UCLA
Electronic Green Journal

Title
Sustainability and Ethical Stewardship in Archival Practice: Perspectives from the United States

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/10561553

Journal
Electronic Green Journal, 1(54)

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Publication Date
2026-10-01

DOI
10.5070/G3.48856

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Electronic Green Journal
Volume 1, Issue 54

Sustainability and Ethical Stewardship in Archival Practice: Perspectives from the United States

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Abstract

This article maps the contemporary political landscape shaping archival practice in the United States (U.S.). It examines how executive interventions, funding instability, and the privatization of historical production have intensified the governance pressures facing archival institutions. It introduces the term *Commercial History Production Centers* (CHPCs) to describe for-hire firms that integrate archival custody, infrastructure, and narrative production within market-driven frameworks, raising critical questions about transparency, labor, and public accountability. In response, the article advances *Radical Archivy* as an approach to preservation that reconceptualizes sustainability as a matter of governance, labor, narrative authority, and access, rather than solely as a technical concern. Drawing on professional and international sustainability frameworks, it presents the *Sustainable Governance and Ethical Stewardship Questionnaire for Engaging with Archival Environments*, a public-facing tool designed to help donors, artists, community members, and institutional clients evaluate archival stewardship across sectors. By empowering those who entrust repositories with their memories and records to assess archival practices, the article contributes to an ongoing reorientation of archival culture toward accountability, care, and structural transparency.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Radical Archivy is a framework for thinking across the fragmented archival field in the U.S. It emerges from sustained engagement with existing ethical and sustainability commitments articulated by professional and international bodies—including those of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the American Library Association (ALA), the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the United Nations (UN)—while attending to how these commitments operate unevenly across archival sectors. Rather than offering a parallel or competing standard, *Radical Archiv*y offers ways of looking at individual institutions that brings these positionalities into relation in order to examine what

becomes possible, and what breaks down, when they are applied within our racial capitalist regime, our contemporary political moment, and in anticipation of rise a in privatized history production.

As a framework, *Radical Archivy* is both diagnostic and generative. It is diagnostic in that it reveals structural tensions within archival practice—between mandate and voluntarism, access and control, preservation and destruction, care, and extraction. It is generative in that it offers a way to think about sustainability, as well as ethical stewardship, access, labor, and education as interconnected concerns shaped by political economy rather than isolated technical problems. *Radical Archivy* does not look to resolve these tensions through universal prescription; instead, it provides a lens for understanding how archival responsibility is distributed, deferred, or disavowed across the contemporary archival landscape.

Scholarship addressing the relationship between information systems and environmental knowledge has tended to conceptualize “environment” as an external object of study rather than a condition of the archive. Work on environmental information science emphasizes the importance of reliable, well-managed repositories to support environmental decision-making, while treating archives and data infrastructures as stable and unproblematic substrates for knowledge production (Yousefi-Sahzabi et al., 2014). Similarly, research on green and sustainable libraries foregrounds the environmental impact of buildings, technologies, and institutional operations, positioning libraries as ecological actors within broader sustainability frameworks (Tanzin et al., 2024). Taken together, these perspectives reflect a dominant understanding of archives as functional supports for research rather than as environments shaped by preservation practices, labor regimes, and material constraints. Therefore, this article argues for an expanded conception of “environment” that includes the archival conditions under which information is created, preserved, and made accessible conditions that are themselves implicated in sustainability, care, and responsibility.

Nearly all archives can be situated within one of several broad categories—governmental, public, academic, community-based, or corporate—yet archives within these categories still vary widely in management, capacity, standards, and care because of a matrix of distinct organizational, political, and economic factors. Furthermore, articulating these differences is difficult, because archives use a wide variety of metrics, including physical volume, digital storage capacity, budget size, labor capacity, facilities, and production outputs to describe who they are and who they serve. Lastly, these measures are applied unevenly and shown inconsistently across sectors. While federal and public funded archives are typically needed to report on holdings, capacity, and operations, private companies are often valued for their discretion and do not have to report in this way, instead emphasizing market reach, client portfolios, and curated narrative outputs. This emphasis leaves the scale, disposition, and fate of historical materials opaque. This absence of transparency is not merely a methodological limitation; it poses a significant challenge to assessing sustainability and

ethical stewardship, as the lack of shared metrics obscures the long-term environmental, ethical, and social costs of historical care.

This opacity in reporting casts a shadow over archival and historical integrity in the U.S. That shadow makes it difficult to measure and articulate the scope and breadth of the archival industry, a condition that is not inevitable, but the result of specific governance choices shaped by racial capitalism, private enterprise, and corporate authority. In contrast to countries where archival authority stays public even when services are outsourced to private companies, the U.S. allows historical stewardship to migrate into private markets without corresponding mechanisms for transparency, regulation, or public accountability.

