A Cadillac, a collection and a community

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Abstract:
The Frank and Eunice Corley House Photographs collection comprises over 60,000 unsold house photographs that were donated to State Library of Queensland in 1995. Enhancing the usability and user experience of this collection was a project that spanned 23 years. State Library collaborated with the local community early to develop a grassroots approach to identifying basic location data. Later, it worked with artists, researchers and the general public to foster new understandings of the collection. This paper will highlight how digital tools and analogue processes were integral to facilitating these diverse interpretations.

> "It's such a unique collection. There's no other record of that number of houses, from that time, the 1970s, not only in Brisbane, but we have regional areas covered as well, which is very important."
> — *Patricia Parr, Retrospective Collecting Coordinator, Queensland Memory State Library of Queensland (Yeh, 2019a)*

There is a collection of black and white house photographs tucked away in the depths of the State Library of Queensland's repositories. The printed ones with a white border that you remember in photograph albums. Photos that were once ubiquitous in family collections. The houses contained in the photographs are often unremarkable, but the impression they leave is unforgettable. They leave a mark on their viewer and have the power to elicit the most diverse emotions: happiness, sadness, longing, anger, nostalgia, grief, pride and hope.

This collection is now known as the Frank and Eunice Corley House Photographs collection and comprises over 60,000 unsold house photographs that were donated to State Library in 1995 (Wilson, 2005). At the time of acquisition, with only physical copies of the photos and only general details of where they were taken, State Library faced a momentous challenge: how might State Library make this collection not only accessible but also useful and meaningful to a Queensland audience? Overcoming this challenge was no easy feat—the process spanned 23 years and used multiple modes of engagement to breathe life into the story of this collection.

Community engagement was the first step to understanding the collection. In the early stages of making meaning, before digitisation was a viable option, State Library collaborated with the local community to develop a grassroots approach to identifying basic location data about the homes that would enable better organisation and understanding of the value of the collection.

From there, digitising the collection was also crucial to the process. However, it is one thing to digitise a collection of this size; it is another to decide what comes next. As many collecting institutions can testify, it is not enough to simply digitise a collection, release it to the wider public and presume that it will take on a life of its own.

State Library applied a participatory design methodology and a community engagement model in order to increase discoverability of the collection and to shape a unique user experience with it. Through an exhibition, *Home: a suburban obsession*, a digital platform, the *Corley Explorer,* and a series of immersive public programming activities, State Library sought to experiment with myriad means of connecting communities with its collections.

With many successes and some failures, the result of these approaches has allowed us, and our viewing public, to develop new, and more nuanced, understandings of the Corley Collection. What was once a seemingly simple (but large) set of black and white house photographs is now a collection that celebrates the hidden histories of Queensland's houses; stories not commonly told; stories of resourcefulness, creativity and individuality; and stories that demonstrate the diversity of the Queensland home experience.

Background

The context of the Frank and Eunice Corley story and their collection has deeply informed State Library's approach to the development of the user experience of the collection and this project. Mystery, intrigue, storytelling and community involvement are all core elements interwoven into the history of the collection, all of which significantly enhanced the successful outcome of the project.

The Frank and Eunice Corley story

Frank and Eunice Corley were a married couple who operated the Pan-American Home Photographic Co., which records indicate was the photographic division of their main business, F. & E. Corley Interstate Enterprises and Co. (Corley and Corley, 1969 - 1972).

Through their business, the Corleys left us an extensive physical legacy: one of the largest single photographic collections of Queensland housing. However, the story of the couple behind the lens remains largely speculative. Not much is known about the entrepreneurial couple. What we do know about them has a compellingly iconic quality: they travelled South East Queensland in a Cadillac from the late 1960s to the 1970s, managing door-to-door sales of photographs and personalised calendars through the Pan American Home Photographic Co.

According to Doug Spowart (Yeh, 2019b), the Corleys had a team of photographers, printers and salespeople. Frank would trawl the streets in the Cadillac using a Leica camera to photograph houses while 'steering with his knees'. Eunice would develop the postcard-sized, black-and white photographs in a mobile darkroom. A salesman would then sell them to householders as standalone images, Christmas cards or calendar inserts.

The Corleys are thought to have taken over a quarter of a million photographs of houses throughout South East Queensland and as far north as Bundaberg. Around two-thirds of the photographs were sold to householders, and those remaining ended up in boxes beneath the Corleys' house.

An exciting learning from the research process was discovering the significant contribution of Eunice to the business. When the collection was acquired in 1995, it had been via Frank's estate after the deaths of Frank and Eunice. A presumption was made that Frank was the sole contributor to the business. With little information to rely on, the collection was acquisitioned and added to the collection as *The Frank Corley House Photographs.*

After learning about Eunice's involvement in the process, the project team informally began referring to the collection as *The Frank and Eunice Corley House Photographs.* As the exhibition got closer to opening, this title started to be formalised in use in didactics and copy relating to the exhibition. The adoption of the new name in this way led to vigorous debate internally as to what title should remain—should the didactic copy be altered to adhere to the original title or should the collection title be changed to reflect the new knowledge that had come to light? Ultimately, the State Library agreed that it was best to acknowledge Eunice's previously overlooked contribution to the creation of the collection, and the title of the collection was changed in all records.

