

The “Timeshelter” Nedstaal

Personal narratives from Alblasserdam's maritime industrial past

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Introduction

The Water Triangle (*Waterdriehoek* in Dutch) is a heritage region in South Holland where the historical relationship between water, land, and human activity has national cultural significance (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, n.d.). Notably, the maritime industry was a driving force of development, leaving a legacy of factories, shipyards, and other field-related facilities along the riverbanks. Its substantial presence greatly influenced the economic, urban, and cultural landscapes of the adjoining cities and their communities. However, most of these historical maritime facilities are currently neglected - either abandoned, crumbling or loosely reorganized.

“We are constantly producing the past. We are factories for the past. Living past-making machines, what else? [...] A person might be gone, but his past remains”

This excerpt from the book “Time Shelter”, by Georgi Gospodinov might be the perfect epitome of the Waterdriehoek industrial past (Gospodinov, 2023, p.120). Once, these buildings were established because of an economic opportunity. Their original users were predominantly the workers themselves. Much like the quote, while these people might be gone, their past remains entangled within the maritime industrial facilities. Their remains act as *time shelters* of the past - a tangible evidence of materiality and spatial configuration, interwoven with intangible traces of historical discourse and human interaction. One such time

shelter of the Waterdriehoek maritime industry is the Nedstaal Fabriek in Alblasterdam - a 20th-century steel complex of both regional and national significance.

In 1937, the Delft-based Nederlandse Kabelfabriek (NKF) announced the establishment of its second branch in Alblasterdam - a town situated along the De Noord River in South Holland, The Netherlands. Shortly after that, Nedstaal Fabriek became the largest employer in town (Kramer, 2021). In the following decades the factory evolved into an organized industrial complex with multiple facilities (figure 1). Its micro-community of workers had on-site amenities like a school, hobby clubs, and even an exclusive factory magazine. While the decades leading to the 1970s were a time of prosperity and stability for the factory, a gradual economic decline started taking shape in the years afterward, ultimately resulting in official bankruptcy in 2014 (Kramer, 2021).

