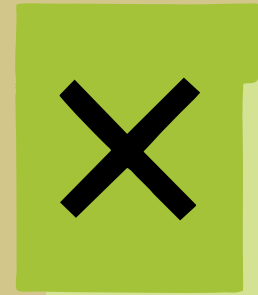


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FILE NOT FOUND



Protect
Archives.
Defend
Democracy.



Resistance notes
from the Lisbon Retreat

March 2026

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Why are archives under threat?

Archives are not only where the past is kept. They are where evidence survives, where names remain, where communities recognise themselves, where alternative histories can be reconstructed, and where dominant narratives can be questioned.

For this reason, **archives are never neutral**. They can be powerful precisely because they preserve what authoritarian, colonial, patriarchal, racist or exclusionary systems would rather erase, reinterpret or leave undocumented. Most of the time they hold fragile traces of resistance that may not have been considered worthy of preservation by official institutions.

Today, these traces are under pressure in many different ways. Some archives face direct censorship, criminalisation, political interference or destruction. Others are made vulnerable by lack of funding, precarious infrastructures, fragile legal protection, institutional dependency, technological instability or the disappearance of the communities that sustain them. Some materials are at risk because they remain hidden, others because they become too visible.

The digital realm has not solved this problem. For decades, putting archival material online seemed to promise safety, access and continuity. But **digital archives also bring new risks**, like data deletion, platform dependency, algorithmic bias, extraction by artificial intelligence, exposure of vulnerable communities, loss of context and the illusion that access alone is the same as justice.

In March 2026, the project brought together more than 20 archives from around the world in Lisbon for four days of collective reflection. The gathering was called a “Retreat” to help shield participants from public and political scrutiny. Throughout the retreat, participants shared experiences of working with archives shaped by dictatorship, exile, colonial histories, queer and trans memory, Indigenous knowledge, feminist collections, censorship, migration, conflict, fragile institutions and contested public narratives. Their experiences were not the same. In fact, one of the strongest lessons of the Retreat was that risks cannot be mapped in a single universal way. What is urgent in one place may be secondary in another. What protects one community may expose another.

And yet, common questions emerged. **How can archives remain accessible without putting people at risk? How can memory be protected without being enclosed? How can archives resist manipulation without becoming rigid? How can they stay alive, not only as repositories of what happened, but as tools for imagining what may still become possible?**

FILE NOT FOUND begins from these questions. It does not offer a final answer. It creates a space for exchange between archives already affected by political pressure, archives working in grey zones, and archives that once felt secure but are now reconsidering what safety means. **The following pages gather images, notes, risks and provisional strategies from this first movement of the project.**

They are fragments of a larger process. A Retreat, followed by artist residencies, and later by an exhibition, a conference and publication. A shared attempt to think about archives as living infrastructures of memory, care, resistance and democracy.



