

# TRAVEL AS A NARRATIVE

©MARTA LULIĆ

FROM LITERARY  
EXPERIENCE TO  
ARCHITECTURAL  
SPACE

Where to next?

THE BOOK OF  
INTEREST

01

©Marta Lulić

Design mentor: Roel van de Pas  
Research mentor: Angeliki Sioli  
Building technology mentor: Rico Heykant

Explore Lab 39  
MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences  
TU Delft Faculty of Architecture & the Built Environment

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# PREFACE

This research plan is part of the one-year research and design trajectory of Explore Lab, a graduation studio within the MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences program at Delft University of Technology.

Explore Lab is a studio that encourages students to design their own curriculum by pursuing personal fascinations within the field of architecture. This approach leads to projects involving extensive research, culminating in both a research paper and a linked design proposal.

The aim of this research plan is to establish a solid foundation for the relevance and methodology of my research paper. It outlines the problem statement, research questions, key theoretical references, and methodologies, as well as the expected outcomes of this project.

# ABSTRACT

Inspired by the notion that people frame their lives and experiences through stories (Sartre 1938), this thesis delves into the role of narrative in architectural design, proposing that architecture is not merely a physical space but an intricate interplay of tangible and intangible elements that shape human experiences within built environment. By beginning the design process with a narrative drawn from literature, the idea is to create emotionally resonant yet functional spaces, specifically focusing on a design of a hotel as unique meeting point of personal stories and communal experiences (Pérez-Gómez 2016).

The research explores how literature can inform architectural design, emphasizing the importance of atmosphere and embodied experiences (Pallasmaa 2005; Zumthor 2006). It addresses key questions about translating narratives into functional design and extends the concept of narrative-driven architecture beyond temporary installations to permanent contexts. Through case studies, literature analysis, and personal narrative surveys, the study aims to identify design principles and strategies that offer a cohesive vision for integrating narrative, atmosphere, and embodied experience into architectural design. Moreover, expected outcomes include a comprehensive understanding of how narrative and sensory experiences influence architectural spaces, resulting in a catalogue of design principles, a detailed design brief, and a manifesto for future design on this topic.

Keywords: narrative, storytelling, translation, metaphors, atmosphere, experience, emotions, travel



Figure 1. *The Pilar* by Ishmael Randall Weeks

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# 01

# INTRODUCTION

**THESIS TOPIC**

**RELEVANCE**

**RESEARCH DEFINITION**

## THESIS TOPIC

*“...a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them...”*

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938

Architecture is more than just the physical space; it's a complex interplay of both tangible and intangible elements... where buildings and humans engage in a continuous dialogue... where spaces act as stages which users navigate, crafting their own stories while the environment influences their experiences and emotions (Pallasmaa 2005). But how well can architectural elements impact those experiences? How well can they also tell their own story?

Inspired by the notion that people frame their lives and experiences through stories (Sartre 1938), my fascination lies in using narrative as the foundation for an architectural design, where the environment created is not only emotionally resonant but also practical and usable. In that way, I am intrigued by the idea of starting a design with a story, rather than focusing solely on a specific task, site or a program.

Each person is the author of their own story, shaping and interpreting every experience as part of a continuous narrative. In this way, we are constantly living our story, weaving meaning from the events and encounters that fill our lives. By framing these experiences within a personal narrative, we create coherence, connecting the past, present, and future in a way that gives purpose and direction.

Moreover, when we read a story, novel, or book, we engage with the characters through our eyes, immersing ourselves in a world filled with diverse images, interactions, and emotions.

Travelling is also a type of a narrative journey. Each place visited, each person met, and each experience lived adds a chapter to our personal story, leaving an imprint on us and deepening our understanding of the world and our place within it.

Travelogues and travel memoirs are literary forms that recount these personal journeys, offering insights into the author's experiences and reflections on the visited places therefore I will use them as foundational texts to create spaces that resonate with the emotions and experiences described in these works.

Another layer of interest is the transition from past experiences - what was (the journey of a traveller), to present interpretations - what is (a written story), to future possibilities - what could be (an architectural design). This process unfolds like a journey, moving from the intangible and abstract to the concrete and familiar, capturing the essence of travel in a physical form (Lefebvre 1991).

My research seeks to connect the two spheres of knowledge/art into one - translating the abstract art of storytelling into the tangible art of built space while demonstrating immersive experience engaging all the human senses. Through this exploration, I hope to show how narrative-driven design can transform architecture into a medium that not only shelters but also tells a story, enhancing the experience of those who inhabit it.

# RELEVANCE

Great works of literature often emphasize human experiences and relationships over mere descriptions of scenery or objects; similarly, architecture should focus on enhancing the human experience (Pallasmaa 2005; Zumthor 2006). Since buildings are designed for human use, it follows that creating better spaces involves understanding how individuals move through and interact with their environments. And what is a better way to understand humans than through knowing their stories?

In this way, narrative-driven architecture becomes a powerful medium for enhancing human experience by designing spaces that resonate with their users.

Furthermore, the topic of hotels and tourism holds significant relevance today. The last few years have seen a transformation and exponential growth in tourism, driven by technological advancements, increased affordability, cultural curiosity, and the lasting impacts of the global pandemic. More people are eager to explore the world and seek new experiences. Consequently, many destinations are grappling with issues of overcrowding and environmental degradation, while the nature of travel itself has evolved (Oosterwoud 2021). Ideally, travellers prioritize unique, immersive journeys that connect them to local cultures and communities, valuing authenticity over standardization in their accommodations and experiences.

