

Appraisal of Architectural Records in University Archives

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As the art of architecture has come to the forefront of public consciousness in the last few years, and even movie stars like Brad Pitt are attempting to be taken seriously as designers, the fact that great structures are not only feats of design but also of sophisticated building technology is often forgotten. When appraising architectural records, it is an easy decision to retain all the beautiful drawings – but what about the engineering details? What about product samples? Architects are often innovators, utilizing new technologies from many different fields to advance their goals for particular buildings and sites. Which stages of the design process are revolutionary enough to warrant permanent preservation, and which are routine enough to be sampled or deaccessioned entirely? Non-architects are often intimidated by the need to make these decisions, especially since architectural information is most often represented graphically – a language that not all archivists read fluently.

Ask any archivist what his or her idea of a nightmare collection is, and the answer you'll probably get is "architectural records." The records of any given architectural firm are usually composed not only of large, unwieldy drawings on unstable media – some original, some prints -- but can also contain correspondence between clients, contractors, government officials, and engineers. They usually contain large numbers of photographs and negatives, some of which can be oversized, and may often include films or videocassettes. They contain product samples and literature – which sounds innocuous until you remember that the products architects use may often be large slabs of stone, heavy metal hinges, asbestos tiles, or color tests of lead paint on rapidly splintering

shingles of wood. On top of all of these records normally accumulated and created in the course of the architect's business, there is often some amount of personal material, diaries, sketchbooks, and student records, along with materials related to the architect's professional life outside of designing buildings for clients, such as records of architectural critiques or "juries" on which he or she served; syllabi for courses taught; recommendations written for students; consultant work for government agencies; competition entries, never built; research notes and clippings; drafts of writings for publication; and legal records.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the kinds of records I have encountered in the five architecture and landscape architecture collections that I have had a part in processing over the last three years. One may wonder what kind of institutions choose to take these kinds of records on. Public libraries? Museums? Private foundations? All of these are true, but very often architectural records are collected, processed, housed, and made available by academic institutions. The two universities at which I've processed collections – Yale and the University of California at Berkeley – each have well-respected architecture schools out of which a large number of graduates have gone on to distinguish themselves locally, nationally, and on a global scale. Yale and UC Berkeley have similar collection development policies: Yale's is to collect the records of architects who were educated, taught at, or built at the University; Berkeley's is to document architects and landscape architects who made a significant impact on the built environment of the Bay Area – and many architects who satisfied that criterion, by default, taught at Berkeley. Fitting these collections, whose requirements are far different than the majority of manuscript collections or university archives collected by most

academic institutions, into the general processing flow of the archives is a major challenge. Appraising them is another story altogether – but it need not be a horror story.

In 1985, twenty years ago, Nancy Carlson Schrock – always a leader in thinking about the appraisal and retention of architectural records – presented some appraisal guidelines at the Symposium on the Appraisal of Architectural Records in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sponsored by the Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records (MassCoPAR).¹ The guidelines she presented have stood the test of time, and the concerns that she raised about archivists collecting CAD documentation are still haunting architectural records archivists around the world. In 2002, with Schrock’s guidelines in mind, Waverly Lowell, the curator of the Environmental Design Archives at UC Berkeley, came up with a more detailed set of appraisal guidelines that the assistant archivist, Betsy Frederick-Rothwell, and I would test while appraising the four extremely large and entirely unprocessed collections that we were charged with: those of architects William Wurster and William Turnbull, and landscape architects Garrett Eckbo and Robert Royston. These initial guidelines were first tested against project records in the Wurster collection, which had been sitting unprocessed in an offsite storage location at UC Berkeley since 1976.

