

archive
/ Lost Memory of Brno

P5 reflection



In the following lines, I am looking back and forth in my graduation journey that started in the Chair of Interiors. Beginning in this chair as a complete newcomer, I decided to join the Independent Group that could provide me with more autonomy and freedom compared to a regular graduation studio. Also, a selection of the theme and location of my graduation project became quite new but familiar at the same time. By returning to my native environment, I am enclosing a circle of my education. Departing and ending at the same place.

An archive is everything but definitive. It is the nature of every living collection and such a collection is a city as well.

Every nation, every culture and every society strive to forget and sometimes even cut off its unwanted past. As a result, blind spots and distorted reality are created instead. In general, society learned to forget in order to keep a healthy “state of mind”. As a memory of an individual cannot afford to capture everything, collective memory has a similar feature. Émile Durkheim had already declared that every society displays and requires a sense of continuity with the past and thus establishes a collective memory, even though he had not mentioned this term explicitly. On the other hand, forgetting is not only a defensive and voluntary mechanism of the society but also an inevitable consequence of violent history. A civilization developed a series of tools to forget and remember afterwards. Museums, libraries, memorials, repositories and archives. According to Adrian Forty, in the Western tradition fragile human memories are preserved in a form of material objects and thus artefacts are made. Together artefacts constitute a collection that is part of the archive or does collection equal archive? What is the archive then?

The origin of the word “archive” could be traced to the Greek “arche”, which means beginning, origin, order and government. Thus the close relation of archive to politics and power is obvious. It has been exceptionally researched in recent time. As for instance in well-known Archive Fever by Jacques Derrida: “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.” Traditionally, buildings that housed archives have had a physical similarity to places of worship. A wearing of white gloves indicated the almost sacred nature of the material. Especially in the archive you realize the vulnerability of the material. There is this essence of preserving something with a hidden potential for the future. In a contemporary context, an archive is a service or institution that collects, classifies, conserves, and makes accessible certain documents. The last characteristic is important in order to differentiate the archive from the vault or other secured containers. Archive not only protects but reveals as well. Archive needs to be located on a safe place secured from unwanted elements, although it does not necessarily mean a distant location on a periphery behind barbed wire as it is common for data centres and other restricted typologies.

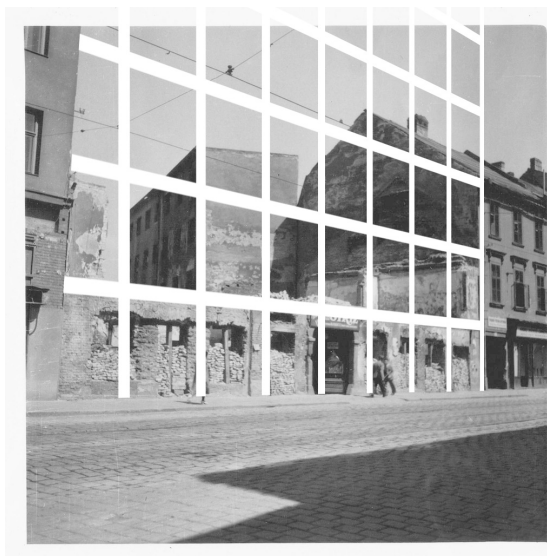
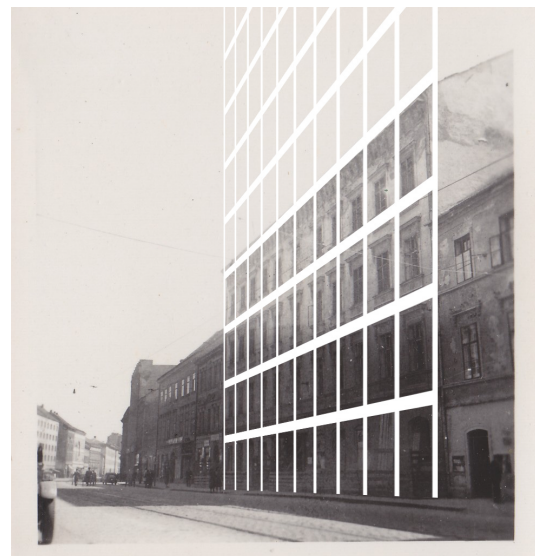
In contrast to the artefact, making stands iconoclasm as the most conventional way of forgetting. This denial of the past has unintended consequences and empty pedestal is even more memorable than the previous monument. After all, absence becomes the stronger element similar to gaps in the city waiting to be filled as an empty shelf. In the words of Alison and Peter Smithson, we should not be frightened of holes in cities and focus on their qualities instead.



