

# THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

## or how archival heritage reemerges: the case of Triennale Milano

Filippo Lorenzo Balma

### ARCHIVIO, ESPORRE, TRIENNALE MILANO

Negli ultimi anni, è emerso un nuovo paradigma architettonico che ha trasformato l'immaginario comune dell'archivio. Solitamente percepito come un magazzino buio e polveroso, riservato ai soli archivisti e ricercatori, l'archivio si sta oggi svelando attraverso una nuova identità: aperta, visibile e pubblica. La punta di un iceberg di immensi patrimoni archivistici comincia ad emergere, portando alla luce ciò che tradizionalmente rimaneva nascosto. La sua duplice natura—allo stesso tempo luogo di conservazione e dispositivo di controllo—si riorienta progressivamente verso accessibilità ed esposizione. In questo senso, il Depot di MVRDV ha segnato un punto di svolta, mettendo in mostra la macchina archivistica e dissolvendo i confini tra custodia ed esibizione. Lo spazio *Cuore – Centro studi, archivi, ricerca* di Triennale Milano, inaugurato nel febbraio 2024, si inserisce in questo cambiamento. Tra varie iniziative milanesi, Cuore rappresenta sicuramente il caso più emblematico di questo modello emergente. Questo articolo si concentra quindi sul progetto di Cuore come caso studio per esplorare le implicazioni architettoniche e concettuali di questo nuovo paradigma. Cuore riattiva un secolo di patrimonio della Triennale poiché concepito non solo come deposito ma come nuovo luogo di memoria istituzionale e di ricerca. Di particolare rilievo è la dimensione architettonica del progetto: l'opacità tradizionalmente associata agli archivi lascia spazio a una rinnovata trasparenza, restituendo luce e valore culturale a materiali finora nascosti. Lo spazio riscopre un'estetica e una dignità progettuale dell'archivio, nonché riafferma il potenziale dell'autorialità dell'architetto nel progetto di questi luoghi. L'articolo nasce da una ricerca dottorale in corso sugli archivi e sull'architettura dello storage, sviluppata presso il Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani del Politecnico di Milano. Questa ricerca esamina, attraverso visite e sopralluoghi, archivi appartenenti a diverse entità e ambiti presenti nel territorio milanese.

### ARCHIVE, DISPLAY, TRIENNALE MILANO

*In recent years, a new architectural paradigm has emerged, reformulating the conventional imaginary of the archive. Traditionally perceived as a dark, dusty repository accessible only to archivists and dedicated researchers, the archive has revealed a renewed identity: open, visible, and public. A tip of the iceberg of immense archival heritage begins to emerge, shedding light on what was long concealed. Its dual nature—as both a place of preservation and a dispositif of control—is increasingly reoriented toward accessibility and exhibition. MVRDV's Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam arguably marked a turning point, exposing the archival machine and blurring the boundaries between storage and display. Triennale Milano's Cuore – Centre for Studies, Archives, and Research, inaugurated in February 2024, aligns with this shift. Among various Milanese initiatives, Cuore represents the most emblematic case of this emerging model. This essay focuses on Cuore as a case study to investigate the architectural and conceptual implications of this new archival paradigm. Cuore reactivates Triennale's century-long heritage through a space conceived not only as a repository but as a new locus of institutional memory and scholarly inquiry. Most significant, however, is the project's architectural dimension: the opacity traditionally associated with the archive gives way to a novel transparency, restoring both light and cultural value to materials previously concealed in hidden depots. The project reclaims the archive's aesthetic and design dignity and reasserts the potential of the architect's authorship in the design of archives. The article is based on ongoing doctoral research on archives and the architecture of storage, conducted at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano. This investigates, through fieldwork, the archives of various entities and fields across the Milanese territory.*

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## Introduction

Archives are traditionally imagined as dark, dusty, and impenetrable spaces reserved for specialists. Nevertheless, over the past decade, this paradigm has undergone radical changes. Archives have progressively positioned themselves as public, open, and visible spaces, acquiring a new cultural and architectural role. The concealed heritage of diverse institutions—especially museums—has been revealed, opening up to a broader public. Indeed, as several surveys report, almost 90% of museums' collections are conserved in storage (Loddo and van Thoor 2021, Corona 2025, ICCROM 2016). New trends in the design of archives allow at least the tip of this immense iceberg of knowledge and culture to emerge.

