Catherine Moriarty and Harriet Edquist
RMIT Design Archive, Melbourne

Curating Design Archives Data for Research Collaboration

The RMIT Design Archive was established in 2007 and comprises collections representing Melbourne design practices from the twentieth century to the present. It occupies a purpose-built facility within the Design Hub, a landmark building that opened in 2012 in the centre of Melbourne, designed by the architect Sean Godsell.1 [Fig. 1] The University of Brighton Design Archives, in the UK, was set up in 1994, and now amounts to over 20 archives relating to British and international design organisations and individual designers, among them the International Council of Graphic Design Associations, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, and the archives of F H K Henrion, Joseph Emberton, Theo Crosby, and the exhibition designer James Gardner.2 [Fig. 2]

Despite their geographical separation, these design archive research initiatives have much in common. Their focus is twentieth century design; both are located in schools of design and have an important proximity to design research, design practice and the design profession. Design is an inherently collaborative and project-based activity and so it makes sense that the archives that record and represent its past are employed in a similar manner. Research underway and under development at both Brighton and at RMIT presents opportunities to connect our collections and to consider how we might work with others, and technology plays a crucial part in this. Indeed, many designers whose archives we hold were skilled problem-solvers and most held utopian ideals, and so the possibilities of technology underpin our aspiration to make our collections more visible and accessible.

In 2010, our first collaborative seminar took place at Brighton on the topic Mapping Design Archives. The genesis of this collaboration lay in a research initiative of the Design Research Institute at RMIT, ‘Geoplaced Knowledge’. Headed up by Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan this project was particularly interested in the intersection between new cartographies and design practices. At Brighton the discussion focused on how the mapping of data might reveal new ways to approach histories of design. The seminar inspired the doctoral project Towards an Atlas of the Design Profession, a collaboration with the Chartered Society of Designers in the UK, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.3 In 2013, a symposium held at the RMIT Europe Centre in Barcelona formally launched Design Exchange as an international project to connect design archives and to establish foundations for cooperation in the form of research, exhibitions, knowledge transfer, continuing professional development and doctoral studentships.4 The presentations by curators

1 RMIT Design Archives http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=ohlih78qwcts
2 University of Brighton Design Archives http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/collections/design-archives
3 Towards an Atlas of the Design Profession http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/collections/design-archives/projects/towards-an-atlas-of-the-design-profession
4 Design Exchange http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/collections/design-archives/projects/design-exchange
from Australia, the UK and Barcelona addressed the notion of the ‘active archive’, the relationship between the analogue and the digital, and the place of the archive in mapping émigré networks and the journeys of objects.

The activities of Design Exchange continue, and during 2014 we focused on ways to consider further how our subject specialisms and concerns come together. In March we presented a paper at the Digital Humanities Australasia Conference in Perth that addressed some of these issues. We observed that our ideas about curating could be broadly divided into two mutually enforcing areas – those with a focus on stewardship and those with a focus on interpretation. Our focus on the former is concerned with data structures and how information architectures are constructed and how our catalogue records might become linked to afford fluid navigation between the records of our respective holdings and with records elsewhere. The latter is concerned with how digital representations of original archival items can be constructed and animated to deliver archival content in new and creative ways, reaching out beyond the repository to new audiences in new locations. Of course, these two approaches to curation - data curation on the one hand and curating in an interpretative and exhibition context on the other - are not separate and, as will become clear, our capacity to pursue projects depends hugely on our respective institutional digital strategies, and the relationships and digital assets and competencies we have either accrued over time or have direct access to.

Firstly, we consider research taking place at Brighton that seeks to link data between and beyond design archives and to demonstrate how experience in digital image and catalogue record production can be pursued to provoke new inquiry. It considers an Arts & Humanities Research Council-funded project Exploring British Design that aims to produce a proof-of-concept mechanism to link archive data. Secondly, we turn to how the design archive can become activated in digital contexts in an outward facing way through the production and animation of digital surrogates and environments.

Exploring British Design is a project that builds on many years of digitisation and collection catalogue work at Brighton. The question that underpins it is how we might transform the discovery and understanding of Britain’s design history by connecting design-related content in different archives. The project is a collaboration between researchers, information professionals, technologists, curators and historians – and a partnership with the Archives Hub, a national data service and an aggregator of the archives held in over 220 different institutions, and the Design Museum in London who see it as a mechanism to potentially enhance their visitor experience by enabling the discovery of richer design content than is possible in the galleries alone.

