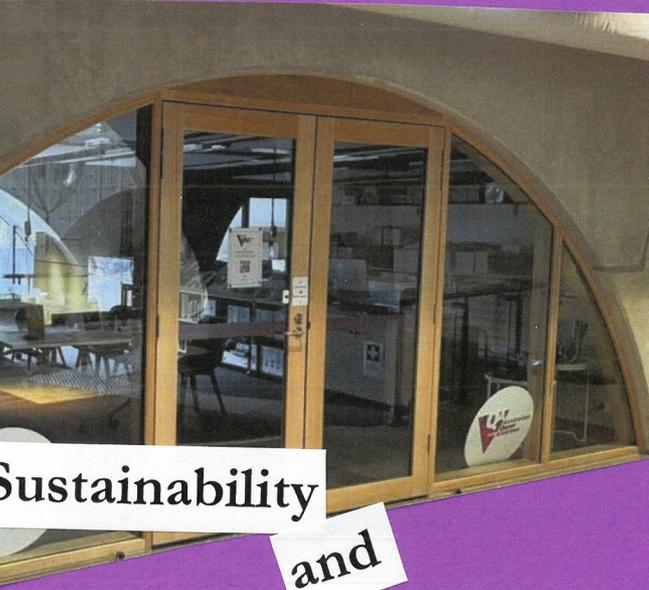


We Were Here,

We Are Here

and

We Have a Future



Organisational Sustainability

and

the Australian Queer Archives



AQA Australian
Queer
Archives
1978

Edited by Zelmarie Cantillon & Sarah Baker

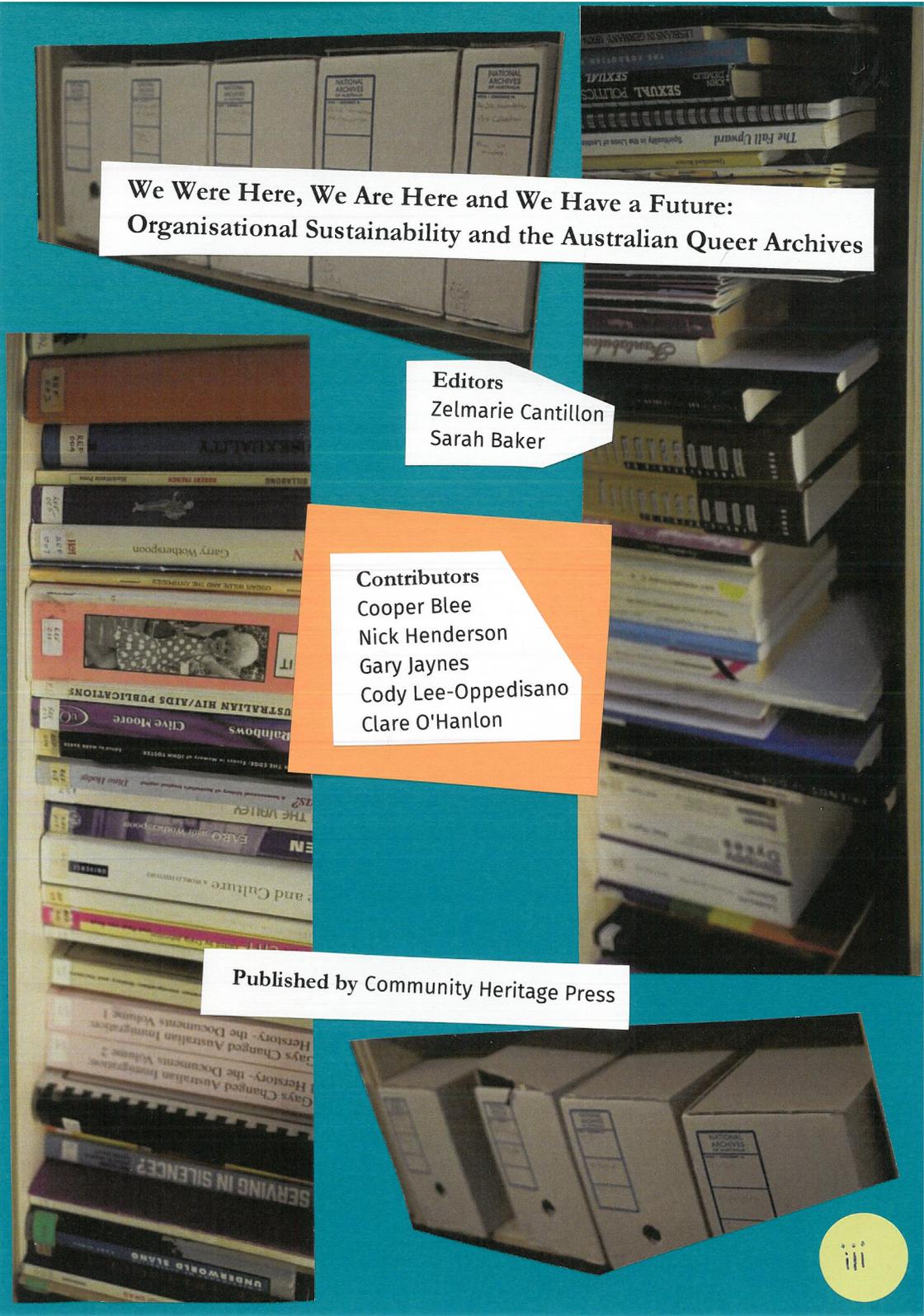
Sustaining Community Heritage zine series

Series editors
Professor Sarah Baker
Dr Zelmarie Cantillon

The Sustaining Community Heritage zine series emerges from an Australian Research Council-funded project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector'. This project explores the organisational sustainability of Australia's volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies which serve important functions in shaping public history through the collection, preservation and display of local, everyday and marginalised heritages. However, the sector faces a sustainability crisis. Mounting pressures pose a threat to the long-term futures of volunteer-run heritage institutions, putting at risk the diversity and accessibility of the nation's historical record. In this project, we collaborate with representatives from community heritage institutions across Australia to co-develop strategies for recognising value, measuring organisational sustainability and creating benchmarks for sustainable practice.

The zines in this series capture the work of the project as it unfolds, enabling volunteers in community heritage organisations to communicate their experiences and knowledge creatively and accessibly. We approach the zines as a way to facilitate a networked, co-designed understanding of organisational sustainability from a range of institutional contexts. The zines in the series identify challenges, but they also seek to build on existing resources, capabilities and ambitions already in place for the pursuit of viable futures.

For project updates and other issues of this zine series, see:
<https://communityheritagetoolkit.com/>



**We Were Here, We Are Here and We Have a Future:
Organisational Sustainability and the Australian Queer Archives**

Editors

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Contributors

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Published by Community Heritage Press



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Ethics

This project has received full ethical clearance from Griffith University's Human Ethics Committee (GU ref no: 2025/199).

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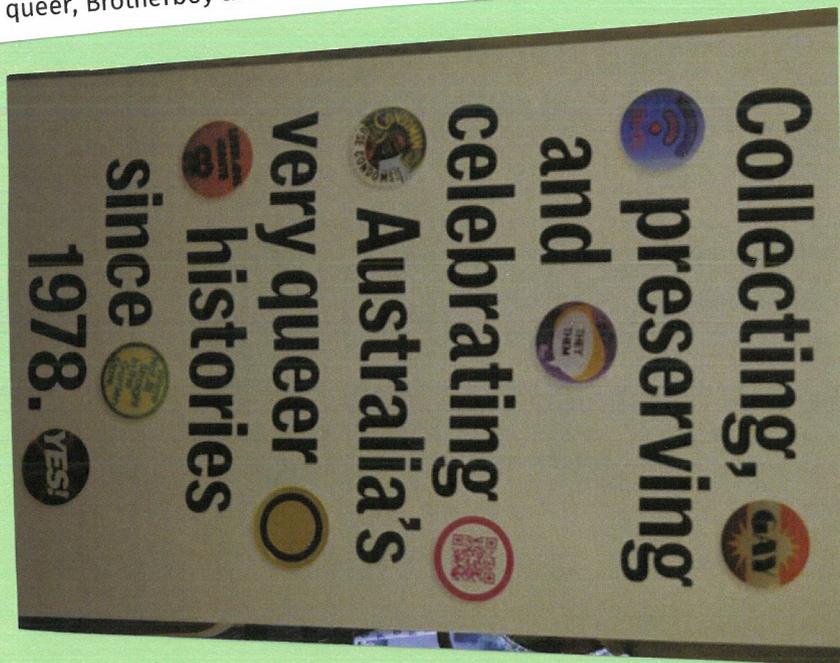
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We Were Here, We Are Here and We Have a Future: Organisational Sustainability and the Australian Queer Archives

Editorial

About the Australian Queer Archives

For almost 50 years, the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA) has been collecting, preserving and celebrating 'material from the lives and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer, Brotherboy and Sistergirl (LGBTIQ+) Australians'.¹



Originally named the Australian Gay Archives, the organisation was established in Melbourne in 1978 following discussions arising from several preceding years of National Homosexual Conferences. The organisation was renamed to the The Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives in 1991 before being renamed again to the Australian Queer Archives in 2020, shifts that reflect a movement towards a more inclusive organisation and collection.

