

# THE ADVENTUROUS JOURNEY OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE MOLENPOORT



RESEARCH PLAN  
URBAN ARCHITECTURE  
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Just when I was getting used to the bended streets with occasional stairs, familiarizing the brick facades and tuned down scale of the architecture, I stumble upon this enormous creature, hiding within a city block...

Its enormous opened mouth is gobbling up the innocent people, to spit them out later, robbed of all their money...

I need to be careful, let's investigate this beast cautiously...

- Koen Huybers

# 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the over-all story of the research- and design process is explained, by introducing the relevant problems and architectural and societal themes that are at stake.

The initial interaction I had with the Molenpoort was on my very first day visiting the city of Nijmegen. I felt much like Robinson Crusoe; he stranded on a deserted island and had to work with the materials at hand to make a living and survive, I stranded in Nijmegen having to work with the positive and negative influences on a dysfunctional site that would shape my graduation project. Like how Robinson Crusoe in the novel of Daniel Defoe (1897) started to explore the island to get to know his 'treasure' of objects and materials at hand, I started with investigating the city of Nijmegen to get a grip on the city's characteristics, systems and particularities.

After understanding the city a little better, seeing the Molenpoort felt like stumbling upon a strange 'beast' that is hiding within a building block in the city centre, trying to seduce passers-by to come in and spend their money. The initial investigation of the Molenpoort happened from a distance, doubtful and cautious about getting close to this beast. It became clear how it communicates with the people passing by, what its relations are with the surrounding buildings and how its rhythm is; when does it sleep and when does it hunt?

Eventually it was time to come closer and start investigating this organism from the inside. Observations led to conclusions about the beast's skeleton (loadbearing structure) and the spatial regulation of the individual shops. The ambiguous spaciousness is reminiscent of both a Parisian passage and an American mall, where consumerism is celebrated and executed in every aspect. A negative encounter with the Molenpoort's guard showed how the indoor space is regulated with an additional set of rules, but inspired to continue the investigation by having conversations with the present shop owners and customers. This was a way to discover more hidden qualities and problems, such as the Molenpoort's long history, the sense of community between the entrepreneurs and the incentives of the customers.



Figure 1: 'Storyboard of research- and design process'. Own image

By hearing these stories the initially negative view on the Molenpoort shifted towards a more positive one, appreciating its qualities and acknowledging its values. In a way I befriended the beast, and when finding out that the municipality of Nijmegen has plans ready to tear down the Molenpoort and replace it with a generic project where most of the stakeholders are not involved in, I noticed myself switching towards a more defensive attitude. Even though the Molenpoort in its current state experiences a diversity of problems that make it a dysfunctional part of the city centre, I believe that there is potential in the existing material that can be used to create a qualitative, well-functioning place.

The research- and design process up until now has followed a logical storyline that is relatable to Robinson Crusoe's story of how he stranded on an island and started investigated potentially usable objects and materials. The coming process will be about translating the researched aspects of the city of Nijmegen and the Molenpoort into a design, much like how Robinson Crusoe takes elements from his treasury, decomposes and recombines them to create something new with great value. Because of the relatability, the research- and design process will follow a storyline, documented as a travel journal of my adventurous journey of my graduation project. As a logbook, the chapters will contain annotations to specific themes and investigated elements collected in a catalogue-like way. This constructed 'script' will guide me through the process of designing and researching after the P2.



Figure 2: 'Shop owner bringing up memories'. Own photo



Figure 3: 'Molenpoort entrance from Moenenstraat'. Own photo

This chapter describes the site of the project. Following the storyboard, the first part is about the topography, typology and people of the city of Nijmegen, the second part is about the positive and negative local influences on the site, and the third part is about the Molenpoort itself, how can it be understood and what are its qualities and problems?

