RESPONDING TO CIRCUMSTANCE: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND DIRECTIONS IN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES COLLECTION POLICY IN (SOUTH) AUSTRALIA

Introduction

My presentation provides a very brief contextual background to cultural collections in Australia by way of an introduction to the current status of Australian architectural archives collections. It then traces the development of the collection that forms the basis of the Architecture Museum at the University of South Australia and introduces the Museum’s Collection Policy and collecting strategy.

Cultural collections in Australia: contextual background

Australia was founded in 1788 as a series of separate colonies. They joined together in 1901 when a national seat of government was established in Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory. Australia’s distinctive foundation and political history, along with its geographic differences and expansive size, have influenced the location and character of its cultural collections. They are held in various locations in the capital cities as well as in country towns and regional centres and they largely relate to the place where they are situated. Each state has its own state library, museum and art gallery, but Australia also has a National Library, National Gallery and the Museum of Australia, all situated in Canberra. Australia’s cultural collections are referred to collectively as ‘the distributed national collection’.

Australia does not have a national museum of architecture, although calls for one have emerged from time-to-time in the last decade. However it does have a number of collections of private practitioners’ architectural records held in state libraries and universities and in local government repositories. Documents pertaining to government architects’ works are stored in state and national archives. Many private practices retain their own records. Australia has just one Architecture Museum, at the University of South Australia in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia.

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Private practitioners’ architectural archives in Australia: an overview

In Australia the phenomenon of collecting records generated by architects in private practice is a relatively recent one. It took root in the 1970s almost in parallel with the establishment of Australian architectural history as a discrete field of academic research and with the rise of community and professional interest in the history and heritage of the built environment. A small number of academics based in architecture schools and Fine Arts departments in Melbourne and Adelaide were critical forces in fostering the expansion of fledgling collections or the establishment of new ones. Given the then burgeoning interest in Australia’s architectural history, it was anticipated that, over time, ‘demand for this source material will certainly increase.’ However, they were acutely aware that architects were destroying their records, blind to their potential as research resources.

Mirroring Australia’s foundation history and geographic and political boundaries, its collections of architectural archives are generally state-specific. They have been formed through local initiative and in response to local circumstances rather than because of a deliberate or nationally-organised and focused collecting program. The following list shows the main collections and their locations.

MAJOR COLLECTIONS OF AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURAL RECORDS

ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Architecture Museum, University of South Australia
State Library of South Australia

MELBOURNE, VICTORIA
University of Melbourne Archives
State Library of Victoria
RMIT Design Archives, RMIT University

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA
School of Built Environment, Curtin University
State Library of Western Australia (Battye Library)

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND
Fryer Library, University of Queensland
John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane

SYDNEY, NEWCASTLE, NEW SOUTH WALES
Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
Rare Books and Special Collections Unit, University of Newcastle Archives

CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
National Library of Australia


Lewis (1977), 89.
Most of these have not been established as discrete architectural collections with a defined Collection Development Policy. Instead, items have been accepted on the basis of general institutional collecting strategies and managed according to collection-wide policies.\footnote{Based on personal communication in 2010 with librarians and archivists associated with the management of architectural collections around Australia.}

One collection that was formed as a discrete entity was established in Adelaide in the mid 1970s by architect and architectural historian, Donald Leslie Johnson, then a lecturer in Fine Arts at the Flinders University of South Australia.

Establishing an architecture archive in Adelaide

Johnson was born and educated in the US and, as an historian of architecture, he was attuned to the potential research value of architects’ records and to the then nascent development of architectural archives overseas. When he realized that South Australian architects were literally dumping their records in the face of a shortage of space, high office rents, and the absence of an agency willing to accept them, he began a rescue mission, collecting ‘obsolete’ records for the next fifteen years. He assembled them into a formal archive of items related to the practice of architecture in South Australia.

Approaching his retirement, and with the demise of the Fine Arts department in his own institution, in 1990 Johnson donated his archive, which then numbered about 30,000 items, to the School of the Built Environment at what became the University of South Australia. Under the purview of a new management regime, the original collection was expanded along the lines established by Johnson. A further fifteen years later, in 2005, it was moved into a purpose-designed home in a new building with the School of Architecture. The archive was christened the Architecture Museum and was rejuvenated as a repository for architectural records as well as a centre for research, publications and exhibitions.\footnote{For a general history and overview of the collection and the Architecture Museum’s activities see: http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/architecturemuseum/default.asp}

Building the Architecture Museum’s collection

In the early years of its development the Architecture Museum’s collection was built up in accordance with a general collecting strategy, rather than a formal collection policy. The collecting intent was to rescue ‘working records’ which Johnson considered would constitute ‘a source of unique material for research scholars’.\footnote{‘Flinders University Architecture Archive Collection’, 11 November 1981, 1. Architecture Museum General History files, UniSA Architecture Museum (AM).}

All types of items were accepted – drawings, specifications, accounts, correspondence, photographs, notebooks and diaries, press clippings, drawing equipment – on the basis that drawings and their related records would assist researchers in ‘understanding the conception and
practice of both the individual architect and of the architecture profession generally at that time.\textsuperscript{7} In other words, ‘working records’ would help contemporary and future researchers’ appreciation not only of the design process but also of the context in which architectural projects had been developed and executed. As a further aid ‘to ... study and research’, Johnson assembled a library based largely on donations from architects’ own libraries.\textsuperscript{8}

The provenance of the records ranged from prominent South Australian-based sole practitioners to little-known figures. Firms were represented too. Normally whatever was offered was accepted – in most instances that was items that architects or, in the case of donations from deceased estates, family members, selected, but on one occasion it was an individual’s whole of career records.