AQuA has had numerous homes over the years.² In 2021, AQuA moved to its new home at the Victorian Pride Centre, a state-government supported and purpose-built piece of infrastructure that houses key organisations and services for LGBTIQ+ communities.



Today, AQuA's collection has expanded to '650 shelf metres holding over 400,000 items'³. In addition to caring for an extensive archival collection, AQuA engages with communities through frequent exhibitions and events. The organisation is supported by 50 active volunteers, with more than 100 on the waiting list keen to help out.



The title *We Were Here, We Are Here and We Have a Future* is a quote from our interview with AQUA committee member Nick Henderson. It speaks to the archive's long-standing commitment to collecting, preserving and making accessible the histories of LGBTIQ+ communities – histories that have so often been ignored, erased or discarded. Through ephemera, personal papers, publications, audio-visual records and many other physical and digital materials, AQUA provides proof of presence across time: that queer lives existed in the past, are lived in the present, and deserve to be carried into the future.

The title also makes clear that organisational sustainability at AQUA is connected to what archives scholar Michelle Caswell describes as 'representational belonging'.⁴ By preserving and activating queer records of and with their communities, AQUA produces ontological ('I am here'), epistemological ('we were here') and social impacts ('we belong here') – echoed in the refrain 'We're here, we're queer'. Sustaining the archive, then, is not only about caring for collections, but about supporting the conditions that allow people to recognise themselves in history and to locate their lives within longer trajectories of community, struggle and care. In this sense, *We Were Here, We Are Here and We Have a Future* names organisational sustainability as a form of collective continuity: the ongoing work of affirming presence, belonging and possibility, across generations, political climates and shifting institutional landscapes.



Outline of this zine: What's inside?

Content for this zine was created during a two-hour workshop conducted with four volunteers on 6 December 2025. Zel, one of the project's co-leads, guided the volunteers through three activities aimed at getting them to think creatively about organisational sustainability.



The first activity invited participants to jot down on sticky notes the first words or phrases that came to mind when they thought of 'organisational sustainability'.

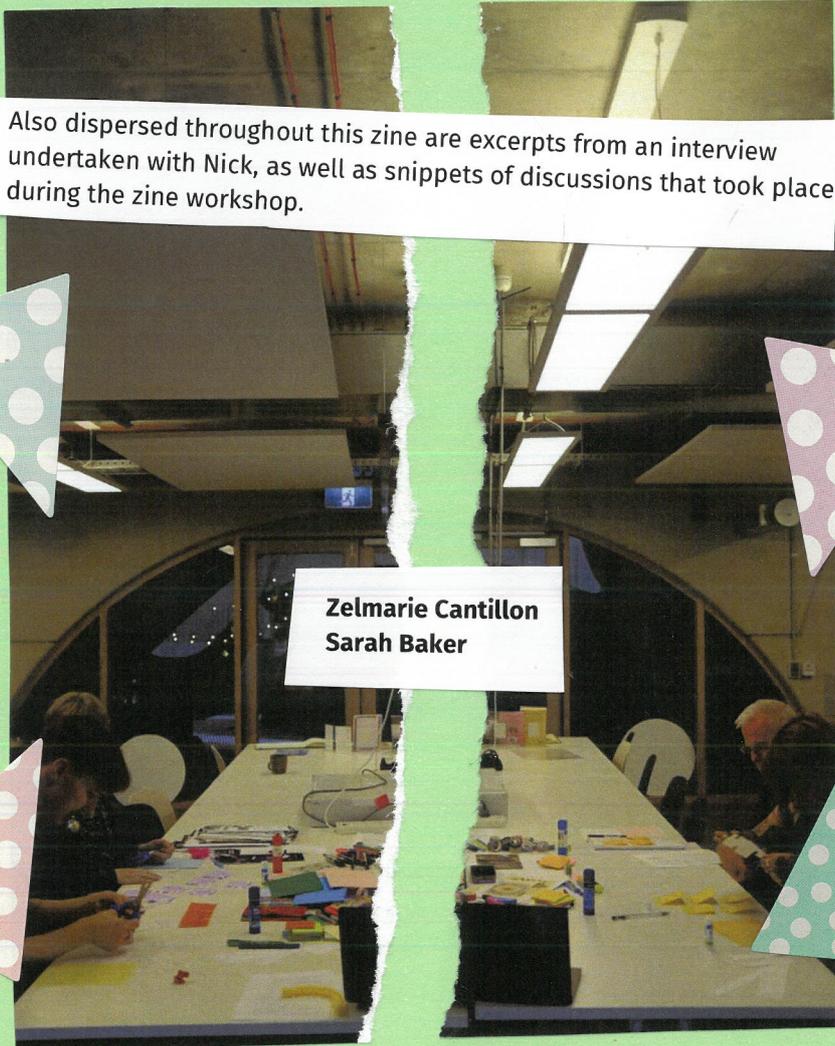


Next, we turned to an activity where participants considered a pre-prepared list of keywords relating to sustainability in community heritage organisations. Participants selected the factors and themes that stood out to them most, then stuck these on a page and indicated how various issues/themes are interconnected. For example, Cooper's page highlights autonomy, community and accessibility as the three key concepts from which a range of other issues flow (p. 27), while Clare emphasised the importance of tea breaks, letting go, opening up, building trust, community engagement and inclusive practice (p. 22).



Our final activity required participants to respond to writing prompts to elicit reflections on AQUA's longevity and future, as well as the rewards and costs of volunteering. Participants' pages offer valuable advice to other community heritage organisations, including the importance of community engagement and building strong partnerships and relationships within the community, as well as taking non-hierarchical approaches to governance that involve all volunteers. They also reflect on their hopes for the future of AQUA, such as keeping the archives relevant to younger generations, securing appropriate storage and resources, and becoming more inclusive.

Also dispersed throughout this zine are excerpts from an interview undertaken with Nick, as well as snippets of discussions that took place during the zine workshop.



Zelmarie Cantillon
Sarah Baker

¹ <https://queerarchives.org.au/about-us/>

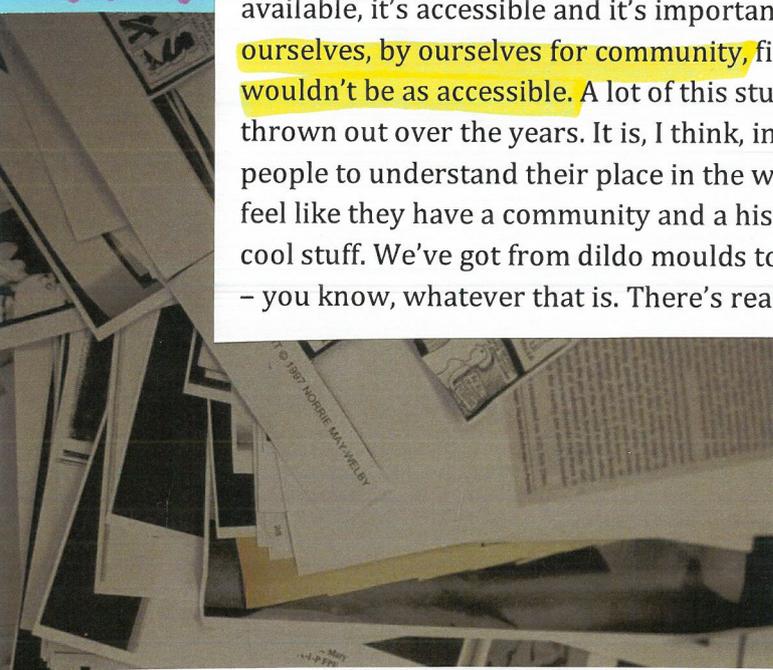
² For a more detailed history, see: <https://queerarchives.org.au/posts/our-history/>

³ <https://queerarchives.org.au/collections/>

⁴ Caswell, M, Cifor, M & Ramirez, MH, 2016, "'To suddenly discover yourself existing': uncovering the impact of community archives', *The American Archivist*, vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 56–81; Caswell, M, Migoni, AA, Geraci, N & Cifor, M, 2017, "'To be able to imagine otherwise': community archives and the importance of representation', *Archives and Records*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 5–26.



