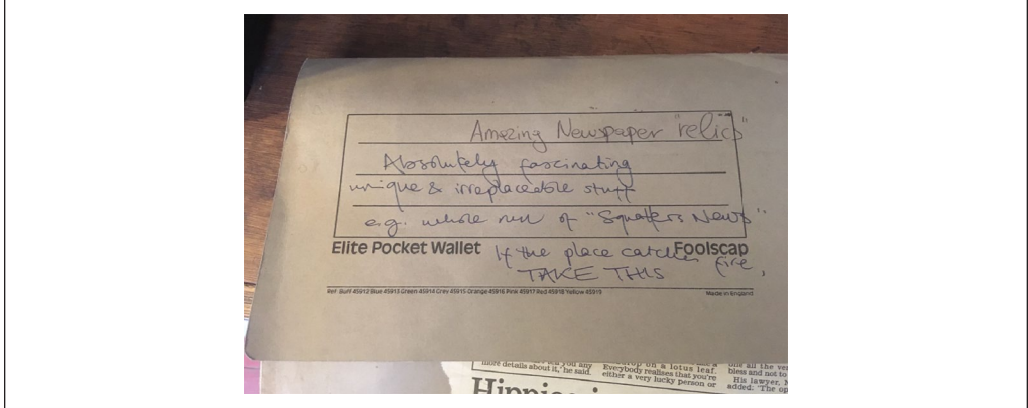


Figure 2. Front cover of a folder at Advisory Service for Squatters.
Source: Author.

Projects such as Resistance Project, 56a and ASS, on one hand, may “express the experience of and desire for neighbourhood solidarity and community autonomy,” yet they are also, by the same token, the archives which are “in the greatest jeopardy.”⁶⁰ Such precarity raises difficult choices between keeping collections close—where they are more accessible and symbolic for their local community—or moving the collection away from the risk of arson, leaks, or (as was the fate of at least one exhibition) being thrown into a skip after a squat eviction. Despite being at risk of damage or destruction, the locational importance of ASS and 56a has meant keeping much of their archives in place, acting as existential moorings for continuing urban campaigns.

The inherent precariousness of community archives raises difficult decisions around location, authority, and control. Yet, despite these possible limitations, this section has demonstrated that archiving is not only an increasingly important practice for urban movements and campaigns, but also an important tool for grassroots community organization and authoritative counter-narratives in the city. Through their very “steadiness, longevity” and “sense of history” such archives hold open the possibility for alternative pasts, presents, and future, which “speak to a history of struggle, occupation and use” within their context.⁶¹ By re-collecting and remembering alternative radical histories, such archives recall alternative scripts that challenge mainstream normative imaginaries. In contrast to more mainstream archives, “which rests on seeing the archive as the tomb of the accidental trace,” community archives are instead “characterised by the presence of voice, agency, and debate, rather than of mere reading, reception and interpellation,”⁶² and it is this potential that colors community archives with political possibility. With this in mind, I now intend to build upon the idea of archival authority and the participatory turn, by going beyond pamphlets, photographs, newspaper clippings, posters, and zines, and considering what it might mean to view city streets, buildings, monuments, and squares *themselves* as archives.

The City Is An Archive

This final section seeks to build upon the idea of archival authority and the participatory potential of community archives by revisiting the idea of seeing the city *itself* as an archive. The city appears, at face value, to be predetermined, distributed, and immovable. But the concrete, brickwork, steel, and tarmac belies a history of design, blueprints, and layouts, authoritative decisions around the “proper” use of this or that space, which—as we stare upward at a glacial skyscraper or sideways at a rock-face wall—appear unchangeable. The city is an archive because it operates via a “principle of ordering stimula upon which future transactions are imagined and made present,” materially reaffirming “specific notions about the prospects, capabilities and rights (or lack thereof) of specific groups.”⁶³ Yet, of course, these urban designs are contingent and continually re-enacted (and challenged) by everyday practices. Their apparent permanence is built upon histories of expertise, law, power, distributions of property ownership, as well as forgotten contests over what counts as legitimate use. As an archive, the city claims an authority over its territory, in a way which continually constructs limits, biases, exclusions, and silences; but also *possibilities*. Seeing the city-as-an-archive, in other words, alerts us to contested urban memories, denied histories, and (im)possibilities which are congealed in the very fabric of the city, its buildings, architectures, and infrastructures.

