

Bridging the Archive: weaving a public landscape into de Singel

by
Yunke Li

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science
at Delft University of Technology,
to be defended publicly on 30-10-2025 (**day month year**).

Faculty: Architecture and the Built Environment
Department: Architecture
Programme: Interiors Buildings Cities

Mentors / Supervisors: D.J. Rosbottom
S. Pietsch
E. Karanastasi
S.S. Mandias
Graduation committee: V. Danivska

This thesis is confidential and cannot be made public until 30-10-2025 (**day month year**).

An electronic version of this thesis is available at <http://repository.tudelft.nl>

Keywords:

Interiors Buildings Cities, Antwerp, DeSingel, VAI, landscape

Abstract

The Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi) has outgrown its current spaces within de Singel, Antwerp's modernist arts complex. Simultaneously, de Singel itself suffers from poor accessibility, fragmented circulation, and severed landscape connections due to Ring Road infrastructure. This graduation project proposes an integrated solution operating at different scales. A landscape bridge reconnects fragmented green spaces across the highway, creating ecological corridors and establishing a walking network that extends the archive into the city's modernist landmarks. A new VAI building with a transparent ground floor transforms de Singel's into a welcoming public threshold. The design embraces permeability and connectivity as a core principle. By transforming the highway barrier from urban wound into landscape infrastructure, the project gives the VAI a contemporary public identity while completing Leon Stynen's interrupted vision of de Singel as a building embedded in nature. It demonstrates how cultural institutions can actively contribute to urban healing and ecological restoration.

Yunke Li
4806174
MSc3/4
2024/2025

interiors buildings cities

REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE ASSIGNMENT

The graduation project proposes the design of a new building for the Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi). The Flanders Architecture Institute, also known as the VAI is the main centre for information about architecture in Flanders and Brussels. It seeks to provide a meeting space for everyone who wants to get acquainted with architecture, through exhibitions, lectures, events and publications.

Currently, the VAI has two different locations: one in the city centre, which hosts their collection inside a depot, and another in the south, bordering the historic city, located inside de Singel with their office. De Singel is a modernist cultural campus designed by Léon Stynen, and later Stéphane Beel, which hosts multiple institutions, including the Royal Conservatory and various dance and theatre companies. However, the VAI has outgrown its current space and needs a new home.

We were given the assignment to design a new architectural archive building for the VAI as an extension to the existing cultural campus de Singel. The project seeks to address the VAI's need for a consolidated space that combines its archive, offices, and public functions, while fostering a dynamic relationship between the institution, de Singel, and the city. Simultaneously, addressing the urban disconnections of the current location of de Singel.

Beyond simply housing the VAI's needs, the assignment also challenged me to reconsider and reimagine what an archive could be, specifically how it can be transformed into an engaging, public assembly. The design aims to redefine the typology of an archive, transforming it from an introverted, functional space into a public assembly that actively engages with its urban and cultural context.

The VAI would like to become more public-facing, creating more space for public and community engagement. This vision is reflected in their brief, which requires a combination of private and public spaces.

The site presented complex urban conditions. De Singel is located next to the Ring Road highway, whose name was derived from the structure built to be used as the former military moats. Currently, the building sits within a web of infrastructure. The original 1958 vision of Leon Stynen was to create a "modernist city in the green". Unfortunately, this idea had been compromised by the construction of the highway, resulting in de Singel becoming disconnected from both the landscape and the city. My project aims to not only add a physical building, but also heal the urban wound and reinterpret Stynen's vision.

THE PROJECT DESIGN AND PROCESS

My design centers on the concept of the bridge, both physical and metaphorical. The project proposes a triangular bridge that covers the highway and is an extension of the existing bridge, reconnecting the fragmented green spaces around de Singel while providing a foundation for the new VAI building. This bridge operates at multiple scales simultaneously: as an improved urban infrastructure, as a public landscape extending de Singel, and as the architectural foundation for an archive.

The proposal originated from my initial idea that an archive does not have to be confined to a single building. For my P1 project, I explored the idea of an archive housed within a modular, transportable unit that can be opened to transform a space into an archive extension. It rethinks the city itself as an archive and, in its essence, as a typology as publicly accessible as possible. The existing modernist landmarks in the area become integral parts of the VAI's collection. Rather than simply storing the material of these buildings in the archive, they become activated spaces for archival functions, such as exhibition. This network transforms the traditional archive from a singular building into an extensive, modular system that can be expanded into the city. Specifically, the Antwerpen Expo building on the other side of the highway plays a crucial role in this redevelopment. Sitting on the opposite side of the new VAI building, framing this new bridge, its presence is of importance. An extension and a new facade will create a dialogue with the VAI and transform this bridge into a cohesive landscape park.

The architectural strategy emphasizes connectivity and transparency. The ground floor opens directly onto the bridge landscape,

making the archive's presence visible and accessible to both planned visitors and casual passersby. As you move through the building, the level of publicity changes. The upper levels house more private functions while maintaining visual connections to the city through the design of the facade and the collection of landmarks that comprise the extended archive. The roof gives space to visitors to look out onto the new landscape on the bridge, extending throughout the entire city and therefore strengthening the relationship with the city and the concept of the city as an archive through visual connections. The design challenges the traditional separation between storage and display, between private and public, and between building and city.

It is interesting to see how my initial observations of the archive typology being very introverted and repetitive were challenged in my P1 module, and how the essence of this conceptual small cabinet still exerts influence on the current design proposal. The new archive is extending itself physically and tangibly, taking the shape of a bridge and a passage inside the existing building of de Singel.

The VAI building sits at the crucial corner where the bridge meets de Singel, between the existing complex and the new landscape intervention. Rather than designing a traditional archive as a closed, protective container, the project proposes an open, public-facing institution that extends its collection into the city itself. The surrounding modernist landmarks, including other buildings by Stynen, become nodes in a distributed archive network, allowing the institution to claim a presence throughout the urban fabric rather than being confined to a single location.

REFLECTIONS AND OTHER

Looking back on the process of the past year, I was faced with many different challenges. Having a project with a duration of one year, in my case, a bit over one year, it can be hard to keep track of your initial idea and understand how to extend on that. Working at multiple scales simultaneously presented both opportunities and challenges. The urban vision of the bridge as landscape infrastructure provided a strong conceptual foundation and helped give direction for the architectural interventions, but it also made it difficult to develop a cohesive design on a building scale. The constant switching between different scales also required different approaches and thinking, which was sometimes hard to balance. However, the test moments (P1-P4), are extremely useful to learn and practice how to present your work clearly and to summarize your project in a concise, but convincing way. I noticed that I would tend to invest a lot of time into defining this storyline and structure, which would help regain confidence as a designer. Similarly to how the rotation of tutors was sometimes frustrating, but also trained me to become firmer in my decision-making.

The relationship between research and design proved essential throughout the process. This cyclical process was sometimes frustrating but ultimately productive. Maintaining a project journal helped me track these iterations and understand how ideas evolved. However, I did struggle with the documentation, as I experienced that a design process is not always linear, and a book is often written chronologically. In retrospect, developing alternative documentation methods that could better represent my messy design process and mind would have strengthened both my understanding and communication of my project.