Performing the Archive

How to Archive the Space & Design Strategies Department

Master Thesis

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ABSTRACT

I began work, on the thesis because I was confused. When I entered the Space & Design Strategies program I did not understand what work had been done before the thesis. I also did not understand how the department had changed over time. I tried to look at theses. Projects to find my way. I found an archive that was hard to read: files, without context missing information and materials spread in places.

This situation made me wonder about the role of the archive, in the department. The problem was not the amount of work that existed.
The way the work was organized and accessed. The archive did not help me understand the program. The archive pushed me to ask students for guidance.

This thesis does not try to give a definition of an archive. Instead the thesis looks at how a student experiences an archive when the student has to work with the archive. I work with the SDS archive read theory texts and look at case studies. I examine how archiving can go beyond just storing things and become part of practice.

The outcome of this work is not a finished solution but a proposal that grows from specific encounters, frustrations, and decisions. It suggests an approach towards archiving, allowing academic work to continue being accessible and usable without fixing it in a closed system.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Space & Design Strategies archive has existed since 2009 and includes both Bachelor and Master theses. At present, the physical archive is stored in the printer room of the department.
Until last year, the archive was quite messy. The theses were there, but they were not arranged in any clear way, which made it difficult to get an overview. More recently, Elisa went through the material and organized it according to the year in which each thesis was written and presented, which made it much easier to navigate.

I started the Space & Design Strategies (SDS) program about three years ago. I did not know what to expect. I did not understand how the people who worked in the Space & Design Strategies program before me worked what the projects, in this program were or how the research was done in the department.

At some point I tried to look at the theses and projects. I thought the previous theses and projects would be a way to understand SDS. I opened the folders that had no dates. Some files had no explanation. The other files seemed important. I could not tell why. I did not know if I was looking at the projects or something unfinished. I felt lost.
After some time I stopped using the archive. When I needed to find my way I asked the students for help. The archive did not help me understand the department or the history.
This was not something I noticed away. Later I realized my confusion was linked to the archive. The archive had work. I could not see connections, development, or continuity within the material in the archive.

The thesis Performing the Archive[1] begins there and it does not start with a plan or does not have a concept. The thesis starts with a lack of understanding. At first I did not want to write about archives. I wanted to understand where I was and what had been done before me.

This issue is also connected to my country, Iran. The lack of a proper archive has meant that many realities, experiences, and achievements remain hidden or unclear to society and to future generations. In many cases, works and documents have been removed or destroyed, and historical narratives have been rewritten or altered in ways that serve those in power.

From that point on my attention began to shift. I began to watch how the material is stored, described and accessed. I watched what happens when the material does not work. The next chapters stay close, to that experience. Theory and case studies appear when theory and case studies help me think about the experience I encountered.

I do not see this thesis as a solution but as an attempt to work through a situation that I was already a part of and to respond to it as carefully as I can.

[1]Sylvia Osthoff, Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium, Atropos Press, 2009. * I chose my thesis's title from Sylvia's book.

2. PERSONAL POSITION & MOTIVATION

I did not start the research with a set theory or an archive model. The research grew out of my experience as a student.

Coming from Iran where study of the programs is rare I had no reference points. I could not find any record of theses, projects or processes that would show what the department really is. I asked myself the following questions: What work has been done in the department before? How did former students handle their projects? What methods have the department built over time?

This absence showed how intensely academic memory relies on sight and accessibility.

As Berit once told me:
Archive stays longer than you!



Pre presentation of the SDS Archive website.
April 2025 Linz, Austria



Personal workspace during the early phase of the research.
April 2025 Linz, Austria

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the beginning I did not plan to work with theory. My questions came from situations and, from trying to understand the SDS archive. After I spent time with the material I began to look for concepts that could help.

While I was working with the archive I saw that the archive is never neutral. The archive shows things in a way because a person decided to store them that way describe them that way or leave them undescribed. Some projects, in the archive were easy to find. Other projects, in the archive were almost invisible. I realized that the archive is not a place where things are kept. The archive also shapes how work can be seen and understood.

The theories introduced in this chapter entered my process slowly. I did not use the theories to define the archive, in general. I used the theories to think through problems I met. The theories helped me name issues that I had already felt such, as visibility, access, responsibility and authorship.

