

# 100 Years of Summer

Research Plan | Valentin Zech | 4587979 | 11.11.22





# Shul

‘Track’ in Tibetan: shul, a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by - a footprint, for example. In other contexts, shul is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock where a river runs in flood, the indentation in the grass where an animal slept last night. All of these are shul: the impression of something that used to be there. [...] Indentations, hollows, marks, and scars left by the turbulence [...].<sup>1</sup>

(From "A Field Guide to Getting Lost" by Rebecca Solnit)







# Content

- 6 Fascination
- 7 Extended Introduction
- 10 Problem Statement & Research Questions
- 12 Expected Results
- 14 Methodology
- 16 Research Diagram
- 18 Design Prospective
- 20 Appendix: Field Trip



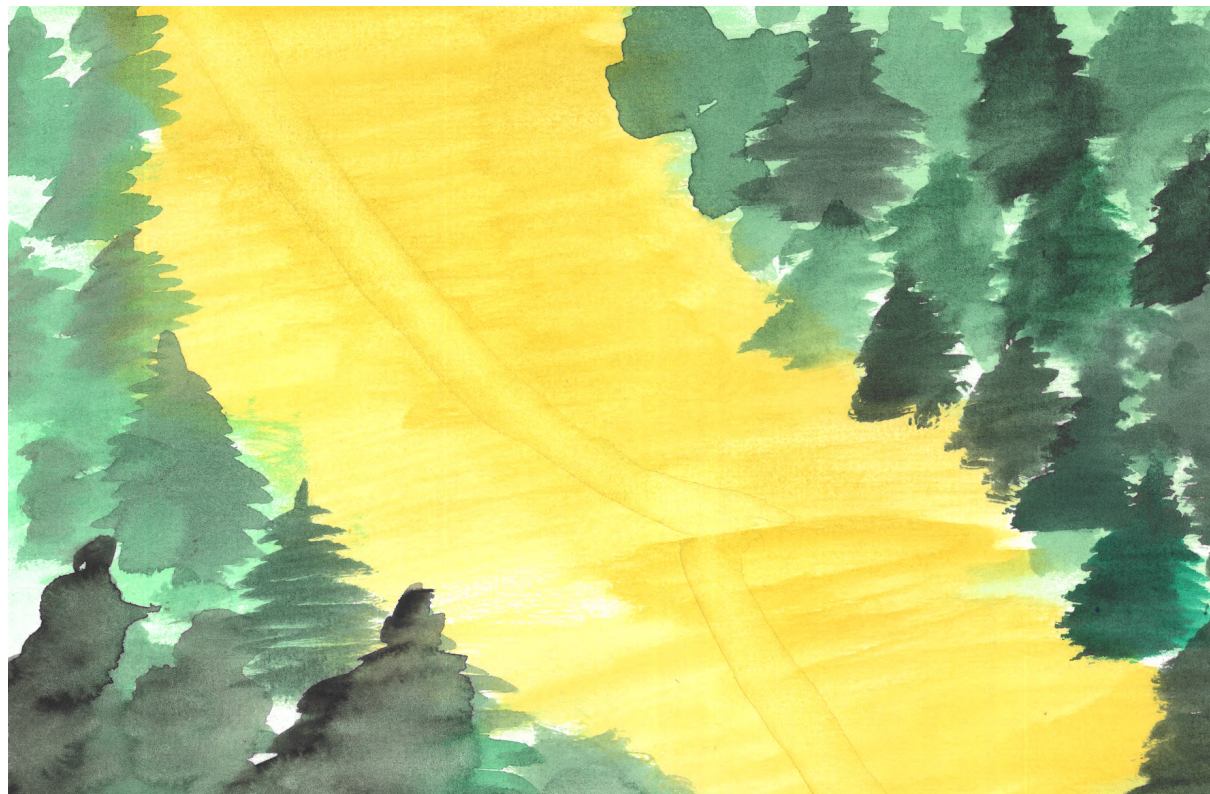
# Fascination

I am gliding through a thick layer of powder, fresh snow that has fallen during the night. It's early, I am the first one to cut a line through the sea of white and the cold wind blows across my face while I ride. I am in the here and now, I feel connected to the nature around me, nowhere else I'd rather be.

