

Break the Archive

a workshop report



Introduction

Break the Archive: what is the future if the archive was a workshop conducted over Zoom during the *Futures: Summer Research Festival* hosted by the South, West & Wales Doctoral Training Partnership. In this fast pace design thinking workshop the participants deconstructed the archive and created a fantasy alternative from the ashes of that deconstruction. Using maps, matrixes and flowcharts the participants explored how the role of the archive could be reimagined for today's society. The overall aim of the workshop was not to find a concrete solution, but rather start a conversation around how we might want to rethink the very idea of the archive and the role it plays in preserving our history. Around 30 people took part in the workshop and their ideas and thoughts were collected within the constraints of virtual sticky notes on the online whiteboard platform Miro.

In this report I have gone through each task outlining the aim of the task and what the participants had to do. Following that, I analysed the outcome of the task and reflected on the process from a workshop lead perspective. I also selected some of my favourite sticky notes to showcase. To finish with I summaries my concluding thoughts on the workshop and reflected on the overall process and any improvements that could be made for future projects.



Task 1: the archive VS the anti-archive

The Archive



The Anti-archive



Aim

To break down the symbols and language of the archive and use this to create an anti-archive.

Task

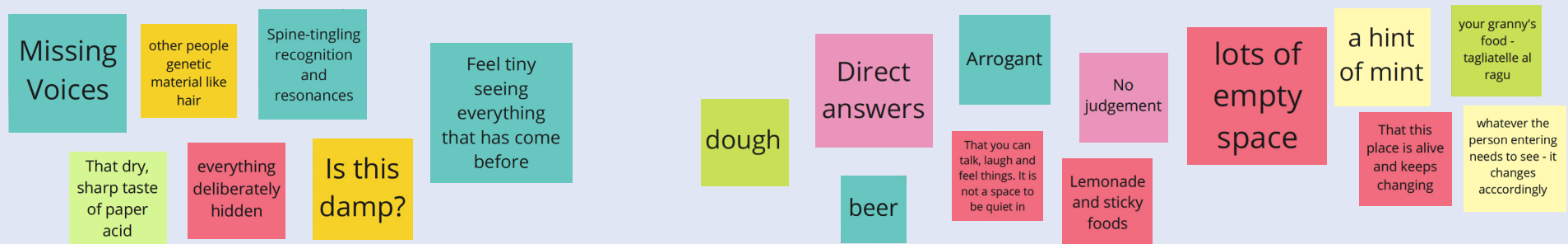
The participants deconstruct the archive through the five senses. What do they see, smell, hear, feel, and taste when they are in an archive or think of when they hear the word 'archive'? Following this deconstruction the participants create an anti-archive by mapping on an identical matrix the exact opposite of what they experience within the archive.

Analysis

Unsurprisingly the first sticky note put down on the archive matrix was the word "dust"; similar words like "yellowing", "creaking" and "old" quickly followed. There were also references to the unaccommodating nature of archives; the lack of noise, the fear of damaging something, and the uncomfortable office furniture. While some sticky notes remarked on the barriers experienced in archives, like waiting for your material and the occasional illegible handwriting, there were many that mentioned the positive feelings of "anticipation" and "discovery" people experience in the archive.

