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Preservation Planning: The Vital First Step

INTRODUCTION

Concern over the preservation of cultural materials is not a new phenomenon, but wide-ranging institutional action to ensure that such preservation occurs is new. For years, institutions have employed conservators and technicians to provide single item treatment for materials damaged or vulnerable to damage. More recently, the trend has been to establish preservation programs that take a more holistic approach to the dizzying multitude of factors that, taken together, comprise the institution's preservation challenge.

For the most part, the first preservation programs in the nation's libraries were started only in the early 1970s. Staff at institutions supporting these early programs are responsible for developing the concept of a library-wide preservation effort that was not aimed solely—or even primarily—at rare books and special collections.

It is often quite easy to rouse people to a state of heightened awareness of and concern about the preservation challenge in an institution. Many librarians and archivists concerned with the range of problems caused by embrittled paper have grabbed an administrator's attention by crumbling a sheet of brittle paper and allowing the pieces to drift to the floor. As a matter of fact, the first stage of preservation consciousness is often a feeling of panic. This is not entirely bad. Certainly, it has its place as a way to galvanize reaction from peers who did not recognize the problems, and to convince administrators that the problems have to be addressed in an organized and rational manner. Panic does have its applications when the object is to stir emotions and elicit a strong reaction.

Another characteristic of panic is that, once a person has succeeded in getting others excited about the need to preserve the material in the collection, those same people are likely to come back to the initiator with the directive to get in there and do something about the problem. The questions are, of course, where does one begin, and how are the time, effort, and money best spent? Clearly, careful study of the nature and extent of the problem facing a particular institution is of paramount importance. A thorough assessment of the collection would include, but not necessarily be limited to, examination of the following: the formats represented in the collection; the age of the collection, or, rather, the range of ages of items in that collection; the physical condition of the material itself; the environment in which it is stored, and, if applicable, the differing environments in which it is displayed and used; the type of shelving and housing (such as boxes, racks, etc.); the patterns of use, and of misuse, if that is a problem; any inhouse programs for maintenance, refurbishing, reformatting, or conservation; and any established relationships with outside vendors of those same services.

Condition Surveys

In recent years, there have been a number of condition surveys conducted at research institutions around the country. In the library world, many of these surveys have concentrated on the effort to determine what percentage of a collection is brittle (with *brittle* being defined as the inability of paper to withstand two double folds of a corner of a page). Books printed on brittle paper cannot be used without the danger of loss of text. Horrifying statistics have been corroborated time and again at institutions around the country: 25 percent to over 35 percent of the collections of the nation's major research libraries are brittle. Many of these same libraries uncover other similarities as well regarding the type and condition of the building, the history of use and misuse of materials, and a sad history of inappropriate treatment. Yet, many libraries continue to conduct individualized surveys. Why?

Even though one can read published results of surveys done at other institutions, even though one can see that each survey only reinforces the findings of every other survey, there are still very good reasons for conducting a collection assessment at one's own institution. The results of such a survey allow the particular institution to prioritize its own needs; give very specific ammunition for budgetary purposes; provide information useful in dealing with physical plant, engineering, and housekeeping departments; and establish a baseline against which to measure progress. This last reason is very important. Progress can and will be made, although it is sometimes difficult to see on a day-to-

day or even month-to-month basis. Preservation may not be the field to go into if one is looking for instant gratification.

Perhaps the most important point in favor of an institution conducting its own survey is that survey results are often the best, and sometimes the only, way to capture the attention of the higher administration, the people who control the budget. The collections in a library, archive, or museum are valuable resources representing and bringing together a huge investment of money and intellectual effort. Moreover, these same collections are often a great source of pride to the parent institution or community. How many times has a library been called the "heart of a university?" How often is it said that a museum enhances or forms the center of a city's cultural life? Data that proves the deterioration—or demonstrates the vulnerability to deterioration of a particular institution's collection will get people's attention.

Conducting a survey enables the preservation officer to define the nature and extent of the problem in his or her institution. Thus far, the officer has responded well to the panic that has been stirred up. Now, all that has to be done is to formulate and implement a comprehensive plan that allows the institution to use the information gathered in the survey. It is embarrassingly easy to become bogged down at this point. The survey is so nice and finite, contained there in a paper file or on a computer disc, that one wants to believe it solves as well as defines the problem. Unfortunately, this is just not so.

