Case Study

Appraisal of Architectural Records in Practice: The Northwest Architectural Archives

ALAN K. LATHROP

Abstract: The Northwest Architectural Archives was established in 1972 as a comprehensive regional repository to acquire and preserve architectural records of building and landscape architects, engineers, contractors, interior designers, and other professional organizations in architectural fields. The appraisal of records by the Northwest Architectural Archives is based in part on its comprehensive collections development strategy as well as criteria regarding the record creators, completeness, age, current and potential users, subject matter, and how such material fits with existing collections. Underlying most appraisal decisions is the expert knowledge of the curatorial staff regarding architectural records. Preservation and conservation actions are based on condition and value of the materials. The Northwest Architectural Archives' appraisal of the contents of the Minneapolis Plan Vault demonstrates some of the factors that influence appraisal decisions. However, architectural records have their own unique appraisal questions, many of which cannot be decided globally, but must be decided at the local level based on local user and research needs.

About the author: *Alan K. Lathrop is the curator of the Manuscripts Division at the University of Minnesota Libraries, which includes the Northwest Architectural Archives. He holds masters' degrees in history and library science from the University of Minnesota. He is currently compiling a book on the religious architecture of Minnesota and is the author of two previous articles in the* American Archivist *dealing with architectural records.*

THE NORTHWEST ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES at the University of Minnesota Libraries was formally established in 1972. Before its establishment, discussions were held between the curator and representatives from the Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis Public Library, museums, and county historical societies in the Twin Cities area to determine their interest in collecting architectural records. These discussions took place under the auspices of the Minnesota Society of Architects. When these institutions indicated they had no plans to actively collect such records, it was decided that the University of Minnesota would set up its own architectural records collecting program.

The major objective of the archives is the acquisition and preservation of records of architects, landscape architects, engineers, contractors, interior designers, and associated professional organizations from a region including Minnesota and parts of surrounding states. One hundred fifty collections representing all of these professions, dating from the 1830s to the present, are contained in the archives. Collections range in size from a single item to many thousands, and include every type of document that these professions generate: drawings of all kinds, specifications, job and contract files, financial records, photographs, survey books, field inspection reports, change orders, and individuals' personal papers (such as diaries and correspondence). An adjunct to these collections is an actively growing "library" of 7,000 volumes of trade catalogs dealing with the vast array of building materials and components, plus a 300-volume collection of pattern (stock plan) books.

There is scarcely an architectural style or type of structure for which the archives cannot provide at least one piece of documentation. Last year, about twenty-five hundred users were registered, including architects, contractors, developers, realtors, lawyers, building owners, students, and scholars, as well as several requests for the loan of original objects for exhibitions. At last count, over eighty objects are on loan to three different shows in the United States.

The staff is composed of two full-time members (the curator and assistant curator), who have full responsibility for supervising all operations of the archives, including acquisitions, appraisal, reference, and processing. Two to four part-time students (working a total of twenty-five hours a week) are employed to sort, arrange, and inventory the collections. The staff is supplemented periodically with interns, volunteers, and grant-funded full- or part-time personnel.

The archives was intended from the start to be comprehensive—to collect not just the pretty renderings and perspectives that tell only a small part of the story of how a building was designed and built, but *all* the records that an architect, engineer, landscape architect, contractor or interior designer creates during the design and construction process. The Northwest Architectural Archives was one of the first repositories in the United States to embark on a comprehensive collecting program, and many archivists have sought advice from its staff over the years on how to establish similar programs. A great number of their questions were concerned with appraisal for collecting and retention.

The collection development policy adopted by the archives was to take as broad a sweep as possible, not to rule out anything so long as it fell under the general heading of architecture and the building arts. This has probably resulted in some oddball collections—although the staff doesn't think they are, of course. Collections have been obtained from every profession targeted for preservation, as well as associated professional groups such as the Minnesota Society of Architects (now AIA Minnesota) and the Builders Exchange of St. Paul. The latter is a central office funded by annual membership dues from contractors and architects who, in return, can deposit plan sets there for the convenience

of estimators. The Builders Exchange has been in existence since 1906, and all of its board of directors' minutes and weekly newsletters ten years old and older are in the archives. The newsletters are a veritable gold mine of building information because they feature several pages listing plans currently on file. These plans give a good idea of which structures were in progress at any given time after 1906.

Appraisal of records for retention is, of course, based largely on collection development strategy. Three criteria underlie the Northwest Architectural Archives' strategy for collecting:

1. Importance of the firm or individual in the context of architectural history in the region.
2. Completeness of the documentation (e.g., a firm may not be important, but its collection may be comprehensive in terms of records).
3. Age of the material.

