

New software has been developed to make it simpler for practices to manage their digital archives. Stephen Pacey reports

Images at your fingertips

Architectural practice often seems to fit Donald Rumsfeld's curiously circuitous description of US Intelligence: there are known knowns, things we know we know; known unknowns, things we know we don't know; but there are also unknown unknowns, things we do not know that we don't know.

Architecture should perhaps have an additional category: "Unknown knowns". This is the

information we once knew, but find difficult to recall — what was the site area of that university project last year? How many projects have we completed with an affordable housing element? What experience do we have in single-ply roofing? These are all questions that you can probably find an answer for, but often at the cost of both time and sanity.

The ubiquity of the computer over the past decade has, ironi-

cally, often been at the expense of a more disciplined approach to information management. If an accumulation of hard-copy letters is not filed, its very physicality will eventually force you into some sort of action. Those same letters on a computer are much easier to ignore. The problem can get out of hand when faced with the mass of documentation that building projects generate.

All practices have some form

of database. But these collections of information and data need to be managed. Ideally, a practice needs a single central system that links projects with people, documents with projects and records of all the decisions made through the life of a project. It should be self-feeding: staff should find it easier to do their job through the system than to do it any other way.

After undertaking a wide-ranging practice review last year, Feilden Clegg Bradley Architects (FCBA) identified a need to structure the way it organises images, exacerbated by the need to share resources between large offices in Bath and London.

Existing image-management software is good for single-site installations but doesn't address the complexities of mirroring an image database in multiple sites. So Axomic, a young Cambridge-based software company that had carried out part of the FCBA's IT review, offered to write a system that did. The result is OpenAsset, a web browser-based image and document library.

Browser applications usually operate over the internet, where data is stored remotely on the server of the application service provider. But the practicalities of sharing 50MB images over the internet are seemingly insurmountable. OpenAsset's solution is to operate entirely within the FCBA's office. The application stores a database of images and documents on FCBA's internal network. Images can be assigned to a number of general categories and given keyword meta-tags.

Security levels can be set to allow individuals to check images into a specific project. But OpenAsset begins to show its genius in its "states" function. When images are uploaded, they are automatically resized to a number of states, or user-definable sizes and resolutions. The user sees only one thumbnail of the image, but when placing the image from OpenAsset into Quark Xpress or Photoshop, simply selects the required size. This comes into its own when creating selections of images, which can then automatically be saved as a Powerpoint or PDF slide show.

FCBA has a mirrored OpenAsset server in its London office that is automatically updated every time an image is uploaded in Bath.

OpenAsset is deceptively simple and appears robust, well supported and rapidly growing in functionality (driven by its architect users). Interest is growing at a pace. Wilkinson Eyre and Assael Architecture have both recently bought the system.

IT can only be part of the solution for information management. Categories and meta-tags must be structured to suit what you want to be able to search for, and the whole practice needs to be committed to using it. But the benefits of using such a system feed its use, and can take you several steps closer to rediscovering those "unknown knowns".

● Visit www.axomic.com

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