## THE CITY OF NIJMEGEN

The typology of Nijmegen is shaped by the topography of the city's location. Being situated on a hill next to a river results in height differences within the city that are unique for the Netherlands, and these height differences are dealt with by sloped streets and occasional stairs, influencing the thresholds between public and private areas (Wróbel et al., 2020, p. 145). Nijmegen is a city that is organically growing and reacting to local components, the old streets follow the topography of the city instead of a grid. It could be stated that Nijmegen is a city of mostly porous fabric with bended streets creating intimate spaces for squares and cafés. The scale of the city is sometimes described as village-like, the functions in the city centre are perceived as part of the neighbourhoods that are located around. Conversations with residents documented in 'A-Z, encyclopedia of the Nijmegenaar' (de Cadilhac et al., 2020) point out that there is a large community that wants more public places to socialize and share. An often mentioned example of a popular 'third-place' in the city is the Honigcomplex on the Waalkade, a former factory temporarily inhabited by entrepreneurs that combine production, art, entertainment, dining and small scale retail.

## CONTEXT OF THE SITE

The site of the Molenpoort has a central location, a little on the south-side of the city centre. The location experiences a variety of forces from different sides, making it an intersection of a complex diversity of different atmospheres, functions and routes. The context of the site can be read in a more objective spatially/architecturally way, but also in a subjective socially way. There certainly are positive influences around the site that in the current situation are not being used to their full potential, there are negative influences that cause problems which ideally should be fixed or tamed, and there are opportunities that could be used to create new qualities for not just this city block, but the entire city of Nijmegen. The next paragraphs will address some of these qualities, problems and opportunities.



Figure 4: 'Courtyards of Nijmegen'. Alex Comanceanu

### Church garden

The post-war front facade and clocktower of the Molenstraatkerk are visible from multiple angles in the city, but the neogothic old backside is hidden between the surrounding buildings. Next to the church is a modest garden, on one side enclosed by the old church, and on the other side by a high blind wall of the Molenpoort. In the current situation the garden can only be reached from inside the church and the only way to appreciate its exterior is by looking down from the parking roof of the Molenpoort. This garden with a view towards the old neogothic backside of the church has potential to be experienceable.

### Service side

Towards the Tweede Walstraat the Molenpoort has a small entrance and this is where the ramp towards the parking roof is situated. A wide space is reserved for the delivery of the Coop and Xenos, and there are glass and plastic containers. The space in front of the Molenpoort feels like a service area and has an unpleasant atmosphere, while on the other side of the Tweede Walstraat there are three-storey houses, that could benefit too from a better space in front of the Molenpoort.

### Molenstraat

On the North-West side of the Molenstraat the line of monofunctional shops form a long straight façade, while on the other side the façade jumps in and out, creating areas suitable for terraces for the cafés and restaurants. The stairs in front of the church together with the big canopy create a space where people like to sit and observe others. The Molenpoort façade towards the Molenstraat has a different gesture, being rather flat and simplistic, but has potential to use the freedom of the surrounding facades to also create usable areas for the people.