Policy Statement

The institution will profit from creating a preservation policy statement that will provide a philosophical framework from which to proceed. A statement of the institution's preservation philosophy might include the definition of terms as they will be used in that setting, a statement of priorities for the preservation program, and an articulation of the duties of the various sections of the preservation program and the standards the staff of each section will follow in carrying out their responsibilities.

In order for a preservation program to succeed, the institutional philosophy as articulated in the policy statement must have broad-based support from all staff at all levels of the organization. It is not enough that an enthusiastic few develop the policy and support the goals of the program, since when these few retire, resign to take jobs elsewhere, or are promoted or transferred to another part of the organization where they cannot continue actively to support preservation, the very real danger exists that any impetus for the preservation program will die out among remaining staff.

It goes without saying that the program must have support from the top of the organization. The senior administrators not only set the course of the institution, but also set the tone of the institution by their words, actions, and tacit approval or disapproval of activities in that institution. A pragmatic approach is probably the best one for the head of the preservation program to take if he or she has any say in deciding where that program should report. It is useful to have preservation located in the most effective area of the institution, reporting to the most sympathetic and influential administrator. The results of the collection survey, including not only the hard data but also the reactions those data elicit throughout the organization, may suggest where in the organization a preservation effort belongs by identifying the area in which the most concentrated action is needed and welcomed.

PROSPECTIVE AND RETROSPECTIVE PRESERVATION

Roughly speaking, preservation action can be divided into two categories: prospective and retrospective preservation. By *prospective preservation* is meant actions that are taken to prevent or slow down the deterioration of or damage to library materials. Prospective preservation includes such things as stabilizing the environment and maintaining it at acceptable levels, mounting an aggressive and wide-ranging program of staff and user education, standardizing care and handling procedures, establishing a policy on the exhibition and loan of materials, and putting in place a collections maintenance program.

Prospective preservation tends to affect the greatest number of items at the same time. Thus the cost per item is low. This does not mean, however, that a program of prospective preservation is always free or even inexpensive to start up and maintain. However, since it is cost effective, it is often the logical place to begin any preservation action. Because prospective preservation tends to affect the greatest number of items, it also affects the greatest number of people. Therefore, it is essential to win the hearts and minds of as many people as possible, as early on as possible.

Retrospective preservation action is taken to counteract the effects of time, use, and the inherent physical problems of materials. It includes such actions as the conservation or restoration of individual items, the replacement of items that cannot or should not be used in their original format, and reformatting deteriorated material into another, more stable medium. Retrospective preservation tends to look at and then treat one item, or a batch of similar items, at a time. The cost per item, then, is relatively high.

Before proceeding any further, an explanation of terminology might be useful. *Preservation* is a broad term encompassing actions that anticipate, prevent, stop, or slow the deterioration of materials. *Conservation* is a narrower term, encompassing actions taken to maintain items in usable conditions. *Restoration* is narrower still, and describes actions taken to return a deteriorated item to original or near-original condition.

Returning to the concept of prospective preservation and to the fact that it affects a large number of items at the same time, it is often said that the best thing can be done for a collection is to control the environment in which it is kept. *Environment* here is used very broadly, and refers to temperature, humidity, and light; type of shelving and housing; physical maintenance of the stacks or storage area; and housekeeping practices. It is important to control these factors to the greatest degree possible, in order to derive the greatest benefit for the collection.

The importance of storage conditions is easily recognized when one considers that most materials spend most of their useful lives (and then, unfortunately, their unusable lives) sitting on a storage shelf. In the case of museum objects, that life may be spent on display. The embrittlement and deterioration of organic materials are chemical reactions, and the rate of every chemical reaction doubles for every 18°F increase in temperature. Taken together, those statements mean that, all else being equal, the collection stored at 78°F will deteriorate twice as fast as the collection stored at 60°F.

Logically speaking, the energy costs of keeping a library, archive, or museum at 60°F would be enormous; the psychological toll of listening to all user and staff complaints would be even greater. For these reasons, senior administrators are not likely to support an argument for such drastic measures. One should argue, then, for reasonable compromises in temperature and humidity controls in both public access and staff working areas. If an institution has storage/shelving areas to which access is restricted, one may argue for stricter environmental control in those parts of the building.

