

# From city walls to public park:

An examination of J.D. Zocher Jr.'s redevelopment of the defensive walls  
of Utrecht



# Content

Introduction	3
Chapter 1 – historic context	5
Chapter 2 – The establishment of the commission and their goals for the redevelopment of the Singel area	7
Chapter 3 – J.D. Zocher jr.	10
Chapter 4 – Zocher's design: content, reception, and implementation	12
Chapter 5 – Comparing maps: the implementation of the plan in 1838, 1850, and 1874	14
Conclusion	17
Bibliography	18

front cover -Bos, J. (1859). Gezicht op het Begijnbolwerk te Utrecht. Pagina 5 van het Panorama van Utrecht, op de lithostenen getekend door J. Bos,. catalogusnummer: 13005. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archie.

# Introduction

## Object of study

Between 1820 and 1830, the city of Utrecht was bursting at the seams. The population grew from 30,000 to 43,000 in just ten years, leading to a severe housing shortage. The city became increasingly dirty, expensive, and unhealthy, with a growing urgency for expansion. However, Utrecht was still surrounded by its defensive walls. In 1827, the city received permission from the king to dismantle these walls, allowing for redevelopment of the area around the singels (Smit & Radboud, J.D. Zocher jr. 1791-1870, 2018). This redevelopment would not only provide a solution to pressing urban issues but also presented an opportunity to enhance the city's image significantly. This led to the creation of the Commissie tot Uitbreiding en Verfraaijing der Stad Utrecht who opted to transform the singel area into a city park which and expand the city to create more housing and industry, whilst uplifting the living quality of the city. They entrusted the task to renowned Dutch architect and landscape designer J.D. Zocher jr. (Commissie, 1827).

## Interpretive ideas

This research focuses on the development and realization of the urban expansion of the city of Utrecht including the redevelopment of its city walls to city park in the 19th century. It not only examines the execution of Zocher's plans but also the original objectives and the final outcome. This might also give insight in the way J.D. Zocher worked and be indicative for the many other projects he worked on throughout the Netherlands. The main research question is: To what extent does expansion and redevelopment of Utrecht differ from the original goals and J.D. Zocher's design, and what are the causes of these differences?

## Academic context

Not much is known about the way the Zocher family worked on projects. Their personal archive is believed to be lost so the available information comes from splintered archives of municipalities pertaining their local projects (Constance, Baeten, & Boersma, 1991). There has already been extensive research on urban development in the nineteenth century, both within and outside the Netherlands. Cities such as Haarlem, Amersfoort and Leiden underwent similar transformations, where singel areas were converted into public spaces. Historians have often focused on the architectural and urban impact of these transformations, but the specific role of J.D. Zocher in Utrecht has been less thoroughly examined. By examining the background information and original goals for the project, I hope to make a valuable contribution to existing knowledge of the practices of municipalities and designers working in the early 19th century.

## Methodology

The research questions will be answered by looking at primary and secondary sources.

The secondary sources will be used to gain general understanding of the situation in Utrecht before, during and after the single area was redeveloped. The primary sources will be used to describe the commissions plans and to understand the designs of J.D. Zocher. Primary sources include archival documents of the commissions archive that include, records of meetings, letters to and from the commission, communication with the mayor and letters to and from J.D. Zocher. These will be used to establish the goals that were set for the redevelopment and expansion. Additionally, historical maps and illustrations will be analysed to identify visual changes in the singel area.

## Structure

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: The first chapter discusses the historical context of Utrecht in the early nineteenth century and the reasons behind the need for redevelopment and expansion. The second chapter explores the establishment of the commission and its objectives for the redevelopment of the Singel area. The third chapter introduces who J.D. Zocher Jr. was and how he became involved in the city expansion project. The fourth chapter discusses J.D. Zocher Jr.'s design in detail. Chapter 5 compares city maps of Utrecht from 1838, 1850, and 1874 with the original design by J.D. Zocher Jr. This comparison allows us to assess which parts of the plan were implemented during each period and to what extent the commission's original goals were realized, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the findings.



# Chapter 1 – historic context

This chapter explains the context of the redevelopment of the Singel Park. It begins with a brief overview of the history of Utrecht, with a focus on the Singel area and the city's fortifications. It then outlines the reasons behind the redevelopment.