The contingency of archival authority makes it a useful tool for domination—such as when city, national, or colonial institutions have constructed narratives which carry an air of objective historical record, yet which exclude, silence, and marginalize. Yet, as the participatory turn demonstrates, community archives can also use this contingency to not only create an authority “from below,” but also open up that authority and make it potentially more inclusive, as a forum for “negotiation between memory and desire.”⁶⁴ The archive, in other words, can be used to create *new* histories of who we are (self-representation), who we were (identity construction), and who we want to be in this space (empowerment). As Appadurai has argued, archives are more than simply history, they also shape our “capacity to aspire” in the present, or “a politics of imagination, in which the past has become a place of succour and strength, a kind of home, for the ideas people possess of who they really want to be.”⁶⁵ This makes the archival approach a powerful tool for developing counter-narratives in the city.

In the same way as community archives repurpose authority, we can use the archival imagination to intervene into the concrete structures and sedimented histories of the city itself. Squatting or occupying space, for example, might be framed as squatting an *archive*, re-enchanting urban spaces with counter-narratives based upon radically alternative histories. In this way, imagining the city as an archive goes beyond the idea of the archives as physical records, so as to engage with the idea of the “taken-for-granted” often implicit “archive” that is the foundation for the production of knowledge in the present, the basis for the identities of the present, and for the possible imaginings of community in the future.⁶⁶ It has a dual potential as (1) an heuristic tool for understanding urban dynamics of authority in terms of the histories woven into the very buildings, designs, and plans of the city; and (2) a radical praxis which presents opportunities for promoting counter-narratives and unsettling the taken-for-granted.

First, seeing the city as an archive helps to foster an awareness and attentiveness to the dynamics of power and authority which emerge from the intersection of history and territory. Instead of accepting normative narratives, or the “hijacking and domination of our attention by the agencies of capital and commerce and biopower”⁶⁷; the buildings, streets, architecture, street furniture, monuments, memorials, murals—and archival institutions themselves—instead become reframed as “part of the multiple record of that city that one encounters in a variety of ways” even if “some of this is clearly visible and well known [while] other things are not.”⁶⁸ For example, we might return to some of the (now empty and refurbished) square and parks which have been the sites of urban occupations, and re-view them as archives of

now-hidden voices, appearances, histories, and forgotten possibilities. After Occupy London had set up their protest camp outside St Paul's Cathedral in October 2011, a lesser-known overflow campsite was established at Finsbury Square. Persisting well past the eviction of St Paul's, by June 2012 Finsbury was the longest running Occupy campsite in the world, and they saw their continued occupation of the space as crucial for contesting the post-crash city around them. One year after the eviction of Finsbury, with any trace of the camp long buried under fresh turf, I did a lap of the businesses surrounding the square which represented the dominant narrative of that space:

To the north, the Alphabeta building advertises office facilities that (in a language reminiscent of the Occupy movement) rejects "traditional notions of the controlled office and instead, offers an adaptable space designed for the enjoyment of a creative and empowered workforce . . . restoring and reformatting a series of historical buildings with a sophisticated urban aesthetic, an active and vibrant communal area has been created." To the east, the American consultancy and accountancy firm Grant Thornton LLP, who claim to have an "instinct for growth" are next to Invesco UK LTD (now Invesco Perpetual) who claimed a 114% return on investments in the first five years of the financial crisis. To the south, Herbert Smith LLP (property management), Bloomberg LP (real-time financial news services), and Bloomberg Space which is "not a conventional corporate art collection" but, rather like Occupy, aimed instead to be "a dynamic space, where artists and audiences can explore new ideas and relationships in an innovative way . . . open to employees, clients, and the community at large." Finally to the west, Wood MacKenzie LTC (analytics) and Simply Business (insurance), whilst underneath the square itself, an NCP car park (£16 for 2 hours parking). At the entrance to the square, a sign reads "Welcome to Finsbury Square. Opening Hours 8am to Dusk Daily."

