

## GRADUATION THESIS - REFLECTION

### Personal dimensions

#### *Make it personal*

This project was initiated and driven by a personal motivation which stems far further my academical past. Growing up in Lausanne, Switzerland, the Alps were simultaneously the background of my daily view and the destination for much of my free time. Thus the alpine landscape and its interaction with humanity became a subject at the intersection of many things, which make me as a person — and my graduation project became the opportunity to engage with it.

This personal dimension became the motor for the whole investigation. Looking back at it, it is striking to see how important this was. Making it personal allowed me to remain interested throughout the year of research and design that this project became and made each result all more gratifying. Thus a first lesson — *make it personal*.

#### *The three consciences of the designer*

An essential question that came up during the project was how do I position myself, as a landscape architect, in society and particularly what responsibilities do I have towards society. The answer that followed from my practice can be summarised in three levels of conscience, which start from a basic observation.

Observation:	Consciences:
We design in the present	We must develop an ethical conscience
on basis of the past	a historical conscience
for the benefit of the future	a political consciences

*Ethical conscience* - To design is to take position. It is to accept certain things and reject others, proposing their transformation. But people will live with these transformations. 'Landscape architecture is so powerful that it is dangerous' stated Pierre Bélanger. This power gives responsibilities. We must acknowledge our systems of value, which define our ethical stand, and we must stand for them, even if this means to refuse certain assignments or collaborations.

*Historical conscience* - It is only thanks to the past that there is a present and thanks to the present there will be a future. We have a debt to the past, a debt of continuity instead of break-up.

*Political conscience* - We must seek the improvement of the human condition and of society. It is our task to implement a part of the organisation that will allow this improvement to take place. We must advocate for change towards this.

These three consciences allowed me to navigate through the many opinions and values that people project onto the project's site and the related themes. By questioning the project's position in reality, they help make the link between the theoretical work and its concrete implications.

### Of the graduation studio

#### *Landscape infrastructures*

The first objective of the project was to engage with the contemporary alpine landscape through design, in order to form an understanding of the relation between man and mountain and to conceive how it could further develop. The Alps have long been perceived as a spectacular natural topography, or as an nostalgic illustrations of archaic ways of life and vernacular knowledge. These approaches are outdated for who wants to observe these mountains in their contemporary condition. We need new keys to their interpretation.

Starting from similar observations for a wider context, the Flowscapes graduation lab proposes to address the relation between landscape and infrastructure. Taking the approach of this studio as a starting point, a new reading of this territory could be achieved. This is because infrastructures embody the relation between people and landscape, as they are the underlying structure built by people in the landscape to make the human existence possible.

It became gradually clear throughout the design process that this subject is a key theme in the alpine landscape. A new scale of infrastructure is taking place since approximately one century, opening a new period in the history of the Alps: that of large-scale infrastructures. To engage with the contemporary alpine landscape is to engage with these large-scale infrastructures. In this transition, spatial designers have a crucial role to play as they can mediate the relation between these interventions and the people affected by their implementation.

The approach of the Flowscapes studio proved highly relevant in the European alpine context. Its integrative nature offered a helpful tool for confronting the high complexity of this contemporary landscape. The concept of landscape infrastructures allowed to cross many barriers set by more classical approach, such as the distinctions between aesthetic and functional or between the process and the product. In fact, such dichotomies do more harm than they help. The times are not to distinctions and separations, but rather to hybridisation. This hybrid state is relevant at many scales: the lake of the Vajont is both landscape and infrastructure, man-made and natural, productive and recreational.

Often-encountered dichotomies:

Natural	Man-made
Aesthetic	Functional
Otium	Negotium

Naturally, what ‘flowscapes’ or ‘landscape infrastructures’ means is wide-ranging and subject to interpretation, therefore it is the task of the person who uses the notion to redefine it for him/herself. This diversity of interpretation is a quality, as it allows for new readings to emerge. In a world of growing complexity, a plurality of responses is an asset.

The Vajont disaster left the Italian nation in shock in its time. It slowed down the development of infrastructure in the whole country (Casagrande, 2014). Whilst it allowed people to gain conscience of the stakes and risks of such constructions, it also led to a general condemning of large infrastructures. As the world-wide development of large infrastructures goes further, we need directions and examples for their design. The project aims at offering such a case of design. It illustrates that it is possible to conceive landscapes where people live with such infrastructure in a symbiotic way, if the infrastructure is carefully designed, not just as functional infrastructure but also as an element of perception and interaction, as part of the daily life of people who live around it.

## Academic dimensions

### *Active analysis*

As a design process, the form of research it provides to the field is that of research by design. There are, however, different ways to put this relation between research and design into practice. I want to end up with a design proposal - but do I start by designing directly? Do I start by analysing the site? Do I start by analysing references?

