

Research Plan

# **(Re)Reading the Nieuwe Binnenweg**

Towards a different understanding of *liveability*

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# Introduction



image 1: The starting point; My sociology thesis

## Fascination & Starting Point

The main fascination and starting point for this project was my previous thesis in Sociology about a specific Dutch social-mixing policy (the *Rotterdamwet*) and the role of the representation of (urban) neighbourhoods therein. In a fear of a “spiky city”, a term coined by Harding and Blokland (2014) to express high intra-urban inequalities and socio-economic residential segregation, the Netherlands has adopted a tradition in social-mixing policies. This “spikiness” in the Netherlands mostly means growing concentrations of residents of certain socioeconomic strata and the rise of criminality in these neighbourhoods. These social-mixing policies aim at creating less “spiky” and more “balanced” neighbourhoods: socio-economically heterogeneous neighbourhoods that don’t deviate too much from the city average. The fear of residential segregation and wish to act upon it is widely accepted in the Dutch political field but framed differently along the political spectrum. This is making it possible for diverse political parties to adopt these policies (although with different reasoning) ranging from social-democratic, to neo-liberal, to far-right voices (Musterd, 2020). These policies thus represent a dominant discourse in the debate around intra-urban inequalities. These social-mixing policies range from trying to attract middle-class households to so called ‘problem neighbourhoods’ (which could according to Bridge, Butler and Lees (2011) also be considered state-led gentrification), to the *Rotterdamwet* (*Wet bijzondere maatregelen grootstedelijke problematiek*), a law which is actively banning specified groups of (marginalized) people from these same neighbourhoods, implicitly showing a preference for middle- and upper-class lifestyles.

In general, this law is only applied to neighbourhoods that are (according to certain measurements) represented as ‘problematic’. This implicitly shows that this law doesn’t stem from a fear of concentration per se (and an idealistic vision of different social classes living side by side), but from a fear of *specific* concentrations. It shows a fear of concentration of stigmatized and disadvantaged groups that could undermine the stability of society. Besides this shows the belief that inequalities are reproduced through the spatial structure of the city and the spikiness of the urban landscape (Uitermark, 2014; Harding & Blokland, 2014). Areas and neighbourhoods where these groups are concentrated have become important sites for policy interventions. Hereby making it spatial issues as well, while a spatial perspective in the governance of these issues often lacks. This opens possibilities, after having critically examined the representation of (urban) neighbourhoods, to offer a more (socio)spatial perspective and to investigate how these spaces can be represented differently, by developing a different way to read the city.

# Introduction

## Problem Statement & Research question

In the selection for areas to apply this law, “liveability” is an important concept. In the request by the municipalities to apply this law to certain areas or streets, they must demonstrate that the liveability and quality of life is at stake in such a way that intervention is necessary. My previous thesis focused on this process of selecting areas for intervention (Figure 1). Based on this I concluded that, because of increasing quantification, different measurement tools are used to demonstrate this. Municipalities bundle these results using statistical, visual, and semiotic methods to show that the “liveability” in the selected areas is ‘substandard’ and ‘out of balance’. This also made clear that this selection of neighbourhoods and the representation of “liveability” in those neighbourhoods is a political process. The concept of liveability, made measurable at certain scales and within certain boundaries, raises a lot of questions on how municipalities and policymakers ‘read’ a city and its urban life. Within this project I would like to focus on this process: the way neighbourhoods and cities are being understood, treated, read, and made legible, prior to being (re)acted on with aforementioned policies like the Rotterdamwet.

By focusing on **quantifying and projecting** “liveability” in confined areas, by confined categories (Figure 1, \*political process), a lot of socio-spatial complexities are lost in the process. Complexities that go beyond the sum of people, houses and amenities that make up the “liveability” of a neighbourhood. Because it is also about the interaction between spatial/physical elements and social life. About how people assign meaning to space and about how space is experienced differently by different people. Besides, it also raises questions about the meaning and functioning of the border of the neighbourhood, who decides what aspects make neighbourhoods liveable and how to show the values of certain aspects of urban life that are not so easily quantifiable. This creates opportunities to come up with an alternative (more refined) reading of space, which could offer policymakers a different view on urban reality and the concept of liveability. Can, instead

of projecting a certain definition of liveability on reality, another description of “liveability” be found in the **distillation and abstraction** of the particular, a specific socio-spatial reality? How can knowledge and value be found in multiplicity and specificity? And how can this be decoded and translated? This leads the following research question:

*How can the reading of a specific place help in creating a broader understanding and redefinition of the concept “liveability” \* and what lessons can be learned from this for designers (of space and policies)?*

This question will be investigated by means of a case study in Rotterdam. By examining a specific space, an attempt will be made to abstract more general lessons about “liveability” (see also Figure 2, p. 17 for a visualisation of the research structure).

\*

*I still struggle with the word “liveability” (among other policy terms) and the fact that it must be made explicit. It is however a political reality we are faced with in the context of this law. That's why I hopefully will redefine it along the way*

## (Personal) Relevance

This topic has scientific as well as societal relevance. Although the law was initiated in Rotterdam, it keeps expanding geographically as well as content-wise. It is a measure that a lot of policymakers keep thinking is necessary to tackle social issues in certain neighbourhoods. This is proven for instance by the recent manifest “*Dicht de Kloof*” (signed by many mayors and civil society organisations) (Burgermeester Halsema e.a., 2021). This makes it relevant and important to dive deeper into the concept of liveability, which is of great importance for this law. Recently however, because of public pressure, part of the application of the *Rotterdamwet* in Nijmegen was abolished (De Jong, 2021 21 october). This shows that these laws are not static and that policies can change when knowledge and perspectives are shifting. That’s why I think it is important to keep on questioning these kinds of laws and policies and their reasoning behind it. This is of course about social-mixing policies in general and goes beyond the context of the Rotterdamwet.

While in social-mixing policies the problem is made spatial - by focusing on different neighbourhoods as the space where these problems manifest itself -, a spatial perspective is lacking in the governance and managing of neighbourhoods that are considered “unliveable”. At the same time, I personally also struggled with a lack of focus on social policies during my education in architecture. This while these policies are also very important in the shaping of spaces (as is now quite literally visible in the demolishing of part of the Afrikaanderbuurt). This offers in my opinion possibilities for architects and spatial researchers to serve as a bridge and mediator between institutions and the residents and users of a place. This project will be, by trying to move between the fields of policy, sociology, and architecture, my first step to try to discover how this could be possible. I see this project as the commencement of a process and (personal) struggle. It is not attempting to give solid answers but hopes to open up and unlock a different representation of (public) space for policymakers and designers.