For this reason, this framework is selective and incomplete. It does not aim to cover archival theory as a field. Instead, it reflects the theories that became relevant to me while working with the SDS archive and trying to respond to its conditions.

3.1 Sylvia Osthoff — The Archive as Performance

When I first worked with the SDS archive, I mainly accessed the shared department folders and the physical archive stored in the printer room. The more recent theses were organized by year, which gave at least a basic structure. However, many older projects were stored under individual names or in folders without clear dates or descriptions. In some cases, I did not know whether I was looking at a final thesis, a draft, or course material. This lack of clarity shaped how I encountered the archive from the beginning.
The idea of the archive-, as-performance by Sylvia Osthoff made me think about the situation. In the article Performing the Archive (2009) Sylvia Osthoff defines the archive as something that's active, through acts of arrangement, presentation and interpretation. She says that through those acts memory does not stand apart. In my view the relevant thing, for this thesis is not the definition. The relevant thing is how the theoretical definition helps explain the SDS archive. The order of the folders the visibility of the projects the lack of information all shape what can be seen and understood. The decisions make the project part of a shared memory. Let the project stay isolated. I see this perspective, as what let me treat archiving as a design practice of a task. The perspective shifts the question from what's stored to how the archiving looks. The perspective also shifts the question, to how the archiving can be found.

3.2 Rebecca Schneider — Embodiment, Presence, and Remains

I worked with the archive. I saw what was missing. Many projects existed as final documents and the final documents had no trace of how the projects were built. The conversations, the experiments the intermediate stages were rarely visible. The conversations, the experiments the intermediate stages had played a role, in the learning process. Rebecca Schneider’s writing points, to the gap. In Performing Remains (2011) Rebecca Schneider argues that memory lives not in documents but in body actions, in repeating and in experiences. I think the things that stay after the event are not traces. The idea became important for my work because the idea shows how knowledge is made in the SDS department. A lot of the learning, in the SDS department happens through steps that're hard to write down in a way. If the archive looks at results the archive will miss those steps. Schneider's work supports the question of how an archive might acknowledge processes and experiences beyond a notion of full capture or storage.

3.3 Hal Foster — The Politics of Archiving

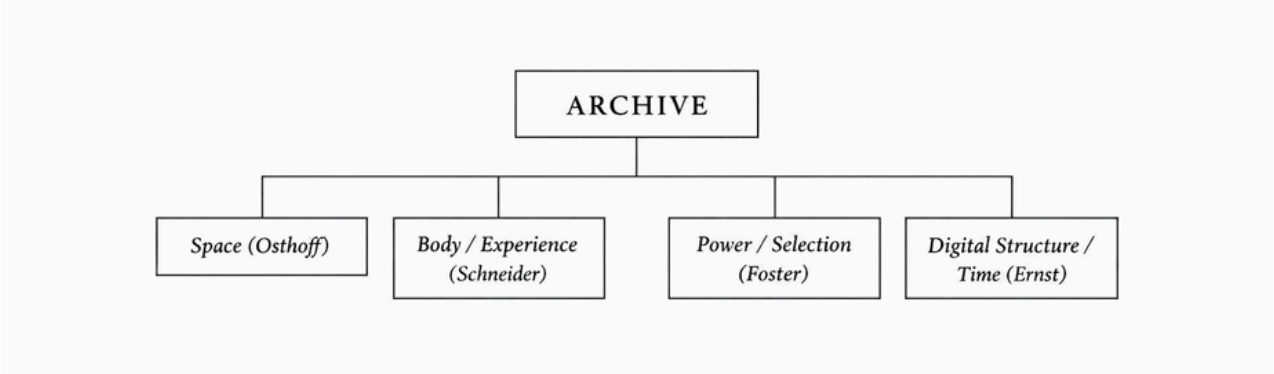
I saw that the SDS archive did not just lack material or have broken pieces. The SDS archive offered work that was simple to locate and work that was difficult to locate. Hal Fosters writing helped me think about this question in a context. In his book The Archive, without Museums (1996) he says that the way institutions are built and the power of those institutions set the archive. Decisions shape the archive by choosing what the archive should keep how the archive should be sorted and what the archive should leave out. Those decisions are never neutral. The approach became important, to me in the work because the approach changed my perspective on the SDS archive. I notice gaps and inconsistencies in the SDS archive. The gaps and inconsistencies are not issues. The gaps and inconsistencies also show the practices and the priorities. The approach, by Foster says that there is always selection in the archiving. The selection can be intentional or not. For the thesis this means that the visibility of archival decisions is important. The visibility of archival decisions should not be hidden. Of keeping the selection process hidden the selection process should be open. The archive must treat the selection process as part of the work of the archive. The work of the archive includes the selection process.

