



# Gardens as Protest

for the right to sustenance  
and  
the right to the city



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# problem statement

In the cities of Portugal, a growing and marginalized population is left with little to no access to good quality and healthy food. It is too expensive or the infrastructure is simply missing in certain neighbourhoods. The country is still suffering from repercussions of the financial crisis in 2008 and pensioners, unemployed, and other marginalized citizens are struggling to meet their most basic needs. This is a phenomenon happening in cities all around the world. *Food deserts*<sup>1</sup> are often materializing in marginalized communities and more often than not this is the result of systemic racism and discrimination<sup>2</sup> in a profit-oriented capitalist society. Food justice is increasingly becoming a reason for protests and the engagement of bottom-up initiatives.

Out of this necessity, citizens in Porto have started to grow their own vegetables in left-over spaces around the city. Next to metro lines, highways, and underneath bridges they have transformed neglected and non-cared for land into little vegetable gardens and personal refuges.<sup>3</sup> In their struggle for their right to sustenance, they are creating qualities and places, which – if not for those guerrilla gardeners – otherwise would have never been made visible.<sup>4</sup> They are reclaiming abandoned land and their right to the city<sup>5</sup>, showing that they belong. Such gardens are a form of slow and non-violent protest for a more just city for all. They are fighting not only for social justice but environmental justice as well. By appropriating the third landscape of the city and only taking the space they need, they are making place for biodiversity and other forms of life.

The *Bananeira* community garden is one example of such an insurgent practice in the heart of Porto. In 2020, residents from around the neighbourhood of Fontáinhas collectively transformed former waste land into a productive and fertile garden.<sup>6</sup> It is located in the escarpments of Fontáinhas. Through direct action and in joint effort people have created a common space shaped out of their own needs and aspirations. This differentiates the garden from other public space in the city, which is always planned and controlled by public authorities. That otherness is

**1** Food deserts are geographic areas in cities where residents have limited access to good quality and nutritious food, due to the absence of affordable grocery stores in appropriate distance.

<sup>2</sup> Spaces of Opportunity is sowing the seed of community and change,” Shareable, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.shareable.net/spaces-of-opportunity-is-sowing-the-seeds-of-community/>.

<sup>3</sup> John Wriedt (Ed.). *Notes from the Underdog. Agriculture for Subsistence in Porto*. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>6</sup> “Bananeira,” accessed November 11, 2022, <https://hortadabananeira.hotglue.me>.

why places like the *Bananeira* gardens are often misunderstood and ignored. They are labelled as informal and illegal because they are not fitting into commercial and monetary structures.<sup>7</sup> Framing them as illegal makes it easy to ignore the structural problems these gardens are addressing<sup>8</sup>, such as food injustice, climate change, and property speculation (see figure 1). By squatting the land and not asking the state for permission, the people creating these gardens are explicitly refusing to recognize the state’s authority<sup>9</sup> over the forgotten urban spaces in the city. This positions the gardens in the current discussion about the right to property ownership versus the right to basic necessities like housing and sustenance. Gardens, like the *Bananeira* community garden, are cultivating abandoned property and re-qualifying it as communal urban space in the city. This takes time and effort but leaves them in a precarious situation. Even though they are fulfilling the social and ecological sense of property – by caring for the land – the law can always reclaim that ground these people created<sup>10</sup>, leading to eviction and marginalization. This makes the question of property their biggest weakness.

Gardens set up as protest for the right to sustenance and the right to the city are, however, an important contribution to a more just city for all – humans and non-humans alike – and need to be protected. By supporting the communities plus their gardens these spaces can be established and embedded in the city ensuring a sustainable and long-lasting relation with the city. But how can Gardens<sup>11</sup> that are set up as Protest<sup>12</sup> be supported so they can become an integral part of the city? And how can we integrate them and ensure their permanence without institutionalizing them, which would mean taking away their essence?

Gardens as Protest go beyond asking questions and their initial stage of provocation – they are proposing possible answers.<sup>13</sup> They are questioning existing structures, decentralizing their power, and giving it back to once marginalized individuals. These Gardens are allowing local communities and their ecologies to organize themselves autonomously<sup>14</sup>, creating free spaces for humans and non-humans alike.

