

Editorial Policy

thresholds, the Journal of the MIT Department of Architecture, is an annual, blind peer-reviewed publication produced by student editors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Opinions in *thresholds* are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the editors, the Department of Architecture, or MIT.

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Published by SA+P Press

MIT School of Architecture + Planning
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 7-231
Cambridge, MA 02139

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ISSN: 1901-711X
ISBN: 978-0-9726887-1-0

Book design and cover

Partner & Partners
<http://partnerandpartners.com>

Printing

Puritan Capital
<http://www.puritanpress.com>



Massachusetts
Institute of
Technology

SEBASTIAN SCHMIDT THE ARCHIVAL WORKSPACE: AN ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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THE ARCHIVAL WORKSPACE: AN ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY

WORKSPACE

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Archives are critical workspaces for historians. They are repositories for materials that convey academic authority and harbor the promise of the yet-to-be-discovered. More so than many other locations in which historians may be working—offices, libraries, coffee shops, and porches—the archive is a space that brings its own set of rules and material practices. Those practices not only have an impact on the researcher’s ability to access the required materials, but also are important reminders of the forces that shape historical work.

While experiences in the physical spaces of archives might come up in departmental small talk, deeper analyses of the relationship between those experiences and the work seldom occur. This lack is becoming increasingly obvious with a growing interest in transnational histories and historiography. If a goal of those histories is to overcome legacies of power and hegemony inscribed in nation-centered historical narratives, then an understanding of how structures resulting from those legacies may shape research questions and findings is critical. Many archives are the products of structures that transnational history seeks to expose and resist.¹

To think about the archive as the historian’s workspace raises two principle challenges. First, the epistemological connection between the archive’s material practices—such as issues of access, reproduction, storage media, catalog organization, and indexing—and those of the historian—searching, collecting, recording, analyzing, and writing—need to be discussed. And second, the implications of pursuing global or transnational history based on bodies of evidence that are often representative of structures of *national* history have to be understood. These challenges are too big to be met here, but I take them as an opportunity to reflect on some aspects of transnational archival research.

I have visited archives in Berlin, Tokyo, and New York to learn about how tropes and narratives of global unity and universalism entered visions for architecture and planning in those three cities during and after WWII. I have found that the turn towards global, non-national, or foreign models for the future of cities was often motivated by a certain helplessness in a world that, following the catastrophe of war, no longer seemed to be either controllable or predictable. This postwar globalism was different from the international trends of the interwar period, but it was far from pursuing a non-hegemonic

¹ A large body of research exists on the epistemologies, challenges, and opportunities inherent in the archive, both as a concept and physical space. Often resting on Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘archeology’ as a model for historical work, Georges Didi-Huberman and Knut Ebeling discuss the archive as an attempt at relating the unrelatable and as a vulnerable and volatile space, respectively, in their short book *Das Archiv Brennt* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007). The volume *Archivologie: Theorien des Archivs in Philosophie, Medien und Künsten*, edited by Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kadmos, 2009) expands these perspectives to analyze the archive as a key concept in histories of knowledge and media. In the fast-growing body of work on global and transnational history, Christopher L. Hill’s *National History and the World of Nations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008) may be pointed out here as it explicitly investigates the ways in which desired realities of the nation state were created and shaped through projects of writing national history in Japan, France, and the United States in the 19th century. Hill helps expose the often close relationship between the institutions of the state and the institutions of history.

understanding of the world. There was significant uncertainty over how to plan the future of cities when the roles they would play in a changing world were not clear. The result was a veneer of global visions, ideals, and plans under which were disguised unresolved conflicts and anxieties over urban social issues.

Working on a transnational topic has not only substantially increased my need for travel funding, it has also made me an accidental ethnographer of the material practices of archival research in different contexts, which has informed how I think about historical evidence. Revisiting here the workspaces and materials encountered within my three principal archives in Berlin, Tokyo, and New York, will demonstrate that assessing the workspaces of different archives is helpful in understanding the forces that create and conceal dominant historical narratives that ought to be challenged. Differences and limitations in the collection of evidence are not commonly articulated, despite the fact that not all evidence is created equal. Transnational history is about being sensitive to issues such as the often-tacit legacies of nationalism in historiography. I argue that engaging the material practices of archives can cultivate a habit of looking for epistemological forces that are so deeply enmeshed with established ways of doing historical research that they easily go unnoticed.

