

# Bordeaux City Archive

## Research Plan

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AR3A010

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Reading room of the Bordeaux city archive, photograph by Filip Dujardin.

Built in 2016, amid an important project of densification within the industrial South Bank neighborhood of Bordeaux, the city's archives were being relocated from their cramped *Hôtel Particulier* to a space that seemed to offer generous possibilities of extension (Escolin, 2016, para. 2). The “Halle aux Farines”, an industrial warehouse used for two centuries by the *Compagnie d'Orléans* to store grain and provisions, was selected to host the archives: unfolding a clear chronological narrative for the building. When the warehouse caught fire in 2008, the competition had already been launched, and it was too late to retract (L'Observatoire CAUE, 2022, para. 1). Despite the incident, after which only the four stone walls survived, the winning project by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten tried not to consider the “Halle aux Farines” as a ruin, but as an intact building that survived through the idea it bears: storing goods (Van Den Driessche, 2017, p. 333). Within the stone walls, new concrete volumes were

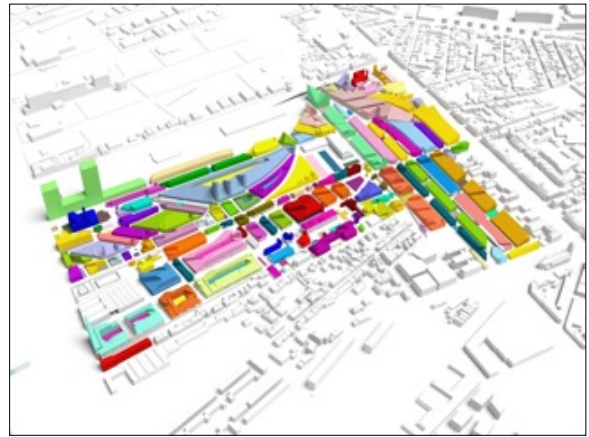
raised, laying down an “inner street”, used as a reading room. Inside these cantilevered concrete *magasins*, the materials are stored, in a climate-controlled environment (Escolin, 2016, para. 14). If the concrete may appear unbreachable, the user is offered to glimpse in the *magasins* through long vertical windows: allowing critics to argue that the building “desacralizes” the archive. However, through the spatial public/private dichotomy, the massive *cathedralesque* concrete blocks and the play of light, the architectural language of Robbrecht en Daem seems anchored in an almost religious dimension (Van Den Driessche, 2017, p. 333).

Stated by Achille Mbembe (Mbembe, 2002, p. 1), “The status and the power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents”. An archive is the material representation of an institution, of the State. As a political apparatus, it must both reflect its stability as much as its cracks to avert defiance from the people.

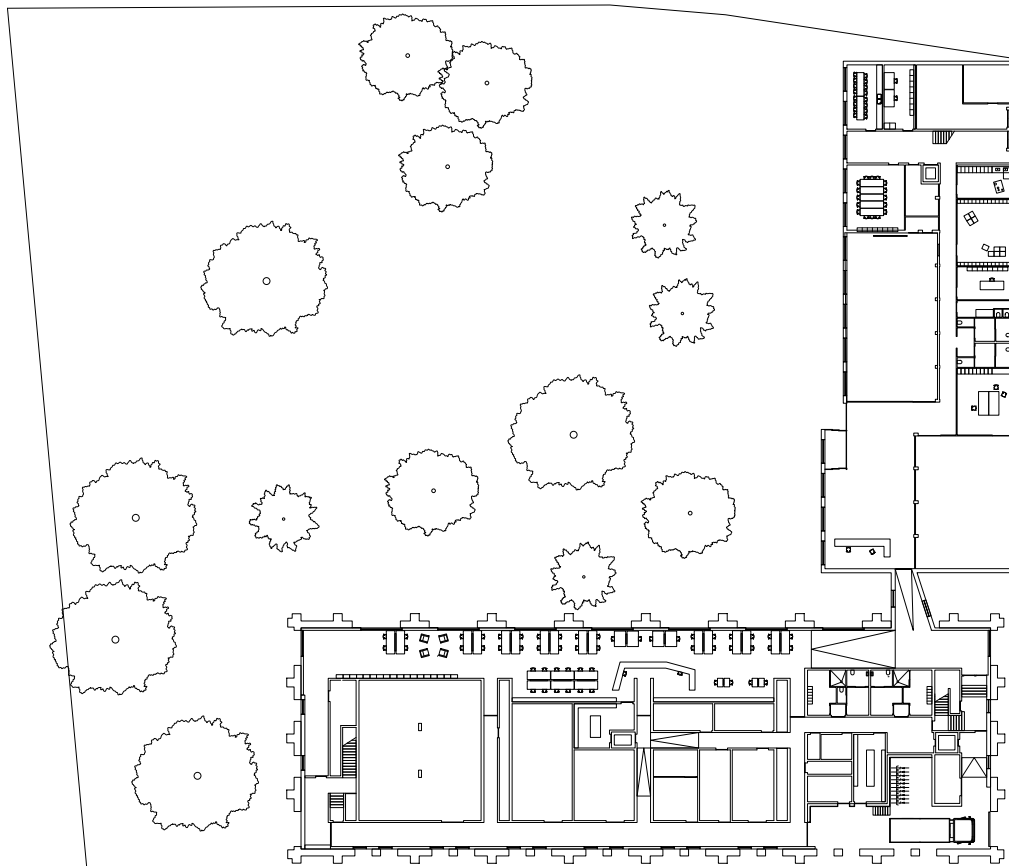
In a dialogue between opacity and transparency, it is clear the *Archives of Bordeaux Métropoles* are performing such stakes.

