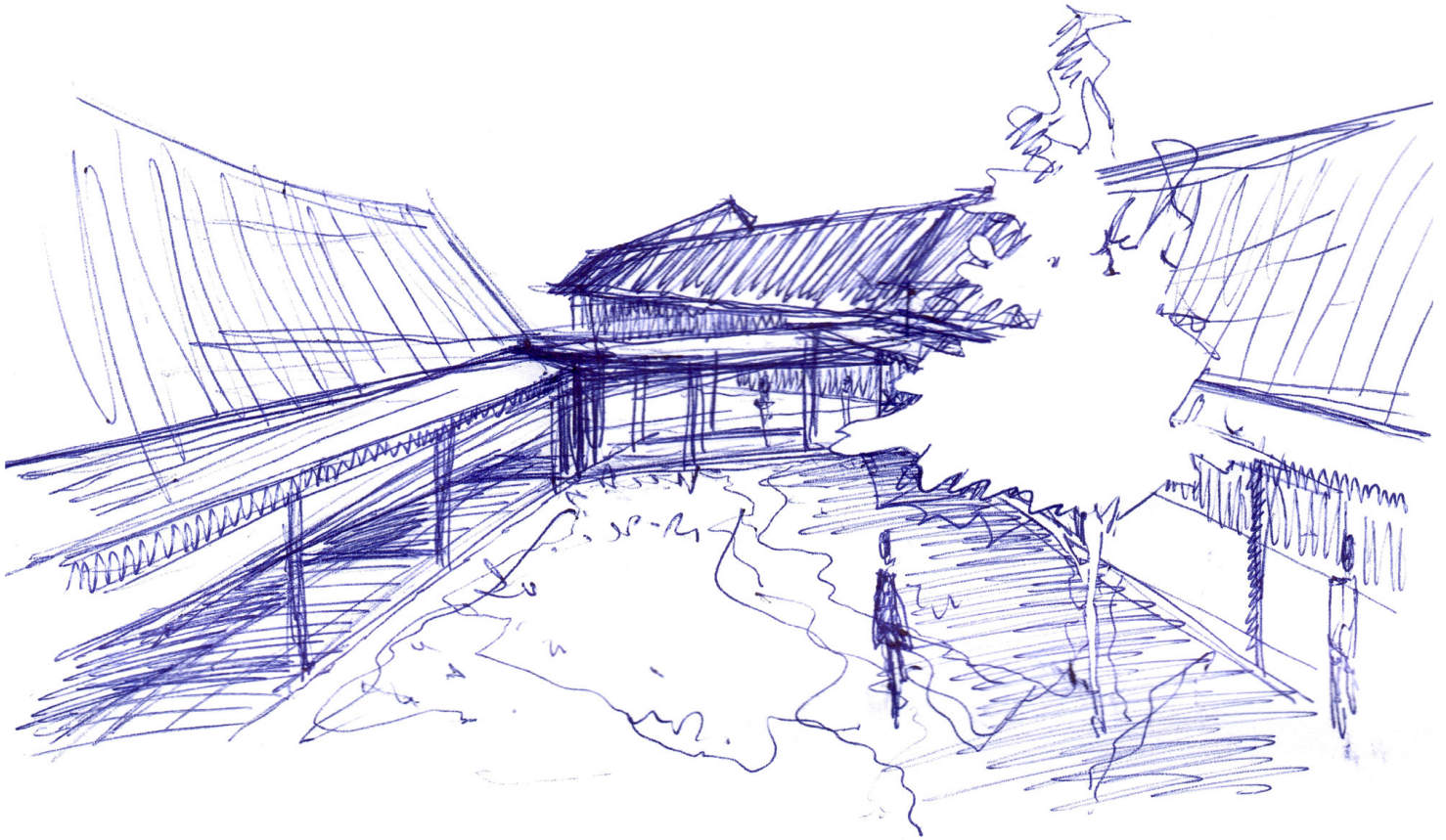


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12.06.2026

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Islands of Refuge

Reframing the concept of refuge in Ter Apel

Key words: Tourism, Ter Apel, Refuge, Monastery, Nij Begun, Groningen, Architecture

Public Building Graduation Studio
Graduation Report

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Introduction

The regions of Groningen and Drenthe in the Netherlands have a long history of extractive (economic) processes that have left deep scars on the landscape and the daily life of its residents.

In response, *Nij Begun* was established: a 30-year plan recently implemented by the Dutch Government to build a better future for the regions of Groningen and North Drenthe. *Nij Begun* targets areas that have been affected for decades by practices of gas extraction and as a consequence also by several earthquakes, causing serious damages to buildings as well as economical and mental damage to its inhabitants. (Nij Begun, 2026).

This problem statement, and initiative to solve it, serve as the context for the Public Building Graduation Studio. The assignment is to work alongside this 30-year plan and create a so-called *tourism-hub* in the quiet yet (in)famous village of Ter Apel; a small village in the south-east of Groningen.

Ter Apel is nationally known for its Asylum Seeker's Centre and the issues surrounding its overcrowding; leading to unsafe situations and inconvenience for both the local community and the asylum seekers themselves.

Amidst this tension and social friction, the only surviving rural monastery in northwestern Europe stands as a living blueprint for a new, yet historic, kind of 'refuge' that serves both the tourist and the asylum seeker.

The monastery embodies an ancient tradition of hospitality; a historical 'refuge' that once provided sanctuary, contemplation and community.

In its current capacity as a museum, the monastery remains a static relic of the past. By re-engaging with Ter Apel's monastic heritage, and going beyond its current function as a museum, this project seeks to redefine the connotation of 'refuge' in Ter Apel by creating a new tourism-hub.



Figure 1:
Klooster Ter Apel

(Monumenten-
portaal.nl, 2026)

Problem Statement

Domus Novae Lucis

The village of Ter Apel originates from a 15th-century 'Kruisherer' (Crosiers) monastery which was established on a strategic sand ridge amidst the Bourtanger Moor; once the world's largest peat bog. This monastic settlement, *Domus Novae Lucis* (*House of the New Light*), functioned as a religious and physical outpost in a hostile and isolated landscape, introducing the first visitors to the region: pilgrims and travelers seeking hospitality and refuge. However, due to religious shifts and a radical transformation of the landscape through peat extraction, the monastery transitioned from a vital religious center to a sequestered historical monument. (Herwig, 1916).

Today, Ter Apel faces an identity crisis: it is nationally synonymous with negative associations around the Asylum Seekers Center (AZC); a place defined by its 'temporary transit', while Ter Apel's village centre lacks character and purpose. These conditions have resulted in Ter Apel being socially and spatially fragmented. The monastery is nestled within the forest on the eastern side of Ter Apel, while the AZC sits within the open landscape on the western side. The village centre, physically caught inbetween these two worlds, fails to mediate the tension between these two extremes. (OKRA, 2025)

The introduction of the Nij Begun Agenda offers an opportunity to bridge these gaps through the introduction and development of tourism. However, the remaining challenge doesn't lie in tourism in and of itself, but in defining a form of tourism that is context sensitive, socially inclusive and spatially meaningful.

This graduation report will explore how the typology and archetype of a crosier monastery can serve as a design catalyst for a tourism hub that embraces Ter Apel's monastic heritage and its values of social inclusion, ecological restoration, and personal reflection.

It recognises that the current monastery exists as an island of 'historic' refuge, detached from the daily life of the village and the complex social reality of the AZC, and will try to use this profound monastic heritage as a catalyst for a new island of refuge.

This research will also explore the need and creation of a contemporary or 'modern' monastery that doesn't merely look at the old monastic values in the setting of a museum but instead activates and contemporises them. The aim of the new touristic hub will be to transform the image of Ter Apel from a mere 'passing through' towards a destination of 'meaningful refuge'.

Problem Statement

"Ter Apel faces an identity crisis, both in its urban and architectural context as well as its national image and identity. How can the concept of refuge be reimagined as a constructive, unifying force rather than a source of social and spatial division?"

Main Research Question

"How can the presence and historic influence of the crosier monastery *Domus Novae Lucis* in Ter Apel serve as a design catalyst for a tourism hub that embraces Ter Apel's monastic heritage and its values?"

Relevance & Aims

Ambition and Contribution

The choice of this research question stems from a personal interest I've always had in the historical layers behind a given site or context. When I was assigned to the group 'past-present-future' within the analysis phase of the graduation studio, I was delighted and inspired to discover what stories lay behind the preconceived image I had of Ter Apel.

Through my belief that architectural design should not be an 'outside' intervention but instead a continuation of historical narratives, I was inspired by the monastery's role as a centre for refuge in a hostile landscape and how the village of Ter Apel has since evolved into the complex social and spatial reality we see today. I aim to study, adapt and create a dialogue between the old and the new 'monastery' where the old monastery's spatial and social logic is used to address the village's current identity crisis.

Ambition

This project envisions a new phase in Ter Apel's history where the village is no longer seen as a fragmented border town, but instead functions as a cohesive landscape of sanctuary; just as it was characterised centuries ago. My ambition is to prove that the architecture of the past can serve as an effective tool for current architectural interventions.

The second major ambition is to leverage 'tourism' as a bringer of social repair. The site's position next to the AZC results in a shared space for tourists, asylum seekers and local residents. I aim to bridge these isolated 'islands' through an architectural intervention that treats tourism as a healing industry, rather than an extractive industry.

Contribution for Ter Apel and Society

My project will target a specific, already present tourist profile: the 'active peace seeker'; tourists who value authenticity, natural immersion and personal reflection. This aligns with the *CittaSlow* philosophy, a global movement focusing on 'slow tourism' which prioritises authentic experiences and care for nature. The municipality of Westerwolde, which Ter Apel is a part of, embraces the focus on this type of tourism. (*Citta Slow Nederland*, 2018).

My design introduces 'islands of refuge' as a contemporary architectural interpretation of monastic spaces where visitors can unplug from their daily lives and find peace. These islands serve as a starting point to engage with Ter Apel's beautiful nature, cycling- and walking paths, but also with a person's own self and other communities.

By reactivating monastic values in a non-religious form, my project aims to facilitate a space for both personal and social healing. This celebrates Ter Apel's unique geography as a place of deliberate peaceful isolation, instead of forgotten exclusion.

In addition to the social contributions, my project also aims to economically benefit Ter Apel and its residents. By shifting the national narrative of Ter Apel as a negative centre for refuge towards a centre for constructive refuge, the tourism hub will increase Ter Apel's attractiveness; both for tourism and other investments.

By specifically catering to 'slow' tourists who tend to stay longer and deeply engage with the region, the project will also help the local economy as this type of tourist values local products and services.

Approach

Scope, Research Questions and Methodology

The scope of this graduation project is centred on the village of Ter Apel, located in the southeastern corner of the province of Groningen, The Netherlands. Within the public building graduation studio, the task is to develop a tourism-hub situated on a site defined by its touristic potential and relation to the village and azc.

The programmatic brief calls for a hub that is: '[...] symbiotic to, or integrated with, multiple facilities in order to accommodate both visiting tourists and the local travelling community' (Public Building, 2025).

By 2040, the Nedersaksen train line will connect Ter Apel to a cross-regional network. Responding to this site of transit, my project translates the brief into three interconnected zones.

Mobility and Arrival:

The entry sequence of this public building is defined by the railway station. This zone will feature a covered waiting area, ticketing and rental facilities, and a mobility hub of 450-750m² for bicycles.

Civic and Cultural Exchange:

To foster interaction across Ter Apel's diverse demographics, the hub incorporates a 100–150 m² theatre, a 200m² café/restaurant and a 100m² exhibition space. Paired with local retail and kiosk spaces closer to the station, these functions form an accessible, shared ground for community life.

Hospitality and Refuge:

The brief also includes dedicated guest accommodations, comprising of ten 30 m² rooms, alongside reception and support offices.



Figure 2:
Site Area Ter Apel
(Public Building ,2025)

Research Approach

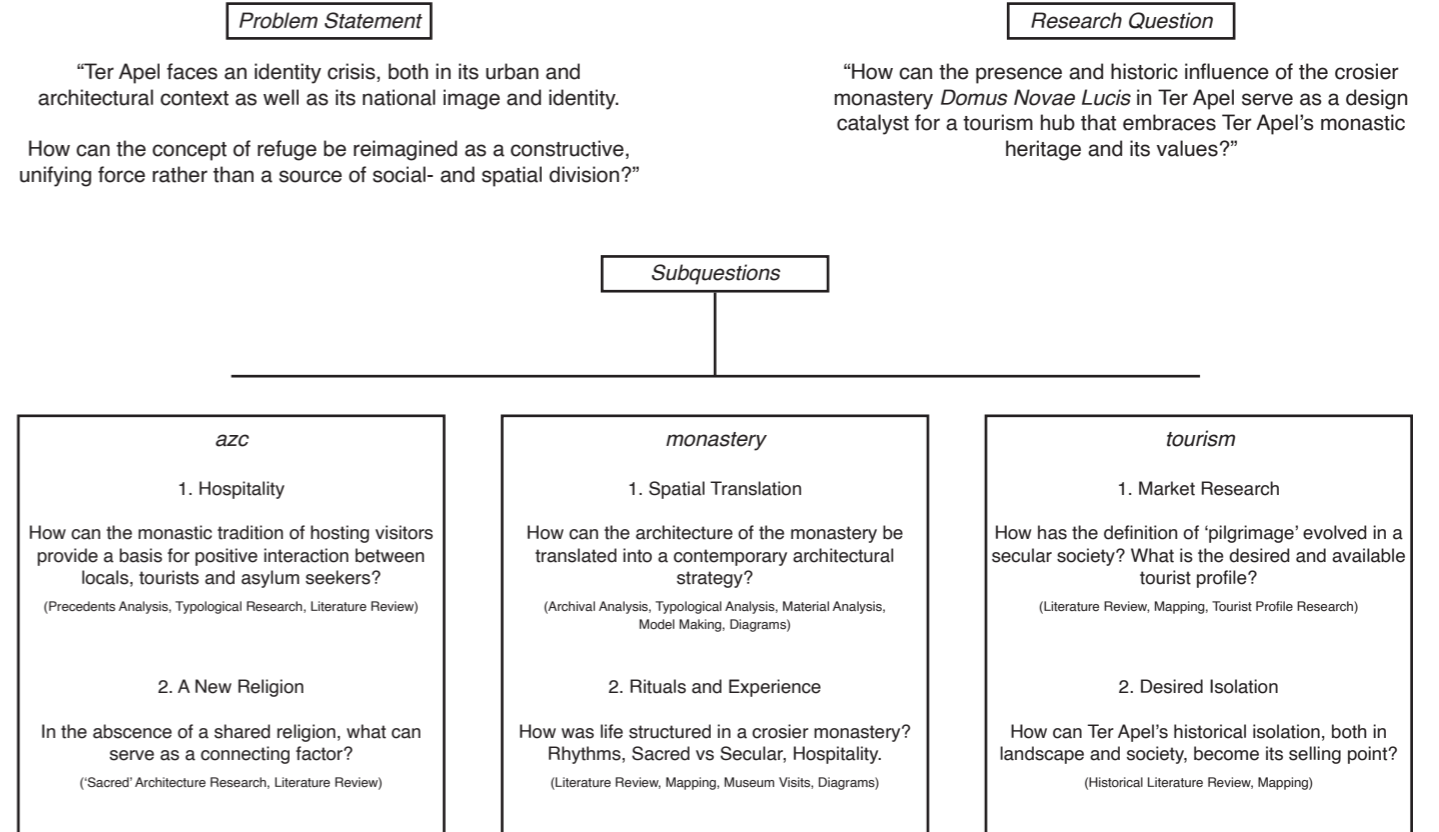


Figure 3:
Research Approach

In order to come up with an appropriate final design, this graduation report will utilise the research by design methodology. Rather than using a linear and separate progression from analysis to design, this approach treats research and design as integrated and merged concepts; an iterative loop where sketching, modeling, mapping, etc. become just as important as ‘traditional’ forms of research.