Despite these businesses offering discourses of dynamic interaction and vibrant communal areas, the Occupy assembly on the square (which had aimed for similar goals as part of a post-crash democratic space) was framed only as a nuisance. By 2013, a year after their eviction by Islington Council, there was no longer any trace of the tents and mud created by the occupation. Unwashed activist bodies were now slick city workers on lunch, sitting in the sunshine. Where once there was an info-tent, radical library, and a banner which read "Capitalism Isn't Working. Another World Is Possible." there was now a brand new monument to the casualties of the Moorgate underground train disaster, 28th February 1975. This monument erected after the eviction of Occupy and the refurbishment of Finsbury Square, like an entry into the city-archive, was a reassertion of the "proper" use of this space and normative system of enunciability. This was a place for reflecting upon the collective sacrifices made for an efficient city transport system, the ability to commute from the suburbs, and the slick infrastructure needed to grease the wheels of capital and commerce; not a place for the appearance of protest, discussion, and counter-narratives.⁶⁹

In 2019, as part of an exchange program with UCL and Brazilian activists and academics, I organized a walking tour from St Paul's Cathedral to Finsbury Square with the help of a.n.on⁷⁰ (an activist from Occupy Finsbury Square). As we began the tour on the steps of the cathedral, where that first general assembly had taken place in 2011, a.n.on (who always has their face covered) was pulled aside and questioned by City of London police. Here was a timely reminder of the authoritative forces at play which try and control appearances, voices, and the meaning of the space outside the cathedral. Their face covered, a.n.on was seen as threatening the religious, corporate, and tourist overtones of this area, and yet we remember this space very differently. For us, the walls, buildings, monuments, cathedral, and now-empty square were an *archive* of the post-crash Occupy movement in London, a space of possibility rather than aesthetic policing.⁷¹ We walked to Finsbury Square and found the tree which a.n.on had climbed to protest their eviction. a.n.on re-remembered Occupy Finsbury Square for us, sharing a narrative of the square while passing around a picture they had painted at the time using mud from the site (Figure 3). In the hedges around us, sleeping bags and roll mats stashed by rough sleepers were traces of how the square continued to be a contested space.



Figure 3. Four figures in Finsbury Square

Source: a.n.on

Once we see the city as an archive, the mud on the flip chart paper and the sleeping bags in the hedges become traces of counter-narratives. The archival framework carries the potential to reveal the “sounding of memories (and also counter-memories) that sometimes call into question received archival understandings, place myths and place brandings,”⁷² allowing the re-collection of hidden and marginalized narratives. The city as an archive, in other words, reframes the city as a text or a language,⁷³ or more precisely a *palimpsest* upon which earlier writings are effaced by later ones.⁷⁴ It is a method that incites critical reflection on the cultural geographies of memory, allowing us to excavate the city in a way that reveals the layers which hold it up. Or to put it differently, the city-as-an-archive “straddles the material and symbolic city” revealing how the memories “specific to cities and other urban landscapes—are enfolded across multi-sited and multi-layered spaces of everyday urban practice.”⁷⁵

As well as an heuristic tool for interpreting authority, then, this approach also has potential as a radical praxis, one which presents opportunities for enacting counter-narratives and unsettling the taken-for-granted. The Remembering Olive Collective (ROC), for example, was a grassroots archiving group from Brixton, founded by Ana de la Torre after she found a picture of the activist Olive Morris in the back of a book at Peckham Library (itself an archival trace). Upon discovering the photo, she remembered that the council’s housing offices were named after Morris, and this connection spurred de la Torre to contact Morris’ friend and comrade Liz Obi. Together they formed the ROC, describing themselves as “a group of women who want to find out more about Morris and celebrate her life and legacy . . . we’re collecting oral history from those who remember her, researching and creating an archive and website” (quote from *Walking Map*, see below). The project developed into a remarkable narrative of both Morris’ life and the streets of Brixton. Born in Jamaica in 1952, Morris later joined her parents in the United Kingdom, initially living on Milford Street, Battersea (since demolished and redeveloped) before moving to Brixton. She became politically conscious at an early age, dropping out of school to join the British Black Panthers and fight discrimination against black people in housing, employment, and the criminal justice system. As a young, single, black woman, Morris

