ESTONIAN DESIGN AWARDS 2026 · SERVICE DESIGN · PUBLIC SECTOR

Heritage depository open depository service

The service was designed before the building.

SITE	South Estonia heritage depository, Raadi Manor estate, Tartu
PROJECT DURATION	November 2022 – August 2023
CLIENT	National Heritage Board · Ministry of Culture · State Real Estate Ltd

Submission material · English version · 15 pages

JURY CHECK QUESTION: IS THIS UNDERSTANDABLE TO AN ORDINARY PERSON IN 5 MINUTES?

The whole project on one page

Around 3% of museum collections make it into exhibitions. The remainder is in storage. When the state builds a central shared depository for artefacts, heritage moves even farther away from its home museum — into a closed zone that the public cannot access.

We designed the public side of that depository: an open depository where visitors see artefacts in storage conditions and see how a museum works as an internal organisation — conservation, digitisation and collections work. Four user profiles, their journeys and a four-tier service model were translated into security zones and a spatial programme.

The outcome did not remain a concept. It became the substantive basis for the design brief of the Raadi heritage depository architecture competition: the spatial programme was derived from the user journey, not the other way around.

Why this matters

- In Estonian public infrastructure projects, the usual sequence is the reverse: the building is designed first and the service is fitted in later.
- The conflict between security and openness was resolved through transparency, not compromise: four access zones, glass walls, visibility without access.
- Preservation is free for museums; the public experience is paid. Visits fund openness.

~3%
of collections are currently visible in exhibitions

4
service tiers with pricing logic

5000 m²
open depository accessible to visitors

100 / 30
people and groups per week — designed capacity

4
user profiles and journeys

23
museums' collections in the shared-depository model

From a construction problem to an access problem

The starting point was asset-related. Estonian museums lack conditions for the long-term preservation of artefacts. The decided solution was to establish central heritage depositories — in Jüri for North Estonia and in Raadi, Tartu, for South Estonia. This is a question of square metres, climate conditions and security requirements. A construction brief.

The project's decisive step was to reframe the problem. When heritage moves to a central depository, it becomes even less accessible to the public than before: an artefact moves away from its home museum into a zone visitors cannot enter. Only approximately 3% of museum collections are accessible through exhibitions and displays. A central depository without a service layer would amplify this loss.

> **How can infrastructure that must remain closed for preservation be turned into public value, without compromising the security or preservation conditions of artefacts?**

This gave rise to the open depository: a visible part of the depository where artefacts and their treatment are explored in storage conditions. Visitors do not see an exhibition — they see the museum as an internal organism.

WHAT THE PROJECT SET OUT TO SOLVE

- The open-depository visitor-service concept: what visitors see, experience and do.
- A value proposition that differentiates the heritage depository from a museum rather than duplicating it.
- An analysis of user groups and their journeys in a building that does not yet exist.
- Service tiers and pricing logic: what is free for museums and what is paid.
- Spatial and technical design principles for the architecture-competition design brief.

Heritage depository overall concept: vision, mission, values, differentiation and unique value proposition. Source: project documentation, p. 6.

THE DESIGN PROCESS FROM START TO FINISH

Five stages, one handover point

NOV 2022

Framing

Mapping the starting situation and the client's expectations; reframing the problem from preservation to access.

DEC 2022

Research

Mapping users and roles in the museum sector, in-depth profiling, trend and comparative analysis, and site analysis in Raadi.

JAN 2023

Concept

Value proposition, position as an enabler, four opportunity packages, service tiers and pricing logic.

FEB 2023

Service and space synthesis

User profiles and journeys transferred to the floor plan; zoning by access rights; spatial-programme volumes.

AUG 2023

Handover

12 design principles and the service concept handed over as input for the architecture-competition design brief and public-service development.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Stakeholder	Role in the project	Contribution
National Heritage Board, Ministry of Culture, State Real Estate Ltd	Client and sector owner	Defining the brief, artefact-preservation requirements, the national depository programme and investment framework.
Museum collections managers, chief collections managers, curators, conservators	Subject-matter experts and future users	Input on workflows, concerns and constraints; requirements for handling artefacts and technical spaces.
Service design team	External design partner	Research, concept, user profiles and journeys, service tiers, spatial and design principles.
Estonian National Museum (ENM)	Neighbour and part of the visitor journey	Context of Raadi's existing visitor flow and infrastructure.
Estonian Association of Architects and the architecture competition jury	Recipient of the design outcome	Applying the substantive basis of the design brief in the competition conditions.

