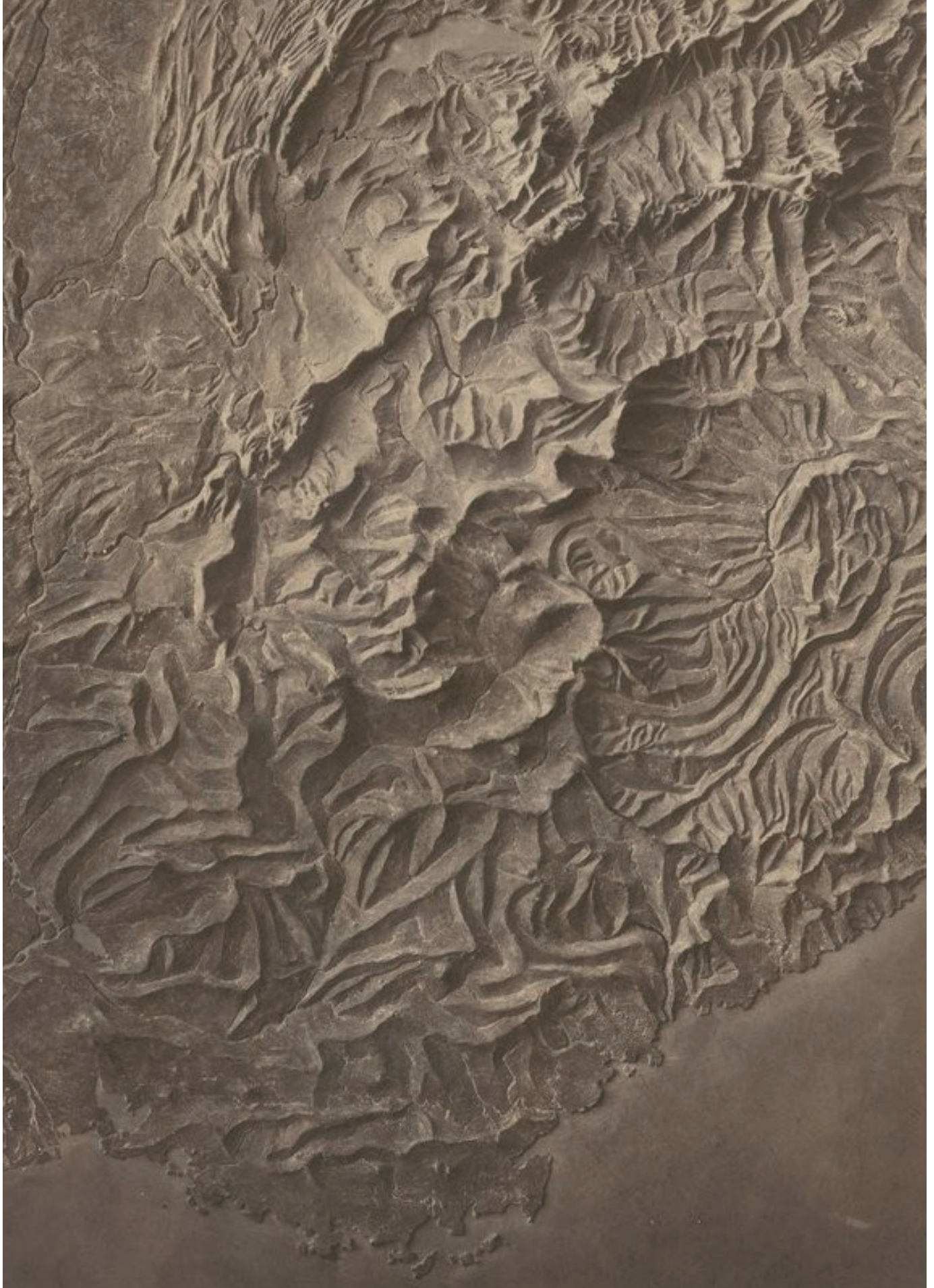


Forgotten Heritage of World War II, the Narratives of the French Alps fortifications.



Explore Lab 37_Research Plan

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Context

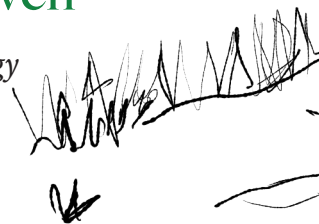
Finding yourself walking the paths of the French Alpine mountains, scaling the slopes with a heavy backpack in the hope of pushing back limits, you might come across some odd structures. Long forgotten and marked by the passing seasons, the stories of the people who settled there are cast in the concrete of the shelters.