The collection

In June 1995, all 67 boxes, featuring 61,490 prints, were donated to State Library of Queensland. No negatives or paperwork accompanied the prints, and each box was marked with a 'spool identifier' that linked the images to a general location (Wilson, 2019a).

In late 2001, State Library volunteer John Wilson began the lengthy and complex process of sorting the prints. This process involved translating Frank's handwritten spool identifiers to crack the photographer's organisational code (Wilson, 2005). As Patricia Parr noted (Yeh, 2019a),

> *"…this was pre-Google Earth [sic] and there were minimal technological tools available to assist with identifying houses. Instead, Wilson relied on other volunteers to help him verify addresses, as well as the judicious use of Australia Post workers, who, in riding their routes were able to confirm particular houses…"*

This painstaking work laid the foundation for later users of the collection to launch their own community research projects.

In 2014, the Annerley-Stephens History Group Inc. (ASHG) launched *The Frank Corley House Photos Project*, drawing community attention to the collection and engaging residents in identifying photographed houses. As Denis Peel explains,

> *"…The pilot project launched on Saturday 8 Nov 2014 with volunteers being asked to gather in Lagonda Park, Annerley. A group of 20 assembled and after briefing headed off in four directions each group with a proof sheet of a Corley reel. After walking the streets and identifying and photographing the surviving houses, the group reassembled for a debrief…"* (Peel, 2015)

In 2017, the work of this group was recognised by State Library when it became the winner of the John Oxley Library Community History Award (State Library of Queensland, 2019) for the group's continued and highly successful engagement with communities using the Corley Collection. The outcomes from the history group's efforts demonstrated that with deep community involvement, there was an opportunity to use the collection to:

- Develop a strong interest in identifying the original location of Corley houses
- Stimulate interest in local history
- Create conversations among neighbours and communities
- Study suburban change over time
- Document personal histories of residents (Peel, 2015)

Wilson's and the ASHG's methodological approach to community engagement can be viewed as experiments and prototypes in crowdsourcing new knowledge about the collection. Their processes were people-led with minimal support from State Library. This in turn allowed for a wider group of users to connect the collection to their lives in ways that suited them best. In some cases, this was deeply personal (in the creation of oral histories); in other cases, it was predominantly functional (in the identification of house location). In most cases, it was a mix of the two.

The Approach

The purpose of exhibitions at State Library of Queensland is to offer experiences that are inspiring, thought-provoking and transformative to people, by telling stories with collections and communities. Our work aims to place the visitor at the centre of the exhibition experiences that we create.

In acknowledging the success of *The Frank Corley House Photos Project* in 2017, we also recognised an opportunity to build on the deeply local community-driven approaches over many years that had brought the collection to life.

We drew on State Library's Community Engagement model (figure a), also developed in early 2018, to further frame the development and outcomes of the project. Drawing on the success of Wilson's and ASHG's previous approaches to engagement with the collection, we identified *People-led productions* and *Facilitate* to frame how we would design experiences for users.
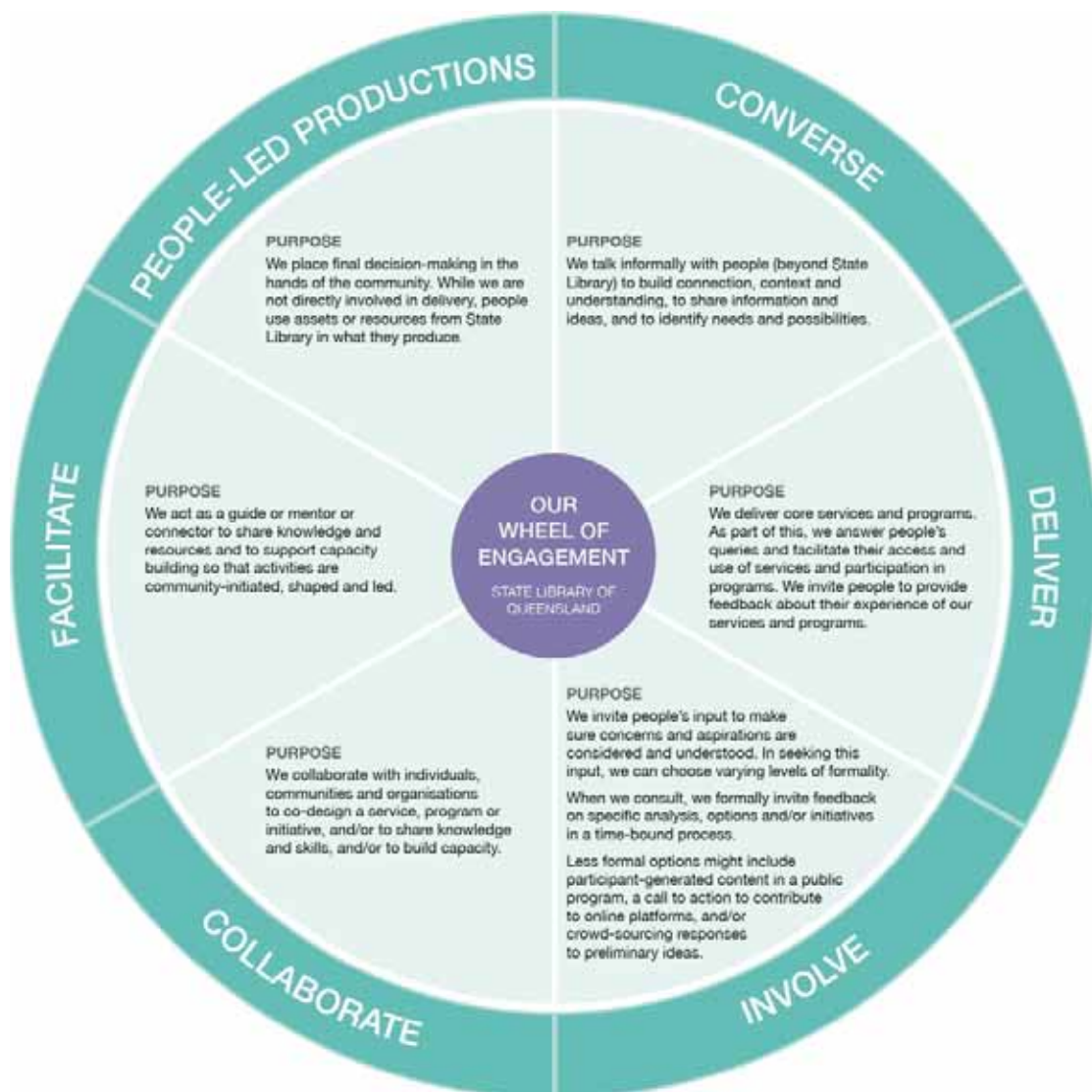