Addressing this gap would require drawing on existing archival surveys, institutional reports, and sectoral data—such as those produced by national archives, academic library consortia, and cultural heritage organizations—to prove comparative baselines and make visible the infrastructures through which history is currently governed. Knowledge about the size, scope, and capacity of the archival field in the U.S. is currently derived from a patchwork of sector-specific surveys and reporting systems rather than a unified measurement framework. These include national surveys of archival administrators such as *A*CENSUS II* (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022); holdings and staffing surveys conducted by the *Association of Research Libraries*; research studies on special collections and archival backlogs produced by *Online Computer Library Center Research* (Dooley et al., 2010); institutional finance and staffing data reported through the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Academic Libraries Survey* (Phan et. al., 2023); and collections stewardship and infrastructure assessments issued by the *Institute of Museum and Library Services* (Mbollo, 2023). At the federal level, the *National Archives and Records Administration* (NARA) provides the most transparent volumetric reporting on public records through detailed statistics on physical and digital holdings (NARA, 2026). The National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) offers governance guidance, trust frameworks, and digital preservation models such as the Levels of Digital Preservation (National Digital Stewardship Alliance [NDSA], 2026) articulating benchmarks for infrastructural resilience. Participatory initiatives—including the Documenting the Now (DocNow) (Documenting the Now [DocNow], 2018) and the study that assesses the impact of archival representation on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-centered arts organizations developed by the South Asian American Digital Archive (Caswell, 2024)—foreground consent and community authority.

Each of these instruments contributes essential criteria. Yet, few situate structured, cross-sector inquiry directly in the hands of donors, artists, organizations, and community stakeholders navigating archival placement decisions. Taken together, these instruments provide partial visibility into governmental, academic, and publicly funded archival activity while systematically excluding corporate and private archival service providers, leaving the volume, growth, and disposition of privately stewarded historical materials unmeasured. Radical Archivy builds on these precedents by translating

professional, ethical, and global sustainability commitments into public-facing tools for structured comparison.

This article argues that archives—and, consequently, the knowledge they make possible—are shaped by systems of governance, including law, labor, infrastructure, access, culture, and political economy. As historical stewardship increasingly shifts into private markets without shared accountability, these governing conditions become less visible, raising concerns about transparency and the public's ability to understand how historical knowledge is preserved, produced, and accessed.

The Archival Landscape and How It Is Changing

In March 2025, during the National Humanities Conference and National Advocacy Day, the author joined cultural heritage professionals in advocating for sustained federal support of archives, libraries, and museums. Shortly thereafter, the executive order titled *"Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History"* (Exec. Order No. 14253, 2025) started efforts to dismantle IMLS freezing grants nationwide and placing staff on administrative leave. Directives to review, revision, or removal of historical content deemed "divisive," "ideological," or inconsistent with a narrowly defined vision of national unity, leading to pressure on the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service to reassess or eliminate exhibitions and signage addressing racism, slavery, and Indigenous dispossession. High-profile cases — such as the alteration of Underground Railroad narratives, the removal of slavery-related interpretation at the President's House Site in Philadelphia, and the dismantling of federal DEI offices and language across agencies — have drawn sharp criticism from historians, civil rights advocates, and cultural workers, who argue that these changes function as deliberate efforts to sanitize the historical record and perpetuate a false narrative of national identity unmarked by structural violence and inequality.

Legal challenges from ALA and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) followed, resulting in a temporary restraining order. (ALA, 2025; AFSCME, 2025). At the same time, NARA experienced leadership removals and staff layoffs framed as bureaucratic "streamlining," but widely interpreted as political intrusion into the independence of national memory institutions (Associated Press, 2025). Such actions underscore the vulnerability of even well-established archival bodies to executive power and ideological manipulation (Gilliland, 2011; Cox, 2016). Taken together, these measures demonstrate how archives, monuments, public interpretation, and state enforcement practices become contested terrains of power (Cook, 1997; Foucault, 1980; Trouillot, 1995), where what is preserved, erased, feared, or policed reflects ongoing struggles over who gets to define the past, shape the future, and occupy the present.

Simultaneously, communities across the U.S. are building and sustaining archives rooted in care, survival, and collective self-determination. Scholarship on community

archives, for example, situates grassroots initiatives within a broader archival landscape and highlights how their practices both challenge and influence traditional institutional norms (Bastian et.al, 2019; Caswell, 2014; Cook, 2013; Flinn, 2007; Wiśniewska-Drewniak et.al, 2025). Community-based and community-centered initiatives—both independent and institutionally embedded—prove that archival labor has never belonged exclusively to credentialed professionals. Families, activists, artists, and educators have long performed memory work in response to institutional neglect and erasure. Yet this expansion of archival authority also raises structural questions: how can radically inclusive memory practices remain materially sustainable? How do we avoid reproducing precarity as we resist centralized control? As public infrastructure contracts and private archival service firms expand without shared mandates or regulatory oversight, the field confronts a fundamental tension between inclusion and institutional durability.

