



COMPLEX PROJECTS

RAMLET DANCE THEATER

Research Plan

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“Throughout modern Lebanese history, theatres (...) across the capital hosted politically active Lebanese artists, (...) allowed artistic expressions that reflected concerns on the streets. (...) Theatre is one of the rare places in Lebanon where people from all sects, regions, political views and colours come together. The moment non-commercial theatres (...) cease to exist, is the moment Beirut’s cultural image is erased.”

Moe Ali Nayel

EVALUATING THE WAY TO DEAL WITH PUBLIC-TO-PRIVATE TRANSITION SPACE IN THE DESIGN OF A DANCE THEATER

SUBTITLE

Reviving the Beirut's Golden Age tradition of interaction between performers (private) and audience (public) by dealing with the transitional private-to-public space in the design of a dance theater in Beirut.

KEYWORDS

Beirut's Golden Age; performer; audience; private-to-public; transitional space; dance theater.

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Topic: Leisure
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1 WHAT AND WHY: MAKING AN ARGUMENT FOR THE RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 GRADUATION TOPIC

Proposing the question 'How does catastrophe impact the future development of Beirut?', Complex Projects graduation studio 2021-2022 sets out to understand how catastrophe can impact the development of a city like Beirut. While requesting its students to develop a narrative that attempts at creating a frame of intervention for Greater Beirut in 2050¹. Accordingly, the following paragraph introduces the choice of the personal architectural topic by posing the question 'What is contemporary Beirut asking for its urban future?'

A quick browse on the urban challenges that Beirut faces today leads inevitably to the fact that private speculation driven by few powerful joint-stock companies like Solidaire² has been depriving Beirutees from the 'free and public' for decades. Resulting in civilian protests that challenge the widespread practice of 'public' consumeristic places inaccessible to most citizens³. Modern Beirut offers 0.8m² of public space per capita against the suggested norm of 9m² according to the World Health Organisation (WHO)⁵.

From here rises the interest for the architectural topic of leisure, for it can help support most of its population's (the non-super rich one percent who only can afford the private places of leisure⁶) 'right to the city'. While catalysing positive urban, social and economic change⁴. According to Henri Lefebvre, French sociologist that introduced the concept of production of social space, the 'right to the city' should aim "to reclaim

the city as a co-created space (...) detached from the growing effects of commodification and capitalism (...) over social interaction."⁷ Accordingly, the following paragraph introduces the personal fascination for a theater beginning with the question of 'What forms of leisure can support the 'right to the city' in Beirut?' and '(How) Can the design of a theater reflect the need for public space in Beirut?'

In the interview conducted in Beirut in October 2020, practicing Architect and Assistant Professor at the Lebanese American University (LAU) Roula El-Khoury retraced the dynamics of Beirut's Golden Age (1945-1975) picturesque buzzy streetscapes and abundant free places of leisure, numerous along the seashore and in the historic heart of the city. Which made Beirut a vibrant melting pot that never slept and welcomed the influx of cultural influences from international visitors. A vibrancy that elicits an interest to finding architectural inspiration in pre-Civil War social practices.

Roula then spoke about the loss of experimental performance venues in the redevelopment of post-Civil War Beirut, with the few venues that withstood the damage of the Civil War becoming commercial places like blockbuster cinemas. This erased the tradition of direct exchange between performers and public on the city street fronts and the theaters foyers. As a result, performers organisations have struggled over the past decade to find affordable rehearsal studios and venues to bring their performances to the public⁸. On top of this, the 2020 port explosion caused the damage of most of the then surviving theatres of Beirut, located in the historic centre in proximity of the blast.