Nick: We were here, we are here and we have a future. A lot of parts of community don't have access to their histories. We have been working since the early portion of the movement to ensure that those histories are preserved and accessible into the future. For so many in community, irrespective of the current political climates, they won't always have access to that. We don't have family structures in the way that were passed down necessarily. Some do, some don't. This knowledge, and if people want to access the histories of their community, it is here. And it's available, it's accessible and it's important. If we didn't do it for ourselves, by ourselves for community, first and foremost, then it wouldn't be as accessible. A lot of this stuff would have been thrown out over the years. It is, I think, incredibly important for people to understand their place in the world and for people to feel like they have a community and a history. And it's also really cool stuff. We've got from dildo moulds to punk leather jackets to – you know, whatever that is. There's really great stuff.



Nick: We have beautiful, complex, messy lives and I want all of that to be preserved. Well, not all, I mean – calm down. Maybe a selection.



← 16 – 20

According to carrying beams safety



USE THIS
IN USE...



Building



Preservation



Cataloguing



Exhibitions



Community Outreach



Engagement



Membership

Researcher use



Public profile; collection growth



Volunteer recruitment
Volunteer retention



Younger volunteers

Ageing volunteers



Succession planning

Financial resources



Disaster preparedness

Contingency planning

Relevance

Younger generations

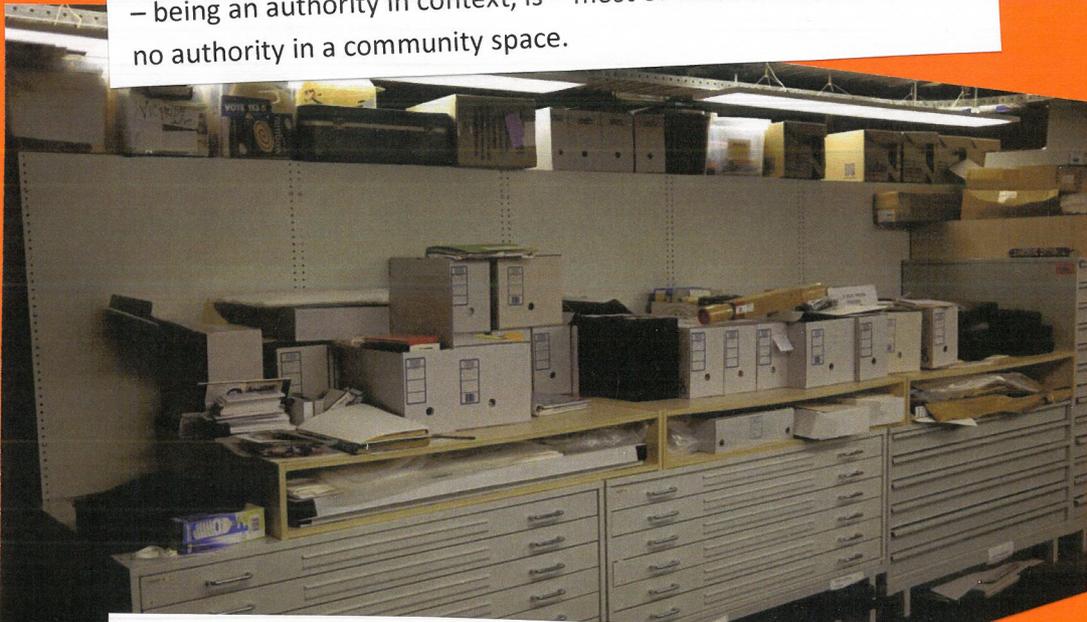
Inclusion

Fundraising

Opening hours

Security

Nick: Often, there's this kind of dichotomy that community orgs don't do things in a professional way. Having worked in the sector for 25 years, I can absolutely say, there are professional orgs who do not do things in a professional way. This is the kind of thing I find is often quite funny between the two. The professional orgs just don't talk about all their mistakes, and there's a lot. That sense of always – being an authority in context, is – most of those institutions have no authority in a community space.



Nick: I've seen correspondence from, say, the State Library of New South Wales where they've explicitly denigrated us as an organisation because we're community and claim that 'we're not sustainable, we're not permanent; we don't do things properly', et cetera, et cetera. I've seen them do it to multiple orgs as well. I was literally at a panel not so long ago, which had the Women's Art Register, they were celebrating their 50th anniversary this year, and [a curator at a State-level heritage organisation], who is the same person who denigrated us, kind of was like, 'Oh, well are you looking to permanently preserve your collection any time?' As though they haven't been doing that for 50 years.

• If someone were to approach A&A asking for advice on how to establish a long-lasting community archive, the best advice to give them would be to focus on... remaining independent and engaged with community. Especially in regards to the ~~archive~~ ^{community}, by making sure that volunteers of all types and levels of experience have the opportunity to become more involved in how the organisation is run. To ensure that governance does not feel removed from the broader community of volunteers.

• To secure A&A's future, what we need most is... to work towards being more inclusive. By engaging more with Australia's queer communities who historically been under-represented in the collection, or could have felt excluded by the organisation - especially trans, bisexual, first nations, poc community members - we can ensure that the collection captures and preserves a more accurate account of Australia's queer history. This kind of engagement will only strengthen what has been so special about A&A: it's community and volunteer run nature.

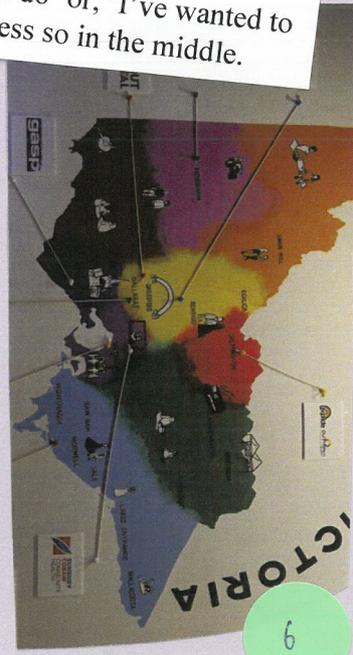
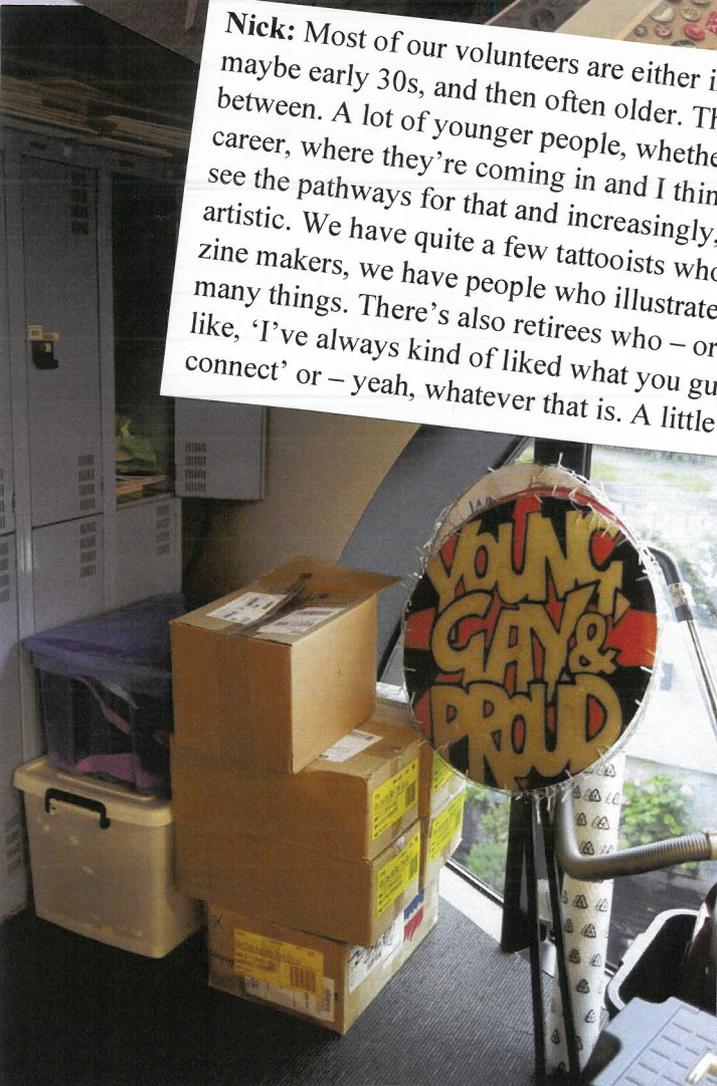


Nick: I think there's absolutely a role to improve sustainability and we've got a strategic plan. We've got now notable savings, in terms of assets, we will continue to move towards the sort of sustainability that we want. The collection is now 700 shelf meters of material. We have additional storage off site, we have managed storage and self-managed storage, and for us, it's never going to decrease. ... We have 50 active volunteers and we have 100 on the waiting list.