A few hours later I sit in the sun with a beer in my hand: happy, exhausted, with red cheeks from the sun and the cold. I start looking around me, notice the parking lot with hundreds of cars. Austrian plates, German plates, Dutch plates. People from close by and far away. I notice the snow machines blowing out sprays of water, just high enough that they can freeze before hitting the ground. I notice the cut through the trees where the piste runs, like a canyon or, perhaps, train tracks through the buildings in a busy city.

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

Bottom: aquarelle sketch made during the field trip



Growing up an avid skier in Austria, I have always felt very connected to the mountain landscape – both in the summer and the winter. As I am getting a bit older, however, I can't help but wonder about the future: *What we will be*

*leaving behind once there isn't enough snow anymore for the resorts to be profitable? Can the destruction be reversed or repaired? Is there an economical perspective for the local communities? Could it be a moment for us to rethink our relationships with all non-humans?* I felt such a strong connection to these questions that I wanted to spend my graduation year exploring them.

# Extended Introduction

## Once upon a time..

In 1894, the priest of the small mountain village Warth, Austria saw photos of Scandinavians moving through high snow on two long slats of wood. He was immediately convinced that this would also be practical for him – often times in the winter, he couldn't leave his village for weeks because of several meters high snow. The first attempts on the new skis were tough, but soon him and the other villagers regularly used them to travel between the small towns in the valley. What the priest probably could not have imagined is how big skiing would become and that it was about to fundamentally change the town of Warth, along with many other small mountain towns in the Alps.<sup>2</sup>

## Commercialized Landscapes

Nowadays, the main income source of these towns has transitioned from farming to tourism: even in 2021, a year still affected by the corona pandemic, more than 22 million tourists visited Austria – many of them for skiing and hiking in the mountainous regions.<sup>3</sup> This transition is visible in the physical world: the guesthouses and hotels are getting bigger and more numerous, new lifts connect smaller ski areas into large-scale resorts to stay competitive; elaborate snow-making systems and higher cable cars conquer new untouched areas to delay the effects of climate change. While the economy blooms, the non-human natural world suffers. Their “voices” often go unheard while their living environment is being transformed into a capitalistic production landscape with little attention for actors that stand in the way of selling the “product”.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Übelher; Elisabeth Willi; Rückblicke + Ausblicke. 50 Jahre Skilifte Warth., Skilifte Warth GmbH & Co KG (Warth, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Austria Tourism, Factsheet Tourismus, Austria Tourism (2022)



Inevitably however, climate change will make it impossible to ski in the future – the lower altitude resorts are already closing, and it is a matter of time until this will happen higher up as well. What will be left are the ruins of capitalist human activity, a derelict landscape covered with infrastructure that has been rendered useless by the warm climate: the ski areas will be the new brownfields of the Alps.

### **Brownfields for a Dialogue**

This research project explores a ski area through the perspective of brownfields. Brownfields are “the legacy of contaminated and derelict lands that have been left by industrial activity”<sup>4</sup> In architecture and urbanism, brownfields have been researched thoroughly – not only the elements of human destruction, but also how these production landscapes become a permanent part of a place’s heritage and culture. Think, for example, about the Ruhrgebiet: for a long time, the coalmines were the epicenter of the economy before they closed-down and catapulted the area into a major recession. Nowadays, the left-over sites of these times often become cultural places where dialogues can take place: dialogues about the heritage of the people and dialogues about the human role in changing the natural environment; for themselves and other species.

<sup>4</sup> René van der Velde, “Transformation in Composition. Ecdysis of Landscape Architecture through the Brownfield Park Project 1975-2015.” (PhD Delft University of Technology, 2018)

Bottom: Photo taken during the field trip, St. Anton



<sup>5</sup> Elissa Rosenberg, ed., Gardens, Landscape, Nature: Duisburg-Nord, Germany, Trash. Alphabet City Series. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

### **Brownfields as a physical place**

Besides the cultural meaning, brownfields have a physical and spatial dimension: the machinery. The machinery of a brownfield is “how the industrial landscape was made, how its various components functioned, and what impact production has had on the shape of the land”<sup>5</sup> and concerns both the processes and systems as well as the objects of the site. The research project will document the machinery of the ski area brownfield to communicate some of the embedded information and intentions, but also as a physical starting point for designing in an abandoned winter tourism landscape.