<sup>7</sup> Michiel Schwarz. *A Sustainist Lexicon. Seven entries to recast the future – rethinking design and heritage*. (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 2016), 85.

<sup>8</sup> René Boer, Marina Otero Verzier, Katia Truijen (Eds.). *Architecture of Appropriation. On Squatting as Spatial Practice*. (Rotterdam: Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2019), 98.

<sup>9</sup> “Gift Economy. How to start your own free store,” Shareable, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.shareable.net/how-to-start-your-own-free-store/>.

<sup>10</sup> Wriedt, *Notes from the Underdog*, 485.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Bahnson, “A Garden becomes a Protest. The Field at Anathoth,” *Orion*, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-field-of-anathoth/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Urbanibalism. The city devouring itself,” accessed November 11, 2022, <http://www.urbanibalism.net>.







11 Gardens can take on many forms and meanings. They are often associated with wealth, power, and colonial structures.<sup>15</sup> This paper will distance itself from this bourgeois and privileged connotation of the Garden and examine the Garden and the Gardener in their most essential form. Gardens as a relation of ecosystems and the Gardener as the cultivator and farmer of soil, living with and within nature. The main focus lies on productive Gardens for substance in the city.

12 Gardens as Protest (see figure 1) are a form of slow and non-violent protest. They are a radical act in the fight for food and environmental justice,<sup>16</sup> manifesting themselves where the need is the greatest<sup>17</sup>. They are giving protest a permanent character by planting directly into the ground. They are prolonging the momentum of protest. Often, they are already an answer to the questions posed.

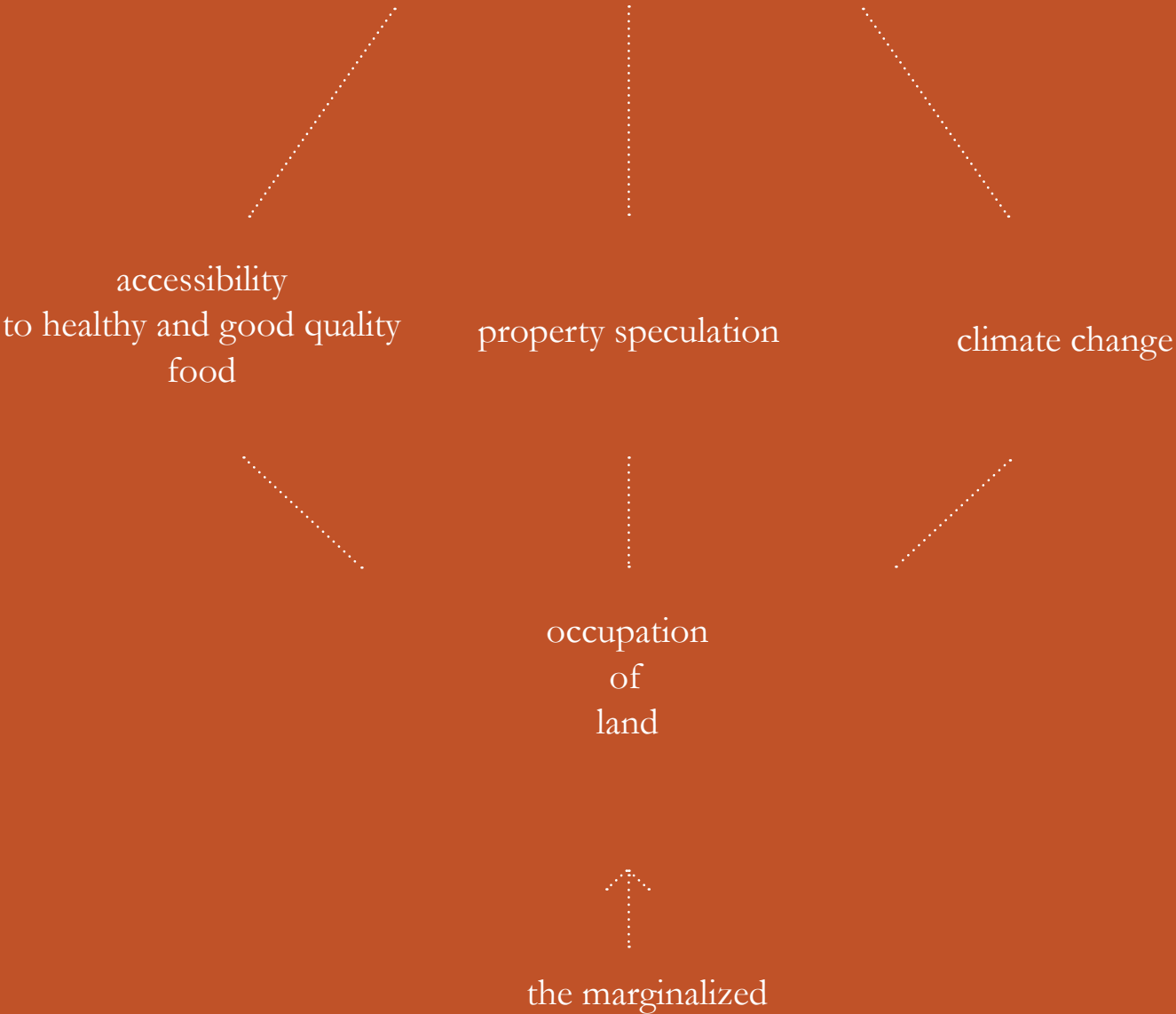
<sup>15</sup> Laurie Cluitmans (Ed.). *On the Necessity of Gardening. An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 111.