Many times in the process of this research, I started by analysing the site and some references before engaging with design. This form of approach worked out very little. Often I would try to design, but remained blocked because of the load of information about the site and about possible references which weren’t necessarily relevant to what I was searching to design. It proved much more effective to work with design experiments since the beginning, and through this to raise questions about the site, about certain themes and certain references which were needed in order to move further. By doing so, one knows that the questions he raises are directly related to the design and will help to bring the process further. I name this approach *active analysis*, where one questions the site, its status quo and its possibilities by observation of its reaction to design experiments. To make an analogy, it means that if one stands in the kitchen in front of some vegetables for cooking, wanting to prepare good food but without an idea of how to do so, it works out better to experiment directly rather than read literature about the ingredient’s chemical composition, taste or symbolic.

*Memory, experience and hope*

After engaging with the theme of infrastructures in the Alps, a site was selected for design, in order to tackle the issue in a concrete case. The Vajont Valley offered the ideal site for a design laboratory on the contemporary alpine landscape. The first reason to this is its emblematic position as example of the consequences of large-scale infrastructure implementation. What happened fifty years ago in the valley was a worst-case scenario, leading to its designation as ‘worst case of environmental management’ by the United Nations in 2008. To engage with the Vajont Valley allowed to address many aspects of landscape infrastructures. The second reason is that this piece of territory faces the same issues of land abandon and emigration as most alpine territories, but these issues were accelerated by the landslide of 1963. The valley therefore appeared as a ‘future preview’ of its neighbouring territories, which will themselves soon face the same issues.

Therefore, the second objective was to propose a design intervention in this valley that would address its most important problematics. In order to engage with this location however, the concept of landscape infrastructure was too limited. My investigation led me to understand that in this valley, the most important issue that could be engaged with in design was that there is a dense node of problems in terms of memory and little perspectives of improvement in the nearby future. The present seems caught up between the load of the past and a fading future. A new key to interpretation was necessary here, and it was found with the same starting point as the three consciences of the designer:

Observation:	Key notions:
We design in the present	We relate to it with experience
on basis of the past	memory
for the benefit of the future	hope

*Experience* is understood here as the result of personal perception and evocation in the landscape in the present condition. The project starts with experience (the one I had in the mountains in my childhood, the one I had whilst visiting the Vajont Valley for the first time) and ends with experience (the ones the project creates in this landscape).

*Memory* brings together all the processes of reconstruction and transmission of the past in the present day. It includes processes of remembrance, commemoration and forgetting.

*Hope* is the projection of our wishes and desires into the future. It is the motor that drives us through the present, to go forward.

These three notions allowed to capture the essence of the present state of the Vajont Valley, and to bring together the various aspects of this design proposal. They engage with different scales, from the individual, to the community, onto the whole society, which is an important quality. It was an important approach in the design process which reflects very much my personal perception of the environment. It formed a helpful tool both for investigation and communication. This investigation was the first context in which I made use of it, but I believe it can be helpful for a variety of contexts and intend to use it further myself in my future works.

*Trans-disciplinarity*

In landscapes of growing complexity, interventions require a wide array of expertise. The graduation thesis is, in this perspective, only a first step towards the actual intervention. The result of the project is an idea, a proposal, which would still undergo many further steps if it were to be built. But even in this first step, different disciplines interact. I conducted some literature studies in fields which ranged from geology and biology to sociology and politics. I discussed and interviewed with people from as many fields. Even in landscape architecture, where we distinguish landscape planning and design, the project goes through both. To implement a lake is a case of both.

## **Societal dimensions**

### *Possible directions for alpine territories*

The design process of this project allowed to unveil certain possible directions for the further development of the alpine landscape. With the premise that landscape inhabitants are key and that we must shape conditions for their subsistence in the landscape all year-round, it became clear that economic opportunities are essential. If one cannot subsist in a place, one leaves. Two directions were explored and combined by the present project.

A first direction lies in tourism. As I have experienced in the Swiss context, people like to go to the mountains, even if they do not live there. Thanks to this, many rural alpine settlements have turned into attractive touristic destinations. This demand for opportunities for temporary visits and recreational experiences developed local economies very much, creating a wide range of working perspectives. Whilst it may be claimed that tourism has spoiled many landscape, its role in creating work for local inhabitants is undeniable.

A second perspective lies in energetic production. We constantly need new opportunities for a sustainable energy transition. The alpine topography is hardly competitive for agricultural and industrial development, however its relief offers possibilities absent in the plain. Height differences and the possibility to form considerable water basins laid the basis for the hydroelectric developments of the last century, and whilst the European perspective for hydroelectricity is limited, the design of hydroelectric infrastructures is still on the agenda. On one hand, hydroelectric development is still booming in many countries outside of Europe. On the other hand, the concessions for exploitation have to be renewed periodically, and to obtain the concession again, developers need to enhance their offer. Examples of projects which turn infrastructures into landscape infrastructures are important in this regard, in order to allow an improved development to take place. The present project offer such a case.

