

GRADUATION **REFLECTION**

Interiors Buildings Cities
Archiving Architecture

PERSONAL & STUDIO INFORMATION

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Studio: Interiors Buildings Cities

Theme: Archiving Architecture

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And; Dilek Zaid, Daan Franken, Iris Niederer and all my colleague students at the Interiors Buildings Cities graduation studio

ABSTRACT

Project title: The Living Archive

Location: Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium.

Design assignment: designing an archive depot with offices and public functions for the Flanders Architecture institute (VAi).

The brief: Design a ± 3000 m² archive depot as well as multiple public spaces, offices and ateliers.

Research question: How to create a new home for the VAi and the material it is responsible for, which provides optimal storing facilities and comfortable working spaces, while still being inviting for the public?

Sub-question: What does the internal culture and identity of the VAi mean for the architecture of the building in which the institute resides?

Keywords: archives, culture, nature-inclusive design

ASSIGNMENT AND RELEVANCE

The architecture archive is an interesting typology that has been around for centuries. Its evolution started with private collections from universities and expanded to wealthy men developing their own interests and collections, like Sir John Soane. In a more recent trend, it seems that society has discovered the importance of preserving everything and anything.

The architecture archive typology is quite uncommon and unknown, and often confused with museums or exhibition spaces. But the archive requires very specific processes and rituals, that not many know about. That is why for this year of Interiors Buildings Cities, the topic of the graduation studio was Archiving Architecture. The newfound trend of public archives brings with it some controversy. The well-known example of the Boijmans van Beuningen depot in Rotterdam

Museum Park -whose building is really a showcase in itself- has received a lot of criticism. The level of publicness and possibilities for interaction are limited. The archive typology seems to need further re-thinking.

This year, the graduation studio is working with the VAI, the Flanders Architecture institute. This is the government funded architecture archive of Flanders, located in Antwerp. They are an institute that collects the archives of Flemish architects from the past century.

The institute is responsible for the complete archiving process, from bringing the archive in, processing the material, organizing and storing it. They then allow the public to interact with the archival pieces by organize exhibitions, readings or having them analyse the material themselves in the VAI's reading room. They find themselves wanting

to be even more proactive in reaching out to the public, instead of the public having to find them. The VAI has the possibility to teach society about architecture, about what we learn from it and how it influences our lives.

At this time, it is hard for the VAI to fulfil their responsibilities, because they don't have the means. Their home is split into two; the archive depot and the functions that go with it are located within the city centre of Antwerp. Unfortunately, the spaces they utilize here are incompatible with the typology of a depot. The working spaces are too small and dark and the structure of the depot doesn't allow for efficient storage facilities.

At a distance of three kilometres, the other part of the institute is housed in art campus DeSingel. Here, the VAI utilizes an exhibition space and

offices, but within DeSingel you can also find a conservatory, a dancing school and other cultural institutions that need a podium to showcase their activities. The public image the VAI tries to achieve is tied to their presence at DeSingel, their collaboration with the art campus, even though the actual archive depot isn't located here.

For this assignment we were asked to bring together these two parts of the institute and relocate them to DeSingel, where they can synergize with the other cultural organizations and establish themselves in a new and attractive way. The brief requires a large amount of archive depot, next to a reading room, a library, an exhibitions space, processing spaces and offices. Students were free to choose any location in, on or around DeSingel as their preferred building plot to design new spaces for the VAI.

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND ARCHITECTURE

For this project, the plot on the West side of the existing building was chosen as the VAI's new territory. It is right next to a road, which on the other side borders on a landscape park, Pomppark Zuid. By placing a very linear building along the side of the road, a new edge of the park arises, as well as a new façade for DeSingel, which represents the presence of the Flanders Architecture institute.

This triangular plot on the West side of the existing building has always been used in the landscape design for DeSingel. Starting from when Léon Stynen originally designed DeSingel, when he imagined a large triangular pond, highlighting the quiet and inspiring enclave set in a natural landscape, where art and music could thrive. Even though the triangular pond was still built, its purpose has also been lost over the years. No longer a connection to nature, but an aimless, shallow pond.