These dynamics underscore the need for cross-sector frameworks capable of addressing governance, labor, access, and sustainability simultaneously. In a moment marked by political volatility and privatized history production, archival responsibility extends beyond preservation technique to the defense of ethical stewardship and public accountability. Given their resources and influence, the for-profit sector will play a significant role in this landscape—but their leadership *should* be measured by their commitments to transparency, labor equity, and historical integrity. The field of archival practice is undergoing a profound moment of reckoning. Recent political developments have illuminated the precariousness of the institutions that safeguard public memory and the urgent need for archival professionals—across sectors—to respond with clarity, solidarity, and strategic foresight. These developments reinforce the central argument of this article: sustainability in archives is not solely about environmental efficiency or preservation techniques, but also about fair access, ethical labor (SAA, 2025); radical empathy (Caswell & Cifor, 2016) and the defense of democratic knowledge infrastructures.

To orient readers within the broader archival field, professional organizations such as the SAA provide practical typologies of repositories—for example, college and university archives, corporate archives, government archives, historical societies, religious archives, and special collections—to aid researchers, donors, and students in identifying appropriate institutions and materials for specific topics of inquiry (SAA, n.d). While useful for understanding where archival materials may be found, these categories function primarily as institutional labels rather than analytical constructs that explain the conditions under which records are governed, preserved, and made meaningful. In this article, by contrast, *archival environments* refers to the governance, economic, regulatory, and access regimes that shape archival practice—the mandates, policies, labor structures, and disclosure norms that influence what survives, how it is described, who may access it, and what is rendered visible or invisible in public memory. This analytic framing moves beyond the repository type that looks at “what is preserved” and

“who is served” toward the infrastructure, operations, and conditions of preservation and knowledge production underlying the archives, repositories, and/or archival labor.

Archival Environments

Government Archives

Government archives encompass institutions responsible for preserving, managing, and providing access to records created by public agencies while governing. In the U.S., this includes federal repositories such as NARA, state archives such as the *Georgia Archive*s, and local city and county archives that keep municipal records including court files, land deeds, and administrative documentation. Across these levels, government archives are mandated by law to preserve records as evidence of public activity and to support transparency, accountability, and historical research. Their authority derives from statutory frameworks that regulate records management, retention, and access, prioritizing standardized procedures and public oversight.

Access to government records is governed by legislation including the Federal Records Act (FRA), the Presidential Records Act (PRA), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Privacy Act of 1974, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). These laws prove a presumption of openness while delineating exemptions related to privacy, national security, and law enforcement. Records disposition is guided by federally approved retention schedules and regulatory oversight, embedding archival stewardship within formalized legal structures.

Unlike public, academic, or community repositories, government archives do not accept unsolicited donations from private individuals. Their mandate centers on preserving records generated through official governmental activity, and acquisitions outside that scope are subject to strict policy and legal review. Professional work in this environment emphasizes compliance, records management ability, and legal literacy, reflecting an institutional culture grounded in statutory accountability.

While government archives face challenges, including political pressure, resource constraints, and the expanding archival debt, their authority rests in public law rather than institutional discretion. This legal grounding distinguishes government archives from corporate or CHPCs, where stewardship practices are shaped primarily by organizational priorities and contractual arrangements rather than enforceable public mandates.

Public/Non-profit Archives

Public and nonprofit archives encompass repositories run by historical societies, public libraries, museums, and independent cultural heritage organizations. Unlike government archives, their authority is often not derived from statutory mandate, but from institutional mission, charitable governance, and public trust. These archives often steward materials documenting regional history, social movements, local organizations, and underrepresented communities, functioning as custodians of collective memory beyond formal government recordkeeping.

Governance in public and nonprofit archives typically rests with boards of directors or trustees and is shaped by nonprofit law, donor agreements, and grant compliance requirements. Funding often derives from a combination of public appropriations, private philanthropy, foundation grants, and federal programs such as those administered by IMLS. As a result, while not regulated through the same legal frameworks as government archives, these institutions stay accountable through reporting requirements tied to funding, professional accreditation standards, and community stakeholder relationships.

Access policies in public and nonprofit archives are guided by professional norms articulated by organizations such as SAA and the American Alliance of Museums. These institutions commonly accept donations from individuals, families, and organizations, subject to collecting policies and deed-of-gift agreements. However, resource constraints—including staffing limitations, reliance on grant cycles, and infrastructural precarity—often shape processing capacity and long-term preservation planning. In contrast to CHPCs, public and nonprofit archives run within visibility structures tied to public funding, professional networks, and community accountability, even as they navigate ongoing financial vulnerability.

