

The “Timeshelter” Nedstaal

Personal narratives from Alblasterdam's maritime industrial past

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1. 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 (RCE, n.d.). The maritime industry was a driving force of that development, leaving a legacy of factories, shipyards, and other field-related facilities along the riverbanks. Its substantial presence greatly influenced the regional economic, urban, and cultural landscapes. Nowadays, most of these maritime facilities are neglected and their stories – untold.

“ 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 and their original users were the workers. Much like the quote, while these people might be gone, their stories remain entangled within the industrial realm. These factories therefore act as time shelters of the past - tangible evidence of materiality and spatial configuration, interwoven with intangible traces of human discourse. One such time shelter of the Waterdriehoek maritime industry is the steel complex Nedstaal Fabriek in Alblaserdam.

In 1937, the Delft-based Nederlandse Kabelfabriek established its second branch in Alblaserdam - a town along the De Noord River in South Holland (figure 1, page 7). The factory evolved into an organized industrial complex and largest employer in town (Kramer, 2021). It facilitated on-site school, hobby clubs, and a magazine for its employees. While the decades until the 1970s were a time of prosperity for Nedstaal, a gradual economic decline ultimately resulted in the factory's official bankruptcy in 2014 (Kramer, 2021).

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 potential value. This threatens the historical industrial skyline of Alblaserdam (Sock, 2020). The current demolition processes not only appear to disregard the socio-cultural connection between the local community and Nedstaal; they also suggest broader-scale oversight of Alblaserdam as a site of maritime industrial heritage (Boer, 2020, p.292). Furthermore, the value of places like Nedstaal doesn't solely manifest in its tangible characteristics, but also in its position within the urban fabric and societal perceptions. In that sense, industrial heritage buildings surpass the physical realm; they become a language expressing the multitude of spatial, personal, and collective narratives of a specific place (Rudokas & Čizaitė-Rudokienė, 2021, p.5). Omitting the role of those narratives hinders the authentic, socially sensitive approaches to heritage transformation.

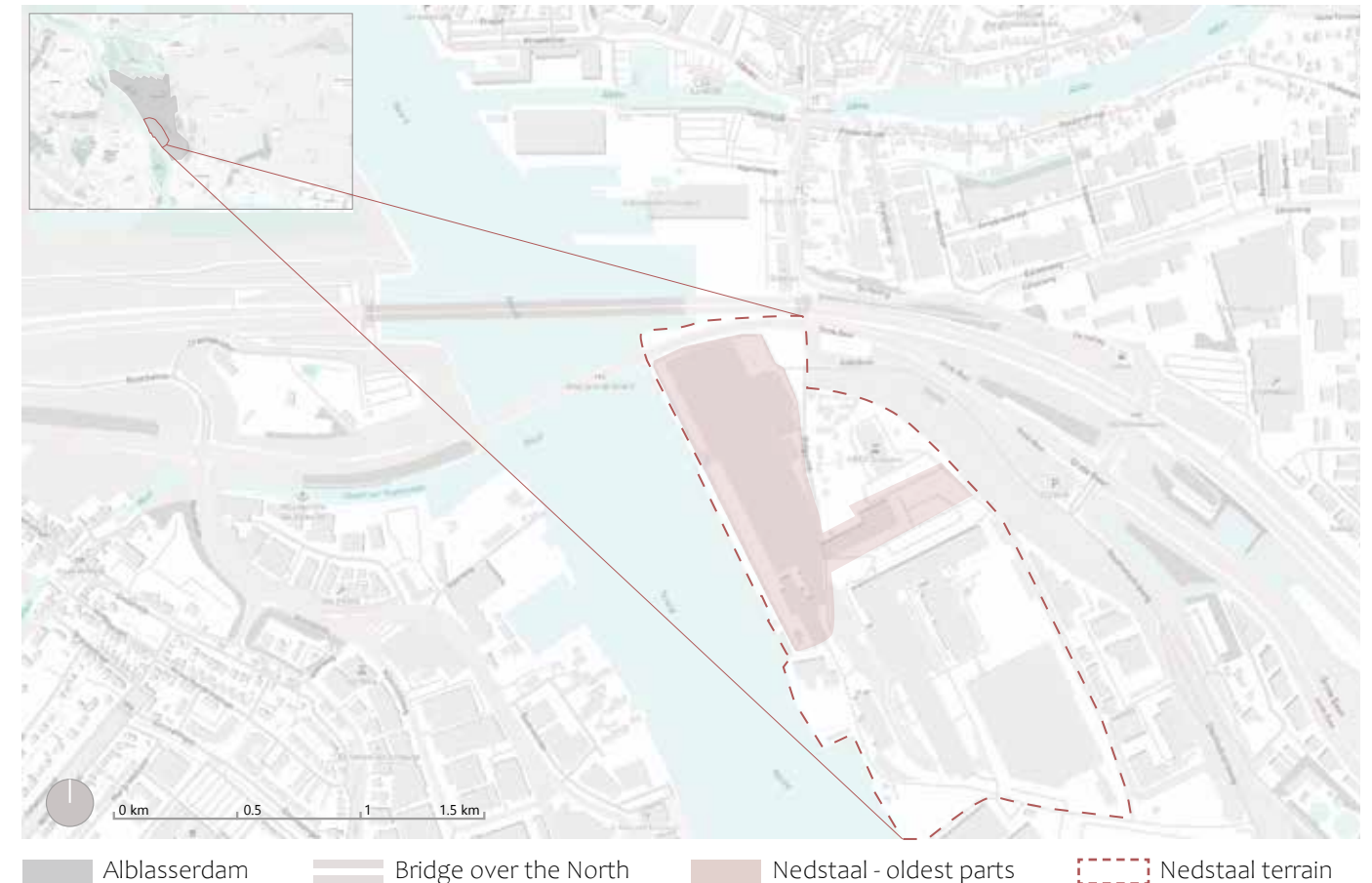


Figure 1: Location of Nedstaal Fabriek. River "De Noord" is on the North-West. Alblaserdam is in the North. (MapBox, 2024)

Research question

Extended accounts of local disagreement with the neglect of Alblaserdam 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 its industrial heritage?

How can the personal narratives about Nedstaal Fabriek identify its maritime industrial heritage values?

- How did Nedstaal develop chronologically and in relation to the steel-making process?
- What are the direct oral narratives about Nedstaal, collected from former employees and other members of the public?
- What do these direct accounts reveal about the factory's tangible and intangible values?

2. Methodology

Answering the main research question and its sub-categories requires a comprehensive approach. Therefore, literature, archival documentation, and direct oral interviews comprise the methodology of this paper. The obtained results are then analyzed through the theoretical framework in chapter 3.

Archival Research

Archival evidence provides empirical data regarding Nedstaal, thus establishing a factual basis for further research. Various documentation, including the ‘De Wals’ magazine, are retrieved from the Regional Archive Dordrecht and the Historical Society in Ablasserdam (HSA).

Literature Research

“The Steel Face of Ablasserdam” - a report by the HSA, provides chronological information about the factory’s development (Dam, 2008).

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 and personal interactions with the factory.