<sup>16</sup> “green guerillas,” accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.greenguerillas.org/history>.

<sup>17</sup> Cluitmans, *On the Necessity of Gardening*, 11.



Gardens as Protest



> a more  
just city  
for all

Figure 1



Gardens as Protest are appropriating the *third landscape* in cities, a term coined by Gilles Clément. The third landscape is the totality of all those territories abandoned by man in cities and their peripheries. They are abandoned or forgotten places, a result of political negligence. They can be found in awkward left-over spaces next to roads or in an empty former factory building. They are spaces where nature has found its way back and biodiversity has found a refuge.<sup>18</sup> If one touches upon these third landscapes, like the guerrilla gardeners of Porto, one has to do it with care and respect. These gardeners are understanding their role within nature. Following the principles of Gilles Clément's planetary garden, they are seeing nature not at the service of the human, but the human as a guest within nature's ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> The gardener only takes what is necessary and no more. He respects his responsibility towards the non-human world and does not exploit it. But would it then not be better to leave the third landscape alone so its biodiversity can thrive and unfold? Here the term the *actual territory* of the Roman-based architectural practice Stalker/ON might give an answer. They also see the actual territory as abandoned, unknown, excluded, and inaccessible territories in and around cities. In the *actual* the everyday and the rejected sides of formal reality happen. This means it is a space for the other and has to be preserved, and as Stalker says, excluded in a positive way.<sup>20</sup> The guerrilla gardens of Porto, for example the *Bananeira* community garden, is exactly that. They are refuges for rejected groups of the population – human and non-human. Here, the marginalized find a space to practice their right to the city and their right to sustenance in the third landscape together with other forms of life. The gardener realizes, that humans are not the only important actor, with other beings only being able to react to his decisions. According to Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene*, humans are with and of the earth.<sup>21</sup> This suggests a multispecies urbanism approach, as Debra Solomon is asking of future planners and designers.<sup>22</sup>

This paper is following an eco-feminist approach, by recognizing

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Clément. *"The Planetary Garden" and Other Writings*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>20</sup> Lorenzo Romito, "Walking across Actual Territories," *Amateur Cities*, 2016, <https://amateurcities.com/walking-across-actual-territories/>.

<sup>21</sup> Cluitmans, *On the Necessity of Gardening*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> "Multispecies Urbanism: Interview with Debra Solomon," Het Nieuwe Instituut, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://whoiswe.het-nieuweinstituut.nl/en/multispecies-urbanism-interview-debra-solomon>.

the agency of non-conventional actors, the power of small acts of caring, and the struggle for social and environmental justice. In the ecosystem of the garden many actors and agencies can be determined, other will rest uncovered. The paper will transcend the boundaries of the garden and uncover complex relations within the city and beyond, following the theory of assemblage<sup>23</sup>.