The city of Utrecht has a long history dating back to Roman times, when around 50 AD a castellum was built on the banks of the Rhine. After the Romans left, the Franks settled in the area, and Utrecht developed into an important trading city. In 1122, the city was granted municipal rights, this was most likely a formal confirmation of an earlier granted privilege, and it is likely that permission to build fortifications had already been granted before that time (van der Vlerk, inleiding, 1983). Remarkably, a fairly large area was enclosed by approximately six kilometers of walls corresponding to the area now surrounded by the present-day Singels. This was a very costly undertaking, most likely made possible by the use of existing river courses to dig the moats (de Bruin, 2000).

Initially, the fortifications consisted of an earthen rampart, wooden walls, and strategically placed tuff stone wall sections and towers. After the introduction of brick, the walls were reconstructed using this more durable material (van der Vlerk, 1983). The layout of the city walls remained unchanged for centuries and continued to define the city's boundaries. Streets such as the Weerdsingel, Wittevrouwensingel, Tolsteegsingel, Maliesingel, and Catharijnsingel formed a ring around the old city. Within this ring, space for expansion was limited.

In the nineteenth century, the defensive function of the city walls changed drastically. Due to technological advances, such as the development of modern artillery and the construction of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie in 1824, a system of forts designed to protect the Netherlands as a whole, city walls became obsolete, and even became an obstacle because cities were not allowed to expand beyond them. (Renes, 2005). At the same time, the promise of employment drew people from the countryside to the city. Like many other Dutch cities, Utrecht faced rapid population growth and urbanization. From 1820 to 1830, the city's population grew from 30,000 to 42,000 (Smit & Radboud, 2008)

Within the city walls, there was hardly any room for expansion, which led to housing shortages and unsanitary living conditions. Property owners neglected maintenance, and there was little knowledge of hygiene. As a result, the city was dirty and foul-smelling, and epidemics occurred (Smit & Radboud, 2008). For the wealthy, the city became increasingly unattractive. Due to the unification of the Netherlands and the relative safety that came with it, they began to leave the cities for the countryside (Knippenberg & de Pater, 2011). Utrecht became a place for trade, but no longer one where merchants wished to live.

The situation became untenable. The city needed to expand to meet the growing demand for housing, and the quality of life had to be improved. The mayor established a commission to oversee the expansion project.



Figure 1 - J. ten compe, (1740-1760). painting of Wittevrouwenpoort and bridge. catalognumber 804341. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief



## Chapter 2 – The establishment of the commission and their goals for the redevelopment of the Singel area

When Hubert Matthijs Adriaan Jan van Asch van Wijck became mayor of Utrecht in 1826, he had already studied earlier expansion plans (Smit & Radboud, 2018). In 1664, then-mayor Henrick Moreelse had designed an ambitious plan for a large-scale walled expansion of the city, including 21 new bastions. Moreelse's plan paid particular attention to improving navigation to boost trade. It also designated large areas for systematic housing development (Moreelse, 1664) Although the plan was ultimately deemed too expensive to implement, maps from 1695 show that some canals intended for residential development next to the western part of the city were realized (Vianen, 1695)



Figure 2 - Moreelse, H. (1664, january 23). designplan of the city Utrecht by mayor Moreelse. Catalognumber: 216114. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.

On 3 August 1827, Van Asch van Wijck established the Commissie tot Uitbreiding en Verfraaijing der Stad Utrecht. The commission consisted of seven members, a combination of representatives from the kamer van fabricage (Chamber of Fabricage) and the city council (Commissiet, 3 August 1827) The commission was tasked with investigating how the city expansion should be carried out, with a number of specific focal points (Commissie, 1827):

1. To study earlier expansion plans, especially that of Moreelse, and assess their applicability.
2. To focus on the development of trade and transportation along the North Holland Canal.
3. To investigate to what extent the city walls should be demolished.
4. To ensure that the plan would be financially feasible

Not long after, the commission submitted its advice. Firstly, they stated that the purpose of the expansion was not only to address the housing shortage but also to improve the existing housing for the current population by beautifying the city in general (Commissie, 19 march 1828 p.1). This was expected to encourage the working class to improve the condition of existing buildings. Another aim was to improve infrastructure for shipping and trade, which would in turn contribute to greater prosperity. This prosperity could then be used to enhance the old part of the city, improving residents' health and the circulation of people and goods. In addition to improving the old city, the expansion of housing was intended to meet the growing residential demand.

