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Doomed?

Sharon Macdonald, Jennie Morgan and Harald Fredheim

As we saw at the end of [Chapter 13](#), sending items from a home to a museum is a way of removing them from one's immediate surroundings, but it is certainly not about stopping them from being kept for the future. On the contrary, it is a way of trying to ensure that they endure for longer than things usually do in domestic time frames, for 'the future' in domestic temporalities is usually only envisaged, if at all, as at most a generation or two. Museums, by contrast, promise a longer, generally unspecified, future – 'for posterity'; a future, moreover, in which objects will be valued as official *heritage*.

In this final chapter of the part of the book detailing our work on profusion, we bring together our two domains to reflect on the implications of our research for heritage futures. Looking across and between museums and homes, we highlight some of their commonalities and differences, especially with regard to how they negotiate the question that we posed at the start of Part III: *In the face of a profusion of things – especially those mass produced for mass consumption – what gets kept for the future?*

As has been clear from the preceding discussion, there are no definitive blueprints for determining what is kept – and, as such, no single answer to the question. Rather, in both museums and homes, sometimes relatively systematically and sometimes more provisionally, people try to figure out how to deal with what in both domains is widely regarded as a profusion – and often a 'too-muchness' – of things that have already been kept, as well as ones that might potentially be acquired. Amid our various interlocutors' attempts, however, certain motives and other influences have emerged as especially salient for shaping what is kept, and what is not, as we discuss further below. In each domain, we have also identified a range of strategies for 'coping with profusion', and thus for potentially avoiding being doomed to feeling overwhelmed by too much stuff.

In the final part of this chapter, then, we speculate on how some of these might be deployed in the other domain, and on the implications of this for heritage futures more generally. First, however, we further introduce the cross-domain insights from our research by turning to our discovery of ‘cupboards of doom’ in both museums and homes, and to what this suggests about keeping for the future.

Cupboards of doom

The cupboard of doom is a kind of purgatory for things whose fate is as yet undecided. What goes into a cupboard of doom might just turn out to be worth keeping, perhaps to be useful in some way, but such is the degree of uncertainty about this that not only are its contents hidden from view, they are not usually even accorded any kind of organisation. Instead, things are piled up, ‘packed to bursting point’, and are described as having been ‘shoved’ or even ‘hurled’ in there.¹ In the museum, the things in cupboards of doom are not ‘accessioned’ – that is, they are not formally part of the museum’s collections. Perhaps they will, one day, become so. But as they probably lack accompanying documentation, they are more likely to be doomed to not being kept for the long term – if, that is, anybody ever gets around to ‘sorting them out’.

The cupboard of doom is a further example of the relativities of keeping that we discussed in the introduction to this part of the book (Chapter 10). Like attics, basements and self-storage units – where the cupboard of doom might even be located – it is a space of ‘absent presence’, to use Kevin Hetherington’s (2004) term (though not quite as he does). But in its naming and degree of intense disorder, it is an even more vivid expression of the profusion predicament. Sometimes talked about with embarrassment or even shame – manifest in a reluctance to show it, perhaps – the cupboard of doom speaks even more eloquently than those other spaces of the sense that things can be ‘a burden’ or ‘get out of hand’. Although some of what goes into the cupboard of doom might one day find a new space and life in the museum or home, the word ‘doom’ implies considerable pessimism over the likely future of things accumulated in this way. Unlike Sasha Newell’s (2014, 187) findings, the objects in cupboards of doom seem to be less often ‘endowed with personhood, making them inalienable from the individual self and especially the collective identity of the family’. Instead, the ‘doomed’ things seem – as the very word ‘doom’ implies – to be further on the spectrum towards alienability, moving on and away, perhaps to more terminal disposal.

Nevertheless, the fact that things still lurk in such cupboards speaks to a reluctance to chuck them out. Such reluctance might potentially be understood psychologically, in terms of more general negative emotions around 'letting go' and 'loss'. While our research showed reluctance to dispose of things – and feelings of being troubled by doing so – in various other instances, it was certainly not a universal experience. Indeed, it runs counter to the positive feelings that decluttering is often said to generate. Rather, reluctance to dispose was linked either to specific things – and perhaps the human relations entangled with them, which could take the form of senses of obligation to keep things, or of affective attachment – or, as seemed most significant for the cupboards of doom, could centre on concern over possibly throwing out something that one might, in the future, wish one had not.