The Bordeaux City Archive is a state archive, holding metropolitan, municipal and private administrations (Bordeaux Tourism, 2024). The importance of the archive to the city becomes clear when studying the building's location. The neighborhood *Bastide Niel* in which it stands is located between the train tracks and the Garonne river. It is an area in development, the masterplan designed by Dutch architecture firm MVRDV. Formerly housing mostly warehouses, in the future the district will be occupied by a mixture of public and cultural functions, as well as housing (MVRDV, 2021). The archive itself, however, was commissioned by the city of Bordeaux. The budget Robbrecht and Daem were allowed to work with was 14,5 million euros, once again showing the significance of the archive (HIC

arquitectura, 2016). At present time, the renovations in the district are in progress, making the Archives Bordeaux Métropole a striking landmark in a sea of ruin.



Bastide Niel masterplan. From "MVRDV - Bastide Niel". MVRDV



scale 1:1000

Floorplan of the lower level. Redrawn from Robbrecht en Daem Architectes by authors.





The building in the context of Bordeaux Métropole



Before the renovation the building used to house trains from the French SNCF



## Part I – The Typology: A continuous narrative

If an Archive is *per se* a typology, we can still define sub-types within it: establishing different methods for archiving materials. Originally used as a grain warehouse and comprehended as such by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten; the Archives of Bordeaux Métropoles follow an attitude towards storing/archiving directly inherited from the past role of the building (L'Observatoire CAUE, 2022, para. 7). Referred to by the Architecture French Council (L'Observatoire CAUE, 2022, para. 1) as a *Grenier* (*attic/breadbasket/granary*), this term evokes all at once the symbolic power of such a space. While *Greniers* are for most the inaccessible dusty storeroom of a late grandma's trinkets, they used to be spaces meticulously cared for; spaces in which grain and provisions were kept away from animals and the cold moist air. As such, the "Halle aux Farines" was a *Grenier*. Understood both in the sense of a granary and a breadbasket, the building received thousands of sacks of flour, delivered by trains from all over France (Escolin, 2016, para. 3). These were then conveyed under the attic, preserved by the dry climate.

*Greniers* are thus protective shells, shielding from a ruthless environment. They are, by essence, spaces of confinement. Inherited from this typology, the intervention of Robbrecht en Daem Architecten within the *Halle aux Grains* refers to that language. Lifted from the ground, the concrete boxes of the magasins are rendered as fortified and impenetrable elements. Each of these precious boxes are introverted microclimates, protected from the outside world. These very rational and scientific motives underline one visual language, ineluctably connected to the *Greniers*. The epitome of such architectural expression is disclosed in *Greniers'* contemporary manifestations. As such, the Swissmill tower in Zürich and the Archives de Bordeaux

Métropole, are, to different levels, the expression of *Greniers* inherited secrecy.

The shift from the granary to the archive raises questions on the nature of archival material, as much as the means to protect them. The necessity of confining them is to generate atmospheres that may not convey a democratic message. Yet, the technological improvements of last century, coupled by the active considerations of climatic issues within the field, suggest that such expression of closeness might be obsolete or counterfeit. Transparency is nowadays not antithetical to climatic protection.