Figure a. State Library of Queensland's community engagement framework.

People-led productions are activities designed, developed and executed by State Library visitors with minimal direction or input from the Library itself. This approach was selected in order to empower Corley Collection users to drive their own content.

In *Facilitated productions*, the general public still plays a leading role but State Library works more collaboratively with users in order to provide guidance and support in delivery. In some instances, State Library may also look to connect two or more groups that have similar goals or interests in order to enhance the outcome of both. In the development of this project, a Facilitate approach was used in order to respect the expertise of our users whilst also enabling access to State Library resources and networks in order to grow suggested outcomes.

As we began to develop approaches to exhibiting the collection, we also applied a co-design process to explore how we might continue to grow a community-driven approach to increasing discoverability of the collection. Co-design is a highly used process that has had applications in a wide range of industries including health (Dimopoulos-Bick, Dawda, Maher, Verma, & Palmer, 2018), education (Barger-Anderson, Isherwood, & Merhaut, 2012) and the GLAM sector (Fuks, Hugo & Moura et al, 2012). As Lupton (2017, p84) highlights, co-design processes can be multi-modal (p84) but ultimately "help prompt discussion, stimulate creative thinking and build empathy" (Lupton, 2017, p80).

The decision to use a co-design process at this stage was informed by extensive research that highlights the benefits of collaborative approaches. In *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction To Design For Social Innovation,* Manzini (2015, p77) notes that innovation "occurs when people, expertise, and material assets come into contact in a new way that is able to create new meaning and unprecedented opportunities" and co-design processes are just one way of facilitating this interaction.

Steen, Manschot and de Konig (2011, p58) also analysed a number of projects that utilise Co-Design methodologies and found that benefits aren't just extended to the outcomes of a project but also to the organisation and the external stakeholders. The benefits they found across these groups include improved creativity, better idea generation and more successful project outcomes.

We invited a number of key stakeholders who had demonstrably engaged with the Corley Collection to a planning day to identify new ways of sharing, talking about and using the collection. The stakeholders included:
- Doug Spowart—the (then) only known first-person connection to Frank Corley
- Representatives of ASHG.
- Architecture Theory Criticism History – a research centre within the University of Queensland's (UQ) School of Architecture, with which State Library had previously collaborated to develop *Hot Modernism*, an exhibition that explored the history and stories behind Queensland's mid-century architecture.
- Artists of varying disciplines, including Jennifer Marchant and Ian Strange
- State Library staff with varying degrees of knowledge of the collection, including the Queensland Memory and Community Connections teams.

Through facilitated discussion and activities, this diverse group of participants connected with each other, and this mingling of convergent and divergent skills and perspectives helped to draw out new insights to inform the project going forward. Key questions co-designed with our stakeholders helped to frame our curatorial approach to the exhibition, which was to:

- **Address the enigmas that are Frank and Eunice Corley.**
  Who were they, what did they do and how did they amass their large collection?

- **Demonstrate how the collection has the ability to create new Queensland stories.**
  Hidden in this collection are new-found Queensland stories buried deep in the suburban backyards; shuttered behind the blinds; confined between plaster and fibro walls; exposed on our suburban driveways. The personal tales reveal resiliency and inventiveness of homeowners bringing a level of humanity to the black and white house photographs.

- **Dig deeper into the connection between house, home and creativity.**
  Showcase how creative works that respond to our collections can inspire and generate a wider public interest in the possibilities of State Library's collections.