Nick: Having sustainability from housing to volunteers to everything is really important for us to have that reflection as we get to this point.



Nick: Most of our volunteers are either in their mid to late 20s, maybe early 30s, and then often older. There's often a bit of a gap in between. A lot of younger people, whether it's university or early career, where they're coming in and I think – it's really fascinating to see the pathways for that and increasingly, it's often creative and artistic. We have quite a few tattooists who are volunteers, we have zine makers, we have people who illustrate for furry communities, many things. There's also retirees who – or soon-to-be – who are like, 'I've always kind of liked what you guys do' or, 'I've wanted to connect' or – yeah, whatever that is. A little less so in the middle.



space for
collected
material -
free or at
least affordable

continuity of
volunteers -
esp in roles such
as coordination,
finances & comm

community
support for
the work done
on its behalf

- trust
- finances
- national



Cooper: We've [Cooper and Cody] just joined though. Our first meeting is today. ...

Zel: What made you want to join the committee?

Cooper: I mean, I guess I just really love being involved in AQUA. I wanted to get more involved. ... I knew that Cody was joining and it felt like a good time to get involved, like the people who would be on it. I'd maybe in the past thought I would be a bit of an outlier ... But then it felt like a good time, seeing who else was on there. Maybe the way it has the potential to be in the next few years. ...

Cody: I really enjoy volunteering and I enjoy that process, but I always like trying to push it to the other fucking level and be like, what else can I do? Because I just love projects. I love doing stuff. ... if there's some way to make something slightly different or slightly better, like how can I get in so I can help and do it? For better or for worse.

Cooper: I'm a bit the same. I can't help being like, 'let's do this!' ...

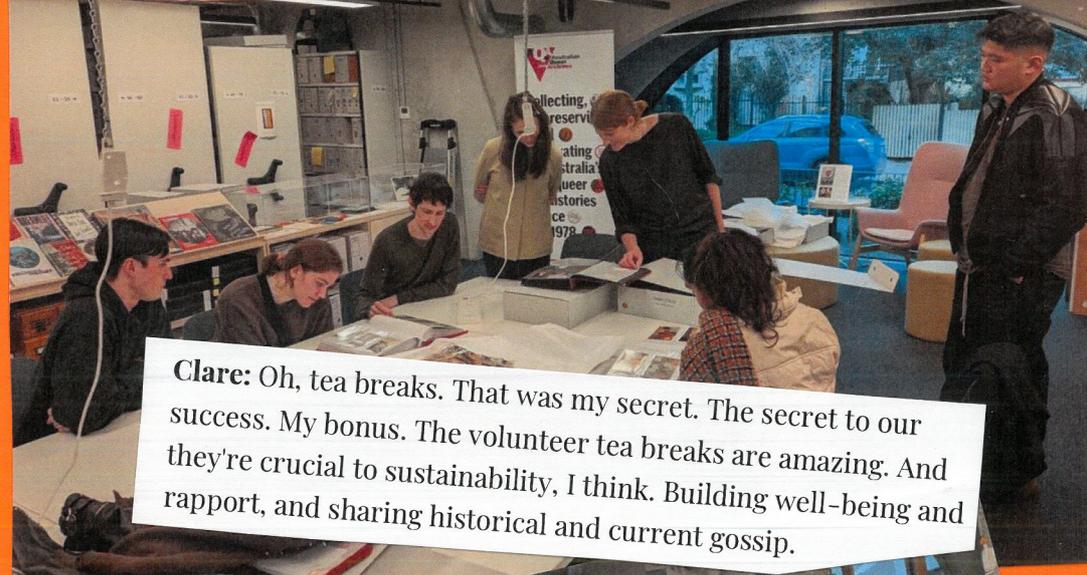
Cody: I'm interested to see what we can... Like, obviously, we can do anything to a certain extent, but I'm interested to see in a good way how far we can push that. What can be done.

Zel: That's great. I suppose you've got ideas, too, about what you'd want to see happening into the future and things?

Cody: Yeah, totally. But it's interesting having that thought and having that idea and then seeing what it looks like now. And then is your idea still valid? Because you don't know how things are working until you're in it. So I'm really interested to just suss it out.

Zel: Totally. And not saying this is you, but sometimes you can be, like, critical from the outside, or you can think, oh, why doesn't it work this way? And then once you get into it, you're like, oh wait, there's all these moving parts.

Cody: Yeah, totally. There's no point of staying up thinking, oh, they didn't do this. Go do it. Shut up and do it.



Clare: Oh, tea breaks. That was my secret. The secret to our success. My bonus. The volunteer tea breaks are amazing. And they're crucial to sustainability, I think. Building well-being and rapport, and sharing historical and current gossip.



Clare: We don't need help recruiting volunteers, we just need help because we have so many on the waiting list. We need help actually empowering them, creating more opportunities.

if you don't reinvent the wheel - there are a lot of resources + networks that archives folks can learn from! Mainstream community can learn from us too!!

but don't try to be too samey or imitate

If someone were to approach AQUA asking for advice on how to establish a long-standing community archive, the best advice to give them would be to focus on...

Building relationships, partnerships and trust with community members, volunteers, memberships, significant people and groups in the community. Actively listens to concerns and challenges and work with them, empowers and support them.

Co-create collections with ~~community~~ ^{community members} to every step of the process.

YOU CANNOT DO IT ALONE.
WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER.

THIS is a key message in AQUA's collections and in the ^{orig in} history of the Archives. + evolution

Resources for queer community heritage organisations

queer histories, radical futures toolkit:

<https://bihistory.com/2025/05/23/queer-histories-radical-futures-a-toolkit-for-archivists-community-memory-makers/>

New York City Trans Oral History Project handbook:

https://nyctransoralhistory.org/content/uploads/2021/09/NYCTOH_Handbook.pdf

Invisible Histories project resources, including:

<https://invisiblehistory.org/archiving/>

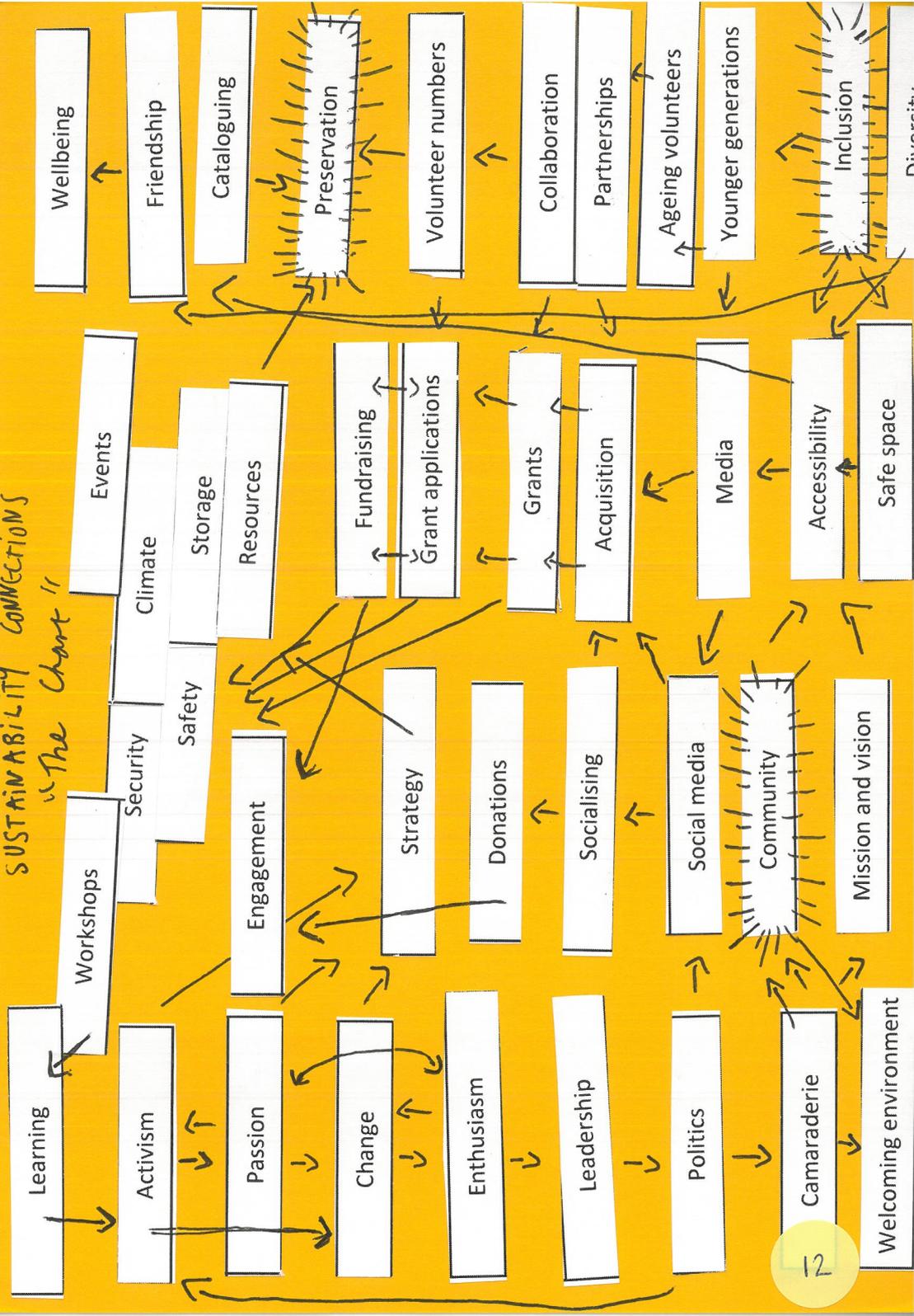
Digital Transgender Archive policies:

