

# P4

# Reflection

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Maksymilian Bernady | 6080596  
Interiors Buildings Cities | MSc 3/4 *Palace*  
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This reflection revisits the process behind the development of my graduation project - a design proposal for the architectural archive facility of the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi), set within the deSingel arts campus in Antwerp. The year-long process combined design and research in a continuous dialogue. Rather than separating research and design into distinct phases, the project was approached through a “research by design” methodology, where model-making, analysis, and architectural speculation progressed in parallel.

## Notion of an Archive

The starting point for the project was the fragmented condition of the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi), whose offices and temporary exhibition space are currently housed within the deSingel arts campus, while the bulk of its archival collection is stored in multiple locations across Antwerp. Despite being one of Europe’s most prominent architectural institutions, the VAI lacks a dedicated, cohesive space that brings together its collection and opens it up to the public.

At the same time, deSingel itself - originally conceived by Léon Stynen as a clear and unified cultural campus in the landscape - has undergone successive expansions and transformations that have blurred its original identity. The ambition of this project was to address both of these conditions: to give the VAI a permanent home, and to restore deSingel’s spatial and conceptual coherence.

## Looking Carefully

The year began with collective precedent research into existing archives and cultural institutions. Working in small groups, we explored the philosophies behind these buildings, their material and spatial strategies, and the role they play in the public realm. Each group produced a model-based photograph replicating a key representational image, as well as a research booklet with analytical drawings, diagrams, and reflections.

This collective work was followed by a more personal investigation. Each student was assigned an architect from the VAI’s collection, which we studied in the archive during a site visit. This helped build a stronger connection to the material we were designing for and offered



deSingel campus | photograph: Jan Kempenaers, 2010

a first look into how architectural memory is currently handled by the institution.

## A Room for an Archive

Our first design exercise was to develop a scale model of an “archival room” - a contextless space that could express our early ideas about what an archive could be. While the only fixed requirement was to work with the archival ensemble of the assigned architect, the assignment encouraged an open and individual interpretation.

In my case (archival ensemble of Jo Crepain) this was an opportunity to think about atmosphere, materiality, and the balance between openness and intimacy. The model became a way to test how light enters a space, how materials affect focus, and how architecture can quietly guide behavior. Some of the themes from this early model - like spatial rhythm, tactility, and the use of thresholds - continued to evolve throughout the rest of the project.

## Reading deSingel

Understanding the site was essential. As a studio, we divided into groups to research different aspects of deSingel: its history, structure, landscaping, spatial development, and how it connects (or fails to connect) to the city. Through site visits, mapping, and physical models, we unfolded how the campus has evolved, what it has lost, and what qualities are still present and could be reinforced through design.

We also revisited the open call for the St Hubertus church site (2021), which had proposed an archival building for the VAI but was never realised. The program and ambition outlined in that call served as a loose reference for our own proposals, though we were free to reinterpret and question it.

## Developing the Archive

With this groundwork laid, the design process unfolded through a mix of strategic thinking and experimen-

tation. A key question throughout was how to embed the archive into deSingel complex ensemble. The project needed to integrate Leon Stynen's original building with Stephane Beel's 2010s addition, clarify the circulatory and structural logics between those two in an almost infrastructural way. On the other hand the project had to express the ambition of VAI as a standalone institution along with negotiating its position within deSingel cultural campus as a broader institutional project in Antwerp

After P2 I tested how the new archive could work with the existing fabric of the campus, and how it could enhance deSingel's public and cultural role. Drawings and working models supported the process, while Building Technology workshops and tutorials helped me refine the project's structural logic and climatic performance for a peculiar needs of an archival function.

The design balances permanence and openness. It offers the VAI a clear identity within the campus, while creating a space that is accessible and flexible. Rather than seeing the VAI archive only as a passive repository, I tried to enhance its role as a negotiator between storage and showcasing; preserving and curation; For my P3 presentation I have chosen to realise a section model to represent the duality of the project with the lobby / exhibition space in the bottom with an archive facility spanned upon it.



P3 model | photograph: Maksymilian Bernady, 2025

## Studio Culture

Although the final project was developed individually, the year was shaped by a strong collective spirit. Shared site knowledge, group research, and informal peer to peer discussions played a huge role in how my ideas evolved. At times, I missed the collaborative dynamic of group work, especially when decisions became overwhelming and the peer to peer became equally relevant in terms of design process as the "official" tutorial on Thursdays.

Throughout the year, I kept returning to the question of what public interior is. In this case, the archive is not just a building for specialists it's a place where architectural culture can be made visible and relevant but also leave the room for other forms of arts. The goal was not just to house documents, but to create a place that invites people to engage with them.

## Afterwards

As the project enters its ultimate phase, between the P4 and P5, I plan to consolidate all the research, drawings, and models into a clear and layered representation of the design. I plan to build a large-scale section model to show how the polyvalent space upon which the actual archive sits on looks like in detail, how it relates architecturally to the campus, and the internal life of the building. This model will be part of the final exhibition, which in plan is also to showcase the collective research we've done throughout the year.

## Conclusion

Designing a new archive for the VAI within the deSingel campus has been a demanding and rewarding experience. The project brought together questions of memory, architecture, cultural identity, and public space. Working within an existing and historically significant context made the process more complex, but also more meaningful.

The graduation year allowed time for ideas to develop gradually, through drawing, discussion, reflection, and making. It deepened my interest in designing public buildings especially considering the notion of a public interior - space that transcend beyond their function to bring meaning and identity to society as its general user. The archive, in this sense, became more than only a programmatic concern - it became a way to think about architecture's broader role in cultural narrative of its community.