### **Ski Arlberg as a Research Location**

There are four main reasons why I chose Ski Arlberg as a Location to conduct my research:

- 1. Ski Arlberg is the biggest ski area in Austria.** There is arguably no other ski area in Austria with the same diversity of landscapes, lifts, and towns. With 88 lifts and 300km of piste, it is a good place to try to understand the complexity of a large ski resort.
- 2. The ski area is a “patch-work” of several smaller areas.** The ski area consists of several smaller areas that have been connected throughout time. Those connection moments are especially interesting, because they often cross whole valleys and large ‘untouched’ areas. Furthermore, the individual ski areas all had their own character and approach that can still be seen today and makes it possible to compare a few different areas without having to actually do fieldwork in several locations.
- 3. I know the area very well.** My family has been going skiing in the area ever since I can remember. This is a very strong base for my research.
- 4. Accessibility and contacts.** Since I grew up close-by, it is easy for me to retrieve information (no language barrier) or go back to the area to conduct more research if necessary. In addition, lots of the location specific literature is only available in local libraries and in German language that might not be easy to access in a context that I am less familiar with.



# Problem Statement

Ski areas have become elaborate and exhaustive landscapes of production. The infrastructure of lifts, pistes, avalanche safety equipment, and snow making systems changes the mountain landscape and influences the plants and animals living there, but also tells the story of human exceptionalism and a capitalistic profit-above-all attitude. Once the course of our changing climate makes winter tourism impossible, the effects of this will be visible in the form of ski area brownfields: vacant, abandoned industrial landscapes that are difficult and expensive to break down or “redevelop”. This means there will be opportunities to think about the future of those landscapes, as well as the future of how we view ourselves as humans among other species. Therefore, the main research question is:

Bottom: Photo taken during the field trip, Warth



# Research Questions

*How can reading a post-snow ski area as a brownfield help to re-think the relationship between humans and non-humans in winter tourism landscapes?*

The research question is split up into two parts:

## **Part I:**

The first set of sub-questions is about the machinery of the ski area brownfields, inventorying and documenting the objects, patterns, systems, and processes of these industrial landscapes.

*What is the machinery of ski area brownfields?*

*How was it made?*

*How does it function?*

*How has it shaped the land?*

## **Part II:**

The second part is about the experience of the ski area brownfield, how humans and non-humans perceive the landscape, but also each other.

*How does the machinery influence the human and non-human experience?*

Just like an abandoned factory has some especially interesting spatial “moments” that define how we perceive it (e.g. a part that is especially big, or a place that was the core of the industrial process before the shut-down, etc.). The same might be true for a ski area brownfield. I would like to try to identify those places in my research – the ones relevant for humans, non-humans, and others where the interaction between the two groups is most prevalent.

*Which places in the landscape are most significant in influencing that multi-species experience?*



# Expected Results

Walking through a brownfield can be quite an impressive experience: they tell the story of places that were once buzzing with life, the spaces are often vast, and infrastructure that has lost its purpose creates a very strong feeling of abandonness. Being there stimulates you to wonder. You wonder about the people who worked or visited the places when they were at their peak. You wonder about the processes of production, about what a certain building was put-up for, about what a derelict machine was doing. I would like to explore and communicate those experiences through photos, physical objects, and video/sound. Those media can convey the strong phenomenological side of strolling through a ski area brownfield, but also allow for a non-linear way of storytelling. I feel this is important when attempting to uncover some of the complex entanglements of technology, landscape, humans and non-humans, and places.

Finally, there are many ways one could go about researching and documenting a brownfield. Striving for a physical research result will help me to focus on the spatial perspective when thinking about the brownfield, its machinery, and the human and non-human experience.

Bottom: Photo taken during the field trip, Warth



## Part I:

**Biographies of the machinery:** documenting the patterns, processes, systems, and objects of the ski area brownfield machinery. The biographies will be collections of photos (fieldtrip) along with drawings to show interdependencies and relationships within and across the different systems. When needed, there will be small sections of descriptive text.

## Part II:

**Imagined dialogues with human(s) and non-humans:** exploring the perception of the brownfield from different species' perspectives through imagined dialogues. For the human perspective I would like to use my own experiences and observations from the fieldtrip. In addition, there will be the perspective of at least one non-human animal, one plant, and one natural object. Together, the dialogues tell the 'complete' story of multi-species experience and interaction in the context of a ski area brownfield and form the base to re-think some of the relationships.

