

Finding and using Architectural Archives

Which Archives might I want to use?

Architecture is an activity that produces large amounts of records. They will be stored in a variety of different archives depending on who produced, kept or collected the records.

The National Archives holds the records of central government. They hold a large quantity of architectural drawings, particularly in relation to the Crown Estate, the armed services, transportation, substantial developments such as housing estates and dockyards, or national events such as the Festival of Britain.

Local record offices (e.g. London Metropolitan Archives, City of Westminster Archives) hold records of local government, as well as business and private individuals within their geographical area. Record Offices are usually a good starting point to find the planning records associated with a building, as well as photographs, and sometimes legal records. They may also hold the records of local architects, or of organisations responsible for the construction of a building (e.g. a church).

Business, charity, estate and church archives hold the papers of the institution that they serve. They will usually hold detailed records about their buildings (e.g. leases, plans, photographs and possibly correspondence relating to their construction). However if the organisation still uses the building, access to these records may be limited for security reasons.

University archives will hold the records of their own institution, including records of its buildings, however they may also collect papers relevant to their research interests. The University of Westminster Archive holds several town planning collections, including the Max Lock Archive. Important collections on domestic and interior architecture are held by the University of Brighton Design Archives, and MoDA at Middlesex University.

Specialist repositories are archives which collect on a particular subject area. These include the archives of the Architectural Association and RIBA. Museum archives also tend to collect papers around their area of expertise, and the V&A holds several architectural archives.

Some **architectural practices** have now employed professional archivists; however many of these archives are usually not open to the public due to commercial sensitivity. Those that are willing to accept researchers can be found through the National Archives' *Find An Archive* service at:
<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/#archive>

Tracking down your Archives:

Most publicly-owned archives have made their catalogues available online. Bear in mind that the search function on most archive catalogues is a lot less advanced than Google – it will usually require an exact match in order to return results. If you are looking for an individual, try searching with just their surname rather than their full name. If you are looking for a particular property, try searching for the street name only rather than the whole address. Many will also allow you to use wildcard searches such as *architec**, to return architect, architects, architecture, architectural etc.

Many private collections (e.g. businesses, charities or estates) will require you to contact the archive and request details of their collection. When you contact them, try to be as specific as possible about the building or type of building you are researching, and the kind of information you are hoping to find (e.g. if you are particularly interested in one period of its use or decoration). Allow plenty of time before your deadline as it could take a week or two for them to reply to your email and it may then be another few weeks before you can access the collection. Keep in mind that private organisations are not obliged to provide access to their archives and do so at their own discretion.

You may also find references to archival material in books or exhibition catalogues that you want to follow up. If so, make a note of where the collection is held, and any reference number mentioned, so that you can track down the item for yourself.

There are several archive ‘portals’ which allow you to search across multiple institutions at the same time.

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> helps you to find archives held in repositories across the UK. Enter the name of an individual/organisation or a topic into the search box and the results will come up in two tabs, *Records* and *Record Creators*.

The *Records* tab will give you results for that individual/organisation/topic within the catalogue of the National Archives itself and certain other repositories. The *Record Creators* tab is more useful as it will give you an overview of individuals and organisations relevant to your search and the archive repositories who hold major collections relating to them. Bear in mind that the *Discovery* portal relies on voluntary submissions of information once per year, so it is not always comprehensive or up-to-date.

www.aim25.ac.uk hosts ‘collection-level descriptions’ of archives held by London-based universities and colleges. This means that it holds very broad descriptions of groups of archives (see **Understanding archival cataloguing** below) rather than details of every individual item within those collections. As it is restricted to collections in the London area, it can be useful if you know that you want to use archival material but you do not want to travel too far.

www.archiveshub.ac.uk covers collections held in Universities across the UK, as well as some small specialist repositories. It includes a mix of collection-level descriptions and complete catalogues (i.e. listing every item within the collection).

Accessing archival collections

Most archival repositories will publish their access conditions online. These are not designed to keep away researchers, but are dictated by the resources available and to ensure that the archival material is protected for future researchers.

