Toward a Dispersion of Architectural Archives?

¿Hacia una dispersión de archivos arquitectónicos?

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Abstract

While architecture museums come in all shapes and sizes, the practice of establishing an archive of architectural artifacts and instituting public accessibility is central to all. If, in the past few decades, two main approaches to the architectural archive have been identified—namely, the ‘critical depth’ of carefully curated assemblages and the ‘encyclopedic breadth’ of comprehensive collections—more recently, new hybrid models have been developed and implemented. The emerging dominant model appears to be conceptual, if not formal: the dispersion of the architectural archive. However, with such growing dispersion, is the architectural archive itself at risk of evaporation?

Keywords: architectural archives, architecture museum, critical depth, encyclopedic breadth, networked model, NAi, CCA, MoMA

Resumen

Aun cuando los museos de arquitectura pueden ser de todo tipo de formas y tamaños, la práctica de establecer un archivo de artefactos arquitectónicos e instaurar la accesibilidad pública es fundamental para todos. Si en las últimas décadas se han identificado dos enfoques principales para el archivo arquitectónico, a saber, la “profundidad crítica” de conjuntos cuidadosamente seleccionados y la “amplitud enciclopédica” de colecciones extensas, recientemente se han desarrollado y implementado nuevos modelos híbridos. El nuevo modelo dominante parece ser conceptual, aunque no formal: la dispersión del archivo arquitectónico. Sin embargo, con tal dispersión creciente, ¿corre el riesgo de evaporación el propio archivo arquitectónico?

Palabras clave: archivos arquitectónicos, museo de arquitectura, profundidad crítica, amplitud enciclopédica, modelo en red, NAi, CCA, MoMA

Archives = Museums

While architecture museums come in all shapes and sizes, the practice of establishing an archive of architectural artifacts and instituting public accessibility is central to all. Not only was the constitution of a disciplinary archive one of the most important motivations for establishing an architecture museum, but an analysis of the evolution of these institutions—from early eighteenth-century efforts to their more recent widespread materialization—reveals the fundamental primacy of the architectural archive in defining the institutional typology of the architecture museum.

The architecture museum is the clearest expression of the concrete and abstract qualities of the archive within architectural culture. It is not only a physical location where documents, manuscripts, drawings and other artifacts are collected, but also an abstract conception in which knowledge is produced and meaning created. The archive has not only constantly defined the architectural discipline, but the discipline has constantly defined the archive. This condition is most visible in the specific archival policies and strategies adopted by modern architecture museums, which vary considerably. Paradoxically, while such diversity reflects different museums’ conceptions of architecture, it nevertheless reinforces the centrality of the archive as the instrument in which claims are made and statements established.

While their basic perspective on architecture may differ, all museums instrumentalize the archive to validate their specific conception of the discipline.

By establishing a conceptual field and defining a space of communication in which possible interventions and discussions can occur, the archive goes beyond its material function as a physical repository of artifacts and representations and becomes a central instrument in architectural disciplinary apparatus. The architectural archive has continuously enabled the advancement of the discipline by governing the emergence of statements and grouping together knowledge and experience in distinct figures, as well as establishing multiple relationships. As Michel Foucault once argued, the archive is not merely the sum of all texts and artifacts that define a culture, nor the set of institutions that make it possible to record and preserve them. Rather, “[t]he archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.” Since, for Foucault, the archive is the “general system of the formation and transformation of statements,”
it inherently “governs what is said or unsaid, recorded or unrecorded.” Thus, despite its superficial claims of neutrality, the archive always embeds power structures and systems of control. Ultimately, the archive is not merely a passive repository of memory, but instead informs and regulates how history is understood and new meanings are formulated. It is the archive that allows for the enunciation of ideas and the creation of meaning for an intellectual endeavor such as architecture.

Critical Depth and Encyclopedic Breadth

In the multitude of approaches to the archive, there are two that have primarily been used within architecture museums, with most contemporary institutions developing their particular policies somewhere between these two extremes. Emerging from the earliest practices established by architects and connoisseurs for assembling architectural collections since at least the sixteenth century, most institutions have adopted what Terence Riley, the longtime chief curator of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), once identified as a critical depth approach. This approach is defined by what can best be described as antiquarian practices — that is, a concern with specific periods, architects or architectural ideas assembled with individual artifacts, rather than any comprehensive or inclusive narratives of the discipline’s past. Therefore, instead of contextualizing periods, architects or ideas, these architectural collecting practices defined their subjects as autonomous fragments within the discipline. By focusing on the particular rather than the general, the composition of these archives is based on the exceptional rather than the typical. There is thus an inherently great accumulation of material regarding exceptional examples and particular ideas, but the connections between them (and with other elements within architecture) are entirely constructed by juxtapositions. These are isolated fragments of architectural knowledge which simply overlook most, if not everything, in between.

