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Archival Challenges for the Van Nelle Factory Documenting Twenty Years of a World Heritage Property's Redevelopment

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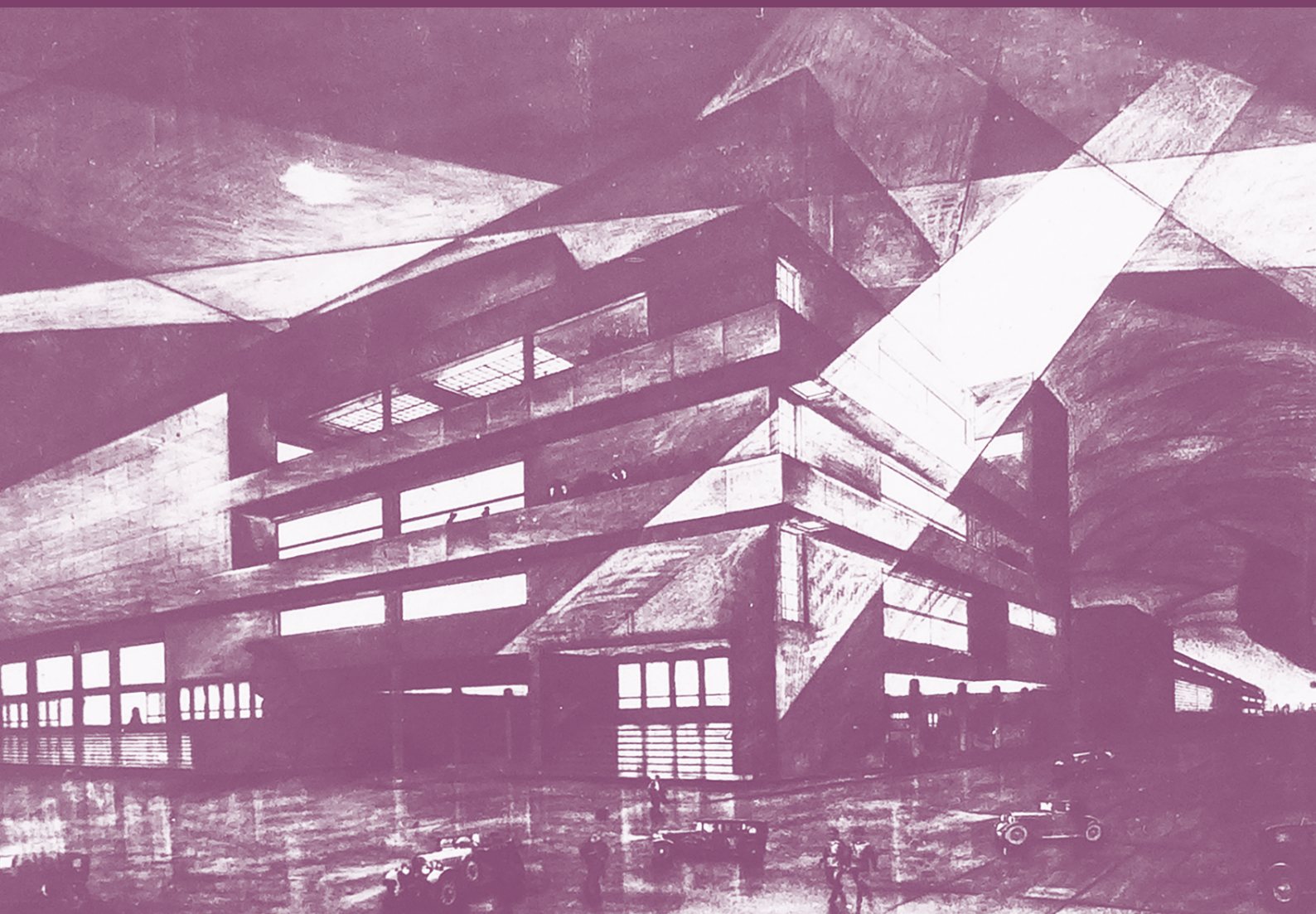
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ARCHIVAL CHALLENGES FOR THE VAN NELLE FACTORY

Documenting twenty Years of a World Heritage Property's Redevelopment

Edward van Hevele, Wessel de Jonge

ABSTRACT: Marking the anniversary of the redevelopment of the Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam, the related project archive was formally transferred to the Rotterdam City Archive in order to enable proper archival conservation and public accessibility of this essential documentation. This article sheds light on the documentation and redevelopment process of a modern World Heritage (WH) site and on the role of archives as an example for other protected heritage projects or sites.

