

Awakening the sleeping beauty of Kopli

A way to change and revive memories of the existing

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Research Plan - AR3A010

A Matter of Scale - Methods of Analysis & Imagination

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The background of the page is a faded, artistic illustration of a two-story building with peeling paint and a gabled roof. A large, hand-drawn sign is attached to the building, reading 'DO NOT DISTURB' in a cloud-like border, with 'Zzz' and small blue flowers below it. In the foreground, there are stacks of wooden pallets and a large white water tank.

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Position

As a future architect, the concept of redevelopment is critically important, as it allows underutilized areas with latent potential to be revitalized. This process creates opportunities for accommodating more people, fostering economic activity, integrating nature, and enhancing consumption, among other benefits. However, successful redevelopment requires a nuanced understanding of for example how an area might function on a social-cultural level. Therefore redevelopment of an underutilized building can create new functions for the social-cultural demands of an area, which can contribute to a broader goal of social-cultural needs.

In the context of urban redevelopment and rapid growth, Tallinn represents a unique opportunity for architects. The city, with its numerous unoccupied buildings and abundant underutilized spaces that were used during the Soviet occupation, offer a good base for architectural intervention. While this might be seen as an ideal scenario for architects, it may pose challenges for residents, raising the question of whose values should guide redevelopment. Because as architects, what we prioritize in design may not always align with the perspectives of the local population.

Having spent two weeks in Tallinn observing and analyzing the city, I remain aware of my position as an outsider. While I was able to explore the urban fabric and form certain impressions, my analysis is necessarily limited by the fact that I do not have the lived experience of a resident. Local inhabitants have a deeper understanding of how the city functions in daily life and have a more intimate connection to the cultural and historical context.

As someone who did not experience the Soviet period and is not from Estonia, my interpretation of the memories that the Soviet occupation brings is from an external viewpoint, which may differ from the values of Estonian residents. The regional and national significance of such memory can only be fully understood by those who have a personal or cultural connection to it.

This creates a significant ethical dilemma when attempting to assess the value of vacant buildings, that were used during the Soviet occupation. As an outsider, it is difficult to take a definitive stance on whether these buildings hold value or not. Furthermore, the very concept of “value” is complex and not easily quantifiable. Instead of making conclusive ethical judgments, I have chosen to focus on the historical context of underutilized buildings, like Kopli 93, and examine how their potential redevelopment could address contemporary social-cultural needs. This approach allows for a more objective, rational inquiry into urban development, avoiding sweeping ethical claims that are not easily resolved from an external perspective.

My interest in history and its influence on urban form is deeply aligned with Tallinn’s layered architectural narrative. During my two-week study in Estonia, I found inspiration in the city’s diverse architectural heritage, particularly in the west-area Kopli with buildings like Kopli 93, used during the Soviet period. While I personally appreciate the architectural qualities and elements, I recognize that local residents may hold different views.

Thus, the aim of my research is not to assert the intrinsic value of these structures, but rather to explore the multifaceted historical and cultural dimensions that influence their redevelopment. This study provides a framework for understanding how underutilized buildings with a certain historical background can inspire new designs, especially within the context of Western approaches to redevelopment.

Instead of quantifying the value of a building, my research seeks to explain how these historical structures can inform contemporary urban design, bridging the past with the present in ways that respect both historical significance and modern societal needs.

Introduction

Tallinn, a picturesque coastal city, is rapidly emerging as a symbol of modern urban development. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, after a period of “voluntary membership” that began in 1944 following the Second World War, Tallinn has undergone significant transformation. Now evolving into a market-oriented liberal democracy, the city is characterized by its fragmented urban landscape, where neighborhoods are often separated by highways and other infrastructure, each carrying distinct historical legacies (Kooij, 2015).

The city’s industrialization led to the expansion of suburbs like Kopli and Paljassaare, which developed working-class neighborhoods. Tallinn is therefore a patchwork of historical layers, combining Soviet, utopian, and collective architectural influences. Soviet-era neighborhoods, while employing innovative construction techniques, also reflected a distinct social modernist approach to urban planning (Kooij, 2015).

The Soviet period in Estonia evokes diverse reactions. For many Estonians, particularly among the elite, this era is viewed as a time of occupation, leading to a general aversion to Soviet heritage (Kooij, 2015). The Soviet occupation is often perceived as a dark chapter in the nation’s history, devoid of cultural or architectural value. This sentiment is understandable given the context of Soviet control and the suppression of Estonia’s national identity during this time.

However, not all residents share this negative view. Some regard the Soviet period as having a cultural and historical significance, appreciating the architecture from that era as part of the city’s historical narrative (Lige, 2022). While some Estonians prefer to forget this period, others do not object to the continued presence of architecture that was used during the Soviet occupation, illustrating the varied emotional responses that Tallinn’s built environment can evoke.

