

**Magdalena
Dardel-Coronado**

Doctora en Historia del Arte, Profesora
Titular, Departamento de Artes Integradas
Universidad de Playa Ancha,
Valparaíso, Chile
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9105-4789>
magdalena.dardel@upla.cl

Olimpia Rossetti-Krauss

Licenciada en Historia,
Estudiante de Magíster en Historia del Arte
Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez
Valparaíso, Chile
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5573-3737>
orossettik@gmail.com

DOCUMENTARY COLLECTION OF JOSÉ VIAL: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE OF VALPARAÍSO

ACERVO DOCUMENTAL DE JOSÉ VIAL:
APORTES PARA EL ESTUDIO DE LA ESCUELA DE
ARQUITECTURA DE VALPARAÍSO

ACERVO DOCUMENTAL DE JOSÉ VIAL:
CONTRIBUIÇÕES PARA O ESTUDO DA ESCOLA DE
ARQUITETURA DE VALPARAÍSO



Figure 0. José Vial during the construction of the house in Jean Mermoz, 1960. Source: Archive Historical José Vial Armstrong.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo se dedica a presentar el trabajo en torno al acervo documental personal del arquitecto José Vial Armstrong (1926-1983), parte del grupo fundador de la Escuela de Arquitectura de Valparaíso. Éste se basó en identificar, revisar, ordenar y clasificar casi mil documentos teóricos inéditos, que entregan nuevas aristas al trabajo individual de Vial Armstrong como el rol que cumplió al interior del colectivo. Considerando la propuesta de volver a revisar las fuentes de la arquitectura moderna según Panayotis Tournikiotis (2014). Este artículo se desarrolla en identificar cómo el estudio del acervo documental de Vial, permitiría visibilizar al autor en la historiografía de la arquitectura moderna en Chile, a la vez de comprender el rol del arquitecto al interior de la Escuela a la que perteneció y por lo tanto, revisar nuevos antecedentes sobre esta institución académica.

Palabras clave: archivo, fuentes, documentación, arquitectura moderna, historiografía

ABSTRACT

This article presents the work on the personal documentary collection of the architect José Vial Armstrong (1926-1983), part of the founding group of the School of Architecture of Valparaíso. This was based on identifying, reviewing, organizing, and classifying almost a thousand unpublished theoretical documents, providing new insights into his individual work and role within the group. Considering the proposal to revisit the sources of modern architecture, according to Panayotis Tournikiotis (2014), this article aims to demonstrate how the study of Vial's documentary collection would make the author visible in the historiography of modern architecture in Chile, as well as to understand the role of the architect within the School to which he belonged, and, therefore, to review new information about this institution.

Keywords: archive, sources, documentation, modern architecture, historiography

RESUMO

Este artigo é dedicado a apresentar o trabalho sobre o acervo documental pessoal do arquiteto José Vial Armstrong (1926-1983), parte do grupo fundador da Escola de Arquitetura de Valparaíso. O trabalho baseou-se na identificação, revisão, ordenação e classificação de quase mil documentos teóricos inéditos, que fornecem novas percepções sobre o trabalho individual de Vial Armstrong e o papel que ele desempenhou no coletivo. Considerando a proposta de visitar as fontes da arquitetura moderna de acordo com Panayotis Tournikiotis (2014). Este artigo é desenvolvido para identificar como o estudo do acervo documental de Vial tornaria o autor visível na historiografia da arquitetura moderna no Chile, bem como para compreender o papel do arquiteto dentro da Escola à qual pertencia e, portanto, revisar novas informações sobre essa instituição acadêmica.

Palavras-chave: arquivo, fontes, documentação, arquitetura moderna, historiografia

INTRODUCTION

Jose Vial Armstrong (1926-1983), a key figure in founding the Valparaíso School of Architecture (EAV), brought a unique perspective to the collective. His multifaceted role as a professor, project leader, and pivotal figure in establishing the design degree program and Open City (Ciudad Abierta) underscored his influence.

Since his early death at the age of 57, his personal documentation has remained with his family and has not been addressed within the historiographical interest around the EAV in recent decades. This text focuses on a series of writings, most of which Vial authored. Therefore, visual, artistic, or architectural sources such as photos, maps, drawings, sketches, and plans are not included. Given that the main interest of the article is to present this documentary collection, an analysis of the sources is not considered. However, the idea of doing this at a later stage is left. This text aims to show theoretical documents that, in light of the current bibliographic balance, reveal the importance of incorporating them into studies covering the collective and the individual figure of the architect, which have hardly been reviewed.

