



Archiving Landscape: A European Network to Address the Current Challenges Facing Landscape Architecture Archives

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Each open space exists within a historical continuity on which decisions about its future development should be based. Landscape architecture archives are the basis for a deeper understanding of the history of designed open spaces and help historians and landscape architects to understand the design concepts and genesis of open spaces. In practice, there is still little awareness of the importance of adequate historical research as a foundation for making appropriate future decisions in the face of global challenges. The fragile character of designed landscapes, the role of vegetation and the scale of projects and plans present archives with specific challenges. To meet these challenges, expertise from different disciplines is required. Historians, art historians, archivists and landscape architects share their experience on these topics in the Network of European Landscape Architecture Archives (NELA) and expand the knowledge of archiving landscape architecture in collaborative projects. The aim of this paper is to explain the relevance of landscape architecture archives for research, education and practice; to delineate challenges for landscape architecture archives and their use; and to address emerging issues that further research in this field may be facing.

Keywords: Landscape architecture; archives; historiography; open space development; Network of European Landscape Architecture Archives (NELA)



The Role of Landscape Architecture Archives

In the competition between the various demands of growing cities, landscape architecture plays a key role in creating high-quality living environments. Over the past three decades, the requirements of social and ecological sustainability, climate change adaptation and an increasing focus on the fact that land is a limited resource have led to a growing awareness of the field of landscape architecture. Landscape architecture is here understood in the broadest sense, as encompassing garden design, landscape design and landscape planning with a strong orientation towards the sciences (ECLAS n.d.).

Like other parts of the built environment, open spaces carry function and meaning; as historical objects, they form part of our common cultural heritage. Designed open spaces have distinct functions and materialities that document ecological, climatic, social, cultural, economic and political changes. As artefacts, they recount a distinct history of use and formal arrangement that to some extent is connected to the other arts. Designed open spaces are expressions of culturally defined ideas of nature (Meinig 1979). Every designed open space has a history that is an essential part of the history of the built environment. Current challenges will lead to another cycle of transformation, adding more layers to the history.

Solutions to contemporary challenges should be based on a deep understanding of history. Accordingly, documents related to gardens, cultural landscapes and other designed open spaces are of great relevance to society; specific archives dedicated to landscape architecture are needed not only to document and learn from past achievements but also to establish continuity between past, present and future.

Landscape architecture archives can bear witness to the constructedness of garden and landscape historiography. Archival records are essential for in-depth historical research on designed landscapes and projects on their restoration, transformation or reconstruction. Archives also contain valuable source material for the development of adequate management and maintenance concepts. Archivists play an active role in shaping societal memory by deciding which documents are preserved, taking account of institutional standards and strategies (MacNeil 2011: 185). Order and systematisation create access to this knowledge, which in turn is reflected in the historiographical presentation (Antenhofer 2020: 14). Thus, archives contribute to the historiography of the profession and the built environment.

An important challenge is the issue of critical practice in the acquisition and interpretation of archival records. Contemporary research, based on archival sources, develops alternative narratives which are detached from single objects and explore the complex nature of designed landscapes, their use and perception (Fundação Calouste

Gulbenkian 2003; Land 2021; Seeber 2020). This archival turn in historiography calls for a new perception and assessment of archival collections, as it ‘rejects the neutrality of historical sources, the privileging of “objective” written records over “subjective” oral histories and, along with them, the trustworthiness of archivists and archival institutions’. Archivists’ work is therefore to ‘make transparent to users the actions they have taken in the course of appraising, acquiring and preserving records, and in making them available for use’ (MacNeil 2011: 185, 186).

But are documents related to open spaces given due consideration in archival strategies for collecting, preserving and communicating? The establishment of dedicated archives on landscape architecture lags behind many other realms (Hennaut 2021: 106; Dooren and Francke 2021; Hellemondts 2002), and, as a result, the use of landscape architecture archives in education, research and practice is limited.

Challenges for Landscape Architecture Archives

Using landscape architecture archives is challenging. The media of landscape architecture records are heterogeneous, with plans, models, photos and textual sources all playing a role in providing a comprehensible insight into a project. To a certain extent, landscape architecture records can be seen as comparable to architectural records, for example in terms of type and scope of media. They convey an idea of the essence of a landscape architecture design, even if it was built in a different way or never built at all. The archives of landscape architecture and of architecture face similar challenges, such as archival acquisition policy and the preservation of records, digitisation and the safeguarding of digital-born records (Wilson et al. 2022; Goudarouli, Sexton and Sheridan 2019), as well as ethical questions potentially connected with the digitisation and online accessibility of analogue collections.

