Monographs, Archives, and Networks: Representing Designer Relationships
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History is not static but dynamic. No generation is privileged to grasp a work of art from all sides; each actively living generation discovers new aspects of it. But these new aspects will not be discovered unless the historian shows in his field the courage and energy which artists have displayed in their use of methods in their own epoch.¹

Despite evolving methodological and theoretical approaches that shape historical research and its explication, the persistence of the formats used to frame and present this work have changed very little since Sigfried Giedion’s prescient assertion of seventy years ago. If we consider histories of design as we see them arranged on bookshelves and accumulating in journals, it is national surveys, typologies of designed objects, stylistic evolutions, and biographies that continue to dominate. However arranged—for sale, as a result of editorial decision, or by the conventions of library classification—all these publication types remain compelling devices for presenting narratives that unfold largely chronologically (or in the case of dictionaries, alphabetically). The monographic form especially, with its focus on the accumulating oeuvre and the creative journey, has a particular irresistibility that has been much commented on.² The model is inherited from artist biographies and those of architects. Alongside their search for professional credibility, designers aspired to the monograph, despite the fact that in prioritizing the individual over the collective, through its very form a monograph contradicts the realities of design practice. Inevitably, design histories without designers remain rare. Although the anonymity of makers throughout history and the world over has become visible beyond ethnographic scholarship and exposes dramatic overemphasis on the named designer and their insistent singularity in the modernist narrative of industrial progress in the Western world, it has not upset it. Perhaps if we embraced Giedion’s concept of dynamism, we could adjust our view of biography as a stand alone form and consider how we might deploy it as tool. Such a shift might allow us to understand design’s history differently and suggest new ways to represent collectivities and complexity more clearly.

¹ Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 5. This seminal work was first published in 1941, it derived from lectures Giedion delivered before World War II.
One way to focus on collaboration rather than individual endeavor is to concentrate on the links between people. These might be revealed through oral history methodologies or by analysis of photographs or archival documents, yet design histories, once written and published, are static. Although signposted and arguably mobilized in subsequent texts by different authors, or when transferred to different media, they remain constructed largely as their authors intended at a particular time. Connections between people are selected, described, and presented to us; they are locked down, and as such no other players might come to the table, at least not on this particular occasion. Although future kinds of text delivery may allow opportunities for annotation and repurposing, overlay, revision, and rebuttal (as we experience already with Wikipedia and other online formats), for the time being this is not a readily accessible option for mainstream and academic publishers for many reasons. 

Figure 1

3 There are outstanding studies of design collaboration, and my point is not to diminish their significance but to indicate their formal fixity on the page, for example, Pat Kirkham, Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Beatrice Colomina, “Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture.” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 58, no. 3 (September 1999): 462–71.

in the form of images, tables, or diagrams is usually, necessarily static. In 2010, Brian Lutz’s history of Knoll included diagrams to open each section that pertained to a particular decade and charted the evolving connections between designers and the company’s departments over time. With Hans Knoll resolutely at the central point of this “modernist universe,” and although anchored to the page, the charts reveal within the conventions of diagrammatic representation how the networks of design might be visualized and the power of renderings to tell a particular story (see Figure 1).

Employing similar principles but animating them, the 2009 Impuls-Bauhaus project of Jens Weber and Andreas Wolter revealed the changing shape of the social networks of the Bauhaus over time and the impact of arrivals and departures at its various locations. Powerful in its dynamism, this resource was produced as a standalone tabletop feature, a curated experience derived from archival evidence. It was, however, suggestive of how data could be deployed and activated to reveal new dynamics between authors and researchers (see Figure 2).

In 2011, Severin Wucher’s Forschungstisch sought to display archival content as a similar light box experience. Focusing on graphic designers, the tool included the facility to track designers and their work on a timeline and map these spatially. Designers were connected to their works and to those who commissioned and worked alongside them (see Figure 3). These projects, while demonstrating the possibilities in visualizing data in new ways, were designed with data selected from the archive; as such each was inevitably arranged rhetorically. It might be seen as reproducing the meaning-making through arrangement that constitutes the image selection and ordering undertaken by teachers and students of design the world over, once in slide libraries and now in PowerPoint.

