Special Issue on Architecture

Documenting Twentieth-Century Architecture: Crisis and Opportunity

NICHOLAS OLSBERG

Abstract: Architectural records come in many different formats and are used by a variety of users for diverse reasons. The records share, however, some common characteristics—their awkward sizes, their fragile physical form and increasing electronic existence, and their ever increasing volume. Little has been written on the archival view of appraisal and selection criteria for architectural records. With this in mind, and with the belief that a documentation strategy would provide a useful beginning to set appraisal guidelines, the Working Conference on Establishing Principles for the Appraisal and Selection of Architectural Records was held in April 1994 at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. At the conference, archivists, curators, and users gathered to discuss the inherent principles and problems in the appraisal and selection of architectural records, and to propose an agenda for the future analysis of these issues and for the development of a model documentation strategy.

About the author: *R. Nicholas Olsberg has served as Chief Curator of the Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture since 1989. Prior to that he held positions as the head of the Archives of the History of Art, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities; coordinator of the Master's Program in History and Archival Methods, University of Massachusetts, Boston; Archivist of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and editor of the Colonial and State Records of South Carolina. Olsberg served from 1991 to 1994 as the founding chair of the Joint Committee on Canadian Architectural Records and Research, as chair of the Roundtable on Architectural Records of the Society of American Archivists from 1992 to 1994, and, since 1989, as the chair of the Steering Committee, Foundation for Documents of Architecture.*

Thanks for the Working Conference on Establishing Principles for the Appraisal and Selection of Architectural Records must be extended to the steering committee members of the Joint Committee on Canadian Architectural Records and Research: Louis Cardinal (National Archives, Ottawa), Robert Desaulniers (Centre Canadien d'Architecture), Irena Murray (McGill University Libraries), and Janet Wright (Parks Canada); and to the conference organizing committee: Mark Coir (Cranbrook Archives), Michael Dabrishus (University of Arkansas Libraries), Maygene Daniels (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), Alan Lathrop (University of Minnesota Libraries), Waverly Lowell (National Archives, Pacific-Sierra region), Tawny Ryan Nelb (Michigan), and Sally Reeves (New Orleans Notarial Archives).

THE WORKING CONFERENCE ON Establishing Principles for the Appraisal and Selection of Architectural Records met at the Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal April 14-16, 1994. The conference, funded by the Getty Grant Program and sponsored by the Joint Committee on Canadian Architectural Records and Research (JCCARR) and the Architectural Records Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists, set out to establish criteria which institutions that collect and manage architectural records could use to develop common approaches to the documentation of architecture in the twentieth century. The conference succeeded in establishing a broad level of agreement on the nature of the problem, on the characteristics of the given documentary universe, on a methodology for selecting essential documentation for preservation, and on an agenda for further study and action.

Architectural records appear in vastly different settings with vastly different agendas: as building records within an institutional archives, as documents of artistic processes in museums, as records of the local built environment in heritage agencies and historical collections, and as the record of regulatory history in government archives. These records are used by architectural historians, by preservation architects, as legal evidence in litigation for failures, as records of a society, and as records of individual creativity. In the twentieth century, they are united by four overriding characteristics: their unwieldy scale, their physical fragility, their increasing electronic fluidity, and their massive and expanding bulk.

The need to establish guidelines for the collection, retention, and disposition of architectural records is critical to any efforts to maintain documentation of architectural design and construction in the twentieth century. The architectural process, by its nature, now requires a vast amount of paper to develop and communicate a modicum of design information. As a result, those involved in the preservation, cataloging, and maintenance of architectural records are overwhelmed by sheer volume.

Even in 1940, it was still possible for a major architect to present a full drawing set for a single house on one sheet. The archives of a major career, like that of Frank Lloyd Wright, could be embraced in 25,000 drawings. By 1979, the drawings of Piano and Rogers for a single project, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, numbered 200,000. For built projects, duplication of records among designer, design and engineering consultants, client agencies, contractors, subcontractors, and regulatory bodies is vast and expanding. At the same time, the number and type of repositories sensitive to architectural records found in or offered to them has burgeoned, while the extent of use has widened and increased: in the expanding field of architectural history, in building conservation and historic preservation, in litigation relating to built structures, and in reconstruction after natural disasters.[1] Yet the volume of materials means that even recently established architectural collections, especially those with a focus on the records of modern-day architectural practices, find themselves effectively closed to further acquisitions after only a few years of collecting.