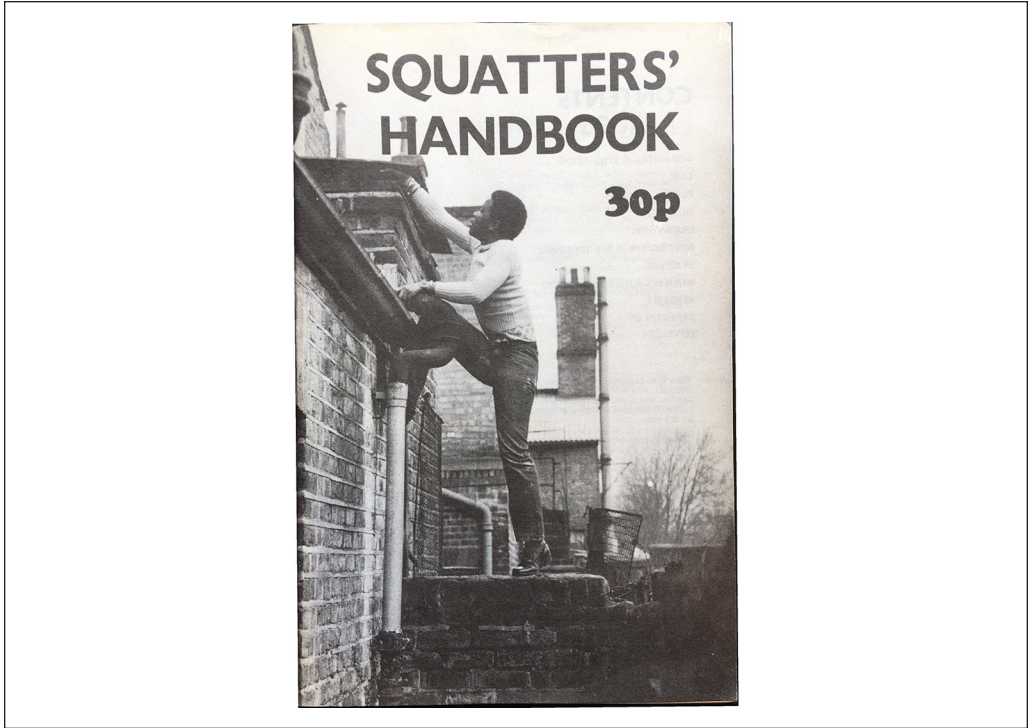


Figure 4. Cover of the Squatters Handbook (1979) with a picture of Morris resquatting 121 Railton Road after an eviction attempt.

Source: Author.

faced racial discrimination in the private rental sector and was not eligible for social housing, so she began squatting in the early 1970s. Morris and Obi's most famous squat at 121 Railton Road was the first occupation of a private premises in Brixton, memorialized on the cover of the 1979 edition of the ASS Squatters Handbook (see Figure 4).

As a brick and mortar entry into Brixton's city-archive, 121 Railton Road (which wasn't evicted until 1999) went on to play a central role in the spatial politics of Brixton and the London squatting movement. After Morris and Obi left, it became the Sabaar Bookshop, providing an informational hub for black struggles in South London, as well as acting as the headquarters of many groups including the Black Workers' Movement and BASH (Black People Against State Harassment). In 1981, the squat then became the 121 Centre and home to many more campaigns, including Brixton Squatters' Aid, Brixton Hunt Saboteurs, Food Not Bombs, Community Resistance Against the Poll Tax, Anarchist Black Cross, the Direct Action Movement, London Socialist Film Co-op, the Kate Sharpley Library, the Troops Out Movement, and Queeruption. The center's printing press was also the source of many of London's best-known underground literature, including Crowbar, Shocking Pink, Bad Attitude, Pink Brick, Black Flag, and Contraflow.

As part of their archival project, the ROC produced a walking map (see Figure 5) which follows the history of Railton Road. Following the route, it soon becomes clear that this street, formerly known as the "front line" and a prominent stage in the 1981 riots, is an archive. In addition to 121, the street was also a former home to CLR James, as well as buildings which housed the South London Gay Centre and U.K. Gay Liberation Front, opposite a row of houses which formed a gay squatter community in the 1970s. Today, it would have been hard to discern this radical history