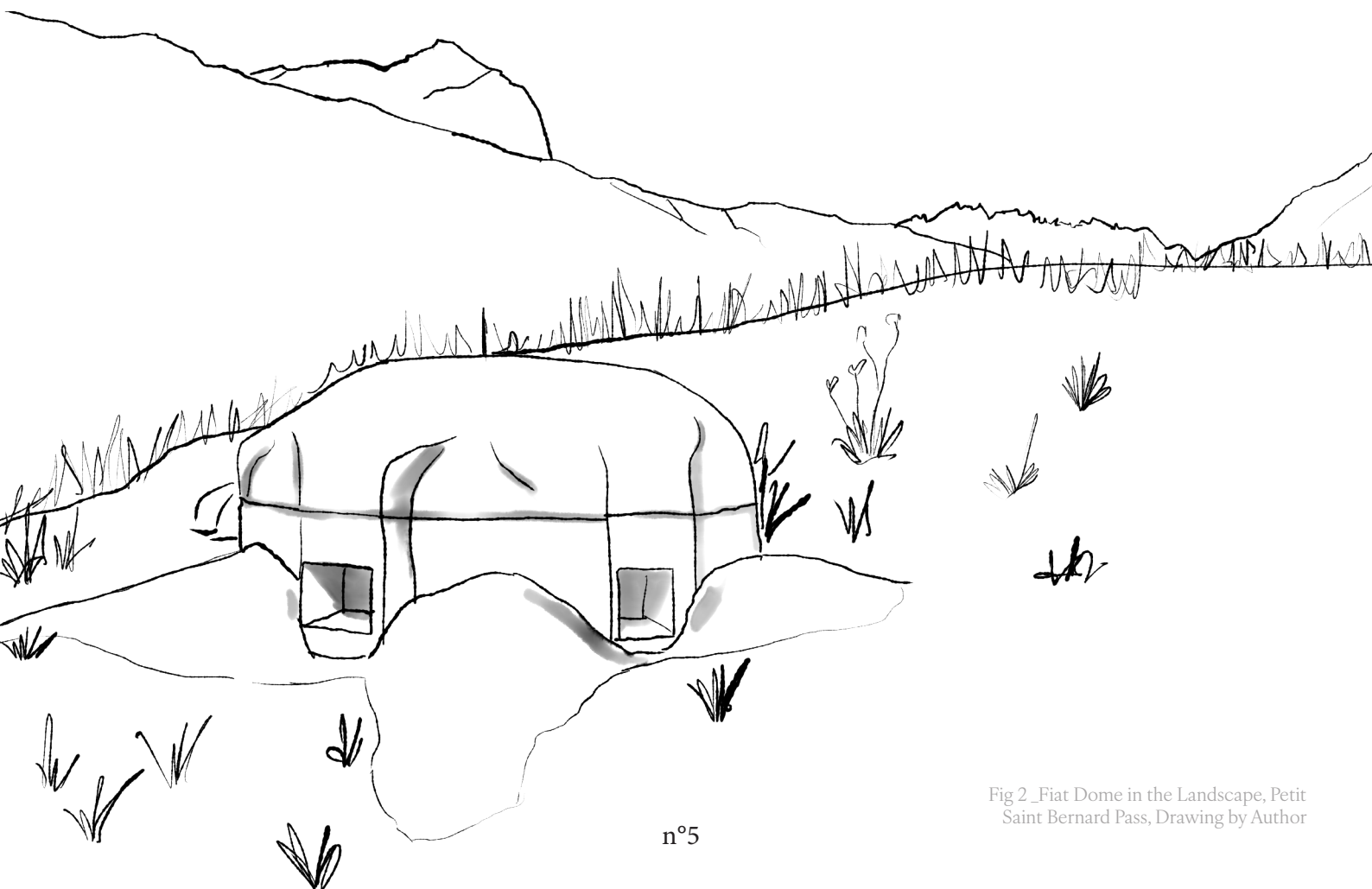
Into the ground, the structures were buried to shield from the sky (Bennet L. 2011). A sky threatening to rain bombs.

The interwar period saw a growing paranoia of a coming conflict. Shaken by the unprecedented attacks of the First World War, France built a wall of fortifications, the Maginot Line, from Nord-Pas de-Calais to southern Corsica, in an attempt to contain possible invasions from neighbouring countries (Mallory K, 1973). The Alpine section, a forgotten part of the Maginot Line, will be the focus of this research.

These mountains were the front line of the Battle of the Alps in 1940 and later in 1945. Both the Italians and the French built an entire system of fortifications on either side of their border, the Maginot Line facing the Vallo Alpino. Substantial investments in positioning military infrastructure within the mountainous terrain were made. However, after the end of the Second World War and following the creation of the United Nations Organisation and later the end of the Cold War, the primary function of these military infrastructures became obsolete, relegating them to a state of neglect. What remains are concrete structures, corroded steel, and kilometres of underground galleries, often overlooked. Much like Paul Virilio's (1994) inquiries into the Atlantic Wall, our initial thought is:

«Why would these extraordinary constructions not be perceived or even recognised? » Paul Virilio (1994), *Bunker Archeology*





