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Roundtable: Transmedia Architecture Archive: Historical Knowledge in the AI Era

Chairs

Dirk van den Heuvel, TU Delft
Eytan Mann, TU Delft

The archive is undergoing a profound transformation. Once conceived as static repositories for historians, archives have expanded into dynamic, digital platforms attempting to democratize the narration of history. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Extended Reality (XR), the notion of the archive encounters ideas of collective, decentralized intelligence and multisensory engagement. This transmedia approach allows researchers to move fluidly between different modes of knowledge – from AI-powered pattern recognition to embodied understanding through virtual site visits – creating richer, more nuanced interpretations of architectural history.

However, historical knowledge in the AI era is increasingly shaped by a set of tensions particularly visible in the architectural archive. On one axis lies the pull between datafication and resistance: while machine-readable descriptions promise expanded access, they simultaneously provoke counter-archives and practices that insist on opacity, informality, or partial visibility. On a second axis lies the tension between augmentation and forgetting: while XR offers immersive, affective modes of engaging the past, it also foregrounds the fragility and potential “drift” of born-digital materials as constitutive conditions of knowledge rather than mere technical failures.

This roundtable invites scholars to interrogate the “Transmedia Architecture Archive” as a field of negotiation where historical meaning emerges through shifting relations between simulation and erasure, institutional stewardship, and precarious forms of memory work. We will explore how moving from metadata-based systems

to AI-driven epistemologies introduces intimacy and urgency, while navigating the pressures of digital persistence and loss.

Guiding Questions

- What does the advent of AI entail for architectural historiography, and how does it reshape the agency of individuals and institutions in historical interpretation amidst the tension of datafication?
- What tools and methodologies can breathe life into static collections, transforming them into participatory spaces that balance the desire for cataloguing with the creative potential of archival “drift”?
- How can XR technologies (AR/VR) foster emotional connections to historical spaces, and how do we address the “confusing” or fragile nature of these simulations when representing systematically excluded histories?
- How can we ensure AI and XR don’t reinforce Western-centric power structures? Special attention will be paid to data sovereignty, indigenous knowledge, and the right to resist total digital legibility in contested historical contexts.
- By addressing these issues, the roundtable aims to push the boundaries of architectural historiography. We seek to understand how transmedia archives redefine the roles of historians, architects, and the public, inviting both speculative and grounded contributions that examine the future of architectural knowledge at the intersection of traditional scholarship and emerging, often volatile, technologies.

Unfolding the Archive: New Dimensions of Access to Born-digital Architecture Collections

Ania Molenda
Nieuwe Instituut

Born-digital architecture archives present unique opportunities to study and interpret the relationships between the built environment, digital cultures, and social change. They allow us to rethink the design practice and its archive as a dynamic collaboration between humans and machines. As pioneers of Computer-Aided Design (CAD), architects created archives that are idiosyncratic, transmedia and rich in file formats, including 2D drawings, 3D models, graphic design, collages, renderings, animations, and computer code. These archives ask for readings that will allow for new technical and cultural interpretations. However, much of their contents remain inaccessible to the broader public, posing limits to both research and discovery.

Research project Unfolding the Archive explored forms of access that position metadata of CAD records as key. It used inherent properties of CAD records to explore ways in which their discovery could be supported, bypassing proprietary technical dependencies. By developing conceptual approaches and prototypes, it demonstrates how relational and experimental interfaces can visualise connections between archival objects and their contexts, stimulate early-stage research, and democratise access to born-digital architecture collections. It presents ways that pose an alternative to the catalogue-based and author-centered forms of access towards networked, multimodal, and multivocal readings.

If we recognize machines as co-creators of architectural archives, they also need to become our allies in access. Ethical engagement, especially with technologies such as AI, posing risk of decontextualization and manipulation of archival material, and is crucial. A metadata-driven approach focusing on creating generous interfaces enables new narratives to emerge, for example, revealing conditions of practice and ways in which archives were created. Stimulating more nuanced and multivocal interpretations of architectural history requires a broader inclusion of users, beyond the specialist audiences. To create such inclusivity, responding to diverse levels of digital literacy and providing multiple modes of access that are meaningful to the users are key.

The Intelligence of Loss in the Archive

Anna-Maria Meister

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Archives are entropic sites, where the very processes designed to preserve knowledge – whether on paper or servers – inevitably lead to transformation, selective preservation and loss. While in art and architecture history, narratives of loss and decay have started to play a more important role in historiography, AI is hailed as a promise against loss. But what if we treated forgetting not as a bug, but a feature? AI's processes of erasure follow distinct patterns that may reveal new ways of managing archival sustainability. Its mechanisms of forgetting and loss – such as data selection, pruning, model drift, algorithmic obsolescence and capacity to (almost) randomize choices – offer alternatives to human-driven/caused archival destruction. Rather than treating AI as an optimized alternative for pattern recognition in archives, this research explores how AI's patterns of forgetting might reshape our understanding of archival decay and persistence. By taking loss and erasure seriously – not as failures, but as integral to knowledge systems – this project tries to explore how it might be an underappreciated field of exploration, one where its (at least seemingly) irrational and unpredictable human shape might be a form of intelligence AI could learn from. What does the pattern of loss look like and can it be modelled? Reversely, can humans gain insights from AI-driven loss provide into archival decay? Investigating what is lost with which intentions, what is memorable only because it was lost, or how forgotten materials incorporate intelligence, this project takes loss not as a problem, but as a promise of other ways of knowing.

