

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE REARRANGEMENT OF A CONSTRUCTION ARCHIVE

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ABSTRACT: *The construction archives as a tool to analyze and reflect on the theme relating to the conservation and valuation systems of a documentary complex in its dual significance as a site of cultural heritage and an active repository, serving an institutional purpose of managing the University building patrimony*

KEYWORDS: Archives, Documents, Conservation

A reasonably substantial complex of documents,, produced by constant institutional activity over time, such as to be considered an "archives"[1], can be ordered, in the presence of a first accumulation of documents deposited on a casual basis, or re-ordered, in the case of documents filed according to simple rational criteria, following systems that are each very different. The literature on the subject suggest that there are many of these.[2]

It is evident that factors such as the typology, the quality and the cultural affiliation of the material being reordered significantly influence the reorganization methodologies.

In effect, what is produced from construction activity (such as planimetries, electrical schemes, etc) is extremely different to material originated from geological research, for example (stratigraphies, chemical analysis, etc) or from other types of situations. It may be argued that a report of any argument traits is still a textual document, while an elaborate, geological or planimetric graphic remains a cartographic model.

This interpretation may appear plausible, but not considering the thematic context of forming part of a complex of 20,000-30,000 documents[3] means failing to address the implicit connections between different documents, thereby disrupting the unity and composition of situations that should be closely connected.

An archives consisting of construction activity material should, therefore, be considered and evaluated on the basis of criteria which take its specific characteristics into account.

Physical specificities (elaborated graphics of substantial dimensions pose different problems in their conservation and fruition from any text document of normal size): cultural aspects (it is legitimate to consider not dividing documents and graphic printouts relating to a historic building by the category that they belong to or following other criteria in the light of a possible reuse as an exhibition or the publication of a text on the subject): professional aspects (the material concerning recent interventions – maintenance, renovations, new construction – should be easily accessible in view of the importance of this documents for design processes and for administrative and legal matters).

Establishing the affiliation of a single document to a specific series means giving it a precise collocation and, inevitably, not allocating it to other situations where it may otherwise be usefully integrated. It is realistic to consider that it is impossible to reproduce it multiple times, owing to an increase in the volume of paper material and management of the available space.

Therefore, it is necessary to make rational choices that also take intuitive aspects into account. Every potential user sets (places) a different approach in searching for useful material but, when technical documents produced by design processes are involved, there are connections that are sometimes evident by which to recognize the source of interest.

Some theories discussed by reference literature, in considering the development methodologies used over time in the processes of accumulating and rearranging documentary complexes of a certain consistency, draw attention to some points that should be part of the common lexicon of operational archives praxis. Among others, the one which can be defined as “fundamentally respecting the original position of a Fonds [4] offers several references with the base hypothesis:

“...the only method for the arrangement of an archives which can be designated as such is one that reconstitutes the original order of the documents, i.e. that order which the documents had when they were initially filed and that reflects the modus operandi of the institution that produced them”[5]

The conceptual translation, as asserted in the citation, suggests an approach and confirms the methodological process to be used in rearranging (reordering) the material.

In our case, documents are generally deposited on the basis of rationality criteria that is sufficient to consider the position originally defined positively or at least in absence of problematic dispersions within of documentary sequences identified by functional links. This, of course, allows a coherent operational praxis which therefore takes into account the systematic arrangement of the archived materials.

In view of the above, it is now appropriate to reflect on the complexity of the reorganization process. In effect, the archives can be classified as “current” for its service to the department as part of its role of managing the university building patrimony. But there is no doubt that it also absolves (fulfils) the dual purpose of a repository for materials and of safeguarding the historical section. Thus, the gradual process of reorganization and classification will also take these two aspects into account.

The first objective is undoubtedly to reorganize the preserved material for practical finalities. In other words, to be able to conduct searches – by using the computer and then directly on the shelves – as quickly and effectively as possible.

In a broader sense, further aspects are also fairly significant. The corresponding facility of reading, made available by the appropriate software, makes it possible to visualise considerable amount of data, to retrieve the useful material for historical investigation or other type, and to improve the cartographic and textual documents in the presence of marked elements of cultural interest.

It is right to underline in this case, the importance of the archives as a site of material connected to the structural and territorial evolution of the institution.

