

LIVING ARCHIVES

Beyond the Institution

***Home, Process and the Ethics
of Cultural Stewardship***

Flat Time House (London),
Charleston House (Firle),
The Alasdair Gray Archive (Glasgow).

by SORCHA DALLAS
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Sorch Dallas, photographed by Alan Dimmick

Biography

Sorch Dallas is the Custodian of the The Alasdair Gray Archive (established 2020) and The Agnes Owens Archive (established 2024) and worked closely with Alasdair Gray as his gallerist and representative for over twelve years. She has since led the research, archiving and accessioning of his work, and curated major public projects including The Alasdair Gray Season and a large retrospective exhibition at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in 2014-15. Dallas has published and presented internationally on Gray's visual practice, and has facilitated acquisitions of his work by major collections including the Tate, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and Arts Council England. She has also overseen significant commissions and projects connected to Gray's legacy, including collaborations with Pringle of Scotland and the stage adaptation of Lanark for the Edinburgh International Festival and Citizens Theatre. She has foregrounded creating an archive that embeds Gray's approach to making as a socially focused activity using a 'living archive' model, making the case for his collection to be recognised as being of civic and national importance.

Summary

This study examines three artist-centred archival models – Flat Time House (London), Charleston House (Firle) and The Alasdair Gray Archive (Glasgow) – to explore how domestic space, artistic process and public engagement are reshaping contemporary archival practice beyond traditional institutional frameworks. Research has also been drawn also from my new Chapter: 'Building a legacy through The Alasdair Gray Archive' From *The Edinburgh Companion to Alasdair Gray & the Arts* (Edinburgh University Press, 2026, eds Prof. Marie Hedon, Prof. Camille Manfredi & Prof. Kirsten Stirling). Rather than treating archives as static repositories focused primarily on conservation and scholarly access, the archive is positioned as a living social ecosystem rooted in community participation, creative production and radical accessibility.

Drawing on feminist archival theory, ethics of care, artist-led organisational models and theories of the domestic interior, the study argues that artist archives can operate as dynamic civic infrastructures that resist hierarchical systems of cultural authority. Particular attention is given to the role of the home as both a site of artistic production and a curatorial methodology. Through examining the domestic environments of Alasdair Gray and John Latham, alongside the preservation strategies employed at Charleston House, it proposes that these archives create new forms of public intimacy and collective memory.

The discussion further explores how The Alasdair Gray Archive extends Gray's socially conscious practice through collaborative cataloguing, oral history, community engagement and creative commissioning. It contends that archives are never neutral spaces but are actively shaped through curatorial intervention, emotional labour and political choice. In doing so, it frames the "living archive" as a critical alternative to institutional models increasingly shaped by market logic, precarity and restricted public access.



The Alasdair Gray Archive, photographed by Alasdair Watson



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Introduction

Across the United Kingdom, a growing number of artist archives are challenging traditional institutional approaches to cultural stewardship. Historically, archives have functioned as sites where preservation, classification and scholarly authority are prioritised over public encounter. Yet contemporary artist-led archival projects increasingly resist these structures, instead foregrounding participation, process, co-authorship and social engagement.

This shift raises critical questions: what happens when the archive is treated not as a fixed repository but as a living cultural organism? What forms of knowledge emerge when domestic space, memory and everyday life become central curatorial tools? And how might artist archives operate beyond institutional boundaries while still maintaining scholarly and archival rigour?

These questions are especially pertinent in relation to artist homes and studios. As Kirsty Bell argues in *The Artist's House*, the domestic interior allows "the personal, the intimate, or the peripheral [to] become the locus of meaning, rather than exterior events or public occurrences" (Bell 2013, 8). The home becomes not merely backdrop but methodology: a structure through which artistic labour, collaboration and social relations are made visible.

This study considers three significant examples of archival practice operating through this expanded framework: Flat Time House, established following the death of conceptual artist John Latham; Charleston House, the former home of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant and now a major site of Bloomsbury scholarship and public engagement; and The Alasdair Gray Archive (AGA), a contemporary living archive preserving and activating the legacy of Alasdair Gray and others.

While differing in structure and scale, these projects share important characteristics. Each uses domestic space as a curatorial device; each foregrounds process over static completion; and each positions public participation as central rather than supplementary to archival practice. Collectively, they suggest new possibilities for how archives might function as socially embedded cultural infrastructures.

The Domestic Interior as Archival Methodology

The relationship between domestic space and creative production has long occupied artists, writers and theorists. Gaston Bachelard famously described the house as “our corner of the world... our first universe” (Bachelard 1969, 14). Within artist archives, the domestic interior often becomes a mechanism through which biography, process and social history are materially preserved.