- **Highlight who uses the collection, how they interpret it and why**
  How stories, from researchers, artists, designers, academics, volunteers and community groups, reveal how this collection has become a lifelong obsession to those who have worked with it.

Outcomes

With these principles set, we began the process of developing the project in earnest. While an exhibition had always been intended as an outcome of the project, participatory engagement with key stakeholders had set a new curatorial direction for the exhibition and resulted in two additional complementary activities: a digital experience that enabled visitors to take an active, exploratory role with the collection, and an immersive community-led public program.

The Exhibition

The new focus of the exhibition enabled State Library to demonstrate the power of the collection to inspire new academic and creative work.

Research

The exhibition highlights how the Corley Collection can inform research about Queensland and as a medium for sharing new knowledge about Queensland. University of Queensland's Architecture Theory Criticism History research centre and the ASHG were vital collaborators in the development of this research. Research examined in the exhibition included:

- **The Corley Story**
  An exploration of the story of the Corleys and their collection.

- **Art of the Suburb**
  Research that examines artistic projects that bear similarities to the Corleys' work.

- **The Queensland House**
  Nine sets of 50 images that use the Corley photographs to tell complex stories about houses in Queensland.
- **Personal stories**
  Three personal stories that demonstrate the lived experience of Queensland:
  - Walter Stubbings—A wharfie who became an indelible part of Brisbane's activist history.
  - Cec Fox—An overview of life in Moorooka that captured the experiences of a particular time and place.
  - Robyn Jenkinson—A story of five generations across 150 years in one location.

Type	Total
Total visits	*35,767*
Average daily visits	*156*
Highest visitation in one day	*400*
Lowest visitation in one day	*47*

Table 1. Exhibition visitation across 229 days of display

Creative production

The inclusion of multidisciplinary artists, Jennifer Marchant and Ian Strange, in the initial planning day provided important insight into how collections like the Corley Collection can inspire new creative works. With the exhibition, State Library looked to make this creative potential discoverable for visitors by commissioning the production of five new artworks including:

- **The One and the Multiple**
  Creator: [f]FLAT
  [f]FLAT's Home project, 'The One and the Multiple', played with ideas of perception and spatial experience. Using tectonic sculpture and Virtual Reality (VR), 'The One and the Multiple' offered viewers an experience that combines the virtual and the actual.

- **Ghost Sounds**
  Creator: Seth Ellis
  Ellis' work featured a set of sound installations, situated in an enclosed exhibition space. In this work, a series of 40 houses photographs were paired with archival sounds to create a new perspective of everyday life in the homes.

- **Sixteen: triptych**
  Creator: Ian Strange
  Strange researched and photographed houses from the Corley collection that are still standing today. Through a set of three charcoal drawings, he created haunting reinterpretations of Queensland dwellings.

- **Safe as Houses**
  Creator: Jennifer Marchant
  Marchant's work physically represents the classic adage using 3D printed tower models. She was informed by the construction materials frequently identified in the Corley photographs, including picket fences, breeze blocks, louvres and bricks.

- **Home Podcast**
  Creator: Tim Ross
  Three fictional audio stories inspired by the Corley Collection. In each piece, Ross' distinctive voice breathes new life and laconic humour into vignettes of suburban life.

The Corley Explorer digital experience

State Library identified an opportunity to create a digital experience in order to enhance the community's access and use of the Corley Collection — how might it be used to share their story and see their own personal histories anew?

The Corley Explorer was a custom made digital platform created by Mitchell Whitelaw and Geoff Hinchcliffe at the Data Design Lab, ANU School of Art and Design, in collaboration with Icelab, and was iteratively developed over a four-month period (Hinchcliffe & Whitelaw, 2018). It allowed visitors to the exhibition, and the wider Queensland public, to interact with the collection, uncover the unique features of Queensland housing, search for their own homes and share stories of living in these houses. Core components included:

- Searching by location and adding addresses—Users were able to match a photo with its street address and put the photos on the map, literally. As addresses were added, the collection became more searchable.
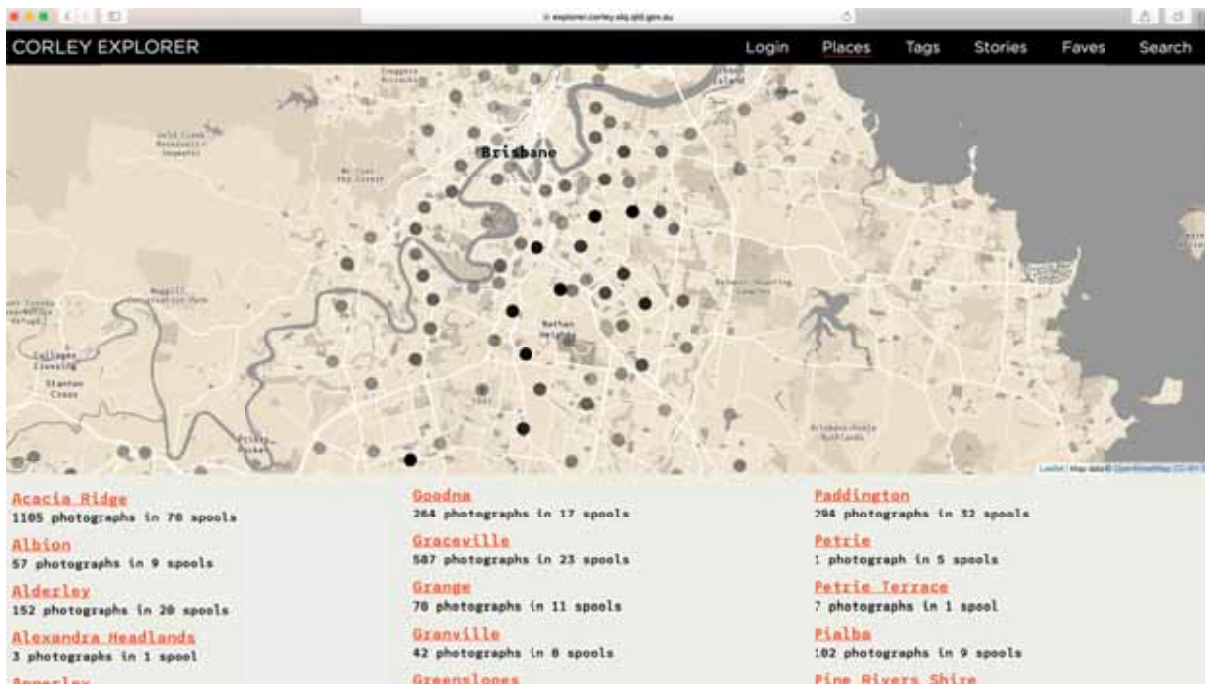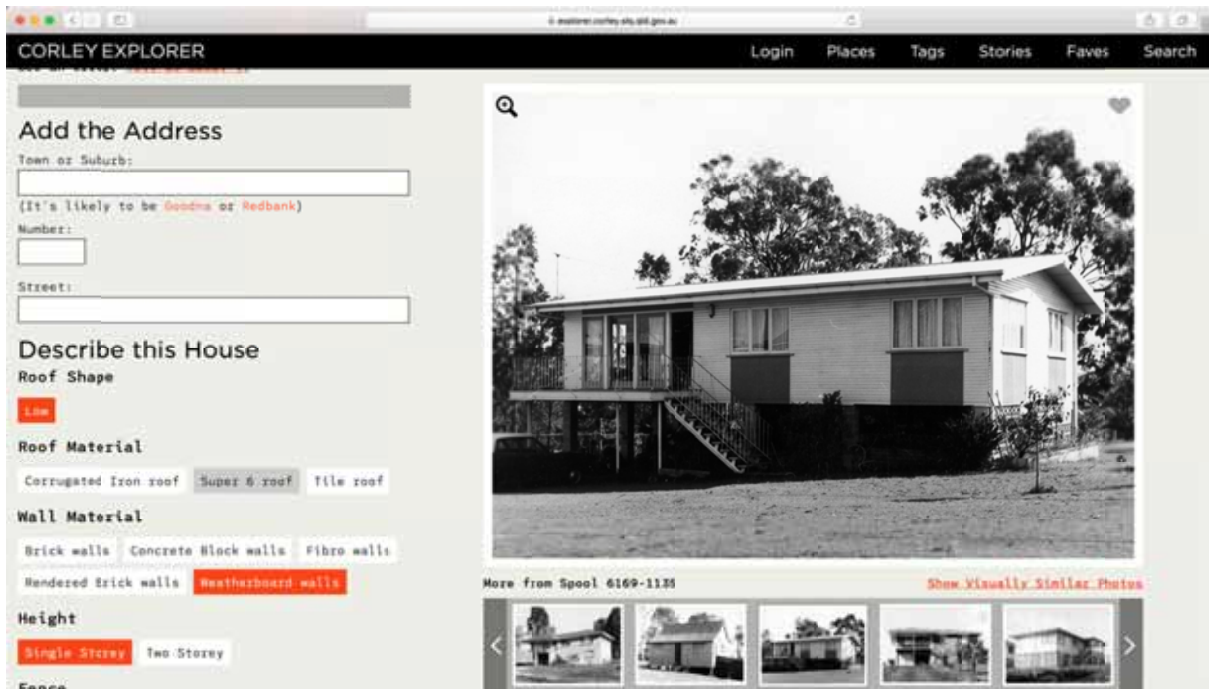

