

Chapter Title: Too many things to keep for the future?

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Book Title: Heritage Futures

Book Subtitle: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices

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Published by: UCL Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13xps9m.16>

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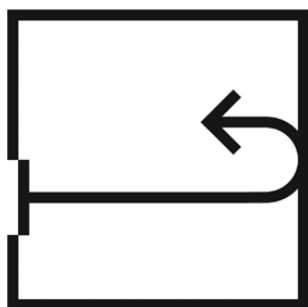


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Part III

Profusion

In the face of a profusion of things – mass produced for mass consumption – what gets kept for the future?



Too many things to keep for the future?

Sharon Macdonald, Jennie Morgan and Harald Fredheim

In some ways, profusion could be said to be an inexorable condition of heritage: there is more that could be conserved than possibly can be, at least according to current technological and space-time conditions. Moreover, as a mode of according value, heritage is selective – it operates by much not making the cut. Valuable past – heritage – swims in a sea of, and is effectively buoyed up by, all that sinks into oblivion (see also [Chapters 1 and 2](#) in this book). In some contexts, however, there is a particularly heightened sense of there being a profusion of objects, places and practices – even ‘a growing sense of too muchness’, as Elizabeth Chin (2016, 7) puts it – that might be saved. What are the consequences of such profusion for heritage futures? How and in what ways do some things – and some of their accompaniments – rather than others come to be kept?

To make active selections about what should be conserved, a panoply of heritage institutions and practices has developed in most countries of the world. For example, UNESCO World Heritage listing – in which there is typically a profusion of applicants, relatively few of which are successful – is discussed in Part IV, Uncertainty. By contrast, however, the heritage institutions researched in Part II, Diversity – namely the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, the Frozen Ark and the Endangered Languages Documentation Project – operate against a presumed backdrop of diversity loss, and thus seek to preserve as much of the perceived dwindling profusion as possible.

In this part of the book, our concern is primarily with the keeping of material culture that takes the form of things or objects¹ – sometimes, as we show further below, variously labelled as ‘stuff’, ‘treasure’ or ‘heritage’. We focus on museums – institutions that are culturally tasked with selecting which objects (and whatever else is presumed to go with them) are to be saved for posterity, and also on homes, where we look at domestic practices

that shape what is kept for the future.² Although such domestic practices might initially seem to be less obviously about heritage-making, they are a key domain for determining what will be inherited by future generations. Moreover, this inheritance is not necessarily restricted to within families, but is also a source on which other kinds of heritage-making may draw. This is the case for the museum collections of contemporary (that is, of the present or recent past) ‘everyday life’ – usually called ‘social history’ collections in our primary geographical research location of the UK – that are the focus of our study, whose collections often contain objects that previously lived in people’s homes (and were subsequently gifted to the museum or otherwise acquired by it). As such, then, we are looking here at two interlinked heritage domains – museum collections of contemporary everyday life, and homes – both of which, we contend, face a profusion predicament, namely, many more things that could potentially be conserved for the future than can be. We ask how, in the face of this predicament, do some come to be kept – to ‘remain’ or ‘make it’ into the future – while others are not?

The profusion predicament

In choosing the term ‘profusion’ rather than negatively loaded terms such as ‘overload’ or ‘excess’, or positively connoted ones such as ‘abundance’ and ‘plenty’, our aim was to keep the question of evaluation open – to be able to see whether and in which specific contexts having a lot of things from which to select between might be regarded as an advantage rather than necessarily as a problem. Nevertheless, the research was also framed in relation to a widespread contemporary popular discourse of concern about various forms of ‘overload’ and ‘excess’. As Orvar Löfgren and Barbara Czarniawska (2012), who use the term ‘overflow’, describe:³

‘It is simply too much!’ has become a common complaint in contemporary Western societies, where many people often feel they are living in a situation of overflow because they have to deal with a steadily growing amount of commodities, technologies, and time constraints. Too much information, too many market choices, too many responsibilities, and too many social relations, is the common complaint.

