

Ghost Archives and Shadow Records

Urban history among documentary disappearances and
dispersions, reconstructions and restitutions



Archives of the prefecture of Algiers in 1934 (ANF, AB-XXXI-C 293)

Archival City is a Tremplin project selected by the I-site Future of Gustave Eiffel University and funded over the period 2019-2023. Its aims are to propose new modes of intelligibility, visualization and use of urban archives, from six experimental and non-exclusive fields: Algiers, Paris, Jerusalem, Bologna, Quito and Chiang Mai. More information on Archival-City here: <https://archivalcity.hypotheses.org>

Archival City is organizing its fall 2022 symposium on the theme "Ghost Archives and Shadow Records". It will be held at the National Archives (Pierrefite-sur-Seine site, metro line 13 Saint-Denis Université) on November 17 and 18, 2022.

Every record, file or archive is the ghost of something. Archives are related to institutions, events and people that can only be grasped through documents. This international symposium aims to explore every possible meaning of such paradoxical but fertile terms that express the relationships between documentary disappearance and conservation, and the lacuna and completeness of historical sources, as they perpetually interact with rationales for forgetting and strategies of memorialization. The present call for papers invites authors to reflect on "ghost archives" and "shadow records", using three different meanings of these expressions, from the strictest to the widest sense.

In French, the expression “archive ghosts” (fantômes d'archives) is the technical term for the dummies, the cards which are put in the place of original documents or files that are currently being consulted by researchers. In a metaphoric sense, records which existed once and then disappeared can be called “ghost archives”. This term applies to an extremely wide group of records that are rarely studied as a whole: it includes both documentary collections which have been the object of a selection (as part of a controlled archival destruction operation or of a "wild" elimination), and those lost or struck by involuntary selections (natural or human). However, these lost, dispersed or missing archives leave traces and imprints, more or less visible: dummies lingering on the shelves, destruction registers, lists and inventories, summary descriptions, collections of copies or extracts, or catalogue records. Archivists and historians are finding it increasingly necessary to establish a method of investigation and critical analysis for use of these traces, in order to reconstitute or even to reconstitute these mutilated or destroyed archives. Historians are now more concerned about the heuristic challenges related to the creation and conservation of documents, and to the role of archival institutions in these processes.

From a historiographical or epistemological point of view, shadow records are existing documentary sets which have not been the object of an archiving procedure. Indeed, they are not considered historical records and are not preserved as such. In some cases, these records are not considered to be of interest, but they survive for a number of reasons, and thus may become archives at a later stage. In other cases, the interest of these documents is recognized by their creators who choose not to transfer them to the service responsible for their archives, but instead choose to keep or even destroy them. In still other cases, operational, financial or technical reasons delay archiving, or even prevent it permanently. Finally, this concept of shadow records intersects with a key contemporary challenge affecting archivists and historians who work on the documentation of the last thirty years, marked by the transformational adoption of computer technology. Indeed, the digital transformation has led to new archiving issues: in this case, digital sets which have been "saved" thanks to the inertia of digital data, but which have not been the object of an archiving procedure, can be considered “shadow records.”

Finally, from a historical and critical point of view, some documentary collections are actually archived but have become difficult to find or invisible over time because they have escaped the notice of researchers or because of the power relations within the field of intellectual knowledge. A lack of interest in some subjects can delay or prevent the creation of finding aids, which makes it more difficult to study or even to preserve these documents. In recent decades, numerous movements (postcolonial studies, gender studies) have tried to react to this “invisibilization” and have found the archival field to be in need of examination. The recognition of this "archival turn" has had the merit of reminding us that any constitution of archives meets a political logic of power relations. More recently, researchers have tried to qualify this approach in order to account for a more complex and varied archival landscape. Indeed, documentary sets are created, transformed, and used by a multitude of actors (political personnel, civil servants, intermediaries, historians, researchers, scholars, and professional archivists) guided by different logics. These interactions must be reconstituted in a precise and delicate manner that acknowledges different contexts.

Distinguishing all these "ghosts" or “shadows” from proper "archives" (i.e. sets of documents arranged in such a way as to be retrievable by a reader or user, and preserved for a long period of time), is a research challenge gaining recognition today. Indeed, historians are showing a new willingness to make global comparisons. They also have new means at their disposal to do so. Studying the different forms of conservation and use of documents mobilized by different communities, societies and eras is thus an emerging research objective.

Cities are a particularly fertile ground for this research. Since their beginning, cities have been sites where varied and often competing powers converge and clash. Each city is an archive in itself (of buildings, streets, toponyms...). Within cities, archival memory is more frequent, dense, and more intense, so it is always dispersed in multiple spaces and sites. This situation creates ghost archives in the narrower sense (inventories, copies for multiple recipients). Sometimes, in the same city and at the same time, some institutions aim to preserve documentation while others set up counter-archival practices of oblivion that can have paradoxical effects (this is the well-known case of the Geniza in Cairo). More often, the coexistence and stratification of different institutions in a city generate document sets which are marked by different degrees of archival organization. More globally, the richness of urban archival material gives the opportunity to accurately trace the phenomena of documentary dispersion, disappearance, reconstitution and restitution, all of which this symposium will seek to make clear through the comparison of different cases and examples

This focus on the urban context will finally also be positioned as an alternative to the traditional vision of archives as a mirror of the modern European state. It thus gives the opportunity to study ghost archives and shadow records over a long period of time and in different configurations, especially in local contexts.

Historians, archivists, historians of architecture, urbanism or cities, are invited to propose papers across these themes of "ghost archives" and "shadow records" in the urban context, paying special attention to its epistemological and comparative potential, and addressing topics such as:

- The (re)discovery of disappeared, relocated and dispersed urban archives.
- The "visibilization" of urban archives which have been overshadowed for various reasons (linguistic, political, archival, technological)
- The study of the loss or "invisibilization" of urban archives
- The reconstitution of these archives by their "ghosts" or "shadows", or by other preserved traces
- Issues related to the integration of "ghost archives" or "shadow records" within a corpus of sources of a current or past research project.

To propose a paper, send:

- Statement of interest and summary proposal (maximum 3000 characters), before June 15.
- For selected papers, a draft must be sent before November 1st.

to paul.lecat@univ-eiffel.fr ; carole.lamoureux@univ.eiffel.fr

The symposium will lead to a publication of its proceedings or of a dedicated issue in a journal.

Scientific Committee: Valérie Gouet-Brunet, Thierry Guillopé, Anne Lacourt, Carole Lamoureux, Nathalie Lancret, Paul Lecat, Vincent Lemire, Georges Lomné, Giuliano Milani, Frédéric Moret, Yann Potin, Pijika Pumketkao, Loïc Vadelorge

More information on Archival-City: <https://archivalcity.hypotheses.org>