

Unleashing the Archive

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An overall view of Bonsall, England, which was the subject of George Jaramillo's historic preservation design thesis "Barnscapes: Mapping Rural Cultural Landscapes." This project examined the challenges that rural communities face when long-established industries are rendered obsolete. Treating the agro-industrial landscape of Bonsall, England as a kind of archive, Jaramillo used mapping as an analytical tool to uncover the patterns and relationships that communicate the region's history. His proposal to develop a biorefinery in Bonsall offers a sustainable and economically viable alternative to tourism. The design features a series of modern greenhouses that follow the contours of the region's rolling hills. (Photo by George Jaramillo, 2004)

# Unleashing the Archive

The archive is protected both physically and ideologically by all sorts of rules, protocols, procedures, and technologies that govern access to the material. The purpose of all this protection is to create a space in which research can occur. It allows one to look closely at documents that probably would have been lost had they not been taken out of circulation and placed in the archive. Thus in a sense, the archive is against time. In fact, the archive is the enemy of time; it is against entropy. Not only are the documents within the archive rescued from destruction, but they then are not allowed to age, even gracefully.

Archivists are experts at making sure that documents don't fade, tear, wrinkle, swell, or change color. Items within the archive are not exposed to too much heat, too much light, too much water, too much anything. Archives exist outside of time, available for future generations of scholars to examine. More precisely, archives are available for generations of people who will become scholars by virtue of the new ways they will look at these documents. Archives await new eyes, demand new eyes.

Very simply, archives keep the past alive. But the word "past" and the word "alive" are highly debatable terms. One can recognize in the title of our *Living Archive Project* the importance of reconsidering what life and death in an archive really means.

The default setting for most architects is that the archive is what is behind them and design is what is in front. Architects cultivate an ideology of experimentation, particularly here at Columbia University. Students and teachers believe that through their work together, they are moving forward and, therefore, away from the archive. The dominant thrust of experimental design is to leave the archive behind. The archive is understood as the opposite of experimental design. Whatever has been archived is what the architect will have to move beyond.

Of course, experimental design at Columbia has a unique history because its archive came first. Our school was built around a unique collection and is even housed in the Avery library so, in a certain sense, the school and its capacity for experimentation comes after and out of the archive. When the school was first founded, the ideology of classical architecture formed the basis of the curriculum. The whole point of the classical is that architecture must obey the law of the archive.

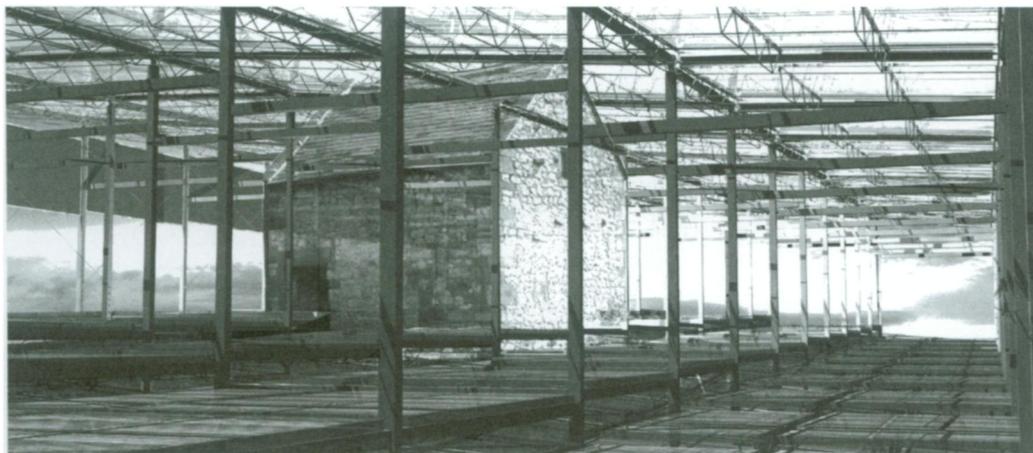
The highest ambition of the classical architect is to reach backward and catch that moment in time in which a built structure acted as a perfect bridge between the physical world and the cosmos, the moment in time in which architecture became a conduit to the timeless.

The centrality of the archival didn't end with the classical. One could also argue that the development of modern architecture followed more or less the same logic, not just in the sense that architecture became "modern" by virtue of the particular way it appealed to and reworked certain historical references and images, but also modern in the way that it redefined the archiving gesture. For instance, one might claim that the production, circulation and publication of photographs of grain silos with which the modern architects launched their polemic constituted an act of archiving. Such photographs effectively took the grain silo out of circulation, freezing it and repositioning it within a high-art architectural collection to liberate a new form of design practice.