Six direct oral interviews are featured in this paper, three of which are with former Nedstaal employees, one with the current manager of the terrain, and two with people from the general public. These narratives portray a limited scope of experiences, on the sole basis of which no general conclusions can be drawn. Although inherently restricted, this selection nevertheless aims to at least partly represent the variety of perspectives and values about Nedstaal.

3. Theoretical framework

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

“Landscape biographies”

The main scope of this research paper is to explore people’s personal narratives of Nedstaal. Therefore, the book “Landscape Biographies” is the first pillar of this theoretical framework as it interprets the creation of architectural landscapes through the human perspective, daily activities and emotional attitude (Kolen et al., 2015).

“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, explores how the tangible and intangible values of industrial landscapes shape the social narrative and community identities (Riesto, 2018). The author’s emphasis on the role of memory in place-making is a particularly applicable theoretical lens for the analysis of Nedstaal.

“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 and the interviewee’s subjective recollection (Kirby, 2008, p.24). To establish an unbiased manner of oral history interviews, the book “The Oral History Reader” is implemented as the third pillar of this theoretical framework (Perks & Thomson, 1998).

4. Literature and archival results

The report “The Steel Face of Alblasserdam” establishes the factory’s chronological context, pre-required for any further analysis. Founded in 1938 to support the growing demand for steel wires in the maritime industry, Nedstaal would expand through the years, reaching its peak size in the 1970s (Dam, 2008, p.3). Figure 3 represents that morphological development. Throughout this time, the factory management developed a strong sense of social engagement towards its workers - hundreds of employee homes were built, hobby clubs and various social programs were established.

Furthermore, the factory magazine - “De Wals”, also testifies about that strongly developed sense of community among the Nedstaal workers. Each reviewed volume almost exclusively focuses on information about its employees - family matters, organized trips, training programs. As figure 4 suggests, the factory buildings seem to have been regarded as large cover spaces for the machinery and steel production - the main focus points in the complex.

To further facilitate the exploration of personal narratives, the practical context in which those narratives were set – namely the steel production process at Nedstaal, must be understood. Steel scraps were delivered at the riverside and then followed a strict production order, as illustrated on figure 5. For the execution of that process, Nedstaal’s landscape had its own street network, railway infrastructure, central open spaces - typical characteristics of a post-war industrial complex (Riesto, 2018, p.33).

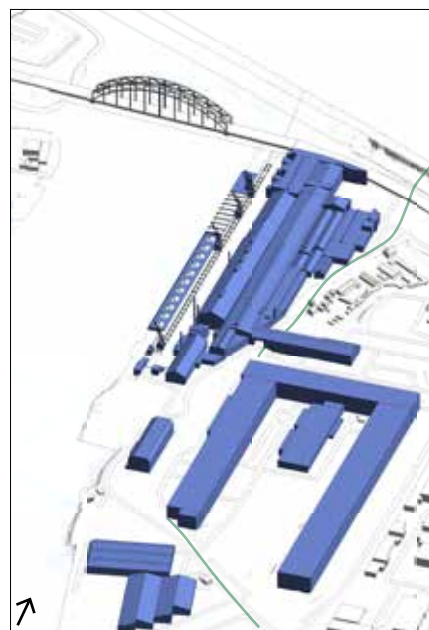
1938-1965

Oldest parts of Nedstaal.



1970's - 2000's

Nedstaal at its largest state.



2019 - now

Parts of Nedstaal are demolished.



■ Nedstaal buildings □ Historic dike line

Figure 3: Morphological development of the Nedstaal complex. Alblasserdam is in the North. (Marinova, 2024)



Figure 4: A short announcement about the scale of the smelter furnace. A scaled model of the smelter furnace with a tiny black human figure for reference. Although the factory is enormous, it is still being referred to as just a "house" for the ovens. (De Wals, 1982)

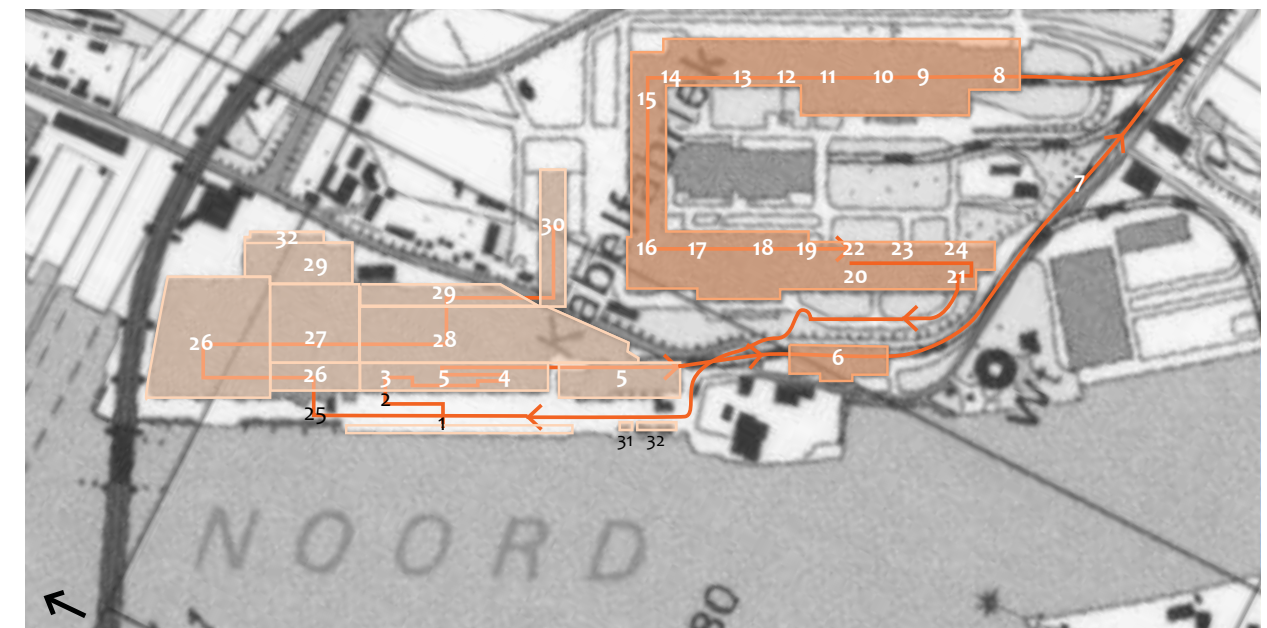


Figure 5: Nedstaal's steel-production process sequence. Base map dating from 1989 (topotijdreis, 2025)

■ Nedstaal oldest part ■ Nedstaal parts built during the 1970's □ Terrain infrastructure

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Raw material | 9. Approach roller table | 17. Billet reheating furnace | 25. Shipping quay for rod |
| 2. Scrap charging bucket | 10. Blooming mill | 18. Strip mill | 26. Wire mills |
| 3. Charging an electric arc furnace | 11. Blooming shear | 19. Continuous rod mill | 27. Annealing department |
| 4. Open Heart furnace | 12. Cooling bed | 20. Conveyor for coiled product | 28. Continuous rod mill |
| 5. Electric Arc furnace | 13. Continuous rod mill | 21. Coil take-off | 29. Laboratories |
| 6. Stripper bay | 14. Conveyor for coiled products | 22. Continuous strip mill | 30. Billet store |
| 7. Transport of lignote | 15. Coiled take-off | 23. Strip coilers | 31. Pumping houses |
| 8. Soaking pits | 16. Billet unscrambler | 24. Strip discharge | 32. Offices |

5. Oral history results

These following interviews establish a spectrum of personal narratives about Nedstaal and its values. Each conversation is summarized, and the results are graphically represented in a narrative fragment map. The latter visualizes the memories and values each participant highlighted.