The commission identified two main goals: firstly, to improve the old city; and secondly, to facilitate expansion and new construction outside the existing city.

According to the commission, Moreelse's plan contained many elements aligned with these goals, but the scale and cost were deemed excessive. However, certain parts could be adopted in the new plans. In the northwest, for instance, houses could be built for wealthy merchants, placing them near the expanding trade district (Commissie, 19 March 1828 p.3)

The commission recommended organizing a design competition for the city expansion plan and the demolition of the walls where necessary. To that end, they drafted guidelines outlining both practical and content-related requirements for submitted designs. In their guidelines and general communication, the commission often referred to named bastions and city gates. These were used as orientation points when discussing certain parts of the city. figure XX Illustrates the situation of Utrecht's walls in 1820, before the city's expansion with these landmarks (author, 1814-1820).

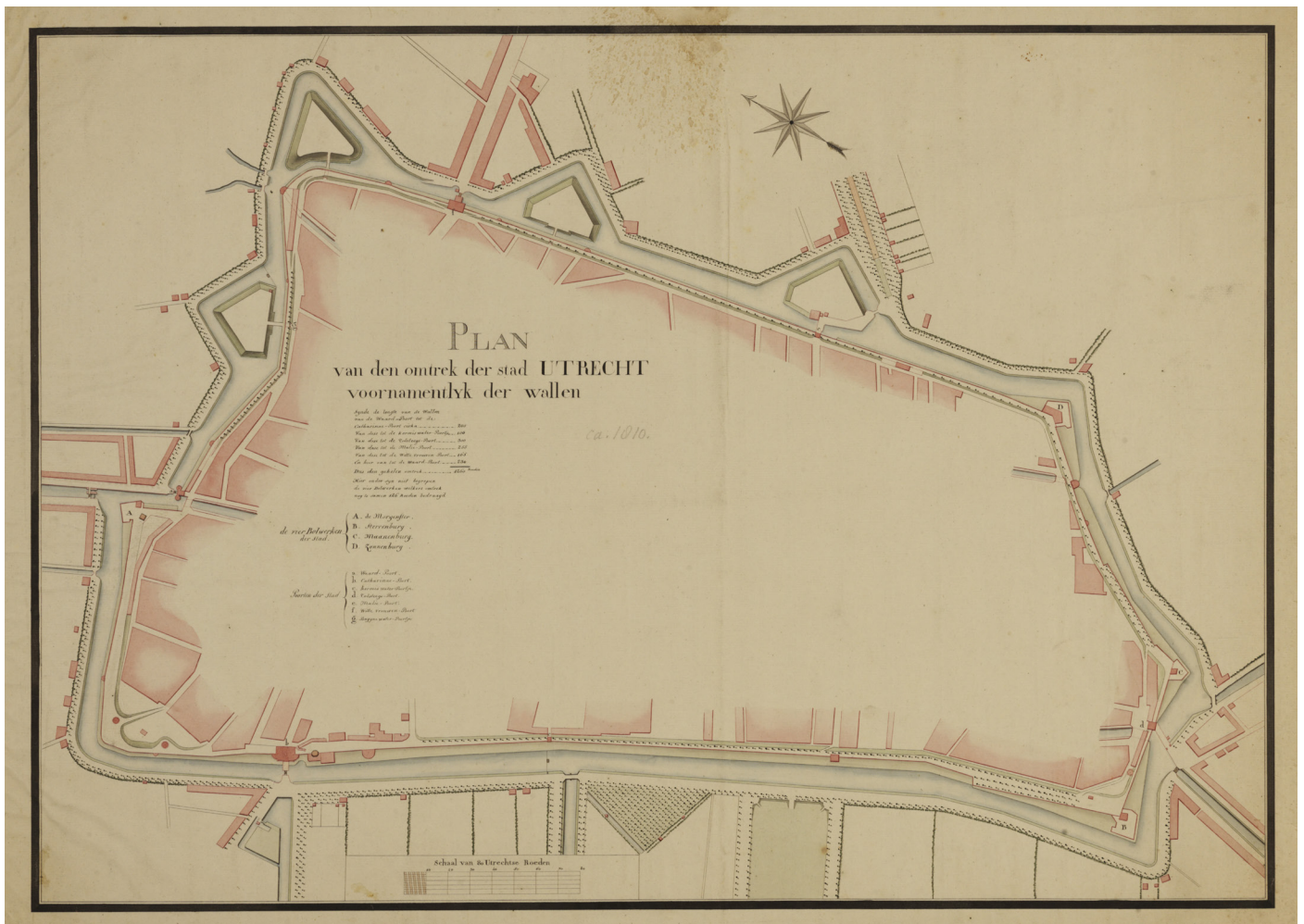


Figure 3 - author unknown. (1814-1820). plan with the city walls, moat and bastions. catalog number 216139. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.



The attached memorandum included the following requirements for submitted designs (Commissie, 19 March 1828).

Practical guidelines for the competition:

- A prize of f 1200 would be awarded to the designer of the winning plan. Designers whose submissions were not selected but contained elements that could be used would receive f 300,- to f 600,-. These submissions would then become property of the city of Utrecht.
  - The plan had to be submitted at a scale of 1:1250.
- Content-related requirements for the design:
- The starting point of the design had to be Moreelse's original plan from 1664.
  - The wall between the Weerdpoort and the Catharijnepoort were to be demolished.
  - The Catharijnepoort itself, and the wall between it and the Mariawaterpoortje were to be preserved due to their historical value and because the wall served as a boundary for a nearby riding school.
  - A basin had to be excavated in the bastion Morgenster to allow boats to maneuver, but the two windmills located there had to be preserved.
  - The remaining bastions were to be preserved, but the canals between them could be filled in to connect them to the city and make them accessible.
  - The other gates and sections of the wall could be demolished.
  - The areas freed by the demolition of the walls on the eastern and southern sides of the city were to be converted into a promenade or city park.

Converting the old defensive structures to parks was not a new idea; similar successful plans had been made in other cities such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Zwolle (Cremers & Kaaij, 1981).