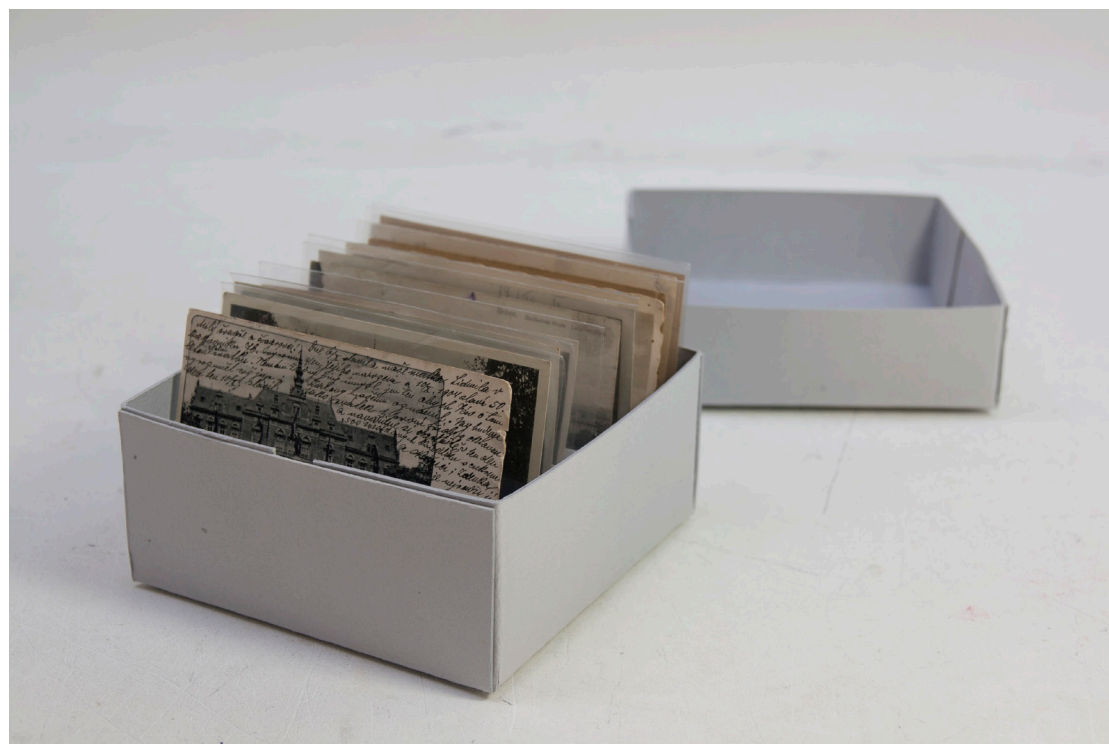
This project operates on a similar principle of collecting, classifying, conserving and revealing of certain artefacts. Either it is in a form of proposing new repository unit or providing a new infrastructure that reveals up to now inaccessible artefacts. In order to be understood correctly, it strives to avoid sacralised conservation that could easily lead to a dangerous fetishisation. Is it a work of archivist, architect or even archaeologist?

During the past months, my role in the project changed from archivist to architect but was never really fixed to one of these. Therefore, the boundary of my actions became blurred in this sense. I understood the relation between my research and design as one coherent package that two exclusive things. What I researched was reflected in the design and without it, no design would emerge because the substance of my project relies on real artefacts either material or cultural.

Departing from a very broad understanding of memory repositories and precarious techniques using to store recent human memories, I landed in a very specific place with specific conditions. In the former centre of the textile industry of Brno in the Czech Republic. Since then I became an archivist, in order to reveal instead of reinventing.



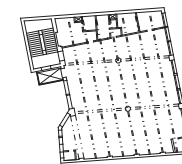
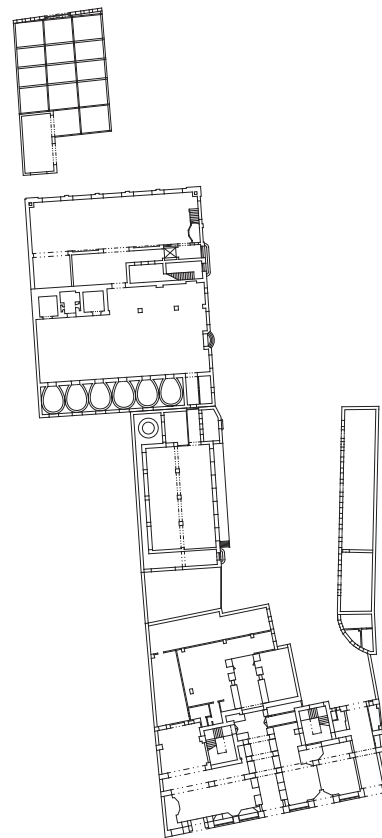
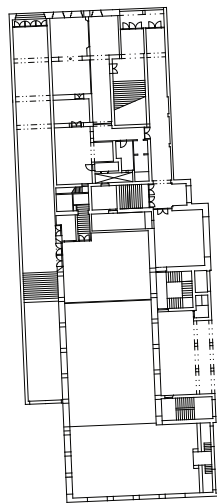
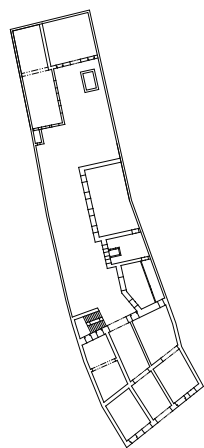
never filled gap sites from WWII on the street Cejl,
(original photographs were taken shortly after the war, from Brno City Archive)



/research method

I set up an archive holding a collection that does not aim to be holistic but rather eclectic and testifying in its substance. Personal histories are hidden in every archive securely stored on the shelf and to reveal them became essential. I observed the mundane and everyday through which the driving labour force of the city spoke and still speaks. According to that, my selection of four urban artefacts and four different approaches is established (*as seen on the next spread*).