<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/about/policies>

Homosaurus: <https://homosaurus.org/>

Commons Library: <https://commonslibrary.org/activist-archiving-start-here/>

SUSTAINABILITY CONNECTIONS
"The Chart"



Cooper: Do we have oral histories from volunteers, talking about being here? ... Because we should do that.

Clare: Good 50th anniversary project. ...

Cooper: I love that idea.

Clare: I did informally interview [founding member] Liz Ross, and it was amazing. It was not a proper oral history, but it was just to get some [information] – because she was going to be part of [an] event that Gary [was organising] – and we had Mark Riley, and Helen [Pausacker]. And I *loved* talking to Liz Ross about the early days. It was great. ...

Zel: Is it in the archive?

Clare: I don't think it is yet. ...

Gary: There certainly aren't too many, if any, Cooper. For Graham Carbery, there were two, one of those is specifically about his role in the archives. But can't think of too many others.

Clare: A good 50th anniversary project.

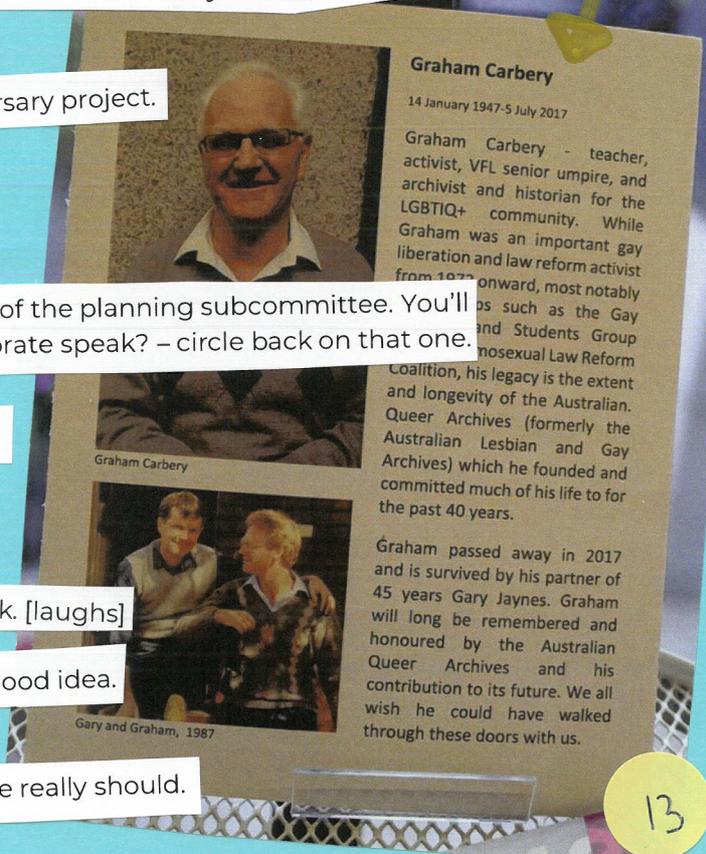
Zel: Now you're in charge of the planning subcommittee. You'll have to – what's the corporate speak? – circle back on that one. [laughs]

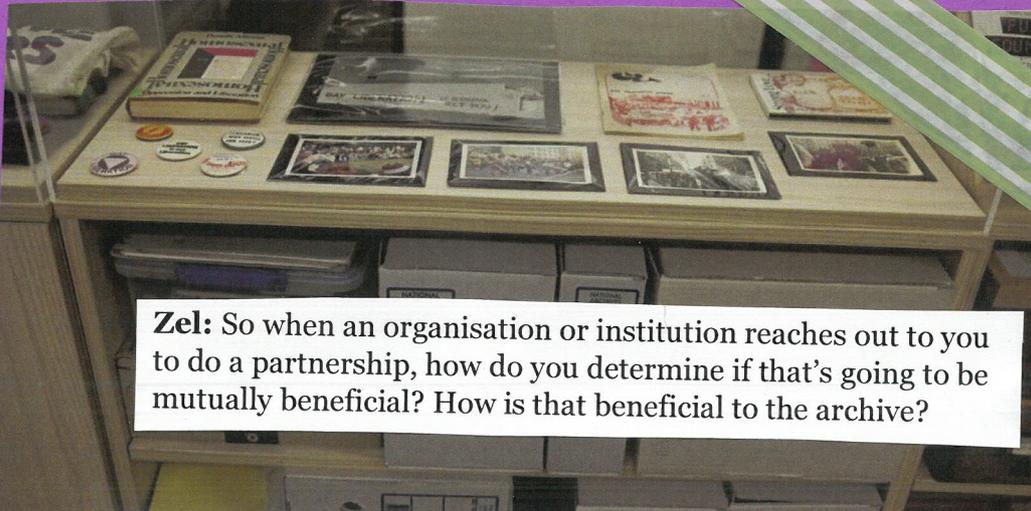
Clare: Oh no!

Cooper: Not a circle back. [laughs]

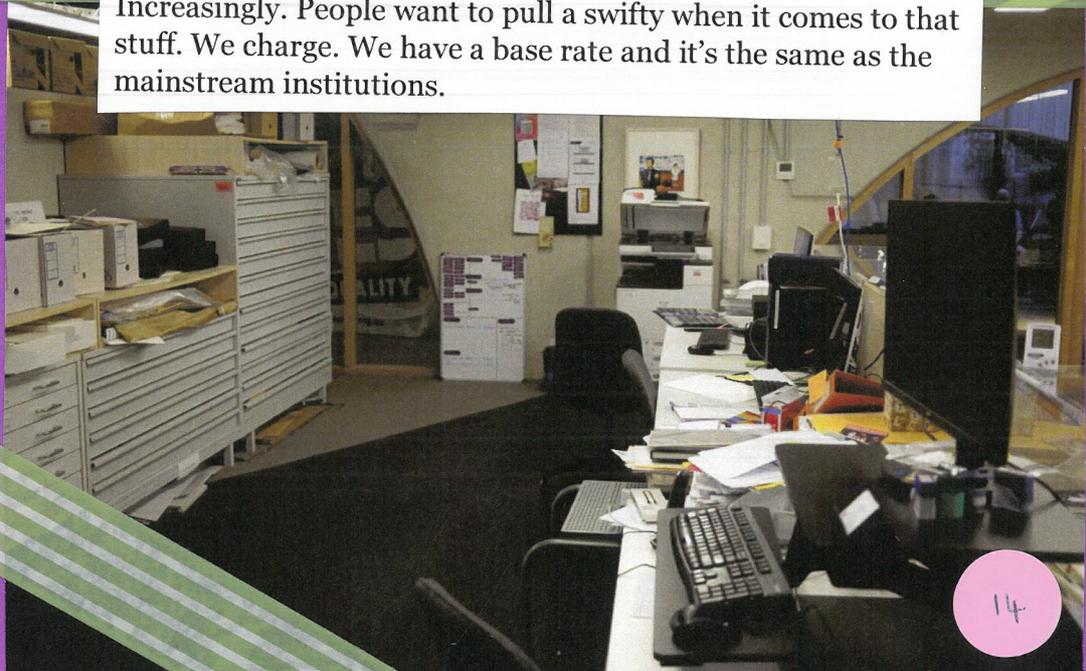
Zel: But that is a really good idea.

Clare: Yes, we should, we really should.





Zel: So when an organisation or institution reaches out to you to do a partnership, how do you determine if that's going to be mutually beneficial? How is that beneficial to the archive?



