



Reconstruction of the Notre Dame de Paris *as a moment for reinterpretation*

Keywords: Notre Dame, reconstruction, authenticity, heritage, emotional mapping, mental image, public perception

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Introduction

The Notre Dame de Paris, situated on île de la Cité, in the heart of Paris is a cathedral that dates back to the 12th century. The monument is part of the “the banks of the river Seine”¹, that contains a large area of Paris and is listed as UNESCO World Heritage. “The ensemble, regarded as a geographical and historical entity, forms an exceptional and unique example of urban riverside architecture, where the different layers of the history of Paris, the capital city of one of the first great nation states of Europe, are harmoniously superposed.”²

15 April 2019, the Notre Dame set fire and was severely damaged. The roof and its spire got fully destroyed. The whole country witnessed – on television or first hand – the destruction that the fire caused. I’ve been intrigued by the emotions of the people that were brought up by the fire. This event showed the very strong and emotional relationship between the French and this monument. A debate about reconstruction followed immediately after. I wrote a thesis about the authenticity matter of the reconstruction of the Notre Dame. Examples of reconstructed heritage around Europe show that due to the strong relation between heritage and cultural identity, socio-political factors underlie inevitably the way we deal with heritage, whether it is to enhance, cultivate or destroy cultural identity. Authenticity in reconstruction can, for example, be obtained by applying the Anastylosis principles, which prescribes to differentiate newly added elements and old elements. However, post-war reconstruction of heritage often involves rebuilding something to its pre-war state because the people wish to, although authenticity can be questioned because the monument now would suggest that it never suffered from destruction. Authenticity is not an absolute concept but rather paradoxes. In the end it is a matter of perception of people that ascribe authenticity on their own subjective way. However, we can state that authentic reconstruction of the Notre Dame is to let the principles of reconstruction meet the people’s desire assuming that heritage owns its status by being meaningful to people. Therefore, these meanings and symbolism that people assign to the Notre Dame need to be identified before being translated in design principles serving a reconstruction design. However, after hardly any public discussion, rebuilding the Notre Dame to ‘its last known state’ before the fire has been chosen as reconstruction strategy. In this way, the Notre Dame would suggest that it did not suffer from a fire and authenticity can be questioned.

1 UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Paris, Banks of the Seine,” Paris, Banks of the Seine, accessed March 25, 2021, Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/600/>.

2 Ibid.

Problem Statement

Soon after the fire French prime minister Edouard Philippe announced a future competition for its reconstruction. Emerging and established designers posted proposals of a possible reconstruction on social media.³ Supporting renders showed extreme ideas for the Notre Dame, like a swimming pool, a greenhouse or gardens, as shown in figures 1 and 2. Sharable images resulted in public anger at architects capitalising on tragedy.⁴ Architect neglected the fact that designing the reconstruction of the Notre Dame is actually a profound job.⁵ Comments on social media labelled the proposals as “shamefully insensitive to the building and its history”⁶ and they called for reconstruction *à l’identique*. And so it happened. Before a debate about reconstruction could even start, the French senate passed a law to rebuild the Notre Dame to ‘its last known state’.

The Notre Dame holds many sculptural qualities and is therefore, for great importance for the art history sector. In addition, it is one of the most emblematic monuments to French history, thanks to the remarkable events that the site provided, such as the marriage of Henri IV in 1572, the celebration of the liberation of Paris after the Second World War or masses held by former President Charles de Gaulle.⁷ The Notre Dame is deeply intertwined with the French culture and historic events, which is effectively the reason to preserve the great monument. The danger of the fire destroying it all was therefore evident.

However, the debate about the reconstruction is overshadowed by an assumption that rebuilding the Notre Dame *à l’identique* preserves the collective memories and rebuilding differently would mean a loss of these memories and values the French cherish so deeply. Whether I am convinced, also for the sake of authenticity, a design which is not convulsively *à l’identique* could equally well represent important parts of the French collective memory, which will accordingly be the aim of my design project.