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Rather than using selected evidence to make a particular case, as with the projects outlined here and in line with the interpretative conventions of the historian and the curator, an alternative approach would be to embrace archives in their entirety and employ them as a site of inquiry, allowing them to tell their own stories by revealing the points of connection within. By identifying references to individuals, organizations, and events, we could allow them to rise to the surface, emerging from the overarching body of material in which they reside. If we believe archives to be objective sites of inquiry—and, in fact, even if we do not—perhaps therein we might discover relationships that are not fixed in prescribed narratives or locked in interpretation. Might it be possible to establish connections across different archives by employing the data compiled to describe them? The data produced already by archivists for cataloging and access purposes could be employed as a corpus in itself, indeed, as an environment in which to establish connections in new ways. Yet as we will see, even these processes of description are far from impartial. Data describing archives is compiled in the form of finding aids with relative objectivity—ostensibly. This is, however, determined by the professional practices, personal predilections, technological structures, and administrative frameworks within which the work of archival description takes place.8 Indeed, in their very form, archives are shaped by the manner in which they are created, and the principle of honoring this arrangement, respect des fonds, underpins archival description. This in itself is a schema that represents each archive

8 Compelling studies that reveal the forces that shape archives have been written, among others, by Patrick Joyce, in the British context, and by Ann Laura Stoler, in that of the former Dutch East Indies. Patrick Joyce, The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City (London: Verso, 2003); Ann Laura Stoler, Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009).
by way of an extendable hierarchical data model, the ISAD(G): General International Standard of Archival Description. It is an impressively designed solution, the collaborative endeavor of the international community of archivists since the 1990s. Its remarkable flexibility means it can accommodate the departments, offices, and other sections of complex governmental bureaucracies and commercial organizations, from the smallest to the monolithic. This hierarchical model is the same as that which is used to represent the archives of individuals, yet the archive of an individual is inherently biographical, representing life and work over time. Thus archival form underpins the monographic model, for structurally it endorses monographic conventions. Having undergone processes of sifting and selection by its progenitor, and often subsequently by their estate or descendants, each body of material is then appraised by the accessioning organization, where it comes to acquire a particular status depending on where it is located, be it national museum, university library, or private institute.

All historians recognize the archival research journeys that take them from one repository to another, and connected evidence is built from this endeavor. This once involved considerable travel before the arrival of digital catalogs and, more recently, digital content. Now, instead of navigating up and down hierarchies, along chronologies from college days to mature works, we have the means to build stepping stones between archives to represent connections across institutional divides. We have the capacity to use the codified descriptions of archives as an environment in which to identify and establish points of connection and, having made these connections, remodel the data and represent these relationships. Although it is tempting to wonder what this possibility could reveal and what it could tell us, we would also need to consider how we might recognize its omissions and inadequacies.

To enable this type of relationship building, in 2010 the archival community produced a new standard titled Encoded Archival Context—Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (EAC-CPF). The concept of context is articulated through the description of the corporate bodies, persons, and families that created and are referred to in historical records. This was recognized as potentially affording the users of archives with “unprecedented integrated access to archival holdings (regardless of location) and access to biographical-historical information about the people, including the social contexts in which they lived and worked.”

This emphasis on context and its potential informed the thinking behind the Social Networks and Archival Context project (SNAC), led by the University of Virginia, an ambitious investigation into the large-scale creation of name authority records (see
Figure 4 also informed Harvard University Library’s Connecting the Dots project, which employed EAC-CPF to reunite Samuel Johnson and his circle. It seemed to be a method that might answer various questions that had been discussed in different ways and over several years at the University of Brighton Design Archives, building particularly on discussions and projects that considered mapping design networks from archival records and the visualization of data in new ways. It would further mobilize the digital data produced, curated, re-presented, and enhanced by the Design Archives since the 1990s. It would start to answer some of the questions that were raised early on about the status of digital data and the understanding of archival structure, and how visualization techniques might animate design’s history afresh. We wanted to test whether this new archival standard might be a mechanism by which we could upturn and observe from another vantage point the structures that hold the archives relating to design in a very particular shape, and by which we could traverse the institutional boundaries that hold them.

For complex questions that seek to represent collaboration, it was imperative to address this collaboratively. It is a principle that is put forward by proponents of digital humanities, especially...
in terms of project design. We also sought to put into practice Johanna Drucker’s observations on the importance of evolving “ways of thinking with digital processes.” Rather than pursuing a design history in which individual designers and particular objects are presented in isolation or in a linear progression, we wanted to reveal the connecting elements of collaborative relationships and design networks to expose with more complexity precisely how design is constituted within historical circumstance and extends across national borders. Borrowing from Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh’s question pertaining to art history, we wanted to ask: how is the history of design henceforth to be arranged to make sense of the past in the global present? Since the principles of archival arrangement are themselves historically constituted, there seemed an opportunity to expose and question the challenges and opportunities of conjoining the past and the future.