The specifics of landscape architecture need special attention in the work with landscape architecture records. These include the scale of projects, most of them represented in large-format plans, the role of vegetation and the corresponding maturing of gardens, parks and designed landscapes and, as a corollary of this, the fragile character of the work (Buttler 2019: 10). Open spaces are in a state of permanent transformation through natural processes, climate change adaptations, management and maintenance, communitisation, (over)use and adaptation to new contexts. Once an open space is constructed according to a design, that design begins to evolve, in which respect it differs from an architectural project. Adequate maintenance, which is necessary to keep the original idea intact, is mostly a luxury (Buttler 2019: 10–11); but even if the designed landscape is professionally maintained, it changes naturally. The dynamic development of soft and natural surfaces and, above all, of plants contrasts

with the durability of building materials in architecture. Plans show what was projected, but rarely are inventory plans available that show what was actually implemented. That is why additional archival documents, like correspondence, photographs, plant lists and invoices are crucial in providing a comprehensive picture of the historical design and planting schemes (Hennaut 2013: 46). The intrinsically ephemeral nature of plants, soft surfaces and sculpted terrain means that archives can play key role in ensuring the long-term existence — material or virtual — of landscape architecture ensembles (Hennaut 2021). Many historical layers usually coexist, and deciding which fragment and historical phase has the most cultural significance is a matter of comprehensive research and careful consideration.

Today, the pressure of transformation is probably higher than ever. Current challenges include shifting expectations and use patterns connected with demographic changes and technological developments, intensified pressure on use in urban areas and economic pressures relating to ease of maintenance and the feasibility of planting schemes. The most fundamental challenge, however, is posed by climate change, which affects the very essence of gardens and designed landscape as embodied by the planting design, inexorably changing the face of our designed and non-designed landscapes alike. It is extremely important for landscape architects, stakeholders and decision makers to keep an eye on archival records, which document changes that are otherwise difficult to understand.

Other specifics of archiving landscape architecture are less material than structural, and they have an impact on the kind of archival records that are collected, thus shaping society's awareness of the profession and its achievements. For example, planning applications in architecture do not generally require the submission of a plan for the open-space design. In consequence, public archives may hold the architectural drawings but have little information about the adjacent open space. Another case is changes in ownership and accessibility, such as the transition of historic estate gardens to public open spaces. The new authorities do not always preserve the relevant documents; alternatively, the records may have been lost or scattered. Such structural peculiarities of landscape architecture collections reveal the special pitfalls associated with historical research into landscape architecture.

Interdisciplinary, intersectoral and international collaboration is urgently needed for historical reflection and knowledge exchange on conservation practice, the proper use of archival documents and ethical standards (Roberto, Anderson and Crockett 2021), not only for archives and academic research but in education and practice as well. The use of landscape architecture archives is still limited in the professional world of landscape architecture, apart from explicit restoration projects. Many designers tend to start

with a clean slate, with little awareness of the genesis of designed open spaces and the embeddedness of their own practice in the history of their discipline. This is problematic not only in terms of the essential continuity between past, present and future but also in the light of current challenges (Ool 2015). The sustainable development of the built environment requires the sparing use of resources. By maintaining and preserving existing structures in the long term, emissions from the construction of new facilities can be avoided. Building on existing qualities is more sustainable and supports a more circular approach to open spaces. Furthermore, studying an original design can help to identify why an open space may no longer fulfil contemporary expectations, which may lead to an adaptation to new requirements with minimal expenditure while better retaining the legibility of the existing space.

Herein lies an important task for education and lifelong learning: to familiarise designers with the process of collaborating with historical researchers and making use of archival records in their design practices. Through their use in teaching and practice, archives also contribute to the (self-)definition of the discipline.

The Network of European Landscape Architecture Archives

Most European archives and collections on landscape architecture were established at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century and are mainly associated with universities or museums.¹ By contrast, architectural collections with a close relationship to museums had already emerged in the 18th century, followed in the 19th century by teaching collections at universities.² As modernism turned away from classical models and oriented itself towards 'the new', the influence of architecture collections in teaching became less important (Bélier 2010: 10). After the Second World War, the interest in these collections rose again and new archival repositories were established.³ However, archiving landscape architecture has lagged behind. In 2019, a group of academics associated with the field of landscape architecture and garden history established the Network of European Landscape Architecture Archives (NELA). In NELA, experts from different disciplines work together to share knowledge on landscape architecture archives and to better understand the complex history of the discipline from a variety of perspectives.