The first step to establishing principles must therefore be to guide institutional efforts at creating valid and practical collection policies, and at identifying duplicate, marginal, and ephemeral records within a given fonds. Design and construction processes are some of the most complex transactions in modern society and are subject to the most varied

[1]As an example of the last, the demand for architectural records for rebuilding increased dramatically after the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 and the Berkeley-Oakland fire of 1991.

levels of research. Any appraisal principles must take full account of these factors, which can become apparent only through consultation across disciplines. In the absence of that discourse, little has been written from an archival perspective on the role and function of document types in architecture. The American Institute of Architects has established some very basic definitions of project phase; the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* includes a developing hierarchy of terms for visual works that includes architectural drawings; and tentative descriptive standards have been formulated by a number of groups, including the Foundation for Documents of Architecture/Architectural Drawings Advisory Group and the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library. But the first steps toward a definition of the elements of design and construction and of the types and relative intellectual values of the documentary forms that are part of that process have yet to be taken.

The Montreal conference began with the following assumptions: that it is impossible to maintain a complete record; that in order to develop a manageable body of documentation we must find out and be mindful of the perspectives of this varied body of users; that some common bases for appraisal could be established among the multifarious custodians; and that the methods and techniques of documentation strategy could provide the most useful context in which to begin the search for appraisal criteria.

We therefore invited a representative group of twenty archivists and curators drawn from differing constituencies, including university and special library collections, architectural museums, institutional archives, local history collections, and government archives—enough to include all of the principal specialist collections in North America and to sample the perspectives of those who worked in repositories where architecture appeared as an important component of a larger universe. A smaller group of users—a lawyer, architects with general and preservation practices, four working historians of twentieth-century architecture, a heritage officer, and specialists from related fields including an architectural librarian, an expert in new media, and a conservation specialist—was added to work with the archivists and curators. The members of the Architectural Records Committee of the International Council on Archives also joined the discussions.

To animate the group and to assist in structuring and focusing its discussions, we invited three people who had written important theoretical works on documentation strategy and appraisal, but who had no specific knowledge of the architectural field: Helen Samuels, Richard Cox, and Terry Cook. This team of animators served not only as facilitators and tutors in methodology, but also as guinea pigs—outsiders well placed to challenge or clarify long-standing assumptions.

In the first full day of public presentations, which are published in this special issue of the *American Archivist*, we heard from two historians, a preservation architect, and a lawyer. Each speaker challenged our ability to make any choices that would be satisfactory while resulting in the loss of any part of the record. Then a set of presentations on methodologies of selection questioned our ability to retain anything of value if we attempted to retain it all. A discussion of the characteristics of architectural documents, from the physical properties that affect appraisal decisions to the intrinsic and material qualities of their nature as objects, turned into an important debate on the significance of the original, and on the difference between documents that carry information by their nature as artifacts and those that serve simply as vehicles for the information recorded on them. An extension of this discussion into electronic formats identified many critical issues relating to the morphology of the record. In a final sequence of case studies, of which the two most extensive are included in this issue, six archival institutions outlined approaches to local collection policies and to selection strategies within the fonds.

The second day was devoted to closed sessions, in which the working participants, divided into three groups, undertook functional analyses of three interlocking sectors of the architectural landscape: the architectural profession and practice, architecture in institutional settings, and architecture in regional and cultural contexts. On the last day of the conference, each group reported its analytical model with an indication of the relative priority of each function for documentation, listed special problems, and identified an agenda for further research and action. From these reports and from the discussions of the open sessions that preceded and followed them, the conference reached a set of common conclusions.

Principles

Two overriding central principles were quickly established. First, any approach to selection must be based on an analysis that "looks at the whole process of architecture and determines what gives evidence of its critical acts and moments." This constitutes an injunction to look analytically at a range of activities—to view the world of architecture both vertically and horizontally—before considering a range of documentation. Second, it was agreed that it was possible to define an essential corpus of documentation reflecting the critical activities identified in this analysis. But it was also recognized that the universe of architecture is so large and the volume of records so vast that a diversity of perspectives is essential to maintaining a universally useful record. Each repository or museum should therefore define its agenda for collection in terms of its own unique mandate, and repositories and standard setters must respect these diverse agendas in order to have any hope of retaining a common representative sample.