In the figure above, I've summarised my plan for the A1 period. I want to systematically move from problem statement and research question towards specific subquestions and themes. These themes are the monastery, tourism, and the azc. Within these themes, I will explore specific typologies, rituals and social relations.

Coming up with good answers to these questions will be done through the research-by-design method. I have listed specific (architectural) analysis methods that will guide me throughout this research, and by actively designing and testing out what I've learned, I will progressively come up with better design solutions.

This process will become an ‘active research’, a back-and-forth process where I will be moving from research to design and from design to research. The entire process becomes an evolving framework that adapts based on new findings, ensuring that the final intervention provides a meaningful, context sensitive response to Ter Apel's unique challenges.

Results

Research and Design Results

The transition from the initial preparation phase (A1) to the active design period (A2) and the finalisation period (A3) marked a shift from a structured planning and research phase, towards a period of iterative, integrated design.

While my original research approach was divided into 3 specific topics: the monastery, tourism and the azc, the reality of the research-by-design process quickly revealed that these categories didn't allow for isolated research. Instead, I've come to realise that my research plan and subquestions should not remain parallel paths but should rather intertwine and integrate into a dialogue where every variable influences the other.

In addition, I've also found that moving from a metaphorical and narrative-based research towards a period of spatial decision-making has proved challenging. Translating the story of Ter Apel, a story of peat extraction, monastic isolation, and current social friction, into a physical building turned out to be more complex than I initially anticipated. There is no physical blueprint for a contemporary 'Island of Refuge', meaning I was assigned to define the abstract concepts of hospitality, contemplation and isolation towards tangible, fitting design constraints. I had to move past the safety of my concept and story into the vulnerability of the drawing board.

In this chapter I will share my design and research process during the A2 period followed by my A2 results, as well as the results for my A3 presentation. For the A2 part I will mainly share my process of testing, discussing and reflecting with my tutors and peers, while the A3 part will focus on specific design decisions such as lay-out, materials, etc.

A2

The development of my design during these 10 weeks can be categorised into three distinct stages:

1. The Discovery Phase (Week 1-3)

A period of exploration, with a focus on the Ter Apel monastery as a literal precedent; researching monastic life and the practices of the Crosiers.

2. The Adjustment Phase (Week 4-6)

A period in which I began to bridge the gap between the historical values and the modern programmatic brief. Moving away from literal, historically inspired lay-outs; trying to find a logic that works for modern tourism.

3. Preparing for Presenting (Week 7-9)

A period of making the first 'final' design decisions. Shifting the focus back towards creating a cohesive story where the landscape, the building, and the narrative converge.

These phases will be discussed further in the coming pages and will be followed up with final results during the A2 and A3 periods.

A2 - The Discovery Phase

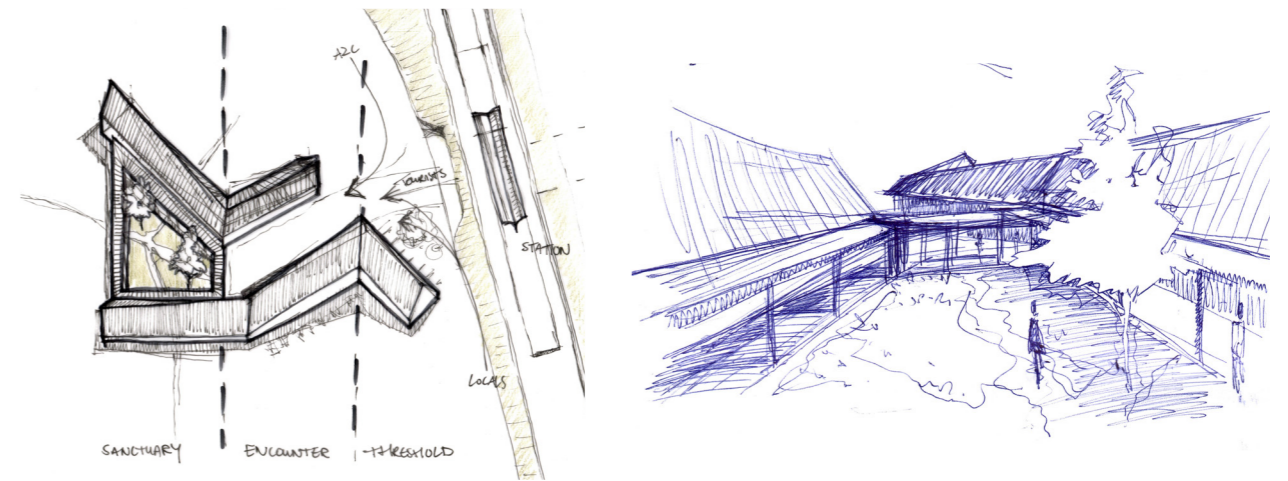
Week 1 - Moving Past A1

In the following pages, I will briefly describe my weekly progress and challenges. I will discuss specific design decisions that relate to my choices in program, users, circulation, etc.

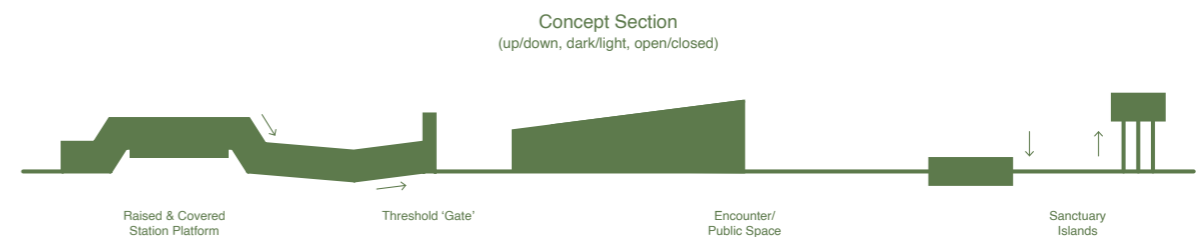
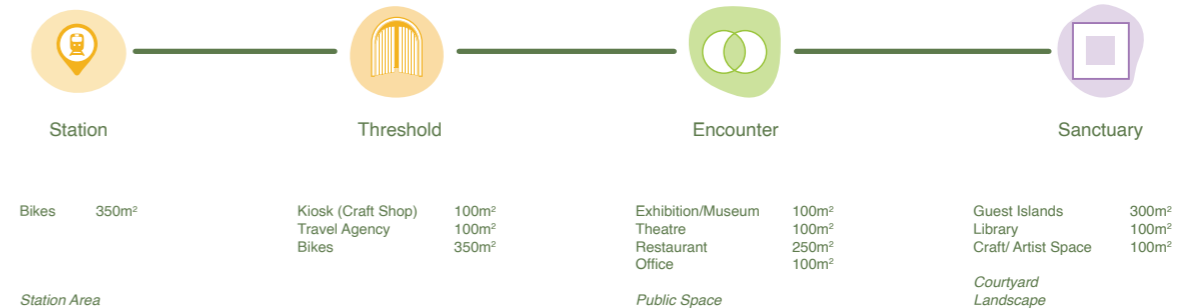
All these topics were still largely undefined directly after the A1 presentation. I started off with a quite literal application of a monastery onto

the landscape; however, I wanted to move beyond a nostalgic architecture and towards a new typology that is public and accessible.

The first two weeks during the A2 period were therefore filled with varied attempts at getting a grip of the programme and the sequencing in which I wanted to arrange it.



Total: 1950m²
(excl. outdoor)



A2 - The Discovery Phase

Week 2 - Programmatic Tests

My first attempts of this are demonstrated below. My first tests already consisted of pulling apart this 'historic' monastic typology; a central courtyard with the functions spread around.

The four specific 'moments' I had in mind during the journey (pilgrimage) of the tourist consisted of : the station, the threshold, the encounter and the sanctuary. This sequence is inspired by my research during A1, with a clear divide between 'sacred' and 'secular', private and public.

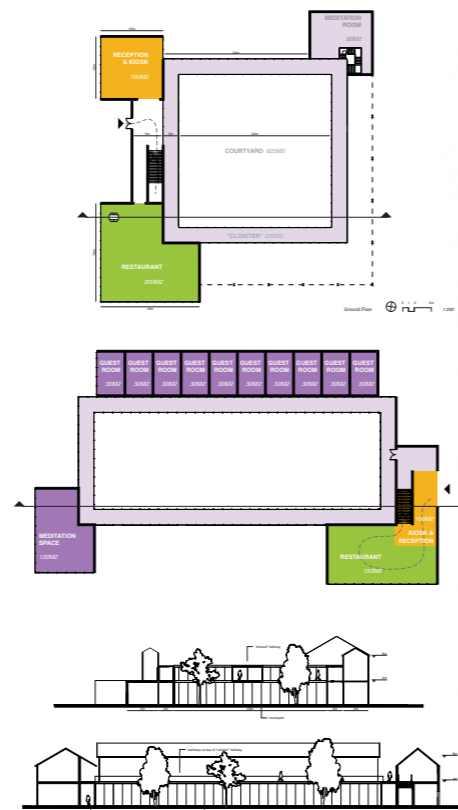
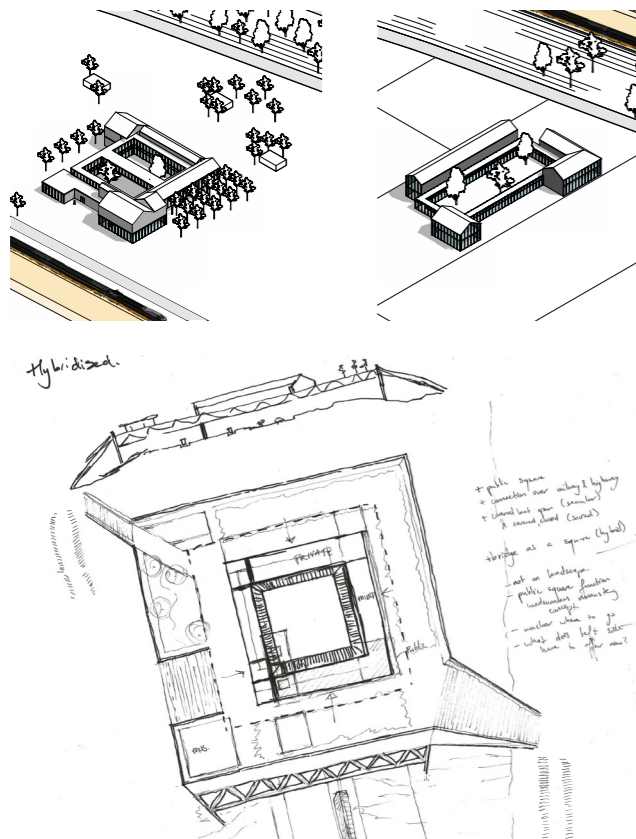
Given these ideas of the program and sequencing, I attempted three options. These options differed mostly

in their circulation and their relationship between public and private.

Option 1 was a 'compact' way of arranging the spaces, where the visitors and 'monk' (dedicated tourist) were separated vertically with little interaction.

Option 2 separated sacred and secular horizontally. This option kept everything at the ground level and created a clearer, longer sequence of spaces connected through the courtyard.

Finally, for option 3 I was inspired by a reference by Openfabric, where a bridge spanned over a railway and through its shape turned into a square.