KEYWORDS: Van Nelle Factory, Rotterdam City Archive, documentation, archival challenges, redevelopment.



INTRODUCTION: The Van Nelle Factory was designed by the architects Brinkman and Van der Vlugt, and gradually completed between 1928-31 [FIGURE 01]. The redevelopment project, involving the conservation and adaptive reuse of all ten buildings and the outdoor space, started late 1998.¹ The aim of this endeavor, as conceived by its spiritual father Eric Gude (1953-2018), was to create a hub for the creative industry of Rotterdam: the 'Van Nelle Ontwerp Fabriek' (Design Factory). By September 1999 a Master plan for the redevelopment was drawn up by the architect Wessel de Jonge. Since then, his office was in charge of all conservation works, the conversion of two of the buildings, and of coordinating the adaptive reuse projects by fellow architects for the other heritage buildings on site. The property was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014.

COORDINATED PROJECT

In addition to providing historic building surveys and coordinating the redevelopment project, the architect also had an on-going and instrumental role as a member of the site's Management Committee. This committee, which also involved the owner, the municipal and the national heritage agencies, was in charge of supervising the sub-projects for the various buildings, as well as all subsequent modifications when requested by new tenants or the maintenance team. As a result, between 1998 and 2018, when a shift in ownership and management took place, a vast amount of documentation was produced and recorded, ranging from historic research reports and design studies, to committee meeting reports, building permit applications, zoning plan amendments, project administration and all related correspondence. These documents remained in the archives of the architecture firm, partly due to a legal obligation to keep project and construction documents for at least ten years. Upon the conclusion of their involvement with the project, it became opportune to hand over the archive to allow for more professional care and to ensure long-term accessibility as a documentation of the redevelopment process. This endeavor proved to be challenging, considering the intricate nature and distinctive characteristics of the project and the volume of the related archive.

MODERN HERITAGE ARCHIVES

Historic archives related to 20th century historic buildings mostly differ from those of older buildings in their volume and particular character.² This is mainly due to the introduction of building legislation and permit procedures³ and to the ever-growing breakdown of responsibilities in the building process, both of which required increasing communication through drawings and other documents. As a result of the many actors in the design and building

process, documentation may be dispersed among the various contributors to the project. Information may be found in municipal archives, at architecture firms, technical consultants, suppliers, construction companies and with clients. The period in which the Van Nelle Factory originates, is also characterized by the rise of photography and film. The company had the construction of the buildings and the final results extensively documented by professional photographers and cinematographers. The ample availability of films and photographic documentation is another particularity of many 20th century historic building archives.

Such an abundance of information makes it difficult to get an overview of the archival material. Often it is not so much a matter of where and how to find information, but where to start, how to set about it, and what choices to make. The case of the Van Nelle Factory was no exception to the rule but fortunately the company itself had kept an extensive historic archive of thousands of drawings, documents and photographs that became available for the preparatory research. Around 2005, upon completion of the first phase of the redevelopment project, this Van Nelle Historic Archive had already been donated to the Rotterdam City Archive.

VAN NELLE REDEVELOPMENT ARCHIVE

Due to the appointment of a coordinating architect, the documentation of the redevelopment project was less dispersed than could have been expected. The architect's project archive was quite comprehensive but was not classified and access for further study could not be provided by the office. Moreover, it took up a lot of space while archival storage standards could not be met. The 25th Anniversary of the redevelopment proved to be the right momentum to also find a more suitable home for the archive. With the municipality of Rotterdam, as one of the site-holders of the WH site, a solution was found to reorganize and move the archive.