On Historical Archives and “Synthetic Memories”

Ana Miljacki

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In the night of June 13, 2022, *The Partisan Memorial Cemetery* in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was vandalized. All 630 gravestones dedicated to fallen soldiers in the Second World War, part of a remarkable memorial land artwork by the local architect and monument artist Bogdan Bogdanović, were destroyed. This event prompted a very personal work of “preservation,” a form of “affective history.”

The artifacts that today constitute Yugoslavia’s socialist architectural heritage, and especially those that were instrumental in the ideological wiring of several postwar generations for antifascism and inclusive living, have been swallowed by the entropic appetite of aging collective memory, exacerbated by various forms of local and global political investment in forgetting their meaning. But for those who choose to claim citizenship in the idea of Yugoslavia, now thirty years after its destruction, memorials like the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar serve as navigational devices, both backward into history and forward into the future. *The Pilgrimage | Pionirsko Hodočašće* is a multichannel video installation comprised of nine video interpolations produced using the StyleGAN3 platform. StyleGAN3 has been widely available since 2021 and is already deemed obsolete by regular users of such tools, but when we began this work, it seemed that it would enable us to use a structurally “nostalgic” tool for the production of a deliberately reflective nostalgic effect, to borrow one of Svetlana Boym’s two characterizations of nostalgia.

We trained models in StyleGAN3 on photographs and images found in institutional and personal archives acquired specifically for the project, as well as those found online in video banks and on social media platforms. Each of these visual assets indexed actual visits to nine of Yugoslavia’s key postwar (WWII) memorials and monuments, and together they served as the basis of a time-filled video and audio experience. This transmediatic work has now been presented three times, each time differently and to a different audience, culminating most recently in a spatial video installation set against a nonlinear documentary soundscape at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, a museum dedicated to stewarding the heritage of Yugoslavia. I propose to present this work in detail for the panel *Transmedia Architecture Archives* in order to discuss “the archive,” as well as what is historical and what might function as “heritage” in this project.

Queering the architectural archive: AI-assisted data collecting, hybrid prototyping, and web scraping lost traces in architectural history

Lucas de Mello Reitz

IAB — Brazil's Institute of Architects

This paper explores queer architectural histories circulating beyond canonical repositories and archives, unfolding across ephemeral media, local press, and digital platforms (re)collected and (re)assembled through AI-assisted programming, hybrid prototyping, and web scraping. Together, they describe a queered architectural archive, composed of architecture's material forms, attendant discourses, and historiographies, as put by Marko Jobst.

Drawing on work produced at muq – the transdisciplinary platform I run – I argue that queer archival practices of architecture and the built environment are often tacit, relational, and produced through gossip, alliance, and mutual protection: forms of record institutional archives marginalise, yet are visible in material forms and online traces. This work is built on Ann Cvetkovich's concept of the queer counter-archive and understands the archive as a technology of gender perpetuating normative knowledge, echoing Teresa de Lauretis.

The speculative investigation juxtaposes two forms of archive-building bridging material and online data excluded from disciplinary canons: (1) traces of Fernando Betzler, an architect whose career in 1980s Florianópolis, Brazil, remained confined to local newspapers and who later died of HIV/AIDS; and (2) queer spaces of encounter and sociability in Florianópolis, registered through point cloud scanning and collaborative online platforms mapping over 180 online dating websites. They result in text and image entries, data sets, and hybrid files – fusing online testimonies with material environments into 3D models based on point cloud scanning.

Through these dispersed fragments, the investigation exposes the limits of the traditional archive while pushing the boundaries of transmedia experimental practices. As a branched enquiry, the use of AI LLMs to data collecting programming reframes precarity: analysis no longer depends on formal expertise in data science but becomes a facilitator for queering the archive through natural language. Ulti-

mately, the project asks how to queer archival technologies to include histories, discourses, and material forms consistently excluded or marginalised.

Architectural Warez: Another Archive of Digitalized Architectural Production is Here

Joshua Silver

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, saai Archive

While institutional architectural archives have undergone a digital transformation, digital technologies remain a furtive presence among the material they collect. Archivists may find obscure data tapes among their paper collections. An architect may bashfully donate an external hard drive. Boxes of inert graphics cards gather dust in archival cold storage. But also, for architectural office archives, this digital transformation has added another tool to their public relations and project management toolkits. Original files are stabilized as PDFs. Email correspondence is periodically deleted. The material traces of office practice and architectural production are secured behind firewalls in virtual private networks. Otherwise, digital corporations like Autodesk, Meta, and Alphabet plunder the web and the Earth itself to fill their own archival architectures supporting Gen-AI, whether physical data centres or distributed databases. Meanwhile, “warez,” whether ad hoc software and pirate media, community hardware projects, or informal digital know-how, form their own networks in the cracks between institutions, corporations, and states. Could architecture’s warez, too, escape these binds? Could they be found, as I discovered during my own research, circulating through unexpected channels?

In contributing to this roundtable, I would take the position that another architectural archive, one which evades control of digital and architectural corporations alike, is not only possible but necessary for apprehending the contemporary conditions of architectural production under digitalized, “AI”-enabled global capitalism. And perhaps it might already exist in the distributed, informal, “grey” web repositories of born digital and digitized material, in the dark corners of architectural institutions, on the personal hard drives of peripheral design consultants, and in architectural workers’ own testimonies. Like the warez which gesture toward a more expansive definition of digitality, this “pirate” archive of architecture could direct researchers toward architectural voices, practices, and networks which are not only overlooked but whose traces are being actively deleted in favour of iconic drawings, images, projects, and celebrity practitioners.