Jan Hekkert

Jan Hekkert worked as a head manager of the steel quality test department at Nedstaal Fabriek from 1963 to 1997. His direct oral account concerns the 60s and 70s - when Nedstaal was at its peak development.

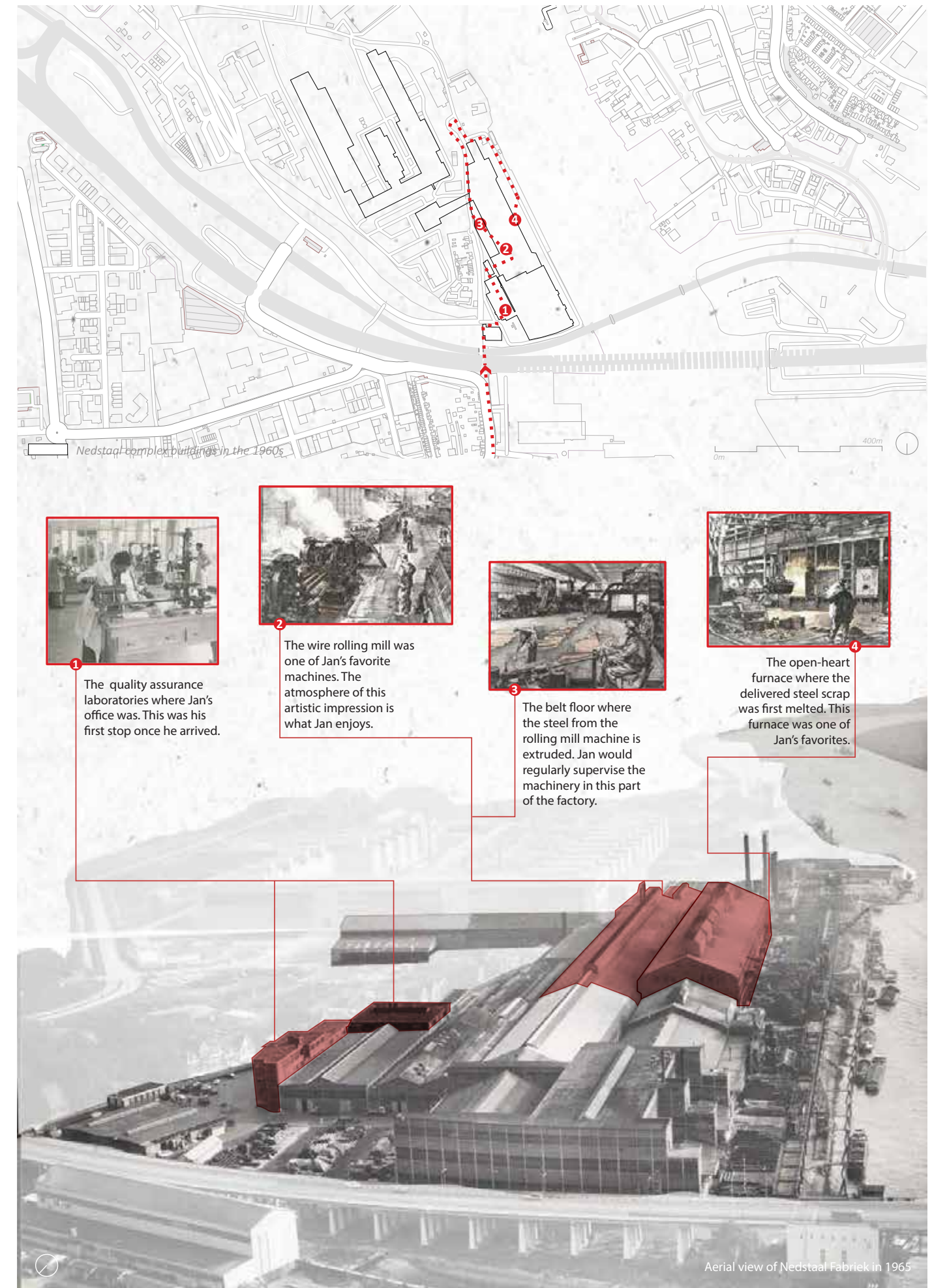
Right at the start of our interview, I was met with the contagious enthusiasm of this 87-year-old gentleman regarding everything, revolving around the factory. In particular, he highlighted two aspects- the atmosphere and the machinery. For Jan, the factory atmosphere was contained within the interplay between the dynamic work and the sense of community among workers (figure 6, image 2).

Overall, Jan made great friendships and benefited from Nedstaal's social engagement with its employees. The only physical object he admired was the factory's state-of-the-art machinery, like the smelter furnaces (figure 6, images 2 and 4). On the contrary, he viewed the buildings only as a shell for housing the engineering process. This process of making was what generated the dynamic atmosphere so dearly beloved by him. In that sense, the intangible aspect of his narrative uncovers the importance of everyday

Figure 6, page 13: The narrative fragment map of Jan Hekkert. (Marinova, 2024)

The fragment map on page 13 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Jan's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Jan during our interview in order to explain how he felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