What was researched and what it revealed

Research activity	Project output
Mapping users and roles in the museum sector	Four user profiles: museum representatives, school and other groups, scholars/researchers, general visitors
In-depth profiling by role: objective, attitudes, behaviour, need, fear, constraint, time horizon	Profile cards with fears and constraints — for example, a collections manager's fear of an information vacuum and responsibility for an artefact's condition
Mapping user journeys in physical space	Each profile's trajectory from point -1 (pre-booking) to the end point, with points of interest and desired outcome
Estimating demand and load	Shares: general visitors 50%, school and other groups 49%, scholars 0.5%, museum representatives 0.5%; approximately 100 people / 30 groups per week
Trend and comparative analysis of international open-depository solutions	13 trends placing sustainability, energy prices, accessibility and self-guided visits at the centre
Site, mobility and history analysis of the Raadi estate	Connecting the visitor journey with the ENM neighbourhood, car parks, park, lakeside path and manor ruins

SERVICE-DESIGN TOOLS USED

- Value-proposition framework: vision, mission, values, differentiation, unique value proposition
- User profiles with attitudes, fears, constraints and behavioural patterns
- Mapping the user journey onto a floor plan, not an abstract timeline
- Service map: user type × service tier
- Modelling service tiers and pricing logic
- Zoning by access rights and volumetric planning of the spatial programme
- Trend and benchmark analysis
- A set of design principles for handover to the architecture competition

User-profile card: attitudes, objective, fears, behaviour, need, constraints, contact person, required functions and tools. Source: project documentation, p. 16.

Users share the same building, but not the same rights

FINDING 1

99% of visit volume is public. 1% needs the artefact in hand.

General visitors and groups account for almost all visit volume. Museum representatives and scholars together make up around 1% — yet they are precisely the people who need physical access to artefacts and work equipment.

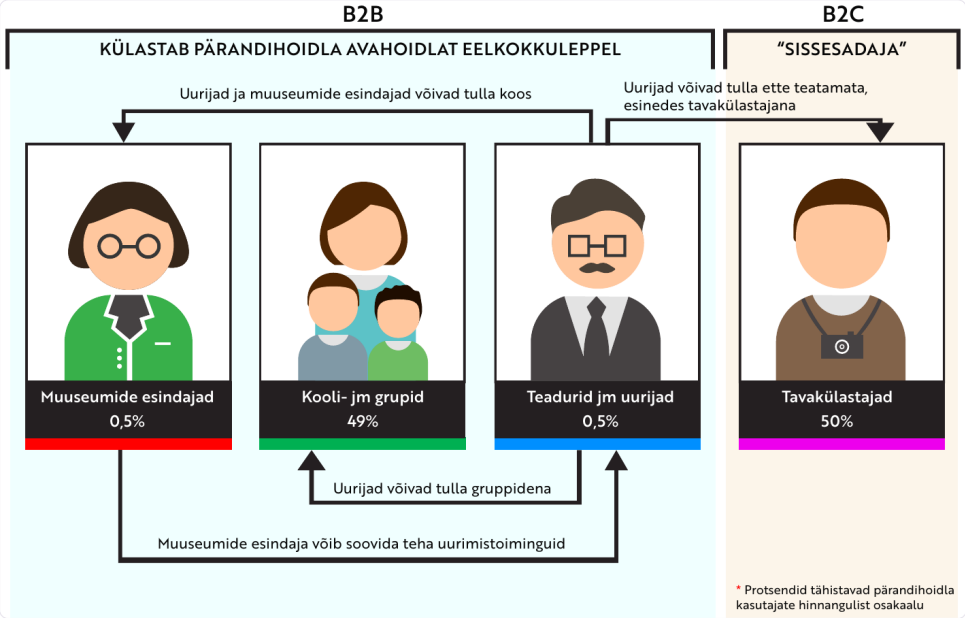
Impact on the solution: four-tier zoning in one building and glass walls between zones. Visibility without access. The conflict between security and openness was resolved not through compromise, but through transparency.

FINDING 2

Roles shift — the journey is not linear.

A researcher may arrive without notice and present as a general visitor. A museum representative may wish to conduct research activity. Researchers may arrive in groups.

Impact on the solution: journey points are not in a fixed sequence but emerge on site from the user's purpose. The reception point must identify the role and change access dynamically, rather than relying on a booking assumption.



Four user profiles, their estimated shares and overlaps: who arrives by prior arrangement (B2B) and who arrives spontaneously (B2C). Source: project documentation, p. 14.

A collections manager does not buy square metres, but assurance

FINDING 3

A collections manager's real need is speed, assurance and a contact person.

They fear an information vacuum and damage to artefacts. Their time and budget are constrained. They want a 'sense of home' and swift administration even when the artefact is in another city.

Impact on the solution: a remote workstation in the heritage depository, a named contact person and advisory technical support were planned for museum representatives. The depository service was designed as a relationship, not a transaction.

FINDING 4

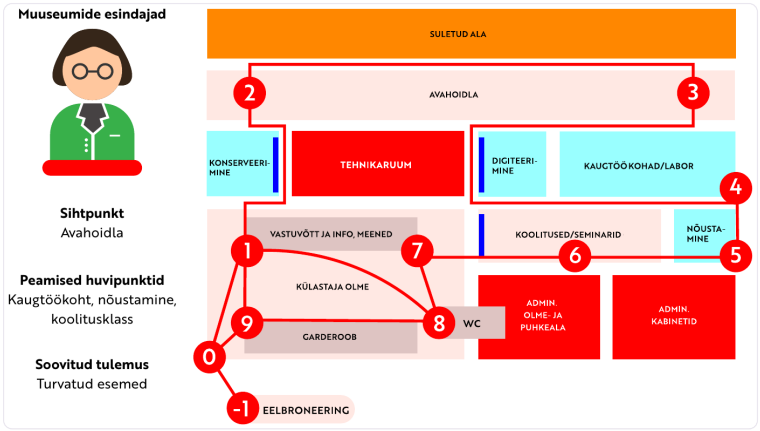
Free and paid must be clearly separated.

Impact on the solution: four service tiers with transparent pricing logic — preservation must not be a financial obstacle for museums; the public experience can be a source of revenue.

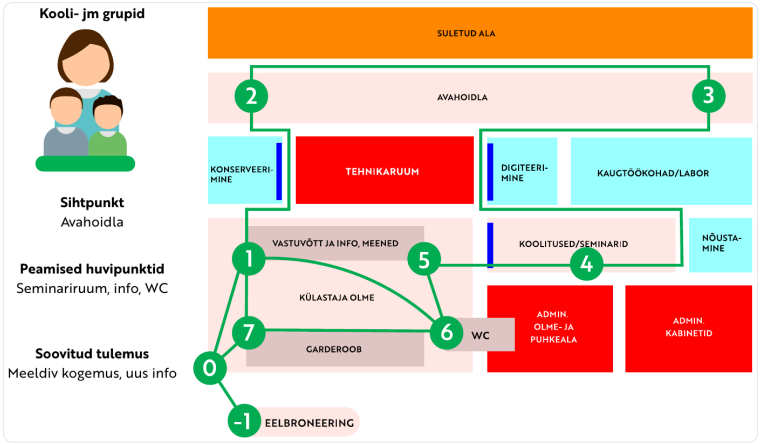
FINDING 5

A self-guided visit is simultaneously a question of experience and security.

Impact on the solution: a requirement for a self-guided tour of secured objects with a guided-tour option; study of digitised objects on screens on site beside the glass wall of the digitisation room.



Museum representative's journey on the floor plan: pre-booking (-1), arrival (0) and nine points, destination: the open depository, desired outcome: secured objects. Source: project documentation, p. 21.



Journey of school and other groups: same plan, different trajectory and different points of interest. Source: project documentation, p. 23.

The heritage depository is an enabler, not a content producer

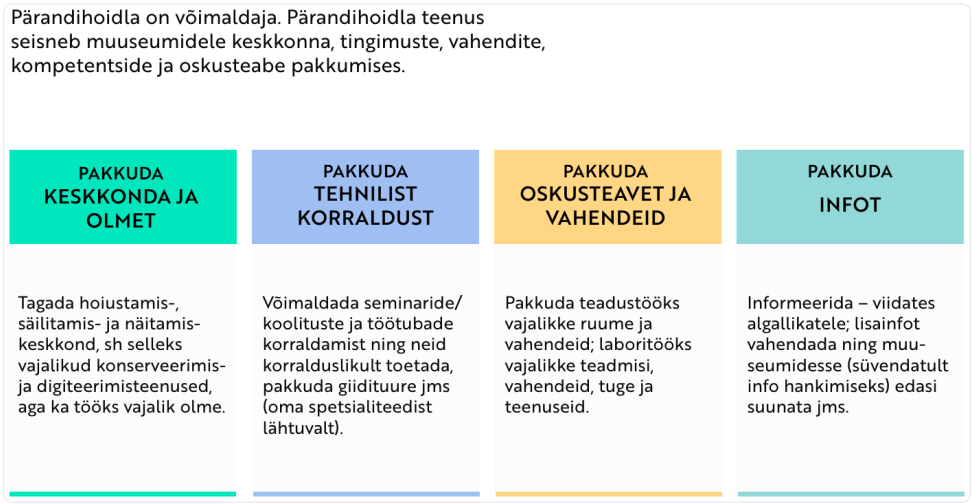
Value proposition

‘We offer a cross-sectoral, central opportunity to store, display and conduct research on museum artefacts. We also offer the opportunity to see and experience how a museum functions as an internal organisation.’

Position

The heritage-depository service provides an environment, conditions, tools, competences and know-how — not content production. Creating substantive context when artefacts are displayed remains the museum’s responsibility; the heritage depository’s role is supportive.

This boundary prevented a typical public-infrastructure project from drifting into ‘yet another museum’ and keeps the heritage depository’s role empowering rather than competing with museums.



Four opportunity packages: environment and amenities, technical organisation, know-how and tools, information. Source: project documentation, p. 8.

Preservation free, public experience paid

Tier	Content	Price
1. Core service	Storage, preservation, display in controlled conditions	Free for museums
2. Professional additional services	Conservation, digitisation, restoration — commissioned from the heritage depository or undertaken using its equipment	Free up to a specified volume; paid beyond that volume
3. Amenity services	Remote workstation, laboratory, seminar rooms	Free for museums, except seminar-room use beyond the allowance
4. Convenience services	Courier, transport, catering	Paid, brokered from partners
Open-depository visit	Groups, scholars, general visitors	Paid

The logic: preservation must not be a financial obstacle for museums; the public experience can be a source of revenue. The state funds the mission, visits fund openness. Two access models for additional services — order it or do it yourself — recognise that museums' skills and volumes vary greatly.

TEENUSE TASANDID

1. PÕHITEENUS: hoiustamine, säilitamine ja näitamine – tasuta

- Pärandihoidla põhiteenus on eri muuseumide museaalide hoiustamine ja säilitamine (ühes selleks vaja-like kaasnevate meetmetega spetsiaalselt kontrollitud tingimustes). Teenus on muuseumidele tasuta
- Museaalide näitamise võimalus pärandihoidla avaalal on samuti muuseumidele tasuta, v. a. seminariruum

2. LISATEENUSED: konserveerimine, digiteerimine, restaureerimine jm – teatud mahuni tasuta

- Tehniliselt spetsiifilisi oskuseid nõudvad teenused on tehtud muuseumidele kättesaadavaks kahel moel:

  b) Pärandihoidlalt tellimuse alusel (igale muuseumile on mõeldud teatud tellimusmaht, mille raames saab tellimusi esitada tasuta; mahu ületamisel rakendub tasu)

  b) Ise pärandihoidla vahendeid kasutades (oskuste olemasolul)

3. OLMETEENUSED: kaugtöökoht, labor, seminariruumid jm – muuseumidele tasuta

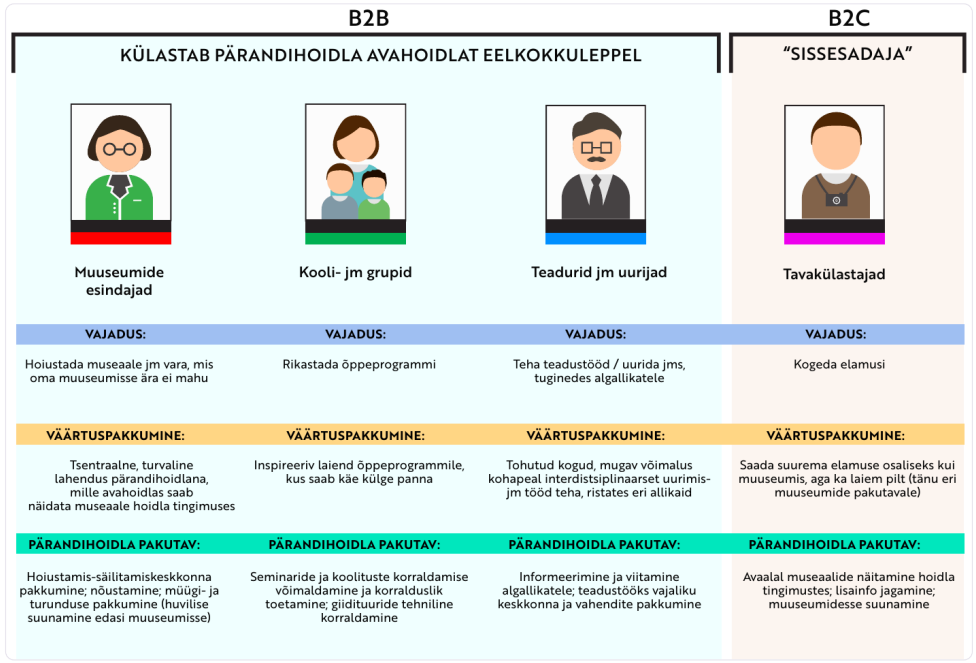
- Museaalide uurijaile võimaldatakse sobivad tingimused, ruumid ja vahendid tasuta
- V.a seminariruum, mille kasutamine on teatud mahuni tasuta; mahu ületamisel rakendub tasu

4. MUGAVUSTEENUSED: kuller, transport, *catering* jm – tasulised, eraldi tellides

- Pärandihoidla administraatori kaudu

Service tiers and the boundary between free and paid. Source: project documentation, p. 9.

Need, value proposition and the heritage depository's offer



User × need × value proposition × heritage depository offer. Source: project documentation, p. 15.

DIRECT BENEFIT FOR THE USER

User	What they gain
Museum representatives	Central secure storage free of charge; an artefact does not disappear into the collections but becomes displayable beyond its home institution; remote workstation and named contact person.
School and other groups	An inspiring extension of the learning programme, with hands-on opportunities; seminar room and guided-tour arrangements.
Scholars and researchers	Collections from several museums in one building; interdisciplinary work with primary sources without travelling between institutions.
General visitors	Access to the part of heritage that lies beyond the ~3% visible in exhibitions, and an understanding of how preservation actually works.