With these findings and guidelines, Van Asch van Wijck personally travelled to The Hague to present the plan to the king and request permission to proceed with the project and organize the competition. According to the mayor, the plan was not only endorsed by the firm language of the Minister of the Interior but also by the speed with which the matter was handled (Commissie, 25 April 1828) (Commissie, 17 May 1828)

Nevertheless, the competition was never held. Mayor Van Asch van Wijck directly approached J.D. Zocher jr., asking him to create a design for the amount of f 1200,-. According to the mayor, this was a safer approach than launching a competition—especially since Zocher had already explored the city of Utrecht (Smit & Radboud, J.D. Zocher jr. 1791-1870, 2008), and the competition would have taken too long.



# Chapter 3 – J.D. Zocher jr.

This chapter describes who J.D. Zocher Jr. was and how he became involved in the city expansion project. Zocher in brief



Figure 4 - Dingjan, A. (1815-1825). portret of Jan Davvid Zocher jr. . catalognumber 107241. Haarlem: Het Utrechts Archief.

## Family Zocher

Johan David Zocher Jr. (1791 – 1870) was an architect and landscape architect from Haarlem. He came from a family of architects and landscape designers, his father Johan David Zocher Sr. and grandfather Georg Michael were both respected professionals in the field. In addition to being designers, the family also worked as gardeners. Zocher Jr. worked under his father and took over his practice after his death in 1817. He studied in Paris and Rome after winning the Prix de Paris competition, where he was trained in classical architecture. Zocher Jr. was a highly productive architect and received commissions from municipalities, wealthy merchants, and both large and small cities throughout the Netherlands.

## Design style

Zocher always designed architecture in combination with the landscape, viewing the two as inseparable. The potential of one could not be fully realised without the other. His architectural work typically followed three styles: neoclassicism, neo-Gothic, and the rustic style. Neoclassicism was the most prevalent in his work, a style he adopted during his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (Constance, Baeten, & Boersma, 1991). His parks were designed in the landscape style, which contrasted with the strict, mathematically symmetrical designs of French classical garden architecture. Instead of straight paths and neatly trimmed hedges, his designs featured winding paths and variation. In the early stages, the landscape style aimed to depict an idealized pastoral landscape (Stichting in Arcadië, 2017), later transitioning to a more expansive and naturalistic English landscape (Oldenburgers Historische Tuinen, 2010).

