

January 1977

The Archivist and Architectural Records

Alan K. Lathrop
University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lathrop, Alan K., "The Archivist and Architectural Records," *Georgia Archive* 5 no. 2 (1977) .
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol5/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Alan K. Lathrop

Of all the areas of human knowledge that reside in written form, few have suffered so much neglect as architecture. Only recently has there been widespread interest in the preservation of drawings, specifications, job files, and other documents related to the profession's activities.¹ Much of the fault can be laid at the feet of architects themselves. Seemingly insensitive to history, they have been singularly adept in erasing their past. They have periodically "cleaned house," throwing away tons of valuable, irreplaceable documents. When an architect dies or retires, the entire contents of his office may often be consigned to the trash. If retained, the records are likely to be placed in damp basements or hot, dry attics where they are left to crumble and rot.

Architects work for the moment and for the future, usually with little thought for the historical value of their creations. They are businessmen first, artists second, and historians not at all. As with most businessmen, concern for the preservation of their papers beyond their administrative life-span has a very low rank on the scale of priorities. Many individuals and firms have lacked the foresight to keep their records; others have allowed them to be lost either through their own insouciance or failure to provide for safe-keeping after their careers end. In consequence, the

Mr. Lathrop is Curator of the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota.

amount of documentation available today on the architectural work of past decades is shamefully thin.

The United States does not stand alone in its failure to promote the preservation of architectural records on a wide scale. Although most Western European nations have provided for the safekeeping of records associated with public buildings or government sponsored projects, the papers of private architects have been allowed to disappear. M. LeMoel, former Curator of the Maps and Plans Department, French National Archives, reported to the VII International Congress on Archives in 1972 that most countries had no systematic programs for preserving the papers of private architects practicing within their borders.² Only in isolated instances have special efforts been made to preserve such records, and then only in cases of extraordinarily outstanding individuals. An exception is the United Kingdom, where a national depository was established in 1834 by the professional architectural organization, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). Today ranked as one of the best such collections in the world, RIBA's holdings include well over 200,000 drawings, dating from 1520, housed in an eighteenth-century row house in London with a modern gallery for continuing public exhibitions.³ With its accompanying British Architectural Library, the collection forms a vital, comprehensive research source for the scholar of modern architectural history.

The United States, by contrast, has no comparable repository which can provide a comprehensive source for the study of American architecture. Perhaps the Avery Library at Columbia University comes closest, but its archival collection is far smaller and is not truly national in scope. The majority of the nation's holdings are scattered and fragmented among literally hundreds of repositories, small and large, stretching from coast to coast. A great deal of this material is unknown to scholars either because it is unreported or, more frequently, unprocessed. Much of it was acquired obliquely and certainly not as the result of a systematic collecting program for architectural records. Furthermore, many of the repositories which hold such records have only a vague conception of how to treat them and thus have shrunk from collecting more for fear of compounding the problem. In years past, some

institutions have refused offers of rich and valuable collections of architectural records with the result that potential donors destroyed their records, thinking them worthless.

Happily, this attitude seems to be vanishing. Most archives, libraries, and museums will at least seriously consider the acceptance of architectural records, even though few are systematically soliciting them. The problem of physical control still perplexes archivists and librarians, together with the question of deciding which types of records should be permanently retained. It is to these two important questions that the remainder of this article shall be addressed.

The problem of deciding what records should be collected and preserved is tied up with the definition of "architectural archives." John Harvey once wrote that "architectural archives" are all the records which architects produce in the course of their work, as well as those which generally document the production of buildings.⁴ While this may appear repetitious, a closer look will reveal a clear distinction between the two types.