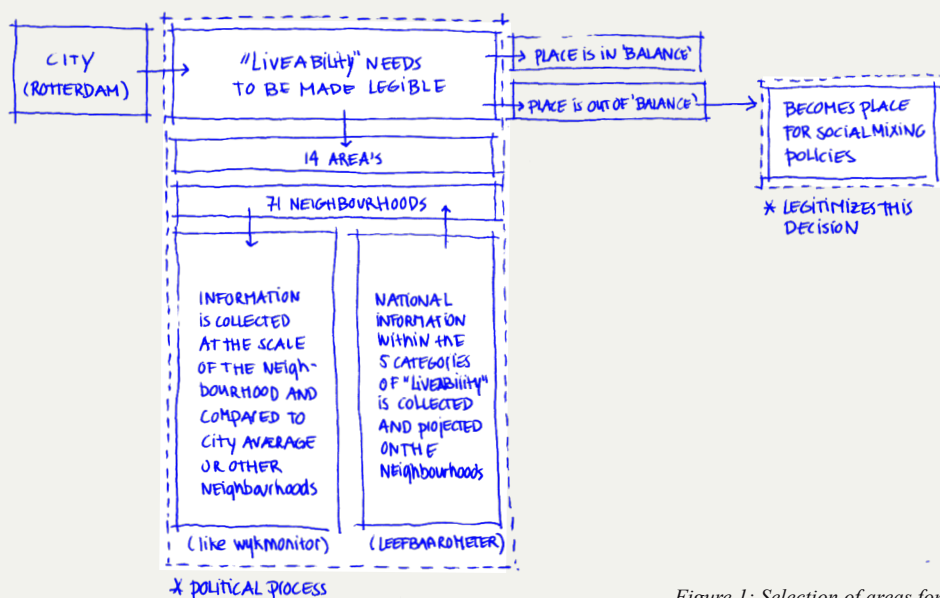


Figure 1: Selection of areas for intervention



*image 2: Rotterdam Blaak*

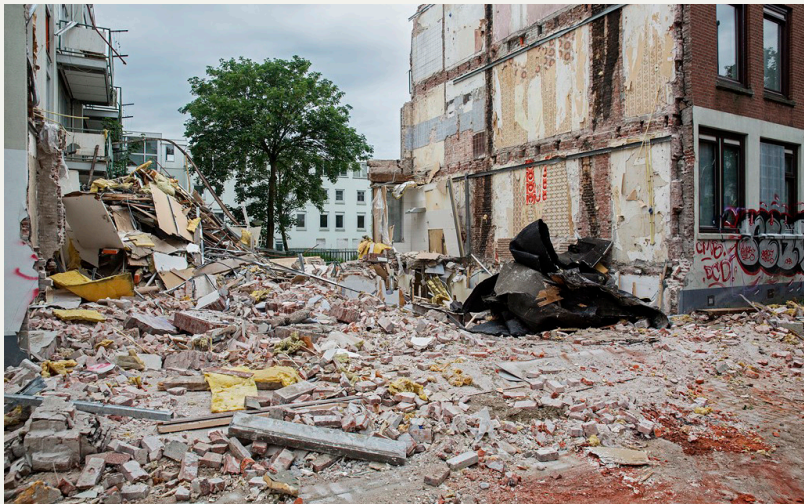


*image 3: Rotterdam South*





*image 4: Demolition Tweebosbuur*



*image 5: Demolition Tweebosbuur*

## Theoretical Framework

This section will describe some theoretical concepts and themes that were consulted and read during the formation of this research plan. The concepts played a role in, and inspired formulating the problem and questions raised and/or will serve as concepts that will be kept in mind during the research. This part is ongoing and will be further expanded parallel to doing the research.

### A socio-spatial approach

By applying social-mixing policies, the city is implicitly being seen as both the product and reproducer of inequalities (Harding & Blokland, 2014, p.128). This implies an understanding of space not as a mere container of social activities:

“Space not only contains actions but also constitutes a part of social relations and is intimately involved in our daily lives. It affects the way we feel about what we do. In turn, people alter space and construct new environments to better fit their needs. Hence, a dual relationship exists between people and space.” (Gottdiener & Hutchison, 2011, p.19)

Space is thus thought to constitute social relations and meanwhile produced through social relations, and constantly re-created. Lefebvre (1991) therefore argues that space is a social product, produced on three interconnected levels:

- First, space is produced through **spatial practices** (*perceived space*) of production and reproduction. This refers to everyday social and spatial practices that take place in a specific space. “We need to ‘know’ how to navigate, be in and negotiate relations in space in a coherent and consistent way to make sense and function in the world” (Zieleniec, 2018).
- Second, **representations of space** (*conceived space*) are produced by government surveyors and planners, by architects and scientists, reflecting their power positions, and creating

the rationalized city of maps and plans. They “identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.38). This refers among other things, to the way the “liveability” of a specific space is represented now in the *Rotterdamwet* by politicians, policymakers, and scientists.

- Third, **representational space** (*lived space*) includes space “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ .. This is the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.39) It refers to “space as produced through experiences, practices of the everyday, and imagined” (Harding & Blokland, 2014, p.128). In this space symbolic value and meaning is given to a place.

In this project I aim at focusing more on space as it is perceived and lived by its users and inhabitants in order to contribute to, and expand and inform the way the (“liveability” of) space is conceived right now.

## The city as an (disorderly) assemblage

In making a general definition of “liveability” legible, and the importance of intra-urban comparison for this (that fact that in describing the liveability in different areas of the city, neighbourhoods and streets are constantly being compared to each other or a city average), rises the idea that the city should be seen as a well-functioning whole that should move in a certain direction. It ignores to a large extent the heterogeneous nature of a city (Munthe-Kaas, 2017). From an urban assemblage perspective however, it is claimed that the idea of the city as a single actor is politically loaded, as it suggests a harmony of interests within the city; “what’s good for one ... is good for all” (Marcuse, 2006, in Fariás 2010 p.10). From an assemblage perspective the city is in stead being read...

