NOT JUST A ROOM OF STUFF

ARCHITECTURAL MATERIAL COLLECTIONS 101
The University of Houston Materials Research Collective

I visited the University of Houston Materials Research Collaborative (MRC) in November 2014 and spoke with Donna Kacmar, Director of the collection. The MRC was founded in 2010 by Kacmar, and is managed through the College of Architecture. It includes both a substantial collection of materials sourced and acquired by Kacmar and her staff, as well as a set of samples lent by Material Connexion.

What kind of materials does this collection include?
Innovative building and design materials. We try to have things that other people don't know about. One example is Luccon, a kind of translucent concrete with carbon fibers.

How big is the collection? How many items, and how many square feet of space?
We have about 400 materials in our regular collection, and another 200 in our Material Connexion collection. We're changing from a subscription to a purchase model with Material Connexion. The samples from Material Connexion are updated semi-annually. The University of Houston also subscribes to the Material Connexion database.

Our space is about 700 square feet, in a single room off the main foyer of the School of Architecture building. It was originally gallery space with a pin-up wall and some built-in cabinets with Hormacite doors. We had a $15,000 budget to start up. We spent $3000 on cabinets, $5000 on our samples database, and the rest on our student budget.

Who supervises the collection? How many staff do you have? Who runs the collection on a day-to-day basis?
I'm the Director, as well as associate faculty in the Architecture School and a registered architect. My area of expertise is energy use in buildings, lighting, acoustics, LEED reviews, and building systems. There's a budget for 1 FTE student workers, and .25 FTE for me. Currently I have two undergraduate architecture students and one graduate architecture student working in the MRC. The graduate student's position is partly paid by a faculty development program TA-ship. All staff, including me, rotate to keep the MRC open 1-6 Monday and Wednesday, and 10-6 Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday during the school year.

Who provides expertise and knowledge for this collection? How do you build staff knowledge and expertise?
I'm a registered architect with materials as an area of interest. We all learn by reading and doing. When a student asks a question it's an opportunity for all of us to learn. For instance, based on student questions we undertook a project where we looked at carbon footprint software to see how they were calculating carbon
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MATERIALS LABORATORY
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DON’T CLASSIFY.

MUCH.
KEEP TRACK OF YOUR ASKS.

AND KEEP ASKING.
FIND EXPERTS TO HELP.

AND BUILD YOUR LOCAL EXPERTISE.
WEIGH THE COSTS OF DIGITAL.

DIGITAL COSTS.
Identify the Mess
State Your Intent
Face Reality
Choose a Direction
Measure the Distance
Play with Structure
Prepare to Adjust

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF ANY MESS

Abby Covert