

The Records Room: An Interpretive Archive, 1937-1997

lydia see, May-June 2018

Introduction to the project:

Inspired by special collections and archives, *The Records Room* was created as a functional installation emphasizing access to tangible records and archival materials, thereby illuminating Elsewhere's former identities while making available materials which will continue to be used and re-incorporated into new installations in perpetuity, being both an end product and a storage space for raw materials simultaneously. The Records Room attempts to (re)articulate the essential characteristics of archival concepts in terms that make sense in a vastly different environment.

The Records Room is located on the third floor and has limited access. However, hidden in plain sight all around the museum are tiny archives within archives.

Archives (also archive), n. - 1. Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records. - 2. The division within an organization responsible for maintaining the organization's records of enduring value. - 3. An organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or other organizations; a collecting archives. - 4. The professional discipline of administering such collections and organizations. - 5. The building (or portion thereof) housing archival collections. - 6. A published collection of scholarly papers, especially as a periodical.

* In the vernacular, 'archives' is often used to refer to any collection of documents that are old or of historical interest, regardless of how they are organized; in this sense, the term is synonymous with permanent records.

Throughout the museum, archival materials are identified by tags which are stamped "ARCHIVE." These tags describe collection materials and their interconnectedness within the larger archives of Elsewhere.

Project Statement

An archive is a repository - a space in which materials of historic interest or social significance are stored and ordered. The Records Room is a functional installation emphasizing the tradition of collecting in Elsewhere's past, present, and future identities, which attempts to (re)articulate the essential characteristics of archival concepts in terms that make sense in a vastly different environment. The project required the arrangement of a physical space to house tangible records and archival materials, and the production of digital records, promoting access and use by a diverse and ever broadening base of artists and appreciators.

The Archive is the heart of this work, but it is complemented and informed by new works made in response: photographs, documents, drawings, and objects. In the Records Room, the politics of memory via the performance of archive-processing activities are examined by engaging with the space - an act of arrangement or curation becomes a performative act influencing the narrative of place. The room houses a special collection of materials which will continue to be used and re-incorporated into new installations in perpetuity, being both an end product and a storage space for raw materials simultaneously. In processing, (re)defining, and navigating the existing collection, a map and visual language emerged, connecting Elsewhere's collection to more technical archival terms and methods, thereby underlining the archive's necessity within the context of Elsewhere's Living Museum.

A Guide to *The Records Room: An Interpretive Archive, 1937-1997*

Prepared by Lydia See, May-June 2018

Title:

*The Records Room: An Interpretive
Archive, 1937-1997*

Author / Creator:

Gray Family, Carolina Sales Inc.

Description:

Room - size: 8'8"x11'8"

22 white document boxes, 6 MEAD brand paper boxes, 6 plastic tubs, 1 wooden trunk, 3 single letter-size filing drawers, 2 4"x6" file drawers, 2 3"x5" file drawers, 1 metal filing basket, TBD

The collection is currently arranged in 5 series:

Gray family personal, Sylvia + Joe Gray businesses, Sylvia post 1955, S. David Gray businesses, textiles

Scope and content: This collection documents the history of the Gray Family and their businesses, dating from 1937 to 1997. Materials in the Records Room Interpretive Archive consist primarily of the papers of several local businesses owned by the Gray Family, including Carolina Sales, Realfit Shoe, Cinca (S. David Gray.) Also included is personal correspondence, family papers, upholstery textile swatches and sample books, customer and wholesale receipts, Army/Navy surplus records, and TBD.

Subject

Greensboro, NC
North Carolina
South Elm Street
Gray Family
Carolina Sales Inc.
Realfit Shoe
Army/Navy Surplus
Cinca / S. David Gray
Thrift Store
Textile
Upholstery Fabric

Form / Genre

Business Records.
Correspondence.
Newspapers.
Periodicals.
Photographs.
Ephemera.
Textiles.

History

In 1937, Joe & Sylvia Gray launched a series of businesses principled on the creative use of available surplus in downtown Greensboro. Realizing that trucks sent to New York with new furniture were returning to the region empty, they began filling them with stock from Depression-era storehouses in the North. Before long, the business known as Carolina Sales Company outgrew its space at 607 South Elm. In 1939, the Grays bought the building across the street (606 + 608 S. Elm St.). The space was large enough to include a first floor retail store, a second floor four-family boarding house, and a third floor warehouse.

Following WWII, the furniture store gradually transitioned into an army surplus business with extensive catalog sales that sent pup tents, army bags, and canteens to Boy Scout troops and hospitals around the country. Sylvia mended army goods up on the third floor that were brought up from the back alley via homemade pulley.

