"We exist because we have a great disorder in organisation, [but] order in spirit." Sigfried Giedion
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collecting architecture today and tomorrow
‘discursive archives’, based on the example of the archives of the institute for history and theory of architecture at the ETH Zürich

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In Switzerland, as in other countries, buildings and urban ensembles and the goods relating to them represent primary and long-term manifestations of the cultural heritage. What is the contribution of architecture to the safeguarding of this cultural memory? First, throughout large historical tracts exceptional structural monuments in Switzerland have survived, their significance as monumental testimonies both to the period of their completion as well as of their own historical existence being beyond doubt. Ensembles of spaces in the towns, small communities and estates, as well as gardens and engineering constructions that bear testimony to history while still fulfilling a wide range of functions today can demand conservation or careful handling.

Key significance is claimed for the extremely differentiated and rich heritage of secondary material on the history of architecture and urban development in Switzerland, to which new fonds of material are being added every day. Collections and archives in Switzerland have long been dedicated to the conservation, recording and researching of this property. Included are architecture drawings, models and images of all kinds, manuscripts and other text material and sound and film documentation that provide valuable insight into the history of the architectural culture in Switzerland and its position in an international context, frequently going beyond this, and have a rightful claim to conservation as artworks. These are, in part, collected in municipal and cantonal archives of building records, which are often closely tied to the conservation authorities, and there are sections in the academic archives.

Among the latter are the Archives of the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture at the ETH Zürich, the Archives de la construction moderne at the EPF Lausanne and the Archivio del moderno at the Accademia di architettura at the Università della Svizzera Italiana in Mendrisio. In the fields of architecture and planning these three archives are the centres of gravitation for an extremely diverse landscape of architectural archives in Switzerland, one that reflects the Federal organisation of communities, and to which numerous private archives also belong. Together with the Werner Oechslin Library Foundation in Einsiedeln they have for a while been united in the ABA_AR-CH (Association bibliothèques/archives d’architecture Suisse).

museum, collection, archives

Every architecture archive is the product of its history and its institutional context. A clearly defined core goal is often predefined in a founding charter. Accordingly, in the late-19th century municipal archives were established to fulfil a perceived need to document the buildings and urban ensembles threatened by the construction fever of the Gründerzeit using written testimonials, original plans and the new medium of photography. Today municipal archives of planning records are often closely tied to
The appropriate conservation authorities. The holdings enable historical research to be carried out as the basis for taking decisions regarding the extent of protective measures, and in finding suitable approaches to the renovation of and eventual extensions to historic substance. Usually these archives operate purely as a service. They are frequently under the jurisdiction of the planning authorities, which impacts on their level of independence.

So too, the Archives of the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture at the ETH Zürich (gta Archives) fulfils the function of an archive of planning records and building documentation. With the estates of architects, which comprise the main stocks, and the extensive collections of images and plans, it is a key resource for researchers engaging with a specific object, an urban ensemble, or architecture history and theoretical issues. Nevertheless, its profile is significantly different to that of the municipal planning record archives. It has developed successively, whereby three phases are to be ascertained.

The background to the gta Archives goes back to 1880 when students of Gottfried Semper’s (1803–1879) founded the Semper Museum, modelled on the Schinkel Museum in Berlin, in the domed hall of the new Zurich Stock Exchange, which had also been built by a student of Semper’s, and the realisation of which Semper had played a role in as a member of the competition jury. So Zurich became the first town in Switzerland to have an architecture museum. Although at the time it was a museum almost devoid of a public so it soon had to close down. The museum’s stocks — plans and sketches by Gottfried Semper — were donated to the polytechnic where, as the Semper Archives, they lay largely ignored for decades in the library even though continually being added to: additional material for the Semper Archives, and gradually also the estates of Semper’s successors were integrated, including the estate of Karl Moser, the ‘father of Swiss modernism’.

In 1967 the architecture department of the ETH founded the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture. The driving force behind it was Adolf Max Vogt. At his side was a panel of curators comprising art historians, architects, and the head of the architecture department Heinrich Hauri, a civil engineer, also being involved. Even from this composition it is clear that the aim was to teach and research history and theory in an interdisciplinary exchange while retaining a strong relevance to current issues. To do this, however, a material basis is required.

Even at the opening event for the newly founded Institute Adolf Max Vogt spoke about wanting to expand the library soon, to supplement its existing stocks of architecture periodicals and treatises and expand the Semper Archives — here he explicitly referred to the project for an archive of the Congrès internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Although things actually turned out the other way...
round: The Semper Archives were donated by the library to the gta, so making the gta Archives a fait accompli. The research programme in the founding years reflected the areas of research being pursued by the current professors and lecturers, while also being orientated on the major estates.

acquisition and selection

The early years of the archives were marked by a very active acquisitions policy. A rapid expansion resulted, especially in the collection of modern Swiss architecture. There was also a successful appeal to the protagonists at CIAM — whose secretary general, Sigfried Giedion, we were able to welcome among the guests at the celebrations to mark the founding of the gta Institute. In the four decades of their existence the gta Archives have hardly altered in terms of the collection’s profile and its basic agenda. The archives still basically make new (when possible, comprehensive) acquisitions based on donations of estates and living testaments. The authors of the designs, their complete oeuvre and their networks in the national and international architecture system are the key. The actual authors from the disciplines within the planning process are supplemented by individuals who reflect on the process in theoretical terms (historians and theorists like Sigfried Giedion and more recently Stanislaus von Moos). Even if the archives have a heterogeneous range of users, the primary orientation is on the academic and scientific discourse, and so on the needs of those conducting the research — finding direct access to original material whenever possible.

