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“Um sich behaust zu fühlen in dieser Welt”

The Architecture of “Verzetteln”

Abstract

The following contribution negotiates strategies of academic literary and archival inquiry and knowledge organization for (architectural) historiography. “Where did I find this?” is the central dilemma, with which all researchers, from doctoral students to professors emeriti, are confronted. Methods of excerpting and Verzetteln (which, in German, has a double-meaning of “card-indexing” and “dissipating in details”) as a solution of the problem are as old as the textualized knowledge production. Already in the Renaissance, they belonged to the most important topics of academia: “You know how easy it is to collect facts, and how difficult to order them.” (Caspar Wolf) Gutenberg’s invention of letterpress printing and the subsequent flood of books made it increasingly difficult for researchers to comprehensively appropriate and store the constantly growing body of knowledge. An effective adoption needed technical tools and methods to control the, at that time already bemoaned, flood of publications. The card file cabinet in its different occurrences through the centuries—from the humanistic polymaths Conrad Gessner and Vincent Placcius, to Paul Otlet and Niklas Luhman, and to its digital version—evolved as an apparatus for material collection and organization, as well as for production. Describing and analyzing its efficient and creative potential through different models in various contexts raises questions regarding the essence of (architectural) history.

Keywords

File Cabinets, Excerpt Collections, Ordering Systems, Knowledge and Information Organization, World Cataloguing, Collective Memory