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Short Subjects: When Archivist Meets Architect

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SHORT SUBJECTS**Features****When Archivist Meets Architect****Donald B. Schewe**

Most archivists are better prepared to file and retrieve blueprints than to read them, more comfortable with COM (Computer Output Microfiche) than CAD (Computer Assisted Design), and better prepared to discuss linear feet of documents than square feet of floor space. Yet archival repositories do not spring up full-blown, and if the space an archival facility is to occupy is going to be utilitarian and provide for the various specialized needs of an archives, the archivist must become involved with the design process. In practical fact this means working with an architect either to design new space or to refurbish old space. This can be done, even if the archivist is

untrained in construction methodology, mechanical engineering, or quantum physics.

The first and most important step to be taken once the decision to build or remodel has been made is to establish a relationship with an architect. This may sound fairly simple and straightforward, but it requires more than just meeting and becoming friendly with the architect (important as that is). The architect will want to know who the client is--that is, who has the ultimate say in the building, which can often be translated into who pays the bills. The architect will set out to please the client, whomever that may be. Few archivists will enjoy the luxury of being the client--usually there is a board or an agency that really pays the bills, and the archivist is the employee or agent of that group. The wise archivist will establish his relationship with the board or agency, and his relationship with the architect vis-a-vis the board, at the very first meeting. That lets the architect know where he stands and where the archivist stands, so when the archivist says he needs seventy-two degrees and 50 percent humidity twenty-four hours a day the architect knows that a special heating and cooling plant will have to be built into the building, and this is not a luxury that can be dropped later when the need arises to cut costs.

Part of establishing a relationship with the architect also includes agreeing very clearly in the beginning what is expected of both parties. It is best to have a full-service architect, who will work throughout the construction project providing a number of services (explained below). But it is important to establish in the beginning what the agreement with the architect is. This includes what the architect charges for services, how and when payment is to be made, what charges for extras are, who is the contact person when questions arise, and any other possible questions.

At the same time, it is helpful to establish what type of building is expected. The primary purpose of buildings is to be

utilitarian—they are meant to keep the elements off while the occupants go about their business. This is easy to forget, because buildings can also be quite elegant, and the frills can catch the attention of the architect rather than the functional necessities. These frills may or may not cost a good deal of money, but the balance between the utilitarian and the beautiful should be established. This will probably mean that some compromises will have to be made along the way, but it is important to establish in the beginning where to stand with regard to these trade-offs.

There are also architects who will get carried away with "the importance of history," "the grandeur of the past," and "the romance of the written word." They will design a building to reflect on the outside the importance of what is inside. This may or may not be a good idea. Some grand architectural statements are wonders to behold, but impossible to work inside. There will need to be compromise here as well, and it is best to gain agreement from the beginning on what is paramount—the functional utility of the building or its architectural statement.

Very few people understand what archivists do, and architects are no exception. Unless the architect has built an archives before, he will probably not understand what the archivist needs. It is up to the archivist to explain this to the architect. There are various ways this can be done, but two elements are essential: the first is a written statement of needs and the second is site visits with the architect to other archival repositories.

The statement of needs will take a good deal of time to prepare, but it is essential to spend this time in order to let the architect know what the purpose of the building is. The statement should start with a general overview of what the building's uses will be and include what standards are expected in the structure. The Society of American Archivists, Association of Records Managers and Administrators, National Fire Protection Association, and other professional organizations

provide such standards, and it is a good idea to secure copies of these and include them with the statement of needs. Then, it is helpful to address each area within the building and explain what that area's uses are. Go into as much detail as possible: include a complete description of what activities take place in the area; what light levels are needed, both artificial and natural; any special needs for electricity; what temperature and humidity controls are standard; whether water and sewer service are necessary here; what load levels the floor must support; what areas should be located next to each other; and any other special needs for that area. And the archivist should not worry if some of the needs are conflicting--these can be resolved later. The important thing is to be imaginative and come up with all possible needs.

The needs book should be prepared and given to the architect well in advance of any visits to other archival repositories. These visits give the archivist an opportunity to highlight important points made in the book. They also provide a chance to compare various approaches to building problems, both good and bad. (Before visiting an archival repository, contact someone there who can talk to archivist and architect about the pros and cons of the place--not to mention someone who will be honest about his facility. It is often helpful to have the architect talk to the architect who designed the building to be visited.) These visits are also opportunities for the archivist to get to know and work with the architect.

At this point the architect begins the design process, and the archivist's responsibility is to assist in this effort. The temptation for the archivist is to assume that knowledge of how archivists work automatically translates into knowledge of how to design an archival repository. This is not necessarily true. A good architect will look for and suggest new ways of laying out the building and alternative solutions to the conflicting needs outlined in the needs book. A good archivist will look at the

proposed plans with an open mind and see whether the architect's suggested solutions will work. Just because the research room has always had a door on the north side is no reason not to have one on the east side. A good way to test plans is to take them and "walk through" a typical day, looking at how normal operations would take place in the new structure. If something in the new building will not work, or will not work well, tell the architect, and more importantly, tell him *why* it will not work. This is a give-and-take process and should not be expected to happen in one or two sessions. A complex building can take several months to design properly.

Once the compromises have been made and difficulties resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned, construction can begin. This does not end the relationship of archivist and architect. A full-service architect will continue to work throughout the construction process. No matter how well designed buildings are, inevitably changes will be necessary as unexpected problems arise. Manufacturers discontinue items specified in the original design, or weather delays impact construction schedules; these and a thousand and one other questions must be resolved as the building rises from the ground, and the architect is an integral part of this process.

It is a good idea to have a regular meeting (probably weekly) between the archivist, the architect, and the various contractors and subcontractors. At such meetings these difficulties can be resolved. Additionally, this is a way to keep in touch with the progress of the building (whether it is on schedule or not), and how close the project is to the original budget.

As construction nears completion it is important to work closely with the architect to develop a "punch list" of those items the contractor will need to complete before the building is acceptable and final payment will be made. It is helpful to all concerned if these problems are pointed out as they are discovered, rather than waiting to the end of the project. Even

so, at the end reserve a day (or more) for walking through the building and preparing a final list of problems to be resolved. The architect will be very helpful in this process and should be viewed as an agent of the archivist (or the archivist's agency) in dealing with the contractor.

The day will come when the records are moved into the building and the carpenters and painters leave. This does not end the relationship between the archivist and architect. If the archivist is happy with the building, he should indicate it by nominating the architect for some of the awards given by groups such as the American Institute of Architects. (Awards might also be considered for the construction company, the various subcontractors such as heating and air conditioning, and any special-applications contractors.)

This ends the relationship, right?

No, not quite yet. The architect will want his new potential clients to come see his work, and the archivist should accommodate that. After all, the archivist found out about the architect by talking to some of his earlier clients.

Not only that, but other archivists, just starting on the process of building a new facility will be asking for help and bringing their architect to see the latest in archival construction. If a good relationship with the architect was maintained, the archivist will be able to ask him to talk to the visiting architect and to provide the type help one professional can give to another. Or, the archivist might even write an article about working with architects.

Donald B. Schewe is director of the Jimmy Carter Library. This article is adapted from a presentation given at the fall meeting of the Society of Georgia Archivists, Roswell, Georgia, 22 September 1989.