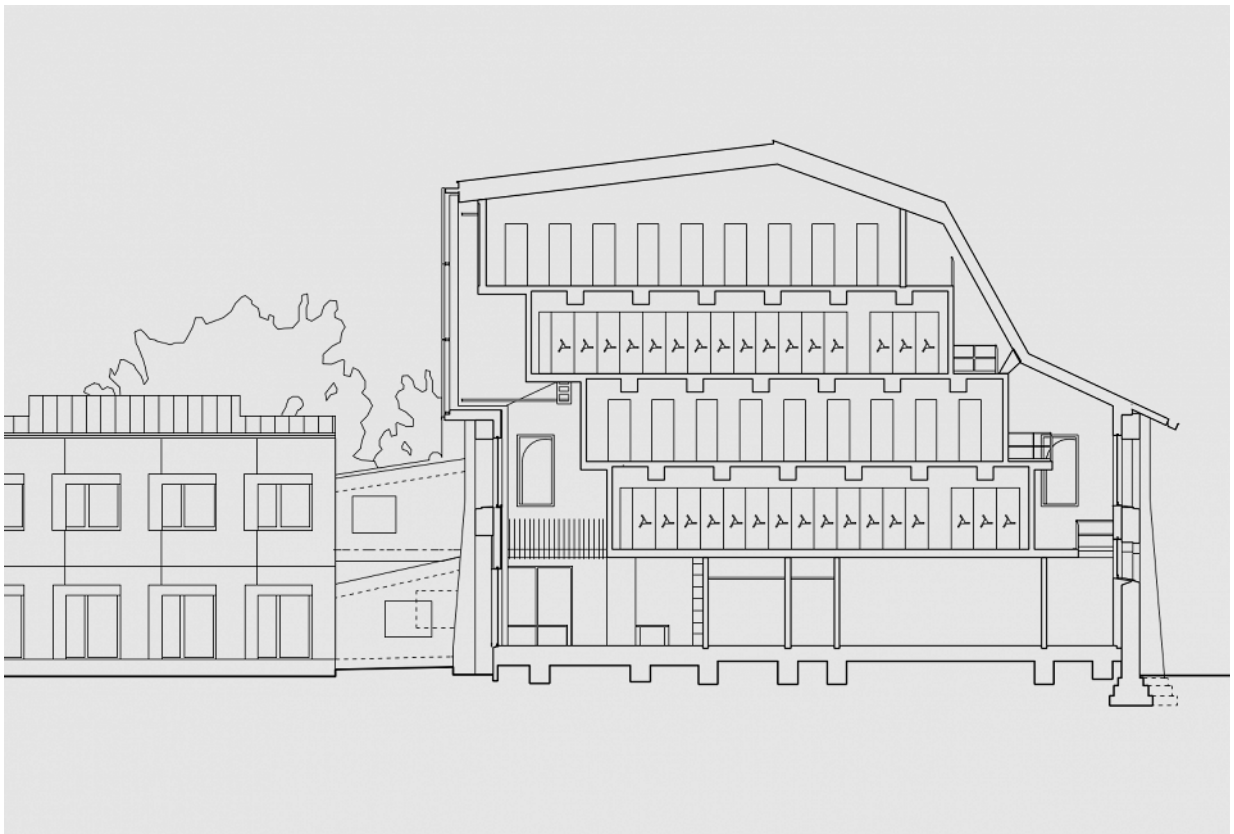




The Swissmill tower in Zurich

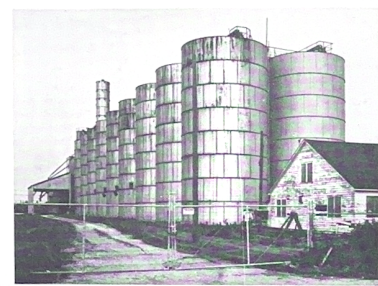
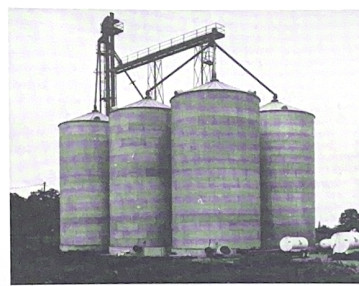
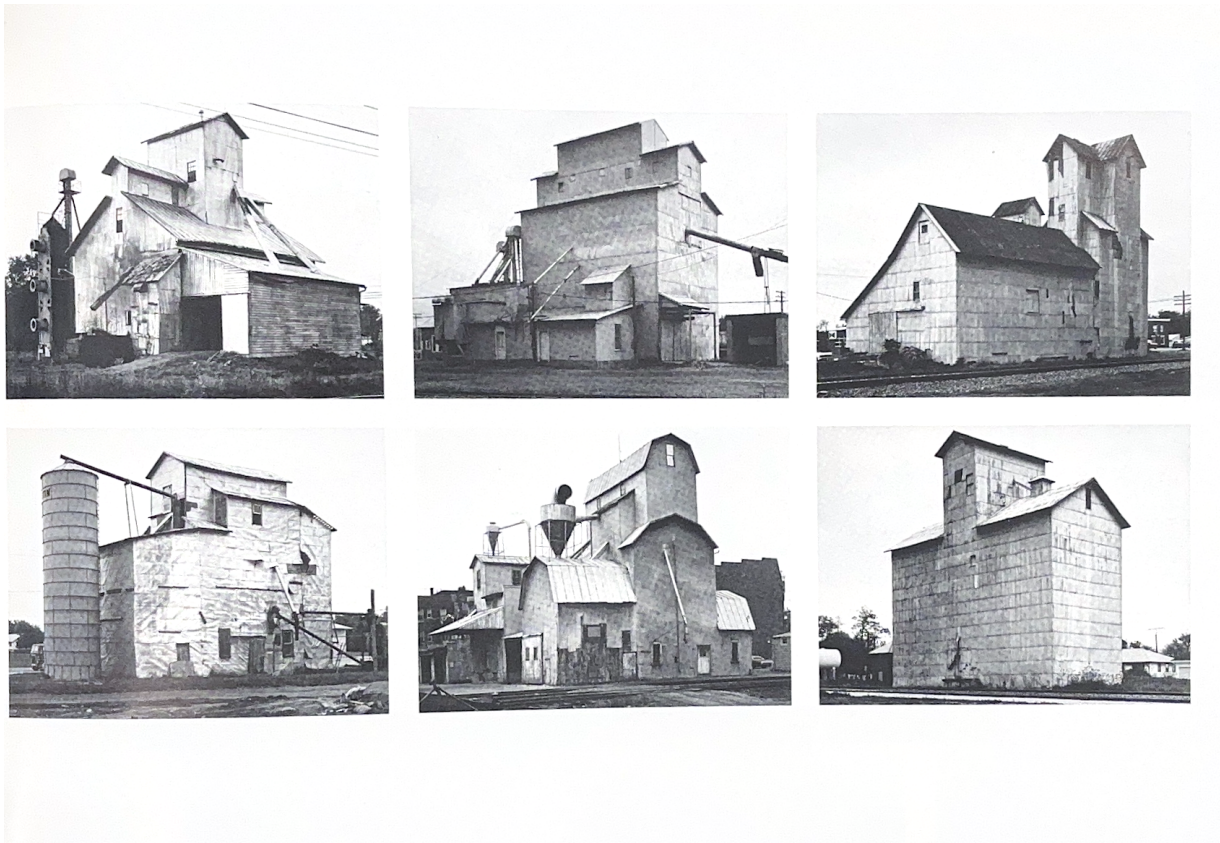