1963



Emine Osmanoglou

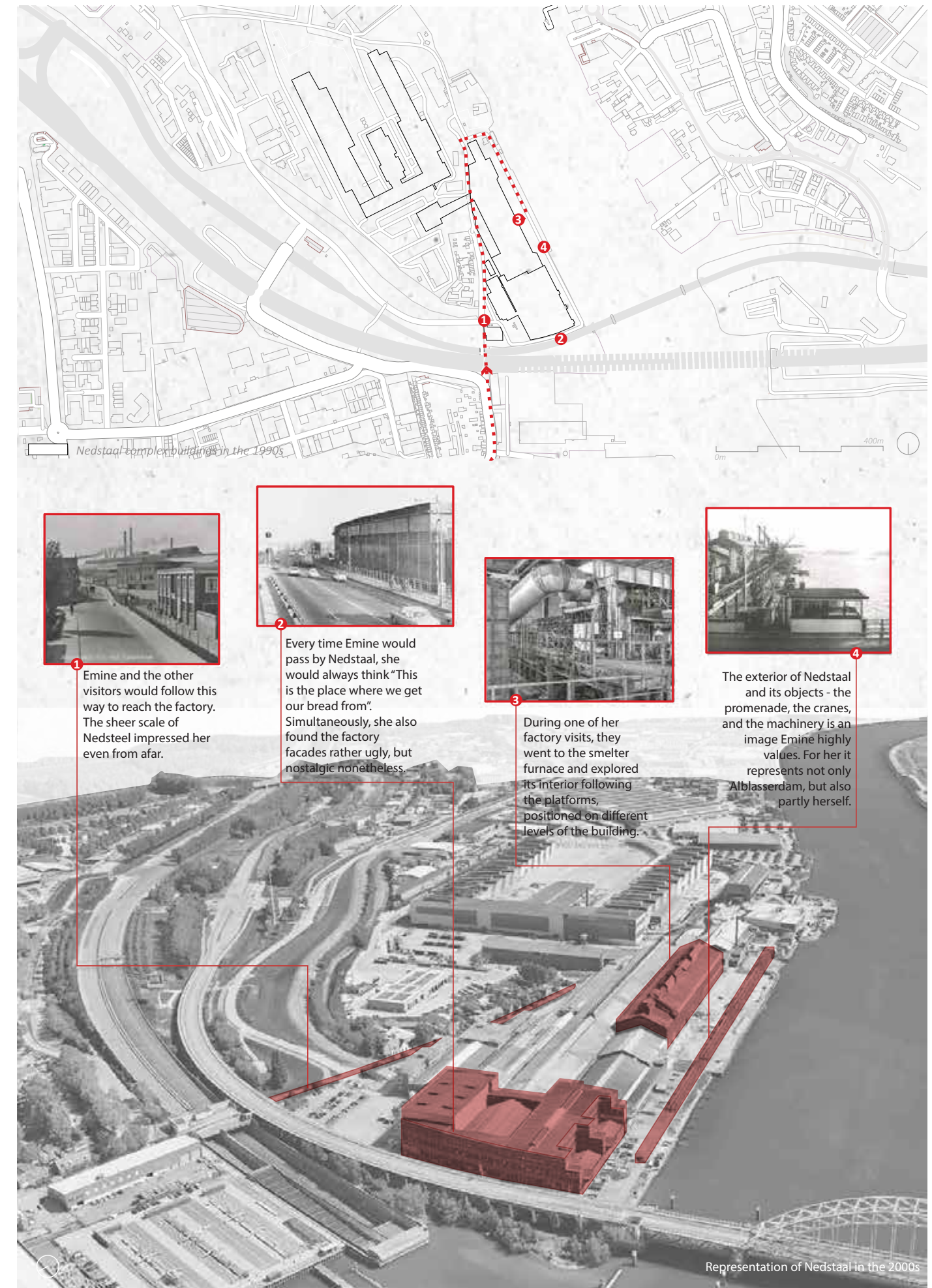
In 1967, the then 7-year-old Emine Osmanoglou and her family moved to the Netherlands from West Thrace, Greece. They were among the first foreign workers recruited by Nedstaal – a practice common in those decades due to the enormous workforce demand in the Dutch industrial sector. Emine’s narrative represents the perspective of the international factory workers and their families – people who left the homeland in pursuit of a better life.

Such was the impact Nedstaal had on Emine’s life, that she wrote a book about the factory, carefully featuring the oral narratives of its West-Thracian workers (Osmanoglou-Hakioglou, 2010). As a child, however, Emine could physically visit the steel complex only during the biannual open days. Her young mind was impressed and simultaneously frightened at the factory tour - the grand scale of the Smelter building, coupled with its sounds and fumes, made Emine think to herself “This is what Hell must look like”. During this visit, they walked on one of several levels in the factory, thus vertically exploring it (figure 7, image 3). For her, Nedstaal was the livelihood of her whole family and in her own, emotional words – the reason she is the person she is today. From an aesthetical point of view, however, Emine found the factory’s facades rather ugly and unspectacular (figure 7, image 2). Her relationship to Nedstaal was and still is purely emotional – filled with a sense of gratitude, pride and nostalgia.

Figure 7, page 15: The narrative fragment map of Emine Osmanoglou. (Marinova, 2025)

The fragment map on page 15 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Emine's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Emine during our interview in order to explain how she felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

1967



Ayhan Osmanoglou

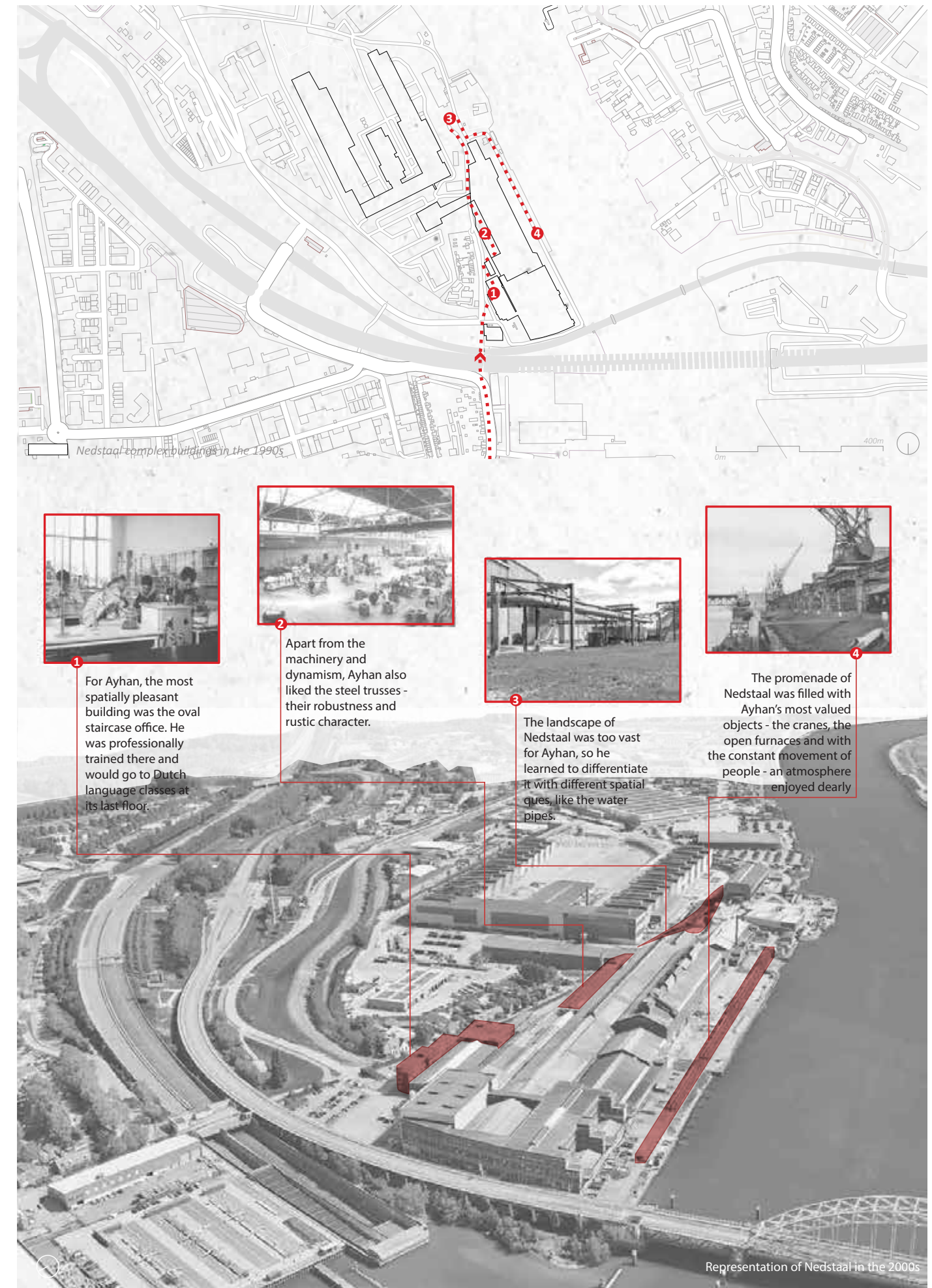
Emine's husband, Ayhan, was recruited by Nedstaal and moved from West Thrace in 1974. For the next 44 years, he worked as an electrical engineer there and was responsible for the automation of the rolling mills.