This evolution reflects a broader change in the architectural conception of archives and depots. From the case of Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen by MVRDV in Rotterdam (2021) to the recent V&A East Storehouse by Diller Scofidio + Renfro in London (2025), architects and major firms have taken on a new role in designing storage architectures. In the Italian panorama, the most emblematic experience of this design trend is Triennale Milano's *Cuore – Centre for Studies, Archives, and Research*, inaugurated in February 2024.

This paper asks: what spatial, institutional, and aesthetic implications emerge from this paradigm? And how does the archival space reclaim its social and cultural relevance through architecture? Building upon ongoing doctoral research on the architecture of archives, the article focuses on *Cuore* as a privileged case study for a broader discourse on the architectural and symbolic role of archives today.

## The Archive as a Space-Device

This essay contends that archives cannot be reduced to mere containers of documents. Drawing on Jacques Derrida, the archive is “the intersection of the topological and the *nomological*, of the place and the law” (Derrida 1996, 3). The topological dimension refers to the archive as a delimited, physical space, while the nomological denotes the system of rules that organise its contents (Derrida 1996, 1-3). This dual nature defines it as a space-device—an Agambenian *dispositif*—that conserves, arranges, and, at the same time, exercises control over memory and knowledge (Giannachi 2021, 12-13). The archive thus functions not only as a storage site, but also as a mechanism of power and interpretation: it is a repository, a framework of order, and a cultural stage, where architecture mediates between materiality, knowledge, and human experience.

Recognising this dual dimension—space and device—is essential to understanding the architecture of archives, their design, and their recent evolution. Mark Wigley argued that the very act of archiving is inherently architectural: to archive is to build, to classify, and to order (Wigley 2015). To design an archive therefore entails exercising control over both space and time, as well as over its organisational principles. In this sense, the archive can be seen as the insatiable architecture, continually seeking to contain the entropy of an ever-expanding world of documents and data. Redefining the archive architecturally thus involves rethinking both its spatial and its operational dimensions, with profound consequences for its contemporary design and cultural functions. From this perspective, the design of archives emerges not simply as a functional necessity, but as an opportunity to explore new spatial forms based on logics of accumulation, density, and stratification of the manifold.

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Triennale Milano's *Cuore –  
Centre for Studies, Archives,  
and Research*.

View from the entrance.  
Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani-  
DSL Studio.  
Courtesy: Triennale Milano







2

Triennale Milano's *Cuore* –  
Centre for Studies, Archives,  
and Research.

Shelving system.  
Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani-  
DSL Studio.

Courtesy: Triennale Milano

3

Triennale Milano's Historical  
Archive and *Cuore*.

Axonometric drawing  
illustrating the archival  
space-device by tracing,  
as an example, the multiple  
connections activated by the  
official poster of Triennale  
Milano's 14th International  
Exhibition (designed by Albert  
Steiner, 1968). The diagram  
maps the poster's links across  
fonds, series, collections,  
and locations—from the  
underground depot to the  
online digital archive and the  
Steiner Archive at Politecnico di  
Milano—revealing the stratified  
and distributed nature of the  
archival system. Drawing by  
the author.

### *From Storage to Stage*

Projects such as Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen and the V&A East Storehouse seized this opportunity, redefining both the relational system of the archival device and its reflection within the physical space. As Alessandro Benetti noted, within the Depot—“the very first museum's art depot to be entirely publicly accessible”—not only does “the distinction between backstage and scene, between technical space and official rooms fade” (Benetti 2021), but the complex archival machine is spectacularly exhibited. This becomes the pivot around which the entire composition is organised. Similarly, in the Storehouse, the seriality of the archival storage becomes a design and aesthetic principle of what would otherwise be a simple warehouse. Both examples play with the tension between the overabundance of the interior and the flatness and vagueness of the exterior.

These experiences testify not only to a new awareness of the potential of the archive as a design instrument but also to a different approach to the display of heritage. Opening the institution's collection to the public resonates with current trends in the democratisation of cultural heritage, no longer limited to professionals but potentially enjoyed by anyone (Corona 2025). At the same time, the archival principle itself—where all materials are levelled and the subjectivity of single items is depleted in favour of the whole (van Alphen 2014)—aligns with contemporary decolonial approaches, as social, cultural, and personal hierarchies are suspended, and new meanings can emerge.