Little is known about the specific design methods and working practices of the Zocher family. The family maintained their own archive, but it is believed to be lost in a fire. As a result, most available information about J.D. Zocher and his practices come from scattered municipal archives related to their local projects (Constance, Boersma, & Baeten, 1991)

## The selection of Zocher

Mayor Van Asch van Wijck personally asked J.D. Zocher Jr. to create a design for the city expansion. The available archival sources do not reveal whether Van Asch van Wijck considered any other candidates. At first glance, Zocher Jr. seemed a logical choice, he was already highly regarded at the time and had completed similar projects. In 1821, for example, he designed a park on the former fortifications of Haarlem (figure 5)

At the same time, landscape architect Hendrik van Lunteren was also active and based in Utrecht. Like Zocher, he worked in the English landscape style. One of the reasons the mayor gave for selecting Zocher was that he had already explored the city, but the same could be said for Van Lunteren (Oldenburgers Historische Tuinen, 2010). It is possible that Zochers experience and status were the most important factors for selecting him.

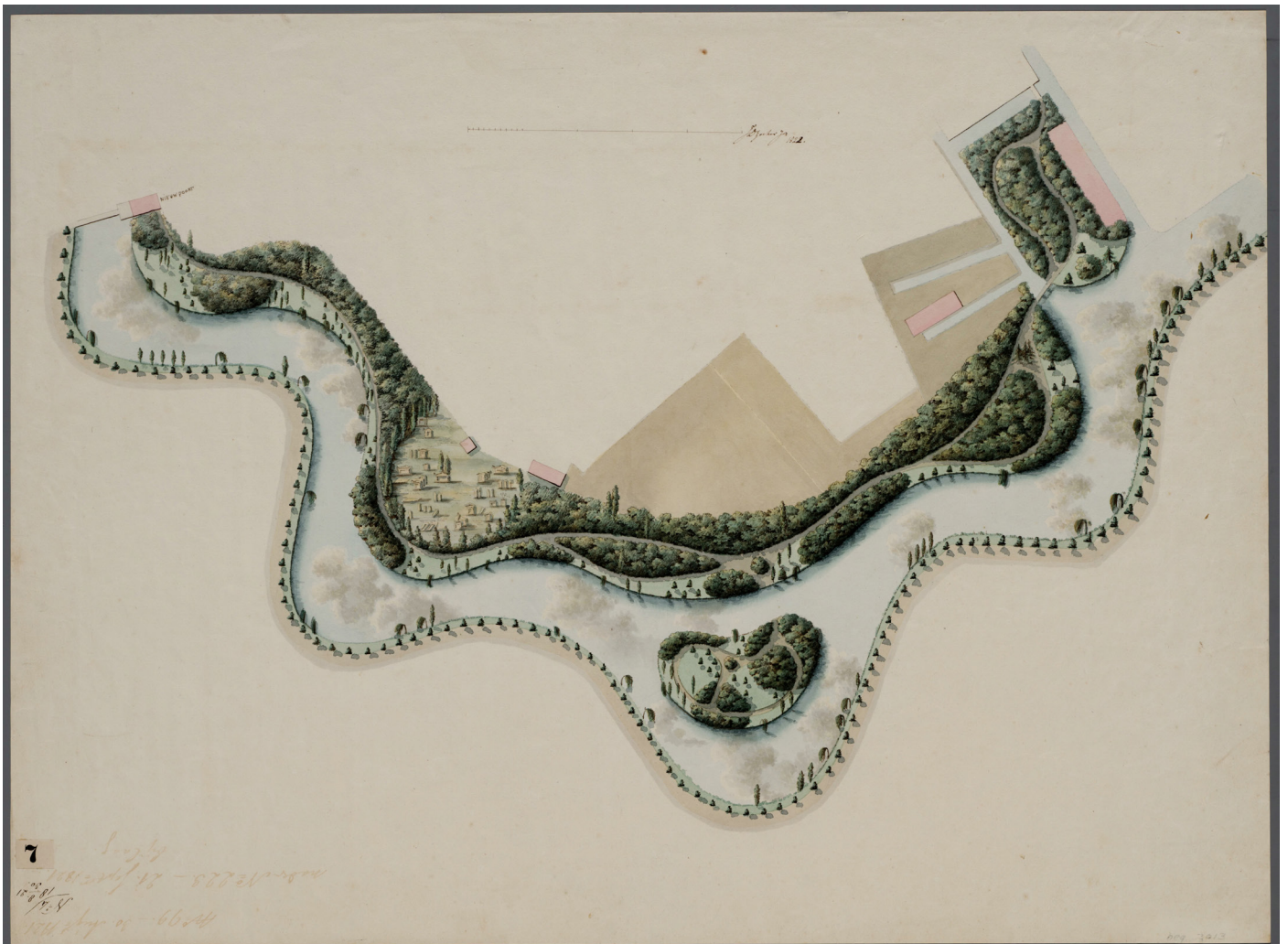


Figure 5 - J.D. Zocher jr., (1821). designplan for development of city parks on bastions of Haarlem. Collection: 1100  
Inventory number: 51898. Haarlem: Noord-Hollands Archief



# Chapter 4 — Zocher's design: content, reception, and implementation

This chapter discusses J.D. Zocher Jr.'s design in detail, providing clarity on the nature of his proposal and allowing us to investigate to what extent it was actually implemented.

## Zocher's design

In 1829, Zocher completed his design. He produced a large-scale map showing the proposed new situation (figure 6). Along the outer edges of the drawing, perspective views were included, depicting both the planned residential expansion and the new city park. These visual materials were submitted to the commission along with a written explanation (Commissie, 1829, Zocher design description). The design appeared to align well with the commission's wishes, as described in Chapter 2. Zocher's written explanation provides insight into his vision for the future of the city. In the drawing, the existing city blocks are shown in light tones, while the proposed additions are colored to clearly



Figure 6 - J.D. Zocher jr., (1829). Designplan of expansion and redevelopment of Utrecht. catalognumber 219016. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.

distinguish the new elements. In the northern (left side of the drawing) and western sections of the city, extensive and carefully planned housing developments were included. Zocher specified strict height regulations for these houses in order to preserve architectural unity.