(Löfgren and Czarniawska 2012, 1–2)

In relation to the focus of our research, recent years have seen such concerns repeatedly raised in relation to objects in domestic contexts, especially in media coverage of cases of hoarding (Frost and Steketee 2011;

Herring 2014). Reality television series such as *Hoarders* in the US (first broadcast in 2009) and *The Hoarder Next Door* in the UK (first broadcast in 2012) are just one indication of a recent widespread popular interest in people with what is presented as a pathological attachment to stuff. Fuelling that interest seems to be a fear that many of us could find ourselves on the road to such a pathology, as James Wallman argues in his popular book, with the telling title, *Stuffocation* (2015, 99): we are collectively suffering, he claims, from ‘a clutter crisis’ and ‘the dark side of materialism’. That many people are seeking a way out from this seems to be substantiated by the expansion of advice and services to help people to ‘declutter’ (see Belk et al. 2007; Wallman 2015; Newell 2014; Kilroy-Marac 2016), to find ways to ‘cope with overload’, or to adopt lifestyle strategies such as minimalism (Klug 2018). The books and television shows of Japanese tidying guru, Marie Kondo, have created a worldwide enthralment with her KonMari Method (a term based on her name), meaning to radically reduce the number of one’s possessions by getting rid of those that do not ‘spark joy’.⁴

While, as far as we are aware, museums have not adopted KonMari, or ‘kondo-ing’ as it is sometimes called, they have seen a growing discourse about insufficient storage space and a search for solutions to a perceived problem of expanding collections – solutions that include increased interest in and practice of ‘disposal’, that is, removing objects from collections. A survey of almost 1,500 museums in over a hundred different countries reported two in three saying that they lacked space, one in two complaining of overcrowded storage units, and two in five noting large backlogs of objects to be accessioned (ICCROM and UNESCO 2011). That one possible solution to this overcrowding might be getting rid of some objects seems to indicate, as Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh (2018, 13) note, that ‘an important taboo that has long been part of the museum world seems to be dissolving’. When, in the course of our research, we brought a professional domestic ‘declutterer’ together with various museum staff and others to discuss issues of profusion, this struck a nerve and generated much interest, not only among those present (see Chapter 11).⁵

We should emphasise that, in holding this event, and in our research overall, our aim was not to help museums – or people in their own homes – to declutter, although for those seeking to do so, our research has something to say, for which see the final chapter of this part of the book (Chapter 15). Rather, our remit was to explore whether and in what circumstances profusion was an issue for museum staff and for people (who were not diagnosed as hoarders) in their home lives. We wanted to

know how they chose what to keep, and also how, even in the absence of acts of choosing, some things survive into the future and others do not. What practices and evaluations were involved? What features of objects – such as their size, weight or durability – might also influence whether they would remain rather than be removed or leave? And what might happen – in theory at least – if some practices or ways of thinking were transferred from museums to homes and vice versa?

Although our research began with the idea that we currently face a particular profusion predicament, it could be argued that there is inevitably an abundance of objects – and even of kinds of objects (depending on quite how ‘kind’ is defined) – that might be collected by museums or kept in homes. There have always been more things that *could* be collected and kept than are actually preserved for the future. In the face of many things, there is still a question of what and how many will be *pulled into* homes or museums. Likewise, whether there is even seen to be a profusion of objects that might be kept is not simply an empirical matter, dependent on actual numbers of things. Rather, it is also perceptual – that is, whether a certain number of objects will be perceived as many, or a profusion, or not, is also in the eye of the (culturally and historically located) beholder. Moreover, it is not necessarily inevitable that even when there is a perception of there being an abundance of things, that this is regarded as a problematic ‘too muchness’. That abundance may be relished, as seems to have been the case, for example, for nineteenth-century ethnological collectors (Penny 2002), and as could be said to be the case, perceptions of loss notwithstanding, for some of the domains discussed in Part II, Diversity. Furthermore, in some contexts it may seem quite obvious what to keep, there being a confidence about what should be selected from the profusion of possibilities. Likewise, what counts as ‘too much stuff’ for one person or institution can be very different for another (Miller 2008; Stevenson 2018).

