

# Dear Robinson Crusoe

Apologies for my late reply! The past year I have been extremely busy with my graduation project, but I am very happy to tell you that it seems to be going towards a successful ending.

I'm writing you this letter, because the story of your survival on the island has been a huge inspiration for my project. You have been so successful at documenting your journey through your diary, that I decided to keep one myself, of my entire process of the past year. What a shame that you ran out of ink and weren't able to finish your diary, I know how you like to obsessively keep track of your activities. I also struggled with keeping track of everything at times, but what I realized is that not every written detail matters. By flipping through the pages after finishing the diary I was able to see the fundamental outlines of my process, and because a lot of it reminded me of your story, I decided to write to you about it in this letter.

*I was so sorry to hear that your father didn't understand your calling to go to the sea, and that he advised you to live a modest and secure life by studying law instead. Understandably you wanted to listen to him and accept a middle station in life, but I admire how you still followed your dreams as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Even after your first wreckage and that situation with the Moorish pirates, you still followed your calling!*

It reminds me of when I was deciding on which graduation studio I was going to enrol for. There were these secure studios that offered the same program as many years before and described exactly what kind of building would have to be designed in exactly which time schedule. Despite the fact that in the past I have struggled with insecurities when doing exercises within architecture school that weren't totally defined, I felt completely attracted to the bricolage studio of Urban Architecture. How you functioned as the inspirational figure to embark on a journey of experimentation and discovery sounded very exciting to me, and however people advised me to take the 'secure route' instead, I am very happy to tell you that it was the right choice to follow my own instinct.

*Reading about how you found yourself completely alone on that island, with a very clear purpose to survive and be able to leave the place again, it must have been tough! You had no idea how long it would take you to escape, another week? Month? Several years?*

During my process I also had a very clear goal; to deliver a project that would be sufficient to make me graduate. Where my journey really contrasted with yours, is that I knew exactly how much time I had left. In the beginning of the year this didn't affect me, since there still was a lot of time left, but the more I got to the end, the more the time pressure got to me. For example the moment when Paul Vermeulen suggested me to change the concept of the floorplans a week before the P3 presentation was a very stressful situation.

*It is so impressive to read about how you overcame all the obstacles on the island, and how you succeeded to control your environment. At first you seemed to see yourself as a passive victim of your choice to disobey your father, and how this situation had to be your punishment for being so greedy in the past. But then when you started to master the nature around you, the idea of the island as a place of captivity, seemed to turn into the idea of the island as a place of deliverances from your earlier sins. You realised you were responsible yourself for surviving, for your own success and happiness, and also for the choices that led you there. When you called yourself 'the king of the island', it became clear to me how comfortable you got with the idea that you possessed the place. I have to say that this idea of mastery went too far when you met Friday and saw him as your own slave. Why didn't you see him as your friend or equal? Sure, you succeeded in mastering the nature around you, but that doesn't give you the right to treat other people as your property too.*

I have to admit that something similar happened to me during my research- and design process. Because I combined the information from my elaborate analysis of the existing situation with my skills as a beginning architect, I somehow got the impression that I could rule over the area and decide as a superior figure on its future. This seems to be an attitude that other architects have too, and also the people involved in the plan that the municipality of Nijmegen has made for the area. We do have the knowledge of building, but that doesn't give us the right to think we can determine and decide everything. Later in the process I started talking with the actual shop owners and manager of the Molenpoort, and I realized that I had this authoritarian attitude towards the building and its stakeholders. I decided to let go of that and show more respect to what the people had to say, and see it from their point of view. Relating to your emotions, I also felt like a passive victim sometimes. For example when I was struggling to position all the predefined spaces of the music- and arts school into the super specific existing structure of the Molenpoort. In the end I realized how it was my own active choice to go for this particular location in the urban plan, and that I am pleased how the complexity of the structure became the quality of the design.

*Have you noticed that throughout your journey, you referred to the past as if it was a different reality than your situation after the shipwreck? You even blamed that 'before' period for being the reason why you ended up abandoned on the island, but at a certain point your perception changed. Instead of two different realities, you started to see the past and present as one continuous whole. For example when you remembered how as a kid you learned how to make straw baskets, and that you were making straw baskets again.*

You gave me this insight on how to look at the past. Throughout my process I had seen the history of the Molenpoort as the history of the site and all my references to 'the past' were from the period after the opening of the Molenpoort and the current situation. Later in the process I realized how I never spoke about what happened at the location before the Molenpoort was built in 1972. This history turned out to be as relevant, or even more relevant than the successful times of the Molenpoort in its early days. I learned from researching the whole history of the site that the situation from before the Molenpoort touched my goals for the urban plan on a lot of different aspects. This situation with the civil hospice and green courtyard inspired what I now propose as my urban plan.

*It obviously was an important moment for you to find the sprouting grain, since from that moment you realized how instead of continuously reducing the existing grain stock, you could start growing new. The sprouting grain means that the supply is no longer a dead end, but that there now is an opportunity to keep replenishing stock. The same happened when you got close to running out of gunpowder, your required means to kill animals. You changed plans, and started to successfully keep and breed animals, so that you would have 'production' of food close to your shelter. Of course this method also gave you new opportunities for making butter and cheese.*

This shift in attitude, from slowly running out of a finite resource to determination to have a secure future with influx of new stock, is very relevant for what architects are dealing with nowadays. We heavily depend on fossil fuels and building materials, but only start worrying about the future when our resources threaten to run out. The idea of sustainable building inspired my desire to keep as much of the Molenpoort's structure as possible, simply because using what is already there saves new materials. Originally everything that I could use felt like a win, since it has an impact on how many new materials I need, but after the ROTOR workshop I got a new insight on this topic. Looking at the future, in which my project might get outdated and need a transformation again, the next architect might want to use the existing as well. Previously I believed that using existing materials is the most sustainable thing to do, but my new insight to this is that it is even more important to think about what will still be possible to do with the material after I have used it. Do my decisions bring the materials to the end of their lifecycle, or have I created something that future designers can still use in different ways?