The primary goal of this text is to present a comprehensive documentary collection consisting of nearly a thousand theoretical documents. These largely unpublished documents serve as primary sources, offering new background information and shedding light on lesser-known aspects of the collective. The text also outlines the process of reviewing the documents. It suggests potential avenues for further research to contribute to the historiographical discussion on the development of local modernity and its teaching in Valparaíso.

First, it is necessary to identify some central aspects that will better contextualize the documentation worked on. From a very young age and for about forty years, Vial was interested in recording writings from the different areas of his professional life. The oldest documents that its collection preserves are related to the reformist movement of the late 1940s, referred to by its protagonists as the "Revolution of '49", in his role as a member of the Student's Union (Vial, 1949), where notebooks with notes, leaflets, and reports were found.

Once he settled in Valparaíso in 1944, José Vial gave importance to preserving personal and collective documents related to architectural, teaching, and administrative topics, as well as his notes. This documentary drive was recognized and institutionalized in an archive at the School in the mid-1950s, later named the José Vial Armstrong Historical Archive (Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong, 2023), where all the documents relating to the School from the year 1952 to the present day are kept. At the moment, there is not enough evidence to conclude whether Vial intended to create an archive since the document recording occurred spontaneously. It is believed that this exercise could indicate the collective's interest in registering their work,

1 This archive should not be confused with the Personal Archive of José Vial Armstrong, now in the hands of his son Daniel Vial, who refers to this work as the documentary collection of José Vial..

probably to recognize the originality. In this sense, the knowledge and interest that Vial had about history, the history of art, and the teaching of architecture is relevant. Apparently, this would have allowed him to recognize the importance of documenting EAV's work from its earliest years.

It is appropriate to consider that, according to the current state of archival research, the material collected by José Vial, given the absence of systematization, could be considered architectural documentation and not an architectural archive (Carrascal, 2023, p. 18). Therefore, the terms architectural documentation and documentary collection will be used as equivalents to refer to the written sources produced and stored by José Vial. In this article, it is evident how the analyzed material has the potential to be understood as an archive, making this research a first step in that direction.

The documentary diversity presented by this set of theoretical sources would allow new approaches to fundamental topics of EAV's history, proposal, and way of working. In particular, three documents stand out: *Hace 30 años, en 1952, se funda en Valparaíso el Instituto de Arquitectura, Cómo se inició la Amereida* and *El fundamento de la Ciudad Abierta*. Later in the investigation, the importance of these three documents and the value of analyzing them in greater detail will be commented on. The main objective is not to look closely at a hermeneutical analysis of these sources, which have an essential value both to obtain new evidence and a deeper understanding of this group's path and its proposals, but to highlight the importance of publicizing the set of sources to work on them in depth.

CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE DOCUMENTARY COLLECTION

José Vial Armstrong entered the Catholic University of Chile's (UC) School of Architecture in 1944. From his first years as a university student, he stood out for his leadership qualities among his classmates, participating in the Student's Union for several years. In 1948, he traveled to Europe with his professors Alberto Cruz, Francisco Méndez, and higher-year classmates to learn about modern architecture and their new pedagogical models.

Upon his return to Chile in 1949, Vial became involved in the opposition movement to the academic teaching of his alma mater. The movement was led mainly by young students and teachers, who understood it as a revolution that began in the mid-1940s and managed to crystallize modifications in the curriculum by 1950. In this context, Vial contacted the Argentine poet Godofredo Lommi, who supported the reformist group, leading to an interdisciplinary collective where



Figure 1. José Vial and Teresa Cruz on the day of their marriage in 1955. Source: José Vial Armstrong Historical Archive



Figure 2. Miguel Eyquem, Alberto Cruz, and José Vial in Victoria Square, Valparaíso, c. 1952. Source: Personal Archive - José Vial A.

modernity and its teaching were discussed. Iommi had settled in Chile in 1940, approaching collectives linked to the artistic avant-garde. The group that was formed during the reformist process was initially composed of architects Alberto Cruz, Francisco Méndez, Miguel Eyquem, Jaime Bellalta, Pedro Burchard, Octavio Sotomayor, and architecture students Arturo Baeza and Fabio Cruz, in addition to José Vial. The poet Godofredo Iommi and the filmmaker Patricio Kaulen also participated.

