

Craig Robertson, **The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 313 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

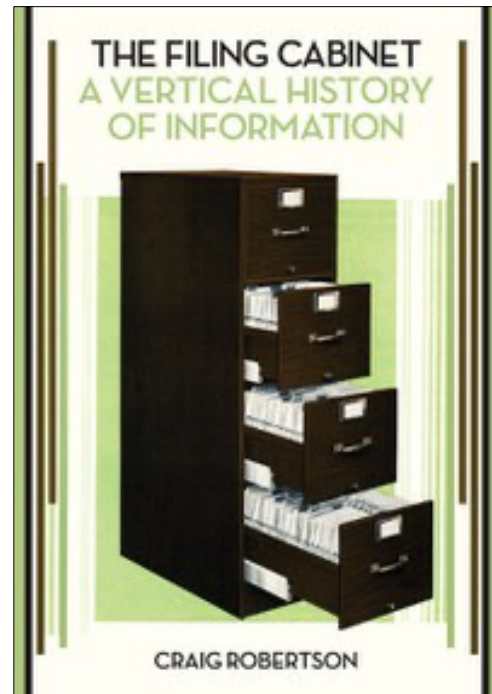
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In ***The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information***, author Craig Robertson provides an in-depth historical account of the filing cabinet's impact on corporate capitalism through its vertical storing and accessible retrieving of information. Using critical media studies, Robertson's broad description and use of advertisements assist his argument that the filing cabinet is not a passive object but a 20th-century technology.

This book could be covered in an undergraduate or graduate course on critical media studies, advertising, corporate communications, or women's studies. His interdisciplinary approach will appeal to educators, scholars, and historians alike. The author also contributes impressively to our understanding of the filing cabinet. Other authors, such as JoAnne Yates (1989) and Cornelia Vismann (2008), have written on the subject of the filing cabinet; however, Robertson provides a comprehensive historical account of the role that the vertical filing cabinet had in the 20th century.

The two parts and seven chapters are divided logically, starting with an introduction on the efficient work of paperwork and ending with an afterword titled "Out of Time, Out of Place." The book contains two parts—(1) "The Cabinet" has three chapters on verticality, integrity, and cabinet logic, and (2) "The Filing" has four chapters on granular certainty, automatic filing, ideal file clerk, and domestic storage. Robertson's premise remains throughout the book that the filing cabinet is a critical "expansion of modernity" (p. 3).

The book begins with depictions of how the filing cabinet represented modernity and efficiency with its vertical height and vertical storing of information. Robertson posits that the filing cabinet is a storage technology that "claims and shapes space in particular ways" (p. 63). Before the filing cabinet, information was in bound books with limited indexing, which posed issues with storing and retrieving information efficiently. Robertson provides an ad from a 1901 Fred Macey catalog to illustrate the notion of disorganized storing of bound volumes (p. 21). The ad shows a man holding bound volumes in disarray; as a result, the ad emphasizes the value of storing loose papers in folders. Robertson brings to light the effect the filing cabinet had on reshaping the filing system.



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The filing cabinet's vertical storage and filing changed filing systems by improving how information was stored, sorted, and retrieved. The filing cabinet's vertical container and technologies like manila folders, guide cards, and tabs made information visible with the help of compressors, which allowed the paper to stand vertically. Its height provided additional storage without taking up extra space. However, the filing cabinet went beyond housing information to allowing information to be quickly and efficiently retrieved at a glance.

Through the filing cabinet's design efficiency, Robertson asserts that the furniture gave time back to corporations. Verticality transformed into a productivity strategy. Space was reorganized to save time (p. 24), which helped corporations become more efficient. He claims that the filing cabinet provided efficiency, dependability, and labor-saving benefits to corporations. Although the book remains limited on data of companies' savings due to the filing cabinet's efficiency, Robertson does provide advertising examples that showcased businesses selling the message that the filing cabinet provided productivity to businesses and households. For example, an ad from Y and E showed the benefits of having an efficient desk with vertical drawers and card drawers, claiming that records are instantly accessible (p. 181).

In Part II, Robertson discusses the synergy of the office and the filing system. He argues that certainty is a reduction of individual discretion and that the filing cabinet increases the likelihood that a task will be completed efficiently (p. 134). This efficiency is demonstrated by dividing labor and time into smaller functions, which "made them easier to control" (p. 128). He discusses how the storage is reliant on integrity to secure and access information. Robertson views the filing cabinet as possessing "automatic memory," meaning a separate index or registry was unnecessary. He discloses that to use the filing cabinet as a system of working with information "did not require thought" (p. 179), and as a result, job roles changed.

Robertson impressively distinguishes how information labor and knowledge work were divided by gender. The division consisted of clerical work and mental work. Robertson argues that the reclassification of roles was intentional. The filing clerk moved from a knowledge worker to an information laborer. Women organized and pulled the files, while men read the files. The book showcases advertisements of women's feminine hands and nimble fingers conducting manual work. This demonstrates that filing became a kind of information labor for women.

Robertson provides a historical account of how women were trained as filers and how this role carried into their homes. To prevent women from misfiling, training and education were desired. By the 1930s, women filers were expected to have a junior high school education, and office managers preferred filers to have training in "typing, stenography, or filing" (p. 207). A senior female office manager identified three necessities of efficiency: concentration, accuracy, and "good nature" (p. 204). Women in the workforce blurred the lines between home and office (p. 223). Although few filing cabinets made it to the home, the idea of storing and sorting objects into smaller partitions did also allow for more efficient homes.

Overall, Robertson provides the science and engineering of the vertical filing cabinet in great length of its drawer slides, folders, tabs, steel, and so forth. Although the descriptions seem prolonged at times, perhaps this is because its original intent was a parody; the argument is clear that the filing cabinet emerged as information technology. However, in the 21st century, the filing cabinet was no longer viewed as being modern or efficient.

The filing cabinet became a structure that represented the past. In Burlington, Vermont, "The World's Tallest File Cabinet," which consists of 11 metal filing cabinets and stands over 40 feet tall, represents inefficiency. The 38 drawers signify the 38 years that the Southern Connector road project has been under review (p. 251). Robertson argues that this sculpture succeeds as a satire because the filing cabinet is associated in the 21st century as inefficient (p. 253).

In the afterword, Robertson provides a historical account of workplaces transitioning from the filing cabinet. In the 1970s, "information overload" emerged as a new office phenomenon. Piles of papers on a desktop became an "exemplary information management system" (p. 255). Researchers in the 1980s and 1990s who studied the organization of desks argue that "a pile was a more efficient way to store and process information than a file cabinet" (p. 255). However, the way information was processed changed as computers emerged in the workplace. The filing cabinet's components were first represented in Apple computers in the 1970s by emulating a desktop, files, folders, and a trash can. To this day, readers can see the impact of the filing cabinet's system on computers.

In conclusion, Robertson eloquently describes the historical account of the filing cabinet. He examines the shifting relationships between concepts of information, labor, time, and space. In the 20th century, the filing cabinet impacted corporate capitalism, but as the 21st century began, the filing cabinet was replaced with new technology—computers.

References

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Yates, J. (1989). *Control through communication: The rise of system in American management*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.