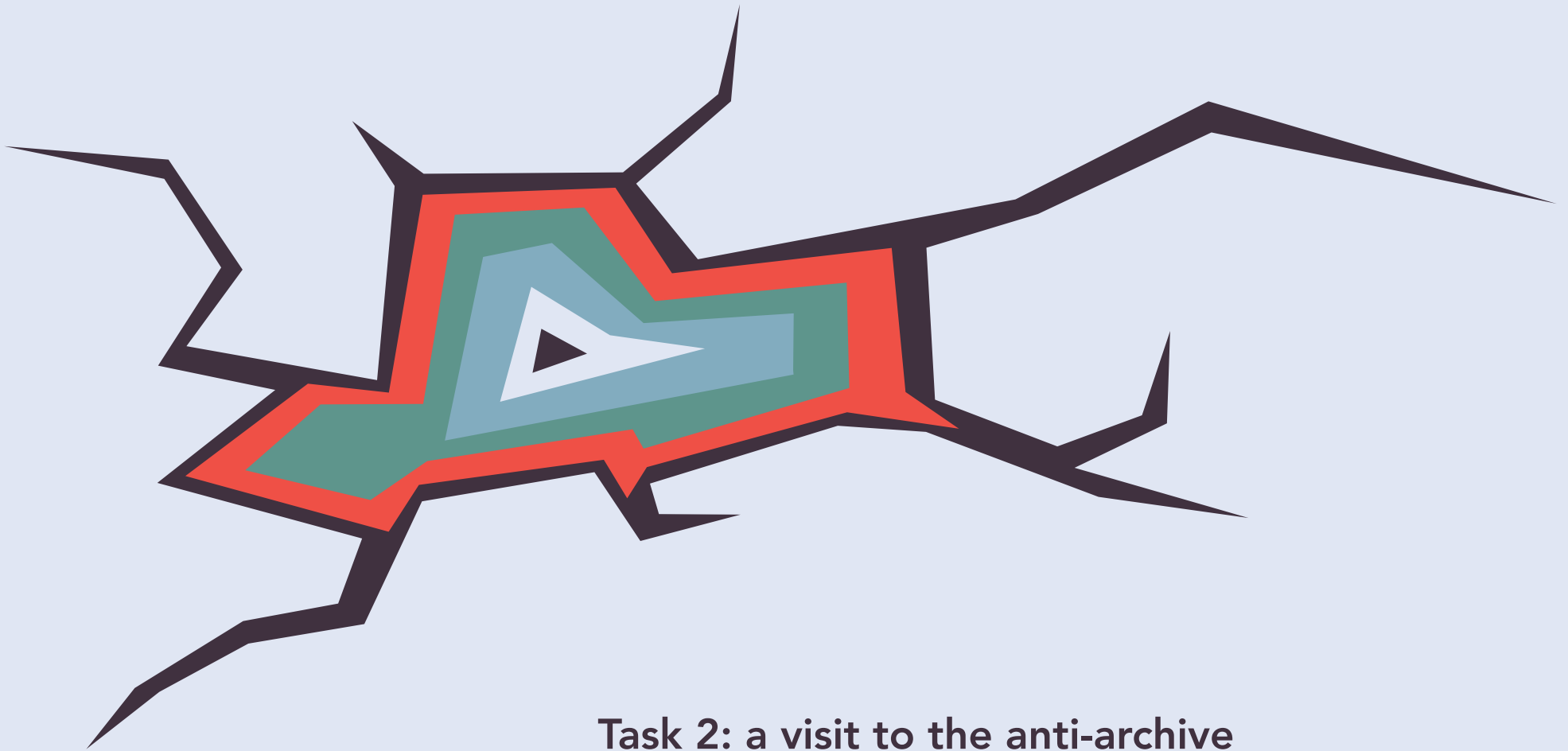
On the anti-archive matrix there was a clear increase in smells, noises and food. It appeared that in the anti-archive there would be plenty of destruction happening with sticky notes referring to "fires", "explosions", and "anarchy". It was also desired for nature and animals to be a part of the anti-archive. The participants and their sticky notes created a general feeling of the anti-archive being place that was "alive".

Interestingly both the archive and the anti-archive matrix had sticky notes saying "chaos". This is not too surprising as chaos can take on many forms and therefore present in both the archive and the anti-archive.



Reflection

As soon as the task started people started writing down feelings they experience in the archive, so I quickly added a feelings block to the matrix in order to accommodate this. Overall I was very happy with the results even though they did not stick to my colour coordinated sticky notes.



Task 2: a visit to the anti-archive

Jamie



An art student visits the anti-archive looking for some inspiration for a project based around second-wave feminism. They are particular interested in sound and voices.



Sascha



They have recently run an oral history project with a local school and would like to donate the recordings and other documentation to the archive.