3.4 Wolfgang Ernst — Digital Archives and Temporal Structures

Another problem I faced when I worked with the SDS archive was the organization of the archive. The digital organization of the archive arranged the content, with logics. The content followed logics. I felt stuck. Sometimes I did not know where to begin. Sometimes I did not know how to transition from one project to another. I think the work of Wolfgang Ernst gave a framework for looking at this situation. In his book Digital Memory and the Archive (2013) Wolfgang Ernst writes about the archives. The digital archives are systems that organize access, to the past. The digital archives use the tools such, as databases, metadata and interfaces. I found that the thing that mattered for my thesis was not the theory itself. I realized that the idea that digital organization changes experience mattered more. In the SDS archive the lack of metadata and the problems, in structure made tracking changes over time hard. The archive did not help with orientation. Instead caused splitting. This approach emphasizes that digital archiving is not only a matter of storage, but also a matter of designing access. The structuring of the material determines the possibilities of understanding and reusing it.

3.5 Positioning the Framework

Theoretical positions mentioned in the chapter did not appear in my work at once. Theoretical positions showed up at stages as I tried to understand the SDS archive. Theoretical positions helped me shape an issue that I was already dealing with in my research. I think about the role of archives, in memory, after talking with Osthoff. Schneider showed me the gaps that happen when processes and experiences are not validated. Foster made me see the issues of selection and power. Ernst brought the role of structures into focus. Collectively, these approaches allow me to move away from the definition of what an archive is in general. Rather, they enable me to investigate archiving as it is done in a particular academic setting and how it might be done differently in the Space & Design Strategies department.



Conceptual framework outlining the theoretical perspectives informing the understanding of the archive in this thesis.
Diagram created by the author. Image generated by GPT_4

4. CASE STUDIES AS TOOLS FOR ARCHIVING

I did not choose the case studies, in this chapter to show perfect archival models. I started looking at archives only after I spent time with the SDS archive and saw that I needed points of reference. At that moment I was not interested in practices. I wanted ways of thinking about access, about structure and, about continuity. I approach each case study. I focus on one aspect that matches my questions, about archiving work. My intention is not to analyse the archives in depth. I use the archives as tools, for reflection. The archives helped me think through problems that I met while working with the SDS archive. The problems include orientation, visibility and the role of processes.

The two selected examples differ a lot. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive lives in a space follows rules and stays tied to a place. The Cyberfeminist Index lives online invites participation and changes all the time. I was not looking for similarity, between the Kunsthalle Bern Archive and the Cyberfeminist Index. I was looking at the tension, between the Kunsthalle Bern Archive and the Cyberfeminist Index. The tension makes me think about ways an archive can work.

By placing these case studies next to each other, this chapter does not aim to define a model to be copied. Instead, it uses their differences to position the SDS archive and to clarify which aspects might be relevant for its specific academic context.

4.1 Kunsthalle Bern Archive — Spatial Organization of Memory

I I started looking at the Kunsthalle Bern Archive. I searched for examples of how institutions keep long-term documentation. Then I was not looking for inspiration. I was looking for direction. I wanted to understand how the Kunsthalle Bern Archive can make past work readable, over time.This place lives in a space. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive follows a structure. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive sorts material, by date and by institution. It lets me follow changes, over time. The sense of continuity catches my eye. Draws my attention. Without any knowledge I can see when an event happened and how that event fits with events. The sense of continuity helps me follow the story. It does not explain everything. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive provides a framework that gives me orientation. I found that the structure of the Kunsthalle Bern Archive helped my work. The structure showed me how the structure can support understanding. In the SDS archive the material often looked broken. Not linked. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive showed development. It ordered the material. The ordering made development visible. I do not see this archive as a model that can be transferred directly to an academic context. However, it helped me realize how important basic information, consistency, and long-term thinking are for making work accessible beyond its immediate moment.