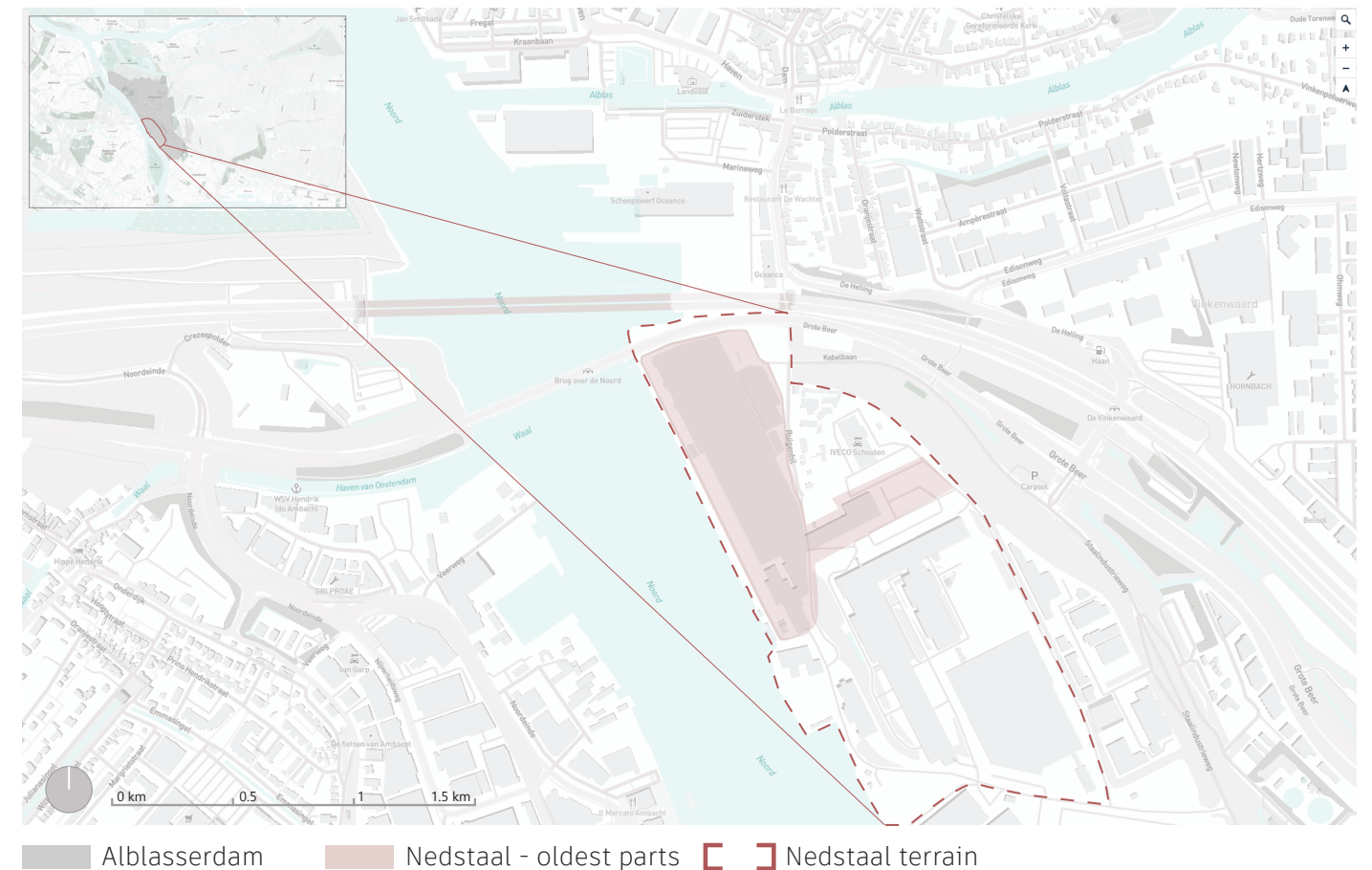


Figure 1: Location of Nedstaal Fabriek in Alblasterdam (Marinova, 2024)

Problem statement

The present-day matrix renders the future of Nedstaal uncertain. Following the factory's bankruptcy, ownership status changed, and new spatial demands were introduced (Sock, 2020). To make way for contemporary industrial facilities, some of the otherwise structurally sound halls have been demolished regardless of their cultural value. This threatens the historical industrial skyline of Alblasterdam (Sock, 2020). Despite the conduction of conceptual studies for the factory's functional redevelopment no definitive decisions have yet been made (Sock, 2020). The current demolition processes not only appear to disregard the socio-cultural connection between the local community and Ned-

staal; they suggest broader-scale oversight of Alblasterdam as a site of maritime industrial heritage in its own right (Boer, 2020, p.292). This constitutes a problem because the cultural value of places like Nedstaal doesn't solely manifest in its tangible characteristics, but also in its space-time position within the urban fabric and societal perceptions. In that sense, industrial heritage buildings surpass the physical realm; they express the multitude of spatial, personal and collective narratives of a specific place (Rudokas & Čižaitė-Rudokienė, 2021, p.5). Omitting the role of those narratives hinders the authentic, socially-sensitive approaches to heritage transformation.

Research question

Extended accounts of local disagreement with the neglect of Alblasserdam as a maritime cultural site, showcase an important aspect of heritage redevelopment - the role of public opinion and personal narratives (Boer, 2020, p.293). The specific context of Nedstaal, therefore, renders the following research question:

How can the personal narratives about Nedstaal Fabriek inform a value framework of the local maritime industrial heritage?

The thus formulated problem statement is further divided into several sub-questions, aimed at precisely defining each layer of analysis.

Which factors shaped Nedstaal into an industrial complex composed of multiple facilities and how did they affect the factory's landscape?