**Series of places (5-10):** conveying the experience through the totality of the brownfield is very hard, because many aspects are very specific to one particular location. The information collected throughout the fieldtrip can be used to choose a number of specific 'moments' in the landscape that are most relevant in perceiving and communicating the experience of species in the brownfield as well as species with each other. Subsequently, these locations can form the core to tell the story of the brownfield as a whole.

I would like to make a model for each one of those spots and use that series of places to tell all the entangled stories of the imagined dialogues in the exhibition.



# Methodology

A core part of this research is to experience a ski area without snow. As a result, I had to do the fieldwork as soon as possible in the process – as the autumn progresses it becomes less and less likely that the ski areas are snow-free. Therefore, the framework of the research was only loosely defined before going on the fieldtrip: through photos and literature I had chosen the ‘lens’ of the brownfield and I had come up with a basic set of observatory activities for the time there.

Upon my return, I reflected on my experiences and the collected material and found the research to naturally split into two phases:

- 1. the collection of material and experiences**
- 2. the structuring and ordering of the material and experiences to draw conclusions**

A methodological approach that describes this way of working well is ethnography. Much more well-known in anthropological research, it is usually used to study a community or a group of people. The researcher spends a longer period of time living daily life with the group that is the subject of the research, observing the ordinary: daily rituals, objects, and processes. Afterwards, the anthropologist uses the research records (journals, photos, drawings, etc.) to draw conclusions about the cultural and philosophical views and practices of the observed group.<sup>6</sup>

A similar framework can be applied to this research project: documenting and observing the ordinary ‘daily life’ in a ski area brownfield during the fieldtrip and, in a second step, drawing conclusions about the bigger picture in the second phase of ordering and structuring the material collected earlier. Each phase comes with a set of specific methods:

## Collection of material and experiences (Fieldtrip)

- Daily Journal
- Photography
- Drawing

- Sound Recordings
- Informal Interviews

## Structuring, Ordering, Concluding (Post Fieldtrip)

(The results of these activities are the ‘pieces’ for the exhibition)

- Spatial mapping of observations
- Curating/Structuring collections of photographs
- Drawing, writing, and model-building to abstract complex systems and processes

Both phases are supported by formal interviews and literature research for background information.

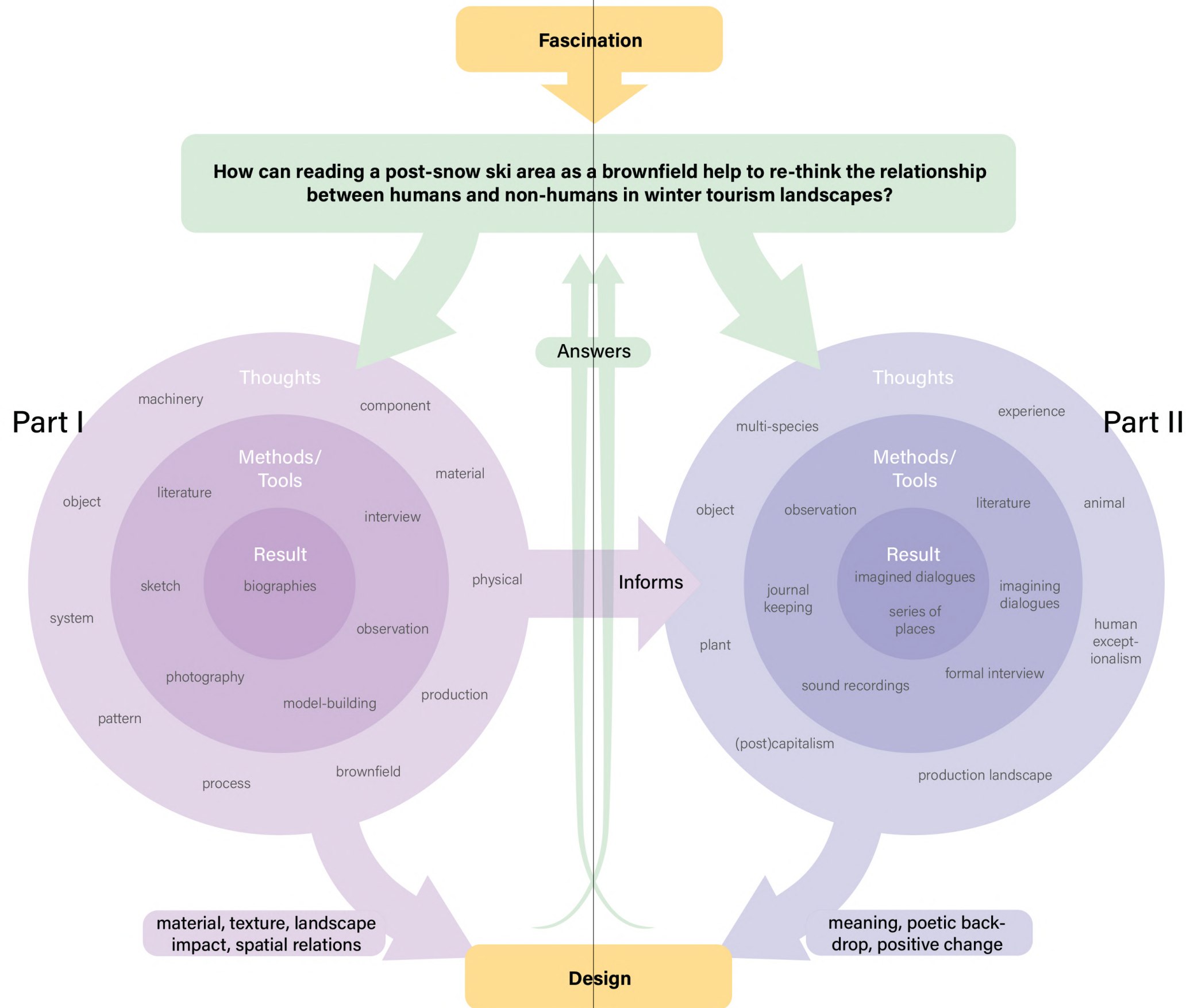
<sup>6</sup> Lucas Raymond, Research Methods for Architecture (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

