The Architectural Museum

A Founder’s Perspective

Architectural materials have been collected since at least the early thirteenth century. However, they have only been recognized as the basis of a new entity, the architectural museum, since 1979 when some fifteen recently formed institutions met in Helsinki to form the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM). Since then the membership has grown to nearly 100 members, including museums, archives, and collections housed in larger institutions such as libraries and schools. In approaching architectural collections, I can most usefully discuss some of the key issues from my own personal perspective gained in framing and developing the collection of the Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). It is not my intention to describe the CCA’s holdings, which has been done in earlier publications. Most pertinent is what has been learned about the significance and special aspects of collection building and related research in the ten years since the CCA opened as a public institution in 1989. This has been experience gained in presenting exhibitions, preparing publications, and, most recently, with the reception of scholars in residence at the CCA Study Centre.

The nature of the collection cannot be separated from these activities nor from the institution’s founding, its purposes, its mode of operation, or its locus. In 1989, looking forward to the next decade, Adolf K. Placzek was prescient in underscoring the interconnectedness of an architecture museum’s collection in a broader institutional setting: “The importance to a great library of drawing, photographs and manuscript material cannot be overemphasized. . . . library, archive museum and study center must be viewed as a unit in its activities, in its staffing as well as [in] its holdings.”

As a collection formed by an architect in the late twentieth century, the CCA resonates historically with the individual practices of architects who, since the Renaissance, have selected drawings, prints, models, and books of their peers and predecessors for reference. Jacques Lemercier or Hippolyte Destailleur come to mind, but it is certainly John Soane who is the great exemplar: beyond collecting as a source of inspiration for his own work, he created, at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, dramatic spaces for his collection of architectural plaster casts, antique fragments, objets d’art, and paintings as well as books and collections of drawings of architects whom he admired. Soane intended his house and museum, with its collections, to be both a great work of art in and of itself and a place that would provide architectural students with a rich learning environment (Figure 1). He left his house/museum to the nation in 1833 with the stipulation that the collection, and the very specific manner and context of display, not be changed after his death. Ultimately his is a very special case of the house museum, which as John Elsner has commented, “memorializes and freezes for posterity the moment at which collecting (and redeploying a collection) ceases, the moment when the museum begins.”

Like London’s Wallace Collection, Paris’s Musée Jacquemart André, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner

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Museum, New York’s Frick Collection, and many small, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art and decorative-art museums that were built as closed systems of display within a collector’s residence, Soane’s museum was a product of its time. However, the Soane Museum’s current project to catalogue major works in its collection in order to encourage research is consonant with programs of the architectural museums formed after 1945. Mostly created as state museums with an activist, preservationist, often even archival focus, in essence these are research-based institutions. Programs launched beginning in the 1980s to inventory and provide intellectual access to the Soane Museum’s collections have reinforced a sense of mission and underscored the collections’ status as open-ended resources for inquiry.7

The CCA was founded in 1979 as a study center and museum devoted to the art of architecture past and present, with the three-fold conviction that architecture, as part of the social and natural environment, is a public concern, that architectural research has a profound cultural influence, and that scholars have a social responsibility of the highest order (Figure 2). In this the CCA provides one among several contemporary models of a museum of architecture, quite distinct from either the museum of art or the academic research center, although both institutions inform its overlapping agendas. Indeed, the terms “study center” and “museum” attach selectivity to the collection. As a study center, acquisitions are directed to works that have advanced thought about the nature of the built world and that will therefore engage significant research. The resources of the library and the holdings of drawings, prints, photographs, and architectural archives offer specialists a wealth of primary and secondary material for advanced research in the history, theory, and practice of architecture. As a museum, the CCA interprets its collection for the public through exhibitions and publications that reveal the richness and sig-

Figure 1 Sir John Soane (1753–1837), view of the plaster-cast display in his House and Museum, London, 1835. Lithograph, Plate 28 from Soane, Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields (London, 1836), collection CCA, Montréal

Figure 2 Peter Rose, CCA Study Centre, Alcan Wing for Scholars, Montréal. Photograph by Richard Pare, chromogenic color print, © 1988 Richard Pare
nificance of architectural culture and stimulate awareness of contemporary issues in architecture.