What is the spectrum of personal narratives about Nedstaal and how do they influence the socio-cultural perception of the factory?

What direct oral recollections do former Nedstaal workers provide, and do these accounts reveal the perceived tangible and intangible values of the factory?

How do future redevelopment plans reflect on the historical significance of Nedstaal and do they align with the values and perceptions of the Alblasserdam community?

Theoretical framework

The following literature establishes the theoretical framework of this research paper, thus providing a critical lens for further analysis.

“Landscape biographies”

The book “Landscape Biographies” is the first pillar of this theoretical framework as it provides philosophical interpretations of the relationship between humans and their landscape.

In this reading, Michel de Certeau defines the community as an active participant in the “continuous production of living space” (Kolen et al., 2015, p.34). He argues that the real authorship of the urban fabric belongs to the ordinary people who shape the city through their daily activities (Kolen et al., 2015, p.33). Furthermore, John de Jong’s biographical approach analyzes the social dimensions that influence landscape development through the lens of urban nostalgia. This centers on the daily human routines - their identity and meaning - for the conception of the lived environment. Most importantly, however, there is a mutual understanding that each landscape is inextricably linked to the multitude of personal life stories. The latter is what converts a physical environment into an actual lived space (Kolen et al., 2015, p.303).

De Jong’s categorization of the essence of space is also implemented. If this theory is illustrated (figure 2), then the inextricable link between the aspects affecting space formation becomes evident. The physical construction of space

might be the visible result, but its existence would be impossible without all the other intangible components (circles).

With the theoretical definitions in “Landscape Biographies”, I can construct an argument supporting the interpretation of Nedstaal as a landscape of its own, a city-within-a-city. This lens will therefore support the reconstruction of the factory landscape by focusing on the narratives that participated in its formation.

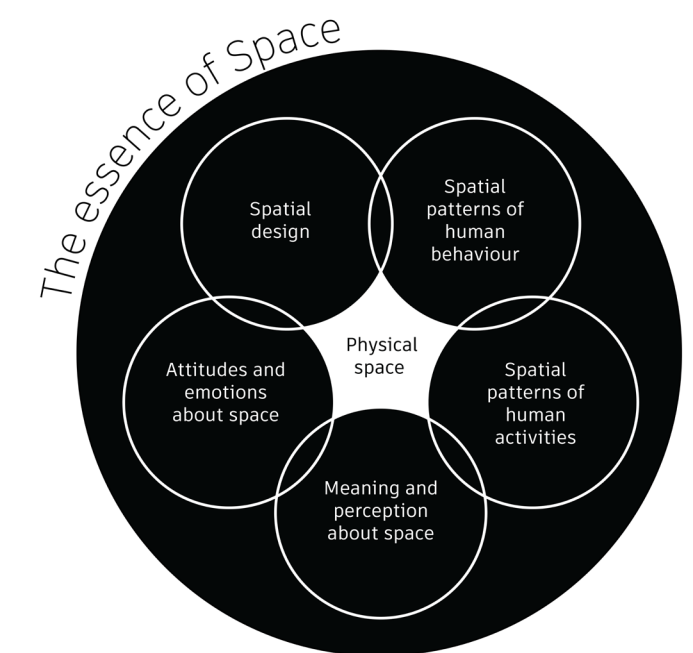


Figure 2: De Jong’s component of the essence of space (Marinova, 2024)

“Biography of an industrial landscape”

The second pillar of the theoretical framework is based on the book “Biography of an Industrial Landscape” where the author - Svava Riesto examines the transformation of Copenhagen’s indus-

trial harbor area, Refshaleøen (Riesto, 2018). Riesto explores how the tangible and intangible values of industrial landscapes shape the social narrative and community identities.

The author's emphasis on the role of memory in place-making is a particularly applicable theoretical lens for the analysis of Nedstaal. Riesto argues that the narratives of former workers, inhabitants, and local historical societies transform the industrial landscape into a repository of cultural identity. Ultimately, through its critical reflection on the ethics of heritage redevelopment, the book proposes an alternative frame of viewing industrial landscapes: not as segregated relics, but as active, culturally significant urban fabric.

