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Back to the Stone Age: How Clemson's Architecture Library Built a Builders' Sample Collection

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How Clemson's Architecture Library Built a Builders' Sample Collection

Gypsey Teague and Kathryn Wesley with photos by Susan Long

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Libraries are no longer bound by print and paper. In this digital age, where Library 2.0 is a buzzword among the academic librarians, online resources are increasingly becoming the norm. How, then, do librarians serve students of construction, landscape architecture, and architecture, and provide them with hands-on examples of materials they will encounter once they graduate, when most databases represent these products only in the form of online images? This was one of the problems faced by the Gunnin Architecture Library at Clemson University when a new Master's program in Landscape Architecture was initiated two years ago.

The Gunnin Architecture Library supports undergraduate programs in Landscape Architecture, Architecture, Art, and Construction Science, graduate programs in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Art, Real Estate Development, Construction Science, and Regional and City Planning, and two Ph.D programs, one in Environmental Design and the other in Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design. With over 900 students enrolled per semester, there developed a need for a collection of products that students could examine before calling them out in designs and projects.

This collection began with a single brick left in the library by a student. The assignment had been to find and show a product that would be used in the design of a playground. In addition to the aforementioned brick, students also brought bags of mulch, river rocks, pieces of tire, and various other materials to class. After the assignment was over, the student left the brick in the library on one of the tables downstairs among the stacks. From there, it migrated to the main

floor to serve as a door stop. It eventually ended up on a desk as a large paperweight.

That brick became the inspiration for a larger and more complex collection of tactile materials. Discussions among library staff and faculty led to the idea that there were many examples of bricks, glass, and tiles used in the industry that such examples would be beneficial to have on hand. Further, there was an array of materials from metal signage to edging, as well as row upon row of building materials catalogs in both print and CD formats.

After some investigation, it was found that a few other universities had similar collections. Some circulated materials, others did not. The Materials Lab at the University of Texas @ Austin has over 12,000 samples, which their circulation staff report are used extensively. Another library with a building materials collection is Platte University in New York City. Both libraries serve the general public as well and their university communities.

The staff next faced the question of how to acquire materials for the collection. The 2005 national conference of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) presented the answer. Exhibitors at any conference, whether ASLA, ALA, or Star Trek, are willing to provide, at minimum, a catalog and price list. In the case of landscape architecture and construction science product providers, they are also generally eager to send samples of all their products. By the end of the three-day event, requests for samples had been given to more than 500 vendors. Vendors were told that their materials were to be used by students in the studio and on actual job sites and were asked for their most

extensive sample packs. The vendors proved enthusiastic, and samples began arriving two weeks later, at times by the bin full. Eventually, almost 300 representative samples sat in boxes and on the floor in the Architecture Library's media and equipment room.

Once those first folders, binders, samples, CDs, and other items were in some initial semblance of order, the staff met to decide what type of system for cataloging and retrieval should be used. First, a searchable database was created with Microsoft Access using the Construction Specifications Institute Master Format 50 subject headings. These 50 categories apply to anything from concrete to transportation and identify the products or services by group (either Procurement and Contracting or Specifications), subgroup (General Requirements, Facility Construction, Facility Services, Site and Infrastructure, or Process Equipment), and finally, division. Clemson chose CSI MF 50 because it is used throughout the construction and design professions, and staff thought that a subject scheme standard to the industry would enhance the usefulness of the database.

During the first year, 285 vendor packets were received, cataloged, and placed on the shelves. The materials database soon began to have an impact on the quality of student projects. The ability to touch and experience a product first-hand helps students appreciate the nuances of different types of stone, concrete, recycled plastics, and artificial turfs. Their designs have begun to show a marked improvement in quality of products, and they are able to create better specification sheets because the product books are in the library.

Technical innovations at the next year's ASLA Conference in Minneapolis made sample collection easier. Conference cards were equipped with magnetic strips, and conventioneers were able to swipe the cards if they wanted information sent to them. After the conference, over 700 additional samples were received by staff at the Architecture Library. The collection continues to grow as faculty receive samples from vendors and send back specification books from meetings they have with individual suppliers.

The staff fully realized the significance of the collection when a student was preparing a patio design in "true red" pavers. In the catalog, these pavers were such a deep red as to be almost maroon in color. The student was planning to use pyracantha coccinea as a background planting. The dark green leaves and bright orange berries had a striking effect as a background to the red pavers as pictured in the catalog. However, the color of the physical paver was an orange-hued maroon. When held up against the orange berries, the true color of the paver washed out the effect of the berries and was totally inappropriate. If the student had not been able to look at the color of the sample pavers and berries together, she would have recommended a design that would have failed miserably.

While much of library service is evolving toward the digital, this collection continues to remain and grow in the physical. Therefore, there is still the problem of the space required to house such an extensive collection. The collection has grown from three shelves at one corner of the main floor to an entire wall; however, the positive reaction from the students has more than made up for the limitations placed on the space. The library has had to designate an area for items too heavy or awkward to be placed on shelves, such as concrete blocks, brass grating, or six-foot lengths of edging. The staff has also created a CD/DVD library for those manuals and documents that are included digitally.

All these initial problems have finally been resolved. Gunnin Architecture Library is now on its way to creating a comprehensive design collection of materials that will, in the opinion of our students and faculty, give a better understanding of what's out there in the product marketplace for the benefit of themselves and their clients.

Screen shot of the database showing Vendor Information

Window Display for the Unveiling of the Collection

Kathleen Lilly (L) and Amy Cook (R) discuss options for a driveway and sidewalk