

Session ID	6
Session Title	The Lives and Deaths of Historic Buildings: Biographical Approaches to Recording and Interpretation
Start Time	Wed Dec 18 09:30:00
Room	828

Historic buildings have long been studied and recorded to further our understanding of past societies and social practices. Established methods of recording standing buildings seek to create objective architectural records of the type laid out by Historic England. These records belie a more personal and human storytelling of a place and its histories. This session will open up discussion of a range of alternative ways of articulating the 'spirit' of a building from embodied perspectives. Papers will draw on disciplinary methods ranging within and beyond archaeology and architecture, including forms of storytelling, image-making, artistic practices and creative writing. Inspired by Igor Kopytoff's (1986) biographical approach to material culture, the session advances a 'life-cycle' model for thinking about historic buildings, considering their entire lifespans from conception, cycles of use, to eventual decrepitude, abandonment and death. Buildings are understood to accumulate person-like histories through interactions with human and non-human agencies over time. Interactions and modifications are aggregated from momentary engagements across human lifespans and passing centuries. Many buildings will have lived far longer lives than we have, and deserve the respect that we give them when we seek the gently whispered stories that they have to tell.

9:30	Session organisers	Introduction	
9:40	Michael Shapland, UCL	Capturing the spirit of singular places: a biographical approach to historic building recording	I spend my working life as a commercial archaeologist exploring many different types of buildings, from medieval manor houses to 20th century football stadia, as part of a development-led brief to record them for posterity. This provides the opportunity to visit places that few members of the public - other than squatters and urban explorers - will ever see. It also involves grim hours picking round cold, derelict hulks with the rain coursing down the walls. This work feeds into the undeniable research value that arises from the study of individual buildings and how they inform our understanding of past societies and social practices. Conversely, there is also the less classifiable output of our attempting to capture the 'spirit' of a building prior to its demolition or conversion. Whilst the former is prioritised in guidance literature and methodologies, the latter arguably comprises the majority of what we do. This paper is an attempt to reconcile these two mindsets, with what can be termed a 'biographical' approach to historic building recording.
10:00	Kate Giles, University of York	Ways of telling the story of the English parish church	<p>The concept of building biography has received critical attention from a number of recent writers and journals, with different theoretical traditions in the UK and US helpfully outlined many years ago by Gavin Lucas (2006). Lucas argued that in the UK, the explicitly stratigraphic approach to buildings archaeology and the time depth of many of the buildings recorded by archaeologists lends itself well to an approach to the life cycle of structures, whereas in the US, the idea of biography was more commonly applied to the inhabitants of buildings, and their personal biographical narratives. However, since Lucas' important article and the expansion of interest in biography across the discipline, it has become evident that the distinction between these approaches is often elided in practice, but also that traditional forms of buildings history linking the construction, alteration and restoration of buildings to key individuals continue to dominate how we tell the story of buildings, in commercial practice and within the academy.</p> <p>This paper invites archaeologists to reflect on and explore the potential of particular forms of biography and narrative in the study - and writing - of building archaeologies and histories. Rather than seeking to lock down their interpretive possibilities, it seeks to open up and explore different ways of telling, using the case study of Pickering church, North Yorkshire, as an example of recent applications of theory to one of the best-established narratives within the field of historic buildings, namely the story of the English parish church.</p>

