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Theory

Building an Archives: Appraisal Theory for Architectural Records

TERRY COOK

Abstract: The appraisal of architectural records is complicated by the many existing interpretations of the purpose and function of architecture: which buildings, which architects, what other social, economic, and governmental influences, and which interpretations of the architecture are to be documented? In dealing with these questions—and with the massive growth rate of current records—the traditional approach to appraisal based on present and future research value is of little use. Documentation strategy is a relatively new approach to appraisal, and stresses a macro-appraisal and selection of the functions, activities, and record creators that need to be documented for posterity. The understanding of records in their overall context provided by macro-appraisal will ensure a more complete documentary record, but will require archivists to become actively involved in determining which records survive, not passively waiting to appraise and select those records which find the way to archival repositories on their own.

About the author: *Terry Cook is Director of the Records Disposition Division at the National Archives of Canada, and is responsible for appraising all records in all media of the Government of Canada. A former General Editor of* Archivaria, *the scholarly journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists, and of two national series for the Canadian Historical Association, he has published extensively on archival theory, appraisal, electronic records, archival history, and the fonds concept, as well as in Canadian intellectual history. He has lectured internationally, including invitational tours of Australia, South Africa, and England. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.*

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IF PRINCIPLES RATHER THAN codifications of past practice are to be the signposts for building this generation's architectural archives, then appraisal theory must be considered before strategy and planning, let alone actual acquisition. If architectural archives are to be more than collections of prestigious architects' papers and pretty drawings of famous buildings, we need a theoretical consensus as to why we are appraising, before deciding what types of records are the most important. Without resorting to purist scientific definitions, the term "theory," at the very least, implies concepts, ideals, and guiding assumptions, upon which the more practical strategic planning and actual work of appraisal should be based. I hope to present appraisal theory as a basis for discussion and argument, rather than explore the subject fully or enter into its more arcane, historical reaches. I hope, despite my limited knowledge of architecture—its history, its present dimensions and issues, or its documentary heritage and problems—to offer some general guidance on appraisal theory and strategy; any application in an architectural context must come from specialists who are archivists for particular institutions and jurisdictions.

In my approach to appraisal, I will demonstrate a controversial maxim: while archivists appraise *records* for eventual *use* and thus societal enlightenment, they should not in the first instance appraise records or try to anticipate their use.

* * * * *

Two famous quotations concerning architecture may give us a starting point to address the problems of appraising architectural records. Reflecting on Sir Christopher Wren's design of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, his son had inscribed in Latin on Wren's tomb: "If you would see the man's monument, look around." And Frank Lloyd Wright once observed: "No house should ever be *on* any hill or on anything. It should be *of* the hill, belonging to it, so hill and house could live together each the happier for the other."[1] These aphorisms open two lines of thought. In studying the history and traditions of architecture, it may not be possible to look around and see the architect's physical monument: very often it no longer exists, or has been restored, refaced, reconstructed several times, reused for radically different purposes; or it may be located far away in another city or country. Therefore, the monument of the architect's work may not be the actual building, but the archival documents that give evidence of the building's plan, design, construction, use, and subsequent alteration and possible demolition. The question then becomes, "Which of the millions of buildings in any country are worth documenting?" Are architectural monuments, of which Wren speaks, only the important civic landmarks or, more democratically, the broad expanses of cityscapes and streetfronts? Are New York's brownstones, London's Georgian terraces, Boston's Back Bay Victorian elegances, or Montreal's wrought-iron-trimmed rowhouses perhaps not a more important part of the collective architectural heritage than such single masterpieces as libraries and cathedrals? And following from that: which of the thousands of documents relating to each of these buildings are worth keeping in our archives? And what of our unbuilt heritage, those often grandiose schemes for buildings and other structures that have never seen the light of day,

[1]Both quotations are taken from John Bartlett, comp., *Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed., edited by Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 278, 608.