In addition, however, reluctance to 'tackle' cupboards of doom related to not wanting to have to deal with the stuff – to make decisions about it – at all. A cupboard of doom always needs sorting out; it is always there as a kind of reprimand for having not done so. It is not surprising in this light that the curator in the museum chapter ([Chapter 11](#)) spoke of her relief at having devised a careful acquisition process that would, she hoped, mean that the museum would no longer create cupboards of doom. She hoped thus to be able to foreclose the postponing of decision-making to the future that such cupboards allow or even encourage.

Getting rid of cupboards of doom, then, could be seen as one strategy – others of which we will see below – for dealing with profusion. But we should not forget that the cupboards themselves are also such a strategy. They are a deferral tactic that also allows for acquiring-without-fully-acquiring, for keeping-while-not-fully-keeping – even for nearly-but-not-really-disposing. As such, they illustrate well that keeping and disposing are not simply either/or binary options but are part of a spectrum that is characterised by degrees of visibility, organisation and care that are variously accorded to things.

Cupboards of doom also illustrate that storage infrastructures are variable in their capacity to contain profusion. Alongside the orderly modes of storage – especially, though not only, evident in museum shelving and drawers – are also, frequently, if not universally, less organised modes of keeping. These are especially important for things that either do not easily fit into existing classifications or physical spaces, or that, while kept, are especially close to not being.

These cupboards can also be used to make a further general point from our research, which is that what counts as profusion is not just about absolute numbers of things, but often hinges more on whether they are

contained and containable by available storage. Recall the collector in [Chapter 13](#), on domestic profusion. Despite a clear profusion of things in his home, he operated what he saw as a careful system to avoid being deluged with ‘crates of stuff’, and the many things he owned were carefully ordered by his own – very museological – system. What spells a sense of ‘too-muchness’ is more things arriving than can be properly organised and stored, the building up of backlogs and stuffed drawers – and cupboards of doom, especially when their doors no longer can be closed.

Let us turn, then, to provide a brief schematic account of the various factors we have seen in the previous chapters that influence what is kept or what somehow or other ends up staying around, and what, for one reason or another, leaves the museum or home.

Why some things stay and others leave

Although the primary focus of our research was on what is kept for the future, we found ourselves also looking at what is not kept – at practices such as domestic decluttering and museum disposal. This was not only an artefact of our research methodology, but also reflected what can be seen as a finding, namely, that what is kept is not necessarily what is actively selected but can simply be what remains, what is not disposed of. This is especially the case in homes, where we also sometimes found that some interlocutors seemed to have given little prior thought to what they would keep for the future. While there were others who certainly did so, as we have described, for many, domestic keeping for the future was not a specific organised – we might even say museological – activity, but something more provisionally pieced together from decisions about specific objects or just from what was not discarded. Nevertheless, all such keeping – and its closely entangled counterpart of disposing – was shaped by various values and other factors. Below, building on the previous chapters, we list those that we identified – in effect, through grounded theorising – in our research. For any particular thing, the relativity of its staying or leaving – including the particular routes on which it might go (for example: in the case of homes, to a member of one’s family; in the case of museums, to another museum) – is generally shaped by a mixture of these values and factors, sometimes characterised by struggle or push-and-pull. As our research also showed, many of these values and factors are imbued with emotion, with individuals in both domains sometimes talking in terms of feelings, which might also make rationalising decisions seem awkward or inappropriate.