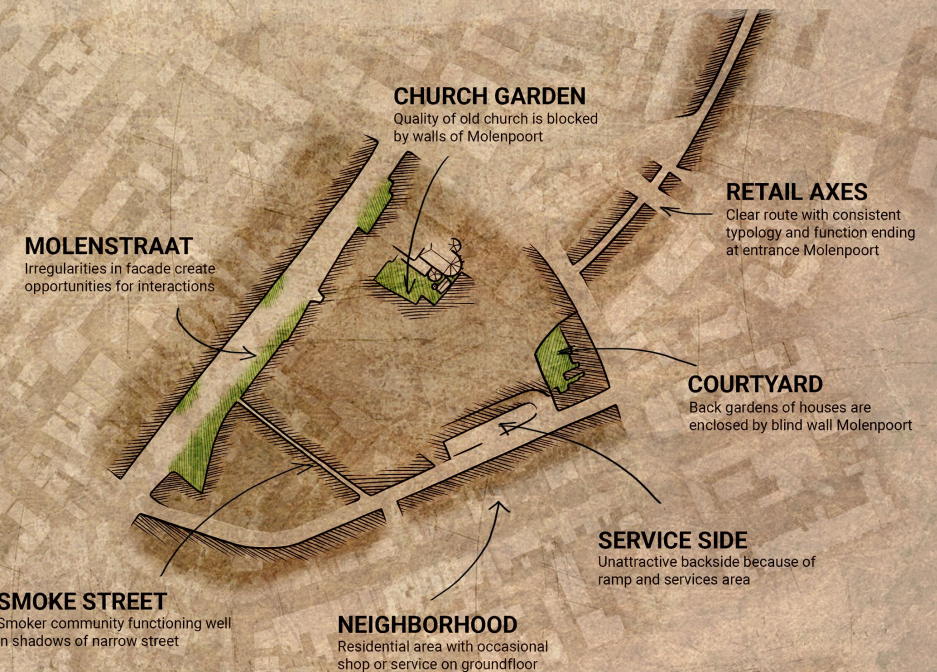


Figure 5: 'Influences on the site'. Own image

## THE MOLENPOORT

Within the urban fabric of the city centre of Nijmegen the Molenpoort has the biggest footprint. The shape of the footprint is irregular because at the time it was built, they just filled the leftover space within the building block (Brinkhoff & Pantus, 1983). Despite the irregular outline, within the building there is a grid which the interior walls follow.

One of the most striking observations about the Molenpoort is that it is an ambiguous space. Even the shop owners disagree about whether the Molenpoort should be called a passage or a shopping centre (Gao, 2020, 00:11:35). Characteristics of both typologies can be found in the Molenpoort, thus to understand the Molenpoort better spatially, the French passages and American malls have been investigated. The next paragraphs will explain some of the similarities and differences between the passage and mall and how the Molenpoort is related to them.

Both the passage and the mall coordinate individual retail activities to create a more attractive environment for shopping. The passage adapts to the city by bypassing the already existing pedestrian fluxes in between city knots (Lemoine, 1989, p. 31), while the mall on the other hand has its own gravity, creating entirely new fluxes of customers by attracting them with anchor shops and providing carparking (Coleman, 2006). The passage is about guiding people through, while the mall is about trapping people inside. Just like the mall, the Molenpoort uses anchor stores in an airconditioned space with parking on top to attract customers, but in the current situation it fails to work with its central location in the city centre of Nijmegen, ignoring present qualities such as the neighbouring church and the successful shopping axes of the Marikenstraat and Molenstraat.

Both the passage and the mall are in a way celebrating consumerism. Where the passage focuses on exclusive luxury products for bourgeoisie and embodying the production of these goods (Lemoine, 1989), the mall is more about affordability for the middle class with elsewhere mass produced mainstream brands (Coleman, 2006). In the passage shop owners form a community, working together, while chain stores in the mall are more individualistically focused on profit. The Molenpoort is mainly about the functional convenience of shopping, where the small community of entrepreneurs needs the popularity of the large chain store magnets.

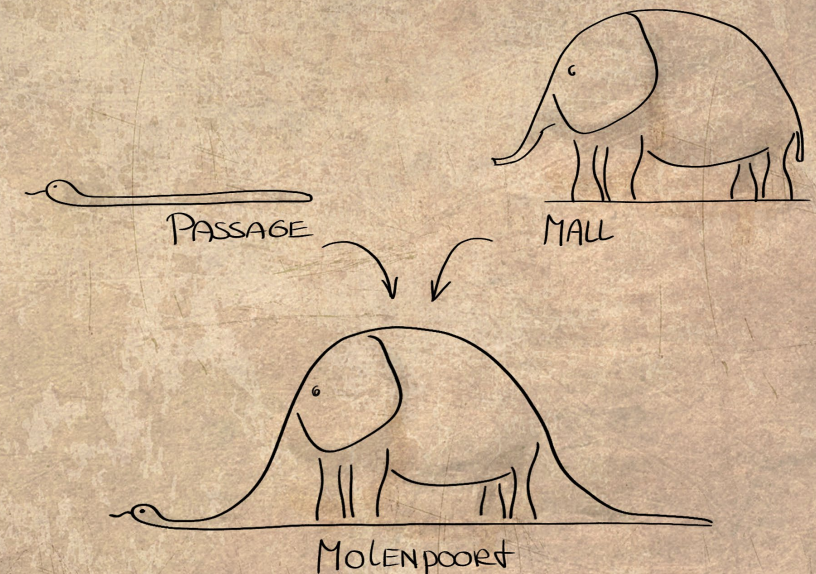


Figure 6: 'Passage or mall?'. Own image

Just like with the mall, when entering the Molenpoort people have to go through doors and after that feel like being in an indoor space, while the passage has no such threshold and feels more like a continuation of the outside street, while having additional benefits such as a roof and being pedestrian-only.



Figure 7: 'Entrance Luna Park Sydney'. Own image

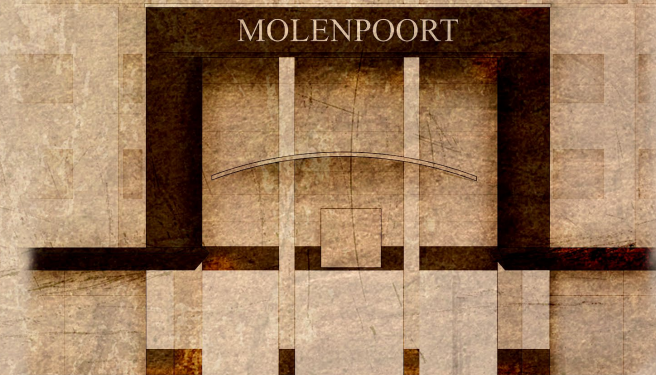


Figure 8: 'Entrance Molenpoort'. Own image



### 3 | THEME

In the process of coming to a design for the future of the Molenpoort different themes, concepts and theories will be relevant and carry the narrative explaining the decisions. This chapter is about the key notions and concepts that will be used throughout the research- and design process.

Every year the visitor numbers of the Molenpoort decrease and together with an exponential growth in shop vacancies the Molenpoort seems to be in a dying state. Where in the past it was 'the place to shop', nowadays people rather walk around it than through. It seems like people just enter the building to go to the Coop or Xenos, or use the roof as a convenient parking spot when visiting the city centre. Shop owners in the Molenpoort blame recent renovations in adjacent shopping streets for the decline in popularity, but the problems are not just happening inside the Molenpoort, the entire shopping area of Nijmegen experiences a decrease in visitors and growth in vacancies. It raises the question whether a focus on traditional shopping is outdated and should be thought-over.

The rise of online shopping is a relevant trend, but the internet has a broader impact on the popularity of commercial spaces. What the flaneur did in the French passages, spending their day looking at activities of others and showcasing themselves, happens nowadays on Instagram. What the teenagers did in the malls, coming together outside of school, happens nowadays on Whatsapp.

There is a change in demand of today's society where cities should try to adapt to. People seek products and activities that they can't experience online, which could explain why some American malls became successful again after replacing big parts of their retail offer by entertainment and gastronomy functions. Ellen Dunham-Jones, professor of architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, states that next to this approach there are two other ways how currently covered shopping spaces are being redeveloped (WIRED, 2019). Some malls are being redeveloped as extensions to the downtown areas by creating a street grid with ground-level retail and apartments above, or by housing community-serving services such as offices, libraries and educational functions. The third approach is to see the unused building as an opportunity to regreen the area by recreating the original landscape or putting in community gardens that then increase the value of properties adjacent to them and again triggers new redevelopments (WIRED, 2019, 08:30–08:47).