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that lost out in the architectural competitions, and yet may reveal much about our architectural world, past and present?[2]

Frank Lloyd Wright's remark takes us in a slightly different direction. Buildings do not sit in isolated splendor on a hill or street; rather they are integrated, with varying degrees of success, with their surroundings. They are of the hill or of the street. This underlines the reality that the architect's handiwork, his or her careful, often beautiful drawings, and the resultant buildings or landscapes, do not exist in a vacuum. The architect's work is also integrated with its broader surroundings—not just the physical surroundings of the building, but also the political, social, economic, and cultural influences of the time. Goethe's epigram, that architecture is "frozen music," is somewhat misleading.[3] Where musicians (and other artists) have often been allowed complete freedom of expression when working for patrons, architects work for clients who usually have very fixed views and impose very real limitations. And clients are not alone. City planners, environmentalists, citizen lobbying groups, politicians, regulators, bankers, lawyers, engineers, interior designers, contractors, subcontractors, construction managers, suppliers, artists, users, and many others all have their influence on the architectural ideal, and they all create records relating to architecture. The architect's work is also influenced by the availability of certain types of wood, stone, marble, plants, and other materials, the immediate natural landscape and existing built surroundings, and community and neighborhood patterns and histories that must be respected, all of which can also be reflected in the records of many different creators—individual and corporate. This is to say that there is a great deal more to the history of architecture and to the documentary heritage or record of architecture than the records of the architect, or the drawings and photographs of famous buildings.[4]

As if the challenge of understanding the broad function of architecture in society was not enough, there is also considerable debate over what architecture itself actually *is*. As Witold Rybczynski remarks in *Looking Around: A Journey through Architecture*, there is little consensus concerning the nature of the profession itself. Students of architecture, for example, are variously and bewilderingly taught "that buildings should respect their functions; that they are really personal essays in which function plays a secondary role; that the responsibility of the architect is to respond to the needs of the client; that the duty of the architect is to challenge societal values; and that commercial concerns or user preferences must be ignored if the purity of the architectural ideal is to be maintained." One professor teaches the importance of specific historical styles; another condemns all historical styles as mere pastiche. One teaches the students about housing; another asserts that housing is not architecture at all. Rybczynski concludes that, concerning the societal role of architecture, "there is no agreement about whether the responsibility of the architect is to the community, to the users of the building, to the client, or merely to himself" or herself.[5]

[2]On this point, see the review by Hal Kalman of Alison Sky and Michelle Stone, *Unbuilt America: Forgotten Architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the Space Age* (1976) in *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 230–31.

[3]Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, 350.

[4]A good introduction to these themes of the interaction of buildings with past, present, and future time, and their place or space is Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972).

[5]Witold Rybczynski, *Looking Around: A Journey through Architecture* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), 272 and 274, for the quotations that follow in this paragraph.

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Then exactly what are we documenting? The building (begging the question, which buildings?); the architect (likewise, which architects?); the architect's firm; the broader institutional context in which many architects work, such as city or government public works departments; the many other players and communities which impinge on and influence the architect's activities; the theorists and teachers of architecture as a profession; or, ultimately, the ideal of architecture itself? The answer is, of course, all of these. The function of architecture is, in short, complex and wide-ranging; the records creators are numerous and varied, and the records of this function are deeply interrelated and are generated by many recording media.

* * * * *

This lengthy introduction to my topic is quite deliberate, for it is the quickest way to discredit the traditional approaches to archival appraisal and to introduce you to a new appraisal paradigm that has been developed in recent years. Traditionally, appraisal theory focused on the appraisal of mountains of records for their "value" to actual or anticipated research rather than as evidence of the functions, programs, activities, transactions, and structures of the records creator or creators. The old approach focused on appraising records; the new approach focuses first on appraising which functions, which creators or institutions, which programs and activities are most important to document. In fact, for shock value, the new approach asserts that the *last* thing an archivist does in appraising records is to appraise records.

