

The Living Archive

*A Proposal for Federated Archival Connectivity at FIT
For the Leadership of the Museum at FIT*

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On what this document is

This document accompanies a demonstration hosted at *livingarchive.fit*, password *livingarchive* — and is intended to be read alongside it. The URL hosts a working preview of a system we are calling the Living Archive, built against a fictional analog institution constructed to mirror the structural shape of the Museum at FIT and its parent institution in a different scholarly discipline.

The fiction is deliberate. The architectural moves the demonstration performs are the moves the system would perform against the Museum's actual holdings; only the institutional frame has been invented. The objects in the fictional institution's collection are drawn from real public-domain archival materials, attributed in each record to their actual source institutions.

The Stillman Institute's curatorial figures — Vasquez, Chen, Hayes, Whitmore-Pierce, and the others named throughout the demonstration — are invented at the same structural scale as the institution itself. Their publications, their exhibition arguments, and their scholarly positions are compositions written to mirror the form of curatorial argument the system would surface against published curatorial work at the Museum at FIT. The form of the scholarship is faithful to the institutional register; the specific arguments belong to the demonstration.

This document describes what the system is, what it proposes, and what the Museum is being invited to consider. It is shorter than it could be. The demonstration is intended to carry the weight of the proposition; this document is the proposition's institutional frame.

What the Living Archive is

The Living Archive is a federated connective layer for an institution's archival ecosystem. It reads from the public catalogs of participating institutions and surfaces the relationships across them — citations, curatorial echoes, material descents, scholarly contestation, pedagogical use — that no single catalog can surface alone. Every record routes back to its source institution's canonical catalog. Each participating institution retains full authority over its own holdings, including the authority to withdraw any record from the system at any time, for any reason, without negotiation.

The system is not a tool the Museum would adopt for its own internal use. It is an infrastructure that lives across institutions, reading from each, routing toward each, and accumulating — over time, as researchers engage with it — a record of the institution's collective intellectual life that becomes itself a kind of archival asset.

The work the system does is the kind of work that has historically been performed by senior scholars holding their field's connective architecture in mind: tracing how a 1972 *Bon Appétit* article cites a curator's catalog essay that draws on a 1968 manuscript from a separate collection; recognizing that a student thesis from 2019 builds on a curatorial argument first made in 1985; surfacing the contestation between two exhibitions twenty years apart that have engaged the same body of material from opposed positions. This labor has, until now, been performed privately and ephemerally — held in the minds of those who do it, lost when they retire. The Living Archive proposes that this connective labor can become *cumulative* — performed once by the scholars whose published work establishes the relationships, then made navigable for the field at large.

What the system does, mechanically

The system reads from each participating institution's existing public surface. For the Museum at FIT, that would mean eMuseum's collection records, the exhibition history, the People records, the published curatorial essays linked from the Museum's site. It does not access internal Museum systems. It does not require the Museum to change anything about how the existing catalog is maintained. The Museum's infrastructure remains the canonical source for Museum records.

The system identifies relationships across records by reading the scholarship that has been published about them. When Patricia Mears argues, in the catalog for *Yves Saint Laurent + Halston: Fashioning the 70s*, that a particular Halston ensemble and a particular Saint Laurent ensemble share a vocabulary of "absolute modernism," the system reads that argument and creates a typed connection between the two records: *Curatorial echo · Resonance*. When a doctoral dissertation cites the Mears argument and extends it in a particular direction, the system reads the citation and creates a connection between the dissertation and the catalog essay: *Material descent · Genealogy*. When two exhibitions twenty years apart engage the same body of material from opposed positions, the system reads both arguments and creates a connection: *Argument of contrast · Tension*.

These typed connections are scholarly claims, not algorithmic similarities. Every authorized connection in the system is grounded in something a scholar has argued in published work. The system does not generate scholarship. It makes the scholarship that has already been produced newly accessible across institutional boundaries.

A researcher encountering an object in the Living Archive sees the object's primary record (routed back to the source institution's catalog), the curatorial arguments that have engaged it, the related objects in other collections that those arguments have placed it in

relation to, the scholarship that has descended from those arguments, and the student work that has built on it. Where the system has identified patterns of proximity or resonance that no curator has yet written about explicitly, it surfaces these as *ghost connections* — the absent argument that would make a cluster of related objects cohere as a single scholarly claim, surfaced as a candidate for future research and clearly marked as speculative, never as an authorized curatorial position. A ghost connection is the system saying: "here is a place where scholarship might be written." It is not the system saying that scholarship has been written. The researcher navigates these relationships spatially, choosing the compositional shape that suits their inquiry, filtering by the types of connection that matter to them, working within the year-bounded scholarly moment they want to inhabit.