Architects may produce up to a dozen kinds of documents, most of which are vital to the construction of a building and are of equal importance to researchers. The most common include preliminary sketches (the initial design concept, rough and sketchy as the name implies); presentation drawings or renderings (made for presentation to the client as a bid to secure the commission); site surveys (prepared by a civil engineer to show the contours of the building site and its relation to surrounding ground); working drawings (also called tracings or plans, which detail how a building is to be constructed, obviously made for the contractor); specifications (a prose document directing or specifying to the contractor how the construction work shall be carried out, his obligations, kinds of material to be used, etc.); correspondence with the contractor and subcontractors and with the client; contracts between the architect, the client, and the contractor; photographs of the site before construction begins, while construction is going on (progress photos), and of the completed building; field reports (made daily by the architect on the site during construction, noting progress

and problems); shop drawings (prepared by materials suppliers and subcontractors in their shops illustrating how certain equipment or furnishings is to be installed); and sometimes (not always, because they may often form part of the shop drawings file) mechanical, electrical, and structural drawings and calculations. The last group may be prepared by the firm's engineer, if there is one, and will consist of tables of numbers which detail load tolerances for the building's steel frame.

All of these are easily recognizable to the untrained eye. Working drawings may be available on a variety of media, depending upon their age or their initial purpose, and pose corresponding difficulties in preservation. In the nineteenth century, architects drew up plans on either heavy-grade paper stock or linen. The latter is virtually indestructible and can survive a great deal of abuse, whereas the former tends to dry out and become brittle. Linen was widely used for working drawings up to relatively recent times when a conversion to a high-quality paper called vellum and, more recently, to mylar, began. Because these drawings must be copied to provide the contractor with a set (the original stays with the architect), mylar was discovered to offer the advantages of being easily reproducible as well as durable and long-lasting, yet less expensive than linen. It is now almost as widely used as linen was several decades ago.

Working drawings will often appear in several prominent types of copies: blueprint (white line on blue background), blueprint (the same as blueprint, except for color), sepia (brown line on gray or blue background), and xerox. Depending upon the process and the quality of the paper used, these will usually remain legible for many years if kept, like most archival material, out of direct sunlight or fluorescents, although the paper may become brittle with age. Little if any information is available on the anticipated life of such copies, but they have been known to survive under less-than-ideal conditions for up to fifty years without showing appreciable loss of legibility or durability. These records, directly produced by architects and their associates, ought to be acquired in any orderly collecting program. John Harvey's definition of "architectural archives" also identifies other kinds of records, not necessarily produced by architects, which document

building production. Such municipal or county records as building permits, demolition permits, tax records, maps, and city planning documents of all kinds form a very large and vitally important group, as do the records of real estate firms (especially the one-page descriptions which are produced by Multiple Listing Services for realtors and prospective buyers), contractors and engineers, landscape architects, and developers. All of these may have crucial significance in piecing together the architectural history of a locality or region. Such records often provide new approaches or insights which can be gained in no other way, and the archivist referencing architectural records should know of them regardless of whether they are a part of his collections.

Managing architectural records--physically storing them and setting up finding aids for them--can present archivists with considerable challenge that, as noted earlier, may be a chief factor in the reluctance of many repositories to accept such collections. The records vary widely in size and bulk, making it nearly impossible to store all the documents which comprise a collection together in one place. The drawings (which are usually the largest items) must be frequently filed in plan drawers or tubes in the oversized storage area of an archives; while the smaller-format material--correspondence, photographs, specifications, and contracts--may be boxed and shelved in another area. Thus, the difficulty of retrieval of related materials may require the searcher to pull records from two or more locations.

While storage can present problems, the task of arranging architectural records is often refreshingly simple. Architectural firms everywhere operate using almost identical methods and generate the same kinds of records. This standardization of practice works to great advantage for the archivist who, having seen one architectural collection, can truthfully say he has seen them all and can thereafter confidently handle all of them the same way. Most architectural firms assign each project a number, utilizing either a system of consecutive numbering through the history of the practice or of prefixing project numbers with the last two digits of the year in which the commissions were secured, then numbering sequentially through that year. A project number of this type may appear, for example, as "67-45,"

indicating that it is the forty-fifth commission of the year 1967. Rarely are other systems of record-keeping employed in architects' offices. In essence, this means that the archivist is given a ready-made filing arrangement. Although collections may be received in a disorderly state, they can be rapidly sorted by checking the title block in the lower right-hand corner of the working drawings to see what system is being used. The title block, incidentally, will also reveal such useful information as the building name, its location, the sheet number within the set, the scale, draftsman's initials, and date of drafting. Often, correspondence, photographs, contracts, and even shop drawings will arrive packed in folders (called "job files") under the heading of the building name and can remain in this condition in the archives without further arrangement.