Aim

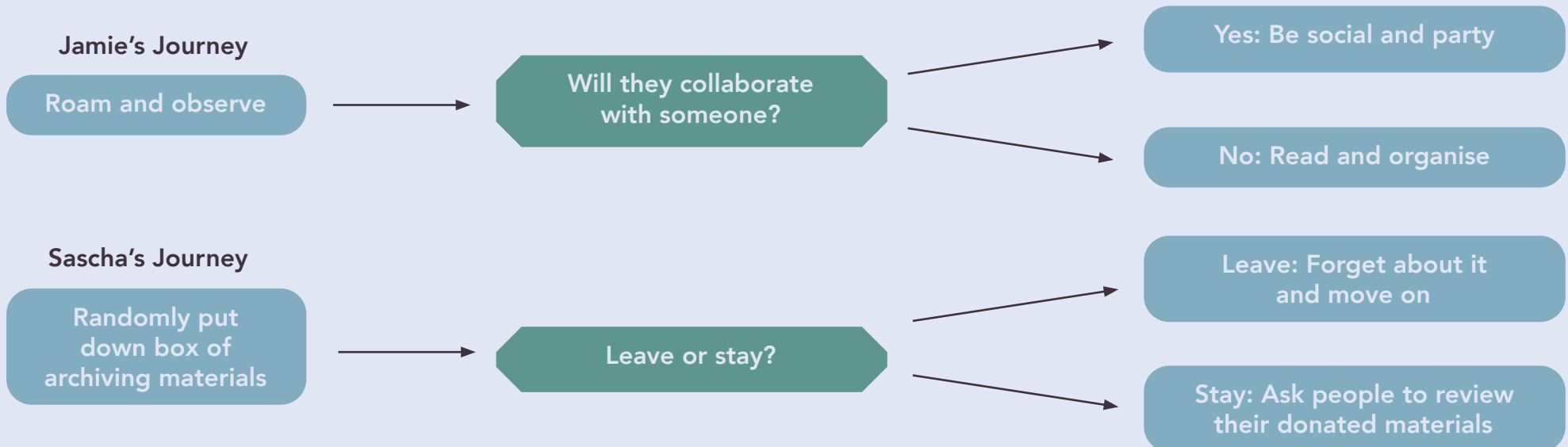
To explore the anti-archive through a form of role-play and scenario building.

Task

The participants are given two scenarios of someone visiting the anti-archive. The first being "Jamie" who would like to *use* the anti-archive and the other being "Sascha" who would like to *donate* to the anti-archive. Both scenarios have a flow chart that went:



For each section the participants imagine anything that could possibly happen to the person in the anti-archive and I then pick one to continue with.



Analysis

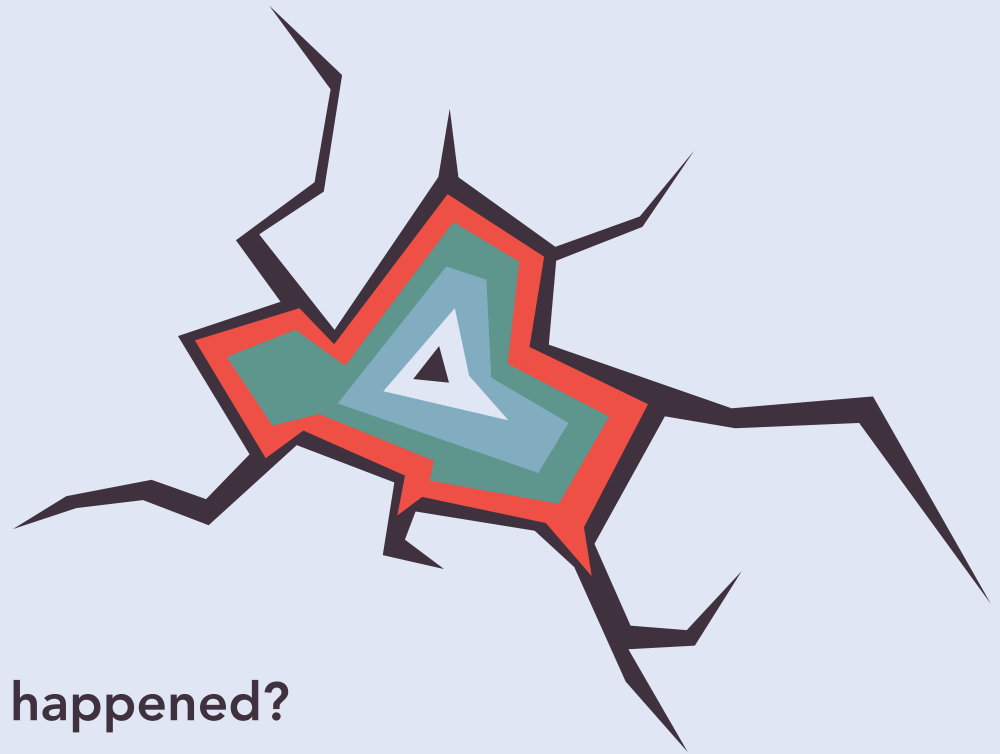
The main themes of the flowchart were around interacting and collaborating with fellow anti-archive visitors. There were many sticky notes that wished for the personas to make creative responses and reflections to the anti-archive through various mediums. Predictably there was also plenty of chaotic behaviour and several participants made specific references to children being present in the anti-archive. Ideas around how to manage the storage of the anti-archive also popped up with participants suggesting exchanges but also voluntary destruction of materials as trade off for storing new materials.

