

Long-Term Preservation of Architectural Records

Excerpted and adapted from a *Practice Management Digest* article by Alison Langmead, PhD

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SUMMARY

Project managers keep records for multiple reasons. During the process of design and construction, records have a direct role in the communication and documentation of actions, transactions, and decisions. Once the project is complete, these records become a source of authentic evidence for those same actions, transactions, and decisions.

Over the near term, perhaps the next 15 years, this evidence certifies legal accountability for the project and serves as an important resource for project managers when making informed and effective decisions. For the much longer term, these records serve as vital historical evidence for future generations of designers and scholars who wish to learn more about this country's architectural heritage.

THE CHALLENGE OF DIGITAL DESIGN

Architecture firms increasingly perform complex design work on the computer. As these digital models become more complex, it becomes harder to represent this work faithfully on a two-dimensional plot. Digital design tools no longer constitute a simple automation of traditional hand drafting. Rather, they allow for the creation of virtual building environments in which the designer can run simulations, create virtual studies, and produce other digital transformations.

While these new tools create fabulously rich design experiences, their usefulness springs directly from their digital intricacy. This intricacy, in turn, ties these records forever to their digital form. Because it is impossible to fully represent, for example, a full-motion sun study in a static two-dimensional format, authentic and complete records of the digital design process can no longer always take paper form. Therefore, responsible architectural record keeping must establish systems to maintain these digital records as digital records for both the active life of the project and the long term.

HOW TO ESTABLISH A DIGITAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Beginning a digital records management program does not have to be expensive, nor do you have to implement it in a giant, sweeping gesture that fundamentally changes the existing design workflow. What is important is to start thinking about the future of your digital project records right now. Whether you are a sole practitioner or a project manager for a large firm, here are a few ways to begin.

Identify, arrange, and collect the digital files that document your project. Determine which computer files serve as evidence of project actions, transactions, and decisions. Consider all of the file components of any digital model or drawing as well as any other administrative information in digital form, such as the databases that produce project records and any born-digital correspondence, especially e-mail. Just as digital drawings can contain more information than any one plot can reproduce, the original electronic version of an e-mail contains more information than is usually found in the printed copy. Over the last decade, the courts have recognized these differences to be significant.

Store these digital records in an accessible, relatively prominent place. Once you have identified your digital records, do not simply store them on backup tapes, CDs, or DVDs that you send off site or put in the bottom of a drawer to be forgotten. For generations, the best practice has been to squirrel paper records away in the coldest, darkest place possible to preserve them. Digital records, however, must be stored in a place that is regularly and easily accessible, not only to test the storage medium for its readability but also to ensure that modern software can open the stored files and that users can make sense of the information.

Keeping these records on hard drives devoted solely to your digital archives is one good way to approach this problem. That said, moving a duplicate copy of your digital records off site for safekeeping remains a good idea. It is vital that you remember to look at all on-site *and* off-site records every year and assess them for their viability.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Keep in mind that the best practices for digital records management are still emergent. For the time being, you should frequently assess and reassess your entire approach to digital records management —perhaps every two to three years. If you can still open and use the digital drawing files you created five years ago, you are on the right track. If, in 20 or 50 years, you can still open and use those files, you will have proof of an effective, continuous, and responsible digital records management program.

As digital architectural records become more powerful and intricate, project managers will need have even greater control over the location and description of their documentation to ensure efficient access to accurate information, both during the design process and over time. Such needs should lead to a broader, more complete system of digital records management. However, do not wait until you can implement such a system to begin tending to your digital records. Start small and allow your digital record-keeping system to grow with your needs.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.04.06 Managing Challenges of Electronic Documents
- 05.12.06 Project File Organization
- 05.12.03 Document Disposal: When and How to Throw It Out

For More Information on This Topic

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Store by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



See also “Information Management and Services” beginning on page 321 of the 15th Edition of the *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Store online at www.aia.org/store, by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4), or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Practice
- Project administration
- Project administration documents

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