Figure b. Searching by location

Figure c. Adding an address

- Tagging the collection—Users were able to enrich the collection by adding descriptive tags and use these tags to explore the collection in alternative ways.
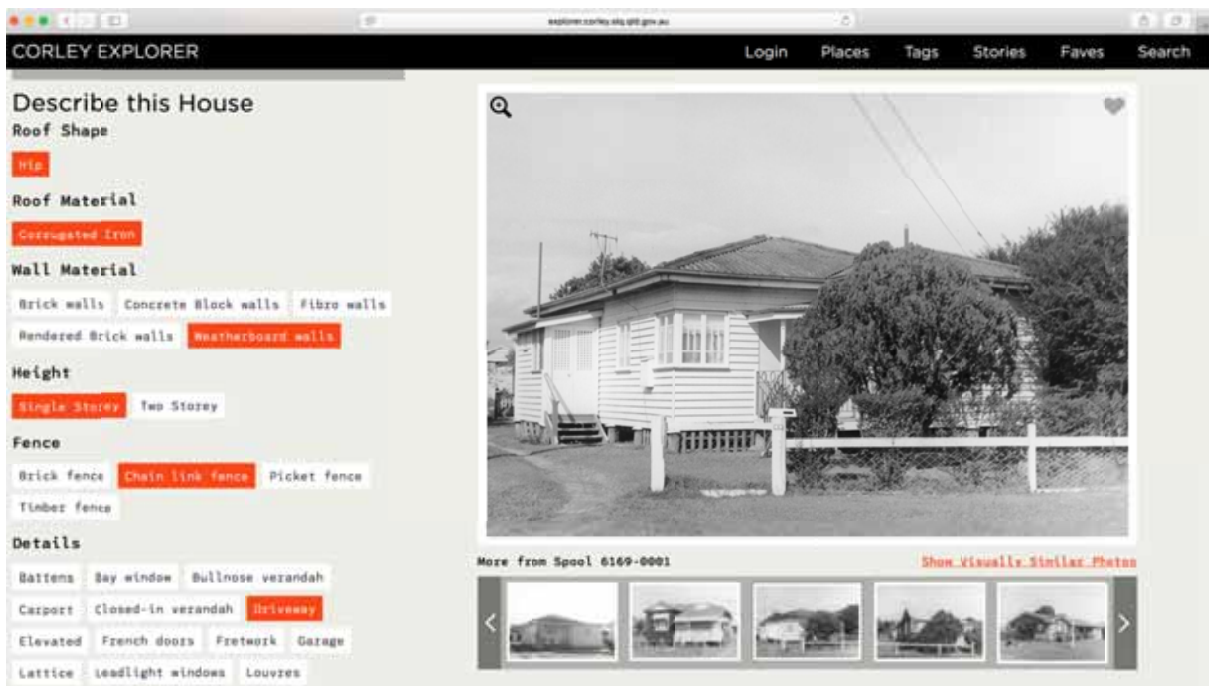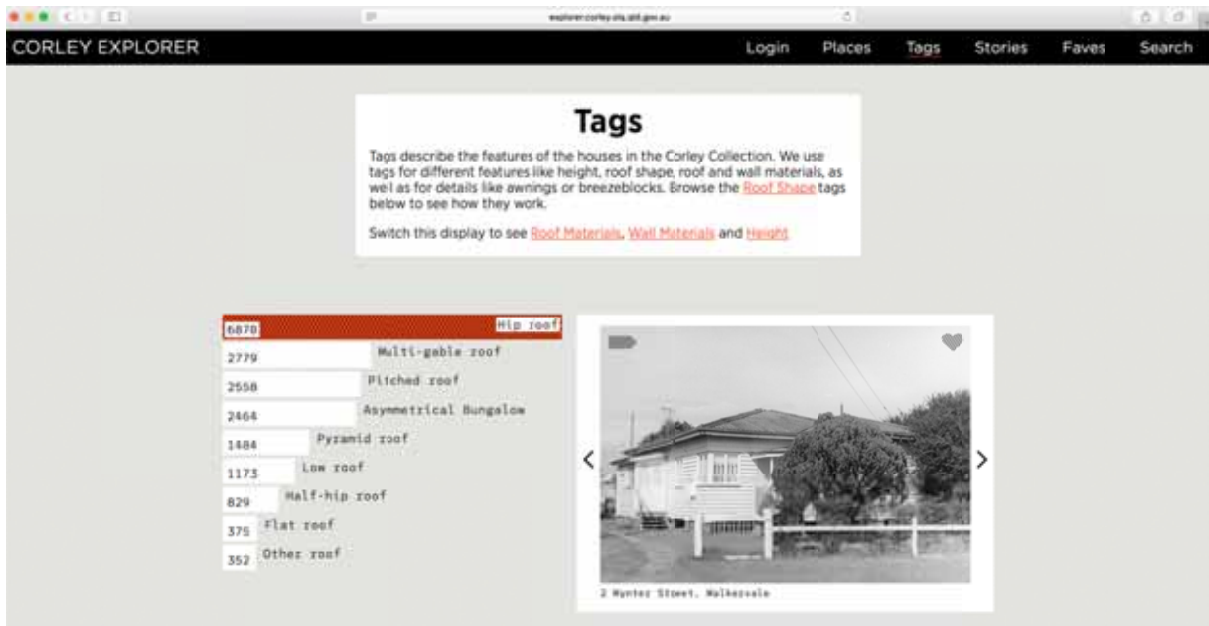