Archivists (with a few noted exceptions) have, in Gerald Ham's view, traditionally "assumed a passive role in shaping the documentary record." They have been "too little aware of the larger historical and social landscape" that surrounds the record, content to gather, arrange, and describe records no longer needed. By contrast, appraisal theorists are now asserting that archivists should be active, probing how society records, uses, stores, and disposes of information and, even more importantly, determining what larger functions these acts of recording were meant to serve.[6] Archivists need to engage in a kind of macro-appraisal of functions before appraising records. In concentrating their appraisal activities on the end-product—the actual record—and the potential for research possibly evident in it, archivists followed Schellenberg's model of relying on researchers' articulated interests. Not surprisingly, they became "too closely tied to the . . . academic marketplace," with the result "that archival holdings too often reflected narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience. If we cannot transcend these obstacles," Ham

[6]They are doing this, however, with a provenance-based, contextual focus on the organic functions of the records creator, not a content-centered documentalist approach based on historical themes or present-day controversial subjects. Hans Booms and Helen Samuels, the world pioneers in macro-appraisal thinking, have both clarified their thoughts on this matter in recent works. I have also repeatedly emphasized the provenance-based focus of my own work in this regard. This dichotomy of context versus content, provenance versus themes, is very important to keep clear, for it is the central, defining distinction of archivist versus historian, of appraisers versus users of archives. Traditionalists who cling to the record as their touchstone do not keep the distinction clear, and, indeed, in the interests of their own position, accuse the new appraisal theorists of being anti-archival historians. For a particularly unpleasant example, see Terry Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival Studies," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 248–50, which I refuted in my article, "'Another Brick in the Wall': Terry Eastwood's Masonry and Archival Walls, History, and Archival Appraisal," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994): 96–103. Quotations from Ham are from "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207.

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warned, "then the archivist will remain at best nothing more than a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography."[7]

It is important to note that, because the old approach was passive and circular, it was easier. Archivists felt comfortable with it, and no few of them express their discomfort with the new archival agenda which Hans Booms, Helen Samuels, Margaret Hedstrom, Richard Cox, and I, among others, are recommending. Our macro-appraisal approaches are not easy, but in my view they have more integrity vis-à-vis the nature of records creation in society, and will produce a better archival record.

In fact, the traditional approach of starting at the bottom and moving from the transaction up to its animating function, from the function to the creator, that is, moving from the specific to the general, from the matter to the mind, simply breaks down in the reality of modern bureaucracies and the massive volume of contemporary records. That traditional approach was perhaps suitable for older documents, especially medieval ones—and of course it was in dealing with such documents that classic archival theory was articulated. There, the surviving information universe is very limited and the functional context is often unknown. The archivist thus has no choice but to extrapolate the context from the artifact—that is, from the record. This is emphatically not the case for modern records: contextual information is everywhere and the volume of records is overwhelming. On precisely this point of information overload and the archival method, Hugh Taylor, the doyen of Canadian archival thinkers, has asked the rhetorical question: "Do archivists see their work as essentially empirical, dealing with individual documents and series . . . or are we concerned with the recognition of forms and patterns of knowledge which may be the only way by which we will transcend the morass of information and data into which we will otherwise fall?" Archival activity, Taylor further asserts, should be seen as "an intellectual discipline based on the philosophical study of ideas, not an empirical discipline based on the scientific study of fact."[8] There are a growing number of very practical ways to translate this new theoretical or conceptual or even philosophical approach into strategic and documentary plans for the architectural function, and for archives generally, but it is important to remember that these strategies and plans come from a quite different theoretical vision of archives and archival work.[9]

The concept of the macro-appraisal focus begins with Margaret Cross Norton's simple but profound insight that records follow functions. This truism has long held for corporate and governmental practices, from business area analysis and computer system

[7]F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, edited by Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, U.S. General Services Administration, 1984), 328–29.