On the role of AI

The technological framework of the system uses artificial intelligence in three specific ways, each of which is a mechanism rather than a feature.

First, the system uses vector embeddings to identify which records belong in proximity to which other records, based on the published scholarship that has engaged them. The vectorization is the operational means by which the system can read across institutional boundaries without requiring keyword matches between catalog systems built on different metadata standards. The vectors are the bridge; they are not the argument.

Second, the system uses a conversational layer to allow researchers to ask questions of the archive in natural language. The conversational layer is grounded in the records and the scholarship the system has indexed; it cites everything it surfaces; it routes the researcher back to canonical sources for every claim. The conversational layer is not an "AI assistant" in any general sense. It is a research instrument scoped to the institution's holdings and the scholarship that engages them.

Third, the system uses automated tagging during ingestion to identify which records contain which kinds of material, which scholarly arguments engage which objects, and which relationships are explicit in the published literature. Human catalogers review and authorize every auto-tag before it enters the system. The AI does not create attributions or generate descriptions; it identifies candidates that human catalogers approve or reject.

These mechanisms allow the system to operate at institutional scale. They are not the system's intellectual claim. The intellectual claim is about federated connective architecture for archival ecosystems — a kind of infrastructure that has not been possible to build until recently, that is now possible, and that institutions like FIT have a window of opportunity to build well, on their own terms, before less considered versions of it arrive from elsewhere.

On the question of scholarly rigor

A serious concern arises naturally: if connective relationships between records are made visible and navigable, what happens to the labor of building those relationships? Does externalizing the field's connective architecture undermine the scholarly authority that has historically been earned by carrying that architecture in mind?

We have thought about this carefully. The system does not remove the labor of scholarship. It changes who performs it and what happens to its product.

Currently, every scholar in a field builds the architecture of their understanding privately, over years, through reading. The architecture exists only in their head. When they retire, it disappears. The next generation rebuilds it from scratch. This repetition is one of the great inefficiencies of scholarly inheritance, but it is also one of the field's quality controls — the rebuilding *is* the apprenticeship.

The Living Archive does not propose that the rebuilding stop. It proposes that the *product* of the rebuilding — the connective architecture that scholars have already articulated in published work — can become *cumulative* rather than evaporative. Curatorial scholarship like Dr. Steele's, performed across nearly three decades of leadership at the Museum and articulated in catalog essays, exhibition arguments, and monographs, can be made navigable to the next generation of scholars in a way that honors what she has built rather than asking them to rebuild it from nothing.

The rigor remains where it has always been: in the published work of curators. The system reads scholarship; it does not produce scholarship. The student walking a genealogical thread in the Living Archive is walking a path that a curator has traced in published argument. They can disagree with the path. They can refuse to walk it. They can write new scholarship that contests it. What they cannot encounter is an *authorized* connection that no scholar has argued for. Where the system has surfaced a ghost connection — the absent argument that would make a cluster of related objects cohere — it is clearly marked as speculative, and the responsibility for converting the ghost into a written scholarly position remains with the scholar. The architecture is downstream of the scholarship, not parallel to it.

This is, we think, an extension of curatorial authority rather than a diminution of it. The curator's published scholarship becomes infrastructural — it shapes how a new generation of researchers encounters the field. The Museum's curatorial intelligence becomes the load-bearing substrate of a system that other institutions across FIT will eventually participate in. The rigor that has made the Museum's scholarship a foundation of the discipline becomes a foundation of how the discipline is encountered, taught, and built upon.

On what the Museum is being invited to consider

The Museum is not being asked to underwrite the project. The system's technological framework has been reviewed by the technical team at the Gladys Marcus Library, who have expressed enthusiasm for the architecture from an infrastructural standpoint. Their feedback gives us confidence that the architecture is technically credible within FIT's institutional environment. What remains is the question of

whether the proposal is intellectually and curatorially sound — whether a system of this kind, operating across FIT's archival ecosystem, would serve the scholarship that institutions like the Museum have spent decades producing.

The Museum is being invited to be the first *curatorial* voice within FIT to evaluate the proposal. Not as adopters of a tool, but as the founding curatorial partner in a federated infrastructure that will eventually connect the Museum's holdings to SPARC Digital, to the Gladys Marcus Library's special collections, to the FIT Institutional Repository, to faculty research across FIT's schools, and to the active intellectual work of students engaging the same material.

The Museum's participation would shape how the system handles its most distinctive scholarly materials. The typology of connections, the registers of scholarly argument, the conventions of attribution and provenance, the operational norms for how machine-identified candidate relationships are reviewed and authorized by human catalogers before entering the system — all of these would be shaped by the Museum's curators in dialogue with the Library's technical team and the broader institutional collaboration.