1. **Memory-value** – that an object is regarded as a carrier of significant personal or collective memory, and that it can potentially work as such in the future, was undoubtedly a key value in both domains, especially for more active forms of selection for the future. In some cases we witnessed, the search for the right kinds of objects to perform this future heritage work was very marked. Some kinds of memories also loomed large, and could be regarded as subcategories of memory-value. This included the following. **Place-value** – objects selected to carry memory connected to specific locations – was significant in both homes and museums. **Event-value** – to remember specific moments – could also be seen in both, working in terms of specific life events for personal remembering (for example, a birth) or events in collective histories for museums, although the latter could sometimes play a part in personal collecting too. **Memory of individuals** – that is, the recollection of specific people – was also characteristic of both domains. While these forms of value were shared, museum selections were more likely to be characterised by notions of ‘representativeness’, though these were not entirely absent in homes.

2. **Obligation** – senses of obligation to keep, and sometimes also to acquire, things were evident in both domains. This could even be to the extent that people said that there were things that they would prefer to get rid of but that they felt themselves obliged to keep. For museums, this sometimes lay in what was seen as a fundamental duty to keep what had been given to them for preserving for perpetuity. More specifically, however, there were cases of gifts (in museums, usually called donations), which in both domains established relational links to people, which meant that getting rid of something could feel like a disrespect for that relationship – the equivalent of failed reciprocity in Maussian exchange analysis (Mauss 1990). In addition to this **gift-value** was also sometimes a sense of obligation to objects on account of the fact that they had already been around a long time – thus, what we might call **time-value**, or, more specifically, respect for **staying power**. Things that had been kept a long time – either in museums or homes – were seen to somehow have *earned* a right to remain.

3. **Materialities** – the physical qualities of objects also shaped staying power. Some were seen as too large, fragile or awkward to move. Furthermore, the small and relatively invisible could also have staying power, hidden in storage or even in cupboards of doom, thus evading routine clearing up, decluttering or disposal. Such materialities could, equally, shape whether something was acquired or not in the first place – would

there be sufficient space for it or, particularly for museums, might its conservation demands be too much to cope with?

4. Use-value – in homes, especially, many objects are acquired for their functionality and they often remain because they are regarded as useful. In museums, objects are normally taken out of their everyday use but nevertheless museums may acquire objects in order to use them in exhibitions. Increasingly, it seems, many museums acquire objects in relation to specific exhibitions rather than to complete collections, and in some cases they seek forms of temporary or provisional acquisition, such as through loans or (particularly for museums of contemporary everyday life) objects that are displayed in exhibitions but that are not formally accessioned for long-term futures in the museum.

5. Rarity and age-value – in both domains, the fact that an object is rare or old (which is not necessarily equivalent to having staying power within a location) could be a reason for acquiring and keeping certain things, or for seeking good future homes for them. These were not, however, prominent values in our research settings. For museums whose focus is not on the contemporary everyday, these values are likely to be more significant.

6. Aesthetic value – the beauty of certain things was also not a prominent value in the domains that we studied. It was occasionally mentioned in both domains, although the objects judged lovely were not necessarily so by canonical criteria. As has been argued elsewhere in relation to aesthetic judgements, it seems likely that in some or even many cases when objects were judged beautiful their place in more specific regimes of value, notably their memory-value, were at play (Bourdieu 1984).

7. Financial value – although monetary or financial value is sometimes considered to be especially significant in capitalist societies, the monetary worth of things was only rarely mentioned in either museums or homes, and was not usually given as a reason in itself for acquiring or keeping something (indeed, cost was more likely to be a reason *not* to acquire something). Partly due no doubt to the fact that our focus was on everyday and, especially, mass-produced things, when monetary value was mentioned, it was usually in relation to something having now gathered financial worth, perhaps due to its rarity.

It is worth here comparing these with the values identified by Nathalie Heinich (2011) in her research on heritage: (1) authenticity; (2) ancientness;

(3) rarity; (4) beauty; and (5) signification. We too identified rarity and beauty as relevant values, and while ‘ancientness’ was not pertinent in our case, some kind of age-value nevertheless was. What she calls ‘signification’ has strong overlap with our ‘memory-value’. ‘Authenticity’ she considers to be ‘an absolute value ... the very core of heritage’ (Heinich 2011, 123). That there was virtually no discussion of authenticity in our research sites might, then, be seen as surprising. One explanation might be that it was so taken for granted as to never need to be mentioned. In some ways that was the case: the origins of these mostly fairly new objects were not in question, and it is usually only when authenticity is doubted that it is explicitly invoked. In addition, however, the criteria for selection and keeping that we witnessed seem to suggest senses of authenticity that might be broader than the scientifically asserted ‘bond between ... the object and its origin’ (Heinich 2011, 123) that is so central in Heinich’s research on French national heritage administrators (see also Heinich 2009). Rather, what we have here called memory-value might be seen as providing the authentic links in relation to the kind of heritage on which we focus. Our research thus also contributes to findings of others concerning the variable forms of authenticity evoked in relation to different kinds of heritage and heritage-making (Wang 1999; Jones 2010).