The Notre Dame is already eight centuries old whereas a human life is one-tenth of this length. Therefore, the notion on the cathedral is always changing when generations pass. Over time, people tinkered with their cathedral, reinterpreted it, and made it go with her time. One of the most important example is the restauration done by French

3 Hamish Lonergan, “Pools, Carports and Ball-Pits: Or Why the Notre Dame Restoration Competition Is a Meme,” *Footprint: The Architecture Competition as Contact Zone* Spring / Summer 2020 (2020): pp. 125-136, 125.

4 Ibid.

5 [DÉBAT] Faut-il Reconstruire Notre-Dame à l’identique ?, *Reconstruction De Notre-Dame : Quatre Mois Pour Sauver La Cathédrale*, 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/reconstruction-de-notre-dame-quatre-mois-pour-sauver-la-cathedrale-26-04-2019-8061246.php>.

6 Hamish Lonergan, “Pools, Carports and Ball-Pits: Or Why the Notre Dame Restoration Competition Is a Meme,” *Footprint: The Architecture Competition as Contact Zone* Spring / Summer 2020 (2020): pp. 125-136, 126.

7 Ministère de la Culture, “Le Monument,” Notre Dame de Paris, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://notre-dame-de-paris.culture.gouv.fr/fr/monument>.

architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc during the second half of the 19th century, based on a modern interpretation of gothic architecture. Interventions and modifications has been done with certain intentions. Interpretation is a not a static concept. It never stops happening. Reinterpretation is inevitably connected to heritage. It tells a story and makes people reflect. Now, after the fire, it is again time for an intervention, which should respond to a process of reinterpretation of the Notre Dame without desperately hold onto 'how it was'. I believe, a truthful and authentic reconstruction design can be made by obtaining a profound knowledge on the emergence in relation to how people perceived their monument in the past, perceive it nowadays and may perceive it in the future.

