

Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects of Archival Material



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Abstract

Some citations extracted from the literature on the archives are used as a pretext to reflect on what could be defined as the characteristics, or even properties, of the material preserved in a construction archive. The object of the analysis is acts and documents – generated through activities related to the management of a complex of institutional edifices. – to be examined (or evaluated) as functional instruments, both from the context in which they originate and the conservative phase in which they are destined when they are no longer effective.

Keywords: Technical archives; Documents; Cartography

Introduction

The various aspects detectable from the documents preserved within a building archive, become the object of evaluation in order to gain a better comprehension of what could be defined as the functional and cultural features of the deposited material. The ordinary (or current) dimension and the conservative one allow a reading of the transformations that invest the documents. These transformations are related to the status to which they belong at the moment of their creation – as means aimed at achieving determinate objectives – and verifiable in their active and finally conservative path.

Functional and Cultural Characteristics of Archive Material

The term document is generally used to describe the various archival materials or can be better defined as: *“Any material object that can be used (in original or in reproduction) as a tool for study, consultation, investigation, or as a support for certain research (graphic, iconographic, photographic, visual, phonic documents, etc.)”* But also *“In its main meaning the word document indicates every means (in particular, and originally, a writing) that allows to pass on (perpetuate) the memory of a fact proving its accuracy and modalities”* [1].

The assertion derived from a text published in the early 1980s, in addition to widening the range of materials for which the expression may be used, underlines their role as an active part in the activities of study and research. Plausibly the

information retrievable from a documental complex, as well as performing concrete functions [2], becomes an instrument for purposes that go beyond the role for which it was generated. The practical side of the documents emerges when they become necessary. From the conservative phase they regain value in the situation for which they have returned to be useful. Of course, the cultural vocation of the single element also depends on its belonging in typological and qualitative terms. For example, a thematic map (topographic/settlement) of the early twentieth century will have lost part of its effectiveness in representative terms due to the geographical transformations that must have taken place over the decades in the territory reproduced. Therefore, it will not have a much reliability if it is evaluated with reference to the purpose for which it was created, but it still remains as the photograph of a regional area in a certain epoch. This aspect will render it valuable for cultural initiatives (such as exhibitions) and historical research on the territory.

Like other factors, typology and quality related to the documents stored depend on the activity of the Subject (such as the Agency, or Association) from which they are produced. While the term typology, in relation to archival documents, might suggest a classification that takes into consideration their format (Letter, Report, Drawing, etc.), the term quality could be connected to the content (Electrical diagram, Technical report, etc.) and, therefore, to the argument or object of the document. It is evident as definitions often cover a relatively wide series of alternatives

associated with the functions performed. An Archive formed by the conservation of material coming from environmental issues, will have specific characteristics related to the implementation of the functions relevant to the producing agency. In this case, it is a prevalence of documents concerning the state of health of the elements that constitute (compose) nature, environment and landscape in a general sense. [3], Even collections formed by the material produced from different activities will have within them documental groupings of the same type. The most immediate reference is one coming from material originated through administrative action, a sector probably common in any productive segment. [4].

A definition of Archive could be as following:

“The set of documents produced (formed) by a natural(physical) or legal (juridical) person (or a part of this last) - or even, we add, by a de facto association - in the course of the execution (implementation) of its activity and therefore linked (the documents) by a necessary constraint, the which ones, after the loss of interest (effectiveness), they have been selected for permanent conservation as cultural heritage” [5].

The proposed citation expressly mention *constraint, interest and cultural heritage*, as representative definitions that will attempt to interpret the characteristics detectable (perceptible) in the archive material. The relations (*constraint*) existing between documents, generated through different processes, could also be identified in what are the objectives and the finalities to be achieved. A meeting report and a project drawing are elements originating from types of diverse activities. The first one could be the minutes of what was defined within the board of a company and the second one is the graphic representation relating to a requalification project of an area/edifice belonging to the same company. In this case, a simple reading makes clear the association between the final act of a decision process formalized through a report, and the executive project concerning the object (building/area) of the intervention and connecting element of the two documents.

It is mainly the time factor that determines the cause for the loss of *interest* in the material conceived by the ordinary activities of the subject (company, association, etc.) or the producer. The term *interest* presumably refers to the valence, limited in time, of acts and documents finalized or aimed at specific objectives. They present significant discrepancies even in their timing efficacy if they are evaluated in the context in which they took form. A planimetry reproducing a determined area might reveal useful information for a certain number of years, in absence of interventions to redefine the concerned zone. A financial writ will photograph the situation of a certain period that has elapsed and thus it will not be reliable anymore if considered for a specific purpose.

It is probably the historical dimension, inherited and achieved by documents with the passage of time, which confers to an

archive the *cultural* significance. The two citations [6] reported below reiterate what has just been affirmed.