In addition to these criteria, the archives staff apply the following in appraising collections and materials for retention:

1. Clientele and potential clientele. Staff members know the archives' clientele and especially its *potential* clientele. They look carefully at past user trends and anticipate what might meet future needs.
2. Subject matter. The staff is fully knowledgeable in the subjects of concern. The importance of this cannot be emphasized strongly enough. No institution can deal knowledgeably with any kind of records, let alone architectural records, unless its staff is familiar with terminology and practitioners and with the types of documentation produced by the building professions in its area.
3. The existing collection. The staff know the strengths and weaknesses of the archives' current holdings. In this regard, they are much like bibliographers in research libraries, who first become thoroughly familiar with the holdings and the subject areas in which they operate, and then seek to fill the obvious gaps with material that covers the missing styles, time periods, firms and individuals, and structural types.

Indefinable ingredients, such as personal prejudice or sentiment, also play a role. From long experience with architectural records, the curator and his assistant often make judgments for or against acquisition and permanent retention for which there is no basis other than "it feels right."

Appraisal is usually made on site. If a collection is too complex or time or circumstances do not permit an on-site appraisal, *everything* is removed to the archives and the work is carried out there. Sometimes appraisal is taken out of the staff's hands. Architects have an irritating habit of weeding their own papers in the mistaken belief that they know better than the archivist does what is important for posterity and what isn't. Also, they naturally want to be remembered only for what they consider to be their "best" work. Despite the best efforts to convince them otherwise, architects often sort through their papers without telling anyone and weed furiously, then call and say the archives can have what remains. Never mind that some jobs which might be highly significant have been trashed. Correspondence and contract files usually go first ("They take up too much space," "Who's interested in that stuff?"), followed by shop drawings (admittedly usually of limited value, so not missed as much as correspondence or contracts), sketches, working drawings, and specifications for entire jobs. It is all quite maddening, of course, especially if a firm has known (as a lot of them already do) that the archives is interested in the

entire corpus of its work. The curator tells them he or she will decide what is worth keeping and what is not, based on what he or she knows of the archives' needs and the history of the firm. A number of firms go along with that and a number do not. Fortunately, the former have a substantial edge on the latter.

Virtually everything acquired from important firms is retained: items considered of less significance are weeded more vigorously. This holds true for all but old records. In the upper Midwest, architectural records dating from before 1910 are so rare that almost anything that can be found is kept, whether it documents important work or not. Another exception is the category of early twentieth-century women architects, for whom relatively little documentation remains. The archives has been fortunate in obtaining the records of three "pioneers" who began their practices in the 1920s, after either receiving training under older architects or attending a school of architecture, as well as the records of the Minnesota (Beta) chapter of the Association of Women in Architecture. The Beta Chapter, the second founded in the United States, was organized by Minnesota female graduates of the University of Minnesota's School of Architecture in the early 1920s.

Newer records (from the mid-1970s and later) are treated no differently than other material, although, in the absence of historical perspective, they require careful appraisal. Many of the records generated in the last decade and a half relate to architecture that is mundane and unexciting by any standard, as to both style and type. But the archives still keeps much of this material, both because users demand it and because it is difficult to know what may be considered significant years from now.

No print copies of any kind are retained if the originals are extant. The important exception to this rule is prints that contain information about a structure as built, not noted on the originals.

A high percentage of the material documenting existing buildings is kept, possibly as much as 90 percent. The archives' clientele regularly request drawings and other data for a wide variety of structures in the area. The primary aim of the Northwest Architectural Archives is service to the community; as the only architectural records repository in the region, the archives is often the only hope most people have of locating needed documents. Therefore it must be as complete as possible.

User requests for drawings of nonextant structures are less predictable, so these materials are more difficult to appraise. The archives makes retention decisions on the basis of whether the structures are stylistically significant, were good representatives of a type, were locally prominent in some way, were the product of an important firm or architect, or demonstrated an innovative structural or HVAC system. In the last case, the full set of drawings, including structural, electrical, and mechanical, is preserved. Otherwise, all but the job files, architectural drawings, and photographs are discarded.

Because of a perennial lack of funds, the archives microfilms virtually nothing. The exceptions have been projects undertaken to preserve deteriorating materials. The format used was 35mm aperture cards, which offer the convenience of holding one sheet of plans per card, making individual items (which the archives is often called upon to provide, rather than entire sets) easier to retrieve. These sheets also have the added advantage of being readily enlarged to original size in Xerox prints on bond or vellum. The cost to the archives is about $8.00 apiece. Fragile originals are almost always discarded after copying. Only if the originals have some outstanding artistic, associational, or informational value would the archives consider investing in having them professionally restored.

The Northwest Architectural Archives does not have an advisory board to make recommendations on acquisitions or appraisal. This is primarily because, in the curator's

experience, architects (who are most likely to sit on such a board) generally lack the knowledge and expertise necessary to make objective judgments about the historical, informational, and artifactual value of architectural records. For this kind of assessment, the archivist's judgment is better than the architect's.

