

The Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection

Naomi Mullumby and Natasha Story

The Rare Materials Collection of the Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP) Library at the University of Melbourne contains unique works and donations by individual architects and architectural firms, with a focus on Parkville and Melbourne's built environment heritage. The collection is a rich resource for students, teachers, researchers and members of the public. Nevertheless, its heterogeneous nature, and the fact that some holdings remain undigitised and undocumented, mean that much of its research value is yet to be realised.

As librarians, we aim to develop and care for collections. Opening up collections to new uses and for new purposes means that exciting connections can be made and new forms of knowledge produced. The more we work with our collections, the better we understand their value. Often it is through the eyes of library users that a collection's true worth is revealed. Researchers can expose new connections with other collections and identify new lines of enquiry. Our alumni also provide invaluable context by contributing unofficial stories on the provenance of a collection. However, it is the important work done by our student interns that we particularly wanted to celebrate in this article. These students have

worked alongside us on the Rare Materials Collection to conserve, catalogue and digitise its objects, and in so doing they have revealed glimpses of its extraordinary potential and given us pause to think of new types of users of these resources.

Since the early days of the Melbourne University Architectural Atelier, when Leighton Irwin's photography books formed the nucleus of the ABP Library,¹ the ABP Rare Materials Collection has been built mostly on donations. Historically, the collection has always been entwined with student learning: our rare books and ephemera were donated specifically to help students in their endeavours. The largest donation was made by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, but generally the ABP Collection is made up of small donations from individual donors, such as Walter Butler, Ernest Fooks, Eileen Good, Derham Groves, Frank Heath, Leighton Irwin, William Mitchell, Balwant Singh, George Tibbits, Cynthia Trembath and Evan Walker—to name but a few. Original student work makes up a small but significant part of the collection.

The ABP Library has been devising projects through which students can help preserve this collection. Students have undertaken

placements through the Cultural Collections Projects Program, and have been employed as paid staff to help prepare the collection for digitisation. In 2016, Melbourne School of Design students enrolled in the Master of Architecture coursework subject Critical and Curatorial Practices in Design worked with the Dr Ernest Fooks Collection, exploring the work of this Czech-born, Austrian-trained architect (born Fuchs, 1906–1985), who lived and worked in Melbourne after World War II, staging an extensive exhibition in Fooks' house in North Caulfield and producing a substantial publication.² Some of the activities that our students have undertaken include conserving glass slides, faculty handbooks and architectural drawings; cataloguing slide collections; assessing manuscripts; and identifying donors from bookplates and signed copies.

Architecture, building and planning librarian Naomi Mullumby has initiated student projects that help meet the particular needs of faculty members, refining projects over time and making decisions about funding and the allocation of resources. Dr Natasha Story currently works as a librarian in the ABP Library, though in 2013 she undertook a Cultural Collections

George Hastings, *Social and physical problems associated with the replanning and removal of a country town to a new site*, undergraduate thesis, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne, 1956. T1272, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning Library, University of Melbourne.

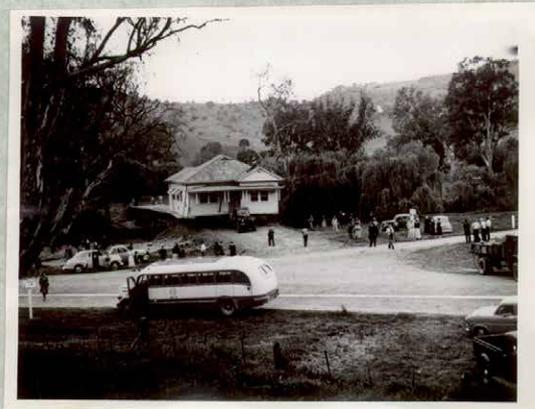
After completing his degree in architecture at the University of Melbourne, George Hastings gained a diploma in town and country planning and pursued a career as a town planner, which included partnership in the firm Rosman, Hastings and Sorel.³

Project. Through our respective experiences, we have seen at first hand the significance of these student projects. We have found that they can bring to light connections between collections and new audiences, reveal little-understood relationships within the collection, or draw our attention to new aspects of the collection. The largest student project undertaken is nearly completed. It involves the conservation of important faculty coursework theses, and at this point offers us the chance to reflect upon the benefits of student involvement and what students and library staff have learnt from the process. But it also gives us an opportunity to consider how we can improve the student experience in future, to exploit the teaching and research potential of the collection, and thereby discover new ways of attracting and involving new users.