*“If you’re lucky, and a building succeeds, the real product has many more dimensions than you can ever imagine. You have the sun, the light, the rain, the birds, the feel.”*  
- Peter Zumthor

# RESEARCH DEFINITION

The proposed research aims to find the way of designing and creating specific atmospheres with literature as a starting point. Thus, the main question of this research is as follows:

**How can a design process begin with a narrative based on literary work, and be effectively translated into functional and atmospheric architectural design?**

The following sub-questions provide support for the main question:

How can a design start with a narrative instead of a program?

How can literature be used as a design tool to generate architectural ideas?

How can architects evoke emotion and mood by creating specific spatial atmospheres?

How can architectural elements convey meaning, and intentionally evoke emotions, ultimately shaping the overall experiences of occupants within built environments?

# 02

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SPACE AND ATMOSPHERE  
NARRATIVE IN ARCHITECTURE  
THE ART OF TRAVEL

## INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework forms the primary overview of existing theories, serving as a guideline for understanding basic ideas and key topics within this research. This framework will also support decision-making in the later stages of research and the design.

To establish a solid foundation, key concepts will be defined. A theoretical base related to experience, and more precisely to embodied experience and atmosphere, must be established to understand the interaction of people with buildings. Moreover, the topic of narrative in architecture is the core focus of this thesis, while understanding the art of travel provides essential context. In the following sections, these three concepts will be explored in greater detail.

*“Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses.”*  
- Juhani Pallasmaa

# SPACE AND ATMOSPHERE

Architecture is more than just the physical space; it's a complex interplay of tangible and intangible elements. Space and atmosphere are interconnected concepts that shape human experience, perception, and interaction within built environments. Space is traditionally understood as the physical characteristics of an environment—its form, scale, volume, and layout. Atmosphere, however, encompasses the sensory and emotional qualities of that space, influenced by factors like lighting, acoustics, temperature, and even social dynamics.

A person doesn't just passively observe a space; they experience it through movement, perception, and interaction. This interaction fosters an embodied experience, where sensory engagement moulds perception and affects how individuals connect with their surroundings. As Juhani Pallasmaa states, when we enter a space, the space enters us. This experience is essentially an exchange and fusion of the object and the subject. Moreover, a building could be considered as a metaphysical tool. Every architectural perspective is multi-sensory. The eye, ear, nose, and skin all measure the qualities of space, substance, and size. When entering a space, one doesn't just see it but also smells, hears, and feels it. This sensory data is stored directly in the brain, forming immediate impressions that impact comfort and well-being. In that way, architecture mediates the relationship between us and the world, enhancing how we experience and inhabit spaces, and this mediation takes place through the senses (Pallasmaa 2005).

Peter Zumthor, in his book *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments - Surrounding Objects*, delves into the essence of creating architecture that resonates deeply with human emotions. He emphasizes that true architectural quality is found in the way a space makes people feel, which is shaped by its atmosphere. For Zumthor, atmosphere arises from the interplay of materials, light, sound, and spatial proportions, all thoughtfully designed to evoke an emotional response. He believes that architecture should engage the senses subtly yet powerfully, crafting experiences where people not only inhabit a space but connect with it on an emotional level.

Moreover, atmosphere can be seen as an exchange between the qualities projected by a space and the personal emotions or memories an individual brings to it (Böhme 1993). For example, visiting a familiar space with a loved one can evoke different feelings than visiting it alone (Pallasmaa 2005). Thus, the design of a space must consider both its tangible and intangible aspects, combining them to create environments that are not only functional but also resonant and immersive. This holistic approach to design underscores how architecture can transform spaces into profound experiences that connect deeply with those who occupy them.



Figure 2. *The architecture of light* by Serge Najjar

# NARRATIVE IN ARCHITECTURE

Narratives in architecture serve as a powerful tool for enriching the experience of built environments by intertwining spatial design with storytelling elements, which embedded within the spatial context, enhance the atmosphere of a space, inviting visitors to become active participants in a story rather than merely passive observers. This narrative approach infuses design with layers of meaning, shaping spaces that resonate on deeper emotional and sensory levels. By drawing from personal, cultural, or historical stories, architects craft environments that engage visitors and evoke specific experiences, allowing architecture to transcend mere functionality and give each design element a purpose that reflects a larger vision or message.

This transformative strategy can turn a building into a narrative journey, where each space reveals part of a cohesive story, guiding occupants to connect with their surroundings in meaningful and memorable ways. Ultimately, narratives enrich the architectural experience, making spaces not just places to inhabit but stories to be experienced, underscoring the profound relationship between architecture, atmosphere, and human engagement (Havik et al. 2016).

Klaske Havik, in her various works, emphasizes how narrative methods can illuminate the relationship between architecture and urban places, suggesting that storytelling can inform design processes and deepen our understanding of spaces. By employing literary techniques, architects can craft atmospheres that resonate with users, where the physical characteristics of a space intersect with the emotional responses it evokes (Havik 2016).

Moreover, narrative methods such as description, transcription, and prescription help translate literary insights into architectural practice, shaping spaces that reflect human stories and experiences. Havik's work highlights how narrative structures can map urban experiences, turning architectural design into a process that reads and writes the city itself (Havik 2014).

By incorporating storytelling into design, architects create environments that connect occupants to a place's essence, fostering immersive and meaningful experiences that echo the richness of human interaction and memory.