A typical working day of Ayhan's involved a lot of biking between the factories, as he had to maintain various electrical equipment. In retrospect, he began viewing the complex as a small city with streets between the buildings and a grand 'boulevard' - the water promenade with the crane tracks (figure 8, image 4). To orient in this grand landscape, Ayhan mentally separated the terrain in parts, based on the type of procedures and machinery (figure 8, image 3). Just like Jan, he strongly valued the process of making and its dynamism and complexity. Due to the dangerous nature of the job, Ayhan would not intentionally think about the factory's spatial qualities but instead focus on his duties. This is perhaps why he valued the objects in the complex- the cranes and various machines, rather than the architectural qualities of its buildings. However, Ayhan's most cherished aspect of Nedstaal remains the workers' community and the factory management deep engagement in it.

Figure 8, page 17: The narrative fragment map of Ayhan Osmanoglou. (Marinova, 2025)

The fragment map on page 17 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Ayhan's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Ayhan during our interview in order to explain how he felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

1974



Harry Klasens

Harry Klasens worked at Nedstaal from 1997 until its official bankruptcy in 2017. His oral account provides valuable insight into the final decades of the factory and paints an intriguing picture of the floor worker's community at the time.

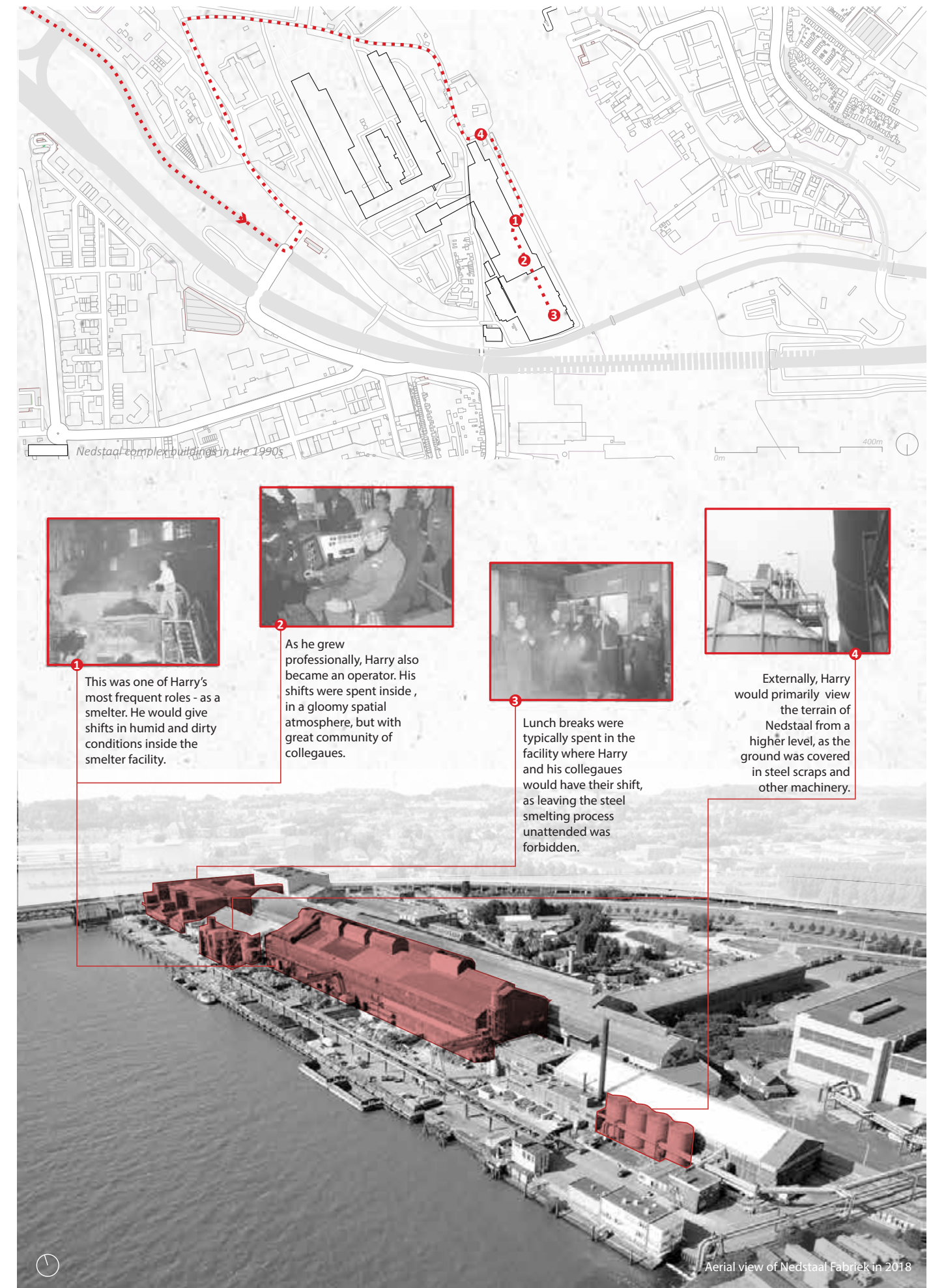
Initially, Harry worked one of the most physically demanding jobs – as a floor worker. Those employees would melt the scrap material and operate the machines. The only adjective Harry used to evaluate Nedstaal's appearance was 'old' and during our conversation, it became clear why. Harry's physically demanding work meant long shifts melting and pouring steel, which required constant attention. Even lunchtime would take place inside the halls where Harry and his team were working - leaving the melting process unattended was strictly forbidden (figure 9, image 3). Under the given circumstances, the only spatial elements workers were actively acknowledging where the emergency exists, and the only place anticipated by them were the shower rooms.

To convey his experience, Harry showed me personally taken photos, featured in his fragment map on figure 9. They depict his colleagues and him - working together, having lunch, talking. For Harry, therefore, the most valuable aspect of Nedstaal was the community of colleagues he was a part of. Despite working there for 20 years, he felt rather impartial towards the current disassembly process of parts of Nedstaal. The only facility he felt amazed by was the smelter furnace that had already been demolished at the time of our conversation (figure 9, image 1).