The concept of 'the right to the city' will weave itself through the whole paper and project, trying to give back the power to those which have been deprived of it for so long. One important approach will be 'the commons' and the act of commoning. The Gardens as Protest are already shaping a social practice of commoning and degrowth, which authorities are still trying to ignore. This research will uncover these small and big gestures, document them, and propose a possible future.

In *Notes from the Underdog: Agriculture for Subsistence* in Porto by Alexandre Delmar, Luís Ribeiro da Silva, Margarida Quintã, and Joaquim Moreno exactly these Gardens as Protest in Porto are being documented. They are, however, focusing on mostly solitary gardeners. Because the *Bananeira* community garden was only established in 2020, shortly before the book came out, it is not yet documented. With my research I want to fill that gap and go beyond the mere, seemingly objective, documentation.

<sup>23</sup> Assemblage Theory by Manuel De Landa







In order to understand Gardens as Protest better I will use the *Bananeira* community garden as a field study. The field study will unearth the divers and multiple layers of a Garden as Protest. Through an ethnographic research on site I will attempt to understand its complex socioecological system, its processes throughout the occupation, and the seasons. I will apply three lenses to the field study: an ecological, a communal, and a political lens. These will help me navigate the complex relations of different scales and actors. History and culture will add an extra layer. At the level of the city, the broader history of Porto will help understand the context and the resulting triggers leading to the occupation. Identifying cultural activities in the neighbourhood and other bottom-up initiatives will create a network in which to place the garden. At the level of the garden itself, interaction with the community will uncover the garden as a complex system of different actors, stories, and components. Together with historic photographs, the conversations will help to reconstruct the different stages of the garden crucial to understanding its current formation. The escarpments as a whole can inform about the importance of autonomous spaces in the city for humans and non-humans. The level of the plot illustrates the ecosystem and the position of the gardener within nature.

Through observations and conversations, I will attempt to gradually become knowledgeable about the garden. It is important to first try to understand in order to act.<sup>24</sup> The intimate knowledge I will gather, I will then translate into photography, drawings, and text. Apart from answering the question, the main goal of my research will be the documentation of the *Bananeira* community garden. As a guerrilla garden and because of future plans of the municipality, the garden is under threat of being evicted. It is important to document such social and insurgent practices in order to be able to learn from them.

The result will be a deep mapping of the garden, told through different narratives and perspectives. Apart from architectural drawings

<sup>24</sup> Clément, *The Planetary Garden*, 34.

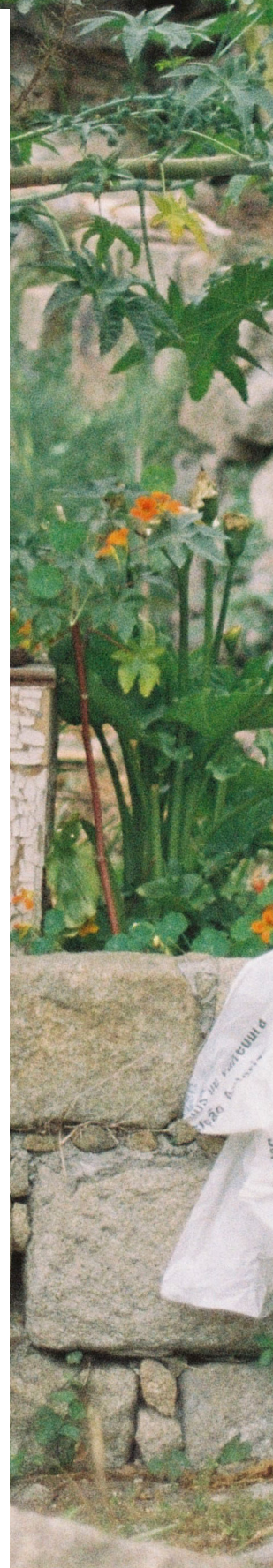
and photographs, important for building up an archive and an argument, other non-conventional and/or non-human perspectives will be expressed in experimental forms of representation. To represent, however, is to select one aspect and to exclude another by making conscious and unconscious choices dictated by interests and prejudices. There is a gap of clearly defined methods for researching and documenting non-normative and criminalized spaces and practices. This attempt draws inspiration from other publications about informal, temporary, and precarious places such as *Notes from the Underdog*<sup>25</sup> and *Architecture of Appropriation*<sup>26, 27</sup>

To fully answer the Research Question and in addition to the field study and Literature backing up my argument, a qualitative analysis of other gardens will be necessary. Gardens as Protest are a worldwide phenomenon, dealing with similar struggles in different contexts. It will be beneficial to learn from gardens that are already further in their fight against eviction and institutionalization. By choosing three different but comparable examples I can reflect on their methods and analyse their advantages and shortcomings.

