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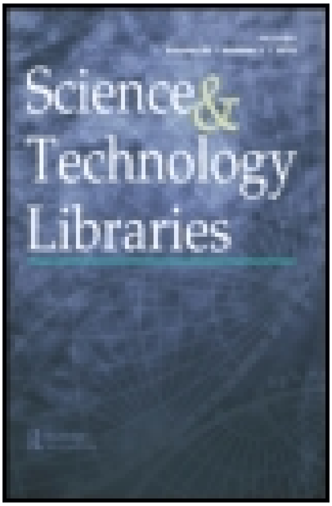

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Records Management in an Architectural Firm

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Records Management in an Architectural Firm: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Catherine R. Burke

ABSTRACT. The following paper describes the management of records at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, a large architectural firm. Types of materials are discussed, along with organization, housing, control and retrieval. Special emphasis is placed on the practices and problems of weeding such a specialized collection.

INTRODUCTION

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), founded in 1936, strives to provide complete professional services in the areas of architectural design, planning and engineering. The firm, with its family of nine major offices, has completed a variety of projects in the United States and over forty countries worldwide. While closely interacting with each other, the individual offices maintain a certain autonomy by assuming the responsibility of their own projects from start to finish. Some of the New York Office's contributions to the field have included Lever House, the various Chase Manhattan Bank Buildings, New Jeddah International Airport and the Kuwait Embassy.

The organizational structure at SOM is characterized by the team approach. A team nucleus is formed with an administrative partner, a design partner, a project manager, senior designers and technical personnel. This team completes one project from start to finish, maintaining the integrity of that project. A new team is then created for each ensuing project.

This team concept permeates every level of the New York

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Office's organizational structure, culminating in its design of a Central File Department. While the File Supervisor functions as head of the department and coordinates the activities of the Archivist and File Clerk, all three positions interact with the same team spirit for accomplishing a variety of tasks. The File Clerk organizes and files current correspondence and contracts related to jobs which are open to labor. The Archivist prepares older materials and drawings of closed jobs for warehouse storage and microfilming. The Archivist also serves as a liaison between the office and the storage facility.

A separate SOM corporate library is a resource center which meets the information requirements of all departments and employees. Besides providing ready reference, research and computer searching, the Librarian also serves as the Head of Information Services and supervises the Central File Department in an advisory capacity.

THE COLLECTION

Since SOM New York's inception, all active records have been housed in one centralized location. Massive amounts of correspondence and other materials must be at the ready disposal of project team members, and a centralized filing department has worked well for the firm.

Organization of Materials

The types of records kept by Central File consist of the following main categories:

- print
- graphics
- accounting
- models.

The system of organization of these materials has evolved over a period of time and recently has been standardized by the department.

Printed items make up a large part of SOM's records. As many as two hundred different projects are open to labor at one time. Each project has vital incoming and outgoing correspondence related to

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the job progress, cost estimates, building codes, construction, as well as the various technical reports, meeting minutes and specifications.

Graphics also constitute the bulk of any architectural firm's materials. Since a finished building is each team's goal, the architectural drawings related to that building are, in a simplified sense, the firm's "product". The various types of graphics held by Central File include: tracings, design sketches, preliminary drawings, shop drawings, presentations, architectural drawings, as well as the various sub-groups of electrical, plumbing, HVAC, zoning, building department, etc.

The Accounting Department also functions as a vital part of SOM's team. Besides issuing the various job numbers to each team project for identification and billing purposes, this department maintains a large file of contracts and other legal documents. They also produce various accounting reports and organize a great deal of other financial data. Once completed, these records then are turned over to Central File for filing.

Models of projects often are commissioned by clients in advance of construction. Sometimes, depending upon the complexity of the building, as many as five or six small scale versions are created in SOM's fully equipped Model Shop. While some models are returned to the client at the job's completion, others are used for display or future study. These are given over to Central File for storage.

Other miscellaneous types of materials include product samples, promotional materials, personal reading files, etc. These items, however, should be discarded before the completion of a project and do not comprise an important part of the Central File records.

Housing/Storage

Decisions for housing or storage are based upon a record's status as active or inactive. All jobs open to labor or still billable to the client are considered active. These active records are housed within the SOM office. Correspondence is coded and sent immediately to the Central File Department. Graphics are retained by the project team until the job is completed. Accounting records and models are housed in their respective departments, both within close proximity to Central File.