n°5

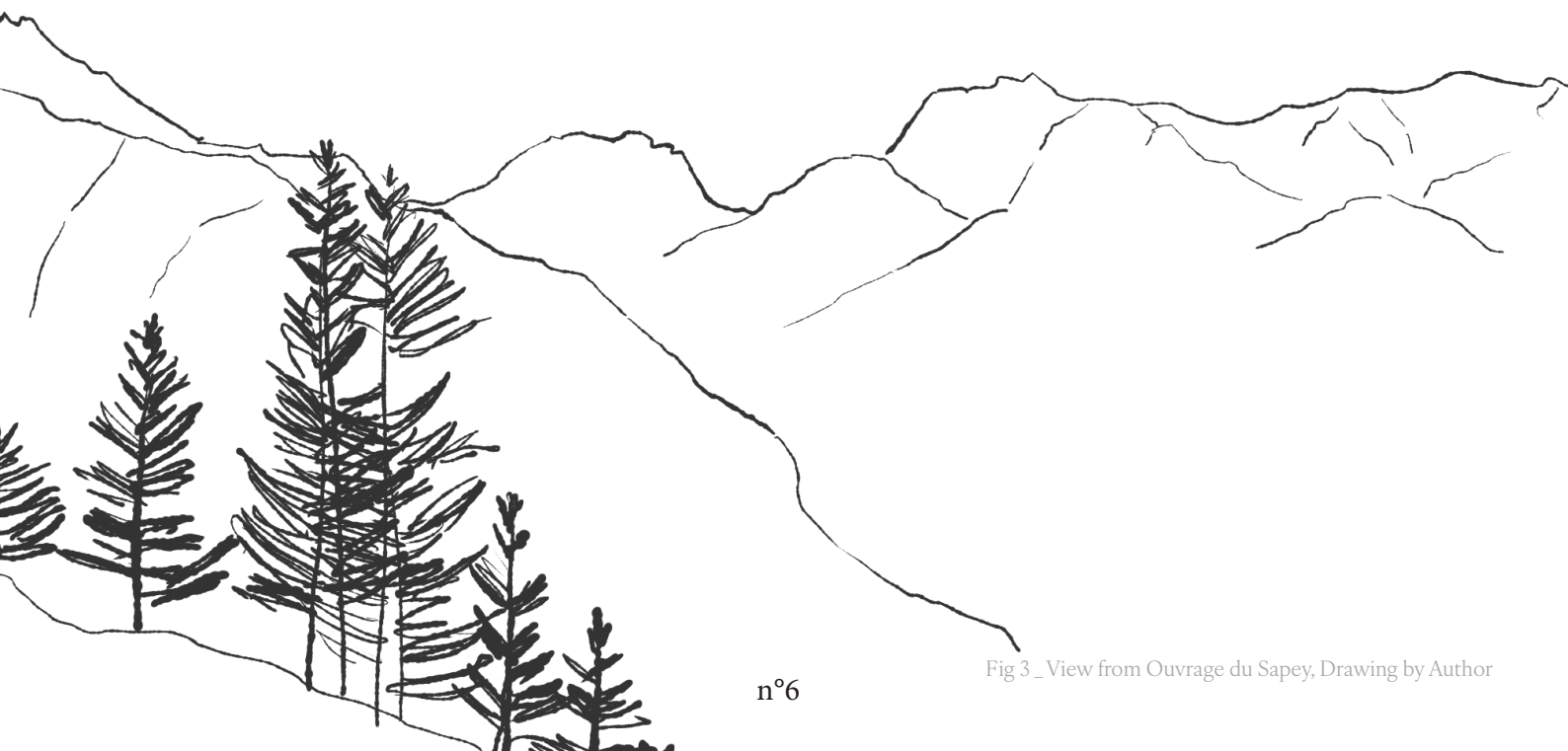
Fig 2 _Fiat Dome in the Landscape, Petit Saint Bernard Pass, Drawing by Author

Research Question

The abandonment and neglect of the Fortifications suggests an evolution in their significance for both the public and the State. In many cases, the very existence of these structures is ignored, even by the locals. Their concealed locations, remoteness, and the historical and military symbolism they encapsulate appear to have hastened their deterioration.

The interest of this research is to analyse the physical integrity of World War II fortifications in the French Alps and its ethnographic narratives as a way of expressing the influence of human perception on architecture. The research will investigate the motivations and behaviours of a defined group of people. Additionally, the preservation state of selected case studies will be assessed, along with their social status and how it is connected to their wartime past.

How does the narratives of the French Alps fortifications of the Maginot Line and Alpine Line influences the integrity of the structures?



Theoretical Framework

Human perception is multifaceted. The senses of body and mind come together to give meaning to what we observe. The perception of architecture or architectural objects is contingent upon physical interactions and is mediated by cultural and personal contexts (Bicknell, J., Judkins, J., & Korsmeyer, C., 2019).

As this research aims to elucidate the symbolism associated with World War II fortifications at different scales and their position within the built environment. Its primary focus is on understanding how narratives influence the physical integrity of such structures.

Fortifications and specifically the Maginot Line's Bunkers have a recent history framed by war. They are architectural objects charged with symbolism and history, open to interpretation.

In the preface to Virilio's book, *Bunker Archeology* (1994), different views of the abandoned bunkers of the Atlantic Wall are expressed. First there is the surprise of finding such an object by the sea and the contrast of its brutality in the gentle dunes: «In this naturalness, was the scandal of the bunker». This can also be applied to the alpine context of the Maginot Line bunkers, buried in the naturalness of mountains. Virilio goes on to address the issue of the abandonment of such structures, propelled by hatred of the context in which they were built: «Many of them had been destroyed by this iconoclastic vengeance». Also Bennet L. in *The Bunker's Afterlife* (2020) underlines the role of human willpower in the abandonment of the WW2 fortifications : « they were being actively denied meaning by passers-by in order to denature and depower these once deadly symbols of an occupying military power. ». This raises a number of questions about the links between human perception and its impact on the built environment.