In recent years, rising real estate prices in the city center have driven young, educated Estonians to seek housing in neighborhoods beyond the historic core, such as Kalamaja (Garlick, 2015). As a result, former working-class areas, like Krulli and Kopli, are being redeveloped into modern districts with updated infrastructure and facilities. This influx of new residents has shifted the cultural and social needs of these neighborhoods, transforming their historical functions from the past 80 years.

These areas contain onoccupied buildings, some of which hold a certain historical value, dating back to both the industrial and Soviet occupation. These vacant buildings are sometimes in relatively good condition, but others need a good amount of transformation. Despite this, the prevailing trend is to demolish these buildings. While there are valid arguments for their removal—such as the perceived lack of architectural merit and concerns about construction quality (Lige, 2022)—the decision to demolish them should be reconsidered.

From a sustainability and social-cultural perspective, underutilized buildings possess qualities that make them valuable candidates for preservation and reuse. Their integration into new development plans could contribute to the ongoing transformation of these districts, addressing contemporary demands for social cohesion. This raises important questions: why are these buildings often slated for demolition when they could be preserved and repurposed? How can these vacant buildings serve as a catalyst for fostering social cohesion in Tallinn’s rapidly changing urban fabric?

By exploring these questions, we can better understand how the architectural legacy used during the Soviet occupation might offer solutions to current urban challenges, providing a bridge between the past and the future in a city undergoing profound transformation.

Research Question

Once the relationship between contemporary and historical socio-cultural uses in Tallinn is established, the research can address the central question:

How can underutilized buildings, like Kopli 93, used during the Soviet era, contribute to the social-cultural needs in the contemporary urban redevelopment of Kopli?

The primary aim of this research is to explore the potential role of Soviet architecture in shaping the current and future cultural life of Tallinn's residents. Understanding the historical significance of these buildings can offer fresh perspectives and open up new possibilities for the city's urban development. This research will promote a critical design process, in which the insights gained from answering the research question will form the basis for the architectural proposal.

However, before such a proposal can be formulated, several key sub-questions must be addressed:

Theoretical Framework:

- What are underutilized buildings?
- What is adaptive reuse? (How can these underutilized buildings be revitalized?)
- How is Kopli currently functioning?
- What happens now with underutilized buildings in Tallinn?
- What are the current plans for the urban redevelopment of Kopli?
- What are social cultural needs and what are these for Kopli?
- How can the design of buildings respond to and fulfill these social-cultural needs?

Historical Framework:

- How did and does the area of Kopli function during the Soviet occupation and now?
- What role did Kopli 93 play during its period of use?
- What is the relation between Kopli and the Soviet Occupation?
- What history does Kopli have?

By addressing these sub-questions, the research will provide a comprehensive understanding of both the historical context and the contemporary needs of Kopli. This will form the foundation for exploring how vacant buildings with a certain historical value can be repurposed or integrated into modern urban planning, contributing to the creation of new cultural centers that reflect the city's evolving identity and social-cultural dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Before starting the research it is necessary to prevent any misinterpretations, which means that some crucial definitions are needed to be defined.

The central theme of this research is about underutilized buildings that can ultimately contribute to society by breathing new life into them; in other words adaptive reuse of unoccupied buildings. How can this best be done with buildings that carry a certain memory?

In order to find out what underutilized buildings are, research is being done on unoccupied buildings in Tallinn in order to stay as close as possible to the core of Kopli 93.

In the article *Fidelity and Freedom in the Theory of Adaptive Reuse* by Van Cleempoel (2020), he illustrates a way in which adaptive reuse of buildings with a certain memory can still be completely transformed, showing how memory and oblivion are two essential principles for (unused) architecture and heritage.

That is why the following working definition of adaptive reuse is used:

Adaptive reuse is the process of repairing and restoring existing buildings for new or continued use (van Cleempoel & Plevoets, 2019).

However, if an underutilized building is finalized you want it to be used. Therefore a research on the future function because of its social-cultural needs needs to be done. Exploring the social-cultural question within the architectural context is not a novel endeavor; however, the distinction in this research lies in its geographical focus, which extends beyond the Netherlands. Before this investigation can proceed, it is essential to clearly define what is meant by the “social-cultural needs,” as this concept forms a critical foundation for the study. To avoid ambiguities and potential misinterpretations, the research will adhere to the following working definition:

The social cultural needs refer to the expectations, values, and aspirations individuals and communities hold regarding their social interactions, cultural expressions, and lifestyle activities (Mehrdad et. al, 2013).