For Alasdair Gray, home and studio were inseparable. Gray consistently lived and worked within domestic environments where creative labour unfolded communally and in relation to others. His final home at Marchmont Terrace in Glasgow embodied this approach. Books, unfinished artworks, correspondence, found objects and furniture accumulated organically across the flat, forming what might be described as a living map of intellectual and social exchange.

The significance of this environment extends beyond biography. As Bell argues, domestic space allows overlooked histories and peripheral narratives to emerge into visibility. Gray's home was not organised according to institutional hierarchy but according to use, encounter and ongoing process. Draft manuscripts of *Lanark* sat alongside sketchbooks, annotated books, shells inscribed with memories, collaborative mural plans and letters from friends and fellow writers. Such juxtapositions reveal the extent to which Gray's practice depended upon social interconnection.

This resonates strongly with Gray's own belief that culture should remain publicly accessible and collectively owned. Gray repeatedly framed libraries, books and storytelling as democratic civic tools. Reflecting on his childhood experiences in Glasgow libraries, he later described them as “being like a university to him.” These formative experiences informed both his creative practice and the philosophy underpinning his archive.



Alasdair Gray at home, Kersland Street, 1983, photographed by Alan Wylie

The domestic interior similarly underpins the conceptual framework of Flat Time House. Established after John Latham's death in 2006, the project transformed Latham's former home and studio into a site for contemporary art, alternative education and public programming. Conceived initially as part artwork and part social experiment, Flat Time House resists the conventional separation between archive, exhibition space and lived environment.

Like Gray, Latham rejected static understandings of artistic production. His "Flat Time" theory proposed that all events exist simultaneously within a continuous temporal field, disrupting linear historical narratives. The domestic structure of Flat Time House materialises this concept architecturally: archive, artwork, discussion, performance and research coexist within the same spatial ecosystem.



Flat Time House, © Jean Philippe Woodland

Charleston House offers another important model. Unlike the experimental frameworks of Flat Time House and AGA, Charleston operates within a more established heritage structure. Nevertheless, its preservation of domestic intimacy remains central to its significance. Visitors encounter not simply artworks by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, but an immersive environment in which walls, furniture, objects and decoration collectively document the social and artistic entanglements of the Bloomsbury Group.



Charleston House, © Lewis Ronald

What unites these projects is an understanding that domestic environments preserve forms of cultural knowledge often erased by institutional archival systems. They reveal process rather than product; collaboration rather than individual genius; and everyday labour rather than mythologised artistic exceptionalism.



The Alasdair Gray Archive, photographed by Alasdair Watson

Beyond Neutrality: Archives, Care and Curatorial Intervention

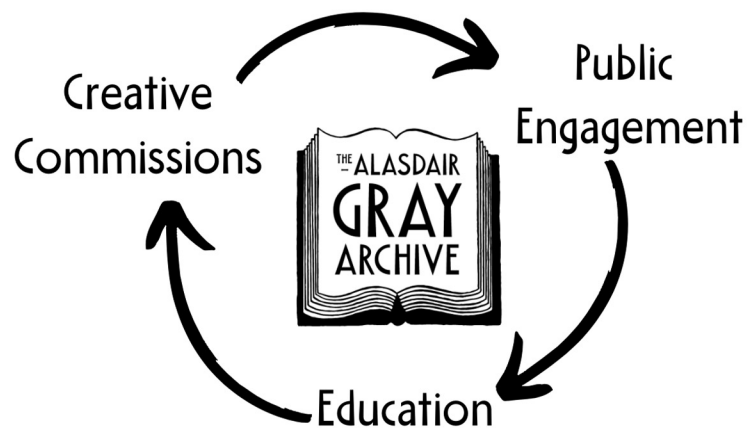
Traditional archival theory has frequently emphasised neutrality, original order and institutional objectivity. Yet contemporary archival scholars increasingly challenge these assumptions. Randall Jimerson argues that archives are never neutral repositories but active sites of power shaped through selection, arrangement and access (Jimerson 2009). Similarly, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor propose “radical empathy” as a feminist archival methodology rooted in care, accountability and emotional responsibility.

These frameworks are particularly useful in understanding the curatorial approach developed at The Alasdair Gray Archive. Unlike many institutional archives, AGA opened publicly while still in formation. Rather than prioritising stabilisation before access, engagement became central from inception.

This decision reflected Gray’s own ethics. Throughout his life Gray resisted hierarchical structures of artistic production. He openly acknowledged assistants and collaborators, credited labour transparently and insisted on equal rates of pay. His practice foregrounded interdependence rather than singular authorship.

The archive extends this methodology structurally. Collections have been reorganised thematically and relationally rather than strictly according to conventional archival provenance. Boxes dedicated to writers, collaborators, family members and contemporaries reveal the wider networks through which Gray’s work emerged. The result is an archive organised less around the mythology of the solitary artist than around webs of social production.

CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM



This approach departs significantly from standard archival practice. Yet it also creates new forms of accessibility. By embedding curatorial knowledge directly into catalogue systems and physically reorganising material around thematic relationships, AGA encourages exploratory encounter rather than specialist gatekeeping.

Importantly, this work is deeply shaped by emotional and care labour. The archive was established rapidly following Gray's death in 2019, with thousands of items relocated from his home shortly before the first COVID-19 lockdown. The process involved not simply cataloguing but grieving, remembering and reconstructing a social environment.

Such labour is frequently invisible within institutional narratives of archival professionalism. Feminist archival methodologies, however, insist that affect, care and relationality are integral to knowledge production rather than external to it. AGA demonstrates how these principles can operate practically within collections management and organisational governance.



The Alasdair Gray Archive, photographed by Alasdair Watson

Living Archives and Collaborative Ecosystems

A defining characteristic of living archives is their refusal of closure. Rather than presenting collections as complete or fixed, they remain open to reinterpretation, expansion and participation.

This principle is central to AGA's organisational model. Since its establishment, the archive has developed through partnerships with universities, artists, writers, schools and community organisations. Oral histories, creative commissions, public events and educational programmes continuously extend the archive's interpretive framework. This reflects Gray's own understanding of culture as collaborative and cumulative. Gray consistently described himself as "an artist who fell into writing," positioning his work within wider traditions of visual art, literature, politics and collective struggle. His famous slogan – "Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation" – encapsulates this belief in culture as a shared civic project.

The archive's commissioning programme extends this ethos directly. Writers and artists are invited to respond creatively to the collection, generating new layers of interpretation. Such activity positions the archive not as endpoint but as catalyst for future production.

This approach bears comparison with Flat Time House's educational and residency programmes, which similarly activate archival material through contemporary artistic practice. Both projects resist reducing the artist archive to memorialisation alone. Instead, they position the archive as an active participant within contemporary cultural discourse. Charleston House also increasingly operates through this expanded framework. Though historically associated with heritage preservation, its contemporary programming includes exhibitions, residencies, talks and educational initiatives that reinterpret Bloomsbury legacies in relation to present-day concerns. Collectively, these models suggest that the future of artist archives may lie not in institutional consolidation but in distributed, participatory and socially embedded structures.



Flat Time House, photographed by Ken Adlard



The studio at Charleston House, © Hannah Kroes, Art Distance

Home, Precarity, and Cultural Politics

The emergence of living archives also reflects wider structural pressures within contemporary culture. Across the UK, artists' estates and archives increasingly face precarity due to rising property costs, unstable funding and shrinking public cultural infrastructure. Domestic archives occupy an especially vulnerable position within this landscape. Artist homes frequently exist outside formal institutional systems and depend heavily upon unpaid labour, personal commitment and fragile funding structures.

The establishment of AGA demonstrates these tensions acutely. Much of the archive's early development relied upon voluntary labour, emergency funding and collaborative support from individuals across Glasgow's cultural sector. Its continued sustainability remains tied to ongoing questions of infrastructural investment and public policy.

Yet this precarity also reveals the political significance of such archives. They preserve not only artworks and manuscripts but alternative models of cultural organisation. Gray's archive foregrounds collectivism, mutual aid and public access in opposition to increasingly market-driven understandings of culture.

This political dimension aligns with Gray's lifelong commitment to documenting overlooked Scottish histories and working-class experience. As in novels such as *Poor Things* and *Lanark*, the archive insists upon culture as a shared social resource rather than private commodity.

The domestic setting intensifies this politics. By preserving ordinary spaces of making – bedsits, living rooms, crowded bookshelves and improvised studios – these archives challenge dominant cultural narratives that privilege institutional authority and elite production.

Conclusion

The emergence of living archives beyond institutional boundaries signals an important shift in contemporary cultural stewardship.

Projects such as Flat Time House, Charleston and The Alasdair Gray Archive demonstrate how archives can operate simultaneously as research centres, social spaces, educational infrastructures and sites of creative production.

Central to these models is the domestic interior. Far from being incidental, home functions as methodology: a means of preserving process, collaboration and everyday cultural labour. Through domestic space, these archives foreground forms of knowledge frequently excluded from institutional systems.

At the same time, they challenge archival neutrality. Their structures openly acknowledge curatorial intervention, emotional labour and political responsibility. Rather than aspiring toward detached objectivity, they embrace care, participation and relationality as central archival values.

Among these examples, The Alasdair Gray Archive offers a particularly compelling contemporary model. By embedding Gray's ethical framework into organisational practice, it demonstrates how archives might remain active, porous and socially accountable. In doing so, it positions cultural stewardship not as an act of preservation alone but as an ongoing collective process of making, remembering and imagining otherwise.



The Alasdair Gray Archive, photographed by Alan Dimmick

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