* * *

The reference room in the Berlin State Archive in Reinickendorf is a space where rules are not only written on signs, but are enforced as well. Bags and water bottles must stay in the provided lockers

and papers are checked when leaving the room. Only occasional injunctions—“Use pencils only!” “No photography!” and “Submit request slips now!”—interrupt the silence and remind forgetful visitors of the archive’s most fundamental rules. One day I asked to photograph parts of a map that was too big for the reproduction staff to copy. My request was met with incredulity: “Das geht doch nicht!” (“*This is not possible!*”) This most German expression of rejection does not simply say that something is not possible. It carries within it the outrage of someone who is thinking: “What kind of a person *are* you?”

In order to obtain copies of materials from the State Archive, researchers must place paper markers at the beginning and end of desired sections within folders. File numbers and a description of the content to be copied need to be written on the “Reproduction Request Form,” and all folders and request forms are submitted at the service desk. The reproduction team then checks all content for compliance with privacy laws to determine whether it can in fact be copied. If so, the paper copies are mailed at a cost of €0.50 per page plus shipping, with the processing time running at about eight to ten weeks.

A research environment like this one highlights the importance of note-taking without photographic aids, and requires quick judgments of whether a document is worth keeping, copying, or writing about. These judgments are particularly difficult when the narrative that is to be constructed aims to be independent of the structure that has driven the gathering and organization of the materials consulted. Take, for example, the case of Berlin’s 1957 international building exhibition

the U.S. trend was *the* trend and ought to be followed, ignoring the very real space constraints of West Berlin's location within socialist East Germany. Also ignored was the fact that access to suburban homes in the U.S. was for the most part limited to white members of society.

However, the second—short and classified—letter sent from the Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs (Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen) puts these issues in a different perspective. It guarantees the building exhibition's organizers funds to be used to subsidize accommodation for visitors coming to the event from East Germany. Before the construction of the Berlin Wall, crossing the border was possible for residents of both states, but a curfew was in place for returning. The goal of this operation was thus to enable more visitors from the East to experience the superiority of Western living. The city here is a showroom that should represent predominant and future ways of living anywhere in the West. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the first letter not as a commentary on what should be built in Berlin, but on what should be exhibited in Berlin as the present and future in the rest of West Germany. In this vein, the fact that the Minister for Families was not concerned with the details and racial issues that inhered in US suburbanization shows that the goal was not to understand a phenomenon with its implications abroad. Rather, it was used as a decontextualized emblem of progress, which is exactly what the desired suburban homes in West Berlin would have become. The Interbau played an important role in the ideological conflict between East and West. Within Berlin, it was an architectural

response to the megaproject of the Stalinallee, a wide boulevard lined with socialist housing blocks, built in the Russian sector between 1952 and 1960. The two letters make this ideological conflict explicit, while the majority of archival documents do not. Similarly, the ways in which the documents are archived are representative of the dominant and desired narrative of what the Interbau ought to represent, but that is by no means the complete narrative. In fact, the ideological motivation behind the project may weigh more heavily than one would be led to believe going through the finding aids at the Berlin State Archive.

The material constraints of the archive do not have to be visible in the research outcomes. In fact, they are concealed or neutralized in most research, and the focus instead rests on the insights gained and the narrative constructed. However, the relative ease or difficulty of gathering evidence is a reminder of the fact that some narratives are privileged over others. This, in turn, should be a guiding principle of all historical work, in particular of that aiming to decenter narratives that are seen as biased towards a nationalist project. Working in archives is an important part of writing history not only because it holds the promise of providing previously unseen evidence and a more direct encounter with the past, but also because it provides constant reminders that seemingly benign organizational structures and principles may shape evidence in unexpected ways. Such reminders and epistemological vigilance are critical if projects of transnational history that work from bodies of evidence collected in national frameworks are to succeed. The more archival contexts we visit and understand the better. What

follows are brief examples from my own research in Tokyo and New York to demonstrate this.