It would be helpful to prepare, for each job in the collection, a card which would contain the name of the building, its geographic location, date of construction (or design), the architect's name, some reference to the media (whether drawing, specification, photograph, etc.) in which information about the building is contained, and the collection it is in. A card file with cross-references prepared for each key bit of information would form a handy index to the entire architectural holdings of the archives, for it is quite possible that not only are such data about a particular building scattered through several kinds of documents within a single collection, but other data about the same building may be found in several other collections. As the archival holdings grow, so, too, would this index, keeping pace with growth and ensuring some degree of control and retrieval at all times. The index does not replace a detailed inventory of the contents of each collection, but it could suffice until such an inventory is made. The index would direct users to the proper collection for the information they seek, at which time they might turn to the inventory for more detailed data.

In the case of drawings, the inventory should be an item list, describing each sheet in terms of physical dimensions, scale, media (whether ink, pencil, marking pen, watercolor, etc.), and content. The documents in the "job files" need not be so finely described if there are great numbers of such files. A general contents note prefixing the inventory of this portion of

the collection should suffice to alert users to the records and information they may expect to find there.

In venturing to collect and preserve architectural records, archivists should understand that they are entering a new archival field, fraught with problems and perplexities but offering excitement and the opportunity to explore and develop new methods of handling archival material. By virtue of the congruity of the subject matter, this field offers an excellent chance for setting up standardized procedures for processing and for indexing. This standardization could lead to the construction of a system for the rapid exchange of information about collections throughout the country and perhaps facilitate the publication of a guide to architectural records nationwide. Most of the lore of handling architectural records must be learned from experience; there is little useful, practical knowledge which the archival profession can impart. Archivists working in this field must take an active role in developing selection criteria, in establishing bibliographic collections which have great diversity of forms and format, in developing innovative storage methods, and in formulating new ways of extracting information from these records. Archivists in architectural archives may thus contribute to the development of procedures which can be applied in other areas of the profession.

Beyond this, archivists working with architectural records have an obligation to learn the specialized terminology of architecture, construction, and engineering, to recognize design styles, and to become conversant with the history of the profession and the contributions of its leading practitioners. They must learn what records researchers in this field require for their study and make an effort to identify long-range research trends. Archivists can help develop the use of aural and video technology by providing new sources of information and insight about man-created environments. Above all, they should assume the task of educating architects and persons in related professions and trades to the historic and artistic value of the documents and drawings which they create.

It is time that archivists recognize the vast new research potential inherent in architectural records. Only then will they be able to respond to the growing

demand for these materials among historians, preservationists, and planners now and in the years ahead.

NOTES

¹A relatively new organization headquartered in New York City, the Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records has recently received \$79,633 from the National Endowment for the Humanities to locate, identify, and make accessible historically significant architectural records. The Committee is not a depository but rather a group to promote archival preservation of architectural materials. The Committee's address is 15 Gramercy Park South, New York City 10003.

²M. LeMoel, "Archives of Architecture" (Report to the VII International Congress on Archives, Moscow, August 21-25, 1972), pp. 21-22. (Manuscript.)

³Howard Colvin, "The RIBA Drawings Collection," RIBA Journal 77, no. 2 (February 1970):83; "Displaying and Preserving Architectural Archives," Architectural Record 174 (April 1975):92.

⁴John H. Harvey, "Architectural Archives," Archives 2 (Lady Day, 1954):117.