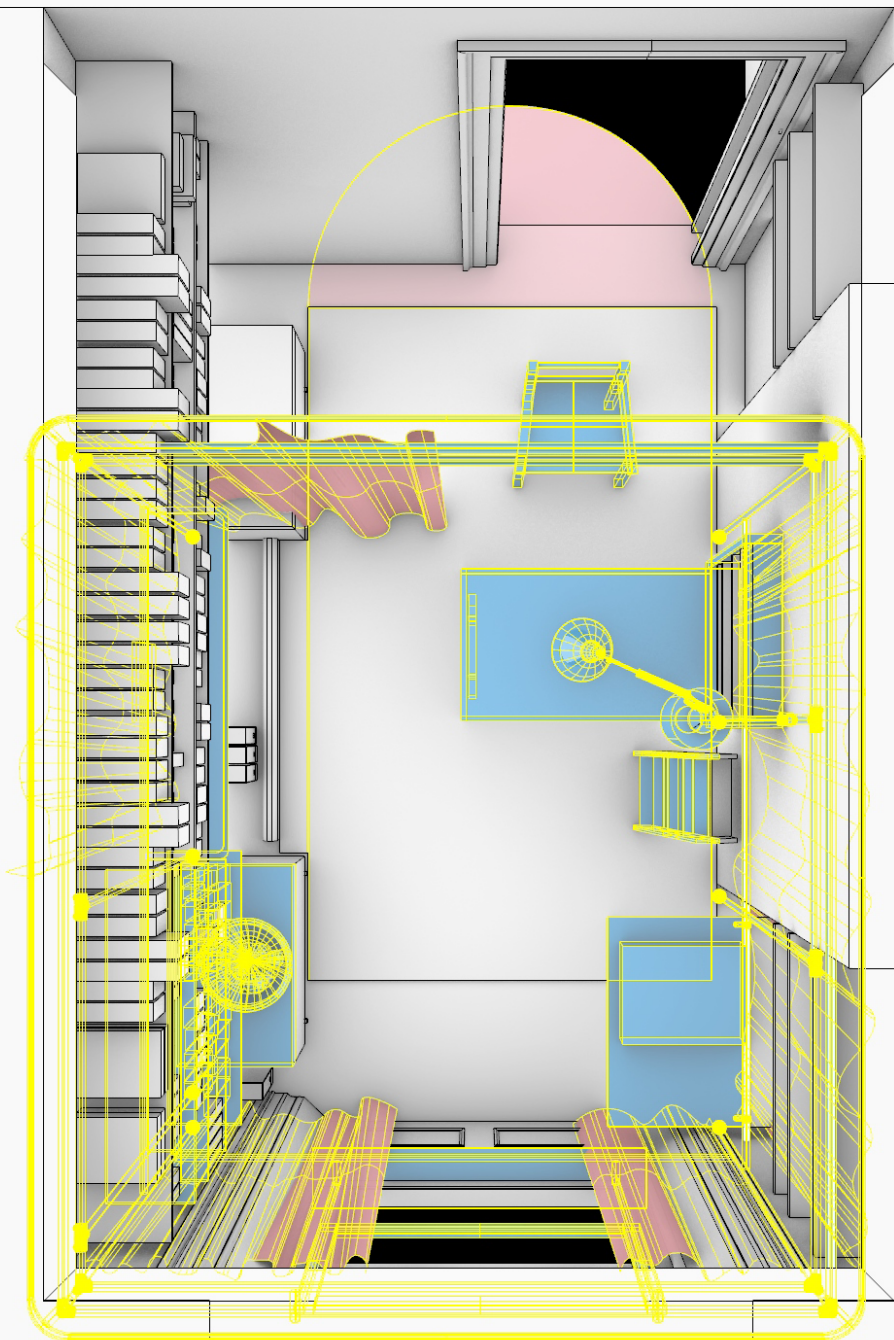


**Alison's Room**  
**An Extended Reality Archive**

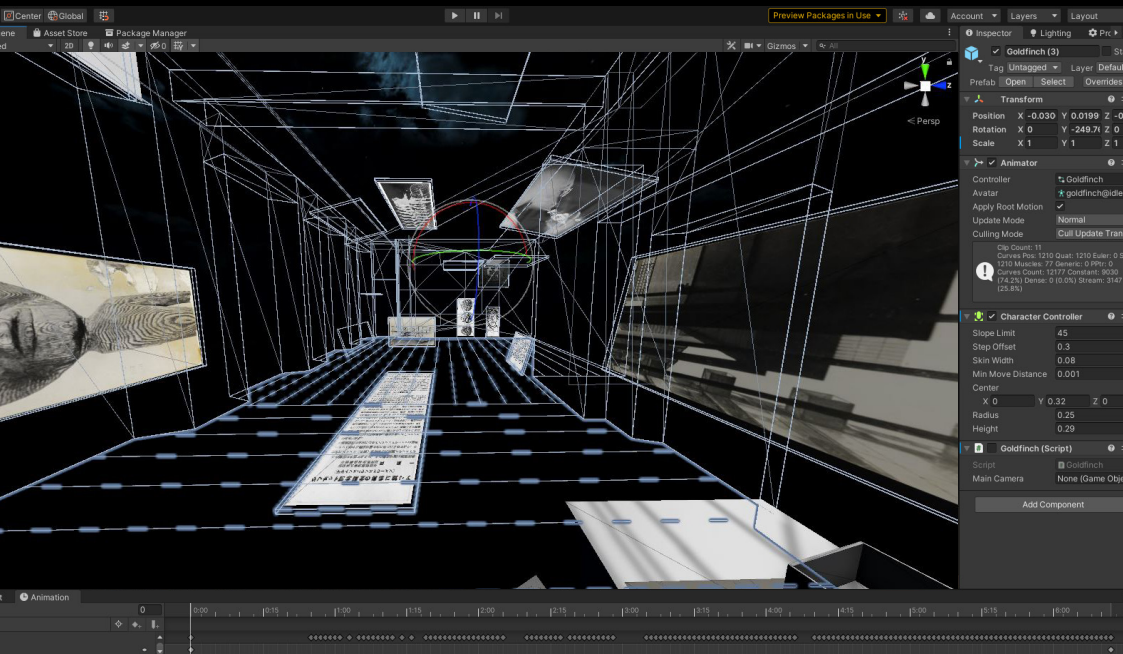