Right: Photo taken during the field trip, Schroecken





# Research Diagram



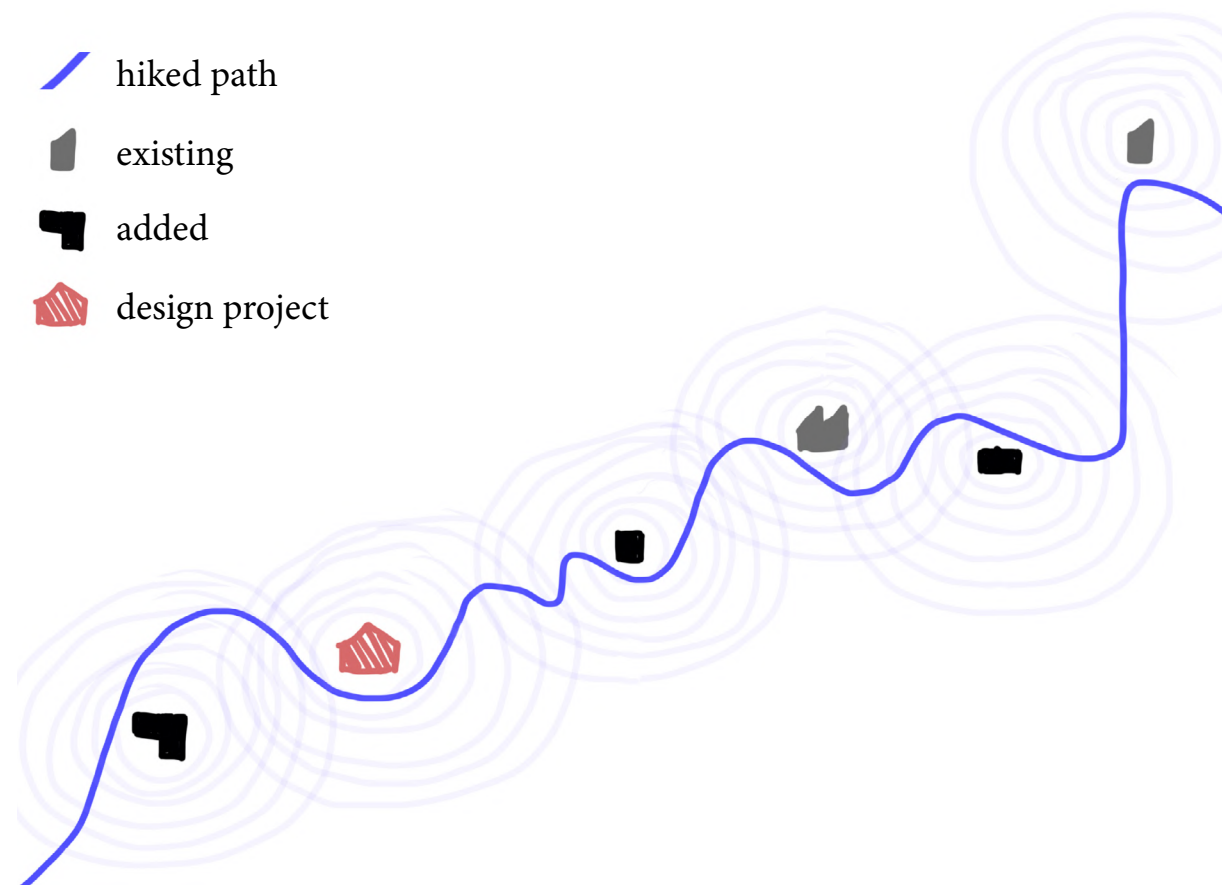





# Design Prospective

The scale of a ski area brownfield is large, comparable with a small city. Ski Arlberg, the resort from the field trip, spans across approximately 60 kilometers and 4 major valleys. Depending on the altitude, the roughness of the landscape, and the density of the ski infrastructures, the experience can be vastly different. To come to a general statement of what a possible future of these places might look like, I think you cannot ignore the larger scale.