Despite these caveats, however, we contend both on the basis of the widespread discussion of domestic hoarding, stuffocation, decluttering and so forth on the one hand, and museum anxieties about collecting strategies, storage space and disposal on the other – as well as on the basis of our empirical research – that it does make sense to talk about a contemporary profusion predicament in relation to certain kinds of things. Moreover, while the profusion predicament is undoubtedly perceptual – and a struggle with ‘too much stuff’ is something that those we studied discuss – it also has particular historical and cultural roots.

More and more things

Especially charged with causing suffocation and other profusion problems are manufactured goods. While it is certainly not the case that these are the only things accused of causing problems for museums and homes, they are at the forefront of blame and of a wider, moralised discourse about 'too muchness', as Chin (2016) explains in her partly Marxist-inspired analysis. The background to this is the development of industrialised capitalism, which laid not just the foundations for being able to manufacture more and more things relatively quickly and easily, but also established an economic and social system that was based in the constant production of more things.

Technological advances, especially in relation to electronics, also fuelled the production of new things – further intensified by changes in production techniques, such as shorter production runs, which have increasingly allowed for more differentiated products aimed at more specific market segments, and for ever more rapid cycles of fashion, fuelling what is sometimes referred to as hyper-consumption or turbo-consumption (Campbell 2015; Schor 2008). Already, innovations from the 1970s, such as floppy discs and video recorders, have become archaeological curiosities, and one survey estimates that the range of different Android devices – numbering in the tens of thousands – increased six-fold between 2012 and 2015 (Mirani 2015). Fast fashion stores, such as H&M and Zara, have not only expanded massively worldwide, they bring new ranges to their stores every few weeks (Joung 2014).

Producing more things makes no sense, however, without people ready to buy them. In other words, we also need to understand why people might pull more and more things into their homes – at least temporarily. There is a considerable literature on techniques such as advertising that developed to encourage and sustain consumer demand (for example, Tungate 2007; Turow and McAllister 2009), as well as on developments such as fashion (for example, Wilson 2003; English 2013) and 'planned obsolescence' of manufactured goods, in order to help ensure that people would continue to buy afresh rather than just keep what they already have (for example, Tischleder and Wasserman 2015; Strasser 1999; 2015).

Nevertheless, the desire for new things should not just be taken as a given, the psychological phenomenon of 'new possession rush' notwithstanding (Campbell 2015). Rather, this itself needs to be seen within a wider positive cultural evaluation of the new and the novel, even while interest in and desire for the old and the antique are not necessarily displaced, and indeed may even be intensified as our own

research below also shows. The increased purchasing of more things is enabled in part by a rise in overall incomes and a relative decrease in the costs of many products (Campbell 2015). More fundamentally, however, it also requires a desire to buy new things even before the earlier ones have become obsolete or worn out. Central here, as various sociologists have argued, are changing ideas about selves – with these now generally being less ascribed but instead more changeable, flexible, liquid or even multiple (for example, Campbell 1987; Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000; Bell and Hollows 2016; Hazir 2015). Objects are bound up with how people are seeking to define themselves, including imagining what they could potentially become in the future (Campbell 1987). This fuels consumption, as new products allow for fantasies of self-realisation; in effect, visions of new, future selves. At the same time, however, this does not necessarily mean that old things are just discarded, for objects are invested with many meanings, including as carriers of memories, emotions and relationships.⁶ All of this, then, contributes both to the production of more and more things and also to the likelihood of individual people possessing more things over the course of their lifetimes than did people in pre-industrial times. Indeed, research shows that people living in industrialised Western countries today typically have vastly more objects in their homes than did earlier generations (Arnold et al. 2012).