Nick: Often it is – initially, it's understanding the – how do I describe it? The conceptual framework and ethics of the project and then, looking at whether it's a community-based or an institutional project. If it's unfunded community-based project, we'll do all of the work for free. If it's got funding – so particularly, recently, there's a lot of film projects and they're like, "We don't have much money" and I'm like, "But I've just looked it up and you've received over \$100,000 in development funding." Interesting. That often happens. Increasingly. People want to pull a swifty when it comes to that stuff. We charge. We have a base rate and it's the same as the mainstream institutions.

What I hope for the future of
Aqua is ...



I hope for a long successful trajectory for
Aqua. I hope for many more enthusiastic vols to
come through, passionate about Aqua's mission.
I hope for more diversity and ~~more~~ continuous
growth for inclusion.

I hope for Aqua to receive more / continue
share of primary donations.

I hope for more connection with
community and more outreach from people
willing to borrow / use our knowledge and
resources. I hope for Aqua to be
even more well known. I hope for
constant secured funding, and donations
coming out the wazoo.

It would be an amazing thing to
secure more free housing (again) for members

not have to stress about finances.

I hope that A&VA can stay well run, but also have an element of sustainability / takes seriously by the higher up? Our archives are just as valid and important as any others. I hope for new corridors to be made, and coming together of coming.

To secure A&VA's future, what are the most:

- Members, shit-ton of em!
- Funding
- more people on the admin end, that would mean paid jobs.
- continuous donations
- facilities for more vols + more training in processes
- more space / re-arranging of space to host more vols / events etc.

- more structure to "higher up" rolls. But still all aimed with autonomy!
- Organizational and constantly more of it.
- concerns growth and diversity
- people's voices being heard
- community building / care
- secure space / full use of space
- communication between all levels of parties involved, big or small.
- maintaining independence + autonomy but with that enhancing long term!

* organisation (physical and
on the world wide
level)

* growth (community backing,
vols, funding)

* inclusivity (and the
open-ness to keep
growing)

© could keep improving ©

* preserving / ~~pro~~ archiving /
maintaining our history

* community
- friendships / togetherness

By
Coody
The-Opinionator

Nick: In Melbourne they're like, "Oh, I'll have to cross the river?" Honest to god, trust me, it is a thing.

Zel: That's funny, because this is my first time in St Kilda, it's actually really, really nice.

Nick: It's really easy to get here, but people have – there's a lot of people I talk to and they're like, "Oh, I haven't even been there to the [Victorian] Pride Centre." We've been here four, four and a half years. We're a founding tenant, we helped with the design of the building, et cetera. But for some, it's just too far away. A lot of the locus of community events, in the sense of parties or spaces, has shifted further north. So, it's like, "It's not in Brunswick or Preston?" It's really not that far.

Mezzanine

↑ Australian
Queer Archives
Mezzanine Room
Pride Centre Office

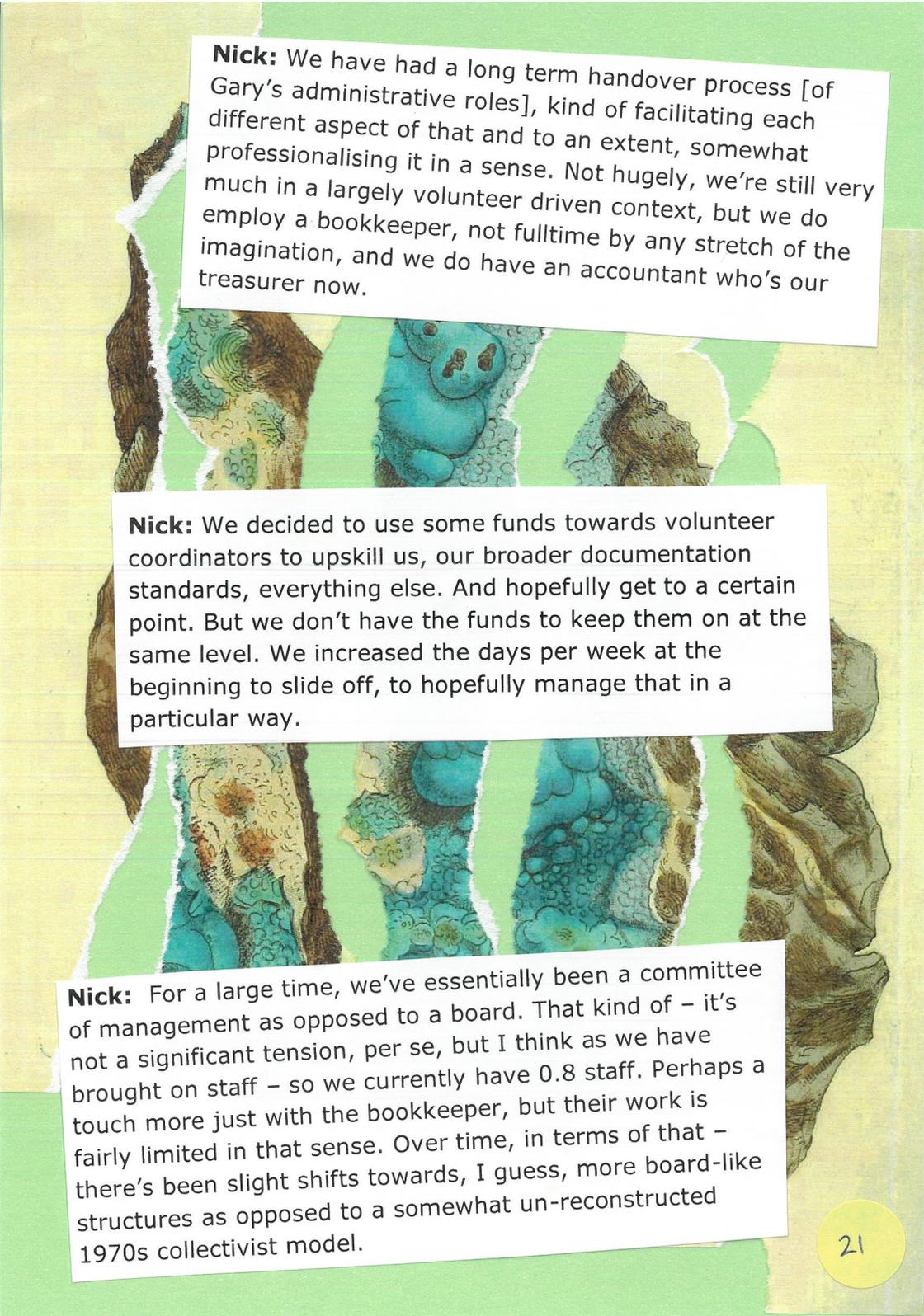
↑ Theatrette
Bar
Boardroom
Bookshop

← T

Community
engagement

Volunteer
Run

multi generational

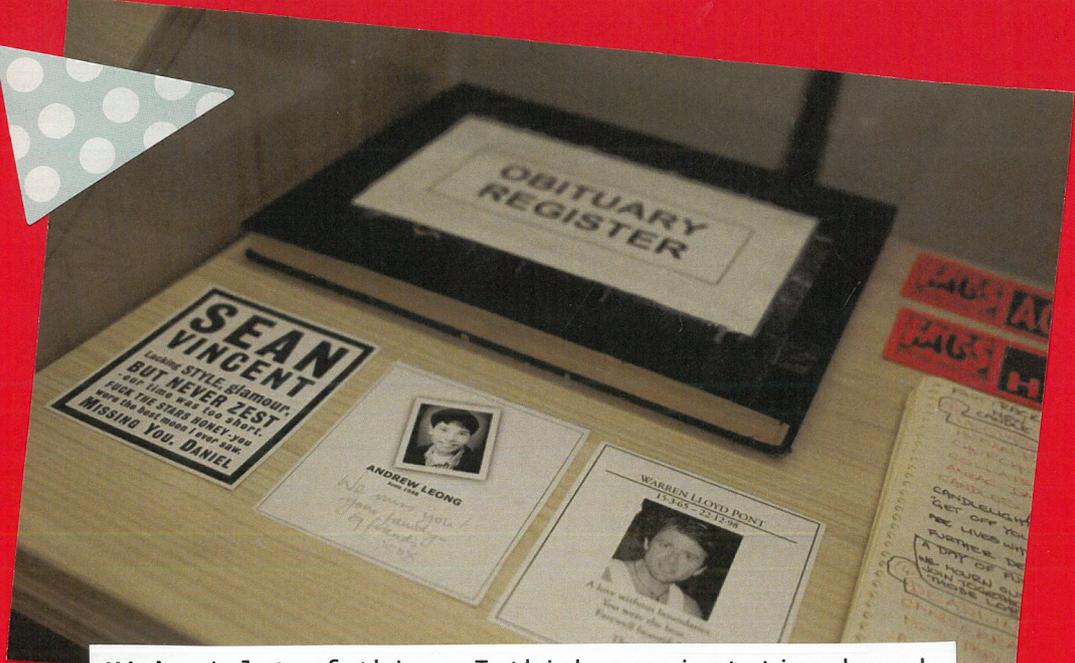


Nick: We have had a long term handover process [of Gary's administrative roles], kind of facilitating each different aspect of that and to an extent, somewhat professionalising it in a sense. Not hugely, we're still very much in a largely volunteer driven context, but we do employ a bookkeeper, not fulltime by any stretch of the imagination, and we do have an accountant who's our treasurer now.