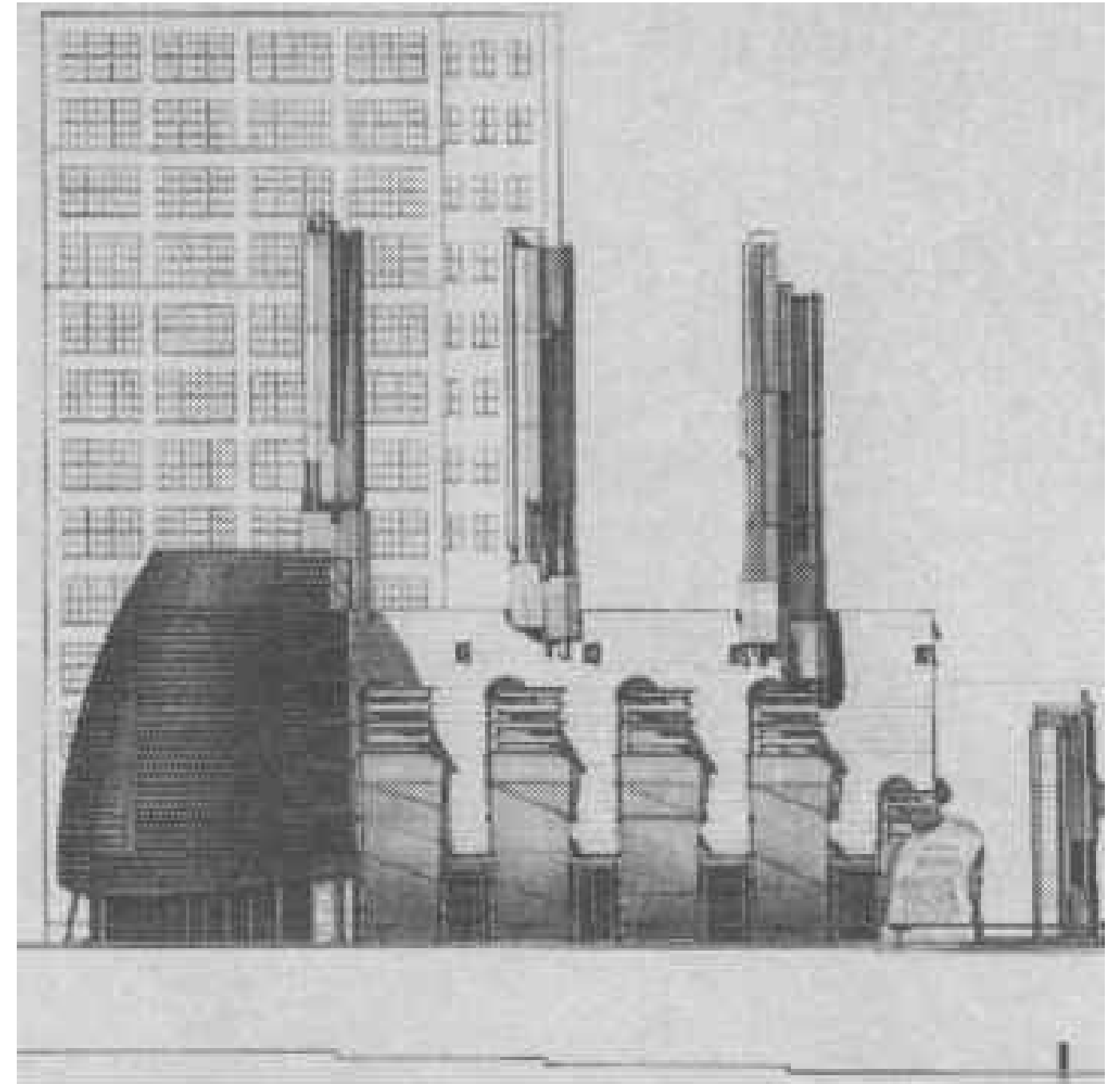


Figure 3. *Melvilla* by Douglas Darden

# THE ART OF TRAVEL

Traveling opens the door to new experiences, immersing us in diverse cultures, landscapes, histories, and ways of life that broaden our perspectives and challenge our assumptions. Each place tells its own story, weaving a tapestry of moments that connect travellers to its unique essence, allowing them to temporarily live within its rhythm, colours, and atmosphere.

Navigating such unfamiliar environments often unfolds as a blend of discovery and transformation, leading to serendipitous encounters and profound insights that craft unique narratives rich with lessons and memories. This exposure to diverse cultures, histories, and ways of life only broadens perspectives but also pushes individuals to see beyond their daily routines. Ultimately, the act of traveling enriches one's understanding of the world and deepens connections to oneself and others, highlighting the profound impact of exploration on personal growth and shared human experience.

The art of travel lies in immersing ourselves in the unfamiliar and embracing each experience with curiosity.

It invites us to focus not only on destinations but also on the richness of experiences along the way - the conversations, moments of solitude, unplanned turns that reveal hidden places and perspectives, savouring local cuisine, participating in traditional rituals, or simply taking in the sights. This approach encourages us to pause, observe, and connect with the present moment. Each trip adds a new layer to our personal narratives, evoking a range of emotions from joy to nostalgia, shaping how we perceive not only the world around us but also our place within it. (De Botton 2002).

Personal narratives in travel capture moments of deep connection, worry, joy, and solitude. They evoke the warmth of crowded markets, the quiet of mountain villages, or the thrill of discovery. Reflecting on these experiences--whether the intensity of a bustling city or the peace of a hidden spot-- translates into spaces that embody the sensory essence of travel. Each detail, from feelings of solitude to the chaos of unfamiliar places, shapes a traveller's journey.



Figure 4. *Movilidad* by Jean Pierre Orfeuill

# 03

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CASE STUDY  
BASE LITERATURE  
SURVEY  
DESIGN BRIEF

## CASE STUDY

To answer the research question, multiple research methods will be employed. Firstly, a selection of existing projects that use narrative as a design tool has been made. These projects will be viewed as case studies and analysed according to specific criteria in order to identify principles and design strategies for translating literature into architecture and creating distinct atmospheres. Next, an intuitive selection of books, novels, and travelogues will serve as a foundation for the future design. These literary works focus on people's experiences in particular locations, with the settings described in the texts later guiding the location of project site. To gain a deeper understanding of travel experiences, the concept of literary narratives will be expanded to include personal narratives through the conduction of a survey. Lastly, to achieve an in-depth understanding of the building's program, further research into a design brief will be conducted.