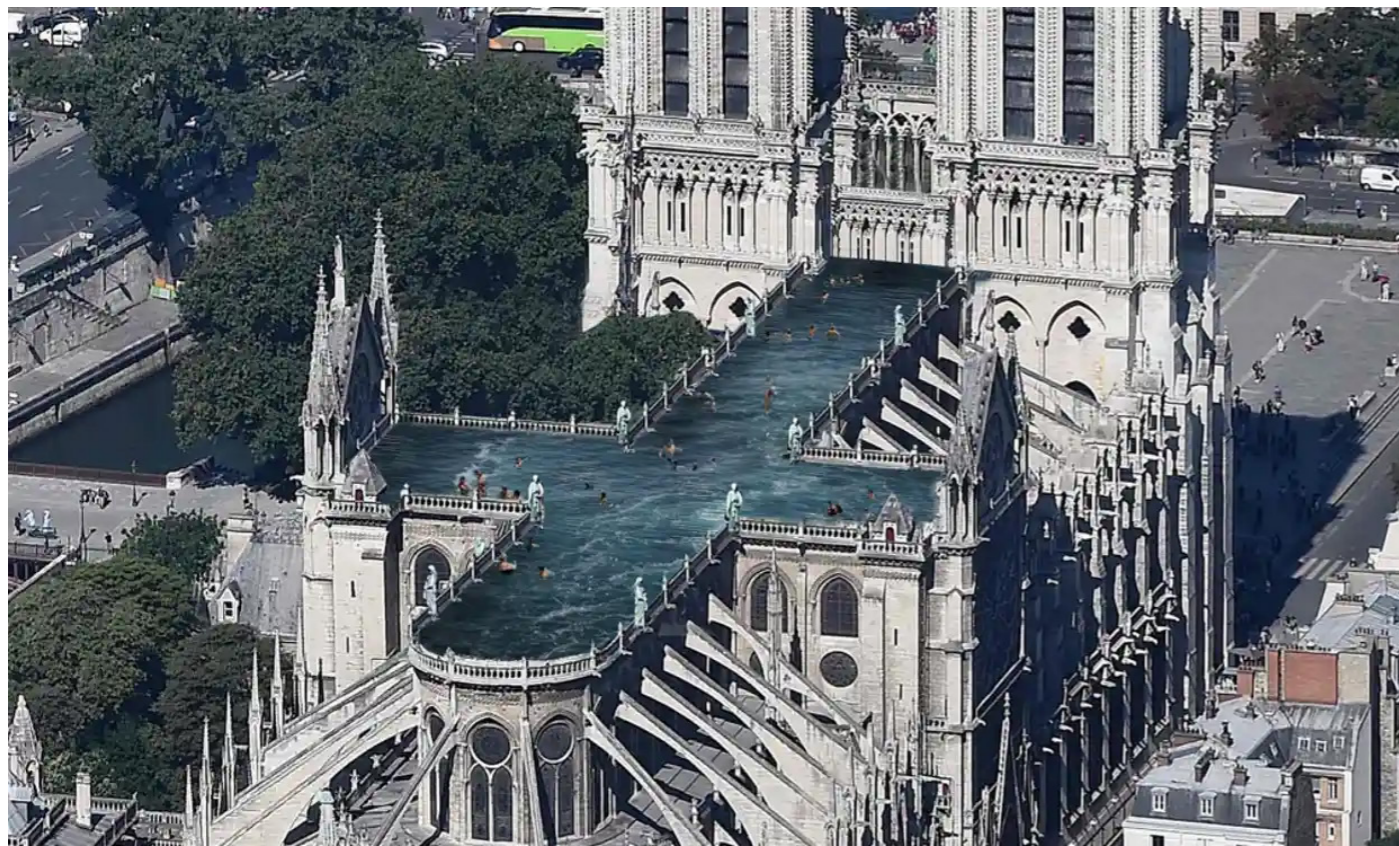


Figure 1: The swimming pool design by Stockholm-based Ulf Mejergren Architects, Photograph: UMA/u-m-a.se, Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/15/swimming-pool-roof-notre-dame-architect-proposals-shock-traditionalists>



Figure 2: Greenhouse Roof for Notre Dame by Studio NAB
Retrieved from: <https://www.archdaily.com/915803/studio-nab-designs-a-greenhouse-roof-for-notre-dame>

Research question

The aim is to design a reconstruction for the Notre Dame that responds to a reinterpretation of the building and its tangible and intangible context. The main question of this graduation project is therefore:

How to design a reconstruction for the Notre Dame that responds to reinterpretation?

But how to reinterpret the Notre Dame? As said, the Notre Dame is a several centuries old building and reinterpretation and interventions have happened over time. A reconstruction proposal build upon a history that goes back to the 12th century. When reinterpreting heritage there is a delicate balance between the past and today. The one notion helps to interpret the other, and the other way around. It is next to the an evaluation of today's perception import to know how the Notre Dame arrived to the point as it is now. Which developments played a role and in what way did it influence the existence of the Notre Dame. The question that follows upon the main questions is:

How does the emergence of the Notre Dame relate to the way this is perceived?

On which another sub question that follows is:

How is the Notre Dame perceived?

