Changing the Landscape: Exposing the Legacy of Modernist Architects and Landscape Architects

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Introduction

"Changing the Landscape: Exposing the Legacy of Modernist Architects and Landscape Architects" is a two-year project to arrange and describe collections of drawings and other papers of six influential modernist architects and landscape architects who changed their professions as well as the national and regional landscape. The project is funded by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)’s Hidden Collections Grant. NCSU Libraries’ Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) has collected representations of these designers’ works to make them widely accessible to scholars and practitioners. Selections from six influential designers—Matthew Nowicki; Lewis Clarke; Richard Bell; George Smart; Hollaway & Reeves; Biberstein, Bowles, Meacham & Reed—comprise approximately 1,200 linear feet of material spanning the latter half of the 20th century. All practiced in North Carolina but had national scope and influence. Containing over 40,000 original plans and drawings in both paper and electronic formats as well as related project files and records, these collections offer valuable insight to the evolution of the field and modernism’s relevance today.

Efficient Processing

One of the major questions we are addressing with the Changing the Landscape project is the extent to which we can apply our usual principles of flexible, cost-effective processing to these fragile and oversized architectural materials. Currently, NCSU Libraries Special Collections Research Center staff process at approximately 4 hours per linear foot. This is achieved by applying MPLP standards and recommendations to our practice.

Efficient processing practices

Traditional archival processing calls for detailed information about each individual sheet (including dimensions, type of ink used, details about the type of drawing). We separate drawings from blueprints for preservation purposes, but unlike traditional architectural processing, we try not to touch every drawing, instead collecting metadata at a project level (as opposed to an individual drawing level). We collect metadata based on recommendations in Shepherd & Lowe’s Standard Series for Architecture and Landscape Design Rules. Based on feedback from a group of architects, architectural professors, and architectural historians, we are focusing our efforts on collecting location information at the project level. We enter project metadata into an Excel spreadsheet and then use Stead code (developed in house by Digital Collections Technology Librarian Jason Ronaldo) to import the .cav file into Archivist’s Toolkit. Stead allows us to easily and efficiently collect geographic and additional creator information and apply it at the project level.

Cost Analysis

In addition to processing physical and digital materials, we are conducting a cost analysis to determine the true cost of moving architectural collections from unprocessed and inaccessible to useable for scholarship and research. To this end we have been collecting processing timing data. We are contributing our information to a database created by the staff from Harvard University’s Center for the History of Medicine.

We are timing individual processes so that we’ll be better able to predict the cost of collecting, arranging, describing and exposing architectural collections and entering the time into the database (figure 1). As such, we are able to determine the cost and time spent writing notes or re-folding papers, for example. Additionally, we are collecting supply information and the cost of storage spaces.

Please see figure 2 for a detailed breakdown of the costs associated with processing the George Smart collection.

Benefits of processing architectural collections

Architectural records, being both documentation of professional activity and artistic artifacts, are critical to understanding the environment in which people live, work and define their community. Therefore, architectural materials have a wide appeal and research value beyond the field of architecture.

Challenges of processing architectural collections

Architectural drawings are large and therefore require a great deal of space for both processing and long-term storage. Architectural collections tend to be large as practicing architects are required to save materials for legality purposes. As such, a great deal of supplies are required for most architectural collections and the supplies themselves are large and create storage/space concerns. Because most architectural collections are large and require an investment of both supplies and space, processing (supplies, processing spaces) and preserving and providing access to these kinds of collections (long-term storage) can be costly.

Project Update

We have processed 831 of the estimated 1200 linear feet. Because we are processing unexpectedly fast, we have made the decision to add additional collections to the project. These collections are all modernist architecture or landscape architecture related. Many of these additional collections are either entirely digital or contain significant digital material. We hope to further develop our processing and preservation procedures for digital materials.

We are also tweeting and blogging about our progress. We would love for you to join the conversation.

http://news.lib.ncsu.edu/changinglandscape/

http://twitter.com/SCRC_landscape

Please feel free to contact me at emily_walters@ncsu.edu

Finished Collections (http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/findaid504)

MC 00145 Gil Wholesome Papers
MC 00190 Matthew Nowicki Drawings and Other Material
MC 00222 Biberstein, Bowles, and Meacham Records
MC 00326 George Smart Papers

A note on storage costs

Storage costs are hard to calculate as they vary between institutions. It should be noted that NCSU Special Collections Research Center built three storage units to house grant materials. Although it is difficult (if not impossible) to determine a cross-institution storage cost, calculating the cost for such storage is critical for each individual institution as storage units that meet both the size and specifications needed for architectural collections is expensive.