These needs encompass a wide range of pursuits and practices—including religious, recreational, artistic, and social activities—that contribute to personal and collective context. Social-cultural needs are shaped by social systems and cultural institutions (e.g., family, education, media) and influenced by factors like interpersonal relationships, media, identity, and consumerism. By recognizing and addressing these needs, social cohesion can support personal development and foster a sense of belonging within communities.

Theoretical Framework

Despite efforts to define the “social-cultural needs,” it remains an inherently abstract and fluid concept. The terms “social” and “cultural” are not easily quantifiable like an amount, and often represent philosophical considerations rather than concrete, measurable entities. Additionally, the social-cultural needs and priorities of individuals can vary significantly; what one resident considers essential may not be of equal importance to another.

To address these complexities, this research will first conceptualize the social-cultural needs through an extensive review of relevant literature. Following this, the concept will be further refined by categorizing it into specific target groups, each with its own set of associated social-cultural needs and priorities. This approach will ensure a more nuanced understanding of how architecture can merge with diverse social-cultural demands.

Then after this a more in depth analysis of Kopli is done to see how the site is currently functioning and what the current and future plans are for this area. How can the renewal of this sleeping beauty, Kopli 93, contribute to the current social-cultural needs in Kopli?

Almost 11 years ago Kopli struggled with social problems with social symbols like high fences and segregation (Semm, 2013). Raat (2002) informed that the neighborhood had a lot of tradition and distant future making it not possible to talk to one another. And since there weren't any new building- or urban plans that considered a change, anonymity and arrogance manifested in that area.

However in the past couple of 10 years parts of the neighborhood have been changed and redeveloped. New people started to move to this suburb and the area had become less anonymous and more lively. Because of this change, new needs are developing too, making it an easy choice to revitalize underutilized buildings in the area, such as Kopli 93.

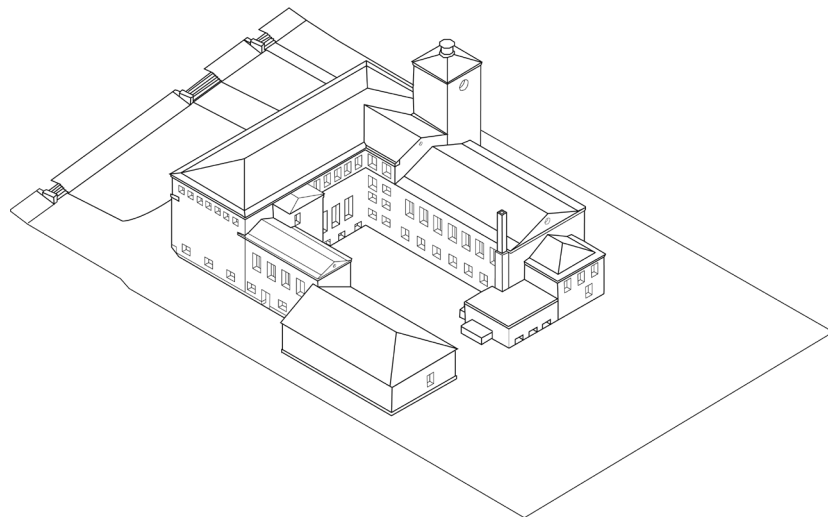


Figure i: *'Situation of Kopli 93* [own work based on work by Spatialist Studio]

Revitalizing Kopli 93 is more than just a redevelopment effort; it represents an opportunity to establish a new model of public space within a rapidly changing urban environment. Now Kopli 93 project's approach is to foster a “spatial culture” in which residents are encouraged to be active contributors to public space creation rather than passive consumers (Kopra & Toom, 2024). So it would be a nice concept to continue this thought and contribute to the current needs of Kopli.

Historical Framework

The historical layering of Tallinn, where the city's past is visibly inscribed in its urban fabric, is both complex and, at times, difficult to interpret. Estonia's 20th-century history, particularly its Soviet past, remains a sensitive and contested topic that cannot always be addressed openly. The demolition of several Soviet-era buildings of buildings that were used during the Soviet occupation raises critical questions about how these architecturally significant structures, once regarded as prominent symbols of a bygone era, are now being demolished. It is perplexing to witness these architectural works, which possess historical and architectonic value, being dismantled rather than preserved and recontextualized.

While some of these sleeping beauties can indeed be considered architectural "gems," they are inextricably linked to the ideological and political ambitions of the regime that was occupying Estonia—a heritage that many Estonians understandably find difficult to reconcile with their national identity. During my fieldwork, I observed an aversion among locals toward the Soviet occupation, a perspective that contrasts with my own outsider's view, which tends to emphasize the architectural qualities of these structures.