However, in the 2019 protests, dance and music became means of peaceful manifestation⁹. Unifying the diverse population of Beirut that was reclaiming its right to leisure and to personal expression. This supports the notion that, although sometimes disregarded by the ministry of culture as a 'minor art', dance remains a popular tradition to watch in theatres and festivals in its folkloristic forms

like the Dabke, and to perform as hobby in its more or less modern variations¹⁰. In family gatherings there still is plenty of music and dancing, with the public watching while smoking the water pipe or eating¹¹.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Beirut of the Golden Age became known as the 'Paris of the Middle East' for its cultural scene of theatre, poetry, cinema and music. For instance, the Baalbeck International Festival, set within ancient ruins in the Bekaa Valley, was in its heyday¹². But the term 'Paris of the Middle East' today is seen as 'aggravating cliché' from which Beirut claims its own artistic identity while struggling to keep afloat its art scene.

With some of its artists demonstrating unbreakable tenacity¹³ while other are forced to flee to keep their artistic passion alive¹⁴. With the new theatre season opening in December 2020, after the Covid19-induced closure of all performance venues, some artists returned to perform no-longer only by means of illegal occupation of privatised or abandoned spaces¹⁵. However, many artistic performances and festivals like the Bipod, traditionally performed live, are this year only streamed online for the lack of funds to take the performances on-stage. This revamps attention to the challenge of unaffordable performance venues. The claim is that the current model of commercial theatre doesn't accommodate for crossovers among artistic associations, due to a lack of affordable space for practice and encounter¹⁶. This situation calls for a new model of affordable non-commercial theatre to resuscitate the artistic life that Beirut was famous for¹⁷.

Lebanese performers have different views on what the process of dance contributes to one's life. The majority of older institutions see dance as a way to keep the memory of the country alive while processing trauma. Most contemporary institutions find in performance a liberation from the gravity of daily life¹⁸. The common denominator is that theater is one of the rare places in Beirut where religious and cultural differences don't interfere with professional relationships, and

the only way they are allowed into the theatre venue is if by serving the development of a performance or of an artist professional growth.

Figure 1 propose the diagram of the project argumentation.

For these reasons, the project for Ramlet Dance Theater proposes a 30,000 m² dance theatre and the refurbishment of the adjacent 8,000 m² park.

The project location results of the group assignment to the suburbs of Beirut and the group decision to work on the neighbourhood of Moussaytiba (from Mastaba, meaning the intermediate level between low, the beach, and high, the mountain, levels¹⁹). The site is a rare empty urban plot adjacent to Ramlet El Baida beach (meaning 'white sand', Ramlet means 'sand' and Baida 'white'²⁰), the last public sandy beach of Beirut under 'threat of encroachment by real estate developers, leaving people with limited access²¹'. And Ramlet El Baida park, Beirut's lost opportunity in space for a park²². The abandoned plot overlooks the Mediterranean Sea from which it is divided by a 12m level change and secondary road Rafic El Hariri, offering a view while sitting in a potentially public green space. Most appealing to locals in the afternoon for satisfying their passion for watching the sun set over the sea²³. The plot stands out amongst a variety of high-rise, high-income apartment towers of the 1970s UNESCO neighbourhood²⁴. And rests in the vicinity of the low-rise Mar Elias refugee camp, illegally established in the 1950s by Palestine refugees²⁵.

The project foresees 1/4 of the performance spaces underground to mitigate the existing disconnection between the beach and Moussaytiba in a modern reinterpretation of Beirut pre-Civil War 'basement theater'. Namely the tradition of locating theatres in the basement of large apartment and office towers, often seen as 'community theatres' for their modest dimensions and humble appearance²⁶.

The ambition for Ramlet Dance Theater is to provide a space in the neighbourhood

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where dance becomes a catalyst for dialogue across the diverse stakeholders of Beirut urban life. Where folkloric tradition and new expressions of experimental dance can meet in affordable spaces. Where indoor and outdoor dance activates its surroundings facilitating performers and public exchange.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Triggered by this challenging context, the research questions how and where the reinterpretation of Golden Age Beirut's tradition of places of leisure and art can inform the addressing of a modern urban paradox. Namely the fact that the selected plot contains two of the largest free spaces of Beirut which however are largely under-used. Thus, the question rises of how public buildings can activate the use of large free-access open spaces like Ramlet El Baida Beach and Park. To test this idea in pragmatic design actions, the research focuses on the question "How to deal with the relationship of transitional public-to-private space in the design of the interior and exterior spaces of a dance theater in Beirut?"

Expected key design principles to investigate are the spatial relationships diagram of the 'reverse dance theatre' or 'basement dance theatre'; its role in activating its surroundings and specifically the role of the foyer in dealing with the transition of public-to-private space.

CHALLENGE

GOLDEN AGE

the basement theater

foyer place of encounter
performer - public

post-civil war
speculation transforms
in commercial venues

loss of small cultural and
artistic activities
with human connection
between artists and public

PROTEST

protests

privatised open space

theaters
destroyed

art as mean of peaceful
protests and cultural
mingling in period of lack
of opportunity for youth

OPPORTUNITY

CITY

mingling

public reclamation of
open space

venues
reclamation

modern shared
affordable venues for
associations

SITE

architecture as tool to
activate the public use
of the last public beach
of Beirut

city plan to revive the
pub. beach as economic
catalyst

locals need for proper
venue of free open leisure

local refugees need for
legal venue

Figure 1: Diagram of the project argumentation.

2 HOW: DESCRIBING THE RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 METHODOLOGY

Given the challenges posed by: the physical and cultural distance to the site of research; the limited information retrievable online; the limited literature and archival information retrievable on-site. And given the impact of the information gathered during the site visit, this project is fit for context-led research. Meaning that it allows the contextual research done on-site (emic research, i.e. from the perspective of the subject) dictate the research process and establish the hierarchy of the information retrieved non-on-site (etic research, i.e. from the perspective of the observer)²⁷. Hence, physical, social and historical settings are of primary importance²⁸. The goal is to use a mix of resources to sustain a 'future-proof' argument for the narrative of the project that should project architectural speculation into 2050.

The methodology includes primary and secondary sources to achieve a wholesome perspective on the topic and to ultimately establish a framework of design rules. Primary sources include on-site urban and architectural surveys like walking, mapping, sketching and photographing. In addition to interviews with Beirut Urban and Architectural Institutes, practicing architects, Dance Companies and locals. Visits of dance theaters and attending dance performances in the Netherlands also constitute a form primary source. This data is processed and archived in mind-maps which support site and program related decisions.

In terms of secondary sources, withdrawing information from Beirut local archives proved to be impossible given the

limited amount of time on-site and given that archival material is difficult to retrieve because in times of war it was not a priority to archive it or because it got lost through a history of catastrophes. However, from the beginning and at every stage of the research, key are secondary sources withdrawn online and mixed-media literature withdrawn from the BK Library at TU Delft. Both on the topics of the historical development of Beirut and on the design of dance theatres. These include maps, typological case studies and literature review. Compiling a catalogue of architectural references with a focus on the transitional space public-to-private will help inform the layout of the project's program.

Ongoing conversations with Beirutees studying at TU Delft provide insightful guidance on how to approach the context rather distant from the European reality. Moreover, conversation with members of the research group informs the advancement of the architectural topic.

Figure 2 and 3 propose the diagrams of the research structure, including argumentation and methodology.

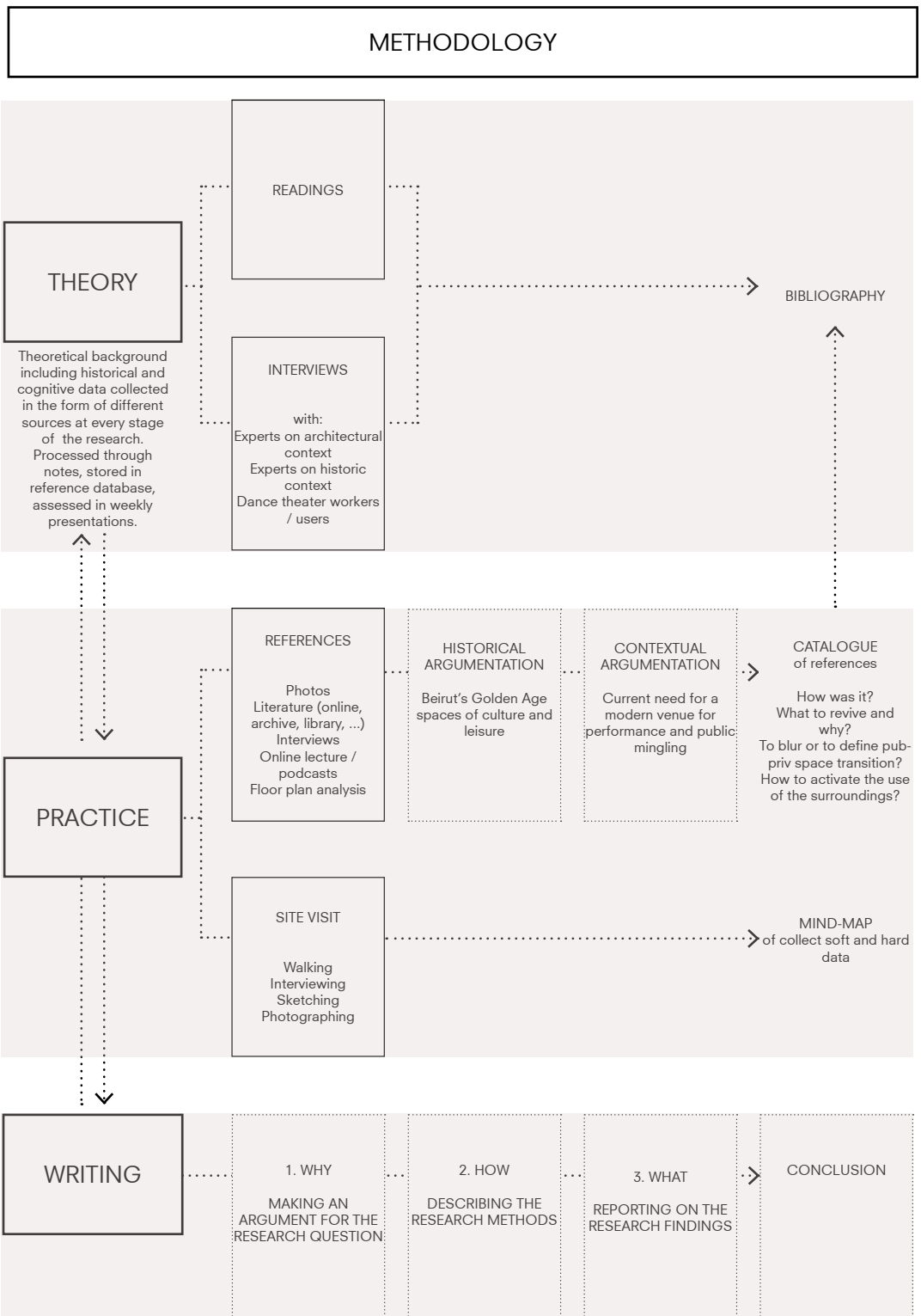
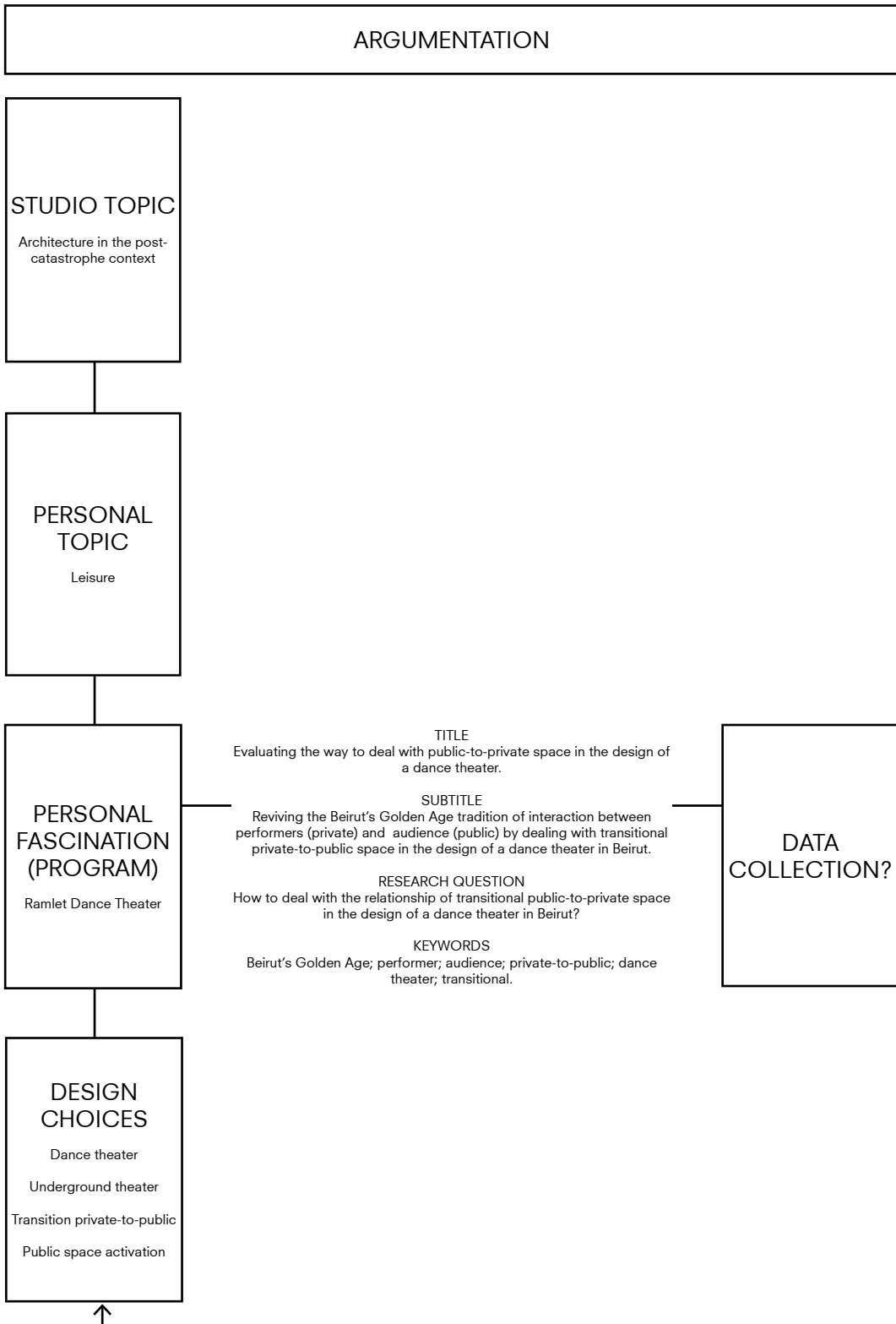