---

The aim of *Exploring British Design* is to bring about a step change in a) the understanding of archival research and the way archives are arranged and b) design research possibilities in digital environments. More than simply building a tool to access material online, we intend the project to be, to borrow a phrase of Johanna Drucker’s, an enquiry into ‘ways of thinking with digital processes.’

Archive collections are multi-level resources, reflecting complex relationships. Descriptions of archives are therefore hierarchical in order to reflect the way each archive is assembled. Traditional routes through descriptions descend from the collection-level, down through series, to individual items be they documents, photographs, plans or drawings. The aim of *Exploring British Design* is to evolve this model to enable a more dynamic navigation that moves between and across collections at different levels. Crucially, we want researchers to understand better the way that archives are arranged and described. It is this work with researchers that is informing the building of the proof of concept web interface which will provide the means to navigate content and to connect different sources of information. We intend it to demonstrate what can be revealed by connecting hierarchical archival descriptions with relationship-rich authority files. To bring this about we are creating detailed XML authority descriptions that adopt the standard (EAC-CPF) Encoded Archival Context - Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families. In this way, we are building on and extending, the Archive Hub’s extensive experience of creating descriptions in Encoded Archival Description, and design historical expertise at Brighton, to create structured biographical-historical information about individuals and organisations, including the contexts in which they lived and worked. Some of these files will employ existing data in the Hub while others will be created from scratch – from data held at Brighton, at the Design Museum, the Royal Society of Arts, and elsewhere, including RMIT. For example, the ‘lost modernist’ Michael O’Connell (1898-1976) is represented both at RMIT and at Brighton.8 [Fig. 3]

We intend to connect our work to the global linked data community and in the context of design this global reach is particularly important due to the international and collaborative nature of much design work, and designers’ connections to manufacturers, clients and consumers around the world. Additionally, many of the designers represented at Brighton and at RMIT were émigrés and so the possibilities for mapping design careers and relationships over space and time could be revelatory.9 Ultimately, the project will present new research potential for design historical scholarship and design practitioners by conjoining data from disparate archive sources nationally and internationally, and secondly, it will provoke better understanding of archival structures when encoded and arranged in digital environments as a key, yet fast fading, skill in humanities research practice. We also

---

6 Archives Hub [http://archiveshub.ac.uk/index.html]; Design Museum [http://designmuseum.org/]. The Design Museum will relocate to the former Commonwealth Institute building in West London in 2016 with anticipated visitor figures at 500,000 a year.


9 Sue Breakell and Lesley Whitworth, ‘émigré Designers in the University of Brighton Design Archives’ *Journal of Design History*, first published online March 4, 2013, DOI:10.1093/jdh/ep006
see this as an opportunity to expose and debate the relationship between the original artefact and its digital surrogate, and both the construction and representation of the information architecture in which it sits.

Alongside investigations into data structures we are also absorbed in projects that employ digital technology to represent archival content in very outward-facing ways. In terms of research collaborations the RMIT Design Archives has adopted various models for building projects across disciplines, media, institutions and industry. *Frederick Romberg: an architectural survey* was a collaborative, government-funded, small project involving an architect, video artist, graphic designer, architectural historian and project manager. It chose four objects from the archive of Frederick Romberg, a German-born émigré who was trained at ETH Zurich and arrived in Melbourne in 1938. These items were a small tin box containing Romberg’s student portfolio, a presentation photograph album of his early work, a red cloth album documenting his return journey to Europe in 1946 and a large scrapbook with collaged photos and documents recording his career. From these objects the team produced a special issue of the *RMIT Design Archives Journal* presented as a collection of posters with essays and images to be read together or separately, digital reconstructions of Romberg’s unbuilt thesis project, ‘Hotel Dolder’, and a film that was shown in the window gallery of the Archives building, and also resides on our website. Each collaborator worked in their own medium to interpret the material and present it to the public in engaging ways.