One of the most interesting to observe from the task was when it was Jamie's decision moment - To collaborate or not to collaborate? For the yes to collaboration option the participants added sticky notes like "start a drumming circle", "throw a party" and "involve community". However for the work alone and not collaborate action people wrote: "plan the structure of the day", "get out a list of priorities", "join a 3 hour zoom call" and "weep". There were even some sticky notes that just ignored the no-collaboration rule and still suggested finding people to work with. One could conclude that as soon as the persona was no longer allowed to collaborate the participants reverted to the original archiving stereotypes of working in methodical isolation. The desire to collaborate is an odd one, only because in reality people prefer working alone to group work, however it could be that the anti-archive is simply not a place to work.

Reflection

I have never done this type of method before so I had to improvise a bit as it went on. For example I did not ask the participants to think about a result to each of the final actions as I thought that it would not really work and also I was trying to stick to a time limit. I am not sure if the flowchart framework was the best option for this task. I personally feel that this persona/role-play activity would work better in person, so considering the circumstances it functioned fine.





Task 3: What just happened?

The Archive



RESPECTING ORIGINAL ORDER

SEARCHING, SEARCHING AND SEARCHING

CONDITION RESTRICTIONS

No photography

Catalogues and the fixing of what's in the archive

HUMAN ERROR

Objects

Chaos

Static

People Power

Sharing photos so people outside the archive can access it

Access

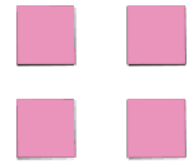
Animating findings in writing

How you use the material

Dust - who does it belong to?

State Power

The Anti-archive



Archiving things people are interested in

knowledge easily accessible

open access

Public Outreach Projects

Co-produced archive and search terms

Record the archivists

Take things

Use archive as source

Change copyright law

potential

talking to people

WALKING ABOUT AND CARRYING MATERIAL TO A MORE COMFORTABLE PLACE

BEING FLEXIBLE WITH THE ORDER OF CONTENTS

Performance

Creative interventions

collaboration

tURNING UP ANY TIME WHEN FREE

Dynamic

Decisions about metadata

The silence and that you can only observe

Observe the researchers

calm and quiet

Chairs/ tables

SORE NECK AND SHOULDERS

Searching visitors by Security

having to request items

Photograph everything

Researcher share options

No-one can go in

No food/ drink

silence

Controlled access

copyright

Give things away

Watching

Access

knowledge-making

Progressive state funding

Interest in research work by institutions

Preservation for future

oPEN aCCeSS

Provide journals for note taking

Having to pay to take photos

geoblocking

Inaccessible obsolete digital technology = excuses for lack of transparency

Touching

Location(s)

Gatekeepers

Aim

To map out both the archive and the anti-archive onto a matrix seeing how they differ.

