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PRE-CUSTODIAL INTERVENTION:  
WORKING WITH (NOT AGAINST) ACTIVE ARCHITECTURE FIRMS

Collecting the output of contemporary architects is less the job of an archivist than that of a diplomat, or an expert in logistics, or preferably both. This is, at least, how it seems at my repository, which is home to a rapidly-growing collection of the work of architects who are still very much alive, well, and productive. I am the only staff member in our archives whose time is dedicated to architectural records. All processing responsibility for these collections is mine. I am also not on the staff of the Yale School of Architecture and do not receive any funding from it, though its faculty and students are the most avid patrons of the architecture collections. I share a reading room with the rest of Manuscripts and Archives, which means that architectural drawings often extend past the edges of the tables (which were not designed with the dimensions of large drawings in mind), and that getting oversize materials from our basement loading dock to the patrons in the reading room upstairs is a delicate, one-box-or-large-folder-at-a-time process. Our collections are “teaching collections”, meaning that use of the materials is not mediated by staff members at the item level, that we encourage the creative use of our materials in classes, and that access to and handling of the materials is open to all. The result of our successful integration of primary source materials into faculty’s lesson plans and students’ research projects is that our reading room is often overcrowded, that many collections are in use at one time, and that incoming collections must be made accessible very quickly.

Despite the fact that I work in a generalist repository, which collects in many fields other than architecture, the number of boxes I bring in each year surpasses by an order of magnitude that of my colleagues’ incoming collections. This deluge of architectural materials began to arrive in 2002, with the donation of the Eero Saarinen records, and collecting the work of contemporary architects associated with Yale has been strongly encouraged by both the President of the
University and the Dean of the School of Architecture. There is no turning back now; no time to consider whether collecting at this scale is appropriate given our limited resources. We had to think and act quickly about how best to manage the constant influx of materials from these firms, whose records are voluminous and show no sign of diminishing.

We decided to take a page from the Records Management book and ask the firms themselves to take over the processing of their own archives, from appraisal to arrangement, description, rehousing, and creation of an access tool. I engage with the firms well before any of the records are transferred to Yale – indeed, before a deed of gift is signed – so that all parties are in agreement about the scope of work, the estimated costs, the amount of time I will spend working with the firm, and the expected output. The solution is not ideal in every way, but it enables us to collect at a level that our faculty and students require and support. We call this “pre-custodial intervention” – acting to influence the arrangement, description, and appraisal of the materials by the creators before they are transferred to our repository.

I will mention here that we only ask active firms to work with us in this way, or firms that are continuing to operate after the principal has died. We do not ask the widows of solo practitioners, for example, to do this work. We take into account the scale of the firm and the amount of material. I do, personally, process collections of local architects who have died and left only a small amount of documentation of their work.

Because I have been asked to give only a short overview of the process in ten minutes’ time, let me briefly outline the procedure as it would ideally proceed, then quickly point out the benefits of this strategy for all parties involved. During the discussion I would be happy to talk more specifically about my successes and failures with teaching architects to be their own archivists.

At the initial meeting with a potential donor firm, I describe what an architectural archive “looks like” – the type of documentation that has permanent research value; the typical researchers that use the material and how they use it; the logistics of transferring the records to Yale and access to the materials. I immediately begin to manage the firm’s expectations: we cannot take everything they have ever produced; we cannot take physical models; we will do no further processing of the material once it arrives at Yale and therefore cannot take material “as-is”. I explain to them that they will need to put someone from the firm in charge of the archives, or hire a professional archivist to join the staff. I also tell them that I will train that person in our practices and procedures, I will help them select appropriate archival supplies, I will come to the firm and work with them until they are comfortable with the procedures, and I will be available to them at all times to answer any questions. Working with firms in this hands-on way is very time-consuming, but the payback in terms of hundreds of boxes of processed, immediately-accessible records is extraordinary.

Once the firm has agreed to this – this negotiation can take quite a while – and we have a signed deed of gift, I meet with the person who will actually be doing the processing work. I show them an example of a finding aid and a project index, so they know what they are working toward as an access tool, and understand that this will be the tool they, too, will use to access their own records. I give them a list of supplies to order – both a “recommended” list and a “bare minimum” list. Then, together we take one small, early project and go through the documentation for a couple of hours. This allows for a discussion of “permanent research value”, appraisal guidelines, and general arrangement and description procedure. While this is not
extremely difficult work, it does take some training, and members of the firm are usually architects, not archivists. What seems intuitive to us is not necessarily intuitive to them.

When the records have been arranged and transferred to us in a batch (usually of about 50 boxes at a time), the processor sends me the current version of the project index, already filled out with project information and box numbers. I update our finding aid and holdings records to reflect the new boxes, prepare the boxes for barcoding and labeling, and arrange for them to be sent to the offsite shelving facility. The materials are then available for research use.