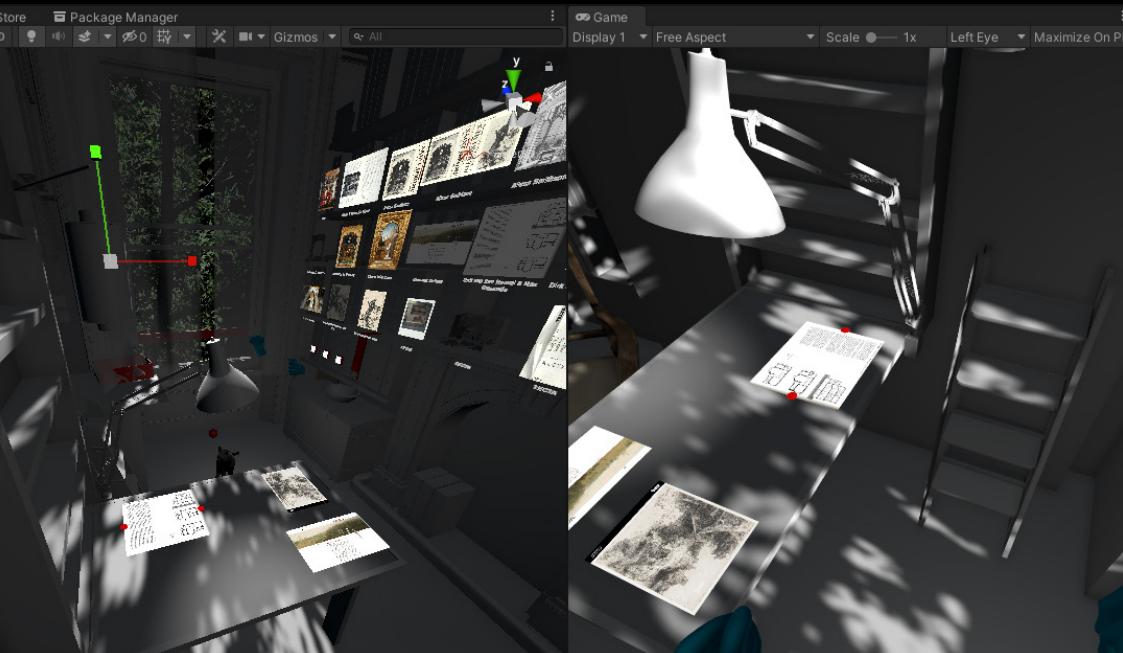
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2022