Before delving into the issues raised by the conceptual organisation of this archive, it was crucial to identify the specific objectives related to it. One of the main reasons for opening this archive was accessibility for researchers and architects, for example in the context of historic building surveys in the event of a possible future restoration or redevelopment. Moreover, it is in the interest of future maintenance because, besides the rationale for certain decisions, the documents also contain building specifications with details on materials and finishes, product codes and so on.

A second important objective was the documentation obligation that comes with UNESCO World Heritage status, which requires information about the site to be made available to researchers and the public at large. Emphasis

is not only placed on the history of the site, but also on the traceability of the strategies that informed the 1998-2018 restoration and redevelopment. In this case, this obligation lies with the two site-holders: the municipality and the new owner. This prompted the municipality to enter into a partnership with the architect to secure the archive.

THE CHOICE FOR AN ARCHIVE

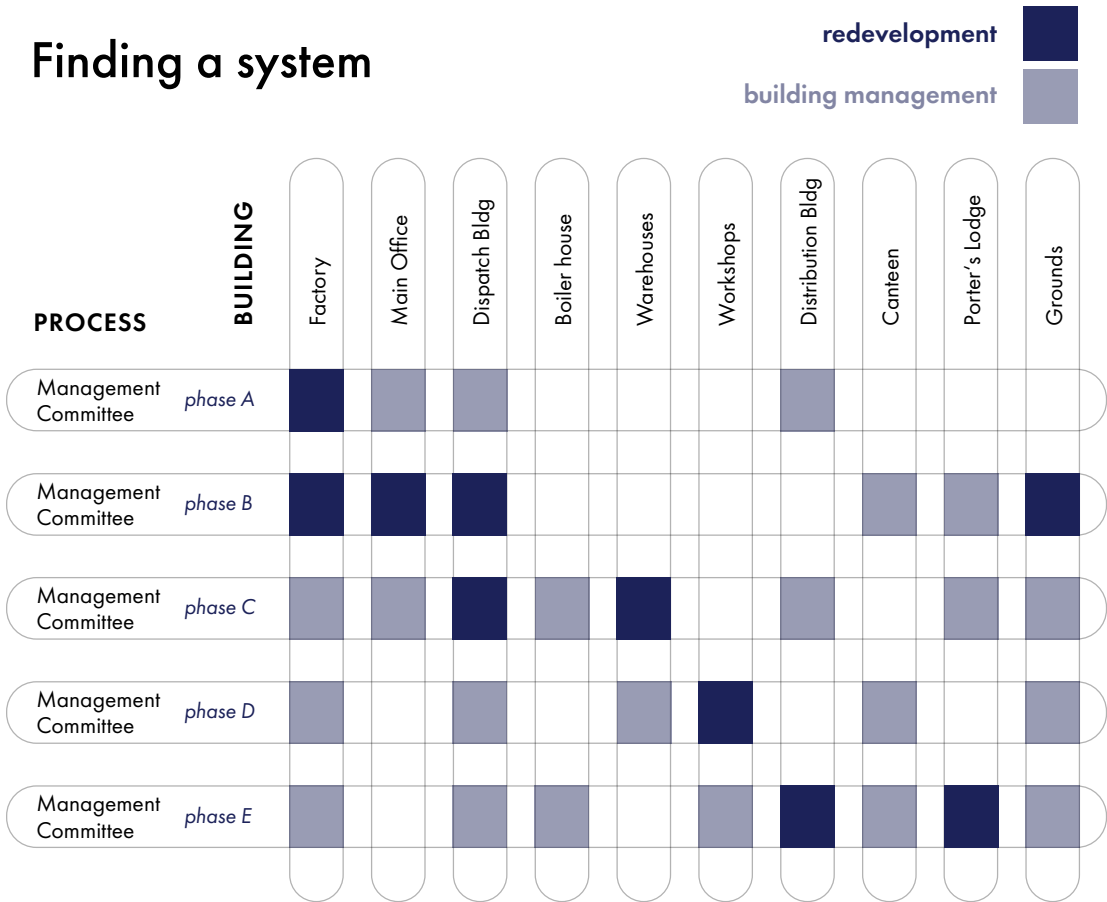
One of the first challenges is determining to which archive the material should ideally be transferred. In this case the choice was somewhat obvious, given the municipality's involvement and the fact that the Van Nelle Historic Archive was already kept in the City Archive. The imperative remains to consolidate the information. Still, this decision needs consideration as archival institutes have different interests and emphases. For instance, an architectural archive such as the one of the former Netherlands Architecture Institute⁴ focusses on intermediate products of the architect in the design process, such as drawings on transparent paper, sketches on tracing paper and so on, reflecting design ideas, even if they have not necessarily led to an outcome. The City Archive on the other hand attaches great importance to precisely those documents that have led to a decision or process, by them referred to as 'transaction documents'. This led to a decision to leave some of the early sketches outlining the redesign project in the architect's archives that are more design-focussed.