“The archives have to be considered historical heritage, material evidence having the value of civilization and are included, rightfully, into the category of cultural heritage” and “The concluding document of the Second National Archives Conference affirms that to take account of the transformations intervened in the last fifteen years, it is today necessary to initiate a policy of safeguarding and enhancing of the archives that assumes as determining factor their character which historical source”

It is necessary to consider the value of documents in terms of narration, namely their impact on identifying a situation, a period or an event that has been decreed simple or consisting of complex transformations. [7]. In the technical-construction ambit, reports, correspondence and drawings allow for the re proposition of a projectual route related to the realization of an edifice or the redefinition of an area, highlighting operational aspects and decision-making processes. Therefore, the connections that exist between the quality of material preserved in a technical archive and the historical reading relating to architecture and territory remains significant.

Effectively, what originated from interventions belonging to the construction sector [8] —in addition to the inside documents recoverable in other types of archive (generic correspondence, administrative material, etc.)—includes graphic representations, technical documents and the product of operations relating to the design and maintenance of buildings and pertinent external spaces as well. [9] The qualitative peculiarity of what is preserved in a Fund of this nature requires a polyvalent reading - sectorial and cultural - as suggested by the solicitations deriving from the material object of safeguarding (*tutelage*), the source of technical and historical information.

The relations that subsist (exist) between documents [10] are an integral part of an archive. The term might suggest connections of different kinds. The ones related to the purpose have been exemplified previously. On the other hand, even the content and provenance (of documents) might lead to a relational analysis in the light of specific aspects. The production of every single element (letter, report, drawing, etc.) may derive from a common matrix, this last one determining the comprehension related to the associations existing between different materials.

The extract reported below resumes the argument and affirms:

“If the archive is the complex of the documents and their reciprocal relations, its meaning shifts with the variation, even partial, of these relations. In fact, if in a given period the documents have been positioned in a certain way and another period in more or less dissimilar ways, this means that the same ones have had a diverse form of utilization, and consequently they have had, in a certain sense and within certain limits, a different value” [11].

Therefore, according to the assumption just mentioned, aggregation and positioning could become an interpretation that is key to the use of documents. Effectively, the cohabitation in the same unit, more or less wide, of elements of various origins might be determined by the functions absolved of the same ones. A test certificate and a graphic scheme relating to the same electrical system come probably placed together once the necessary plant maintenance is completed. And in (the) presence of their displacement, it is possible to hypothesize a diversified use of the same ones for administrative or other reasons.

A document, as time goes by, may assume diverse valences. It can be created for a specific aim, be reused for other purposes and be consequently repositioned (physically and thematically) one or more times. The plan of a building comes during its project process in the form of a drawing of the same and realistically later when it is placed together with the materials required during the initial phase of the new construction. During the years, it will come reused whenever there is the necessity for maintenance interventions and, presumably, new material will be inserted in the new documental aggregations due to the various technical actions that are undertaken. But it might also be attached to administrative and accounting documents in the case of commercial transactions or during operations that are not strictly of a technical nature.

The ordering of acts and documents is an argument that is treated in different ways in the literature on archives. A recurring element, probably recognized by insiders, is the reconstruction of what had to be the initial structure (if changed over time) of the archival object of re composition, namely the disposition of material according to criteria determined at the origin. In effect *"The documents that constitute an archive come collocated according to a certain order which is the one given by the agency that produces them. Over time this order may be modified as a result of various (different) reasons. The archivist, called to reorganize the archive, has to reconstruct and if possible restore, the original order according to which the agency that had produced those documents had arranged to classify and articulate them in series, because from the reconstitution of that original order already descends a first and fundamental possibility of information relative to the organization and the functions of the agency"* [12].

The last part of the citation underlines the relevance of the documents as instruments that can be used to comprehend the connotations of the producer (Agency, Company, etc.). The concentration of material deposited on the shelves, with time, becomes an element of narration on the vicissitude of the institution, which reveals its structure, activity, evolution and the context in which it is inserted. The indication that can be derived is the usefulness of the documents in the reconstruction of facts and situations relating to a recent or distant past; therefore their importance lies within the different forms of historiographical

investigation [13].

Final Considerations

The analysis conducted in this writing has highlighted different aspects connected to the characteristics of the archival material and has underlined the different types of reading that can be used to comprehend its potentiality. Practical and cultural purposes, as they have been understood before, are part of this conservative dimension and is supported by the evolution of technology. Unlike the previous period, the advent of the digital world has probably allowed a major efficacy in access to information. This consideration is perhaps more valid for archives of large size. The variation in the modality of document research has probably expanded the conditions of accessibility and the fruition of material inserted in demanding dimensional contexts. The minor archives, presumably, may have maintained the direct approach through which the documents are perceived and utilized.

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