

# Community-Based Archives and Education: *Teaching Outside the (Hollinger) Box*

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Archival Education and Research Institute, July 2011

## Community Archives

An archive can originate in many places (an attic, an office, an open lot) and in many forms by a group of people. In this effort I emphasize the roles of geography and of local urban identity in analyzing the development of a community-based archive (Flinn, 2011) dedicated to the preservation of neon signs and identifiers. The sign collection has been the focus of leadership efforts since the formation of a citizens committee in the 1980s. Their work collecting signs from local casinos and businesses created a founding collection and ensured that the city's heritage would remain local and protected. The group was absorbed by the city in 1996 and a public-private organization advanced till 2000, when it became non-profit. Some milestones in the city's use of neon include: the availability of electricity in Las Vegas in 1907, the use of incandescent bulbs on sign borders around 1910, the city's first neon sign at the Oasis Cafe in 1929, the opening of a branch office of the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO) in Las Vegas in 1933, the beginning of the resort industry with the opening of the El Rancho Vegas in 1941, the placement of the giant Stardust sign in 1958, the architectural introduction of the porte-cochere notably at the MGM Grand Hotel in 1973, and YESCO's donation of the museum's boneyard site in 1996.

·Flinn, Andrew. 'Archival activism: Independent and community-led archives, radical public history and the heritage professions.' *IntraActions* 7.2 (2011).

## “Living and Organic”

The city's neon signs began to be collected years after the first neon signs in the city were retired from their active use on building rooftops and as pylon roadside signs. The Neon Boneyard began in the 1990's as a *de facto* gathering place for un-restored (and often unsolicited) historic casino signs in the city. Judy Natal (2006:xii) writes of the Neon Boneyard's continuing value as an ever-changing "archaeological site," an active place for community memory.

## Description

The archivist provides both a technical narrative of the objects' physical characteristics, and also researches the historical context of signs. These components form a more complete understanding of individual signs which spark nostalgia and memories from visitors to the boneyard park. With the upcoming groundbreaking of the historic La Concha Motel lobby and visitors' center, the archival descriptions will be included in the museum's exhibits and public education efforts in the downtown area.

## Abstract

Archives and records centers based in community spaces retain the local character and individuality of their surrounding region. Dedicated archivists and records keepers provide stewardship for materials which document the activities and changing eras of a region through its historic objects. Archivists, as individuals concerned with preserving the story of their community members, effect the creation and sustainability of community archives by communicating its unique story through exhibits, hands-on presentation, writing, and collaboration. The distinctiveness of community archives preserves for society at large knowledge of the numerous cultural communities which coexist. The author draws upon work as the archivist for the Neon Museum, which is preserving a city's visual and material history.

## Historical Preservation Partnership

From its beginnings as a gathering place for large local signage, the Neon Boneyard has benefitted from the combined support of individuals, businesses, sign companies, and local and state government. Research methodologies for documenting urban spaces have taken visual, textual, and oral forms. In 1986 the Nevada Historical Society and Sierra Nevada Museum of Art published Chelsea H. Miller's "Neon in Nevada: A Survey of Contemporary and Historic Neon Signs in Nevada"; in 2000 the city's Allied Arts Council separated from the museum and oral histories were conducted at YESCO; in 2002 UNLV's David G. Schwartz published the Neon Survey and online gallery, and 2008 saw the completion of a Nevada State / Neon Boneyard Historic Resource Survey. These efforts have preserved personal and institutional knowledge of specific signs and strengthened the level of documentation concerning the collection.

## Archival Development

The archivist supports the museum's continuing interactions with the public through researching individual signs and documenting significant aspects of their history which are of interest to members of the public touring the collection. The archive may achieve what Paul Custodial Bube states is the aim to "acknowledge our polyculture and construct education around at least some awareness of the various cultures" (*Rooted in the Land*, 1996, 29). The role of archivists as community builders is closely related to the archival work carried out as a proactive service.



Courtesy Neon Museum 2009