Garrett B. and Klinke I., in their article *Opening the bunker* (2019), associate the bunker with a political context and emphasise the connections between the bunker's function and its form: «Autarchic underground living as a geopolitical expansion to the territorial fantasy of living space (...) It's form and existence is a by-product of socio-political milieu (...)». By going on to describe the conditions for abandoning such a typology of political uses, Garrett & Klinke offer a perspective on the evolution of the social identity of the bunker and thus on a possible shift in people's relationship to this structure. With the start of the Cold War and growing paranoia about nuclear attack, the bunker became more secretive, a concrete cocoon for the privileged (Bennet L., 2011). At the time, they represented both physical and moral confinement, a 'bunker mentality', as people's view of the world around them was limited under such a layer of soil (Bennet L., 2011).

A closer look at the evolution of the status of the bunker in society reveals the importance of the symbolic interpretation of the architectural object in its (non) preservation. By consulting various population groups, the symbol of the bunker varies greatly, from the mental prison to the ultra-technological futuristic base, not forgetting the congenial void, the bunker, in its stubborn physicality, is in a constant state of evolution.

« Meanings and uses of these places evolve over time, and in response to a variety of broadly societal trends and in how individual actors actively engage in a process of appropriation within the bunker, each projecting and inferring upon the bunker in accordance with the needs of their own purposes and practices » Bennet L. (2020), *The Bunker's Afterlife*

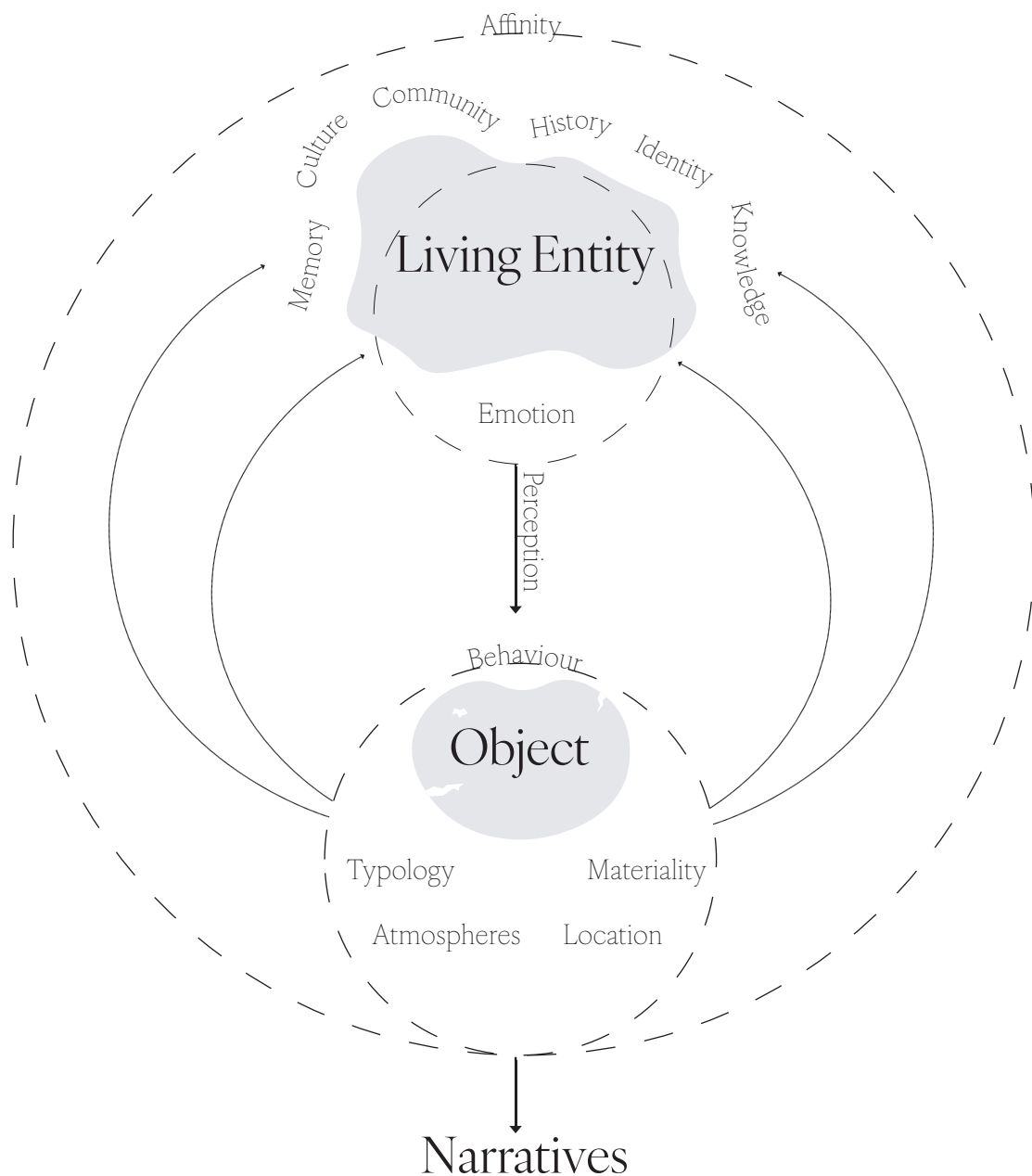


Fig 4 _ Theoretical Framework Diagram, By Author

Methodology

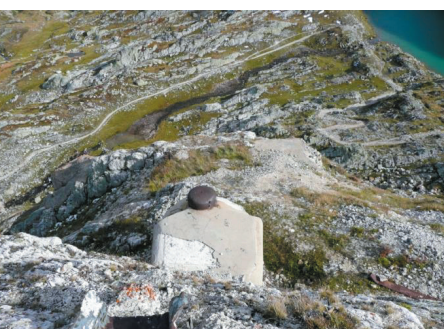
To understand how perception influences the condition of military structures, the research will initiate by selecting case studies characterised by diverse intrinsic attributes. Several scales of perceptions will be set to approach them.

The study will focus on French and Italian military structures in Savoie, offering a scene of various structures with different implications in the Second World War, accessibilities and typologies. By melding my personal experiences as a native of the region and my architecture student perspective, I aim to present a holistic exploration contributing to a more comprehensive study of these structures. Growing up in Savoie and Haute-Savoie, I developed an intimate understanding of the cultural and historical fabric. Granting me access to local narratives and collective memories related to the region, thus offering precious insights for the research. The following structures will be the centre of my study :

Fig 5 _Photography Ouvrage des Rochilles, Arman Patrick 2020, Retrieved from Wikimaginot 15.11.23

Fig 6 _Photography Ouvrage de Sapey, Elena Cuny 2019, Retrieved from Wikimaginot 15.11.23

Fig 7 _Le lac du Mont Cenis vu depuis le Pas de la Beccia en 1933. (Mont Cenis lake from the Pas de la Beccia in 1933, Translated by Author), Coll. Laurent Demouzon, Retrieved from Armée des Alpes Juin 1940 15.11.23



Les Rochilles_2600m alt.

Incomplete construction, difficult access, participated in the 1940 Alpine War.

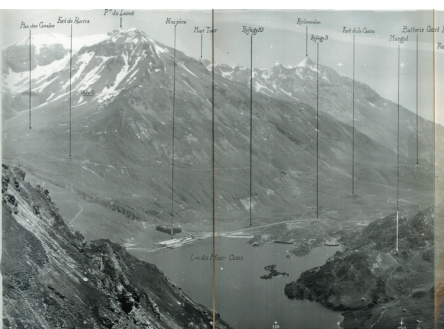
Points of interest : Badges & engravings, various materials, interior to exterior views, machinery in place.



Fort Séré de Rivière & Ouvrage du Sapey_1737m alt.

Complete construction, accessible, propriety of the army, participated in the 1940 Alpine War.

Points of interest : Badges & engravings, various materials & periods, interior to exterior views, machinery in place.

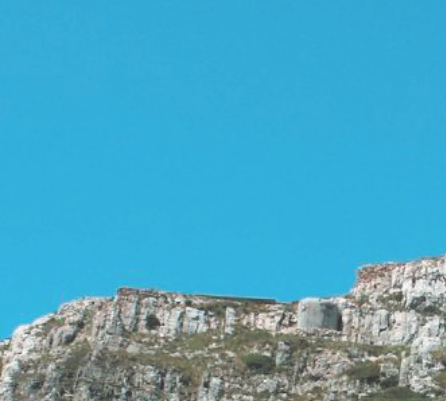


Mont Cenis Italian fortifications_ 2083m alt.

Points of interest : Badges & graffitis, various materials, different stages of decay, interior to exterior views.

Points of interest : Badges & Graffitis, various materials, stages of decay, interior to exterior views.

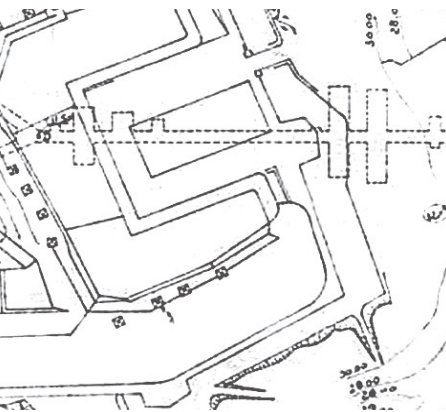
Analysing them through set Scales of Perception and within the theoretical approach delineated above enables the relations between the Narratives and the physical integrity to be highlighted.



Landscape Analysis

Maps, Photographs, Interviews, and Field Experience

Considering the broader context of the structure within a landscape. Factors considered include the visibility of the structure within the surrounding environment, accessibility, and elements that signal its presence in the landscape.



Building Analysis

Archives, Interviews, YouTube Videos, Photographs, and Field Experience

Observation of a typology and its relation to its close environment. Parameters considered include narrowness, proportions of galleries and rooms, visibility to the exterior, and camouflage techniques employed. The objective is to examine how experiencing a specific typology affects the overall perception of the structure.



