

# Museum – Archive – Infrastructure

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and Nicholas Thomas

In this article, we approach the museum as archive and as infrastructure. We do so by introducing two research initiatives that set out to conceptually explore this nexus, and by hinting at methodological approaches and empirical lines of inquiry to be further pursued. The parallels between museums and archives as memory institutions are obvious (Schwartz and Cook 2002). We are interested in the versatile ways in which the museum as archive becomes *enacted*, such as through the revitalization of cultural practices, with implications beyond the realms of the museological and archival. The museum as archive, understood as relational knowledge infrastructure, can be (re)activated for various purposes: from cross-disciplinary renewal to the recovery of Indigenous concepts and frameworks, and as the inspiration for narratives about sustainability and future change.

There is infrastructure that we construct, and there is infrastructure that we inherit. Museum collections constitute *historical* infrastructure: they were assembled and brought into being generations ago. They were, moreover, not one-off creations analogous to old scientific instruments, made at a particular moment; rather they are assemblages formed over time through periodic addition and subtraction. The

distinctiveness of historical infrastructure is that the purpose of a collection has been understood in different ways over time. The rationale for a museum's formation is not generally the same as the rationale for maintaining the collection or the institution today.

Reinhart Koselleck, the historian of ideas, reflected on “the disposability of history.” The specific question that concerned him was the sense in which, around the time of the French Revolution, it became possible to see History (in the singular) as both the product of human agency (rather than providence or fate) and historical narrative – and similarly, as something people could “dispose of,” that is, define and shape, in ways that suited their purposes in particular contexts. His erudite inquiry prompts us to ask whether and how collections are disposable in analogous respects. Koselleck's argument was not a correlative of what became more or less axiomatic in postmodernist thinking, that history (or the body, gender or the polity) was discursively constructed. His concern was to qualify that thesis, insisting that the “given conditions” of history may “escape disposition, or makeability;” in other words, agency is partial and limited; history is also something that ‘happened’ (Koselleck 2004: 204).<sup>1</sup>

To tease out the temporalities underlying Koselleck's reasoning, our first research initiative, *The museum as archive: using the past in the present and future*, addresses questions such as: What happens when archival and museum collections are used in the present and mobilized towards the future? And what happens if we approach archives and museums as dynamic-contingent processes, heterotopian spaces and living resources for creative interventions and utopian (re)imaginings? The inherent temporality of museums and archives has been thoroughly unpacked (Derrida 1995). We are interested in how archival and museum holdings feed into extrinsic, versatile temporalities, such as those underpinning Indigenous textualities enacted through weaving, and the genealogies inscribed in material entities.

An example of the way in which versatile archival material collected in the past can be reanimated in the present is furnished by the legacy of the Board of Maori Ethnological Research established in New Zealand in 1923 by lawyer, politician and ‘homegrown’ anthropologist Āpirana Ngata. Working with tribal partners, Ngata and his colleagues such as Te Rangihīroa (Peter Buck) collected objects, manuscripts, photographs and films – all records that documented visual and material culture and performing arts, which are now housed in museums, libraries and archives. This rich store of knowledge, or *mātauranga Māori*, serves as a resource, stimulus and framework for current revitalization projects in Indigenous language, music, arts and heritage. The versatility of this archival infrastructure is demonstrated by the extraordinary ways in which customary Māori ideas and methods are being applied to contemporary tribal cultural development.

One of these concepts, *whakapapa* or ‘relatedness’, can be understood as a practical ontology – a set of conceptual frameworks, practices, institutions and technologies (such as museums-archives). Like today's Oceanic scholars, Ngata saw *whakapapa* – a cosmic framework of relatedness between all things – as warp and weft not just of Māori life, but of all his strategic interventions, whether academic, artistic or



political.<sup>2</sup> *Whakapapa* is materialized in a range of artefacts, or *taonga* (treasures): weaving, rafter patterns, carving and netting; from small woven *kete* (bags) to the carved, woven and painted iconography of decorated meeting houses that are the instantiation of ancestral bodies. A contemporary example is the beautiful interior of the house on the marae at Victoria University, which includes numerous *tūtūku* panels, such as the one made by Ngata and Buck above, that along with other decorative elements constitute the body of a tribal ancestor within which descendants meet. The house is called Te Tumu Herenga Waka, or the ‘hitching post of canoes,’ alluding to its role in giving Māori students a place within the university where they can maintain their cultural identity.