In parallel with the UC reforms, the Catholic University of Valparaíso (UCV) was also undergoing internal changes. By then, the Society of Jesus had taken over the institution's administration, appointing the priest Jorge González Förster as Rector. Based on the oral sources of the period, the new Rector invited Alberto Cruz to join the University's academic staff in March 1952 to restructure the architecture degree program (Torrent, 2002). Cruz requested the incorporation of the participants of the so-called artistic avant-garde, drawing the attention of the students meeting with them. In March of that year, José Vial, along with Alberto Cruz, Godofredo Iommi, Francisco Méndez, Jaime Bellalta, Miguel Eyquem, and Arturo Baeza, moved to Valparaíso with the possibility of formalizing the group they had constituted years before. Fabio Cruz, Alberto's cousin, who had arrived in Valparaíso a year earlier to study architecture, joined them. They formed the Valparaíso Institute of Architecture, understood as the research wing that complemented their teaching work. Three years later, the Argentine sculptor Claudio Girola joined.



Figure 3. Members of the Valparaíso Institute of Architecture and their families, 1957. Source: Personal Archive - José Vial A.

The Institute of Architecture was conceived as a separate entity from the School, but linked to it, to carry out studies and research that served as a basis for teaching and projects independent from pedagogical work. Historiography has recognized the autonomy of both instances, although it has called the group the Valparaíso School of Architecture (EAV), distinguishing the pedagogical dimension from the investigative (Dardel, 2022; De Nordenflycht, 2018; Pérez, 2014) (Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Since his arrival in the city of Valparaíso, Vial worked as an assistant and then as a teacher in the degree program. Over the years, he developed a deep interest in improving the School's curricula and internal regulations. During his academic career, Vial dedicated himself to the study of history and other humanist disciplines, which was accentuated by the close relationship that both he and the other members of the School had with the historian Mario Góngora (1915-1985), ultimately influencing one another (Rodríguez, 1988). Vial was also interested in theology and taught classes on the subject. Gerardo Mello Mourao, a Brazilian poet close to the EAV, said:

Pepe's architecture and classes were no sweat for him but brought a smile to his serene face. However, one thing brought sweat to his brow: his focus on theology. That was his true profession. Pepe Vial was a theologian by trade and profession, although he was not a church minister (...) Pepe Vial, José Vial Armstrong, Catholic by faith, theologian by profession (Mello Mourao, 1979).

Alongside teaching, Vial worked on architecture, urban planning, and design proposals. After the 1960 earthquake, he was part of an EAV-led project to rebuild a series of churches between Concepción and Aysén (Reyes, 2021). In 1969, alongside Fabio Cruz and other academics of the degree, he led the creation of the School of Design at UCV in alliance with the publishing house Zig-Zag (Vial, 1969). In 1970, he was part of the founding group of the Open City of Ritoque, a project where EAV crystallized its architectural, pedagogical, and research experiences. Over the following years, Vial continued as an academic at the School of Architecture, of which he was also director, resigning from that position in 1980 for health reasons. José Vial died in 1983 at 56 and is buried in the Open City cemetery next to part of the group with whom he worked for about four decades.

When addressing the documentation kept by Vial, the biographical background provided is of particular relevance since it allows contextualization of the written sources. At the same time, this identification admits dialogue with other known documentation, oral sources, and the historiography that the EAV has already addressed. Thanks to this, it becomes possible, as will be developed in the following sections, to recognize the value of unpublished documentation and how it could be inserted into the bibliographic discussion on the EAV, the teaching of modern architecture in Chile, and to recognize and disseminate Vial's contribution in both contexts.

METHODOLOGY

WORK ON THE DOCUMENTARY COLLECTION

To make a list of the material, 996 documents stored in 15 boxes under the custody of Daniel Vial Cruz, José Vial's son, were reviewed. These were registered during the first half of 2022 (Figure 4) and considered the following stages:

- I. Opening. The content was reviewed, identifying all types of records: reflections, logs, notebooks, personal documents, letters, study notes, teaching material, and press clippings, among others.
- II. Identification. Each box was assigned a number and each document, an identification. However, the order José Vial kept the documents was not altered.
- III. Cataloging. A list was prepared that considered the document's location, identification number, title (in documents that had a title, it was kept. When it did not, one was determined based on its content), type of document, and, when relevant, some observations.
- IV. Digitalization. Documents were selected based on two criteria: that they were unpublished, novel, and/or relevant to José Vial's trajectory and the group to which he belonged.