A2 - The Discovery Phase

Week 3 - Poster Pitch

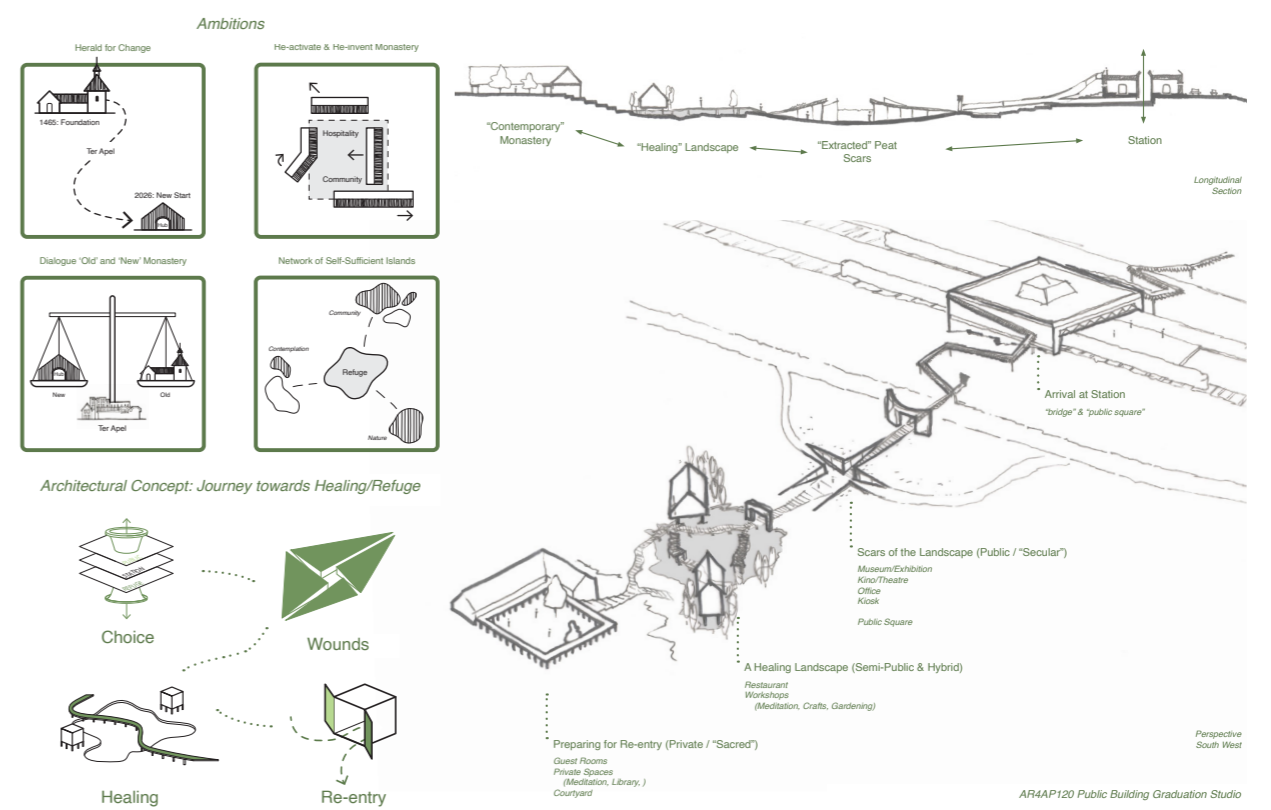
Following the discussion with my tutors the week prior, I realised a literal translation of monastic typology wasn't appropriate for the situation. Instead, I created a literal sequence of spaces and experiences along a central path.

The poster presentation for Nathalie de Vries from MVRDV that week was a moment of feedback from someone who wasn't familiar with my project and had to understand it fully looking at only one poster. It created a moment of reflection and an insight on what areas it was most important to focus on.

A specific piece of feedback I remember was her comment on how my buildings were starting to feel like a theme park

placed onto the landscape. I realised I needed a stronger (physical) framework attaching these experiences together and placing them within a certain context.

My focus became the landscape and its scale. Where at first the green meadows seemed simple to understand, there was a lot of complexity yet to be revealed.



A2 - The Adjustment Phase

Week 4 - OMA Reference "Parc de la Villette"

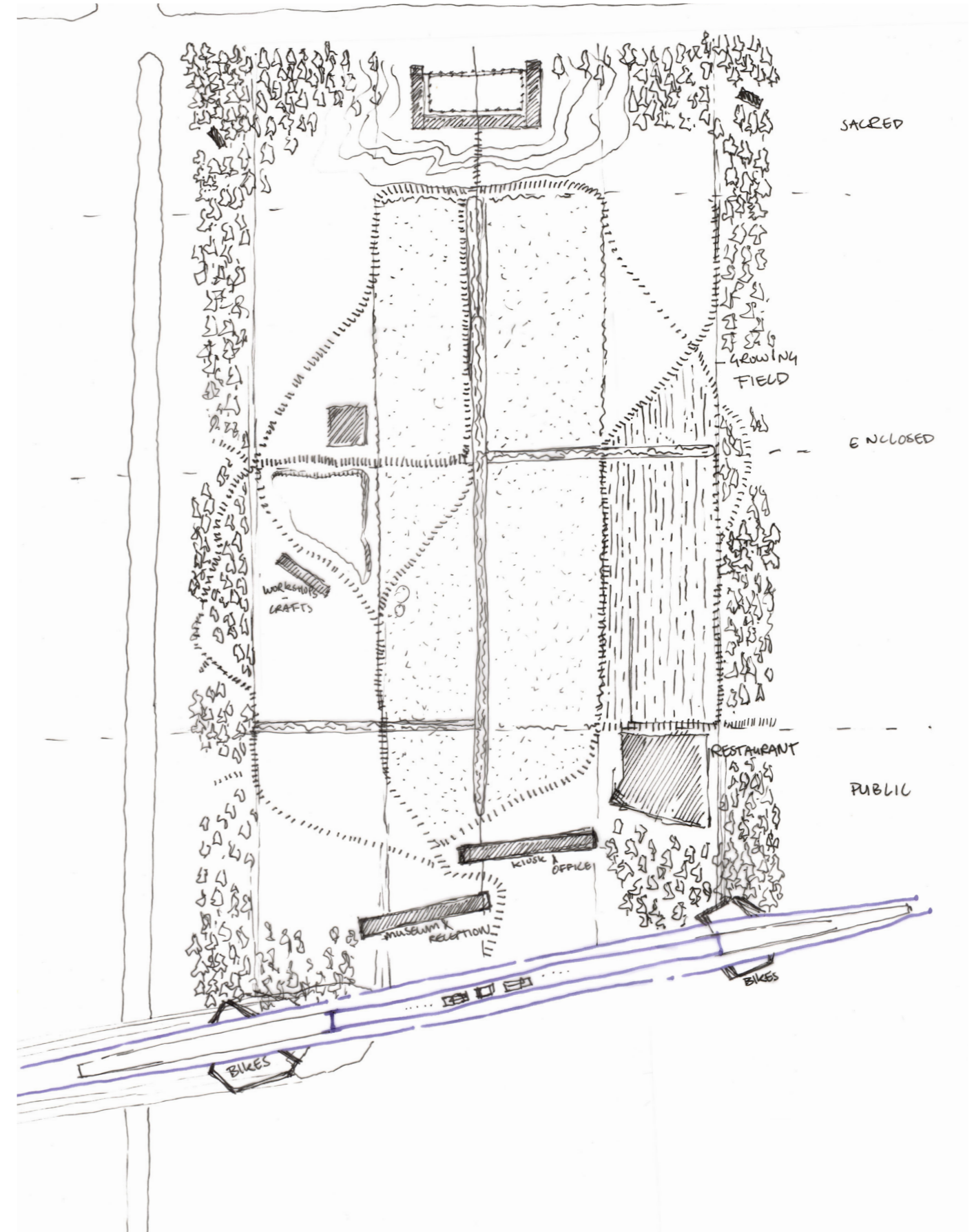
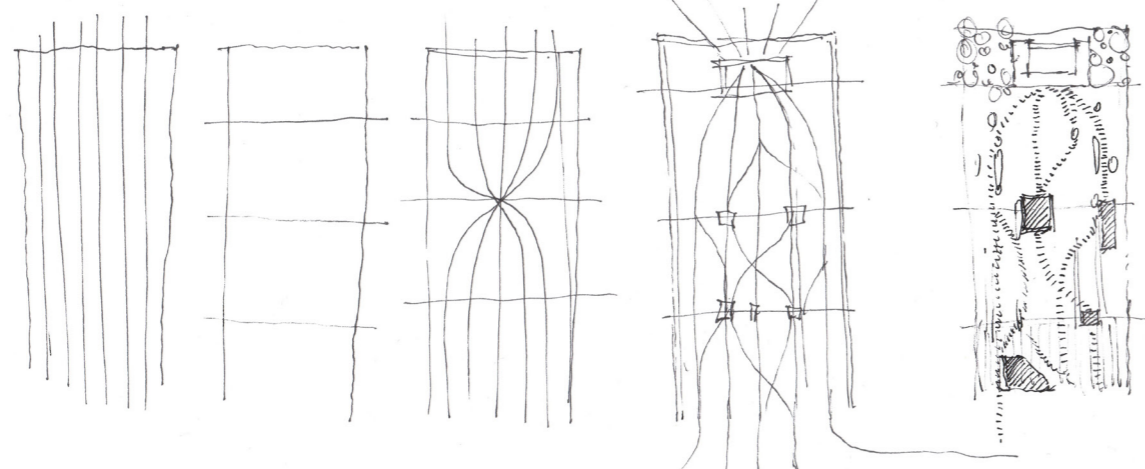
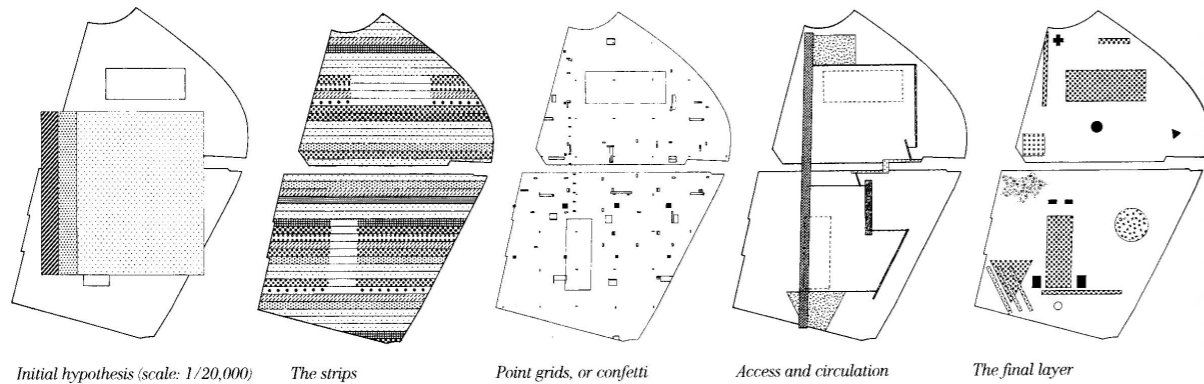
Based on the size of the site, and my inclination towards dividing different buildings throughout, I was given the tip to look at OMA's submission for a public park in France. This reference helped me understand how one can treat a large landscape and create their own context.

During the A1 period I had researched the peat landscape of Ter Apel yet I hadn't considered this history in my site plans up til then. The landscape at the site is divided into peat plots, and this

grid of plots is something I needed to start working with, instead of against. This breakthrough left me with a smaller landscape, a field to place my buildings in.

It was also the moment I realised I could use the station to my advantage. Having a separate station area, causing a slight barrier of entry, creates a 'natural' wall against the 'outside' world; the world my tourists seek to momentarily step out of.

Figure 4: OMA Diagram Parc de la Villette



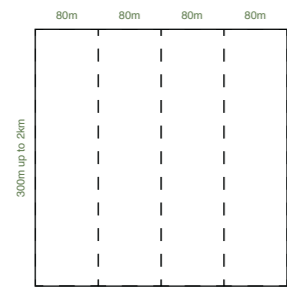
A2 - The Adjustment Phase

Week 5 & 6 - (Landscape) Concepts

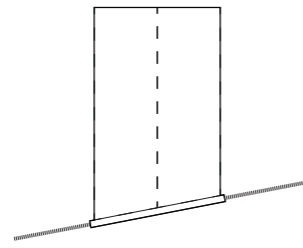
The real breakthrough only came during this week however, when the Ter Apel monastery was not my only precedent anymore; the landscape was added to the list.

Looking at the crops that grow, during what time of the year, and the cycles

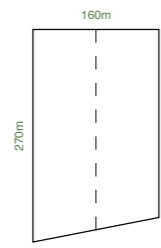
throughout the years, I was able to get a grasp of the rhythm this landscape experiences. In combination with monthly satellite imagery for the previous 3 years, I managed to understand some patterns of directionality, density and tracing.