Within this context, the conference reached a number of more specific conclusions:

1. Each repository must establish a hierarchy of buildings, figures, and record types before it can begin to discriminate either in its initial collection efforts or in its treatment of the documentation once collected.
2. In the case of certain people and works—architects who have played central roles in formulating ideas, buildings that have served as laboratories for design, and monuments that fulfill a critical cultural role—the fullest possible record should be sought and preserved.
3. The project, from the first impulse to build to the reception of the finished work, is the central fact in the architectural process and should be the principal unit for analysis and selection.
4. Architecture is a wide-ranging discipline that generates a culture larger than its productive mode—the design and construction of buildings. That culture manifests itself in publications and media; through institutions, schools, and associations; and in the general movement of ideas as well as in the built environment.
5. Architecture is also one of the languages used by society to express its aspirations, reflect its psyche, and respond to its social and economic needs. The records of architecture and of the built environment should therefore be collected with a conscious regard to its role as a manifestation of other cultural forces.
6. Though the weight given to the artifactual value of the record will vary from institution to institution, it is incumbent on all repositories, whatever their individual mandates, to acknowledge the intrinsic properties of certain records as manifestations of that architectural language.

7. Just as the volume of records forces us to look down on them from the heights of functions, programs, and processes, the enunciation of a documentation strategy must be a collaborative process if it is to embrace the interests of constituents. Certain collective understandings, identified in the research agenda, could be enunciated and communicated to the larger community of repositories interested in the field, so that common, complementary, and comparable approaches to documentation could be developed, however varied in focus. Individual repositories should also work with the research community, the architectural profession, and regulatory agencies as they begin to develop local approaches and strategies to address the architectural component of their mandate.

Problems

1. The critical problems of preserving a comprehensive record—scale, volume, duplication, and instability—are of recent origin, and any documentation strategy must keep time factors in mind. It was generally agreed that before 1920, problems of volume and duplication are manageable. The issue becomes dramatic only after World War II, and horrifying only in the more recent past, when increasingly more complex reproduction systems, liability factors, and regulatory requirements have compounded the growth in records made and copies filed. We are failing the user by failing to define and obtain a balanced and manageable corpus of essential documentation for research in this more recent area. Oral histories must be considered as a form of essential documentation and an integral part of any documentation strategy.
2. At the same time, the need to preserve original design and construction records may be mitigated in many cases by growing standardization in construction, specification, components, and design; the accumulation of synoptic records in regulatory bodies; and the proliferation of visual, statistical, and published records on components, the built environment, and the characteristics of practice. Knowledge of this wider universe of documentation is critical to determining the value of records in architectural offices and in client archives.
3. Predicting research trends is a dangerous undertaking. While the historians urged the archivists at the meeting to become increasingly informed of the changing direction of research in architectural history, and especially of the contextual issues that are now a growing subject of study, strong voices were heard in favor of divorcing the approach to appraisal from the immediate dictates of research agendas. It was proposed that archivists could better involve the research community by including it in the process of functional analysis, so that research can help the archivist to define the roles of architectural discipline and practice and to establish the dimensions and context of their impact on the community at large.
4. Archivists must consider the practicability of any approach to documentation. There is little point in establishing a hierarchy in which the primary records have no hope of long-term survival, or for which the primary subjects are documented in unmanageable form.
5. With the expansion of computer-aided design techniques into everyday architectural practice, problems of volume are now compounded by problems of irretrievability. Design development records—those most critical to grasping the creative pro-

cess—are becoming effectively unsortable. In addition, only a tiny fraction of the world's archives have electronic records programs or expertise. There is no standard for physical storage of the medium that ensures long-term preservation without costly migration and updating programs, and no intellectual standard in software or description that ensures compatibility and accessibility of any record that is so preserved.

6. The archivist is aware of becoming increasingly bound to the vagaries of architectural practice in appraisal and treatment decisions, and of serving as custodian of records that are still in some active administrative status. We are accepting or rejecting records from architectural offices "wholesale," or in crisis situations, and undertaking long-term transfer arrangements with firms whose future is uncertain. Many of these records are subject to continued administrative or legal use, and therefore require processing long before their research use is established. Unless we can help to return some of the responsibility for management of records to the working office, a systematic approach to documentation will not be possible.
7. Any solutions to problems of scale and volume must be cautious. The record of use for recent architectural archives is weak. The legal force of even insignificant records is potent and long. Assurance of the preservation of parallel records should be required before destruction is considered.

