

Preservation by Design: Archives and Records Services at Herman Miller, Inc.

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Who is Herman Miller?

Herman Miller Inc. is a leading multinational manufacturer of furniture, furniture systems and furniture management services. Headquartered in Zeeland, Michigan, Herman Miller has been a source of major innovation in the residential and office environments. The company emphasizes problem solving through design, participate management, environmental responsibility and employee stock ownership.

Herman Miller, Inc. began in 1905 as the Star Furniture Company, a manufacturer of ornate reproductions of traditional-style home furniture. The company's name was changed to The Herman Miller Company in 1923 when D.J. DePree and Herman Miller (DePree's father-in-law and respected local businessman) acquired majority control.

Hard-pressed to stay in business during the Depression, D. J. DePree gambled on contemporary furniture designed by Gilbert Rohde. The gamble paid off, and by 1945 the company phased out its traditional line to concentrate on "modern" furniture.

The association with Rohde began Herman Miller's practice of working with the world's finest independent industrial designers that would ultimately include George Nelson, Charles Eames, Isamu Noguchi, textilest Alexander Girard, and inventor and researcher Robert Propst. Today's innovative designs are created by Bill Stumpf, Don Chadwick, Jack Kelley, Tom Newhouse, Geoff Hollington, Bruce Burdick, Richard Holbrook, Jean Beirise and others.

Collections and Services

Herman Miller's corporate archival holdings have been described by researchers as "awesome" - a testimonial to the corporate officers, who have generously provided monetary and moral support, and to the dozens of men and women, who have contributed their effort, time and talent. The archives, now located in one of the company's original buildings, documents the development of Herman Miller product from its inception and creation to marketing and distribution. Collections include publications, administrative records, photography, drawings and blueprints, oral histories, audiovisuals, three dimensional artifacts, fabric and textiles, and graphics.

To Protect, Serve and Defend

Currently, the archives and record services comes under the administrative arm of Herman Miller's corporate legal department - a good safe place to be. Marketing and public relations may not always see the value in supporting and maintaining archives, but the lawyers know we have what they need and -- we know where it is. Given the litigious nature of our society, procedures have been established with corporate legal and other departments to quickly and efficiently identify key people in the company, who can supply records requested during the document discovery process. A team, including members from both archives and records services and corporate legal, and representatives from local law firms contracted to represent our interests, has been created to respond to court-ordered record requests and to coordinate documents received from other

departments. Space in the record center has been designed to store requested documents and accommodate lawyers from both sides of the courtroom.

Get Rid of that Backlog! It Costs Us Money!

Litigation research has demonstrated the urgent need to eliminate the backlog of uncataloged Herman Miller publications and non-Herman Miller materials containing third party endorsements of our product. Every growing and viable archives will have a backlog of the unprocessed, however, when records or publications are requested as a result of a court order we have to make an effort to locate those documents. The cost of paying a lawyer, or even a paralegal, to search through 300 boxes is greater than the cost of hiring a crew of processors and catalogers. Additional staff to process and catalog has been acquired through re-deployment of existing record center staff and the hiring of Herman Miller retirees, local high school and college students and temporary employees.

Planning a Face Lift

Increases in staffing levels and the need for additional and smarter work spaces in the archives and records center has provided the rationale for completion of interior renovations including new office furniture. (You would think it would be easy for the archives to obtain the latest in office furniture since Herman Miller is the second largest office furniture producer in the country, however, convincing the accountants that new office furniture in the archives provides economic benefits for the company and our shareholders has been

tricky.) We have been asking for a facelift for years but finally got their attention by scheduling an open house in the archives for Herman Miller's retirees, including past CEOs and the sons of the company founder. Two weeks later a team from facilities provided a cost analysis for the project. The redo has been tentatively approved and should be completed by spring, just in time for the June 1998 meeting of Herman Miller's retirees.

It's Not Too Late!! Encapsulate
(and other preservation/conservation projects)
As a result of constant and continuous use of our oversize items including drawings, posters, advertisements and other graphics by corporate legal, public relations, design and development and several public exhibitions, an encapsulation project is underway. Utilizing the services of a local consultant, more than 800 items will be protected by the end of 1998.

The archives also maintains several thousand drawings of Herman Miller furniture pieces designed by George Nelson & Associates dating from the 1950s and 1960s. These drawings are scheduled to be sorted, arranged, labeled and microfilmed. The drawings of Charles Eames and Gilbert Rohde have been filmed and are available for research.

Herman Miller Meets Henry Ford
Throughout the years, the design community has acknowledged Herman Miller's commitment to quality, innovation and fine design. Many of our designs are in the permanent collections of major museums including New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1989 Herman Miller donated its

770 piece collection of product lines and furniture prototypes to the thirteen museums making up the Herman Miller Museum Consortium. Skillfully managed by the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, the consortium continues to receive Herman Miller product, both past and present. The Herman Miller archives coordinates these donations. Additionally, we provide consortium members with supporting literature about our furniture, our company and our designers.

Author! Author!
Residential and institutional furniture designed by Gilbert Rohde, George Nelson, Charles Eames, Isamu Noguchi, and others continues to be hot commodities among designers, design students, art curators and collectors. The archives receives hundreds of requests from authors and publishers from around the world for information and/or photography pertaining to both "classic" and current designs.

To respond to the needs of serious researchers requiring use of Herman Miller's archival material, we established the Herman Miller Author in Residence Program. Office space and clerical support are provided in the archives for individuals making extensive use of our collections. Our first "author in residence" Phyllis Ross, will arrive in June. Ross, who worked for the Library of Congress on a current Charles and Ray Eames Exhibition, will be using our Gilbert Rohde collections.

The Only Thing We Can Promise You is Change
Like all corporations, Herman Miller, Inc. continues to experience dramatic changes. Old facilities are renovated or sold, new facilities are acquired or built; long-time employees retire; and new

employees become part of the Herman Miller community. All of these changes have had a dramatic, yet positive, impact on the archives and record services department. Although the archives continues to be viewed as an important corporate asset providing a competitive advantage, we need to identify new ways to add value to the company and to become more proactive and less reactive. Communication with the rest of the corporation must be improved - perhaps through Intranet capabilities and online newsletters, outreach programs to new employees, and contact through existing internal publications.

For the archives, this is a time of great change but also great challenge. To contribute and prosper, we must make the corporation's mission and objectives our own - and demonstrate that our collections, can and do, support all aspects of the business, from design and development, to marketing and sales.