While the selection of architectural objects and subjects is inherent to the act of collecting, the resulting critical depth (both conceptually and materially) has been hailed by Riley to be a most important instrument in asserting “a resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity.” Following this principle, MoMA’s architectural archive has been assembled from singular pieces rather than complete series, that is, pieces that are valued for their exceptional nature rather than their capacity to represent broader conditions. While crucial architectural works and moments from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are present in MoMA’s architectural archive—from J.J.P. Oud to Rem Koolhaas, the International Style to Deconstructivist Architecture—these are still materialized in an assemblage of discrete drawings, models and photographs. With the notable exception of Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, the work of most architects included in the collection is represented by a handful of models and drawings. The artifacts collected certainly resonate with the metatopics that frame MoMA’s entire architectural archive, but the latter are nevertheless represented by disparate objects, decontextualized from their original formulation. As such, in these collections, the reading of history is limited to the narratives established by the selection and juxtapositions present within, effectively retarding the emergence of competing readings and meanings.

Conversely, with a notable surge in the number of architecture museums worldwide at the end of the 1970s, a new type of architecture museum also emerged, one which was directly supported by a different approach to the architectural archive. By the 1980s, the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) and the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) represented a new type of institution in which architectural scholarship and inclusive debate were to further public engagement and the understanding of the discipline.

Nowhere were the CCA’s and the NAi’s ambitions and intellectual positioning more clearly articulated than in their common approach to the architectural archive. Specifically, they adopted an archival policy aimed at fostering architectural scholarship and discussion unconditioned by—and unshackled from—any singular narrative or reading of architecture and its history. By assembling comprehensive, encyclopedic and complete collections, formed by a diverse array of artifacts that related to the processes of architectural production, the CCA and the NAi aimed to document and present the complexity of architecture. More specifically, since the complete and detailed nature of these
collections meant that, for every architect and for every project, a sizeable amount of archived material could be found, not only the intricacy or nuances of the archived ideas were conveyed, but also the "collections' status as open-ended resources for inquiry" was emphasized.\textsuperscript{11} As such, in contrast to the critical depth pursued by MoMA, the cca and the NAi became paradigmatic examples of a contemporary encyclopedic approach to the archive. Beyond merely collecting final presentation drawings, the scope of their archives came to include "sketches, preliminary designs, working drawings, business and personal correspondence, photographs, models, collections of press clippings, and published articles," that is, full collections composed of both final and preparatory work which "contribute[d] to the understanding of professional practices, projects and personalities."\textsuperscript{12} In Montreal, the cca holds over 150 collections, most notably the entire archives of James Stirling and Peter Eisenman (until 2008); while, in Rotterdam, the NAi housed almost 800 separate collections of the most prominent Dutch architects of the past two centuries. Effectively, these archives not only host representations of architecture, but also a diverse array of artifacts that relate to the processes of architectural production. Beyond drawings, models, original fragments or casts, these archives have come to include correspondence, manuscripts, personal effects and any other artifact that can offer a glimpse into architecture's creative process.

The complete nature of these collections encourages multiple readings of the architectural archive, thus allowing for knowledge and meaning to remain in constant flux, rather than be solidified. Given the breadth of material in these collections, any idea, object, project or architect is constantly subject to possible reinterpretation, in which alternate readings and juxtapositions are nearly limitless. Furthermore, every single artifact is inevitably contextualized by a plethora of other objects, particularly those produced in the development of the same architectural idea. Since, instead of establishing a specific narrative, contemporary architecture museums with encyclopedic archives aim to enable the emergence of multiple readings, the integrity of the collection is valued over the individual artifacts that compose it. The implications of the encyclopedic architectural archive are quite clear: architecture is a multifarious intellectual endeavor animated by ideas that cannot be reduced to a singular representation.