## Introduction

This extended reality (XR) archive prototype focuses on the reconstruction of the working room with archive of the English architect Alison Smithson (1928-1993). The room was originally located at the so-called “Cato Lodge” at 24 Gilston Road, London, where she lived with her life and business partner Peter Smithson and their three children from 1971 to 1993. The act of reconstructing Alison’s Room departed from a single picture taken by English photographer Sandra Lousada before its material collection was split between Harvard University, the Netherlands Architecture Institute, and the Smithson Family Collection in 2003. By re-materialising and re-spatialising the photography, the atmosphere of the place and its material objects — the curation of its artefacts, how they were placed, ordered, and cared for — are rendered “experienceable” for a public audience for the first time. By moving through the room and interacting with the objects at hand, texts, drawings, and architectural projects created by the Smithson between 1956 and 1996 are gradually coming back to life. One by one, visitors are invited to slip into a fictitious moment in Alison’s life to explore the binary divide between measured reality and drawn fiction, delving into the space between historical truth and narrative truth.







# Voice Over

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## VO #1 INTRO

Hi, how are you? I'm glad you could make it today. I am Serafina and I will guide you to the XR archive. As you requested, I have activated for you Alison Smithson's private working room with archive, file number GR7009 Cato Lodge. Your documents have been arranged on site. Please, check if you can see your hands. Are you wearing your blue archive gloves? Great! Please, go ahead, and take a seat on the wooden chair in front of you. Hold on tight, I will now take you to Gilston Road, South Kensington, London.

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## VO #2 CATO LODGE

About fifty years ago, "in 1971 Alison and Peter Smithson and their children moved across Priory Walk twenty-five metres into an Italian urban-villa from 1851. Built the same year as the Great Exhibition. With streets on three sides, this house could be re-organised to give access for family and work separately. Workrooms on the lower floors and family rooms on the upper two floors. Internally, storage and insulation are set as a new layer within the old fabric. As each preceding generation has added its layers" (1)

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## VO #3 ALISON'S ROOM

Please, feel free to get up and roam around. You are free to wander through the space, take a folder from the shelf, flick through Alison's scratch book, open and look outside the window, or study the painting on the mantelpiece. Depending on how you move through the space, where and for how long you stay, and which of the red elements you choose to touch, a different narrative will unfold, and different fragments of Alison and Peter's work-life will be revealed to you. Wherever you end up going, you'll find a red marble from Alison's stone collection, that you'll need to collect to come back. Please, take your time to do so, I will stay right beside you and purr around your legs. If you should ever feel lost, please, just follow me, I can always take you back to Alison's room.

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## VO #4 PARADIESGARTEN

Uh, that's the little garden of paradise painting from the year 1410, come, follow me through the chimney, I think, we can walk inside of it. It looks so strangely familiar here, Alison used this as a reference for her House of the Future design, the hexagonal marble table is the same, the velvet cushions, the colours. Please, feel free to stroll around the garden. I wonder what happens, if you play the harp on the ground, can you try it?

