

The strategic stewardship of cultural resources: To preserve and protect

Edited by Andrea T Merrill.

New York. Haworth Information Press, 2003. 237p.

This book is a selection from papers presented at a Library of Congress symposium held in October 2000 and co-published as *The Journal of Library Administration*, Volume 38, Numbers 1 and 2 2003. It purports to examine challenges faced in preserving and safeguarding library resources and indeed it does, but the focus is very much on larger academic and research libraries in America. However, this does not necessarily mean that much of the content could not be adapted to smaller libraries within an African environment. The only part of the book that seems quite outside the South African frame of reference are those sections which deal with actual figures for endowments and funding!

The main areas that are identified as crucial to developing and maintaining an institutional strategy for preservation and protection are: 1) physical security, 2) preservation, 3) bibliographic control, and 4) inventory control.

A theme that runs throughout the book that is especially interesting, given the rather daunting title, is the emphasis on communication and empowerment. The basic message is that everybody involved with library resources, whether cleaners, shelvers, library managers or users, is an extremely important cog in the wheel. I found the chapter by Charles Lowry, "Creating a culture of security in the University of Maryland Libraries" particularly relevant because that programme has now been further developed and implemented by many other libraries in collaboration with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). I was particularly impressed by the candid acknowledgement that, "Although much activity has taken place, one of the original goals – to encourage staff involvement in and responsibility for safety and security – has remained a challenge. It is easier to write procedures and improve equipment than it is to change an

organisational culture". How true! The disaster at the Morgan Library had a very positive result in that it changed the culture of the organisation of the library and empowered staff to become more adaptable and willing to change.

As all academic and research libraries now 'hold' information resources in electronic format, the need to maintain the integrity of electronic resources is of paramount importance as, in many cases, hardcopy has been replaced, not duplicated by an electronic resource. The book also addresses some of the issues associated with digitisation as part of a preservation strategy, and the implications of this on traditional library and conservation practice is daunting relying, as it does, on a reliable networked information system, migration, emulation, analysis on acquisition, together with complicated legal issues. The discussion about the decision-making process regarding which items to retain in original form is reminiscent of the age-old dilemmas of de-accessioning versus the Compactus. How can we be sure what will be needed by researchers in the future?

As so often happens, factors affecting one aspect of life are also manifest elsewhere. Abby Smith in her chapter entitled "What can we afford to lose?" indicates that the problem with securing adequate funding for preservation lies within "powerful social forces" in the American psyche. "We are not a culture of ancestor worshippers here in America. On the contrary, our culture places high value on things having immediate reward, however small, over those having delayed benefits, no matter how great". This must ring a bell for library professionals the world over as we struggle for funding for 'traditional' items against the high tech and sexy stuff. The folly of this instant gratification culture is captured in a quotation from Cicero, which is inscribed over the entrance of the library of the University of Colorado at Boulder, "Who knows only his own generation remains always a child". Perhaps we should consider such an inscription at the entrance to state-of-the-art computer labs and the like?

As with so many management issues there are many self evident truths in this book, not least the recurrent theme of effective communication and consultation with all stakeholders. Part of the Maryland/ARL programme was developing a Richter scale to facilitate staff perceptions of specific situations or environments. This is another useful management tool with wider applications than preservation and security. Some of the chapters in this book were from museum professionals, and I particularly liked the title of an earlier paper by one of them entitled. "If you don't feed the staff, they'll eat the visitor".

My main criticism of this book is that the blurb rather belies the arrangement of the content and inadequate indexing compounds this. For instance, the book "focuses on four keys that are central to safeguarding your collection:

- physical security
- preservation
- bibliographic control
- inventory control".

However, apart from sundry entries under 'preservation' none of the other 'keys' are contained in the index.

While this is a book aimed primarily at large academic and research libraries in America, it will be a valuable asset for those libraries elsewhere which have yet to embrace, or are having difficulty in gaining support for, preservation and security of their library and other valuable collections.

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