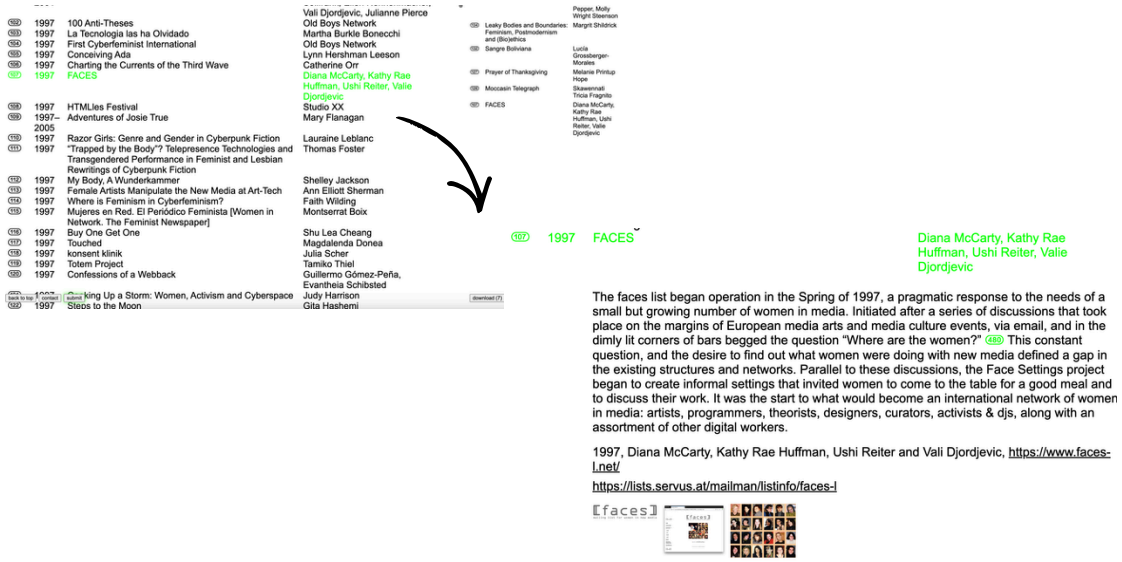


Dürrwang, A. (2019). Archivgeschichten — Mehr als hundert Jahre Kunsthalle Bern. Kunstbulletin. Retrieved November 28, 2025, from https://kunstbulletin.ch/de/magazin/kunstbulletin-52019/archivgeschichten-mehr-als-hundert-jahre-kunsthalle-bern

Interior view of the Kunsthalle Bern Archive

4.2 Cyberfeminist Index — Participation and Digital Structure

I found the Cyberfeminist Index when I was looking for archives that work in a way, from the official models. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive is. Stable. I saw the Kunsthalle Bern Archive. I wondered what happens when the archive is not fixed but open and always changing. I felt curious. The Cyberfeminist Index is an archive that gathers texts, names, concepts and references, about cyberfeminism. The Cyberfeminist Index does not arrange the material in a time order. Rather the Cyberfeminist Index grows as people add items and link them together. The Cyberfeminist Index lets people move around the entries as they like. I can open the Cyberfeminist Index. Click from one entry, to another without any set path. I saw that the archive does not try to be complete or official. The archive accepts pieces and missing parts as part of its shape. The archive lets entries exist without a hierarchy. The archive stays open to change. I felt this approach was different, from the archive I looked at before. I noticed that the Kunsthalle Bern Archive creates orientation with stability and order. I noticed that the Cyberfeminist Index creates engagement, with openness and participation. The Cyberfeminist Index does not explain everything. The Cyberfeminist Index invites users to explore and contribute. For my work, this case study made visible that accessibility does not only come from clear structure, but also from allowing different ways of entering and using an archive. It helped me think about how an academic archive could remain active without needing to be fully closed or finalized.



Cyberfeminist Index. (n.d.). Cyberfeminist Index. Retrieved November 28, 2025, from https://cyberfeminismindex.com

Screenshot of the Cyberfeminist Index

4.3 Working Differences Between the Two Case Studies

I do not compare the two case studies, for quality or success. I use the two case studies as points of orientation. The first archive shows a way of working with material, access and participation. The second archive shows a way of working with material, access and participation. When I look at the Kunsthalle Bern Archive I see an archive that is arranged in space and kept by the institution. The Kunsthalle Bern Archive brings clarity by using structure and control. When I explore the Cyberfeminist Index I see an index that works through openness, interaction and constant change. The Cyberfeminist Index welcomes pieces. Does not aim for a closed system. Putting the two models side, by side let me see where the Space & Design Strategies archive is now. The SDS archive does not fit completely into either model, it sits in the middle and connects to an institution and the SDS archive is mostly digital. The SDS archive holds work it can allow participation. I think that of copying a model the case studies work as thinking tools. The case studies help shape a record keeping plan that fits the conditions of the SDS department. The case studies also support accessibility and ongoing use.
To make these differences more tangible, I summarized the two case studies in the following overview.

