The Big Idea

The big idea for this CDA started when I read the British Library's Oral History archivist Charlie Morgan's article on oral history projects during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the article he talks about how there are all these amazing oral history projects but that little thought has been given to where these recordings might go after everyone is done with them, which I can imagine is very annoying for an archivist. Close to the end of the article he mentions the performance artist Meirle Laderman Ukeles, who I was a fan of when I was an art student. Turns out the Ukeles wrote a Manifesto on Maintenance Art which contains the great line "After the revolution who will pick up the garbage Monday morning?" Her answer the women who do the majority of domestic maintenance jobs, although today I would add migrants and those without any further education to the list. Ukeles' ideas of the garbage after the revolution and her idea of the spilt development and maintenance systems and their roles got me thinking about my own project and projects in general.

Cultural institutions and charities always need money and the best way to get money is by running a project. People like funding projects because they often produce tangible results, this is pure development system. If instead they decide to fund the day to day running of an institution they would not see these tangible results, and that is less satisfying. It is important to note here that generally people do not notice everyday maintenance work unless it breaks down, normally it is invisible. So funding bodies like projects because they are results driven because that is satisfying, but there is little to no focus of legacy of these projects. The general pattern is make something, display it, then maybe archive it, and finally start the cycle all over again without taking anything from the other projects forward. My CDA/project risks falling into this same pattern of making, displaying and archiving, if I ignore these ideas of maintenance.

Maintenance Art

Make → Display → Archive?
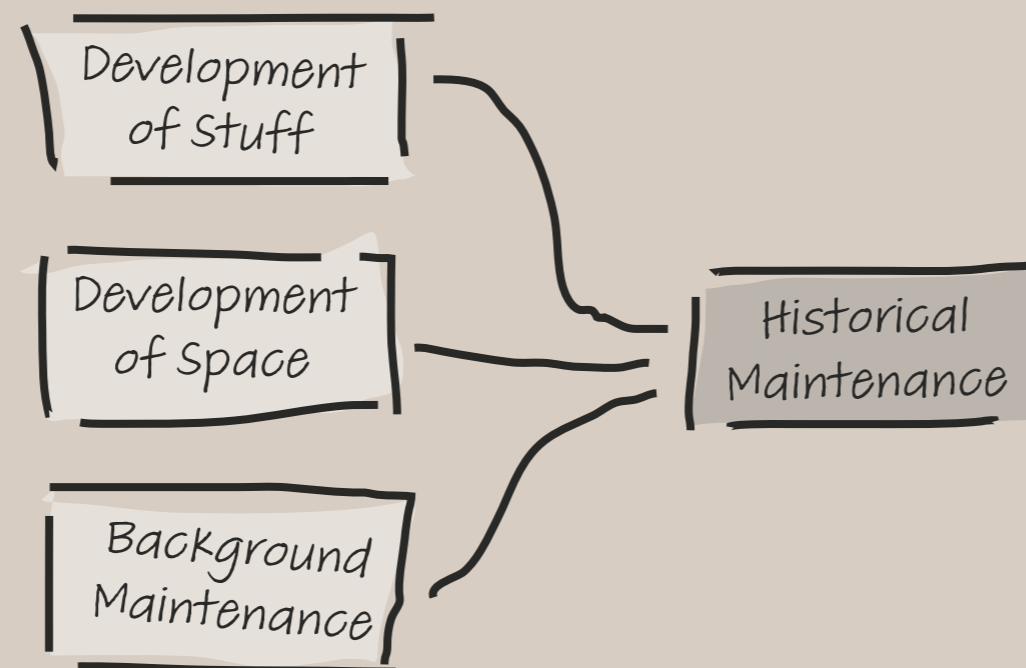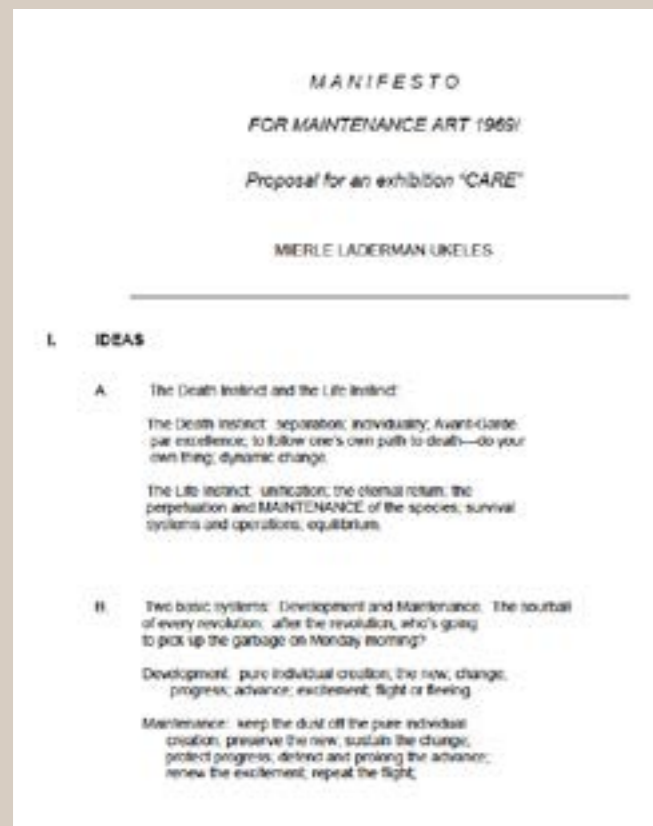
What I believe we need is a switch in mindset. These step-by-step project view work through the lens of the development system, instead we should view work through the maintenance system. In the context of Seaton Delaval Hall and the wider heritage sector their work is to preserve history and present it to the public, but what history is changes over time so it needs to constantly be updated. I call this 'Historical Maintenance'. Within this new mindset historical maintenance instead of being the outcome of sporadic projects is achieve through the close collaboration between development of stuff and space, and the background maintenance required to keep everything afloat. The development of stuff refers to any documents or stories, and the development of space refers to the creation of the space to keep this stuff, that includes archives. Background maintenance is the work that happens every day that keeps the doors open. Without these three concepts working together historical maintenance, that is the constant shaping of our history, cannot be achieve. My hope is that this new mindset helps make the history more democratic and up to date.