Example of a granary in Galicia (Spain)



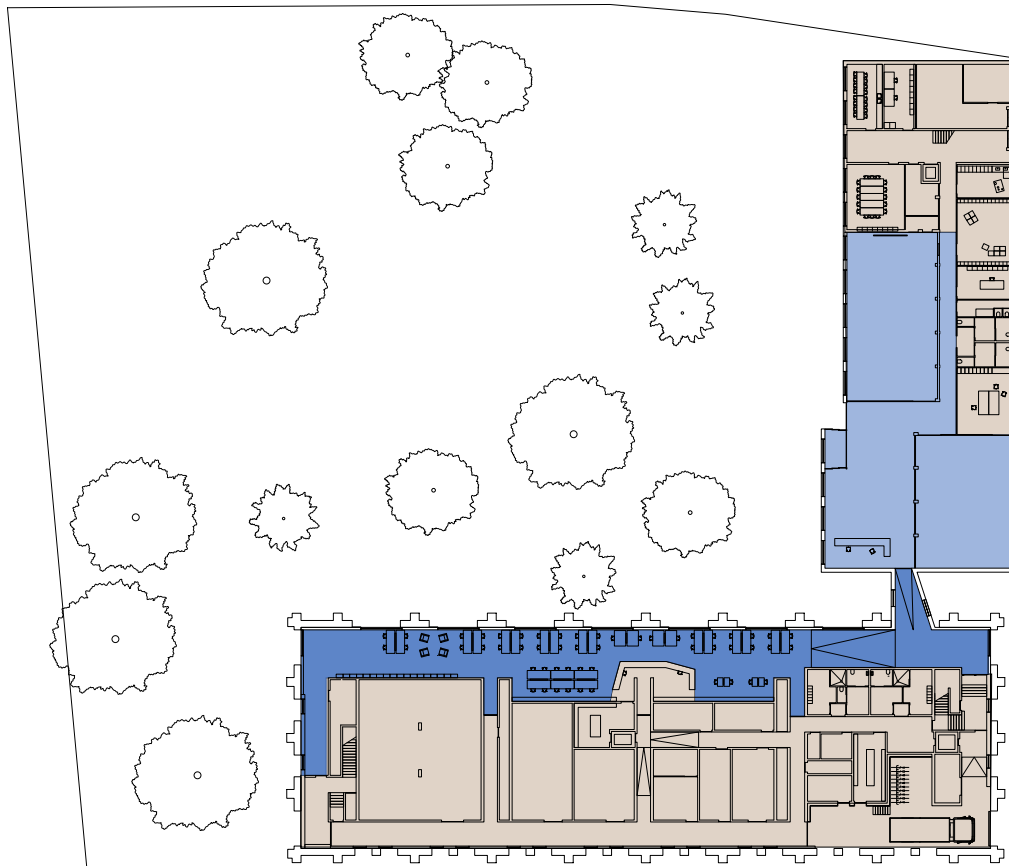
Section of the building through the reading room. Drawing by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten.





USA Fotos 1977

Example photos of grain elevators/getreidesilos in the USA by Bernd und Hilla Becher (Fuchs 1981, p.71-3).  
Source: Fuchs, R, (1981). *Bernd und Hilla Becher*, Van Abbemuseum.



 scale 1:1000

Plan of the groundfloor, displaying the public/private dichotomy. Drawing by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten, Redrawn and color by authors.



## Part II – The Systems

Formerly a granary, the *Halle aux Grains* used to employ low-technology principles to protect grain from the harsh climate (see Part I). Today, with the advent of air conditioning and a wide array of climate control devices, storage facilities are less constrained by environmental factors. Nonetheless, the *Bordeaux City Archives*, with its thick concrete volumes, appears to retain elements of traditional conservation systems (Escolin, 2016, para. 14). However, the methods in place—bridging both low-tech and high-tech solutions—along with the spatial organization of the complex, reflect the considerations of a modern archival facility.