Betsy and I began by appraising at the item level. What we discovered surprised us, and led us to revise the original appraisal guidelines to reflect the actual information content of the records. For example, one major category of records that we had expected to be able to appraise out as non-permanent were the telephone notes that architects took

¹ Schrock, Nancy. Architectural Archives: Current Practices and Future Directions. Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1985, pp. 68-75.

while on the phone with contractors and clients. After reading through several projects' worth of phone notes, however, we found that these were in fact one of the best and most informative sources about problems on the job site requiring immediate intervention, personality conflicts with the clients that were often red flags long before jobs were terminated, and radical shifts in design decisions that remained undocumented in the more formal correspondence between the parties. After ascertaining in more than one collection that these types of informal documentation were indeed extremely valuable to the understanding of each project and, indeed, to the collection as a whole, we made the decision to revise the original guidelines and retain the majority of telephone notes.

More to the point for a session on science and technology archives, we revised our point of view on the value of product samples as well. The majority of architects that leave a legacy of innovation are creative not only in their vision of form, but also of structural and technological inventions to achieve those forms. Many architects of the early 20th century were ahead of their time in this respect: owners and tenants of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings routinely complain that they leak like sieves, but this is in part because Wright was pushing the boundaries of what was capable architectonically with the materials at his disposal. Likewise Eero Saarinen, whose collection we are in the midst of processing at Yale, famously built in "the style for the job", and practically invented a new building material or construction technology with every new commission – for example, the wall of windows at the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan is held together through a lattice of neoprene gaskets, which are a nod to the devices that hold car windshields in place. No one had ever tried that before. Another example is William Turnbull's use, in a Malibu, California beach house in the early

1980s, of a translucent fiberglass sheet called Kalwall as an exterior wall material. In the Turnbull collection at Berkeley, the project records for that house contain telephone notes and correspondence back and forth between the architects and the Kalwall manufacturers – the architects attempting to ascertain whether or not using Kalwall was feasible; the manufacturers attempting to legally cover their bases should the material fail in that application. Eventually, the makers of Kalwall asked Turnbull to sign a waiver relieving them of any responsibility for the behavior of their product in such an unconventional use. Now, however, we see material of the same type used in outdoor applications all the time, and Kalwall actually manufactures entire curtain wall systems. Architects often apply for patents to protect their innovations and inventions – the Saarinen files contain many patents for his furniture designs, as well as several drawings for a “reverse balcony” that he had notarized “just in case”, but which were never put to any use. In the end, we decided that it was important to retain product samples that had made it into the final, built projects, but disposed of literature and materials that had obviously been sent to every architecture firm in the AIA directory of members indiscriminately.

The collaboration of architects and structural engineers is also frequently worthy of extensive documentation and retention. In order to make their ideas for radically new types of forms and materials tangible, and despite their training in structures as part of their architectural education, architects rely heavily on the expertise of structural engineers not only to make sure that their buildings will stand up, but also because engineers keep abreast of the most current materials research, and may be aware of new ways to use old products or, more frequently, new products that can work perfectly for applications that were impossible to predict even a year ago. An example of this type of

close collaboration is the work of Rem Koolhaas and Cecil Balmond. While Koolhaas may be a household name, having won the Pritzker prize for architecture well before his most famous building in this country, the Seattle Public Library, was finished, a large amount of credit for his buildings is due to Balmond, who is a celebrity in his own right among architects, architecture students, and engineers, and whose London firm Arup is hired by other architects seeking inventive solutions to structural challenges. Similar relationships existed between Saarinen and one of his engineers of choice, the firm of Ammann and Whitney in New York (who are also responsible for, among numerous landmark projects, the Golden Gate and George Washington bridges and the Washington, D.C. Metro system), and between Turnbull and his engineers Peter Culley and Steven Tipping, not to mention all of the soils engineers without whom one of his most enduring and award-winning projects, the community of Sea Ranch, California, would not have been built. These are just a few examples from collections that I have worked with; there are countless other architects (Frank Gehry springs to mind) for whom the intense working relationship with their structural engineers is critical to their success with innovative buildings.

