

ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO'S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

The John Gaw Meem Collection has been the basis of a growing treasury of accessible architectural documents.

by Edna Heatherington Bergman

In 1975, John Gaw Meem gave to the University of New Mexico Libraries a rich archive of architectural drawings, photographs, and other documents, along with a substantial donation of money for their cataloging, preservation, and maintenance. This collection has been the inspiration and basis for a collection of architectural records contributed by other architects, their heirs, and other individuals.

The collection and preservation of architectural drawings and related materials was until recently unknown in the Southwest, although architectural libraries exist in some large American cities. The Meem Collection in Albuquerque and the Ponsford Collection of documents of the firm of Trost and Trost (Henry Trost, designer) at the El Paso Public Library are the nuclei of collections which will become important resources for architects, historians, and building owners in the Southwest.

Most architects are aware of the difficulties of preserving and filing construction documents. Many people, until they have some reason to look for plans or other documents of a particular building, suppose that because the city requires plans to be checked before issuance of a building permit, there is a city archive containing all building plans. Architects, who must keep their own archives and are familiar with the problems of sorting and handling project drawings and the cost of flat files, roll safes, and hanging files, understand why the plancheck department automatically discards all drawings after a certain period.

Building owners also lose or discard plans, and plans for homes and residential buildings seem always to disappear. Federal agencies and large corporations, expert users of architectural and engineering services and with large long-term investments in buildings which require maintenance and modifications, keep their own archives. Physical plant managers have extensive and active files, and central depositories hold great volumes of information. It can be difficult, however, for historians or interested outsiders to gain access to such files, which are not kept for historical purposes.

The special architectural collection based on the Meem Collection has been increasingly active, even though there is not a curator assigned to it, and one must make an appointment through the Special Collections Department to use the architectural materials.

The Ponsford Collection in El Paso has been of great and immediate value to historians and building owners throughout the Southwest, for Trost and Trost designed some major building in almost every town of any size throughout New Mexico and much of Arizona and Texas. When the drawings came to light a few years ago, it was at last possible to confirm that the Trost firm designed in Albuquerque the Ilfeld Warehouse (destroyed) and the Old Occidental Building (destroyed), as well as the New Occidental Building, the Sunshine Building, the First National Bank, the Berthold Spitz house, and of course the world-famous Franciscan Hotel (destroyed).

It is appropriate that the generation of permanent public architectural archives should be based on the works - and in the case of the Meem Collection, the vision and generosity - of prolific and well-known architects of the region. But even the modest drawings of an obscure house designer may have an important place in the archives. Such is the work of Beula Fleming, whose papers, donated by her family after her death, tell a story not only of residential styles and individual houses of particular interest built in Albuquerque since the twenties, and of the general history of housing design over some forty years, but also of an individual life of particular interest.

The Meem Collection deserves the support and attention of all New Mexico architects. An informal committee has assisted from time to time in sorting and filing donated collections. An architect ready to retire or at a point to reflect on his career might select materials for donation. A set of drawings and other documents explaining the development of the design of an important building, and its construction documents, would be of great value. One might instruct one's heirs to give selected or collected documents to the collection. And of course, as architects use the collection themselves, they will develop their own ideas of how the archive should be augmented and improved. Thoughtful participation by the architectural community is essential to the growth and usefulness of the collection, and can at the same time refine and expand the horizons of thought and discussion of architectural issues. The Meem Collection is a potentially powerful practical and intellectual tool for the understanding and progress of architecture in the Southwest.

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