Irish Architectural Archive Digital Repository Project

The Irish Architectural Archive (IAA) intends to create a secure Digital Repository so that it can acquire, preserve and make publically accessible the computer-generated creative output of current and future Irish architects including CAD files, BIM files, photographs and related documentation. The Archive has identified Integrated Facilities Solutions (www.ifacsolutions.com) as a partner with the necessary technical knowledge and construction industry experience to deliver project.

Digital files are inherently complex objects whose life expectancy, through a combination of storage media redundancy and software evolution, can quickly become precarious. Printouts or PDF documents can provide stable representations of the contents of a CAD or BIM file, but they are no more than that, representation or snapshots. Only by preserving the original file itself can the IAA claim to be doing for current and future generations of architects what it has done by keeping the drawings of their predecessors– preserving the primary output of the creative process. The Digital Repository will provide the IAA with the means to preserve these files and maintain them over time.

Two steps are essential for digital preservation. The first is early intervention. The sooner digital files are put on a preservation path, the more likely it is that those files will remain accessible beyond their initial period of use. The second is the collection of adequate metadata: the when, where, why, by whom and for whom a file was created, using which version of what software running on which platform and named using which conventions. Without metadata, archival preservation and access programmes cannot succeed. Unless architects take steps to manage and preserve their digital output, this valuable asset may be lost. Architects must therefore be the primary agents for inputting files into the Digital Repository. This will be done via a web-based interface with a straightforward structure the use of which should integrate naturally into general office workflow. The interface will allow architects to upload their CAD or BIM files and other born-digital records (e-mails, electronic documents, pdfs, photographs etc), providing the required metadata for each file as they do so.

In order to be viable in the long term, the Digital Repository must have continually expanding data capacity to meet increasing demand and, most critically, must adapt to keep pace with advances in CAD, BIM and related software to ensure that it can continue to render material it already holds, and can successfully ingest material from newly implemented technologies. The Digital Repository will also have to keep pace with user expectations in terms of access, be it via desktop computer, laptop, smart phone or tablet. Architects and architectural practices availing of the Digital Repository will be charged an annual maintenance fee which will cover software licensing, data storage and expansion, and software adaptation and development.

For the IAA the benefits of the Digital Repository are obvious – the acquisition of born-digital files at a crucially early stage in their life-cycle and of the metadata necessary for long-term preservation. For the architects too the Digital Repository will offer substantial and significant benefits. At its most basic, the Digital Repository will provide secure back-up for current and near current vital business records and lower storage overheads. In addition, through structured access controlled by each subscribing architect or practice, the Digital Repository will also be able to provide project management functionality, while its contents can be used for other purposes such as, for example, populating project libraries on individual practice web-sites.

In order to refine the Digital Repository proposal and the business model to sustain it, the IAA requires input from architects and architectural practices. If you are interested in subscribing to the Repository, or have comments or suggestions, please contact the Archive Administrator Colum O'Riordan at coriordan@iarc.ie or 01 6633040.