The problem with all of this, especially for archivists collecting architectural records in a university setting, is that there usually just isn't room to collect the entire output of an architectural office, let alone document, to a full and rich extent, the contributions made by engineers and contractors to each building. Even Nancy Schrock, writing 20 years ago, gives shop drawings (the drawings made by contractors or manufacturers for various elements in the building, such as millwork or glazing) the green light for disposal, writing that "selective samples may be saved to document stages

in building technology.” While I absolutely agree with Schrock that not all shop drawings should be retained, especially when the drawings are for standard materials, I am also concerned that blanket statements about what types of records to retain and which to destroy as non-permanent can lead to much hand-wringing in hindsight. The grant that we received at Berkeley from the National Endowment for the Humanities required the development of appraisal standards that would not only work in the “real world” of non-architects processing and appraising architectural records, but would also provide enough room to allow for the archivist’s discretion when it comes to appraising individual projects.

Having been trained as a librarian, I used to get very frustrated with my archivist colleagues when I couldn’t get a straight answer out of them about standards applied to archival records. I would ask, “To what level does your archives process collections? Does this fit into the scope of the collection development policy? How do we go about finding collections related to this one?” Too often, I thought, the answer was, “it depends on the collection.” This boggled my MARC-and-policy-trained mind. But having worked as an archivist professionally for three years, I find myself now saying the exact same thing: “it depends on the materials.” How many sets of meeting minutes should we keep? Which stages of the design development process should we document? Do we really need these change orders? Should we save detail drawings? Well, maybe. It depends. This is not the answer that archivists in charge of appraising enormous quantities of architectural records want to hear.

A particular problem exists when a firm wants to do its own appraisal before the records are transferred to the archives – a beautiful dream come true for us at Yale – but

want to know whether we want all of a certain type of document... or none of it. As much as I theoretically believe that it's easier to turn records down than to deaccession them once they've come in, and that architects are sometimes – not always – the best judges of their own output, I have a hard time categorically saying to a firm, “For these ten major projects we want everything you have, but for these other slightly less immediately interesting projects we only want the 100% design development drawings.”

For example, I recently had a reference question about the School of Music at the University of Michigan, designed by Eero Saarinen. This is not generally considered one of his major projects, and if we'd been offered his records while he was still alive, we might have told him not to send much documentation aside from a very limited set of drawings and photographs. The researcher who contacted me, however, was very interested in the design development drawings because, as she put it, “there always seemed to be something missing.” When I looked at the early drawings, what turned out to be missing from the design that was eventually built was a huge, domed recital auditorium sitting smack dab in the front of the building, and a 3200-seat amphitheatre built into the north hill behind the school – a radically different School of Music than exists now. If we had only taken the construction set of drawings, some renderings, and a set of publicity photos, the original, unbuilt design would have been lost forever. I worry that in these times of space crunches and backlogs, we might turn down sets of records that we'll eventually wring our hands over, knowing that we almost had them in our grasp but let them go. Likewise, the correspondence and “thinking on paper” that happens between structural engineers and architects when figuring out how to make a building work, especially when the ideas are far more advanced than the building

technology, can seem either excruciatingly technical and complex or ridiculously fanciful and impractical. But if we make a decision to retain only the documentation and thinking behind what was actually built, it is possible that we will discard materials that in the future would be held up as evidence of a given technology being pushed forward by its potential applications.

At Berkeley, we came up with a way to both have our standards and some wiggle room, too. The “appraisal grid”, a copy of which is included in the handout for this talk, was our solution for creating standards for categories of materials to be retained, destroyed, or sampled to varying degrees. For example, we decided that all design sketches – the very earliest designs for buildings, often created by the architect on napkins or tracing paper – should be retained for every project. Researchers are often even more interested in these early thoughts-on-paper than they are in the construction set – the final documents generated to show the contractors how exactly the building is to be built. On the other hand, we decided that transmittal letters – the faxes or letters that describe which drawings are being sent at a given time to a contractor – are non-permanent and can be categorically destroyed.