Case studies play a crucial role in exploring the intersection of literature and architecture by analysing existing projects through the lens of narrative.

The case study methodology begins with the collection of architectural projects that exemplify narrative-driven design. Once these projects are collected, the analysis focuses on architectural characteristics and affective qualities, examining how physical configurations and narrative mediums contribute to the overall experience of architecture. This analysis also considers the ways in which individuals interact with these spaces, looking for patterns in emotional responses and actions. In this process, design principles are labelled and categorized, allowing for a clearer understanding of how narrative and experience are woven into the idea of design.

The dual focus on narrative and experiential aspects within a single project enriches the analysis, providing insights into how architecture can convey stories and evoke emotions simultaneously.

This approach involves a comprehensive examination of three different projects that incorporate storytelling elements in their design. The three projects that have been selected are *Il Danteum* by Giuseppe Terragni, *The Kafka Castle* by Ricardo Bofill and *Francisco de Blas home* by Alberto Campo Baeza.

# CASE STUDY

*The Francisco de Blas Home* (Fig.5&6), designed by architect Alberto Campo Baeza, is an example of contemporary architecture that emphasizes simplicity and a connection to its user - a professor of literature. Completed in 2000, this residential project offers a paradoxical interpretation of a poem by Luis Cernuda. The design emphasizes creating a space that invites the sounds of the surroundings, allowing residents to experience the ambience, the silence, and the music of the landscape - just like in the poem.

Each project by Ricardo Bofill explored a common theme: the effect of spatial design on human interaction. Moreover, Bofill also demonstrated a predilection toward poetic and literary references in his work - Kafka's Castle included. Built in 1968, *The Kafka Castle* (Fig.7&8) by Ricardo Bofill explores the themes of alienation, authority, and bureaucracy central to Kafka's novel. The design incorporates a fortress-like structure with labyrinthine spaces, reflecting the novel's themes of inaccessibility and isolation.

*Il Danteum* (Fig.9&10) is an unbuilt project designed by Giuseppe Terragni which was supposed to be a monument dedicated to the Italian writer Dante Alighieri as part of the 1942 World Exposition in Rome. The Exposition was meant to display the strength of the Fascist regime, so Danteum was also in a way a monument to Mussolini and Fascism. However, the project has never been built due to the outbreak of World War II. What is interesting about this project is how Terragni used Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* not only as an inspiration but also as a guiding principle for a design - he followed the structure of Dante's three realms: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso.