*Speaking about materials, when you found the old shipwreck and decided to go there to save as many useful items as possible, I think it is interesting how you started with saving the weapons and food that seemed to keep you safe in the most direct way. Later you realized how simple materials, such as wooden planks or a piece of fabric might have been even more useful to save, because they could serve a diverse range of purposes. It gets interesting when in the wreck you find the thing that initially was the motive behind your trip, money. At first you realize how it serves no purpose in the context of the island, but later you still decide to save the money from the shipwreck. You do it again with gold that you find later in a stranded pirate ship. Is your greed really rooted that deep?*

What this made me think of is how I felt when researching the materials and elements in the existing Molenpoort building. It was quite the journey to test whether these elements were worth keeping, or useless to what I tried to create within this building. Some aspects seemed inconvenient and useless at first sight, but later turned out to be very functional. An example is how a piece of raised floor, a leftover from an old car ramp going through the building, turned into a showcase podium in the exhibition room of my design. And how for example the existing staircases in the concrete cores seemed too narrow and hidden for a public building, but in the end turned out to be perfect for realizing private access towards classrooms that separates the stream of students from the stream of guests and audience that only need to get to the lounge and music hall.

*I know you as a very practical, fact-oriented person, who likes to measure things exactly and is obsessed with controlling situations. It is very clear from your writing how during the first period on the island everything you do is assigned to enlarging your chances of survival, and that basically the only goal you have is to stay alive as long as possible. At a certain point you have created a safe environment for yourself, that there is room to start thinking about more than just survival, but also about quality of life. The ultimate moment of this shift is when you decide to create a bower in the valley you find so beautiful. This bower is created for the purpose of leisure, and you design it in a way that it brings you the most comfort and liveability.*

Your development from practical to sensitivity is exactly in line with what I have been going through in my graduation process. In the beginning it was my goal to learn as much as possible about the existing construction of the Molenpoort, and in a very practical way I tried to fit the desired program into these existing constraints. After the P3 presentation I realised how up until that point that my focus had only been on functionality and logic. This realisation was a turning point, because after this moment the experience of the building became the most important aspect. I recognise myself in you, because in the beginning I wanted to know the existing situation as correctly as possible, and I found my comfort in knowing all exact measurements and particularities. Even though having this information helped me a lot, it on the other hand has been an obstacle in my design process. I stumbled upon every small detail and that prevented me from creating spectacular and outspoken spaces within the building. At a certain moment I realised I had to leave the practical fact-based mindset behind me, to be able to bring poetic and spatial qualities into my design. The tutors told me that I had a typical Dutch practical approach, but that it might benefit my design if I lost a bit of that and looked more into the soft sensory and experiential opportunities.

*Remember when you created that big canoe you wanted to leave the island with, but after months of work it turned out to be too big to move to the shore? After many failed attempts of trying to drag the object to the sea you decided to bring the sea to the canoe, by digging a big canal. I could have told you beforehand that it was a way too ambitious plan. In the end you decided to make a smaller canoe, unfortunately not big enough to ensure your escape from the island, but at least you were able to move around the shores.*

This situation reminds me of what happened to me too during my design process. I got a big idea, that I then started to work out completely, to find out later that it would not fit well into the project. I had for example spent a lot of time figuring out what the public staircase should look like, to then realise that this staircase would create extreme acoustic and spatial problems. After that I tried to alter the structure around the stairs to make it function well, but I realized how I was trying to change the context to what I wanted to create, while a real bricoleur rather works the other way around. The object should adapt to the context. In the end I had to redesign the staircase to fit into the specific structure I was working with and I learned how to prevent wasting a lot of time with future design tasks.

*It is very clear that throughout your life you have had different experiences with slavery, and I think that is the reason why you have such an interesting view on the matter. You have seen especially the economical and profitable side of it, and money has been the reason why you went on that trip that ultimately led you to stranding on the island. I lost my respect for you when you sold your friend as a slave just because it was profitable to you, but when on the island you realized how it was not a moral thing to do, and regretted your choices in the past, I think you became a better man.*

During my journey I have encountered different stakeholders with different moral or economical beliefs. Your initial view, focussed on money and profit, is what I have seen in the project developers and also the municipality of Nijmegen. For the Molenpoort site they designed a completely new outdoor shopping area with expensive shops and expensive apartments above, while it is very evident that the city needs cheaper housing and doesn't need more expensive shops that only the big chain brands can afford. I truly believe that when you are not only after profit, but your decisions are morally based and provide liveability and quality for people, you can make better future scenarios that enhance the happiness of people and the quality of our cities.

Robinson, it has been a pleasure to read about your journey, and I hope you were interested to hear about mine too. From what you wrote it is hard to tell whether your experiences on the island have changed your sometimes troubling point of view on subjects such as mastery and slavery, but there is no doubt that you have evolved as a human being. It might be a big statement to make, but I believe that my journey has changed me too. Before I had never heard of what 'bricolage' is, and now I consider myself a bricoleur. Before my way of designing was mostly based on logic and convenience of program. This journey has taught me to see quality in the irregularities, and how to adapt them into poetics that make buildings more unique and beautiful.

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