CULTURAL MEMORY AT RISK: THE GLOBAL CRACKDOWN ON MUSEUMS AND MEMORIALS

February 20, 2026

Britain destroyed records of colonial crimes

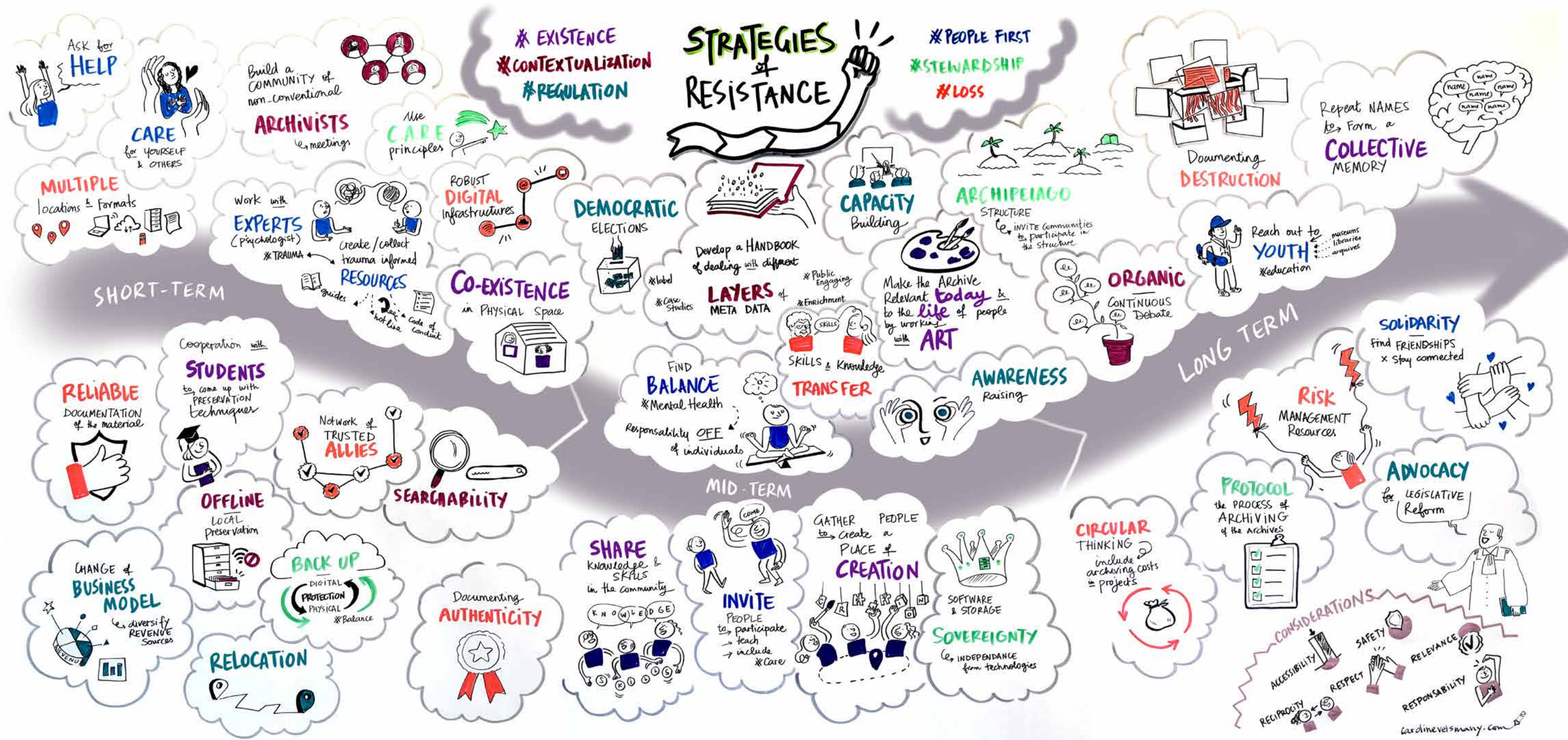
Review finds thousands of papers detailing shameful acts were culled, while others were kept secret illegally

More than 400 government files missing from National Archives

© 3 August 2016



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A common ground in motion

Graphic recording
Caroline Vetsmany
Lisbon, 2026

During the Retreat, **graphic recording** was used as a way of **listening, translating and holding complexity**. The drawings do not reduce the conversations to a fixed conclusion. Instead, they make visible the movement of thought: questions, tensions, contradictions, intuitions, disagreements and possible paths forward.

These visual notes are not a summary of everything that was said. They are another layer of the archive created by the Retreat: a **record of collective thinking** as it was still unfolding.



15 provisional steps for resistant archives

These 15 provisional steps emerged from the Lisbon Retreat as a first attempt to organise a set of shared concerns, open questions and possible strategies. **They are not a universal method. They are not a checklist. They are starting points** to be tested, adapted, contradicted and expanded by different communities, contexts and archives.

Some steps respond to immediate threats. Others require time, trust, funding, technical capacity, political imagination and long-term solidarity. **Together, they move from protection and care to activation and structural change.**

Short-term: protect, care, stabilise

1. Ask for help

Preservation cannot be an isolated response. When archives are threatened by loss, destruction or erasure, the first step is to ask for support and identify who can help, namely communities, artists, researchers, neighbours, students, institutions or informal networks.



2. Put care at the centre

Archives are not only collections of objects, documents or files. They are also held by people who may carry grief, trauma, exhaustion, responsibility or fear. Any strategy of protection must include care for those preserving, those bearing witness and those represented in the archive.

3. Build trusted allies

Trust cannot be improvised in moments of crisis. It needs to be built before, during and after the threat. Creating networks of trusted allies means identifying who can support the archive technically, emotionally, politically and materially, while respecting the histories involved.



4. Secure the material

Immediate protection matters. This may involve reliable documentation, physical relocation, emergency inventories, backups, offline preservation, multiple storage formats and attention to both digital and physical vulnerabilities. Securing the material also means recognising that protection is never neutral.

5. Preserve authenticity and context

An archive can survive materially and still lose its meaning. Provenance, testimonies, dates, relationships, conditions of collection and social context are essential. To preserve an archive is also to preserve the conditions that allow it to be understood.



Mid-term: structure, build capacity, activate

6. Develop searchability and metadata

Archives need to be findable, legible and usable. Metadata, cataloguing, translation, contextualisation and search systems shape how memory can be accessed and interpreted. The challenge is to create systems that are robust without becoming rigid, and accessible without producing new forms of exposure.

