TEARING DOWN THE WALLS: THE CONVERGENCE OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Canadian Architectural Archives was established at the University of Calgary in 1974, by a “‘gang of four’ schemers and dreamers who first made the connection between the University of Calgary and the preservation of architectural records.” ¹ A joint initiative between the University Library and the Faculty of Environmental Design, the Canadian Architectural Archives was created with the mandate of collecting the works of twentieth century Canadian architects of regional, national, and international significance. It was decided not to pick and choose among the projects of participating architects but to seek to acquire the documentation of the total output of each firm in an attempt to provide an accurate historical profile. When it was originally established, the Canadian Architectural Archives was part of Special Collections within the University Library. It became part of the mandate to collect the work of Canadian creativity, which included literary manuscripts, music and art. Eventually the Canadian Architectural Archives became its own department, a special collections unit reporting first to the Fine Arts Librarian and then to the Head of Collections and Technical Services. It also became the largest and most comprehensive collection of the works of 20th century Canadian architecture.

As the first special collection in Canada dedicated solely to the collection of 20th century Canadian architecture in its origins, it was visionary but not without controversy. Former Director of Libraries, Alan MacDonald recalled, that many scholars and critics in Canada could not accept that a major cultural resource was being created in the West.

While there were outbursts of umbrage in a number of national magazines particularly concerning our literary ventures [his] favourite was a Globe & Mail article in May of 1980 entitled: “The western drift of drawings – Calgary collects major works of easterners.” The writer, Lisa Balfour Bowen, found comments that conveyed disappointment in Ontario’s disinterest in such records and a grumpiness and begrudging admiration towards the Calgary initiative. ²

Once established, the difficulties of collecting architecture became immediately apparent. The space needs alone far outstripped existing resources. The sheer volume of architectural collections is not to be discounted here. Storage was a challenge from day one. Over the years, many moves and relocations took place. In fact, the collection moved a total of 12 times from 1989 to 2007. It is currently located in seven separate storage locations.

Staffing has also been a challenge. A modern architecture collection consists of a wide variety of media that documents the design and building process. Processing it takes time and resources that may not be immediately evident to funders and is not only time-consuming but also requires special skills and knowledge. Although, staffing has varied over the years, as MacDonald also recalled even within the Library there were always those who thought that the Canadian
Architectural Archives would be a good place to allocate a budget cut or to solve a budget problem.

Another challenge became the use of the collection. The original intent behind the collection policy was to create a unique research collection that could be used for a wide variety of purposes but in the beginning, the major users of the collection were donors and architects and other building professionals wanting to access project work for completed projects.

Architecture is vastly underrepresented in Canadian archival institutions. Currently, only three major collections exist – two in Montreal and one in Calgary. Given the problems outlined above, major outreach initiatives followed. These included the development of partnerships and an exhibition program, a major digitization project called “Views of Twentieth Century Canada,” and the incorporation of the Canadian Architectural Archives into the University’s teaching, learning, and research mandate. External support of granting agencies such as Alberta’s Access to Holdings Program and federal programs such as the National Archival Development Program helped to provide support for processing and digital initiatives. Most of the challenges have been addressed over time. The collection continues to grow, as do reference and research inquiries and we now are involved in three exhibitions per year seeing items from our collection exhibited in every major Canadian city, as well as Washington, London and Paris. Our major problem now is still staffing levels and the Canadian Architectural Archives has a current staff of one. Given current reference and other demands – sustainability is an issue.

And so we get to convergence. Convergence has been defined as coming together in harmony and convergence of cultural institutions seems to be sweeping the globe. It can be looked on as nothing new but in fact, a return to historical precedent as in “the nineteenth century libraries, museums, and archives could overlap in terms of their political function and physical space.”

This trend may be “driven by the idea that the increased use of and reliance on digital resources has blurred traditional distinctions between information organizations, leading to a digital convergence of libraries, archives, and museums.” The rush to converge is also often driven by financial pressures – and indeed not every one will survive and so there is a need to work together to a greater extent. The current information economy is driven by a need to prove relevance, to use existing technology to make collections better known. The material contained in cultural institutions has to be available to people who will use it in unimaginable ways.

Recent workshops, conferences and publications have explored this issue including “Libraries, Archives & Museums – Three Ring Circus, One Big Show?; “Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Intersecting Missions, Converging Futures? and “Beyond the Silos of the LAMSSs: Collaboration among Libraries, Archives and Museums.” A Cultural Heritage Information Professionals workshop in 2008, produced three special issues of Library Quarterly, Archival Science, and Museum Management and Curatorship “exploring the shared information needs and challenges facing libraries, archives, and museums in the information age; the overlapping educational goals of library and information science, archival studies, and museum studies programs; and areas of convergence for educators and professionals working to meet user needs in libraries, archives, and museums.”