A Phase 1 engagement with the Museum would involve scoping these conventions in a focused conversation; selecting a small subset of Museum holdings as the initial substrate (perhaps a single exhibition's collection, or a curated set of related objects); running the system against that substrate; and inviting Museum staff to evaluate the connections the system surfaces, the way it handles attribution, the way it routes researchers back to the canonical Museum catalog, and the operational burden (which the proposal is designed to keep at near zero on the Museum's side). The Phase 1 engagement would conclude with a structured review and a decision about whether a broader engagement makes sense.

It is worth stating plainly what Phase 1 would *not* require. It would not require access to internal Museum systems. It would not require any changes to eMuseum records or to the Museum's existing catalog infrastructure. It would not require a public launch of Museum data within the system; the evaluation would be conducted privately, accessible only to Museum staff and the project team. It would not require staff labor beyond a small number of structured review conversations. Phase 1 is a controlled evaluation of method, attribution, governance, and scholarly value — designed so that the Museum can assess what the system actually does before any decision about broader participation is made.

The demonstration accompanying this document shows the system operating against a fictional analog institution. The architectural moves it performs are the moves it would perform against the Museum's actual holdings. The visual register, the typed connections, the named operations, the Stewardship Panel that preserves institutional authority, the routing back to canonical catalogs — all of these would carry directly into a Museum engagement. The fictional substrate exists only so that the Museum can evaluate the system without it being run against the Museum's own collection prematurely.

On the moment

We are aware that AI proposals are arriving at cultural institutions in unprecedented volume and at varying levels of seriousness. Many of these proposals frame their AI capabilities as the headline and treat institutional holdings as raw material for what the AI can do. We have tried to do the opposite. The intellectual claim of this proposal is about institutional connective architecture; the AI is mechanism. The institutional holdings are not raw material; they are the load-bearing substrate of a system whose primary purpose is to honor what curators have spent careers building.

We believe this is a window during which institutions can build the instruments their scholars deserve, from the scholars' own life's work, while those scholars are still alive to shape what the instruments become. A senior scholar's life's work is more than a body of arguments. It is a way of thinking — a discipline of intellectual cartography, built across decades, expressed through technique, convention, and composition. The arguments published in catalog essays and monographs are the visible surface of this work. The technique that produced them — the recognition of material descent across centuries, the naming of unstated arguments between exhibitions, the resonance identified between objects no catalog connects — has historically been transmitted only through the long apprenticeship of working alongside the scholar who carries it. When the scholar retires, the technique disappears with them.

The Living Archive proposes that a discipline's intellectual cartography can become *operationally accessible* without being imitated or diminished. The technique becomes a workbench where the next generation of researchers can practice the moves the discipline has developed: walk a genealogical thread, surface a curatorial echo, compose a six-object argument into a citable path, identify a ghost connection where scholarship has not yet been written. The convention — the discipline's agreements about what counts as good scholarship — becomes load-bearing in the system's operation: every connection grounded in published argument, every record routed back to its institutional source, every attribution preserved exactly as the institution's catalog represents it. The composition — the scholar's own making of new arguments — becomes cumulative: a graduate student's path is legible to the field, citable, available for the next researcher to walk, contest, or extend.

The Museum's curatorial program — across Dr. Steele's tenure as Chief Curator since 1997 and Director since 2003, and across the work of every curator who has shaped it — has produced one of the great published archives of specialized museum scholarship in the United States. The catalog essays, exhibition arguments, and monographs that have emerged from the Museum constitute a body of work in which fashion has been articulated as a serious scholarly discipline. The Living Archive proposes that the technique, convention, and composition visible in this *published* body of work can become the apparatus through which the discipline continues to think. The curators are not being replaced and their methods are not being modeled. What is being made navigable is the scholarship they have already written — its citations, its arguments, its placement of objects in relation to each other — so that the next generation of researchers can read and build on it more deeply than the catalog interface has so far permitted.

Whether the Museum chooses to participate or not, this is the moment at which the question becomes possible to ask. We are asking it.

On what the Museum is being asked to do next

We propose a follow-up conversation, at the Museum's convenience, to walk through the demonstration together and discuss whether a Phase 1 engagement would be of interest. The conversation would be scheduled at the Museum's pace; the proposal is not under time pressure from our side.

If the proposal is of interest, we would scope the Phase 1 engagement in detail in a subsequent document, with the Museum's curators shaping the parameters. If the proposal is not of interest, or if the Museum would like to engage at a different level, we welcome that response as well. The proposal is intended to invite serious consideration, not to require commitment.

The demonstration is hosted at *livingarchive.fit*, password *livingarchive*. The password gate exists so that the URL can be shared with the Museum's leadership without becoming publicly accessible. The demonstration is the evidence; this document is the proposition. We hope you will engage both at whatever depth your time permits.

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