* * *

I first visited the Tokyo Metropolitan Archives during August 2013, when neither the temperature nor humidity ever dropped below a value of 85. I had rented an apartment in Setagaya ward, a sweaty 40-minute walk away. The facility's protocol is formal; visitor logs are signed, and shoes are exchanged for indoor slippers whose small size reminds me of how inappropriately proportioned my body is in a Japanese environment. The three attendants in the reference room are polite and magnanimous, they jump up and bow in my direction as I walk into the reference room. They clearly realize that it is my first visit, and their somewhat ambivalent body language of friendly formality seems to suggest that they are there to assist me, without being presumptuous about my need of assistance. They also can't be sure that I know any Japanese, which causes some nervousness—as it often does whenever I enter an office, approach a help desk, or address a station attendant. As I am putting my belongings in the locker, I walk towards the desk, and one woman makes eye contact and smiles, whereas the other two are looking down and shuffling around hesitantly. Satsuka-san is the one who speaks English, and Ito-san and Sekiguchi-san start whispering in excited tones when it turns out that I speak Japanese.

While still being bureaucratic and riddled with paperwork, access to materials in Tokyo is easy. All holdings are searchable in the online catalog, and state-of-the-art microfilm readers with built-in printers

and perfectly indexed microfilm reels make the navigation of this medium quite effortless. I am even allowed to photograph all print materials in a private room without supervision. All of this turns me into a hoarder of everything and anything. I am plowing through masses of materials, greatly facilitated by the fact that two of the attendants spring into action if I only as much as wave a new request form from across the room. Piles of books, document folders, and boxes of microfilm reels appear on my desk at dizzying speeds, and every day at 5pm when I leave the archive my eyes are exhausted.

I barely have time to read much of the material that I gather and transfer from the public archive into my own private archive. Most of the files I consult have to do with the postwar reconstruction of Tokyo, the reconstruction plans that were drafted before the destruction even started. I also study major urban projects, such as the planned but unrealized 1940 Tokyo Summer Olympics that were to coincide with the celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the ascension of the mythical first emperor Jimmu. As I am photographing and copying documents as diverse as marketing brochures, newspaper articles, copies of French, English, and German architecture magazines, as well as classified meeting minutes, one name keeps appearing over and over again: Uchida Yoshikazu. Uchida (1885-1972) was a prominent engineer and architect who became the president of Tokyo Imperial University (now, Tokyo University) in 1943 and who was intimately involved in the city's planning following its two biggest catastrophes: the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, and the American firebombing

東京都公文書館 情報検索システム 詳細画面印刷

| 項目 | 内容 |
|----------|---|
| 資料種別 | 資料館入アーカイブ等 |
| 階層 | 個人アーカイブ>内閣府三閣僚資料>内閣府三閣僚資料>日本建築学会論文報告集 第09巻「エホケンチタガツカイロソブン」ありロクシユウ |
| 資料ID | 00543660 |
| 文書・資料種別 | 個人アーカイブ |
| 種別番号 | UJEC-01-011 |
| 資料名 | 日本建築学会論文報告集 第09巻「エホケンチタガツカイロソブン」ありロクシユウ |
| 年月日 (発行) | 昭和19年4月- |
| 年月日 (西暦) | 1943年09月01日- |
| 収録レベル | 100 |
| 収録・収録・収録 | 1/207 |
| 操作 | 紙 |
| 作成者等 | 出版社：日本建築学会 / 著者名：日本建築学会「エホケンチタガツカイ |
| 内容表記1 | 巻数：第09巻 |
| 内容表記2 | 分冊：建築 |
| シリーズ名1 | 内閣府三閣僚資料 |
| シリーズ名2 | 内閣府三閣僚資料 |
| 検索可否 | 利用可 |
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保存一覧 1/207
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at the end of WWII. It is hard to find a planning committee that Uchida was not a part of, and therefore it is no surprise that the majority of planning-related materials I discover are part of Uchida's papers that were absorbed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Archives. Uchida and his records become my own lens for scanning and skimming through decades of the city's urban history. The finding aid to his archive reads like a complete anthology of urban trends and developments in mid-twentieth-century Tokyo.