Common conditions for access are:

- Make an appointment in advance – this is usually due to space/staffing restrictions.
- Show photographic ID/complete a registration form – archives are unique and valuable and it is our duty as archivists to look after them for future generations. Theft is rare but it does happen, and we need to be able to trace who has seen documents.
- Letter of reference – this is rare these days but some archives will still ask you to prove you are a 'bona fide' researcher. Again, this is for security. A letter from your tutor on headed paper should suffice.

In advance of your visit you should contact the archives to check that the collection you want to see is accessible. Sometimes documents are loaned to exhibition or may have gone for conservation. The records of local and national government are usually closed for 30 years; recent records will be held by the council or government department who produced them and it may be possible to access them under Freedom of Information legislation. Collections containing personal information may be closed for up to 100 years under Data Protection legislation.

At the Archive

For security and preservation of the collections, most archives will ask you to:

- Put your bags and coats in lockers
- Only use pencil or a laptop to make notes (check if they have power terminals for you to plug in a laptop)
- Not eat or drink in the reading room
- Not lean on the documents, keep them flat on the table and/or use any supports that they provide for the documents
- Limit the amount of material you use at any one time (e.g. 1 file or volume at a time)
- Pay for photocopies or sign a copyright declaration before using a digital camera (not all will allow cameras)
- Most archives do *not* ask you to use white glove with documents, however you may be asked to do so with photographs – they will provide them if so.

Archives are not kept on open shelves like library books, someone will need to fetch the material for you. Each archival repository has different procedures, depending on their staffing levels. This may be in advance of your visit, immediately on request during your visit, or at set production times during your visit (e.g. 11am and 2 pm only). It's important to check this in advance so that you are not left waiting for material after you arrive.

Understanding archival cataloguing

Archival cataloguing is different to Library cataloguing. Archives are arranged in a hierarchy, whereas library cataloguing is flat and arranged by subject. When you see an archival reference code, the levels of the hierarchy will usually be separated by slashes or dots. The levels in the hierarchy help you to understand who created the particular archive item, and organises the items into groups so they are easier to use.

As an example, let's look at a lease held in the University's Archives:

RPI/1/22	Lease of premises being No. 307 Regent Street: John Richard Clayton esq to Charles Henry Russell esq - lease to premises No 307 Regent Street commencing Michaelmas 1880 and expiring 19 Sep 1910. Includes floor plans. Signed and sealed.	2 February 1881
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This is an individual archival *item*, which has been put in a group (or *series*) of items called:

RPI/1	Deeds and leases	1838-1895
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In a collection (or *fonds*) called:

RPI	Records of the Polytechnic Institution and Royal Polytechnic Institution
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Which reference number you use to request the documents in the archive, depends on what you want to see (and how large the collection is). If your interest is in finding a floor plan of 307 Regent Street, you might ask to see just the one *item*, RPI/1/22. If you are interested in all the buildings owned by the Royal Polytechnic Institution and how they were leased, you might ask to see the *series*. If you're writing a history of the Royal Polytechnic Institution, you might ask to see the whole *collection*.

Architecture sources in the University of Westminster Archives

Archive Services collects and preserves records of the University of Westminster and its predecessor bodies.

As well as the buildings we own today, the University has owned or leased a large number of premises around the capital (and holidays chalets in Switzerland!), and the archive holds photographs, plans and leases relating to each of them. These include documentation of the alterations to each building over time, especially our oldest premises, 309 Regent Street (including the cinema) and 4-12 Little Titchfield Street.

As one of the oldest architecture schools in the country, the University Archive is an excellent resource for tracing the development of architectural education from the 1880s to the present day, including oral histories with former students.

The University Archive also holds several town planning collections including the Max Lock Archive and the papers of John F C Turner. Both collections include large amounts of material relating to overseas developments, including Latin America and Nigeria, amongst others.

Please see www.westminster.ac.uk/archives for information on our collections, our online catalogue and digitised resources, and arrangements for using the Archive.