**Digital Transformations**

In 2012 the Arts and Humanities Research Council launched a themed strand of funding to support inquiry into digital transformations, and it identified design as a key topic of attention. Here was an opportunity to test ideas about archival context in the context of design. Rather than devising a project that would simply sit within a university department, the proposal involved the technologists and professionals at the heart of a national archives portal—the Archives Hub of Jisc—as co-investigators.

In this way, the concept of building a prototype that would test the operability of EAC-CPF alongside the ongoing delivery of a major data service ensured a real-world scenario and a knowledge-building opportunity that would inform the longer-term operations and development of the service as a whole. Through the Archives Hub, the Design Archives data has been delivered for more than ten years along with the descriptions of archives held by over 270 institutions; it seemed the ideal place from which to test archival context in relation to design. A small team of a data editor, developer, and web designer, led by an archivist and a design historian, set about devising and building within a year a prototype web resource that would sit adjacent to the Hub and the Design Archives’ main search interfaces.

21 For the Archives Hub, see http://archiveshub.ac.uk (accessed August 25, 2015).
22 Exploring British Design, AHRC Grant Ref: AH/M002438/1, comprised the University of Brighton, Jisc, and the Design Museum as partners, and the following research team: principal investigator, Catherine Moriarty, University of Brighton; co-investigator, Jane Stevenson, Jisc; data developer, Pete Johnson, Jisc; data editor, Anna Kisby, University of Brighton; web designer, Tom Hart, Jisc. See http://exploredesign.archiveshub.ac.uk (accessed January 4, 2016).
23 Exploring British Design expert group meeting, March 6, 2015, Jisc, London.

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between two individuals, it was recognized that relationships differed in type, could change over time, and were of course two-directional: teacher/student, brother/sister, patron/client. EAC records were also compiled for eight organizations—professional bodies, educational institutions, and businesses—and for one event, the 1946 Britain Can Make It exhibition, and one of its component displays. It became possible to show how different entities—people, organizations, events, and even objects—could be connected. Timelines were produced as a framework from which to explore connections over time for any one individual, and these were essential for identifying what Clive Dilnot has described as “lost moments of design action.”

The connections were also visualized as charts that rendered the connections graphically and that, as one navigates through them, reveal the morphing forms of alignments within networks (see Figures 5 and 6). The dynamic reshaping of rendered relationships as researchers move from one point of connection to another speak of the “infinite archive” and the subjectivity of individual research pathways. We are reminded of another Giedion mantra: “History cannot be touched without changing it.”

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Inevitably, the production of connected data depends on the extent and detail of the parent data. There is a great deal in archives and museums that is not yet described digitally or identified in such a way that connections can be established. This means that various things that we know to be the case, through other forms of evidence, are not revealed. However, the omissions force us to consider the limits of the archive, and asks how we do know certain things, putting new revelations in perspective, and in balance with the accrual of knowledge that the interpretative work of historians has built up over decades.

In building representations, we are aware of their dependency on the content on which they feed, and the modeled data that give them form. As constructions of code, they are nonetheless significant in important ways—suggesting new narrative shapes, exposing previously concealed patterns and complexity, and emphasizing the partiality of established texts. The context of data gives it meaning, so the overlay representing connections (the prototype) needs to be understood in this way. Of particular significance is the way that the charts representing relationships place emphasis on client relationships. Rather than histories of design that focus on the designer and narratives of creation and
supply, we can see how demand presents a pattern of “events” with businesses occupying a powerful place in establishing connection. Certainly, historians like Judy Attfield have made this clear, and the visualization of these tendencies across a different data set reinforces the significance of these pioneering approaches. While the diagrams in Lutz’s study of Knoll represented connection in one particular instance, by extending the principle by means of EAC-CPF records, a richer and more inclusive mapping could be possible that involves companies of smaller scale, or of regional or what might have been viewed as marginal significance. Although business historians have always encountered design from this perspective, overlaying this with professional, educational, and social alliances would also reveal much. Undoubtedly, it becomes clear that individuals who rarely feature in design’s written history emerge from the sidelines as key connectors, as do individuals working in other fields—journalists, bureaucrats, or politicians—who either promoted, encouraged, or worked alongside designers. Jonathan Woodham argues, quite rightly, that “design historians have been doing this for many years; such people populate the pages of PhDs, the pages of articles; furthermore there are many design historians who don’t publish in design history journals and introduce ‘fresh’ faces.”