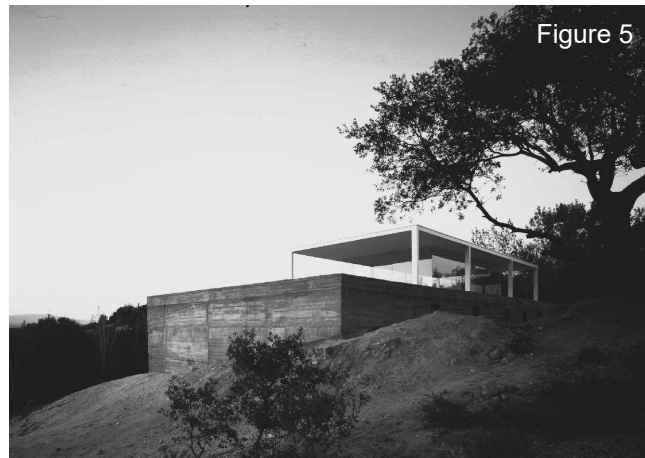


Figure 5



Figure 6

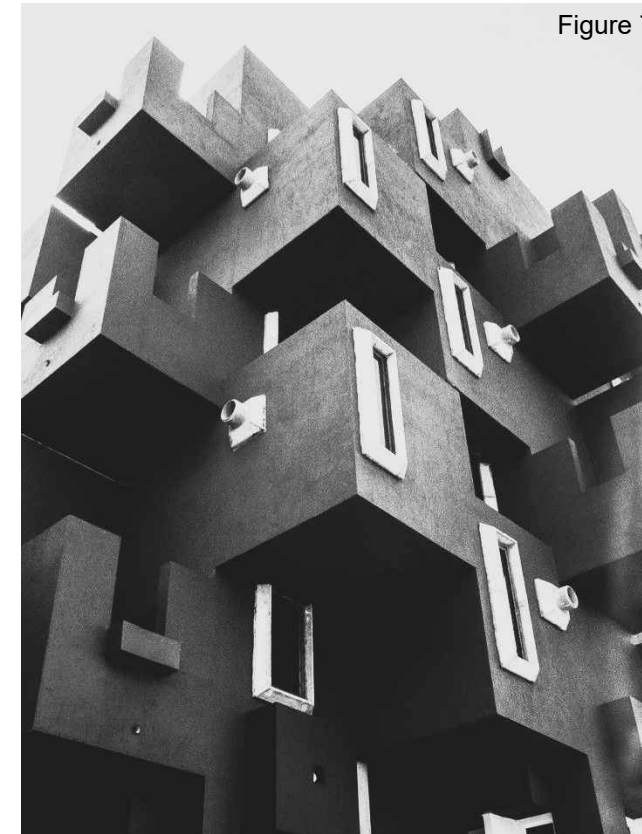


Figure 7



Figure 8

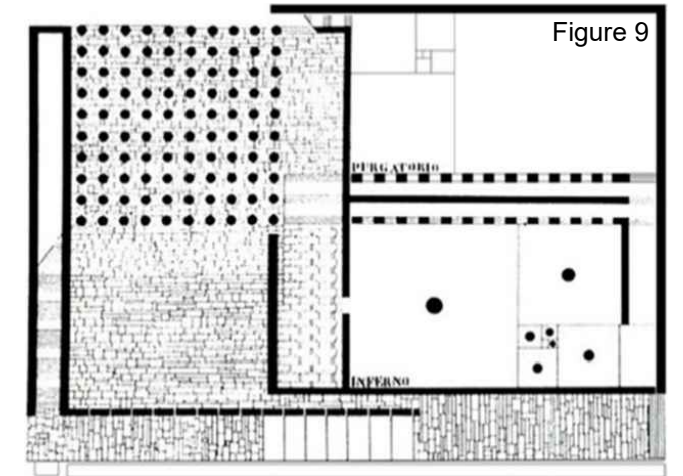


Figure 9

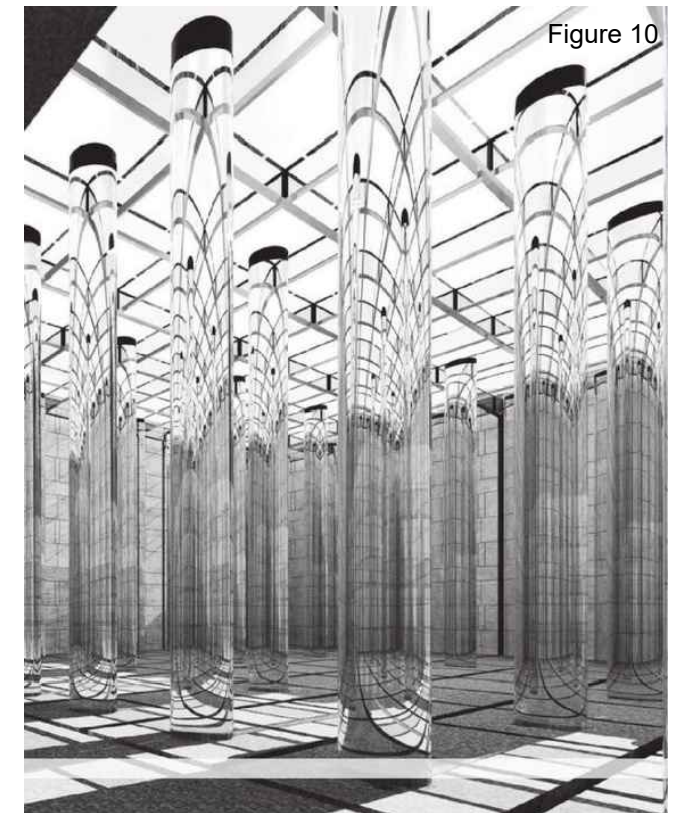


Figure 10

# CASE STUDY

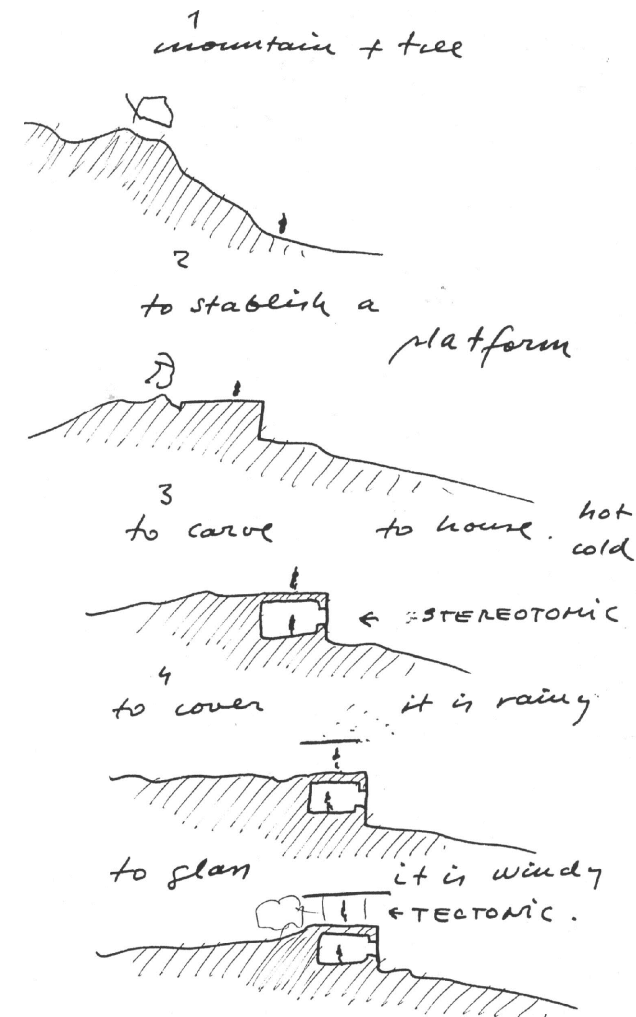
The focus of this projects will be on:

- what is the program of the building
- which literature has been used and how
- is there a clear connection between the literature and the architectural concept
- how well does the architectural design convey the mood or themes of the literary work
- how effectively does the design serve its intended function
- does the narrative integration enhances usability and user experience
- which spaces have been created (open, closed, narrow, high, tight, dark, light, textured, loud, quiet...)
- which types of experience have been created
- which senses were used (vision, smell, sound, touch, taste)
- which feelings/emotions have been triggered
- which elements play the biggest role
- which design strategies have been used for translating narrative into spatial experiences
- which elements were used to create those specific moments
- which materials have been used (how and where)

The case study for each project will include the following:

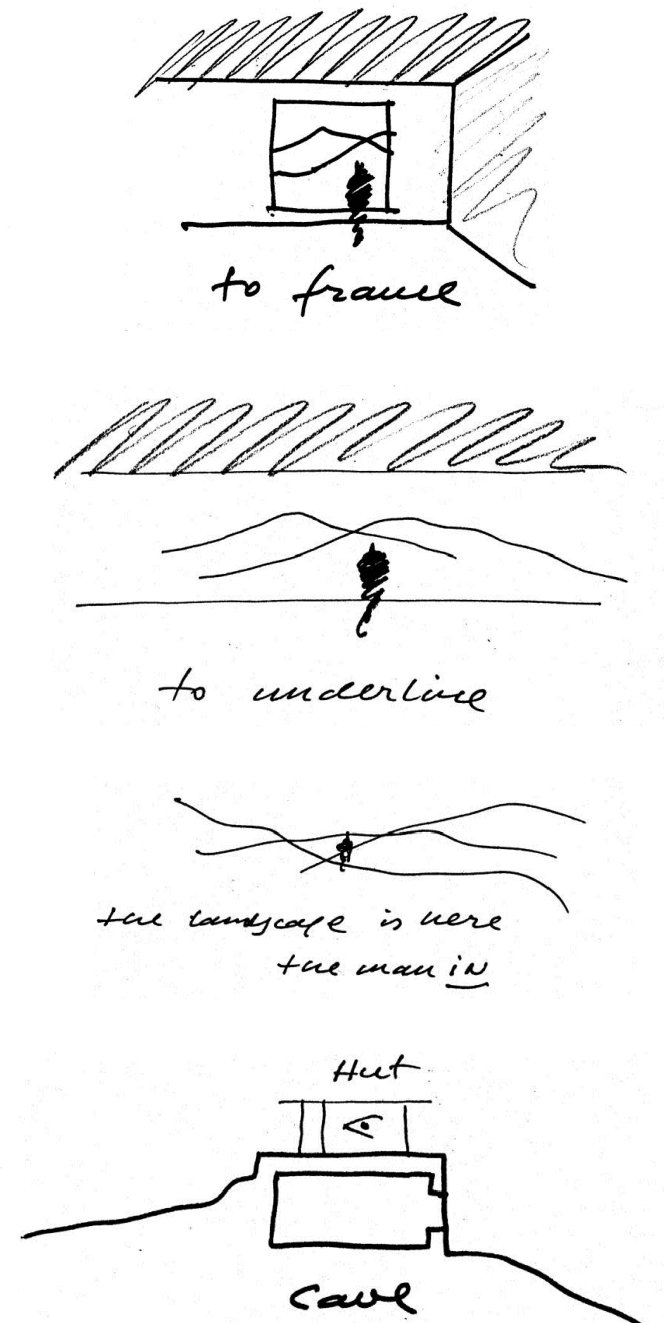
- research of specific literature in context of the design project
- plan analysis
- mapping out zones, experiences and elements
- labelling design principles
- cataloguing elements and design principles
- comparison

Figure 11. De Blas house by Alberto Campo Baeza



DE BLAS HOUSE  
with A. del V.

my  
Tampara, 16 1999.



# BASE LITERATURE

My thesis explores the translation of literature into architecture, using existing books as foundation for design. Specifically, I will draw on travelogues and travel memoirs as narrative frameworks to guide the architectural process. These literary works, infused with personal experiences, landscapes, and cultural observations, provide a rich narrative base which will serve as a base for translation into architectural elements. Through these books, I aim to explore how a traveller feels, what do they experience, how they act, and ultimately, how can that be translated into architecture.

The following books may serve as a foundation for this exploration:

- *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *Driving Italy: A Cheeky Travel Memoir* by Rada Jones
- *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy* by Frances Mayes
- *A Room with a View* by E.M. Forster

These books are all set in Italy and have been chosen based on specific criteria:

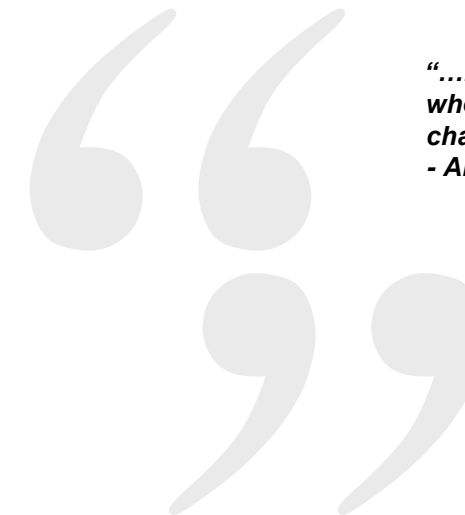
- travelogue or travel memoir format
- rich descriptions of experiences
- a variety of different experiences captured within one entity
- a specific, defined location
- a focus on the perspective of the traveller or tourist

The study of these foundational books will include:

- a detailed understanding of the book's content
- historical and cultural contextual analysis and their influence
- identification and interpretation of themes with potential for architectural translation
- identification and analysis of literary techniques such as narrative structure, symbolism, characters...

# SURVEY

In order to get a better understanding of the topic of travel experiences, I will expand the idea of literature narratives to personal narratives as well. As such, a survey is used as a quantitative research method where the interviewer, I, will pose open-ended questions based on specific research topic. Personal background information will also be requested to get to know the person better and possibly link the answers to a particular profile. This helps the create a better idea of how a person perceives a specific situation.



***“...it seems we may best be able to inhabit a place where we are not faced with the additional challenge of having to be there.”***  
**- Alain de Botton**

# 04

# OUTCOME

## EXPECTED RESEARCH OUTCOME POTENTIAL DESIGN OUTCOME

# OUTCOME

### EXPECTED RESEARCH OUTCOME

Expected research outcomes of this thesis will be centred on a deeper understanding and application of narrative-driven design within architecture, informed by the themes of embodied experience, atmosphere, and the art of travel. The following outcomes will emerge from the exploration of background concepts, case studies, chosen base literature and the survey.