Figure 4. Work in the Personal Archive of José Vial A. Source: Photo by Olimpia Rossetti.

PROPOSAL FOR THE DOCUMENTARY STUDY

Knowledge of José Vial's biographical and contextual background was essential for the digitization stage. This story, briefly explained in the previous section, was handled when making the first approach to the documents, which allowed recognizing fundamental material to propose less widespread aspects of the EAV, thus fulfilling the central objective of this stage of the work.

Given that the preserved documentation covered Vial's career, from when he was a student until a few months before his death, over more than forty years, it was necessary to contextualize the architect's professional career specifically. This exercise involved identifying the temporality of the different sources and, above all, reviewing how this documentary set would provide new lines about different events in which the architect had an impact.

Although analyzing the sources is not part of this stage of the work, recognizing their importance and proposing criteria for their study was a central aspect to consider since the investigation regarding José Vial Armstrong's documentary material constituted a first approach to analysis. In light of the material review, the need arises to continue a closer examination through a hermeneutical analysis of the sources, contrasting them with the bibliography on the subject and putting them in dialogue with other primary and secondary sources.

DISCUSSION

In the last three decades, archives have become a referential aspect of working with visual arts. This move has revealed an area of development of contemporary artistic practices and a diversity of strategies for revisiting canonical artists and works. In the specific case of architecture, the interest aroused around archives has allowed focusing on various areas based on unpublished or poorly worked primary sources.

In 1975, the French art historian André Chastel started a debate by asking, "Where are the archives of modern architecture?" (Ávila Gómez, 2017). As Lourdes González (2004) has highlighted, foundations and other institutions associated with the most recognized figures of architectural modernity have already done a lot of work in this regard. In this way, determining characters were positioned within the canon from the review of their sources. This has not happened, however, with actors who had a more restricted impact or whose names have not entered, for now, the essential references of the historiography of architecture. In these cases, a revision is pending that allows considering the histories of local architectures in a more situational way, based on the preserved documentation and overcoming readings that tend to consider these figures as minor and subordinated to the roles of those who have occupied more recognized positions.

The architecture archives have been characterized fundamentally by having in their collection plans, documents, photographs, and other records essentially focused on projects and/or built work (González, 2004). In this sense, the situation of José Vial's documentary collection is doubly exceptional. He is a sparsely worked architect whose documentary collection focuses on the written word, which has not been considered study material so far. However, considering the historical circumstances of Vial Armstrong's professional life, it is necessary to theoretically define how the documentation will be observed and studied.

SOURCES OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE, ACCORDING TO PANAYOTIS TOURNIKIOTIS

The proposal of the researcher and architect Panayotis Tournikiotis (2014) was used as a base to theoretically articulate the challenge of

investigating the documentary collection of José Vial. With his work, "*The Historiography of Modern Architecture*," the foreword by Emilia Hernández Pezzi highlights that,

(...) the facts from the outside were not written with the detachment that the historian seems to need to interpret or narrate the facts; on the contrary, this was done directly from the inside. Historians actively participated in constructing the theoretical framework of this new architecture. They promoted their analyses of historical events from contemporary keys that contributed to its programmatic and ideological equipment. They often did it at the expense of historical rigor, manipulating and deforming the material with which they worked to support their arguments (Hernández Pezzi, 2014, p. 8).

For Tournikiotis, the first historical studies on modern architecture had an ideological tone that is relevant to revisit nowadays, critically paying particular attention to the sources. For the author, this would allow:

1. Highlighting the constant changes in the discursive elaboration of history regarding architectural modernity.
2. Proposing an appreciation of the events and changes according to the interpretation of each historian.
3. Seeing the alterations produced in the discourses in conjunction with the transformations of architectural modernity (Tournikiotis, 2014).

It is considered that these proposals allow a better understanding of the figure of José Vial from his documentary collection since:

1. The preserved documents allow us to show nuances and specificities of the development of the modern movement and its teaching in Chile, particularly in Valparaíso.
2. The work based on his documentary collection would allow new interpretations regarding his figure, marginalized from the Chilean modern movement until now.
3. The documentary set, especially if reviewed chronologically, reveals changes in discourse alongside the transformations of modernity.