7. Create shared resources and handbooks

Many communities and organisations face similar threats without access to specialised knowledge. Shared guides, protocols, codes of conduct, emergency toolkits and practical handbooks can help distribute knowledge and reduce dependence on a small number of experts.



8. Transfer skills and build capacity

Preservation depends on people. Training students, community members, cultural workers and local organisations can help ensure that knowledge does not disappear when a project ends or an expert leaves. Capacity-building is not only technical, it also includes ethical decision-making and collective responsibility.

9. Invite participation and co-creation



Archives should not only be protected for communities, but, whenever possible, with them. Participation can include identifying materials, sharing memories, interpreting documents, creating new narratives or deciding what should remain inaccessible. Co-creation requires time, reciprocity, accessibility, consent and care.

10. Make archives relevant today

Archives are not only about the past. They can be activated through art, education, public debate, research, exhibitions, publications and community encounters. Making archives relevant today means connecting them to present struggles, questions and forms of imagination.

Long-term: sustain, transmit, transform

11. Build technological and institutional sovereignty

Many archives depend on fragile infrastructures, like commercial platforms, unstable funding, external servers, temporary projects or institutions with shifting priorities. Long-term protection requires thinking about software, storage, ownership, governance, maintenance, funding models and autonomy.



12. Think in archipelagos, not isolated islands

Archives may be stronger when they are connected through distributed, organic and collaborative structures. An archipelago allows each archive to retain its specificity while remaining part of a wider system of solidarity, exchange and mutual support.

13. Develop risk management and long-term protocols

Threats can be sudden or slow. They may come from war, censorship, climate events, political pressure, lack of funding, digital decay or institutional abandonment. Archives need protocols for emergency response, access, safety, relocation, documentation of destruction and decision-making under pressure.

14. Keep collective memory alive

Memory is not preserved only by storing materials. It is also kept alive through names, stories, rituals, education, repetition, intergenerational transmission and public recognition. Involving young people, communities and future users is essential to prevent both symbolic and material erasure.

15. Advocate for structural change

Archives cannot be protected only through individual commitment or emergency response. They need legal recognition, public responsibility, sustainable funding, ethical regulation, international solidarity and political advocacy. To defend archives is also to defend the democratic conditions that allow memory, evidence and plurality to exist.



These steps remain provisional. They leave open many unresolved tensions. It's important to know how to balance access and safety, how to protect without enclosing, how to care without overburdening, how to document destruction without reproducing violence, how to share responsibility without dispersing accountability, and how to sustain archives beyond the urgency of crisis.

Alongside these unresolved tensions, artistic practices can help archives live several lives through reinterpretation, copying, performance or exhibition, whenever possible and consented. This potential will be explored further through artistic residencies developed with the participating archives.

FILE NOT FOUND X

**Protect Archives.
Defend Democracy.**

FILE NOT FOUND is an international initiative led by the Goethe-Institut Portugal, Amsterdam and Washington, in collaboration with Gerador.

The project brings together archives, artists, researchers and cultural practitioners **to reflect on archives as resilient spaces of cultural memory, resistant knowledge and alternative perspectives under growing political pressure.**

This publication presents provisional notes from the project's first gathering, which convened more than 20 archives from around the world in Lisbon for a collective Retreat. It forms part of an ongoing process that will continue through ten artist residencies until May 2027, public presentations, an exhibition and conference in October 2027, and a three-part publication, of which this is the first chapter.

Lisbon Retreat
March 2026

Graphic recording
Caroline Vetsmany

Organised by
**Goethe-Institut
Gerador**

More information
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GERADOR

What can we do together?

This publication does not close the conversation. It opens it.

The Lisbon Retreat gathered questions, risks and provisional strategies, but many perspectives are still missing. Every archive operates within a specific context. Every community faces different vulnerabilities. Every attempt to preserve memory raises new ethical, technical and political questions.

Use this space to continue the work.

Your notes

What risks are present in your archive, collection, community or institution?

What needs protection?

What materials, stories, names, practices, spaces or forms of knowledge are at risk of disappearing?

Your notes

Who needs to be involved?

Which communities, allies, experts, students, artists, lawyers, funders or institutions should be part of the response?

What should remain visible?

What needs to be shared, accessed, circulated, translated or made public?

What should remain protected?

What requires discretion, consent, encryption, restricted access or community decision-making?

Add, question, revise, connect.

The protection of archives is not only a technical task, but a collective practice of care, imagination and responsibility. Would you like to share your thoughts, connect with others and help build a network and community of resilient archives?

Contact us at filenotfound@goethe.de