A Research Agenda

1. Many conference participants felt that a hierarchical typology of buildings should be developed, weighted to indicate both the level of documentation and the types of activity requiring documentation mandate. Clearly, any such typology should reflect the different missions and contexts of collecting repositories. Other participants expressed this as a desire to define a core of significant structures or projects, within a region or an office. But it was agreed that a general recognition that "all buildings are not created equal" should allow us to develop some common understandings as to which are most in need of thorough documentation, and of which aspects of the planning, design, construction, and maintenance processes are most important to each. Such a hierarchy would not normally involve judgments of "quality." For example, the design development phase may be the critical step in the making of any building by a research practice, while the stages of regulatory hearings, reception, and continued use may be the critical phases in the life of a routine project with an impact on the built and social environment. At the least, and here there was general agreement, a methodology should be enunciated for collecting institutions, in order to help them develop criteria for deciding which structures they should be most concerned with and to what level of documentation. A recommendation was made to accompany such a set of guidelines with a description of sample projects, indicating the minimum and maximum set of records that could be retained and the relative losses or gains in documentation that would result, so that a hierarchy, once established, could be effectively applied.
2. A number of participants stressed the need to reinforce the documentary strategy or functional approach to appraisal with efforts to capture a broad picture of the existing documentary corpus in established research repositories, especially in relation to architects' papers. Basic directory-level information on these holdings

should form an essential part of the pool of information needed to develop a documentation strategy. Strong arguments were heard at the meeting in favor of completing the analytical process, so that the essential objectives of a documentation strategy and some consensus on the basic corpus essential to research are in place before undertaking any detailed or analytical surveys of documentation in the field.

3. A series of model inventories, notably of architects' records for representative building projects, are required before any attempts can be made at prescribing approaches to retention.
4. A better knowledge of the nature and range of architectural activities in regulatory agencies is critical to identifying the most succinct evidence of interventions, changes, and common practices in the making of the built environment and of vernacular forms of architecture. An analysis of the scope and character of these records and of their utility for research must be undertaken and its results made widely known, so that private records that duplicate such data and have less direct evidentiary value for these subjects can be allowed to disappear. Collaboration should be sought with appropriate government agencies to develop schedules for these records.
5. Copyright and legal issues commonly affecting the ownership and use of architects' records should be summarized in a widely available published form.
6. Construction records present a special problem, since many documents are duplicated at different filing points—volume and friability are high, and legal factors relating to liability and cost responsibilities are complex. It was felt that appraisal guidelines could effectively be established in this area, and that it was urgent to fund an analysis of the process of construction, of the roles of its players and recordkeepers, and of the typology of standard documentary forms generated in the process of construction, as an essential first step toward disposition and appraisal standards.
7. Certain fundamental research tasks must be undertaken in order to factor preservation issues into appraisal decisions. One such task is to develop a published schedule of the estimated life span of the most frequently encountered media and supports used for creating and reproducing architectural drawings. In order to achieve this, support must be sought for intensive study of the properties of these media in two phases, one devoted to media before 1930, and the second devoted to media after that date. We are largely ignorant of the nature and qualities of many photomechanical processes in use during the twentieth century, and of the behavior of many of the papers and media used in daily practice for original drawings.
8. The impact of computer-aided design techniques on the design process and its documentation must be better understood. How do the architects and engineers and design professionals in our universe actually work? What do they draw and scan and type and write, and which important acts of the creative process are electronic? How do we incorporate functional requirements in software to ensure that "records" are actually created and are safeguarded in an integral, authentic, and unalterable fashion?[2] A series of case studies was recommended to evaluate the effect of electronic techniques on the nature, permanence, and accessibility of essential documentation of the design process.

[2]I am indebted to Terry Cook for the elaboration of this point.

9. Emergency storage facilities should be established, perhaps on a regional basis, to hold endangered records pending analysis and review. This need was recognized particularly in relation to records of architectural practice, where the natural instability and informality of firms often occasion crisis calls for intervention before any evaluation of their holdings can be attempted.
10. The American Institute of Architects, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, and the Society of Architectural Historians should be invited to work with the archival profession to promote and advance this research agenda. However, this lengthy and complex agenda could not possibly be met by exhortation; the precise nature, methods, and objectives of these studies and analyses needed fuller discussion. The consensus of the Conference was that a second working conference, devoted to case studies and to more fully developing this research agenda, was essential.