Both the "encyclopedic breadth" and "critical depth" models have, over the last 30 years, represented the two extremes of the spectrum of approaches to architecture's disciplinary archive within museums. Recently, however, new models for architectural archives have been developed and implemented in these institutions.

Networked Models

In the past few years, the physical limitations of collecting complete archives and funding difficulties for maintaining sprawling collections have become increasingly evident to various institutions. Most notably, the NAi (in its final year before merging into the Het Nieuwe Instituut, HNI) and the cca have adopted more discriminating archival policies. In hindsight, this shift was as inevitable as logic. If archives have run out of the capacity (financial or otherwise) to continue collecting at the same rate, then they needed to become more discriminating in what they collected.

After pursuing an archival policy of encyclopedic breadth for 25 years, in 2012, the NAi officially adopted a policy much more akin to "critical depth." This radical shift was established as the institute's Heritage Department used the discussion concerning its acquisition priorities for the 1960-2010 period to examine not just what material to acquire, but how to acquire it. A new selection process was thus
defined. If the NAI’s acquisition policy had previously relied on identifying the most important figures of Dutch architectural culture within its various periods, the new acquisition policy determined a finer level of detail, namely, the particular themes and projects that best represented those periods. In contrast to the previous policy, which was considered too indiscriminate, the new policy—aptly titled Keuzes Maken, or “Making Choices”—was to be based on “targeted acquisitions.”

Beyond being pragmatic and practical, this also represented a fundamental ideological shift with significant implications for the institute’s intellectual project. Within this new acquisition policy, collecting was no longer the detached activity it had previously been, but one constructed from singular narratives that supported and validated their authors’ positions while also reinscribing the emergence of competing readings and meanings. Even if unintentionally, by “making choices,” the collection was limited to the particular reading of history established by the juxtaposition of the “societal challenges” and archival material selected in the first place. As such, the NAI’s collection should then be treated as being research rather than archival.

Beyond a radical shift in content, the format for the NAI’s collection model was also substantially revised with Keuzes Maken; it became a stated ambition of the revised policy to transition the institute’s archives to a networked model. The NAI therefore proposed to no longer centralize its architectural archives, but rather to provide assistance to other institutions (including architectural offices) to manage their own archives with guidelines and standards similar to the NAI’s own, bringing them together into a network. Within this network, the NAI would be the central node for its various partners, even connecting this proposed constellation of disseminated archives with academic institutions, thus developing collaborative project-based research at the institute. While the NAI (or hni) would focus on establishing critical depth by collecting artifacts and drawings directly related to the twenty-two themes defined for that period, the archive’s comprehensive breadth would be outsourced (or, more accurately, crowdsourced) and delocalized to its networked partners.

While this shift must be understood as a way to ensure the sustainability of the continued development and upkeep of the archives’ encyclopedic breadth—even within the very likely, if not inevitable, prospect of decreased funding—it nevertheless implied a repositioning of the institute. Drawing inspiration from other Dutch archives such as the Netherlands Institute for Art History (Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, or rkh) and the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, or rce), the NAI was to go beyond its “storage function” by force-collaborating and archiving efforts to close collaborations in preparing related research and archival material selected in the first place. As such, regardless of being physically divided between different cities, there is a cohesive vision for these archives, ranging from joint cataloguing and archiving efforts to close collaborations in preparing related research and programming, the first of which was the 2015 exhibition SAA. Process: Housing in Portugal 1974-1976. Most notably, however, this collaborative framework was always intended to become an instrument for “knowledge spillover,” with the Canadian center sharing its expertise on architectural archives with the Portuguese institutions. This was, in fact, an important stimulation for Siza’s donation, as he intended for his work to contribute “to the research and debate on architecture, particularly in Portugal and with a perspective opposed to isolation” as well as to foster greater interest in architectural archives by Portuguese institutions. There was no better way to achieve that than by using his personal archives to enable a partnership with one of the leading architectural archives in the world. Beyond these collaborative models, the cca has complemented its archival policy with acquisitions based on projects and themes, albeit in a less official manner than the hni. Currently, most of the cca’s acquisitions are developed through donations of work featured in cca exhibitions, as well as its particular interest in specific themes, such as experimental practices or the introduction of digital tools to architectural practice. The Archaeology of the Digital research line, with its series of exhibitions and associated programs, is one example. Through it, several project-based archives and artifacts have been donated to the cca, including the work of UN Studio, Zaha Hadid, Neil Denari, Lars Spuybroek, Bernard Cache, Morphosis and Greg Lynn, to name just a few. But well beyond acquisition and collection, this program is a coordinated, long-term effort to investigate the conservation, management, access and presentation of born-digital material, thus developing increasingly crucial expertise for any archive or museum engaged with contemporary architecture.
Museum in the Flow