One of the main goals for this design was to repurpose the pond and once again turn this area into an inspiring space. The main volume of DeSingel already consist of two large courtyards, both meant for the users of the building. With the

addition of a new West-wing, a third courtyard gets enclosed, one that could be a part of architecture for different users; flora and fauna.

This then introduces the question of nature-inclusive design; how to find a balance between the natural and the man-made? An archive is a strictly regulated, carefully climatized typology, where a man-made policy decides what deserves to be stored and to be preserved. But nature is a part of the built environment as well and of our cultural heritage, and it has a similar need for preservation. As my research question was already centred around culture and identity from early on in the process, the idea of redefining the boundaries of architecture by reuniting nature and culture, seemed like an interesting solution. The architecture that represents the VAI could be a manifestation of new ideologies about nature-inclusive design. This notion serves as an answer to the sub-question that was already asked at the beginning stages of this project: What does the internal culture and identity of the VAI mean for the architecture of the building in which the institute resides?

The new wing is a unity on its own, only slightly touching the existing building. It encloses the pond, but leaves a handful of strategic openings where public, flora and fauna can penetrate into the courtyard or move out towards the culture campus. On DeSingel's front square the volume extends slightly past the existing building, creating a new edge of the plot and mimicking the two existing, protruding masses. The new volume completes the square and redefines the entrance area.

The expo pavilion on the end of the building wing houses the most public activity the VAI provides, the exhibition space, with an urban corner meant for displaying artefacts to the city. The next pavilion houses the reading room and the library. And connected to the logistical entrance in the back, the processing spaces are sequenced in chronological order. This allows the archival material to be processed easily and efficiently, as this seems to be important in guaranteeing that the material will be properly preserved. This is important, because this is one of the VAI's biggest current struggles.

To keep the new massing low, a large volume would need to be put underground. A basement is most often made out of concrete, which does unfortunately have an unwanted climate impact. The compromise is working with a pre-cast concrete structure. The repetitive structure of the new building allows for an efficient pre-fab building process.

To highlight the importance of the archive depot within the institute, this building experiments with using representative materials to show function. This didactic way of thinking became a silver lining throughout the project.

If the depot uses concrete for longevity, protection and privacy, maybe the more temporary and public functions need to be constructed of a much lighter material, wood. The contrasting materials embody the duality of the VAI's responsibilities; teaching and preserving, displaying and organizing. These notions were already considered at the P1, where I designed a furniture piece that could do both these things. Many other ideas and revelations from throughout the entire process, have found their way into the P4 design.

REFLECTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Working with a pre-existing and complex building ensemble such as DeSingel has been challenging and inspiring. Even with a year of time, I haven't been able to fully understand it, its systems, its possibilities and its shortcomings. My goals for the VAI's home were not compatible with working within DeSingel and so I didn't get the chance to fully dive into its internal space. More important for my considerations were its external relationships, its urban context, possible synergies.

Working in a large group of students provided plenty of conversations, discussions and shared fascinations. I'm confident in my design, but sharing a studio space with two dozen other skilful students does keep you on your toes. Working together, asking questions and sharing your skills ensures that you and your neighbour are both working towards optimized designs. I learned from their feedback on my projects, but I also learned from my feedback on their projects.

Architectural design isn't new to me, but keeping a project journal is. I'm a visual thinker, so putting into words what I'm thinking or seeing, is a skill that has had much development in the past year. Physical sketching is incredibly important in my process, so I'm grateful that the project journal has much room for personal interpretation. This allowed me to keep two project journals, a digital one and a physical one. I'm still working on entwining the two, something I hope to do for P5.

Even though writing the journal didn't come natural to me, reflecting on it has proven to be incredibly helpful. Instead of only writing after drawing, I learned to draw after writing. At times when I felt confused or had lost control over my design, reading what I had written and evaluating my thoughts set me back on the right track. The project journal helped me write my presentation narratives, which in turn felt balanced and well-integrated.

