

A PROPER HOME FOR THE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

BY Michael Piggott

VIRTUALLY SINCE ITS FOUNDATION in 1960, the University of Melbourne Archives has searched for suitable premises. In the late 1960s plans were drawn up for a modern facility to be built on the corner of Grattan and Barry Streets, but for various reasons they were not implemented. Thus over the years temporary accommodation for staff and collections was found in a variety of locations west and east of the main campus, and from the mid 1970s around University Square in Barry Street, Pelham Street and Leicester Street.

In 1993, Frank Strahan (former University Archivist) prepared a client brief outlining many of the special requirements which were not provided in the then current locations in Carlton.

One possible site for relocation was 234 Queensberry Street. The ground floor had a usable floor area of 1,460 square metres. However, due to the distance between the floor levels, single height shelving was all that could be utilised, namely the existing compactus system of which two thirds required additional shelf extensions. 15,700 metres of shelving was anticipated with this proposal. Offices were to be located on other floors.

Due to space and financial restrictions this proposal did not eventuate either. However throughout the 1990s, the need for a new archives premises

remained the objective, with the Melbourne University Private initiative centred on University Square hastening its final achievement.

BREAKTHROUGH

August 1998 marked the beginning of negotiations to purchase for \$1.16 million the former Seagram's Wines warehouse at 120–122 Dawson Street, Brunswick, following reviews of several other properties. The next step was to convert it to a modern archives storage facility. The total refurbishment cost was approximately \$1.8 million and was funded from the University's Capital Plan with contributions from the Archives and the University Library.

Meetings of the Archives User Group ensued. These allowed representatives of the Archives, the University Archives Advisory Board chaired by Andrew Ray, Records Services and the University Library to fully discuss their requirements. Other key players were the engineers, architects and strategic planner, the latter appointed to prepare the client brief.

The single biggest issue which needed resolution in the planning of the new fitout was the shelving system, specifically whether to use compactus (relocation and/or new), or move to a static shelving system.

The building's interior height of six



A typical storage shelving system at the new Archives storage facility.

metres clear to the underside of the ceiling provided the opportunity to utilise a two level shelving system with an integrated floor at three metres. This was the most economical option while still achieving a reasonably dense collection. (Higher density could have been achieved with two levels of compactus. However, the structure required to support a compactus on a first floor was uneconomical with the existing building and budget.)

The 21.5 ranges of shelving purchased have the capacity to carry approximately 123,840 standard size archive boxes. At the projected growth



Aerial view of the Hoffman Patent Brick and Tile Company, Dawson Street, Brunswick.
(Photo: University of Melbourne Archives.)



The new Archives climate controlled repository, Dawson Street.

rate, the available shelving will have around six years growth given the current 101,485 box collection size. Additional ranges can be added within the facility as the 1,200 square metres of floor area is not fully shelved. This expansion area is already being utilised, however, with plan cabinets, large objects, large framed pictures and furniture.

One of the many challenges faced by all shelving tenderers was how to accommodate the variance in the ground floor slab of up to 100 mm! Steelbilt countered this problem with screw adjustable feet. Timelines were equally

challenging with Christmas approaching, but practical completion was reached by 18 December 1998.

SOLID, SAFE AND SECURE

The repository is lined with a foam filled styrene sandwich panel 100 mm thick on the walls and 150 mm on the ceiling. This controls the atmospheric conditions of the space, acting as a fridge. The floor slab has been sealed with an epoxy finish to seal out moisture.

Air conditioning, including humidity control, pumps air into the store on one

side and extraction ducts on adjoining ranges exhaust air through the ranges.

Fire control is provided via a state-of-the-art VESDA system (Very Early Smoke Detection Apparatus) which is highly sensitive to smoke. In keeping with modern archives storage best practice, the system is not designed to drench or gas the repository indiscriminately but to act as a highly responsive warning system linked directly to the main campus and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. The new facility is also connected back to the University computer network via a 10 Mbps licensed microwave link.

The remainder of the building features a loading dock, a collection processing area, offices, a library and meeting rooms. Researchers will access material through the Special Collections reading room in the Baillieu Library, but a consulting area has also been included at Dawson Street for use by depositors and other specialist use.

At last, thanks to the efforts of all involved, the University Archives has a proper home. ■

Michael Piggott is the University Archivist. This article first appeared in *Environs*, the newsletter of the University's Property Planning and Development Department.

LIBRARY EXHIBITIONS

▼ "THERE IS MORE TO FILMS THAN THE GOLDWYN GIRLS KNOW"
50 years of the Melbourne University Film Society. **July–August**

▼ "YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE"
Marking the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of World War 2; with items from the University Archives.
August–September

EXHIBITION SPACE
1ST FLOOR, BAILLIEU LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE