

The Living Archive

How can community identity be brought back to oxford?

This project proposes an intervention within the accelerated atmosphere of Westgate Shopping Centre in Oxford; a space defined by movement, consumption, and urgency. In contrast, the proposal offers **temporary relief**. The interior values duration over turnover and is used as a spatial instrument that slows the mind and body, restoring **meaningful interaction**. The design is centred around the history of Oxford; its documented past and the **personal histories** of its inhabitants. These narratives are not treated as static records, but as living content, incorporated into the **spatial experience**. An engaging history exhibition becomes the guiding element of the proposal, encouraging users to move slowly and with awareness. **Archived books**, often hidden or removed from daily use, are brought into the spatial foreground, allowing users to engage with **collective knowledge**. Through this, the library transforms into a collective interior: a space where knowledge is shared across generations and **time can be experienced**.

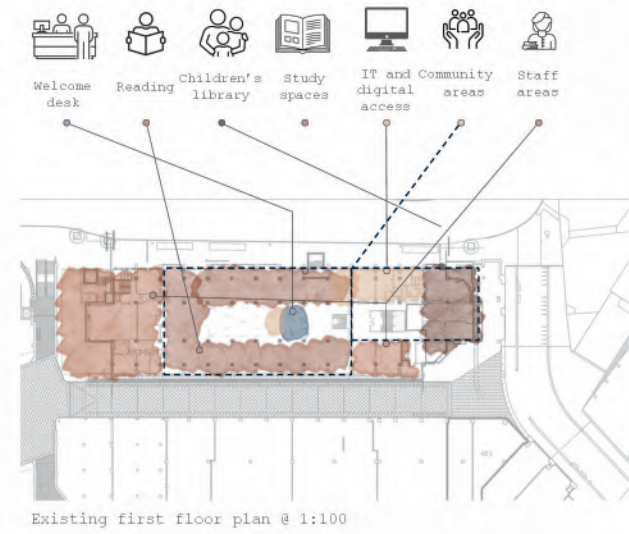
Diorama of concept



“ In a city shaped by centuries of stories, The Living Archive creates a place where memory is not preserved behind closed doors, but experienced through space, people and time ”



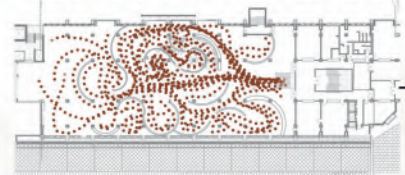
Site context



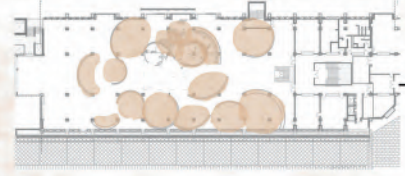
Key design considerations

- Engaging interior for all ages
- Balance quiet study areas with social and community ones
- Accessibility and wayfinding

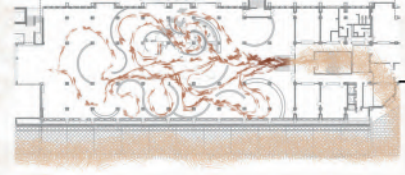
How the proposal would change the interaction between users and the space



- Physical barriers in the form of curved walls contour the space
- Suggest routes people can take
- Slows down the pace
- Many routes to take
- Interactive



- Curved walls create pockets of more private spaces
- These spaces can harbour longer stays
- Different activities can take place
- Clear divides without being completely shut out



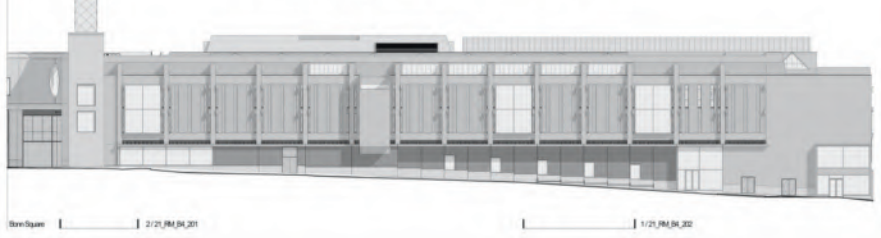
- Changes the atmosphere when entering the space
- Movements are more fluid
- Walking through the space becomes a journey



“Out of sight out of mind”



Existing south elevation



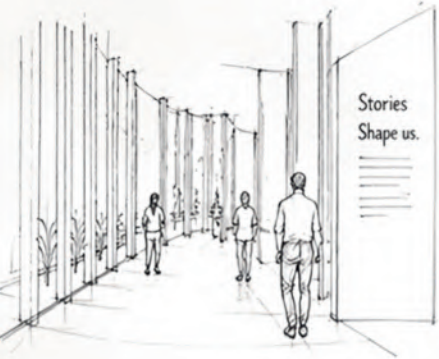
Proposed south elevation



Proposed south elevation



Atmospheres of belonging



Threshold & compression

The entrance sequence narrows and filters movement through the curved thresholds, creating a moment of transition into a calmer, reflective environment



Framed encounters

Exhibition panels and walls are positioned to slow down the flow of people in the library and create a visual overlap, encouraging interaction with the space and other users



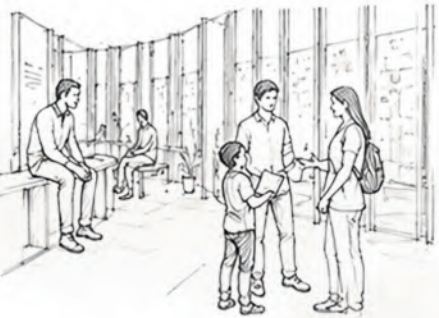
Immersive storytelling

Various interactive displays throughout the exhibition. Users engage with the building, making it a more personal experience and becomes a ritual for the members of the community



Moments of pause

The curved walls and spatial arrangement of the exhibition offers open, communal spaces for interaction and engagement, and also some more private pockets of space for reflection and relaxation



Community contribution

The arrangement of the exhibition means that users will follow a somewhat pre-determined path that eventually leads into the library mezzanine, encouraging people to socialise

Spatial Sequence



Arrival

Entering the library and leaving behind the busy shopping center



Exploration

Moving through the exhibition space and discovering knowledge and stories



Connecting

With other people and the past



Relax

Rest points such as the cafe and nearby seating



Engagement

Interacting with the exhibition and experiencing time



Return

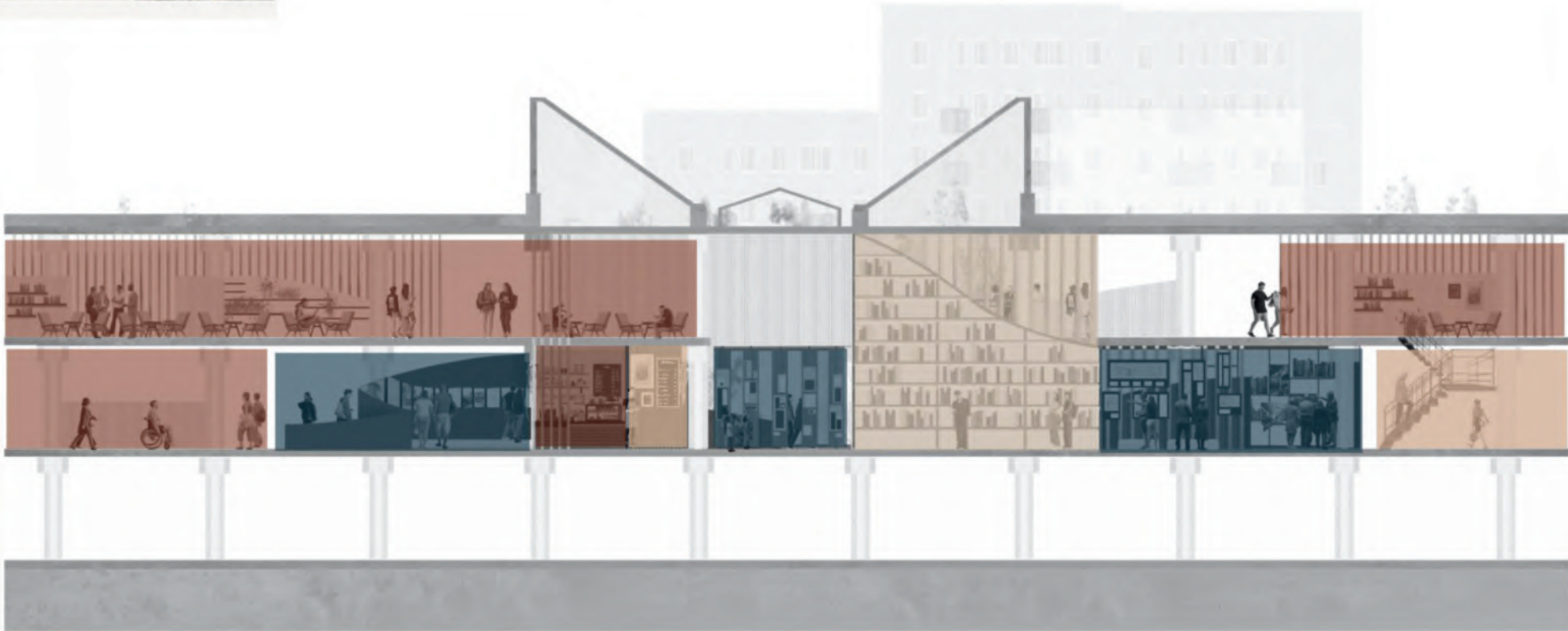
Returning to the westgate with new knowledge and a closer sense of community

Material palette



Warm, tactile and enduring materials create a calm and welcoming atmosphere that invites people to stay and connect

- KEY:**
- Reading/ study areas
 - History exhibition
 - Cafe
 - Personal histories bookshelf



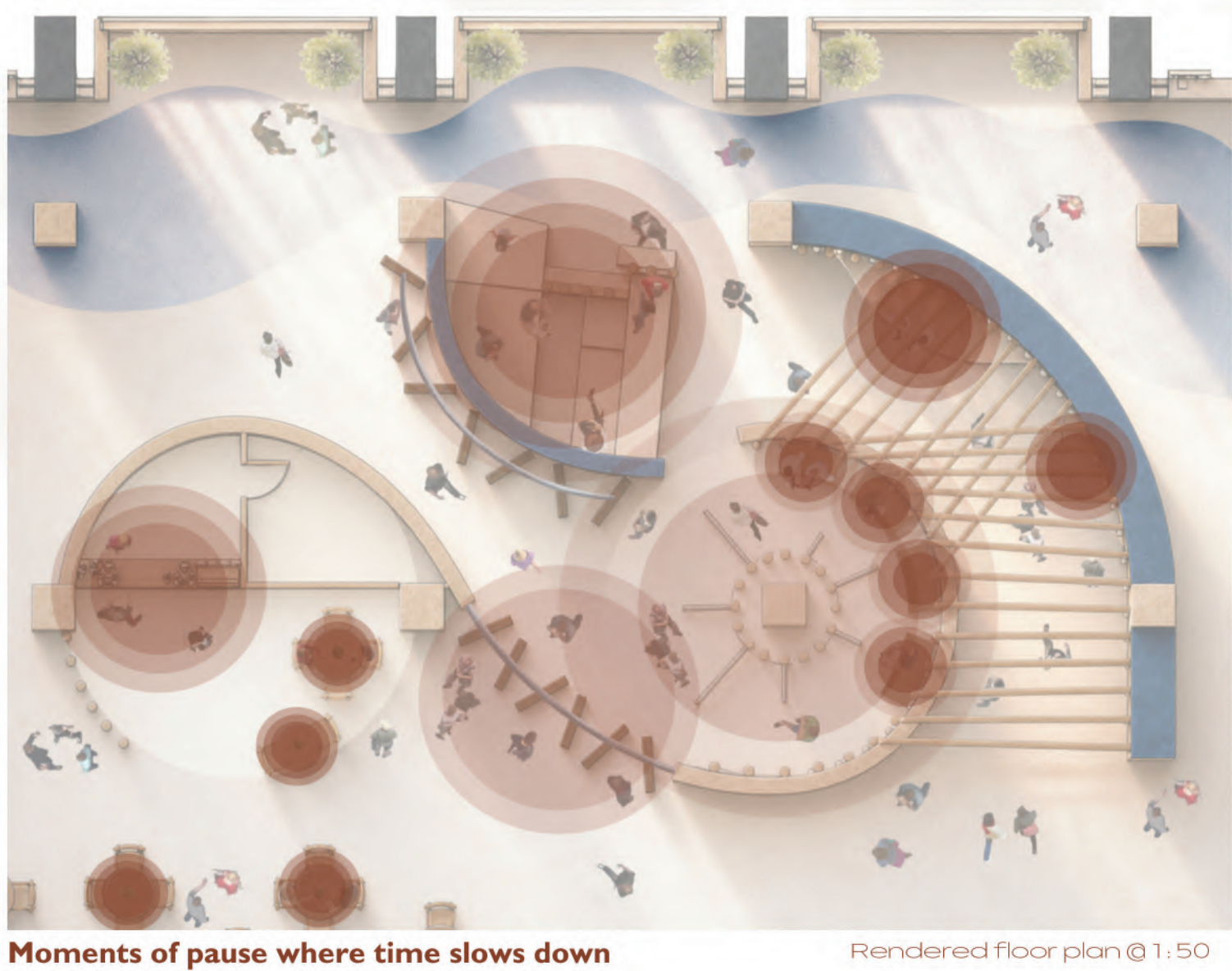
Interiors as community storytelling

Why community histories are important:

- Connects past, present, and future
- Encourages engagement and participation
- Repositions civic spaces as social anchors

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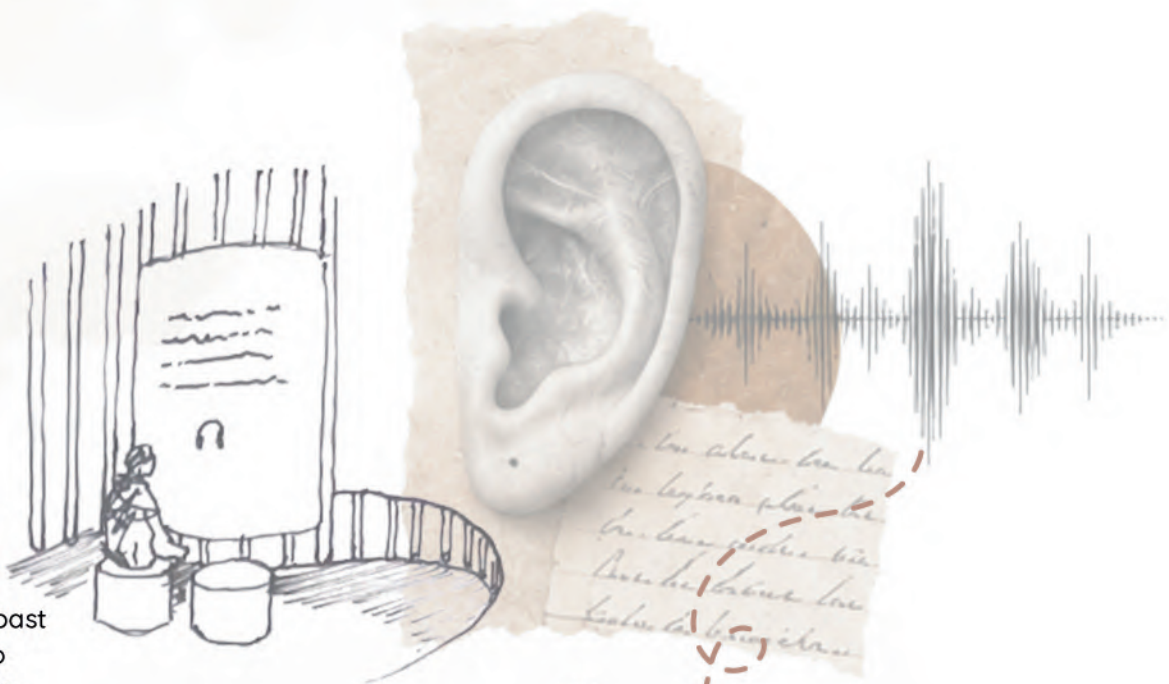
- Builds a sense of belonging
- Represents voices that are often overlooked
- Strengthens community identity