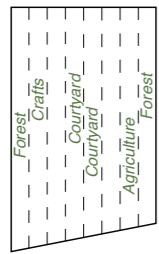
Site Defined by Peat Grid



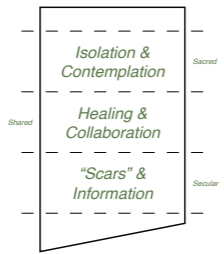
Station Width corresponds to 2x peat field



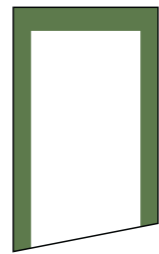
Final Site



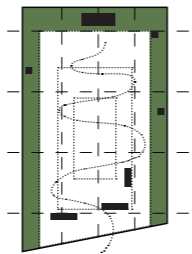
Dividing site into different strips / landscapes



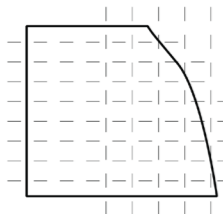
Dividing site into different Sequences



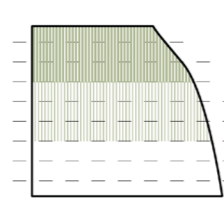
Enclosing the Site "Monastery as a Landscape"



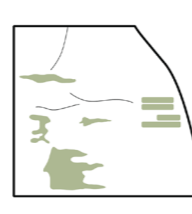
Routes, Moments, Islands and Architecture



Different Directionalities



Cyclical Rhythm of Growth



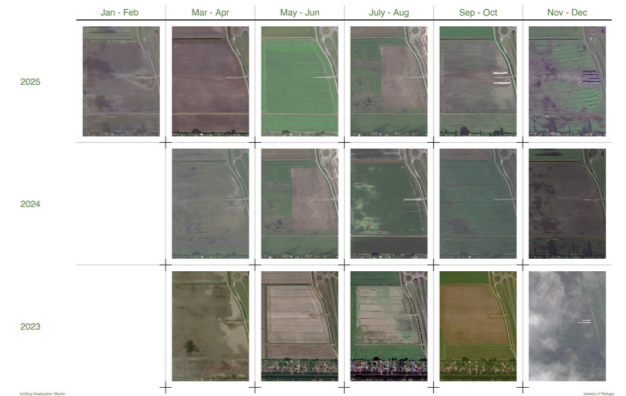
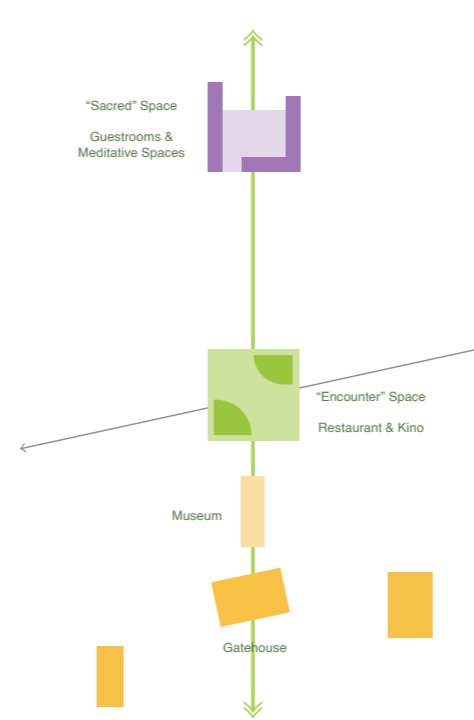
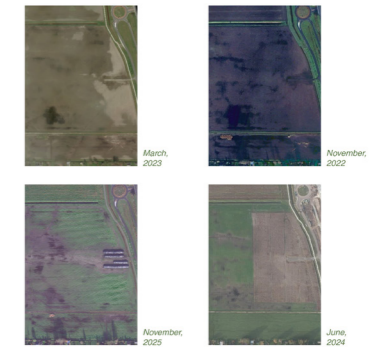
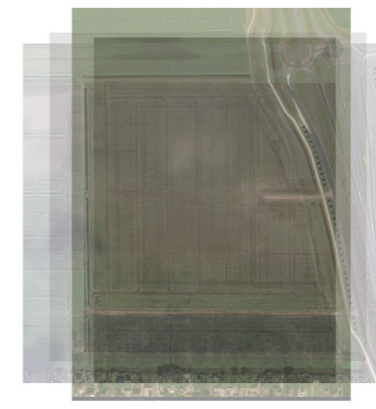
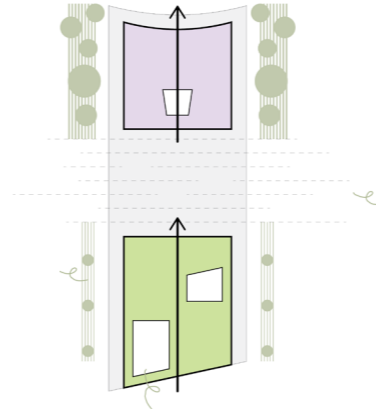
'Anomalies'

A2 - The Adjustment Phase

Week 5 & 6 - (Landscape) Concepts

Through this landscape I also discovered an architectural inspiration: 'De Plaggenhut'. This typology was inhabited by peat-workers and consisted of 'plaggen', slices of the landscape, that formed the roof of their residence; a roof that was literally composed of its landscape and context.

This typology helped me make the decision to move from a landscape with spaces spread out, towards a landscape with one building in it. A roof that encompasses all experiences, and is a symbol for the landscape itself.



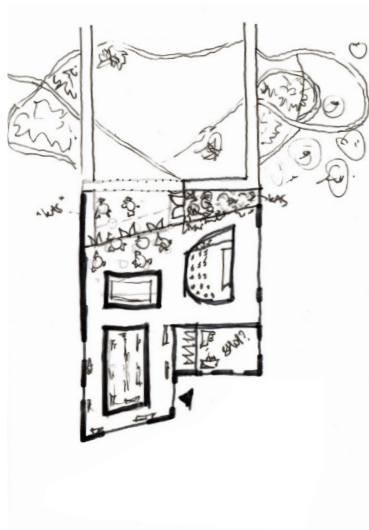
A2 - Preparing for Presentation

Week 7 & 8 - Merging Concepts

In order to arrive at a final floor plan, I revisited the themes of circulation, sequence and program; keeping in mind the touristic experience and their motivation for visiting the public building.

By placing a central courtyard beneath the unified roof, I provide a natural

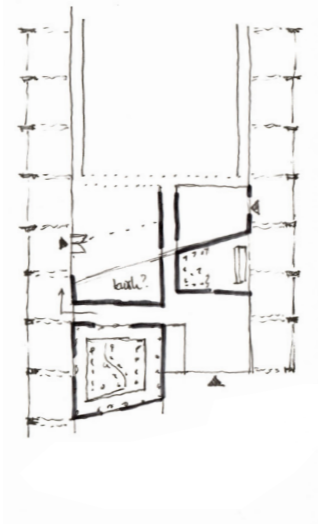
transition between the sacred and the secular, while also providing a direct reference to monastic typology. In its turn, the roof also provides a reference to the history of the landscape.



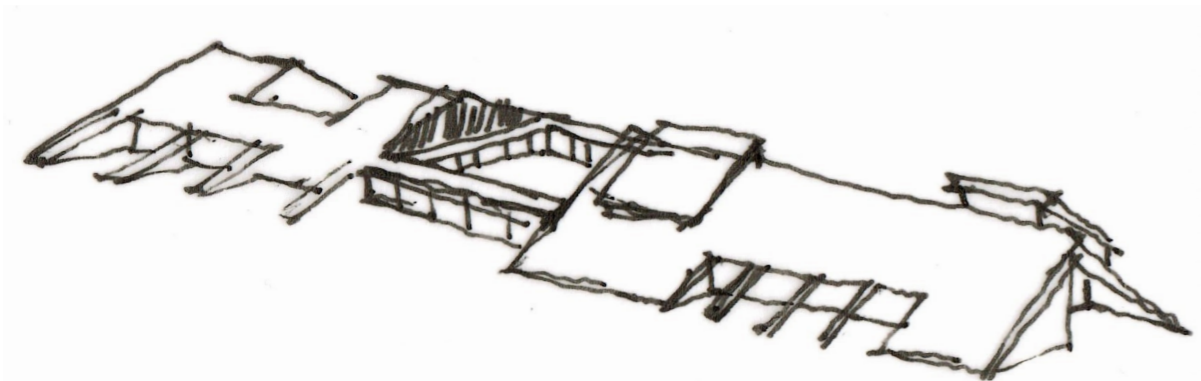
Islands



Framed Views



Outside Accessibility



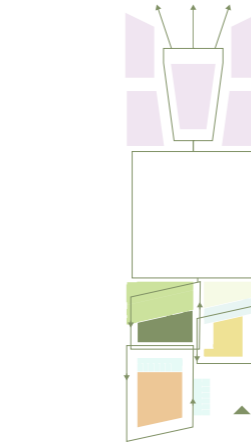
A2 - Preparing for Presentation

Week 7 & 8 - Merging Concepts

Creating spaces under this roof still required some refining, but the main elements are present; framed views towards the landscape, a central route between 'islands' of program, and a courtyard that connects and separates the different user groups.

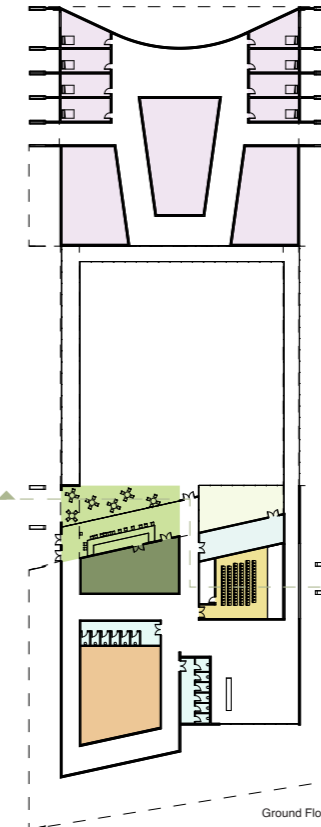
The floor plan is exploring the concept of 'islands' underneath an all-encompassing roof that ties everything together and allows for each space to be unique in its materials and theme, while still feeling connected.

Design Option Islands

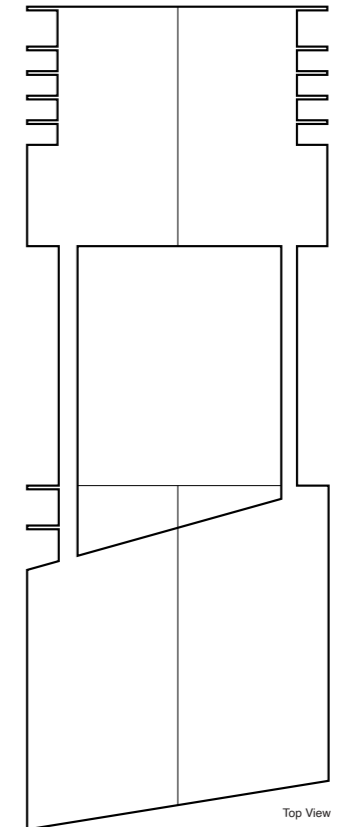


ARMAP120 Public Building Graduation Studio

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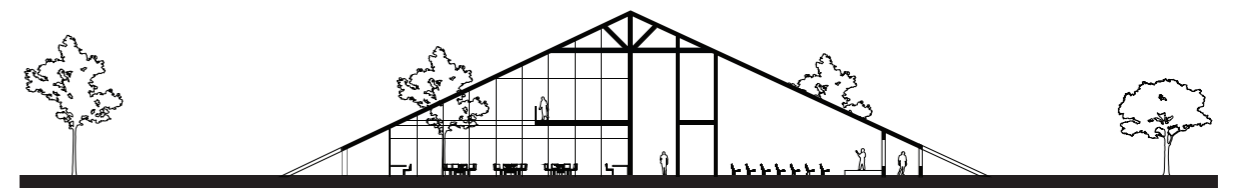


