

Locations & Sensory Detail

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The Tabularium

Lives in: World & Lore → Locations & Sensory Detail. First document in this chapter. Companion to The Arbour Hull Core (Prose & Voice → Reference Passages), which this document draws on directly for its upper-floor sensory texture, and to Arbour City Geography — Skeleton, which this document assumes and extends. Written specifically to ground Wren Emberlain's daily working life — given the amount of page-time the Tabularium will carry, this is deliberately a real, physical place, not an abstract "the archive" backdrop.

The One Decision Everything Else Follows From

The Tabularium is not one building in one kind of construction. It is a single institution that physically spans the city's vertical class structure — its lowest, oldest-feeling public floors sit in Sprawl-adjacent, later-built territory; its highest, oldest-*actual* floors reach up into genuine hull-core construction. Walking up through the Tabularium is, physically and without anyone ever remarking on it, walking up through Arbour's own tier system in miniature. This is not an accident of architecture. It is the single most useful fact this document establishes, and everything below should be read as a consequence of it.

The irony, worth holding onto for prose purposes without ever stating it on the page: this is the building that is supposed to hold the truth of Arbour, and its own walls are shaped by the exact hierarchy that truth gets filtered through before anyone is allowed to read it.

Vertical Structure

Lower Floors — Public Record, Sprawl-Adjacent Construction

The Tabularium's lower floors are reachable directly from the lower rail lines — no Spine crossing required, consistent with Wren's established daily commute. Architecturally, these floors are later

additions: practical, improvised, built and rebuilt over generations the way the rest of Sprawl-adjacent construction has been, with none of the original hull's curved, over-built texture. Anyone can walk in. This is deliberate — the Tabularium's *public* function genuinely is public, and the Council has no incentive to make the parts of the archive it's comfortable with hard to reach.

This is where most of Wren's ordinary working life happens: open reading rooms, public request desks, the long shelves of officially indexed material anyone with a reason (or no reason at all) can ask to see. It is busy in the way any working institution is busy — not dramatic, not sinister, just full of people filing requests, archivists moving carts of material, the ordinary hum of a bureaucracy doing its actual job.

Upper Floors — Restricted, Hull-Core Construction

Above a clear, physically felt threshold, the Tabularium stops being later Sprawl-adjacent construction and becomes genuine hull-core: curved corridors, circular hatch-doors, the specific sound-carries-wrong acoustic signature and over-built wall thickness already established in *The Arbour Hull Core*. This is not a metaphorical age — it is literally older, original-ship construction, which is exactly why it is capable of holding Generation Two-era restricted material (the earliest Tabularium archive, per *What ARBOUR|05 Knew*) in the first place. The building's oldest section was never relocated or rebuilt. Everything was simply added around it, the way later Sprawl growth wraps the base of the standing hull-core itself.

Access requires real clearance, and the boundary is physically legible, not just procedurally enforced. A person without clearance does not get turned away politely at a front desk somewhere upstairs — they simply cannot reach the upper floors at all from the same access points the public floors use. Per the established rail texture, reaching parts of the upper Tabularium on official business sometimes requires the *upper* rail line specifically, not the lower line Wren takes every day — meaning the building's two halves are not just visually distinct, they can be physically reached through different parts of the city's transit network entirely, reinforcing rather than just decorating the access boundary.

Wren's Specific Access

Wren is not confined to the public floors, and the reason why matters: the Council does not spend a rare, costly conditioning procedure on someone and then discard their usefulness — Wren was kept specifically to be valuable in exactly this kind of bounded, trusted, never-quite-unsupervised capacity. Wren holds **standing access to specific sections of the upper, restricted floors** — bounded by subject matter, not by task. Within their own speciality (the kind of misfiled, uncatalogued, reference-number-only material that produced AZ-3-0047-C and AZ-1-0003-I), Wren

can simply walk in, the same unremarkable way they'd walk into the public reading rooms below. One section over, behind a visually identical hatch-door, is material Wren has never been cleared for and has never had reason to question — the same kind of clearance gap that's kept Silas Varran locked out of the Deviation Log for three years, just narrower and more specific to Wren's own designated area.