As Professor Ernst van Alphen noted, so-called artists of memory such as Christian Boltanski, Hanne Darboven, and Ydessa Hendeles anticipated these tendencies in their works. Their installations transformed objects into referential signs, staging the archival logic of accumulation, excess, and “depletion of subjectivity” (van Alphen 2014). More than 20 years ago, these practices demonstrated how archiving can become an architectural principle, where storage and ordering generate atmospheres and spaces. At the same time, they have contributed to making archives themselves—often overlooked or considered barely relevant within architectural criticism—newly interesting objects of reflection, shifting attention from pure functionality to their cultural, aesthetic, and spatial potential. Works such as Charles Boltanski's *Réserve de Suisses morts* (1991), Hanne Darboven's *Kulturgeschichte, 1880–1983* (1980–83), and Ydessa Hendeles's *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project* (2002) underline how archival aesthetics paved the way for architecture to consider storage and display as interrelated, fertile grounds for design.<sup>1</sup>

### *Cuore – Triennale Milano*

In Italy, although on a smaller scale, some institutions have followed the international experiences of the open archive, experimenting with new design strategies to open hidden heritage to the public and to rethink the museum as cultural infrastructure for the city. In Milan, this includes the digital archive of Armani/Silos, the open depot of Mudec, and, most notably, Triennale Milano's *Cuore*.

*Cuore – Centre for Studies, Archives, and Research* is a direct outcome of Triennale Milano's 2022-2026 strategic plan. Specifically, Objective 3 of this plan—“To valorise Triennale Milano as a place where, starting from its heritage, research is conducted, experimentation takes place, and critical reflection on the future and contemporary issues is offered back to society”—aims to reopen the Triennale's Study Centre after more than 30 years of closure and to establish a new Innovation Hub.<sup>2</sup>

*Cuore* is thus conceptualised as a space-device integrating conservation and consultation with activities related to research, innovation, and valorisation. It is designed

<sup>1</sup> Charles Boltanski, *Réserve de Suisses morts* (1991), Fundació MACBA, Barcelona; Hanne Darboven, *Kulturgeschichte, 1880–1983* (1980–83), Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York; and Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project* (2002), Haus der Kunst, Munich.

<sup>2</sup> The former Triennale Study Center was founded by Giuseppe Pagano in 1935 and remained active until 1990.



to actively foster a connection with the architectural and design heritage of Milan, aiming to bring to light an immense legacy, spanning over a century. This is achieved through collaborative projects with key institutions such as the Politecnico di Milano, the Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Lombardia, the Centro Studi di Arti Visive (CASVA), and various archives and foundations of prominent designers who have significantly shaped 20th-century Milanese design and art history. Indeed, Triennale Milano is intended as a central hub of a larger network, supporting diverse archives and minor entities.

Cuore's mission addresses three main requirements:

1. *Accessibility*: The initiative aims to open up the institution's heritage to a broader public, not limited to specialists. Cuore is designed to be freely accessible, offering generous, airy spaces that comfortably accommodate human presence.
2. *Institutional memory*: It focuses on the reorganisation and valorisation of Triennale's century-long history as a capital of Italian design. This objective aligns with the broader aim of making heritage publicly visible through new spatial and curatorial models, transforming an archive into a laboratory of cultural production.
3. *Architecture as a staging*: Cuore is conceived as a space that not only conserves but also "stages" the archiving process itself, making it visible and experiential, thereby rethinking the architectural form of the archive.

The project, led by Luca Cipelletti's AR.CH.IT studio, breathes new life into one of Giovanni Muzio's original galleries at Palazzo dell'Arte, which had remained unused for several years. The new archive is coherently integrated with the original structure. The grid of beams and columns of the existing building also becomes the compositional guide for the design. Echoing the exposed beams, a system of thirty-one modular and flexible shelving units gives rhythm to the space, evoking the idea of a nave of a church. This concept is further reinforced by the zenithal light entering from the glass-block surfaces of

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Triennale Milano's *Cuore* –  
Centre for Studies, Archives,  
and Research.

Overall view.

Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani-  
DSL Studio.