*Augmented Australia 1914-2014. Regenerating Lost Architecture* was Australia’s contribution to the 2014 Architecture Biennale in Venice. Responding to Rem Koolhaas’s curatorial brief for the national pavilions to consider a single theme: *Absorbing Modernity: 1914-2014*, the Australian curators selected for display 11 historical and 11 recent unbuilt projects from the last 100 years of Australian architectural history. As Denton Corker Marshall’s new Australian Pavilion is still under construction, the projects were presented virtually via 3D augmented models, images, voiceovers and animations activated by an app downloaded on common handheld devices. The team built a temporary pavilion for the exhibition, known as the Cloud Space, to give some gravitas to the exhibit and to house trigger images of each project while 3D models positioned around Venice allowed visitors to take a virtual tour and experience at full scale some of Australia’s more intriguing architecture. This innovative exhibition gave new life to the archive, and RMIT Design Archives contributed four small photographs of plans for Frederick Romberg’s 1939 competition entry for Adelaide Boy’s High School, a disarmingly frank exercise in transplanted Swiss modernism. From these the curatorial team constructed digital models that can be animated by the Augmented Australia app. The Design Archives also contributed an essay to the catalogue and the voiceover for the app. [Figs. 4, 5 and 6]

*Shifting gear. Design, innovation and the Australian car,* an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria opening in March 2015, is a collaborative research enterprise of quite a different kind. An initiative of the Design Archives, the idea was prompted by
a collection of drawings and associated material donated to the Archives in 2010. Executed at the General Motors Holden Design Studio in Melbourne from the 1960s to the 1990s, the work shows the stylistic development of some of Australia’s most iconic cars, the Holden Monaro and Torana.

Developed in conjunction with the National Gallery, Shifting gear will occupy the ground floor of the Australian Galleries at Federation Square, and present 22 locally designed cars together with explanatory archival and digitally modified material. Australia is one of the few countries in the world that can build cars from the ground up and has done so for almost a century, yet there is no comprehensive history of this industry and no central repository for its archives. Automotive design is almost entirely absent from Australian design discourse and the whole scholarly discipline of this design realm remains to be constructed. Furthermore the historical evidence of this design field, in particular concept sketches, drawings, photographs and other evidence of design process is extremely fragmented and it would appear that the RMIT Design Archives is the only public institution in Australia that actively collects automotive archives. Hence little of the material in the exhibition has come from collecting institutions, most has been lent by industry (GMH for example), car enthusiasts, car clubs and car designers. As the exhibition has taken shape, it has developed a strongly collaborative ethos, with donors prompting ideas about display, content and interpretation. It has also prompted allied research initiatives within RMIT and a range of supplementary activities initiated by the public.

The process of constructing Shifting Gear, selecting the artefacts for display, designing the exhibition and putting together the catalogue has also been a means to begin to construct the archive and provide some avenues for interpreting it. As twentieth-century Australian automotive design followed the lead of American, British, European and Japanese design there is a rich field here for collaborative projects with other repositories of automotive material so that the full extent of this global design phenomenon can be appreciated.

In conclusion, the combined expertise gained at the University of Brighton Design Archives and at RMIT Design Archives from our various research projects allows us to contemplate the benefits wide and enhanced access to our digital and actual repositories might bring. With respect to the interests of icam we envisage the possibility of research collaborations in design fields that have hitherto received less attention than architecture, but are allied to it, for example interior design, graphic design and industrial design as these are areas of strength in our collections. The tendency to treat architecture as an object in itself might be offset by research in and across design archives that reveal whole projects in all their collaborative complexity and reflect to some degree the dynamic interplay that produced them in the first place. Expo 67 in Montreal is a good example, for here national pavilions were the work of architects, designers and artists working together in new and often experimental ways. Its archival footprint is dispersed and investigating new ways to bring it together might alter significantly our understanding and representation of architecture and design as creative processes.
RMIT Design Archives occupies a purpose-built facility within the Design Hub, a landmark building that opened in 2012 in the centre of Melbourne, designed by Sean Godsell.

*Britain Today* display in the British Pavilion at Expo 67, Montreal, designed by James Gardner. The pavilion was the work of architect Basil Spence, with F H K Henrion responsible for the three dimensional Union Jack that surmounted its tower.

University of Brighton Design Archives
Wall hanging for the Festival of Britain, Michael O'Connell, 1951
University of Brighton Design Archives

Frederick Romberg, Adelaide Boys' High School, South Australia, 1939, competition entry, animator Hannah Bartlett-Wynne

Cloud Space, felix._Giles_Anderson+Goad, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2014
Photo: John Gollings