The collection, composed of numerous genres and media, is referred to in the singular, since drawings and prints, photographs, bound imprints, and ephemera are all concerned with one particular subject—architecture in its widest sense, including the arts and disciplines that create the built world. The Centre’s collection encompasses, in fact, the building process; its aims are to foster inquiry into the art of architecture. The various bodies of work brought together cut across media, time, and geography, as comparative sources dedicated to research. This purpose differs from the cabinet des dessins of an art museum, or the “special collections” of a library, where drawings, prints, books, and models tend to be valued as individual masterworks. It also eschews works that were made outside of the architect’s own critical research, such as drawings, prints, and models made for the market, or fragments of destroyed buildings. In this, the architecture museum’s collection could be seen to have an affinity with archives, but the latter have usually been amassed for administrative purposes, as legal governmental repositories, generally with a detached sense of accumulation rather than a motivated search for interconnections. As a collection rather than a repository, the architecture museum is guided by a inquiry into the forces that shape architecture and into the intentions of architects, patrons, and clients.

The CCA’s first two decades chronicle the extent to which the museum of architecture has been defined in the late twentieth century as a unique institution, distinct from other types of museums in its collections, exhibitions, and relationship to the public. In the first decade, the foundations of the collection were laid. Since 1989 the significance of cross-connections among the collection’s various genres became increasingly evident in acquisitions meetings, in the nature of research conducted, and in preparing exhibitions.
A telling example of the instrumental links between acquisitions and research comes from the sequence of events leading to one of the CCA’s earliest exhibitions. An early acquisition meeting to consider a small group of lithographs by the French architect Louis-Pierre Baltard, representing a project for an enclosure around the Panthéon in Paris, led ultimately to the formation of a research team and the production of a major international exhibition. Works related to the lithographs were identified in the CCA’s library and in the department of prints and drawings. Acquired at different times, these included other works by Baltard, drawings for Sainte-Geneviève from Soufflot’s workshop, and albums of pamphlets and manuscripts, assembled by A.-L.-T. Vaudoyer, documenting the debates over the building’s notorious structural weakness. This rich assembly led to a flash of recognition of the issues raised by documents pertaining to this highly symbolic and problematic monument (Figure 3). Thus, a small but key group of documents and works of art led to extensive research for the exhibition and publication, *Le Panthéon, Symbol of Revolutions*, which ultimately led to further research discoveries in France and brought together widely dispersed material—sculpture, photographs, paintings, books, manuscripts, and drawings—from collections throughout the world. The recent addition to the collection of three drawings (c.1797) by Charles De Wailly, representing a radical proposal to alter the appearance and structure of the Panthéon in accordance with its new memorializing function, reveals the extent to which the exhibition is part of a longer research process. These drawings provide further insight into the Revolutionary period in French architecture and extend yet further interpretation of the seminal building (Figure 4).
Research initiated by relatively sparse holdings might well be a particularity of the research-oriented architectural museum, in contrast to the many forces—from connoisseurship to the market—that usually drive research and exhibitions in art museums. In addition, the institution's commitment to architecture as a public concern has led to emphasis on research related to subjects considered urgent either in the disciplines of architecture or architectural history, or in the local built environment. A desire to sensitize the public to the historical origins of its everyday environment was manifest, for example, in the multiyear research project on the evolution and transformation of the urban fabric in Montreal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A CCA research group, working with primary landholding and building records from the resources of the public archives of France, Quebec, and Canada, created a database that synthesized a vast documentation relevant to the process of urban growth in Montreal. The result was an exhibition and publication, Opening the Gates of Eighteenth-Century Montréal. Lack of recognition of Vancouver as a major site of modernist architecture in North America, and wide-ranging threats to demolish buildings from that period were the inspiration for research culminating in the exhibition The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963 (see JSAH 56 [1997]: 497–499). In this case, critical office archives were lost, but significant drawings and photographs were located during research, and enough material was donated to the CCA's permanent collection by local firms and their descendants to reconstruct the issues of ideas that fostered a vibrant modernist architectural culture in British Columbia. In another instance, researchers recognized the important architectural and cultural heritage of Quebec's industrial towns, and a research team assembled dispersed documentation to produce the exhibition Power and Planning: Industrial Towns in Quebec, 1890–1950.

Unlike art museums, which have generally collected photography according to criteria borrowed from the discipline of art history, or historical societies, which have a local-history focus, the CCA has, perforce, crafted a very different attitude toward the integral role of photography in an architectural collection. Among the priorities of the Photographs Collection, in the last ten years, has been the acquisition of photographs or groups of photographs that offer critical interpretations of buildings. For instance, an album dating from 1860 on the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli in Brescia, by the photographer Giacomo Rosetti, is one of the most important additions to the collection in this regard. Taken from a specially made scaffolding, it offers a uniquely detailed record of the building and reveals Rosetti's analytical skill in deconstructing the façade in its constituent parts. Louis-Emile Durandelle's 165 photographs produced between 1879 and 1890, documenting the construction of the Church of the Sacré-Coeur in Paris, were assembled in an album by the architect Hubert Rohault de Fleury. They are particularly interesting for numerous pencil and ink notations on the photographs made in preparation for engraving. The album, and the traces of changes it contains, contributes to study of the place of photography in architectural practice in the late nineteenth century.