Over the summer break of 2016–17, four students—Jesse Clarke, Xin Zhou, Zeb Kitchell and Jennifer Todd—were employed to undertake conservation work on the faculty’s coursework theses collection. This collection is in high demand from students, academics, professionals, historians and investigative or curious home-owners. As the faculty has long historical connections with South-East Asia, it is not unusual to receive



first home being transferred to new site.



crossing new bridge over Mitta Mitta River.

an email from a researcher saying that they are flying in from Singapore or Malaysia on a particular date and time and would like to view a thesis. Each year brings increasing demand for the thesis collection, and it was becoming evident that some of the volumes were suffering from physical wear and tear as a result. In 2016 the ABP Library made a successful bid for faculty infrastructure funds to preserve and digitise the theses, leading to our largest student project to date.

The students spent more than 500 hours working closely with the thesis collection in a process that was conceived and refined in collaboration with the librarians. Firstly, the students conducted a condition survey of the whole collection, noting the conservation requirements. They then went on to briefly assess each thesis to prepare for digitisation. One of the initial priorities to emerge was the re-adhering of photos: more than 26,000 new photo corners were required. Fold-out pages were then re-attached. Finally, more than 370 archive boxes were sent off for digitisation, filled with theses that had been removed from their bindings and placed into archive-grade Mylar (polyester) or polyethylene sleeves.

Working so closely with the collection, the students could observe the range of content, the development

of faculty expertise, as well as trends and changing foci of research over the decades. Jesse Clarke found that the project taught her much about the discipline of architecture:

Although the technology and the industrial processes of architecture have changed a great deal, there are still some wonderful things that can be learnt from the collection. It is interesting to see the way in which architectural theory has changed, and the historical patterns of past architectural trends.⁴

We selected material for digitisation based on levels of academic research interest. Jesse's experience shows us that exposure to a collection can lead to new knowledge and ways of thinking. As the digital theses collection comes online, the student work that these volumes contain can be explored along several known lines of enquiry, such as the influence of émigré architects through teaching in the faculty, or the development of new technologies and their application in solving design and construction problems.

Some of the early theses typify the faculty's explorative approach to ideas, techniques and communication.

Students working on the collection identified commonalities and differences with today's teaching practices. Zeb Kitchell—who also worked with the faculty's Design Studio albums from the 1950s and 1960s—reflected on how the teaching and learning experience has changed over time:

... I believe in the 50s/60s the students had an even higher workload than I do now. Second-year students were expected to design buildings including complete construction documentation, in very short time frames, without the aid of computers. Therefore, the individual topics of design and construction were more integrated than they now are. This is reflected in the practicality of the students' designs.⁵

Zeb also identified the 1950s and 1960s as an important period for teaching in the faculty:

On a personal level I appreciate the logical and progressive flow from project to project in the 50s/60s. For example, students in first year learned about composition/planning by making an abstract model of

David Eyres, 'The Botanic Gardens Reserve 1956', drawing in watercolour and black ink from *Ballarat Botanic Gardens: 100 years of development*, undergraduate thesis, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne, 1956. T0269, Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne.

an arrangement of 3D planes. In the next subject they would add colour to the model, and the next subject materiality and texture. The next subject would be to draw plans of the model, and then elevations, and so forth.⁶

