

Arkæologisk Forum

Nr.39
2018



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Contemporary Archaeology

Review of Contemporary & Historical Archaeology in Theory conference

The 16th annual CHAT (Contemporary & Historical Archaeology in Theory) conference took place at Moesgaard Museum and Campus on 26-28 October 2018. Despite an enduring engagement from Nordic archaeologists over the years this was the first time a Nordic institution hosted the conference. The following paper will present a short background to CHAT as an organization, the aims of the conference and will highlight some of the discussions, debates and presentations from across the weekend.

Despite its relatively recent emergence in Danish archaeology, interest in the material world of the contemporary has a relatively long history in terms of scholarly publications, especially in the English-speaking academy. Dating back to the late 1970s with groundbreaking work on modern material culture by William Rathje (1979) and Brian Schiffer and Richard Gould (1981) archaeologists initially were interested in modern material culture in order to theorize how we understand the material culture of the past. In the UK, Graves-Brown (2000) and Buchli and Lucas (2001) pushed this agenda further by posing big questions about how and why we engage with the material world around us and how it may have social relevance. Alongside their theoretically-nuanced introduction, Buchli and Lucas's excavation of an abandoned council house divided opinion at the time regarding our roles and ethics in using archaeological techniques to explore the present. These are enduring questions, as the Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) conference hosted at Aarhus in October 2018 revealed (more on this later). In 2018 a new generation of contemporary archaeology scholars have not only emerged but are established in a variety of contexts, including throughout the Nordic region, and the vibrancy of the discipline is clear in the range and variety of questions they are asking about how we engage with archaeology and the world around us.

While archaeological encounters with a variety of pressing contemporary issues have been included in mainstream archaeology journals (including the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, which was established in 2014) for some time there have been an increasing number of edited volumes and monographs exploring what archaeological methodologies, theories and

'imagination' bring to our understandings of contemporary society. These studies cover a range of areas from exploring late modern cities (McAtackney & Ryzewski 2017), to 'natural' catastrophes (Dawdy 2016), to the meaning of modern ruins (Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2014). It is only in the recent past that this field of interest have gained traction within thinking and practice in the Danish context. This includes archaeologies of abandonment in rural Denmark (Sørensen 2017) and Danish-led archaeologies of recent cave use in Greece (Andreason et al 2017), as well as a range of issues in terms of doing archaeology in the contemporary world (see *Arkæologisk Forum* nr.35). Furthermore, there are also a small number of archaeologists working in Denmark who bring their understandings of contemporary archaeology from other contexts, including one of the co-authors of this piece, Laura McAtackney (originally from Ireland) and Nick Shepherd (originally from South Africa), who are both at Aarhus University. Clearly, there is a growing awareness, interest and care for our recent and contemporary past in Denmark and so this report presents some highlights, discussions and talking points from the recent CHAT conference held at Aarhus University.

CHAT 2018

The 16th annual CHAT conference was held over three days at Moesgaard Museum and Campus, marking the first time this conference has been hosted by an institution in the wider Nordic region. The conference was organised by Laura McAtackney, who has been on the CHAT committee since 2008 and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Aarhus University. CHAT is a



Figur 1. Inspired by General Pitt Rivers' typologies Gísli Pálsson and Gerby Mark print methodological tools used by archaeologists in the contemporary (Image by Dan Lee)

peripatetic conference but until recently was mainly hosted by universities in the UK. The conference was established by Dan Hicks and Angela Piccini (who were both in attendance at Aarhus) when they were both based at the University of Bristol (Hicks is now the first Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford) in 2003. Outside of the UK, CHAT has also taken place in Dublin (2004), Boston (2011), Plzeň (2014) and Amsterdam (2017). CHAT has traditionally held annual conferences and (sometimes) resulting publications with the local host holding a significant degree of autonomy over what form the conference takes (see CHAT website). The theme of CHAT in Aarhus was 'CHAT ACT: Agency, Action and Advocacy,' it aimed to explore the potential, possibilities and limitations of how we can be archaeologists, and do archaeology, in an increasingly uncertain and politically polarized contemporary world. While we are facing the challenges of intensified urban growth, mass-migration, neoliberal capitalism, geopolitical conflict and the consequence of Anthropocene disasters on a global scale, do we have a place and what is our response?

