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Topic of the Master thesis:

### **Preservation assessments in paper collections – a basis for preservation planning**

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#### **Task**

Cultural heritage is subject to continuous degradation processes in constantly growing collections of archives, libraries and museums. Conservation actions help to slow down the degradation of material and to preserve cultural heritage for future generations. Due to limited resources, not all cultural objects can be preserved equally. In order to preserve as many objects as possible and as long as possible, preservation actions need to be well planned and structured. Preservation planning helps to prioritise preservation and conservation activities and to optimally distribute available resources, taking into account the significances of collections and collection items. In view of this, the Danish *Kulturbevaringsplan (preservation plan of culture)* from 2003 aimed the development of national standards and strategies for the preservation of the national cultural heritage. A planning tool for the development of preservation plans was formulated by the *Guidelines for the planning of conservation efforts for cultural heritage institutions*. This paper investigates how the guidelines recommend the implementation of preservation plans in museums. Focus is set on the role of the conservator. It examines, whether the given methods are suitable to put preservation plans into practice - and in particular preservation assessments as their basis.

#### **State of research**

The registration of collections and the assessments of preservation needs in libraries, museums, and archives have been discussed since the 1970s. For the implementation of preservation assessments, texts and tools have been developed – such as structured reports, which help to understand the causes of deterioration. But there is no clear definition in describing activities as preservation surveys. Three different methods help to evaluate the risks for a collection: the *general preservation assessment*, the *collection condition survey*, and the *item-by-item survey*. Models of general preservation assessments were mainly published in American and English-speaking countries (cf. Cunha 1982, Waller 1994, Patkus 2003, The Getty Conservation Institute 1999). Different standards help to measure particular practices, as for example the British Standard BS 5454 or the Benchmarks of the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. An important method for collection condition surveys is presented by Keene 2002. The different models do not follow a standardised method and differ in their study focus, duration, form and approach.

## Methods

Introductory, the guidelines are presented in their political context as part of a strategy for the preservation of the national heritage of Denmark. Thereby the Danish Agency for Culture as the executing body of the Danish Museum Act is introduced.

Following, the guidelines are examined in terms of their content, which shows the formulation of components of a preservation plan, but lack on specifications concerning processes, methodology and areas of responsibility. Therefore, assessment types and models are presented from the literature, and areas of responsibility within the process are defined. Models to prioritise preservation actions and possibilities to calculate costs are presented in order to develop an action plan.

A case study tests the requirements of the guidelines from a conservator's perspective. Based on the previous investigations, a method is developed and implemented to assess the paper collections of Skagens Museum. As the museum plans new storage locations to improve its bad storage conditions, the assessment aims to give recommendations concerning storage and furnishing for the paper objects in the new depots. Furthermore, the overall preservation condition of the paper objects – based on a quantitative method- is assessed to plan an active conservation programme. The investigations results in an action plan that recommends preservation and conservation actions in order of priority and costs. A final report provides structured analysis of the collection's condition and practically applicable recommendations. It attempts to serve as basis document for the preservation planning at Skagens Museum.

Taking into account the previous investigations and the experiences of the executed assessments, the implementation of the guidelines are evaluated from a conservatory perspective. Finally, the paper summarises the investigations with an outlook on the implementation of the guidelines on a national level.

## Analyses

The *Guidelines for the planning of conservation efforts for cultural heritage institutions* are in reality difficult to fulfil, because they lack a defined terminology, professional standards and a methodology. Additionally remains the distribution of responsibilities unclear. The following guidelines' analysis is a result of the experiences of the case study at Skagens Museum and the literature research in the course of this study.

### 1. Definition of terms

This study showed that the Danish term "bevaringsplan" is double used in Denmark, meaning both "preservation plan" and the "final report of a preservation assessment". Therefore, the guidelines need to define a clear terminology in order to receive the required products. Consequently means the Danish term "bevaringsplan" the institutional planning tool for the longterm preservation of collections – the "preservation plan". To express "preservation assessment" in its function as basis tool for a preservation plan, the Danish term "vurdering af bevaringstilstand" is suggested.

### 2. Definition of standards and methods

The guidelines gave only very limited assistance for the implementation of the assessments at Skagens Museum. To create a solid basis for preservation plans, the guidelines need to specify terms, content and methodology for the preservation assessments take into account international preservation standards. To understand the basic needs for preservation assessments theories and models were examined by literature research. Based on these studies, it was determined that the guidelines intend a *general preservation assessment* and a *collection condition survey* to evaluate the collection's condition. Considering the impact of physical and institutional factors, the *general preservation assessment* forms the basis for preservation strategies. Through a quantified assessment, the *collection condition survey* identifies the main causes of deterioration and assesses the condition of the entire collection as stable or deteriorating. In addition, *item-by-item surveys* are used to evaluate the object conditions individually and to give object related recommendations.

A suggestion for Danish terms is “vurdering af den generelle bevaringstilstand” for *general preservation assessment*, “vurdering af samlingstilstand” for *collection condition survey* and “genstandsvurdering” meaning *item-by-item survey*. At Skagens Museum, each of the used assessment models provides specific answers to a raised question, and all together result in a comprehensive and complete analysis of the collection condition. Therefore the guidelines need to consider all of the assessment types equally by indicating the scope and method for their implementation.

### *3. Distribution of responsibility's areas*

The role and the cooperation of the museum's management, curators, conservators and respectively other experts must be put in concrete terms. This study determined the conservator's responsibility area (which respectively needs the assistance from other expertises):

- Preparation and implementation of a *general preservation assessment*, a *collection condition survey*, and an *item-by-item survey*;
- Analysis and evaluation of the collected data;
- A final report containing a summary of the proposed preservation actions in prioritised order,
- Cost estimation for conservation actions related to the objectives of the survey.

The implemented assessments at Skagens Museum showed the great importance of the close cooperation between conservator and curator. To ensure evaluating the object's condition objectively, both expertises are needed. Furthermore, the assessments are a great possibility for the conservator to communicate preservation problems on the place, where they occur. That will fundamentally help the curator to better understand the preservation needs of the collection, and to integrate the conservator's recommendations successfully into the institutional planning process. Vice versa, the collaboration helps the conservator to better understand the collection policy to adjust recommendations to the institution's objectives. This presupposes on the part of the museums' management a clear definition of the institutions' mission statement – that influences all of the institutions' management areas- for the preservation planning process.