

The brief

The Flanders Institute of Architects (VAi) collection in Antwerp has outgrown its current building in the city's historical center, which no longer meets the needs of the collection, staff, or public visibility. VAI is exploring the possibility of relocating and uniting with its counterpart, the VAI office, at deSingel—a modernist cultural campus designed by Leon Stynen and expanded by Stephan Beel. Currently home to multiple institutions, including the Royal Conservatorium and deSingel Art Campus, this fragmented site on the city's outskirts offers an opportunity to reimagine its state.

I have developed a proposal to reorganize, adapt, and extend deSingel, enhancing the performance of this cultural campus, respecting its architectural qualities and integrating a 4,000m² architectural archive along with its affiliated programs.

The project and process

At the start of the academic year, the studio focused on two topics: the program and the site – architectural archives and deSingel. The first assignment involved collectively studying eight archival precedents through model-making, redrawing, and written analysis. The second was an individual design task: creating a room to archive a Flemish architect's collection. The third brief shifted the focus to the site, as we collectively analyzed and modeled deSingel. The fourth assignment returned to individual work, exploring possible interventions on the site. These cycles—between design research and research by design, between collective and individual efforts, and between program and site—have shaped the structure of my project up to this day.

Retrospectively, what I was doing throughout the design process was juxtaposing the conditions of the site with the vision for a contemporary archive. It was about finding alignment between the two and balancing the necessary compromises. The design borrows features from the existing building while also giving qualities back. It is about both asserting a clear identity for the VAI and fostering integration within deSingel's existing ensemble.

In this sense, the project became a dialogue between research and design. Each step of the design was shaped by what I learned through analysis—of archives, of deSingel, and of their spatial and cultural roles. These themes guided both the conceptual direction and the architectural response, tying research and design closely together.

A counterbalance

My extension to deSingel restores compositional and programmatic balance to the site by introducing a new volume that serves as a deliberate counterweight to the Beel extension. This addition follows the site's formal language: a strong, cubic mass resting on a double-height plinth, with its geometry informed by the void in the stage tower, while its base shaped by the surrounding urban lines.

Programmatically, the entire Meyer wing and the front wing of the original Stynen complex are reallocated to house the VAI. Current functions, including the conservatorium and office spaces, are reorganized towards the rear of the site—establishing clear, legible zones where deSingel, the Conservatorium, and the VAI each inhabit distinct yet interconnected quarters. This redistribution simplifies wayfinding and enhances spatial clarity, fostering more meaningful interactions among the institutions and the public.

The initial ideas stemmed from my intuitive impressions during the first site visit. Upon arriving at deSingel, I noticed a disconnect between the building's gesture and the direction from which people approach, as well as a visual tension between the two distinct architectural styles. These early observations were later supported and refined through various analyses. Studying the historical development of the building within its changing urban context reinforced my sense of this spatial mismatch. Examining the different users, their logistics and public circulation informed the decision to reorganize the users. Reading about the design intentions of Stynen and Beel helped me understand the genes of the site. The final massing was developed through several iterations of physical models at scales of 1:1250 and 1:250.

A depot

The depot is both the functional and spatial core of the archive. It showcases not only the physical artefacts but also the activity of archiving within the view depot. This core is surrounded by circulation and working spaces, much like the way deSingel's courtyard or concert hall is framed by corridors.

The concept of a condensed core that draws activity to its periphery was already present in my earlier design for an archival room. The large table I created in that assignment has evolved into the view depot space in my final design. What was as an introverted room focused inward toward the central table has transformed into an outward-facing glass room extending to its wings and into the city. Christian Kieckens' idea that "a piece of furniture is also a house" is embodied in this transition.

It's interesting how the 1:15 model I made during that early, contextless design exercise influenced the final project—not through materiality or detailing, but on a conceptual level. That freedom allowed me to design intuitively and helped reveal where my passion lies, before the full complexity of the site came into play.

A sequence

The VAI quarter is conceived as a sequence of loops surrounding three core spaces. Existing backstage logistics areas will be repurposed for VAI operations. This wing, functioning as the 'tail' of the depot, feeds materials into the processing spaces around a small rear courtyard. At the center lies the 'view depot,' topped by the storage depot. The public library and offices are situated around this space, allowing visitors to circulate around the depot. The first one, the entrance quarter, welcomes the public with a flexible exhibition area. These core spaces frames sections of the original front facades in different spaces and allow people to perceive and interact with them in different ways.

My understanding of how an architectural archive operates behind the scenes developed through precedent studies and a visit to the VAI archive. I learned, for example, about the careful procedures followed at the Canadian Centre for Architecture: artefacts undergo a clinical process of quarantine, restoration, and curation before being stored and eventually made accessible to the public. At the CCA, this sequence is clearly articulated in the building's section, moving from bottom to top. In contrast, the current VAI archive lacks such spatial clarity. In my design, I chose to visualize this process horizontally in section—from left to right—making the operational flow legible and integrated into the architecture.

A grid

The structure and façade of my project are defined by the intersection of two grid systems—one derived from Stynen's original grid, the other from the entrance canopy that I plan to remove. The new façade reinterprets the Stynen façades: while the original expresses its structural grid through sculptural concrete, the new design uses prefabricated, assembled elements to articulate an abstract grid. This grid weaves the new with the old, linking people to objects, and occasional visits to the daily workings of the archive.

The rational grid is fundamental to archival architecture. Shelving systems and trolleys conform to standardized dimensions. In buildings like Ungers' House or the Beinecke Library, a three-dimensional grid extends from shelving to floor, ceiling, and façade—making vast collections legible and relatable to the human body. This capacity of the grid to bridge scales became evident through working with both the 1:200 and 1:33 models.

Other thoughts

This year has felt less like the end of my studies and more like the start of a long and challenging path. What I once imagined as a final, polished project turned into a personal process of reflection and uncertainty. I kept questioning myself—my ideas, my direction—without arriving at clear answers. The moments of tension and inner conflict that emerged throughout this process are not yet resolved; they remain with me, waiting to be understood over time.

At the beginning, having a full year to design seemed like a dream opportunity to plan and refine something thoroughly. But as time went on, I realized that most of it was spent hesitating, revising, and second-guessing. The more time I had, the harder it became to commit. Tutors often reminded us to treat the project more like a competition entry than a real building—what matters most is a sharp strategy, a strong narrative, and compelling representation.

Consulting with four different design tutors in rotation revealed something critical: the importance of standing firm in my own ideas. Learning to take in feedback, yet measure it against my own convictions and criteria, became one of the most valuable lessons of the year. In this tension between external input and internal clarity, I began to understand what it means to find my own voice as a designer.