Ground Floor



Top View

Islands of Refuge

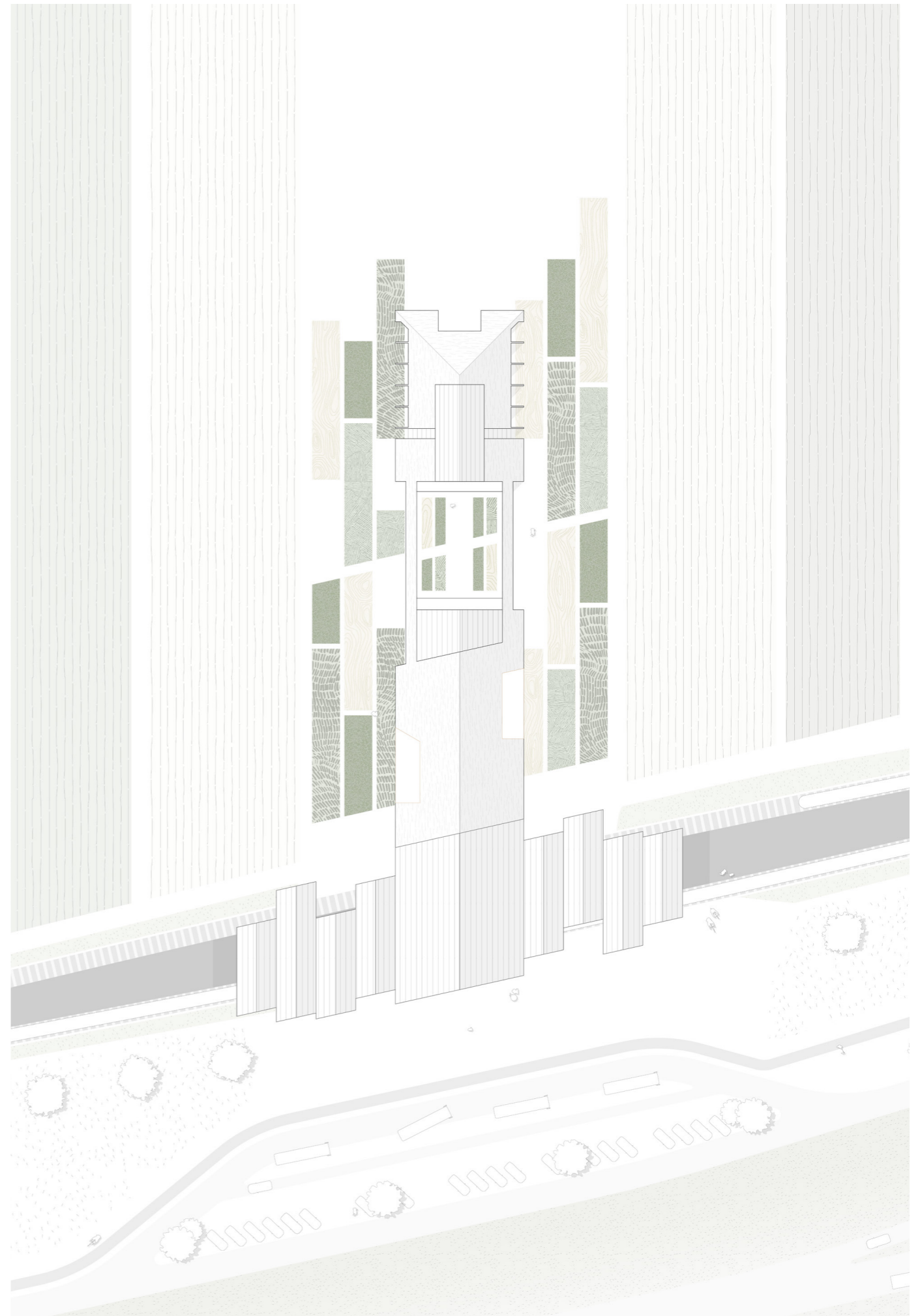
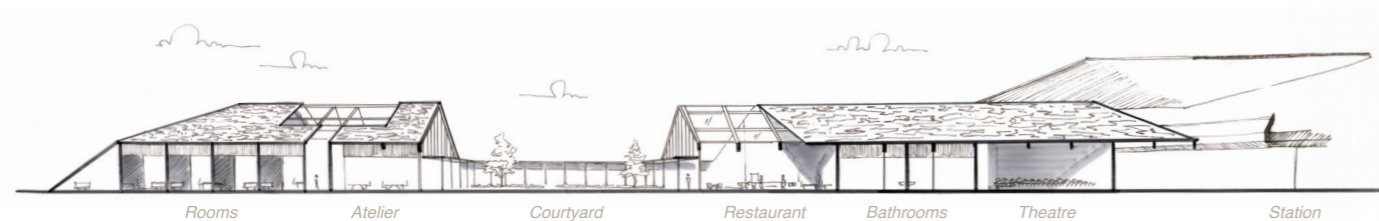
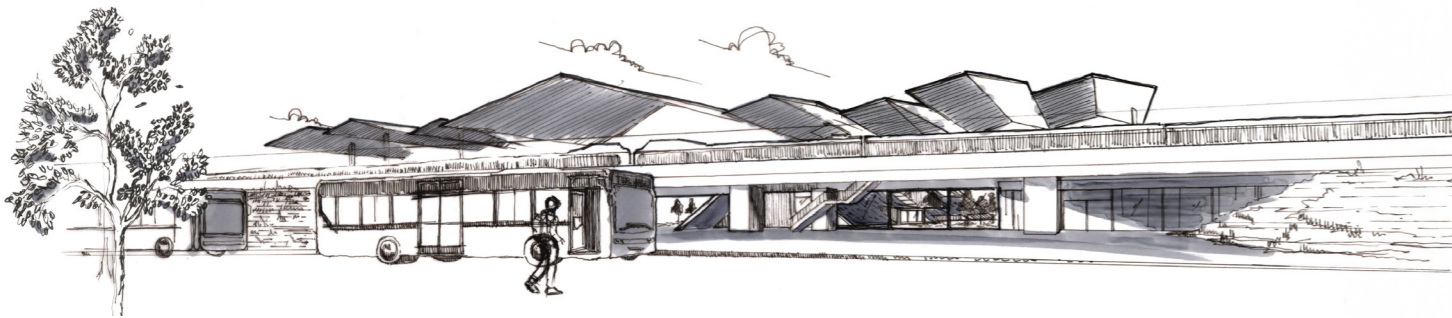
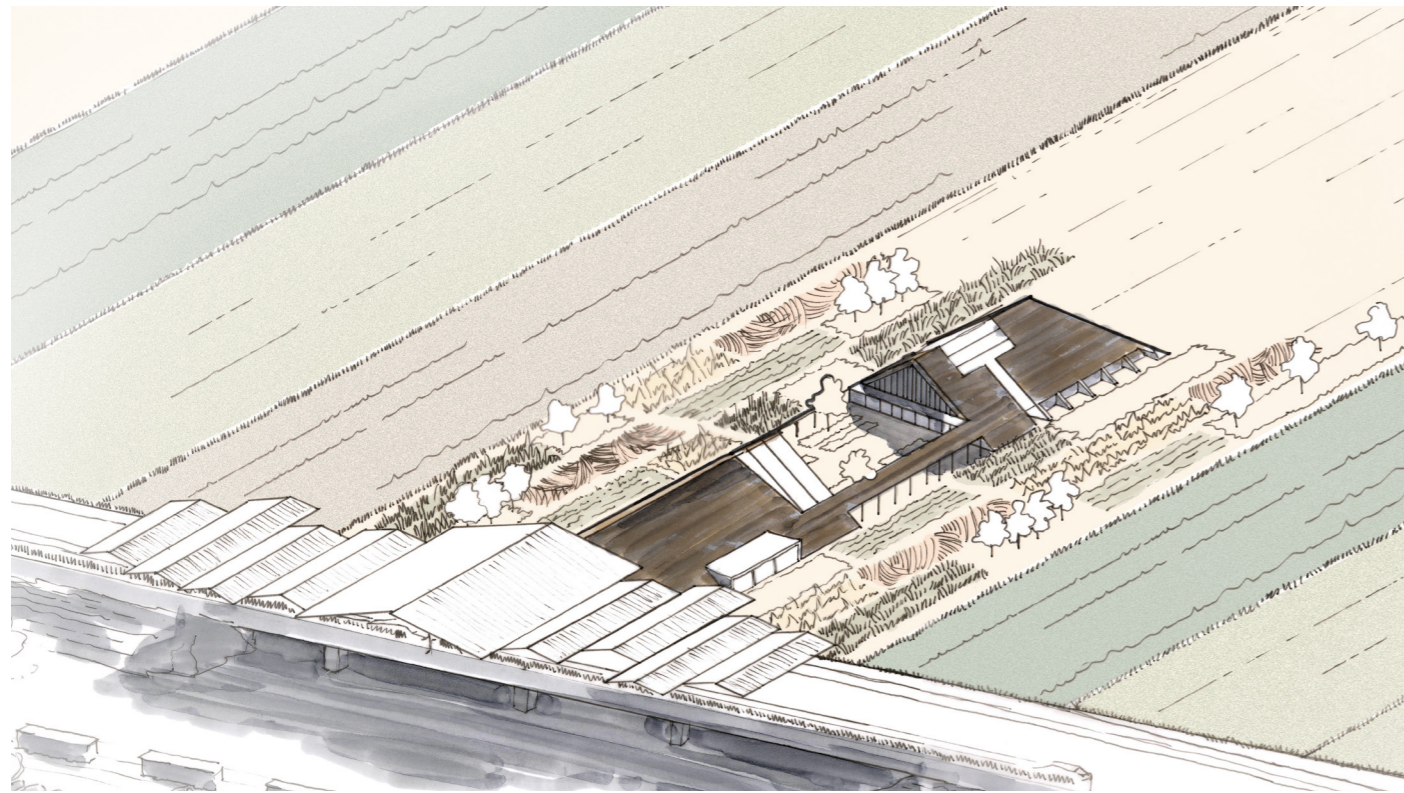


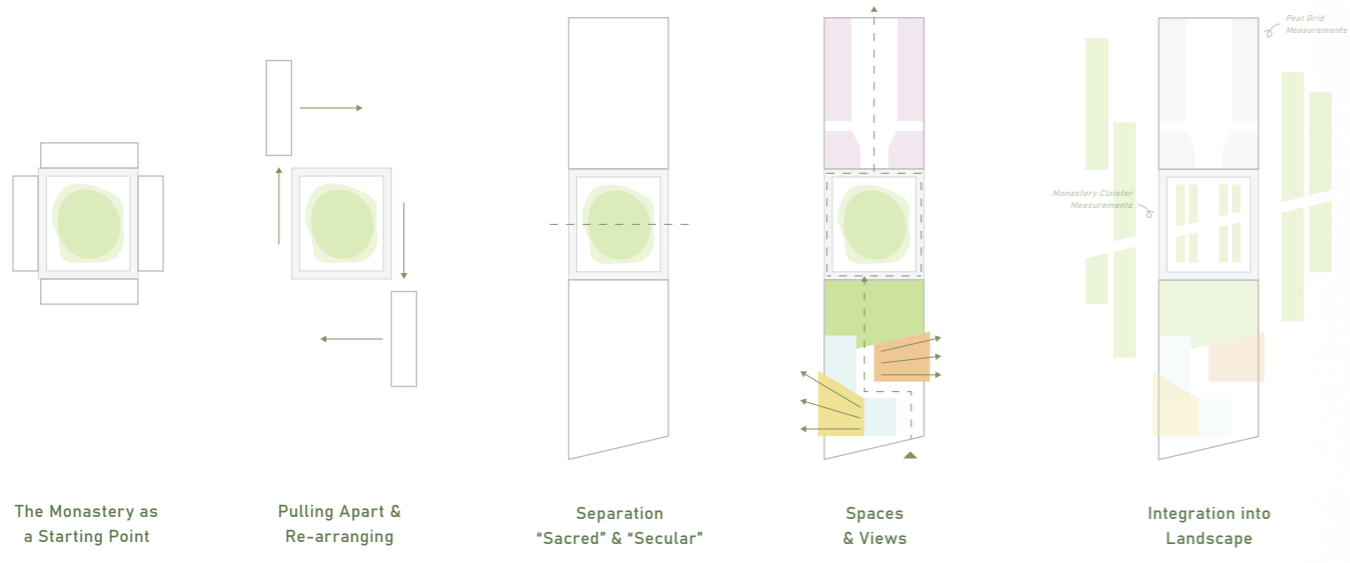
A2 - Final Results

Week 10 - Presentation

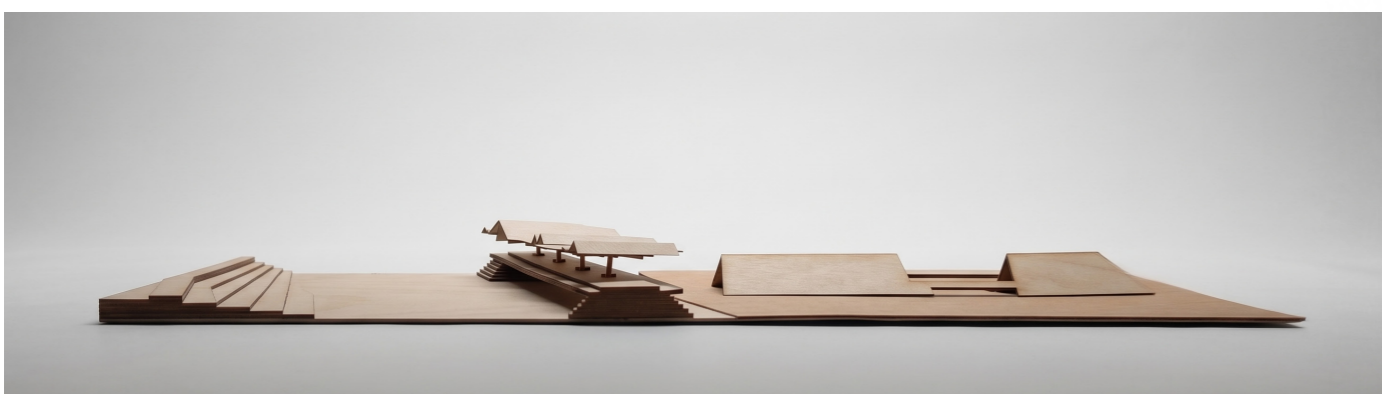
The progress I'd made over the past 10 weeks built up to my A2 presentation. Here I had to explain my spatial concept in a logical and convincing manner, meaning I was forced to reflect on my story and narrative. By translating my ideas into final products, I was able to come to new insights. In combination

with the feedback from tutors it was also a moment to reconsider some design decisions and reflect on some weaker or underdeveloped aspects of my project.





The Monastery as a Starting Point Pulling Apart & Re-arranging Separation "Sacred" & "Secular" Spaces & Views Integration into Landscape



Results

Research and Design Results

The A3 period consisted of finalising and adjusting the design decisions established during the A2 period. Because the foundational framework for the tourism hub was already locked in, this phase was less about broad exploration and more about narrowing down ideas into a highly detailed design. Rather than going over my developments week by week, I will highlight and evaluate the key design decisions that refined the architecture from A2 into its final iteration. To structure this evaluation I will explain four distinct moments of iteration, beginning with the redesign of the station's roof.

Station Roof

The decision to separate the station viaduct from the tourist hub was a conscious one; a 'sanctuary' for refuge requires a place to slow down and rest, rather than a space of fast-paced transit. This separation meant designing two roofs, one for the main building and another for the station's covered waiting area. During the A2 period, the initial station roof successfully repeated the form of the main building, visually transitioning the transit zone with the touristic hub, even reflecting the rhythm of the peat plots; however, the physical model revealed that this approach was too monumental and competed for attention with the primary architecture.

To resolve this, the station was redesigned by using the typology of the garden as a guide. By rotating the roof 90 degrees to follow the axis of the railway, the station is now clearly distinguished from the public building. Yet, the two structures remain conceptually connected, as the station's new form reflects the same voids and vegetation found within the 'hortus conclusus'.

Hortus Conclusus

The decision to fully enclose the interior garden was driven by a need to strengthen the building's overall volume and shape. Extending the roof down to the ground within the garden area created a much stronger, more grounded architectural gesture.

Upon entering the building, and possibly even earlier while still on the train, visitors are presented with unobstructed views onto the vast, open landscape. Enclosing the garden acts as a powerful contrast to this exposure, establishing a spatial rhythm of closed and open atmospheres, making visitors experience feelings of isolation and exposure as they travel throughout the building. This enclosure carves out a protected core where the diverse visitors of this building can blur the lines between the 'sacred' and the 'secular', a dedicated space where anyone can come to find refuge from their hectic daily lives.

Floor Plan Refinements

While the overarching spatial lay-out remained largely intact, the A3 period allowed me to make some critical adjustments to ensure the building functioned well on a technical and day-to-day level. Changes were made to the back-of-house areas, such as the offices, kitchens and technical spaces. Another important alteration was the relocation of the refectory towards the very 'end' of the building. This shift resolved the previous lack of transitional space towards the exterior and into the landscape, while strategically taking advantage of the western orientation to allow for beautiful dinners at sunset.

Materiality and Construction

The final phase required solving the project at the 1:20 and 1:5 scales, ensuring that the conceptual narrative translated even into the smallest architectural details. The thatched roof draws direct inspiration from the traditional 'plaggenhut' typology, characterised by a roof that seems to seamlessly blend and attach into the earth.

To ensure the building remains technically sound and protected from ground moistures, the final details mimic this grounded effect without compromising modern performance standards. The thatch is brought down low to visually meet the earth but is sharply cut 300mm above a gravel 'French Drain' to prevent water splashing and rot.

In contrast, the cloister hallway in the central garden required a different material approach. Because this section features a flat roof, instead of a sloped one, applying thatch was conceptually inappropriate. Instead, wooden planks were selected to match the timber used for the building's primary structural portal frames. This material continuity also pays homage to the timber construction practices of historic monasteries. Furthermore, the enclosing walls of the 'hortus conclusus' are detailed in brick, directly mirroring the historical materials of the Ter Apel monastery.