[8]Hugh A. Taylor, "Towards the New Archivist: The Integrated Professional," a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Windsor, Ontario, June 1988, manuscript, pp. 7–8. The second passage, quoted approvingly by Taylor, is from H. Curtis Wright, "The Symbol and Its Referent: An Issue for Library Education," *Library Trends* (Spring 1986): 743. I have made the same point repeatedly; see, for example, "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-1985): 28–49 and "Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-1991): 171–76. The previous two paragraphs closely follow some of the argument I advanced in "Mind over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 38–70, especially 40–41, 43.

[9]Although this paper deals with the intellectual justification for macro-appraisal, the subject is not entirely theoretical; a very "live" macro-appraisal model and concrete methodology, both based on the conceptual approaches outlined in this paper, are in place and have been functioning for almost three years at the National Archives of Canada, encompassing all the functions and programs of the federal government.

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design to business process re-engineering. Institutions have certain formally assigned or internally developed functions for which they create administrative structures or offices, each with a mandate to perform or implement a function, or (increasingly with one or more other offices) part of a function, or even several functions. These offices in turn create various programs and activities to meet their functional mandates, which in turn lead to actions and transactions, for the recording of which information systems are built, of all of which the record itself is the final evidence within those systems. The contextual milieu in which records are created—their conceptual if not physical provenance—is determined by all these factors: functions, programs, activities, actions, transactions, and structures, as well as records-creating processes, systems, and technologies. In stating this observation I am not abandoning the record, or implying that the long-standing archival grounding in the evidence, structure, and accountability of the record is threatened in any way. I am asserting, however, that records must be understood first within their contextual circumstances of creation and contemporary use if they are to be intelligently appraised.

This change is not a refinement or slight tinkering to accommodate new realities, but a reorientation in what archivists do—a new archival paradigm, as Charles Dollar noted in his concluding address to the 1992 International Congress on Archives in Montreal on the impact of information technology on archival theory and practice.[10] We must get our archival heads out of the sands of practices devised for medieval charters and papal decrees. We must realize that clinging to old practices in light of the volume of new records is *not* a noble defense of principle or archival tradition, but an act of willful neglect. Let me give you some stark figures: it was estimated in the mid-1980s that for the approximately 170 formal institutions of the government of Canada, their *current paper* records alone, if laid end to end, would circle the globe 144 times, or complete eight round trips to the moon. More to the point, these records would amount to about two million books (a good-sized university library) for *each* archivist to appraise, *every three years*—and that is just the paper. It is estimated that the electronic records of the government could total between one hundred and one thousand times the extent of those in paper format. It should be self-evident that we need to start with the mind above all this recorded matter, rather than the other way around. It is precisely this point which gives macro-appraisal its greatest value.[11]

Although macro-appraisal focuses on analyzing functions, it is nonetheless sensitive to the functionality of structure and the ways in which structures reflect the institution's functions. Analysis of the interaction of function *and* structure, including organizational cultural dynamics, recordkeeping systems, and citizen/client involvement, illuminates the broad context in which all information of the institution is created. The main appraisal questions for the archivist are then not what has been written (or drawn, photographed, filmed, or automated), where it is, and what research value it has. Rather, the questions are what functions and activities of the creator should be documented (as opposed to what documentation should be kept) and who, in articulating and implementing the key functions, programs, and transactions of the institution, would have had cause to create a document, what type of document it would be, and with whom that corporate person would cooperate or interact in either its creation or its later use. These questions beg another:

[10]Charles Dollar, "Seizing the Opportunity: Archivists in the Information Age," in *Proceedings of the 12th International Congress on Archives: Montreal, 6-11 September 1992* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1994), 2, where he summarizes (and endorses) an insight offered by Angelika Menne-Haritz of Germany.

[11]This paragraph is taken with some modification from "Mind Over Matter," 47, 53.