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## VO #5 HOUSE OF THE FUTURE

(laughing) What are you doing? The sounds you make seem to be constructing the memory of the House of the Future. It was built in 1956, and Peter always said that the structure "wasn't real. It was made of plywood. It was like an early airplane, and the house was made in ten days. It was not a prototype. It was like the design for a masque, like theatre." (2) Look at the beautiful red bathtub, and the little birds drinking from the bird bath (laughing). Please, take your time to look around, before you pick up the red marble that was left here for you.

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**VO #6  
HEXENBESENHAUS**

This must be the Hexenbesenraum, designed for Axel Bruchhäuser. It was based on a series of drawings made by Alison, but only realised by Peter after she died. There's a little letter that Axel's cat Snuff Smithson sent to Alison's cat Sir Karl in 1984, that said - apart from being top secret (laughing) - that five lookouts were designed in five colours. "And that your butler" (laughing) "will find on the plan drawing the original colours and the original idea of dimensions." Can you feel how the structure swings with the wind? Come, follow me.

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**VO #7  
SAINT JEROME  
FOLDER**

The content of this folder revolves around Alison's essay of St Jerome, it looks like there's a lot to it (laughing). You can select the pages and models by touching them - whatever you touch will be displayed on your table to study at your own pace. Alison wrote this essay on "Saint Jerome, The Desert...The Study" for Axel Bruchhäuser. She wrote about how important it is to have a safe space to work, and I remember how she sat here and whispered while writing "[W]hether in an urban setting or in nature, all creativity relies on being cocooned. Such a sense of inviolability relies on its fragment of functional space being within an enclave, encapsulated in its turn within a protective territory." (3) Enjoy taking a look at the documents! You can turn everything off again by pressing the red button.

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**VO #8  
PARALLEL  
OF LIFE AND  
ARTS**

That must be the Parallel of Life and Arts exhibition from Alison and Peter that they did together with their artist friends Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Ronald Jenkins at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1953. Feel free to step inside the drawing of the space that Alison made to arrange all the images. You can select and rearrange the panels on the tables, while I read the press release of the exhibition. It said that this is "an encyclopaedic range of materials from past and present (...) brought together through the medium of the camera which is used as recorder, reporter, and scientific investigator. (...) There is no single simple aim in this procedure. No watertight scientific or philosophical system is demonstrated. In short, it forms a poetic-lyrical order where images create a series of cross-relationships." (4)

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**VO #9  
RETURN**

Thank you! (laughing) That must have been the last one. I hope you found all the things that you came to look for. As far as I can tell, you've activated everything you could do and learn in Alison's room today. Whenever you feel ready, please, go back to the chair, and it'll take you to the foyer of the Institute, where we came from.

(1) The Alison and Peter Smithson Archive, DES-2003-0001-009455761. Frances Loeb Library. <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/des00015/catalog>.

(2) Peter Smithson, cited by Beatrix Colomina in Alison and Peter Smithson: from the House of the Future to a House of Today. 010 Publishers, 2004.

(3) Typescripts, 1990. The Alison and Peter Smithson Archive, DES, 2003, 0001, 009455761, J000, Volume: J003, Box: J/01. Frances Loeb Library. <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/des00015c01807/catalog>

(4) ICA press release for the POLA exhibition, dated 31 August 1953, Tate Archive: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/henderson-paolozzi-untitled-study-for-parallel-of-life-and-art-t12444>





## Context



In her online Masterclass “On Archives” Giovanna Borasi, director of the Canadian Centre of Architecture explains that one of the primary challenges of preserving and digitising architectural archives relates to “the aspects, that we lose visually or sensorially once the object is not any more in front of us as a physical one. Texture, smell, weight, flavor, scale, and time are flattened together for the screen. Computers appear to instantaneously transform objects into images and meaning into information”(5).