“The Oral History Reader”

The investigation of oral narratives provides authentic accounts of the lived human experience. However, one of the greatest threats when collecting such accounts lies within the interviewer's potential biases (Kirby, 2008, p.24). In order to establish an unbiased manner of oral history interview, the book “The Oral History Reader” is implemented as the third pillar of this theoretical framework (Perks & Thomson, 1998).

Every oral history research has to begin with the inevitable acknowledgment that each interviewee presents their subjective recollection. No general conclusions can be deducted from such individual perspectives. The therapist Dana Jack defines different manners of analyzing oral

interviews by emphasizing the importance of “listening for meaning” (Perks & Thomson, 1998, p.164). According to her, the researcher is an active participant in the process, not only a mere collector of information. As such, the interviewer has to adapt the concept of “listening with a third year” - having preconceptions about what you will hear will prevent documenting the authentic account of the person. Therefore, an unbiased researcher fosters conversational freedom and restricts the imposition of personal expectations and agendas (Perks & Thomson, 1998, p.166). Dana Jack further identifies three ways of listening for the narrator's perspective: paying attention to the moral language of the interviewee, their meta statements and the coherency of their story.

The ethical considerations and practical advice in “The Oral History Reader” will prepare me for the interview process and aid me in self-monitoring myself for any potential biases that might hinder the findings.

Methodology

The research will entail several methods, including literature research, archival documentation, and direct oral interviews. These will be analyzed through the carefully curated theoretical framework. Finally, the methodology results could be also presented in the form of a graphic novel, which depends on the relevance of the oral interviews. A detailed visualization of the thus-formulated research plan is presented on Figure 4 (page 11).

Archival Research

Archival evidence will provide empirical data regarding Nedstaal, thus establishing a factual basis for further research. Information regarding administrative documentation and official media (postcards, photographs) will be retrieved from the Regional Archive Dordrecht. Accounts of the socio-cultural life around Nedstaal and its semantics will be obtained from the Historical Society in Alblasserdam (HSA). They have already provided relevant literature, audiovisual material, and personal photographs of the factory. An invaluable contribution from HSA is the original collection of “De Wals” Magazine - an editorial that was once strictly published for the Nedstaal employees.

Literature Research

Additional literature about the factory and the city will be also reviewed. On a regional level, the report “Heritage Line Exploration” by Arcadis will be examined as it details the national policy regarding the Waterdriehoek industrial heritage preservation (Arcadis Nederland B.V., 2019).

“The Steel Face of Alblasserdam” - a report by the HSA, concerns the development of Nedstaal between 1938 to 2008, also including indirect accounts of for-

mer workers (Dam, 2008). Finally, to gain a deeper understanding of the municipal redevelopment policy for industrial sites, which includes the Nedstaal terrain, the document-passport “Industrial Estates Alblasserdam” will be reviewed (Municipality Alblasserdam, 2022).

Oral History Research

The main scope of this paper is to analyze the personal narratives about Nedstaal Fabriek. Therefore, the oral history approach proves particularly useful as it enables the exploration of the interviewees' perceptions, emotional relationships, and interactions with the factory. By implementing this method, a framework of culturally and collectively significant values could be properly composed.

Several interviews have been in the process of arrangement. These will include a conversation with the son of the Nedstaal Factory founders, former workers, but also members of the Historical Society in Alblasserdam. An interview with one of the current site managers of the Nedstaal Terrain will also likely be arranged. Lastly, to form a well-rounded representation of the various narratives, it is important to include accounts from members of the Alblasserdam community who have not necessarily had a direct relationship with Nedstaal and explore their point of view.

Graphic novel representation

The findings of this research paper will be used to construct a value framework of Nedstaal Fabriek. Depending on the interview outcomes, the format of the graphic novel could be therefore included as a connecting element between the research and the design phases.

