

The Users

The Place of Archives in the Universe of Architectural Documentation

ALFRED WILLIS

Abstract: Architectural drawings are not synonymous with architectural archives, but they do constitute a significant part of architectural documentation. With many of the earliest architectural collections containing only books, the interpretation of the importance of architectural drawings has changed over the years. It has been shown, however, that the primary users of architectural archives are not architects looking for design ideas, but those conducting historical research. All forms of architectural records—books, journals, models, pictures, working drawings, and specifications, to name a few—provide different intellectual content to a researcher. Therefore, the elimination of working drawings from the archival architectural record would not eliminate duplication of content, but would substantially change the documentary record available.

About the author: Alfred Willis has served as Head of the Arts Library, UCLA, since 1993. His recent publications include an essay on the early work of Victor Horta. He also contributed the chapter on "Visual Resources" to the Guide to Indexing and Cataloging with the Art & Architecture Thesaurus. Willis holds a Ph.D. degree in art history and archaeology from Columbia University and an M.A. in library science from the University of Chicago.

MY SOMEWHAT AMBIGUOUS TITLE allows me to discuss three rather different, but related, matters of concern to those charged with the appraisal and management of architectural records. First, I shall briefly review the *literal* place of archival and other collections of architectural drawings in repositories of documents bearing architectural information. Second, I shall call attention to the special significance of archives for the ongoing production of architectural knowledge and hence the wider universe of architectural documentation. Third, I shall outline from a philosophical perspective the *conceptual* place of architectural archives in that universe, and conclude with a suggestion of why, where architectural documents are concerned, one generally can accept no substitutes.

The population of architectural drawings is certainly not identical with that of architectural archives. Yet, architectural drawings do occupy an important place within the universe of architectural documentation, to a large degree precisely because of their relative importance in the archives of architectural activity. There is, in fact, much to suggest that architectural drawings compose the principal component of the archival record of architecture that has been retained in many (if not most) repositories. There they have traditionally been assimilated to cartographic records, and managed accordingly, as though they were special kinds of maps.¹

Collections of architectural drawings—whether from the production of one or many individual practices—have long been a part of architectural libraries,² themselves often multimedia gatherings of books along with drawings, prints, photographs, models, casts, and specimens of building details, materials, or assemblages. As John Harris has shown, private collections of architectural drawings kept alongside, or integrated with, collections of books can be documented in Britain as early as the seventeenth century.³ Many of the most famous such collections now in existence have developed as part of the *institutional* libraries assembled since the eighteenth century to support the organized teaching of architecture—the prime example being found in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris. When William Ware began work in the 1860s on establishing North America's first department of architecture (at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), he also began work on creating a library. He envisioned his library of *books* as being used for various didactic purposes in conjunction with allied collections of casts, models, photographs, and architectural drawings.⁴ A similarly wide range of materials, in various formats, was assembled in the 1880s to support the teaching of architecture at Columbia University, which began in 1881. Visual materials (once again, casts, models, photographs, and architectural drawings), seem, for a while, to have predominated over books at Columbia.⁵ This situation changed dramatically in 1890 with the gift of the Avery Memorial Library to Columbia as the university's *second* architectural library. The Avery Library, conceptualized as a reference and research library composed overwhelmingly of books, nevertheless also in-

¹E.g., Otto Meisner, *Archivalienkunde vom 16. Jahrhunderts bis 1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1969), 57–58; Ralph E. Ehrenberg, *Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1982).

²Angela Giral, "Collecting and Organizing Architectural Drawings and Records" in *The Architecture Library of the Future: Complexity and Contradiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 83–94.

³John Harris, "Le dessin d'architecture: Une nouvelle marchandise culturelle," in *Images et imaginaires d'architecture* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), 74–75.

⁴Caroline Shillaber, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Planning, 1861–1961: A Hundred Year Chronicle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1963), 8.

⁵Theodor K. Rohdenburg, *A History of the School of Architecture, Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 9, 14.

cludes Henry Ogden Avery's own architectural drawings.⁶ The latter formed the nucleus of a now very extensive collection of such items, documenting in many cases entire careers of architectural designing, still located physically and administratively within the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library.

