



# Born digital: a symposium exploring digital architectural and built environment records

Monday 18 + Tuesday 19 April 2016

STOREY HALL

ANNEXE

SINGER

# Valuing the Intangible: Reflections on the concept of cultural significance and the digital architectural record

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Presentation for Born Digital: a symposium exploring digital architectural and built environment records, 18-19 April 2016, Hawke Building, University of South Australia

# The significance of born digital records

- Often, technical concerns dominate debates about the archiving of the digital.
- This presentation aims to make space in the discussion for consideration of the social and cultural issues involved in the area, particularly their importance in appraising such files.

# The Architecture Museum at the University of South Australia:

- privately started in the mid-1970s by now Adjunct Professor, Donald Leslie Johnson
- aims to acquire, collect and preserve documents and related material relevant to South Australian privately practising architects, planners and associated professionals
- holds more than 200,000 paper based documents, including over 20,000 architectural drawings
- endeavours not only to generate research based on, but also develop specialist knowledge about, the records
- staffed part time by Christine Garnaut, as Director and Julie Collins as collections manager, research archivist and exhibition curator
- open to the public Monday to Wednesday

# Australian Architectural collections

- architectural records of both extant and demolished buildings exist as part of the distributed national collection and may be found in various archives, libraries and museums throughout the country, including:
  - National Archives of Australia
  - State Records collections
  - state libraries
  - within university special collections
  - local councils
  - small archives belonging to schools, churches, businesses and other interest groups
  - architectural practices

# Architectural records

- defined as those documents produced not only by architects but also by those in associated fields of building, planning, engineering, urban design, landscape architecture and interior architecture
- include drawings which are generated during the sketch design, design development and documentation phases of a building project, and text based documents such as correspondence, contracts and specifications as well as photographs, models and press clippings
- often retained in relation to legal requirements
- linked with the maintenance of extant buildings
- once the records are no longer perceived as current, the reasons for retaining them can be seen to change, as can the potential users of such records

# Users of Architectural records

- At the Architecture Museum most records held are ‘non-current records’ which could in most cases be called ‘historical’ records.
- Our largest groups of users, outside of the University’s architectural student population, are:
  - historians
  - heritage architects
  - Those researching the history of their own house.

# Archiving Architectural records

- Archivists play a role similar to built heritage professionals whose work it is to determine which buildings to preserve, and it is to the documents which guide such heritage professionals that we can look for some ideas about appraisal of architectural records
- There are several precedents used to determine significance, and although none of them specifically relate to architectural drawings, they can serve as a guide to seeing architectural drawings as cultural records



# Significance documents

- *Burra Charter*
  - used to assess the significance of built heritage
- Australian Heritage Commission's *Australian Historic Themes – A framework for use in heritage assessment and management*
  - used to assess the significance of built heritage
  - also used for heritage places
- Heritage Collections Council's *(significance) – A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*
  - used primarily in museums for objects
- *UNESCO Australian Memory of the World ICOMOS*
  - used for documents

# Assessing Architectural Drawings for cultural significance

- Susan Collins, Christine Garnaut and myself devised a tool to assist archivists with their assessment of the significance of architectural drawings and in particular, the examination of the drawings' cultural dimensions
- This used a framework which included aesthetic, social, technical and historic themes which were synthesised into the reference diagram featuring a series of assessment prompts
- published as: Collins, Julie, Collins, S. and Garnaut, C. (2007) "Behind the image: Assessing architectural drawings as cultural records", Archives and Manuscripts, vol.35, no.2, pp.86-107

# What is different about born digital architectural records?

- Possibly need to look past the media and into the content, to think as historians and users, in order to determine how we could appraise such born digital files
- The UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage gives us some ideas about working with born digital records, and the Guidelines for the Preservation of Digital Heritage prepared by Colin Webb of the National Library of Australia in 2003 offers practical assistance
- In it there are some prompts as to why materials might be worth keeping. These include their value as evidence, information, artistic or aesthetic reasons, showing significant innovation, historic or cultural association, usefulness to the potential users, and any culturally significant characteristics (Webb 2003).

# Born digital architectural records

- In the 1960s architects in Australia began discussing the potential for computation in architectural practice
- Tony Radford in his 1988 book, *Computers in Architectural Practice*, recorded the early history of the field
- William Mitchell later explored the changing role of digital architectural records in his 1999 book, *From Blueprints to Bytes: Architectural records in the digital age*
- Jane and Mark Burry give a brief overview of the history of digital technology in Australia into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the Goad and Willis book, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*

# Survival of Documents and Data capture

- Traditionally, with a paper-based archive we acquire at the retirement or death as an architect and quite often we take what the architect or their family has chosen to give
- But it's not just the individual architect or practice we need to deal with in relation to born digital files. It may be the software company and the storage service provider as well as other consultants.

# Survival of documents and data capture

- the best time to capture the knowledge about a building is just after it has been built and while it is in use, and most certainly before the decline towards demolition
- Data capture needs to occur before there is time for hardware failures, and before the sometimes idiosyncratic software tools and formats become inaccessible, either due to licensing agreements or technical glitches
- If we need to acquire files within a few years of creation so as to avoid technical difficulties, how do we decide which ones to collect so early on in a buildings lifetime?

# User driven demand

- Who is interested in these records and for what purpose?
- Which records do they need to access?
- What elements of digital records hold the content which gives them value for the user?
- An architectural historian will demand a different set of information to an engineer or a builder

# Questions on what to keep

- Does this mean that a fully functioning digital model needs to be maintained in order that future researchers can access the records they need?
- For the general public not familiar with CAD or BIM - how do they use these files?
- Does the archivist have to sit down and guide the user through a software system to show them how to access the information they need?
- What elements must be maintained to give the archive its value?



# Some final thoughts...

- It is indisputable that files relating to 'significant' buildings should be kept and possibly the only thing standing in the way is budget, storage and technical retrieval.
- But what of non-significant buildings? Should a selection of ordinary building files be kept to show the range of items produced daily by architects and builders?
- Selection is already occurring in the digital realm; obsolete files are deleted, forgotten, not migrated, so the process has already started with destruction occurring, often by default.
- Will forensic digital archaeology be required every time someone wants to find any born digital primary records?

# ...Some final thoughts

- The responsibility for preserving born digital records of architects doesn't lie with archivists alone.
- Collaboration is needed between archivists, architects, software and hardware specialists and providers, historians, other collecting institutions, and the general public, to determine why we should preserve these files. Hopefully this will give us some clues about how to set about achieving it.

# Reading list

- Jacob Beetz et al. 2013 'Towards the long-term preservation of building information models', Proceedings of the 30th CIB W78 International Conference - October 9-12, 2013, Beijing, China: 211
- Jane Burry and Mark Burry 2011 'Digital Technology' in Goad, Philip and Julie Willis (eds), *Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, 207-8
- Julie Collins, Susan Collins, and Christine Garnaut, 2007 'Behind the image: Assessing architectural drawings as cultural records', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.35, no.2, 86-107
- Terry Cook 1997 'What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift', *Archivaria*, 43, Spring, 23
- William J. Mitchell and Tawny Ryan Nelb 2000 *Blueprints to Bytes: Architectural Records in the Electronic Age*, Proceedings of a public program sponsored by the Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, Cambridge, MA: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records
- Antony D Radford and Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Education Division 1988 *Computers in Australian architectural practice: conversations with practitioners*, RAlA Education Division, Red Hill, ACT
- Colin Webb, National Library of Australia 2003 'Guidelines for the Preservation of Digital Heritage', UNESCO, Information Society Division