



Call for Presentations

# **Hors Catégorie Defining and Defying Archival Categories**

Research Day Flanders Architecture Institute on 20 November 2025 in De Singel in Antwerp

All archives structure their collections and acquisitions through classification and categorisation, and institutions which collect cultural and design heritage are no exception. They distinguish between different disciplines of design — industrial, graphic, interior, architectural, urban, and landscape — to demarcate the boundaries of their collections. Each discipline is in a sense defined by the familiar forms of their projects: a book, a chair, an exhibition design, a building, a neighbourhood, a landscape. Institutions collect the material traces which capture the processes of these projects, such as letters, drawings and models, and attribute them to one or (sometimes) multiple authors.

Categories of disciplinarity, form and authorship not only determine the way collections are ordered but also structure the dynamic interrelation between audiences, policies, and research. Archival institutions acquire specific design categories based on the interest shown by their users, while researchers tend to focus on types of design for which archival material is readily accessible. Critics and curators generate more attention for collections through publications and exhibitions, which in turn valorises existing acquisition policies of archives and the research interests of academics.

While categorisation and classification are undeniably helpful for structuring information, guiding research, and maintaining consistency in acquisitions, they are also, by definition, limiting and exclusionary. By delineating the categories (whether they be actors, objects or disciplinary fields) which are deemed important and significant, institutions and researchers risk remaining blind to phenomena that do not fit neatly in their confines. How to account for that which eludes, transcends, or contests conventional institutional and historical classification? What to do with practices *hors catégorie*?

Accounting for the blind spots of traditional categories raises archival and historiographical issues. For example, what kind of 'authorship' can we attribute to citizen action groups who thwarted infrastructure projects or real estate developments? What is the agency of those who worked on a building's CAD drawings or, indeed, the agency of the software with which they were created? How do you capture an important conversation, a landmark meeting, or the dynamics of a collaborative design process? Are there material traces of such phenomena worth collecting and preserving? And if so, what kind of new structures — in terms of narrative, (meta)data, classification or policy — are required to disclose them to researchers, designers, and the wider public?

The 2025 edition of the Flanders Architecture Institute's annual research day aims to address these issues by investigating the role of classification in design research and collections. We invite researchers, designers, archivists, collection professionals, and heritage specialists to present experiences and case studies dealing with the way we define and defy archival categories. To ensure a cohesive programme, presentations should be related to one of the three thematic threads outlined below.

## **1. From Object to Process**

Historical narratives of designers are often structured as a series of discrete projects, which together constitute an oeuvre — a logic which provides the basis for the ubiquity of monograph as a publication format, as well as the general structure of most archival collections. But what about design projects that are first and foremost characterised by an emphasis on process rather than object? How to account for the processes that led up to a design project or the ones that followed its completion? And how do we capture spatial or discursive practices such as manifestations, working groups, and protests? Processes and events certainly pose their own unique challenges in terms of research and collection. They tend to span different timescales which might constitute but a fraction of the durations we associate with a typical

design project, or, conversely, vastly exceed them. Some are fleeting moments of sudden collective action which last only a couple of hours, while others might be lifelong projects of education, lobbying or collaboration. The traces of such practices are not as clearly reflected in the typical media (such as drawings and models) which design archives tend to primarily collect. The recognition of processes necessitates a new archival and academic appreciation of different types of archival material like pamphlets, diaries, and photographs of professional and social gatherings. But it also requires a more active approach in collecting and disclosing relevant information, for example through oral histories. What are the implications of these shifts for design historiography? And what role can institutions play in facilitating and enabling new methodological frameworks?

## **2. From Authorship to Roles**

Archival holdings of design projects are predominantly built on author-based subdivisions, which are usually attributed to a single actor. Within design heritage and research communities, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of looking beyond these individual authorship structures. A growing recognition is emerging for the contributions of assistants, contractors, craftspeople, partners, and other less visible positions within design processes. This is particularly important to uncover the agency of marginalised groups and occupations and to challenge biased authorship narratives. But we could also challenge the very notion of authorship itself. What if we approached design agency not in terms of authorship but as a matter of role playing? Which roles are assumed in the processes of conceiving, creating, and managing a design? In addition to the archetypical role of 'designer' or 'client', roles such as mentor, assistant, manager, or activist should also be considered. These roles are played by a variety of 'non-designer' actors, including teachers, politicians, academics, critics, real estate developers, contractors, and residents. This can reveal the significance of agents which remain poorly represented in design histories. Moreover, thinking in terms of roles allows for understanding critical intersections: a single person could assume different roles on different occasions and play multiple ones simultaneously. Beyond the intersection of design-related roles, there is always the presence of other types of roles, including gender roles, family roles, and social roles. How can we grasp the significance of these dynamic intersections in archival and research practices?

## **3. From Archive to Network**

Increasingly, archival institutions develop digital platforms to make their collections more easily accessible. Whether it is merely the online publication of indexes or the actual digitisation of documents, these digital platforms usually mirror the

compartmentalised structure (and traditional categories) of their physical counterparts. But digitisation also affords possibilities to go beyond these categories. It allows for new research practices in which larger (meta)data sets can be analysed, cross-referenced or compared, which can reveal unexpected interconnections between agents, projects, and disciplines. At the same time, there is a growing number of community-based digital archives and repositories which deviate from the conventional categorisation of existing institutional collections. These communities play an important part in revealing the blind spots of existing collection and research practices. Finally, universities and funding agencies are more frequently mandating the open-access digital dissemination of archival material that was collected for research projects. How can we connect these different types of digital archives to create more inclusive knowledge networks? In what way can archival institutions, researchers, and communities collaborate on sharing their specific knowledge? The rise of AI applications also poses ethical questions for digitisation efforts: what kind of categories are fed into algorithms, and to what extent do they perpetuate – or reveal – the biases and gaps of physical collections?

Proposals for presentations can be sent to [janno.martens@vai.be](mailto:janno.martens@vai.be) before 24 May 2025. Submissions should contain a short biography and an abstract of about 300 words. Proposals may be submitted in either English or Dutch. Notification of selection will be communicated by 20 June. Please note that presenters are expected to cover their own travel and lodging costs.