Material Analysis

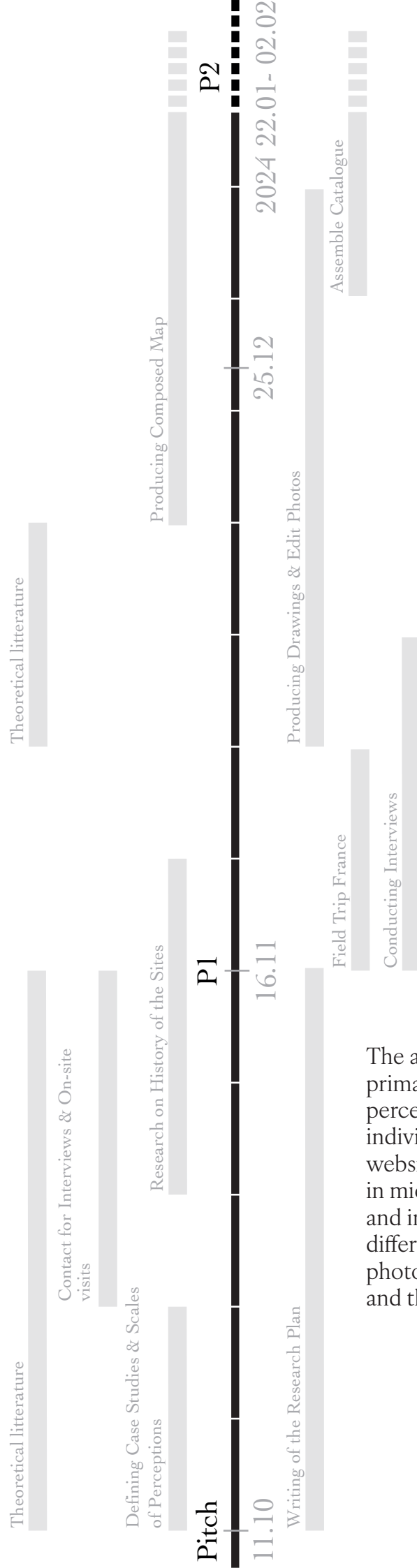
Photograph and Field Experience

Close observation of the material aspects of the structure. It will involve looking for traces of temporal progression and human interaction, such as rust, damaged concrete, accumulation of rubble, soil, plant growth, and others. This analysis aims to uncover how the presence of these traces influences the experience of the building.

Fig 8 _ Photography Ouvrage des Rochilles, Jolas Jean-Michel 2006, Retrieved from Wikimaginot 15.11.23

Fig 9 _ Plan Ouvrage de Sapey, Génie - BEZ R. 1935, Retrieved from Wikimaginot 15.11.23

Fig 10 _ Photography *Graffitis des FTP* in Ouvrage du Lavoir, CJ Vermeulen 1996, Retrieved from Wikimaginot 15.11.23



The approach I intend to employ for the study of fortifications primarily centres around the analysis of my own experiences and perceptions, alongside those of a selected and diverse group of individuals contacted through blogs, associations and fortification websites. To go further, I plan to go on a field trip to the fortifications in mid-November, engaging in the observation of the structures and in-depth interviews. They will yield extensive data on how different populations perceive these structures and will also involve photographic documentation of the structures' physical conditions and their surroundings.

Various sources are to be considered, including archives of plans and official documents, maps detailing the approaches to the structures, blogs and Facebook groups authored by history and fortification enthusiasts, along with extensive photographs and historical narratives. This mixed approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how lenses of perception captured through narratives intersect with the historical and architectural aspects of these structures.

The collected documentation will be analysed and integrated into the three research areas: Senses of Time, Senses of Space, and Heritage & Value. The ultimate output will consist of a curated collection of images and drawings portraying the intrinsic conditions of the chosen structures across varying scales alongside their narratives, complemented by a mapped composition exploring the dynamic relationship between human perception and the evolution of the fortifications. These findings will be presented as part of a catalogue.

