

Architectural Records: Managing Design and Construction Records.
WAVERLY LOWELL and TAWNY RYAN NELB. Chicago: Society of
American Archivists, 2006. 197 p. ISBN 1-931666-19-9.

Design and construction records provide critical documentary evidence of society in surprising ways. More than just a record of how a building was designed and built, they document the development of our towns and cities, societal and cultural trends, power structures, economic forces, and artistic endeavour. But because of their very format, architectural records are often surrounded by a mystique. They have a language of their own and their information is both visual and technical. Complex in nature, they are often comprised of multiple media, and the physical size of the records and the sheer volume of collections can intimidate or scare those who are entrusted with their care. The similarities with other types of records may not be immediately evident, and the differences may seem to pose insurmountable challenges.

Architectural Records: Managing Design and Construction Records, published by the Society of American Archivists in 2006, sets out to demystify design and construction records, and to provide a comprehensive manual for their care. The authors, Waverly Lowell and Tawny Ryan Nelb, obviously have substantial experience in dealing with records of this kind, and their knowledge and passion for the field is evident. Their goal in writing this book is to provide archivists and others charged with the care of architectural records with the knowledge and skills needed to organize, store, handle, and preserve them with confidence. In order to accomplish this goal, they have produced a very ambitious work with a western architectural historical context, that progresses logically through each stage of the record's life cycle: it examines who creates architectural records, how and why they are created, and how they can best be processed, preserved, and accessed.

Divided into eight chapters, and accompanied by a gallery of colour images and three appendices, this book carefully and thoroughly details architectural practice, the creation of architectural records and their various types, and issues surrounding appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and research and use. Beautifully illustrated and well-organized, this book is a treasure trove of information and one that can be read cover to cover or

consulted as necessary. The notes section following each chapter often provides more detailed information, the bibliography is comprehensive, and this manual is fully indexed. Of particular interest is the inclusion of a review of archival literature related to architectural records, which demonstrates the paucity of titles published on the topic to date.

In the opening chapter, Nelb's brief history of the development of western architectural practice, including a very cursory look at ancient, medieval, and Renaissance times, lays the foundation for a more detailed discussion of American practice. Nelb traces the growth of formal architectural training and the increasingly complex nature of the field, due to advances in building technology and materials, an increase in legislated standards, and higher professional accountability. This chapter is especially valuable in creating an understanding of why modern architectural records are so voluminous and so diverse.

In chapter two, Lowell deals with the creation of architectural records. She provides the foundation for their care with a clear and extensive discussion of what design and construction records are, who creates them, what processes are involved in their creation, and how they can be used. She provides a careful analysis of each phase of the design and construction process, which is useful in determining what records are essential for documenting a design project.

In the third chapter, Nelb provides an exceptional examination of the types of project records both in terms of media, such as drawings, models, textual records, and photographs, as well as their physical methods of creation. This chapter is fundamental to the understanding of architectural records as compared to standard business records. It is also useful to archival institutions in the development of collection policies and donor contracts, as well as in making appraisal decisions.

The subsequent chapter on appraisal is of immeasurable value as the sheer volume of modern architectural records makes this a critical component in their collection. Lowell is comprehensive in outlining potential factors that might affect appraisal decisions and in helping archivists identify records of continuing value. Tables offer generic recommendations for appraisal. An excellent grid is also included; it can provide an institution with initial appraisal criteria that can be used on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration mandate and collection policy.

The fifth chapter is devoted to arrangement and description, and further demonstrates the need for an understanding of how architectural records are created and their eventual use as critical to all levels of managing architectural collections. There is an excellent section identifying potential series within the groups and types of records acquired and, as in all other chapters, it is well-illustrated with examples and charts.

The next two chapters deal with various aspects related to preservation.

These issues are dealt with comprehensively and include not only long-term maintenance standards, general preservation issues, and reformatting, but also the identification of preservation maintenance related to common visual media and supports. Of particular note is a section on computer -aided design (CAD) and the implications that technology will have on the preservation of design records in the future.

The final chapter focuses on reference and use, and explores the special requirements of providing access to oversized and fragile material. While a lot of the information covered in this chapter, such as reference policies and reading room security, is germane to the provision of service for all types of archival media, issues specific to architectural records, including access and copyright and exhibitions and loans, are also discussed.

It is difficult to find much to criticize about this book. It is well-researched and visually appealing, and the examples are pertinent and useful. One minor criticism might be the placement of the "Gallery of Images" within the text of Chapter Two, which was initially confusing and might have been better situated as an appendix. Some of the content related to copyright and financial appraisal was specific to the United States but would also be useful for an international audience. The appendices, "Doing Your Neighborhood History" and "Disaster Response Procedures for Water Emergency" were interesting but of questionable value. These minor criticisms aside, this book fills a void in the archival literature. It provides much needed practical information on the care and feeding of architectural records, and is a must-have for anyone interested in the field of architectural archives. It is, in fact, a book I wish that I had written myself and it deserves a place on every archivist's bookshelf.

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