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Discard to Retention: A specialized evaulation and digitization project for architecture slides at Syracuse University

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Abstract

Syracuse University Library established a committee to determine the future of the slide collection. In contrast to other departments, the School of Architecture took all architecture related material in order to secure more time for evaluation. This case study presents an overview of the process and resulting decisions.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Take for example:

Lantern slides depicting aerial views of the Eiffel Tower.

"Happenings" on campus shot by an unknown student photographer.

An image of a horizontal section drawing of a modular house.

What do all of these images have in common? They are unique. They supported academic teaching. And—they are slides! Yet they are vulnerable—most of these images have been systematically discarded over the past two years.

This paper reports on a small-scale, specialized project undertaken by the School of Architecture to retain access to its section of the slide collection at Syracuse University. The Syracuse University Library assumed responsibility for operation of the Visual Resources Collection, which holds images to support the teaching of art, architecture, photography, history, other disciplines related to the humanities, the physical sciences, and as well as the social sciences. The collection, which evolved over many years, was designed to serve the research needs of both students and faculty.

 Actual slide collection use had decreased in recent years, and there was no longer staff in place to continue development of the collection, including in digital format. Faculty was asked to rely upon subscription databases like the *ARTstor Digital Library* and, more recently, *Archivision,* or otherwise make arrangements with the campus' Photo and Imaging Center for the production of digital images. A study and analysis of the collection by the subject area bibliographers and the art and architecture librarians revealed the complexity of the collection and its numerous subdivisions, which were organized using a modified Harvard-Fogg classification system as well as by textbook and subject sets. Varying slide mounts, cumbersome documentation, and heavy reliance on copystand photography were among the other issues.

In May 2010, the Library disbanded the collection and offered sections first to academic departments, then to individual faculty. For example: a French civilization set was transferred to said department. The History department laid claim to several large purchased sets of American history, World History, and Western Civilization. The Drama unit transferred a number of smaller slide sets that included film stills and went about having them digitized. Images from faculty exhibitions went to the University Archives, with regionally based images (largely copystand work) going to the local history association. Faculty requested certain parts of the collection. Many slides were distributed to students and ended up as "art work". However, the

School of Architecture transferred all of the almost 100,000 images to the department to allow further time for review.

Like Syracuse, most academic institutions acquired extensive architecture slide, or visual resource collections, over decades. These collections varied in scope and quality but all had a number of elements in common. Some images were shot on location and donated. Many of the collections grew to be fairly comprehensive, covering a wide range of topics. "Just in case" scenarios as well as meeting a specific subject need were factors of the collection development policy. Architectural images were carefully selected to show a specific angle or detail. Often the slides captured building plans and details not easily found by a casual Internet search.

Retracing the history of the collection

While it is difficult to photograph all the details of either a painting or piece of sculpture necessary for study, it is even more difficult to capture buildings totally through original photography. Original slides were sometimes provided by patrons, but the quality of the photography varied. Depth of coverage too might be limited to one or two images of a particular building. While most architecture slide collections contained some original photography, a number of such collections relied primarily on copy photography from print sources such as books and magazines.

Slide vendors did exist for architecture; however, their work was often limited to the images they were able to shoot on location. Their travel did not extend to all parts of the globe nor begin to address local or vernacular structures. New additions were frequent, but these did not always correspond with teaching needs. Per-slide costs could run high; thus, slide collections were traditionally underfunded and many departmental collections allocated little money for new acquisitions. Many slides could only be purchased as sets, requiring the curator to authorize the purchase of images that might later be discarded or reorganized.

Vendor documentation might be incomplete or inaccurate, nor did the on-site photography often include the kind of visual documentation of the building needed for in-depth study and teaching purposes. Wall sections would not be part of the package even when interiors were shot, so even when images were purchased through vendors, many slide collections augmented the documentation through the addition of copystand images. As copystand photography increased, the architecture slide collection grew to include more international material and more images of specific projects. Copystand photography relied on book or periodical sources, but the resources used were carefully recorded on cataloging sheets and every effort was made to limit the number of images used from a specific source.

As the slide collection grew to upwards of 400,000 images, the amount of new material available for purchase which met the needs of faculty and later student patrons became more limited. Rather, the collection needed to grow in depth rather than broaden its already expansive coverage. This was especially true for the architecture image collection.

Appraising the collection and deciding its future

With such a comprehensive collection at hand, faculty were reluctant to simply discard the architecture slides, knowing though that it would be both impossible and impudent to digitize all the material. Once the transfer was completed, a working group (which included the architecture librarian and the student assistant selected to oversee the project) met to assess the collection and determine the feasibility of digitizing selected materials. The on-campus Photo and Imaging Center was willing to assist with the actual scanning and editing process.

The architecture librarian and student assistant agreed on a work flow and process. The slides would be sorted into two groups-those appropriate for scanning and those to be discarded. A plan was developed to begin the slide review with modern (post 1850) architecture as that material was already organized in the Visual Resource Collection by architect (alphabetized) first, then country and project, making the slides easier to prioritize, research and evaluate.

A senior faculty member and the Associate Dean decided on a strategy to limit the scope of the digitization to plans, drawings, and models. Metadata, too, was to be kept brief, with access targeted for users already familiar with the architect and project. This was to be first and foremost a pragmatic approach, aimed at retaining images over all else. Initially, few kinds of other images were to be selected. However, it became obvious that some context needed to be set and that many overviews of a work of architecture still could not easily be found elsewhere.
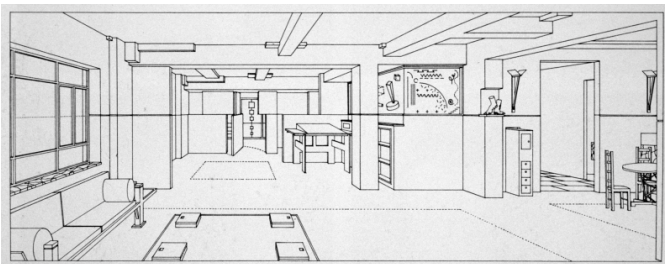
The Cohen Apartments; by architect Steven Holl. The plans and interiors of such buildings, even

> *by well known architects, can be difficult or even impossible to find via image searches on the internet or through image vendors.*

A test by Photo and Imaging Center staff revealed that all of the slides would not scan well through the glass GePe mounts. So once the original slide label documentation was recorded, the GePe mounts were carefully removed and replaced with plastic mounts. A PDF copy of the checklist of the completed work was saved to an external hard drive. The slides were then sent to the Photo and Imaging Center along with a copy of the label documentation. Slides were numbered and grouped into project order before being sent to the Photo and Imaging Center.

The Photo and Imaging Center returned DVDs of the scanned images (containing JPEG and TIFF files). Student assistants then began the task of renaming the digital images and categorizing them into folders. The primary folder would be the architect's name and the secondary folder would be for the building or project, location and year. Adobe CS5 Bridge and InDesign were used extensively for this part of the process. The images were reviewed and the worksheet updated. The finalized work was then burned to DVD and a paper sleeve created to cover the DVD and provide an overview of the contents. One copy was barcoded and made available for circulation; another kept for archival purposes.

In the past two years, most of the modern architecture slides have been reviewed for digitization. Slides not being digitized are being discarded. Select faculty has been asked to address certain parts of the classified collection based upon their expertise. Emphasis is being placed on estimated potential for use—not "just in case" scenarios. For the interim, there is still interest in rediscovering these images and taking from them what is deemed to be valuable for teaching purposes.