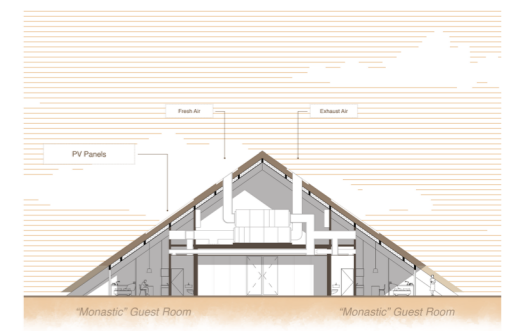
Overall, reflecting on the A3 period, these four moments of iteration highlight how the initial framework established during A2 was brought to its conclusion. Engaging with these clear checkpoints and moments of presentation throughout the graduation process has provided refreshed perspectives, allowing for critical re-evaluation of earlier design decisions. Ultimately, these refinements have ensured that the architectural intervention goes beyond the theoretical and stands as a physically grounded sanctuary ready to serve the town of Ter Apel.



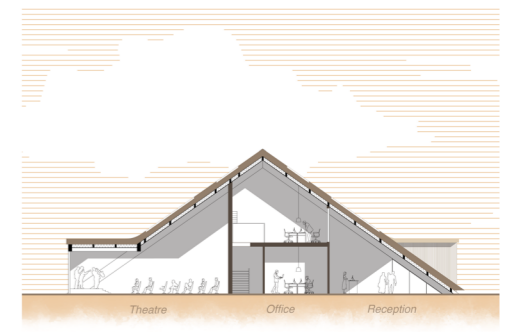
Ground Floor 1:200



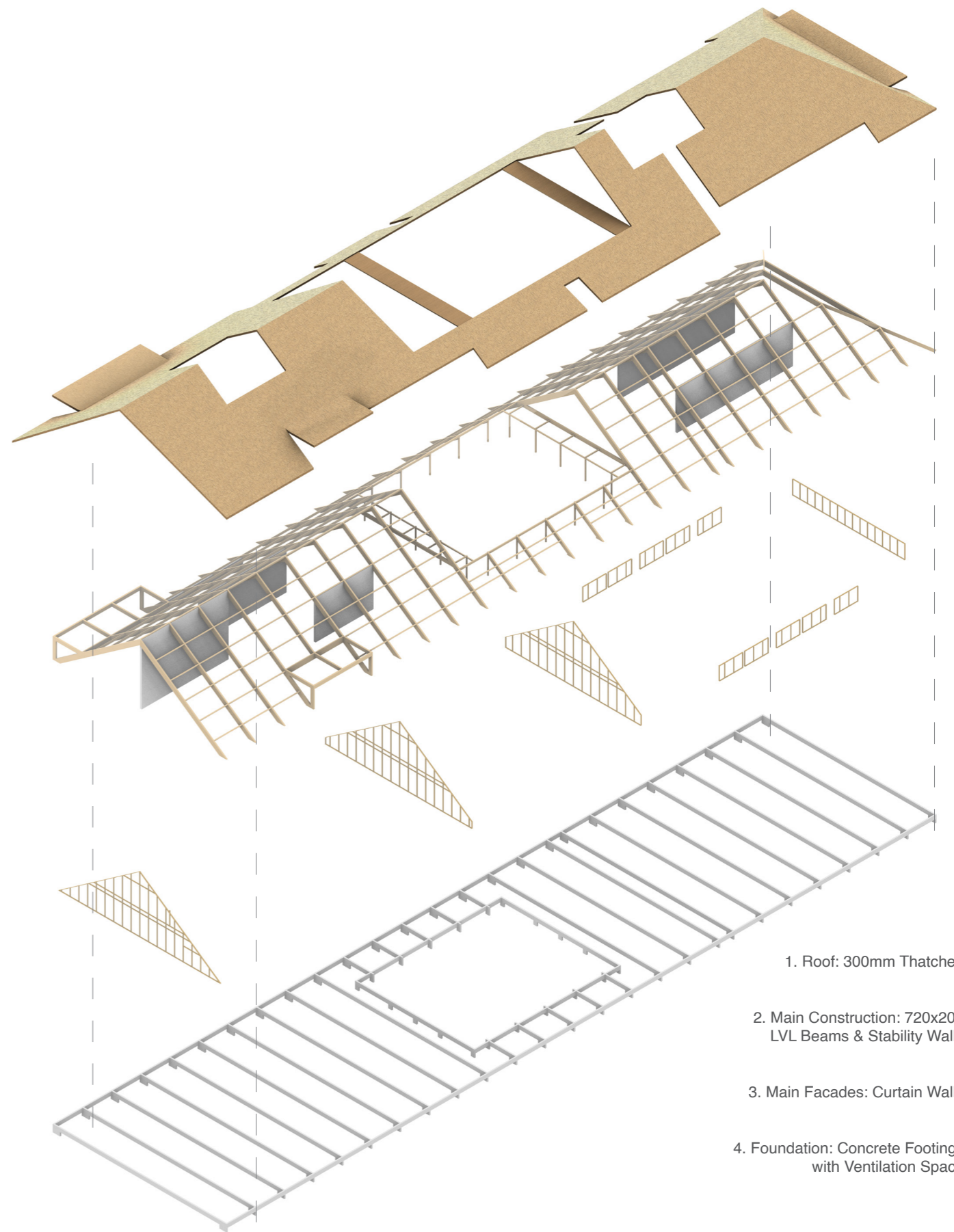
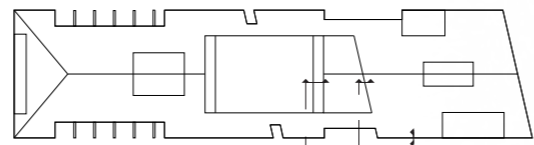
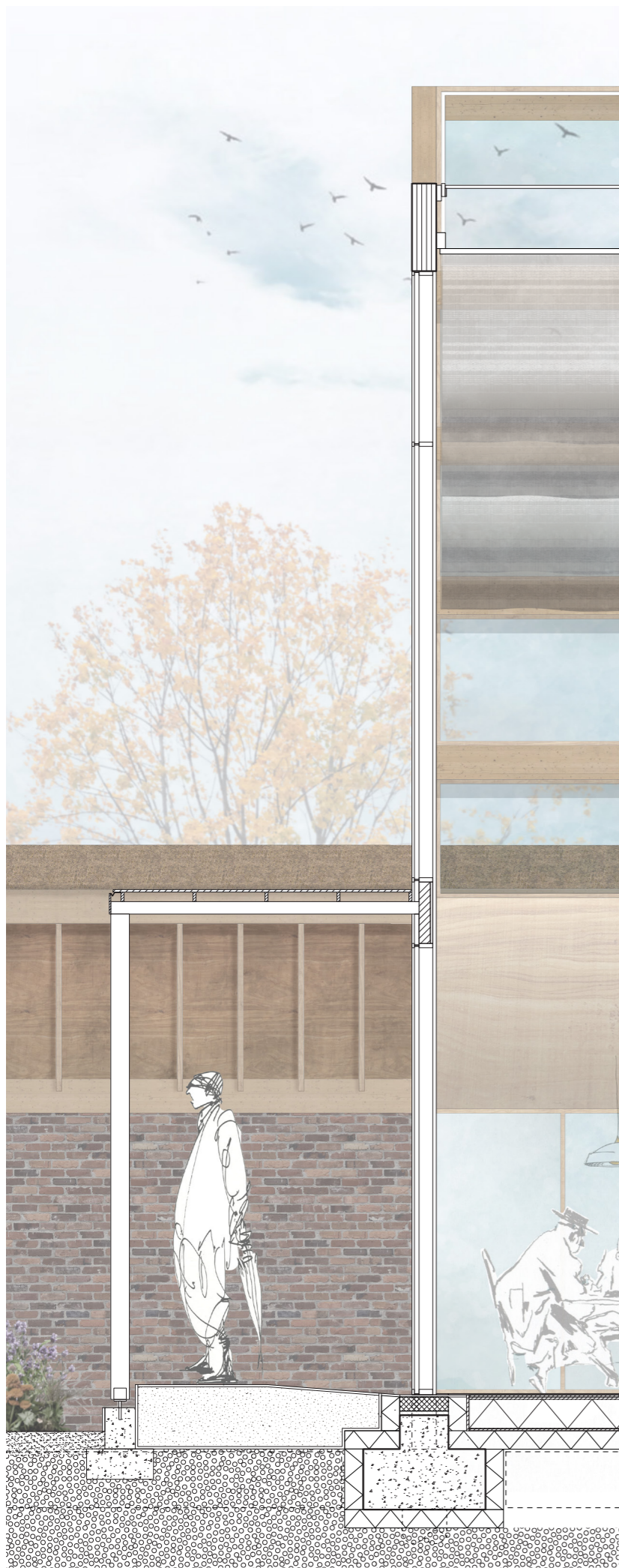
First Floor 1:200



Section AA 1:200



Section BB 1:200

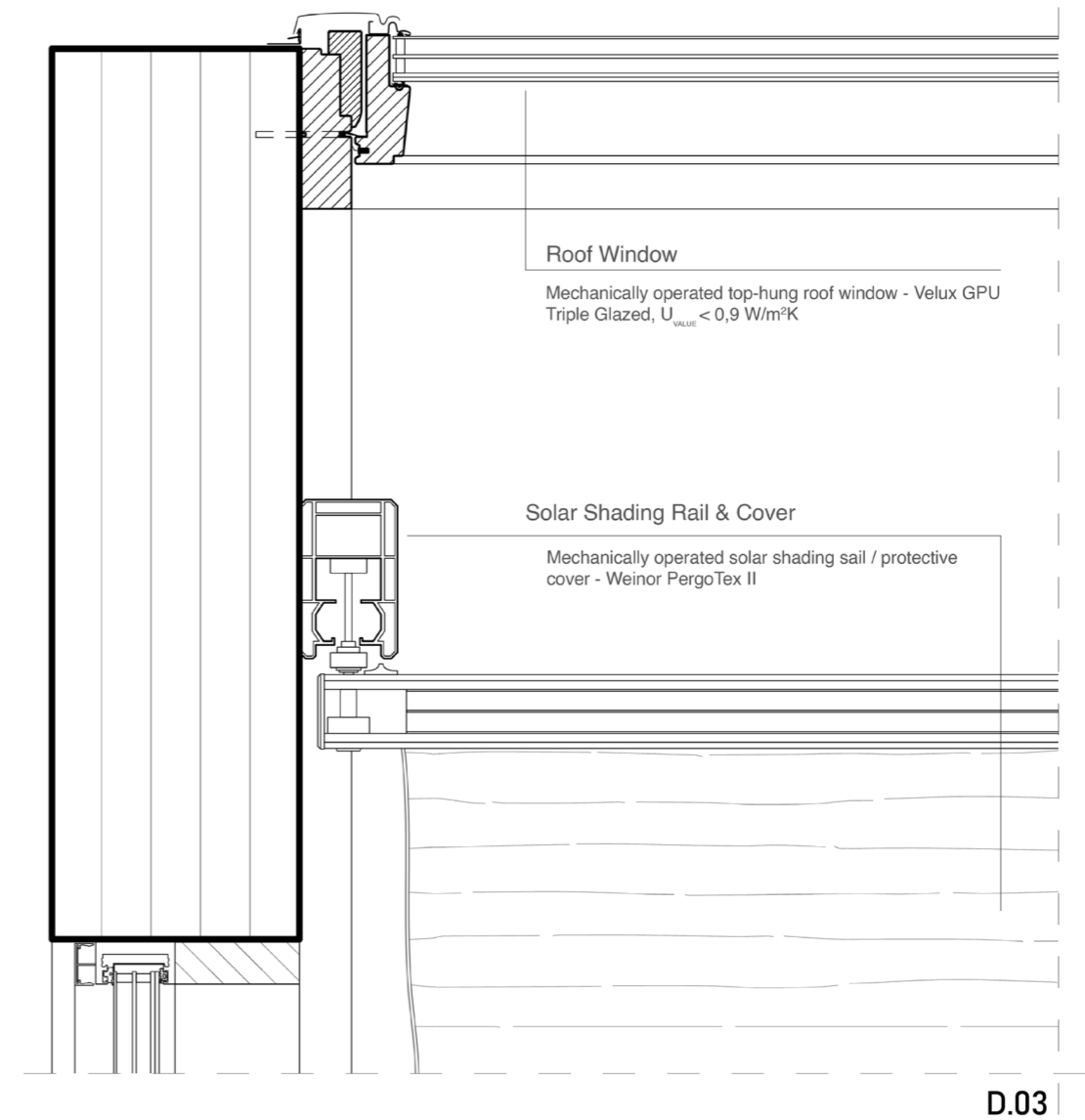
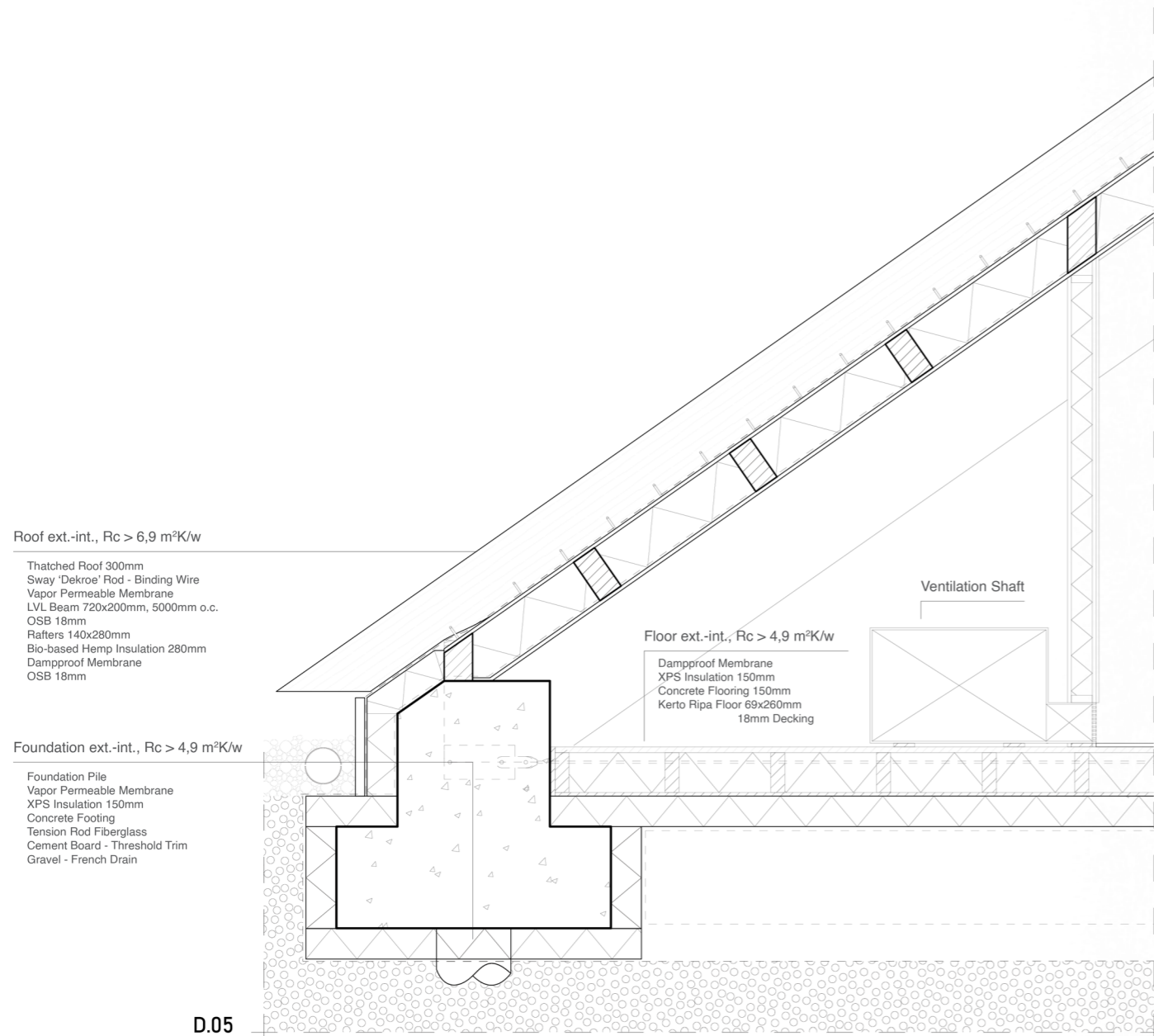