Such an intimate bond between an archiving gesture and a transformative gesture leads to the claim that historical research is fundamental not just to design, but to the most radically experimental design. Work can only be experimental by both actively positioning itself relative to existing archives and through new archiving moves. We should also go so far as to suggest that every architect designs an archive in designing a building. If this is the case, then experimental design requires an experimental relationship to the archive. To explore the exact nature of this relationship, we have to understand the ways in which the architect has always been an archivist.

The archivist and the architect are inseparable. At one level this is literal. Every architect collects all of her or his drawings, napkins, correspondence, and so on. The larger the architect's office, the larger the storage space is needed that keeps the documents in museum-like conditions. The official archiving of architectural documents in libraries and museums around the world is a minute fraction of the countless unofficial but highly organized archives distributed all over the planet. Today, one has to add that the dominant trove of documents produced by architects rests inside their computers. Whole new forms of archive have emerged. To watch architects present their projects is to watch a certain representation of these archives.

I do not mean to say that an architect is always an archivist simply because she protects, studies, and publishes documents. More strongly, there is no such thing as designing without an archive. It is not even possible to imagine the act of design without thinking of the archiving gesture. Buildings themselves can be understood as archives, that is, mechanisms for storing, classifying, and making historical research



Jaramillo's design for a biorefinery proposes a network of greenhouses clustered around Bonsall moors' barns, walls, mines and ponds (Drawing by George Jaramillo, 2005).

available. Couldn't we argue that almost every design is, in a certain way, the design of an archiving machine? And wouldn't that be very closely related to the standard claim that architecture can act as a witness and storehouse of the memory of a culture? If that's the case, architects are surely in the business of making archives—archival experts even.

This notion raises the huge problem of how to archive a building since it is by definition too large to fit inside a standard archive. One could argue that the field of historic preservation reconfigures the architectural archive by turning the entire city into a big filing cabinet. Such vast archives without walls take the relationship between archiving and designing to a new level. Inasmuch as design involves gathering together diverse and evolving materials and giving them a singular fixed shape, historic preservation's archiving gesture is always an act of design. To save something is to redesign it.

This leads to the parallel claim from the side of archives, that an unused archive is not an archive. An archive is only an archive when it is entered, or, more precisely, when things come out. When we think of an archive, we tend to think of it as a place to which material has been brought to be protected. However, the act of archiving really happens when the archive emerges through the voice of a particular individual or character. Thus, the archiving gesture protects documents by projecting them rather than concealing them.

This leads to the suggestion that there might be such thing as an activist archivist, one who designs an archive whose purpose is to polemically rearrange the standard perception of the world outside. To change the shape of an archive—the way it is catalogued, who gets in, what the access is, what is being collected, and so on—is to change the direction of thinking. Given that line of reasoning, perhaps it is the case that all archives are activist in as much as such choices have always been made. There is no such thing as a completely innocent and neutral

The biorefinery sits within an abandoned open pit mine. The design attempts to recapture the lost industrial landscape of Bonsall, which Jaramillo uncovered through an analytical mapping process (Drawing by George Jaramillo, 2005).



archive. This means that to carry out this *Living Archive Project*, we are going to have to think more creatively about the architecture of the archive itself, constructing a new kind of archive that preserves documents by circulating them in new ways.

In a way, what we are trying to do with this collaborative project with the Canadian Centre for Architecture is to study and reconfigure the architecture of the architectural archive and thereby come up with more radical concepts of design. We want to test the proposition that the most experimental design work depends on a deep intimacy with the archive—that the archive might be what is front of us, that towards which we move, rather than that we leave behind.

#### Editor's note

This article is part of an informal talk delivered by Mark Wigley at Columbia University on September 19, 2005 at the launch of *The Living Archive Project*, a major collaboration between the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) and the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) to bring archival documents and artworks to life in contemporary design discourse.

#### Author biography

Mark Wigley is Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University. His books include *The Architecture of Deconstruction* and *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. In 1988, Wigley and Philip Johnson organized the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art.

#### Designer biography

George Jaramillo holds a master's degree in historic preservation from Columbia University and a bachelor's degree in architecture from Cornell University. His thesis "Barnscapes: Mapping Rural Cultural Landscapes" was awarded the 2005 Robert C. Weinberg Award for Excellence in Preservation Planning and Design from Columbia University. Jaramillo works for an architecture firm in New York City that designs sustainable residences in upstate New York. His thesis research was made possible by the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Bonsall Field Barn Project.