By describing the multi- sensorial qualities of a book that smelled of Indian spices, the fragility of a game made from glass blocks, or the dimensions of a drawing that needs five people to be carried around, Boarsi claims that the full experience of an archived object appears to be lost, once digitised. But what about the object’s experience that is lost, once archived? What does it mean to touch paper with blue plastic gloves? How does the wearing of gloves change our experience of the paper’s colour, texture, and weight? Does it smell the same, after being stored in a sterilised, climatized shelf for decades? Does it look the same on a table with a different height, below a lamp with a particular light? How does the controlled and monitored environment of an architectural archive influence the experience of looking, understanding and analysing architectural drawings, models, and material fragments? What role does the spatial environment and atmosphere play while researching pre-selected content, served on a rolling silver tray? As soon as we decontextualise and alter the usage, handling, and consumption of an object, we are modifying its material culture and the social reality grounded within it. One of the questions we thus need to ask with regard to digitising archival material is whether we can breathe some life back into these carefully preserved objects; how can we re-activate and re-animate their sleeping spirits, and re-enable an embodied, engaged, and self-determined use?



These questions lead me to assume, that the full-body immersive experience of inhabiting a three-dimensional reconstruction of a formerly existing place, previously only known through two-dimensional representations, combined with the multisensory experience of actively interacting with physical objects within that place, reveals tacit insights that enable a researcher to gain new perspectives of an architect's oeuvre. These new perspectives are expected to take the form of affective, emotional, and subjective knowledge, a subliminal feeling, intuitive sensibility or form of empathy, which can be further enhanced through narrative elements. I believe this knowledge is incited or triggered by the ability to communicate subjective experiential values and intangible phenomena through material and places in between time and space, and between people who are not (anymore) together.

Further questions I pose to test these hypotheses include: What are the tacit insights derived from experiencing the XR reconstruction of Alison's place and its material culture first-hand? When synthesised with the analysis of other data, what are the new perspectives in relation to the architect's oeuvre that a researcher is enabled to gain? How can one induce hypotheses and ideas in the material activities of making and observation and thus navigate between speculation and experimentation? What role does storytelling and narrative play? What is the value of an archived physical object, removed from its intended context, in relation to its digital copy that can be used and experienced first-hand in its actual context? And finally, how can subjective experiential values be sustained through digitised artefacts?

## Time Slots

Per hour, there are three sessions available of 20 minutes each.

Free entrance

Please send an email to Fatma Tanis, [f.tanis@hetnieuwewinstituut.nl](mailto:f.tanis@hetnieuwewinstituut.nl) with your preferred date and time.

Thursday 24 November 5-7pm

Friday 25 November 1-3pm and 4-6pm

Saturday 26 November 1-3pm and 4-5pm

Sunday 27 November 1-3pm and 4-5pm

Wednesday 30 November 2-5pm

Wednesday 07 December 2-5pm

Wednesday 14 December 2-5pm

Wednesday 21 December 2-5pm

Wednesday 04 January 2-5pm

## Credits

**Artist:** Paula Strunden

**Curator:** Dirk van den Heuvel

**UX Coding:** Joelle Galloni and Malou Minkjan

**Sound Design:** Daniel Helmer and Max Liebich

**Voice Over:** Laura Cameron Wilson

**Graphic Design:** Delphine Lejeune

**3D Modelling Support:** Daana Bolot,  
Bats Bronsveld and Ruben Cahors

**Building support:** Eric Crevels and Henry Holmes

**Team Het Nieuwe Instituut:** Fatma Tanis, Ben Sharnier, Stefan Prins, Tom Prins and Bart Smits

**Special thanks to:** Anna Bach, Louisa Hutton, Evert Klinkenberg, Soscha Monteiro de Jesus, Bodo Neuss, Max Risselada, Simon Smithson, Soraya Smithson and Ines Zalduendo

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The installation is one of the prototypes for a Virtual CIAM Museum, a collective archive-based project of Het Nieuwe Instituut, the Jaap Bakema Study Centre, and TU Delft.



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