This divergence in perception underscores the importance of understanding the various Estonian perspectives, along with the cultural norms and values associated with them. To ensure that any design intervention is contextually appropriate, it is crucial to engage with the social and historical narratives that shape local attitudes. Estonian identity, while broad and multifaceted, can be understood through different lenses, such as security identity or social identity, as outlined by Noreen and Sjöstedt (2004). In this research, the focus will be on the intersection of social and cultural identity, as these concepts provide a framework for understanding the symbolic and emotional resonance of underutilized buildings that were used during the Soviet occupation in the present day.

To grasp how the Soviet period and broader Estonian history have shaped the experiences and identities of Tallinn's inhabitants, it is essential to investigate the emotional and cultural responses these buildings evoke. Through an analysis of the Soviet period's ideals and architectural expressions, this research will explore the correlation between built form and the articulation of social-cultural needs. By integrating historical context, a meaningful comparison can be made between past architectural ideologies and present-day urban dynamics.

Archival research will likely yield valuable insights into the ways in which social-cultural buildings functioned in its social and environmental context. This inquiry will focus on how these buildings interacted with their surroundings and how they mediated the relationship between people and place.

As part of this investigation, I will focus on the specific industrial area Kopli, which developed during Estonia's industrialization and were further expanded during the Soviet period. This area provides a rich ground for examining how formerly well-used buildings-but-now-underutilized, has shaped and continues to influence, Tallinn's urban and social landscape. Therefore its needed to research the historical context of Kopli, broadening the knowledge of the site.

Methodology

In this research, it is crucial to provide a comprehensive understanding of how former unoccupied public buildings can meet the current social-cultural needs of Kopli's urban landscape. What are the next steps and how can these steps bring me to a design?

The research methodology will involve a combination of literature review and documentary analysis to construct a detailed examination of the topic in combination with a contextual analysis on Kopli.

The literary analysis will visually be represented through graphic documents, primarily in the form of maps. These maps will showcase both the historical and contemporary uses of space, illustrating environmental functions, events, routes, and other key factors. By placing past and present urban functions next to each other, such as notable individuals, social customs, lifestyles, and building purposes, these visual tools will offer a concise yet thorough representation of changes over time.

The contextual analysis is about Kopli. The program of Kopli is being investigated, with a special focus on Kopli 93. Think about the infrastructure, the layout and how the neighborhood functions as a whole. What functions are in Kopli? Who is living there and who is attracted to it? Is it commercial or not? The relevance of this is to see what the demand is in this future redevelopment area. It is a local issue for Tallinn and residents, because how do you deal with existing buildings with a certain historical value that have been unused and how can you even make such an intervention?

The primary objective is to capture and illustrate the social-cultural use of urban spaces, both historically and in the present day. To achieve this, documentary footage and photographic archives will be translated into atmospheric collages, serving as visual interpretations of the evolving social-cultural demands. These collages will highlight how such demands have been expressed and fulfilled in different periods, providing a nuanced analysis of how underutilized buildings could be reintegrated into contemporary urban development to meet Kopli's current social-cultural needs.

Past Analysis

Contextual:

For the contextual analysis, we examined several “sleeping beauties”—historically rich yet neglected areas of Tallinn that are currently undergoing significant transformations. The city’s wealth of historical layers fascinated us, particularly how these once overlooked industrial districts are being repurposed into lively, contemporary neighborhoods.

Our investigation focused on Tallinn’s industrial heritage within the broader process of urban redevelopment, with a specific emphasis on the various stages of gentrification. We analyzed how this process has led to shifts in the use and spatial experience of key areas in the city. The sites we explored, Põhjala Tehas, Noblessner, and Rotermann, were formerly industrial zones, integral to the city’s working-class fabric. For instance, these sites housed a rubber boot factory and a brewery, each contributing to Tallinn’s industrial identity.

Understanding the historical context and identifying how certain architectural elements from the past are preserved or reinterpreted in contemporary designs were crucial for our analysis. The different stages, much like the “the chicken or the egg” dilemma, raises the question of whether redevelopment precedes or follows demographic shifts. Therefore, it was essential to determine the stage each district is in within the redevelopment stage.

The comparative analysis consists of three sections: 1. understanding the development approach by investigating urban context; 2. analyzing how the architectural elements of industrial buildings are remodified under developers’ agendas; 3. studying how the new buildings are responding to the industrial heritage and historical context by design and material used.

