Mixed Media

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A Mixed Media Reappraisal Project

by Tricia Gilson, Archivist, Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives, Bartholomew County Public Library

Architectural models, for architects and designers, are tools of their trade. For archivists, these records prove challenging due to their complex structures, ephemeral materials, and size. The Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives (CIAA), an architecture-focused archives based on the Modernist architecture in Columbus, Indiana, houses numerous architectural models, in addition to architectural drawings, administrative project files, and paper-based materials. When I began working as the CIAA archivist in 2014, I was tasked with "stabilizing the collection" of 74 architectural models, occupying over 350 square feet. I didn't realize at the time that this daunting project would eventually become a five-year reappraisal project that involved conservators, art handlers, photographic documentation, deaccession, and creative new housing.

I set out to prepare myself for the task by learning as much as I could about models from their uses in architectural practices and in archival repositories, as well as the challenges of caring for them. I also studied CIAA's collection, its provenance, its strengths, and its weaknesses. For the building project associated with each model, I searched CIAA's collection for any related materials including photos of the model, drawings, and documents. To organize this information, I expanded an existing Excel spreadsheet to include each model's provenance, accession and inventory numbers, project name, creator's name, creation date, dimensions, physical location, and type of housing, as well as if the project was built, and the model's purpose and its focus. To assign a purpose and a focus to each model, I utilized the rubric outlined in Margo Delidow's article on architectural model conservation.[1]

The state of the models spanned from pristine to ruin, and many of them were stored in an environment that would only encourage deterioration. Small models were stored in the architectural archives located in the public library, which maintained a stable temperature and humidity. The larger models were stored in a former industrial building that lacked air filtration, cooling, and humidity control. Many models were still housed in shipping crates built for an exhibit in 1986. Some were stored in cardboard boxes; others had no housing at all. Lacking the expertise myself to evaluate their condition, we engaged a conservator experienced in treating architectural models to conduct

The entire model in a plan view

a cursory condition assessment of the models. We hired a team of art handlers to open the crates for inspection, and the conservator spent two days reviewing the models. To each model, the conservator assigned a numeric score from zero (damaged beyond repair) to five (undamaged) and offered commentary. This information was added to the spreadsheet.

Prior to the conservator's visit, I had not been able to physically see many of the models. Given their size, it simply was not possible to access them as a lone arranger. To remedy their inaccessibility but also to document the models themselves, we applied for and received grant funding to photograph all the models. We hired a photographer with many years of experience documenting both museum collections and architecture. We sought two types of photos. The first type captures the model as an artifact with views of all sides. The second type attempts to create views as if one were in the model; architects often use this approach when photographing their own models.

When I turned to reappraisal, I asked the same questions of each model: Does it fall outside CIAA's collecting scope? Does it duplicate materials in the collection? Does it provide little research potential or none (with respect to the collecting scope and mission)? Is it damaged beyond repair? Is CIAA unable to provide appropriate care for it? Does its condition threaten the collection? Answering "yes" to any of the questions could be a reason to consider deaccession. In practice, however, only if a model's condition threatened the collection was it automatically deaccessioned. Two models found with significant mold infestations were removed immediately from storage and disposed of.

A detail of the model showing the tennis courts and a playground area

The photography set up for the project, showing the scale of the model

Of all these questions, the most difficult concerned the research potential of each model. Generally speaking, study models hold greater research potential than presentation models; likewise, primary models made by the architects hold greater research potential than secondary models made by third parties. There were, however, many exceptions, and these exceptions underscored the importance of documenting well-defined processes and collecting criteria for reappraisal projects.

I would like to say the reappraisal process went smoothly, but in one crucial way it did not. Although the CIAA board had asked me to do this work, several board members were opposed to deaccessioning any model without having approval from design professionals. Perhaps I had been naïve, but I had not anticipated this. Several design professionals from the board weighed in on my recommendations for deaccession, and they rejected nearly every one of my recommendations. Each model, they argued, helped "tell the story of architecture in Columbus." It seemed we were at an impasse.

What happened next might be considered a miracle of sorts. CIAA did not have the financial resources to care for the collection or to maintain professional staff. The board's charge that I "stabilize the collection" could not be achieved without support from another organization. The CIAA board determined the best course of action was to transfer the entire collection to the Bartholomew County Public Library (BCPL). CIAA had since its start in 1969 been located at BCPL's main branch, and, in 2018, the CIAA collection officially became part of BCPL. The nonprofit organization known as the Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives became the Friends of CIAA whose mission is to support the collection.

Once the collection was transferred to the library, we removed 40 models through deaccession, leaving 34 in the CIAA collection. What happened to those that were removed from the collection? Only one model was transferred to another collecting organization; efforts to transfer others were fruitless. Three were returned to the donors; in one instance, the return was stipulated in the deed of gift. Because our collection documents our community, we worked with building and site owners to see if they might want them. Most had no interest, but the school corporation took three models, and the city, two. Two were transferred to a local graduate program in architecture. Five were removed from CIAA's collection but remain at the library on display. The remaining 24 were destroyed.

Where deaccession is irreversible, reappraisal is iterative. Among those we retained are several about which the next archivist may wonder why. The reappraisal project, including deaccessioning, took five years to complete. When models were moved from the off-site storage to the archives in 2019, I began to make custom housings for each. Today, just seven lack archival housing. Because the reappraisal process entailed improving the intellectual control over collection materials and documenting all the models photographically, this portion of our collection is more accessible and frequently used.

NOTE

1. Margo Delidow, "Architectural Models: Materials, Fabrication, and Conservation Protocols," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 52, no. 1 (2013): 1–12; http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751291.