

I'm Not an Archivist But I Played One For a Year: Lessons For Librarians Who Step Outside Of Their Comfort Zones

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To many librarians the world of archives is cloaked in mystery. How exactly do they organize those rare documents and artifacts? What do those little numbers written in pencil mean? What is a finding aid anyway? I was one of the librarians fascinated by those questions and eager to learn more about archives. Luckily, I had the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity by spending a year working with the Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives (CIAA). My time spent working with the archives taught me that archives and libraries have much in common and also much to offer one another. It also provided me with lessons that might help other librarians like myself who find themselves playing the part of an archivist for a period of time.

Before I relate the lessons I learned, I would like to explain a little more about the archives I worked with and how their collection got started. Columbus Indiana is ranked sixth in the nation for architectural innovation and design by the American Institute of Architects. This town of 40,000 boasts world-famous works by designers such as I.M. Pei and Eero Saarinen and is host to thousands of tourists annually. The architecture itself is not the only thing worthy of study. The process of producing this architecture leaves a record of sketches, correspondence, architectural models, etc. that tells a fascinating story.

In 1967, the Library Associates of the Bartholomew County Public Library recognized the value of these records and began a concerted effort to collect and catalog them. The records were housed in the Bartholomew County Public Library's Main Library and a committee of the library oversaw the maintenance of the collection. The library did a tremendous job with the resources they had to collect and organize the collection, but it wasn't the same as having a full-time archivist.

Since 1967, interest in the architectural archives has waxed and waned. In 2004 the community once again got behind the archives, led by community cheerleader Lynn Bigley. The archives was officially reorganized as a 501 c 3 nonprofit organization in October 2004 and was named the Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives (CIAA).

Around the time of its reorganization, CIAA enlisted the services of consultants from the Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) Archives to survey the collection and make recommendations on what the archives' next steps should be. The archives has worked with a few consultants over the years and each time their recommendations have included hiring a full-time archivist. This most recent consultancy was no exception. While CIAA began a fundraising campaign, IUB Archives staff continued the survey on an hourly basis.

Because the fundraising campaign did not have enough time to achieve funding for a full-time archivist, I proposed to the CIAA board president and my library director that I work on the archives half-time for a year. While I did not receive formal training in archives management during my SLIS degree, I had worked in archives before. Additionally, the consultant staff employed by CIAA had laid the groundwork for growth that I felt I could build on. While I knew that I was no substitute for a professionally-trained full-time archivist, it was important that the CIAA had some continuing staffing to build momentum at this critical growth time in its history.

Both the CIAA board president and my library director accepted my suggestion and I began working at the archives in July 2006. During my time at CIAA, I focused on continuing to organize the collection (using recognized standards rather than the library's previous home-grown system), assisting patrons, increasing publicity for the archives in the community, investigating grant opportunities and building the collection.

While working with the archives, I realized that there is great overlap between how libraries and archives work. For both types of institutions, organization is paramount. While the type of descriptive information collected on the materials and the type of organizational tools used to catalog the collections may differ, both libraries and archives have the goals of describing their materials and making them discoverable. The latest Stephen King novel and a blueprint of the 1916 Bartholomew County Hospital both need to be described and discoverable to be of use to patrons.

Libraries and archives are also both concerned with preserving information (though for libraries, the format of the information—or artifact—might not be as important). Perhaps just as important as preserving information, they are interested in promoting access to that information. Even rare items need to be made available in some way to be of real value. The development of digitization technologies has improved access to some of the more fragile items in archives, thus expanding the reach of their collections. As a corollary to accessibility, both libraries and archives need to actively encourage their use and publicize their value to the communities they serve. In a culture that is increasingly focused on accountability, it is critical that libraries and archives show the world the good things they offer.

All of these similarities helped me see archives and libraries more holistically as society's keepers of information. In addition to recognizing the interrelatedness of archives and libraries, I learned some valuable lessons about archives and about stepping outside of my comfort zone in general. A few of the key lessons are described below.

Protect the Process

Because I was not formally trained as an archivist, it was important that I not try to dramatically change any of the processes that had been put in place by the consultants from IUB Archives.

They knew better than I did how best to organize the collection, even if the process seemed

foreign and arduous to me at first. It is especially important to protect the process in situations where you will only be working with an organization for a short amount of time, since implementing novel processes that make perfect sense to you will likely leave headaches for your replacement. Protecting the process was also critical in dealing with the CIAA board's expectations. Some of the procedures used in archives might seem excessively time-consuming to those not familiar with how archives operate, so I found it necessary to explain to the board why it was important to put in all of the work involved in organizing the collection.

Preserve the Process, AKA Document What You Do

Just as it is important to respect procedural precedent when you will only be with an organization for a short period of time, it is also important to leave a record of what you have done. Even if you do not make many changes, it is helpful for those who come after you to let them know what you worked on and why you did what you did. For example, it might be helpful to keep a file of emails or other contacts you have had with donors or community groups so that your replacement does not need to retrace your steps. I also made it clear to the CIAA board that I would be glad to answer any questions that might arise in the future about anything I had done in my time there.

If You Don't Know, You Don't Know

Because archival collections often contain rare items, it is important not to take any chances with their care if you are unsure what to do. It is better to leave something in its original condition rather than risk trying to repair it and cause further damage. If you feel that an item is in need of immediate treatment, contact a conservationist. The same can be said for organizing

the collection. Don't make guesses about what to do if you are unsure. It could render an item undiscoverable if you do.

Ask For Help

In my experience, archivists are always willing to offer advice. Ask local archives, whether they are university-affiliated or independent. It also helps to join a professional organization such as the Society of Indiana Archivists for networking, or to join appropriate listservs.

Even if you never have the chance as a librarian to work in an archives, there are still many opportunities for collaboration. One of the simplest collaborations can come in the form of mutual referrals. If you are familiar with what archives in your area offer, and the archives are familiar with your collections and services, you will both be in the position to refer patrons when appropriate. This not only increases both organizations' foot traffic, it also improves the customer service you provide your patrons.

Libraries can also offer exhibit space for archives collections that might not otherwise be seen by the public. This will add some visual interest to your library while increasing exposure to the archives.

Libraries and archives can also collaborate on grants and special projects that capitalize on each organization's strengths. As an example, I am currently working on an LSTA Digitization Grant for the CIAA. Because the lead agency on the grant must be a library, CIAA would not have been eligible for the grant on its own. By partnering with the University Library of Columbus and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis University Library, the CIAA was given access to the equipment, manpower, and know-how necessary to make some of its collection available online. This never would have been possible for the CIAA by itself.

In spite of all of the fun I had last year and all that I learned in the process, I am glad to report that the CIAA now has a professionally trained full-time archivist/director in place. A collection as vibrant and

important as theirs deserves the most knowledgeable staff possible. I feel as though my time spent with the collection helped it grow a little and helped me grow a lot as a librarian.