Academic Archives

Academic archives encompass university and college repositories, often housed within libraries or special collections, which steward institutional records and manuscript collections supporting research and teaching. Their governance is shaped by university policy, donor agreements, and legal compliance regimes (FERPA when student records are involved), while professional standards and peer networks influence descriptive and access practices. Because academic archives are embedded in educational missions, they often emphasize access for scholarship and instruction, but their sustainability is uneven—dependent on institutional funding priorities, endowments, and administrative support. Although academic repositories take part in public reporting and professional communities, they can also reproduce inequities through selective collecting, uneven processing capacity, and access barriers tied to staffing, reading-room rules, or digital infrastructure.

Community Archives

Community archives encompass a diverse range of initiatives created to document, preserve, and interpret the histories of specific communities, particularly those historically marginalized or underrepresented within mainstream archival institutions. Unlike government or academic archives, community archives are not defined primarily by statutory authority or institutional accreditation, but by relationships of representation, autonomy, and collective memory.

Scholars distinguish between several forms within this landscape. *Community-based archives* are typically started, governed, and run by members of the communities they document, emphasizing autonomy and self-determination in appraisal, description, and access decisions. *Community-centered archives*, by contrast, may be housed within larger institutions—such as universities or public libraries—but prioritize participatory methods and shared authority in documenting community histories. Other hybrid models include collaborative or partnership archives, in which institutional archivists collaborate with community members while navigating questions of ownership, control, and long-term stewardship.

Governance in community archives is often informal or nonprofit-based, structured through volunteer leadership, grassroots organizations, or small boards rather than statutory frameworks. Funding commonly derives from grants, donations, and community fundraising rather than stable appropriations. While community archives draw on professional archival standards, their primary accountability is relational rather than regulatory rooted in trust, representation, and the ethical imperative to counter historical erasure.

This autonomy enables community archives to intervene powerfully in dominant historical narratives. At the same time, the absence of stable funding, legal mandates, and infrastructural support can produce precarity in preservation capacity and long-term sustainability. Unlike CHPCs, however, the vulnerability of community archives arises not from market-driven priorities but from structural inequities in resource distribution. Their central commitment stays representational justice rather than strategic narrative alignment.

Commercial History Production Centers

Corporate archives are commonly described as organizations that either keep their historical records internally or partner with external consulting firms to manage archival collections, including libraries that house business records (SAA, n.d.). The *Commercial History Production Centers (CHPCs)* refers specifically to for-hire firms whose core business model includes assuming responsibility—either physically or digitally—for historical holdings while transforming those materials into narrative products and heritage assets, such as anniversary storytelling, executive communications, curated digital platforms, exhibits, or brand histories. This distinguishes CHPCs from two adjacent but analytically distinct sectors. First, they differ from records management corporations (Iron Mountain), whose primary function is logistical retention, storage, and

retrieval of records without interpretive history production. Second, CHPCs are distinct from heritage consulting firms (The Winthrop Group, Chroma Diverse) that do not assume custody or maintain archival facilities, but instead advise organizations on records management strategy, historical research, governance policy, or interpretive development while materials remain on-site with the client. In short, CHPCs combine custody, infrastructure, and narrative production within a single market-based enterprise.

Structured more like production enterprises than cultural institutions, CHPCs primarily market their services to corporations, Fortune 500 companies, and high-net-worth clients. Although these firms employ professionally trained archivists and records specialists, their workflows often emphasize rigid, high-volume processing models designed for efficiency, brand management, and narrative coordination. In such environments, interpretive and preservation strategies are shaped by client priorities and contractual obligations, which limit opportunities for reflexive, community-centered, or justice-oriented archival engagement. Consequently, CHPCs operate less as publicly accountable sites of memory stewardship and more as profit-aligned mechanisms of historical production.

This opacity forms a significant structural concern. Although CHPCs may currently represent a relatively small segment of the archival landscape—depending on how impact, labor distribution, and narrative influence are measured—their profitability and scalability position them for expansion across corporate, nonprofit, and potentially governmental sectors as organizations increasingly outsource archival functions rather than maintain internal departments. Therefore, decisions about what is historically, socially, and culturally significant—and therefore preserved, framed, or destroyed—are progressively displaced from publicly accountable institutions into contractual market relationships. The consequence is not merely a lack of comprehensive data about this sector, but a structural reallocation of authority, raising urgent questions about whose histories endure, under what terms, and for whose benefit.