In 1937, Avery librarian Talbot F. Hamlin surveyed the major architectural libraries of Europe, finding that collections of architectural drawings figured in many cases among their components. "Architectural drawings are important indices to architectural culture," he wrote, "and so to human artistic culture. They are the architect's means of diagramming and expressing his conceptions; in a sense they are the flowering of the ideas whose seeds are in the books of the architectural library."⁷ Hamlin thus recognized a distinction between the *kinds* of information typically contained in architectural drawings and architectural books. For Hamlin, the special value of such drawings was mainly as records of exemplary architectural *designs* not available in published form.

The value of architectural drawings as expressions of designs seems to have become a less and less compelling reason for collecting them in the years since World War II. Increasingly, architectural drawings have been collected in libraries (like that of the University of California, Los Angeles) not as sources of design inspiration, but as evidence for architecture's historical development. More recently, they have come to be prized also as exemplars of draftsmanship, and even as decorative objects of a fetishistic character. A notable exception is the collection of prints of working drawings assembled in the library of Syracuse University to support the teaching of building technology and professional practice.⁸

Collections of architectural drawings may now be found in libraries not only in their original form and substance but reproduced in printed volumes and microform sets. While sets like those published by Garland Publishing of New York⁹ seem at first glance to be intended mainly for historical research, there is no denying their utility in architectural design education. Their availability has opened up quite new pedagogical possibilities for many schools of architecture lacking local access to architectural archives. In such schools, the drawings reproduced in these sets may be given to students as design precedents, precisely as Hamlin proposed.

I would now like to broaden this discussion to architectural archives proper, and particularly their primary users. Although Anthony Coulson has stated that "these archival materials provide the core of the library/information service" in an architectural firm, it is unlikely that architects are heavy users of historical archives, other than their own, for the purposes that Coulson had in mind, namely: (1) as sources of precedents for new designs; or (2) as material for developing or fostering client relationships.¹⁰ No doubt architects call for older building designs, such as are often found in archival contexts (though not necessarily only there), when doing renovation, remodeling, or restoration

⁶James Grote Van Derpool, "Avery Memorial Architectural Library," *A History of the School of Architecture, Columbia University*, 75–84.

⁷Talbot F. Hamlin, *Some European Architectural Libraries: Their Methods, Equipment and Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 72.

⁸It is worth noting that Syracuse University also collects architectural archives, in the proper sense, to support historical research.

⁹Lois Swan Jones, *Art Information: Research Methods and Resources*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1990), 220–21.

¹⁰Anthony J. Coulson, "Interior Design," in *Information Sources in Architecture*, edited by Valerie J. Bradfield (London: Butterworths, 1983), 300.

work. Urban planners may seek similar documentation in the course of efforts to delineate the mutations of a particular site over time that might be relevant to choices among possible new uses. But nowadays, the greatest appeal of architectural archives, as of collections of architectural drawings, is to historical researchers. Empirical evidence supporting this conclusion was collected by Eugene E. Matysek, Jr., in a study done in 1991 as a student project in the College of Library and Information Services at the University of Maryland.¹¹ Matysek examined the citations in three major journals of architectural research from 1986 through 1990: the *Architectural Science Review* (considered to represent “hard” research in architectural design); the *Journal of Architectural Education* (considered to represent “soft” research in architectural design); and the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (considered to represent historical scholarship in architecture). He tabulated, among other things, the frequencies with which researchers publishing in these three target journals demonstrably used sources falling into twenty-two form categories. Matysek found that, of the 204 articles in the five-year runs of the three journals he studied, 89 (or 43.6 percent) cited at least one archival source. The distribution of these citations over the three journals was dramatically uneven, however. Of all the citations to archives, 77.5 percent were found in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. While only 13.2 percent and 3.3 percent of articles in the *Journal of Architectural Education* and the *Architectural Science Review* (respectively) reported research documented in part with archival evidence, fully 70.4 percent of the articles in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* showed evidence that their authors had consulted archives. Matysek concluded that “a heavy dependence upon archival sources emerges as a clear marker of contemporary historical research in architecture.” For architectural scientists and other researchers not involved in historical investigations, archives seem to have only marginal to slight importance.¹²

Matysek’s statistical study measured only the relative importance of archives, among other information sources, to a particular group of scholars. An indication of their absolute worth to those apparently most dependent on them—architectural historians—may be gained not only from the papers by David De Long and Christopher Thomas included in this volume, but also from anecdotal evidence contained in the prefaces to some recent monographs on past architects of varying degrees of fame. Franz Schulze, author of *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, stated:

The greatest boon to Miesian scholarship in the past forty years has been the establishment of the Mies van der Rohe Archive at the Museum of Modern Art. With the acquisition and assembly of most of the architect’s professional files and many of his personal papers, as well as a treasury of his drawings numbering in the thousands, it became possible to begin filling in the gaps in Mies’s history which had frustrated students even while Mies was still alive. An additional quantity of archival material, obtained in 1965 by the Library of Congress, proved to be a windfall of nearly comparable magnitude.¹³

¹¹Eugene E. Matysek, Jr., “Three Recent Literatures in Architectural Research: A Citation Analysis, 1986-1990,” research paper, College of Library and Information Services, University of Maryland, 1992.

¹²Matysek, “Three Recent Literatures in Architectural Research,” 15-16.

¹³Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985),

Sara Holmes Boutelle, in her book, *Julia Morgan, Architect*, acknowledged three main sources of information: (1) "interviews with people who knew Morgan" and with other scholars; (2) libraries (particularly their special collections) and archives throughout California, the state in which Morgan practiced; and (3) architectural drawings, brought to the author's attention through exhibitions. In remarks of special significance to the present context, Boutelle went on to note the setback posed to her research by the inaccessibility of certain of Morgan's papers remaining in the hands of her family.¹⁴ In emphasizing at once both the positive effect that the availability of archival materials had on her ability to pursue her research, and the negative effect that their inaccessibility had on the same investigation, Boutelle echoed sentiments expressed by Leland Roth in the preface to his monograph on *McKim, Mead and White, Architects*. There he wrote:

The primary source has been the immense archive of drawings, correspondence, photographs, and miscellany deposited at the New-York Historical Society. As large as this archive is, there are important lacunae, for the office was moved twice, in 1891 and again in 1894, and much of the oldest and apparently superfluous material was discarded.¹⁵

Roth added, in a footnote: "Much was sent away later, too, as files were cleaned out."¹⁶

It thus appears from statistical evidence as well as from expert testimonials that research in architectural history depends heavily on the availability of relevant archives, and that (conversely) the inaccessibility of such archives—whether because of inadvertent destruction, intentional discard, dispersal, or improper triage—poses a considerable obstacle to the architectural-historical enterprise.

Having looked briefly at the position typically occupied by architectural drawings within the repositories of architectural information sources as they have historically developed, and then at the relative usefulness of such archives to the several classes of researchers currently contributing to the expansion of the universe of architectural documentation, I want to turn finally to the differences between the characteristic information content of architectural archives and that of the books, journals, photographs, and other materials that are their complement.

"The architect's papers are a curious mixture," wrote Nelson Goodman at the outset of what may well be the only serious philosophical discussion of the nature of architectural archives as they relate to architectural works and built structures.¹⁷ Goodman was concerned, in this context, with distinguishing art works from the artifacts in which they are sometimes embodied, or by which, at other times, they are merely set forth or specified. He considered, particularly, the two kinds of artifacts most commonly and characteristically found in repositories of architectural records (as distinct from the larger body of business records and the related body of records of artistic creation in general). These are plans and specifications. A plan, because drawn, appears to be a sketch, Goodman noted; but because it is dimensioned (or scaled) in such a way as to set forth in script-like fashion

¹⁴Sara Holmes Boutelle, *Julia Morgan, Architect* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 248.

¹⁵Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), xix.

¹⁶Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects*, 371, n. 2.

¹⁷Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1976), 218.

a particular structure, he ultimately concluded that such a hybrid “counts as a digital diagram and as a score.”¹⁸ Works of architecture, in Goodman’s analysis, thus clearly fall within the class of allographic, as opposed to autographic, works of art; they are hence more like most musical compositions than they are like most paintings. A particular architectural work is identifiable neither with a particular building, nor with the plans and specifications that preceded that building’s construction and determined its configuration and appearance. Rather, the building stands as an instance of a (performed, metaphysical) work in so far as its form, shape, colors, materials, etc., comply fairly closely with the requirements given by those plans and specifications.

