

*Reflections & Projections*

*A matter of fact & figure*

*Sem Verwey*  
*Interiors Buildings Cities*

## *Reflection*

### *Interiors Buildings Cities*

The IBC studio Palace offers a complex assignment for a public building: The Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi). The VAi is currently active in two separate establishments in Antwerp; their office and public program are located in culture campus deSingel, while their archive is located in a building on Parochiaanstraat 7.

In an attempt to bring their program together under one roof, a competition for a new building for the institute was held in 2021. The Sint-Hubertuskerk—a church in the district of Berchem—was designated to be repurposed for this project. The winning project had been selected, but was never realized due to rising costs of materials, an increase in the interest rate of a loan, and difficulties with the church as a protected heritage site and the particular criteria for the program. As of today, not much has changed for the VAi in terms of their wish for a new building. This studio aims to revive the project by proposing a new and alternative solution. Situating the project in an urban context, designing a building in terms of form and function, and creating atmospheric interiors ensure that its historical, social, political, aesthetical, constructive, climatological, organizational, expressive and impressive relations are all addressed and therefore truly becomes a public building.

### *Archiving Culture*

In order to formulate a problem, different methods have been used to understand the culture of archiving. These ranged from seminars and literature research, to research exercises in groups and individually.

#### Seminars

In a series of seminars the notion of the architecture archive has been investigated. Reading thematical articles and reflecting on these formed the basis for collective discussion about archiving culture during the weekly seminars.

Invited guests—people who work in architecture archives and/or institutes—have given lectures on their experiences and particular challenges they had to deal with.

Presentations about precedent projects have been prepared in groups, to further investigate and critique the archiving culture and identifying elements that could be of interest for individual projects.

#### Looking Carefully

In groups of 4, we have made a series of physical models representing 8 precedent projects. Working in scales, ranging from 1:10 to 1:20, an understanding of spatiality, content, light, shadow, and colour was gained. This understanding has been deepened further by redrawing and analysing drawings and images of the project. The aim was to recreate a photograph of the real space, which meant that a great emphasis on detail and cohesion was necessary in order to achieve desirable results.

#### Excursions

Several excursions have been organized. A three-day excursion to Antwerp introduced our studio group to the site, its people and the wider context of the project. We have done a tour through Antwerp along several buildings and had conversations with architects from different offices. We have visited the architecture archive and the cultural campus where the VAi resides and were allowed to see the inner processes of the institute. We have had a lecture from Sofie de Caigny, former director of the VAi, and were allowed access inside the architecture archive to get our hands on some of the material from its collection.

#### Research Book

A collective research book on precedent architecture archives contains written and drawn research on 8 precedent architecture archives. Having produced this in parallel to the physical

model resulted in in-depth conclusions and reflections on the references.

Among this, extensive collective research is compiled that gives an overview of the project site, its urban context and existing buildings on the site itself.

#### A place for displaying the archive

A physical model has been made (scale 1:12,5) of an interior space for archiving. Since there was no context provided to embed the space in, focus was mainly put on the interior spatiality and conditioning of a space for archiving artefacts. It allowed to experiment with certain preliminary ideas concerning the graduation project.

#### *Questions and problems*

*How does the acquisition of archival material into the VAI work? Which changes to this process could eventually result in a more carefully curated architectural canon?*

While the archive of the Flemish Architecture Institute (VAI) has the power to retain certain memories, to preserve certain knowledge, it does not have the capacity to retain all memory and preserve all objective knowledge. The design of an archive – its architecture, its collection, its processes – presupposes certain goals, intentions, motifs, norms and values. When individuals are unaware of these presuppositions they may be unaware of what memory an archive is actually preserving.

*How could the VAI sensitize its knowledge to the public?*

The way artefacts are organized within an archive influences the way in which the knowledge in them becomes accessible for individuals. Objects relate to other objects, and their compositionality makes it possible for individuals to interpret knowledge. One can think of many organizations of artefacts: based on materiality, authorship, thematics, chronology, and so on.

Which objects are brought together—how, by who, for who—becomes an important part of archiving.

*How should different materials be conserved and preserved?*

On the downside of accessibility of artefacts is the inaccessibility of them. In order to conserve and preserve artefacts, stable and optimal environments are necessary. Whether a space is fit to preserve an artefact depends on the material properties and conditions of the artefact. The great variety of different artefacts makes it challenging to offer adequate spatial conditions for all different kinds of artefacts.

*How could the VAI balance the need to make artefacts both accessible and inaccessible?*

As an architecture institute, the VAI's mission is to both make architectural knowledge accessible to the public and to make it inaccessible by preserving and conserving it. There are several ways in which this opposition could be overthrown or reinforced, all with their specific advantages and disadvantages.

*How could commoning practices be introduced and be of value for a project for the VAI?*

The VAI is a clear authority in terms of shaping architectural knowledge. It decides which artefacts are incorporated into the archive and how they add to the public discourse. Finding ways to 'democratize' the VAI's archiving culture could lead to a more representative body of architectural

knowledge. Democratization could take place in the acquisition of artefacts, the organization of the archive and the productive program of the institute.