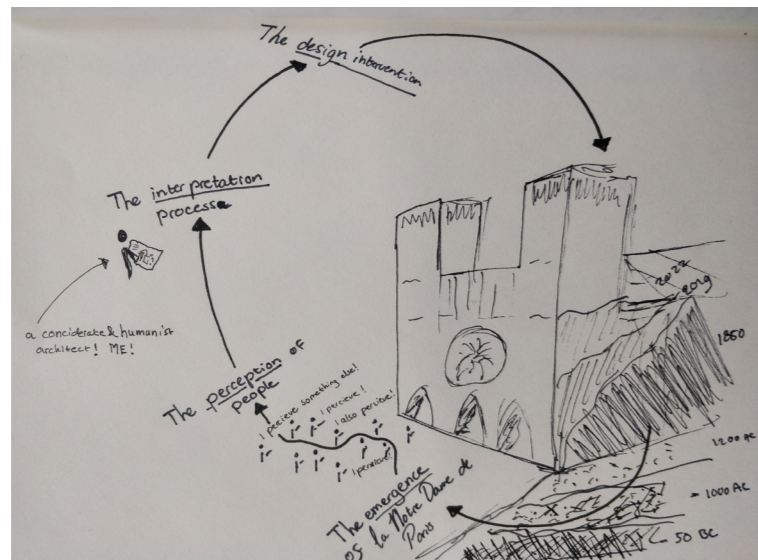


Figure 3: Process from research towards design, self-made image, March 2022

Method

To obtain broad understanding the emergence of the Notre Dame historical research will be done. As explained in the introduction, the Notre Dame is deeply intertwined with the French cultural history. Accordingly, the research will contain both societal developments and discourse and tangible developments, which will effectively be analysed on both the scale of the building itself and its environment. The emergence of the Notre Dame will be visualised on a comprehensive timeline which shows the relation between certain happenings. These relations are important to understand why the Notre Dame is from importance and how certain interventions on the building resulted from certain thinking.

To determine people's perception on the Notre Dame I will let people do a drawing experiment. How does the Notre Dame lives in people's imagination? The verb imagine derives from the word image. Someone's image is "soaked in memories and meanings"⁸. Someone's perception on the Notre Dame can be read out of someone's 'mental image'⁹, which is the way someone remembers a building, site or city. The way people draw the Notre Dame in the way this present in their imagination says a lot about the personal way of perceiving.

"Public images however, are images that derives from a multiple mental images."¹⁰ By analysing and compering the different drawing I can make a public image that translates all the drawings into one or several comprehensive products. Kevin Lynch described in his book how he translated several mental images to one public image. Elements that were mentioned many times get a more empathized look than elements that are less collectively present, see figure 4. In this way the hierarchy of perceived elements become clearly visible, see figure 5. Since, in my research also intangible factors play an important role, the products of the public images also involve some socio-cultural aspects by adding quotes descriptions or social sceneries. The can be modestly depicted or really emphasized like a caricature in order to show a hierarchy.

	PATH	EDGE	NODE	DISTRICT	LANDMARK
over 75% frequency	thick solid line	thick dashed line	solid circle	solid polygon	star
50-75%	medium solid line	medium dashed line	circle with dots	shaded polygon	inverted triangle
25-50%	thin solid line	thin dashed line	circle with cross-hatch	shaded polygon with dots	small inverted triangle
12 1/2-25%	dotted line	thin dashed line	circle with vertical lines	shaded polygon with vertical lines	small inverted triangle

Figure 4: Legend of public images, Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 21st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: The MIT Press, 1992), 145.

8 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 21st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: The MIT Press, 1992), 1.

9 Ibid, 2.

10 Ibid, 7.

I will set up meetings in which someone will draw a personal mental image of the Notre Dame. These sessions will take around sixty to ninety minutes in order to achieve a meaningful image that contains much information. The interviewee will draw her/his mental image alongside the conversation that is held between me and the interviewee based on the questions. Just like the research on the emergence of the Notre Dame, it is important to involve tangible and intangible notions of the building itself and its context. But in this drawing experiment the interviewee will be constantly be invited to reflect on what she/he draws and what this tells about her/him. In this way the mental image will become personal and therefore show someone perception. The mental map will involve questions about the form, function, context – both timewise and societal – and discourse from and around the Notre Dame. The script is shown in figure 6 and a part of the outcome of a own personal trial in figure 7.