Conference contributions

The conference offered a range of different formats to ensure maximum interaction between all attendees. This included six plenary panels, an 'in conversation' between Whitney Battle-Baptiste (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, author of 'Black Feminist Archaeology') and Rachael Kiddey (University of Oxford, author of 'Homeless Heritage') chaired by David Harvey (Aarhus University), six parallel workshops, a publication launch, film screenings, and an experimental typology creation project (in which attendees had their own methodological tools printed for them by Gísli Pálsson and Gerby Mark). The attendees came from all over the world (outside of Europe this included South Korea, China, Canada, and USA) and were scholars, practitioners and students from a variety of branches of archaeology, heritage management, and other related disciplines. The presentations gave a rich insight into archaeological contexts and situations globally with contributions ranged from exploring the impact of public archaeology in China (Stojevic) and the study of modern archaeological materials such as plastic waste

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Figur 2. In Conversation – Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Rachael Kiddey with David Harvey (Chair) discussing their conceptions of how they ‘act’ as contemporary archaeologists. (Image by Dan Lee)

(Agbe-Davies and Deetz), to the more difficult aspects of our contemporary world: including the uses and forms of civil war memorials in Finland and the US (Mullins and Ylimaunu), sites of political resistance and protests (Chenoweth) and racial inequalities (Graff) in the US and landscapes of repressed war-time memories in Spain (de Vos).

The conference started appropriately with April Beisaw and Kelsey Noack Myers’s presentation asking: “how contemporary can archaeology be...”. Drawing on their fieldwork documenting sites in the US related to the recent construction of infrastructure including oil pipelines across Native American ancestral lands, theRebecair talk uncovered significant problems for all archaeologists involved in terms of how we can do our work – whether that be in cultural resource management or as university-based research archaeologists. They discussed issues such as how embedded we are with communities, timescales to turn around research for academics, conflict of interests between economic interests, political agendas and the preservation of cultural resources and what we consider the ‘archaeology’ in the context of such contested landscapes. While such issues may seem far away from Danish archaeology, they still provoked consideration as to how robust the legal frameworks and mechanisms truly are for protecting archaeology in any nation and what are our ethics in terms of our responsibilities to objects / communities. In a German context, Attila Dézsi presented an evocative project on his community-based excavation project at a site of long-

standing anti-nuclear protests. He presented findings from excavations at an activist camp which, since the 1980s, has been the scene of protests towards the building of a nuclear waste facility. He noted various evolving issues he has encountered in terms of how we work with various stakeholders and what is the impact of the changing political context regarding processing energy waste. Shining a light on the ethics of recent historical and contemporary archaeology in the UK, Jonathan Gardner talked about guilt by association in terms of how archaeologists are involved in developer-funded archaeology and how this may clash with public interests. He asked if archaeologists working with the developer archaeology sector should be more critical towards which projects, they undertake and how their findings are used.

Perspectives regarding the ethical responsibilities of archaeologists working within the cultural resource management industry were unfolded by practitioners from the Swedish consulting firm Kulturlandskapet. Based on anarchic principles of organization, they promote an innovative stance for citizen inclusion and democratization as part of archaeological fieldwork and urban planning. From a theoretical perspective, Tim



Figur 3. In discussion at the end of their session - Attila Dézsi, Jonathan Gardner and John Chenoweth in the Auditorium of Moesgaard Museum (Image by Dan Lee)

Flohr Sørensen and Þóra Pétursdóttir presented, ‘A View from the Depraved Ethics of the Contemporary,’ in which they sought to answer critiques they have experienced in being contemporary archaeologists who focus on things and post-human conditions of the Anthropocene. Criticisms of aestheticizing and fetishizing the material and negating real world issues, were countered by referencing Adorno’s famous quotation ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (1983: 34) in which they argued for broader understandings of ethics and the need for contemporary archaeology to include a variety of perspectives, standpoints and methodologies.