Once a job closes and the project is completed, all related records take on inactive status. Correspondence is boxed by the Central File staff and sent to a dead storage warehouse. Graphics are rolled or boxed by a project team member and sent to Central File. The Archivist then separates architectural drawings and specifications for microfilming and forwards everything to dead storage. Accounting Department and Model Shop, likewise, prepare their specific materials for the warehouse.

Use

Project team members and their secretaries are the primary users of SOM's Central File. Retrieval of pertinent correspondence of contracts fill the information voids of their various projects. Drawings of previous jobs serve as examples for future alterations. Legal questions are answered by forwarding accounting files to SOM's attorneys. Background and current status of every SOM project can be and is researched by the Central File user.

OPERATING PROCEDURES

All SOM offices have found the need for standardizing their operating procedures on every level. This practice has been extremely helpful in the organization and operation of the Central File Department. All procedural practices are in writing, available to all personnel and periodically updated to fit SOM's ever-changing administrative environment.

Control of Records

Accurate control of records is the main goal of Central File. This is best accomplished by strict adherence to the following items:

— file manual
— file index
— classification systems.

The *SOM New York File Manual* is a document produced by the Central File Department, annually updated and distributed to all project managers and their secretaries. In keeping with the SOM team philosophy, the File Manual must be reviewed by a committee before changes can be approved. This document serves as a manual

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of Central File practices and use. It describes, in detail, the purpose and organization of the department and provides a step-by-step orientation for the user. The File Manual includes special instructions for opening a job number, preparing documents for filing and storage, coding and use of the File Index, retrieval, retention, etc. (see Figure 1).

The File Index is the core of Central File's organization of records. This unique system serves as both a guide for the coding of documents and a record of what is contained in a project file.

Each job open to labor has its own file and billing number. The first item included in each new job file is the File Index Sheet which contains an outline of the classification scheme for that project. As correspondence accumulates, it is coded according to this outline and corresponding classification numbers are circled on the sheet before filing. This way it is possible to see what types of correspondence are available for each job. When the project is nearing completion and graphics and other records are prepared for the warehouse, Inactive Storage Forms are completed and added to the file (see Figure 2). This way the history of every job can be seen at a glance.

SOM NEW YORK FILE MANUAL

(sample section)

Coding and Use of File Index

A. Responsibility for Coding

It is the sole responsibility of the Project Manager to correctly code all correspondence before sending it to Central File.

If uncoded material is received in Central File it will be returned for coding.

B. File Index Sheet

The File Index sheet serves two purposes: 1) It is a guide for the coding of documents; 2) It is Central File's record of what is contained in a project file.

When notification of a new project is received, the File Supervisor enters the information on the top of the Index Sheet and places it alphabetically in the CURRENT JOB FILE, which contains a similar sheet for each active project. As material is sent to Central File, the class number of the file is circled on the sheet to indicate that a file on that subject exists. Files are not opened in anticipation of material to be received.

Figure 1

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INACTIVE STORAGE FORM

Figure 2

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT #	MICROFILM #	DESCRIPTION OF DOCUMENTS	SIGNATURE	DATE TO STORAGE	LOCATION

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The classification schemes that make up the File Index are quite complex. The original system was based on a series of three-digit numbers, the main classes being, 100, 200, etc. with subdivisions of 110, 120, etc. For example, "Site" becomes a subdividison of "Design" in the following breakdown:

200 Design
  210 Interior
  220 Site
  230 Architectural, etc.

While this system worked well initially, projects became larger and correspondence increased tremendously, making the existing subheadings obsolete. As technology also changed, new terminologies followed new techniques and a second, more detailed classification system was devised. This second system, based on a four-digit series of numbers offers extra sub-groupings for a more complex information need. For example, "Site" becomes a main class in the following breakdown:

2000 Site
  210 Site Survey/Mapping
  220 Subsurface Investigation
  230 Excavation/Foundation, etc.

Because of the massive amount of records in storage and the successful acceptance of the first coding system, a retrospective conversion has been unnecessary.

One outstanding feature of SOM's classification system relates back to the Firm's team concept. Here is a rare example of a user-created system. A committee was formed to study various existing architectural classification schemes and draw from them in the development of a unique coding method. The result is a system flexible enough for a large volume of records as well as the intricacies of a complex subject matter.

While the File Index is Central File's major tool for the organization of active records, a computer-printed Inactive Records List has proven indispensable for control of dead storage items. Active records make up a small part of SOM's files and, as such, can be physically accessed rather easily. However, the large amount of dead files, coupled with limited availability of storage space require

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a random-access system of shelving. Also as older records are destroyed and new items added, a computer-printed shelf-list is vital (see Figure 3).