Zoning by access rights — visibility without access

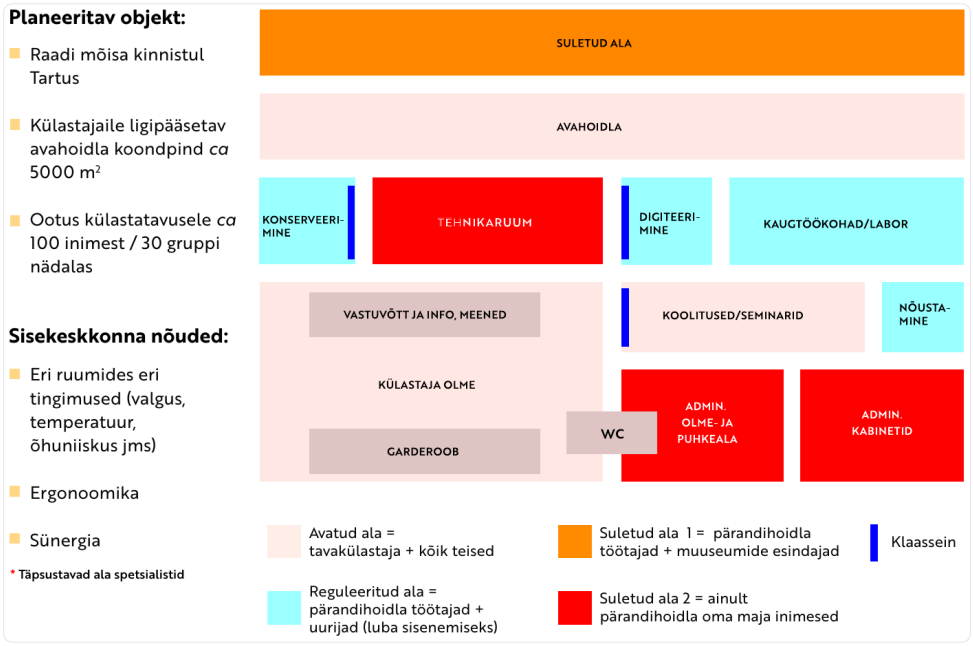
Four access levels

- Open area — general visitors and everyone else
- Controlled area — heritage-depository staff and researchers, permission to enter
- Closed area 1 — staff and museum representatives
- Closed area 2 — only the heritage depository's own staff

Glass walls between zones: conservation and digitisation are visible to visitors but inaccessible. This keeps artefact security intact, while the public experience arises precisely from what is not usually shown — the work process.

Volumes and indoor environment

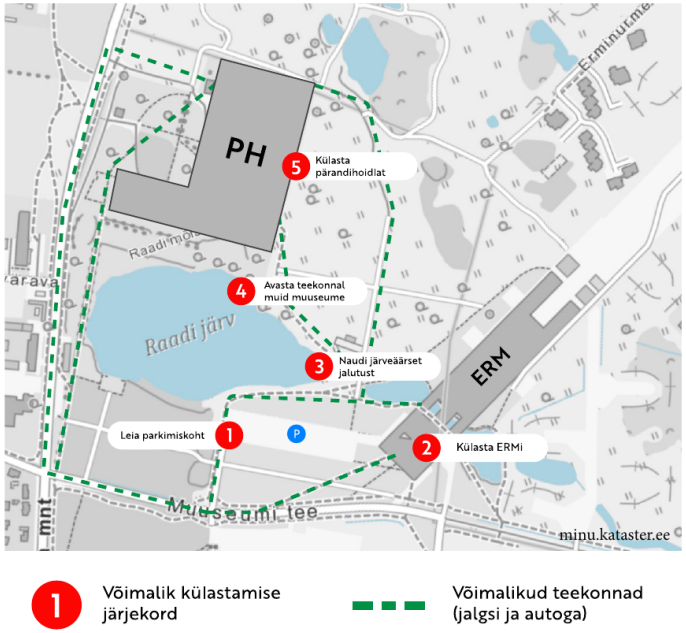
- Total area of the visitor-accessible open depository: approximately 5000 m²
- Expected visit volume: approximately 100 people / 30 groups per week
- Different conditions in different spaces: light, temperature, humidity
- Ergonomics and spatial synergy based on workflows



Spatial concept: colour-coded zones, glass walls, and the arrangement of spaces according to workflow and access logic. Source: project documentation, p. 12.

The journey starts at the ENM and uses existing infrastructure

Keskkonna iseloomust tulenevalt näeme, et kasutajateekond peab maksimaalselt ära kasutama olemasolevat infrastruktuuri, sh ERMi naabrust, parklaid, parki, järveäärset teerada ning mõisa kinnistul asuvaid hooneid ja rajatisi.



Proposed visitor journey on the Raadi Manor estate: parking, ENM, lakeside walk, other museums, heritage depository. Source: project documentation, p. 37.

Heritage preserves heritage

The South Estonia heritage depository was planned on the Raadi Manor estate, within walking distance of the Estonian National Museum. The surviving ruins of the manor will be reused according to the reuse principle: the von Liphart manor, destroyed in 1944 — once home to a rich art and book collection and salon culture — returns to public use as a guardian of cultural heritage.

- The visitor journey makes maximum use of existing infrastructure: the ENM neighbourhood, car parks, park, lakeside path and manor buildings.
- The heritage depository does not compete with the ENM; it extends the existing visitor flow — one trip, several destinations.
- The manor park and lakeside also benefit from the service without entering the building.