Graphic novels are defined as visual means of conveying personal narratives about space in a sequential form (Richard Welsh Library, 2023). In the context of this paper, combining oral accounts and visual materials could thoroughly inform the reader about the individual perceptions, daily rituals, and presence within the factory's physical realm. Furthermore, oral narratives refer to a distinct time and space where the narrator's story revolves (Keleş, 2023, p.564). Graphically portraying that narratology could therefore provide a comprehensive idea of Nedstaal's authenticity, spatiality, and hidden intangible values. Figure 3 presents an example of how narrative-based research can be conveyed through the graphic novel format.



Figure 3: Richard McGuire's "Time Warp": an excerpt from the graphic novel book: "Here" depicting the corner of a room and the events that took place in it through time. (McGuire, 2014)

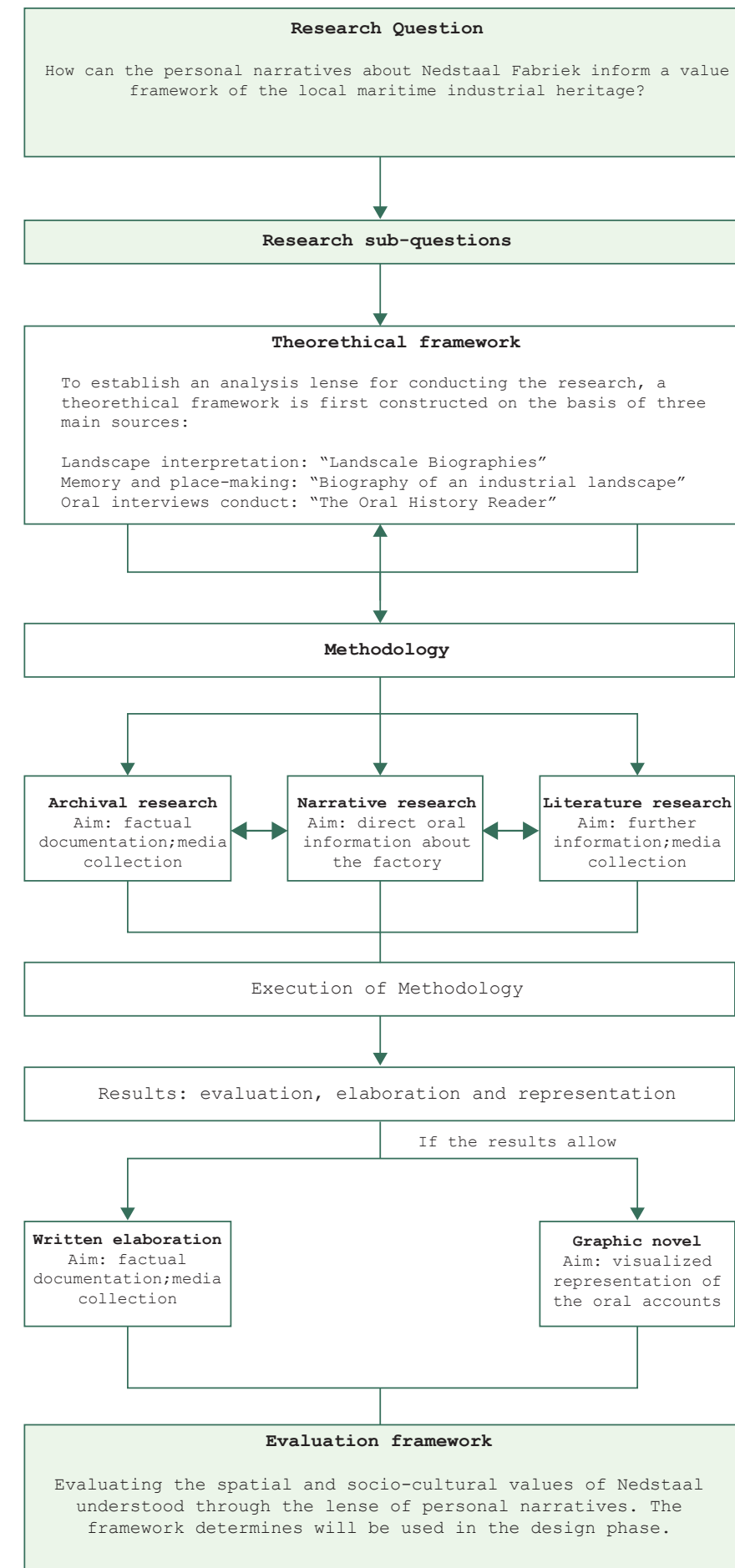


Figure 4: Research plan structure overview (Marinova, 2024)

Methodological reflection

Graduation trajectory

An overview of the graduation trajectory is presented in Figure 5, where the Research and Design strategies are simultaneously shown, to illustrate their interdependent and mutually informative character.

In synchrony with the group analysis, an individual research question and the sub-questions are defined. Both result in the selection of a specific project location - Nedstaal in Alblasserdam. The initial site analysis and the finalized research plan are presented in presentation P1.

The period from P1 to P2 is reserved for the research plan components: further defining the theoretical framework and conducting the methodological steps - interviews arrangement and collection, archival and literature analysis. The theoretical framework and the methodology mutually inform one another, thus