At the same time, this capacity raises a critical question: what mechanisms exist to ensure accountability in environments structured by contractual discretion rather than public mandate? If CHPCs increasingly shape how corporate and institutional histories are preserved and narrated, then their internal governance practices, labor conditions, and preservation standards carry broader implications for public memory. The issue is not whether commercial archival firms should take part in heritage stewardship, but under what conditions their influence becomes transparent, ethically grounded, and subject to meaningful scrutiny. The following company sketches of History Factory and Heritage Werk's illustrate how CHPCs mobilize infrastructure, archival labor, and narrative production within market-based frameworks. Examining their organizational structures and service models clarifies both the capacities and the governance tensions that define this sector.

History Factory, Founder Bruce Weindruch and Tom West

History Factory was founded in 1979 by Bruce Weindruch and Tom West, originally under the name *Informative Design Group*, in Alexandria, Virginia. The firm began with

a focus on corporate museums and commemorative history programs, collecting and organizing materials for institutional clients such as Riggs Bank, where early projects included the establishment of archival functions and the production of oral history initiatives. Over time, the organization evolved, rebranded as History Factory, expanded its service portfolio, and opened offices beyond Virginia, including Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Chantilly, VA.

Under Weinrich's leadership, the company developed a strategic philosophy that positioned corporate history not as static preservation but as an asset for shaping institutional identity and future direction. A guiding principle— "start with the future and work back"—reflects an approach in which archival materials are mobilized to support contemporary business goals. Rather than functioning as custodial repositories alone, History Factory integrates archival organization with narrative development, strategic consulting, and brand engagement (Weindruch, 2016).

The firm offers archival solutions and digital asset management systems that help corporations in organizing and accessing historical records, alongside research services, oral histories, corporate publications, exhibits, branding, and multimedia storytelling. Through these combined services, corporate records and archives are framed as active instruments for culture-building, marketing, and strategic communication. History Factory has collaborated with major corporations across industries, including Verizon, Southwest Airlines, Booz Allen, and Boston Beer Company, helping clients in building, upgrading, and using archival programs to support brand and organizational narratives.

Today, History Factory runs as a privately held company headquartered in Washington, D.C., with other offices and staff that include archivists, researchers, designers, and brand strategists.

Heritage Werks, Chicago, founded in 2009 by Kier Walton

Heritage Werks is a U.S.–based heritage, archival, and brand history services firm founded in 2009 by Keir Walton, who continues to serve as its President and Chief Executive Officer. Under Walton's leadership, the company has positioned itself as a heritage agency dedicated to transforming organizational records and historical artifacts into strategic assets. Rather than framing its work solely in terms of preservation, Heritage Werks integrates archival program development with digital infrastructure, content strategy, and narrative production, reflecting a hybrid model that combines traditional archival practices with branding and storytelling goals.

The firm offers a broad range of services, including the establishment and management of archival programs, digitization and digital preservation initiatives, metadata development, historical research, oral history documentation, and content curation for anniversary programming, exhibits, and audience engagement campaigns. Heritage Werks uses professional archival facilities where teams of archivists organize, catalog, digitize, and support collections for clients across corporate, sports, entertainment, nonprofit, and celebrity sectors. Public materials found on their website show that its client base includes major Fortune 500 corporations and professional sports

organizations, and industry reporting suggests the company manages extensive physical and digital collections while expanding into technology-enabled content services.

Unlike government or publicly funded repositories—whose authority derives from statutory mandates and public accountability—firms such as Heritage Werks work within market-based frameworks, where archival decisions are intertwined with reputational management, strategic narrative construction, and business goals. As such, Heritage Werks provides a useful case for examining how private archival actors take part in shaping what is preserved, curated, and mobilized within contemporary knowledge infrastructures.

Although firms such as History Factory and Heritage Werks run within corporate heritage sectors, they stay absent from peer-reviewed archival scholarship and sustained professional discourse. This absence is not evidence of misconduct. Rather, it signals a structural gap: CHPCs often run outside the regulatory, scholarly, and collective frameworks that shape public and academic archives. Consequently, questions of preservation standards, labor conditions, retention policies, and long-term stewardship remain embedded within contractual arrangements rather than exposed to broader professional scrutiny.

When archival stewardship migrates into private markets without corresponding regulatory oversight, scholarly visibility, or collective labor protections, the sustainability of archival practice becomes difficult to evaluate. As CHPCs continue to expand and prove profitability across market sectors, including sports, entertainment, and multinational corporations, it is reasonable to expect growth across the archival landscape. Without mechanisms for transparency, shared professional engagement, or public accountability, such expansion risks combining forms of historical production that privilege profit over ethics and standards. In this context, the question is not whether CHPCs should exist, but how their increasing influence might shape the conditions under which history is preserved, curated, and potentially narrowed in scope.