*Āpirana Ngata and Te Rangihīroa (Peter Buck) weaving a tūtūku latticework panel during the Dominion Museum Ethnological expedition to the East Coast in 1923.*

Courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Clues to the interpretation of Māori material culture, often housed in museums, and its regeneration today, can be found in the writings of Māori experts preserved in historical manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> Having discovered Ngata’s text, *The Terminology of Whakapapa*, in the archives of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Ngāti Porou artist and researcher Natalie Robertson has employed his “genealogical method” (Lythberg, McCarthy and Salmond 2019: 12) to re-examine the records of the Dominion Museum ethnological expedition of 1923. Her research reveals how the different qualities of relationships, genealogical and otherwise, were acknowledged and maintained during the expedition. These are woven throughout the films, images and archival fragments it produced – the *taonga* that it helped bring into being – offering a rich account of the expedition’s exchanges with Robertson’s people, then and now.<sup>4</sup>

Our second initiative, *Museum futures: material cultures of ethnography and natural history as archives of environmental knowledge*, builds on the assumption that both ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ holdings constitute archives of environmental knowledge, thus offering distinct repositories that are mostly neglected in the environmental humanities. The relationship between the cultural and natural sciences has a long museological history (Miller 2021). Our interest is twofold: First, the scholarly attitude of critical curiosity will be historically traced to the epoch of eighteenth- and much of nineteenth-century scholarship, an era before the disciplines under scrutiny were taking shape and staking out their ground in the academy. Second, interdisciplinary material-based inquiries will be geared towards de-installing disciplinary divisions by (re)connecting the environmental and the cultural.



*Interior of the meeting house Te Tumu Herenga Waka built in 1986 at the marae (ceremonial meeting place) of Victoria University of Wellington. Courtesy Marie Cocker and Image Services, Victoria University of Wellington.*

The artefacts brought together in vast numbers in museum collections exemplify the capacity of collectors and curators to present things in ways the original creators (and owners) of those objects did not envisage: this is the decontextualization that commentators have long lamented. If, in the nineteenth century, scholar-curators thought the comparative collections that they assembled would empower a new science of global technology, or of cultural traits that would enable human affinities and migrations to be mapped, this disposition of the material lapsed as anthropology, archaeology and related disciplines shifted their interests towards social relationships, cultural symbols and questions of power and hegemony. Artefact collections can also be reconceived as ‘heritage.’ This contextualization, increasingly prominent since the 1980s, is at once familiar yet also heterogeneous: the issues that it brings and what it means for different groups varies widely. But in this context Koselleck’s

question might be raised: In what ways do collections bear “given conditions” that are not disposable or makeable? Do aspects of their historical formation constrain the versatility that contemporary curators and cultural activists might wish to exploit? Are artefacts ‘stuck’ in museological regimes that only enable so much remaking?



An optimistic response might foreground the versatility of artefacts and also natural specimens that artistic interventions in museums – themselves extensively debated for over twenty years – have (re)discovered and mobilized. Mark Adams’s images, for example, capture and reveal events surrounding the landing of Captain James Cook’s *Resolution* at Tamatea (Dusky Sound) in the far south of New Zealand in March–April 1773. The pristine forest on a low hill was cleared, and the location named Astronomers’ Point. The naturalist George Forster later eulogized: “The superiority of a state of civilization over that of barbarism could not be more clearly stated, than by the alterations and improvements we had made in this place” (2000, I: 105). In the 1990s, photographer Mark Adams responded with these haunting images of the stumps of the trees cut down 220 years earlier. The images were juxtaposed with photos taken at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London, of botanical specimens collected during the same voyage, evoking the travels of plants and the global project of economic botany. Together, these visualizations effect what the Indigenous Australian artist Brook Andrew has described as “bringing into the light” the signs of land, culture and history that proliferate in anthropological and other archives, and in museum collections.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the “given conditions,” and the painful legacies of colonial violence that collecting institutions unevenly bear, the museum can thus constitute infrastructure; specifically, it can constitute a very particular creative technology.

*Mark Adams' large format triptych of the stumps of totara cut down by participants in Cook's voyage in 1773 (1995. Astronomers' Point. Totara stumps. 1773. Silver gelatin prints.)*  
Courtesy of the artist.



*Mark Adams' photograph of the kidney fern specimens collected by the naturalist Forster and brought back to Britain (1995. *Trichomanes reniforme*. Tamatea Dusky Sound. Johann Forster. Silver gelatin print.)*  
Courtesy of the artist.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “On the disposability of history,” originally published as a separate essay in German in 1977, is reproduced as chapter 11 in Koselleck 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This draws on Lythberg, McCarthy and Salmond 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See McCarthy 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See Robertson 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas and Andrew 2008; see also Jorgensen and McLean 2017.

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**Acknowledgements:**

We acknowledge funding through the European Research Council Starting Grant No. 803302, "Indigeneities in the 21st Century" (Philipp Schorch). Thanks to Mark Adams for his photographs.



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**Cite as:** McCarthy, Conal, Philipp Schorch and Nicholas Thomas. 2021. "Museum – Archive – Infrastructure." *Roadsides* 5: 38-46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202100506>

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**Nicholas Thomas's** books on cross-cultural encounters, colonialism, art and museums include *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Harvard University Press, 1991), which influentially contributed to a revival of material culture studies, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (Thames & Hudson, 1999) and *Discoveries:*



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**ISSN 2624-9081**

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