As far as museums are concerned, the increase of manufactured and consumer goods relates most directly to those museums that collect such objects, which, as we have already noted, generally go under the label of ‘social history’ collections in the UK. Such collections are the focus of our research described in the following chapter. For museums more generally, however, the fact that they are expected never to get rid of anything once it has become part of their collections (even if, in practice, they do – see, for example, Lubar 2017), means that they are inevitably accumulative – they ‘pile up’ more and more (see Harrison 2013a, 2013b). Here it is worth noting that the great wave of public museums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coincides with capitalist production being in full swing – and thus with an expansion of commodities and consumerism (Pearce 1999; Lubar et al. 2017). On the one hand, museums seemed to help to legitimate a ‘mania for collecting [in which] domestic collections flourished and remodelled interior spaces into esthetic and historic museums of themselves’ (Maleuvre 1999, 4). On the other hand, however, perhaps they ‘could act as a kind of moral antidote’ to consumerism and its treating of things as ephemeral ‘by illustrating careful and meaningful selection’ (Macdonald 2006a, 86). In any case, over time, without processes of

removing items from collections, these could only grow bigger, and in the face of worlds of things that themselves constantly expand – as do manufactured items – this could only lead to profusion.

In the case of social history collecting, however, it is not only the number of new things that causes the challenge – as became very evident in our research. Compounding the sense of a profusion predicament is the movement of which the development of social history itself was a part, namely, the democratising attempt to collect from a wider range of the population. While the early social history movement called for attending to the lives of the working class and of women, this has been expanded to many other forms of social diversity, such as of racial and ethnic heritage or of sexuality, often expressed as ‘communities’ (Macdonald and Morgan 2018a). This recognition of the worth of collecting more histories from more and diverse communities has, then, also led towards museums seeing more and more things as not just possible candidates but even as desired items for collecting, as we discuss further below.

Alternative responses to profusion

Faced with more and more things, the following options – alone or in concert – are logically possible: (1) acquire and keep as many as possible, inevitably in more crowded conditions – that is, allow more and more to enter into the home or museum; (2) avoid acquiring more or only do so very selectively at low numbers; (3) expand or improve methods of storage (so as to be able to acquire and keep more); (4) get rid of some things that have already been acquired. As we will see in the chapters that follow, all four of these can be seen – to different degrees and with fascinating twists – in both the museum and the domestic domains.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, selecting certain things as worth keeping for the future, and putting effort of care into conserving them, is to accord them value (Heinich 2009; 2011); and this has its correlate in that those not selected – or that are deselected through getting rid of them somehow – are not valued or are devalued. And because objects are often associated with people, non-selection or divestment of some kinds of things is easily regarded as a devaluing of particular people, memories and histories. This makes selecting what to keep for the future and, even more emphatically, deciding what no longer to care for, or to actively get rid of, so fraught. As Petra Beck (2016, 127) puts it: ‘dealing with things always means dealing with relations’.

A significant literature across a number of disciplines has been devoted to theorising relationships between keeping and disposal, especially the ways in which value is constituted in relation to that deemed waste or rubbish (see especially Hetherington 2004; Gregson 2011; Lucas 2002; Thompson 1979; see further discussion in Chapter 2). In a context of escalating production and consumption – and ensuing profusion of things – questions of waste and sustainability become all the more pressing. The options are not, however, simply limited to the either/or choice of keeping or disposing. As we will see in Part IV, Uncertainty, for example, even that which has been ‘disposed of’ may well endure for a long time. And as we see in both Part II, Diversity, and Part V, Transformation, there is a wide range of forms of keeping and divesting, constituting, in effect, a spectrum or repertoire of possibilities.

Below, we briefly highlight something of this repertoire, as illustrated in existing literature relating to domestic and museum contexts. This can be seen as both background and supplementary to the empirical research that we present in the following chapters.