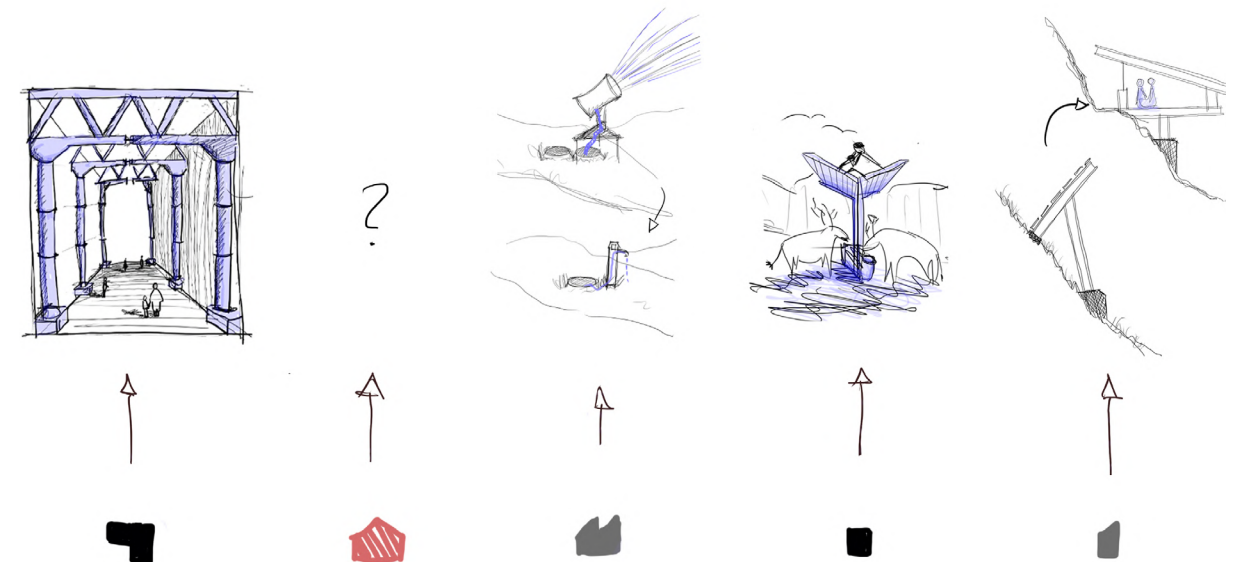
Furthermore, the way one experiences the mountains is always tied to a route. Without infrastructure, even the travel speed is predefined – walking.

Therefore, I think the design challenge will involve a sequence of places, rather than a single location with a single building/place/intervention. Each instance could be something that's already there, something newly built, or something re-imagined. The target-group could vary, too, from human to non-human to communities.