Kunsthalle Bern Archive	**Cyberfeminist Index**
Physical, spatial archive	Digital, interface-based archive
Institutional structure	Participatory structure
Controlled access	Free access
Activation through space	Activation through interaction

5. THE SDS ARCHIVE's CURRENT SITUATION

In this chapter, I describe how the SDS archive looked during my time as a student. I am not judging it. I only explain how it was organized and how it worked in practice.
I told before:
There were many projects in the archive. Bachelor and Master theses existed from different years. They were stored physically in the department, and and also saved digitally on phaidra website of the university. The material was there, but it was not always easy to understand as a whole.



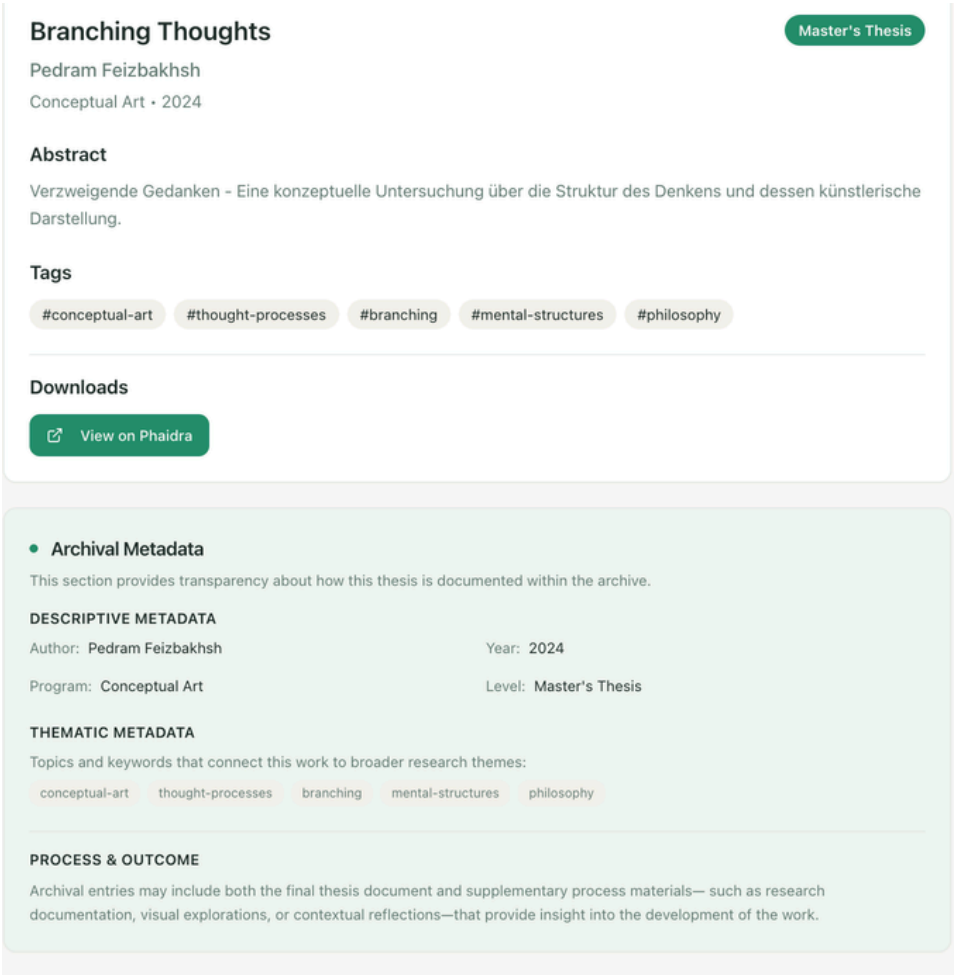
Current archival condition: accumulation without visible structure
June 2025 University of art and design Linz, Austria

6. HOW TO ARCHIVE THE SPACE & DESIGN STRATEGIES DEPARTMENT

This chapter is on my experience with the existing SDS archive and responds directly to the difficulties described in the previous chapter. Instead of presenting a general model of archiving, I focus on what would make sense for our department and its way of working.
My goal is not to create a fixed system or a complete archive. I am interested in developing an approach that makes existing work readable and usable for students. I guess the form of a digital interface, a website that helps structure access to past projects without claiming to be final or exhaustive.