Repertoires and relativities of domestic keeping and disposal

In her work on domestic practices, Nicky Gregson (2011) chooses to use the term ‘ridding’ in order to illuminate the range of forms that disposal of objects might take. As she and others emphasise (for example, Crewe 2011; Appelgren and Bohlin 2015a; 2015b; Bohlin 2019), how and to where something is got rid of, including how irretrievably, can be highly meaningful and carefully differentiated. This is nicely illustrated, for example, in a recent paper by Melanie Lovatt (2015), in which she discusses the struggles – the ‘push and pull’ – and often nuanced decision-making over which ‘trajectories’ items from a deceased relative take – what is given to whom, what goes to the charity shop and what is thrown away.

Just as ‘ridding’ may cover a wide range of different practices, so too may ‘keeping’. Visibility and display – and often subtle and shifting differentiations of value – are at issue too, as is shown, for example, by Drazin and Frohlich’s (2007) study of which photographs are framed and which are left unframed and stuck with magnets on to the fridge in English homes. Drawing on museum practices, whether objects are arranged into a collection, and how they are cared for and displayed, can also be an indication not just of how they are valued but also of specific

personal histories, memories and relations (Belk et al. 1991; Pearce 1998; 1999; Elsner and Cardinal 1994; Martin 1999; Shamash 2014). So too can the designation of some objects as heirlooms (for example, Joyce 2000; Cieraad 2010), souvenirs (for example, Stewart 1993; Hitchcock and Teague 2000) or other special carriers of memory. It is perhaps no surprise that there has been increased use of the term ‘curation’ in contexts including the domestic in recent years (for example, Balzer 2015; Bhaskar 2016) – offering as it does a mode of careful selection and arrangement of things in contrast to supposed ‘overload’ – and we deploy this below, too, in part in order to highlight the links between domestic and museum practices. A further instance of curation, in its original sense of care, is the tending to objects at home, including their repair, maintenance and preservation (for example, Gregson et al. 2009; see also <http://repairacts.net>), which can be seen as at least partly analogous to conservation and restoration within museums.

Attention to storage practices encourages understanding the home, as Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003, 229) put it, ‘not simply as a place for living’ but as ‘a set of spaces, channels, and flows, as objects and people find their way into, through, and sometimes out of’ it. Moreover, storage constitutes an interesting and often liminal value space for domestic objects, as both Sasha Newell (2014) and Sophie Woodward (2015) argue in their respective discussions of ‘closets, attics, basements, garages, and storage units’ (Newell 2014, 209). The possibilities for further liminal keeping have been expanded in recent years by the development of commercial self-storage facilities. In the US, which saw the first such facilities in the 1960s, one in ten households now uses them, in a total storage area equivalent to three times the size of Manhattan Island (Eldridge 2017; see also Bell 2013). In Europe, where the development is more recent and not so intense, there has been a sizeable increase in self-storage, with the UK accounting for nearly half of the use of self-storage (FEDESSA 2018; SSAUK 2019). In ethnographically exploring practices of using commercial self-storage facilities, Petra Beck (2016) productively plays with the term ‘self-storage’ to trace the kinds of selves that are created through what is located and done there, arguing that storage and discarding should be regarded as creative processes alongside acquisition. Others too point to the sometimes complex considerations, as well as the emotions, involved in selecting the fate of certain things, be it giving them to friends or relatives, or to charity shops, sending them for recycling or reuse (see also, for example, Appelgren and Bohlin 2015a; 2015b; Bohlin 2019), putting them into the bin, or even – as we will see below – taking them to museums.