Joe Gray unexpectedly died in 1955, leaving Sylvia with three children to

raise. The ten year period following his death included the decline of the once booming surplus and catalog sales company. With the goal of increasing revenue, Sylvia began buying the ends of fabric bolts, upholstery, denim, and copious amounts of finishing ribbon from local mills. She shut down the boarding house to save money and boarded up the warehouse.

During the late 70s Sylvia's inventory expanded once again to include general thrift items such as toys, books, clothing, dishes, housewares, and wigs, as well as general knick-knacks, junk, whatsamacalits, parts, pieces and particulates, bits and bobs, furniture, glass, etc ad infinitum. The first floor was filled until only a tiny path between the boxes and piles remained. She shopped twice a day at the local Salvation Army and Goodwill, followed by a host of other women store owners who snatched up objects that she handled but returned to the shelf. Over time her inventory became more or less a collection, more or less a hoard, more or less an archive that detailed her tastes, interests, and perceptions of value. Ribbons were tied around tissue boxes stuffed with toy cars. Dolls were preserved in Roman Meal bags, strung together with various other bagged collections like dresses, jewelry, plastic toys, and dried out pens. Sylvia would buy clothing items for their buttons, cut them off, and stow them in jars. She would take piles of ribbon home with her in the evening, wash them, iron them, and roll them around a pencil.

Sylvia worked in the store until the day before she died. The astounding accumulation amassed over her lifetime remained in a massive heap that was boarded up after her death in 1997.

-excerpted from (from Elsewhere's "beginnings" story)

Processing Information:

This inventory was created in May 2018 by Lydia See from a variety of sources found primarily on the third floor of 608 S. Elm Street in the “Business Office” henceforth known as “*The Records Room*”. The material has only been partially examined, processed and arranged. Interpretive material was devised by the artist-archivist, complemented by responses to and documentation of the collection: photographs, documents, drawings, and objects, and enhanced with digital content. *The Records Room* is intended to be expanded by future residents, visitors, and participants as more collections are processed or the existing collections are refined.

Notes

The Elsewhere Museum archives also holds unprocessed collections dating from 2003 to the present.

Other Works relating to the archives / Former Iterations

Personal Historical Society, Museum of Natural History, Selling Field or Similar Work

Permalink

<http://www.goelsewhere.org/the-records-room>

Using The Records Room

Archives exist both to preserve historic materials and to make them available for use. Since materials in archival collections are unique, the people (archivists) in charge of caring for those materials strive to preserve them for use today, and for future generations of researchers. Specific guidelines for how collections may be used exist to protect the materials from physical damage, keeping them and their content accessible for posterity.

The Records Room is a special collection within Elsewhere's Living Museum/Archive. Special collections contain materials from individuals, families, and organizations deemed to have significant historical value.

Access to the Records Room is by appointment only: A simple form may be filled out explaining the nature of research, materials to be used, and/or a description of the project. Such registration practices familiarize the archivist and Elsewhere staff with the researchers to better serve their research needs and interests. This practice also ensures the safety of the collection from misplacement or misuse.

Careful handling: To ensure that materials are maintained for future use, all archives ask researchers to *handle materials carefully*. While older

materials are generally thought to be more fragile, even newer materials need to be handled with care so they remain available to the next generation of researchers.

Please don't reorganize the collections: It is important that materials remain in the order in which the researcher found them so they can be located later and observed in contexts.

Use of pencil only: This is a preservation practice in case accidental marks are made on archival materials; pencil can be erased while pen marks cannot.

No food, drink, or gum: This guideline is designed to help preserve the collections. Spills can irreparably damage documents. The presence of food may also attract pests that infest archival materials.

***The Records Room* is an in-process collection:** Unprocessed collections contain materials that have yet to be examined, identified, and organized for researchers to use. The work that archivists do in preparing materials for research use is called “processing.”

Usually unprocessed collections have restricted access. This collection will have limited access while the following is performed:

- Artist-archivists need to **identify and describe** materials so that they can create the finding aids, database records, and other tools that will help researchers locate materials to aid their research.
- **Poor storage methods** may contribute to the rapid deterioration of materials, so artist-archivists may remove rubber bands, metals, plastics, boxes, folders, and other items that are harming materials..

Overall, the work of processing makes materials safe for researchers to use, and helps protect and preserve those materials for long-term use at an archives.

This document was drafted with the aid of Emily Atkins, MLIS, and utilizing the Society of American Archivists online resources, particularly:

- **Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research** - By Laura Schmidt <https://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>
- **The Society of American Archivists Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology**, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>. A very thorough resource outlining the terms and definitions used in the archival profession.

Cite As

Box, record, or object # /info, *The Records Room, 1937-1997*. Prepared by Lydia See, 2018. Elsewhere Archives.