Courtesy: Triennale Milano

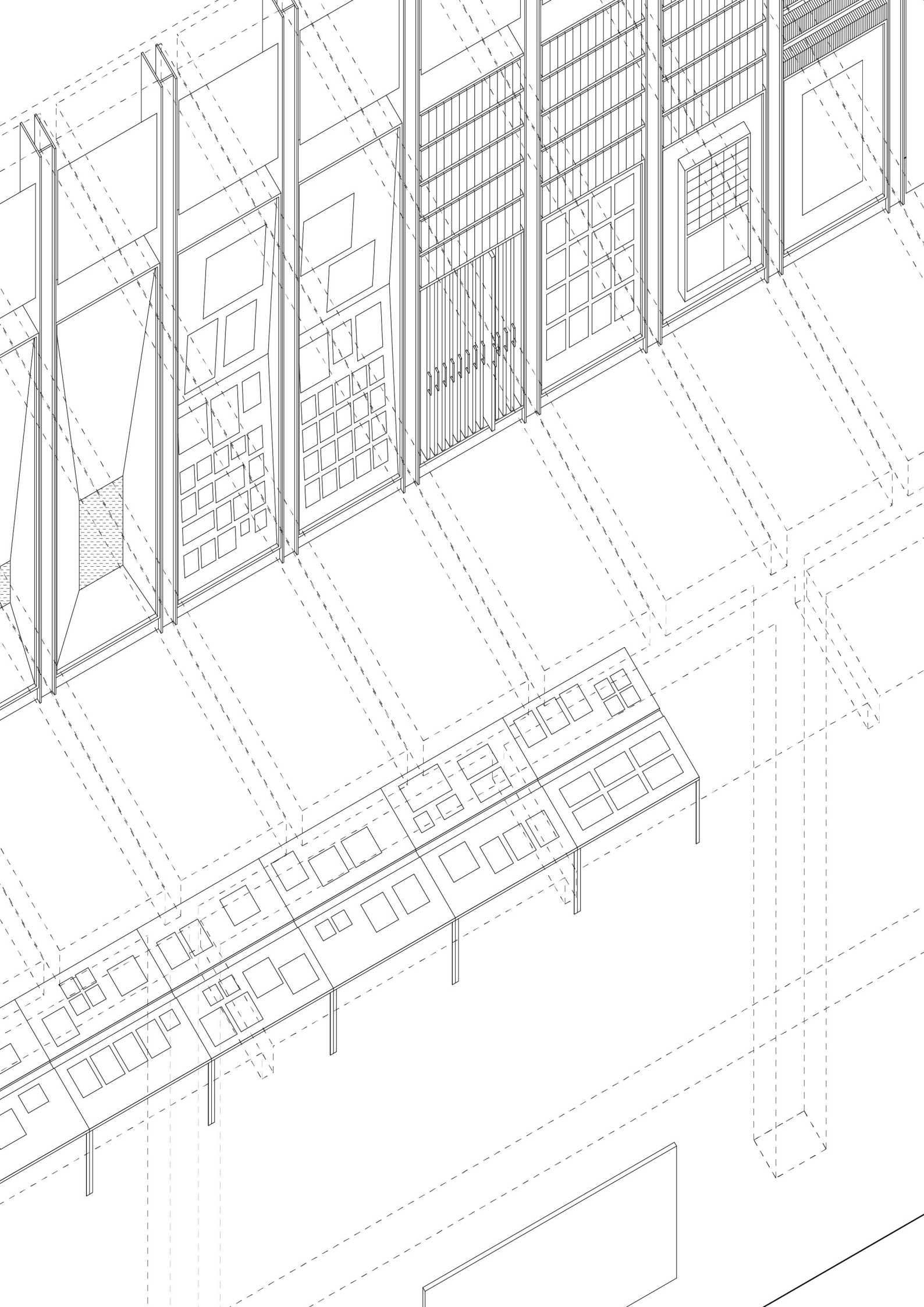
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Triennale Milano's *Cuore* –  
Centre for Studies, Archives,  
and Research.

Axonometry.

Drawing by the author.





the ceiling and by Muzio's restored staircase lantern, which functions as a symbolic apse. Its design reclaims the archive's aesthetic and design dignity. The abundant natural light, low density of stored material, and the apparent lack of separation between archived and exhibited elements clearly distinguish the project from the idea of a traditional archive, thereby rejecting the cliché of the dark and dusty depot. Instead of opacity, transparency becomes the dominant design principle.