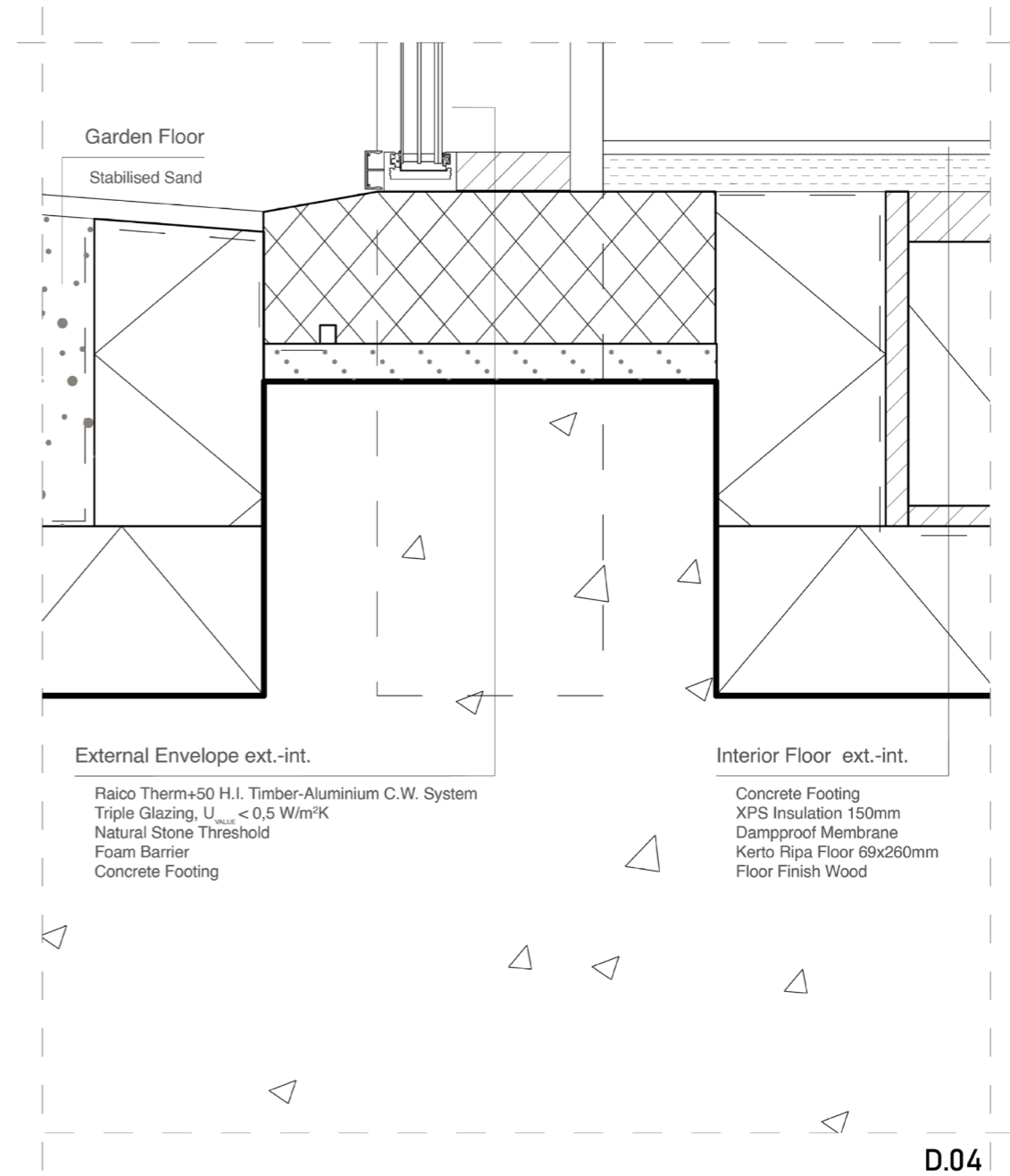
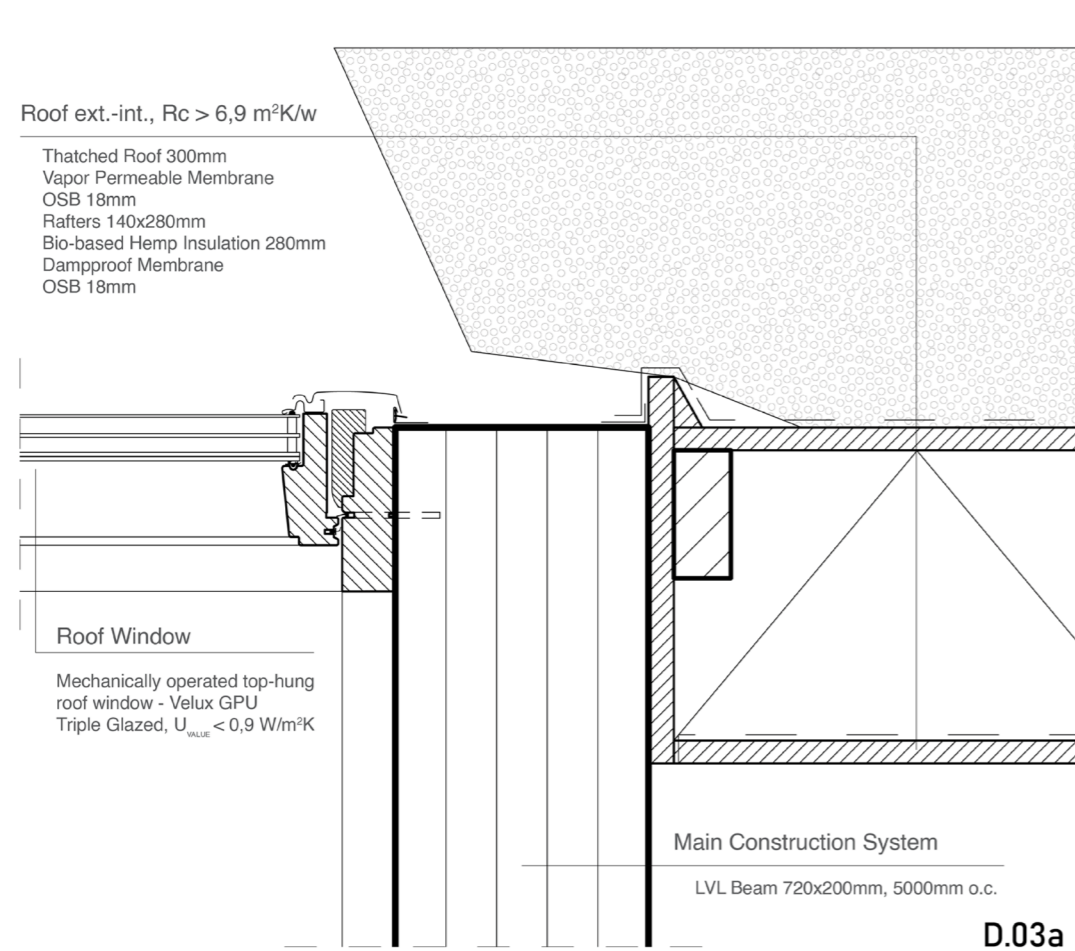
1. Roof: 300mm Thatched

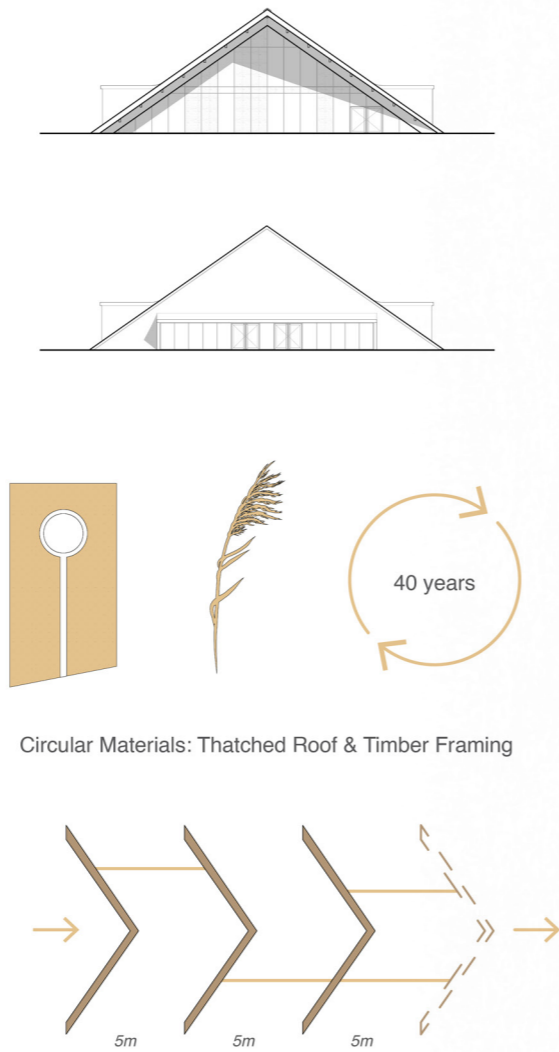
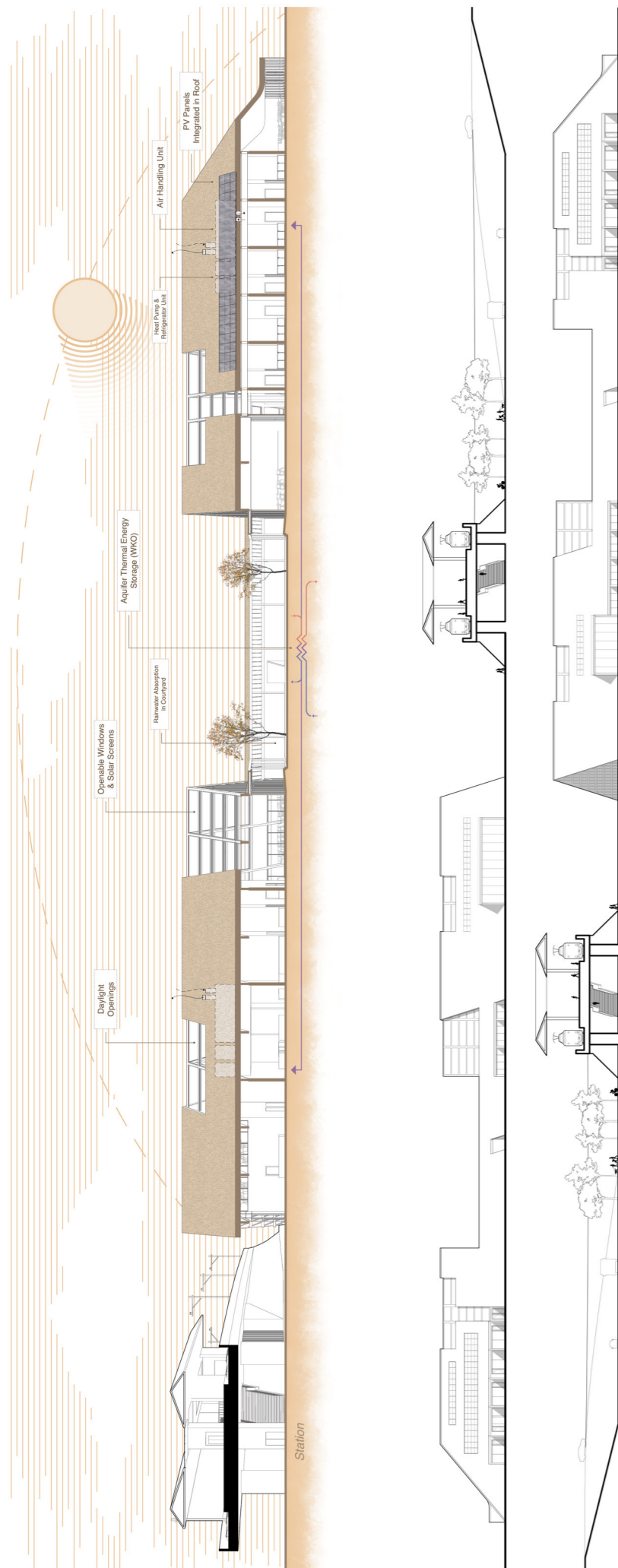
2. Main Construction: 720x200
LVL Beams & Stability Walls