“... as a plurality of sites between which the connections are changing and contingent, assembling the city in different ways. The relation between the elements of which the assemblage is made does not necessarily alter the elements themselves. It is the interactions between human and non-human actors that form the assemblage, and these interactions cannot be reduced to the individual properties of the parts.” (Munthe-Kaas, 2017)

According to DeLanda, Deleuze calls these interactions “relationships of exteriority”: relationships that can be separated out (European Graduate School, 2012). The parts interact with one another, but they retain their own identity in those interactions, so they can be detached from one assemblage and plugged into another assemblage. This constitutes one condition for an assemblage. According to DeLanda, another condition for an assemblage is that fact that it is constituted by material and expressive components (European Graduate School, 2012). He claims that we should make a distinction between the role that the different parts of an assemblage play: some components play a material role, and some components play an

expressive role (but individual components may both have material and expressive roles). To explain this, DeLanda gives the example of a community in a town. The materiality of the community constitutes for instance of the infrastructure of the city, the composition of the town (where is the church that reaffirms community every Sunday, or the pub that maintains community bonds), the proximity of neighbours to one another, in addition of course to the embodied agents (the people) that form the community. The expressivity of a community is multiple (language, actions, behaviour, attitudes), but can also be found in the material. Certain symbols or identities can for instance be expressed in the architecture of the community. According to DeLanda, from his reading from Deleuze, assemblages can be more territorialized (bound to a (physical) territory, having sharper borders) and more deterritorialized (less bound to a territory, having borders that are more fuzzy) (European Graduate School, 2012).

Urban assemblages thus focus “on the concrete and situated practices of socio-material ordering in urban space” (Munthe-Kaas, 2017). By focusing on the spaces of territorialized assemblages, it can be interesting to see how communities as assemblages can overlap in a territory, how different assemblages make use of the same material components and how maybe sometimes a certain disorder and friction can be found in this. By focusing on analysing the specific and the multiple, perhaps different “assemblages” and the material and expressive components that ‘bind’ them can be identified.

## Methodology

By focusing more on the way space is lived and perceived, to find new meanings to the concept of “liveability”, it is important to focus on the (everyday) social-spatial practices and the user perspective. The way everyday life is taking place and the relation between space and its users. That’s why a praxeological approach, in focusing on practice, what people do and how they use space, is a suitable framework.

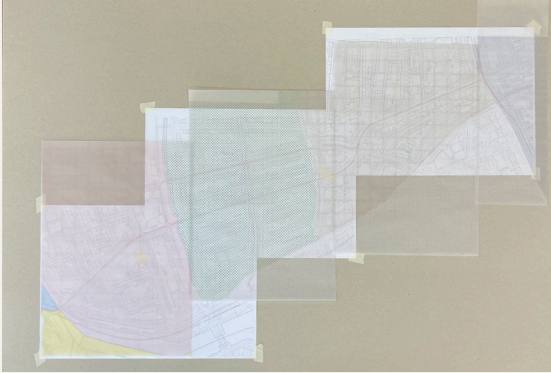
### Case study

Since the aim of this research is to focus on a specific socio-spatial reality, to abstract lessons about “liveability”, a case study of a specific area will be executed. The research question will be explored in the context of Rotterdam. It is the place where the *Rotterdamwet* was ‘born’ and where there is a big tradition in quantifying aspects like liveability. Besides, Rotterdam was one of the cases I studied in my previous thesis, which makes it an interesting case to reflect on again.

