

“Quaderni della Fondazione Piaggio”, New Series II, 2004: a review

by *Antonella Bilotto*

In Pontedera, on September 19th, 2003, the Piaggio Foundation organized a Study Day at the Antonella Bechi Piaggio Historical Archives, to celebrate its 10th anniversary. One year later, in December 2004, the proceedings of that meeting were published in a monographic issue of “Quaderni della Fondazione Piaggio”.

The title already draws my attention: “The *Discovery* of Papers. History, innovation, and design in business archives”. The structure of the volume follows the program of the study day:

- Opening remarks
- Session one – Introduction
- Session two – business archives: valorization and digitalization
- Session three – company case studies

After the opening remarks, an introductory session coordinated by Tommaso Fanfani focuses on *memory and its distinctive role in companies* – a theme that Giovanni Alberto Agnelli had developed, proposing that “a company that can boast a centuries-old historical background gains a wide advantage in terms of prestige from both partners and potential customers” (Fanfani, p. 17). It goes without saying that the tool to communicate this historical background is a well-organized and functional archives.

In the second talk, Romiti concludes the “theoretical” part of the study day, he focuses on the unconditional “freedom of private subjects [companies] to make their own decisions about the question of memory conservation. Consequently, he asserts that legal obligations should be imposed regarding “methods and procedures (of conservation) ” (Romiti, p. 33) in order to restrict this “harmful” freedom, going against “archivists, who accepted that the freedom of private subjects cannot and should not be restricted” (p. 34). Following this statement, he also defines a series of procedures: that companies divide current from semi-current and non-current records, or use a filing plan. In theory, these procedures would oblige private subjects to conserve a company’s memory, which actually belongs to the surrounding community, because “if a company does not preserve its records, it destroys not only its own memory but also that of its extended network” (p. 33)

At this point, a few specific questions arise in my mind: what should companies be obliged to preserve in their archives? Is it true that they won't preserve anything unless they are forced to? Who decides what a company should preserve or eliminate? Perhaps these questions might be answered in the third part; the "case studies".

But before turning to the 'real life stories' to be found in the business archives, it is necessary to examine the second part, which provides a link between the theoretical introduction and the case studies of the third session. In this section, Linda Kaiser, Renato Delfiol and Roberto Cerri show us around the world of archives enhancement, for the most part relying on extensive computerization. By making information available online, many types of archival records become attractive and functional to the wider public.

It isn't only the database of industrial patents that build a European network – thereby making information about technological innovation easily available (Kaiser, p. 46-48); but also the surveys of business archives that provide a picture of this continuously changing world, and pursue the difficult aim of linking public (local departments for archives) and private bodies (Delfiol, p. 55-58).

Computerization will also connect business archives to the market, so that they more accessible. (Cerri, p. 68-69). And although "archives cannot be turned into museums" (p. 69), e.g. the initiative "Sunday at the Archives", periodically promoted by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, a company's archives may well attract greater attention because it "often holds a collection of products as well, [...] we should rather talk of hybrid cultural institutions [...] where the company archives fits in perfectly with the company museum, as well as the photo and film collections" (p. 69).

The issue is a lot more complex than the title suggests: the title speaks of "papers", but the monograph proposes solutions for digital enhancement and protection; and then goes on to discuss the "aesthetic" value of company objects, including records prepared with non-traditional media, such as films.

The third session shows how different companies have responded to the challenge. There are at least three different groups among these "company cases". The first one consists of those who straightforwardly tell their "institutional-economic history", which is drawn from archival records (see for instance Baglioni, p. 108-119). The second group consists of those who speak of archives with a strong communicational impact – for example, Agnelli, or the Olivetti archive and its movies (Pacchioli, p. 92-95). Finally, a counter-current trend coming from the Ferragamo and Alessi archives, where the traditional concept of archival science is turned upside down. Appiani says: "I would like to recall that also our archives, like Ferragamo's, is rather unconventional, being an archive of objects (products or prototypes) resulting from the 90-year history of Alessi" (Appiani, p. 160). And, as if to justify the small amount of paper files in the archives, she adds: "What sort of papers did we look for? Author sketches, technical dossiers and correspondence with designers" (p. 161). With these words, she stresses the choice NOT to preserve company records while building their archives.

So which kind of memory might a company preserve? Should it focus on the primary reason why a company exists: the product?. Which part of an archive should be preserved? "Traditional" archivists choose papers; business people opt for film clips or other media; however, a company with its own museum would prefer to focus on products. Can't

apparently opposite approaches be compatible? Perhaps the history we draw from an archives isn't just an economic history anymore, as it was in the 70s, when the "primary sources" in business archives became relevant. Nowadays business archives are more concerned with memory as a means of communicating with their publics, and therefore tend to concentrate on products rather than on "company books".

Is it possible, then, to find a balance between minutes of the Board of Directors, workers' payrolls, company publications, pictures and movies, production tools, and finished products? Ferragamo follows this course, and is not the only company to do so. The study day (and its subsequent published proceedings) seems to follow the same path and to contradict its very title, "The *Discovery* of Papers". Any kind of restriction by law is equally contradictory and impossible to pursue in a varied world that is jealous of its privacy. In the Italian civil code, there is a list of papers companies can eliminate, and nevertheless some parts of those archives are often preserved. Why?

Perhaps because the entrepreneur already realizes the intellectual relevance of what he does. I think this is the issue we should insist on, rather than on coercion, which is unnatural for companies.