

# de Singel has no depot

*reflection*

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The studio of Interiors Buildings Cities, much like a laboratory for Architecture, invites a group of students to consider, study and rethink a typology of public institution within a specific context. This reconsideration is developed at the scale of urbanism, Architecture and the interior, to create a palace for the public.

The initial brief provided by the studio corresponds to requirements expressed by the Flemish Architecture institute (the VAI) for the construction of new facilities. The brief was initially intended for a church rehabilitation, later deemed as ill-suited: a more appropriate site was required.

#### de Singel

Currently, the VAI occupies a portion of the deSingel, a large 1960s cultural campus, home to: the Royal conservatorium, DeSingel, the Flemish music study center, the VAI and more. The campus, designed by 20th century Antwerp's most prominent Architect, Leon Stynen, houses performance halls, facilities for education and, and exhibition spaces.

Like a small city at the service of the study, spread and celebration of art, the tenants at de Singel thrive from their promiscuity.

Despite that, the VAI seems to exist as a satellite to this ecosystem, forced to spread its activity across multiple locations.

#### Beel

Most recently, the complex was rethought and expanded by the Antwerp firm Stéphane Beel Architecten. This 2010 addition intended to introduce dance and theater facilities and space for the VAI. However, the spaces allocated to the Architecture institute were merely as a public front, neglecting the Archive. The VAI was constrained to divide its occupancy into two distant locations.

Today, the occasional visitor fails to read the complex with ease and is stripped from the opportunity to wander through the building. Meanwhile, daily users have further developed their "wings" within DeSingel. As the number of common spaces for interface diminish in favor of redundant programs, interactions between groups become rare.

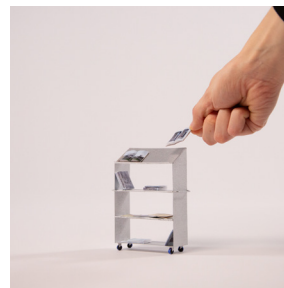
#### Looking carefully

The research started as a collective laboratory in which the studio developed a detailed canon of architectural archives as a typology across the western world. This catalogue displayed the plethora of possibilities for the design of a storage facility and its publicity. The diversity in size, materiality, informality, climatization, proximity to the public, modularity and more, allowed for a demystification of the traditional archive. From this exercise, the courage was developed to imagine an Architectural Archive as something else-something that could perhaps insert itself in an existing context.

#### A trolley for an Archive

The following exercise called for the design of a room for an Archive, curated for a fragment of the Archive of Leon Stynen. The consultation of this fragment at the VAI introduced a new perspective on the production of architecture: analogue architectural practice. This led to the conception of a mobile furniture triptych which mirror the semantics of an analogue architecture office: research, display and storage.

The set was designed with Stynen in mind, yet it is not limited to his work. These furniture pieces can be applied within the setting of an Archive, as tools for Archivists, researchers, and exhibition scenographs. Their mobile properties and format hold the potential to expand the Archive beyond its realm



01.



03.



02.

### The proposal

The exercise of the Studio does not impose the new VAI to remain in DeSingel, yet it seems that in doing so, the opportunity to offer the VAI a stronger position at DeSingel also provides a chance to rethink the entire campus as a system and re-allocated its tenants, with cohabitation as guiding principle.

Through the means of a reorganization of DeSingel's functions, the building will be reconsidered according to its three main functions: School, Public arts center, Flemish Architecture and music institute.

To liberate space and clarify the plan, redundant programs will be merged and strategically located to serve the functions they belong to; with special attention to the main entrance and the first floor.