The channel between the old city and the new expansion was drawn with generous proportions, and Bastion Morgenster was excavated to create a harbor basin, while preserving the two existing windmills. On the city side of the canal, space was allocated for warehouses, allowing merchants to live directly across from their goods and keep a close eye on them. This residential expansion reused canals originally dug for the unrealized Moreelse plan.

In the northeast, Zocher reserved space for a royal stable, as this location connected to roads leading to Amsterdam, The Hague, and Gorinchem. This part of the plan was focused on addressing housing needs and enhancing trade opportunities.

In the eastern and southern areas of the old city, a continuous green strip was included, this was the “wandeling” (promenade) intended to beautify the existing city. Winding paths connect to the existing street network. The drawing also features clusters of trees, lawns, and occasionally villas, whose outlines Zocher drew and colored in pink, as was his usual practice (Stichting in Arcadië, 2017).

The park spanned both sides of the canal, and perspective views reveal the use of natural slopes. Zocher created these slopes using the remnants of the demolished city walls, which reduced the need for additional building materials. Despite the commission’s earlier wish to preserve the Catharijnepoort, Zocher proposed its removal, arguing that it would otherwise be a major obstacle between the old city and the new extension.

### **Commission’s evaluation**

In the report dated 21 November 1829, the commission expressed high praise for the design (Commissie, 21 november 1829). They stated that the plan met the requirements and described it as both efficient and graceful.

The proposals for residential expansion and the new promenade were both complimented, and the commission recommended that the city council follow Zocher’s plan as closely as possible.

However, they did suggest delaying the demolition of the Catharijnepoort and the Wittevrouwenpoort, despite earlier plans calling for their removal.

### **Implementation**

The commission was eager to begin implementing the plan as soon as possible. They recognized that, due to financial limitations, the entire project could not be completed at once and would need to be carried out in phases.

They proposed starting in the north at the Begijnenbolwerk and in the south near the Catharijnepoort. The housing expansion in the western part of the city was also to be phased, with priority given to the development of the new city park. Once again, Zocher was commissioned—this time to execute the first phase of the plan. For this work, he was to receive *f* 21,000. In return, he would design the façades of the houses, provide the drawings, and oversee the implementation of the works. Plants and trees would be sourced from the city’s own gardening department (Claessens, 1973). The works were carried out in a fragmented manner between 1829 and 1861.