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which records creators or ''functions'' (rather than which records) have the most importance. And its converse: which functions are poorly documented in institutional records and must be complemented by private manuscripts, other archival media, and nonarchival documentation (publications, ''gray literature,'' oral history, buildings, inscriptions, museum and gallery artifacts, etc.)—none of which are necessarily collected by archivists, or at least by the institutional or corporate archivist. Only after these questions are answered can the archivist realistically target the records or series of records likely to have greatest potential archival value for micro-appraisal (or, for that matter, traditional appraisal applying criteria such as age, extent, uniqueness, time span, completeness, fragility, manipulability, etc.) at whatever greater level of detail they may warrant. Evidently, this type of macro-appraisal emphasizes, at least in the first instance, the archival value of the provenancial location or site, circumstances, or functionality of records creation rather than the value of the records themselves. It assesses the capacity of institutions (or large segments thereof) to create records of value in a global way rather than dealing directly, one by one, with the tens of thousands of records series, databases, and media collections which any large jurisdiction will contain, let alone with the billions of individual files and records.

There are really two levels of macro-appraisal. The first level assesses which institutions or records-creating entities within an archives' jurisdiction or collecting mandate are most important. The second level of macro-appraisal assesses the internal functions and structures within each records-creating entity identified as having importance. Macro-appraisal at this second level involves researching, understanding, and evaluating the degree of importance of the mandates, functions, programs, decision-making processes, internal organization and structure, and activities of the records creator (the branch, sector, or program entity actually targeted for investigation). It also involves developing a detailed understanding of the entire information universe of the records creator—a corporate information mapping, if you will—of all recorded information in all media: its nature, structure, characteristics, creation process, and, especially, interrelationships with other information or records. This includes related published sources, near-published sources, and other ''nonarchival'' sources.

Let me conclude by reiterating my central point. Macro-appraisal moves in a top-down fashion from the purpose or broad societal function to all relevant record creators, to the key individual record creator, through various structures, transactional processes, and client interactions designed to implement that societal function (and numerous sub-functions and activities) within that creator, on to information systems created to produce and organize records that permit those processes to work, and finally to the records themselves—which document all the foregoing as well as the impact of the function and structure on the citizen and, equally important, that of the citizen on the function and structure. By concentrating on the functional and records universe as a whole rather than on a portion of it, by advocating a top-down approach based on functional analysis rather than a bottom-up, empiricist analysis based on the search for ''value'' in records, macro-appraisal provides a sense of direction, a strategy, and a theoretical basis for coping with the voluminous and very fragile records of complex modern organizations. It also removes the archivist and his or her records manager ally from their traditional, reactive, ad hoc, servant relationship with records creators—and with researchers—and substitutes instead a strategic, functions-oriented, research-based stance.[12] The result, I am certain, will be a more com-

[12]Such an approach to strategic appraisal, while first envisioned by Gerald Ham, has had its most extensive

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prehensive, more usable, perhaps even less voluminous archival record, ensuring both the accountability of records creators to society and posterity, and the fullness and richness of the national memory we leave for our communities and nations.

Witold Rybczynski challenges those interested in architecture to ponder the choice between viewing architecture as "the art of building" or as "the building of art."[13] I would challenge architectural archivists (and those interested in helping them) to move from passively gathering available architectural archival collections into their buildings to using macro-appraisal tools to build virtual architectural archives spanning collecting jurisdictions.

North American analysis and practical exposition from Helen Samuels, especially in her new concept of institutional functional analysis (as contrasted, in part, with her early concept of the documentation strategy). For an introduction to the concept, an example of its application in one kind of institution, and a practical plan to follow for others wishing to implement the same strategy in any kind of institution, see Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992). Her institutional functional analysis is very complementary, at least by analogy, to my own macro-appraisal approach, although she and I would define functions rather differently.

[13]Rybczynski, *Looking Around*, 270 and passim.

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