Figure d. Describing photographs by tag

Figure e. Exploring the collection using tags

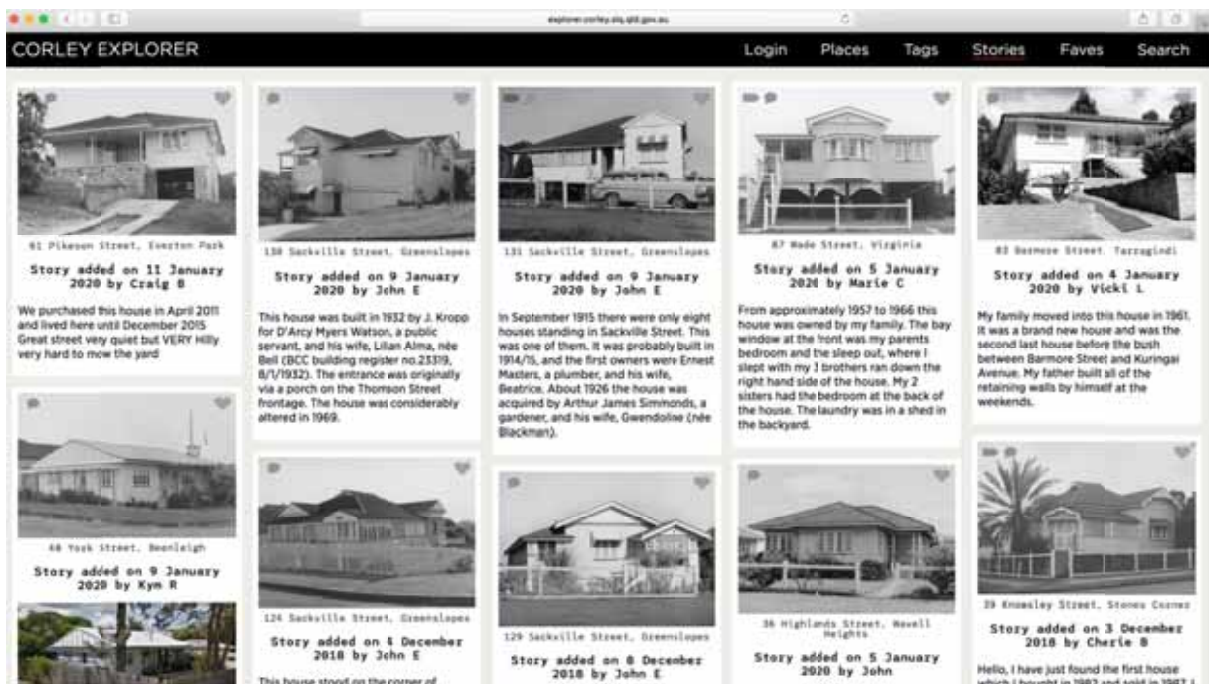- Adding stories—Users were able to add their own stories and photographs to any image in the Corley collection.

Figure F. Stories added to photographs in the collection

- Creating favourites and curated sets—Favourites are a convenient way for users to keep track of and share photographs that they wish to save for future use.
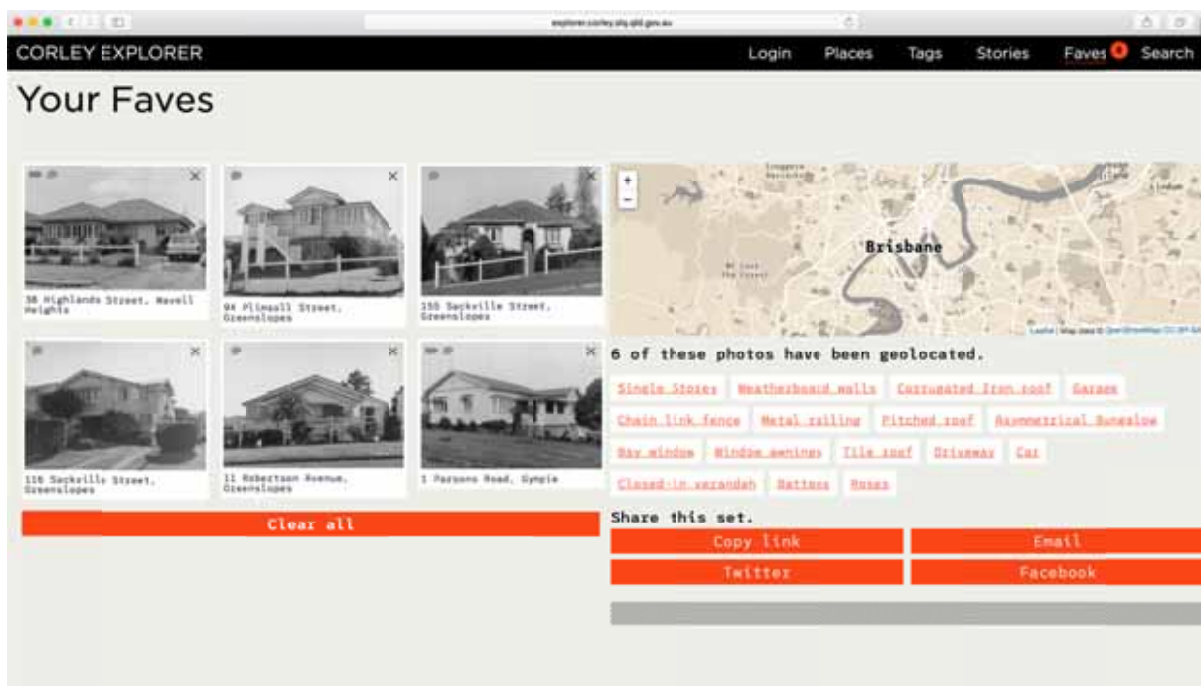
Figure g. Creating collections of favourites with the collection

Over the six-month life of the exhibition, visitors used the tool to geo-locate over 28,000 of the photographs (houses) and share over 1,600 personal stories of Queensland homes. A highlight of the Explorer is the community-contributed stories. These personal tales reveal resiliency and inventiveness of homeowners and bring a level of humanity to the black and white house photographs. In turn, State Library has been able to merge this community content with its catalogue to enrich data on our collection records.

