

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

Welcome

My name is Christine Garnaut and I am the Director of the Architecture Museum in the School of Art, Architecture and Design here at UniSA.

Kurna welcome

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Kurna people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country, and their living culture.

Welcome everyone to our symposium on born digital architectural and built environment records. A special welcome to our guest, Tim Walsh, who has travelled from Montreal to participate in the symposium, as well as to those who have come from interstate.

The people participating in the symposium are from a mix of backgrounds including the architectural and engineering professions; the building construction and the archives, galleries and museums sectors; academics and PhD candidates in areas including architecture, building, gaming, computing, architectural and built environment history. We have some people who are associated with the Architecture Museum as researchers and volunteers and friends, as well as several people from the regional network of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums, icam Australasia. Thanks to you all for joining us.

Project and symposium introduction

This 'Born digital' symposium exploring digital architectural and built environment records is associated with a project that had its beginnings about two years ago at the 2014 conference of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums that I attended along with Harriet Edquist, Director of the RMIT Design Archives. The conference was in two venues – at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), Montreal, and in New York. At the CCA we heard presentations on an exhibition that coincided with the conference. It was titled 'The Archaeology of the Digital' and was curated by American architect Greg Lynn, one of the early adopters of digital tools in design. Greg gave a lecture at the conference on the curatorial rationale and challenges of the exhibition which focused on a small number of early projects designed using digital tools. Other curators from the CCA involved with the project presented too, along with colleagues from institutions in Europe who are exploring the question of how to deal with born digital architectural records.

Harriet and I were inspired by the exhibition and the presentations and thought that perhaps we could undertake a project in Australia that drew from 'The Archaeology of the Digital'.

Although the prospect of such an undertaking was daunting we, and colleagues with whom we work, had already recognised the need to tackle the topic of archiving digital records. These are the archives of the future for practitioners, for collecting institutions, organisations and agencies, and for researchers. But being digital they pose particular challenges. The rise of digital technologies has led not only to a new suite of digital records but also to an explosion in the number of records produced per project.

Members of the architectural profession have told us that they want to preserve their individual practice's digital records because they are their history and also to understand why and which digital records are useful and relevant to other people so as to make informed decisions about which ones to keep. Collecting institutions and similar bodies want to understand which records are important to the profession and to future researchers in order to develop appropriate collection policies that will secure the records' retention. The issue of the future accessibility of the records is relevant to both the profession and to collecting institutions; to be accessible, digital files need to be in readable formats.

About 12 months' ago the opportunity arose at UniSA to apply for funding in a new internal research investment scheme that focused on cross-institutional collaboration and external partnerships with other institutions and with 'end users' of our research. This seemed an appropriate scheme to apply to for a pilot project focusing on digital architectural records and to test the waters for something larger in scope and focus.

We elected to concentrate on the beginnings of the use of digital tools in Australian architecture, in the 1980s and 90s, and on the archiving of associated records. We established a research team that included architectural practices in Adelaide and Melbourne, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, secured in principle support from the Australian Institute of Architects (SA Chapter), submitted an application for funding, and were successful.

We conceived the project as having three stages. The first was to carry out research involving a broad review of what has been written on the subject of digital archives in the field of architecture and the built environment, reviewing the archives of selected case study buildings in Adelaide and Melbourne and interviewing where possible individuals who had worked on them and/or were involved with archiving the associated records. We knew from the CCA project that the surviving records might include paper files like faxes and emails and sketches on paper, as well as digital files. In addition to archival items we were also keen to locate surviving relevant hardware and software from the 1980s and 90s.

We selected Woods Bagot and ARM because they (1) introduced digital technology in the 1980-90s, (2) survive today, and (3) have retained their archives. Additionally, Storey Hall designed by ARM and opened in 1996 is regarded as a leading early example of Australian buildings designed in a digital environment (Greg Lynn made this point in Montreal) and we wanted to use that as a case study. The Woods Bagot

case study building is Ridgway apartments in the Garden East development in Adelaide's East End.

The second stage of the project was to convey what we found out from the research via a public symposium involving people who could potentially use the findings, help us to understand how they could use what we had learnt and also what else they would need to know to assist their everyday work and practices. This is what we are doing over the next two days.

The third stage is to develop a larger project based on what we learnt from the pilot study.

The case study research has been conducted primarily by our project Research Assistant, Chris Burns. The project team has met several times with Chris to hear and discuss his findings and to either use or respond to them in particular ways, according to their individual expertise. You will hear presentations from Chris and from the other team members in the course of the four symposium workshops.

Now, though, I would like to return to the Archaeology of the Digital project at the CCA and to introduce our guest presenter Tim Walsh who is the Digital Archivist at the CCA. We are very grateful to the CCA for agreeing to collaborate with us on this project and in that regard I would like to acknowledge the support of the Director, Mirko Zardini, the CCA Board, and Giovanna Borasi, Chief Curator who has been our liaison person.

Tim will introduce the Archaeology of the Digital project and some of the opportunities and challenges associated with archiving born-digital architectural and design files. Would you welcome Tim Walsh.