The preservation officer should also argue for controlling the amount and type of light that falls upon material in the collections, as light is damaging to nearly all types of collections. Sunlight, incandescent, and fluorescent light will bleach cloth, paper, and pigments; all contain ultraviolet radiation, which hastens chemical reactions harmful to paper and to cloth. Of the three, incandescent light is the least harmful. Incandescent light is also more expensive than fluorescent, which explains the widespread use of fluorescent light fixtures. Here, then, the compromise argument favors the purchase of devices which filter ultraviolet (UV) radiation, such as coating on windows and plastic sleeves that slip around fluorescent lighting tubes. One should also emphasize

the importance of turning off the lights in any stack or storage area when it is not in use, whenever this can be done without compromising the safety of staff and users.

Establishing and maintaining a good environment is extremely important. It is also important to define, establish, and maintain good shelving and housing standards. The correct storage of materials enhances their useful life by providing the right kind and size of shelving, by providing work space within the storage area to examine materials removed from the shelves (especially important in the case of large or unwieldy items), and by providing adequate support for the material in the form of bookends or upright shelf dividers. Any housing system should be suited to the materials and nondamaging to them. Housing here means any boxes or other protective enclosure, reels, or spools for film, and closure devices. It will often fall to the preservation officer to identify and document incorrect storage/shelving practices, suggest modified or new practices, search for a supplier of appropriate furniture and housing devices, and train staff to work in the new environment.

A popular issue in librarianship these days is how to handle what is sometimes called "mixed media" or "items with accompanying material"; for example, a bound—or worse, a paperback book—that is issued with a map, computer disc, small board game, audiocassette, or whatever, in a pocket in the back of the book. Increasingly, the nonbook item is becoming the primary item and the text is the accompaniment, as, for example, a computer software program with its documentation. The questions of shelving and access are thorny ones whose answers impact both the preservation of and access to the material. Will a cassette be stolen if shelved in an open stack in a library? If the answer is yes, some other way to store the material must be found. Will the electronic information encoded on tape or disc be destroyed or hopelessly scrambled if the cassette or disc gets too close to a working magnetizer/demagnitizer used with some security systems? If the answer is yes, some other way to store the material must be found, or some way must be devised to clearly mark the book or storage container that houses the vulnerable material. Some institutions have opted for completely integrated shelving (books, records, tapes, etc., all shelved in one call number order); some have opted for shelving the entire package—book and accompanying material—in the collection or area of the collection that has the equipment necessary to access the nonbook medium; sadly, some libraries have taken the path of least resistance and locked up the material in an office somewhere where the user cannot get at it, if, indeed, the user can even discover that the library owns the material.

Maintaining a good working relationship with the housekeeping

staff is an important part of prospective preservation. It is, after all, these staff members who are charged with the daily responsibility for cleaning the building that houses the collection. Rich rewards will come from the time and effort devoted to working with the housekeeping staff and explaining to them the importance of keeping the facilities as clean as possible. The reward comes the next time a staff member is in a remote corner of the collection area and notices something out of the ordinary—a small puddle of water on the floor or a water stain on the ceiling—and reports it to the preservation officer; or the next time the floor is stripped, washed, and rewaxed and not one drop splashes onto the lowest shelf. Worrying about housekeeping may not be the glamorous part of a preservation manager's job, but it is certainly a necessary one.

A strong, consistent, and realistic program of staff and user education will help in the effort to preserve the collections. The way in which each item is used and handled has a profound and direct impact on its longevity. Every staff member, from the mail room clerk to the senior administrator, should know how to handle correctly an item from the collection. Just as important, everyone should know why it is important to do so. Incorrect or careless handling can be structurally damaging and can shorten the life of the material. This being the case, incorrect or careless handling is a harmful and expensive habit. However, it is a habit that can be changed with a staff education program that first explains why material should be handled carefully and then goes on to train staff in correct techniques.

Presentations by preservation staff should be included in any orientation program for new staff. Some institutions have formal orientation programs that take place on an annual cycle, arranged and publicized through the personnel office. In this case, it will be fairly easy to work with the staff in personnel to put preservation in the orientation loop. If there is no formal orientation program to tie into, preservation staff will have to take a more active role, not only in designing and implementing the presentation itself, but also in making the arrangements. By its very nature, preservation tends to affect a broad range of institutional activities. Therefore, all staff should be made aware of current institutional preservation policies and activities and should be encouraged to contribute to the preservation effort by bringing their concerns and questions to the preservation staff. Responding to these concerns may require an increased level of day-to-day public relations effort, but the payoff is a greater level of staff engagement in collection preservation issues, problems, and solutions.