Through the theoretical insights and the study of narrative in architecture, atmosphere and embodied experience, and the unique allure of travel, this research aims to develop a thorough understanding of how stories and sensory experiences shape architectural spaces. These foundational insights will establish the role of narrative as a design tool and help clarify the ways in which atmospheres can be crafted to evoke specific emotional and experiential responses in occupants.

By examining case studies of architectural projects inspired by literature, this research will uncover the principles and strategies that architects employ to translate written narratives into spatial experiences. This will result in a catalogue of design principles and strategies that can be selectively applied in design, offering a practical guide for using literary narrative as a drive for architecture design with additional focus on creating specific atmospheres.

In-depth analysis of chosen literature will yield a detailed understanding of the book's content, themes, and context. By identifying symbolism and themes with potential for translation, this literary analysis will directly inform design decisions, serving as a blueprint for transforming literary narratives into tangible architectural elements.

Survey will provide insight into personal travel experiences, capturing the sensory and emotional qualities that individuals associate with memorable journeys. This qualitative data will contribute to the design process by adding a new personal layer to the base literature narrative.

Based on these insights, the research will culminate in the formulation of a design brief and manifesto. The design brief will outline the essential components of the program, establishing rules, methods, and constraints necessary for a viable design. The manifesto will present key design principles, offering a cohesive vision for integrating narrative, atmosphere, and embodied experience into architectural practice.

### POTENTIAL DESIGN OUTCOME

The narrative-driven design approach appears as the translation of a language game into architecture, often used in temporary settings like festivals and exhibitions. To maintain the scope, I will be now concentrating on designing a single building - a meeting point for stories - a "hotel", as it uniquely embodies elements of both public building and temporary housing, making it an ideal setting for storytelling and experience.

My aim is to create a functional building where architecture itself becomes central focus based on an existing narrative. The design will integrate, overlay, absorb, and reinterpret elements from literature, crafting experiences that echo those in the book.

This approach also serves as an architectural reflection on the past, present, and future: the traveller's journey, the written narrative of it, and the architectural design itself.

# 05 PROJECT FRAMEWORK

TIME PLANNING  
DIAGRAMS  
GLOSSARY

## TIME PLANNING

- 1.1 Introduction of a topic
- 1.2 Formulation of a research question + finding mentors
- 1.3 Formulation of a research question + finding mentors
- 1.4 Formulation of a research question, method and outcome + finding mentors
- 1.5 Finalisation of a research question, method and outcome + finding mentors
- 1.6 Pitch**
- 1.7 Research plan draft - research of potential literature + existing cases
- 1.8 Research plan draft - research of literature, existing cases, program and intended qualities
- 1.9 Research plan draft - research of literature, existing cases, program and intended qualities
- 1.10 Hand-in research plan + P1 presentation**

- 2.1 Analysis of existing projects + reading of base literature + identification and analysis of base literature themes
- 2.2 Analysis of existing projects + reading of base literature + identification and analysis of base literature themes
- 2.3 Survey formulation + formulation of design principles + background literature research
- 2.4 Survey finalisation + formulation of design principles + site research + background literature research
- 2.5 Selection and formulation of design principles + development of the design brief + background literature research
- 2.6 Research paper formulation + design manifesto formulation + concept development
- Holidays // Christmas
- Holidays // New Years Eve
- 2.7 Research paper finalisation + design manifesto finalisation + concept development + sketch design
- 2.8 **Hand in graduation plan** + sketch design and building layout (1:500)
- 2.9 P2 preparation and printing
- 2.10 Hand-in research paper + P2 presentation**