One of the most consistent means by which the CCA has managed to collect photographic material that adopts a discerning attitude to architecture has been through its program of photographic commissions. This represents another form of research, proactive rather than reactive, interpretative rather than didactic. Beyond joining current polemics, such commissions build archives that document conditions and attitudes at a point in time. Two notable examples, both with a polemical edge related to threatened or neglected landscapes, were the photographic survey of industrial buildings along the Lachine Canal in Montreal and a vast, multiyear photographic commission to study Frederick Law Olmsted's legacy across North America. Both were status reports and interpretations as well as polemical statements. Photographic commissions have also served as editorial statements, notably in connection with such exhibitions as Designing Disney's Theme Parks and The American Lawn. The close observation of the fall of light by Guido Guidi in photographs made for the Summer 1999 exhibition and publication Carlo Scarpa, Intervening in History was in itself a research project, revealing—beyond Scarpa's signed drawings—his design process and intentions in ways otherwise inaccessible (Figures 5, 6).

Another goal of collection building is to deepen existing research possibilities of holdings rather than simply to fill gaps in a universal collection. Roberto Valturio's Opere de facti e precepti militare (1483), acquired recently by the library, is a military treatise that earns its place as an illustrated commentary on the classical writers, including Vitruvius, who provided the inspiration for Renaissance architects, engineers, and town planners. It joins not only the CCA's three fifteenth-century editions of Vitruvius but also the Verona edition of the antiquarian Flavio Biondo's major works, Roma Instaurata and Italia Illustrata (Verona, 1481–1482), enhancing the researcher's ability to trace the architectural culture of the Veneto in the decades after the invention of printing. The interest of a collector of the Renaissance in the connection between geometry and architecture is made palpable by three treatises brought together in a mid-sixteenth-century Venetian binding: the first Paris
edition of Euclid’s Elements (1516), the first illustrated edition of Vitruvius’s De architectura (1511), and the first edition of Albrecht Dürer’s Underwysung der Messung (1525). An inscription showing the Dürer to be owned by a friend of Erasmus and annotations in the Vitruvius referring to Erasmus and Guillaume Budé spurred further research into the culture of the sixteenth-century humanist circle. Another instance of the relation between research and acquisitions is material collected around the figure of the French ornemaniste Gilles-Marie Oppenord. The CCAs collection now includes an album of ornamental and emblematic designs drawn over pages from Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia, an unbound sketchbook of studies of architectural and decorative details of the Farnese Palace (c.1692), a pair of finished grisaille capricci (c. 1720), and a presentation drawing for the staircase of the Palais Royal. This material offers scholars an occasion to study in depth the range of graphic modes and design techniques employed by one of the founders of the Rococo in France.

The acquisition of over 400 photographs of works produced in the 1920s at the Vkhutemas in Moscow allows scholars to examine architectural instruction in the Soviet Union a few years after the Russian Revolution. The Vkhutemas was noted for innovative teaching methods that tried to reconcile artistic disciplines with emerging technological means. The Soviet Union is also represented by a library collection embracing both the avant-garde and the “official” approach to housing and planning of the Stalinist period, which is probably the most extensive on the subject outside Russia. Other twentieth-century collections have also been considerably extended. A 1997 bequest by the distinguished American planner James Emmon (Jack) Robinson provided well over 1,000 books and archival documents relating to campus planning after 1945. This bequest interconnects with a very important corpus of works on the architecture of learning in the library and other collections: from the very appearance of spaces devoted to teaching as visible in an mid-eighteenth-century plan à retombe in an extension project for the Convent of Notre-Dame des Enseignantes in Perpignan (c.1755), to the proposed disappearance of centralized place in Cedric Price’s Potteries Thinkbelt project for a decentralized campus (1965).

A particular challenge faced by museums of architecture everywhere is what attitude to adopt in relation to contemporary architectural practice, and in particular to the sheer escalation of the number of documents and representations (drawings, models, computer images, written documents, etc.) generated by the construction of buildings in the late twentieth century. For the CCA, acquisition of the complete archives of three major critical practitioners of the post-1965 period—Cedric Price, John Hejduk, and the ongoing accretion of the funds of Peter Eisenman—are important complements to recent acquisitions related to the “heroic” architects of the earlier twentieth century: Wright bibliographically, Le Corbusier with significant projects of the late years, and Mies van der Rohe with 800 mostly auto-
graph drawings from his early years in America. A sustained effort in the last decade has also been made to collect material relative to the circle of architects, students, urban planners, and landscape architects around Mies in Chicago, including George Danforth’s work from 1939 to 1943, the personal papers of Myron Goldsmith, the rendered drawings of Alfred Caldwell, and the complete archives of Peter Carter, David Haid, and Reginald Malcomson. Support for these holdings is found in the library’s strong periodicals collections and also in the archives of Shelter magazine and Oppositions that detail the editorial process underlying the professional periodical press, one of the fundamental media used by architects in the twentieth century to circulate their works and ideas.