My approach in Tokyo is quantitative and administrative. I skim finding aids and request materials systematically, giving me the ability to glance at anything that appears significant and transfer it from the public archive to my private archive. I build my own catalog system to not lose track, buy large paperclips and form neat stacks of documents. This archive is a bureaucratic environment in which it is easy for the researcher, too, to turn into a bureaucrat. Official request forms are stamped with the date, the name of the person in charge,

and each item on the list is stamped as retrieved, consulted, returned, and the pages that were photographed or copied are noted. The forms are sorted and filed according to media type, and a perfect and voluminous record is created. The structure of my own research is similar to the archive's organizational structure. I reproduce and collect materials quickly because they are provided quickly, and I document my own searches and search histories almost as meticulously as does the institution.

What I end up with are some official municipal publications as well as an edited and abridged version of Uchida's papers. Compared to my work in Berlin, in Tokyo I rely heavily on a pre-existing narrative. My materials represent a particular perspective on the history of urbanism in Japan. However, this narrative is sorted not according to institutional history, but Uchida's research and policy interests. I am confronted with a researcher's take on Tokyo's history and future, rather than the official documentation of particular projects. Uchida's interest in international models for architecture and urban planning is indicative of Japan's modernization project that aimed to build global relevance for the nation. This took a nationalist and imperialist turn in the early 20th century, leading to a disastrous war. Following WWII, the nationalist styles of architectural and urban design were largely dropped, but the global aspirations were not. Uchida thus conducted research not to provide an answer to the question of what a postwar Japanese city would look like, but what *the* postwar city would look like. The broadly international collection of documents I encounter is a reminder of the

need to question the relationship between the nation that archives materials and the nation represented in these materials. This is only underlined precisely by the fact that it is largely through Uchida's research perspective that that questioning becomes possible.

* * *

New York City is the third and last principal site of my project, and the Municipal Archives are another workspace whose organizational structure is a reminder of the forces that shape historical narratives. There, the finding aids are folders whose worn-out pages have come loose from being turned countless times. All microfilm reels are stored in self-service cabinets, and users are responsible for returning them to their correct location. The dials on the microfilm readers are so worn that it requires considerable effort not to zoom past the desired pages. Those readers equipped with printers are consistently low on toner. When I once asked for a new toner, I was told to "take it out and shake it a little," because "the city has no money to buy new toner."

The reference room in New York is busy, and many people come and go throughout the day. There is constant activity and the space is rarely quiet. In addition to members of the public, many city employees consult archival resources. More than twenty microfilm readers in varying stages of disrepair are available, and competition for them is stiff at times. The staff tends to be overwhelmed by the large number of requests and questions, and thus it is common for patrons to turn to their neighbors when they are struggling to operate equipment. I found myself shaking

toner for other users in my vicinity on at least three different occasions. One woman told me that she was doing genealogical research for her Irish friends and had just found their ancestor's death certificate. She was thrilled to finally learn that he had died from gunshot wounds to the neck, inflicted by the other male participant in a love triangle. "I hope that woman was worth dying for," she said. Together we enjoyed making up possible scenarios that could have led to this tragedy. On another day I met an older woman who said she was a regular at the Municipal Archives. She browses the records to look up dead people, and then writes their information on hand-drawn record cards to avoid paying the fees for copying registrar records. When I asked her what she was doing the research for, she shook her head and responded, "it is just a hobby."

In the midst of this, I came across a microfilmed letter that was unlike any other. An African-American New York resident named Mercedes Owens was complaining to mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia in 1942 about overt racial discrimination she had experienced in trying to secure housing in Morningside Heights.³ She referred to President Roosevelt who had emphasized the importance of social cohesion and national unity in the fight against fascism at home and abroad. Owens pointed out that the existence of discrimination was antithetical to those goals. The response she received from La Guardia's office stated that while the mayor was troubled by the complainant's experience, unfortunately there was no provision of law offering protection. Roosevelt's Executive

3 New York City Department of Records, Municipal Archives, LaGuardia Papers, Reel 197.

Order 8802 from June 1941 banning employment discrimination based on race, color, and creed in government business and the war industry did not extend to civilian society, let alone housing. The letter and its response illustrate how WWII highlighted the friction between political ideals and lived experience. As much as the war helped accelerate desegregation and anti-discrimination movements, its global frame of reference also showed the perseverance of injustice all the more clearly. Owens' exchange with the mayor's office thus is a reminder that the presidential narrative of equality made promises it could not keep, which is not so different from an archive that struggles to provide the resources necessary to guarantee unimpeded access to its holdings.