<sup>25</sup> Wriedt, *Notes from the Underdog*.

<sup>26</sup> Boer, Verzier, Truijen, *Architecture of Appropriation*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 35.







LIXO

incubadora

MUDAS A CRESCER

PORTA-RECEIPI DE

RECEIPI DE

RECEIPI DE

Deposito de Lixo

Deposito de Lixo



20

The research and the field study will discover the effect all things have on each other in the ecosystem of the garden. In a garden, time becomes circular instead of moving directional.<sup>28</sup> Ecological and communal processes are slow in contrast to our ever-accelerating society. Productive guerrilla gardens offer refuge, support, and agency to those it was formerly denied to, including other forms of life. They are practices of placemaking, enabling multispecies stories. With my research and project, I want to emphasize the importance of such spaces in the city. The *Bananeira* community garden has the cultural potential of becoming a permanent place within the city. There consists an actual necessity of action to save the garden, as the municipality is planning a new project in this site, which could lead to major transformations. Instead of constantly building new, things that are already there should be supported. That is why I choose the *Bananeira* community garden as the site for not only my research but my design intervention as well.

Autonomous and self-managed Gardens as Protest are important places in the city. They have to be protected from eviction and marginalization. Porto is increasingly becoming a major tourist attraction and hotels and other tourist accommodations are rapidly transforming the fabric of the city. Because of its hilly topography, good views are an accelerator of gentrification. The *Bananeira* community garden is located in the escarpments with prime views over the river and the city. Sooner or later this will attract developers. The garden, its community, and its ecosystem need to be protected from the real estate market. Change on a meaningful level always has to be structural. A change in policies is necessary, challenging the concept of private property and protecting common spaces like the *Bananeira* community garden. This is linked to long processes on the municipal level. I believe that architecture can act as a facilitator of change. It can help sustain the garden's momentum beyond the occupied protest and establish it within a wider community outside of its initial border. If the garden is regarded as a vital resource in and for the city, it will be safeguarded by a bigger community. The challenge is to not institutionalize the garden and preserve it as an autonomous place with its own rules. Only then the initially marginalized will keep their safe space.

<sup>28</sup> Cluitmans, *On the Necessity of Gardening*, 172.

21



The permanence of architecture will stand in contrast to the ephemerality of the plants and the community, making a statement about the permanence of the garden itself. The intervention should not be an ideological response, but relating to its specific case, scale, and ecosystem.<sup>29</sup> That is why the initial observation and research phase will relate strongly to the design phase. To preserve the resilience and the biodiversity of the garden, it is important to keep areas of uncertainty. That is why the surroundings of the garden are important as well, as they are the spaces where biodiversity can unfold. All the different actors, the community, the ecology and the city/politics, will have different needs throughout the seasons. They are all interrelated and architecture can be able to address them all. The project should be part of the symbiosis of things, not controlling them.

My initial idea for my design, before having gone on my field trip and talking to the community, is a kitchen. I think it is important to design for sharing and create an environment where knowledge can be exchanged informally. The garden is already creating the platform for it, but the garden is big and without a space to meet in the winter. A communal kitchen, together with a meeting space, and storage rooms could be a facilitator of creating a stronger community and solidarity. It will complete the cycle of food in the garden and the kitchen table could be the centre of a social practice. It could be the link to the city, feeding those without the means to do so themselves. The typology of the kitchen involves reflecting about resources, economy, gender, space, social agency, and politics.<sup>30</sup> It can only exist within the context of its larger ecosystem and source of food and water.