In the following pages I break down the ideas of, Development of Stuff, Development of Space, Historical Maintenance and Background Maintenance into the smaller things I have been thinking about.

Development of Stuff

Development of Space

Background Maintenance

→ Historical Maintenance
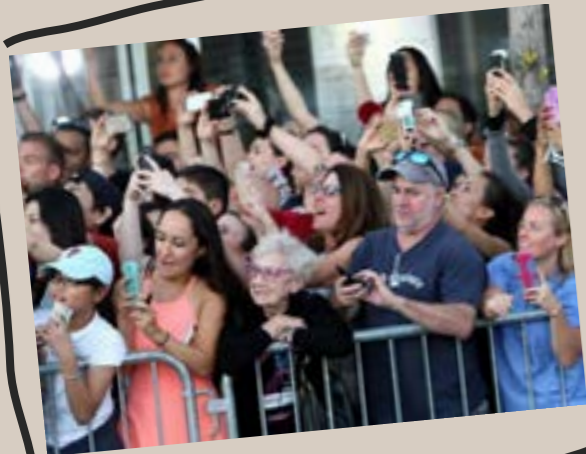
The development system, the creation of stuff, is an obsession in today's society. We need to all be creating content all the time. But where are you going to put all this stuff?

Should we record everything?
Or should we live more in the moment?
Should we wait until we know what actually is important?

Materiality of oral histories

Oral histories are simultaneously what is said on the recording and the medium of the recording. This makes it difficult to archive. Archives are made for silent word documents and the occasional photograph, but oral histories are noisy which disrupts the peaceful archive space.
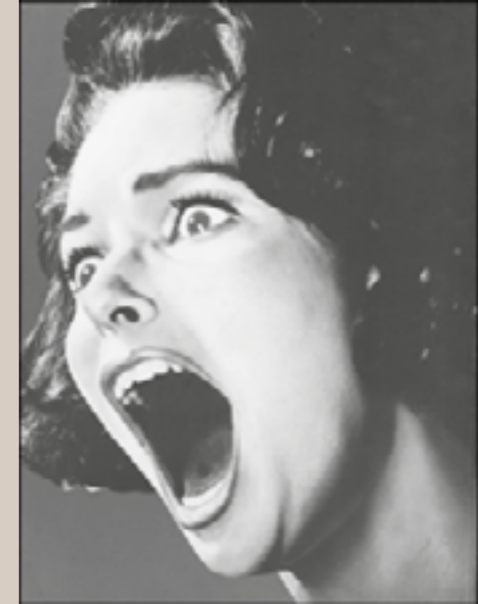
Oral histories are noisy!!!!!

In addition how we consume oral histories affects the way we experience them. Do we read a transcript or do we listen to a tape recorder?

Talking to the future

When we record something we are communicating with the future. We are showing the future what we thought was important to keep.

Should we be more conscience of this when we record?