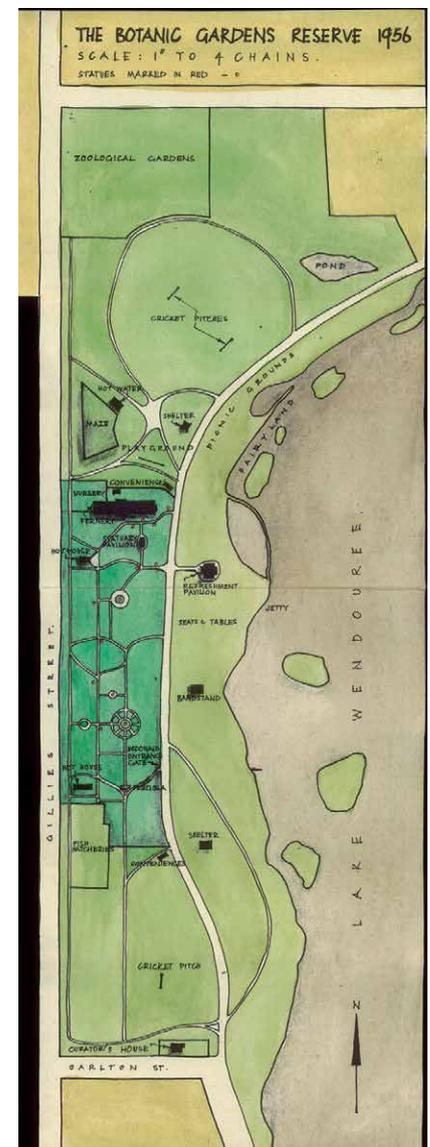
The theses, too, represent an enduring example of the results of teaching in the faculty in the 1950s and 1960s. Being typical student work, some of the theses had been lovingly and laboriously hand-crafted, while others were probably pulled together in a final all-nighter. They contain experiments in bookbinding, early computer-generated graphics, hand-drawn sketches, watercolours, and photographs. 'I regard the theses we are digitising as irreplaceable antiques ... of enlightening conclusions and discussions from students, critical comment from reviewers, priceless historic photos and maps', said Xin Zhou.⁷

In their theses, generations of past students documented buildings, spaces, construction techniques and urban forms that have since been altered significantly or may even no longer exist. They tell a unique story of the history of the university, of Melbourne, and of regional Victoria. Xin Zhou said:

I come from a background of urban planning, and my major always grants me the insight of focusing on city change and urban movement. From these old theses, it is [possible] to obtain knowledge about what old Melbourne looked like through the texts, photos, [and] maps ... These valuable records are of great importance for urban planners to research Melbourne's history and development, as well as a treasure to find the difference between old days and nowadays.⁸

From the librarians' perspective, having students work on the collections brings rewards in opportunities for making digitised materials an integral part of the curriculum. The Master's program has a growing number of studios that tackle ever more diverse design problems, from Design for Ageing to Beyond Biophilia. Our students will help us link the collections to the teaching program.

In 2013, Dr Natasha Story worked with a collection of rare and fragile magic-lantern glass slides from the ABP Rare Materials Collection, as part of the Cultural Collections Projects Program, compiling a thorough inventory



H.H. Long, *Planning Brighton*, undergraduate thesis, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne, 1953. T1308, Architecture, Building and Planning Library Rare Materials Collection, University of Melbourne.

Harcourt Hilton Long (b. 1922) studied architecture at the University of Melbourne as a returned serviceman, from 1946 to 1952, including time at the Mildura campus, and graduated in 1953. He then completed a Master's degree in town planning and pursued a career as a planner, particularly in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, where he was appointed as the first planning officer of the NT and drew up a plan to guide the development of Darwin.⁹

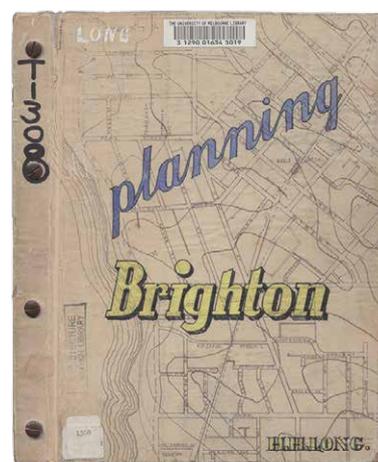
and doing preventive conservation work to ensure the slides' longevity. This led to funding for digitisation through the University Library's priority digitisation program and, early in 2015, the scanning work was undertaken. The files were made available through the university's Digital Repository, thus unlocking the collection's contents to staff and students for research, teaching and learning, and also to the wider community.¹⁰

Natasha was thrilled to work with a unique collection of such physical immediacy, and felt a great responsibility to accurately document and safeguard the glass slides. Having worked in a number of archival organisations (including Public Record Office Victoria and the University of Melbourne's eScholarship Research Centre), Natasha understood that getting this initial process right would determine the future findability and accessibility of the collection, and ultimately lead to greater use. One of the driving forces behind digitisation has been 'liberating resources from the physical barriers of their formats and construction within collections'.¹¹ This is true not only because scanning and then publishing online make collections easier to find and use, but also because they allow us to

see individual objects as discrete items that have their own significance and research value outside their original, intended use.

