Denver Public Library Digital Collections:  
A Review  

http://digital.denverlibrary.org/

Administrative Aspects

“This online collection contains a selection of photographs, maps, broadsides, architectural drawings and other documents from the collections of the Western History/Genealogy Department chronicling the people, places, and events that shaped the settlement and growth of the Western United States.” This is the closest statement that passes for a mission in the Denver Public Library Digital Collections. As reflected in its list of acceptable materials, the purpose is broad—to digitize items are continuously added to keep “chronicling the ongoing development of Western America.”

Although all the Collections are maintained and owned by the Denver Public Library and lean heavily toward Colorado, the audience is indeed anyone who lives in Western America. Students, historical scholars, and those interested in genealogy are most likely to use the Collections.

According to Craig Haggit, one of their senior catalog librarians, previous digitization efforts were grant-funded, “though we're exploring ways to build digital library production on a more sustainable basis through improved workflows and utilizing existing staff.”

Collection Content

While the exact collection development policy (CDP) is not stated, it is again clear from the “About” section that the scope of the Collections is wide. They digitize “photographs, maps, broadsides, architectural drawings and other documents” of the “people, places, and events that shaped the settlement and growth” of Western America. It has been called a difficult process to “anticipate user needs while remaining true to the core institutional values,” (Weiss, 2014) so perhaps that is why the CDP is so broad—out of the effort to be inclusive.

All items are owned by the Denver PL and they do not link out to third-party resources. Many of these collections are donated in full by either individuals or a subject’s family. (Haggit, 2016)

As a result, this could be a recipe for a sprawling, confusing database. Yet through the use of hyperlinks and by keeping collections demarcated, users are able to get to the materials they need.
Information Organization

From the landing page, users can access materials by clicking on a link for a subject or format, or by clicking “browse all” at the top. Clicking on hyperlinks will take the user to a list of the individual collections while “browse all” brings up all items in alphabetical order. This may be overwhelming or frustrating, but they can narrow the results down by use of sidebars.
Above: two examples from clicking on the Biographies (“Browse by Subject”) and Photographs (“Browse by Format”), respectively.

Below: the results page when “browsing all.”

Dublin Core metadata is used, as is typical with CONTENTdm, with an emphasis on description (although administrative aspects are also evident). Controlled vocabulary is used to keep consistency among items, to lessen confusion. As Patricia Harpring noted, searching among cultural items is difficult because different groups may use different terms. “A controlled vocabulary allows such users to browse or search for data using familiar terms or other criteria in order to discover relevant information.” Linked data is also in use, examples being that users can click on a subject heading or on a date and see everything with that same data.
Collection Storage and Preservation

The Collections contain both digitized and born-digital objects. By checking the metadata, a user can see what the physical item is or what its original file is. Administrative metadata also lists its storage site and accession number, although this will be of more use to staff.


According to Haggit, analog originals are kept for their tactile information. Photographs are kept in the originating collection and some maps are kept in a secured, temperature-controlled room while others (less brittle) are kept in flat public access drawers. “Other formats, like oral histories on cassette tape, will need to be digitized and the original cassette eventually disposed of as it degrades and becomes completely inaccessible.” Discretion is used among staff about where to store items, or what will be disposed. Their increasingly born-digital originals are stored using Digital Archive (an OCLC product). Photographs are converted to TIFs and audio files to WAVs. The metadata attached to these items is also stored entirely on the hosting platform. “To date we have not had to migrate anything.”

This attitude of “basically, it depends” (Haggit, 2016) and the habit of disposing of certain analog originals may strike some as wrong. Yet Schumaker and his colleagues argue that “it is time to embrace a ‘good enough’ approach to digital preservation”—an argument that calls for a gradual approach that will respect library funding and staffing. (Shumaker, et. al., 2014)
Collection Access

The Digital Collections are run on CONTENTdm, which is proprietary software sold by OCLC that can be accessed anywhere with an online connection. The landing page is set up with hyperlinks clearly explained and organized by category so that both casual and dedicated researchers will have an idea of where to go first. This may be a result of “first click testing,” such as the Penfield Library used, in which usability is increased by lessening the number of clicks before finding the needed information.

A search bar and Advanced Search functions exist to further assist users, along with sidebars that can narrow searches down further once in the results by date, subject, format and creator. Wording and organization are concise and consistent throughout all the collections, so a user can pick up the terminology quickly and avoid confusion.
Results are displayed by thumbnails in rows, and if the mouse is hovered over an item, a pop-up bubble with brief descriptive metadata appears. Records are displayed under a special viewer that allows users to manipulate the item, with each element bolded.

There are no options for text-to-speech function for visually-impaired users. The only mention of privacy is in their copyright and usage guide, which only states that any invasion of privacy that may occur after one has acquired permission to use an item is the responsibility of that user.
**Technical & Service Aspects**

No access policy is available on the website. Despite all material being owned by the Denver Public Library, the Digital Collections are completely open with no patron information required. (Although some research indexes do require card information but these are not readily available.) During review, no error occurred and the site functioned properly. There is a “help” button in the top right corner that will open a pop-up with instructions on how to use the search features with otherwise no tutorials or FAQ.

The only contact email listed for the Digital Collections is for the Photo Sales department, although if a user clicks on the “Contact, Location, Hours” link bottom for the Western History/Genealogy (departments heavily involved) a link to the Ask-A-Librarian function is available, but it is the same as for the rest of the library. (It will take 2-3 weeks to process a request.)
From the individual item’s page, users also have the option to download pictures by size and texts as .pdfs. They may also print out the material. In the menu at the bottom of the webpage is a link for “Pricing, Sizes, Copyright, Permissions.” All images are copyright protected and may not be publically or commercially used without the Denver Public Library’s permission, and that permission is granted on a one-use basis for a fee. (Prints for personal use are also available for a fee.) This policy is reflected in many museums and libraries across both the US and England (Kelly, 2013)

The Digital Collections follow these design standards, of the ten described by Chow—consistency, compatibility, user control, visual clarity, explicitness, aesthetic and minimalist design. By improving user support and eliminating some library jargon, the Digital Collections could achieve the other standards.
References