Where the wiggle room exists for us, and for other archivists dealing with architectural collections, is in the sampling. The collections at Berkeley were rich with correspondence and telephone notes. Some of these were more routine than others. We decided to “retain for documentation” – that is, to only discard the most routine correspondence -- such as that with building inspectors. Conversely, the minutes from meetings between the architects, contractors, and government officials often contained little to no information that could not be gleaned from other types of material related to a

particular project, so we assigned these a value of “retain for examples” – that is, to retain evidence -- of the minutes, so that future researchers would know that these meetings had taken place, but to sample them to such a degree that they did not take up space in the collection that might better be used for a richer type of documentation. Not only does this kind of sampling allow the individual archivist to use his or her knowledge of the collection to make professional, informed decisions about the level of documentation necessary for each of the categories of material, but it also streamlines the collection, making it much easier for researchers to find exactly what they are looking for without having to wade through reams of non-permanent paperwork.

The grid and its standards can be adapted for any architectural collection. Even the Saarinen collection, upon which we are doing very little appraisal aside from removing duplicates, benefits from our use of the grid in arranging the project records into logical subseries by documentation type. Archivists who do not specialize in architectural records may be bewildered by the different phases of design and the different drawings that are generated in each stage. The appraisal grid acts as a reference for these archivists by breaking down a project into its component parts chronologically, so that if the grid is followed step-by-step, the archivist can see which phase comes first, then second, through to the end of the project and its subsequent publication.

I mention above that in sampling the collection, the archivist uses his or her knowledge of the collection and its strengths and weaknesses in deciding what to retain for documentation and what to retain for examples. In the aforementioned scenario, wherein the architecture firm performs its own pre-appraisal before the collection is transferred to the archives, the archivist is not able to determine for him-or-herself which

types of materials should be retained in full or not; he or she turns this judgment over to the firm. Many large firms are equipped to make this type of judgment, as they often have an information manager on staff who is well-versed in the legal retention requirements for architecture firms and has a very good grasp of what materials and projects must be kept. However, the archivist must always be vigilant and maintain open lines of communication with the firm about the types of materials that they expect to receive. For older collections, or for firms that do not have their own records or information managers, the consequences of allowing (or having allowed) the architects to make judgments of the value of their own documentation can be disastrous. One immediate example of this is the Saarinen collection, which is a treasure trove of drawings, sketches, product samples, and photographs – but contains almost no correspondence between the architect and his clients, it having been discarded by the firm years before it was donated to Yale. This is a tragedy for researchers who are interested in the relationships Saarinen had with his clients, the negotiations that they went through for each stage of the building, and the decisions, both financial and aesthetic, that affected the final designs. This is a cautionary tale for those archivists who might be tempted, when offered the appraisal services of the architecture firm itself, to just let the architects alone decide what will be donated. Architects retain a certain amount of material for legal reasons, but they, unlike archivists and other information professionals, are not in the business of determining what, in their collections, has permanent research value. That is our job, and perhaps our most important responsibility.

Appraising architectural records – even the most technical, such as the records generated by architects and structural engineers – need not engender feelings of panic and

inadequacy. When negotiating with an architecture firm interested in donating its materials to your university collection, first decide whether your repository is the appropriate one for such a collection, and then do not hesitate to ask the architect for a history of the firm and its significant projects. From there you can do your own research and ascertain whether the collection is likely to contain a great deal of documentation on significant progressions in building technology and, if so, be prepared to retain more technical records, materials samples, and detail drawings than might ordinarily be called for in an architectural collection. If your institution has a strong architecture or engineering school, these types of documents can be very valuable teaching tools for professors when introducing their students to the ways architects and engineers collaborated in the past, before the use of computer-aided drafting and engineering. For example, Professor Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen is teaching an entire architecture class at Yale this fall, using drawings from the Saarinen collection, during which students will construct digital models and animations of the twelve most structurally innovative of his buildings in order to perform sophisticated structural analyses. University archives are, in many cases, the most appropriate repositories for architectural collections, and archivists at educational institutions can ensure that these collections remain alive and well-used as primary resources, helping scholars understand the exceptional structures that comprise our built environment.