Figure 9: 'Molenpoort sign for cars'. Own image



Figure 10: 'Molenpoort parking roof'. Own image

Since the Molenpoort, just like the mall and the passage, is a space dedicated to consumerism, the theme of how commercial spaces are designed is relevant. Theme parks constitute the ultimate commercial environment by offering an escape through experiential design (Miles, 2010, p. 142), therefore the research- and design process could benefit from an investigation of concepts used when designing theme parks. Jan Gehl (2010) adds to this discussion by writing about commercial spaces and the qualities that make public spaces successful. The theme of seeing people and being seen by people, Gehl also writes about this, came up when talking to the owner of the café on the first floor of the Molenpoort. People prefer to sit at the table on the edge of the balcony, so that they can look down on the shopping people and feel like being part of it. Tables on terraces are often facing the street, because people like watching other people.

Another theme that came up in the interviews with the shop owners is that the Molenpoort is privately owned, and therefore adapts to different rules than other shopping areas in the city. Even though it has elements that refer to it being a street, the space is perceived as more private than public. This has some positive effects on how people behave when they are inside of the Molenpoort, relatively keeping it cleaner and treating it with more respect, but it also results in people deciding to not go in, and to not inhabit the space as how they would use the public streets.

Even though the municipality of Nijmegen doesn't own the Molenpoort or the ground where the building is on, they made plans to demolish it in the future and change it into an outdoor shopping area with apartments on top. This seems to be a strategy that the municipality uses more often, an example is the plan to demolish the Honigcomplex, a factory building currently used by a variety of entrepreneurs that create a cultural meeting spot for locals situated next to the Waal, to make place for new neighbourhoods. In both cases the opinions of local stakeholders are being ignored and cultural, historical and sentimental value doesn't seem to matter.

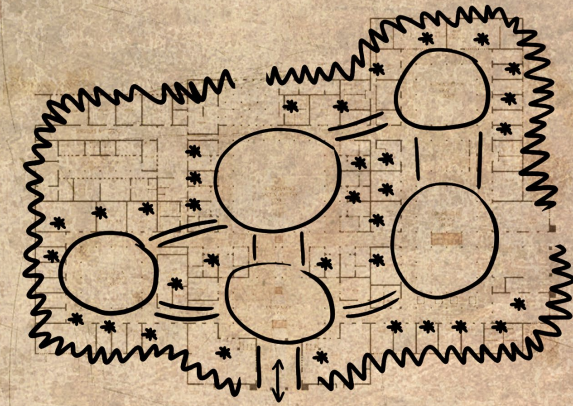


Figure 11: 'Floorplan analysis Intu Elton Mall Newcastle'. Own image

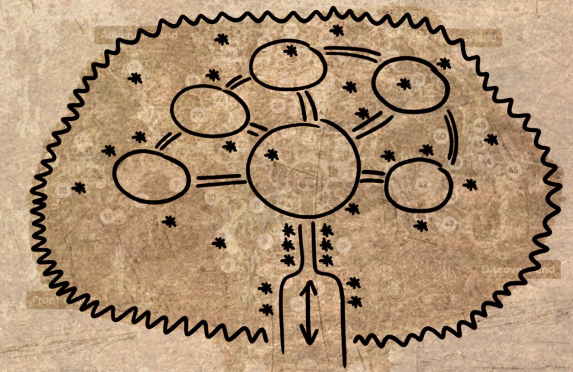


Figure 12: 'Floorplan analysis Disneyland Paris'. Own image

### 3 | THEME

The theme of bricolage, described by Scalbert (2011, pp. 71-86), is an interesting concept for this project because it is in contrast with the approach the municipality had when creating their new plan for the Molenpoort. A bricoleur would recycle as much as possible of the existing material and introduce new concepts that use the elements that are at hand, instead of starting from scratch and building a new shopping area like the adjacent Moenenstraat and Marikenstraat. The theme of bricolage is in line with my personal interest in sustainable building, but also with the city's ambition to become a more sustainable city. Through the act of bricolage, the Molenpoort's future can become an example of how the city wants to execute this ambition.



Figure 13: 'Early bricolaged urban plan'. Own image

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

The composed storyboard functions as a guidance throughout the entire research- and design process. Every finding, conclusion, experiment or thought belongs somewhere within this story. This chapter describes per step of the storyboard which research- or design method has been used, or is going to be used, to come to essential findings within the process.