In the field of Canadian architectural archives, the exponential growth, in the last decade, of the size of archives housed at the CCA, or proposed for acquisition, has opened new challenges for archival criteria, challenges shared with other major repositories of architects’ papers. Simply to underscore the scale of the issue facing the documentation of late-twentieth-century architectural practice: whereas between 1981 and 1984 five of the eight archive groups that entered the collection were composed of some 3,000 drawings each, the archives of Ernest Cormier, the most important Canadian architect of the first half of the century, contains some 29,000 drawings and 14,000 photographs. In the late 1990s, a single architectural project can reach 10,000 items. Considering that the archives acquired in the period 1981 to 1984 were composed of all the holdings of an office for projects built or not built, it is easy to understand how overabundant contemporary records have become. Deciding which documents to retain in the original and which to preserve in microfilm or other reproductive storage is an issue facing archives everywhere, and one that will require important decisions in the twenty-first century as the technical means of architectural design and of representation itself continue to evolve. Yet, whether all-encompassing or selective, archive material provides a unique insight into the building process, which remains—more than the designation of masterworks—the intellectual aim of an architectural archive.

Inaugurated two years ago, the CCA Study Centre, through the work conducted by visiting scholars, is founded on the heuristic potential of the collection. Work has been carried out in two areas of study: “The Baroque Phenomenon Beyond Rome” and “The Critical Debate after 1945,” both of which have engaged in significant ways with CCA holdings. Although the collection of historical material is not built for the specific needs of one scholar, such needs do help shape great research libraries. In the first year a resident scholar working on the Ducal Hunting Lodge at Venaria Reale prompted the library to acquire Amedeo Castellamonte’s monument to Baroque emblems, Venaria reale: palazzo di piacer e di caccia, ideato dall’Altezza Reale di Carlo Emanuel II, duca di Savoia, re di Cipro &c. (1674). Research on Guy Debord and the Situationist International prompted acquisition of the growing recent bibliography on this critical post–World War II movement. And because scholars are expected to cross disciplinary boundaries, to link architecture with cultural and intellectual conditions past and present, the collection of the CCA will have much to gain in the coming decades from this new program.

Finally, Montreal itself, an encompassable, multilingual city where architectural and urban forms from the seventeenth century onward can be read, a place with a strong sense of cultural alterity, favors a concentrated focus on work for its own sake and for la collectivité, the public realm.

Notes
3. Notably, a reception for members of the Society of Architectural Historians in Montreal during its fortieth annual meeting was the first public event at the CCA.
4. The first year of activity at the Study Centre is described in CCA, Study Centre, Annual Report 1997-1998 (Montreal, 1999).
7. As members of the Foundation for Documents of Architecture (FDA), a few ICAM members produced, with support by the Getty Foundation, the following reference tool: Vicki Porter and Robin Thorne, A Guide to the Description of Architectural Drawings (New York, 1994). Inventories and cataloguing information remain the province of individual institutions and networks such as RLIN and the International Council of Archives (ICA).
9. These drawings are considered in the CCAs forthcoming catalogue surveying ten years of acquisitions as well as in an article by Barry Bergdoll, “Panoramic Patriotism: Charles De Wailly’s Project for the Parisian Panthéon,” in Nanni Balthazer et al., eds., Forster’s Kaleidoscope: A Festschrift for
Kurt Forster (Zurich, forthcoming).
13. The CCA holds thirty-six folio volumes of drawings by three generations of the Rohault de Fleury family. It includes student drawings and those related to a wide range of projects and executed commissions for domestic and public buildings.
19. These collections are the basis of intense research for the exhibition and related publication “Mies in America,” now in progress under my curatorship.
21. See CCA: Catalogue of Archive Groups and Collections (October 1984), i. For the problems of architectural archives collecting, see the report of the working conference on Establishing Principles for the Appraisal and Selection of Architectural Records, held in April 1994 at the CCA and published in The American Archivist: Special Issue on Architecture 59 (Spring 1996).
22. Among the federated bodies to which the CCA adheres, the members of the Association of Research Institutes in Art History (ARIAH), incorporated in 1988, are largely museums of art. In addition to exchanging information about the scholarly activities of its member institutes, ARIAH develops cooperative projects. Its first major research collaboration was the Latin American Fellowship Program established for a period of five years in 1994.