Finding Opportunities and Challenges in a Custodial Partnership

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COVER PHOTO
Arts in Training. A Sister of Providence in traditional habit teaches an art class outside of Sacred Heart Academy in Missoula, Montana, between 1900 and 1909. (Note a copy of “Pharaoh’s Horses” by John Frederick Herring on the right!) The sisters began teaching in Missoula in 1874, in a frame dwelling that also housed the early iteration of what is today Providence St. Patrick Hospital. Learn more about the work of the Sisters of Providence and the founding of their archives by Sr. Rita Bergamini, SP, on page 10. Courtesy of Providence Archives, Seattle.
Many archivists have experience with permanent loan or deposit agreements. In these arrangements, archival institutions assume responsibility for the physical custody and management of a collection, but the donor retains legal ownership. However, what if the archival institution also doesn’t own or control the physical environment in which the collection resides? The Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) recently encountered this situation with the acquisition of R. Buckminster Fuller’s personal library. There were many challenges to navigate in the partnership between SCRC and the library’s legal owner—the RBF Dome NFP (not-for-profit)—to preserve and ensure access to the library.

Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983) was a world-renowned architect, theorist, designer, and futurist who sought to: “Make the world work, for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time, through spontaneous cooperation, without ecological offense or the disadvantage of anyone.” Fuller’s most recognizable invention is the geodesic dome, exemplified by Spaceship Earth at Disney World’s Epcot theme park. His work continues to influence theoretical and practical work on sustainability and the efficient use of finite resources.

Fuller was a member of SIUC faculty from 1959 to 1971. While in Carbondale, he and his wife lived in his iconic dome house,
Built in April 1960 and the only dome Fuller ever inhabited. After his departure from the university, the house was privately owned and rented to university students. It fell into disrepair and was purchased in 2001 by SIU Emeritus Professor Bill Perk, a colleague of Fuller.

Recognizing the architectural and historical significance of the dome house, local volunteers and SIUC architecture professors formed the RBF Dome NFP in 2002 to acquire and preserve the structure. Perk donated the property to the NFP later that year. In 2004, the house was designated “most endangered” historical structure by the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois and was granted museum status by the City of Carbondale. It was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 2006. The restoration of the physical structure and interior was completed in late 2020.²

**Restoration of the Library**

The Dome NFP continues work toward reopening the house as a museum with educational installations and tours. The Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller gifted the NFP several pieces of furniture, artifacts, and Fuller’s personal library to reinstall in the house as they were when Fuller lived there in the 1960s. In mid-2019, NFP board member Benjamin R. Lowder contacted SCRC and proposed partnering to help care for and facilitate access to Fuller’s library for scholarly research. Archival staff gladly agreed to assist with returning the library of SIU’s most famous faculty member home to Carbondale.

Restoring the library to its original location—the dome house’s second-floor loft—is a unique demonstration of original order and contextual reconstruction.³ Seeing it in the space where Fuller lived and worked enhances visitors’ experience. However, facilitating access to a collection stored offsite on non-university property poses challenges. The university and NFP created a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), approved by SIU Legal Counsel, that outlines partnership responsibilities for the library’s successful care and use.

**Ownership of the Library**

Buckminster Fuller’s personal library is approximately 5,400 volumes. Many are signed by Fuller or signed to Fuller by the author or person who gifted the book. At least 19 volumes contain significant notation from Fuller’s hand. The collection provides rich insight into topics, works, and theories that influenced Fuller and identifies individuals connected to him and the nature of their relationship.

The RBF Dome NFP is the library’s legal owner. Although no loan or deposit legal document was written apart from the MOA, SCRC considers the library and this partnership as an instance of permanent loan. The volumes are treated as a subcollection within the larger rare books collection. The MOA term is twenty years with automatic renewal every two years after the initial term expires. Although SIUC does not own the library, the risk that it will leave Carbondale is minimal—not only is the MOA term lengthy, but the Fuller Estate’s purpose is for the artifacts and books to reside in the dome and the NFP’s mission is to preserve the dome and promote Buckminster Fuller. While the MOA includes language for terminating the agreement, such action would not be in either party’s best interest.

**Access to the Library**

Fuller’s library continued to grow during his post-SIU career and has exceeded the number of volumes that will fit on the second-floor loft shelves. To address one of the NFP’s initial concerns, SCRC agreed to house the overflow volumes in its rare book stacks. It is impossible to know precisely which volumes were on the shelf in the 1960s, but we estimate that more than half of the volumes will fit. The NFP is best suited to identify specific titles to be kept at the house.

A hindrance to researcher access is the absence of a master list of volumes. No such inventory was created during the appraisal due to logistical complications. Therefore, SCRC agreed that Morris Library will catalog Fuller’s books in a manner consistent with other rare book subcollections. Call numbers will be in a format unique to the Fuller library, and catalog records will contain notes fields that identify a volume as being part of the library. Notes fields will also record the presence of signatures and notations unique to a given book. A complete list of volumes can then be generated as needed.