Where our research also departs from that of Heinich – despite her emphasis on looking at the actual criteria used in the practice of selecting what should be accorded the status of national heritage – is that we also give recognition to the more practical, material, contingent and personally inflected influences on what is kept. Although these loom especially large in homes, they are also, as we have seen (perhaps primed by our attention to homes), present in museums.

All of these various factors – values, obligation and duty – can contribute to a profusion of things in both museums and homes. In particular, they can support a situation in which more things are pulled in and kept than are pushed or otherwise drift out. By thinking further about these factors, however, we can perhaps also see ways of coping with what can sometimes become problematic profusion.

Coping with profusion

In our research in both homes and museums, we witnessed the implementation of strategies to either limit acquisition or to encourage objects to leave the premises – or both. The speed of entry and leaving was, however, significantly different in homes and museums: the former typically

acquire many more things and also discard them more readily and rapidly. Museums, by contrast, are institutions of more considered and limited arrivals and – even more so – departures. The ways in which they each manage their different temporalities of object-flow, however, may also potentially offer some possibilities for each other of dealing with what both often experienced as problematic profusion of things.

Beginning with acquisition, the museums' slower modes of acquisition potentially might be adopted, at least in part, in domestic settings. Particularly in light of considerations of sustainability, thinking more explicitly about objects being around for a long time can help to act as a brake on the fast consumption patterns discussed in the introduction to this part of the book. This is a point made by decluttering advice too, with Zemirah Moffat, at our 'declutterer meets museum staff' event, reminding participants of William Morris's maxim to 'have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'. That this directly indexes values that emerged as significant in our research shows too that more explicit reflection on the 'value-work' that each object is intended to do could contribute to more considered – and therefore limited – acquisition. Museums might further refine their own practice in this regard too, as is already under way in the form of establishing typologies of values and processes of what is usually called significance assessment, which are intended to create criteria to help decide what should be selected and preserved for the future (see Fredheim and Khalaf 2016; Macdonald and Morgan 2018b). What such processes can also do is to ensure that objects are selected with sufficient documentation to make them usable in the future – the lack of such information having clearly showed itself to be problematic for many museums in our study. Tacking back to homes again, such documentation practices might also be employed for selected things to be kept for the future in homes – the equivalent perhaps of the annotated photograph album rather than the mass of unlabelled and unsorted pictures.

This brings us to the question of the digital – with its greater saving of physical space – possibly replacing material acquisition or keeping. Although we have personal experience of only keeping digital documents and of purchasing fewer physical books, and there are cases of people adopting such strategies in quite radical forms (see, for example, Portrait 1, in Miller 2008), we saw no concerted moves in this direction in our research. Indeed, what we witnessed was more to the contrary, namely that the digital became an added burden, especially for museums, which are sometimes concerned about whether they should also collect digital objects, and with digitisation of collections becoming another task to accomplish (perhaps with inadequate resources).

Given that the sense of obligation in relation to gifts emerged as especially significant in our research ('Donations – everybody's nightmare!' exclaimed one curator), strategies to allow for not feeling bad about not accepting or keeping them seem worth addressing, if ending up with too many things is to be avoided. Such strategies are already emerging in popular literature, such as James Wallman's *Stuffocation* (2015), with its advice to individuals to request as gifts contributions towards experiences (such as a meal out) rather than durable objects. Museums in our study revealed a range of approaches, from carefully worded letters to explain why they could not accept certain donations, to installing a prominent display of objects that they had already rejected. Staff concern about hurting people's feelings was also reflected in the fact that they sometimes suggested other institutions that might be willing to accept the donation – as part of the looking for alternative future trajectories, rather than outright binning, that was more widely characteristic of the treatment of many objects, especially gifts. At one of our knowledge-exchange events, there was also talk of asking those making donations to make a further financial donation to contribute to the costs of future storage and conservation. This was judged to be a good idea, but, perhaps because it infringed upon the ethics of the gift, was also judged hard to implement and 'may be a bit cheeky'.