This should read, day to day, as completely unremarkable to Wren — not a source of curiosity, not a locked door they think about. The bounded shape of their own access is, quietly, the same shape as the bounded shape of their own memory: precise, walled in exactly the right places, never once questioned because nothing about a boundary you were built to accept announces itself as a boundary at all.

What This Means for Drafting

The vertical climb is a free, reusable structural component. Any scene that needs to move Wren from ordinary working life into something more dangerous can do it physically, not just narratively — by having them go up. The reader should be able to feel the building changing under Wren's feet before anything explicitly dangerous happens: later construction giving way to curved hull-core corridors, the acoustic wrongness setting in, the air changing. This is the Hull-Core prose reference's sensory toolkit, now with a specific, reusable narrative trigger attached to it.

Wren's own bounded access is a quiet, ongoing echo of their bounded memory, available for the prose to lean on without ever stating the parallel outright — exactly per the project's broader rule about not over-explaining its own metaphors.

The eventual Five Arks Thread 2 discovery (the navigation instrument in Tabularium storage) now has a concrete physical home: somewhere in the upper, hull-core-construction floors, in or adjacent to Wren's own bounded specialty section — old enough, restricted enough, and uncatalogued enough to have sat unexamined for centuries, exactly as already established, but now with an actual physical texture (curved storage corridor, hatch-door, the specific over-built hull-core feel) rather than an abstract "in Tabularium storage" placeholder.

Open Follow-Ups

- [] **The Tabularium's exterior — what it actually looks like from outside, at street level,** given it straddles two very different construction styles internally. Worth a deliberate pass once district-level Sprawl geography exists to place it against.
- [] **Specific named sections or floor numbers** within the restricted upper levels, if individual scenes ever need to reference "which section" beyond Wren's own speciality area.

- [] **Whether the public/restricted boundary has a name** — Sprawl vernacular often names things institutional language doesn't (e.g. "being walked," "the shed"); worth considering whether residents or working archivists have their own term for the floor where everything changes.
- [] **Exactly how Wren's specific speciality section is defined or labelled**, if a future scene needs to reference it directly (e.g. by subject classification, by a section name, by reference-number range).

The Sprawl

Lives in: World & Lore → Locations & Sensory Detail. Companion to The Tabularium and Arbour City Geography — Skeleton, which this document assumes and extends — and to the extensive existing Sprawl material already locked across Power Grid, Water & Food, and Transport (the shed, hidden gardens, the seed black market, decommissioned carriages, Veilan, "tastes of the system"). This document does not repeat that material; it gives the Sprawl, for the first time, an actual shape — where it sits, why it's shaped the way it is, and what that shape does to the people living in different parts of it.

The One Decision Everything Else Follows From

The Sprawl is not symmetric, and it was never going to be. It sits at and around the base of the standing hull-core, spreading outward onto ordinary surrounding land — but the ground itself was never even underfoot. The hull's final standing orientation was never perfectly vertical; it came down tumbling on more than one axis at once, the way any genuinely uncontrolled crash does, and the same multi-axis sequence that produced its final lean is also why the aft drive section (R4, R5, the worst-damaged part of the original ship) broke away and came to rest offset from the rest of the hull, in the direction the wreckage was already falling and tumbling toward. The debris field's eastward position isn't a separate fact sitting beside the standing hull's tilt — it's the same fact, the same combined tumble, read at two different scales. The Sprawl's own shape follows that ground, the same way every real settlement on damaged, unequal terrain eventually does.

The eastern Sprawl is the Sprawl's true centre of gravity — larger, denser, older in its informal-economy infrastructure, more thoroughly built up, more populous than anywhere else around the base. This is not despite sitting closest to the debris field. It is *because* of it, and the logic is worth holding in mind for any future drafting: devastated, structurally compromised, officially-written-off ground is exactly the ground nobody with power wants or contests. No upper-tier interest ever fought for that land. No Council resource was ever allocated to develop it properly. Over ten generations, that made it the path of least resistance for exactly the population with the least power to resist anything — not a place people were pushed into by force, but the place that was simply *available*, the way damaged, unclaimed land always eventually becomes available to whoever has nowhere else to go.

It is also, perversely, where the power is. The Sprawl's underground rail lines run hot specifically because they pass close to the structural core's waste heat and the buried, still-active power

infrastructure converging near the debris field (see *Transport*) — meaning the east isn't only where the danger concentrates, it's also where the tapped, unstable, illegally-shared current of Layer Three actually originates from. Proximity to the worst ground is also, however dangerously, proximity to the only resource that makes Sprawl life survivable at all. People did not settle the east despite understanding this trade-off. They settled it because the trade-off was, for ten generations running, the only one on offer.

The west — and the other directions around the base — are real, but minor. The Sprawl does not stop existing outside the east; it simply thins. Smaller, less developed, with a shallower and more recent informal-economy infrastructure than the east's generations-deep tapped networks, hidden gardens, and salvage routes. This is not a hard border. Someone walking the Sprawl's perimeter around the base would feel it as a long, uneven gradient — east at its most crowded, most layered, most thoroughly lived-in; the further around the base you go, the newer, sparser, and more exposed it gets, until it thins into the open Badlands proper with no single moment that marks the change.

What This Means, Physically

The East — Old, Dense, Layered

This is the Sprawl as most of the existing locked material already describes it without saying so explicitly: generations of tapped conduits running through the structural fabric, the deepest and most established hidden garden networks, the oldest informal trade relationships with Wayfarer contact and the seed black market, decommissioned rail carriages incorporated whole into buildings that have grown up around them over decades. This is where "the shed" has the longest institutional memory — residents here have generations of accumulated, unwritten knowledge about which taps are stable, which sheds first, which neighbor's grandmother remembers the last time a whole block went dark for a week.

It is also, simply, the most crowded and the most worn. Population density here reflects ten generations of arrival, not recent growth — buildings subdivided and resubdivided, public space at a premium, the kind of dense, layered, thoroughly-occupied urban texture that takes centuries to produce and cannot be faked by anything built more recently.

The West and Other Directions — Newer, Thinner, Rawer

Settlement here is real but shallower — fewer generations deep, less elaborately layered, with informal economies that exist but haven't had the same centuries to calcify into the deep,

redundant, near-unbreakable networks the east relies on. This is where Sprawl growth is still actively happening rather than simply being maintained and renovated — newer construction, more visible improvisation, a rawer and less settled feel. Someone moving here from the east might notice the absence of certain things before they notice anything present: fewer hidden gardens (less time for them to be discovered and tolerated), a thinner black market, less of the unwritten social infrastructure that makes east-Sprawl life survivable despite the shed.

The Gradient, Not the Border

There is no wall, no checkpoint, no single street where "east Sprawl" becomes "the rest of the Sprawl." It is a gradient a long-time resident could probably place within a few blocks by feel — density, noise, the visible age of tapped conduit work, how confidently people talk about which gardens are whose — but that a visitor, or a reader, should experience as continuous rather than zoned. This matters for prose: nothing in the Sprawl should ever read like a city planner's map come to life. It should read like a place that grew the way unequal ground always grows things — unevenly, generation over generation, by people responding to what was actually there rather than what anyone designed.

Sensory Texture, By Direction

Moving deeper into the eastern Sprawl should feel like moving backward through time as much as forward through space — older salvage, older repairs on top of older repairs, the specific accumulated smell of generations of cooking fires, tapped-conduit heat, and recycled air that's passed through too many systems for too many decades. The lower rail line's heat and noise (already established — "hot," "loud," "original ark infrastructure transmits vibration directly into the carriage frame") is at its most intense here, closest to the structural core's waste heat and the debris field's buried, still-active power infrastructure. Long-time residents read this heat and noise as simply how the world sounds and feels; it is the first thing a visitor's body registers, often before they consciously notice anything else has changed.