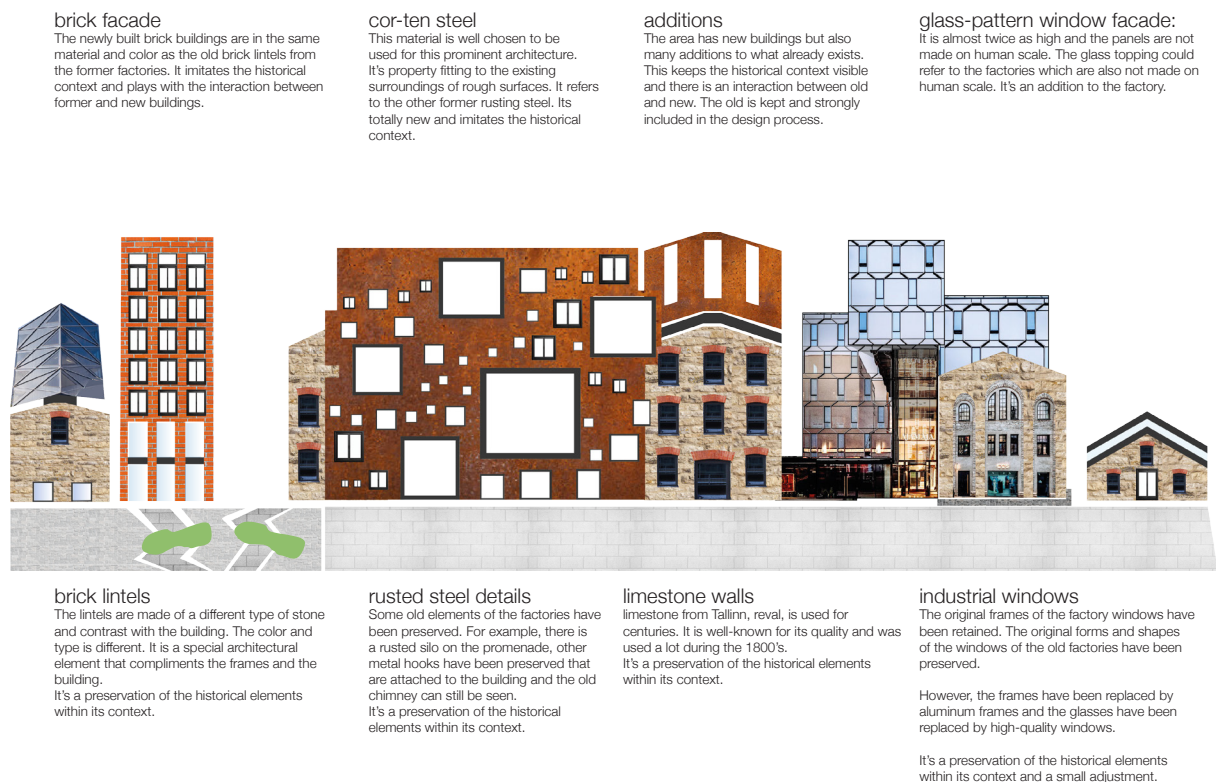


Figure ii: ‘Material Comparison of the New Buildings and Industrial Heritages of Rotermann’ [own work]

Past Analysis

element i: dilapidated facade

The appearance of the old facades has changed very little. The debris can still be seen; old stones have fallen apart and never reconstructed. Some windows and frames have not been replaced and the walls and windows are covered in graffiti. The plasterwork of the wall has not been maintained and is peeling off. The construction is clearly visible from the outside.

element ii: repetitive structural forms

This housing complex in the middle of Pohjala Tehas is made of concrete blocks combined with a steel frame. It mentions the industrial era to the factories that used to be there. The arch structures of the sheds that used to be there with their former machines are imitated as well. This building is not abandoned and all the architectural elements are finished well.

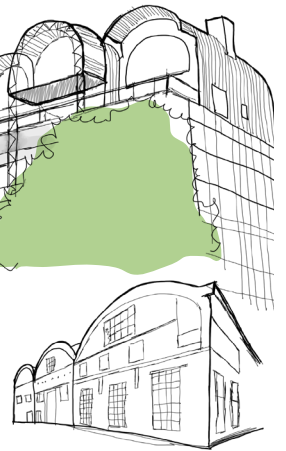
element vi: material reuse

In the old warehouses of the factories, which have been partly redesigned, but also in the area around in Pohjala Tehas, materials have been reused. Old materials are used to make for example benches or planters, but are also used to make information installations for visitors. Objects in the area are not brand new; in fact, the old is reused.



element iv: accessibility scale

In this area, it is evident that less attention is paid to urban planning. There aren't a lot of elements that ensure that the outdoor space is used more often by pedestrians. In addition, there are a lot of weeds and even certain paths that aren't inviting to come as a pedestrian. The area is very easy to enter for a car or a bicycle through the wide asphalt paths and due to the two large fences that serve as an entrance. Because of this unclear separation between cyclists, pedestrians and car drivers, the scale of the accessibility is dynamic.



element iii: new black steel elements

Certain architectural elements that have been added to the new buildings, such as the roof and the stairs in this sketch, are made of steel. The steel is black and has a sleek appearance. It isn't rusty at all like corten steel for example and it is finished correctly. The neat stucco work contrasts with the unfinished façade of the old factory opposite the building.

element iv: windows

Unlike Rottermanni, these windows have also been repaired, but the choice of materials for the frame and the glass leaves the luxury and newness of the windows behind. The windows that do exist have no other bricks as lintel but a concrete one, and the 'old' look of the frames is often retained.