3. Main Facades: Curtain Walls

4. Foundation: Concrete Footings
with Ventilation Space

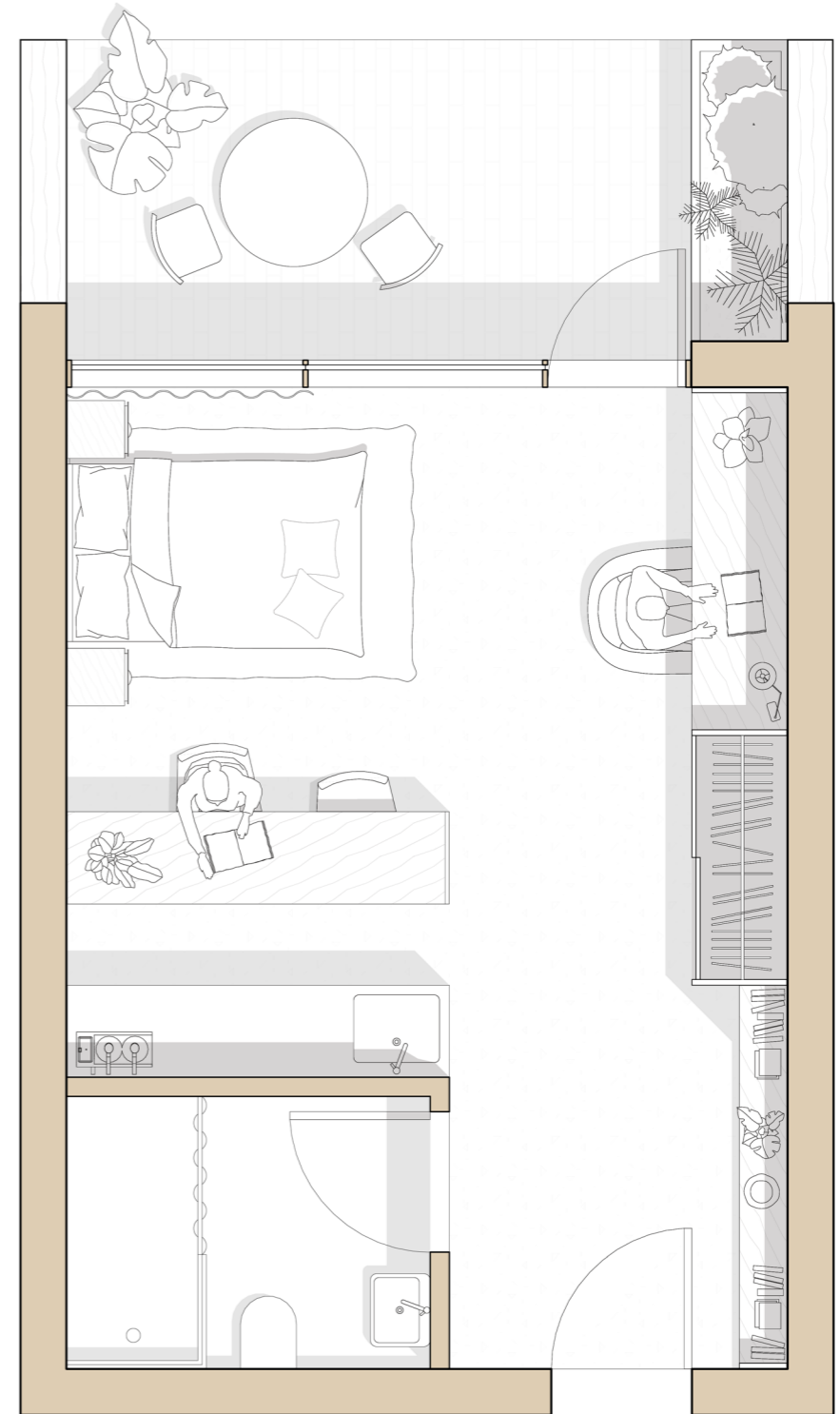






Circular Materials: Thatched Roof & Timber Framing

Hybridity and Flexibility: Flexible Infill & Expandability



Conclusion

Design Brief and Proposal

As this graduation project draws to a close, it's important to reflect on the initial research framework and evaluate how these questions materialised in the final design.

The assignment called for the creation of a hub that is: [...] symbiotic to, or integrated with, multiple facilities in order to accommodate both visiting tourists and the local travelling community" (Public Building, 2025). Building upon this brief and the conducted research during the A1 studio phase, I formulated a problem statement and a research question:

Problem Statement

"Ter Apel faces an identity crisis, both in its urban and architectural context as well as its national image and identity. How can the concept of refuge be reimagined as a constructive, unifying force rather than a source of social- and spatial division?"

Main Research Question

"How can the presence and historic influence of the crosier monastery *Domus Novae Lucis* in Ter Apel serve as a design catalyst for a tourism hub that embraces Ter Apel's monastic heritage and its values?"

Both these questions set the ambition for the rest of the project beyond a strictly architectural exercise, extending the topic towards the social and spatial reality of the town of Ter Apel.

In the coming chapter, I will clarify my research and design process and reflect on why I believe my proposal successfully answers this graduation assignment. I will evaluate the project against its initial ambitions, reflect on the methodologies and tools used during

the graduation period, and discuss the broader implications of this proposal for the architectural profession.

Ambitions

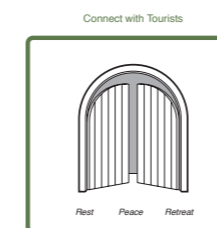
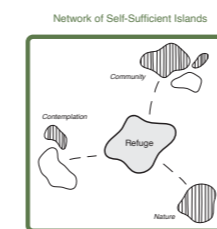
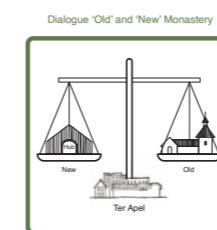
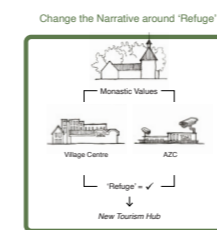
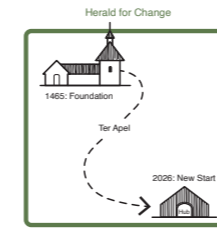
The project title, "Islands of Refuge", encapsulates the core thesis of this assignment. During the analysis phase, it became clear that Ter Apel exists as both a historical and modern 'island'. Historically, its geography as an elevated sand ridge in a treacherous peat bog led to a serious degree of isolation; nowadays, it is a remote village near the German border that has been left to host the largest Asylum Seeker's Centre (AZC) in the Netherlands.

These themes of isolation and refuge relate to the entire history of the village of Ter Apel and converge in the historical typology of the monastery. It is no coincidence a monastery was once erected at the location of Ter Apel. In combination with the fact that Ter Apel's monastery is now the last remaining rural monastery in Western Europe, I was greatly inspired to utilise this typology as a guiding framework to address the social and spatial issues Ter Apel faces today.

During the A1 period, I set the expectation to merge the seemingly contradictory themes of refuge, isolation and tourism into a cohesive public building that benefits tourists, locals and the natural environment. I established six specific ambitions across three main topics:

1. *The concept and narrative of Refuge*
2. *The monastic heritage of Ter Apel*
3. *Tourism and the Landscape.*

I will cover the ambitions according to these topics.



1. The narrative of refuge

During the first meetings with fellow students, it became clear there was already a strong, preconceived image of Ter Apel in the minds of Dutch students, including myself. The town's identity is heavily compromised by a negative, media-driven image in relation to the systemic overcrowding of the asylum seeker's centre. Recognising that a viable tourism industry in Ter Apel will significantly suffer due to this negative perception, one of my primary ambitions became the reframing of this narrative. The design of this graduation project actively seeks to leverage architecture and the historical typology of the monastery in order to foster positive engagement and change the concept of refuge from a merely involuntary consequence into something tourists and locals actively seek out.

2. Ter Apel's Monastic Heritage

The historic *Domus Novae Lucis* monastery represents a crucial aspect of Ter Apel's (historical) identity and remains an underutilised asset for its future. Rather than treating this heritage as a static historic relic, I aim to reactivate and reinvent the monastic typology. By establishing direct conceptual and spatial relations between the historic monastery and the new public building, the design creates a cohesive network that offers tourists the opportunity of experiencing the historical and contemporary layers of Ter Apel in a unified fashion.

3. Landscape 'Islands' Integration

The final topic addresses the physical and ecological context of the project site. As suggested by the title 'Islands of Refuge', the project creates a metaphor of 'islands' that crosses multiple scales, both physically as well as conceptually.

Geographically, it addresses Ter Apel's isolation within the larger context of the Netherlands, as well as within Groningen itself and the economic and health-related consequences. Architecturally, the concept manifests in the site strategy and the internal spatial organisation of the floor plan itself. The design treats the programmatic requirements as a series of distinct 'islands' or unique spaces which are connected through a roof literally created from the landscape itself. Conceptually, the project tries to balance the conflicting requirements of privacy/isolation (refuge) and openness/exposure (tourism).

Overall, these three topics and six ambitions have provided a continuous framework for self reflection and a benchmark I could hold my design to.

Conclusion

Reflection and Implications

In this section I will reflect on the research-by-design methodology, the techniques used during the design process, and the graduation process as a whole.

Reflection

I will begin by reflecting on whether the proposed design is the correct answer to the design brief and the context of Ter Apel. As established in the previous section, Ter Apel faces an identity crisis. The final design successfully addresses this by reimagining and reframing the concept of 'refuge'; not as a point of social and spatial division, but as a constructive, unifying force.

Initially, the design process explored literal translations of the monastic typology, such as the traditional central courtyard surrounded by spread out functions. However, to meet the architectural and technical ambitions of creating a socially inclusive space, the design had to move past a nostalgic recreation of an old typology. Instead, historical values like hospitality, contemplation and isolation were adapted to fit Ter Apel's current social reality.

The progression of this project relied on the research-by-design methodology, which treats research and design as an integrated, iterative loop rather than separate tools. Navigating the different scales of the assignment, from layers of policy like Nij Begun down to specific programmatic requirements, meant that there was a need for constant dialogue between analytical research and architectural propositions.

In the early stages, translating the historical typology of the monastery into the present proved to be a complex challenge. It wasn't enough to solely

focus on floor plans, order-specific monasteries(crosiers), or monastic literature. Progress often required stepping out of the immediate context of the design, and instead studying precedents that were related to this project in other aspects. For example, OMA's Parc de la Villette, which deals with a large public park through a diagrammatic layering of landscapes and systems, provided a crucial breakthrough in understanding how to manage scale and repetition. Treating the programmatic spaces as distinct 'islands' or events unified through directionality helped me form my own site borders and conceptual constraints where the design brief provided few.

Progress rarely came through relentless iteration of the same drawings or research. I noticed that whenever my design stalled, the best solution was to step back from the screen and engage with sketching, mapping or discussions with fellow students and tutors.

During the poster pitch in week 3 of A2, I received feedback that my approach of fragmented buildings felt too much like a theme park. This criticism helped me step away from translating the program into literal islands and instead dive back into the research-by-design process. Through understanding Ter Apel's history of landscape extraction, from deforestation to peat and gas extraction, revealed what historical 'islands of refuge' had already existed there.

This shift in approach led to a defining moment of the process: discovering the 'plaggenhut'. Learning how peat workers took literal slices of the land to form the roofs of their huts, connected with my project on a deeper level. It offered a grounded, protective expression that was less inward focused than the traditional monastery.

Conclusion

Reflection and Implications

By shifting from scattered buildings to a unified roof inspired by the plaggenhut, the final architectural language of my project conveys a cohesive expression of sanctuary and refuge. This design move integrated the building within the context of the peat landscape, and also allowed me to merge the seemingly paradoxical values of isolation and tourism.

Overall, this back-and-forth dynamic proved that the most vital tool in the research-by-design process is often the flexibility to step out of your comfort zone and explore techniques and sources outside your usual scope.

Implications

From the beginning of this project, I set out to prove that a deeply localised, historic typology could solve a highly contemporary spatial and social problem. By successfully addressing the brief, the resulting design proposal extends beyond the boundaries of this specific thesis. It highlights a broader lesson for how designers can approach heritage, isolation, and social friction in modern public architecture.

This project demonstrates that historical typologies do not have to remain static relics of the past, confined to a museum setting. Instead, they can be actively reinvented and reapplied as effective tools for contemporary architectural intervention. When faced with modern issues of spatial fragmentation and social friction, such as the tension between Ter Apel's village centre and the Asylum Seekers Centre, architects and designers can look to the historical logic of a site for proven solutions. The monastic settlement originally functioned as an outpost providing sanctuary and community in a hostile landscape. By re-engaging

with this heritage, the design proves that older typologies, when adapted for contemporary public use, still possess the knowledge to deal with contemporary challenges.

Ultimately, my recommendation for both myself and the wider profession is to treat historical context not merely as aesthetic inspiration, but as a foundational blueprint. At its core, architecture has always been driven by the primal human need for shelter: a need that remains just as relevant today. By embracing this continuity, we can design public spaces that go beyond basic physical protection to heal spatial and social divides and foster strong communities, a potential this project has sought to unlock for Ter Apel.

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Islands

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