# Chapter 5 – Comparing maps: the implementation of the plan in 1838, 1850, and 1874

This chapter compares city maps of Utrecht from 1838, 1850, and 1874 with the original design by J.D. Zocher Jr. This comparison allows us to assess which parts of the plan were implemented during each period and to what extent the commission's original goals were realized. Notes and minutes from the commission are used to explain the possible reasons for deviations between the design and its execution.



Figure 7 - van Baarsel, C. (1838). plan Utrecht and direct surroundings 1838. catalognumber 214031. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.

As early as the 1838 map (figure 7), it becomes evident that the city park was the main component of the plan to be implemented. The old city walls had been demolished, and the parks had been laid out. The intermediate moats between the bastions Lepelenburg, Sonnenburg, and Manenburg were filled in. However, little had been done in terms of the planned housing developments in the west. A few isolated buildings appear on the map, but there is no sign of large-scale expansion. The harbour basin was not excavated either. Nevertheless, a number of warehouses were constructed near Vredenburg (Commission report, July 1834). In this first phase, the focus was clearly on creating the city park and improving the liveability of the old city.





Figure 8 - author unknown. (1850). plan city Utrecht with direct surroundings 1850. catalognumber: 214033. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.

By 1850, more buildings had appeared outside the old Singels. Still, no large-scale expansion had taken place. One notable change is that the city park had been extended further into the southern and southwestern parts of the city. A design drawing by Zocher for this part of the park is dated between 1840 and 1845 (figure 9) Originally, this area had been intended for warehouses, with residential buildings for merchants across the canal. By this time, however, a railway line had been constructed through the area initially reserved for urban expansion, indicating that the housing plans as outlined by Zocher would no longer be fully realized. Again, efforts appear to have been focused more on improving the existing city than on building a new extension.



Figure 9 - Zocher, J. (1840-1845). Designplan for citypark on bastions Sterrenbrug. catalognumber 216213. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.