Modes of engagement

Listen

- Voices from the past and present echo through the space



See

- Objects, images and artifacts reveal layers of shared history and create curiosity



Read

- Books and historical documents invite quiet reflection and discovery



Share

- Spaces for conversation and exchange are created by the spatial organisation and strengthen community connection



Journey Through the Living Archive

South Elevation snapshots

• The transition from the shopping centre into the Living Archive is intentionally gradual. Layers of timber screens filter views, sound, and movement, creating moments of pause within the shopping center's fast-paced environment. Visitors are drawn inward through curiosity, crossing a threshold where everyday circulation begins to slow and attention shifts towards discovery.



• Suspended timelines and interactive displays transform historical information into an immersive spatial experience. Rather than presenting history as a collection of facts, the exhibition surrounds visitors with stories of Oxford's past, encouraging exploration through movement and interaction. The curved spatial arrangement creates moments of encounter between strangers, memories, and generations.



• At the heart of the project, the circular chamber acts as a 'landmark' and gathering space. Surrounded by archived books and community narratives, visitors are positioned within a shared field of knowledge. The architecture encourages lingering, reflection, and exchange, making individual acts of reading into a collective experience of learning and belonging.

• Beyond the central exhibition, quieter reading spaces offer moments of reflection and contemplation. Here, visitors can engage more with the archived material. The spatial atmosphere becomes calmer and more intimate, allowing knowledge encountered throughout the journey to be absorbed, interpreted, and carried forward.



Reflection and calm
pause, read and connect



The Archive
Accessing knowledge and personal histories



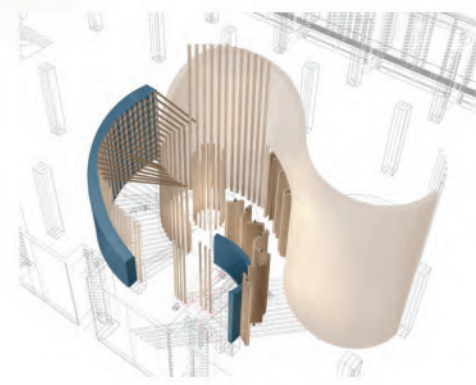
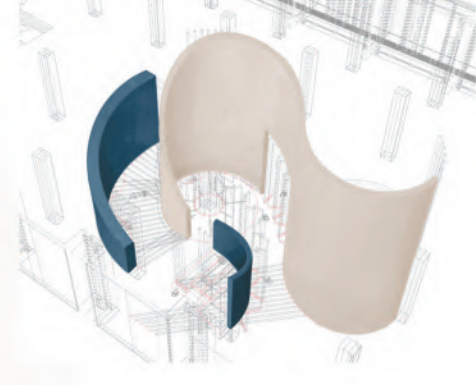
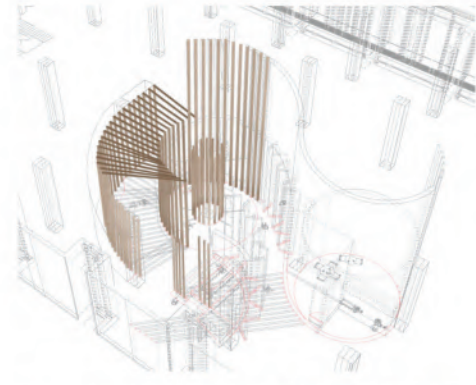
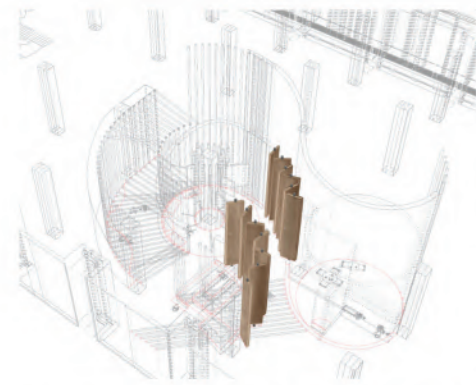
Exploration
Going around the history exhibition



Transitioning
Leaving the fast paced shopping center behind



Entrance
Entering the library



North Elevation

Interiors as community storytelling

"The Living Archive transforms the act of passing through a shopping centre library into a journey of discovery, reflection and community storytelling, allowing visitors to encounter Oxford's history through movement, participation and shared experience."