Yet this written record is dispersed, and the power of visualizing data is the possibility of seeing unexpected patterns take shape and develop. As with the drawings of artist Mark Lombardi, newly revealed or reorganized relationships have the capacity to challenge and expose. Inevitably, any project that represents connectivity breaches its banks, in terms of geography, timeframe, and discipline, but recognizing this unmanageability is important because it brings into sharp focus the disciplinary segregation and the structural barriers and academic conventions that restrict our understanding and practice of interdisciplinarity.

In 2011 Glenn Adamson, Sarah Teasley, and Giorgio Riello argued that the “global design history” they advocated would foster “the recognition of interconnectivity, of situation within networks, often of asymmetrical power and exchange” to usurp (or at least expose) the limitations of established methodologies and embedded narratives. Exploring British Design sought to use the representation of connectivity as a way to look at an entrenched past in new ways, as a device for exploring the past and potentially the present and future. In so doing, the narratives start to fall away, and we are presented with connected networks of circling stories and relationships that are characterized by dynamic and multidirectional forces over space and time, from client to patron, student to teacher, colleague to partner. These connections cross different kinds of organizations and professional formations, and link to those in other disciplines. Importantly, they also cross national...
borders; the rhizome trajectory—if resources and time would allow it—would move eventually across the world. We sought to represent these entanglements that emerge from archives and show their morphing form across time and space.

In 1989, John Walker discussed the appeal of the monograph: “to read or write about the life of one person is reassuring because the subject matter is limited and sharply defined; the story has a clear beginning, middle and end; the hero or heroine serves as a fulcrum around which everything else revolves. This type of text has a compelling unity.”

Rather than this being an impediment to design histories that refute the heroic narrative, the possibility of deploying the biography as an active unit, to see it as one component of a wider landscape and place it alongside other biographies, of the less famous and the relatively unknown, is provocative. In this way the connections between biographies perform their own choreography over the archival terrain and substrata; it is a liberation but not a fanciful one, for it is anchored in evidence.

The next step is to engage with this re-presentation and pursue what it reveals and where it may lead us. It would be interesting to see, if it were to extend beyond its prototype parameters in terms of place, whether it would produce a recognizable global mapping. What would happen if we connected it to other digital sets of authoritative data, such as the survey of British and Irish sculptors? Yet in a tool that is revelatory in many respects, what is revealed is also strikingly devoid of color, feeling, or indeed, ambiguity. In making information about archival material machine-readable, we have to reduce it to a form in which equivocality is obliterated. This being the case, its value is counterintuitive, in that it makes the spellbinding complexity of the material archive abundantly clear. Not least, perhaps, it serves to demonstrate how devoid of life is a biography reduced to cells on a spreadsheet.

It will be fascinating to see the full effect of name authority records and the emphasis on context when employed more widely, but it will require an approach that connects archives held in different institutions. Although this kind of connectivity is a wish expressed by museum visitors, it demands a shift that institutions are resistant to; rather than sending visitors elsewhere, they would like to keep them for longer. Commercial imperatives (rather than research imperatives) mean that online visitors to collection records are more frequently directed to the respective online shop than to associated resources elsewhere. This is precisely why university archives have an important role in undertaking theoretically informed research of this kind. In connecting disparate and relatively small yet invaluable archives and collections, they represent design histories that are inevitably more representative. Discussions between the University of Brighton and the Design Archives at RMIT, Melbourne, have focused on the

30 This topic was raised during a debate at the British Museum titled Museum of the Future: Changing Public Dialogues with Museum Collections in the Digital Age (October 16, 2014). Introduced by Neil MacGregor, and including Amit Sood of Google and Professor Sir Mark Walport, Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government, participants discussed how changes in digital technology presented opportunities for museums to consider “how the public interacts with collections—and how that might impact on the physical spaces themselves.”
The considered production of data structures driven by educational imperatives, rather than the commercial priorities of institutional digital strategies, has an important role in leading work of this kind. Design theory and practice informing project design and the presentation of data, as well as design content, needs to declare itself in a digital humanities context, behind the scenes and out front. In this way critical design thinking and the study of design history come together to encourage us to think carefully about what we see, how we see it, and the processes of selection and editing it has gone through historically and more recently, thus offering new ways to reshape the form and content of design history.

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