Searching for materials like this in the New York Municipal Archives is akin to looking for the metaphorical needle in a haystack, without necessarily knowing what a needle looks like. An abundance of microfilmed documents is available, and the bureaucratic barriers of access are low. However, the relative lack of detailed indexing, unreliable hardware, and the at times distracting environment can make targeted research more challenging. The result may be the discovery of items that one would not have necessarily known how to look for, as well as the difficulty of finding documents that ought to be there. This also raises questions over what the official narrative in the archive's organizational structure would be; these questions remain unanswered.

* * *

In reflecting on my experiences of navigating different archival systems, I am reminded of

Franz Kafka's parable *Before the Law*, from his unfinished novel *The Trial*. It tells the story of a 'man from the country' who approaches the law and is stopped by a doorkeeper when he tries to enter. He sits down and waits for many years to be admitted. When he is taking his last breaths, he asks the doorkeeper why no one else ever attempted to enter the law through this particular gate. The latter responds with what is the parable's final sentence: "Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I'll go and close it."⁴

Archival research can be seen as seeking to get into the law, without a clear understanding of what the law is beyond what it is assumed to contain. Organizational structures and bureaucracies of access are important reminders of the forces that shape historical narratives and therefore are as critical to the research project as the objects they aim to protect. This finding is increasingly relevant as a trend towards global and transnational histories emphasizes the need to understand how epistemological hegemonies are archived and historicized. There is a promise in archival research to yield objects that will put history in a new perspective. This begins not only with the interpretation of bodies of evidence, but already with the material practices that are imposed by the structures that guard that evidence. The man from the country in Kafka's parable may have achieved his goal of going before the law by literally *being before the law*, but he didn't realize it because the allure of the enigma inside was too great, and because he didn't question the politics of access until it was too late.

4 Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. David Wyllie (Project Gutenberg, 2005), Project Gutenberg eBook edition, 397.

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New York Municipal Archives. La Guardia papers finding aid.

The idea for this essay was born from a serendipitous conversation with Christianna Bonin and Nisa Ari, and it would not have survived earlier draft stages had it not been for their comments, dedication, and generosity. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments and deep engagement with my writing. Marilyn Levine has patiently listened to many iterations of this essay and has helped chisel it into its current shape. Thanks are also due to the many archival staff members who, more than anybody else, share in the immediate joys and sorrows of doing archival work in the reference rooms of the world.

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Front cover —

Vacuum Cleaning the Oval Office. December 30, 2009. Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy. Licensed for distribution under the CC Attribution 3.0 License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us/>.

Beach reads. SheKnows Media. <http://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/articles/994995/beach-reads-new-must-read-beach-novels>.

Office cubicles in Gulf Worldwide Sales & Marketing Team. November 16, 2012. Photo by Mark Jayson Aranda. Licensed for distribution under the CC Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Back cover —

The Turkish Chess Player. Author: Wolfgang von Kempelen. Copper engraving from the book: Karl Gottlieb von Windisch, *Briefe über den Schachspieler des Hrn. von Kempelen, nebst drei Kupferstichen die diese berühmte Maschine vorstellen*. 1783. Public Domain.

Oil traders on a Monday at the Houston office of US Energy Markets. October 26, 2009. Photo: Oil Industry News. Public Domain.

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Soap factory in Nablus, Palestine. December 13, 2011. Photograph by Tony Wheeler. <http://tonywheeler.com.au/palestine/>.

Portion of a Time Card Style 10-800762. Adams/Acroprint Time for Business. <http://www.acroprintstore.com/timecards-weekly.html>.

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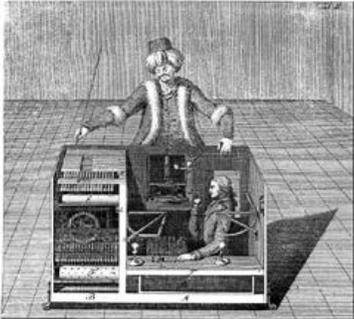
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