resulting in a dynamic research process where one constantly reflects upon its findings. Simultaneously, the design process continues with a detailed site and building analysis that results in identifying opportunities for redevelopment. Those are also informed by the methodology outcomes. As a result, a narrative-based value framework of the local maritime heritage is composed, and combined with the analysis of the research findings, a preliminary design is created. The latter is presented during P2.

The period from P2 to P3 is reserved for further development of the preliminary concept. The thesis paper is finalized and its results inform the design process. Until P4, the final project is refined. With convincing coherency. Finally, P5 is the official graduation ceremony.

Ethical issues

The potential for any personal biases during the interview process is the greatest ethical issue that may arise. It can be resolved by carefully considering the theoretical framework and discussing the interview approach with the research tutor in advance. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the language barrier might influence the quality of data collected - I am not fluent in Dutch, whereas most of the interviewees will probably feel most comfortable communicating in Dutch. To resolve this, a native speaker will assist me during the conversations. With the subjects' consent, the conversations will be recorded for later reference and verification. Finally, the oral interview's inevitable constraints are that they portray a limited scope of selected experiences, on the sole basis of which no general conclusions can be deducted. This issue can be only partly resolved by choosing people of diverse backgrounds - varying in age, occupation, and relationship to Nedstaal - in hopes of exploring the degree of variety between their narratives.