Development of Stuff

Transcripts

Transcripts are a hotly debated topic in oral histories. To use or not to use? I have created my first transcripts and I had some thoughts. Firstly, it is a lot of work to make something word perfect. And secondly I do not understand why people would create transcripts that are word perfect. The beauty of transcripts is that you can word search them on the computer and you can read them easily but if you type them up word perfect then this becomes harder to do. I am therefore pro crude transcripts. Transcripts that clearly communicate the content but encourage people to listen to the recording and the real voice of the person.

Re-mixing and co-creation

We are constantly making new content but we could also review, reuse, and remix old documents to make new content. In a world where there are so many perspectives it is important to bring multiple layers to your work. Remixing and co-creation can diversify what we create, but it also means we have more complicated multi-layered things to archive.

Transcript Ribbon

My idea of a transcript ribbon is a visual aid to show archive users where notes have been added to the transcript or where the oral history changes topic. Instead of a dense word document it a visual treat that is easy to scroll through.

Development of Space

the starting blocks

The empty space of the search bar. The potential to have access to everything and yet so little idea what to type. This is the starting blocks for many researchers and personally it is simultaneously a daunting and uncreative space. It is about hoping for the right results and extracting information from exhausting lists.
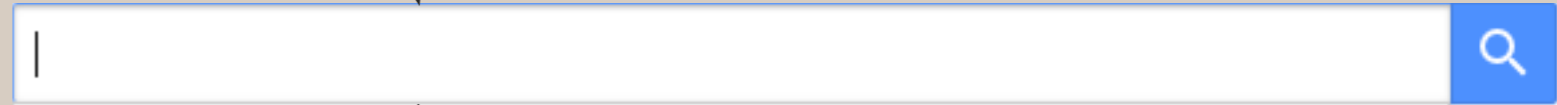
storage .v. reuse

Finding a balance between efficient storage and reuse is the challenge because they often have conflicting requirements. Making duplicated spaces would seem like the obvious thing to do but any changes made through reuse have to fed into the storage space. It is a constant cycle that has to exist otherwise the archive would be pointless.

...so let us create a new space with a new meaning

Instead of having space made for excavation we will make a space for construction. We make a space between the archive and the museum. Somewhere between pure excavation and pure displaying. A place for exploration and creation.

My main inspiration for this space is video games and this awesome art work "Obliteration Room" by Yayoi Kusama.

TRACES!

no man's land
From excavation to construction

audio spaces

An interesting that is happening is the movement towards audio spaces online with platforms like Discord and Clubhouse, but also a general upward trend of people using voice messaging to communicate to each other. It is kind of an anti-robot movement because then we can hear each other's human voices.

See: https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/01/25/1016723/the-future-of-social-networks-might-be-audio-clubhouse-twitter-spaces/

Minecraft

Minecraft is a sandbox game. It gives you building materials and tools and then the player can make whatever they want. Whatever they make they leave behind. These traces of activity and creation can then be viewed and explored by others who are invited to the space. You can also create collaborative spaces: helping each other build and share ideas, which I think are would fit nicely in this new space we are creating.

in person .v. digital

The trick now is to make both a space IRL/AFK and one in a digital format because the pandemic has encouraged hybrid versions of archives.

Zelda: Breath of the Wild

Zelda: Breath of the Wild is an open world game. If I transposed this open world onto our new construction space, instead of excavating I would be creating my own story in the space. Slowly uncovering information and keeping track of my subjective journey within the space. I believe that this magical feeling of an adventure game is similar to that archive feeling. It is this feeling I would like to recreate in this space.

"While the intensity of the archival encounter is not often admitted in print, it continues to motivate the efforts of individual historians"

- Robinson, (2020) Touching the void: Affective history and the impossible

anasi

archives are like gardens

You have to keep looking after them and only then will they work and bring you general joy.

Historical Maintenance

Oral traditions are very flexible. They adapt to the present. Anasi is a mischievous spider god whose origins can be traced to the slave trade and today still teaches children how to behave in a contemporary society.

"Quilting"

Personal Stories | Site Stories | National Stories

An oral history is a very personal account, but once put with others can represent something far bigger. How we handle the personal small stories and the larger narratives is a balancing act, especially because things like our national story change all the time and therefore require different personal stories to make it.

Ethics and ghosts

Dialogue

OUR ETHICS WILL ALWAYS BE IMPERFECT BECAUSE WE CANNOT PREDICT THE FUTURE

Ethics is and always will be a minefield. The most important thing I find is that we do not get to bogged down in the paperwork and remember that we are working with people. Which is why I like the metaphor of ghosts. In an oral history archive you are working with a ghost of someone, a version of someone from the past. It is a good way to remind us of their humanity and allow us room to be less judgemental, because everyone has ghosts especially now we have social media.