Within the context of Rotterdam the Nieuwe Binnenweg is chosen as the specific location for the case study. I chose this street because it is not an area or a neighbourhood and, in that sense, ‘breaks’ with the way the city is read now in the context of liveability (1,2). The street crosses different administrative boundaries, serves as an urban section and thus allows for the questioning of these boundaries (1,3). At the same time the ‘influence’ of the different neighbourhoods it crosses can also be experienced in the street. In addition, the street can spatially be perceived as a whole, one space bounded by its two ends and the façades that frame it (3). At the same time the pronounced curve in the street and the quite distinct streets (like the Heemraadsingel, ‘s Gravendijkwal and Mathenesserlaan) that cross the street in a way also break the street in segments and create points of reference (4). This is reinforced by changing street profiles and building typologies. Moreover, the street feels socially quite coherent. All parts of the street seem socially and culturally diverse in terms of inhabitants, types of housing and range of shops. Besides that, there is also quite

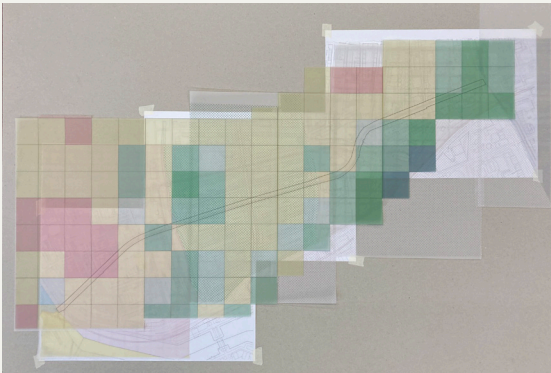
strong network of social initiatives present in and around the street (community centres etc.). At the same time a certain ‘social and cultural gradient’ can also be experienced. These social and spatial “tensions” make interesting factors in questioning the confined and categorized way of assessing “liveability”.

Besides, by living close to the Nieuwe Binnenweg, the context is already quite familiar to me. I have already experienced the street multiple (different) times, so some basic knowledge and understanding of the street is already there. This allows me to fully immerse myself in the context. At the same time this also something to be cautious of when trying to establish an open and explorative view and reading of the place.



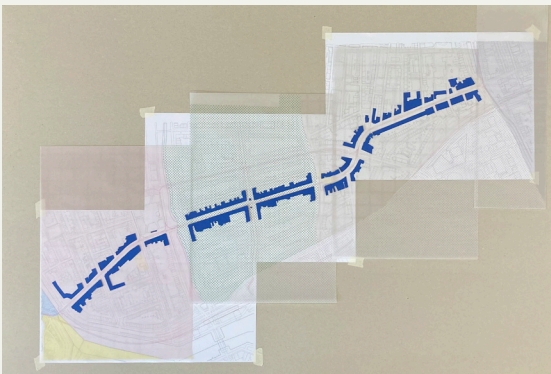
1

*The administrative boundaries overlaying the street*



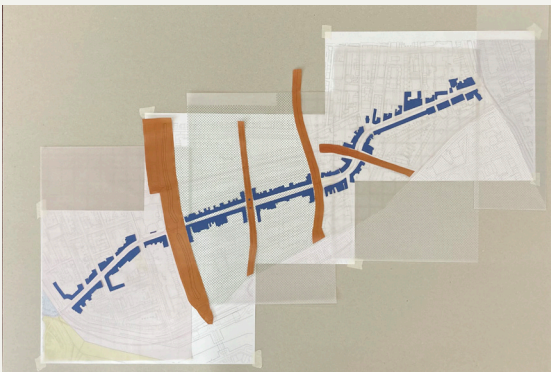
2

*The liveability-index overlaying the street*



3

*The street cutting through the administrative boundaries*



4

*The perpendicular streets that cross and interrupt the street*

# Methodology

## Methods

In the case study different methods will be employed using both the tools of the architect (cartography, drawings, and modelling) and the tools of the sociologist (interviews and observations) and a combination thereof. Because I would like to explore an alternative and open reading of the specific place, the methods used in this case study will be chosen in a somewhat explorative manner. To provide some grip and structure a first pre-selection of **six themes and three groups of stakeholders** is made. This selection is based on my first visits (two walks and one discussion group with residents of Oude Westen), documentations, and (annotative) mappings (5-8).