6.1 What Should Be Archived

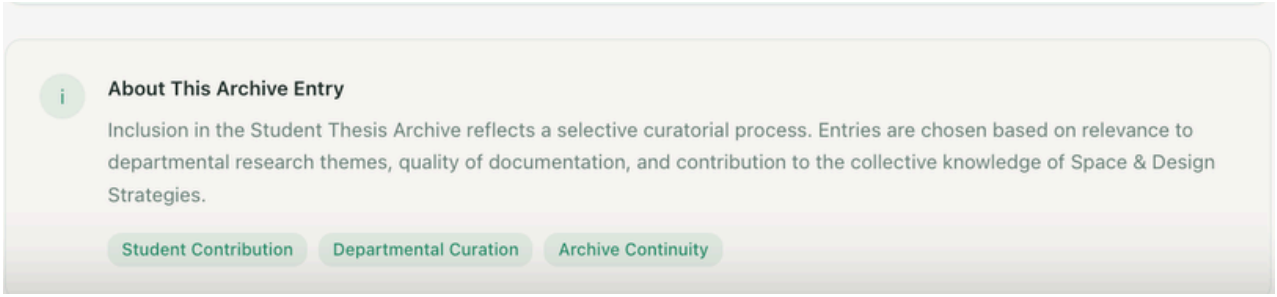
When I looked at older projects, I often felt that something important was missing. I could see what students had produced in the end, but I could not understand how they got there. The work felt finished and closed.
As a student, I like to see small steps of the process. Not everything, but a few moments that show how a project started, where it has problems, or how it changed direction. Even a short text or a few images could already make a project easier to read.
For me, this means that archiving should not focus only on final results. What matters is whether someone else can follow the thinking behind a project. Too much material would not help, but a few useful elements could make past work better.



Thesis detail page illustrating the types of material considered relevant for archiving, including final output and contextual metadata.

6.2 What Should Not Be Archived

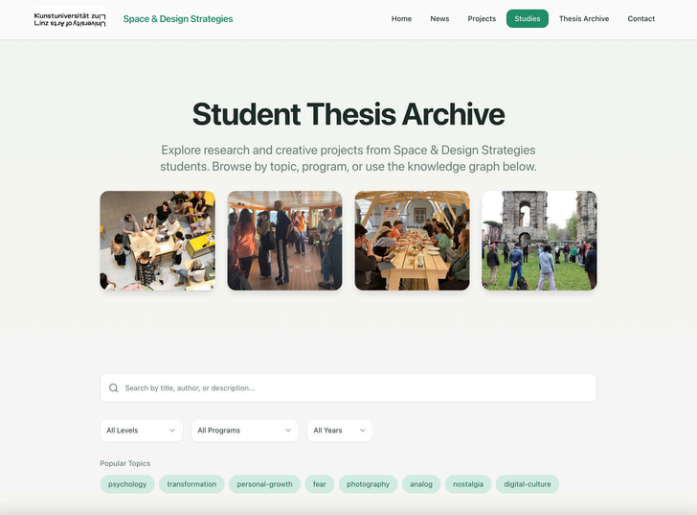
While thinking about what could be part of the archive, I also think of that not everything needs to stay. When too much material is collected without explanation, it quickly becomes difficult to navigate.(It's my opinion and it could be wrong.)
Some notes, drafts, or files only make sense to the person who created them. Without context, they do not help others understand the project and can even make confusion.
For me, this means that archiving is also about letting go. Choosing what not to include is part of keeping the archive usable. A smaller and clearer archive can be more helpful than one that tries to keep everything.