The catalog records will notify researchers of the standard 48-hour notice required for retrieving materials stored off-site. In addition to the time delay, fulfilling requests is further complicated because the bulk of the volumes will be housed on non-university property to which SCRC staff does not have ready access. The MOA secured SCRC’s right “to provide researchers and the public free access to the Overflow Volumes while housed at SCRC.” Because the NFP’s initial contact with SCRC explicitly expressed a desire for researcher access to the library, and since their mission is to promote Fuller’s legacy, we anticipate timely access to volumes in the dome. SCRC staff have willing contacts on the NFP Board of Directors to facilitate book retrieval when needed, and the board is considering giving SCRC a key to the dome.

**Preservation of the Library**

SCRC does not control the dome house environment, and the MOA contains no language concerning the library’s preservation and security. The renovation included the installation of improved temperature and humidity controls. Given the financial limitations common with small not-for-profits, it

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We're All Word Nerds Now  
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DAT aspires to demonstrate how archivists use language in ways not included in general dictionaries. This means we examine a term more closely than a lexicographer of a general purpose dictionary would. For example, take the word archive. Merriam-Webster provides two senses for usage as a noun and one sense for usage as a verb. In DAT, archive has five noun senses, two verb senses, and an adjectival sense.

But which terms get this treatment? There are a few rules of thumb that allow us to identify terms that need exploration and terms that do not.

First is the rule of literary warrant. DAT includes terms that archivists need to understand because they are in use in the archival literature. Writers of definitions collect citations from the archival literature or the literature of allied professions. "Literature" can be anything from books and peer-reviewed articles (American Archivist and Archivaria are some of our most-often cited publications) to blog posts and webinar or conference session announcements.

The second rule we affectionately call the pencil rule. This excludes words that—no matter how frequently they might appear in the archival literature—hold the same meaning in archives as in everyday speech. The best example of this is pencil. Archivists provide pencils, and pencil sharpeners, and write about pencils often. However, the term pencil has no unique archival sense. When an archivist insists on pencils in the reading room, we are not using archival jargon. We mean what every English speaker means by this word, no matter how often our saying it may elicit feigned absentmindedness from a pen-wielding patriarch or aggrieved astonishment from an undergraduate with a yellow highlighter at the ready.

The third rule of thumb, the Kleenex rule, leads us to include those few product names that are synonymous with a generic term. For the most part, DAT does not include product names, but some products have been purchased so widely that their names have become interchangeable with their generic equivalents.

Suggestions Welcome!

Since 2014, when we began sending out Word of the Week, we have logged 145 feedback submissions to date. While some of them have simply alerted us to a typo or suggested an improvement, such as adding images to enhance some definitions, others offered a new way to think about the meaning of the term.

For example, the definition of intellectual property, taken directly from the 2005 Glossary and sent out in 2015, described it as "a group of intangible rights that protect creative works, including copyright, trademarks, patents, publicity rights, performance rights, rights against unfair competition." Two readers pointed out this was actually a definition of intellectual property rights. After confirming that this criticism was borne out by the citations, we revised the definition to "a type of property representing works of the mind governed by copyright, patent, and trademark law."

Another type of feedback we welcome is suggestions for new terms. Examples of terms we have added based on such feedback are processed, unprocessed, reparative description, distributed custody, restitution, web archiving, community archives, bastardy bond, and galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM). Many more terms beyond these have been suggested, and we are working our way through them—just as we are still reviewing all the feedback we have logged.

If you haven't already done so, we invite you to join the world of word nerds! Check out DAT and subscribe to Word of the Week at dictionary.archivists.org.


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may be unreasonable to expect the NFP to maintain the library-standard 70°F, 45–50% RH for a building often unoccupied. However, NFP members check the dome and its environment at least weekly. Discussions on environment are ongoing, and the NFP is considering using the library-standard temperature and humidity. They also plan to install a more sophisticated security system in an upcoming renovation phase.

Benefits of Partnership

Assuming responsibility for the management of a collection neither owned nor stored in our facilities has been a new experience. While SCRC can advocate for archival best practices, the RBF Dome NFP, as the legal owner, has final say.

Both parties have mutually benefited from the acquisition of Fuller’s library. For the NFP, the presence of the library and artifacts in the dome contributes to its restoration and the promotion of Fuller’s legacy. For SCRC, the library is a rich resource for people interested in learning more about Southern Illinois University’s most distinguished faculty member through the books he kept and the connections he made. The partnership has been productive and accommodating, and has advanced the educational mission of both the NFP and the university.

Notes


3 The library, returned to its original location (or order), is restored to its contextual circumstances of maintenance and use. These themes are discussed in Jennifer Meehan, “Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records,” Archivaria 70 (Fall 2010): 27–44.