Despite these characteristics, it is important to outline that the open archive of Cuore functions more as a showcase than a comprehensive storage unit. The architectural design deliberately reinterprets the archive as a large display case, where only what is functional to the Center's activities and the desired aesthetic is stored and exhibited. The archival material on display in Cuore is, in fact, just a selection—a very small tip of the iceberg of its vast heritage. The majority of the institution's documents and objects remain stored in the underground depot and in an off-site warehouse in the Milanese outskirts. In this sense, the archive's symbolic and representational value outweighs its functional storage purpose.

The paradigm shift becomes clear when comparing Cuore with Triennale's actual underground archive. Whereas the latter prioritizes storage density and controlled access, Cuore reinterprets the archive as an open stage, affirming the aesthetic and institutional value of its contents. The physical occupation of the two spaces differs strikingly: the small historical depot is densely packed with compact movable shelving, filing cabinets, and thousands of documents in various media; in contrast, Cuore's open archive is spacious and airy, with documents and objects displayed only along the single shelving wall or in a few horizontal vitrines positioned along the gallery. Hence, despite its name, Cuore is not the true *heart* of Triennale; the historical underground depot continues to house and preserve nearly all the documentary material.

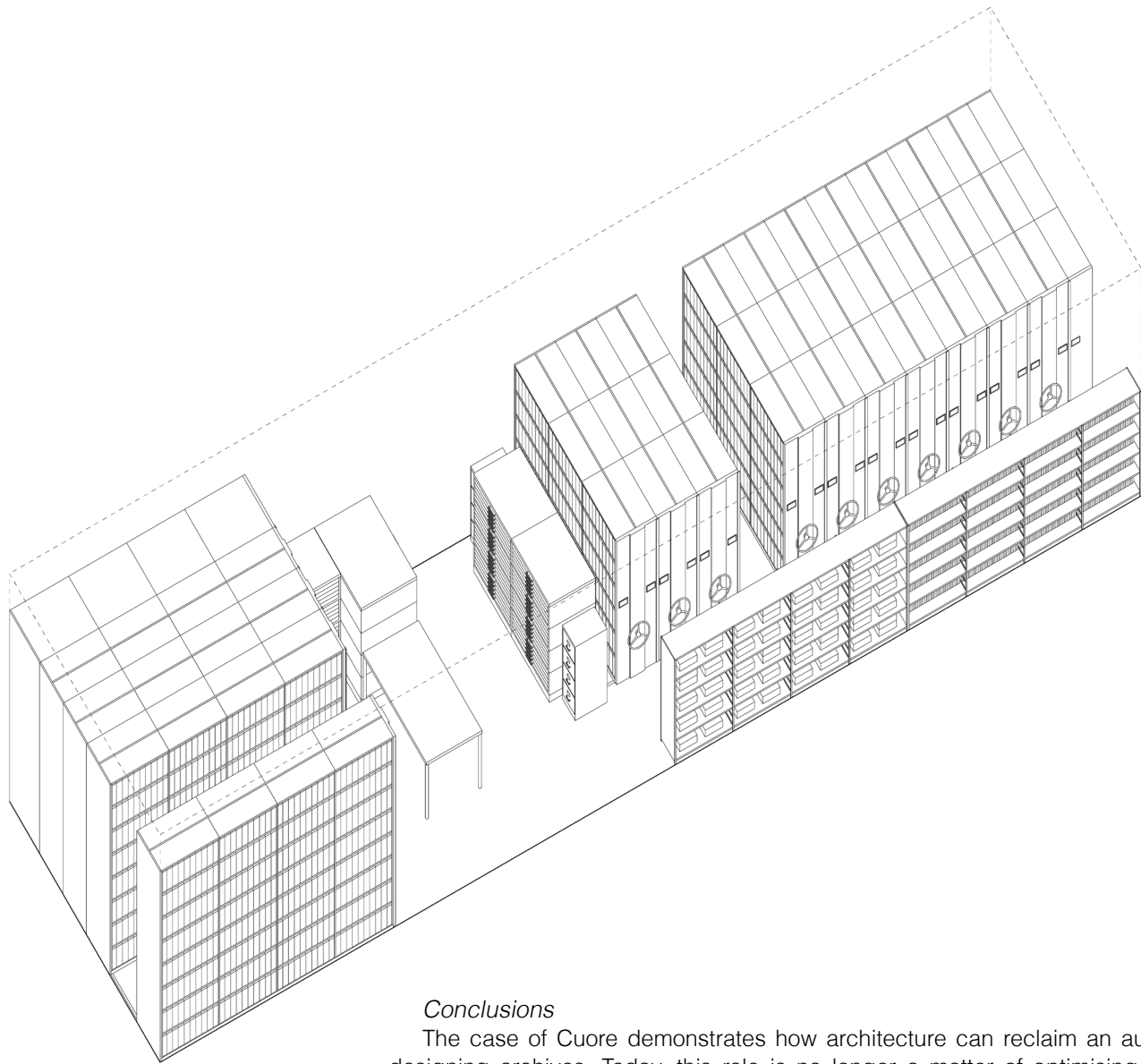
This contrast not only underscores the differing roles of the two spaces but also frames how they are experienced and inhabited. In the depot, human presence is largely limited to the archivist, whose movements are dictated solely by retrieval and storage needs. The imperative to maximize storage efficiency—fitting as many objects as possible into minimal space—often results in arrangements that may appear illogical, reflecting the layered, sometimes linear, sometimes chaotic work of archivists over time. Here, the archive functions primarily as a practical *dispositif*, structured to enforce order and manage knowledge, with little concern for human experience.