While the inherent practical issues of archiving digital material (both born-digital and digitized) that the cca—and most other architectural archives—are investigating are best left for another discussion, it is important to point out how the development of networked models for archives is made possible only by leveraging digital technologies. These not only allow for a seamless combination of multiple databases, but also for representations and surrogates of physical objects to exist within digital systems.

However, such reliance on digital technologies also brings, even if inadvertently, a real risk to the status of the archive within the museum (of architecture or otherwise). Once the architectural archive has been translated and deposited in the digital realm, the removal of its material expression from the museum’s physical space usually follows. The expansion of the digital archive has commonly brought about the contraction of the material one. This, in turn, has a clear impact on the curatorial ambitions and intellectual projects of these institutions.

Such a fundamental conceptual shift has been recently identified by Boris Groys, who has discussed how art museums are currently attempting to enter the flow of time by staging “events that are synchronized with the lifetime of [their] spectators.”46 Groys claims that digital systems and the Internet have wrongly described as spaces of data flows since they are, in fact, instruments for halting and reversing such flows by creating the possibility for endless archives that could never find an equivalent in physical space. By relying on digital systems and the Internet as repositories of collections and archives, the very nature of museums is therefore changing. They are no longer understood as storage for artworks and collections, but rather as stages for the flow of events. As we can increasingly observe in architecture museums, museums are ceasing to be a place for permanent collections or for “the contemplation of unmoving things” and are becoming instead “a place of lectures, conferences, readings, screenings, concerts, guided tours, etc.”47 In short, the museum begins to be a place where the staging of events displaces the collecting of archives as its dominant operational logic.

As museums no longer attempt to resist time, but rather become synchronized with it, this operational logic has also begun to influence collection and archival policies. The rise of presentism has begun to influence the museum’s role as an institution. Since 2016, the director of the S AM, Andreas Ruby, has attempted to change the museum’s mission, which has greatly impacted its collection. By reorienting the museum to make it a “starting point of [architectural] knowledge,” Ruby has not only greatly diminished the role of the archive within the institution, but has also halted the natural expansion of the museum’s collections.48 Although the S AM holds a noteworthy collection with three complete sets of archives pertaining to Danish architecture, these institutions have renounced any control over new archives.49 Although they have their differences, two paradigmatic cases can be found in the Swiss Architecture Museum (S AM) in Basel and the Danish Architecture Center (DAC) in Copenhagen.

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While seemingly insignificant, this is worth noting as the diminished status of the archive has become visible in S AM exhibitions, which mostly focus on contemporary developments without much grounding in history, except in monographic ones. This presents yet another step toward the complete separation between archives and museums that we are currently experiencing and whose consequences may not be fully perceived for years to come.

The DAC in Copenhagen expresses yet another stage in the current trend, one in which the separation between museum and archive is finally complete. The DAC does not have its own collection, but has archives pertaining to Danish architecture held by the Danish National Art Library.50 Kent Martinussen, DAC’s CEO, has claimed the separation of functions between these two institutions to be the most logical since it relies on their respective specializations, with the DAC focusing on organizing exhibitions and the Danish National Art Library on lending to the archives.51 Digitized architectural archives thus become the thread connecting the two institutions, attempting to provide a digitally-enabled continuum between the one’s exhibitions and the library’s collection.