Convergence is happening in Canada at every level, most notably with the merger of the National Library of Canada and the National Archives of Canada in 2004 to form Library and Archives Canada. At a Archives Society of Alberta conference held in Banff two weeks ago, with the theme “The Wars of Independence Reconsidered: Libraries, Archives, Past, Present, and Future” noted
Canadian archival theorist, Terry Cook spoke of that merger and lamented “we are now eight years after this momentous change was initiated in the Canadian archival landscape and ... we have ... complete and utter silence.”¹ Until that conference, he maintained no Canadian conference, articles or the like have addressed the huge implications of that merger. He likened it to an elephant in the room and said we need to finally point to the elephant and say, “Hey there he is, and we’d better get to know this beast better.”² His view is that the potential and possibilities of convergence are endless. Faced with the realities of convergent cultural organizations “we need peace treaties to exploit common elements rather than continually highlighting the differences in order to serve time-worn professional turf wars.”³ It became evident during this conference that many cultural institutions in Alberta already have converged library, archive, and museum programs or were currently converging out of economic necessity. Some papers discussed hostile takeovers, friendly fire, and the creation of cultural ghettos. And indeed it seems that the most successful convergences had a single subject base so that subject expertise of the staff involved was ensured.

For the Canadian Architectural Archives convergence has already occurred. Driven by limited resources, in 2003, it became part of a newly established department called Archives and Special Collections. The reasoning behind this convergence was because it was thought that the establishment of that department would provide a stronger voice at the table for all archival and special collections. Four units now reported to one director: the Canadian Architectural Archives, The Military Museums, which houses a Library, Archives, and Gallery; Special Collections, which holds literary, music, and art manuscripts as well as rare books; and University Archives, which houses the corporate records of the University, faculty papers, and some private records. The passage of legislation for the Freedom of Information and the Protection of Privacy meant that the University Archives came into this new department with a staff of nine – five archivists and four support staff. The remainder of the units had only one or two staff each. Needless to say the convergence was not always harmonious. Clashing visions, personalities, disciplines, and the staffing imbalances were largely responsible. The Military Museum, being physically located off of the main campus eventually became a branch library, reporting directly to the Director of Libraries and Vice Provost of Libraries and Cultural Resources. The units remaining in Archives and Special Collections even today when we share a common reading room, largely still handle reference and research inquiries only for their own unit, although that has changed over the past year. So in fact, after seven years the silos still exist to a certain degree although as staff gain new expertise the lines are starting to blur somewhat. In some ways the Canadian Architectural Archives has suffered the most in a loss of identity through this merger, at least internally, as the department name Archives and Special Collections, often refereed to as University Archives and Special Collections by University Archives staff specifically omits our name.

Currently, we are now undergoing restructuring under the strong leadership of Tom Hickerson. This restructuring will be a total convergence of Libraries, Archives, Museums and the University Press in one new building now under construction, which will be called the Taylor Family Digital Library. The intent behind this convergence, taking advantage of the rich opportunity afforded by the design of the new library building, will address perceived gaps in service stemming from a LibQual survey. One objective of his strategic plan highlighted unique resources while also focusing on a commitment to being digital; integrated discovery; enhanced involvement in the research endeavour; and transforming scholarly communications. In order to do this three new positions were created called Associate Vice Provosts who are responsible for new areas:
Collections, Learning, and Research. Under the research portfolio several new departments will be created including one entitled The Centre for Arts and Culture which will include Archives and Special Collections, The Military Museums, the Nickle Arts Museum, and the Art Library and slide collection. Hickerson’s vision, based on a long career at Cornell University and the University of Calgary’s academic principles of student success, excellence in research, scholarship and creative activity, interdisciplinary education and research, and return to community, is articulated as “providing outstanding support for scholarship, learning, and the creation of knowledge, Libraries and Cultural Resources is a key component in the University’s excellence in research, teaching and community service.” He goes on to say, “We are not limited by traditional roles. Our responsibility is to exercise leadership in realizing the University of Calgary mandate drawing on our expertise, imagination and resources. We will fulfill the vision through a convergence of our libraries, museums, archives, special collections and the University Press and through campus, community, national, and international partnerships. We should imagine greatness.”

All of this will mean a strategic realignment of staffing and resources. Archivists, librarians and curators will be cross-trained and assigned to new divisions and will teach together in the classroom, where new patterns of instruction and reference will emerge. Processing of collections will be removed to a new unit called Metadata Development. Access to all collections will be available through one integrated system. What all of this will look like in the end is uncertain. The internal search for the Director for Arts and Culture is currently underway and the successful candidate will play a critical role in determining the end result but Hickerson feels that, in the end, no institution will be as converged as Libraries and Cultural Resources at the University of Calgary will be.

The new library building and a new storage building will reunite the holdings of the Canadian Architectural Archives. There will be many challenges ahead but I believe that the creation of the new departments of Arts and Culture and Metadata Development will be an advantage for the Canadian Architectural Archives. Converging with the Nickle Arts Museum and the strategic realignment of staff and resources throughout Libraries and Cultural Resources, in particular will enable us to form new partnerships and alliances that will, in the end make us stronger. In the words of Terry Cook, “It is time to move on, to recognize that a new environment, new technologies, new user needs, and new user expectations present amazing opportunities and synergies for such partnerships.” This is a complex and ever-changing world and to remain relevant, we need to change with it.

---

1 Alan MacDonald, “...to Calgary or in the garbage!” (paper presented at the McMordie Symposium, University of Calgary October 7, 2006).
2 MacDonald, “...to Calgary.”
5 Marty, Digital Covergence, 247.


7 Cook. Wars of Independence.

8 Cook. Wars of Independence.


10 Hickerson, LCR Reorganization.

11 Cook, Wars of Independence.