Repertoires and relativities of museum keeping and disposal

In museums too there is a spectrum of forms of keeping. As in homes, there is the issue of whether things are kept in view or out of sight. For museums in the UK, the issue of objects not on open display has come to be increasingly politicised since the 1980s, when neo-liberal audit culture approaches cast things not on public display as wasteful (Macdonald and Morgan 2018a), although this has taken on a different political inflection in relation to repatriation debates (see Brusius and Singh 2018; and see also Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). So-called ‘visible storage’ – in which large numbers of objects are displayed openly to the public more or less as they would be in storage – making objects accessible via digitisation, and various forms of ‘revisiting’ stored collections, have been some of the major responses to this (for example, Griesser-Stermscheg 2013; Brusius and Singh 2018; Reeves 2018; Thiemeyer 2018; Macdonald 2020). Alongside these attempts to open up the collections, however, are others, such as the increased tendency to separate stores from exhibition spaces, and often to locate the former at considerable distances from the museums (often in warehouses on industrial estates) and from people likely to visit (if this is even allowed). The physical organisation of objects within museum storage is reflective not only of various classifications, but also influences the accessibility of objects – such as which are on high shelves or at the back of drawers – and their ‘findability’, as well as influencing how many objects can be stored within a given space. The Musée d’ethnographie de Genève (MEG), for example, has reorganised much of its collections by size and conservation requirements, rather than by the more usual typology of geographical area, in order to maximise the number of objects that it can store.⁷ Visibility and access are also shaped by infrastructures of information, as provided by the structuring of databases, categories and metadata, content and degree of detail of what is recorded (Geismar 2018). Furthermore, there are relativities of keeping constituted by the specific ways in which objects are cared for and preserved, which contribute to how likely certain objects are to make it into the future and for how long.

Ridding of objects from museum collections is a subject that is often said to be ‘controversial’ (NMDC 2003, 3; Simmons 2015), with the term ‘disposal’ having been called a ‘dirty word’ (Goldstein 1997; Vecco and Piazzai 2015), ‘never to be uttered aloud’ (Greene 2006, 7). Nevertheless, at the same time as wider discourses of problematic domestic profusion

have come on to the agenda, so too has disposal from museums (see [Chapter 11](#), and Macdonald and Morgan 2018a; Morgan and Macdonald 2020). As in domestic contexts, removing things from collections may take a range of forms. As set out in the ethical guidelines of the Museums Association (2015), the first recourse should be to try to ‘transfer’ an item to another museum – thus allowing for its reuse and, in effect, as with gifting domestic items to relatives, keeping it in the family. ‘Deaccession’ refers to the formal process of an object no longer being part of a collection – an action that does not necessarily physically remove it from the museum space. Equally, it is possible for an object to remain legally part of a museum’s collection while being physically moved elsewhere, such as for long-term loan, as is sometimes also done as a form of repatriation. And while ‘disposal’ is a generic term for both legal and physical removal from the collections, the term ‘rationalisation’ is increasingly used, surely at least partly in order to sound less terminal. Alongside these, there have also been a range of other, sometimes creative, approaches, such as forms of reusing (Morgan and Macdonald 2020).

Staying and leaving

Pervasive in the literature briefly reviewed above is language that presumes human agency and intentionality – even if authors sometimes recognise the agency of things. Terms presupposing human agency include ‘acquiring’, ‘keeping’, ‘holding on to’ and ‘conserving’ on the one hand, and ‘disposal’, ‘ridding’, ‘letting go’ and ‘divestment’ on the other. In some contexts, these certainly are appropriate, as, for example, when museums are undertaking ‘deaccession’ of objects in their collections or people are ‘decluttering’ their bedrooms. We therefore use such terms when such intentionality appears to be involved. But as our research below shows, sometimes things just ‘stick around’ – that is, they are not so much actively ‘kept’ as merely ‘staying put’ – or they ‘disappear’, perhaps lost, or somehow ‘leave’ (albeit more often a home than a museum), without this being part of a conscious human act of ‘removal’. For this reason, we also supplement the existing vocabularies, where appropriate, with terms that refer to objects as variously ‘staying’ or ‘remaining’, ‘leaving’ or ‘departing’.