FINDING AN ARCHIVAL CONCEPT

Although architects have no legal obligation on how to structure their archives, it is obviously invaluable to contribute to the story and essential for them to recognize this significance, even if this is more of a moral obligation. However, architects are not used to process an archive to this end. Working with heritage buildings, they usually find themselves on the other side of the process where they have to dig into such archives themselves. One of the challenges that was met, was finding a way to make information traceable in files that were previously organized according to the different tasks assigned to the architect over time.

Some of the material was categorized according to the ten different buildings within the Van Nelle complex, while other documents related to procedures of the site's integrated building management. Documents that related to structures and others to processes—or both—caused overlap and dilemmas. For example, from an architect's perspective it seems logical to order the documents building by building, particularly in the first phase when the project primarily focussed on the main factory block. But as the supervision of the project continued for two decades, eventually most building-related documents became integrated as well with the Management Committee's reports, with essential information on several sub-projects in parallel [FIGURE 02].

Finding a system



02 Schematic overview of the overlap of building-related and process-related files, for which an archival system needed to be found.
© WDJArchitecten, 2024.



03 The archive involved various types of hard copies to be processed. © WDJArchitecten, 2023.



04 Discussion how to organize the diverse material, involving historic building surveyor Suzanne Fischer (right), Edward van Hevele (center) and Wessel de Jonge. © WDJArchitecten, 2023.

In an effort to downsize the archive, it was considered to identify duplicate documents, comparing process-related with building-related files, and perhaps discard the duplicates in the meeting reports. The archivists disagreed since splitting up these reports may have made the documents meaningless, whilst these meetings were crucial in the decision-making process with direct implications on the design choices and interventions. Upon consideration, it was decided to keep the reports in their entirety, as a 'customised' solution. An additional list indicating in which reports certain buildings are addressed allows searches by sub-project.

Other tools to regain an overview of the various processes and sub-projects include timelines of the subsequent assignments, and mind-maps of the various stakeholder networks. Just as well, this allows single documents to be understood within their context and added to the proper file.

DUPLICATES IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

Inevitably, the archive of the 1998-2018 redevelopment partly also overlapped with the Van Nelle Historic Archive that was donated to the City Archive before. The latter has been a primary source for series of historic surveys, and was 'quoted' extensively in the preparatory research reports for each of the buildings that were produced as part of the redevelopment process. Again, the question was raised whether such quotations should be respected and preserved, or rather discarded to reduce the volume of the archive. The architects involved were inclined to decide for the latter since the preservation of duplicates seemed hardly relevant to them. The archivists' advice to respect the integrity of the documents and accept possible duplicates elsewhere in the archive was again prompted by their focus on the decision-making process and eventually agreed to be followed.

The discussion about documents appearing as copies within multiple processes triggered a further debate on duplicates. While building processes since the early 20th century are often characterized by the increasing

replication of drawings into series of prints and textual documents into photocopies, there is still a tendency to keep 'the original'—even though their preservation may pose significantly greater challenges in conservation, when we just think of original sketches on tracing paper. More and more we find 'duplicates' that show essential additional information, for instance prints of drawings that have been used in discussions with the client, containing annotations by hand that were crucial to the implementation of the design. With that comes the difficulty of determining what is actually significant and what is negligible [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 04].

When digital resources are concerned this requires further discussion at another level. Again, in order to cut down the volume of the archive, the architect offered digitized versions of many documents. However, as an archival institute subject to national law, the City Archive had to observe digitalization standards that the architect's office could not meet. This made an amount of digitized information unacceptable, so no other option remained but to transfer these as physical documents as well.