Slow scholarship

Slow scholarship is this very trendy idea that within research people should be less focused on creating a load of papers and instead enjoy the process of slowly coming to a idea. This idea of researching slowly allows for more time to really think deeply about certain situations and stops people from coming to sudden conclusions.

Mountz, A. et al. (2015) For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal UniversityACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies, 2015, 14(4), 1235 - 1259

In her paper on the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience Liz Sevcenko talks about dialogue in heritage sites that have been a centre for some type of trauma. Now Seaton Delaval Hall cannot be compared to the sites Sevcenko talks about but I do believe that some things can be learnt for her approach. Where there are groups of people there will be multiple points of view and that can be difficult to handle but also very fruitful.

Sevcenko, L., 2010. Sites of Conscience: new approaches to conflicted memory. Museum International, 62(1-2), pp.20-25.

Seaton Delaval Hall might not be a direct area of conflict but it is a large hall built in an old colonial power. Where the owners got their money from is part of the Britain's wider colonial past and this is important to remember.

Below there is a screenshot from Trove, an Australian online library, where they offer cultural and historical context to their collections. Another campaign which delivers painful history in a considered and elegant way is the 'Stumbling Stones' that mark where a Jewish person was taken from during the Holocaust.

wiki

Wiki engines/software is used to create a web-based system that has no defined owner and has a structure that is mostly built by its users. The most famous example is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, where in theory anyone can add to the information. However, there is an emphasis on sighting sources when adding information and a lot of it is monitored for accuracy by experts. It is in my opinion one of the most awesome things on the internet and possible an option for the future of online archives.

Fan Labour

Fans are one of the most powerful forces in the world. They can get cancelled TV shows to be renewed, they get whole movies to be re-edited, and once a whole bunch of k-pop fans bought tickets to Trump rallies so the stadiums would be empty. Alongside these impressive actions they also create vast amounts of content for each other to enjoy and they do all of this for free. There have been studies on fan labour and their motivations but they often focus on stereotypical 'nerdy' things like Star Trek or music. But how would this work in the context of heritage where people are fans of the history of a place? Fans keep things alive if not for other people then at least for themselves to enjoy.

How to build a community

There was once a village in America where the average life expectancy of the citizens was considerably higher than the average life expectancy in the surrounding area. People tried to work out why this was the case by looking at things like their diet and exercise routines, but in the end the answer was very simple. This village had moved in its entirety from Italy to America and over the years they looked after each other, through everyday social interaction. No one was left alone in their living room, everyone was included in everything. They lived longer because they had a very strong sense of community. Oral traditions also stem from a strong sense of community. I therefore wonder if by building a community round an archive or an archive like space the history will last longer and the stories and the people they came from are better looked after. If this is the case then what we are looking for is to build a community around SDH's oral history, which does not sound very easy.

Ma the Japanese concept of seeing beauty in what is absent.

The Empty Archive

There is such a thing as counter reading archives. This means looking at the things that are missing from the archive, the gaps in the history. There is a great temptation to fill these gaps but these gaps tell us a lot about our history or at least the history of our attitudes towards history.

Background Maintenance

Archive destruction

There are many different factors that can contribute to archival destruction/deterioration. There are environmental ones like storms or earthquakes, with the former becoming increasingly prevalent in today's climate crisis. If an archive has digital storage then on top of environmental threats they also have cyberattacks and software updates. It is also important to know where the servers of the archive are kept and who is hosting them.

It is also important to remember that we cannot yet of certain determine the life span of some digital files because they are so young.

Comment: a reminder that digitised archives have their own version of folios fallen behind book stacks.

DIGITAL!!!

Although it is very tempting to solve problems with digital solutions it is a rather narrow minded option. Firstly because the maintenance required to uphold digital solutions is often under estimated and secondly because in reality there are digital divides within our society. There can be a divide between those who have access to hardware and those who do not. But there are also divides with people's ability to use certain software and their digital literacy. All of this means that digital solutions sometimes cause more problems than they are worth.

Project Legacy + Institutional Memory

Although all National Trust properties have great stories to be told about the time before it was a National Trust property, we also need to remember that we are constantly making new history. Properly documenting a projects legacy, recording institutional memory or generally noting down how things were done is something that often gets forgotten until it is too late. How you get from A to B is often essential in understanding why things are the way they are. Institutional memory is crucial to good maintenance not only because you can keep going as you were but also because you do not need to radically overhauling everything. Instead you make small changes over time which is easier for the work force to take on board.