Figure iii: 'Contextual Analysis of Pohjala Tehas' [own work]

To capture this, we produced sketches that projected the atmospheric identity of these sites, correlating the urban and architectural characteristics of the former factories with their current state and evolving functions.

As a conclusion for the contextual analysis, it is aimed to identify and evaluate the techniques used for the architectural interaction between development approaches and the industrial heritages in respective sites. From the summarisation of the design techniques, it is easier for us to judge if the certain techniques have effectively responded to not just the development approach, but also the respect to the history, as well as the actual engagement of public in the space.

Past Analysis

Disciplinary Analysis:

As part of the disciplinary analysis, my case study focuses on the Energy Discovery Centre, a former power plant situated next to the Linnahall. The building was reconstructed after World War II, adhering to its original design and plans, following its destruction during the war. This iconic building has been successfully integrated into the social-cultural usage of the city, demonstrating how historical structures can be repurposed to meet contemporary social and cultural demands.

This precedent is particularly relevant to the design process, as it illustrates how the adaptive reuse of historical architecture can inform future urban developments, ensuring that they resonate with the evolving needs of society. The integration of past architectural legacies with modern functions offers valuable insight into the potential future uses of similar industrial sites in Tallinn.

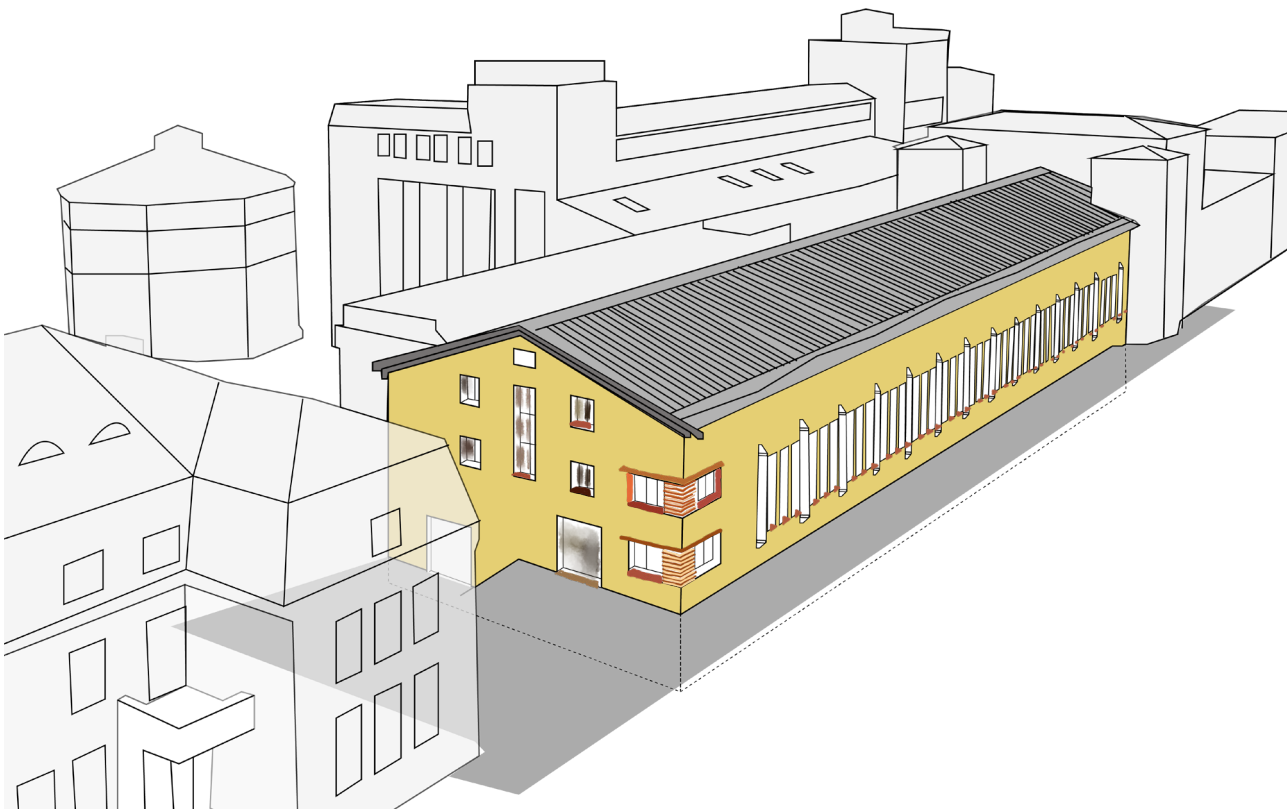
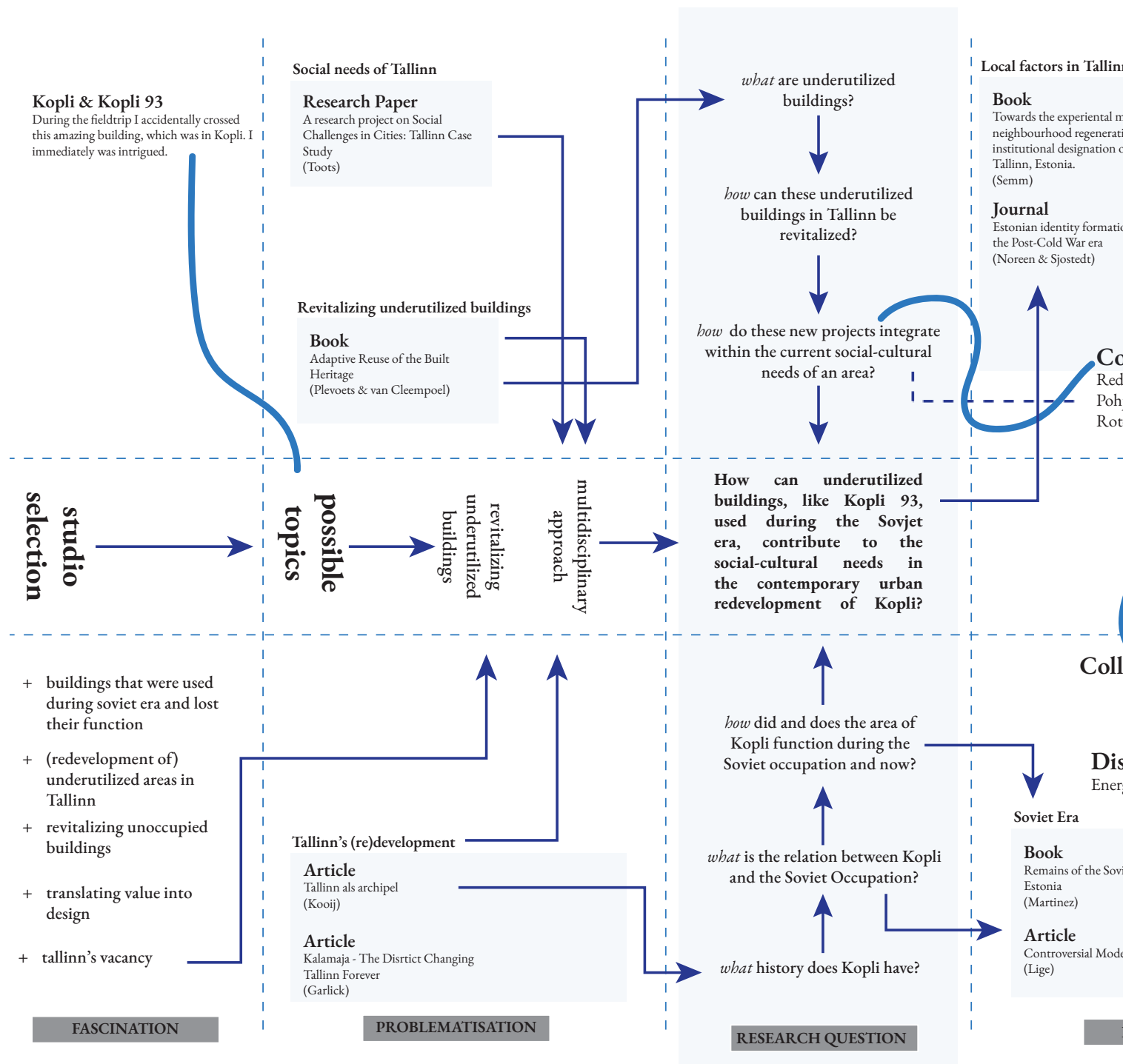


Figure iv: '*Sketch of the Energy Discovery Centre*' [own work]