The cultural heritage of Bordeaux Métropole is housed within nineteen separate *magasins* inside the building. The term and system, devised by Henri Labrouste (Bleton, 1956, p. 75), refer to storage rooms that are divided into a series of isolated spaces, a fire-prevention measure designed to stop the spread of flames between rooms. The materials stored in these rooms range from registers and documents to engravings, photographs, and architectural models, each requiring its own specific climate control system to maintain the appropriate environmental conditions (Escolin, 2016, para. 14). Passive measures, such as low ventilation and high-mass temperature buffering, help preserve the materials. Additionally, a heat pump system provides heating, cooling, and dehumidification to further safeguard the collection.

Archival materials are brought into the building through a loading dock on the ground floor, after which they pass through a quarantine zone (D'Abrigeon, 2021). Here, archivists examine the materials before moving them to their permanent location in the *magasins*. The structural design of the storage units, characterized by load-

bearing walls surrounding each *magasin*, allows for a flexible interior layout and accommodates 18 kilometers (Escolin, 2016, para. 16) of linear storage. This efficient use of space was made possible in part by the removal of the building's original wooden structures, which created a “tabula rasa” that facilitated the rational arrangement of the archival storage areas.

Although the *magasins* are heavily enclosed, the service corridors on the east-end of the building are providing natural light and glimpses on the city through a series of windows; maintaining a connection between the archivists and their surroundings. This design allows the archivists to remain engaged with both the archives and the changing world beyond the walls. These spaces act as conduits between archival materials and researchers, bridging the private realm of storage with the public realm of research. In this sense, the archivists' role transcends mere custodianship; they act as intermediaries, linking the private and public spheres.

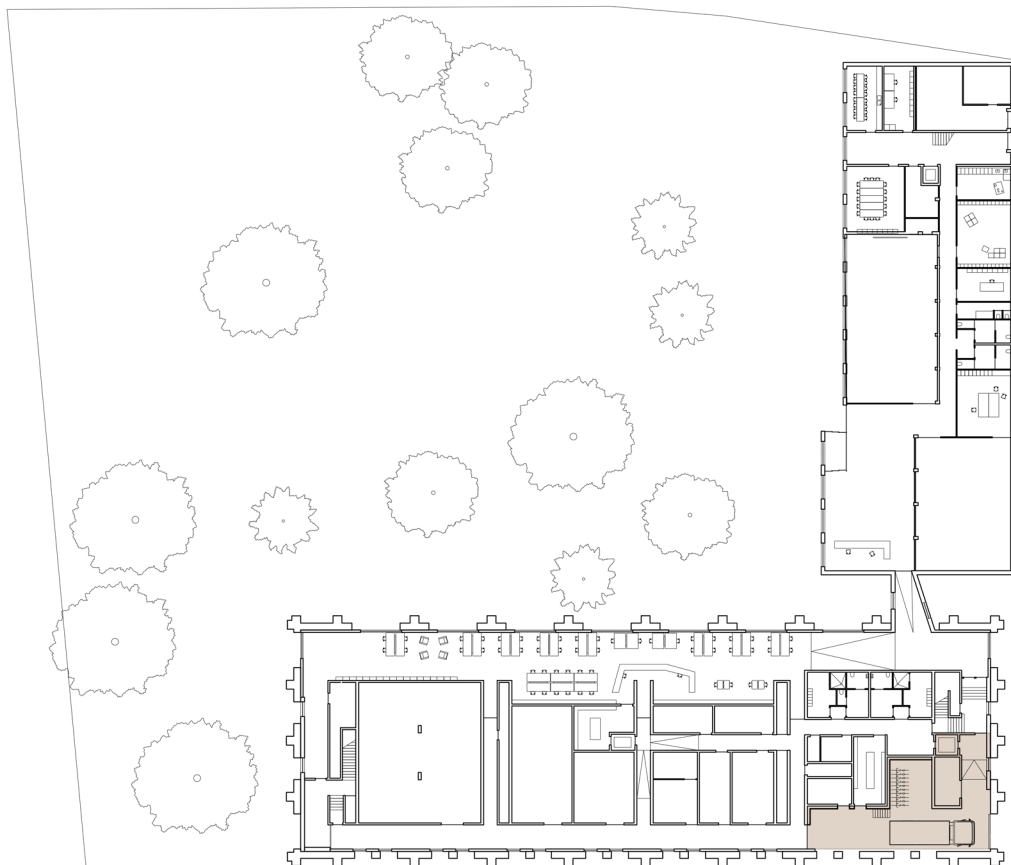
Researchers enter the archives through a newer building (D'Abrigeon, 2021) and proceed into the older, more “sacred” archival spaces. However, there is no clear ritual or formal process marking this transition, making the task feel more mundane—a fitting reflection of the building's primary function as a storage facility. Whether storing grain, facilitating transportation, or preserving the cultural history of the city, the archives serve as a functional space that bridges past and present, and, to a certain extent, the public and private affairs of a political body.