-  hiked path
-  existing
-  added
-  design project

I am fascinated with the machinery of the brownfield and would like to include either the infrastructure itself in the final design or re-use some of the objects of the landscape – as shown in the explorative sketches below.





# Appendix: En Route

Before the fieldtrip I roughly planned the route I wanted to walk using a set of requirements:

**Walk the longest route through the ski area, from one “end” to another,** to see as many different altitudes, landscapes, and infrastructures as possible. Especially the human-made parts can differ not only depending on the natural context, but also the political approach in each town.

**Stay within the domain of the ski area.** Sometimes, the hiking path network follows a very different route than right through the ski area. In those cases, I either found utility roads of the ski area or direttissima through the landscape.

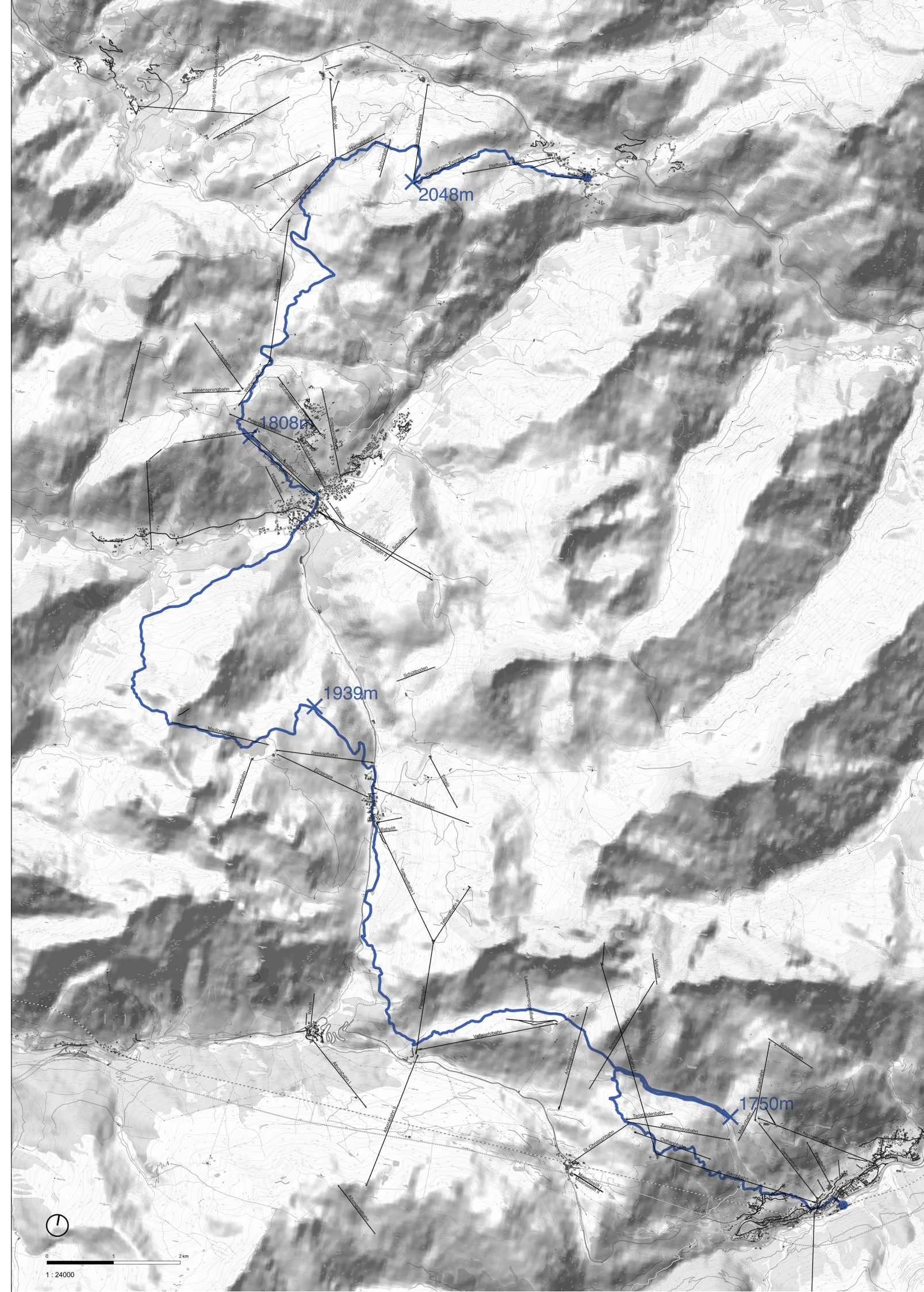
**Safety.** Snow had already fallen around the highest peaks in the ski area, making some paths very dangerous – especially with thunderstorms forecast towards the end of the trip. Therefore, I made sure there were safe paths whenever the hike went through higher parts.