Although developed intuitively, Vial's documentary collection evidences the search for the strategies that EAV sought to instill in the context of mid-twentieth century Chile, where the group's work as a collective is formulated in its organization and an original pedagogical and avant-garde proposal in its artistic exercises. It is important to note that it is pertinent to review this set of sources in line with the current historiographical balance, finding lines that would allow rethinking aspects of the development of modern architecture and its teaching in the specific context of modern Valparaíso.

RESULTS

The relevance of works with archives in recent decades is a relevant topic for investigating the central role they fulfill in research in arts and architecture (Colomina, 2010; Derrida, 1997; Foster, 2016).

In this sense, Panayotis Tournikiotis proposed three objectives for re-examining the sources of architectural modernity. This article considers that they are useful for studying the sources preserved by José Vial. This allows one to understand his work better and obtain new background information to understand the EAV. Regarding this point, it is appropriate to highlight the three sources mentioned above since they allow for rethinking key aspects of the collective:

1. *Hace 30 años, en 1952, se funda en Valparaíso el Instituto de Arquitectura (30 years ago, in 1952, the Institute of Architecture was founded in Valparaíso)* (Vial, 1982).

This text accounts for different milestones in the history of EAV, such as the formation of the Institute, the Amereid crossing, and the Open City of Ritoque. Although it provides already-known information, distinctive features are incorporated by being a retrospective vision focused on Vial's experience.

The source reaffirms the Institute as a research center, the first of its kind in the country. It also highlights that they introduced field trips and the observation process as a study mechanism in architecture teaching.

On the other hand, it addresses the well-known exhibition that the School held in 1972 at the National Museum of Fine Arts (Cruz, 1972), where "the postulation of a direct relationship between architecture and poetry" was exhibited for the first time (Vial, 1982).

A new key that the architect delivers in this source is that for him, the Open City emerged as a continuation of the Institute because it was there that the research and reflections carried out in the previous decades were substantially applied. The relationship between architecture and poetry is particularly relevant, formulated from a specific geographical terrain, synthesizing the group's searches from its origins (Berríos, 2010) (Figure 5).

2. *Cómo se inició la Amereida (How the Amereid started)* (Vial, 1965)

This source is a letter Vial wrote to Francisco Méndez (a member of the Institute based in Europe since 1957) on August 8th, 1965. In the letter, Vial informed him of the preparations for what was understood as a poetic trip through the American continent (La Travesía de Amereida, n.d.).

The document provides some background information regarding the trip's organization, particularly its management. It gives an account of obtaining permits, practical decisions, contacts used, purchases, and other details of that nature. Vial's narration of the teaching activities at the school during the trip and in the weeks before, when a large part of the academic staff was absent, is fascinating. During that period,

Figure 8. José Vial during the construction of the house in Jean Mermoz, 1960. Source: José Vial Armstrong Historical Archive.



On the other hand, the review of Vial's documentation makes it clear that his work was decisive for the realization of these and other projects. So, the investigation should continue in the documentary collection and, with it, in his role within the group. This work is an approximation of the information that the sources made and preserved by Vial could reveal.

CONCLUSIONS

This article focused on bringing to light the existence of a documentary collection of unpublished theoretical sources preserved by José Vial Armstrong, the vast majority of his authorship. This set of sources provides new background information to understand the School of Architecture of Valparaíso and, in turn, makes visible his role within the collective.

To this end, the text explains how this revision was carried out and provides some lines on how the investigation of the texts could be continued to provide new background information to the historiographical discussion on the development of local modernity and its teaching in Valparaíso. The review and cataloging of the documentary collection

strengthen the understanding of the EAV as a collective, making it clear that Vial Armstrong had a relevant, although little-known, role within the group (Figure 8).

The architect's documentary collection during his professional career provided knowledge about three essential aspects that update the historiographical discussion of this School: the figure of José Vial Armstrong, his role within the collective, and how the documentation he preserved sheds light on this group's work.

In line with the theorists above, the Spanish art historian Anna María Guasch has understood the archive as a place of communication, "with information constantly in a state of recycling" (2019, p. 303) linking, starting with Derrida, the archive with the future. In this regard, the Frenchman points out that the archive is "the question of the future in itself" (1997, p. 36).

The documentation collected by José Vial from the late 1940s to the early 1980s could be considered an archive. As already presented, it is not formally so, given the absence of systematization until the first attempt to organize this study. On the other hand, the documentary diversity, the theoretical references, the number of documents, and the new background that was investigated open the possibility of generating multiple investigations regarding his figure as an architect, his legacy, and the School to which he belonged.

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