Moving of archive to the new building.  
Source: France 3 Television, 2016



Unloading of archival material.  
Source: France 3 Television, 2016



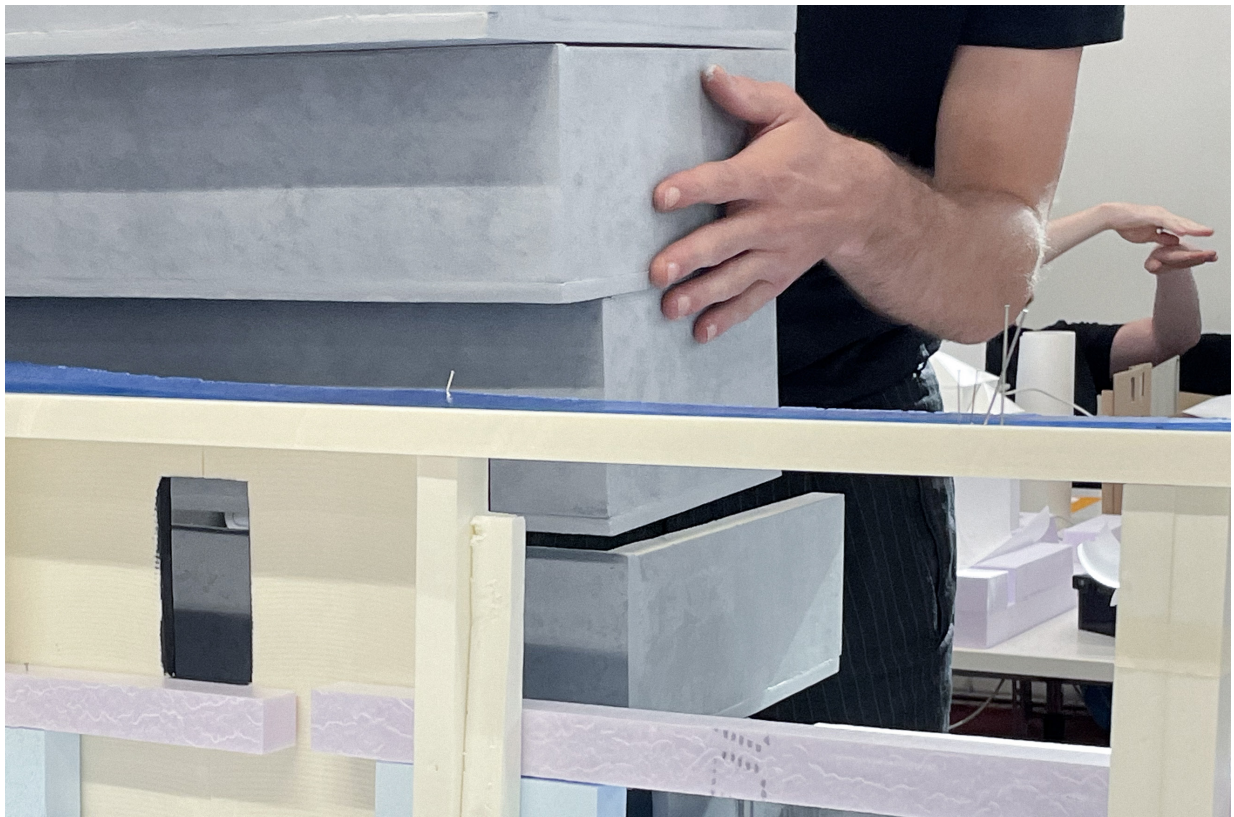
Plan of lower floor. Loading dock indicated. Drawing by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten.



Section through the reading room, displaying the public/private dichotomy. Drawing by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten, redrawn by authors.



Making the dramatic concrete volumes



Recreating the rough materiality of the magasins



## Part III – The Atmospheres; learning from the model

Looking at the archives from the dichotomy concealed/disclosed brought up by the *Grenier* typology, and by the aim of protecting the State's integrity; the ambiances of the building also follow such clear division. However, these two worlds seem to meet and mingle in the reading room; giving depth to the meaning of that space. What is concealed can still be felt, and what is disclosed might be subject to heavy censorship. The expression of such interwoven relation is merely sensorial and phenomenological. In the city's archive, the interplay of volumes, light and materials are, in an almost religious manner, fostering feelings and impressions. Not only visual, and extracted from photographs, this analysis is mostly based on the experience of building a 1:25 scale model of the lecture room, to reproduce a photo. In fact, it gave a thorough understanding of the materiality and the play of light. The process of reproducing the room could be divided into four parts: making the concrete volumes, making the wooden paneling wall surface, recreating the floor and, finally, synthesizing the light. Thus, we could articulate our understanding of that space through these four fragments, and how they partake in creating a space we referred to as secretive.

Directly accessible from the outside, the reading room is in appearance a space of accessibility. As a direct extension of the courtyard, this space is highly transparent and porous. In fact, it blurs the limits between the inside and the outside through a series of seven large windows and the addition of the concrete volumes inside. However, speaking two visual languages, the open facade contrasts with the concrete blocks; nuancing the afore mentioned sense of accessibility given to the space. When in the reading room, the user is submerged under the concrete canopy. Not enveloped, but dominated by the cantilevered masses, the bodily experience is not far from

the one in a church. The reader, like a believer, is made vassal.

If not directly shown, the archive and its materials are expressed through their volume only: silent secretive boxes. Building these concrete elements at a reduced scale uncovered the quality that makes the user subordinate to the Archives. In fact, it would be the way gravity is staged as to reinforce the dramatic moment these massive volumes constitute. As they kept falling over in our scale model, and needed an anchor in the back, we understand that, in the building, this technical tour de force is taunting and menacing the user.