Appraising a Special Collection

In 1984, the archives acquired the entire contents of the Minneapolis Plan Vault. The Plan Vault contained the plan sets that had been registered with the city's Building Inspections Department by anyone who was planning to carry out a building project requiring a building permit within the city limits. These plans had accumulated since 1910 in a room (loosely called a "vault") in the basement of the Minneapolis City Hall. They document everything from skyscrapers to underground transformer vaults, apartment houses to backyard decks, service stations to billboards. There are literally thousands and thousands of rolls of plans representing the work of many hundreds of architects, for most of whom the archives previously had no records or information at all. After the initial deposit in 1984, additional material continued to be received from Building Inspections on a semiannual basis up to 1993. Currently, an estimated eighty thousand to one hundred thousand structures of all types are represented in the collection. The process of sorting and arranging this collection is only 10 to 15 percent completed. It is hoped that processing will be completed by 1997. The archives receives a daily average of six to eight requests for information from the Plan Vault material, making it by far the most heavily used of all the collections in the archives.

Since the entire collection would have been simply hauled to the Dumpster if the archives staff and a small army of volunteers had not rescued it, the archives has full authority to select whatever it chooses for permanent retention. Because these are considered public records, the State Archives must sign off on any destruction, but this is by-and-large only a formality.

Setting appraisal criteria for this mass of material was not easy. Most of it consists of prints, not originals, and only a few sets of specifications are tucked into the rolls. Does this make the job easier? By no means, for several reasons:

First, the only remaining set of plans for many buildings in Minneapolis now resides in the archives. This includes commercial, institutional, and residential structures, as well as a myriad of other types.

Second, because these are prints, they present formidable problems of preservation, especially in the case of the older plans, which were stored in the basement of City Hall for seventy years or more, and are now dusty and brittle.

Third, all of the plans in this collection bear the stamp of the city building inspector, and so are the only legal proof that a structure met existing codes and was approved for construction. The archives staff have been served subpoenas for plan sets because the court required that only the copy with the inspector's stamp could be entered as evidence.

Fourth, there are literally hundreds of repetitive examples of one type of structure—such as service stations, fast-food restaurants, and government infill housing, to name only a few—that were turned out in a "cookie-cutter" fashion by in-house drafting teams from the companies and government agencies that built them. Beyond that, there are thousands of plans for interior and exterior alterations and additions, many of these in downtown high-rise office buildings.

Finally, a vast majority of the plans contain documentation for work that is mundane by any measure. Besides the service stations and fast-food restaurants and Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) dwellings, there are plans for such uninspiring architecture as private residential garages, backyard redwood decks, retaining walls, underground electrical transformer vaults, billboards, and numerous similar kinds of structures. One would think this might make the appraisal process easier, but in fact it complicates it, because many of the structures are no longer extant, and the archives has to be sure that representative examples are being saved, even examples of what most critics would consider worthless junk.

The question is, then, how to deal with all this? At the time the collection was acquired, there were virtually none like it anywhere else. And in those very few instances in which institutions had acquired such collections, their curators or archivists had not been able to deal with them. So the curator of the Northwest Architectural Archives developed some criteria on his own.

The first step is the selection of a sample of the repetitive and mundane buildings that includes examples of projects, large and small, the work of architects known to be missing from the collections, and work that best depicts the type of structure or the spirit of the times. The decisions that go into this are mostly subjective, but are based on a thorough knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the entire Plan Vault collection.

The second step is the selection of examples of recognized styles which demonstrate their best characteristics, for both new construction and renovations.

The third step is the retention of plans for all the important buildings that have existed in the city and a goodly share of the less important ones. Familiarity with the architectural history of the city and with architects, past and present, helps a great deal here. The curator's familiarity stems not only from daily contact with the subject for the past twenty-three years, but from having served on the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission and the State Review Board, which nominates sites to the National Register of Historic Places.

The fourth step is the discarding of extremely fragile material after first assessing its value in the context of the other three criteria and determining whether it is worth copying onto a more durable medium. The archives makes same-size Xerox copies on vellum, a paper stock designed to withstand the rigors of future photocopying. Vellums can also be run through blueprinters (i.e., to make blacklines or bluelines), although these machines are becoming extinct because of increasingly tough environmental laws.

Appraisal is never an easy process—it is complicated by a host of subjective and objective issues and problems. Its success depends on the resolution of, or at least compromise regarding, the problems which surround any individual appraisal decision. Architectural records present their own set of appraisal questions. Most of these have never been thoughtfully considered and continue to linger in the air like unsettled dust.

There are a few issues of general concern to archivists, but most can be resolved only on the local level because of the highly localized nature of research and user needs in every repository. Archivists should bear in mind that what works in one institution may not be a success in others. The strategies outlined in this paper are those that have best served the needs of the Northwest Architectural Archives and, given commonalities of material types and usership patterns, may also be adapted to function as the basis of documentation strategy in other repositories.