Now, within the universe of architectural documentation, one encounters numerous artifacts and documents that have works of architecture (e.g., historical monographs, articles of criticism), or some built structures compliant therewith (e.g., topographic prints, photographs of individual buildings), or even the plans and/or specifications thereof (e.g., books of architects’ designs, dissertations on architectural drawings), as their subjects. These critical, descriptive, and depictive documents differ essentially from the plans and specifications, taken as a whole, which are not works about concrete subjects but rather documents setting forth some more or less determinate objects—“the architect’s papers,” in Goodman’s sense, properly so called and characteristically found in archives.¹⁹

Brought to bear as evidence to support historical or theoretical hypotheses in architectural research, these papers (working drawings, specifications) hence yield information of a completely different order than do those documents (the books, journals, models, and pictures that make up the bulk of the so-called “architectural literature”—some of it just as “primary,” relative to a given question, as any archival record) which usually reside in libraries. This is so not only because, as Robert Bruegmann has suggested, architectural archives often provide a unique source of information, permitting the architectural historian to investigate topics (e.g., a city’s “average buildings”) that would be practically unthinkable in their absence.²⁰ Rather, as Edward Robbins has shown, only the (archival) evidence of design drawings permits the construction of a history of architectural designing, one no doubt related to, but certainly not coextensive with, a history either of the forms of the designs thus produced, or of the forms of the latter’s compliant entities in the built world.²¹ In contrast, Bruno Queysanne has argued that only buildings (and not drawings) can serve adequately to document that history of architecture which is a history of the experience of built space.²²

¹⁸Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 219.

¹⁹Architectural archives are a subclass of design archives. For an outline of the kinds of records typically found in design archives, see John Orbell, “Documents and Design,” in *Design History: Past, Process, Product* (London: Design Council, 1979), 14–15. Giral, “Collecting Architectural Records,” 86, gives an idea of which architectural records might be retained in selective collecting programs. Architectural archives form an important part of the large body of records relevant to the study of the production and configuration of the built environment; cf. W. P. Dezutter and M. Goetinck, “Verhalende en iconografische bronnen en hun belang voor de studie van de bouwambachten” in *Op en om de bouwwerf: Ambachtswezen- oud gereedschap* (Bruges: Stedelijk Museum, 1975), 119–30; Barbara J. Howe et al., *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 39–58.

²⁰See Robert Bruegmann, “Architecture without the Capital ‘A’: Documentation in a Post-Modern Age,” *Art Documentation* 5 (Fall 1986): 103–5.

²¹See Edward Robbins, “Drawing and the Social Production of Architecture,” in *The Design Professions and the Built Environment*, edited by Paul Knox (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 42–61.

²²See Bruno Queysanne, “En histoire de l’architecture, le document c’est le bâtiment,” in *La recherche en architecture: Un bilan international* (Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 1986), 45–51.

Because of differences of intentionality embedded in their respective historicities, typically archival and nonarchival documents answer, in a mutually exclusive manner, qualitatively different research questions. The subject-oriented documents typically found in libraries refer to things that do exist, or that once existed, or, in the case of conjectural reconstructions of a lost building, that might once have existed. The working drawings and specifications seldom found in libraries but commonly retained in archives usually set forth what is (or more likely, was) to be. Various documents found equally often in both kinds of institutions also describe or depict fictitiously what might be (or might once have been possible): the renderings that show how an edifice compliant with an architectural work might appear, were its project carried out.

Among these documents, perfect substitutions are not always possible. For example, any instance of a photographic view of the Empire State Building is as good as any other equally clear print of the same image, and any full set of its working drawings—drawn or printed—is likewise as good as any other (for reasons that have to do as much with the nature of iconicity as with the nature of allographic art). But, used in research, the photograph can never substitute for the working drawings any more than the building can substitute for its photograph, or the photograph for the building, or the building for its working drawings. Each has a unique information content (as well as an evidential value) arising out of its essence as a document—the working drawings specifying a work, the building complying with that specification, the photograph being a depiction of that compliant structure—and independent of the historical acts that link the specified project to its compliant entity (i.e., an act of building in accordance with certain plans) and the compliant entity to its depiction (i.e., an act of making a picture from a particular viewpoint at a particular time), thus creating a certain illusion of documentary redundancy. The loss of the working drawings (the likely archival document) would hence not reduce a redundancy in the historical record but rather scar it irreparably.