Type	Total
Corley Explorer	
Page views	*1,218,000*
Registered contributors	*1,053*
Total tags	*115,771 (across 17,186 photographs, 28.2% of total collection)*
Total number of photographs that have been geolocated	*28,815 (47% of total collection)*
Number of personal stories contributed	*1,611*
Number of personal photographs contributed to stories	*1,029*

Table 2. By the numbers—Corley Explorer usage and visitation as at September 2019

Crowd-sourced data from the Corley Explorer has been harvested (addresses, geotags and description tags) and used to update our collection record in Alma. In March 2019, 15,942 records were updated and then again in November, an additional 16,200 records were updated to include addresses, geotags and geographic subject headings.

- The data extracted from the Corley Explorer was formatted to allow the default title used when the records were created to now include the full address.

- The formatted data was checked and amended to account for named houses and businesses.

- The data supplied by clients to describe each house was extracted and compiled into meaningful sentences to add to the descriptive metadata of 18,353 records.

- The extracted tags data was broken down into three groups – for example, house details (roof shape, roof material, wall material, height, fence), features (details) and other elements seen in the photograph (extras).

- Clients did not always choose elements from every option. In cases where only features and/or only other elements were selected, the sentences were rephrased to ensure they made sense without the preliminary house details.

Figure b. Collection Record including crowd-sourced data.

Community-led Program

The development of the Corley Explorer digital experience allowed for broader engagement community and new perspectives of the collection to emerge. This progress was amplified by the design and delivery of a series of micro experiences. As Sally Hill (2017) notes, micro experiences are "key to deep, ongoing engagement". To design and deliver these experiences, State Library collaborated with its community to deliver events that were rich in deeply local content and afforded community members opportunities to take a highly active role within the activities.

Several of our Public Programs were developed as a direct result of user contributions to the Corley Explorer, with examples including:

- **Walking Home**
  Two tours led by local experts who looked to uncover some of the unique stories that can be found in the Brisbane suburbs. Along the way, connections were fostered with residents of the area, with a number of residents joining a tour after it passed their home. New tenants of a home in the area were introduced to one of the previous tenants.

  In another tour, an opportunity for new learning was created when participants received a crash courses in the unique architectural features as demonstrated by a local architect using his own neighbourhood for inspiration. A game of architecture Bingo helped to reinforce learning of new terminology.

  Participants received a handmade zine to help them document changes in the area. At the end of the tour, visitors enjoyed a sneak peek inside an award-winning home.

- **Tales from our Suburbs**
  Visitors joined local community members to hear remarkable and unexpected stories living within our houses and suburbs. As a live storytelling translation of the Corley Explorer experience, this experience was successful as it once again put the community in the centre of the narrative.

- **Homegrown**
  Participants examined modern ideas and enduring gardening practices that are being cultivated by local thinkers, makers and growers. This experience demonstrated a more lateral interpretation of the collection and highlighted the connection between the historical and highly contemporary.

Over the course of six months, State Library experimented and delivered over 40 activities. Experiences were most successful when their development again followed a participatory design model of development—they were creative, reflexive and curiosity-driven explorations of the concept of house and home. In many cases, this participatory development was driven by content and connections created by the Corley Explorer. For example, storytellers included in the *Tales from our Suburbs* event were sourced directly from the site. Activities were less successful when one or more of these components were overlooked.

Type	Total
Total number of programs	*42*
Total visitation across full program	*3,190*
Highest visitation to one event—UQ architecture lecture	*300*
Lowest visitation to one event—Dancing at Home (event 2)	*5*

Table 3. By the numbers—Program and activities visitation
across 229 days of display

Conclusion

The *Home: a suburban obsession* exhibition and associated outcomes has provided a plethora of learning experiences for State Library that will inform its approaches to activating collections.

Central to this is cultivating opportunities for creating deeply local experiences. Meaningful user experiences are hard to achieve through digital, off-the shelf products alone.

While a digital platform allowed State Library to mobilise a wider audience, the true value of the project was that our users were able to connect with the collection in a more personalised way and on their own terms. State Library was only able to achieve this through a mix of both a co-designed custom digital offer and in-person engagement.

In the case of *Home: a suburban obsession*, collaborating with community meant that State Library users and visitors were taking leadership in making the decision in developing our engagement offer. Moving forward, it is important that we continue to create space to listen to our audience, regardless of whether this results in an online or offline outcome.

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