



AIA Best Practices: Will you be remembered?

Contributed by Steven M. Cox, AIA

Summary

This article presents a challenge to us as architects to consider the historical value of our work prior to purging our files. We have a responsibility to ourselves, our firms, and our communities to preserve the record of what has been created, and at some point pass it on to those who have the professional skills to make it last for future generations of designers and researchers.

Paperless vs. preservation

By going paperless, have you chosen not to be remembered? This question came from a museum professional with a historical perspective on the shift in the way architects save their work. It is difficult if not impossible for museums and archives to keep up-to-date versions of all the software programs architects use to create documents and drawings over time (e.g., Word, AutoCad, Photoshop). Some standard formats of saving images, such as TIFFs or PDFs, are universal to the archival process. But for the most part, archivists would prefer to have an original document or drawing. They can create a high-resolution TIFF or PDF of the document, which can then be used in an online-accessible collection. For them, the preferred starting point is always an original or hard copy.

Over the last decade or more, architecture firms, like those in other professions, have shifted to a paperless filing system. The goal in many firms is to make prints only for the city approval process and field copies of construction documents. Electronic scans are made of all other documents, and the originals are recycled. At the end of a job, the firm has a box of shop drawings and accounting files. Everything else is saved on a server. Most firms also have a backup system to ensure that all would not be lost in the event of a catastrophic event. From a legal, spatial, and environmental perspective, most firms probably believe they are doing the right thing.

The shift to digital drawings also raises the question of what constitutes an original. In the “old days” when drawings were hand drawn, there was always an original on linen, vellum, or some other medium. Today, multiple originals can be created just by pushing the “send” key to the plotter.

Architects create the written and graphic record of the built environment. They produce “instruments of service”—as many have been schooled by the profession and attorneys to refer to their drawings and documents—to get clients through the approval process, construction, and, finally, the operation and occupancy of their buildings. And although they have been advised by their insurance carriers about how

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long to retain records and when to purge files, have they overlooked the longer term record of the built environment, the record of how and why something was designed, built, and occupied?

We as architects have a responsibility to the communities where we live and work to record history. Our job is not to be the record keepers—that is the task of curators and archivists—but rather to ensure the preservation of the documents that could become the record. We have a responsibility to ourselves, our firms, and our communities to preserve the record of what has been created and at some point pass it on to those who have the professional skills to make it last for future generations of designers and researchers.

If firms periodically purge files, they should be encouraged to add a step in the process by asking, “Is there anything here that might be of value to future generations?” The answer may be yes more often than they realize, perhaps because they are too close to their work and may not have the long-term objective view of an archivist or historian.

Museum professionals typically ask the following questions in determining whether a project is historically significant:

- Is the architect or the firm recognized at the local, regional, national, or international level for a body of work, specialization, or design innovation?
- Is the owner of the project recognized at the local, regional, national or international level for some accomplishment?
- Is the builder of the project recognized at the local, regional, national or international level for some accomplishment or specialization?
- Does the building or project have local, state or national landmark status?
- Has the building or project been recognized with design awards?
- Has the building or project been recognized for some design innovation?
- Does the building or project represent a unique architectural style?
- Does the building or project document local, regional, national or international history for an architectural trend or style?
- Are the design records originals or reproductions?
- In what condition are the design records?
- Are the design records complete?

A "significance chart" can help prioritize the answers to the questions above:

Quality and completeness	High	Third priority Architect, builder or the project is not as significant, but the record is complete and/or quality is high	First priority Architect, builder or the project is significant, and the record is complete and/or quality is high
	Low	Fourth priority Architect, builder or the project is not as significant, and the record is not as complete and/or quality is low	Second priority Architect, builder or the project is significant, but the record is not as complete and/or quality is low
		Designer / builder / project significance	
		Low High	

If firms determine they have documents worth saving, they should take steps to preserve them. Conducting some online research can help ensure the records are being properly protected. It does no good to have the right intention and not take the right steps to ensure the long-term preservation of documents.

Consideration should be given to donating the originals or copies to a local or regional museum with an archival facility and a professional staff. These records might include contracts, correspondence, all phases of design drawings, construction documents, field notes, construction observation, photos, renderings, even invoices. All of these documents constitute the record of what was done to envision, design, communicate, and construct the built environment.

A list of several institutions that collect architecture records is provided at the end of this article. Each has a slightly different focus; some take a local or regional perspective while others specialize in a time period or a particular designer's work. The deciding factor in where a firm should donate its records may come from the answers to the questions listed above.

The author encouraged architecture firms in the Silicon Valley to think about preserving their records and to consider donating them to an institution, thereby creating a collective documentation of the built environment. The discussions with firms were interesting. Some had given little or no thought to the community value of their records. Others acknowledged their records had been deeply purged. Many firms have kept electronic versions of their records, not realizing these may not be enough of a historical record. The crucial message is that architects have a responsibility to their communities and future generations to ensure that the visual and graphic record of the built environment is maintained and protected. Choose to be remembered.

Institutions that collect and preserve architecture records in the U.S.

[Architectural Archives, Fondren Library](#) | Rice University. (Houston)

[Architectural and Planning Library](#) | University of Texas (Austin, Texas)

[Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Museum](#) | University of California (Santa Barbara, California)

[Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library](#) | Columbia University (New York)

[The Bancroft Library](#) | University of California, Berkeley (Berkeley, California)

[California Architectural Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library](#) | California Polytechnic State University (San Luis Obispo, California)

[Environmental Design Archives](#) | University of California (Berkeley, California)

[Harvey and Irwin Kroiz Gallery, The Architectural Archives](#) | University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)

[History San José](#) (San José, Calif.)

[Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens](#) (San Marino, California)

[Indiana University-Purdue University Library](#) (Indianapolis)

[J. Paul Getty Museum](#) | Getty Research Center (Los Angeles)

[National Archives](#) (Multiple Locations)

[Ryerson & Burnham Libraries](#) | Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago)

[San Diego Historical Society](#) | San Diego History Center (San Diego)

[Southeastern Architectural Archive, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library](#) | Tulane University (New Orleans)

[UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library](#) | UCLA (Los Angeles)

Other resources

[The Architectural Records Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists](#)

[Cooperative Preservation of Architectural Records \(COPAR\)](#)

[Library of Congress](#)

[Society of American Archivists](#)

About the contributor

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This article corresponds to:

Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession

Chapter 05 – Organizational Development

Section 11 – Knowledge Management