Figure 9, page 19: The narrative fragment map of Harry Klasens. (Marinova, 2024)

The fragment map on page 19 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Harry's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Harry during our interview in order to explain how he felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

1997



Max De Groot

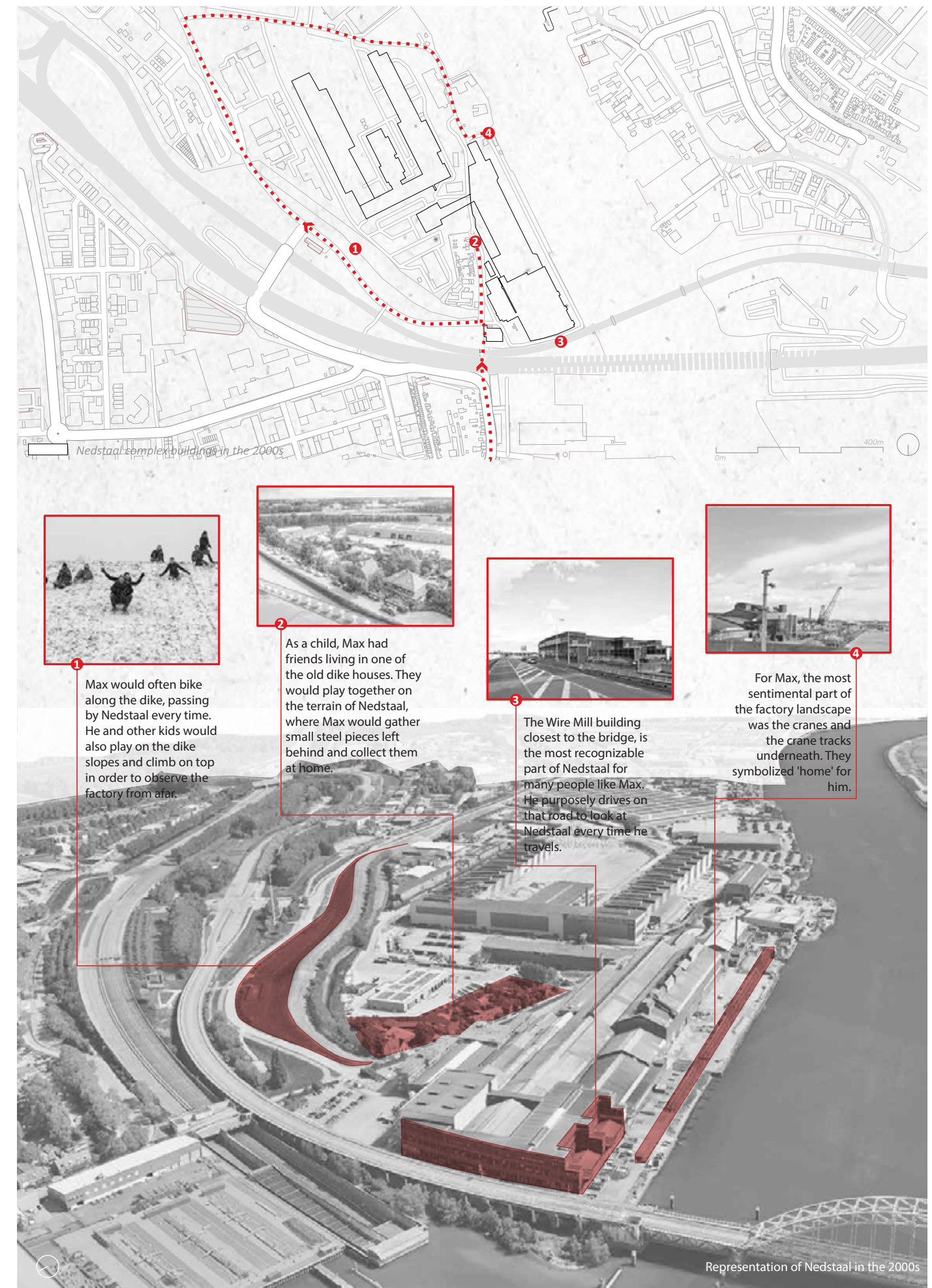
Unlike Harry and Jan, Max De Groot was not a Nedstaal employee. He was a child in the early 2000s and would play on the factory's terrain whenever his father - a truck driver, would park his vehicle there.

Max's account offers another valuable narrative about Nedstaal - that of an outside viewer. His personal values of the factory are based on what was externally visible as the complex was strictly inaccessible to the public. For the then 10-year-old Max, Nedstaal's landscape was the world's most exciting and mysterious playground. During our conversation, he explained how the vast buildings' scale made him feel small, yet simultaneously curious to peak what was inside. As shown on images 1 to 4 (figure 10), he could only explore the factory's landscape and observe the work process from a distance. This fueled his imagination to the point where Max began idolizing Nedstaal and its apparent objects - lifting cranes, the tracks, and machinery. In particular, its patina and large scale compelled him to "look up to the complex" as if it was an imaginary authoritative figure. Whether Max was biking along the dike to his school in Papendrecht or traveling with his grandma on a water taxi, the massive outline of Nedstaal was an everpresent element, permanently imprinting itself in his mind and determining his perception of Alblasterdam to this day (figure 10, image 4).

Figure 10, page 21: The narrative fragment map of Max De Groot. (Marinova, 2024)

The fragment map on page 21 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Max's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Max during our interview in order to explain how he felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