Radical Archivy in Practice

If Radical Archivy is both diagnostic and generative, it must also be operational. Rather than introducing another self-administered assessment tool for archival service providers, this article proposes the *Sustainable Governance and Ethical Stewardship Questionnaire for Engaging with Archival Environments* is designed to redistribute evaluative authority to donors, artists, organizations, corporate clients, and other community stakeholders. This instrument is not a compliance audit; it helps structure conversation intended to help individuals critically assess potential repositories or service providers across sectors.

The architecture of this questionnaire is grounded in a synthesis of sustainability commitments articulated by professional and international bodies. The Society of American Archivists' 2022 *Position Statement on Archives and Sustainability* defines sustainability as multidimensional—encompassing environmental stewardship,

economic responsibility, social justice, labor equity, and archival education (SAA, 2022). This holistic understanding informs questions related to infrastructure durability, staffing stability, inclusion practices, and continuity planning. The American Library Association's *Triple Bottom Line* framework further shaped the design by foregrounding environmental responsibility, economic feasibility, and social equity as interdependent institutional commitments. So, the questionnaires prompt inquiry into funding models, workplace well-being, access equity, and resource management. Finally, The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a broader global vocabulary for evaluating archival responsibility, particularly in relation to decent work (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), responsible production (Goal 12), climate action (Goal 13), inclusive institutions (Goal 16), and partnership (Goal 17). Drawing selectively from these goals ensures that archival stewardship is understood not merely as institutional legacy management but as part of a wider intergenerational and socio-ecological obligation. The International Council on Archives (ICA) frames archival stewardship as a public good grounded in accountability, professional ethics, and access to information across national and institutional contexts. ICA's emphasis on trustworthy recordkeeping infrastructures and professional responsibility offers a useful cross-border reference point for evaluating archival governance, especially where private custody and outsourced stewardship complicate transparency and long-term public benefit.

The Sustainable Governance and Ethical Stewardship 5 Domains of Governance (see Appendix 1) operationalize sustainability not as a singular environmental metric, but as a constellation of interrelated concerns: environmental responsibility; economic feasibility; social justice; labor conditions; archival education; professional ethics; climate resilience; partnership and collaboration; access; and institutional trustworthiness and accountability. These dimensions are embedded within five domains of the *Sustainable Governance and Ethical Stewardship Questionnaire for Engaging with Archival Environments* (see Appendix 2): (1) Authority & Accountability; (2) Infrastructural & Environmental Continuity; (3) Labor & Institutional Capacity; (4) Narrative Authority & Representational Accountability (5) Access Regimes & Stakeholder Accountability ensuring that sustainability is examined as a governance condition rather than a symbolic commitment.

Importantly, this questionnaire does not presume misconduct, nor does it function as a professional audit. What distinguishes this tool is its orientation: it is designed not for internal institutional self-assessment, accreditation, or peer review, but for public use by those seeking to steward collections—individuals, artists, families, community groups, nonprofit leaders, and corporate representatives responsible for historical materials. In archival environments that range from publicly regulated institutions to market-based entities running outside statutory oversight, transparency and labor protections are uneven and often opaque to non-specialists. This instrument therefore redistributes evaluative authority. It equips stakeholders to ask structured questions before transferring custody, control, or narrative power. By repositioning sustainability as a shared responsibility between repositories and those who entrust them with historical materials, Radical Archivy transforms professional commitments into publicly actionable inquiry. The goal is not to rank archival environments, but to provide a clear, accessible method for navigating them with clarity, care, and informed vigilance.

How to use the tool

First, preparation requires stakeholders to clarify their own priorities before contacting a repository. What matters about most public access, long-term preservation, confidentiality, community control, labor ethics, environmental sustainability, institutional stability? Establishing values in advance allows responses to be evaluated in relation to articulated goals rather than assumed professional norms.

Second, the questionnaire guides the conversation. Its questions are intended to be asked conversationally and paired with requests for documentation. Users should take detailed notes and assess not only what respondents say, but also how specific and transparent their answers are. Precise, documented responses often show formal governance systems, while general answers may suggest discretionary practices or structural instability.

Third, reflection requires synthesis. After gathering responses, users should review patterns across domains rather than isolated strengths or weaknesses. Is authority clearly structured or primarily discretionary? Are preservation systems future-oriented or reactive? Is labor stable and supported or project-based and precarious? How is interpretive authority exercised? Are access policies transparent or opaque? These questions illuminate the structural conditions under which memory will live.

Conclusion: Sustaining Archives, Sustaining Future

Sustainability in archives cannot be reduced to environmental efficiency, technological longevity, or institutional resilience alone. In the U.S., archival governance runs across uneven terrains of mandate, voluntarism, privatization, and market discretion. As Commercial History Production expands and public infrastructures contract, the conditions under which history is preserved, narrated, and accessed are increasingly shaped by political economy rather than shared public accountability.

