

# Preserving Your Architectural Legacy

Contributed by Stephen A. Wiser, AIA

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## SUMMARY

While you may feel that your design efforts are not that critical, or perhaps you are just overwhelmed with the day-to-day grind of operating your firm, you really should take a brief moment to review how future historians will evaluate your design legacy. Your achievements are important to your community. Do not allow your vital contributions to be preserved—or not—by chance.

## AN ARCHITECT'S LEGACY

As architects, we create an indelible mark on the communities in which we work. Our buildings and planning define cities and regions. Important civic structures like churches, libraries, and schools will remain useful for decades, perhaps centuries, to come, influencing how future generations function and perceive their place of residence.

Unfortunately, though, the legacies of the talented designers who crafted these notable buildings and environments may not survive past the last commission completed. Drawings, models, and other documents of significance that help to define the career of an architect may be discarded or dispersed to various heirs' attics. There is no standard process for archiving this valuable data that best describes the lasting impact an architect has made on his or her area of practice.

Many painstaking hours of research may be required by a historian or preservationist to piece together a glimpse of an architect's landmark contributions towards a city's development. An architect's achievements and life's work should not be left to chance or for others to connect-the-dots. We should take a more visionary outlook, along with well-deserved pride, to prepare how best to retain our important records and accomplishments.

How can you preserve your design legacy for future generations to analyze and study? Use the following methods to help determine how your strategic projects will be interpreted in the future:

## ONGOING RECORD MAINTENANCE

Establishing a good process to store the firm's historical resources is vital. What projects are noteworthy, and which are of lesser consequence? Award winners and other prominent structures are definitely a high priority for cataloguing. Besides drawings, models should also be retained. Fireproof safes and acid-free boxes are to be used for protection.

## REPOSITORY SELECTION

Determining where a firm's archives should ultimately be located will involve much deliberation and discussion. Keep the following considerations in mind when making this decision:

- All archives should remain together as a total collection.
- The location should be preferably in the same city (or region) where the firm is based.
- Determine the commitment of the repository. Is it a major, well-established entity like a history or art museum? Is its current collection compatible with your materials?
- Review how the repository is handling its other design collections.

Once it has chosen a repository, the firm should periodically transfer archives to this location. It should also assist in providing flat files as well as additional financial support as needed.

If an institution such as a university does not regularly acquire architectural archives, then it is recommended that the firm choose a different location. If your firm's archive would be the only one of its kind (or one of a few) in the institution, then proper maintenance in the future could become a concern.

## ESTATE PLANNING

Be sure that your will specifies how your architectural estate shall be dispersed. While family may desire these items as "heirlooms," this

allocation will likely result in eventual loss of the materials. A history museum will not only keep the collection in good condition but also will allow public viewing for all, including your great-great-grandchildren!

**PREPARE HISTORY OF YOUR FIRM**

At key milestones in the life of your firm, consider having a historian chronicle its history. For instance, a firm can produce a 25th- or 50th-anniversary book that details how the firm evolved, its key commissions, and its design staff. This publication can be used for marketing purposes or donated to local libraries, colleges, and history organizations. For example, SmithGroup, a prominent Detroit-based design firm, recently published such a history on its 150th anniversary, and the text appeared on the AIA Web site.

**LOCAL LIBRARY**

Periodically, such as every 5 or 10 years, firms should prepare a selective portfolio of its work and donate it to the local library. Such a portfolio would contain data sheets on the firm’s important projects as well as its staffs. This 8 ½” x 11” manual would then be catalogued like a typical book in the permanent collection. Most local libraries, though, neither accept nor preserve drawings.

**BUILDING PLAQUES**

Having plaques installed on your significant projects is an excellent way both to recognize your clients and to preserve your design history. Along with the building name and year built, the plaque should also include information about the client (firm name, board of directors, and so forth) and the design team (architects, engineers, contractors, and others). This method is easily implemented within the specification section of the contract documents. Brass plaques are typically done, but stone inscriptions will most likely be the more permanent marker.

**TAX DEDUCTIONS**

Tax credits are available for donating material to nonprofit organizations such as colleges and history societies. There are various IRS procedures to follow in contributing material. Contact your accountant for more information.

**ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTOR**

Stephen A. Wiser, AIA, is senior healthcare architect at META Associates in Louisville, where he is also active with architectural history efforts. He is a two-

term president of the Louisville Historical League and a former president of the AIA Central Kentucky Chapter. He is currently working with the local historical society to retain architectural archives within the region.

**RESOURCES**

**More Best Practices**

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.01.05 Fundamentals of Records Retention
- 10.01.04 Document Disposal: When and How to Throw it Out

**For More Information on This Topic**

See also “Agreements with Clients,” by Edward T.M. Tsoi, FAIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 11, page 275.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org).



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