Valuing the ability of individuals to use collections for their own purposes and to make their own meanings, Natasha was struck by the different potentialities of the glass slide collection. Although the collection's original, intended use was for teaching and research in the Faculty of Architecture (with photographs of classical architecture thought to be used in first-year architectural history subjects in the 1940s and 1950s),¹² Natasha found that the slides could have other research uses. Images of ancient Greek buildings could, for example, be used in studies of post-war travel and tourism. Photographs of backyards along Melbourne railway lines, originally intended for investigations into urban planning, could be used to document social histories of poverty or mid-century suburban Australian life. Collection management, like research, can be an iterative and imperfect process. Natasha, like other student interns, found that it was not until she worked closely with this collection that she started to notice patterns and connections.

How then can these insights be translated into better access and



thus further research enquiry? In Natasha's case, her enthusiastic interest in collections has led to a career in librarianship, first as a University of Melbourne Library Cadet, and later as a librarian in the Faculty of Arts and at the ABP Library. Drawing upon her expertise, we are now endeavouring to geotag (add geographical identification information to) our digitised collections, starting with the glass slides. This is a first step towards assisting researchers to make new connections and uncover new lines of enquiry. It is vital to think creatively about ways to encourage use of the collections. Thus, capitalising on these added layers of metadata, the ABP librarians are seeking new collaborations with researchers in ABP and other faculties. Our experience shows that collections have the capacity to transform teaching and research, and as stewards of these collections we see that a collection benefits from being opened up to the widest possible range of users.

The Cultural Collections Student Projects Program has shown exciting potential for developing new curatorial approaches in our exhibition program and for revealing new lines of academic enquiry. Our collections are important examples



of research infrastructure and we wish to maximise the benefits that our interns bring to them, through their insights and expertise. It has been argued that ‘digitisation is about survival, not just access’,¹³ in that it ensures the survival of research, not just of the object. With this in mind, the ABP librarians aim to involve new users and promote the value and potential of our special and much-loved collections.

Naomi Mullumby is the architecture, building and planning librarian at the University of Melbourne. She has a strong interest in the conservation and preservation of library collections through digitisation, and facilitating access through building digital collections.

Dr Natasha Story is a librarian based in the Architecture, Building and Planning Library at the University of Melbourne. Natasha has wide experience in Victorian cultural institutions, and a passionate interest in the significant role that collections play in the national cultural landscape.

The Architecture, Building and Planning Library is on the ground floor and basement levels of the Melbourne School of Design, Parkville campus. See library.unimelb.edu.au/architecture.

1 Graeme Butler, ‘Irwin, Leighton Major Francis (1892–1962)’, *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 9, Melbourne University Press, 1983, published online by National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/irwin-leighton-major-francis-6804/text11771, viewed 11 February 2018.

- 2 See *Ernest Fooks: The house talks back*, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, 2016.
- 3 Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter, *Register of significant architecture: Norwood Park Crematorium*, p. 3, www.architecture.com.au/docs/default-source/act-notable-buildings/norwood-park-crematorium.pdf?sfvrsn=0
- 4 Jesse Clark, personal communication, 19 December 2016.
- 5 Zeb Kitchell, personal communication, 18 July 2017.
- 6 Kitchell, personal communication.
- 7 Xin Zhou, personal communication, 16 December 2016.
- 8 Xin Zhou, personal communication.
- 9 Built Heritage Pty Ltd, *City of Boroondara Balwyn and Balwyn North heritage study (incorporating Deepdene & Greytborn)*, 2015, p. 126; Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory, Hansard, 28 November 2012, parliament.nt.gov.au/business/hansard/transcripts/listing/nest_content?target_id=345733&parent_id=358614.
- 10 See ‘University of Melbourne Library: Digitised Collections: Special Collections: Architecture, Building and Planning Library: Glass Slides Collection’, digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/55798.
- 11 Roxanne Missingham and Ingrid Mason, ‘Cinderella collections come to the digital humanities ball’, in *VALA 2018: Libraries/Technology and the Future*, conference proceedings, 2018, p. 12.
- 12 Sarah Charing and David Nichols, ‘“A pretty good collection of two by twos”: Magic lantern glass slides in the Architecture, Building and Planning Library’, *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 17, December 2015, pp. 3–11.
- 13 Dr Benjamin Penny (director, Australian Centre for China in the World), quoted in conference presentation (PowerPoint slides), for Missingham and Mason, ‘Cinderella collections come to the digital humanities ball’.