

Reorganising Architecture

A new archive for the Flamish Architecture institute

The Interiors Buildings Cities graduation studio examines architecture as an inherently connected discipline, one that exists in constant dialogue with its urban, social, and environmental context. The studio emphasises that architectural design must consider the relationships between city and building, building and interior, and interior and city simultaneously. These interdependencies form the basis for a holistic design process and contribute to a deeper understanding of architecture's role within society.

The focus of this year's project was the archive, specifically the architecture archive. With the Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi) facing spatial limitations due to a growing collection, the project addressed the need for expansion and redefinition of the institution's archive. In addition to spatial concerns, the project also responded to broader questions related to the digitalisation of collections, the accessibility of archival material, and the evolving role of archives in public life.

The understanding of the archive as a place was the pivotal point of the research phase, in what it entails for the community and how it is commonly perceived, informing the design operations throughout the entire process, translating research into design.

Increasingly, cultural institutions are seeking to open up their archives, not only physically but also conceptually, by making selected material accessible through exhibitions, digital platforms, or public programs. However, such transparency presents significant challenges. Archival material is often delicate and requires strict environmental control, creating tension between accessibility and preservation. This tension became a key theme of the project.

The design and research process was strongly guided by a statement from Sofie de Caigny, former director of the VAi, who described the archive as "[...] far beyond a mere repository of buildings. It gives access to ideas, positions, education, knowledge and images, and that across generations. It gives

insight into the social context in which designs were created. At the same time, the archive shows alternatives. Archives are not repositories of truths but places of research. They are incubators of new ideas, breeding grounds for speculation about the future." This understanding of the archive, not only as a space for storage but as a site of cultural and intellectual production, became a foundation for the conceptual approach.

Drawing on existing precedents, including traditional archives and hybrid typologies such as the Sir John Soane's Museum and ArkDesk, the project explored different models of public engagement and spatial organisation. This analysis contributed to a critical understanding of how architecture is archived, and what it means to design for an archive that extends beyond storage, one that acts as a site of cultural production, reflection, and engagement.

Rather than separating research and design into distinct phases, the project adopted a method of research through design. The development of a project journal facilitated a continuous exchange between conceptual inquiry and spatial thinking. This iterative process allowed for ongoing refinement of the design, ensuring that the initial intentions remained present throughout.

Leading the design phase, was the proposal of an alternative design site in contrast to the one initially given by the brief, challenging the idea of designing for a cultural institution into a broader question of value of the existing built environment, bringing the design into the extremely actual topic of reuse and repurpose existing structures. The proposed design relocates the VAi to a new site, reusing an existing industrial shed and introducing a contemporary addition. This approach enables a clear division between the controlled archival environment and more public-facing functions. The project aims to offer a flexible framework that supports both preservation and participation. The new site has the potential to act as a cultural node within the city, extending the reach of the archive beyond its traditional audience.

By engaging with the archive as both a technical and cultural space, the project reflects on the evolving nature of this architectural typology. In an era of rapid digital change and shifting public expectations, archives face new challenges and responsibilities. This project proposes that architecture can play a critical role in addressing these, offering spaces that are both protective and open, institutional and civic.

In summary, the project frames the architectural archive not only as a repository but as an active participant in the cultural life of the city of Antwerp and the Flanders region. Through a combined process of research and design, it investigates how architecture can support the archive's dual role safeguarding knowledge while enabling its dissemination and interpretation within a broader societal context.

To extend the scope of this reflection, two open-ended questions are introduced — not with the intention of arriving at immediate answers, but as a means to provoke further discussion on the design of cultural institutions and the role of architecture in processes of archiving. These questions have emerged through the iterative process of research and design, and serve to frame broader considerations raised by the project:

- How can the insertion of a cultural institution within an existing urban fabric engage with its complexities and operate as a catalyst for wider architectural and urban regeneration?
- What is the value of the design approach towards cultural institutions, and the commonly perceived idea of them, that has been adopted in the project?

These questions point toward the wider applicability of the project's methods and themes, suggesting that the tools of architecture can offer meaningful ways of reimagining the relationship between institutional structures and the public domain.