

Behind That Locked Door: Archives Between Hoarding and Surveillance

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Abstract

The essay explores the space of the archives through a collection of photographs taken within Milanese archives in the autumn of 2024. The collateral text further elaborates on the contradictory nature of these spaces, both repositories of memory and instruments of control. The research invites us to consider how archives attempt to contain the flow of time, bridging past and future while compressing entropy within their ordered settings. As we stroll by shelves and file cabinets, we notice an obsessive impulse to accumulate and control information – an echo of our data-driven society.

Case studies selected are meant to represent archival architecture across various fields and institutions. Photographs preferably adopt a central perspective to ease comparison among images and with the human scale, while drawings deconstruct the device character of the archive. Furthermore, archivists' testimonies serve as the primary reference for insights into these spaces where the past is preserved, the present controlled, and the future designed.

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Fig. 1 - Archive room, Archivio Storico Civico, Sforza Castle, Milan. Courtesy Archivio Storico Civico e Biblioteca Trivulziana. Photo by the author.

In an age where everything feels accelerated, slipping from our grasp, some places seem to stand still – silent spaces untouched by the entropy of the contemporary world. Or at least, so it appears. This essay is not alluding to pristine natural environments or abandoned buildings. Far from it. Instead, this series of images aims to explore the contradictory character of the archival landscapes.

Conventionally perceived as dim and dusty spaces, archives hold profound significance in our Western culture. From the Ancient Greek *arkheia* to the contemporary data centres, archives have served as repositories of our traces and memory – the foundation of our present and a “pledge” of the future (Derrida, 1995: 18). The importance of archiving has been extensively examined by thinkers such as Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966) and *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969), as well as Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever: a Freudian impression* (1996). Building upon their insights, Maurizio Ferraris more recently emphasizes that our Western society is precisely rooted in the act of recording (Ferraris, 2014), suggesting archives as the spatial precondition for the society itself.

Today, all this is even more clear. Indeed, the digital era has ushered in an unprecedented explosion of data production and accumulation – mainly due to technological advancements – rediscovering the potentiality of the archives. Today, the term “archive” may seem even overused, encompassing all forms of collection and storage, both physical and digital, and its proper scientific meaning. Consider social networks or other web platforms, where individuals – users – curate their own collections (Hui, 2013; Giannachi, 2021).

However, this – arguably – abuse of the term may reflect a new awareness of the power of controlling information and knowledge. The mushrooming of archives is silent and relentless. Since the latter half of the 20th century, and even more so in the internet age, not only public institutions but also private entities, practitioners, and individuals have begun to craft their own archive – a phenomenon that Hal Foster describes as an “archival impulse” (Giannachi, 2021; Foster, 2004). We are witnessing a kind of *obsessive* race to document our past, to validate our existence through the archive. In a way, as Gabriella Giannachi states, being part of the archive equates to being part of this world (Giannachi, 2021).

Thus, looking at the archives, and their architecture, invites us to uncover deeper truths about ourselves and our society. So, let us peer behind the locked doors of these restricted spaces through these images.

To start, we might ask if we can refer to the archive as architecture.

Whether physical or virtual, the archive is undeniably a *space*, a “place” – to quote Derrida (Derrida, 1995: 1-2) – “there where” objects, intended in a broader sense, are allocated, accumulated, and systematically arranged. In this sense, archives also function as *devices* – in the Agambian sense (Agamben, 2006; Giannachi, 2021) – with a proper system of rules and categories that dictates the relations of the collected objects, and not only. As stated in *Le musée ne suffit pas*, the archive is about relationships, within itself and outside itself (Borasi et al., 2019).

Concepts such as space, place, and relations all pertain to architecture.

Nevertheless, if we define architecture solely as something tectonic, a building made of conventional walls and pillars, archives may not fit the mould. Instead, within the architecture of the archives, walls are made of shelves, pillars by piles of cabinets, bricks by binders and folders.