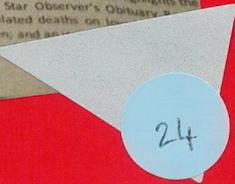
Nick: We decided to use some funds towards volunteer coordinators to upskill us, our broader documentation standards, everything else. And hopefully get to a certain point. But we don't have the funds to keep them on at the same level. We increased the days per week at the beginning to slide off, to hopefully manage that in a particular way.

Nick: For a large time, we've essentially been a committee of management as opposed to a board. That kind of – it's not a significant tension, per se, but I think as we have brought on staff – so we currently have 0.8 staff. Perhaps a touch more just with the bookkeeper, but their work is fairly limited in that sense. Over time, in terms of that – there's been slight shifts towards, I guess, more board-like structures as opposed to a somewhat un-reconstructed 1970s collectivist model.





Nick: A lot of things I think are just time based, and one of the things I think for any community archive is time. We understand and we manage time a bit differently, it's different from a gallery or a museum, it's not singular object focused. We're relational, we're networked, and a lot of that just does take a bit of time.



I'd love to have an Australian queer history reading group. I think I want to turn AQA into a library... which reminds me of how the project for the 50th will continue to be a place for queer + trans + gender + diverse voices.

What I hope for the future of AQA is...

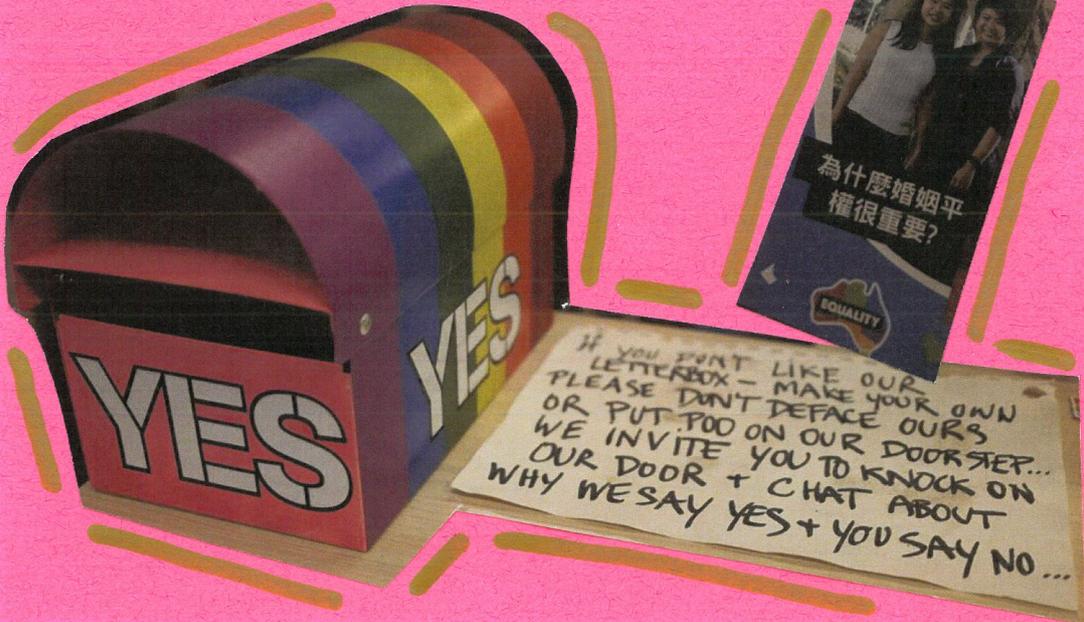
Volunteers and members will be more actively involved in governance if they want to be. Committee members will be more actively involved with and connected to volunteers.

We will have lots of opportunities for all the volunteers on our waiting list (and beyond) to be involved in all aspects of the Archives. We will co-create collections + metadata/description with community members and groups who donate them. We will be happy to help community members and groups archive their papers, ephemera + objects and take oral histories for the collections if they're comfortable adding to the collection.

We will run events in rural, regional + outer suburban parts of Australia + online. Not just in Melbourne/Australia. I would love to have a reading room and have books available for members to browse + learn from.

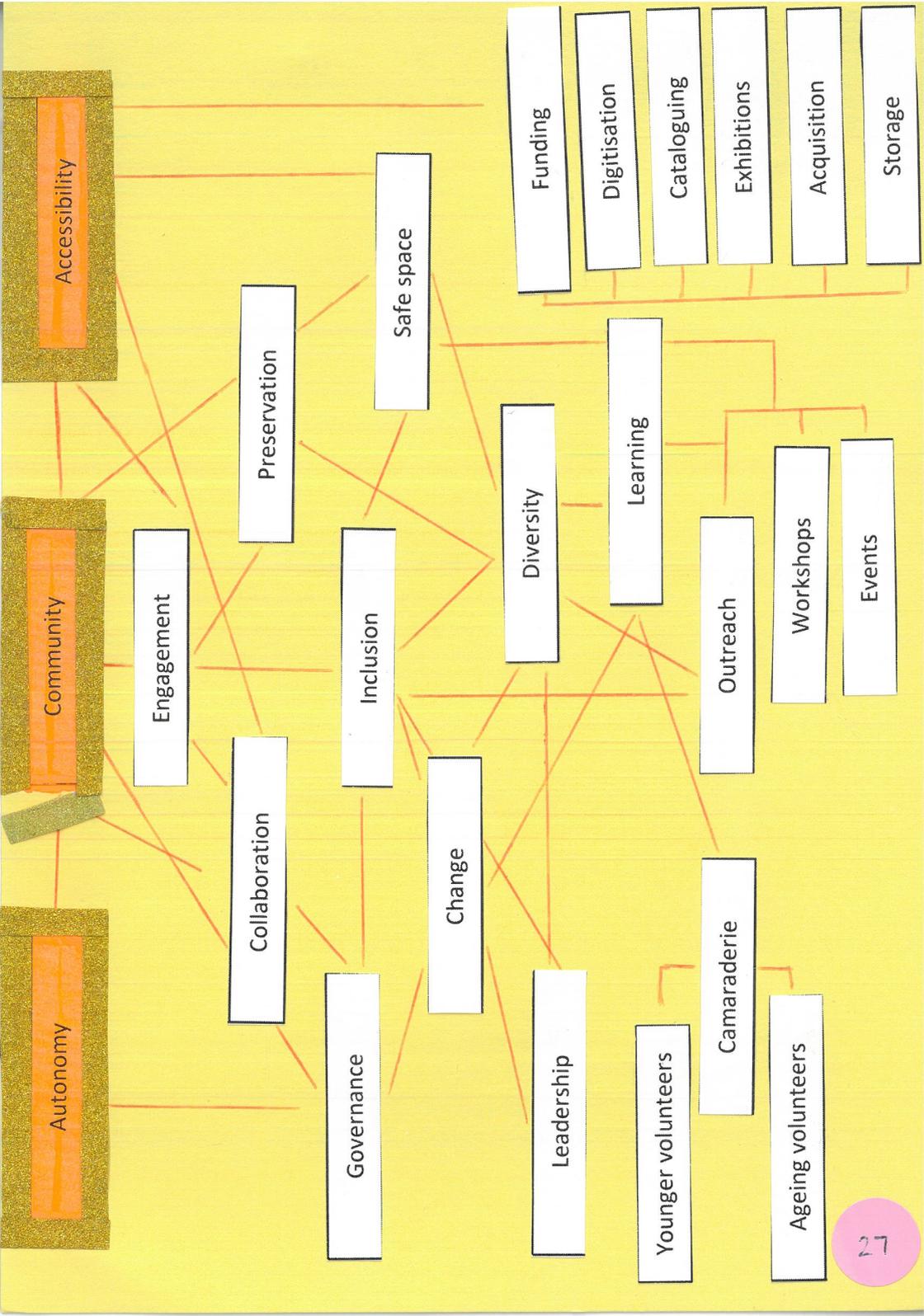
26

Nick: I think we engage the community pretty well. We are very much embedded in community in different ways, in a whole host of different ways. For example, there's queer history Facebook groups around Australia called Lost Gay Sydney, Lost Gay Melbourne, et cetera. That has been a way for us to do cataloguing. To engage community, to understand items better, to find out things, but also to connect. To say, "On this day 30 years ago, this club opened. Here's the flyer from the opening and photos from the community press." All of these things that we can go – it engages community, it provides connection, and for a lot of people, particularly as they get older and disconnected from community in different ways – and communities change in a lot of ways, a lot of venues have closed – it's an opportunity for people to reconnect and to share those memories in different ways. People go, "Here's something from my collection, would you be interested?" That happens all the time. Constantly. I probably do 2.5 acquisitions a week.