In addition, the Van Nelle redevelopment archive included a huge amount of digitally-created material, such as CAD drawings, e-mails, digital reports and so on. This



05 Re-organized documentation before shipment to the archive. © WDJArchitecten, 2023.



06 Example of the photographic documentation in the archive, showing the 'automatic' self-closing mechanism of a fire door. © Fas Keuzenkamp, 2007, coll. WDJArchitecten.

resulted in a diversity of document types that have been transferred ranging from paper and blueprints to floppy disks and CD-Roms. Digital documents were transferred from the architect's digital archives to external hard-drives and handed over for further processing by the City Archive.⁵

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The involvement of the project's property developers and other contributors such as historic building surveyors and architects of sub-projects have been very rewarding. Not only did they possess complementary archival material, their insights were also helpful for its correct interpretation. This led some of them to add documents from their own archives. A special donation was the visual documentation of the redevelopment process by photographer Fas

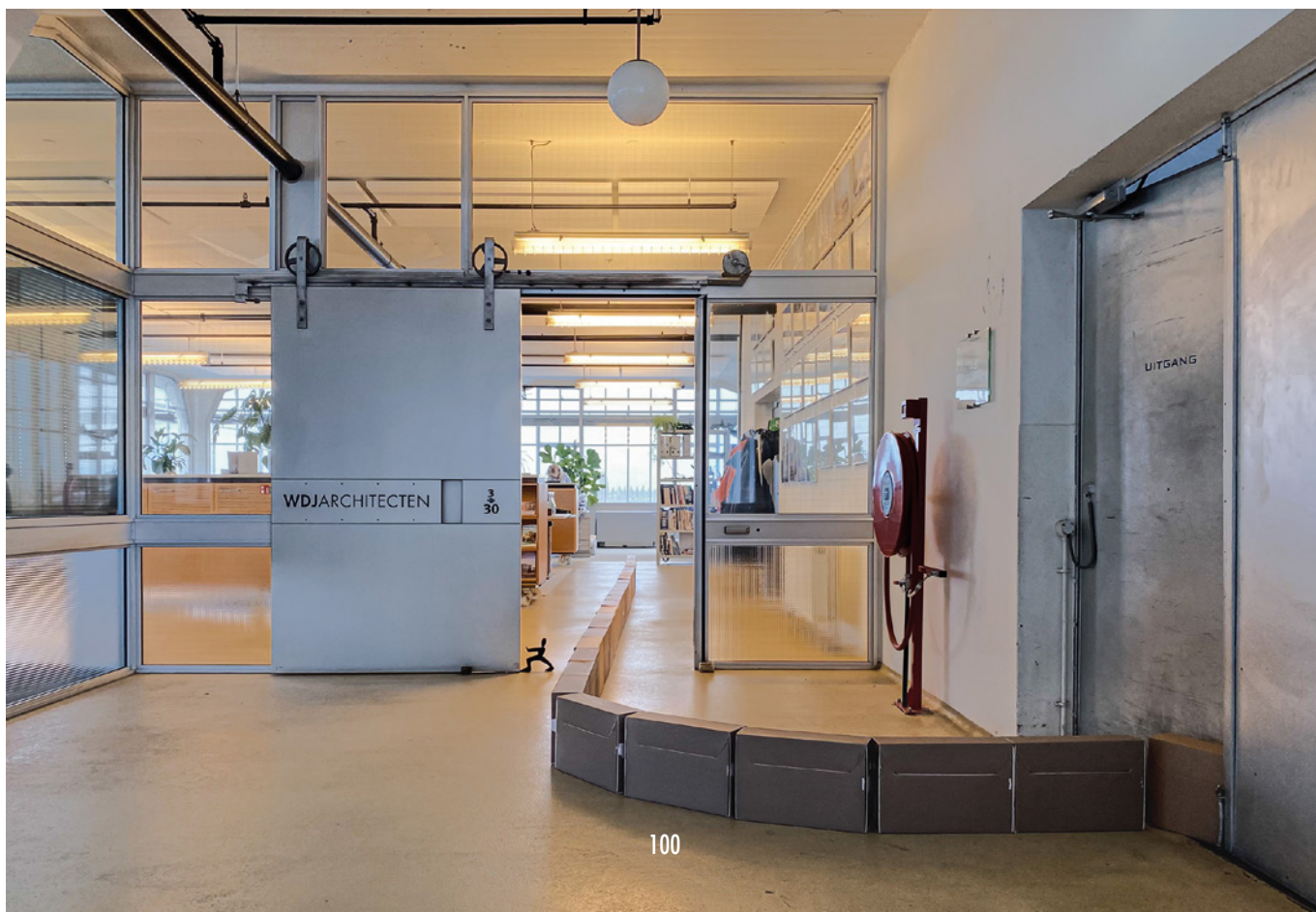
Keuzenkamp [FIGURE 06]. This came with an added complexity regarding the various copyrights and licences associated with transferring an archive of multiple authors. Following legal advice, the archives of some other contributors were officially incorporated as designated 'sub-archives' within the redevelopment archive. Separate licence agreements have been drawn up for the donated photographic documentation and the design documents transferred from CE-design, the architect of one of the sub-projects.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, we may conclude that processing and categorizing such archives to these ends is not self-evident for architects. Soon after starting the work, it became clear how important it is that the reorganization of documents is done in close coordination with the receiving archive. Although, in spite of this, rookie mistakes may still have slipped into the project, this sharing of knowledge has been crucial. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge one's own professional limitations and to understand what should be entrusted to the expertise of the archivist, who will be responsible for the final archiving. Moreover, it is important to reflect on the degree of distance one can take when assessing material one has created or brought about oneself. Allowing different perspectives is helpful when the architect may be so much involved in the project that it is difficult to look at it at a higher level of abstraction.

