Book reviews

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression
Author: Jacques Derrida (translated by Eric Prenowitz)

For the heritage professional, archives are often so close, so much a part of day-to-day practice, that they remain invisible as an entity to be analysed or consciously considered.

In Archive Fever, Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher of writing, takes a magnifying glass to the notion of the archive to reveal a complex of implicit meanings and processes which structure it. These meanings and processes are inextricably woven into the everyday work of the heritage professional.

Beginning with an examination of the etymological origins of the term, Derrida presents the reader with a detailed deconstructive analysis of the notion of archiving, offering in the process an extended meditation on remembrance, religion, time and technology. Through this Derrida carefully lays the necessary keystones or signposts for what he terms a 'new science of the archive'.

The archive with which Derrida is primarily concerned is that of Freud, freudian psychoanalysis and the engagement of others with this archive (specifically, the scholarship of Yosef Yerushalmi). Indeed, and with typical intellectual aplomb, Derrida extends beyond mere reference to the archive of Freud and extrapolates from freudian psychoanalytic theory, particularly the notion of the 'death drive', to his own archival discourse.

Derrida proposes that within the notion of the archive a dual logic is at work, with one logic counterbalancing the other. On the one hand there is what he terms 'archive desire' or passion (in the old, suffering sense of the word) — a 'compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin', to return to the moment of 'impression'. And, on the other hand, there is 'archival violence' (the death drive), or what he later comes to term 'archive fever' (le mal d'archive). The death drive, Derrida suggests, is 'archiviolithic', exerting an 'annihilating force' against the archive. Derrida summarises this tension succinctly: 'the archive always works, and a priori against itself'.

Such a notion poses tantalising and manifold possibilities for heritage. The idea that the archive is simultaneously constructive and destructive is illuminating for an industry obsessed with origins and moments of significance. Yet, perhaps even more potent for heritage are the impacts of new technology on archives as Derrida envisions them; three of these are outlined below.

The first concerns Derrida's pronouncement that 'archivable meaning is also and in advance co-determined by the structure that archives'. He suggests that the archive 'produces as much as it records the event'. As Derrida shrewdly notes,
this functions similarly to the way in which the modern news media produce rather than merely record news events. The proliferation of 'new' technology within heritage — CD-ROMs, electronic databases, html files and web sites, e-mail, microcomputers and other electronic storage retrieval systems — are all implicated in this process of production. Utilisation of these technologies within the archival process, Derrida suggests, serves to 'transform archives from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, in its very events'.

Strongly connected to the above point is the second impact of new technology on the archive/heritage relationship. This concerns the emerging perception of new archival technology — especially electronic databases and other storage systems — as some kind of aide-mémoire which, it is hoped, will enable the historian to fruitfully grasp archivable heritage in its entirety, to 'objectivize it with no remainder'. For Derrida, however, the very antithesis of this holds true — new archival technology in fact disperses rather than synthesizes knowledge. The impact of this technology is such that the contents of our archives 'move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs'.

The third impact of new technology builds on Derrida's observation that the archive, contrary to what is commonly assumed, is not a question of the past, it is one of the future. 'If we want to know what [the archive] will have meant', he writes, 'we will only know in times to come'. Derrida terms this the archive's 'covenant with the future' (and it is precisely at this point that Derrida commits to his own covenant with the future by producing a book that offers a pre-history — that is, archive — of an as yet unrealised science of the archive).

A major consequence of this covenant, especially when coupled with new archival technology, is that it ultimately challenges archival origins, the 'unique moment of archivization'. As Eric Prenowitz, the book's translator, notes, 'while an archive may not be an end, it is only a beginning. It is not the beginning, and never contains its own beginning. It can only be a translation of its conception'.

Archive Fever can be read as a cautionary tale for heritage in that it posits that new archival technology is not necessarily a panacea for all archive ills, a way of preventing what Sue McKemish terms a 'national amnesia'. Rather, this technology, when coupled with Derrida's 'archive fever', actually incites amnesia.

Archive Fever is a challenging book; its brevity belies its complexity. In it there is much to debate. The greatest 'violence' that could be done to this, Derrida's archive, is to ignore it.

endnotes

2 Ibid., p. 12.
3 Ibid., p. 12.
4 Ibid., p. 17.
5 Ibid., p. 16.
6 Ibid., p. 68.
7 Ibid., p. 18.
8 Ibid., p. 109.
10 Derrida, p. 12.
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Robin Boyd a Life

Author: Geoffrey Serle

Publisher: Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

Serle’s work is a marvellous read. Often biographies or histories lapse into all too dry works giving mainly facts and figures pieced together with loosely expressed opinions from the author. In Robin Boyd a Life, Serle has crafted more than just a wonderful historical document but an illuminating insight into one of the great Australian cultural lives of this century.

The simplicity of the title in an insight into the clarity of expression and the substance contained in the work.

As an architect with a particular interest in Robin Boyd’s work, I approached this book with the expectation of much about Boyd the heroic architect and his substantial body of work — I was not disappointed. What Serle also reveals is not only generous amounts of illustrations and photographs of the work of Boyd, but his influences, passions and heritage. We are introduced to Boyd the mid-century men, the architect, the planner, the philosopher, critic, lecturer, father, soldier ... the list goes on.

The surprise, though, of this work is the insight that we are given into the social fabric of Melbourne society throughout this century, setting the scene for Boyd, the hero, to shine like a bright star in the otherwise dran and dreary postwar Melbourne. We are placed in the Australia of the cultural cringe, the Australia of meat and three vegetables, of families sitting around the radiogram or, if affluent enough, the latest black-and-white telly. In this way, Serle articulates the way in which Melbourne influenced him and the way in which he was eventually able to influence that city and leave a lasting impression on the nation.

The book is a wonderful resource for students of architecture, particularly for those requiring an insight into how a master is not necessarily born into his role, but must struggle to achieve success and the fame that comes with it. It also shows how difficult it can be to maintain that status once it is achieved.

For those interested in mid-century design, the graphic material is both topical and vivid. The setting and its clear expression of the influences of the times would certainly be of interest to any social historian. Those with a high regard for the Boyd dynasty would very much enjoy the early chapters of the book and Robin Boyd’s childhood and heritage.

Serle has added to a long list of significant works with Robin Boyd a Life; it is rare to find a biography/history of this heroic period in Australia’s contemporary history. The work is meticulously researched and presented with poise and clarity. It is a genuine good read, whether as a reference or one of those bedside books that one refers to only on occasions when relaxing.