### Themes

#### Perspectives

*interested in experiences from different spatial perspectives to observe the street: as a walker, from a vehicle, behind the window of a café or from your personal balcony.*

#### Layers of appropriation and use

*the more 'human' layer to the built environment; looking at the way people appropriate space and objects and leave their traces of use (this can be more formal or informal).*

#### Boundaries & Transitions

*looking at the spatial and social boundaries as one moves along the street and in and out of buildings; this can be experienced by changing street profiles and building typologies, but also by changing shops, restaurants and people.*

#### Contrast & Diversity

*identifying social, cultural and spatial contrasts and diversity; looking at the residential as well as the non-residential.*

#### Encounter & Exchange

*Looking at the way formal and more informal encounters take place; what kind of spaces or objects play a role in this?*

#### Institutional presence

*focusing on to what extent institutions have their (physical) presence in the street; how is this experienced? Does it influence daily life and activities?*

As mentioned before, these themes serve as starting point. Along the way they will perhaps be redefined and/or expanded. They are in no way intended as mutually exclusive categories. Within these themes I will start a dialogue with different stakeholders, from different parts of the street:

### The stakeholders

#### Passers-by/visitors

*Returning visitor (like myself)*

*Tourist*

*(the homeless?)*

#### Residents

*The student / younger people (temporal)*

*The family (mores settled)*

*The elderly*

*The resident that left*

#### Workers

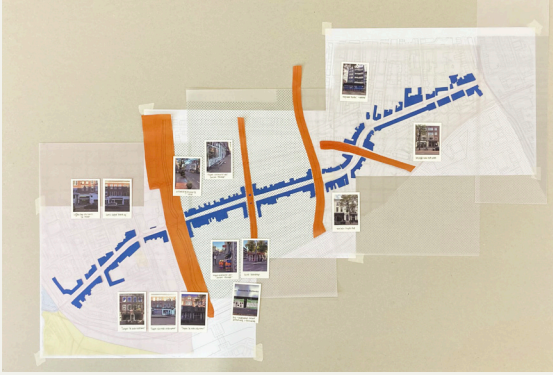
*The entrepreneur/employer*

*The employee*

*(The entrepreneur that left)*

The start of this dialogue requires the formation of a 'network of stakeholders', which I have started to do at a discussion group I attended and will continue.

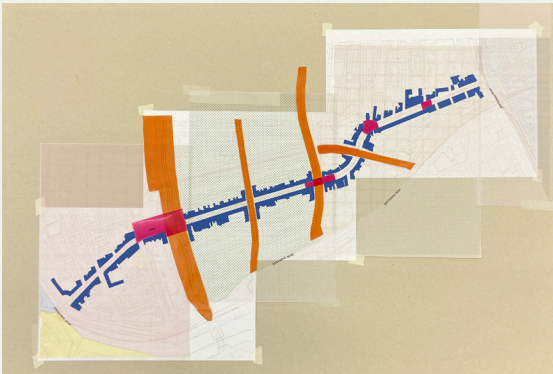
To explore how different stakeholders relate to these themes a combination of more *external* observations and more *engaging* dialogues will be used (figure 3, p.17). Questions about how people navigate and make sense of the street (*perceived space*) as well as how people give (symbolic) meaning to the space (*lived space*) will be central. The data from both processes will be selected, abstracted and documented within each theme to be able to translate them into more general lessons and find overlap and connections between the different themes (and perhaps expand the themes).



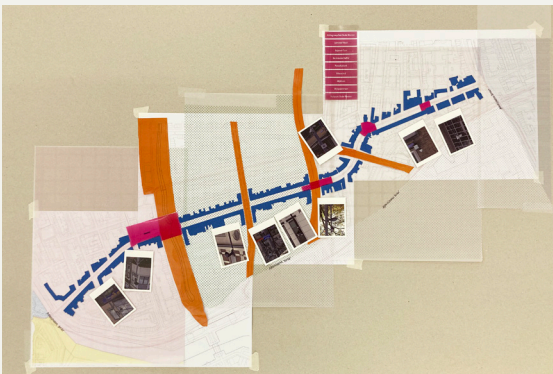
5  
*First phases of annotative mapping*