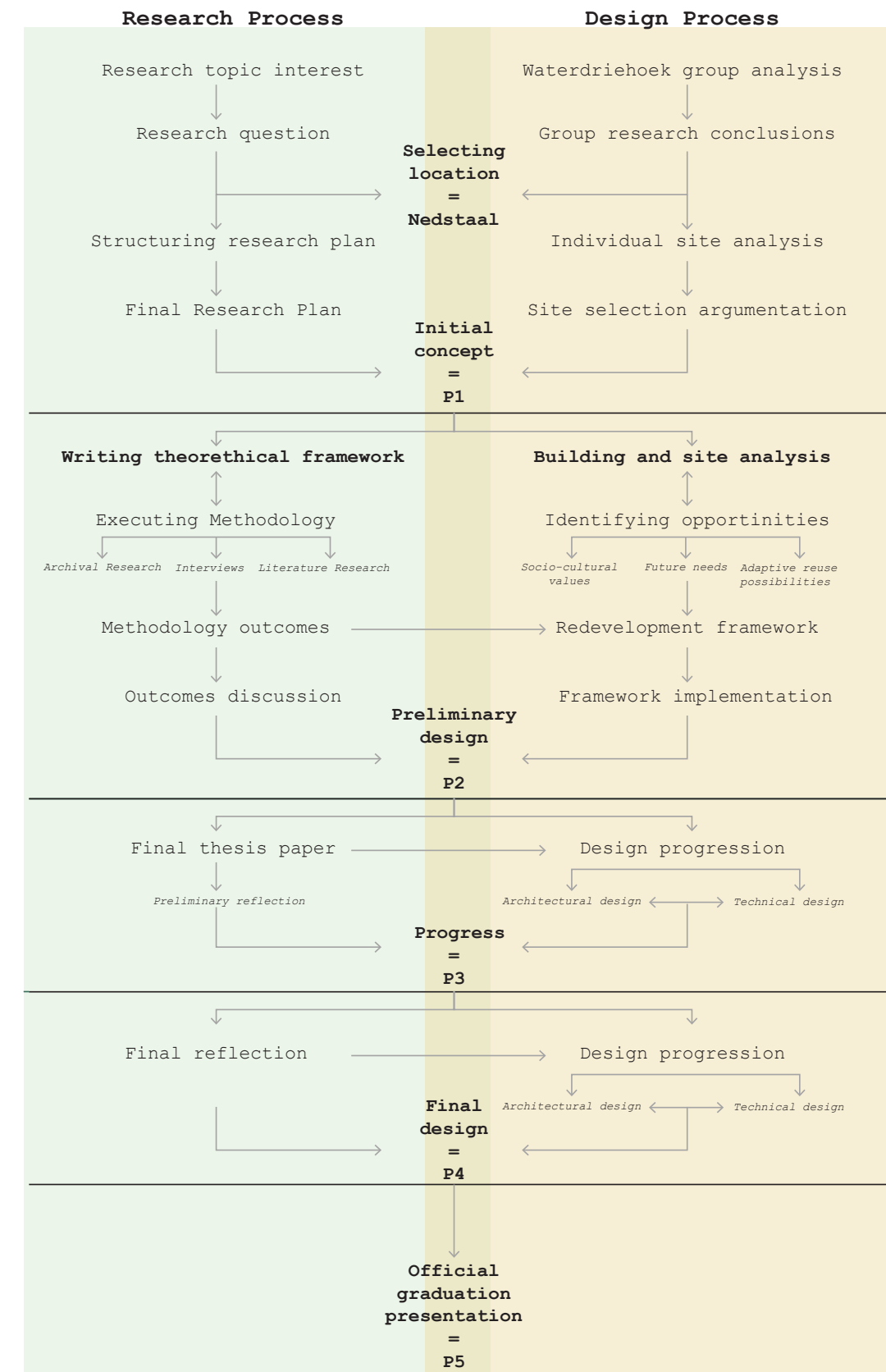


Figure 5: Graduation trajectory overview (Marinova, 2024)

Relevance

The graduation research focuses on a specific building, which is also part of the group analysis of Waterdriehoek - Nedstaal Fabriek in Alblasserdam. In that sense, the research and design processes are interconnected and mutually inform each other. The implementation of oral history, combined with archival and literature research, is a thorough method of identifying the values a site might hold and how these can inform a value-based framework in a culturally sensitive manner. This is particularly noble in the current context of industrial revitalization, where, as Paul Meurs puts it, “heritage is about the presence of the past in contemporary life” and where personal experience ranks equally important to scientifically straightforward approaches (Meurs, 2016, p.14).

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Figure 1: Marinova, Martina. 2024. Location of Nedstaal Fabriek in Alblasserdam. Map. Author.

Figure 2: Marinova, Martina. 2024. De Jong’s components of the essence of space. Diagram. Author.

Figure 3: McGuire, R. (2014). “Time Warp” [illustration]. (2014). The New Yorker.

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Figure 4: Marinova, Martina. 2024. Research plan structure overview. Diagram. Author.

Figure 5: Marinova, Martina. 2024. Graduation trajectory overview. Diagram. Author.