### 1. Stranding in Nijmegen

Reading literature has helped create an understanding of how the local topography of a hill in combination with a river was an advantageous location for founding a city. An investigation of maps, sections and elevations of the city led to the discovery that the city's typology is influenced by this topography, and characterized by porous fabric with meandering streets that open up to courtyards.

Through mapping the distribution of functions in the city, it could be concluded that in the centre there are retail axes connecting various public spaces with each distinct uses and characteristics. A catalogue of these spaces has been made to create an overview of the diversity, and to check if there are certain public spaces missing within the urban fabric. These findings were tested by interviews with locals, confirming which spaces are meaningful for the community, and these interviews also created an understanding of the characteristics of the people in Nijmegen.

### 2. Encountering the beast

By making an inventory of the local factors that influence the site of the Molenpoort, an overview was created of the qualities, problems and opportunities that the project could address. The four streets that enclose the city block of the Molenpoort each have different characteristics that have been investigated by making maps, sections, elevations and observations. This research led to conclusions about how the Molenpoort is connected to surrounding functions. A thorough analysis of the facades, and especially the entrances of the Molenpoort, formulated an answer to the question how the building communicates with its context. Talking to customers and observing them led to conclusions about their interactions with the building and their customer behaviour. A rhythm analysis showed when the Molenpoort opens and closes, when the deliveries happen and at what time the shops are used the most.



① Stranding in Nijmegen

→ figuring out the place



② Encountering a beast

→ investigating it from a distance



③ Meeting the beast

→ entering the building and observing it



④ Befriending the beast

→ learning about hidden qualities and problems



⑤ Learning about its endangered state

→ Investigating plan of municipality



⑥ Saving the beauty

→ constructing plan to save values



Figure 1: 'Storyboard of research- and design process'. Own image

### 3. Meeting the beast

An observation of the interior of the Molenpoort and interviews with shop owners let to the discussion whether it is more like a passage or a mall. Both typologies were thoroughly investigated through literature and case studies, serving as the two extremes where the Molenpoort is situated somewhere in between. After finding out the spaces are designed from the concept of consumerism, the topic of theme park design became relevant and will be investigated through literature and case studies. An investigation of literature about 'junkspaces' by Rem Koolhaas (2011) and 'non-spaces' by Marc Augé (1995) might be relevant to understand why the Molenpoort doesn't function.

Analysing floorplans and sections resulted in an understanding of the loadbearing structure of the Molenpoort. Within and outside of this structure there is a variety of elements such as the glass roof, the car ramp or the entrance gate that will be systematically collected in a catalogue of present elements and their functions.

### 4. Befriending the beast

Conversations with the guard, shop owners and customers shifted the perspective from an architectural reading towards a social reading of the space. Within the Molenpoort entrepreneurs work together, distinguishing it from any normal shopping street. An investigation of archival historical photos and videos established an awareness of the long and glorious past. Technical documents of the previous renovations in the years of 1985 and 2000 were found and will be analysed to understand how in the past the Molenpoort has been adapted to changing times and needs, maybe initiating new ideas for its future. The interviews with shop owners brought up that for them it has advantages that the Molenpoort is owned by a private company and that the municipality has no power over it, even though they say that they are aware of the plans that the municipality of Nijmegen has for the future of the Molenpoort.

### 5. Learning about its endangered state

The plans from the municipality were investigated, concluding that the Molenpoort will be completely demolished to make place for an outdoor shopping area with housing above. Interviews with the shop owners brought up that they were not at all involved in the process of creating these new plans, and that most of them disliked the Molenpoort being turned into a generic area that Nijmegen already had enough of. An investigation of different recent and future plans of the municipality will help building a statement against the demolishing of buildings like the Molenpoort and Honigcomplex, where communities of entrepreneurs and starters are located.