In contrast, Cuore foregrounds spatial quality, legibility, and human engagement: archival elements are employed deliberately to achieve a specific aesthetic and atmospheric effect. The archive becomes a performative and symbolic space, enacting the principles of organisation and display while inviting visitor interaction. Its significance lies less in its operational function and more in its visibility, image, and cultural presence, demonstrating how architecture can render the archive not merely a repository, but a stage for memory, research, and creative exploration.

Notably, while MVRDV, with the Depot, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, with V&A East Storehouse, highlighted the mechanical complexity of the archival device, AR.CH.IT studio chose to clarify its internal logic, creating a design that emphasises simplicity and legibility in the arrangement of the collections. This is particularly evident in the shelving wall, where holdings are presented in a clear, simplified classification system (library, architecture, design, photography, fashion, etc.). By contrast, within the depot, the archive's intricate organisational structures remain intertwined with the demands of spatial efficiency and indexical categorisation.

The openness and visibility of Cuore raise an open question about its creative potential: could making archival material visible and legible—from the Depot to Cuore—stimulate new creative practices based on the reuse, reinterpretation, or remixing of archival resources? Could this new “public visibility” generate entirely unforeseen cultural or artistic productions? Perhaps only time will tell.





### Conclusions

The case of Cuore demonstrates how architecture can reclaim an authorial role in designing archives. Today, this role is no longer a matter of optimising shelving and climate control systems but about imagining spaces capable of narrating, evoking, and engaging. In this sense, archive architecture dialogues with artistic practices that, since the 1970s, have explored memory and accumulation: from Christian Boltanski's installations, which transform anonymous objects into memorial atmospheres, to the works of Hanne Darboven or Ydessa Hendeles, which stage excess, redundancy, and the loss of subjectivity.

Structured in this way, the archive is no longer a simple storeroom but a cultural and spatial machine. It activates an architectural poetics based on stratification, the interplay between presence and absence, and the dialectic between control and openness. This tension makes archives today a fertile topic for contemporary architecture, reflecting the contradictions of a society of memory and surveillance (Derrida 1996, Giannachi 2021).

The case of Cuore at Triennale Milano illustrates how the archive is becoming a new architectural paradigm. From a marginal place to an exhibition space, from a hidden and overlooked container to a cultural device, the archive is emerging as a central theme for contemporary design. Cuore represents an iconic case: it reorganises and displays a unique heritage, showing us that archival architecture can be functional, poetic, symbolic, and authorial. Hence, it is truly the tip of an iceberg: visible, accessible, yet rooted in a much larger, deeper mass of memory and knowledge.

In an era where more and more information and data are recorded both physically and digitally, the visibility and accessibility of archival collections have become newly significant. Archives like Cuore can potentially preserve knowledge but at the same time, allow for reinterpretation and creative reuse, providing space for heritage to inspire new ideas, new projects, and new cultural production. It is not only a question of storage but rather making memory legible, engaging, and generative. Moving forward, we have yet to see whether this shift constitutes a lasting paradigm or a temporary experiment.

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Triennale Milano's Historical  
Archive, underground depot.  
Axonometry. Drawing by the  
author.

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