This latter element is one of the distinctive factors of the Fonds, a differential element in the approach with other entities of the same type. That is to say: construction archives as testament to the activity of individuals or groups, or, more simply to periods or architectural and constructive currents of the recent or more distant past.

The presence of a conspicuous profile of documents, working alongside the design drawings, facilitates the reading of mechanisms and policies gradually implemented within the process of territorial expansion of the university. There then re-emerge programmatic development addresses that later became classrooms, departments, centres and also design itineraries abandoned for various reasons.

A programmatic approach, geared towards an evaluation of the present material, might be the selective one. It proceeds with the gathering (collation) and the analysis of documents positioned in different sectors to make explicit a limited collection of data that highlights the different existing typologies.

From this introductory process it is possible a partial verification regarding the multiple present categories and their incidence within the conserved fonds. The elements from which to decipher the general organization of the preserved material are different. A first confirmation is possible from the composition of the individual documentary units intended as aggregations of material defined by various types of connections

A further element of comprehension is the position of the individual documents within the units and in relation to their particular category. In our case, it is clear that papers and drawings are placed in the archives per single incident (intervention). This translates practically into an accumulation of documents referring certainly to the same design context but to a different category.

A significant factor to consider is the time period to which the reordered material belongs. Even if they are thematically similar, documents produced in different epochs may be evaluated differently in view of their potential future usage, Namely those recent more integrated into the projects in progress for their effective practical utility in the release of technical and documentary information. The ancient ones probably no longer valid, if not marginally, within design processes that adopt more advanced technological solutions, but of vital interest for historical research.

Finally, the inevitable cultural transversality of part of the material provides for a series of evaluations on the different arrangement options. One such segment is that of generic maintenance. Indeed, the presence of documents produced by project and administrative processes relating to maintenance activities has a significant impact on the archived material. This generates problems involving re-arrangement, relating to their "disordered territorial location" and to their general definition within a system that, as noted previously, emphasizes an "archives of documents" based mainly on the single project within general geographic criteria. The interventions, reparation and management of technical plants are characterized by a transversal incidence, disaggregated in location terms and therefore are not referable to a single building or specific area. Therefore one of the matters that arises is the physical collocation; should it be sectorial, geographical or temporal? Managing information with the appropriate software allows for complex interconnections (plots), which should therefore solve such problems.

But the disposition in the shelves of the acts produced by such activity requires a coherent approach that will have to be followed for the entire reorganization process

The number of documents referable to a unique project as the restructuring of internal parts in a building, presents characters of greater uniformity than in the previous example. Despite the material belonging to multiple categories (plans, specifications, notices, etc), the common "procedural origin" becomes the unifying element to define a functional grouping.

The problem of integration between documentary groupings with highly heterogeneous categories and characteristics, such as the examples cited (documents for a unique project and more design-oriented documents) can probably be resolved by establishing specific criteria in the organization of data.

As has been discussed every collection presents unknowns of different nature. In part because documents are generated by different processes that influence and determine their thematic and typologic affiliation. Such affiliation can be variable in presence of polyvalent contents as, for example, a writing that collects (contains) technical, legal and procedural aspects or because it refers to a form that is not explicitly definable in the context of pre-arranged models.

But above all every document [6] often presents connections that can move it in multiple directions, for example intrinsic relationships that refer to various sectors and are sufficiently flexible to make them useful for heterogeneous groups

Finally, it is essential to consider that while the physical position of the material necessarily becomes an "immobile" factor, this is not the case for allocating the same documents in informatics. The data of the archived material becomes "movable" in a digital environment and therefore usable in various dimensions and for different purposes.

Footnotes

- [1] A definition relative to the archives may be the following "...they contain predominantly documentation of practical nature, especially connected to activities performed by the various public or private entities that have produced it in order to satisfy specific requirements...." Zanni Rosiello 2009,p.33
- [2] The author commenting on the sorting methods used in the past states:
"Some old archive manual indicates several archives sorting methods: chronological sorting, alphabetical sorting by the person's name, geographical sorting, sorting by subject, decimal sorting ..." Lodolini, 2008, p.148
- [3] The estimate is approximate
- [4] The ISAD (International Standard Archival Description) definition of "Fonds" is as follows: "The whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions."
- [5] Lodolini, 2008, p.191
- [6] The term document contains multiple meanings, which is described by the literature (Carucci 1983, chapter 3). In this case it describes every type of archived materials, i.e. texts, drawings, digital supports, images etc.

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