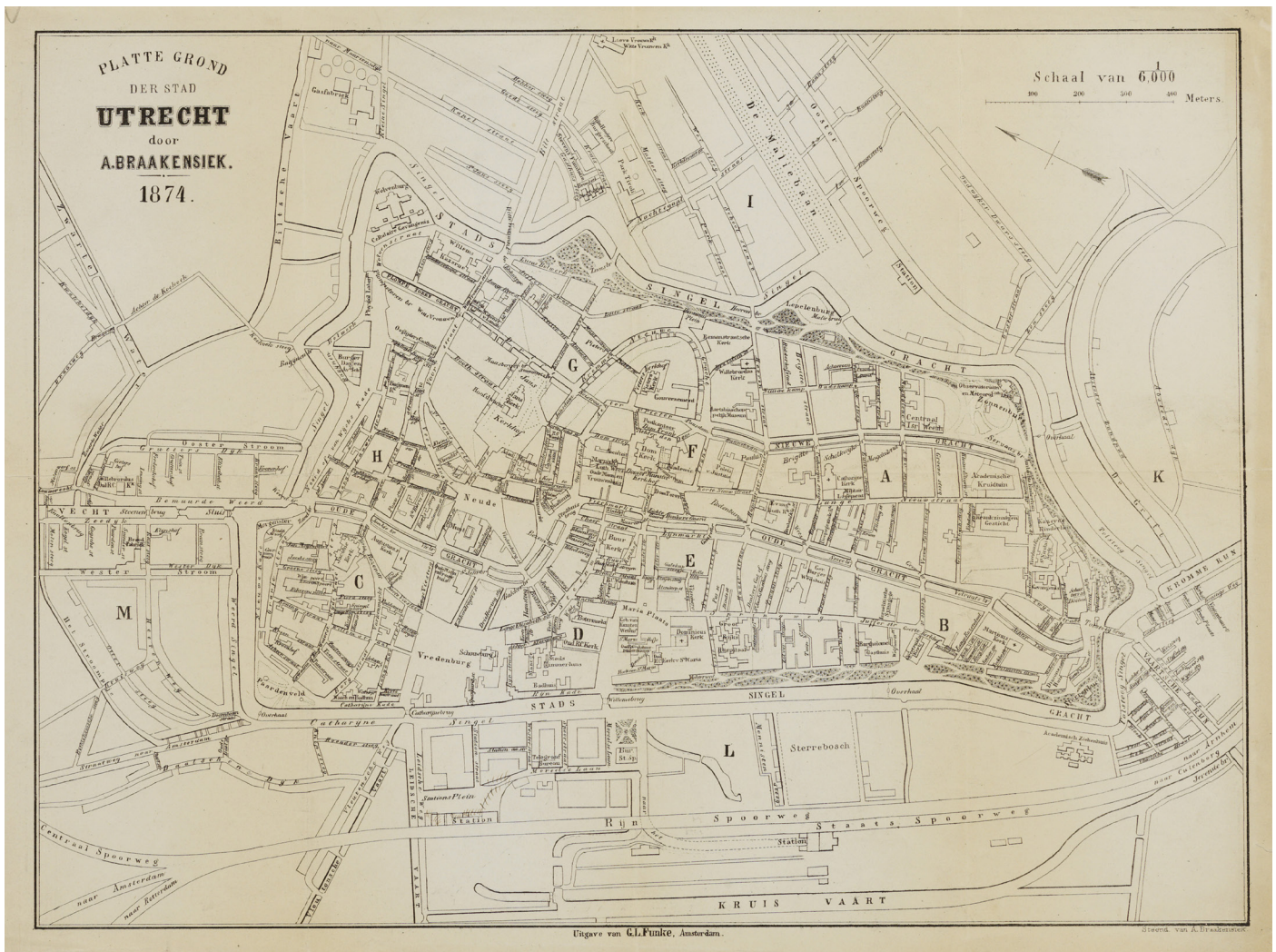


Figure 10 - Braakensiek, A. (1874). Plan Utrecht city and direct surroundings with streetnames and building. . catalog-number 214039. Utrecht: Het Utrechts Archief.

The 1874 map shows all the developments that were carried out under the name of city expansion by the commission. As in the 1850 map, there is still no large-scale urban expansion. The buildings that do appear in line with Zocher's plan are mainly located within the Singels, along the quay. Notably, much of the new development had shifted toward the eastern part of the city. It is possible that the newly built park made this area a more attractive location for development. Ultimately, the parks planned for the opposite side of the canal were never realized.

From the beginning, the commission acknowledged that the project could not be completed all at once due to financial constraints. Throughout the documentation, the two main goals are consistently stated: first, the improvement of the old city, and second, the expansion beyond it. However, the work that was eventually carried out focused almost entirely on the old city. No clear explanation for this shift has been found. From the start of the implementation phase, documentation becomes increasingly scarce. Many later meetings primarily concern land ownership and long-term lease agreements. One possible explanation for the limited urban expansion is that land ownership issues proved too complex to resolve. Maybe the plan was too ambitious, or maybe the commission deemed the redevelopment of the old city to be more of a priority.

# Conclusion

The findings show that although the commission and Zocher intended to achieve combination of urban expansion and redevelopment of the old city, the implementation prioritized the development the later. Large parts of the housing expansion, as outlined in the original plan, were never realized. Instead, the emphasis shifted toward enhancing the quality of life within the existing city boundaries rather than expanding beyond them.

Zocher's design was ambitious and multifaceted, incorporating residential neighborhoods, trade facilities, a royal stable, and a landscaped promenade. The commission praised his work for its aesthetic and practical merits. However, the phased execution of the plan, changes in political and economic priorities, and possibly unresolved issues concerning land ownership may have contributed to the limited realization of the design, although these hypotheses could not be confirmed with the available archival material.

Moreover, the research highlights Zocher's capacity to produce a coherent and well-integrated design that largely adhered to the commission's guidelines. At the same time, it illustrates his willingness to adapt or challenge these guidelines when he believed they conflicted with the integrity of the overall plan. A clear example is his decision to remove the Catharijnepoort, despite the commission's initial preference to preserve it.

This research aim was to examine the extent to which the 19th-century expansion and redevelopment of Utrecht deviated from the original goals of the Commissie tot Uitbreiding en Verfraaijing der Stad Utrecht and from the design created by J.D. Zocher Jr. It also aimed to identify the underlying causes of these deviations. While the research clearly demonstrates that the final result diverged from both the commission's vision and Zocher's design, it was not possible to conclusively determine the reasons behind these differences.

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