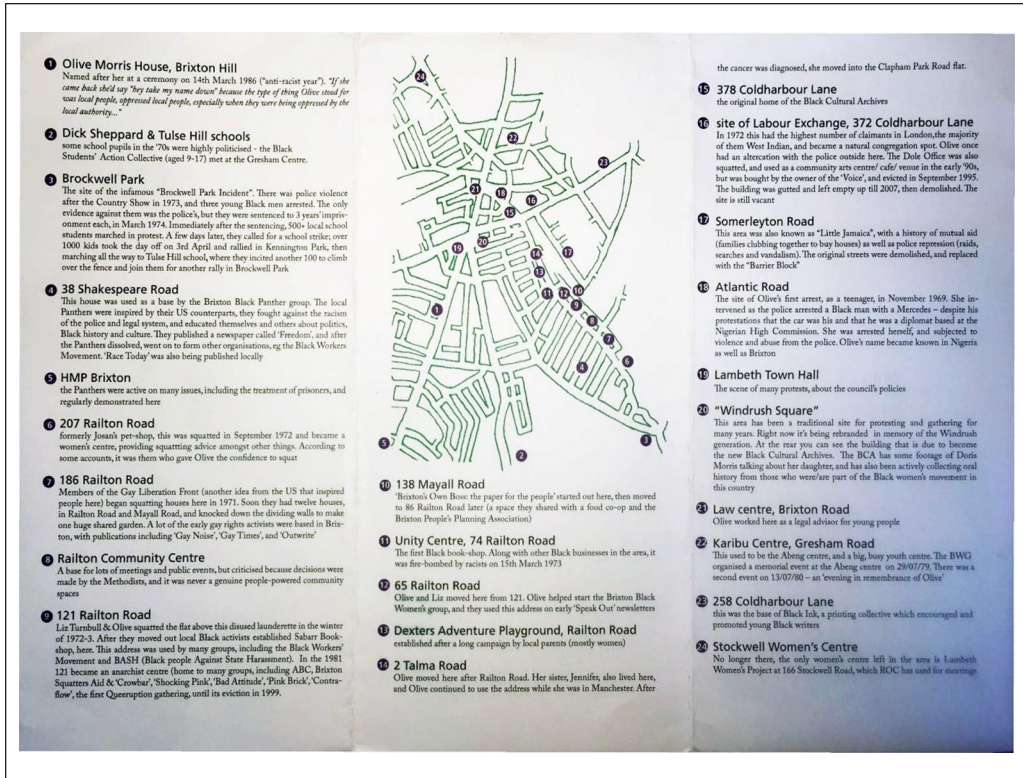


Figure 5. The Remembering Olive Collective walking tour map.

Source: Author.

without the authority of the map. The 121 Centre is now a faceless corner house (see Figure 6), while the British Black Panthers HQ on nearby Shakespeare Road is now a middle-class family home (a result of a history of gentrification and displacement in this area). Through the walking tour, however, the hidden layers of the archive come into view. Each building becomes refigured as a palimpsest with a history that belies its current appearance and speaks toward an alternative memory of the space. As I walk on, I become attentive to the traces. The Dexters Adventure Playground, which the map informs me was opened after a long campaign by local parents, is now closed and protected by property guardians. A few blue plaques commemorate important local heroes and there are photographs of black campaigners in the window of the Brixton Advice Centre which, along with the colorful Brixton Housing Co-op opposite, speaks to a legacy of housing battles and racist urban legacies. Then suddenly, the most extraordinary trace, as there on the pavement in front of me, someone had stenciled: "Where the Panthers Roared" (Figure 7).

Following the route, and moving steadily through the city, allows the buildings, streets, and squares to be re-membered and re-collected as traces of past contestations, protests, and occupations. The overlaid meanings of urban space start to become malleable and selective. Each vacant building, anonymous row, and demolition site becomes re-enchanted through this lens, unsettling dominant urban imaginaries with counter-memories. Following the example of Benjamin, de Certeau, and psychogeography,⁷⁶ it could therefore be said that walking is the best method for experiencing the city as an archive, because it entails an "activation of the urban grid . . . that sidesteps the planner and the remit of official histories."⁷⁷ To walk the city-archive is to accept that "the minutiae of everyday life (the decorations of buildings, ironwork, street signs,



Figure 6. The I21 Centre today.

Source: Author.



Figure 7. Faded white stencil on the pavement, Railton Road.