10:20	Matthew Johnson, Northwestern University, USA	Bodiam Castle And Landscape: A Cultural Biography	<p>Bodiam is the most discussed castle and landscape in later medieval England, and arguably the world. However, debate has tended to take as common ground a view of Bodiam as a single-phase building, a creation of the 1380s. This common view is one reason why scholarship has been led into false oppositions of defence/status and utilitarian/symbolic.</p> <p>This paper thinks about the building and the place in terms of its complex history over the very long term, from earlier prehistory to the present. Key elements of this history include: The long-term environmental history and political ecology of the Rother valley from the early Bronze Age onwards; the intersection of Roman road, river crossing and harbour; the replacement of ford with bridge in the 13th century; traces of earlier buildings 'below' and around the later castle; changes of mind and irregularities in the 1380s building campaign itself; 15th century occupation by chatelaine Alice Bottiler; work around the Bodiam landscape in the 1830s by slaveowner "Mad Jack" Fuller; restoration of the castle by Tory politician and former Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon; and continuing management of the site by the National Trust.</p> <p>The theoretical lessons of such a history include an emphasis on the equal and linked concepts of lived experience and political ecology, and the importance of situating ideas of biography within a range of scales ranging from the local and intimate to the global and postcolonial.</p>
10:40	Ed Hollis, University of Edinburgh; Rita Alaoui, Independent Researcher	Minefields: Excavating Interiors	<p>Buildings have long been imagined as (human) bodies: why, therefore, should they not possess biographies? The interiors they contain, however: endless rearrangements of objects, surfaces and atmospheres, evade obviously anthropomorphic lives.</p> <p>But the interior has long been understood as the intimate biography of its occupants in a way that buildings, with their long lives, are not: in the writing of Mario Praz, for example, the home becomes an archeological site from which the author's own life is excavated.</p> <p>But what of the life of the interior itself? What traces does it leave: upon the buildings that contain it, the furniture and objects that compose it, or the lives lived within it? What might we excavate of the interior itself? This paper will consider a practical experiment in such an excavation.</p> <p>In 2017 the artist Rita Alaoui and the writer Edward Hollis took up residence in one another's worlds. Hollis travelled to the artist's studio in Casablanca, and Alaoui to Edinburgh; and in those cities they sought to investigate and to record, the traces of the lives that they lived there.</p> <p>This process was synthesized into a survey, drawn and written, of the artist's studio which has now become, itself, a trace, since, partly as a result of that process of investigation, that interior no longer exists.</p> <p>This paper will recount this process of discovery, documentation, and disappearance, reflecting on the problematics of telling stories about that most evasive, yet most ubiquitous of artefacts – the interiors in which we live.</p>
11:00	Matthew Jenkins, University of York; Charlotte Newman, The University of York	London in Pieces: Building biographies in Georgian London	<p>In the eighteenth century, London and particularly the West End is frequently regarded as the epitome of urban improvement and the process of Georgianisation. However, scholarship on these subjects has been largely formed without reference to the detailed architectural evidence. The same concerns apply to interiors and investigations of privacy and the use of domestic space.</p> <p>This paper utilises a series of small-scale case studies combining standing buildings evidence, documentary archives and English Heritage's Architectural Study Collection (ASC) held at Wrest Park. The ASC contains a huge number of the internal fixtures and fittings (cornices, fireplaces, wallpaper etc) of London houses that have now been demolished. By utilising the approach of building biographies, these displaced objects can be imaginatively reunited with their former houses and their social context can begin to be understood.</p> <p>The case studies include a fashionable street in the West End and the home and office of a powerful political operative. Tilney Street is on the edge of the Grosvenor Estate and highlights the messiness of urban improvement and Georgian domestic living. While 43 Parliament Street explores the tensions between the personal, political and professional in the home of John Calcraft. These biographies serve to complicate national models and illuminate the communities and individuals who owned, occupied and visited these buildings at the dawn of the modern era.</p>

11:20	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
11:50	Belinda Mitchell, University of Portsmouth	Matter of the Manor: The life and death of a timber joist	<p>Conservation practice, as in architecture, uses a particular set of representational conventions and language which pay attention to a building's material properties. It uses dry descriptions which avoid any form of emotional engagement. This paper examines the ways in which subjective experiences, emotions and affect can be represented in historic and architectural records through the form of the artists' book and how in particular the book acts as a means of investigating space through its materiality, gesture and performativity.</p> <p>This paper draws on New Materialist thinking, through what things do rather than what they are. Feminist writing practices, photographic documentation and LiDar scans are used to create an archaeology of the present through the material mapping of a timber joist from a 16th-century manor house. The timber connects spatially and temporally to the house; it carries traces of its own making, its jointing and bringing forth into construction through its handling and makers' marks. Its material properties, its propensity to decay, the ongoing work of natural, biological processes, and its shaping by past and ongoing human activities and encounters, allow it to be conceptualised as an active agent in affective relations.</p> <p>Through a short film the work explores the ruination of the house, its decaying presence, the gestures and actions of the community that care for it and beetle larvae that are transforming it to dust. It develops poeticized representations which reveal human and nonhuman actants performing uncertain, unstable trajectories for the future making and unmaking of the Manor.</p>
12:10	Karen Fielder, Weald & Downland Living Museum	Afterlives and Spectral Buildings: Coleshill House	<p>Coleshill House was an English country house, completed around 1662 and long considered to be the work of Inigo Jones until it was reattributed to Sir Roger Pratt in the 1920s. Identified as the first truly classical English country house, Coleshill was put on a pedestal by architectural historians, who characterised it as masculine, pure and disciplined and gave it a seminal position in the canon of English architectural history. In September 1952 the house was set ablaze by an errant ember from a blow torch whilst repairs were underway, and the ruined house was razed to the ground shortly after. Rather than viewing this as a moment of death, and the closing chapter of the biography of Coleshill, in this paper I will argue for an afterlife of the building. My contention is that a spectral house continues to reside at the site, and that its lingering and palpable presence shapes ongoing social and cultural engagement with it. A field of material and immaterial traces generates an afterlife that evades normative methods of empirical recording of artifactual remains. The forcefulness of the spectral building cannot be described through the mapping of material evidence alone. A case is made for what David McCormack (2010) refers to as the 'remote sensing' of its spectrality, 'the sensing of something without its direct presence, without touching' (p. 651).</p> <p>McCormack, D.P. (2010) Remotely Sensing Affective Afterlives: The Spectral Geographies of Material Remains. <i>Annals of the Association of American Geographers</i>, 100:3, 640-654</p>
12:30	Session organisers	Discussion	
13:00	END	END	END