Nick: In the long term, looking at everything, we need to look at – we manage that in that way now, but moving into the future and just seeing the costs of storage, we can calculate the costs per box per shelf meterage for each site. We need to be really conscious, given the volume of material, how we manage what we manage and just also the costs associated time-wise with trying to manage small amounts of deaccessioning or anything like that, which is probably more than it's worth, if you know what I mean.





Accessibility

Community

Autonomy

Engagement

Preservation

Inclusion

Safe space

Collaboration

Change

Diversity

Learning

Outreach

Camaraderie

Governance

Leadership

Younger volunteers

Ageing volunteers

Funding

Digitisation

Cataloguing

Exhibitions

Acquisition

Storage

Workshops

Events

• What I hope for the future of AQUA is...

(older)

• that people of my generation

feel sufficiently invested in enabling

the Archivists to be (or become)

relevant to younger generations

• To secure AQUA's future, what we

need most is...

secure and affordable accommodation

for the collection, and the resources

to ensure it {remains} accessible (staffing)

(implications for opening hours

and a publicly available catalogue)

Zel: So what would you say are AQUA's top priorities over the next five years to maintain sustainable operations?

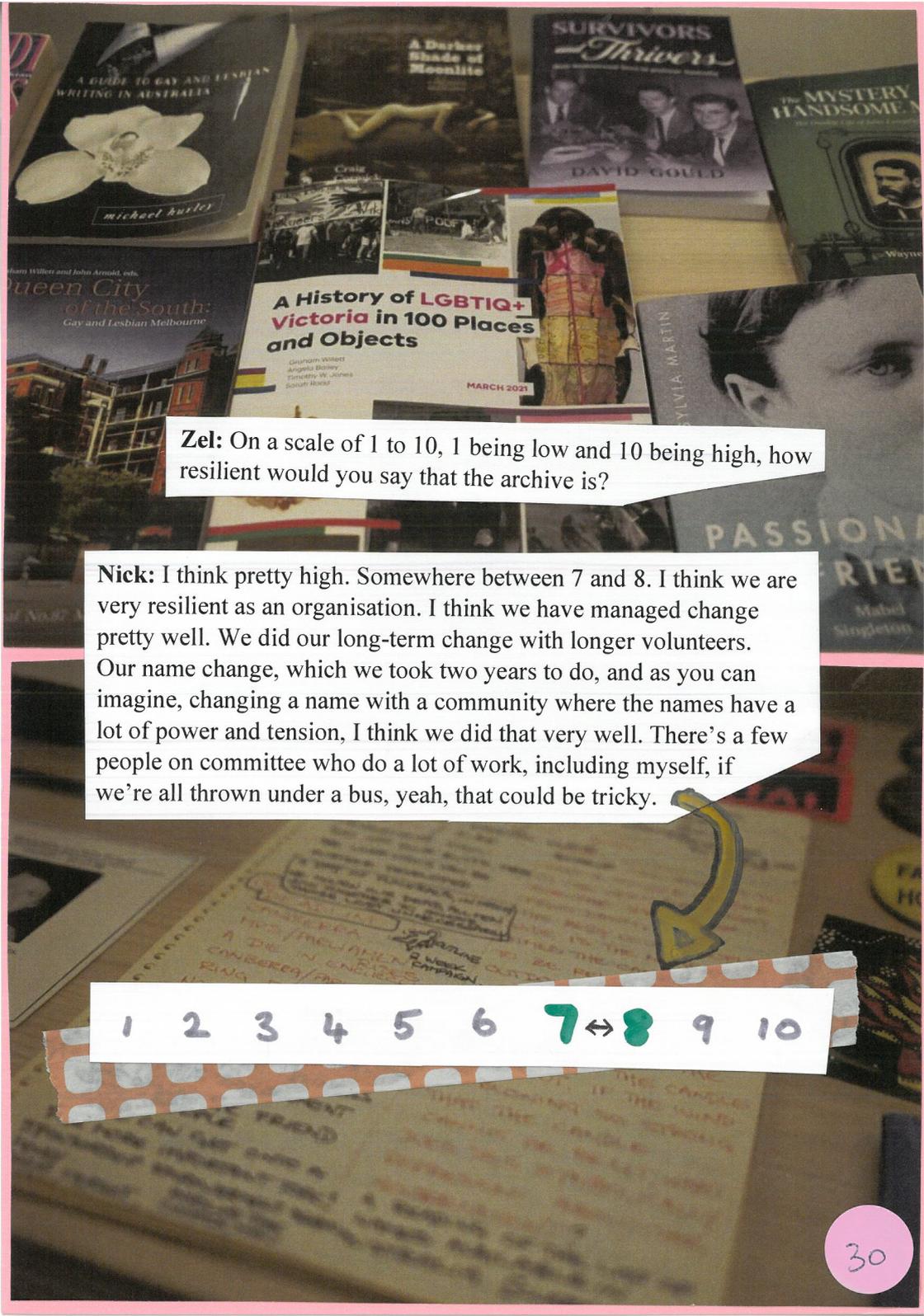
Nick: Let me pull up our actual strategic plan, which is very close to final form, because that means that I will actually be accurate when I talk to this.

Zel: That's interesting that you have an organisational sustainability component.

Nick: Absolutely. We're really conscious, we're coming up to our 50th anniversary, looking at sustainability, whether it's knowledge transfer, whether it's financial sustainability. ... [the strategic plan's top priorities for success by 2030 [are]: 1) preserve the collection, ... 2) have a searchable online catalogue, 3) increase reading room access, 4) expand the diversity of the collection, 5) have engaged members, volunteers and researchers, and 6) have a sustainable income.



Nick: So working through [the strategic plan] and seeing it as a narrative is part of that. Seeing it as a way to communicate. For us, I think practically, the goals are pretty similar to the previous ones, but I think that it is stronger in that sense, we tried to go back to first principles in the sense of understanding why we were talking about vision, mission and various things. Trying to communicate that as a broader narrative associated with the Archives. I think particularly as we move towards looking at – supporting fundraising as we go to our 50th is something as well. I think part of it, it's – some of these things that help over time, like we didn't use to calculate volunteer hours, so we do now.



Zel: On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being low and 10 being high, how resilient would you say that the archive is?

Nick: I think pretty high. Somewhere between 7 and 8. I think we are very resilient as an organisation. I think we have managed change pretty well. We did our long-term change with longer volunteers. Our name change, which we took two years to do, and as you can imagine, changing a name with a community where the names have a lot of power and tension, I think we did that very well. There's a few people on committee who do a lot of work, including myself, if we're all thrown under a bus, yeah, that could be tricky.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 ↔ 8 9 10



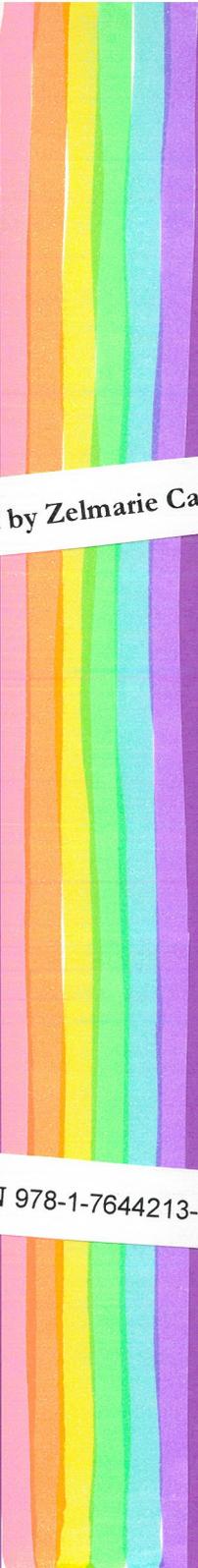
Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to Nick for being Zel's main point of contact for the research and for helping to arrange the zine workshop. Thanks also to Jessie for assisting in coordinating participants for the workshop.

Some images used throughout the zine were provided courtesy of AQUA (p. 6, top; p. 9, 23). Others were taken by Zel during fieldwork or sourced from databases of public domain images.

→ p. viii, bottom

A vertical strip of rainbow-colored paper is centered on a purple background. The colors from top to bottom are red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, and purple.

Compiled by Zelmarie Cantillon

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