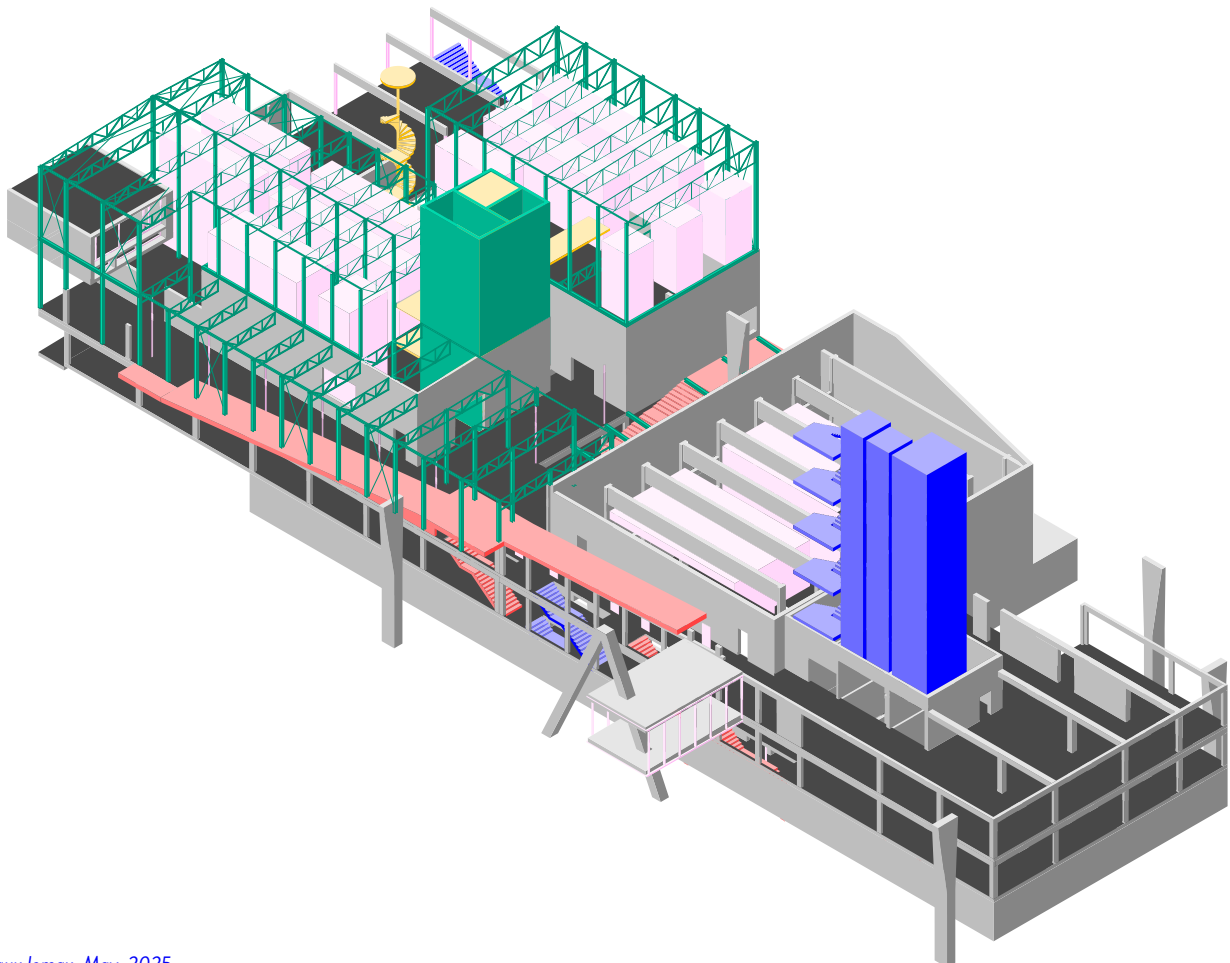
The VAI brief will be divided into two categories: program which is already in DeSingel, and program specific to the VAI. The first will be merged with existing program. The later will be in place of the "most problematic" area of DeSingel-Low Beel-to best interact with the neighboring functions and repair the clarity in that area. A careful study and classification of newly vacant spaces will reveal how to best integrate the archive function. The depot will in part be relocated in an existing auditorium in Low Beel, and in two surélévations of the roofs. These new volumes will serve as a means to redefine the tectonics of Low Beel both inside and out.

The interface of the VAI and the other functions, and thereby the public, will be characterized by punctual interior intervention in the existing tissue of the complex, scattering the presence of the Archive throughout de Singel.

The intervention aims to be minimal both in demolition and addition, by carefully considering, appreciating and repairing the existing complex. Guided by an approach of economy of means, the proposal defends the existing potential in the complex as sufficient to the introduction of the new brief, with the aim to benefit both the VAI and the rest of de Singel's tenants.

