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Building Beyond The Mediterranean Studying The Archives of European Businesses (1860-1970)

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The Baume & Merpent archive collection

Le fonds d'archives Baume & Merpent

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The Baume & Merpent archive collection

Isabelle Sirjacobs

The Écomusée of Bois-du-Luc, housed since 1983 at the old mining site of Bois-du-Luc (Belgium), has made the saving and transmission of industrial experiences one of its founding missions. Included among its collections is the Baume & Merpent archives. With over 100 linear meters of archives, this precious assembly contains numerous plans (1200) portfolios, photographs (including 800 glass slides) as well as administrative archives (20 linear meters). It reflects the international expansion of the company founded in Haine-Saint-Pierre (La Louvière) in 1853. Originally specialized in railway construction, from 1871 the company diversified its manufacturing programme and conquered the five continents: China, the Near and Middle East, Belgian Congo, Brazil, Argentina, Egypt etc. In addition to civil engineering constructions, it created structures for civil and industrial buildings; gasometers, water, oil and acid reservoirs; heavy engineering machinery, railway equipment, etc.. These constructions are all documented in the Baume & Merpent archive collection which is of undeniable interest for the architectural field. The portfolios of technical plans thus contain the entire development process for constructions, from land surveys for the elevation of a bridge to the details of rivets or even the decorative escutcheons of the railings that contain it.

The archives selected in the context of the Arching project illustrate the projects embarked on by Baume & Merpent in Egypt. These records show how much the firm from Haine-Saint-Pierre worked in that part of the Mediterranean basin. The company's administrative archives complement the information supplied by technical plans, such as, for example the abundant correspondence exchanged between the head office at Haine-Saint-Pierre and the Egyptian division (1948-1958). The archives describe moreover the close relationships formed between Belgium and Egypt through Belgian and Egyptian engineers in particular working together on numerous projects. Beyond the technical exploits of the company, it is precisely this alternative view which fascinates us and opens us to new perspectives.

The Società Nazionale Officine Savigliano archive collection

Vilma Fasoli

The documentation related to the Società Nazionale Officine Savigliano (National Ironworks of Savigliano) is currently housed at two different institutions in Turin: the State Archives (combined sections)⁴²⁵ and the Central Library of Architecture at the Polytechnic of Turin (www.polito.it).⁴²⁶ The first institution houses documentary material from roughly 1880 to 1975, when the American company General Electric took control of SNOS.⁴²⁷ The material, stored in folders or bundles, constitutes the largest part of the archive: nearly 400 linear meters. The part relating to projects and construction site activities is collected in folders, with the drawings folded. Numerous other documents, mostly tracing papers, are wrapped in tubes or lying flat in large folders. Other drawings (about 800) are simply wrapped. Photographic documents consist of glass plates, prints, photo albums, and slides. This section of the archive also contains woodblocks and metal plates that may have been used to print the company magazine. The archives also include the 665-volume technical library. As an excellent primary source for the industrial history of Turin and Piedmont, the company's archives were donated to the Italian State Archives, which then completed a full reorganization and computerized cataloguing of the materials between 2002 and 2003.

The Central Library for Architecture at the Polytechnic of Turin stores about 1000 glass plates, reproductions of the project and construction site drawings, some of which document the work in progress. An inventory of the archives has been compiled in hard copy.