# GRADUATION IDEA

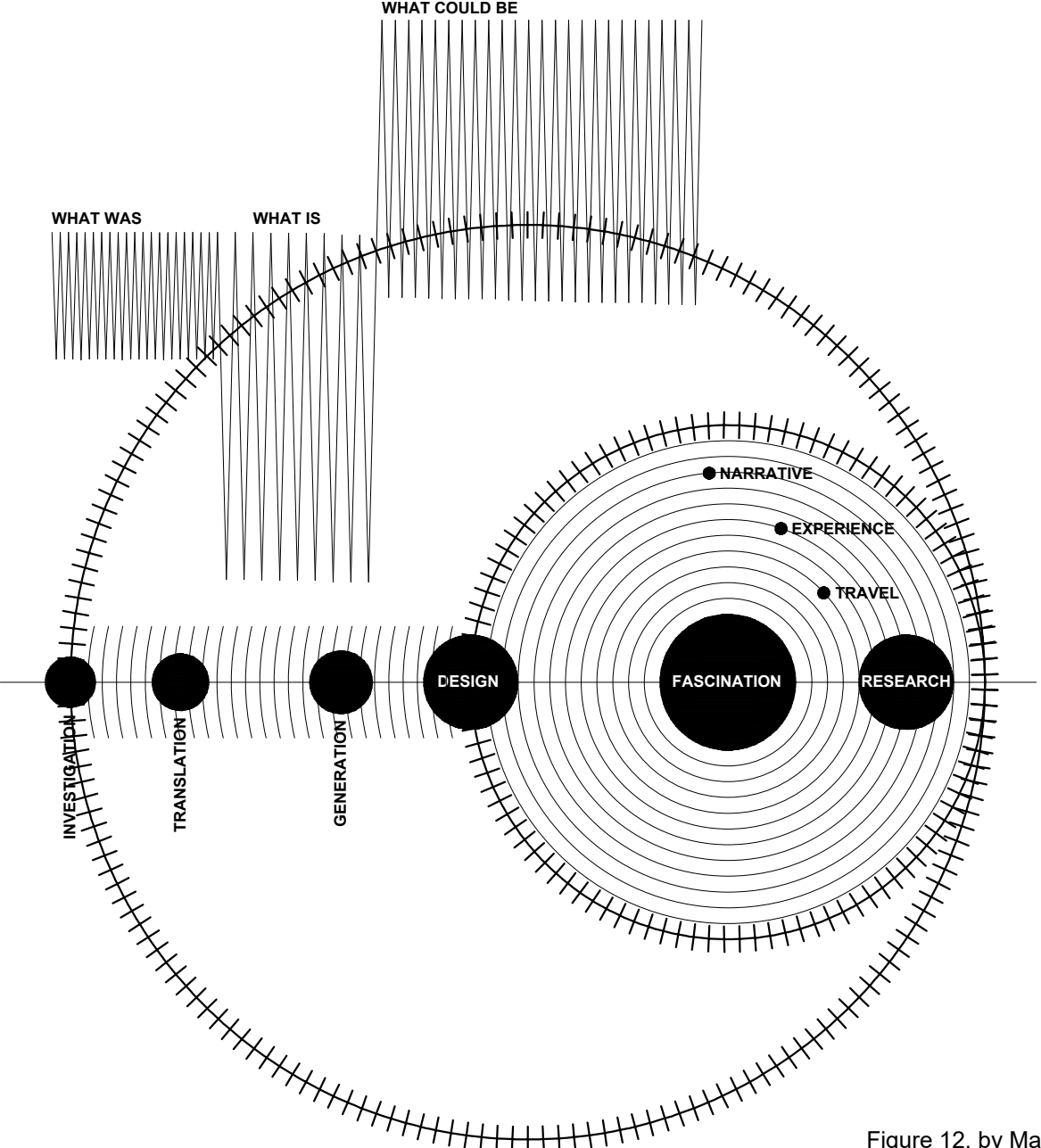


Figure 12. by Marta Lulić

# GRADUATION PLAN

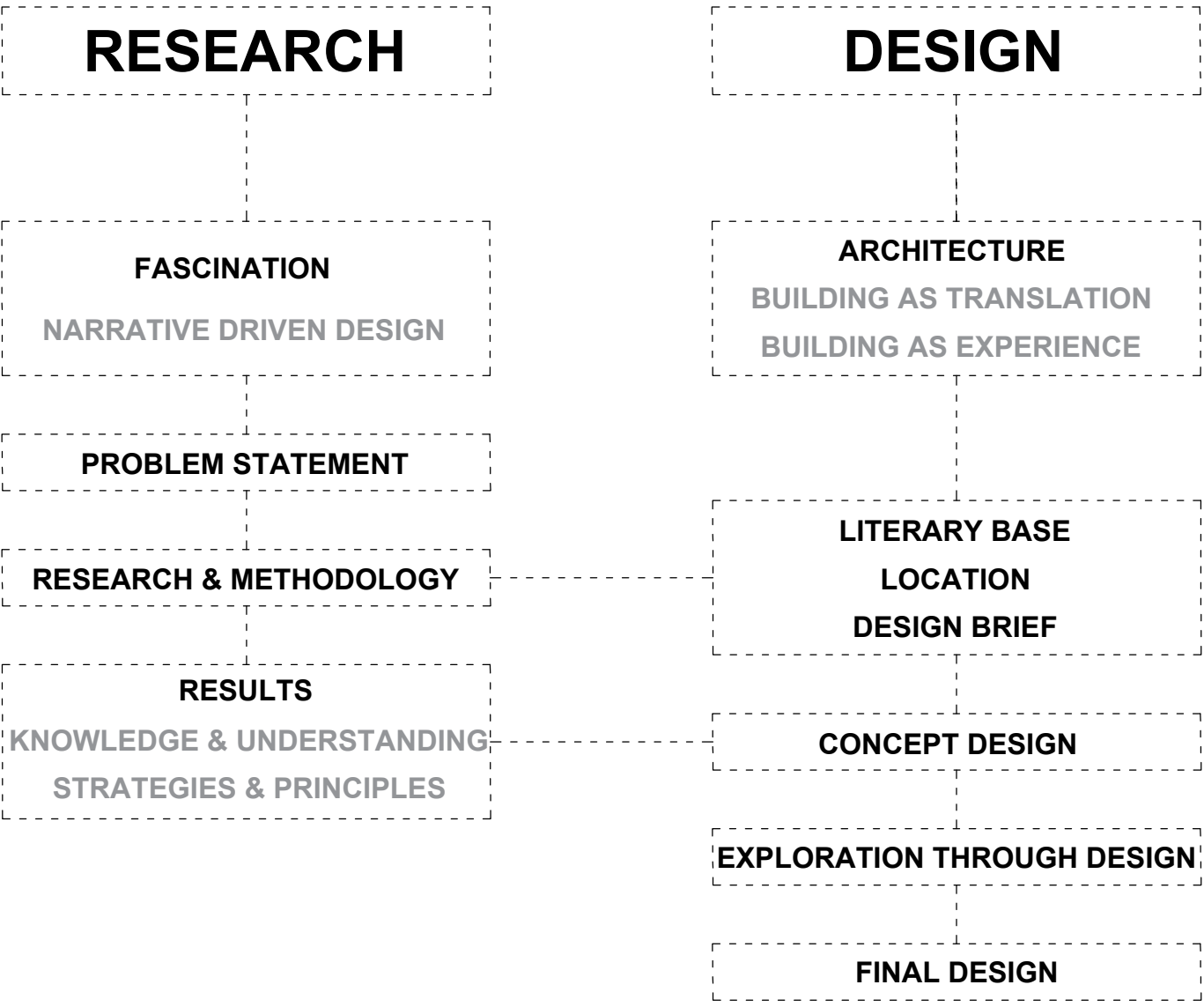


Figure 13. by Marta Lulić

# 06

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