The planned route changed sometimes throughout the trip because of spontaneous factors:

**Sleeping Places.** (marked with an X on the map) We carried a tent and everything we needed to not depend too much on finding a perfect sleeping place every night. There are a few factors, however that make some sleeping spots much better than others (flat surface, shelter from the wind, nice views, possibility to charge cameras and lights), so sometimes the route changed for the prospect of a better sleeping spot somewhere else.

**Unforeseen Interesting Activities and Places.** Sometimes we encountered workers who were maintaining the infrastructure etc. We always tried to make the most of those moments and looked at what they were doing and engaged in conversation. Sometimes, this also changed the route of the trip.

Right: Entire Route with Sleeping Places







1<sup>st</sup> Night: 2048m,  
Top Station Wartherhorn Express



2<sup>nd</sup> Night: 1808m,  
Top Station Schlegelkopf



3<sup>rd</sup> Night: 1939m,  
Madlochalpe



4<sup>th</sup> Night: approx. 1750m,  
Empty Storage Hut





19/10/22 18:45 Burg Hotel Oberlech

Now we are the aliens: a fine star hotel where the Schnitzel costs 35€, the 0,5 beer 7,5€. All the restaurants that do either that or bad pizza that is still expensive. Smooth jazz in the background, old couple that is not super friendly to each other close by. English is not an issue. Am anderen Tisch eine Galspaar wo der Mann für die Frau bestellt. Deutsch.

Today was a nice day! We walked all the way from Wirtelhorn express Berg to Schlegelkopf berg. Vorbei an ~~Höll~~ Ewert haben wir beim Jägeralpepr. noch eine coole Sache erlebt: ~~Wolfgang~~ 11 Women fixed the rope of the lift. Quite an operation. If they can't do it as easily, they do it at the Talstation or by helicopter. The guy I talked to was from the cable manufacturer.

Then we took a look at the ~~Höll~~ Hochalpbahn & the water reservoir (-> water scarcity in north???)  
 ↳ article on generated led website

Quite an artificial thing. No fish, no algae, no dirt in the water. There I also did my first interview (with the reservoir), went well, but need to get used to it a bit. Water is a bit of a weird one for the technique, it's also a bit long.  
 ↳ at sleeping area 21:00

Afterwards we walked to the Arentfeldalpe and passed Salberkopf on the way. The small valley around the Arentfeld is very pretty + romantic: soft rolling hills in the front and 'proper' mountains in the back. A cute small river (-> Bregantersch) runs through wetlands.

Comments: after the lift with workers on plates it seems worse, size factor, but sustainability. This is also water being pumped up from the bottom.

unloaded + completely empty. A perfect roof + sleeping place for the night. (25)

Observations:

- This is a surreal place in the summer/fall. Feels like Disney World when everyone's left. A kind of 'temporary ruin'
  - ↳ enniadi.com (Seilbahn - Area)
  - ↳ industrielles Schigebiet
- Only place to get food is the canteen for workers
- Now (Oct 21st) everything is completely green. In just three weeks they need a ready-made slope for the worldcup (12/13/17)
  - ↳ see photos of army of snow-machines
- According to canteen lady, the snowmats need 4 cold days to get enough snow made.
- Fleckenbahn + Gurtsgrottoah (?), but also Völlung are crazy!! Really exposed lifts - how do they get them there?
- St. Anton is another huge area!
- Jonas says: was very critical of the use of the word 'conquering' at first, but it makes more + more sense to me now.
- Relating to story of today - crazy how fast the mountains can become hostile, even with

Entrance:

often seen, not too though:

Philosophy

Sleeping Place II

- stones (and reddish brown from metal (rust) division between wood + stone

East: grey, not necessarily more weathered  
 North: whitish grey, weathered a lot towards the western edge on the bottom.

Wind during the night came from south

probably Lockbauweise (Strickbau) with tädung





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