Moving toward the west or the Sprawl's thinner edges should feel exposed by comparison — less crowded, less layered, the specific kind of quiet that comes from fewer generations having had time to fill a space in. Less heat, less noise, a thinner version of the same recycled-air smell. Newer improvised construction reads differently than the east's deeply-incorporated decommissioned carriages and generations-old repairs — rawer edges, more visible seams, the texture of a place still actively becoming itself rather than one that has long since settled into what it is.

Throughout, regardless of direction: the specific, flat, slightly-too-warm taste of "tastes of the system" water; the grey-beige, nutritionally-complete, joylessly textured cultured protein; the soft sounds of unlicensed livestock behind walls residents stop consciously hearing; the particular, unwritten choreography of who knows which gate attendant, which taps are stable this week, which neighbor's roof is the one with the hidden garden. This is shared Sprawl-wide texture,

present everywhere regardless of how close to the debris field a given block happens to sit — the east/west gradient is about density, age, and degree, not about which experiences exist at all.

What This Means for the Story

Wren's "Sprawl-adjacent upbringing" can now be located, deliberately, rather than left as a generic gesture toward the lower tiers. Worth a future decision (see Open Follow-Ups) whether Wren grew up in the dense, layered east — closer to the debris field, closer to the heat and noise, with all the generations-deep informal infrastructure that implies — or in the thinner, newer west, which would carry a different, less rooted texture to their upbringing. Either choice now has real, specific physical and sensory consequences to draw on rather than an undifferentiated "the Sprawl."

Aran's Act Two B fieldwork (mapping CRS/quarantine disappearances) now has real geographic texture to move through. A pattern-tracking scout working district to district would plausibly notice the gradient itself — the way the Sprawl's character shifts the further he gets from its eastern core — even without understanding why, which gives his sensory, embodied register something concrete to register beyond the abstract idea of "the Sprawl."

The cutoff district from Wren's buried history (already established as Sprawl-adjacent but NOT the same district as Wren's own roots, and deliberately not pinned to the specific debris-field territory) now has a real place to sit on this gradient — likely somewhere in the broader eastern orbit, given the established "life-support systems mattered more" framing implies real population density and real stakes, but distinct enough from both Wren's own neighborhood and the debris field itself to avoid the over-neat coincidences already deliberately avoided in that resolution.

Open Follow-Ups

- [] **Exactly how far the Sprawl extends** in real, specific distance — kilometres from the hull-core's base in the eastern direction versus other directions. Needed before any map can be drawn with real scale; this document establishes shape and relative density, not yet measurements.
- [] **The hull-core's actual base diameter**, narrower than the 420 m max beam per the established aft taper (see *Arbour City Geography*, Part One) but not yet given a specific figure — deliberately left qualitative for now. This determines the actual circumference the Sprawl wraps at ground level and should be locked before any map is drawn; worth noting the number is likely small relative to the ship's full 3,200 m length (which is now the hull's height, not anything the Sprawl wraps around) — the Sprawl rings a base on the order of hundreds of metres across, not kilometres.

- [] **Where Wren specifically grew up** — eastern (dense, old, debris-field-adjacent) or western/thinner Sprawl. Affects the specific texture of their "Sprawl-adjacent upbringing" and is now answerable with real consequences either way, rather than a generic gesture.
- [] **Named districts beyond Veilan**, and which direction around the base each sits in — this document establishes the east/west gradient in general terms; specific named neighborhoods within that gradient are still open.
- [] **The specific district of Wren's buried cutoff history** — still open per its own resolution, but now has a real gradient to be placed against rather than an undifferentiated Sprawl.
- [] **Whether the gradient is a clean east-to-everywhere-else spectrum, or whether other directions around the base have their own distinct character** (e.g., a northern Sprawl that's different in kind from a southern one, rather than all non-eastern directions reading as one undifferentiated "the rest"). This document deliberately keeps it simple (east vs. everywhere else) — worth revisiting if district-level work later wants more texture.