

In communication with subjects who are not used to the dialogue in project design, drawing then represents the means by which to communicate a thought that is complete and complex but which cannot be expressed only verbally.

# Quantum Collecting

## A Few Principles and Mechanisms for the Acquisition of Architectural Drawings

Keynote

Niall  
Hobhouse

Director and founder of Drawing Matter in Somerset, UK.

Matt  
Page

Drawing Matter is often asked to contribute to discussions, initiated by public institutions with significant collections of architectural drawings, about what—and what not—to collect. For ourselves, this feels the wrong way round, not least because we have no public mandate and have always resisted formulating (still less, publishing) any sort of acquisitions policy.

In the talk I gave in Lucerne last year I found myself confronting this contradiction as I spoke about the relevance of specific additions to the collections here. There is always some unease in ever presenting the collection as a coherent whole, knowing that individual drawings or blocks of material generally arrive through complex processes, each fraught with contingency. Of course, a formal acquisition policy could perhaps have made the process of collecting more fluent, but I wanted to ask myself now whether it would have contributed more real coherence to the collection that we have formed over the last thirty years.

To explore this, I have tried to draft a policy of this kind, strictly in relation to Drawing Matter's own collecting interests. What follows below is written with the immense luxury of retrospect (call it cheating?), to which I would add a passing observation that the many qualifying notes that follow are far more extensive than the definition of *drawing* itself: An artifact in any medium (to include text, collage, and models) that can be seen to have immediate agency in the articulation of an architectural idea.

In this context, *architectural* encompasses all spatial events generated by intentional human intervention to include aspects of landscape and urban design, theater, and performance. And *agency* is best defined through examining how the objects fulfill their intended function in the design process. In practice,

it is the designer's own thinking that is most rewarding here: often iterative and uncertain, sometimes bombastic, but always speculative and more rarely evidenced in presentation or construction drawings.

Notes  
On Material

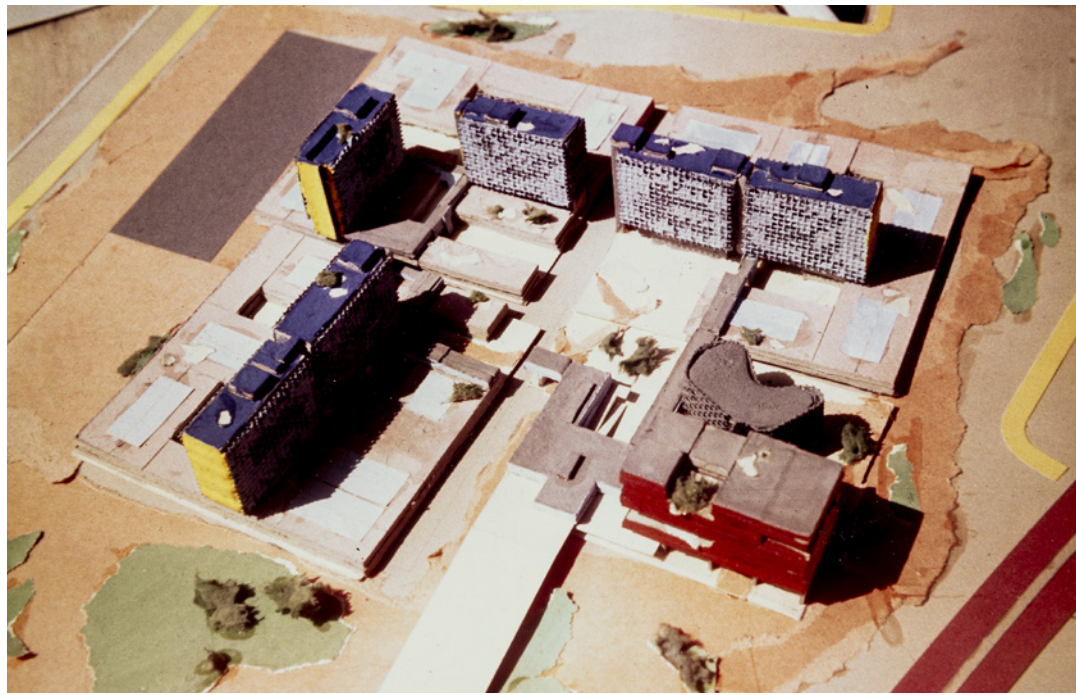
The broad principle is to seek out material that can tell the observer something that the building itself cannot about the thought process of the designers—no matter whether they are in dialogue with themselves, engineers, builders, clients, critics, or the public. The rhetoric of different drawing types, considered individually or in comparison, are central to the inquiry.

Specifically, this plays out as an interest in the complete ensemble for individual projects (or of tight sequences within a design process), in survey and travel drawings, in anything conceptual (or merely unbuilt) and, above all, in sketchbooks.

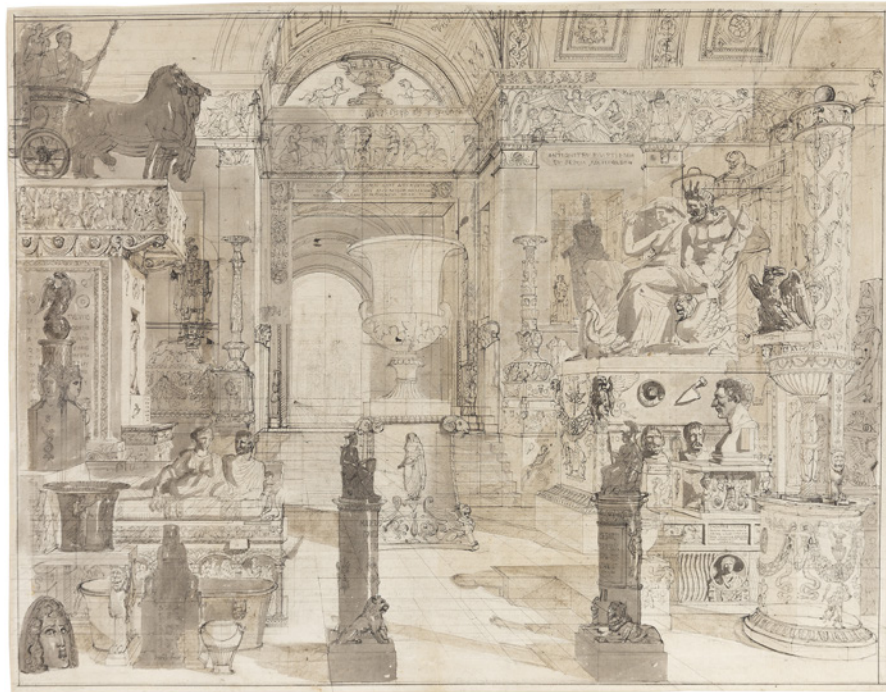
Against these, there is a suspicion of the kind of three-dimensional model that captures only a moment of stasis in the design process, with almost anything that is either ostentatiously signed or made for publication; and a real question mark over the research value of drawings that were extensively published in their own day.

fig. 57  
fig. 58  
fig. 59

57

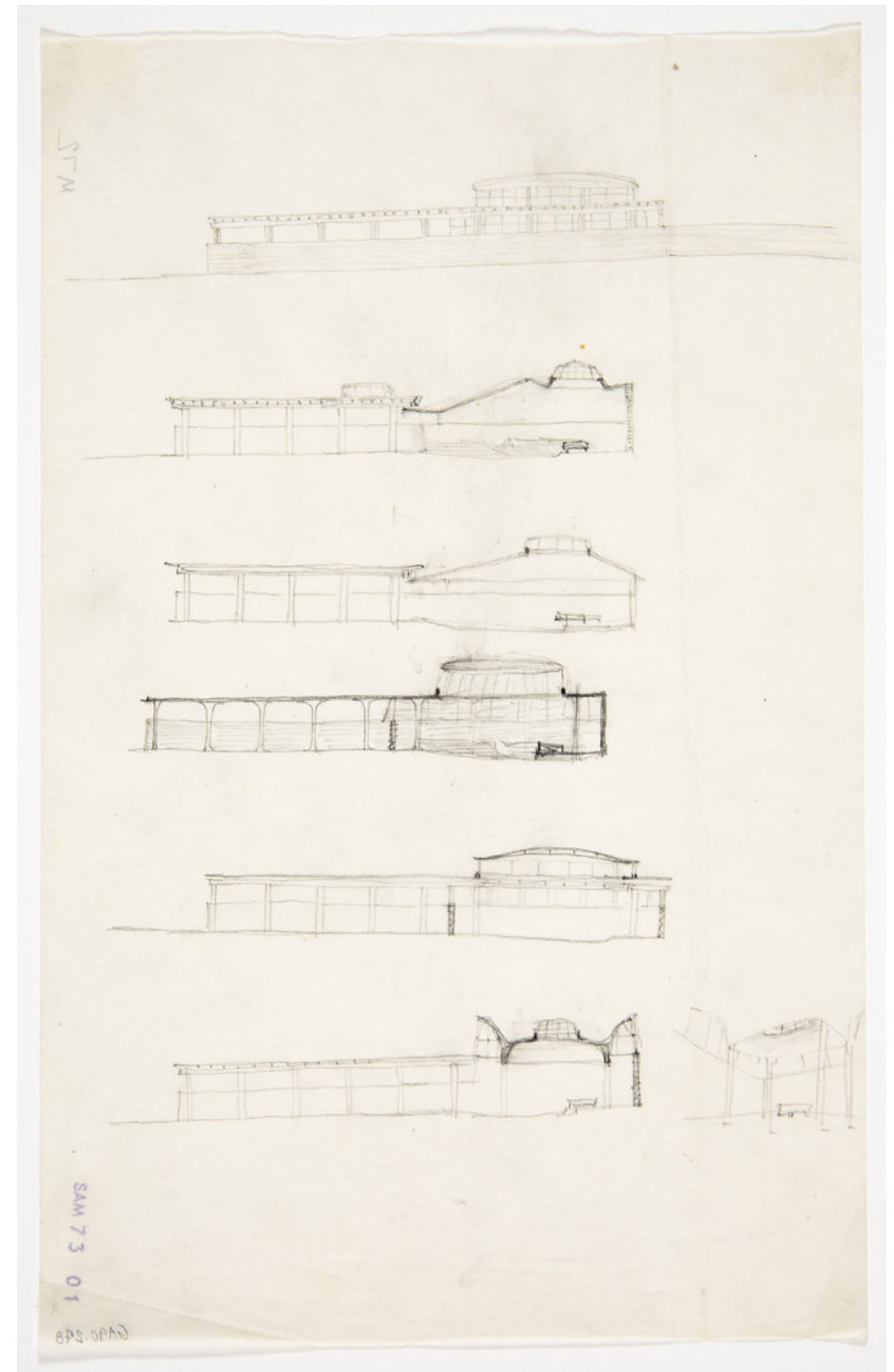


58



57  
Le Corbusier, "Thinking model" for the Olivetti Centre, Rho, Italy, 1962.  
Tempera on cardboard, 113 × 89 × 51mm; color photograph, 200 × 250mm

59



58  
Charles Percier, Preparatory drawing, *Projet d'un Muséum Idéal*, 1796.  
Pencil, pen, ink, and wash on reverse of engraving, on watermarked laid paper,  
457 × 584mm, DMC 3291r.

59  
Erik Gunnar Asplund, section studies,  
Chapel of the Holy Cross, Woodland  
Cemetery, 1935. Pencil on tracing paper,  
355 × 222mm, DMC 1692

As to where the focus falls on the work of individual architects or practices, we are bound to give priority to those for whom drawing, broadly defined, plays a key role in design development.

Within the individual bodies of work, priority is always on the coming-of-age project or on one that marks a seminal turn in their career. This is just as true whether the architect is alive or died 400 years ago.

The passage of time is also a useful tool in the process; we try to allow thirty years to pass before deciding whether a drawing, the building for which it was made, or a particular approach to design have assumed a significant place in the discourse.

fig. 60

### On Interpretation

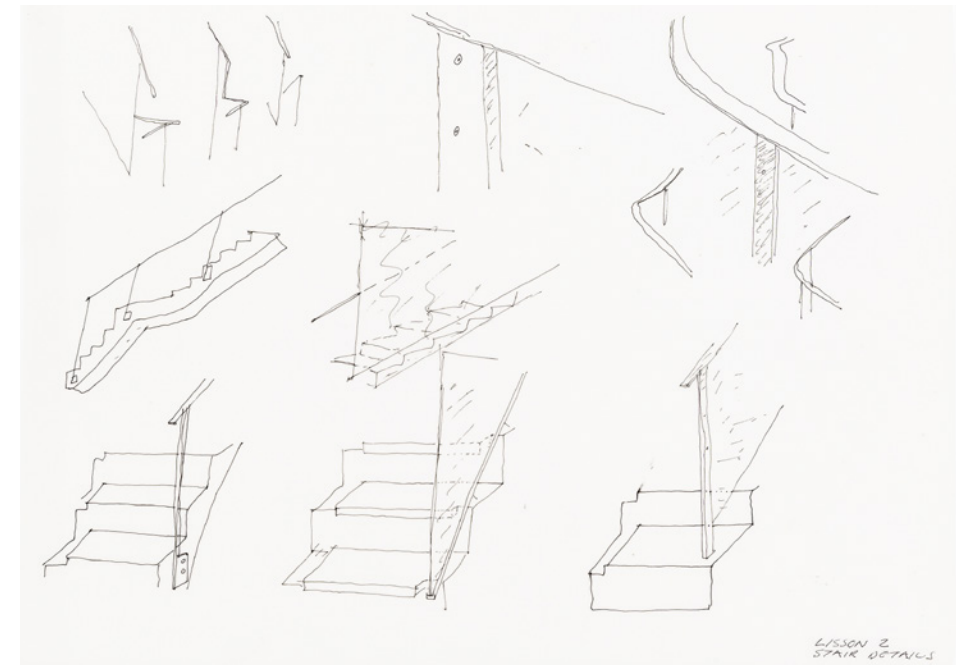
In the formation of the collection at Drawing Matter the first task is always to examine the immediate purpose and the historical or social context of any architectural drawing; this comes before any consideration of how it looks or even of the skills that were required to produce it. Only in this way can we arrive at an understanding of the argument that is being made (and no matter with whom).

This rhetorical energy, dependent as it frequently is on information that is external to the drawing itself, is a direct challenge to any traditional aesthetic. Here, the machinery of the Beaux Arts presents us with a willful paradox: succeeding, as it does, in normalizing drawing quality (and, no doubt, in limiting the production of bad architecture), but in a way that makes the interesting architecture less easy to identify, at least on paper.

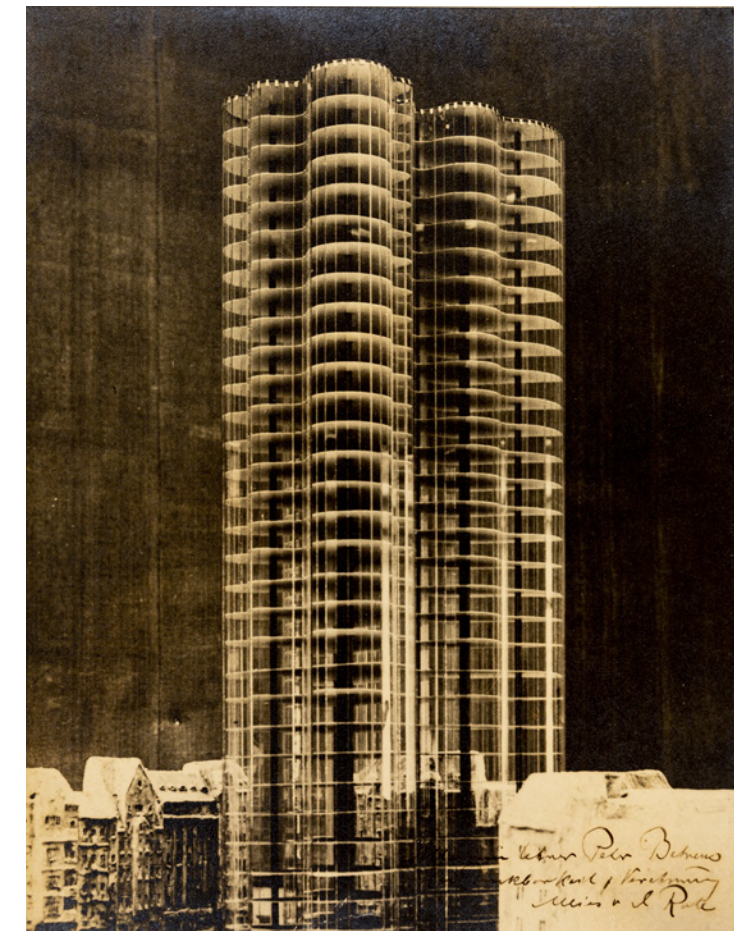
One reliable principle: If a designer is possessed by a difficult—or a radical—idea then, in the urgent effort to represent it, she or he will always push to the limits the media, materials, and conventions that are currently available to do so. In that sense, a good building can often be seen to produce the best drawings.

fig. 61

60



61



60

Tony Fretton, Stair details, Lisson Gallery (second phase), ca. 1992. Ink on tracing paper, 298 × 420 mm

The Lisson Gallery was the project in which Tony Fretton articulated an ethos for practice. He states in the first pages of an early sketchbook for the project: "I don't want to repeat myself; I want to invent anew, which requires another attitude to details. They can't just happen, otherwise I will fall back to my existing mode." (DMC2895.1)

Drawing Matter holds approximately fifty sketchbooks for the project alongside construction and presentation drawings and model photography.

61

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (Curt Rehbein, photographer), Glass Skyscraper model, 1922. Early silver gelatin print on matte paper, 383 × 284 mm

There are many mysteries about the Glass Skyscraper. Was it to be understood as actually buildable, either technically or within the contemporary Berlin building codes? Were these to be flats or offices? Was there a particular site in mind? Above all, how does this vision for a new glass architecture of light and reflection relate to the traditional buildings (modeled by the set designers for *Nosferatu*) that surround it in the collage? Is this a modernism meant to coexist with the existing cityscape, or is the skyscraper meant to present an overpowering, even dismissive, alternative?

These questions sit against a backdrop of hyperinflation in Germany and the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923.



There is an internal debate, privileged by the relatively small size of the collection—and a rueful acceptance that we cannot have everything—which favors: (a) building on existing strengths rather than anxiously filling gaps; and (b) an ambition that anything new, however modest, must be seen to change the overall texture of the collection, however minutely. Both aspirations get that much harder as one goes along!

The level of public exposure and of active feedback—from within the room, in print, and online—gives impetus to the decision-making of architects and their heirs, about what part of the work should come to the collection, and to our frequent requests only for particular projects or drawing types from their own archives. But it is important to stress that these emerge from intense and protracted discussions, and from the building of mutual trust. Time (well) spent in this way is likely the largest single resource expenditure of the Drawing Matter operation.

Our focus on the design process—as opposed to presentation objects—has brought into the discussion a far broader range of voices, who have their own poorly recorded roles in project development and in the production of the drawings.

fig. 62

fig. 63

I have always discouraged arguments about whether Drawing Matter functions as the repository of a collection or of an archive (even accepting that nobody now quite knows what *archive* might mean); of course, it can be either or both—and each at the same time. This is particularly so with open online access to the collection catalogue and a publishing program that reaches far beyond our own holdings. Our only consistent publishing principle is of making full catalogue information available online within a month of any acquisition.

I would say also that Drawing Matter conceives itself principally as a forum for discussion in which the drawings are simply the indispensable props. The collection is housed in a single space, where all discussions around it take place. (We have a good rule that no more than fifteen people are ever allowed to gather around a single sheet; this is practical in itself but, equally, a way of allowing everyone in the room to have their voice.)

In the process of selection, the most valuable tool has been what we learn from the responses of visitors and collaborators to existing works in the collection, whether they come in person (approx. 2,000 historians, scholars, and practice students per annum) or online (approx. 700 visitors per day). In a similar way, we observe the choices of material requested for exhibitions and for academic publications (400–500 per annum). In this sense, our (admittedly specialized) public itself sets the directions for our collecting choices.

62

Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, Drawing model for a Music Room for Empress Josephine, ca.1803. Pen, ink and watercolor on paper, 120 × 185 × 144 mm, DMC 2081

Discussing this drawing-model, Iris Moon has brought into focus the contribution of Sophie Dupuis to Fontaine and Charles Percier's graphic output. Fontaine commissioned Dupuis to color the plates for his and Percier's first book, published in 1798. The professional relationship between Fontaine and Dupuis became a romantic one, and she gave birth to Fontaine's illegitimate daughter, Aimée Dupuis, in 1803.

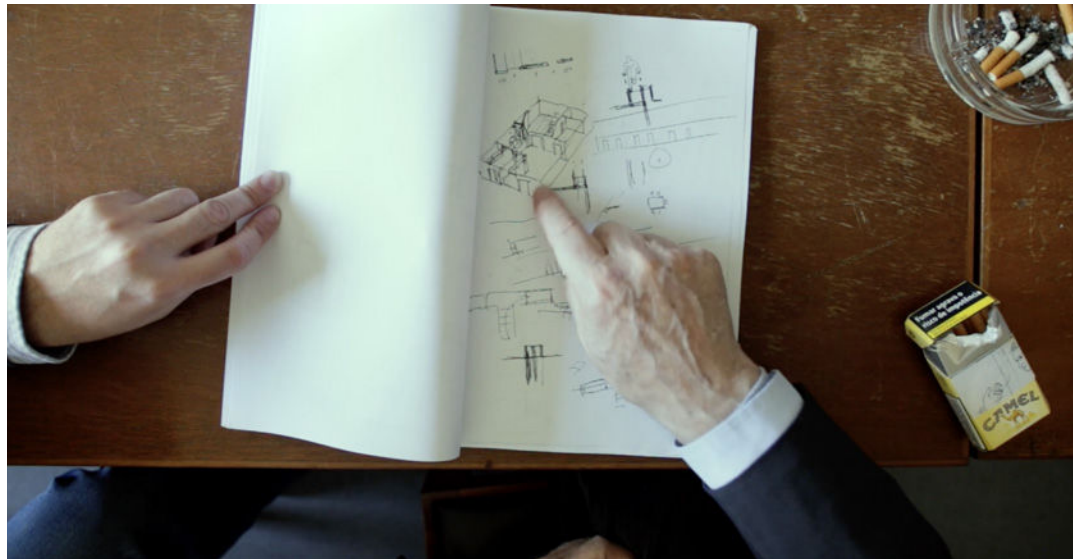
The folded model was found in the pages of a book among the family possessions of Aimée's daughter-in-law, Félicie Meunié d'Hostel. See:

<https://drawingmatter.org/hidden-and-see/>.

63

Zoe Zenghelis for OMA, aerial view of the Parc de la Villette made after the competition, 1983. Acrylic on paper, 530 × 860 mm, DMC 3148

Drawing Matter has been recording the contributions of Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp to the graphic identity of OMA in the 1970s and '80s. This painting for the Parc de la Villette competition, alongside other paintings for the Hotel Therma (Lesbos, 1985) and the Roosevelt Island Redevelopment proposal (1975) were recently included in the exhibitions of Zenghelis's work *Do You Remember How Perfect Everything Was?* (Architectural Association, London) and *Zoe Zenghelis* (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh).



#### On Presentation

For some of the same reasons, we are resistant to setting our own research agendas or to initiating exhibition projects. Done in-house, either activity can lead quickly down self-reinforcing rabbit holes, particularly in relation to collecting choices. Much of the success of this approach depends on maintaining a diversity of audience responses: these come principally from architecture (student-practitioners, practitioners, historians, and scholars) but with the habit of co-opting ethnographers, economists, or social historians to the same discussion.

It happens that we are free from any national and (most) temporal constraints on what we acquire and, for the same reasons, want to resist the limiting and relentless processes of academic specialization, hierarchies, and of specific outputs.

Much of this thinking, and its practical application, has come from observation of the collecting constraints, often self-generated, of museums and other public institutions. For instance, if a drawing says very little about architectural thinking, we would have limited interest in its exhibitability, per se. (A sketchbook, which can only be shown one page at a time, and in a vitrine, is generally more useful here than any “finished” drawing.)

fig. 64

In fact, we see two contradictory attitudes at work among our “competitor” museums: on the one hand, the expectation that architectural drawings should perform as works of art—or as substitutes for the buildings—in the context of public display; and on the other, a long-standing reluctance to accord to an architectural sketch the same status as a dynamic work of art such as a figure drawing. Even Raphael, whose architectural and figure drawings are both acknowledged as “for” something more substantial, experienced this reluctance during his lifetime.

At the same time, full archival institutions are often distracted by the thankless contradiction of servicing technical and legal inquiries (where interest does not extend beyond the drawing as a document) as well as scholars and historians; the in-house curatorial and conservation skills demanded by each audience are generally at odds.

This uneasy preoccupation with autonomous artifacts—of approaching *drawing* as a noun and not as a verb—seems key to a general impasse in collections’ thinking. (Architects themselves are often willfully complicit in this: witness the assistant at SOM instructed by Gordon Bunshaft each day to collect anything in the office drawn by hand and then to destroy it.) Of course, drawings are only at rare moments a substitute for the architecture itself; but taken together, the artifacts of architectural production, besides offering a forensic narrative of its representation over time, do certainly help construct a useful history of architecture itself—and, most usefully, of architectural history as a succession of inherited ideas.

64

Álvaro Siza: *Seven Early Sketchbooks*, seven-part film, 2018

This film, in which Siza reflects on his first seven sketchbooks for public housing in Porto and Malagueira, was produced for the exhibition *Opening Lines: The Sketchbooks of Ten Modern Architects* at the Tchoban Foundation (June 30–October 7, 2018). The film was projected in seven parts alongside the sketchbooks, which were opened each day to the pages being discussed in the film segment.