The conference, however, was also open to the more creative side of contemporary archaeology, exemplified by Rebecca Hearne’s presentation, “Pigeons: pooping, disease-ridden pests or ambassadors of nature in an otherwise urban setting”, in which she discussed how contemporary archaeology may inspire pedagogic approaches to engaging with children through the case-study of Rotherham, a deprived city in Northern England. Her presentation showed how facilitating children to engage with the city through their eyes allowed them to re-imagine and reclaim ‘their’ city through playful exploration, co-creation and a little (temporary) memorialization. Further creative approaches could be seen in Jaime Almansa-Sánchez and Elena Papagiannopoulou’s talk on their systematic documentation of “tagging” (graffiti, signs, posters etc.) through inner city Athens. They argued their insights reveal the beat of urban discourse by highlighting the interactions of creativity, commercialism, ideological



Figur 4. Creativity in working with marginalized children in Rotherham by Rebecca Hearne in her presentation: “Pigeons: pooping, disease-ridden pests or ambassadors of nature in an otherwise urban setting” (Image by Jeff Oliver)

struggle and even support of local football teams. Also, Daniel Lee’s paper “ACT | EXPERIMENT | INNOVATE” promoted novel experimental approaches to the mapping of archaeological landscapes through digital technologies.

An innovation for CHAT ACT was the introduction of parallel workshop on Saturday and Sunday mornings (the conference is almost always plenary) to allow deeper discussions in small groups that aimed to allow participants to think through and discuss their interests beyond the usual 20-minute presentation. Workshops included gender activism (facilitated by Julie Rokkjær Birch of Kvindemuseet in Aarhus), how we engage with colonialism and its legacies as part of our practices (facilitated by Dutch archaeologists Marjolijn Kok and Jobbe Wijnen), how we can incorporate film practices (facilitated by Angela Piccini) and creative engagements with the planning process in terms of architecture, heritage and history (with Swedish architect Magnus Rönn). The Saturday night included a two hour film session with three contributions exploring issues of citizenship, prisoner rehabilitation and memories of forced movement in the aftermath of World War II. While this range of different formats may not survive – at least in this particular form – into future CHATs there was an overall very positive response to the conversations they facilitated amongst conference attendees.

Emergent discussion & conference outcome

With such an eclectic mix of presentations styles, forms and content it is difficult to pinpoint any strong or definitive conclusions to come from the conference other than to marvel at the wide array of offerings in terms with how we are being archaeologists, and doing archaeology of, the contemporary. There were a lot of case-studies and evidence of best practice to help us think about how we may diversify or reconsider our practices. There were also a lot of cautionary tales regarding the limitations of what we are currently doing – including Harald Fredheim’s critical assessment of how we work with local communities and whether we are in danger of becoming “heritage hipsters”. It was clear in terms of how we do contemporary archaeology that there are divergent practices around the world and these are as much determined by the nature of what we consider archaeology, as the limitations of existing

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legal frameworks and theoretical standpoints. The Danish archaeologists who presented – Tim Flohr Sørensen and Julie de Vos – and participated from the audience provided a range of Danish perspectives on the themes under discussion. The focus on how diverse our understandings and engagements with the world are, resulted in a general acknowledgement that our differences as well as our similarities as archaeologists are indicative of a dynamic and growing sub-discipline.

Future horizons of CHAT (London 2019)

Moving forward the conference ended with discussions on the many interconnections there will be with the next CHAT conference, which will be hosted by the Museum of London in the UK in 2019. With a theme of “Methodologies” it was clear at CHAT ACT that there is a growing interest in discussing in more depth how we do contemporary archaeology and how those methodologies impact on what we find out. We look forward to London to have yet more inclusive and broad discussions about doing contemporary archaeology next year. We hope even more Danish colleagues can join us then!

Links

Arkæologisk Forum nr. 35
<http://www.archaeology.dk/16142/Nr.%2035%20-%202016>

CHAT website
<http://chat-arch.org/>

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Udgiver:

Foreningen af Fagarkæologer – FaF

Forsidebillede:

"Er straks tilbage" – Holmegaards Glasværk.
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Tryk og oplag:

Museum Vestsjælland trykker 250 stk.

Arkæologisk Forum udkommer:

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Abonnement og løssalg private:

175,- kr. årligt (2 numre)
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ISSN 1399-5545



Foreningen af
Fagarkæologer
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Nr. 39
2018
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