

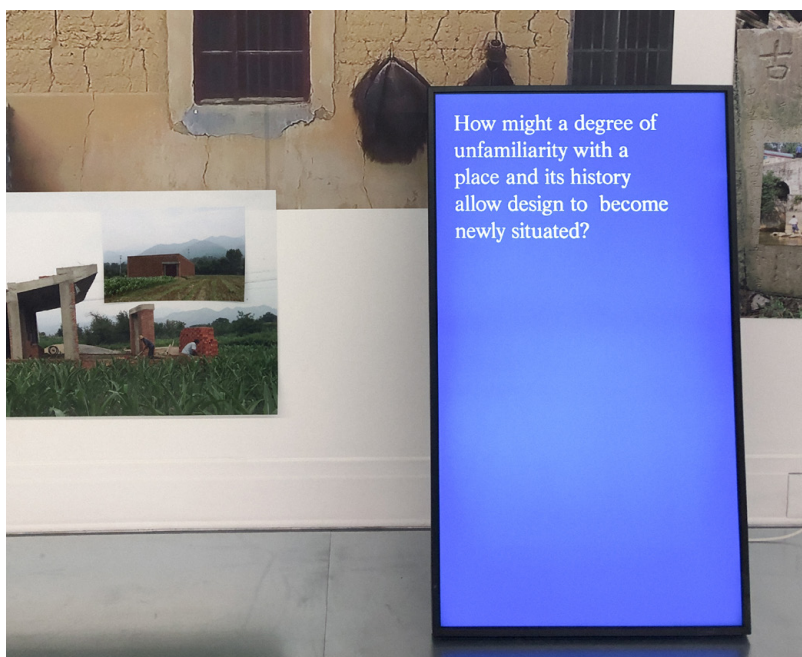
Final Reflection

Romain Tournon - 5836301

Foreword

My graduation year has been shaped by the convergence of personal motivations, academic familiarities, and interests. Choosing this studio felt like a natural continuation of my academic path as I had already taken part in both Interiors Buildings Cities elective and their MSc2 studio. The Graduation studio's methodology, grounded in critical reflection and research by design, aligned with the way I wanted to conclude my studies. Working on a project in Antwerp felt especially relevant, as I intend to pursue my career in Western Europe - France, Belgium, or England- and this context provided a concrete setting to engage with both the architectural and professional realities of the region.

Having lived in Montreal and being closely familiar with the Canadian Centre for Architecture - a canonical institution in the realm of architectural archives - I've developed a deep interest in this typology. Designing an archive for my graduation project became a way to bring together various parts of my personal and academic journey. It offered a chance to engage with a form that is both historically rich and politically charged.



Photograph taken at the CCA - R. Tournon, September 2021

The Typology

Archives, as a typology, most likely originated from the desire to protect artefacts from weathering, decay, and amnesia. Archaic in nature, the archive is a sealed box - putting distance between the inside and the outside, between a stable climate and a tempestuous one. However, as analyzed during my P1, these climatic prerequisites tend to create a distance between the public and the documents. Archives display secrecy which, in our times - when deconstruction and transparency are the norm - only reinforces a politically incorrect gap between civil society and governing bodies. This intrinsic ambiguity between display and secrecy was explored by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*, where he frames it as the tension between the desire for death (amnesia) and the desire to remember. This tension has evolved with time, shaped by societal and technological shifts. One could argue that mechanization and digitalization tip the balance toward anonymity and privacy, while emancipatory movements like decolonization push in the opposite direction.

In this effort to understand the archive as a typology, the studio's first exercise, *Looking Carefully*, offered valuable insights. We were asked to analyze precedents through modelling. My precedent was the Bordeaux City Library by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten in France. With several archive projects to their name, their work provided an essential case study. However, after modelling and photographing the library's reading room, I felt reluctant to replicate such spaces. I saw in them the theatrical expression of archival secrecy. As I wrote at the time:

"If not directly shown, the archive and its materials are expressed through their volume only: silent secretive boxes. Building these concrete elements at a reduced scale uncovered the quality that makes the user subordinate to the Archives. In fact, it would be the way gravity is staged as to reinforce the dramatic moment these massive volumes constitute."