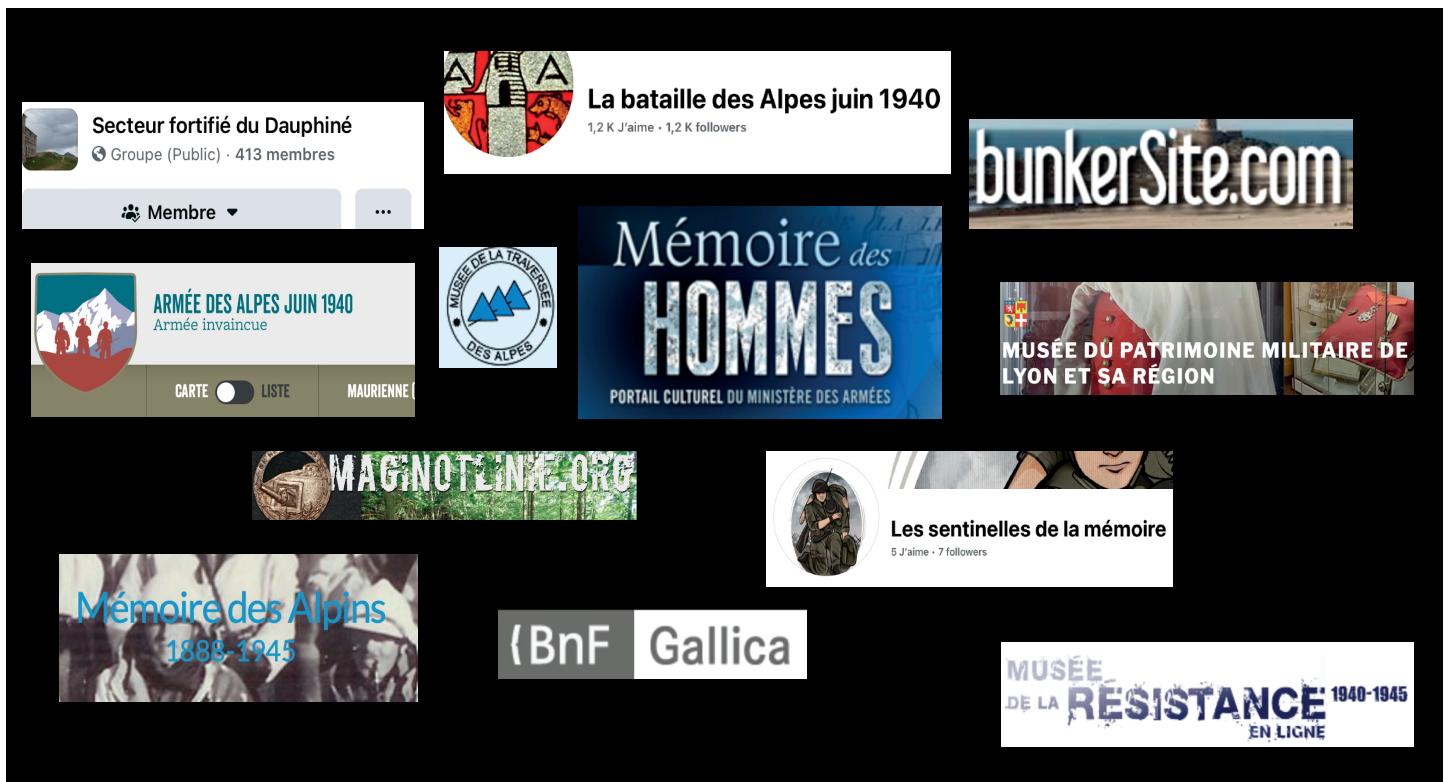


Fig 12 _ Collage of Fortification Websites, Museums & Blogs, By Author

Structure of the Research

During these first few weeks of research, I dived into the world of fortifications— secretive and private, taken care of by a community of enthusiasts. Within this community, dedicated individuals strive to preserve the memory and integrity of these isolated structures. My approach to abandoned fortifications prompts reflections on perception, memory, heritage conservation, and their intricate interconnections. I believe that human behaviour toward architecture is profoundly influenced by lived experiences of space, shaping how it is perceived. This perception, based on the (historical) knowledge, memory, and sensory experiences of a person/community, is the basis for my investigation. The aim is to unveil the nuanced relationships between these elements, informing the subsequent design process. My focus lies on conducting an ethnographic study of fortifications, with the ultimate objective of crafting a design that integrates and sustains built heritage within its ecological context, as part of an ecosystem.

I believe that the research will provide practical and cultural insights into military structures of the Second World War in the high altitudes of the Alps, interrogating our understanding of their significance in contemporary society. Exploring Narratives and their impact on the built environment can guide me towards a design assignment.