However, if establishing power dynamics, the dramatic effect is mitigated. Not completely hushed, the magasins are yet sliced by long windows, offering the users a sneak peek into the archival system. Secondly, the rough materiality of the magasins is didactically showcasing its tectonic of stacking. The connections between the slabs and the walls are still visible: the volumes are communicating. Overall, the space of the reading room is somehow a very expressive one. Clashing with the user, but also, frontally dueling with the light wooden wall, the reading room of the city's archives in Bordeaux seems to be, hiding behind its quiet appearance, a space of tension.

The way Robbrecht & Daem Architecten uses color in their projects, as we see here in the wooden facade and the floor of the reading room, is both subtle and loud. Both techniques seem to be reoccurring in the architects' work. We understand the use of excessive color as a call of attention to materiality, recognizable here in the intensive blue of the reading room carpet. Contrasting to the heavy concrete blocks, with its softness and, according to Robbrecht & Daem, like a



Reproduction of the reading space through a 1:25 scale model, during assembly

fresh flow through the hall (Delbeke et al., 2010, p. 7). Furthermore, the sides of the wooden paneling have been given multiple subtle colors. Referencing different projects by the office, it seems the colors have been chosen to somehow reflect the archives context. A visitor will experience the stimulating, changing color scheme when moving through the stretched hallway of the reading room (Delbeke et al., 2010, p. 7; 124-153).





Final reproduction of the reading space through a 1:25 scale model

## Conclusion

By blending the past use of the “Halle aux Farines” with contemporary archival needs, Robbrecht en Daem Architecten have skillfully reinterpreted the grenier typology, maintaining the essence of creating a protective storage. The building’s materiality and spatial organization not only serve practical purposes - ensuring the preservation of the archives - but also evoke a complex atmosphere that plays with the dichotomy between the visible and the concealed. The reading room, as the heart of the archive, encapsulates this duality, simultaneously offering openness whilst imposing reverence towards the massive concrete volumes hanging over the room. The careful orchestration of light, material, and scale, with subtle interventions such as the wood paneling and vibrant carpet, create dynamic interactions between the user and the archival space. By reproducing all individual

architectural elements in our scale model, we discovered details of materiality, hidden spaces and a complex play of light and dark, which helped us understand the atmosphere in the space. The balance between transparency and secrecy that defines the institution is to be reflected within a bigger picture. In other words, the spatial dichotomy found in the Bordeaux city’s archives is the reflection of the way a state uses Archives as a mediation/distancing tool between itself and the citizens.

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## Personal statement Laura Tijchon

The Interiors Buildings Cities chair believes that research and design cannot be separated; that they provide each other with knowledge and considerations. If you want to analyse architecture across all scales -from interior to city,- you need to find a convincing way to study each scale. The Interiors Buildings Cities studios do this by making large scale models.

In the past, I have never used a model as a means to understand an existing architectural object. It is partially because of my lack of practice that with this assignment, making a model while simultaneously theoretically researching a buildings context, was a difficult task.

The project we got assigned is the Bordeaux City Archive by Robbrecht and Daem. In the archive, Robbrecht and Daem use complex architectural references and seem to have an overarching concept of volumes and materiality that can only be understood when properly analysing the project. Robbrecht and Daem want to create a religious experience, showing great respect to the mightiness of knowledge, hovering above your head like the sword of Damocles. After analysing the building, I was able to understand Robbrecht and Daem's position towards archive cultures. I can relate to their appreciation for protected knowledge, but came to the conclusion that I would have chosen a different design approach.

The canon researched by the whole studio did show us a certain relationship between the architecture and the culture of an archive institute. The formality of an institute could almost directly be linked to the architecture of its building. The Bordeaux City archive is a good example, as it's the only state archive in the canon. I needed to understand this interaction before I could relate to the distrust surrounding archives, as posed by Mbembe in his *The Power of the Archive* and

its Limits. Only now do I realise that my experience with archival research was also limited by secrecy. It has made me start to doubt the validity of my research; might it have been influenced by the archivist? The archive seems to be a chaotic place, where archivists try to desperately hold on to the system they created. Any disturbances -like people wanting to examine material- are met with a condescending: 'only if you're careful enough'.

To summarize, the correlation between culture and architecture is one I find interesting. As well as in the theoretical research, I noticed this when building the model. For example, after the model was built -reconstructed from precise architectural drawings- we struggled quite a bit to recreate the photograph itself. Something I took away from this was the underlying understanding that the discrepancy with this curated promotional material, was not an accident. That photo was taken and edited deliberately. Not only the architecture itself conveys a message of secrecy and religiousness, the photo does as well. This has me considering the influence of visual and promotional material when rendering a design.

Going into P2, I now know that when designing my own project, I'll continue considering atmosphere, architecture and culture, and visual design material during the design process. Furthermore, I'll keep asking myself critical questions about what kind of archive I want to create and how to present it to the world.