### *Local effect*

The graduation project is a work of the academic field, destined to enrich design knowledge. However, it can also have an effect on the site of investigation itself. My visits to the site have led me to raise essential questions in discussion with local inhabitants, envisioning what the possible future of this territory could be. This first act of questioning and sharing thoughts is already an act of transformation in itself, because it brings local inhabitants to a further step in thought. I am searching to bring this further, to bridge the gap between the academic context of the project and its relation to a certain place. I am currently attempting to set up an on-site exhibition of the project with round-table discussions about the subject once the academic part is over. It is my hope, if this does happen, to observe the possible effect of the project and see whether it was a helpful initiative for the local context.

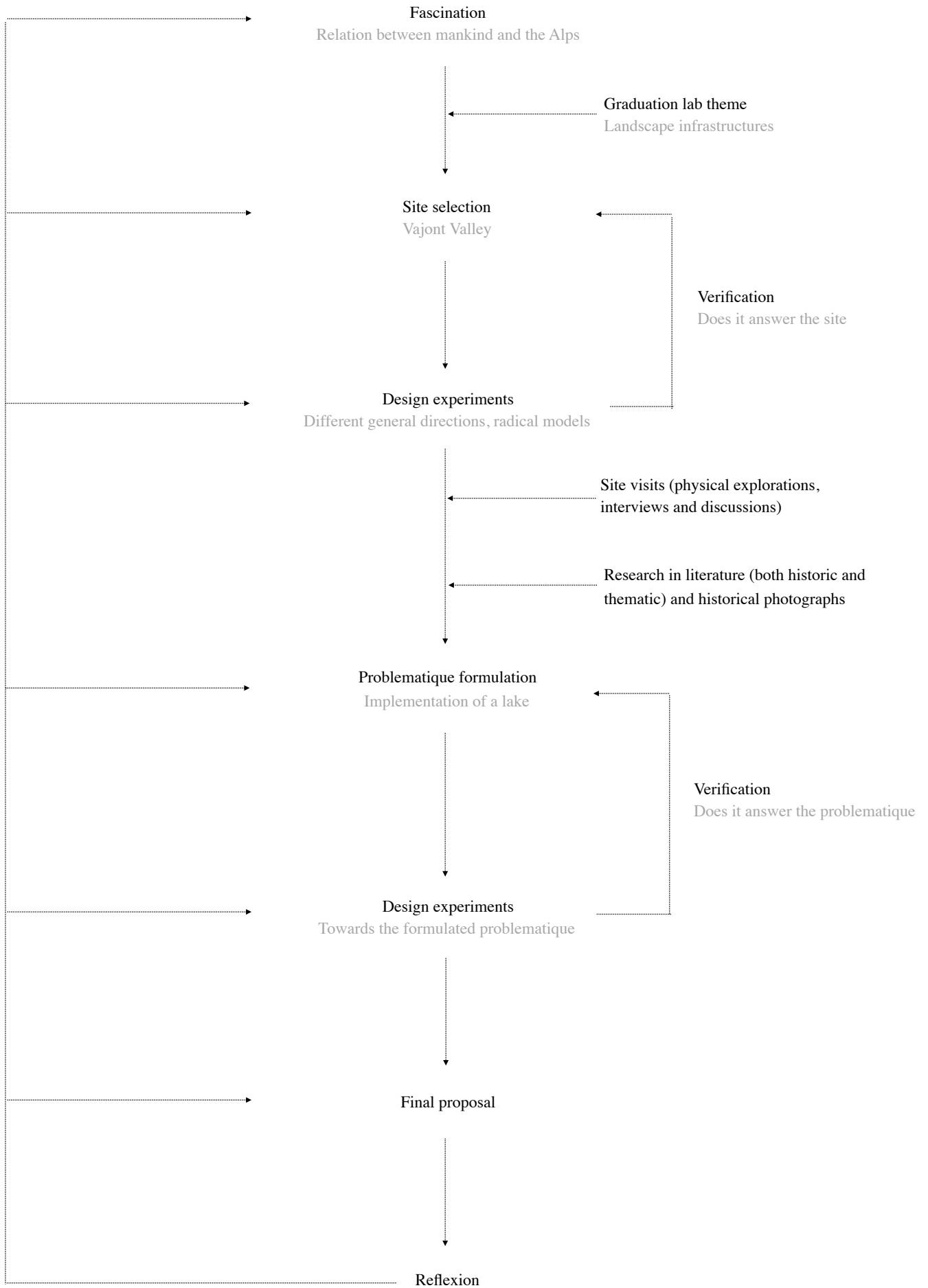


Diagram of the project's design process