This strategy has its merits, since the art library’s expertise has allowed for the smooth transition of several of its holdings to the digital realm. One good example is the digitization of architecture models with a basic photogrammetry technique, which has allowed these physical objects to be represented in 3D digital models that can be easily rotated. Conversely, the DAC has organized several remarkable exhibitions that have been praised for their original approaches and public engagement. What has been missing is the connection between the archives and exhibitions, as most if not all of the DAC’s exhibitions have completely ignored the knowledge and ideas contained in the architectural archives hosted by the art library. By offloading architecture’s disciplinary archive to the Internet and other digital realms, not only does the archive become detached from the museum, but the separation seems to also free the museum and the digital archive...
and inactive, the concern is that “unless ideas are massaged into reality, they
are out of mind.” If the previously-discussed networked arrangements, such as at the cca
and the nva, illustrate the ongoing-dispersion of the architectural archive from
the museum, the cca and the nva present the most alarming trend of all,
which is perhaps the logical conclusion to the dissolution of the archive: the
complete re-orientation of maintaining any type of disciplinary archive by
certain institutions. The present is a curious reversal, for if the architectural museum
was created in the stability of architecture’s disciplinary archive, the contem-
porary archive seems to find its raison d’être in the fluidity of events and
discussions. More importantly, however, these events and discussions seem
to largely ignore the accumulated knowledge of what has come before. If
the museum previously conceived the present by engaging with the past, it
seems that the museum now mostly considers the present by speculating
on the future.

Present discussions will certainly survive the reorientation of architec-
ture’s disciplinary archives, but will past knowledge also survive? As the
(physical) separation between archives and museums is already isolating
the discipline’s history and making the ideas embedded in it unreachable and
inactive, the concern is that “until ideas are massaged into reality, they
will inevitably evaporate.” ⁷ Ultimately, if the architectural museum was
the materialization of the archive within architectural culture, as archives become unmoored from their grounding in the disciplinary archive, what
does it tell us about architectural culture and its future?

Notes
1. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, World of Man (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.
4. For an extensive discussion on the influence of antiques in modern collect-
ing practices and museum culture, see Martin Maroto and Lury Polé, eds., Pro-
7. Mark S. Lambari’s fascination with the collected architectural object has evolved from the
built construction to the representation of the architectural idea. Sergio M. Figuer-
8. While the adoption of an encyclopedic model by architecture museums has only
become a dominant model since the 1980s, it finds its origins in the Enlightenment
ambition to collect all human knowledge in one location.
10. As the objective of these collections was “to document the design process and not
to collect individual drawings as pieces of art,” these collections were “composed
of all the elements that [gave] evidence of the personality and practice of an ar-
chitect, from the whole range of drawings, specifications, models, working tools,
travel sketches, account books, as well as the library and works of art collected by
the individual architect or firm.” Monika Platzer, “Interview with Mariet Willinge,”
12. Boris Groys, “Entering the Flow: Museum Between Archive and Gesamtkunst-
werk,” in Gerald Botta, Elias G. Carayannis and David F. J. Campbell, eds., The Future of Architectures, Research, Innovation and Society (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 67. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-95955-1_8
14. Presentation, at the ontological downside arguing that rather than past nor future exist,
have begun to include broader philosophical debates in recent decades. An
introduction to this doctrine can be found in Ned Markosian, “A Defense of Pre-
15. Marcela Antonia García Martínez, Framwork: Exhibitions, and Efforts of Four Euro-
pean Architecture Centers (Genova: University of Genova, 2019), 26. doi:10.13097/
archive-reuses/155695.
16. Ressources for a discussion of how this ma-
16. Present 
volve
networked nature, São Paulo’s archive at the CCA still surpasses most other archives in
Montreal in size, as it includes models, drawings (282 sketchbooks), photographs,
 correspondence, textual documents and related digital files.
can also be argued that Siza’s intentions have been successful in stimulating an
escavation assisted to architectural archives in Portugal. Since the donation of
São Paulo’s archive, the Macau-based Casa da Arquitectura has increased its own
archival capacity and collecting efforts, housing, among others, Siza’s complete archives.
19. Thus, for three exhibitions have been organized, namely Archaeology of the Digital
(2011), Archaeology of the Digital: Asia and Machines (2014) and Archaeology
of the Digital Complexity and Convention (2016), as well as a variety of lectures,
discussions and other events.
21. Of more than ten thousand drawings, 30,000 architectural photographs, 300
22. Swa, “The World of Man.” World of Man 076 077
23. Marcela Antonia García Martínez, Framwork: Exhibitions, and Efforts of Four Euro-
pean Architecture Centers (Genova: University of Genova, 2019), 26. doi:10.13097/
archive-reuses/155695.
24. Present 
volve
25. Kent Marinussen, intervention in “Enhance: Creating Value in Commercial Part-
nerships,” at ICAM 19, held in the Danish Royal Library, September 11, 2018.