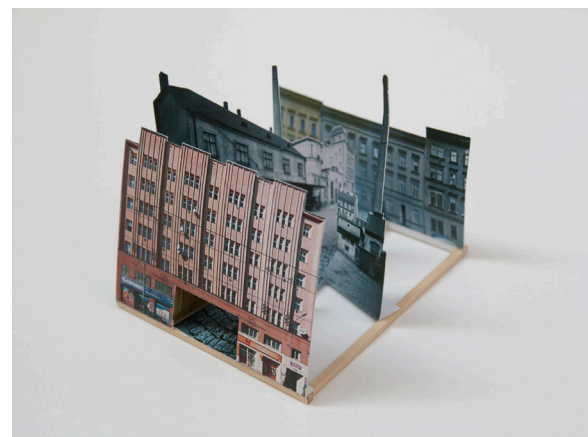
My research was composed of historical research and fieldwork research. I started my historical research simply by collecting various artefacts that unfold the narrative of the place and set up a basis for my project. The “artefact making” belongs to the Western tradition of memory and comprehension that material substitutes the fragile world of human memory. The latter method involved personal observations and as such, I used sketching with notations and interviewing owners in rather informal discussions to get involved in this sensitive environment.



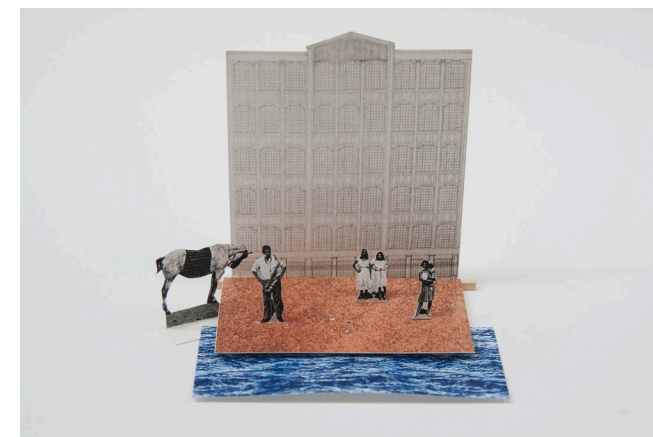
gap site



workers' house



bakery



textile factory

/process

Four heterogenous places represent the past and future as well. Each of them is situated in a different life cycle. As any other artefact in the archive, they could be easily overlooked, hidden or lost. The aim was not to be excessively nostalgic, but to demonstrate that renewal or reappropriation could serve as an effective strategy for resistance to commercialization and express a form of critique. When generating these new meanings my role shifted to the realm of an architect. I was trying to approach my proposal rather as a piece of infrastructure that I am inserting in existing conditions. Infrastructure that could serve as a tool to study the environment. What I found especially useful was instead of thinking of the final image of the proposal, was to think about the list of necessary steps. These steps were described in action plans I proposed for every place. Finally, a possible future was represented in a series of collages reusing the original historical or contemporary photographs.



Eva Davidová, Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, 1970

/relevance

The graduation project is trying to embrace a wider social context by looking at the complexity of the environment and trying to capture the everyday practices that form the place. By looking at mundane and rather ordinary situations, the project elaborates inclusiveness that is present at current architectural discourse. Moreover, the notions of reviving and recollecting the history, that was flourishing in past decades, are addressed in a less pedagogical way and speak more through the selection of 'artefacts' and later through the architecture itself.

The most pressing ethical issue is beyond doubt the fragility of the environment in which I am operating. Some of my artefacts are just waiting to be demolished and thus I am trying to save them with already mentioned action plans. Next factor is the resident composition that is changing nowadays and a distinct marginalized Roma minority is slowly forced to leave the area because of occurring gentrification.

Since the beginning of my research, I was interested in the influence of the past in the present. Especially nowadays, when boundaries between past and present have weakened. Last two centuries were great eras of collecting and storing memories, but now this time is over. What to do with all that gathered information is the question of today.

/conclusion

Throughout the year one urging question was asked by the mentors and until the later phase of the project was not properly answered by me. What is actually holding the whole archive, the whole knowledge about the place, together? In all my interventions I was using a unified architectural language that was a connecting thread between the sites/artefacts. Nevertheless, the mentors' insistence to make a physical container holding the collection proofed to be clarifying for the project and in the end I proposed a repository based on very utilitarian principles.

Even though the previous months were going on in a chaotic and fragmented way in terms of organization, I appreciated several insights from various persons (provided by this graduation studio) with different backgrounds and that made the project more rich and layered. Instead of a common practice of finding problems and solving them with one answer.