The project should be like Gilles Clément's house. He didn't want to build a house with a garden around it, he wanted to live in the garden.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Clément, *The Planetary Garden*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Floating University Berlin. *Designing around the kitchen table*. Berlin: Universität der Künste Berlin, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Clément, *The Planetary Garden*, xvii.





train line

typical architecture in the  
city of Porto

bridges of Porto;  
static and monumental

bricolage;  
architecture without architects

ruins; out of stone

places with the best view

ruins;  
overgrown with plants

self-made house

shade for humans and animals  
+ support for plants

another place for rest

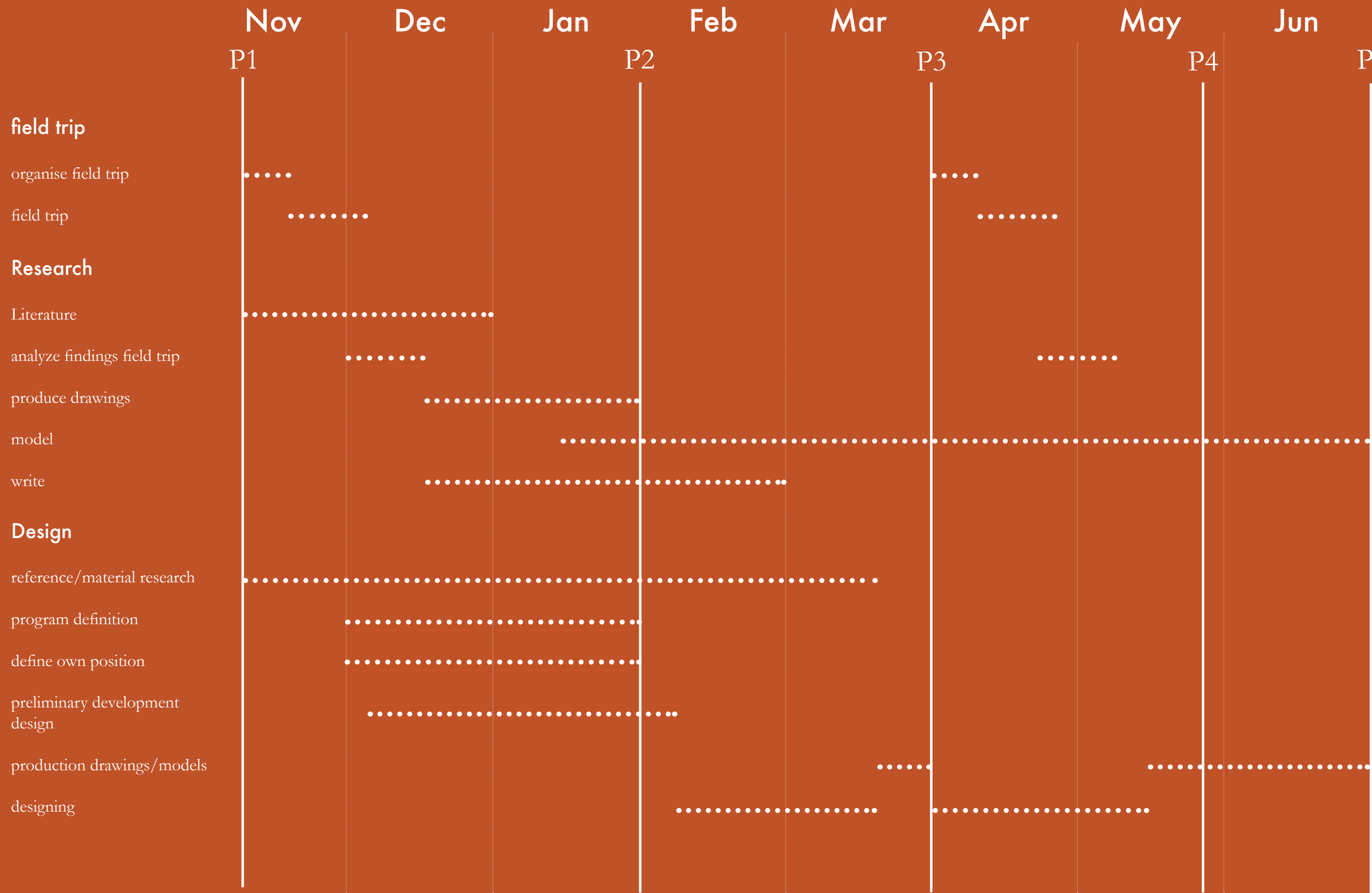
stone tunnel & old railways

24

25



year plan





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