Figure 14: 'Situating Molenpoort between the two extremes'. Own image

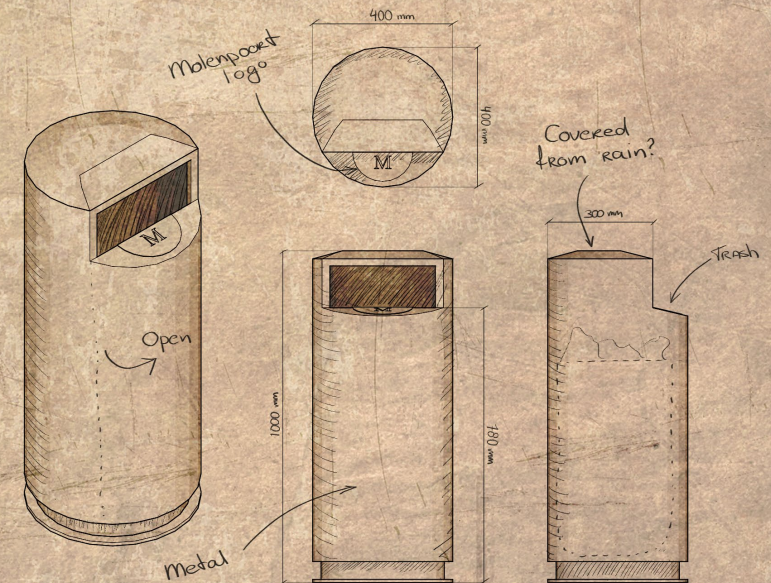


Figure 15: 'Trashcan anatomy'. Own image

## 6. Trying to save the beauty

For coming up with a future plan for the Molenpoort, the earlier mentioned catalogue of present elements will be used as the sort of treasury of the bricoleur, out of which elements will be decomposed and recombined into new fruitful ideas. Through the experimental act of sketching, collaging and modelmaking, together with literature and case-studies about 'placemaking' (Jacobs, 1992) and 'third-spaces' (Oldenburg, 1999), the design for the Molenpoort will playfully take shape. The coming workshop with studio Rotor will hopefully clarify which parts of the construction can be kept, since it is the goal to keep as much of the Molenpoort as possible. Investigation of the work of inspiring architects such as Bernard Tschumi will create a theoretical base which could support design decisions.

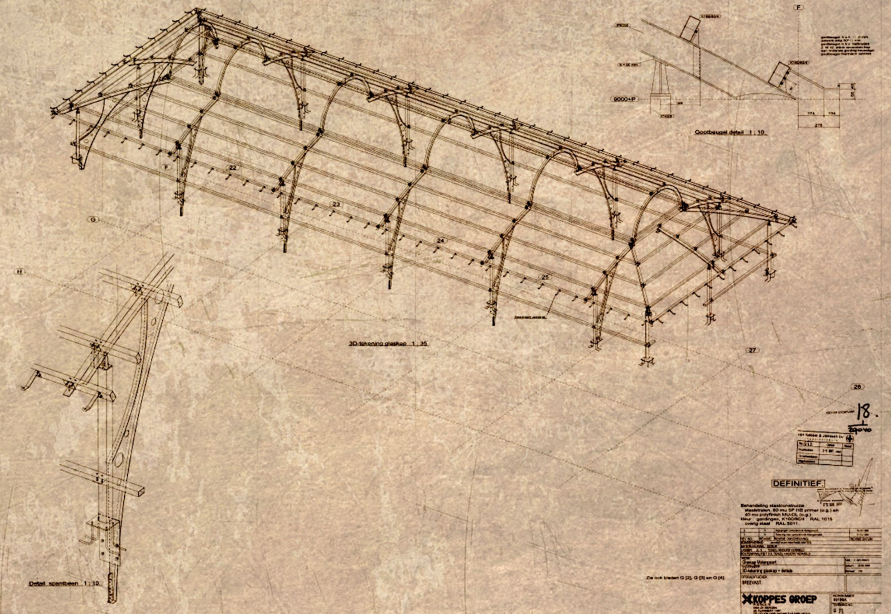


Figure 16: 'Canopy structure'. Ingenieursburo Bartels b.v.

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Figure 17: 'Books for research'. Own photo