

Satellite Meeting: Inspired and Engaged on Sustainability

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Iconoteca: A Digital Repository by Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura

Elisabetta Zonca, Ph.D.

Special Collections, Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura, Università della Svizzera Italiana, Mendrisio, Switzerland

E-Mail address: elisabetta.zonca@usi.ch



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Abstract:

Iconoteca went live on May 26 2020, after two years of study and work to create a digital repository suitable to preserve and disseminate our photographic collection. Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura holds ca. 100,000 analogic photographic items, most of them rare and unique pieces that are part of archival and bibliographic collections: they are related to a specific cultural context that we need to valorize through a scientific description of each image.

Scientific is archived using international standards for cataloging; applying schemas for structure and syntax of metadata; creating controlled lists, vocabularies and a geographical thesaurus to uniform field content in order make exchanges easy. As we decided to run an Italian/English web site, since our academic community is international, we have chosen to rely on Getty Vocabulary Program for the English authorial references while Italian key words are taken both from Nuovo Soggettario Thesaurus and from Getty itself, since we are officially contributors for their vocabulary program. Authority files and cultural objects are identified also with Wikidata identifier, because we are working to realize a LOD data ambient.

From the beginning, we decided to release our data and images free, according to their intellectual rights: they are both precious study objects for our patrons, interested in themes such as art, archaeology, architecture, infrastructures and territories development, as for external users.

Keywords: photographs, open-access, collections, digital repository, collaboration

Introduction

When I started thinking about this presentation, I searched through the literature on the topic of environmental sustainability and I was struck by the fact that one of the first documents, promoted by the United Nations, "Our common future", was released in 1987[1]. Nine years before the institute where I work, the Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura, opened. In

fact, the library of the Academy of Architecture is a young library, founded in 1996 together with the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI).

Before opening, the library must be constituted in all its parts, including the book heritage, whose acquisition must be planned from scratch, with the aim of satisfying the basic needs of students and academics. We were oriented in two directions: the publishing market in the first place and the antique market. The latter is probed for the purchase of entire personal libraries, selected among the most useful to provide a retrospective look at the disciplines of interest of the Academy, therefore art, architecture, engineering, but also other humanistic subjects. Maintaining this practice, the heritage of our library grows steadily over the years, reaching the current numbers of 130,000 open-shelf volumes, 600 periodicals and other digital objects accessible thanks to subscriptions with 80 databases specialized in art and architecture. To these we must add about 100 linear meters of archives, 1000 graphic works from different eras, from the 18th Century to the end of the 20th Century, and almost 100,000 photographic images [2].

These numbers reveal that ours is a specialized library of medium-small size. Quantifying the dimensions allows us to better frame the work done, and to better explain some of the choices we have made, given that human and financial energies are necessarily related to the greatness of the heritage.

I introduce this reflection because we all know how important it is to weigh the growth projects of our libraries. The costs of a large-scale project, due to the use of technologies and the professionalism involved, are amortized by the number of documents involved. Having to work with a small amount of documents, the relationship between costs and benefits may be less convenient, blocking the entire project. Sometimes, however, it means compromising on some of the objectives set, as they are thought in the theoretical design phases.

Theoretical framework

The events of Iconoteca began in 2018, when a study group, consisting of Angela Windholz (Head of the library), Silvio Bindella (Web Services and Open Access) and myself (Special collections) matured the choice to establish a digital archive where to host the collection of photographs of the library. This decision matured following the occurrence of a specific event, which acted as a catalyst, despite being present in an embryonic stage the desire to protect the photographic heritage and to enhance it through digitization.

This event is the arrival, in 2015, of the Fondo André Corboz: 25,000 books, 60 linear meters of archival documents, over 46,000 slides and 28,000 postcards, a documentary complex that represented the analog legacy of a Swiss scholar of art history and urban planning. Although we had already welcomed other book collections that came together with the archives of their creators, some of which contained photographic material, and over time we had carried out the purchase of photographic material carefully chosen for its cultural importance and study utility, the numbers were such as to discourage the creation of complex infrastructures for cataloguing, storage and return of digitization.

With the arrival of these documents, we have on one hand reached a critical mass of photographic documents such as to modify the premises that discouraged such an undertaking, on the other hand the awareness that we were custodians of a mostly unique photographic heritage was confirmed. André Corboz's photographs were taken by himself during his many study trips and cognitive excursions; to these are added other color slides that he used in the performance of his lessons as a supporting iconographic apparatus, which are

excluded from the project. Their value is easy to understand: they are unique specimens, not reproduced in series. They are also unpublished, only a small nucleus of photographs had been used as a kit for his articles. Then, they are the expression of a personal point of view, of an intellectual path, which reflects on the choices of subjects, and techniques, and is linked to a scientific production. They are testimony to an architectural and urban reality now disappeared or modified. Finally, they are well-executed.

All these reasons have led us to look for a way of enhancing and disseminating the photographs of the Fondo André Corboz; the other photographic collections, which shared similar characteristics both for their uniqueness and for their unpublished status, but smaller in size, were also considered for this new project. There are about 4700 photographs of the Fondo IN.CO., an Italian engineering studio, and 2000 photographs by the Ticino engineer Augusto Rima; the 600 photographs of the architect Augusto Guidini taken between the last decades of the 19 th century and the first decade of the 20th century.

For us, the criterion of the uniqueness of photographic images was fundamental, because it justifies the entire project: working with unique photographs means offering users a new and exclusive source of information, avoiding the duplication of human and environmental energies that the process of digitization and digital management entails. This for us was an important inspiring principle, which was only set aside in rare cases. In fact, if we think of professional photography we must reflect on the fact that it goes through almost two hundred years of history and has evolved. The nineteenth-century photographers who practiced this activity professionally produced and sold numerous copies, of which a good part have come down to us. Our library has decided to digitize them for several reasons, affording the risk of the existence of other digital copies:

- They are part of archival fonds, they were pieces of a larger picture
- They constitute a very low percentage of our photographic heritage
- Other reproductions are not open access
- The quality of the reproductions or data was poor

The optimal situation would be working in a cooperative environment with other public cultural institutions (libraries, archives, museums) by dividing the tasks of digitization and description of photographs. In this way, which - simplifying - can be compared to what has been done in the library sector with the cataloguing of books. Until then, we cannot know for sure whether others have already digitized copies of our photographs, without being able to create sufficient visibility and discoverability, or whether they will do it in the future, creating a negative value in terms of the sustainability of this practice.

If digitization are present in the web, but fall under one of the last two options listed above, implementing an exception to the rule becomes almost necessary, because in this case between the attention to sustainability and the improvement of a service, the latter prevails. Reflections on the opportunity to digitize do not arise when working on materials produced by non-professional photographers, or by those photographers who, especially after the First World War, work with the periodical press or with art galleries, as their professional archives contain documents reproduced in a few copies, at most published in catalogs and newspapers. Knowing the context of birth and production of the materials we manage is very useful in the decision-making process.

In compiling this list, we have named a principle that we pursued during the creation of our repository, namely the use without fees, subscriptions or limitations of digitized photographs. Images licensed under a Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 license can be downloaded and re-used, fully responding to the ideal of free access, but also in this case there are some exceptions, due to the fact that we do not own the rights to all images. When it was possible, we have requested, and we will keep on doing it, the assignment of rights or the right to publish the images for free.

Referring to the last point of the list, it is important for us that our images are reproduced at their best, in high resolution, to allow a study of the details, supporting all those researches that do not require the study of the material support - in this case a study in the presence of the analog object is necessary -, and that thus become feasible at a distance. At the heart of the process, therefore, were high-level reproductions, able to capture the attention, but we were aware that this was not enough for a research institute. We have decided to link each reproduction with a dataset of scientifically structured information. I disclose that the data we create are all available under a Creative Commons 0 license.

Operational phase

The next phase of reflection concerned the realization of this project, from the realization of the IT infrastructure to the choice of the standards to use, up to the creation of a network of relationships with other institutions and sponsors. As far as infrastructure is concerned, we have decided to rely on an external company with expertise in the cultural sector. The choice was rather painful, because initially we would have liked to use open-source programs as univocally recommended, but the impossibility of personally following the development – or of hiring an ad hoc figure – led us to choose to collaborate with a company with which the Università della Svizzera Italiana had ongoing collaborations [3].

Another starting point was offered by the collaboration with Memoriav, an association that deals with the protection and promotion of Swiss audiovisual documents, with which we have built a partnership for the restoration and digitization of the oldest photographs in our collection. Starting from their request for a descriptive standard of the images conforming to SEPIADES [4], we have built a descriptive sheet of the every single object; then, to the prescribed fields we decided to add other fields which are described by the Italian standard issued by ICCD called "Scheda F", and "Scheda FF" to indicate the description of photographic collections.

Our geographical location has led us to ponder a card whose structure (and also the content of some fields) is written in Italian, the official language of the Canton Ticino; instead, the website is bilingual, Italian and English, as our academic community is made of people from different countries and the audience we hope to reach is international. It follows that even some fields should have contemplated content in English, through the use of controlled lists. In support of the descriptive card of each digitization, tools have been created to control and manage the terms to be used in specific descriptive fields. WE have created vocabularies, lists and a geographical thesaurus, based on authority files. The terms that are exposed in the descriptive tab displayed by the user are present in two languages, English and Italian, depending on the setting chosen in the site view.

After evaluating several options we decided to lean on the Getty Vocabulary Program because its vocation to artistic disciplines was very close to our needs, it is an open structure and also because it offered a multilingual structure. Although the Italian language was scarcely present in the translations of the Getty vocabularies, and in particular of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), we had the opportunity to collaborate. We made contact with the Getty Vocabulary Program and we offered to provide them with translations into Italian of some clusters of terms, in particular of those AAT lemmas that referred to the production and photographic techniques. Our proposal was accepted and we became contributors to the four main vocabularies of the Getty Vocabulary Program, Art and Architecture Thesaurus, Union List of Artist Names (ULAN), Thesaurus of Geographical Names, Cultural Objects Name Authority (CONA).

Being able to be part of this program has a high value for us, because it allows us to save energy by relying on an already existing, tested and populated structure; to focus our contribution on those terms most strictly necessary for us – it may seem selfish, but for a small library like ours it is decisive; it connects us with an open network, so our contribution is not only useful to the Getty, but also to all users of the Getty Vocabulary Program. The work of translating words, especially those of the AAT, is challenging, so for the attribution of keywords we decided to also rely on a thesaurus in Italian, the same that we use for the subjecting of books in the library, edited by the Sistema Bibliotecario Ticinese, based on the Thesaurus of the National Central Library of Florence.

Thinking about the future evolutions of Iconoteca, we would like to open up to the world of linked open data, we have started to integrate the Wikidata identifier for each of the records we create for the "creators", that is, for persons and corporate bodies involved in the realization of the photograph and in the conception of the cultural heritage represented therein; also for the record that describes each of the cultural objects photographed there is a card that collects, among the various information, the identifier of the Getty CONA and the Wikidata item. Our data are published, and exportable in two formats, Dublin Core and MemoBase Core (the structure required by Memoriav). The process of disseminating our data began "at home" by connecting the experience of the Iconoteca repository with the library's discovery tool, Reperio, which hosts the image records; they are published in MemoBase Core, a Memoriav portal that collects and enhances the audiovisual digitization projects of Swiss cultural institutes, in order to be part of the national network of institutes consistent with our mission; with Samara, a Ticino portal that brings together various digital initiatives united by territorial belonging. We tried to create positive contacts with different types of partners, to reach different audiences, and to ensure that these data were open access, and but also well known, an essential requirement to give meaning to the collaborative job.

Moreover, within USI we have created synergies with research institutes and departments, with which we collaborate by offering a space in which to converge their digitized photographic archives and an infrastructure for their description and dissemination on the web. This is the case of the Fondo Fernando Astete, a Peruvian anthropologist who donated to the "UNESCO Chair in ICT to develop and promote sustainable tourism in World Heritage Sites" of USI a few hundred photographs he took in Macchu Picchu, now in the Iconoteca; the second case concerns the Pastorelli Archive, a complex of 25,000 between photographs and aerial photogrammetry related to Switzerland, which recently the Institute of Urban and Landscape Studies of the Academy of Architecture has entrusted to the library to continue the digitization work, to begin their description and the dissemination of data. The needs that led us to create this tool are the same as those that other USI subjects may have: making the

Iconoteca structure available to all USI components is in our opinion a way to mitigate the choice of proprietary software and, at the same time, to fulfill our "service" function. The digitization files are stored on the servers managed by the IT service of the USI based in Lugano. We have deposited multiple versions of the images, which means that our space needs are substantial. An idea to solve this problem, reducing the impact of energy consumption and virtual space, could be the use of IIF; in addition to the potential that we all know, IIF relies on open-source image servers, which starting from a high-resolution image generate derivatives that respond to the specifications of the requests made at the same time, without having to archive them. This streamlining has positive repercussions on the environmental sustainability of digitalizations.

Conclusions

For the Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura is essential to move in the perspective of open access. This topic is of great interest to all Swiss universities, gathered in the Swissuniversities association, which supports "the values of academic freedom and cooperation, which are not only the cornerstones of the higher education sector, but also make a fundamental contribution to the stability of society and democracy"[5]. With this in mind, Swissuniversities promotes the accessibility of all publications resulting from funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation, to be finalised by 2024. Iconoteca is placed within this context by offering the world of open access unpublished images and information, which allow to increase the availability of documents accessible from the web. After the outbreak of the pandemic all of us, operators of cultural institutions, faced a new scenario completely based on the network, which had become the only method to connect to realities outside our homes, albeit physically close; we have become accustomed to the absence of materiality; we practiced an intensive use of the web to make up for all those actions that were precluded to us. Beyond the meaning that this situation has assumed and its long-term consequences, the sense of powerlessness that gave the impossibility of free access to knowledge remains vivid. This must serve as a warning to us, to embrace data sharing practices more and more widely, to allow free access to all, especially those who are economically disadvantaged or physically unable to move.

On the other hand, it is necessary to ponder, as has been highlighted several times during the present speech, the positivity of each initiative to maintain a balance between the practice of digitizing and the indiscriminate proliferation of data on the web. Producing open, shareable data with a set of scientific information can be a deterrent to the multiplication of digital; the ideal context would be a shared standardization of descriptions and using a tool, working as a meta-OPAC, to converge in a single, or in a main, virtual place of research the reproductions of photographic and graphic documents. Intentionally, I also added the graphic documentation because we are working to include drawings and prints in the Iconoteca. We want to take care of our photographic collections, preserve their materiality, make available the documentary value and disseminate their cultural meaning, using technologies to enhance these aspects and share them with students, scholars and curious, because our task as librarians is to create opportunities to improve everyone's knowledge.

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