Chapter 4: Buildings

4.1 Introduction

In the developing world, after the second World War, there has been an upward trend in the number of new libraries, archives and museums. A boost in building activity occurred especially in the sixties when many countries gained their long desired independence. The availability of a suitable building for archive operations must be regarded as the first prerequisite in the preservation and conservation of archive materials. It is so obvious that it tends to be overlooked: buildings are the first line of defence against a severe climate and various disasters, and thus the primary means of preservation of collections. Preservation should be the basic and general guide for architects and archivists planning an archive building (Buchmann, 1998). Often the building is the only line of defence for the majority of museums worldwide (Daniel et al., 2000).

Understanding the importance of buildings in preserving records is hardly new. The Roman architect Vitruvius, in the first century BC, describes where the library should be located in a house to catch salubrious breezes and avoid excess humidity (Banks, 1999). In nineteenth century India, the authorities started to create a network of buildings according to specific standards for the storage of district records. In the tropics the architect has to employ his full armoury of devices to combat an aggressive climate (Plumbe, 1987b). An active building programme can involve the restoration of old buildings as well as brand-new constructions, or a combination of both. It is also a pressing concern in the move towards modernisation of archives (Conté, 1996).

In some countries, even now, the condition of archives and library buildings is alarming. The National Library of Laos had until recently no permanent building and had to be moved five times in recent years. For this reason it has been impossible to organise the collections effectively. Fortunately today the situation has changed for the better (Noerlund et al., 1998). Since World War II many new library buildings have arisen in the West as proud symbols of a new era (Holdsworth, 1959).

There is much to be learned from the continual search for the ideal building which has resulted in a range of national and international standards, such as the British Standard (BS 5454) or the International Standard Organisation (ISO 11799) (Rhys-Lewis, 1999). In some countries, there is much central control over building designs. The advantage is that it can lead to the development of a central body of technical expertise about the construction of record repositories (Thomas, 1988). Yet we should not forget that the conditions and circumstances in tropical countries ask for a different approach. An archive building to be designed for harsh climatic zones demands special precautions. It has to be able to stand extreme heat and humidity, keep the sun away, offer protection against or prevent excessive mould growth, keep insects and rodents out, and be able to withstand the most horrific disaster scenario (Duchein, 1980).

That the construction of an archive is more than a building alone can be learned from the example of Burkina-Faso. Despite international funding the creation of the National Archives depended above all on the government itself, in particular the slow-moving wheels of bureaucracy. It took more than 30 years to achieve the construction of a central building, demanding considerable perseverance (Ouedraogo, 1999).

A number of publications and guidelines on building archives has been published. Yet, archive building in tropical climates has not received much attention so far. The lack of an information base on tropical building in general is often cited as a problem (Ifidon, 1990). In 1979 UNESCO published a book on the design of archive buildings in tropical countries. It is primarily written for the archivist and architect who are both a party in the design and development of an archive building. The book is filled with technical line drawings and diagrams, and in this way the authors succeeded in explaining practical problems and their solutions very conveniently. Technology has changed rapidly in the course of the twenty years that have passed but that does not diminish the value of this lucid approach to the most common problems and the low-tech solutions. It is still a very worthwhile source for any archivist who favours a simple and sustainable design for an archive building (Bell et al., 1979).

A rudimentary RAMP study from the 1980s deals with guidelines for the techniques to be used in archive building in the tropics by comparison with building in countries in temperate climates. The authors treat the storage room, wall, floor loading, shelving, aisles and lighting successively. Emphasis is placed on economical construction and subsequent maintenance. Although most of the premises are still true today, the techniques are outdated (Benoit et al., 1987). Sometimes a chapter on building in the tropics can be found in general works on archives, e.g. Karim’s book on archives administration in Bangladesh (Karim, 1988).

The publications by Michel Duchein (1980 and 1988) have been very popular in the world of archive building for a long time. In particular his Les bâtiments et équipements d’archives from 1966, translated into English, revised and enlarged in 1977 and 1988, grew to be the bible of the business (Chauleau, 1980). In the back of the 1988 edition a select bibliography is included. However, this book is written for the western archival situation, thus for temperate climatic zones and, in any case, the world of architecture and not the least the world of technology, have changed substantially over the years. His article from 1980 however is totally devoted to buildings
in tropical climates. In this survey he is quoted several times because some of his suggestions and ideas are still very practical.

A more recent publication is the sourcebook on archival building by Ted Ling, based on 30 years experience in Australian archive building. He writes that the design, construction and management of an archive building is changing rapidly. Paradoxically, while construction has proceeded on a grand scale, very little study has actually been devoted to these buildings. What has been needed for some time is a ‘How to’ book which synthesises all aspects of the building of archival facilities in the generic sense. True, this publication is based on building in the western countries except for a few pages, but it is nevertheless a very practical and concise publication (Ling, 1998).


Below we will discuss the literature on some important topics that play a major part in the current discussion on building archives in the tropics. First some general literature on climate and building is looked at, in which it becomes clear that the tropics are not just one climatic zone. In moving to new premises the archivist is often confronted with the choice of adapting an old building to become an acceptable archive, or building a new archive. It is important that the architect and archivist work together and take preservation as a starting point. Any modern archive building has to fulfil the many demands dictated by a modern sustainable society, be it east or west. Passive climate control and climate responsive buildings are key concepts in sustainable building, an integrated building view that frequently corresponds with to the principles of a number of traditional building styles. The location of the building is crucial. One possibility is to build underground, though humidity remains a problem. In the construction of the archive safeguards can be built in to overcome problems of high temperatures and high relative humidity. A lot can be done by use of proper building materials, the correct positioning of doors and windows and the appropriate construction of the roof.