Rarely are the archives specifically designed through a dedicated building. They often emerge as appendices from pantries, basements, and other similar ancillary spaces. In other cases, they are grafted onto unused buildings, as with the Archivio di Stato of Milan, housed in the older Palazzo del Senato, or the Archivio Storico Civico, located in a hall of Sforza Castle. In other words, archives usually thrive as parasites in peripheral spaces or from dismissed places through hoarding and accumulating objects and documents over time. The role of the architects is in doubt; they are often set aside in the design process. It is marginalized in the last phases of the project after the involvement of a series of other professionals. More evident in server farms but also newer innovative archives, as in the case of Cittadella degli Archivi in Milan, civil engineers, IT specialists, and other technicians are becoming the main actors in the project, treating these architectural types as machines or robotic landscapes.

Effectively, the nature of the archive is ambiguous. It is a space not intended for humans but for objects which define sizes and proportions. Hidden and windowless, its atmosphere is hostile, uninhabitable, dis-



Fig. 2 - Simplified representation of the system of relations between indexing, spatial arrangement, physical presence of a document, and its connections with other archival units within the hall of the Archivio Storico Civico. Drawing by the author.

Fig. 3 - Archive room, upper level, Archivio Storico Civico, Milan. Courtesy Archivio Storico Civico e Biblioteca Trivulziana. Photo by the author (above).



Fig. 4 - Data hall, Aruba Global Cloud Data Center IT3 - Bergamo. Courtesy Aruba S.p.A. Photo by the author (below).

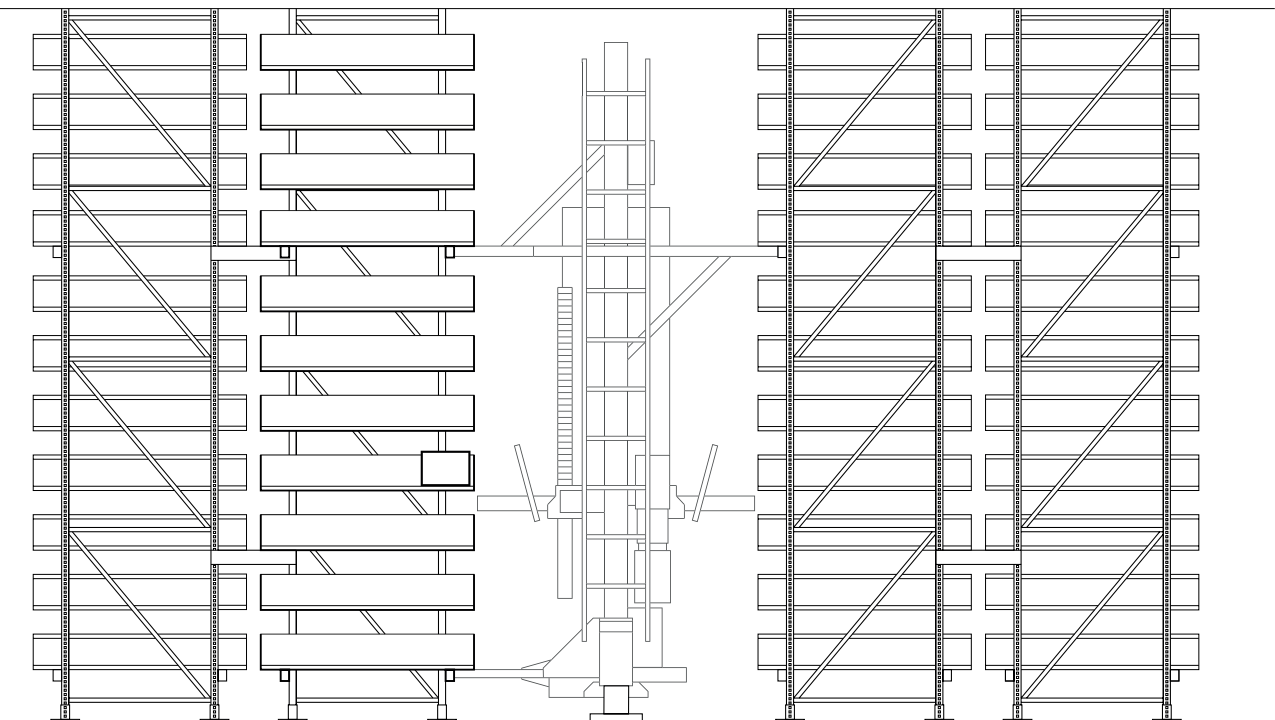
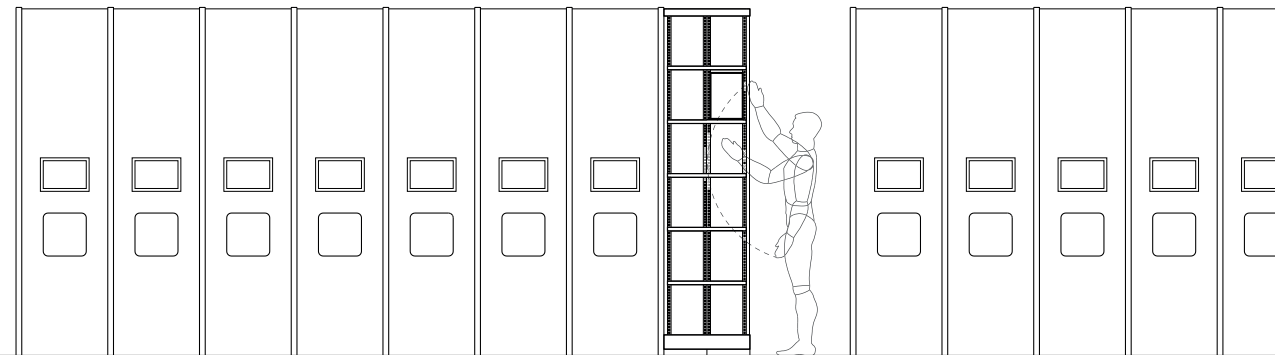
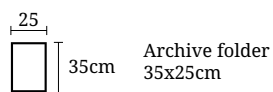
Fig. 5 - Archive room, Archivio Storico Fondazione Fiera Milano, Milan. Courtesy Fondazione Fiera Milano. Photo by the author (above, next page).