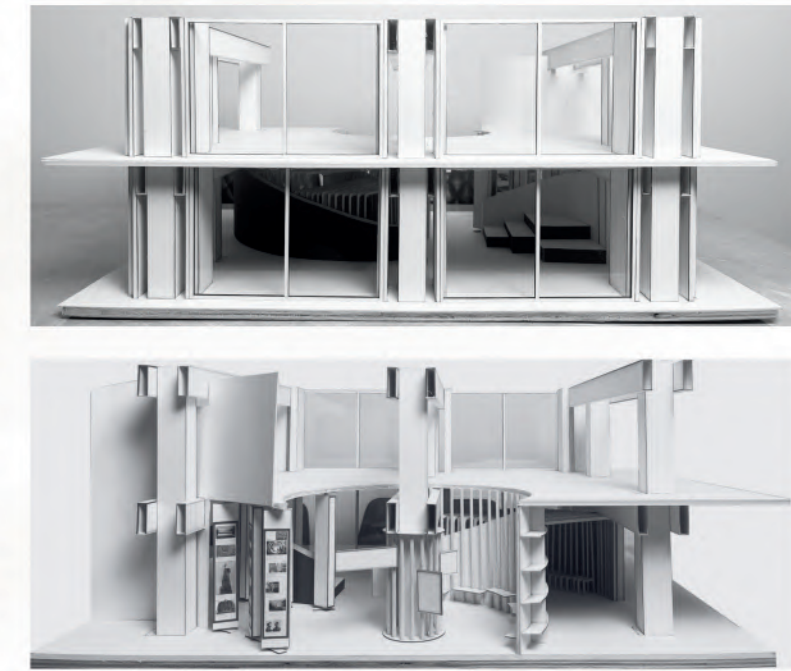


Internal views
(AI renders using commands and the 3D handmade model as a base to communicate atmosphere and user experience)

Atmospheric renders



The rotating exhibition panels act as a partial barrier that can close off the exhibition from the rest of the library if there is an event for example, or they can be at alternating angles to allow glimpses of whats on the other side. This creates curiosity and flexibility within the space.



Central Exhibition Chamber



The Living Archive gives community histories a home within everyday life and becomes a ritual of exploring, learning and connecting. The space where the past is celebrated and carried into the future.



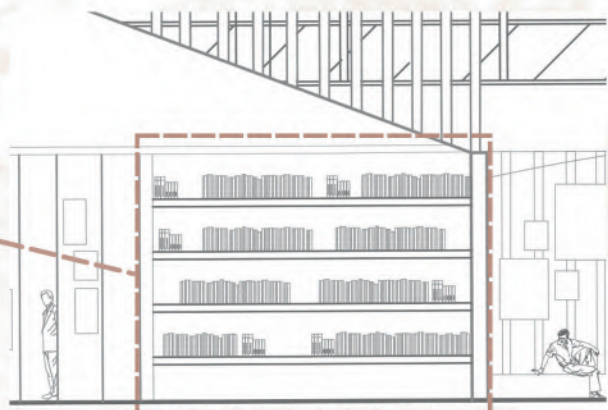
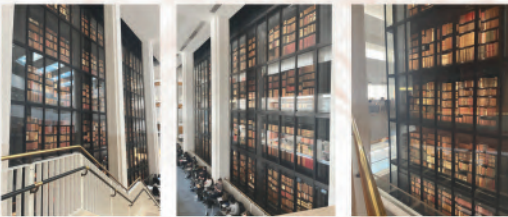
As users enter the library, glimpses of the history exhibition sparks curiosity. The user journey begins with discovery and interactivity.

Discover

The ritual of accessing the Archived books



INSPIRATION The British library



Readers reach the center of the space and get transported through time. The personal and community histories creates a 'bubble' that users can be immersed in while in the library.

Immerse



Knowledge is absorbed and carried with them as they return back to the library and the fast-paced shopping center.

Reflect