The 20th century produced material like no other century before it. This applies in particular to the building culture of the boom years following the Second World War, when a third of the current stock of buildings and major parts of the infrastructure were completed. The sustainable conservation of the documentation from this period is the challenge currently being addressed. In the past 15 years the number of estates in the gta Archives has roughly doubled (to approx. 200 today), further acquisitions of key archives are scheduled to go ahead shortly (among these being the extremely extensive archives compiled by Fritz Haller, the key proponent of what is known as the Solothurner School). Faced with a situation where reserves of space and staff resources can in no way keep pace with this growth there is now a call for intelligent collecting strategies. The evaluation of cultural exponents, an essential prerequisite for the necessary selection process, is an area of indispensable expertise in the development of a collection. Precisely here is where the advantage can be seen in having archives integrated within a university context. Even if the selection has to take pragmatic considerations into account, especially concerning the availability — or not — of existing space for archives, it requires ongoing academic
1/ Estate of Karl Moser, Johanneskirche (St. John’s Church) in Mannheim by Curjel & Moser, 1902
image gta Archiv, ETH Zürich

2/ Estate of Karl Moser, Antoniuskirche (St. Anthony’s Church) in Basel, 1925
image gta Archiv, ETH Zürich

3/ Archiv Le Corbusier, Palais des Nations in Geneva by Le Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret, competition project, 1927
image gta Archiv, ETH Zürich

4/ Nachlass Alfred Roth, Atelier Le Corbusier with the competition project for the Société des Nations, 1927
photo gta Archiv, ETH Zürich
support. An acquisitions policy always means an aware, i.e. scientifically grounded, approach to exercising restraint — or the search for alternatives.

In fact, the Swiss landscape of architectural archives has long shared the view that instead of competing in the acquisition of archive material, cooperation is essential. In their function as centres of expertise, the gta Archives as well as its sister archives in Lausanne and Mendrisio support the initiatives of regional centres (i.e. metropolitan and cantonal archives) as well as private archives. They guarantee orientation in the splintered landscape of memories of Switzerland in the area of building culture, to which alongside architecture the local, regional and state planning measures, garden and landscape architecture and the civil engineering sector are taken into consideration.

digital archives

In May 2008 the Swiss ministry for culture compiled a report on the country’s commemorative policy. The report addressed the key issue of the conservation and mediation of the cultural heritage of Switzerland, and provides an overview of the challenges that have to be met by cultural policy in the face of the digital revolution. Digital storage systems have long been established as standard technology in many areas. Often there is, however, the question as to what the technical challenges will be that we can expect to arise in the long-term storage of digital data, and how we can find reliable ways to address these. Just as urgent has proved the challenge of how to engage with the virtually unlimited storage capacity of digital systems in the future and the need for an appropriate and adequate selection process, and a clear organisation for the material worth conserving.

At the gta Archives, too, the digital era has long dawned. There are already vast quantities of digital data in the archives that were compiled by retro-digitization and amassed in the course of large-scale research projects. If this data were not well cared for, then in the face of the current state of financial resources it would be equivalent to the destruction of valuable material. The digital data includes a second area generated in the course of conservation measures. This applies in particular to film and sound documentation, which is very fragile in comparison to paper archive material or models. A major challenge is presented by the estates and living testament donations that already contain a large quantity of digital information for which there is no analogue counterpart, no ‘original document’. To date this has only applied (as generation specific) to only a few estates. Nevertheless, like all archives with an active acquisitions policy, the gta Archives must now address this challenge, and make provision, with proactive know-how and infrastructure ready. It goes without saying that the ‘digital challenge’ can only be met with a networked approach and by working in cooperation.
cooperations and networking

With the institutions named above, Switzerland has at its disposal a network of highly competent centres of expertise that take responsibility for the safeguarding and mediation of the architectural heritage. The exceptional work in the sectors of conservation and research that is done here is among the clearly visible and respected achievements in the service of the conservation of the cultural and social heritage of Switzerland. For the future it will be important not only to ensure the continued provision for the tasks previously undertaken by these institutions, but also to apply the knowledge available here and the scientific and academic expertise to develop and work on new strategies and techniques for preserving the heritage.

Various projects have recently already been completed successfully in Switzerland that are based on the new information technology and that use existing networks. Of these, worth mentioning in particular are the online retro-digitized periodicals on architecture and civil engineering (Baugedächtnis Schweiz online: www.retro.seals.ch/digbib); online databases with information on the contents of archives and location details (especially the Guide des sources, which covers the west of Switzerland online at www.archisources.epfl.ch) and the Stiftung Planungswettbewerbe Schweiz database (www.research-design-competitions.org). They are all based on institutions concerned with cultural memory, libraries and archives that view, conserve and mediate the archive material received, enabling a critical engagement with our built environment, its past and its origins.

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1/ Estate of Fritz Maurer, Märkisches Viertel in Berlin by Ernst Gisel, 1965–69
photo: Fritz Maurer

2/ Estate of André M. Studer, Sidi Othman housing estate in Casablanca, 1955
photo GTA Archiv, ETH Zürich

*Memopolitik. Eine Politik des Bundes zu den Gedächtnissen der Schweiz,*
Bundesamt für Kultur BAK, 1 May 2008