Retrieval

In order to retrieve a document from active records, the user should supply as much information as possible: job name and number, classification number, type of record, approximate date, etc. Items may be removed for copying or borrowed for a reasonable length of time. No documents should be retrieved or refiled by anyone other than Central File personnel. Turnaround time for borrowing active records is usually immediate.

When recalling material from inactive records, the same guidelines for retrieving active records should be followed. However, since the storage facility is at another location, sufficient travel time must be allowed for. Small amounts of files and drawings, which can be pulled readily by the Archivist, usually have a same-day turnaround time. However, removal of boxes of correspondence, large rolled drawings or models require assistance from warehouse personnel, requiring at least one or two days advance notice.

Microfilming

Because of the slow turnaround time for retrieval of inactive records, a system of microfilming was instituted at SOM. Microfilming assures that important, though inactive, information is readily available in the office. Microfilms of architectural drawings and specifications are available to the user for viewing and printing. Drawings are filmed on 35mm film, which can be utilized on the reader/printer in the Central File office. Specifications, filmed on 16mm film, can be viewed and copied on a machine in the nearby Specification Department. Whenever possible, microfilm is referred to instead of original documents.

DESTRUCTION/WEEDING OF MATERIALS

Skidmore, Owings and Merrill has experienced a steady growth since its inception in 1936. The increased number of clients and projects has led to an overwhelming accumulation of records. This,

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COMPUTER-PRINTED SHELF-LIST

(sample section)

Shelf Location	Destroy Date	Title, Job Name, Job Number & Description of Contents
1345	1987	Estimating Files: Astoria Film Studios thru Seagram Bldg, May 20, 1981 (1 of 2).
1346	1990	Texaco #3734: Shop Drawings, Mechanical, Plumbing, Ductwork, 1976.
1347	1990	Texaco #3734: Shop Drawings, 15400 thru 16100, 1975.
1348	1992	Accounting: Paid Vouchers, F.Y. 1982, National Blueprint.
1349	1986	Otis Elevator #2616: Shop Drawings 5, 8, 10, 1974.
1350	1987	Baren Files: Olympic Tower, Corres., Invoices, 1971-76.
1351	1995	Georgia Pacific #1285: C.F. 275-291.
1352	1995	Georgia Padific #1285: C.F. 305-308.
1353	Hold	Chase Manhattan Bank #677, 620E, 623E, 671: NY Plaza, CMB-Met Branch Bank, 1960-64.

Figure 3

coupled with a sudden shortage of available storage space, has put special emphasis on the need for weeding and ultimate destruction of older materials.

Retention Policies

Although written SOM retention policies have existed for some time, only recently have efforts been made to update, standardize and enforce them. Let us examine the current policies for the various types of Central File records.

Printed records have a varied retention period. Correspondence is retained ten years after job completion, then destroyed. Specifications are microfilmed and originals discarded after microfilm accuracy has been assured. Estimating files have a two-year review period and are destroyed at the discretion of the department head. Contract files are considered important enough to remain permanently. Although a project was begun for microfilming of older contracts, it was later abandoned for not being cost-effective.

Retention schedules for graphics have been revised recently. The various types of preliminary design drawings, detail drawings, sketches, presentation flats, photos, etc., once had indefinite retention periods. Now, all miscellaneous drawings have the same destruction schedule as shop drawings, which is ten years after job closing. All architectural drawings, also called working drawings, are microfilmed and the rolled originals held permanently in storage.

Accounting records have extremely complex and equally strict retention schedules. In a recent restructuring of destruction timetables, nearly forty accounting sub-groups which previously had indefinite retention status were standardized. Payroll registers, job distribution, general ledger and personnel files are among the limited number of items now held permanently. Invoices, paid vouchers, cancelled checks, petty cash receipts, commission registers, client master list, etc. are retained for ten years. Order books, check registers, check books, budget and fee analyses, time cards and other similar records are discarded after six years.

Models, as well as samples and other presentation material, are subject to periodic review and destroyed only upon approval. The enormous cost of the making of models, in terms of both materials and man-hours, makes the decision for destruction a difficult one. Before a model is discarded, attempts are made to send it to the

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client, display it at SOM, donate it to a museum, school or library, or to return it to the Model Shop for mismantling and reuse.

Gaining Approval for Destruction

When the retention period of any material has expired, approval for its destruction is sought by the File Supervisor. If approval is not granted, the material is reviewed every year until it can be destroyed. No material can be destroyed by Central File personnel without proper authorization.