FORGOTTEN HERITAGE OF WORLD WAR II, THE NARRATIVES OF THE FRENCH ALPS FORTIFICATIONS

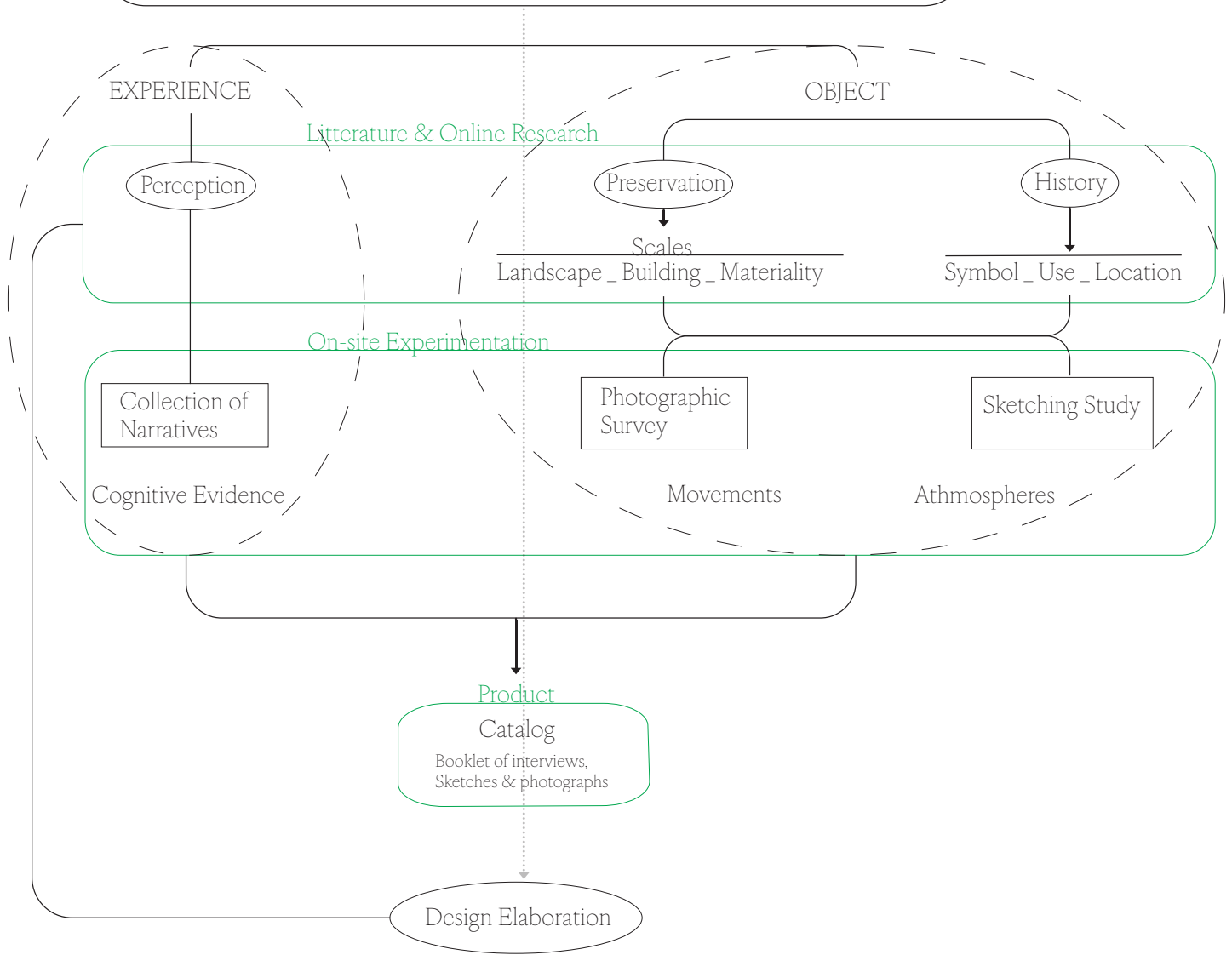


Fig 13 _ Research Diagram, By Author

Expected Outcome

The fortifications considered are mostly abandoned, difficult to access and remote from urban areas. The sheer number of sites and their particular layout make the restoration and conservation of this heritage costly and technically difficult. However, each structure is unique and contains within its walls a special and forgotten history. It is a key piece of heritage in the history of the region and of both neighbouring countries.

Stripped of human activity, the structures are gradually becoming integrated into the ecosystem of their surroundings, continuing their function as shelters for a wide variety of species. Their abandonment has led to the proliferation of other organisms, making them toxic to those for whom they were built, « Thus they are ironic because they are both hostile and habitable » (Bennet L., 2020). Looking at the bunker as a potential design site therefore requires more than simply repurposing it. Its symbolic and historical significance, its unique typology and its new inhabitants are to be addressed.

Considering the abandonment of space as an opportunity for new life to prosper and looking at how new ecosystems can enter the shelter while also engaging preservation and memory-making would be my interest in the design proposal.

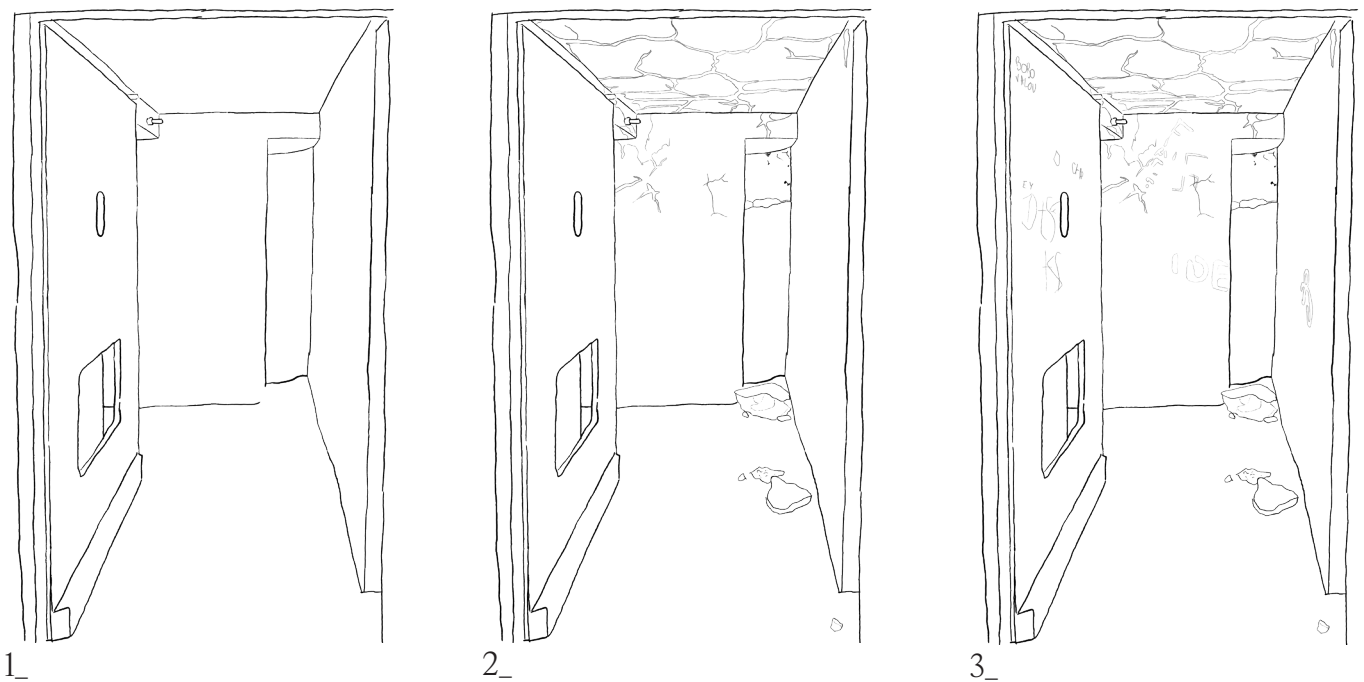


Fig 15 _ Layers of Decay, Study of the impact of narratives on structures, Drawing by Author

- 1_ A Typology
- 2_ Natural degradation following abandonment
- 3_ Traces of human interaction



Fig 14 _ Reference for a Mapped Composition, Lithograph Settling-Elderwood, Matthew Rangel 2011

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