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## **The Accidental Archivist**

A recent [New York Times](#) article focuses on the World Trade Center collection of architectural historian Anthony W. Robins. While researching a book on the World Trade Center in the 1980s, Robins collected original brochures and copied materials from a World Trade Center library. After the devastation of the 9/11 attack, Robins found himself in possession of a unique collection of World Trade Center documents.

When he began planning a new edition of his book, Robins began to investigate the fate of the materials he had used at the World Trade Center library. His research led him to the Special Libraries Association, and a search that he documents in a [guest blog post](#). It turns out the library was closed in 1995. Most of the materials were placed in storage and destroyed in the 9/11 attack.

The significance of the materials changed at the same time as their scarcity did. When he collected them in the 1980s, Robins' collection documented a proud example of American architecture. After the 9/11 attacks, the materials took on a profound emotional resonance, representing the optimism of the creation of the towers in the shadow of their destruction.

Robins recognizes the significance and value of all the materials in his possession. As he points out in a [second blog post](#) for the Special Libraries Association, while he reproduced a number of items within the book, "--the question of what documents to include in a book is not the same question as what documents to preserve in an archive." Anyone who has ever done research in an archives knows that, unlike in the movies, the answers you seek are rarely set out clearly in one document. Instead, it is often a matter of piecing together small bits of information from different sources that provides a clear picture.

Robins hopes to scan the remaining materials and create an online 'virtual archive' to provide research opportunities to others. In the digital age, the sharing of unique materials is possible in new ways. While virtual documents will never replace originals for scholars or collectors, they are of great use and interest to a wide cross-section of society, from genealogists to high school students. The World Trade Center is now part of American history, and the documents that Robins copied will surely be of interest for a long time to come.

Many individuals find themselves in the possession of unique historical documents, whether by design or accident. It is not possible for every item of historical interest to be housed in a public archives or museum. What this means, however, is that private owners of significant materials have a responsibility to respect the materials and, when possible, to share them with the world. Robins clearly takes this responsibility seriously.