Research Diagram



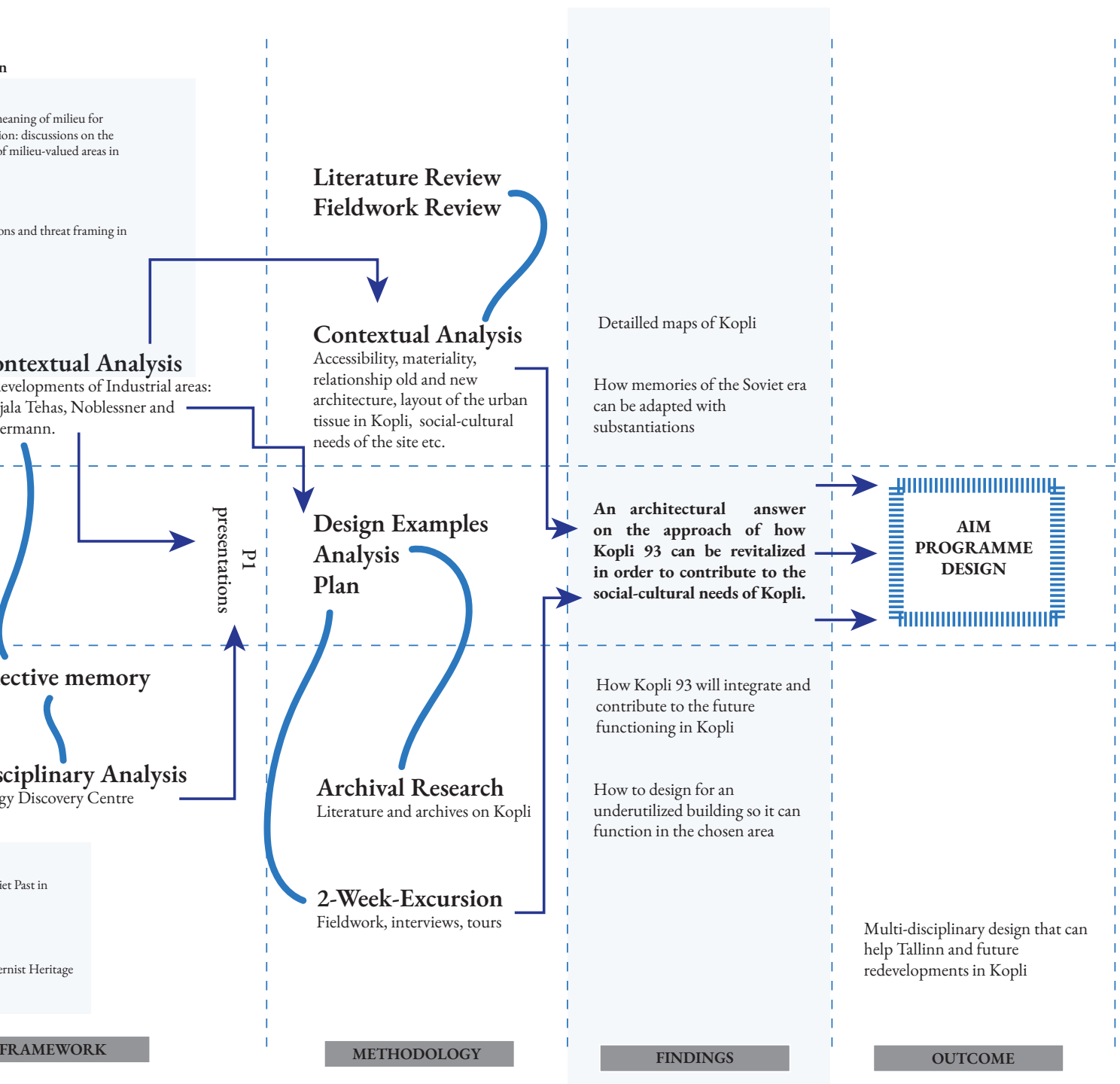


Figure v: 'Research Diagram of Olivia Lensen' [own work]

Reflection

It is striking to realize how interconnected all aspects of this process are. At present, we are in the early stages of formulating a research proposal, while simultaneously conducting various analyses that will inevitably influence the final design. Although nothing is set and the process remains flexible, the mere thought of holding significant responsibility for potential future decisions is daunting.

I also find the use of diverse research methods highly valuable, as multiple perspectives are being explored. There is no singular “golden” approach, and each method offers unique insights. While I appreciate this multiplicity of approaches, I find the act of concretely defining certain concepts somewhat challenging. By making terms explicit, one directs the reader toward a particular interpretation, limiting their ability to form independent conclusions. This approach often renders ideas more binary, leaving less room for the reader’s interpretation and nuance.

Despite this tension between concrete definitions and interpretive freedom, I hope that my research can provide a solid foundation for developers engaged in future redevelopment projects in Tallinn. Through careful analysis and substantiated conclusions, this research aims to support decision-making processes in a way that respects the complexity of urban transformation while offering clear, evidence-based guidance.

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