Finally, the time commitment of such an archival project

07 Symbolic departure of the files leaving the WDJArchitecten office in the Van Nelle Design Factory, on their way to the City Archive. © WDJArchitecten, 2023.



should not be underestimated. In this case, it took three months to process the archive and reduce it by approximately 30 percent. This implies that it is a costly endeavor that would not have been possible without the support of the municipality.

A question remains whether the preservation of such an archive should depend on the moral responsibility of those involved in the project. New construction projects in our country are subject to an archival retention obligation by law of only ten years. For restoration projects, the question is whether that is long enough, and whether documentation on research, conservation methods and interventions will not be lost as a result. For long-term adaptive reuse projects, this obligation is not sufficient either. As it becomes increasingly easy to store information digitally, it may be time for a long-term archival retention obligation for such projects.

After processing the files and documentation in the fall of 2023 [FIGURE 07], the redevelopment archive was officially handed over to the Rotterdam City Archive on January 15, 2024. On that occasion, the archive was registered as the Van Nelle Ontwerp Fabriek Archief, in memory of Eric Gude.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The original design and the redevelopment of the factory are extensively covered in 'Van Nelle. Monument in Progress', Rotterdam 2005.
- ² See W. de Jonge and H.J. Henket: 'Historic building survey on Modern Movement buildings', chapter 2.2 in 'Sanatorium Zonnestraat. The history and restoration of a modern monument', Rotterdam 2010.
- ³ In the Netherlands, building permit procedures were introduced with the 1901 Housing Act.
- ⁴ Today the New Institute or NI in Rotterdam.
- ⁵ More on the challenges of digital archiving from: <https://nieuwinstituut.nl/en/articles/digitalisering-architectuurpraktijk>

Edward van Hevele graduated in architecture from KU Leuven, Belgium, in 2022. He is currently completing his 'Master of Conservation of Monuments and Sites' at KUL. As part of his traineeship at WDJArchitecten in the fall of 2023, he has been in charge of processing the Van Nelle redevelopment archive for transfer to the Rotterdam City Archive.

Wessel de Jonge is a professor at TU Delft and an architect practicing in heritage preservation in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His office WDJArchitecten has been in charge of the conservation and the coordination of the adaptive reuse projects for the Van Nelle Design Factory from 1998-2018.

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