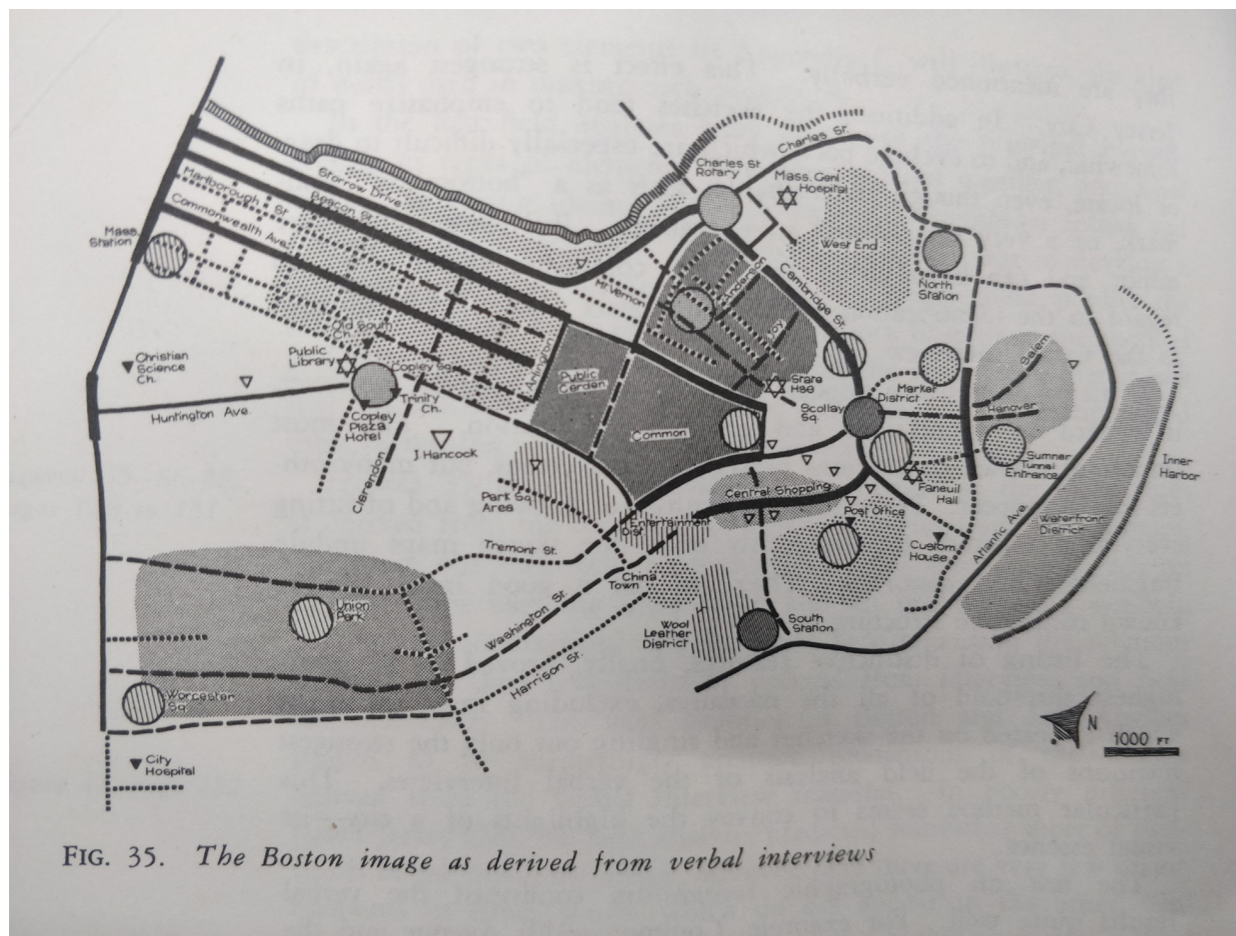


Figure 5: The Boston image as derived from verbal interviews, Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 21st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: The MIT Press, 1992), 146.

Introduction: for this drawing experiment, realistic drawing is not needed. It is about the representation of associations. Talent for drawing is not required, it is rather an obstruction. Let yourself free in everything you draw and talk about what and why you draw.

OUTLINE OF DRAWING

[FORM] How would you draw the Notre Dame throughout your very first association?

[FORM] What are specific elements/ornaments that you remember from the Notre Dame?

[FUNCTION] What kind of role does the building play? Which function does it fulfil?

[CONTEXT] Could you draw the context of the Notre Dame? Where finds the Notre Dame itself in? And which things can be found around the Notre Dame?

[CONTEXT] Could you draw which role the Notre Dame plays in its context?