So, not only what is selected and kept, but also what somehow ‘sticks around’ or ‘remains’ into the future, as well as what does not manage to ‘make it’ or ‘stay’, in the face of the multitude of things, is the focus of the profusion research. How we conducted the research is described below.

The profusion study

As noted above, we primarily conducted our research in and on the UK. Issues of full museum storage – and discussion of ways of addressing this – have been voiced especially strongly in the UK, and within Europe the UK is at the forefront of utilising self-storage facilities and offering professional decluttering services (see, for example, Wijsmuller 2017; Stevens 2018). The Association of Professional Declutterers and Organisers, UK, was founded in 2004 (www.apdo.co.uk/our-organisation). Our reading and consultation of documentary sources, such as museum policy documents and statistics on self-storage, however, was wide-ranging and not restricted to the UK, and we also undertook some direct investigation of cases elsewhere, including in Germany, China, New Zealand and Switzerland.⁸ Our research beyond the UK suggests that concern with profusion, and looking for ways of dealing with it, is widespread, although there can be significant differences between countries with respect, for example, to the legal frameworks for removing objects from museum collections or infrastructures for recycling. Analysis of this is beyond the scope of this particular research, however, and the following chapters focus on the empirical research conducted in the UK. Each chapter also explains the research methods adopted for each domain in more detail.

In outline, however, for both the museum and the domestic dimensions of the research, we undertook wide literature and general research, including attending events of relevant organisations, and coupled this with more targeted ethnographic research. The latter, conducted primarily by Jennie Morgan, involved more in-depth discussion, and witnessing of infrastructures as well as practices. One feature of our ethnographic approach was to allow, as far as possible, respondents to raise their own issues and concerns rather than to remain constrained to questions framed by us. For this reason, we did not separate off a specific study of ‘the digital’, but were concerned instead to see where this topic arose in relation to our more general interest in what people keep for the future and how they keep it.

Most of the museums that we researched ethnographically were independent or local authority museums with social history collections. Part of our rationale here was that compared with larger or national museums, smaller or more local ones tend to be less studied and reported upon. We were also already aware that many such museums face storage constraints – although we did not yet know to what extent, or quite what the implications might be in practice. The research included interviewing museum staff and those in museum organisations, as well as some longer fieldwork and filming. Subsequent to this, and conducted primarily by

Harald Fredheim, further contextualisation was also undertaken through a survey, its analysis and a structured knowledge-exchange event conducted with museum staff.⁹ The aim of this mix of approaches was to be able both to hear the spoken rationales for what was being selected for the future and to see something of the infrastructures and practices involved.

With respect to domestic practices, the approach was also mixed and selective. As it was necessarily small scale, it was shaped not by trying to cover particular demographics but, rather, focused on instances of personal keeping or ridding, especially at ‘critical life moments’ – such as moving home or dealing with the belongings of a deceased family member. At such moments, decisions about whether to keep certain items or not come to the fore, allowing for investigation of the possibilities contemplated as well as those actually taken.

What follows in this part of the book

By looking at two interrelated, cultural domains – museums and homes – that face particularly acute dilemmas over the profusion of possibilities regarding what to keep for the future, we seek to show the practices, assumptions and struggles involved in each. Two substantial chapters discuss what we call curating museum profusion (Chapter 11) and curating domestic profusion (Chapter 13) in turn. As has been noted by various commentators recently, in popular culture, the language of ‘curating’ has increasingly been extended beyond the sphere of museums and galleries (Balzer 2015; Bhaskar 2016). In an analysis that complements our own, Michael Bhaskar (2016) writes of this as a response to ‘a world of excess’.

In these chapters, then, we first outline the methods deployed in each domain in more detail, before discussing how profusion is experienced in each. This is followed by attention to the strategies for dealing with profusion, which brings processes and practices of acquisition, keeping and disposal – as well as ways in which things might also otherwise remain or depart – into view. In both cases, we give particular attention to storage – as infrastructures of keeping and containing – and to the digital – so often imagined as a way of potentially ‘solving’ the dilemmas of material profusion.