Although many things depart from homes, as we saw in the introduction to this part of the book (Chapter 10) and in our curating domestic profusion chapter (Chapter 13), there is still often an experience of more and more things building up, with certain kinds of things being especially likely to be retained or, at least, not pushed out. These were especially those things connected with memory-value or holding certain obligations, in other words, carrying certain relationships – although other factors discussed above, such as physical qualities, could also be involved. Advice from declutterers to ritualise processes of discarding, perhaps even seeing it as a kind of 'death' that needs a period of 'bereavement' – as was suggested by a participant in our 'declutter meets museum staff' event – or Marie Kondo's advice to thank objects before saying goodbye to them, were seen as potentially helpful in such circumstances. Also crucial was what would happen to objects later, with certain routes, such as to charity shops where they could have a new life with somebody else, for example, often being preferred over the rubbish bin.

For museums, as discussed above, removing objects that have been accessioned is a subject that has come to be openly addressed relatively recently, and is characterised by legal as well as moral and cultural considerations. In relation to senses of problematic profusion, however, it

was something that many of the museums that we studied were interested to at least contemplate and, as described above, we followed some cases of how they went about doing so. What was especially clear in these cases was that there was felt to be a strong need to ‘do it properly’, to ensure that there would not be discarding of things whose loss might be regretted in the future. This has led to the expansion of rationalisation processes for doing this. Insofar as these processes entail considering each object against certain specified criteria, they are not dissimilar from domestic decluttering processes. They typically differ, however, in that the museum processes themselves usually entail careful documentation of what is being deaccessioned and where it goes. Potentially, that might be adopted in homes too but, in this case, it would probably simply make the task of discarding all the more onerous. As with homes, however, consideration of where objects will go is very important in how acceptable their departure is seen to be by those involved. That they first be offered to another museum is expected by professional codes of ethics (Museums Association 2014; 2015). Even beyond this, a hope for ‘good homes’ is generally preferred and, in relation to this, forms of new life for objects, such as the Museum of London sending deaccessioned hand tools for reuse, are emerging as part of the increasing emphasis on museum disposal. Other approaches and strategies also emerged across our two domains. These included, for example, the idea of museums having periodic systematic reviews of what they hold – the equivalent of a spring clean perhaps;² or for both domains to think of objects not as necessarily enduring for ever, but as having a certain ‘shelf-life’ or natural lifespan (Morgan and Macdonald 2020; see also Harrison 2013b suggesting periodic review of heritage listings).

The latter idea also took shape partly in relation to thinking about and with the other themes in Heritage Futures. Diversity, Transformation and Uncertainty all, in various ways, challenge modes of imagining or performing heritage as something static, unchanging and performed once and for all. Instead, they show in various ways and to varying extents, as appropriate to the different domains with which they deal, possibilities of working with change and even, as one of the participants in our final knowledge-exchange workshop expressed it, of ‘losing well’ (see footnote 11 of Chapter 13, as well as further discussion in Chapter 23 and Part V, Transformation). In contexts in which the profusion of things seems increasingly unsustainable, and even threatening of doom, acquiring and keeping well seem to be equally crucial. In Part IV, Uncertainty (following

the visual essay documenting the second of our three cross-programme knowledge-exchange events on collections as techniques of worlding), we turn to consider the contexts of the management of different forms of toxic heritage over very long-term futures in which such considerations become particularly acute.

Notes

1. Quotations here and in the following description are from previous chapters and from the post 'The Cupboard of Doom' on Tania Kindersley's (2011) blog.
2. See the blog about the Profusion research, 'Holding on to the past: Why decluttering is such a dilemma' (University of York 2016).