The message must be taken to the user of the collection or patron of the museum, too. This can be a far more difficult proposition than is that of educating staff. For instance, the preservation staff cannot

control the public's use of materials checked out of a library. Neither can the staff control the public's use of materials inside the library or archive, unless there is a staff member working directly and continually with each patron. Realistically, this is not going to happen except in the case of the truly exceptional item. In the case of museums, there is the whole museum, one-of-a-kind mindset that makes most people (for the most part) obey the signs that say "Do not touch." Even then, museums are not totally exempt from patron misuse.

It is necessary to send the message to the patron by whatever means are at the institution's disposal. An exhibit that features some of the problems faced in the effort to preserve the collection and presents some of the solutions to those problems, is a good way to start raising the collective consciousness. Patron education can be looked at as an ongoing and, to be realistic, never-ending public relations campaign. Exhibits, handouts, bookmarks, and demonstrations of preservation problems and solutions can all be used effectively to make patrons more aware of their role in both the cause and solution to those problems.

A comprehensive and comprehensible disaster preparedness and recovery plan is an essential part of any preservation plan. It should be established early on in the institution's planning effort and should be revised and updated annually. One must plan carefully to prevent a disaster and also to cope with one. A general plan is useful to outline; for example, one should turn off the water, call the head of building services at the following number, contact the local business that agreed to loan the institution freezer space, etc. A specific plan is essential to lay out procedures for a particular unit; it is necessary to decide in advance what constitutes the most important part of the collection and to save it first. This prioritization of unit-level salvage operations should be based on value (by virtue of rarity or institutional association) and on the format of the material.

Yet, no matter how carefully an institution has thought out its program for prospective preservation action, it will eventually have to plan for, implement, and manage a program for the retrospective treatment of its collection. The line between prospective and retrospective preservation actions is not a distinct one. Although conservation was earlier classed as a retrospective activity, this is not always the case. Many conservation treatment options are used in two ways: to protect the item or prepare it for use or display (prospective preservation actions), and to treat the item in order to return it to usable or displayable condition (retrospective actions).

The treatment of materials from the collection can be an expensive proposition. Trained staff, the necessary equipment, and archival-quality supplies are all essential. However, they can be difficult to locate and

more costly than untrained staff, jury-rigged equipment, and supplies that do not meet accepted archival standards. In the long run, going the quality route is worth the effort and investment, since correct treatment of material will enhance its stability, longevity, and usability. Moreover, since many institutions already carry out a program of item-level treatment with in-house repair programs, resources may have already been allocated and may already be available for the spending. The preservation manager, then, need only spend those resources wisely and well. Libraries that traditionally have had a budget for the commercial binding of books are in an enviable position in this regard. If the manager can achieve economies in the binding program, she or he may well be able to redirect the freed-up portion of the budget to other areas of the emerging preservation program.

Those institutions that have ongoing programs of in-house treatment of material may well decide to continue these activities, changing procedures and materials used, where appropriate, to bring the program to archival standard. Institutions that do not have established treatment programs face the decision of whether or not to begin such an effort. They might decide to carry out in-house treatment only on materials up to a certain designated level or value or that require a certain level of skill to perform the treatments. That is, in-house treatments may be performed by technicians on material that is not rare, unique, or above a dollar value set by the institution.

Not every institution need set up its own unit to do the expensive, time-consuming conservation and restoration work associated with rare materials and unique artifacts. Those services may be purchased from one of several sources—from a regional conservation center, or from private conservators, for example. Some library binders have or are establishing conservation units for the treatment of rare items and are offering a wide range of services to the library community. While these services are aimed primarily at treatment of bound materials, they do include such things as item-level and batch deacidification, and the construction of custom-made protective enclosures—services that also may apply to the archive and the museum community. On the other hand, the institution may decide at the outset or somewhere down the road that it will fund a unit capable of working on rare, valuable, and unique material. The preservation manager will doubtless be asked to justify the need for a more intense conservation component in the overall preservation program.

Many institutions find it helpful to join with like institutions in cooperative efforts to solve the problems associated with the preservation of collections. The opportunities for cooperative action should be taken into account when planning an institutional approach to preservation.

CONCLUSION

For those citizens concerned with preservation, the growing activity in the field is reassuring. It suggests that institutions recognize the issues, problems, and opportunities associated with the preservation of their collections, and that managers are grappling with the solutions to those problems. It does not suggest, and should not be taken to suggest, that the problems are solved. Perhaps the time for panic is past, but still needed are enthusiasm, commitment, and lots of hard work. It is exciting and rewarding work in which everyone can participate.