Source: Author.

advertising bills, posters, window displays etc) all have the capacity to speak.”⁷⁸ While the urban archive only persists in fragments and traces, it permits new portals of entry, repetition, circling, and crossing through hidden historical layers. I have noticed, for example, that walking with a squatter through London is to re-experience buildings as entries into some great archive of direct action, thick with possibility. Moving along streets, squatters recall buildings as traces of past contests over property, sometimes carrying those traces with them by naming themselves after the squat with which they are associated (leading to family names like “Rainbow,” “Cooltan,” and “Oubliette”). Passing former squats, they share fond memories. Yet they are at the same time continuously looking out for the next empty building and the next opportunity, continuously turning the city-as-an-archive into a capacity to aspire.

Conclusions

All archives share a claim to authority. Historically, this has made them powerful tools in the hands of urban, national, and colonial projects, acting as strategically located sites of power which sought to constitute a public, citizenry, or subjects. Through selection, categorization, preserving, and interpretation of primary materials, the archive constructs a knowledgeable narrative of who we were and who we are. In the process, it creates biases, silences, and exclusions, by selecting between those traces deemed worthy of archiving, and those which are not. The archival turn of the 1990s went a long way to deconstruct and challenge this, but the participatory turn—in emphasizing community archiving—opens up even more possibilities. Through these projects, the contingent and constructed nature of archival authority can be mobilized from the margins, creating opportunities for narratives which are more inclusive, reflexive, and open. Self-representation and identity construction permit an authority to emerge which counters and undermines the dominance of normative histories, addressing silences and exclusions from the past to support empowerment in the present.

The radical potential of community archives like Resistance Project, ASS, 56a, and ROC does not stem from being anti-authority, but in providing a new authority with which to rethink spatial narratives and to “conceive of and build a world in which communities that have historically been and are currently being marginalised . . . are fully empowered to represent their past, construct their present, and envision their futures.”⁷⁹ This authority, however, carries with it the same problems as mainstream archives, caught between the double bind of forming authoritative narratives (involving potential bias, exclusion, and silencing through the selection, organization, and interpretation of materials), and aspirations to be inclusive, open, and negotiable. This is on top of inherent challenges faced by often poorly resourced community archives, located in precarious premises, and creating a political tension in the connection between authority and location. While moving the archive to more secure premises would risk undermining community control, accessibility, and territorial authority, remaining in place risks archives being destroyed. As 56a and Resistance Project have demonstrated, digitization can provide a potential compromise, but there perhaps remains something about the “aura” of the physical located archive—its “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”⁸⁰—which I have not fully explored here.

Returning to the city as an archive, in light of recognizing the authority of community archives, opens up possibilities in urban space. When we take the city as read, we presume its fixity and necessity in a way which obfuscates the contingency and plasticity of urban spaces and what they *could* be. Historicizing the city as many-layered can make us more attentive to those narratives and histories which are mobilized to justify “good” plans, designs, buildings, and regeneration projects. But, further to this, seeing the city as an archive can expand possibilities going *forwards*, because if “archives can be treated as anchors in the reconstitution of social relations . . . the new city, coming into being, can then be read as an archive, and urban political struggles might be repositioned in the zone of anticipation . . . the city-as-archive creates a lens into the emergent . . . intervening into and reading urban fabrics.”⁸¹ Squats, occupations, and community archives become recast as interventions into the urban fabric, re-membering and re-collecting the buildings, streets, and squares of the city in the name of an alternative past, repositioning our capacity to aspire, and, therefore, opening up the future.

There is always a risk, perhaps, that “looking back” leads to romanticism and melancholia, or “a certain narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that frames all contemporary investments in political mobilization . . . a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to feelings, analyses, or relations that have become fetishised and frozen.”⁸² It is crucial, therefore, that archival approaches do not *fetishise* the past, but instead seek to mobilize them actively and genealogically—as a “history of the present”⁸³—with the objective of prompting “reconsideration as to our stage within the city as lived space of everyday memory.”⁸⁴ This requires an approach which is more than simply radical *heritage*, but one which “treats spaces as sets of

relations that are fluid and mobile and in which uncertainty is ever present behind any narrative of place.”⁸⁵ The way in which we remember the past is never neutral, subject to recall and reshaping, but history is nevertheless essential for how we perceive future possibilities. As such, community archives like the Resistance Project and the Remembering Olive Collective are not only essential for helping to address the biases and silences of history, but can also alert us to possibilities in the present. Rediscovering activist histories, in other words, can help develop movement legacies, drawing practical lessons from actions of the past while unsettling taken-for-granted views of who “we” are and where “we” came from, reorienting us toward an alternative urban future.

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