Born-Digital Design Records

In *Born-Digital Design Records*, edited by Samantha Winn, archival practitioners from across the design records landscape come together to provide a new, much-needed resource: an in-depth overview of the management of born-digital design records presented in three modules.

Winn knows from experience the singular difficulties posed by these records, having served from 2014 to 2020 as the collections archivist for Virginia Tech's International Archives of Women in Architecture. The collections that document the work of the design disciplines, including architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, and construction, have always proved challenging for archivists to manage due to their specificity and unique physical characteristics. But the records generated by computer-aided design exist at a unique intersection of obstacles. Even as the set of digital tools used by designers have become more standardized, the records require a steep learning curve to navigate, contain interlinking dependencies with other files, and are often created with expensive, proprietary software.

Like many who face this distinct set of hurdles and the lack of resources that address them, Winn looked to professional networks for guidance. This led her to the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Design Records Section (DRS), for which she eventually served a term as co-chair. *Born-Digital Design Records* was conceptualized during her tenure, responding to a call at the 2015 DRS annual meeting for "a new way of scholarship to document the advancements in archival practice regarding records of the built environment" (p. 1).

While reading *Born-Digital Design Records*, one cannot help but notice the frequent invocation of "complex" as a descriptor: for the design process, the management of collections documenting the built environment, and the born-digital design record itself. This repeated description will not surprise anyone who works with design records, but it does make the book's clear and comprehensive overview of the digital preservation of design records all the more impressive. The first module, "Navigating the Technical Landscape of Born-Digital Design Records" by Kristine Fallon, Aliza Leventhal, and Zach Vowell, tackles this complexity head-on by providing an overview of the design process, the types of files produced by designers, and those files' implications for collections management. The authors' summary is enriched by discussions with digital design records creators and snapshots of the standard folder structure used by two design firms to organize their project files. The module is accompanied by a glossary, which is indispensable for

archival professionals who find themselves suddenly navigating the jargon-heavy world of architecture. It will certainly become a foundational text for those new to working with these types of collections.

The remaining two modules provide a practical overview of recent work done by a diverse set of practitioners tasked with digital preservation of architectural records. "Emerging Best Practices in the Accession, Preservation, and Emulation of Born-Digital Design Materials" by Leventhal, with Jody Thompson, Euan Cochrane, Laura Schroffel, and Emily Vigor, explores the workflows and suite of tools that archivists in a variety of contexts have developed and used to manage born-digital design collections. These range from emerging and promising technologies, like Emulation-as-a-Service, to standard archival documents, like deeds of gift, adapted to the needs of born-digital design records. At every step within their workflows for accessioning, processing, and providing access, the authors clearly articulate the specific dynamics raised by design records. At the same time, they do not disregard the wisdom of the larger digital preservation community: their recommended best practices reference established digital archiving standards and are contextualized within the framework of ISO's Reference Model for an Open Archival Information System and the National Digital Stewardship Alliance's Levels of Digital Preservation.[1]

In the final module, "Case Studies in Born-Digital Design Records," Leventhal and Vowell are joined by Stefana Breitwieser, Alexandra Jokinen, and Mireille Nappert to provide a window into how digital preservation of design records looks in practice from within three different settings: the university archives at California Polytechnic State University, a museum's research collections at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and a corporate archives at the interdisciplinary design firm Sasaki. Because of the complex and diverse nature of born-digital design records, the conversation surrounding them can often feel abstract and intimidating. This module smartly sets a different tone by striking a balance of broadly applicable guidance and practical, specific examples. I appreciated that the authors grounded their analysis in descriptions of the workflows being implemented at their institutions, including screenshots to illustrate what they described. The authors also share the specific hardware and software used in their collections management activities and are generous in sharing the hiccups they encountered and the often "muddy" process of working through them.

If any aspect of *Born-Digital Design Records* disappoints, it is its timeliness. SAA's Trends in Archives Practice series explicitly aims to provide "on trend" guidance "relating to the practical management of archives." According to Winn's introduction, work on this volume was initiated in 2017, the year that I began working with design records. I can only imagine what a useful resource this would have been for me in the early years of my career. While these modules still fill the gap of available guidance six years later, I know from my position within the

field that digital design practices continue to evolve. Building a proportionately responsive literature is an important part of equipping our professional community to address these ever-shifting challenges. As Winn writes in the introduction, "significant opportunity remains for future research. . . . The community still needs viable preservation frameworks that can be implemented at scale" (p. 9).

Even so, this publication is attuned to the work that it is building upon and the work still left to do. For decades, born-digital design records found their way into archives occasionally. They are now the primary records that document our built environment and make up the bulk of design collections accessioned to repositories of all types. Taken as a whole, *Born-Digital Design Records* is a testament to the incredible work of the archival professionals who have been the vanguard of that shift from physical to digital, almost always with limited investment and resources. Although all three modules are concerned with the technical aspects of born-digital design records management, the authors recognize that such management is not merely a problem of technology and emphasize the vital role of engagement and relationship building with records creators, donors, and users of these collections.

We still do not know what at-scale management of collections in the age of computer-aided design will look like. But the challenges of managing these records are too complex, multilayered, and varied to be solved by one perspective. *Born-Digital Design Records* is a necessary synthesis of multiple viewpoints that can be the foundation of our profession's contribution to future conversations, as well as an essential resource for those working with these records now.

© **Andi Altenbach**
Studio Gang

Notes

1   See "Levels of Digital Preservation," National Digital Stewardship Alliance, https://ndsa.org/publications/levels-of-digital-preservation.