2002



Maron Rietveld

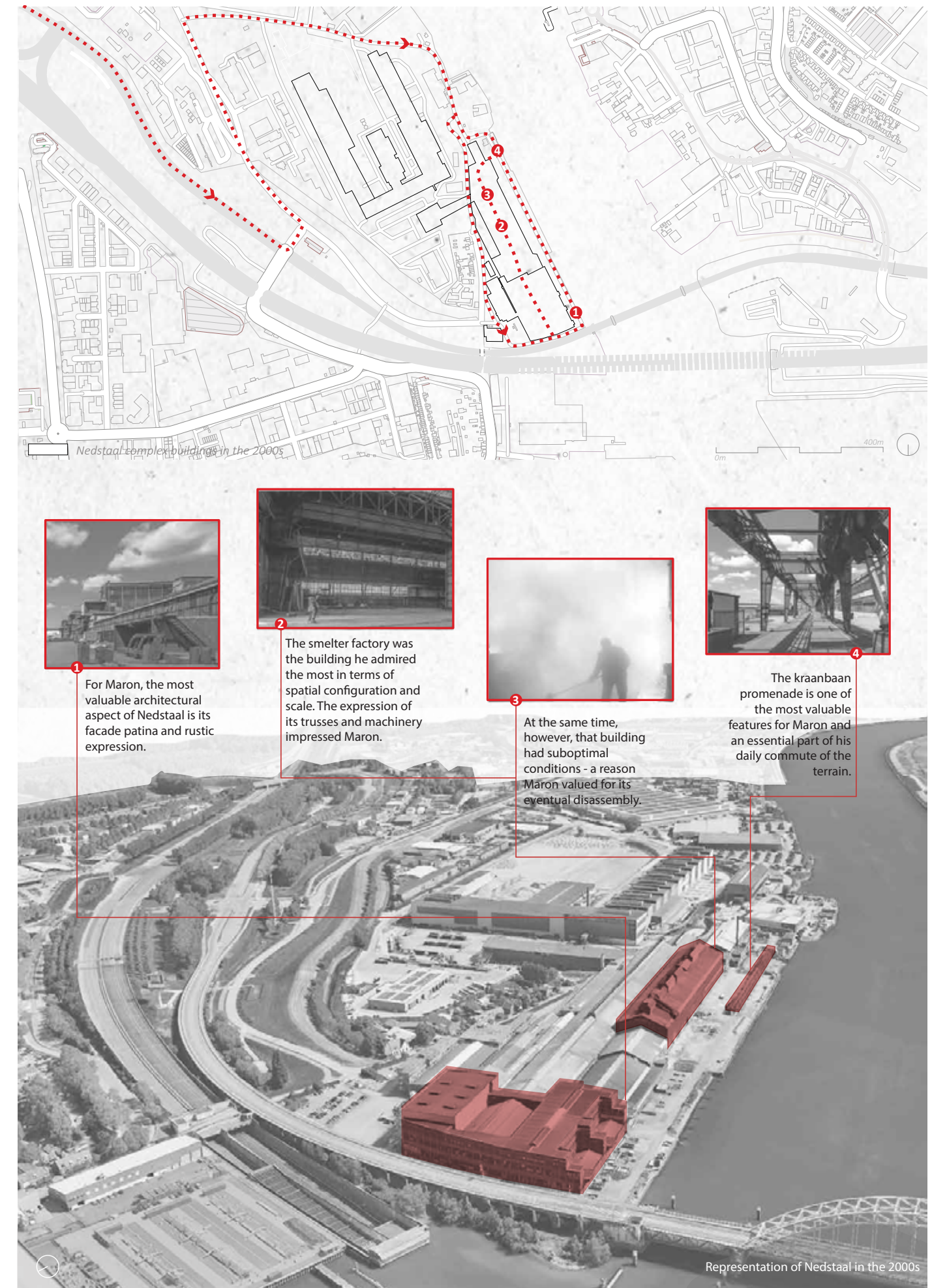
Since 2006, Maroon Rietveld has been the general manager of Nedstaal's real estate. He oversees the buildings on the terrain and is directly involved in their future handling.

Maron's narrative is quite practical, thus representing the most influential actor in the development of Nedstaal - the industrial lobby. The factory occupies one of four industrial zones in Alblasterdam that have a significant economic impact (Municipality Alblasterdam, 2022). Therefore, Maron's oral account focused more on the possibilities for future site redevelopment. From the beginning of our conversation, he admitted a disinterest in any personal value assessment of Nedstaal. Although his office is on the terrain, he doesn't stay inside for long as he is either in a meeting or traveling between the different facilities. Perhaps this is why any questions, regarding his personal memories or subjective value assessment of Nedstaal were not properly elaborated on. Instead, Maron's fragments focused on the challenges regarding the contemporary industrial adaptation of Nedstaal (figure 11, image 3). He talked about the difficulty of preserving some of the oldest buildings due to lack of isolation, proper ventilation, and obsolete spatial organization. Despite that evaluation, the smelter factory was most memorable for him - its dimensions, the machinery, and spatial organization were impressive (figure 11, image 2). Furthermore, the only aesthetic feature Maron perceived as valuable was the exterior patina, the 'old' industrial feeling still so vividly present on the site (figure 11, image 1).

Figure 11, page 23: The narrative fragment map of Max De Groot. (Marinova, 2024)

The fragment map on page 23 graphically showcases the parts of Nedstaal that were highlighted the most in Maron's narrative. Each space is further represented by a specific image, used by Maron during our interview in order to explain how he felt about the specific place or how he perceived the atmosphere there.

2006



6. Conclusion

The following section concludes the findings from the executed methodology and analyses them through the theoretical framework introduced in chapter 2.

In reference to the introduction, the oral history method showcased how each of the six narrators has mentally created their own ‘*time-shelter*’ Nedstaal. They all visited that *shelter* during our conversation, charged with deep sentiment for most, and practicality for others.

The direct interviews, visually concluded in narrative maps, overwhelmingly featured Nedstaal’s *atmosphere* and *sense of community* as those intangible aspects, that formed people's spatial perception of the factory. Simultaneously, the tangible values, each participant associated with it, were less linked to the buildings, but more to objects and external appearance – the furnaces, lifting cranes, crane tracks, the patina. Those spatial components were determinative to people's tangible perception of the complex.

In accordance to the theoretical framework in chapter 2, this research implements De Jong’s interpretation of the “Essence of space”, as presented in the book "Landscape Bigraphies". Figure 12 illustrates this theory. As per the latter, the *essence of space* is composed of the inextricable link between the tangible and the intangible. For Nedstaal, the archival research showcased that designing the complex and its landscape was entirely subject to the steel-making process. This was also confirmed through the direct narratives, which highly valued human interaction and patterns of work activities. Those lived experiences and the emotions associated with them, created the *essence of Nedstaal* (figure 13). Its design elements and physical objects are a direct recipient of those emotions. Therefore, they become the tangible representative of the factory's socio-cultural memory and industrial character.

The methodology results further allow for the interpretation of Nedstaal as a city of its own. Steel production dictated the order in that city; human interactions assigned meaning to it; Therefore, by referring to Certau’s idea that the daily activities of ordinary people author the urban fabric, the factory landscape was thus also authored by its *citizens* – workers like Jan, Ayhan, Harry and Maron, but also outside figures like Emine and Max (Kolen et al., 2015, p.33).

As already established, the direct oral narratives predominantly assigned value to the factory's terrain, spatial objects, atmosphere and act of steel-making. In parallel to the theoretical framework, Svava Riesto's biographical approach argues that the memories of former workers transform the industrial landscape in a repository of cultural identity. Thus, narratives like those presented in this research paper, compose Nedstaal's own repository, unveiling its deep social significance and heritage value.