### *Aim*

The design proposal aims to accommodate a new place for the VAI that attempts to address the acquisition of 'important' architectural heritage, the conservation of this heritage, and the sensitization of this heritage in order to provoke a careful and common production of new knowledge.

### *Proposal*

A matter of fact & figure. Compositions of knowledge is a proposal for a new building for the VAI. As a site, an empty industrial hall on the edge of the centre of Antwerp will be repurposed into a new architecture institute. As a typology, the industrial hall functions well for programs that revolve around storage and production—these are the things that the VAI essentially does.

Three depots oversee the storage of artefacts: an acquisition depot which provides plenty of space and which is open to the public allows for the process of acquiring artefacts to become part of the architectural discourse and asks "What belongs in the archive?"; an open archive holds a variety of artefacts within a variety of cabinets. Allowing individuals who use these artefacts to make their own compositions which can be stored in cabinets ensures a spontaneous way of organizing archival material; a closed archive holds the more vulnerable artefacts in four compartments with varying climates. Each of these compartments function as long-term storage spaces and as buffer zones in which artefacts from the coldest and driest compartment can gradually adjust to warmer and humid conditions outside when they need to be transported elsewhere.

A large hall, adjacent to the three depots, is programmed with an entrance, a multifunctional space, and offices. The multifunctional space can be used for both the reflection on historical knowledge and the projection of knowledge into the future: with exhibitions and lectures, archival material is used to reflect; with discussions, workshops and residencies new knowledge is produced.

The project proposes to intensify the use of the public space around its premises by linking fragmented public space with green routes for slow transportation, which connect to neighbouring public areas.

### *Reflection*

My graduation project attempts to investigate the archiving culture of the VAI. More specifically it attempts to problematize its public function and questions if it, through architectural means, could become a public institute that provokes knowledge-production for a wide public.

As such, this project tries to relate with the theme of the Interiors Buildings Cities studio, which is Palace. A palace, today, is a building that has a representative quality and has a great value for both its direct and indirect context. In short, a palace is a building that has meaning for a large group of people. My graduation project specifically tries to address this.

Architectural means have been used to answer architectural question. Furthermore, academic research on broader architectural topics is conducted. Findings about architectural history, climate and sustainability, and public architecture and politics assure that a strong connection with the master programme of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences and the broader academic field is maintained.

It has been valuable to undertake this research with different means. I am fairly comfortable with reading and writing, which allowed me to develop a structured understanding of more abstract and conceptual notions. At the same time this studio focused a lot on producing two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations, such as drawings and models. This, then, helped me to put my understanding into practice and come to concrete conclusions.

The output at the end of this year are several products in different media, which all relate to each other and allow for others to interpret the work. Having had the opportunity to be around people that were important for the project—directors and employees from architecture institutes, building owners, residents from around the site—and being able to show them my work opened up space for discussion and, perhaps, ensures that the influence of the project extends beyond the walls of the university.

The research that has been conducted in the seminars, excursions, individual assignments and group assignments have made it possible to gain an understanding of how archiving has been done in several particular ways. It was from this basis that I could position myself and ask "How could—or how should—it be done otherwise?".

What has been the most insightful from researching archiving culture are the acknowledgements that knowledge can be expressed through compositions of artefacts and that institutions have a lot of authority in shaping architectural knowledge, being the main composers of artefacts. In my design I have attempted to democratize this agency by characterizing certain spaces and processes by 'collectivity'. The composition of the archival collection as a whole and the composition of

smaller parts of the collection are spontaneous and determined by a collective effort of the VAI and the public.

In contemporary society, major factors cause for great socio-economic inequalities for specific groups of people. Investigating whether collective practices could be integrated within this project, ties in with social, professional and scientific problematics. Besides this, questions of space and reuse is addressed in this project. These are topics that become increasingly significant within the professional field of architecture, since space is becoming ever more scarce and reuse is becoming more and more a necessity/norm.

Alongside the work which has been done for this project, there is also work which has not been done. The project is situated in a neighbourhood and addresses collective practices. In order to get an idea of the individuals to which this project could pertain to, I mainly used sources which were available in archives and the internet. In this light, it could have been valuable to get in touch with residents in the area to gather information first handedly.

With regard to the design, I can imagine that it would have been valuable to start producing earlier and faster, allowing me to make more iterations of the project. In the earlier stages I did not feel knowledgeable enough to do so, which is why I spent much time in gathering information and conceptualizing. Much of this, however, can be done while working on more concrete product for the design.

Since I am repurposing a vacant building, a question about sustainability becomes obvious. In this regard, I would have liked to spend more time on testing several ways to make the building a sustainable project. The re-use of materials and passive climate control are two things which I think could be valuable additions to the project.

### *Projection*

To end with some thoughts regarding the future, I would like to state some interests which I would like to delve into in the future. From the beginning of the year it was clear that designing an archive was part of the assignment, which is why I enrolled for this studio. I knew intuitively that many interesting things could be discovered within the themes of archiving, memory and knowledge. Having had the opportunity to create an understanding of how knowledge can be materialized and composed into collections of artefacts has been truly meaningful. What we leave behind matters a lot. How we leave things behind matters even more.