Building on the work of scholars Michelle Caswell (2014), Verne Harris (2002), Saidiya Hartman (2008) Zakiya Collier and Tonia Sutherland (2022) Holly Smith (2018), and others in critical archival studies, this article approaches the archive not as a neutral repository but as a site of power, affect, and governance. These scholars have shown that archive's structure historical visibility; that absences are produced, not accidental; and that care, consent, and narrative justice must be understood as archival concerns rather than external moral add-ons. Their work reframes sustainability as inseparable from questions of labor, representation, and structural inequality.

In this expanded view, sustainability includes sustaining workers, sustaining marginalized histories, sustaining intergenerational knowledge, and sustaining the conditions under which truthful memory can exist. Environmental resilience and digital preservation matter. So do labor protections, transparent governance structures, ethical narrative practices, and fair access regimes. When any of these domains are weakened, archival sustainability becomes partial.

The contribution of this article is both analytic and practical. It maps the archival landscape to make visible the governance structures that differentiate governmental, academic, nonprofit, corporate, and commercial archival environments. It also introduces a public-facing questionnaire designed to redistribute evaluative authority to donors, artists, organizations, and community stakeholders. Rather than asking institutions to declare their sustainability, these tools invite structured inquiry into how stewardship is organized, how labor is supported, how access is managed, and how narratives are constructed.

Radical Archivy is offered as a working framework — a first articulation attentive to sustainability, care-ethics, access-ethics, governance, labor, and education as interdependent conditions of archival practice. It does not claim completeness. It claims necessity. To sustain archives, then, is to sustain the political, ethical, and relational infrastructures that make collective memory possible.

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Author Positionality

This research is informed by both academic inquiry and professional experience. As the *former Director of Training and Standards* at Heritage Werks—a role focused on establishing and upholding professional standards, supporting staff development and field participation, and strengthening operational alignment with archival best practices, later discontinued amid organizational restructuring—I bring direct knowledge of how a commercial archival firm structures workflows, institutional priorities, and accountability mechanisms. The elimination of a standards-centered role underscores a structural tension examined in this article: in the absence of statutory mandates or formalized peer accountability, professional standards are discretionary rather than embedded. While this insider perspective offers practitioner-informed insight into commercial archival environments, the analysis stays grounded in reflexivity, critical distance, and epistemic accountability (Caswell & Punzalan, 2016).

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Heritage Werks or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.

AI Acknowledgment: *Portions of this article used the help of OpenAI's ChatGPT-4, to support editing, and citation management. Final arguments, analysis, and scholarly framing reflect the author's own original work and intellectual judgment. The author takes full responsibility for the content and final version of the manuscript.*

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Appendix 1

SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE AND ETHICAL STEWARDSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGAGING WITH ARCHIVAL ENVIRONMENTS

5 DOMAINS OF GOVERNANCE

AUTHORITY & ACCOUNTABILITY

This domain examines how archival authority is established, structured, and exercised. It evaluates whether stewardship is grounded in public law, institutional policy, contractual agreement, or discretionary corporate practice, and considers how these foundations shape oversight, reporting, retention, and destruction decisions. Key concerns include the presence of enforceable mandates, transparency mechanisms, and avenues for accountability or redress.

INFRASTRUCTURE & ENVIRONMENTAL CAPACTIY

This domain evaluates the material and technological systems that sustain archival preservation over time, including storage conditions, climate control, disaster planning, digital preservation infrastructure, metadata standards, migration strategies, and energy use. Sustainability is framed as infrastructural durability and continuity. It asks whether preservation systems are adaptable, well-maintained, and responsibly designed to ensure long-term access without imposing disproportionate ecological or operational costs.

LABOR & INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

This domain examines the human infrastructure of archival work, including employment structures, compensation, staffing stability, professional development, and decision-making authority. Archival labor is a site where institutional values, power, and precarity are enacted. Labor sustainability requires equitable treatment, transparent advancement, and investment in long-term expertise. It asks whether staffing models and organizational structures support continuity, accountability, and inclusive stewardship over time.

NARRATIVE AUTHORITY & REPRESENTATIONAL INTEGRITY

This domain recognizes that archives actively shape historical meaning. It examines how appraisal, description, interpretation, and storytelling influence what is preserved, emphasized, or excluded from public memory. Narrative authority concerns who controls interpretive framing and how institutional priorities affect representation. Representational integrity requires transparency, contextualization of contested materials, and accountability to affected communities. It evaluates how archives balance strategic interests, reputational concerns, and ethical obligations to inclusivity and historical accuracy.

ACCESS REGIMES & STAKEHOLDER ACCOUNTABILITY

This domain examines the conditions under which archival materials are made accessible and to whom. It considers formal access policies, intellectual property controls, fee structures, digital availability, user restrictions, and mechanisms for community engagement. Access is shaped by governance structures, legal mandates, and institutional risk tolerance. This domain evaluates whether policies are transparent, equitable, and responsive to public interest, and how institutions balance confidentiality with long-term historical responsibility.

