

## Book Review

Peter Lester

---

**Albena Yaneva, *Crafting History: Archiving and the Quest for Architectural Legacy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020, paperback £21.99, pp.238**

Since the 1990s, interest in the archive as a site active in the production and shaping of knowledge has developed across a number of disciplines and, within the field of anthropology, the forms that this has taken have ranged from archival ethnographies – methodologies that employ archival material as a way to trace lived experiences in the past – through to ethnographies of archives themselves. These last have varied in scale, from studies that, for example, consider the forms and modes of individual documents (Riles 2006) to the production of recordkeeping systems (Stoler 2009), revealing the bureaucratic and cultural ontologies of the organizations and societies that created them. Yet the ethnographic study of the processes of archiving itself – of the everyday business of acquisition, cataloguing, conservation and use, and how such activity works to produce certain forms of knowledge – remains largely unexplored.

*Crafting History: Archiving and the Quest for Architectural Legacy* sits at the intersection between architecture, archives and anthropology, focusing on how the process of archiving produces and generates the epistemological foundation of architectural history. Whilst architectural archives are used by historians and others as sources for research, study and ongoing architectural practice, the actual archiving process itself – the formation and maintenance of architectural archives; the ways in which archival objects are categorized, described and preserved; and thus how they form the basis on which architectural history is constructed – has rarely been considered. What Albena Yaneva calls for here is an ‘anthropology of archiving’ (56) as a way of understanding the epistemological nature of architectural history; to move from ‘archives as sources’ to ‘archives as practices’ (56-7), thereby unpacking the methods that shape or craft the way architectural history is written and understood. This focus is considered timely, situated as it is within a context defined by increasing reflexivity with and use of archives by architectural historians and growing awareness of the socio-political framing of architectural practice. *Crafting History* uses an ethnographic study of the Canadian Centre for Architecture to examine the processes of archiving that happen as part of architectural practice.

As mentioned above, epistemic and conceptual interest in the notion of the archive has been a feature of study within the arts and social sciences since the 1990s, and Yaneva discusses these various ‘archival turns’ and their relationship to architecture in the early part of the book. In the introduction, Yaneva describes the ‘aggregate’ nature of archiving that reveals architectural history as something fluid and dynamic, shaped by a ‘diagram of active forces’ that reformulate new understandings of and possibilities for architecture (23). The notion of the archive as active in the shaping of knowledge and meaning, rather than (or in addition to) the archive as documentary records of the past, is elaborated in more detail in Chapter 1. Here, Yaneva draws on the philosophy of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur to consider the archive in relation to power, memory and loss, before tracing the effects of such thinking in the fields of art, anthropology and archival science, including reflexive and ethnographic approaches. Indeed, it is refreshing to see archival science interwoven here with other disciplines, since this has not always been the case (see Caswell 2016), although this discussion primarily focuses on scholarship around architectural archives rather than wider critical archival studies literature. In Chapter 2 Yaneva focuses in detail on the nature of the

archive within architecture and how scholars within the field of architectural history have used archival material in their research. Here she elaborates on the lacunae within architecture concerning the process of archiving and clearly articulates how an ethnographic approach to archiving can provide new methods and insights for anthropologists, architects and archivists.

Throughout the next five chapters we travel with Yaneva through the vaults, studios and laboratories of the Canadian Centre for Architecture as we follow the various stages of the archiving process. The granular detail afforded to these processes may be familiar to readers with a knowledge of the professional practice of recordkeeping, including in museums. But it is helpful to keep in focus the book's aim of articulating how these processes together build the basis from which knowledge is constructed and which the architectural historian uses to formulate their histories. The concept of original order, a key principle of archival theory, for example, is unpeeled to reveal the spatial and temporal nature of the archive and how it 'mimics' the irregular and messy processes of design (70). Yaneva's account offers new perspectives on how archiving generates different and varied forms of knowledge: for instance, the 'knowledge how' – the 'performative', actionable, craft-like, networked knowledge of archiving – enables but is also distinguished from the 'knowledge that/about', the kinds of 'propositional' knowledge produced by architectural historians (152; 186). These discussions articulate the ways in which archiving enables and generates new forms of scholarship and historical research, thus pointing to how knowledge is bound within the archive and how it becomes the basis for architectural history.

Throughout, the relationship between the fluidity of the archive and the architectural design process comes to light, demonstrating the social processes that entwine both. Moreover, the book stresses the mediated nature of archiving, giving presence to the many actors (Yaneva notes how many of them are women) who otherwise remain invisible throughout these processes. These 'friends of architectural objects', as Yaneva terms them (4), brings to the surface the 'networks' of people, places and objects and the social processes that formulate and construct the archive, as well as some of the immersive methodology used by Yaneva in her research.

Perhaps the key player that is not represented here is the user: the researcher, the exhibition audience, the more 'general interest' visitor. Yaneva acknowledges that the interpretations and political meaning-making of users sits outside the limits of the book, yet it is still interesting to theorize the processes of archiving that happen at the interface between archivist and user, and the active forms of knowledge that are generated there. Overall, this is a rich and detailed study which is clearly of value to students of architecture, architectural history, anthropology and archival science. There is also something here for the museum scholar: the book points to the epistemic nature of collecting and, through its granular study of the processes that act upon and form those collections, reveals the interventions and mediations of individuals in the shaping of knowledge. For those working in and researching all types of collecting and memory institutions there is much here that can inform and provide new insights into how such work forms the basis of learning, scholarship and research.

*Peter Lester*

## References

- Caswell, M. (2016) "The Archive" is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contribution of Archival Studies', *Reconstruction*, 16 (1) <https://scholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>.
- Riles, A. (ed) (2006) *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Stoler, A. (2009) *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.