Today the Architecture Museum’s collection could be described as ‘comprehensive’ since it represents a broad range of individuals from renowned to less well-known architects, and a broad sweep of record groups. It comprises more than 200,000 items, including approximately 25,000 drawings and a 2,500-volume library. The earliest item dates from 1846. Whilst the collection includes 19\textsuperscript{th} century records, the temporal focus is on drawings and related records of the 20th century and especially the period from about 1910 to 1980. The Museum also has a substantial special collection of British and European 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century architectural prints and engravings. The library holds books, monographs, journals and trade catalogues and brochures and a special collection of books on South Australia’s history which assists researchers’ understanding of the context in which local projects were created.

**Collection Policy**

A Collection Policy was first formulated in 2000. Developed retrospectively, it recognised the scope and the geographic and temporal foci of the existing collection and largely reinforced and formalized the status quo. It has since been revised and approved by the Museum’s Advisory Committee. The University of South Australia has a Collections and Museums Policy and the Architecture Museum’s Collection Policy aligns with that.

**Collecting strategy**

How will the collection be built up in the next 5-10 years?

In accordance with its Collection Policy, the Architecture Museum will maintain its geographic and temporal foci and collect records of South Australian architects and allied practitioners (for example, planners and landscape architects) who practised in the twentieth century. This approach reflects the intent of the ‘distributed national collection’ to hold items in the place where they are relevant. The Museum collects only paper documents. Its donors are retiring or retired architects and their families, which conveniently helps to restrict the collection’s temporal cut-off date to about 1980.

\textsuperscript{7} ‘Flinders University Architecture Archive Collection’, 1.

The collecting strategy focuses on three themes:

1. **redressing weaknesses in the existing collection**

Currently two areas are being addressed:

(1) women architects

Only one woman is represented in the Museum’s collections. While this reflects the gender imbalance of the profession in South Australia up to the 1980s, several women were in practice in the 1970s. The Museum aims to eventually hold a representative selection of their work.

(2) interior architecture records

Interior design has been taught in Adelaide since the mid 1960s and is a strong area of professional practice in South Australia. However interior architects are under-represented in the Museum’s collection although Interior Architecture students are one of the Museum’s main undergraduate client groups.

2. **amplifying and complementing existing collections/acquiring missing records**

The Architecture Museum’s Collection Policy states that it acquires records of ‘significant individuals, firms or projects not represented already’. Unrepresented individuals, firms or projects are identified by recording and reviewing visitor enquiries, seeking advice from the Advisory Committee and the architectural profession locally, and keeping abreast of the findings from new research into architectural and built environment history locally, nationally and internationally. Such research helps clarify current and potential future areas of interest and assists in anticipating the needs of future clients.

Occasionally, for various reasons, donors have chosen not to transfer all of their records to the collection. Or they may uncover additional records. In both instances they may approach the Museum to make a further donation. The Museum accepts donations that amplify already established collections on the proviso that the items fit the collecting parameters.

3. **responding to and anticipating needs of existing and potential future clients**

The Architecture Museum not only provides a service to the general community but also is a hub for academic and professional research. Outside of members of the public, its client groups include undergraduate and postgraduate students, academics from within and external to UniSA, heritage architects, and professional historians. Being located in a research-focused tertiary institution, to be considered a viable entity, the Museum must demonstrate that it is a core contributor to the university’s research mission. In order to achieve that objective, the collection needs to be relevant to its academic clients, that is, it must contain materials that stimulate and appeal to their research and teaching interests, and can be utilized in the production of publications and exhibitions.

Academic researchers using the Architecture Museum design conventional, text-based, as well as practice-based projects. A growing area of academic research in architecture and design in Australia relates to the production of creative outputs as research outcomes. The Museum is mindful that a potential future client group is researchers who use its archival items as the

Another future potential client group is researchers working in the e-research environment. E-research involves connecting researchers with data sets (and with each other) and is a rapidly growing area in Australia. The Architecture Museum is currently involved in a nationally funded project to make its collection data more visible and accessible in the online environment. This higher visibility is likely to attract new clients with, potentially, different research interests from those of clients to date.

Conclusion

Currently, the Architecture Museum is faced with several challenges and opportunities in regard to its future collection development. On the one hand there are our everyday circumstances and the pragmatic issues of resourcing the Museum and its activities, on the other the matter of the future and of making decisions today that will help to keep the collection relevant for future generations of clients. The fundamental question with which we are grappling is: should our temporal focus extend beyond the early 1980s or should we focus on building up what we hold already? I am sure the discussion will help with an answer.

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