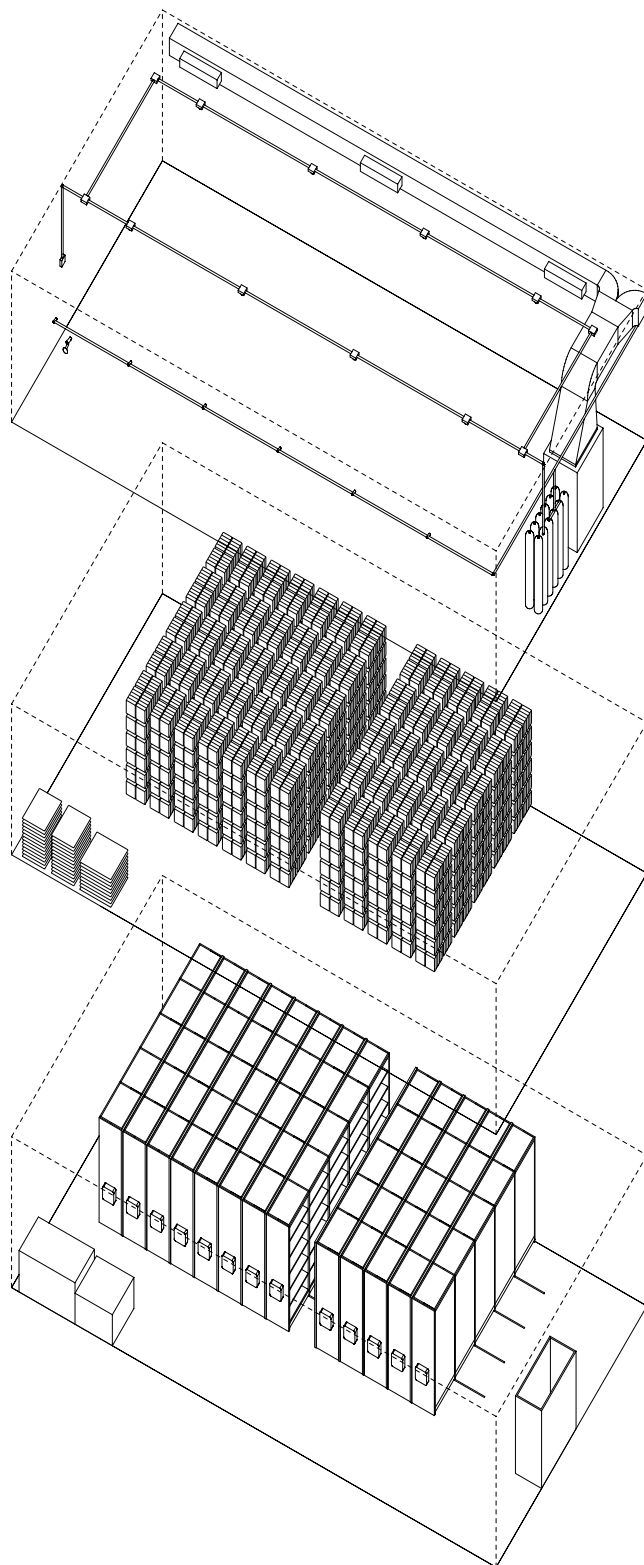
Fig. 6 - Archive room, Cittadella degli Archivi, Milan. Courtesy Comune di Milano, Cittadella degli Archivi. Photo by the author (below, next page).