However, after 8 months spent designing my own archive, I realize fully the multiple constraints -mostly climatic, operating on architects. And yet, if I intend to take a stance against many components of the Bordeaux City Archives, some spatial elements of my design were very much inspired by this precedent, with yet a dash of novelty.



Model of the Reading Room at the Bordeaux City Archive - L. Tijchon, C. van Tilburg, R. Touron



Model of a room for an archive - R. Touron

The Brief and The Competition

The Graduation Studio of Interiors Buildings Cities, proposes to design a project following the brief of a miscarried competition: in our case the competition for a new architecture and archive center for the VAI (Vlaams Architectuurinstituut). The brief of the original competition held in 2020 addressed the tension between privacy and publicness inherent to archives, by mixing programmatically the archive with functions like a cultural center, a café and coworking spaces for the neighborhood. However, unlike our project, that competition focused on repurposing a century-old Neo-Gothic church in the south of Antwerp. Although the cost of renovation proved too high and the winning project by ECTV Architecten was never built, the failed competition remains a useful entry point to understand how the VAI sees itself and its future.

I believe that choosing a church - a building typologically close to the archive - highlights alternative ways of archiving, moving away from the cold, clinical character of most contemporary repositories. One of the finalists, De Smet Vermeulen, offered compelling ideas on climate and publicness. Inspired by OMA's proposal for the *Grande Bibliothèque* in Paris, they envisioned the archive as a solid mass carved out by public routing and program. Public and private spaces are not just adjacent but intertwined.

Beyond the intriguing spatial transitions, De Smet Vermeulen also explored climatic gradients as a means of creating a resilient structure. Using walls with high thermal mass and archaic methods of climate control, they opened up new possibilities for what the VAI archive could be. My project continues this line of thought, seeing climate control not only as a technical necessity but as a political instrument - one that can be tweaked in service of a better publicness. Current architecture has to be a compromise. For instance, because of legislations, Archives couldn't exist without HVAC. Yet some archaic techniques could supplement them. The Archive for the VAI, as a building designed during a social and ecological period of transition, will accommodate and welcome hybridity between customary systems like concrete and AC with passive and potent techniques like non-structural Light Earth walls.

Meeting DeSingel

While the initial ideas stemmed from the competition's brief, they were soon adapted to the new parameters given by the studio. The location shifted: the project is now sited at DeSingel arts campus, in Antwerp's southern periphery near the ring road. This new brief responds to the failed competition by placing the archive close to the VAI's current offices inside DeSingel. With this move comes a new ambition: the project is no longer just an archive, but an opportunity to give the VAI a meaningful and visible address in both the city and Flanders. This address would reflect the goals of this institution but also give them a space to shape and define themselves.

Siting the project within DeSingel meant engaging with the modernist heritage of Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer, as well as Stéphane Beel's later interventions. DeSingel is a complex building, both in its form and programming. After spending time analyzing the building during P2, it became clear to me that my project would be a "strategic reuse and densification" of the complex, aimed at clarifying and enhancing the existing condition. The building's porosity, expressed through its multiple entrances and circulation loops, was not fully resolved. Some loops remained incomplete, and several key spaces, like the terraces were underutilized.

My project responds to these deficiencies through two Etappen. First, a new 5500 sqm volume is added at the south-east edge of the site, adjacent to the terraces, housing the main depot and public spaces. Then, a second phase of smaller interventions mends circulation loops and enhances the continuity of the west-east axis. This gesture connects the new archive to the existing western wing and transforms the axis into the new public realm of the VAI.



Conceptual model for an addition- R. Touron



Photograph of the terraces on the South - ca. 1980



Photocollage of the proposed extension