Twelve requirements that carried the service into the building

ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

- An environmentally responsible approach throughout the building's life cycle
- 100% intelligent use of space through different climate zones and collective collecting
- Resource-efficient water and energy solutions: geothermal energy, solar energy, LED, rainwater collection and recirculation for humidification, toilets and irrigation
- Integrating nature and blending the building into its setting without creating maintenance-intensive landscaping

SECURITY AND PRESERVATION

- A layout complying with strict security requirements, accounting for military threats — collections in underground archives
- Smart storage system and software with personalised access
- A preservation building designed for the future: at least 20% additional capacity for objects not yet held by museums

OPENNESS AND ACCESS

- Open working: visible-but-private spaces, a glass soundproof window into the digitisation room with an adjacent research computer, public digitisation sessions for the media
- Excellent accessibility and visibility of objects
- Multifunctional building
- Self-guided or guided tour; access for people with disabilities in the building, online and in information materials
- Strengthening international reach and virtual presence as a marketing lever

Design added value where change is least expensive

How design added value to the service

Before the project, the heritage depository was defined as an infrastructure asset: square metres, climate conditions, security requirements. After the project, it was defined as a service with four user groups, four service tiers, pricing logic, journeys and a public value proposition. The shared depository's purpose expanded from preservation to access.

Benefits for the organisation and public sector

- The spatial programme was derived from the user journey, reducing the risk that decisions about space which obstruct service delivery emerge in the completed building. Public-money savings arise at the most expensive point: before design begins.
- The shared-depository model itself saves resources — collective collecting and preservation reduce the need for separate depositories at 23 museums.
- A new revenue stream: paid open-depository visits, seminar rooms and workshops fund openness.

Benefits for society, the environment and the community

- Access to heritage: the open depository opens the part of collections beyond the ~3% visible in exhibitions.
- Education: 49% of forecast users are school and other groups; the open depository is planned as a hands-on extension to the learning programme.
- Inclusion: consideration for people with disabilities was formulated as a design principle, not a later adaptation.
- Environment: climate zones, geothermal energy, solar energy, rainwater recirculation, reuse, 20% growth reserve.
- Resilience: security of collections in the context of military threats, with collections in underground archives.
- Heritage reuse: returning the ruins of Raadi Manor, destroyed in 1944, to public use.

STATUS OF THE OUTCOME IN AUGUST 2026

The design process ran from November 2022 to August 2023 and was handed over to the client in full: four user profiles, four service tiers, the access zoning, the spatial programme and 12 design principles as input to the architecture competition brief. State investment has been on hold for budget reasons ever since: in October 2023 the Ministry of Culture placed the three-depository project on an indefinite pause, and the Culture Programme 2026–2029 states that preparatory work on the shared depositories will continue once the state budget situation improves. The South Estonia architecture competition has not been announced to date. The value of the design work does not depend on that decision: the service model is complete and ready to apply, so that when the competition is announced the concept does not have to be commissioned again. In the state's own forecast the share of storage space meeting long-term preservation requirements stays at 44% through 2029 — the problem this service was designed to solve remains unsolved.

Sources and references

1 Estonian Design Awards 2026 — Estonian Design Centre. General terms, assessment themes, deadlines.
https://disainikeskus.ee/eesti-disainiauhinnad-2026/

2 Estonian Design Awards 2026, Defolio competition platform. Service-design subcategories, assessment period, required materials, 500-character limit.
https://www.defolio.com/competitions/eesti-disainiauhinnad-2026

3 Estonian Design Awards 2026 invites applications — Estonian Academy of Arts. Jury criteria, the five-year exception for service design.
https://www.artun.ee/et/eesti-disainiauhinnad-2026-kutsub-kandideerima/

4 Estonian heritage depositories, proposal — National Heritage Board. Collections of 23 museums, total area 31 000 m², South Estonia open depository in the Raadi Manor ruins.
https://muinsuskaitseamet.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-02/parandihoidla_ettepanek_0.pdf

5 Funding museums from the state budget — Ministry of Finance. Site decisions, timetable for architecture competitions, scale of investment.
https://www.fin.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-03/Muuseumide%20rahastamine%20riigieelarvest.pdf

6 Culture Programme 2026–2029 — Ministry of Culture of Estonia. Preparatory work on the shared depositories continues once the state budget situation improves; the share of compliant storage space stays at 44% through 2029.
https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2026-03/Kultuuriprogramm%202026-2029.pdf

7 Ministry places the three major heritage depository projects on an indefinite pause — ERR, October 2023.
https://kultuur.err.ee/1609144151/ministeerium-pani-kolme-suure-parandihoidla-projekti-tahtajatule-pausile

8 Project documentation: ‘Heritage depository open depository service. South Estonia, Raadi’, service design team working material, November 2022 – August 2023. All visuals used in the document originate from this material.