Figure 2: Diagram of the methodology.

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METHODOLOGY

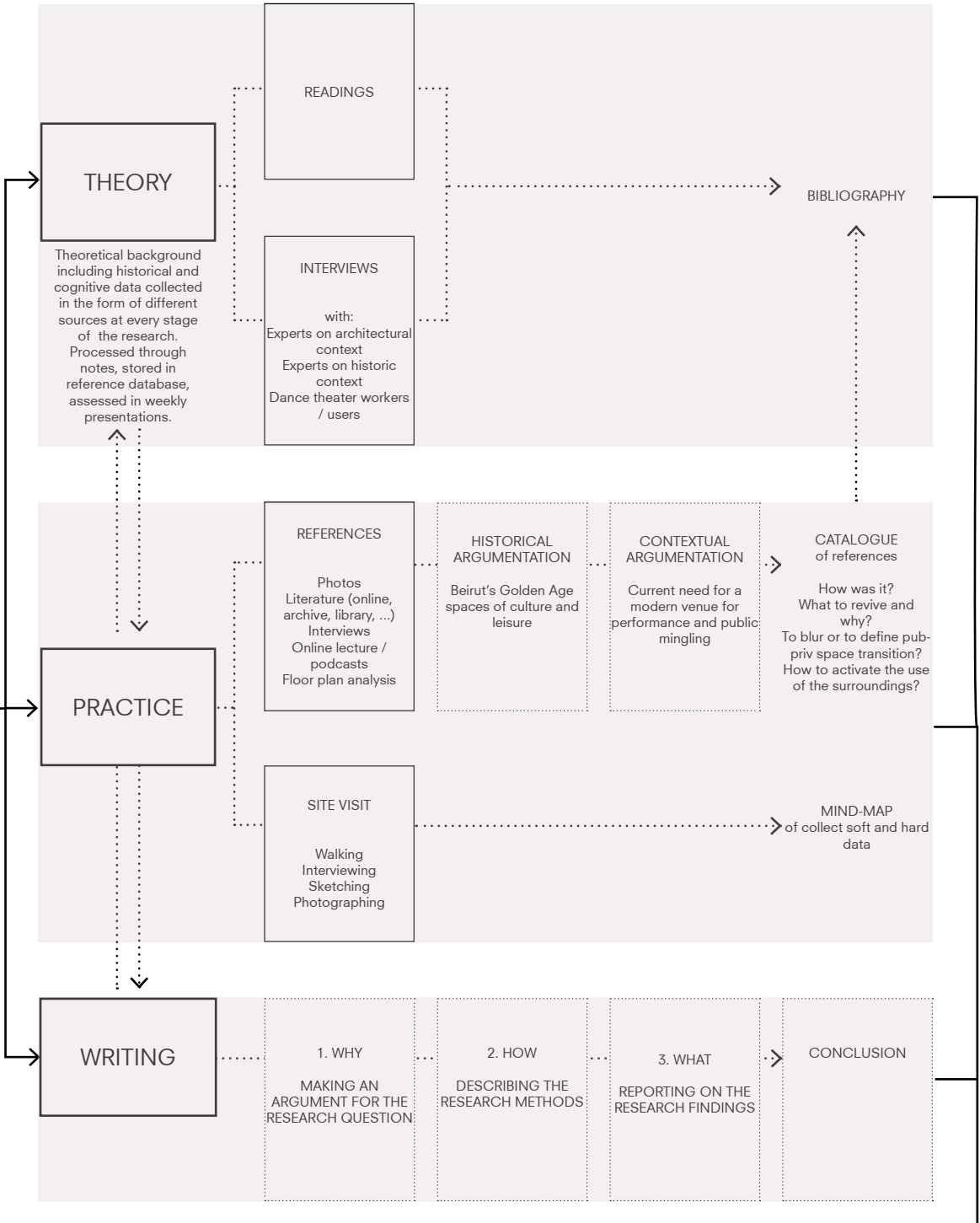


Figure 3: Diagram of the research structure.

3 WHAT: REPORTING ON THE RESEARCH FINDING

3.1 LITERARY FRAMEWORK

Besides the various sources cited so far in this research plan, the literary framework evolves around four points:

1. Urban literature to educate on the historiography of urban practices, particularly in terms of the changes in public spaces between the pre and post Civil War periods in sources like *Beirut Urban Design in the Arab World* by Robert Saliba²⁹, *Lessons in Post-War Reconstruction: Case Studies from Lebanon in the Aftermath of the 2006 War* by Howayda Al-Harithy³⁰.

2. Urban literature to inform good practice of urban design such as *Making Leisure Work* by Brian Lonsway³¹, *Insurgent Public Space* by Jeffrey Hou³².

3. Architectural literature to inform good practice of (dance) theaters such as *Theatre Buildings* by Judith Strong³³, *Theater* by Yukio Futagawa³⁴, *Buildings for the Performing Arts* by Ian Appleton³⁵, *The Shapes of our Theater* by Jo Mielziner³⁶, *Complex Buildings: Generators, Linkers, Mixers & Storytellers* by A+T Research Group³⁷.

