Excerpts from Responses to Queries posed by HTC to University Presses

Our investigation sought to explore the key question of whether senior publishers and acquisition agents—the gatekeepers—at leading academic presses consider accepting a manuscript based on an open access, electronic thesis or dissertation (ETD). The interest in hearing from publishers looks to several studies, including Hilary Ballon and Mariët Westermann’s “Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age” (2006), which asserted that research libraries seek to counter budgetary constraints by avoiding collecting duplicate material—e.g. a monograph based on a dissertation as well as open access to the dissertation itself. Their study noted, “A university press director informed us that some university libraries have instructed book wholesalers to scan the acknowledgements and front matter of books to identify those that originated in dissertations and to exclude them from their book approval plans. Yankee Book Peddler, one of the major wholesalers, reportedly estimated that 40 percent of titles are cut from approval plans for this reason.”1

Following up on the work of Ballon and Westermann, and others, we approached senior publishers and acquisitions agents at major art and architectural academic presses and asked them if electronic, open access to a thesis or dissertation would impact their decision to publish a manuscript based on that work. In order to gather frank answers, we assured our contacts that they would not be identified.

Taken collectively, the material we gathered indicates that publishers might, at times, be wary of accepting a manuscript based on an ETD. Other publishers said that the accessibility of the content of an ETD is less of a concern. Above all, our survey shows that ETDs have transformed the landscape of publishing dissertation based-books: publishers now demand that the book manuscript differ dramatically from the dissertation, be it due considerations of what would appeal to a wide audience or because the dissertation research is already openly accessible. At least one publisher, well-known for its continuing interest in first books, said that it is their policy to ask authors to pull down dissertations if they should be available on online depositories such as ProQuest.

The following are excerpts from our conversation with major university presses:

**Senior Publisher A**

“I think a key starting point is understanding what we, as a publisher, look for in a book proposal. We are an academic publisher and we publish for a scholarly audience, but we are not interested in publishing a doctoral thesis essentially ‘as is’. A book based on the same research is fine, but we would expect it to be heavily re-written in order to appeal to a broader audience than the thesis itself was aimed at. The analogy I use is that a thesis has to demonstrate off the author’s scholarly skills – their research methods and so on –

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whereas a book audience really don’t want or need to read 100 pages of methodology described in detail. In terms of audience, a thesis is really aimed at a handful of people whereas a book, even one with a narrow research focus, needs to appeal to at least a few hundred scholars and researchers to be viable.

That being the case, the existing MIT policy wouldn’t be an absolute deterrent to us as a publisher, as long as the author of the proposal is prepared to develop a book rather than expect us to just put a cover on their thesis. That expectation may vary from publisher to publisher, and the policy may therefore be much more of a deterrent to others.

On the other hand, we do see a difference between having the material freely accessible within an academic institution, and it being freely available to the outside world. Where the latter is the case, it will be a factor in our decision. We judge each proposed book on its merits and if, for example, a book proposal developed from a thesis revolved around a single critical dataset, image collection or diagrammatic insight, and that critical element was freely available via the open-access policy, that might constitute a reason not to proceed to offer a contract. In my experience this isn’t something that’s likely to come up in the Built Environment field very often, but might be more of an issue say in science or business/management research.

In summary, I would say that the current MIT policy isn’t a deterrent per se for us, but that is because we are not in the business of publishing academic theses but books. For other publishers who are in that business, I can certainly see that it could be a severe problem. What the policy does is make it more likely that we will insist on an author making clear the difference between the thesis and any book that arises from it, including asking for title changes to reinforce that distinction. It may also, on rare occasions, mean that we will reject a proposal because we think that the critical element of the proposed book is already freely available and that availability will seriously hamper the sales of the book.”

**Senior Publisher B**

“Speaking for myself as an editor, and also in light of discussions with colleagues at the [****] Press about this issue, I would say that as a press we have a strong commitment to the idea that a book which grows out of a dissertation should be significantly more developed and readable than the original dissertation. We do not have a policy of automatically rejecting manuscripts that are based on dissertations made available through open access electronic publishing, and I think in the case where we were very excited about a book project we would convince ourselves that the book had a market regardless of the easy availability of the dissertation.

On the other hand, if we were on the fence about a project, knowing that the dissertation could be electronically accessed could conceivably have a negative impact on our decision. Library purchasing behavior could affect our position on this issue as well. It makes sense to me that the authors of dissertations would want to be able to have some control over the timing of the electronic publication of their work, and an embargo option seems like a reasonable choice to make available to them.”
Senior Publisher C

“We’ve discussed this as an editorial group, and by and large, we don’t really care if a dissertation is embargoed or not. But, we – I, anyway, as an art editor, expect a book to be a different animal from a dissertation. A thin, slightly warmed-over revision doesn’t suffice for my list. And the number of dissertations that can actually perform as a book are few.

In 30 years as a publisher, only once have I asked an author to embargo her dissertation—and this was an extremely time-sensitive study in sociology—not in art history.

I am less concerned about whether a dissertation can be accessed than if an author publishes most of the content as articles before the book comes out. I don’t mind a single article, but tend to ask authors not to be more promiscuous than that.”

Senior Publisher D

“I have been aware for several years of the concerns among academics about the impact of policies such as the one in force at MIT Libraries. The short answer to your question is that the electronic publication of dissertations has indeed made revised dissertations much less attractive to the [***] Press. We have never considered unrevised dissertations; however, we now consider manuscripts only if we are convinced that they represent substantial revision of the original works. As part of our internal review, we ask that the author provide a thorough summary of the revisions that have been made to the dissertation.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain our position on the matter is simply to send you a copy of the boilerplate response we typically send to authors inquiring about publication of their dissertations. We still publish books that began as dissertations, but, as the attached makes clear, the availability of digital dissertations has reduced the market, especially among libraries, for any book that does not represent a thorough overhaul of the dissertation on which it is based.”

Senior Publisher E

“We don’t generally turn down flat proposals for first books if the dissertation has been published electronically, and X as a company hasn’t yet adopted a policy to the effect that we rule out books which are based on dissertations which are open access. We would though privilege books which are based on theses which are heavily revised and not open access. We recently introduced this question to our publishing proposal form so if we are keen to proceed with the proposal it’s something which we can deal with early on:

If your book is a revised version of your PhD thesis, has the thesis been posted on to any institutional repository? If yes, is the institutional repository publicly accessible or accessible only to members of the institution? Please give details.

If the answer to the above is ‘yes’ we’re likely to ask authors to take down their dissertation from the institutional repository, or ProQuest, if a large proportion of the material is going into the book, and we do write to institutions, when authors
request it, to support petitions to embargo or to extend the timeline of an existing embargo. In sum, we would very much like universities to give their graduate students the choice to embargo their dissertations, even if it’s for a limited period.”

Former Senior Publisher F

Synopsis of phone conversation:

The publisher stated “that her/his research has shown that university presses and other publishing houses are actively looking for reasons not to publish arch and art history books as their ability to bankroll them continues to diminish. Junior scholars attempting to publish books based on dissertations really can be left in the lurch and sometimes are asked to ‘prove’ that the book differs substantially from dissertation content if it’s openly available. The former senior publisher thinks that proving the content of a manuscript differs from the thesis is an unenviable, if not an impossible task. Asked what percentage of a fully available dissertation might still make a viable manuscript, she/he said no more than 30%.”