Archivists and curators always must work in the present to preserve significant documents for the future, even though we never can know fully what lies ahead. This great duality creates a persistent tension for all custodians of cultural heritage, but it is a special challenge for those responsible for preserving documents of the built environment in all its forms.

The action of evaluating and selecting documentary materials for long-term preservation – the process that American archivists term “appraisal” – is unquestionably the most important and the most demanding archival function. If appraisal is done well, future scholars and citizens will have access to the information they need to understand the process and products of architecture. If done poorly, key knowledge and understanding will be lost.

To meet this ever-present challenge, archivists have developed and refined tools to identify persistent values together with standards to determine which architectural documents are appropriate for institutional retention. Through the years, much has been written on these appraisal principles that apply broadly to all types of records. Specialized articles exploring the application of the principles to the appraisal of architectural documents also are available. Recently two particularly important studies on this subject have appeared, “Appraisal, Selection, and Disposition” by Robert Desaulniers I and “Appraisal” by Waverly Lowell.

These and other treatises provide effective guidance for evaluating whether a group of architectural materials should be added to an institution’s holdings, always realizing that study, good information, and wise judgment in applying the concepts will be needed.

But should architectural records be evaluated only once, before they are acquired by an institution?

I think that the answer is no. With experience slowly gathered through the years, I have come to believe that appraisal must be an on-going function and that every institution should periodically and systematically evaluate whether the architectural records, drawings, photographs, and models in its holdings continue to have sufficient value for long term preservation. I am not proposing that reappraisal should be either more or less stringent than the original analysis. The key to effective reappraisal is to apply time-honored practices with new knowledge and perspectives gained with the passage of time.

If only valuable series of records and exclusively significant documents were to enter a repository, reappraisal would never be needed. In reality, many, if not most, architectural records institutions hold unnecessary documents.
Appraisal is inherently difficult, but several characteristics of architectural records make it particularly likely that unnecessary documents will be preserved. The first of these is the very fact that cultural institutions value records of the built environment and are committed to their preservation, an attitude that creates a healthy predisposition to preservation rather than destruction. Architectural curators realize that if collections are not acquired, they are likely to disappear. We value architectural documents and typically prefer to recommend that records should be kept, even in the face of significant doubts.

This is to our credit and has led to preservation of items that at first glance might not be of great significance. Tom partial sheets of flimsy paper without signature or identification typically would be considered to be without long-term value. Yet I.M. Pei’s slight and fragile early drawing for the East Building of the National Gallery of Art documents the intellectual core of the building’s design and neatly illustrates the essence of the architect’s insight. Evidently this drawing is significant, and we are grateful that it has been preserved. [fig. 1]

Yet the predisposition to retention and examples such as this that seem to break established norms inspire repositories to accept similar documents that may well turn out to be unimportant. This is not bad, but when it becomes clear that such materials lack value, continued preservation is more difficult to justify.

External pressures also may lead to preservation of unnecessary documents. Records may be donated or even purchased for the institution by an important supporter or offered by the family of a significant architect. In such circumstances, it can be difficult to decline to accept materials, even when they fail to meet objective evaluation standards. Evidently in such circumstances the wisest course for a repository to follow temporarily may well be to accept documents of dubious value. But this again leads to preservation of superfluous materials within institutional holdings.

Furthermore, although archivists and curators are effective at identifying significant architects and their major projects, typically it is far more difficult to limit acquisitions to only the best and most significant records on any subject. There are several reasons for this.

The first of these is inherent in the competitive environment in which architectural records are sought and acquired by collecting institutions. From personal experience, I know that it can be difficult to approach an architect or his firm to ask for the donation of prized materials – and to follow with the observation that, actually, the repository is only interested in certain documents. This can be done – and often is – but when dealing with an egocentric genius – or his or her bereaved family – the pressure to accept too much is great. 3

When the National Gallery requested I. M. Pei’s records of the design and construction of the East Building, the archives received an entire truckload of materials, called by one partner the firm’s “heavy archives”. 4 Even though the files were voluminous, the museum

3 Author’s note: In this paper I purposely limit problematic examples to my own experiences at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, however I believe that they can be considered typical of situations found in repositories internationally.

avoided limiting its request as we were far more concerned about obtaining everything significant than about receiving excess documents. [fig. 2]

Architecture is a document-intensive discipline, and firms contribute to the challenge of archival appraisal by retaining voluminous, repetitive materials during a project and long afterwards. Partially-completed construction drawings, samples of building materials that were never used, time sheets and other routine records are among examples. The list could go on.

Furthermore, despite the fact that architects create and retain large quantities of records, architectural firms generally have neither the staff nor the inclination to organize files after a project is closed. As a result, offices frequently are jammed with paper and the bulk is swept up and moved en masse to storage – potentially to be dealt with at some future time. Archivists and curators must systematically weed and eliminate these materials, which might have been quickly disposed of by knowledgeable employees soon after a project closed. Inevitably the greater the quantity of valueless material that an archivist must sort through and evaluate, the greater the probability that excess materials will be retained.

Appraisal is made particularly difficult by the physical environments in which architectural documents typically are stored. The location, whether in the architect’s records warehouse or the family attic, is likely to be uncomfortable, cramped, and difficult to access. [fig. 3] Archivists may find that it is virtually impossible to sort through the jumbled accumulation of documents and to make final decisions on site. The only alternative is to move the records in their totality to the archives. The result is that bulky and voluminous architectural materials come into the archives essentially unexamined. Instead of choosing which records to accept, the process is reversed, and the archivist must decide which among the transferred mass to eliminate, making the process more difficult and decreasing the probability that only the most valuable documents will remain. Once in the door, materials become “archival” and elimination for destruction becomes a graver task.