4. Architectural references of dance theaters to understand the peculiarities that make a dance theater:

i. in Beirut, for the opportunity to inform culturally appropriate design, this includes

.Golden Age theaters, particularly looking at the 'basement theater' and its relationship with the

adjacent public space (walkways) and its places for interaction across performers and public, ex.: Caracalla Dance Theater and Baalbeck International Festival (figure 4);

.Contemporary venues for rehearsal and performance and their challenges to maintain independent dancers associations alive in Beirut, ex.: the Beirut Dance Company;

ii. in The Netherlands, for the opportunity they provide to visit them in person to better understand their spatial organisation, ex.: Luce and Amare Dance Theater in The Hague;

iii. Internationally, to contextualise decision of good practice.



Figure 4: Baalbeck International Festival within the ancient ruins of the Bekaa Valley in the 60s.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN STUDIO DISCUSSIONS

The general dilemma of the studio is its support of architectural speculations that seem to partially neglect the gravity of the situation that Beirut experiences today. Architecturally speaking, this situation implies that the city has very limited funds to invest in the building of new structures, with the last planning permissions largely dating back to the pre-protests period. Implying that the city's focus is, or should be, on the provision of structures for the vital needs of the greater part of its population³⁸. However, the positive outcome of this approach is that students are encouraged to imagine a more positive narrative for what Beirut will look like in the coming thirty years. Moreover, this poses an exciting challenge in the postulating of what new models of funding might work for the proposed projects.

Similarly, the individual dilemma of the project relies in the unnatural decision-making of designing a theater imposed by topical coordination with the rest of the graduation studio. Which presents the question of whether designing for performance should be a priority in the catastrophic context of Beirut. However, initial research appeased the ethical dilemma. From an early interest towards the possibility that architecture offers in the emotional healing of a community, the project attempted to avoid the 'cheesy and delicate narrative of healing', as suggested in studio reviews sessions, by proposing the program for a theater. Fascination that arose, on the one hand, from the awareness that the 2019 revolution articulated the need for places of personal expression and mingling for Beirutees³⁹. On the other hand, from the notion that artistic performance is affirming as a tool for psychotherapy in Beirut, where psychotherapy is still often seen as a taboo despite the high level of trauma that the citizens experience⁴⁰.

4.2 RELEVANCE OF THE INVESTIGATION AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The limit of this research resides in the incomplete nature of the data collected on-site due to the time exiguity of the site-visit. Which is aggravated by the scarcity of information retrievable from the Netherlands on Beirut's urban aspects. Further limitations depend on the need for topical coordination with the rest of the graduation studio.

Nonetheless, the topic of study that results from such constraints presents potential for value beyond this graduation thesis, which could act as a model for future intervention in the city.

Firstly, potential resides in foreseeing a prototype of public space appropriation through transitional spaces in public buildings.

Secondly, value is in the proposal of a prototype of reinterpretation of the Beirut's Golden Age traditions as a culturally appropriate design tool through the lens of today social practices.

Finally, value is in the suggestion of a model for architectural intervention on the last public beach of Beirut that simultaneously opens the shoreline for free quality public use, while generating income for the city to boost further revamp of the area.



Figure 5: Concept collage of Ramlet Dance Theater.

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5.1 LIST OF REFERENCES

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5.2 LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Diagram of the project argumentation. Ref.: image by the author.

Figure 2: Diagram of the methodology. Ref.: image by the author.

Figure 3: Diagram of the research structure. Ref.: image by the author.

Figure 4: Baalbeck International Festival within the ancient ruins of the Bekaa Valley in the 60s. Ref.: Imad Creidi and Tom Perry, "From golden age to war and ruin: Lebanon in turmoil as it hits 100," *Reuters* (August, 2020).

Figure 5: Concept collage of Ramlet Dance Theater. Ref.: image by the author.

THANK YOU.