The two visual essays (Chapter 12 and Chapter 14) focus respectively on each domain, probing particular aspects of the research in more depth, highlighting some of the specific methodologies and collaborative approaches that we employed. Chapter 12 does so in relation to the survey of museums and an interrelated knowledge-exchange event,

and explores especially the question of how museum staff experience profusion, thus building on the previous chapter. [Chapter 14](#) looks at an arts–research collaboration that invited individuals to share reflections on their relationships to objects, and ideas about selecting and keeping them for the future, so complementing the material presented in [Chapter 13](#), ‘Curating domestic profusion’. In the final chapter of this part of the book ([Chapter 15](#)), we seek to look across the two domains and reflect on how approaches to profusion within each might potentially be deployed in the other, and even, perhaps, elsewhere. Are we doomed in our struggle with the profusion of things, or are there sources of hope?

Notes

1. There is a considerable but far from consensual literature on the use of these terms (and other linked ones, such as ‘artefacts’, ‘possessions’, ‘stuff’), with various differentiations being made (see, for example, Pels et al. 2002; Morgan 2011; Brown 2015; Macdonald 2020). Here, we do not seek to impose stringent definitions, and we are attentive to how they are used in the domains that we research. Having said that, we use the term ‘objects’ not only in the sense that it is formally used in museums, that is, to refer to items that are part of museum collections, but also more broadly to indicate specific items – from the broader mass of things or material culture – that are singled out, one way or another, as possibly worth selection for keeping. Such items are not necessarily ‘material’ in a narrow sense – for example, digital images might be collected in museums and homes. Nevertheless, our primary focus is on the material, although we offer some reflections on the digital too (including its material implications, such as its need for certain hardware that may also become redundant).
2. We use the terms ‘domestic’ and ‘homes’ – and sometimes ‘personal’ – to describe our research focus, which was mainly through attention to particular individuals and with reference to certain specific ‘critical life moments’, as we describe further in [Chapter 13](#). As we did not much focus on whole households and their members and interrelationships, we chose not to use ‘households’ as we had done in the original research proposal.
3. Löfgren and Czarniawska claim that ‘overflow’ is evaluatively open, although they also write of it as something that ‘must be “managed”’ (2012, 1) and see ‘excess, surplus, overspill’ as ‘synonyms’. They also make a good case for ‘overflow’ as a term with productive hydraulic metaphors and linkages. See also the visual essay by Antony Lyons ([Chapter 26](#)). For information about the Managing Overflow project, see also: <https://gri.gu.se/english/research/mof+eng>.
4. Her first book to be published in English was *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Kondo 2014). This has since been translated into many other languages and has sold more than ten million copies (www.mariekondobooks.com). See also: <https://konmari.com/pages/about>. In 2019, a television series called *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo* was launched on Netflix streaming service.
5. See: <https://heritage-futures.org/curating-domestic-profusion-workshop/>.
6. There is an immense scholarship on this, some of which we mention in the chapters that follow. Among the key works: for museums, see the work of Pearce (for example, 1992; 1994; 1999) and Dudley (2010); for domestic settings, see, for example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Miller (2001; 2008).
7. We thank the museum’s director, Boris Wastiau, for organising a visit of the stores.
8. We have reported briefly on these elsewhere: <https://heritage-futures.org/travelling-future-taking-profusion-theme-new-zealand/>; <https://heritage-futures.org/interview-lili-fang/>. The following includes reference to cross-theme considerations: <https://heritage-futures.org/berlin-thought-experiment-heritage-futures-visits-carmah/>.
9. Harald Fredheim joined the project in May 2018. Jennie Morgan took up a full-time lectureship at the University of Stirling in June 2018, continuing work on the project but at a necessarily scaled down extent.