[DISCOURS] Are there certain people around the Notre Dame? What kind of role do they play in relation to the Notre Dame? What are the things they say and do?

[HISTORICAL CONTEXT] Are there certain historical events around the Notre Dame that are having an influence on what you drew here or associate with the Notre Dame?

REFLECTION (CORRECTION & ADDITION)

[FORM] You drew the Notre Dame from a certain perspective, with certain details, what does this say about you and your association with the Notre Dame?

[FORM] What is the origin from this association? What is the memory that this derives from?

[CONTEXT] you have chosen a certain scale and frame in drawing the Notre Dame and its surroundings, where are you in relation to what you drew? Are you part of it or are you outside of it? What does this tell you about your relation to the Notre Dame?

[FUNCTION] The Notre Dame fulfils a certain function in your drawing and in its surroundings. Where are you in relation to this function? Are you part of this way of using? Is it a collective use or a public use?

[DISCOURS] You drew people around the Notre Dame that take a certain position. Where are you in relation to these people? What is your opinion on it?

[HISTORICAL CONTEXT] You have given the Notre Dame a historical context. What is your relation to these events?

Figure 6: Script for drawing experiments, self-made image, april 2022

The Notre Dame is everyone's monument. Therefore it is important to me that the drawing experiments will be done by diverse group of people consisting of both people that have a religious and secular connection to the Notre Dame. In addition, I would like to engage with people that consider themselves as strongly connected to the French and Parisian culture and people that do not, tourist for example. Lastly, I would like to do the experiment with people that have some expertise in architecture or art historic scene. I would like the interviewees to be from different social economic and cultural backgrounds.

Chosen interviewees are as followed (STILL TO BE COMPLETED & TO BE REVISED DUE TO PROGRESSIVE INSIGHT):

- Non-French visitor 1
- Non-French visitor 2
- Piere Cailleteau
A well-off Parisian that feels French at heart
- Guillaume Escaravage
23 years old, born 55 km north of Paris, architecture student in Paris, raised catholic.
- Person with religious connection 2
- Shérazade Rouibah
24 years old, French/Algerian raised in Kuwait, architecture student in Paris, practicing Muslim
- Secular person
- Genevieve ??
?? years old, French art historian living in Orléans, religion?
- Reinout Rutte, Dutch architecture historian?
- French architecture teacher

To translate the mental images into one public image, I imagine to make several conceptual product like models and drawings like sections and axonometries in which the memories, emotions and associations get a represented. The stronger an aspect was present in the drawing experiments, the more it will be emphasized in the public image in order to create hierarchy between notions.