couraging any extraneous presence, leaving them outside its doors (Roelstraete, 2006). Paradoxically, as pictures of the archives show, *absence* seems to be the actual protagonist of a place dominated by accumulation and excess. From traditional archives to data centres, the entire composition follows the ordered yet alienating alignment of shelving or server racks. Access is usually limited to operators; even public archives require authorization to enter depot spaces. Permission is frequently needed also for publishing related content or photographs, as for this article. Nonetheless, the other facet of the archive space shows a profoundly human side. The archive reveals a *feverish* drive to hoard and control our traces – a reflection of the contemporary social condition. Time within the archive is far from stagnant, unlike what it seems. Inside it, the accu-

Fig. 7-8 - Comparative representation of archiving systems at the same scale: the Fiera Milano Archive, an electrified compact shelving system; Cittadella degli Archivi, an automated system managed by the “Eustorgio” robot. Drawing by the author (p.113).







Control and security
CCTV cameras, HVAC
and fire-fighting systems

Objects
documents (files, drawings,
graphic materials, photographs,
films...), folders and boxes

Containers
furnishing: shelves, filing
and storage cabinets...

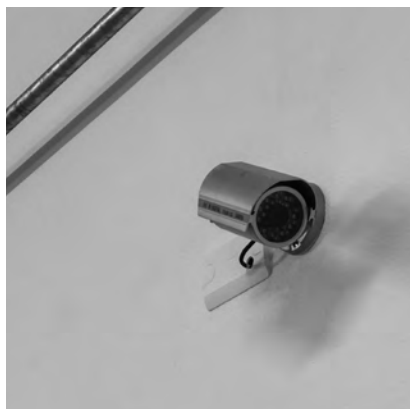


Fig. 9 - The architecture of the archival space-device. Exploded axonometric diagram illustrating the archive's three constituent layers – containers, objects, and control systems – within a room of the Fiera Milano Archive. Drawing by the author.

Fig. 10-13 - Archivio Storico Fondazione Fiera Milano, Milan. Clockwise from the top: CCTV camera, fire-fighting system, shelving, and HVAC system. Courtesy Fondazione Fiera Milano. Photos by the author.

Fig. 14 - Depot, Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milan. Courtesy Archivio Gabriele Basilico. Photo by the author.



Fig. 15 - Mudec depot. Courtesy Comune di Milano, Mudec-Museo delle Culture, Milan. Photo by the author.



mulation of objects and data grows exponentially. Entropy is spuriously concealed under a shadow of order and control.

Indeed, a tendency toward control appears, mirroring the contemporary trends of what David Lyon calls “surveillance society.” Beyond superordinated shelves, the archival architecture is also constituted by a complex security apparatus – from CCTV cameras to HVAC and fire-fighting systems, the latter often posing a paradoxical risk to human life. These systems, usually meant for human liveability, are instead devoted only to the preservation of objects and data. All this further highlights the robotic nature of archival architecture, which cannot be studied without considering this apparatus.

The archive embodies an architectural endeavour to preserve and control information, an attempt to suspend time. Our society invests a great deal of effort into producing these spaces, which are becoming increasingly important, as in the case of data centres, challenging the role of designers. However, the construction of these contemporary *arks* of knowledge leaves open questions. What threats are we guarding our data against? And who is this *pledge* for the future intended to serve? In seeking answers to these questions, we are ultimately exploring the very essence of our architectural ambitions, reflecting upon the relationship between body, information, and space within an evolving data-driven society.

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