### Towards the final presentation

When considering the final development of the project, I aim to concentrate my efforts on detailing the interventions across the building to best communicate the public experience of the newly organized complex, both inside and out. This entails the production of fragment models which reveal the construction, materialization, finishes possible inhabitations of the space, and the pre-existing skeleton they occupy. Exterior and interior views throughout the complex will allow for a depiction of the experience of the newly organized complex.



### Looking back

To design an Architecture Institute and Archive is to give form to a repository of the built environment's heritage. It presents an opportunity to theorize and formalize a typology of Architecture which should commemorate and inspire Architectural production- reaching far beyond our present.

As a student, Architecture has barely been part of my life. Yet Architectural Archives have indirectly shaped my education. The enduring presence of these institutions in our academic and professional contexts attests to their cultural value and highlights the need to critically rethink their role. Contributing to the discourse on Architectural Archives and challenging existing assumption renew on this interest on this often unrefunded and specialized typology.

### *Humility for the VAI – Belgian banal*

The spatial appropriation of the proposal (hopefully) testifies to the potential of cultural institutions to demonstrate humility towards the sacred heritage, knowledge and identity they defend. The complex site that was chosen imposed a rigorous repair operation of the entire campus, before the implementation of the VAI could be designed. This supplementary challenge meant that the conception of a 'palace' (all and its connotations) for people and architecture was desacralized into the inhabitation of an existing set of derelict infrastructures.

Looking back and retracing the threads that make up my graduation journey, I establish links never made before between punctual research endeavors and my final proposal.

An in-depth inspection of Belgian and Flemish architecture as an international style, local movement and manifesto was realized early on into this year. With this I hoped to better understand the institution for which I was to design a new face for. I concluded that the entity and cultural expression that Flemish architecture is, was a result of the place occupied by architecture and the role of the architect in Belgium, in daily life, legislation and the process of construction. In contrast to the other European cultures, I am familiar with, Belgian architecture adopts a sense of banality towards the craft, the people it serves and the legacy it leaves behind. Seen by many as a pejorative approach to a great art, I have learned to appreciate and admire the *Belgian tendenza*.

With this proposal, I do not try to mimic the Belgian style in expression but rather aim to respect and celebrate the banality that it represents. By overturning the preconception of an architectural institution as a temple, through the insertion of the VAI in a constructed ruin, I seek to introduce banality and routine instead of the

'palace' that one might expect. With economy of means, care, repair and submission to pre-existing architecture, the reorganization of de Singel campus is not architectural project but a testimony of humility and modesty in the name of all institutions that are tenants of the complex.

### *Attitudes*

As I reflect on my year and the intricate development of my project underwent, I realize that to offering a second chance to a modernist campus was not merely an architectural exercise. While the proposal involves the renovation of an architectural object, throughout the year I adopted attitudes beyond that of architect.

The reconsideration of the archive typology was a task for a stenographer, furniture designer and historian, researching, discovering and rethinking the archive from a building to a trolley.

The reorganization of the complex was a task for a manager, planner, or a coordinator, understanding, displacing and replacing.

The survey and repurposing of the pre-existing fabric was a task for a gardener, observing, arranging, cultivating and curating.

The appropriation of space was a role for a decorator, collecting remnants of past occupations and weaving them into a reappropriation of the interior for a new use.

The overcoming of the technical challenges of the inserting new program into the existing structure, as well as extending the complex was a task for an engineer - conceptualizing a feasible object that responds to the climate and structural demands.

In doing so I believe to have expressed the plurality of architecture as a technical, social and artistic discipline -and by extension, why it resonates with me so deeply. And yet, looking back on my method, I see that despite this project being grounded in reality, it does not follow a realistic trajectory from the perspective of architectural practice.

I predict that, in reality, the holistic approach of extending the brief to encompass the entire campus would have been unfeasible, given the current economical and legislative framework to which architects must conform. Using the Beel extension as a case in point, I interpret the current approach of the built environment industry as catering towards economic profit; and not what this project defends: resourcefulness, durability, culture and publicity.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that this project is not about a resulting architectural object – which represents only one of countless possible outcomes – but rather about the theoretical and academic trial of a renewed attitude towards architectural practice