Architects also may exacerbate the challenge of disposing of unimportant materials. Deeply involved in the process of creating buildings, they typically lack the perspective needed to recognize that some records, albeit created with much effort and at substantial cost, may not be important in the long run. Yet they often add the weight of their opinions to the process of appraisal.

In the archives of the National Gallery of Art, a photograph of a crack in a basement floor illustrates this point. [fig. 4] The photograph was taken during a pre-construction condition survey. Of little visual or intellectual interest, it was carefully preserved by its creators and transferred to the archives with great ceremony. Indeed this image may have been extremely important in the short run – or even possibly the medium term – however, at some point its practical value will have passed, and it will have little further significance. In the meantime the image remains enshrined in the archives, awaiting a future, much-needed reassessment.

New technologies also can have an impact on evolving judgments of record values. Digital scanning is one example. [fig. 5] Before the scanner was available, it was difficult and expensive to create copies of documents. As a result, for hundreds of key exemplars our archives kept two and sometimes three copies for loan and use. Now with digital technologies,
the drawings can be easily copied, distributed electronically or reprinted as needed. Recognizing this shift, our retention policy has changed so that the Gallery Archives now retains only a single best copy of a drawing for permanent preservation with a quality digital surrogate retained for further reference. The second and third copies are no longer needed.

But why should it concern archivists and curators if our repositories hold extra documents that eventually may seem superfluous? Surely it is safer and easier to avoid difficult decisions and keep all materials that enter an archives. Why is it a problem to bring in too many records, when at the same time valuable records are preserved?

In my view, the answer is that indeed it is most important to correctly accession valuable collections and to ensure preservation, even when in doubt. But we cannot do so effectively if our repositories already are filled. Space, staff and budget are not infinite. If our resources are expended on holdings of minimal value, we will not be able to acquire more important collections later.

For architectural records, storage and resource problems are particularly acute. The factors involved are familiar. Architectural materials can be incredibly voluminous. As an example, an architect created 35 large drawings, each of which was submitted multiple times in various phases with many copies, related subcontractor and utility drawings, materials samples, building permits, product cut sheets, and hearing documents all for a project to renovate a small commercial building in Washington, D.C. [fig. 6]. A significant large or complex building requires thousands of drawings and many cubic feet of related documentation. It simply is not possible to save everything that documents all buildings and construction projects.

Equally important, again stating the obvious, architectural materials are large, bulky, fragile, and expensive to care for. The original 1937-1941 construction drawings for the original West Building of the National Gallery of Art are roughly 36” x 58” in size. [fig. 7] Special large flat files are needed to accommodate them. Even when we move to an entirely digital environment, long-term server storage will remain costly. Given limited resources, the reality is that if we accept and keep one group of architectural records, there will be another that we cannot find space for, and cannot afford to organize and make available to researchers. We need to be certain that we use limited resources wisely.

Since every repository is likely to acquire some architectural documents that lack long-term value, re-appraisal must be considered an on-going part of archives management.

Planning and attention is needed to do this successfully. Deeds of gift and transfer agreements must be written to anticipate the possibility of reappraisal and possible disposition. These legal agreements should routinely authorize destruction of extra copies and should provide for the possibility, however unlikely, that the entire collection might be transferred to another repository or returned to the donor if that should prove appropriate.5

5 The following “boiler-plate” paragraph is routinely used in deeds of gift transferring records to the Gallery Archives: “The Donor may dispose of any of the Materials that are determined to be duplicate copies or to have no permanent value or historical interest, provided that the Donor is offered the return of any non-duplicate materials prior to any such disposal.”
Archivists and curators also should make on-going evaluation a recognized part of collection processing. Much reappraisal simply takes place as records are organized and catalogued. The ordinary work of eliminating early drafts, obvious copies, and routine housekeeping records leads to enormous savings in space, staff, and eventually time caring for the materials. In virtually every instance, time spent removing extra copies and superseded submissions from architectural collections during processing leads to multiplied savings in space, staff and ultimately preservation costs. Thus, even from an administrative, budgetary perspective, each collection should be processed as soon as possible and as fully as possible with a view to efficient storage and long-term maintenance.

Reappraisal also should be seen as a routine element of on-going collection management. Before a collection is relocated, re-housed, or redescribed it simply makes sense to consider whether the materials should be part of the archives at all, in whole or in part.

The importance of this was demonstrated during a move several years ago. I.M. Pei’s model shop had created a magnificent 3/8 inch to one foot room-size model when the building was under construction. The structure was too large to store easily and by the time it came to the archives, it had been reduced essentially to toothpicks. We attempted to keep these remnants in their entirety for many years. Eventually, though, the model needed to be moved, a process that proved to be impossible. Instead of keeping unrecognizable pieces of splintered plywood, we finally accepted that it would be far wiser to identify the few remaining recognizable sections and dispose of the remainder. The result was better protection of what could be salvaged and substantial reduction of storage costs. [fig. 8]

Finally, I would advocate the idea that each archives should reevaluate all of its collections systematically on an established schedule. Evidently archivists and curators are far too busy to do this easily or often. But would it not make sense to reevaluate a collection after it has been in a repository for 25 years or some other established period? In most cases, original judgments will stand the test of time, but if they do not, it is surely wisest and best to recognize that circumstances, conditions, or judgments have changed and, in a fully documented process, again to reconsider the value of the records, applying the same standards that would be used were the records to be offered again. If a sound, rigorous reappraisal process is established that follows documented standards equivalent to those in any other appraisal, valuable records should be in no danger, but instead the repository will be able to direct its full energies to protecting and preserving the most significant records of architecture and will come closer to achieving its fundamental goals.

As archivists and curators we must humbly recognize that our best-considered judgments and efforts are fallible and that reappraisal is a necessary part of wise archival management of architectural documents.