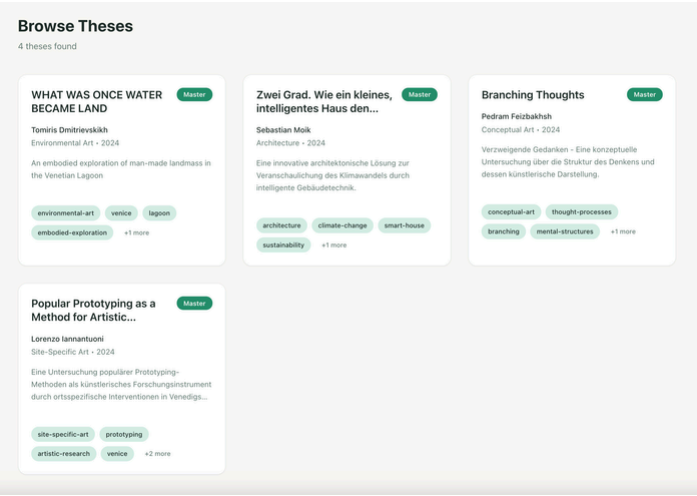
Archival entry emphasizing selective inclusion rather than total documentation

6.3 From Material to Website

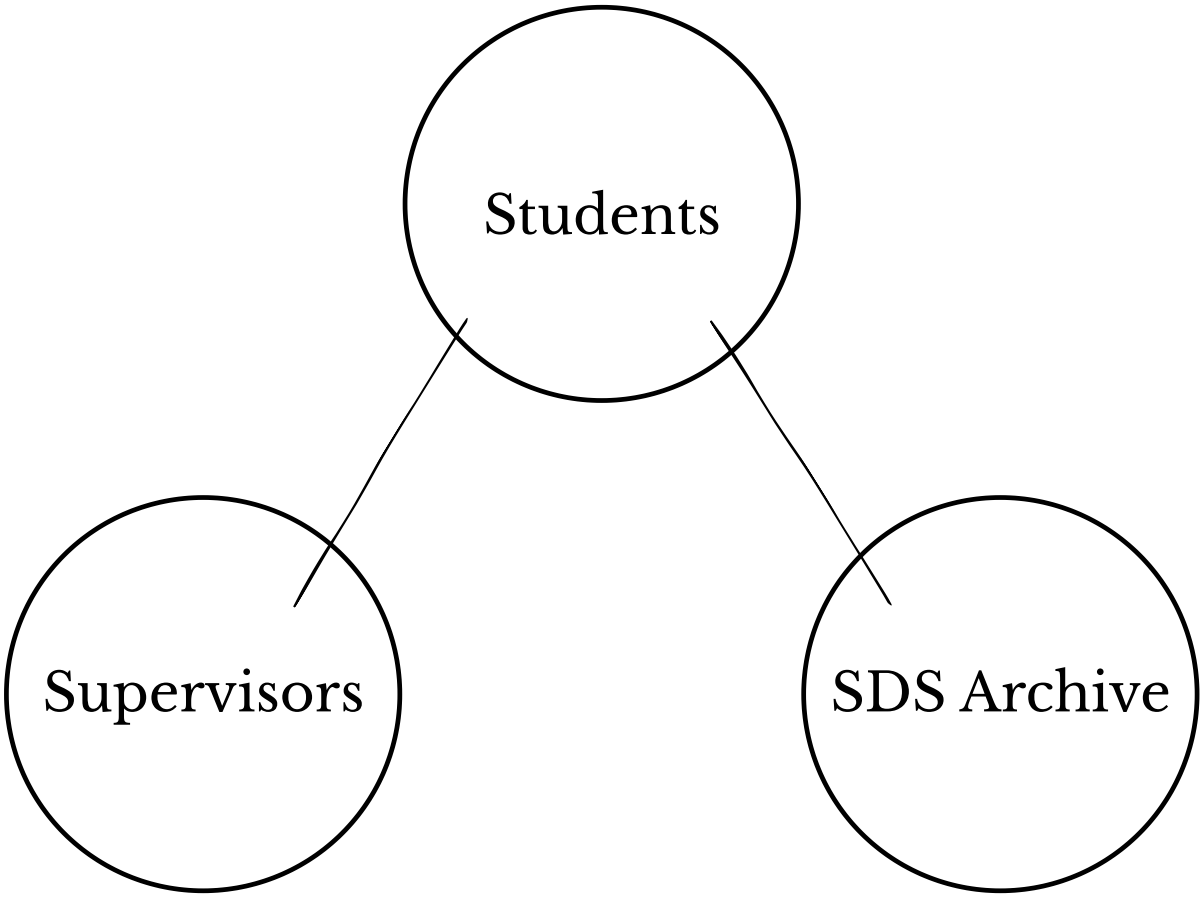
The reflections, in the chapter made me ask about access. The material of the SDs archive is already, in places. The material of the SDS archive is hard to read as a whole. I created the website as the result of this thesis. The website does not try to store all material or replace existing systems. Instead the website works as an interface. The website organizes access, to what's there. I think the website is simple to navigate. The website has context and visible connections, between projects. The website gives a way to get into the archive. The website lets students browse lets students orient themselves. Lets students understand work without needing personal guidance. In this way, the archive shifts from a place of storage to a tool for learning and continuity within the department.