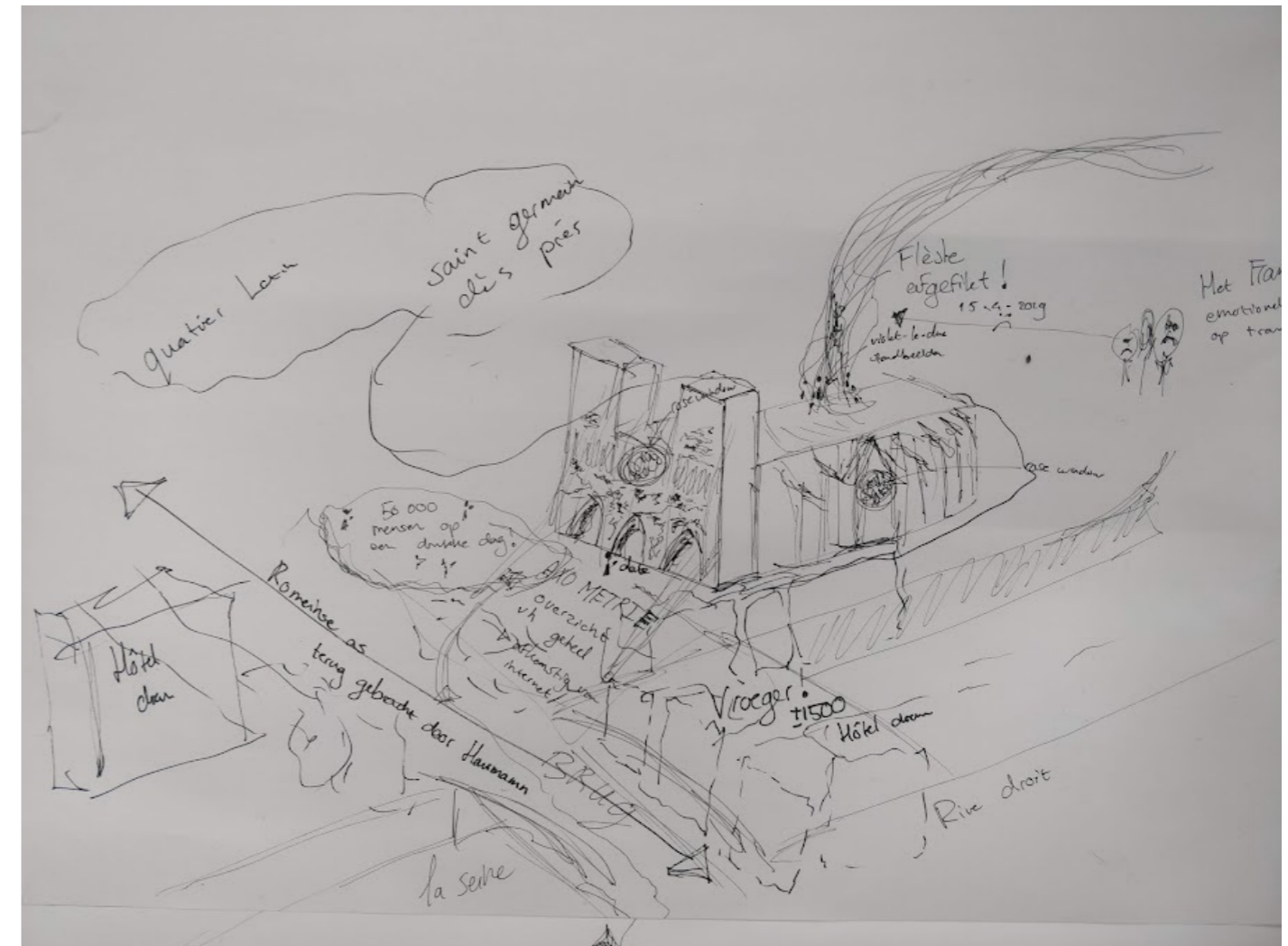


Figure 7: Part of own mental image when being interviewed by Leeke Reinders according script, self-made image, april 2022

Hypothesis

Concerning the drawing experiment, I expect that the drawings will all be very personal because different kind of people will divide the time of drawing differently by spending more time on the one question that is congenial for that person. I expect to see to what extend the interviewees are aware of the emergence of the Notre Dame. I will be able to see misperceptions and matters of course. Some aspects of people's perception on the Notre Dame might be fully individual, some might be collectively shared. I expect the public drawing to be a search for a suitable representation method for emotional mapping. The public drawing will show the importance of aspects from the Notre Dame and around the Notre Dame. I expect the public image to be a stepping stone towards the formulation of a design assignment.

Relation to design

The original purpose of this research is to design a reconstruction for the Notre Dame. It would seem obvious to limit myself to the roof and a possible spire, that went lost during the fire. However, I expect the concept of the Notre Dame to involve a larger realm than only the building itself. Intervening in the Notre Dame might not lead to an intervention on the actual building but may be only in the surroundings. The aim of the research is also to define this realm. Defining this realm is supported by the interpretation of the mental images since there is already a demarcation in a drawing. The public image will prescribe the elements that the design should be based upon. During the creation of the public image, the design phase already starts since I will be prioritizing and simplify the realm of the Notre Dame. The design phase will start running next to the research phase and will get a more dominant role halfway the process as the research will later only involve reflection on the conclusions in relation to the design, as shown in figure 8 and 9.