Appendix 2

SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE AND ETHICAL STEWARDSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGAGING WITH ARCHIVAL ENVIRONMENTS

TRAP

the radical archive project

Institution

Contact

Phone

Email

Meeting Details

Types of materials are included? (circle all that apply)

- Paper
- Photograph
- Audiovisual
- digital files
- Textiles
- Artifact

Other:_____

Category	Subcategory	Question	Notes
1. **Authority & Accountability**	Authority and Mandate	• Under what legal, statutory, or contractual authority does this archive operate? • Is the archive subject to external oversight, reporting requirements, or regulatory review? • Who holds final authority over appraisal, retention, and destruction decisions? • Are retention and deaccession policies formally documented and available for review? • What provisions govern the collection if the institution restructures, merges, is acquired, or dissolves? • Who is responsible for ensuring that internal practices meet field-wide best practices and archival standards? Is there a designated standards officer or equivalent role? How is compliance monitored and documented?	
	Transparency	• Are governance policies publicly accessible? • Are there formal mechanisms for stakeholder feedback or dispute resolution? • Are conflicts of interest addressed in written policy?	
2. **Infrastructural & Environmental Continuity**	Format and Scale	• What environmental controls (temperature, humidity, light, air quality) are maintained and monitored? • Is there a documented and regularly updated disaster preparedness and recovery plan, and how is it tested?	
	Digital Preservation	• What digital preservation system or asset management platform is used, and is it standards-based? • How does the institution plan for format migration and technological obsolescence over time? • Are backups redundant, geographically distributed, and regularly tested?	
	Continuity	• How often are preservation audits conducted? • How often will my collection be assessed? • What provisions ensure long-term digital access if technologies change? • Has environmental impact or energy use been assessed?	

Category	Subcategory	Question	Notes
3. **Labor & Instiutional Capacity**	Employment Structure	• What are the educational, professional, and leadership qualifications required for archival staff at each level, and how are standards and competencies monitored or evaluated? • Are archivists provided with equitable compensation, benefits, and clear long-term employment pathways, and is compensation benchmarked against professional standards? • What performance and advancement structures are in place, and how does the organization actively pursue equity, inclusion, and fair labor practices? • What mechanisms exist for reporting injustice, discrimination, or bias, and how are such concerns investigated and resolved? • What emergency protocols are in place to protect both staff and collections from natural disasters, theft, or other threats, and do you coordinate with external emergency or disaster-response agencies?	
	Professional Stability	• Is continuing education supported, and are staff encouraged or funded to participate in professional associations, conferences, or field engagement? • What is the average staff tenure, and what are recent turnover rates within the archival department? • How is institutional and collection knowledge documented and preserved during staff transitions? • Is archival staff unionized? If not, what formal mechanisms protect employees from retaliation when reporting workplace concerns or injustice?	
	Organizational Structure	• How are decision-making responsibilities structured and distributed within the archival department and broader institution? • Are diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) commitments formally documented and operationalized in policy and practice? • What mechanisms are in place to promote equitable recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement across race, gender, age, religion, disability, and other protected categories?	

Category	Subcategory	Question	Notes
4. **Narrative Authority & Representational Integrity**	Appraisal and Selection	• Who determines which materials are preserved, restricted, or excluded? • How are appraisal criteria established, documented, and reviewed? At what organizational level are appraisal decisions made?	
	Interpretation & Metadata	• Are metadata standards and descriptive systems documented and transparent? • How are descriptive practices developed, reviewed, and updated over time? • How are controversial, sensitive, or reputationally complex materials contextualized? • Are multiple interpretive perspectives acknowledged or incorporated? If so, how?	
	Ethical Safeguards	• Are consent protocols in place for oral histories, personal papers, and community-contributed materials? • Are redaction and restriction practices formally documented and reviewable? • How are historically marginalized or underrepresented voices incorporated into appraisal and description practices? • What protocols govern the handling of materials that may be reputationally damaging or harmful to stakeholders?	
5. **Access Regimes & Stakeholder Accountability**	Access Conditions	• Who is permitted to access the archive, and under what conditions? • Are access policies formally documented and publicly available? • Are there fees, licensing requirements, or contractual restrictions associated with access, reproduction, or publication?	
	Stakeholder Engagement	• Does the archive maintain partnerships with public institutions, community organizations, or research bodies? • How are stakeholders informed of policy changes, governance restructuring, or shifts in access conditions?	
		• What provisions or safeguards ensure continued access over time? • What happens to the collection if ownership changes, the organization restructures, or the archive dissolves?	