

Towards a blueprint for a community supported architecture collection for Flanders

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Overview

This paper will focus on the experiences and results of the appraisal project which the Flanders Architecture Institute is conducting this year, with financial support of the Flemish Community. The project's goal is twofold: (1) Establishing a collection profile for the "as is" and "to be" collection and (2) Creating and testing the model of a "networked collection", where the constitution and maintenance of a collection is the responsibility of a network of partners. For both goals, community engagement is essential.

Project context

On 1 January 2018, the Flanders Architecture Archives were formed within the organisation of the Flanders Architecture Institute. This organisation will operate as the heritage department of the Institute. The Flanders Architecture Archives embeds the Architecture Archives of the Province of Antwerp (APA).

The APA came into being in the late 1980s, and over the years, it created a collection which documents the history of the built environment and architectural practice from 1800 until the present day. The Flanders Architecture institute, on the other hand, developed from 2003 onwards a service-provision role for architectural heritage in Flanders.

As such, the Flanders Architecture Institute has become a fully-fledged specialist institute for architecture, with the largest collection of architectural archives in Flanders.

The need for collection appraisal

Now, the Institute is challenged by new questions regarding the management of a heritage collection. We are faced with limited repository space, new proposals for archive acquisitions, higher demands for public visibility, digital born archives and so on...

To make intelligent choices, we need a strong foundation in the form of a collection profile. The collection profile must provide us with an outline framework within which the collection can be expanded and managed. Therefore, the existing APA-collection needs to be appraised.

The importance community engagement

To have a successful building project, community participation and dialogue between architects, policy makers, inhabitants, private companies... is necessary. The same thing holds true for documenting the history of the built environment. If we want a collection with a maximum of use potential, and where the community feels attached to, their opinions need to be listened to. The

international heritage community is well aware of the importance of participation in the value assessment of collections. Values are after all social constructions.

Still, practical deployment of community participation in collection appraisal remains rather scarce in Flanders. Our appraisal project aims to be a testbed for this approach.

The power of a networked collection

In Flanders, architectural archives and objects are spread over a wide range of heritage institutions, with only a few “hubs” or concentrations of architectural material, like the Flanders Architecture Institute collection. Though we mostly regard this as a disadvantage, this situation can also hide some strengths.

Instead of making the documentation of Flemish architecture the sole responsibility of one single institution, the distribution of collections over multiple organisations, each with their own point of interest, may very well prove to result in a more balanced, complete and community-supported architectural collection.

In practice, however, we see that this kind of networks seldom are created organically. There needs to be a coordinating institution and there needs to be a set of rules. Regarding the service-provision role it has developed for more than 10 years, we believe the Flanders Architecture Institute is well placed to assume this role.

About the author

Wim Lowet is an historian and archivist and works since for the Flanders Architecture Institute. His main focus are *born digital* archives from architects and methods to preserve them. He has led various projects and research regarding born digital architectural heritage. Since 2017, he is committed in the heritage appraisal programme from FARO, the Flemish interface centre for cultural heritage. In 2018, he coordinates the project *Towards a blueprint for a Flemish architecture collections* for the Flanders Architecture Institute.