NELA brings together institutions and individual members: historians, archivists, art historians and landscape architects collaborate and share knowledge on landscape architecture archives, all benefiting from the variety of perspectives represented. So far, representatives of about twenty countries have joined the network, actively engaging in meetings and various projects. NELA is a forum for discussing different questions from both sides, from the point of view of both archivists and users of archives: How

can we meet the challenges of archival work such as collection policy, digitisation or open-source policies? What role do archives play in the historiography of garden and landscape architecture? What are the historical relations between European countries with respect to landscape architecture? How can we make this knowledge visible and use landscape architecture archives better in education and training? How can landscape architecture records be used to support the production and preservation of culturally significant landscapes?

Through different activities, NELA wants to draw attention to existing landscape architecture archives and highlight the relevance of appropriate archival strategies and specific expertise. Drawing on the International Council on Archives (ICA)'s Universal Declaration on Archives, members have established a code of ethics on landscape architecture archives. They also work collaboratively on a glossary to facilitate more precise communication between languages, write joint publications, apply for and work on research projects and share knowledge on integrating landscape architecture archives into education.⁴ Furthermore, NELA is dedicated to sensitising archivists, researchers and the public to the value of landscape architecture fonds, which are sometimes in danger of being overlooked or not being adequately considered. Knowledge is expanded and deepened in joint international research projects to build a comprehensive, multi-perspectival understanding of the history of landscape architecture and to shed light on the development of the discipline in a pan-European context, with all its connections and parallel developments.

By transforming the fragmented history of landscape architecture into a common European knowledge base, NELA contributes to the identity of the professional field occupied with the design of open spaces. The cooperation and exchange within this pan-European multi-perspectival network strengthens not only archival work and research but also archival sciences. Landscape architecture records provide important sources for scholarly research as a basis for taking the right decisions to support the sustainable and resilient development of our designed landscapes in the face of current and future challenges.

Conclusion

While dealing with current global challenges, archives provide relevant sources for research to make the right decisions relating to the (re)design, management and maintenance of open spaces in practice. The engagement with archives must begin in education to strengthen the awareness of the continuity of past, present and future in landscape architecture. However, dedicated archives on landscape architecture are far from established, and, as a result, the use of landscape architecture archives in

education, research and practice is still limited. At the same time, archiving landscape architecture raises specific challenges. These are linked to materiality, such as the intrinsically ephemeral nature of landscape architecture and the nature of landscape architectural records, including digital-born material, but have a more structural character as well, including the choices that are made about the kind of archival records that are collected.

An interdisciplinary, intersectoral and international collaboration is needed for knowledge exchange and reflection on landscape architecture archives and their use in education, research and practice. The Network of European Landscape Architecture Archives aims to collaborate and share knowledge on landscape architecture archives and their use among institutions and individual members.

Notes

- ¹ Archiv für Schweizer Landschaftsarchitektur ASLA, founded in 1982 (Archives of Swiss Landscape Architecture); Archiv Österreichischer Landschaftsarchitektur LArchiv (Archive of Austrian Landscape Architecture) at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, 2002; Historical Archive of Norwegian Landscape Architecture ANLA at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2012; La Fondation CIVA, Centre international pour la ville, l'architecture et le paysage, 2016 (International Centre for City, Architecture and Landscape).
- ² These include École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which holds one of the major architecture collections in France (Bélier 2010: 6); Architekturmuseum der TUM, 1868 (Architecture Museum of the TUM); Semper Museum, a precursor of today's gta Archiv at ETH Zurich, 1880 (Tönnemann and Maurer 2009: 71); Architekturmuseum der Technischen Universität Berlin, 1885/86 (Architecture Museum of the Technical University Berlin).
- ³ In 1945, the first independent museum of architecture was founded in Moscow, followed by the Arkkitehtuurimuseo (Museum of Finnish Architecture; until 2012, Rakennustaiteen museo) in Helsinki in 1956 with the aim of recording the 20th century's built heritage (Voigt 2016: 4).
- ⁴ This work has been published, for example, in Csepely-Knorr et al. (2023) and Lička et al. (2023). A research project funded by AHRC is currently underway: *IFLA 75: Uncovering Hidden Histories in Landscape Architecture*. AH/W011344/1, Nov. 2022–Nov. 2024, with principal investigator Luca Csepely-Knorr, University of Liverpool, and co-investigator Ulrike Krippner, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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