

Preservation of Architectural Drawings

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Introduction

As the popularity of architectural drawings increases and the acknowledgement of their importance as archival documents and works of art strengthens, some important problems regarding the conservation of these documents occurred. In her book *Line, Shade and Shadow*, Lois Olcott Price explains that through their exhibition at the *Académie des beaux arts* after 1810: “[...] Elevated architectural drawings from a functional necessity to an art form in the public mind and significantly increased the expectations of clients.” As a result, museum and archival collections now house large numbers of architectural drawings executed in many different dimensions and on a wide range of paper supports.

As architectural drawings are designed to function as ‘working documents’ their extensive use by workers in uncontrolled environment can easily cause damage to the drawing. Also, the fact that the drawings were viewed as ephemeral has resulted not only in careless handling, but also in the choice of poor long-term quality materials.

Conservation Treatments

There are many conservation procedures available for the treatment of architectural drawings. The most common procedures include:

- Surface cleaning
- Tape removal
- Washing
- Tear repair and filling losses
- Humidification and flattening

The removal of surface soiling is an important procedure as it can be hygroscopic, provide nutrients for pests, cause abrasion and soil transfer to adjacent drawings. Tape removal may be required so that drawing information can be more readily understood. Once the tape is removed, the remaining tears and losses can be mended and filled with matching paper. Humidification and flattening is another treatment used to extend the life of a collection. After humidifying the drawings, they are flattened between layers of felt and/or blotters and a weight.

Storage and Handling

Appropriate storage and handling are fundamental to the preservation of all architectural drawing collections. For the majority of drawings on paper, housing flat in an acid-free folder is the best ways to protect the drawing. Encapsulation in polyester folders should be considered for very fragile or damaged items, as well as for drawings that are frequently handled.

The separation of photoreproductions, such as sepia diazotypes, from original drawings is essential. Many chemicals are involved in the photoreproduction process that can irreversibly damage other drawings. This can be a major issue since space is usually limited and each folder generally contain many prints and drawings. Although it can seem to be an impossible option in instances of limited space, architectural drawing that were created from different processes should housed separately. Even coating can interact and migrate from one drawing to another damaging them irreversibly.

Architectural drawings are often stored rolled. Yet, housing them flat is the best way to reduce damage from handling especially for acidic brittle paper.

Conclusion

What to do to preserve our archival collections

- Assess the the condition of the document you are going to handle
- Handle with care, follow the instructions from the archivist
- Report any new damage
- Use the collections! By requesting to see documents, you acknowledge the importance of having access to these documents, as well as the importance of their preservation and conservation

Selected Bibliography

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