At the time a record is sent to dead storage, a destruction date is set and included as an entry in the computer-printed Inactive Records List. An annual review for destruction begins with each new calendar year and the shelf list is sorted to produce a list of expired materials. To facilitate speedy approval, a Destruction Approval List is circulated to the appropriate partners and project mangers. This list compartmentalizes the following information: storage location, job name and number, brief description of documents, date of materials, date of job completion, project team members and person responsible for destruction approval (see Figure 4).

Preparation for Destruction

When the Destruction Approval List is initialled by the appropriate partners and returned to Central File, the preparation for destruction begins. Records which have not received approval are given a new, usually next year, destruction date. A list of remaining items, in shelf list order, is given to the Archivist who makes a reservation for two or more warehouse personnel, who physically discard the approved boxes, rolls and models. These items are deleted from the Inactive Records List and the initialled Destruction Approval List is kept for future reference.

Problems

While destruction/weeding of materials at SOM is recognized as a vital Central File project and approached conscientiously and systematically, problems still arise even in the most organized of environments.

Accounting records pose a particular problem in the area of standardization of terminology. For example, is a "journal

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DESTRUCTION APPROVAL LIST

(sample section)

Shelf	Job Name	Job #	Materials	Date	Closing	Team	Approval
0426	BANQUE LAMBERT	1708	Corres., s.d., *equip files*, *cuts*, *etc.*	1959-64	1965	Bunshaft, Gans, Overcash	Bailey
0427							
0687							
0423	BEEKMAN HOSPITAL	0275	Prod. files, corres., trans., s.d., repts, etc.	1967-69	1972	Cutler, Olson, Goodman	Bailey
0424							
0428							
0429							
0430							
0703	BLUE HILL PROJECT	0604	S.D.	1968-71	1974	Severinghaus, Hughes	Bailey
0704							
0706							
0707							

Figure 4

voucher'' the same as a ''voucher journal''? Is this filed under ''J'' or ''V'', and do both have the same destruction date? Perhaps a previous department head gave the title ''labor vouchers'' to what is now called ''bi-weekly labor''. A recent investigation revealed thirteen different types of accounting records dating from the early 1950s that no one in the company recognized. This sizeable group of records still remains at the warehouse, awaiting assignment of destruction dates. This problem of ambiguous terminology even recently led to the approval and ultimate destruction of an item that should have had permanent retention.

Another problem area comes with gaining approval for destruction. Since most records average a ten-year retention period, often the original team project members are no longer on staff at time of review. Transferring responsibility of approval becomes difficult and the chosen partner is often hesitant to make a decision, not knowing enough about the former job in question.

Duplication of items is another problem associated with weeding. Bulletins or bulletin changes, for example, exist in two forms, correspondence and drawings. Although the printed bulletins outline, describe and date all changes made and can serve as legally acceptable evidence, recent years have shown a trend toward communicating this same information in drawing form as well. Since bulletins have a retention period of ten years, it has been impossible to gain approval to keep one form and discard the other before ten years. This problem is escalating at a rate where one job alone has over two hundred rolled bulletin drawings, taking up enormous amounts of shelf space.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

SOM's Central File is an example of a well organized, efficiently run records center. Positive attitudes and team spirit have created an excellent reputation for the department. This, combined with SOM's history of strict standardization and control, has achieved a pleasant working environment and resulted in good recordkeeping and smooth retrieval.

Weeding has posed certain problems, however, as destruction of materials had been neglected for some time. An overwhelming amount of dead storage records and lax enforcement of existing retention policies created further problems. The difficulty in establish-

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ing consistent retention periods for items of nonstandard terminology has been compounded by job turnover of previous years and an overall slowness to accept change. Although there is still the need for improvement in these areas, the storage workload is manageable.

Possible recommendations might be:

- Ignore the overwhelming size of the weeding project and dwell on small projects with shorter term goals. For example, focus in on one type of document that was refused last year's destruction approval rather than tackling the whole list. Try to establish a new retention schedule for that record type instead of insisting on its destruction.
- If there is difficulty in obtaining agreement for a standard terminology for certain records, create your own terminology and/or establish a system of subject headings and cross-references that will lead you from one item to another.
- When in doubt, affix tentative destruction dates and discuss them at the next destruction review.
- Constantly strive for the best possible consistency of destruction dates within your shelf list. Once you discover a clue which helps standardize a term or affix a more effective retention limit, search the shelf list for any related items and change them as well.

Establishing a timely, effective system of weeding or destroying large amounts of complex inactive records is no easy task. One's best goal should be to strive for a manageable system and continue improving from there.

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