Archive overview page representing access and navigation within the digital archive



Representation of shared authorship and responsibility within the SDS archive



The SDS archive as a shared practice between students, supervisors, and the archive itself.

This diagram shows that the archive is not separate from the people in the department. Students create projects, supervisors guide them, and the archive keeps the results. But the archive also affects future students, who use it to understand what came before them. In this way, the archive becomes part of a shared practice inside the department.

7. PERFORMING THE SDS ARCHIVE

The website is the result of this thesis. I did not treat the website as an archive or, as a picture of the SDS department. The website started because I had a need.
I was stuck because I needed a way to enter the material when I did not know what I was looking for. The website supports entry of the material.
In this sense, the website functions as an archival gesture. It does not close the archive or define it once and for all. It keeps it open, incomplete, and dependent on how it is used and developed over time.

7.1 Structure and Entry Points

The structure of the website is intentionally simple. I avoided the hierarchies. I avoided the deep navigation because the complex hierarchies and the deep navigation often need prior understanding of the archive. Instead the website offers a few entry points. I notice that the website lets users start at a year at a theme or, at a list of projects. From there users move freely without a guide, toward a reading. There is no forced path. I notice that the openness shows how students usually search for references and students do not have a goal. Students. Follow their interests. The structure supports the way students work. The structure does not force a fixed logic.

7.2 Navigation as Orientation

Navigation matters for how the archive feels. I notice that the website does not tell the users what is important. The website helps the users move through the material. Links, between the projects, the years and the themes let each user build a path that the user chooses. I notice that orientation shows up when the user moves not when the user reads the explanation and orientation grows with each step. Navigation replaces the instruction. I notice that the approach lets different users read the archive in their way. The website does not try to control interpretation. The website only tries to help people get access, to the archive.

7.3 The Website as an Ongoing Practice

I think the website is not a solution. The website stays open to change and extension. I have seen people add projects adjust the descriptions and let the structures change over time. The archive depends on how the students use the archive and how the department maintains the archive. In this way, the website functions less as a finished product and more as an ongoing practice. It reflects the idea that archiving within SDS is not a one-time task, but something that develops alongside the department itself.

8. CONCLUSION & CONTRIBUTION

This thesis started from a very simple situation. I entered the Space & Design Strategies department and tried to understand what had been done before me. I was looking for references, previous projects, and ways to ounderstand. What I found was not a lack of work, but a lack of access and structure. Much of the material existed, but it was difficult to read as a whole.

Instead of treating this as a technical problem, I began to see it as a question of practice. How does a department remember its own work? How do students encounter what came before them? And what role does design play in shaping these encounters?

Through theoretical texts, case studies, and my own experience with the SDS archive, I understand archiving as something active rather than neutral. Archives do not simply keep information, they make other parts visible. This is especially important in a process-based program like SDS, where learning often happens through uncertainty and discussion.

The proposal developed in this thesis does not solve all archival problems. It does not offer a finished system or a fixed structure. Instead, it suggests a way of thinking about archiving as an ongoing academic practice. By focusing on readability, orientation, and participation, the archive can support learning without closing itself off.

I always like to do something for other students based on my job experience.

The website developed as part of this thesis should be understood in this context. It is not an archive in itself, but a way of entering existing material. It helps to already exists into a form that allows students to explore, compare, and situate projects without needing knowledge.

Looking back, this thesis also helped me understand my own way of working. I realized that my interest is in collecting information and more in structuring access. I am interested in how design decisions shape understanding, and how small interventions can change how material is read and used.

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AI-Assisted Translation Notice
This thesis was translated and linguistically revised with the support of ChatGPT (version 5.2). The conceptual structure, arguments, and content were developed by the author.