This, of course, is the ideal scenario, with no misunderstandings or glitches. Even before the gift agreement is signed, one of the major issues that always comes up is that of archival appraisal. Firms are usually happy to hear that not every document must be retained and tracked. They are reassured when I describe what is of permanent research value, which is generally what they consider important, too – sketches, design development drawings, architectural/structural/landscape drawings, correspondence between the architect and client or architect and contractor, photographs, internal memoranda, phone notes, et cetera. Sofie De Caigny posed a question in the abstract for this session about whether “sampling policies can be imagined.” I think that for collections of this size and scope, sampling policies must not only be imagined but implemented. I have worried for years over whether we archivists are abdicating our responsibility to future scholarship by turning macro-appraisal – the selection of projects to be documented – over to the architecture firms themselves, but I have lately made peace with the fact that we have little choice but to do so. The output of large firms is more than any single repository can take in, unless the goal is to be the de-facto records manager for that one firm exclusively. Our current practice is to ask firms to document a certain number of projects “comprehensively” (which we call Category 1 [see list of document types at the end]), and a larger number of projects “minimally” (Category 2 [list at the end]). The firm then chooses which of their projects to comprehensively document.

De Caigny mentions in her abstract that architects and their firms have “historically dubious self-appreciation principles”, by which I believe she means that firms often discard as meaningless or irrelevant material that archivists and scholars would consider valuable. However, I have also seen the opposite problem – architects occasionally have an inflated sense of their place in
history, and believe that every piece of paper they have ever touched has permanent research value. We have found that, even for firms who initially recoil at the idea of documenting any of their projects less-than-fully, this two-tiered system of appraisal assures them that none of their projects will be lost to “the Dumpster” and that all of their projects will be documented to at least a certain level in the archives.

When dealing with a firm that has over 400 projects spanning four decades, talking with them about this kind of appraisal also helps drive home the point that this is an expensive, time-consuming undertaking. Asking an architect to purchase archival supplies for rehousing materials, hiring an archivist, and providing space at the firm to do the processing is not an easy sell. Some architects believe that they should be able to just load up a truck with decades of documentation and drive it over to our loading dock, where it’s then the archives’ problem. In the course of my conversations with firms, it becomes clear to them that the real value in their archives is not just in having them at the institution, but in their accessibility. If the archives are unprocessed, no one is going to get to see them, and in that case they’re no better off than if they had just been thrown out. I personally cannot process the volume of archival material that the firm wants to donate and that scholars want to see. Therefore, if the firm wants its archives to be accessible, it must do the processing work itself. Far from being put off by this “tough love”, the principals of most firms are impressed by the intense amount of labor that ensures the security and accessibility of their records, and gain an understanding of and respect for archivists’ work, once they are asked to contribute to the process themselves.

There are many benefits for all parties to this workflow. First, pre-custodial intervention benefits the archivist. The amount of time spent arranging and describing the material is significantly lessened (though not eliminated). Much more of the archivist’s time and energy is spent talking to members of the firm, learning about the firm’s history, culture, and priorities. While the archivist does give up some intimate knowledge of the materials themselves, she gains a more holistic understanding of the firm, which she can then impart to researchers. The archivist also has greater control over what comes in the door of the repository, having presented the firm with appraisal guidelines. The finding aid to the material is available for immediate use by researchers, meaning the collection is accessible as soon as it is received by the repository. And the cost benefits of the firm purchasing its own archival supplies are obvious.

Second, pre-custodial intervention benefits the researcher. Again, the materials are available and accessible as soon as they come in the door (and researchers have indeed asked for materials the day they arrived). Also, because the records were arranged by the creator, there is an understood, inherent context to the records that an archivist – an outsider to the firm – would not necessarily be able to provide or recreate.

Finally, pre-custodial intervention benefits the donor firm. When a member of the firm arranges and describes the firm’s own records, it helps them realize what they have – to account for, or take stock of, what has been retained to that point. Some firms send project materials to attic or offsite storage automatically at the end of a project, without knowing exactly what was sent away, or how to retrieve it again. When the materials are organized by someone already familiar with them, with the codes and internal logic, the firm, in a way, learns what it possesses that is of value. More immediately valuable to many firms, especially when they are considering the expense of processing and rehousing their records, is the fact that they no longer have to worry about the expense of storing their records.
This strategy raises a number of interesting and provocative questions about the role of archivists
in building and presenting collections to researchers, the desirability of collecting the entire
corpus of a firm’s work, and the role of the institutional repository in the preservation of the
records of large firms. It is, however, only one strategy, and I look forward to hearing the
thoughts and ideas of my colleagues who are also struggling with this embarrassment of riches.
Category 1 projects:

The 10-15 most important works in the history of the firm.

We would like all documentation you have in the following categories:

- Original sketches
- Renderings
- Presentation drawings (reformatted if necessary due to size limitations)
- Preliminary design documents – all
- Schematic design documents – 100% set only
- Design development documents – 100% set only
- Final construction set
- Contracts
- Final specifications
- Drawings and correspondence with consultants re: extraordinary or innovative features (e.g., lighting, landscape)
- Correspondence – except routine correspondence with contractors and building departments
- Minutes of meetings
- Photographs/video
- References to publications and awards
- Tear sheets/published articles (not entire copies of journals)

Please do not provide:

- Billing and financial records
- Construction documents other than the final set
- Shop drawings
- Change orders
- Material samples (except in exceptional cases)
Category 2 projects:

Other significant and innovative projects of permanent research value.

We would like to receive the following:

- Original sketches
- Renderings
- Presentation drawings (reformatted if necessary due to size limitations)
- Preliminary design documents (all)
- Contracts
- Final construction set
- Photographs/video
- Final specifications
- Significant correspondence with clients or consultants
- References to publications or awards

Please do not provide:

- Schematic design documents
- Design development documents
- Billing and financial records
- Construction documents other than final set
- Meeting minutes
- Tear sheets/published articles
- Shop drawings
- Change orders
- Material samples