Task

The participants map out aspects of both the archive and the anti-archive along two axes. One axis indicates how the aspects of archives make it dynamic or static, and the other maps out how the power over the archive is controlled by the state or the people.

Reflection

This was not a strong activity in my opinion. Many people were confused by the colour coordinated sticky notes and my instructions were not that clear. In addition I felt that I had forced my own research frame onto it, restricting people and pushing them to fulfil the outcome that I desired. What was also the downfall of this activity was that people were still adding new elements to the anti-archive. The anti-archive was not yet a fully formed idea that could be mapped out. Its existence was so short and the previous tasks had encouraged people to create the anti-archive rather than define it which continued into this activity resulting in them in not being able to map it out.

Analysis

In an unsurprising turn of events the matrix showed that the archive is static and controlled by the state while the anti-archive is dynamic and hands the power over to the people. Sticky notes referencing copyright, the restrictions around photographing sources and obsolete technologies were assigned to the archive in the static and state controlled quadrant. While the anti-archive had several sticky notes talking about open access.



Conclusion

Initially I was unsure what to conclude from the workshop. At first it seems that there was nothing to deduce beyond the things I already knew about the challenges and pitfalls of archives. There are many similarities between the anti-archive and the dadaesque archive I had written about in a previous paper. However, the more I looked at the matrixes and the sticky notes the more I realised two things.

Firstly, if I focus on the results of task one then the archive matrix has many words associated with 'lack of life' e.g. dust, ghost, dry, cold, old, creaking, etc. While the anti-archive matrix has sticky notes saying alive, animals, children, nature, music, etc. The dust in the archive proves a lack of human movement, while the abundance of noise in the anti-archive is more a kin to the hustle and bustle of a Sunday market. This hustle and bustle is echoed by the sticky notes in task 2, many of which illustrate movement and talking. I think overall the results of the workshop are making me feel that the archive is a place for the dead, while the anti-archive is for the living.

Secondly, people have very different opinions on the archive. As I previously have said the fact that "chaos" appeared in both of task one's matrixes is not surprising. The most puzzling sticky notes were "inclusive" and "excluded" which both appeared in the anti-archive matrix. My first thought was that people must have misunderstood the task or made a mistake. From where I am standing the archive is exclusive which would make the anti-archive thoroughly inclusive, however this might not be true. It is completely possible that the participant does view the archive as an inclusive space that protects our history. This is not an obscure narrative in society.

For me the workshop evoked ideas around who the archive is for. To preserve the dead? Or to inspire the living? This workshop made clear that the archive is not a neutral place. It is intensely political. I am truly baffled that there are people who still believe that the archive can be objective, if anything it is more political than we can even imagine.

A brief reflection

For my first solo workshop which I designed from scratch I think it went well, which I partly think might be due to the audience being willing to participate. I do wonder about the benefits and disadvantages of doing something like this online. Are people more willing to think outside of box in a silly manner because they are anonymous? Personally I have found doing this analysis hard because I was not able to quiz the participants on their sticky notes. It is also very difficult to feel the atmosphere of the room which for me personally contains a lot of information on the process and can be very valuable in the analysis.

However the most important thing I need to reflect on came at the end of the workshop, when I was notified by the host that two people had dropped out of the workshop because they struggled with all the colours on the screen. One participant specified that it was their dyspraxia that made it difficult for them to participate. Considering I wish for my practice to be as inclusive as possible this is not good news. I have therefore posted on the Miro community forum asking if anyone else had experienced this problem and if they had a solution. The first reply I got was very unhelpful and was just an attempt to promote Miro products. The second reply was a little more helpful as they said that I should maybe consider outlining guidelines at the beginning of the workshop that encourage people to stick to one colour of sticky note. However, the second reply also said, "There's only so much that the Miro tech can do" implying that they were not responsible for their platform excluding certain groups. Now that I am aware of this I will be able to adapt my Miro boards to be more inclusive in future workshops.