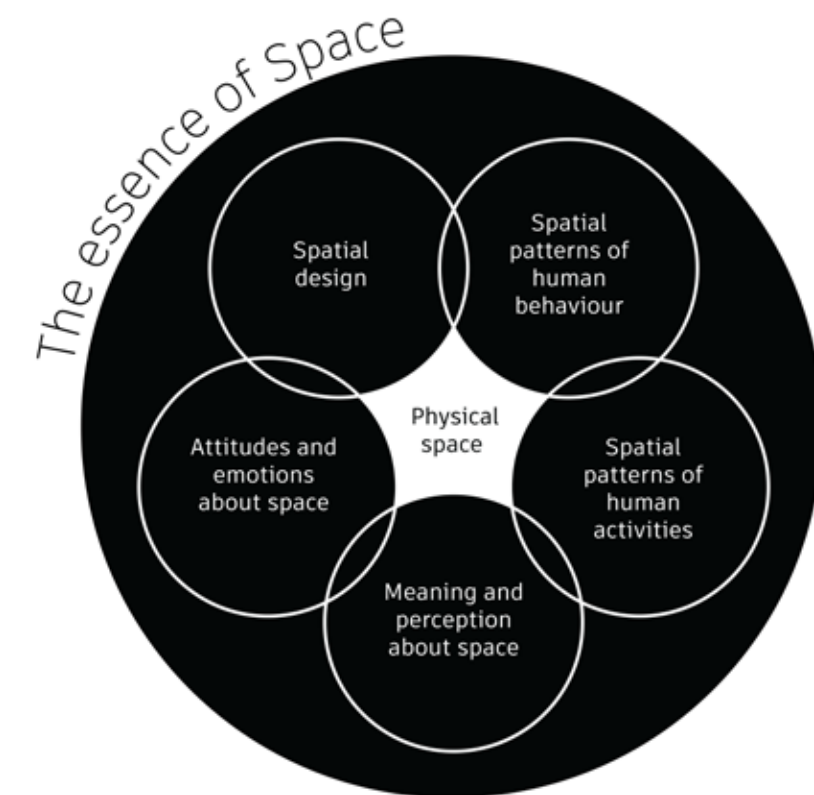


Figure 12: De Jong’s component of the essence of space (Marinova, 2024)

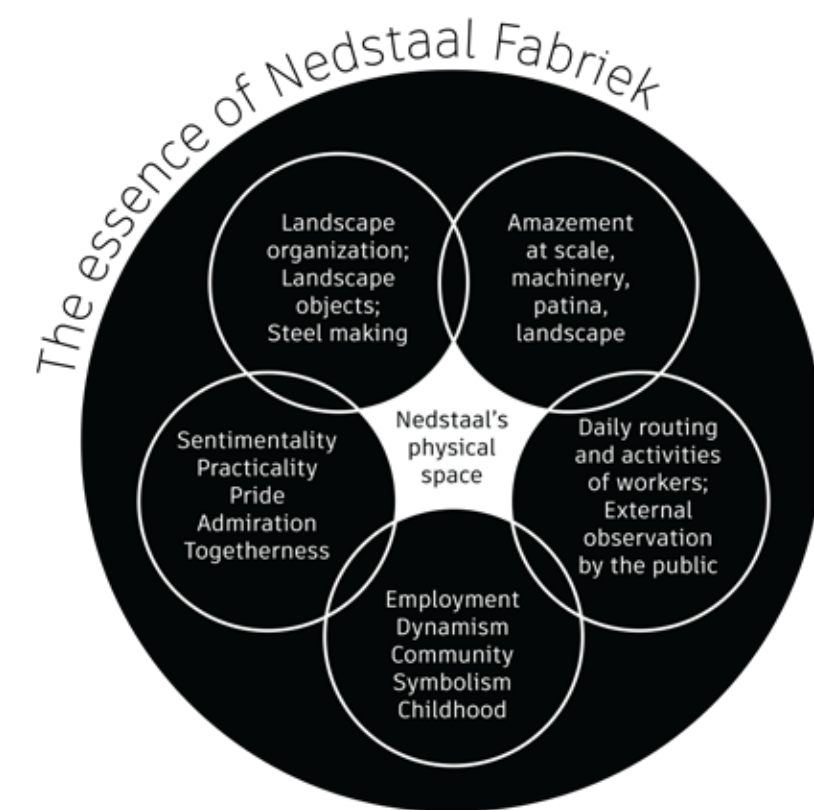


Figure 13: Nedstaal's essence as analyzed through De Jong's interpretation (Marinova, 2024)

7. Translation to design

The oral narratives rendered objects like the crane track, lifting cranes and steel products as some of Nedstaal's most character-defining components. Therefore, the future design can feature these elements as an important part of the new organization and relate them to the historical landscape. For instance, a new public pedestrian and bike route can go underneath the crane tracks, shown on figures 14. Once, steel products would be transferred on that road. In the future design, however, it can be reimagined as a heritage memory lane that guides people on the interface between the complex and the river, thereby strengthening this historical relationship. Additionally, steel scraps from the terrain can be reused for the creation of commemorative landscape art. In this way, remnants of Nedstaal's production – steel, are reinterpreted in a contemporary manner and used to identify the site as a former steel production complex (figure 15).

Furthermore, both the narrative fragment maps and archival findings underscored the importance of movement sequence in the factory. The daily on-site route of workers, like Jan, Harry and Ayhan, was influenced by the steel-making process. This manner of movement can be regarded as an intangible heritage component for the future design. The new plan's routing, for instance, could partly follow the historical production trajectory. On the contrary – people like Emine and Max had restricted access, only seeing certain parts of Nedstaal, like the wire mill building (figure 16). For members of the public, therefore, those most visible parts of the factory figuratively came to symbolize it. In the future design, this could mean adaptively reusing the wire mill facility, thus reestablishing its role as the public face of Nedstaal.

The research outcomes also featured the intangible values of community sense, dynamism and industrial atmosphere. Such characteristics can be spatially facilitated through the introduction of new functions, fostering human interaction, togetherness, but also – movement and exploration. A future mixed-use program could include a public venue, commercial and recreational spaces. Just like each part of the historical complex had a specific purpose and therefore – character, so too can the new design appoint different function zones, each with its own distinct identity.

As the chronological analysis in Chapter 4 showed, several buildings have already been demolished, including the smelter furnace (figure 18, page 28). The latter was not only heavily featured in the oral narratives and literature – it was the place where scraps were first melted, thus marking the beginning of the steel-making process at Nedstaal. Hence, this building was quite impactful and requires an act of remembrance. Designing large public squares, where objects from the demolished factory are displayed, could visually identify those grounds as the smelter furnace former location and educate visitors of its historic function. Additionally, its central location suggests it can be selected as the main gathering point of the whole complex, thus reinstating its original significance in a contemporary manner. Finally, the shipping docks used to be a prominent element in the skyline of Alblasterdam and in the perception of Nedstaal. It is only logical, therefore, to work with this element in the future design.



Figure 14: Nedstaal "Kraanbaan" (crane tracks) in 2018 (De Jong, 2018).



Figure 15: Art piece made of steel scraps from Nedstaal. People were already trying to identify the landscape (De Jong, 2018).

At last, I want to revisit Emine Osmanoglou's words: *"I am who I am today because of Nedstaal"*. Through this research, it was proven that this influence was, in a way, mutual; Just as people - like the six narrators in this paper - were shaped by Nedstaal, so too was Nedstaal shaped by them. Thus, the present research is relevant in the context of industrial revitalization, where, as Paul Meurs puts it, *"heritage is about the presence of the past in contemporary life"* and where the roles of personal experience and collective memory in place-making and value formation rank equally important to other scientifically straightforward approaches (Meurs, 2016, p.14).



Figure 16: View of the wire mill building from the "Bridge over the North" - the first facade seen from that road when entering Alblasterdam (Bridge Management Information Department, 1970).



Figure 17: View of the loading docks of Nedstaal. The smelter building is in the back. (HSA, 2024).



Figure 18: View of Nedstaal's current terrain. The "Bridge over the North" is in top left; Alblasterdam is behind it; The place of the former smelter furnace stands wide open. (FNsteel, 2024)

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Methodology

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