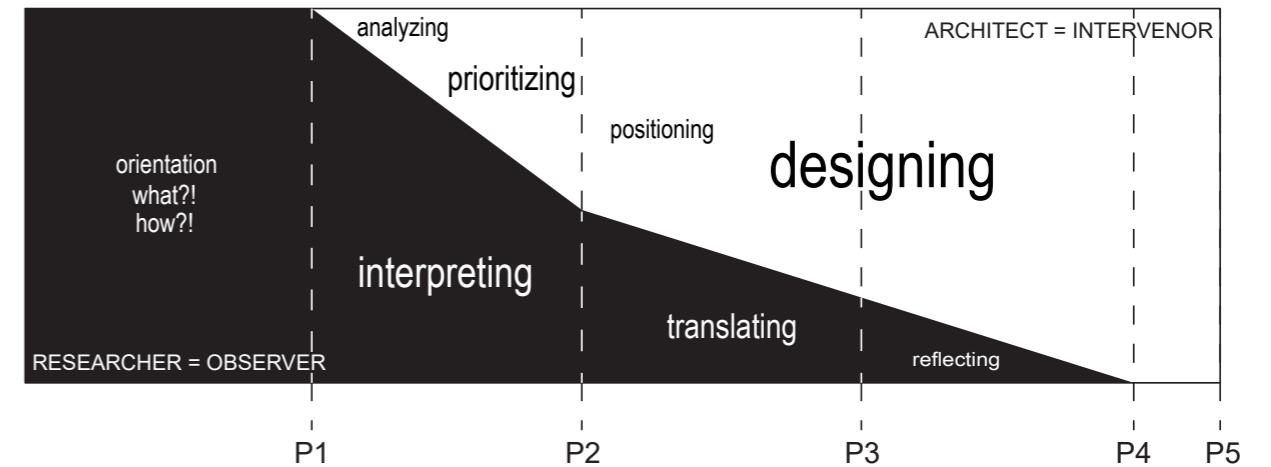


Figure 8: Relation between research and design by acts of doing

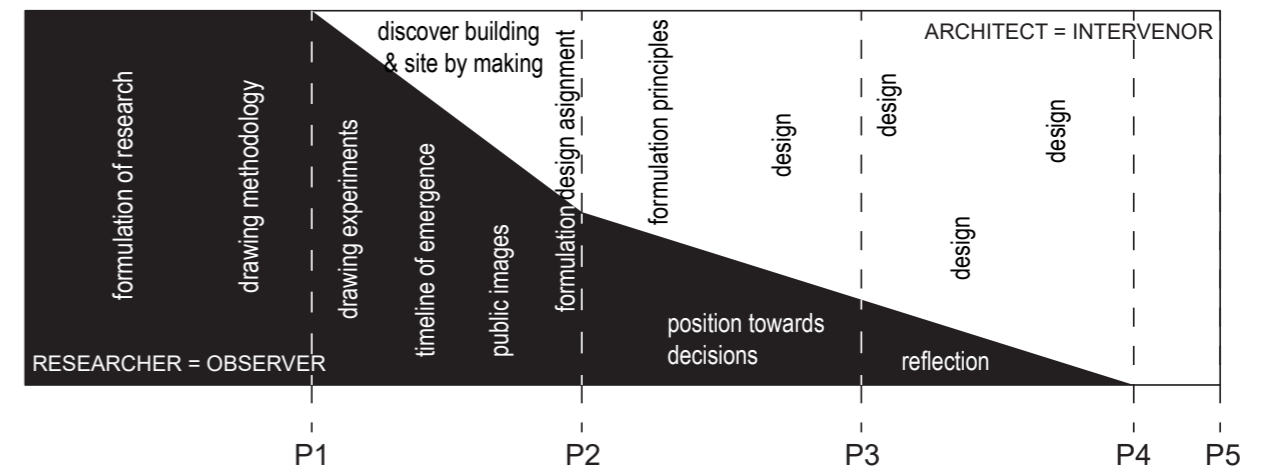


Figure 9: Relation between research and design by defined products

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