## Personal statement Romain Tournon

As the only State Archive within the entire corpus, the Archives de Bordeaux Métropole, provided us with a deep understanding of how state violence manifest through architecture. Archives: understood here as a fluid entity encompassing both the building and its materials; function as instruments of distancing (Mbembe, 2002, p. 1). Materials stored in an archive are controlled, and in some cases, withheld under periods of secrecy. Thus, archives inherently reflect a tactical separation between individuals and the past. However, this apparent act of “censorship” deserves nuance. By distinguishing “History” and “Memory” — where historical materials are often received and filtered through personal pain and trauma (as in the aftermath of a war) — we can see that archives have the potential to mediate raw tensions between opposing groups. In this sense, archives are crucial tools in maintaining a social contract.

However, architecture archives seem to have a different nature. Where can we find the violence and the discord within architecture materials? Are architecture archives political? According to Triin Ojari (Ojari, 2017, p. 2), the meaning of architecture materials has gone lost as “independent artistic media” during the Postmodern era — or the rise of architecture as an intellectual discipline. The VAI, which focuses on archiving an important proportion of non-graphic documents, like correspondences, seems to conceive their archive as more than just a collection of notable pieces. The many letters, payment slips and contracts found there are the tangible witnesses of a dead time. The documents, as a whole, are rendering a fragmented historical tale. Consequently, they are by essence political artefacts.

The need to protect and preserve them in this distancing body that is the archive seems essential. Yet, if we recognize the importance of archives as a mediator, it is clear that new rituals with the public need to be invented. The contemporary stakes of Western societies, intending to deconstruct their sore past, needs to be reflected in the way we build archives nowadays. The

distance between the public and the private (the State) must be addressed. In this context, a strategy seems to prevail: the one of *transparency*. Such tactic is defined by the intention of making the archive fully porous to the public with the noble intent of dematerializing the walls. Typologically, the archives become an almost Apple Store: a commercial place that doesn't render the seriousness of such political apparatus.

However, it is easy to think *transparency* is the best strategy. While keeping the public distant, one simulates a sense of proximity by adding a glass wall between the public and the private. It is not hard to see that such approach is pure marketing, and doesn't change the vertical relation between the State and the Public.

The main reason why such attitude is preferred is the challenge of protecting the materials, primarily due to climatic concerns. However, bypassing such challenges would enable to reach, instead of *transparency*, a real proximity with the public. This would mean reinventing the way we design interior climates within an archive, as to bring the materials closer to the public while inventing proper places of discussion and debate. In an archive, the climatic and the political are highly entangled. They, in fact, influence each other. Can new ways of designing interior climates define and reshape the political nature of an archive in a genuine manner?

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## Personal statement Casper van Tilburg

An archive as I understand it now can have multiple layers. First of all, the contents, the meaning and the effect of what an archive is and contains will be different for everybody. And not just for people personally. As neutral as the act of archiving might sound, the effect of selection, storing and the amount of access people have can be, even is, an instrument of power. As Mbebe (2002) mentions about the existence of the archive on a national level, I would argue that this happens too at a personal scale. What can I see. What do I allow to be stored and do I ever retrieve my own materials if even labeled correctly?

Visiting the Flemish architectural archive (VAi) in Antwerp let me see how fragile the institute of the archive is. Seeing that the amount of material is so expansive that it is impossible to catalogue everything. Therefore, when unpacking an archive it is never certain what will be revealed. This could be a reason for nations or other parties to keep far from archiving, since that would be revealing without knowing what is there in the first place.

Within the archive, we can see different roles. First of all, we see the archivist, who will decide what gets stored and how to retrieve it. She will allow for materials to be kept in shape. Secondly, the explorer is the person who finds solace in retrieving materials and who will be able to see new patterns. I wonder how this role can be linked to people that are not directly part of the archive. This brings us to the third point, which is about seeing in general. The extreme version of an open archive could be that there is no shell and everything is accessible without boundaries. This would however also be both overwhelming (like an extreme wunderkammer), and aimless at the same time. There needs to be some kins of structure. Therefore, I can imagine the explorer as an intermediary between the general public and the archived material. Someone who is funded by public money and has the trust and skills that are fitting for

exploring the archive in a meaningful way.

Another aspect of revealing the archive is how we do it digitally. Per archive, often ten percent is digitised and it takes a lot of money to make the rest accessible. What if we do this project based, and let people who fund the explorer choose what gets uncovered at the same time as the archivist explorer makes connections?

Considering all of the projects reviewed within the studio, I can see a pattern on how specific archives are. It is always limited to the scope of the institution that it is part of. At the VAI, this is limited to work of architects who are Flemish and have built in Flanders. This means that when one does research in this archive, no works from foreign architects in Flanders will be revealed. This limiting will influence the view of what is important (a nationalist force in view, in this case), and will forgo other connections. Assuming that we do want the view to be as wide open as possible, one can imagine to bring archives together, either digitally or (indexing, but a also materials), or making sure that cross-references are available. This probably has to do a lot with the power and money structures that are the core of this system.

An important role of the archive is to be able to see. As a person (look carefully at an original drawing, how a sketch is set up), and as a society (what is known exactly about certain transactions). This seeing can be connected with the seeker, who knows the archive intently, and is supported by society.

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