6



7



8

# Visualisation of research structure

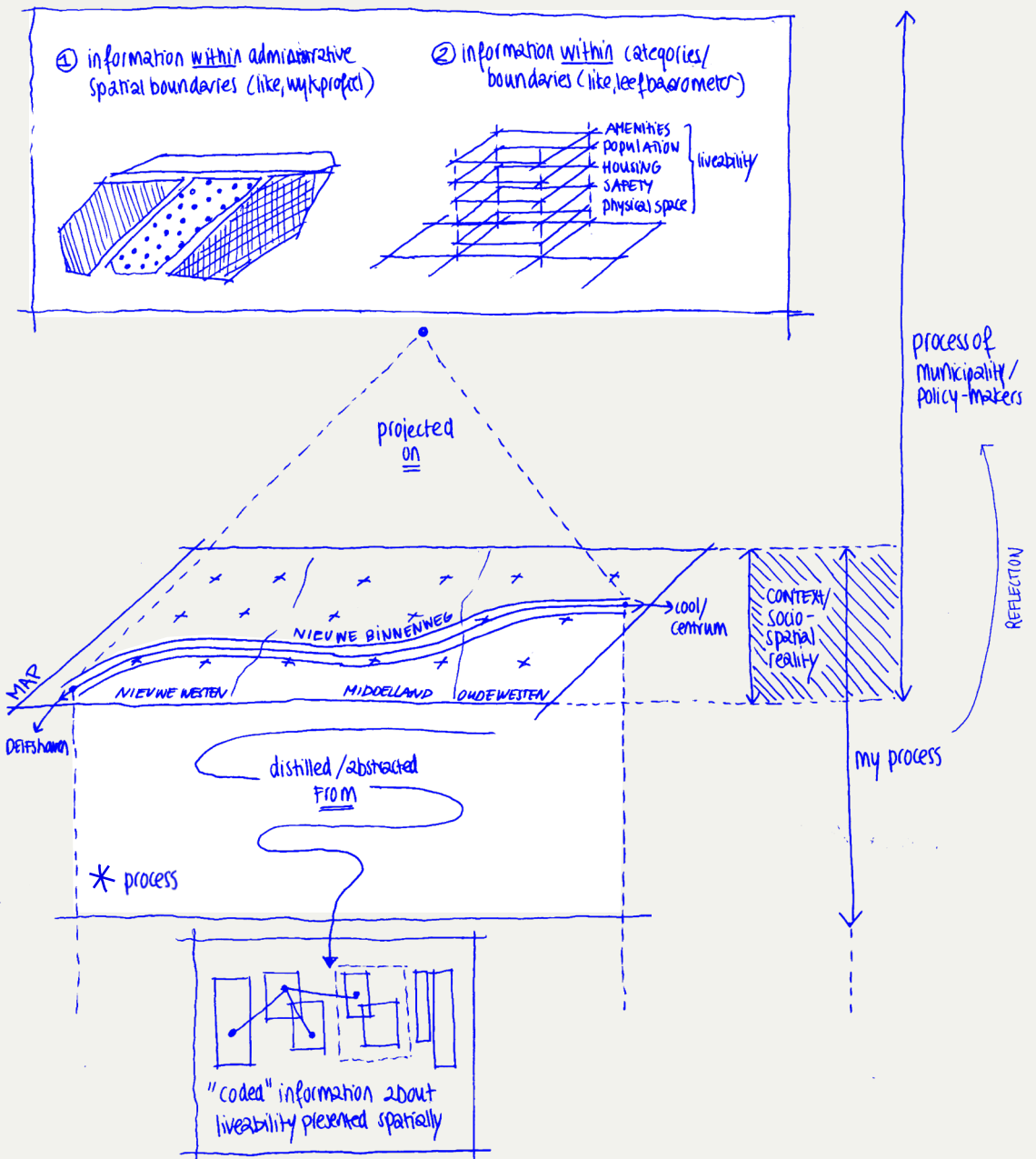


Figure 2: Positioning of Research



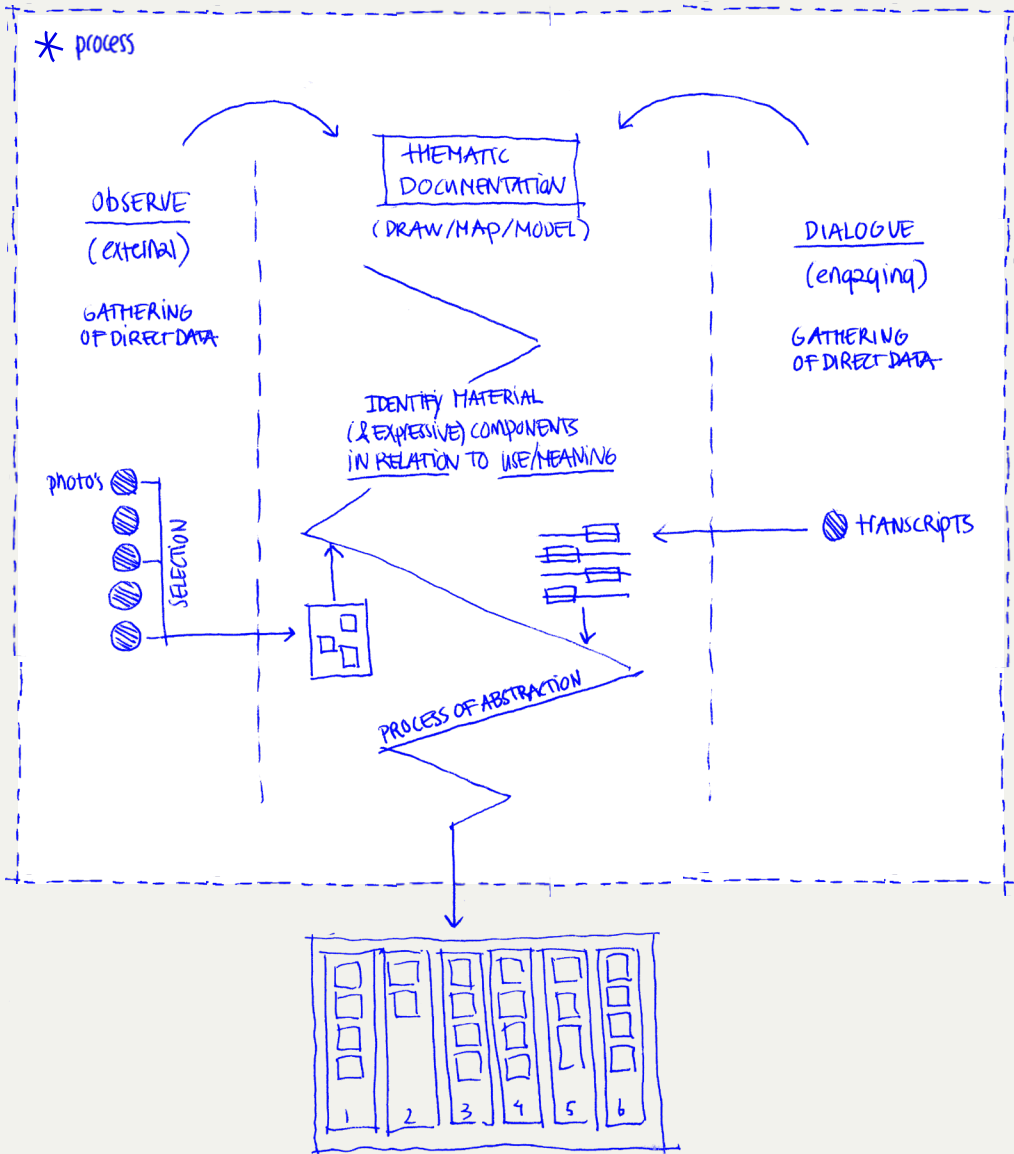


Figure 3: Visualisation of research process

## Expectations & Planning

### Expected results

The research will most likely result in an extensive overview of my reading of the space, reflecting the themes and stakeholders, that shows important findings and aspects regarding “liveability” for people on the Nieuwe Binnenweg. This might be possible in the form of a physical assemblage made from drawings, stories and mappings, collecting and connecting the findings within the different themes and from different stakeholders. From this I will try to ‘decode’ certain (spatial) elements, lesson’s that can perhaps serve as guidelines or ‘codes’ to be used in wider contexts.

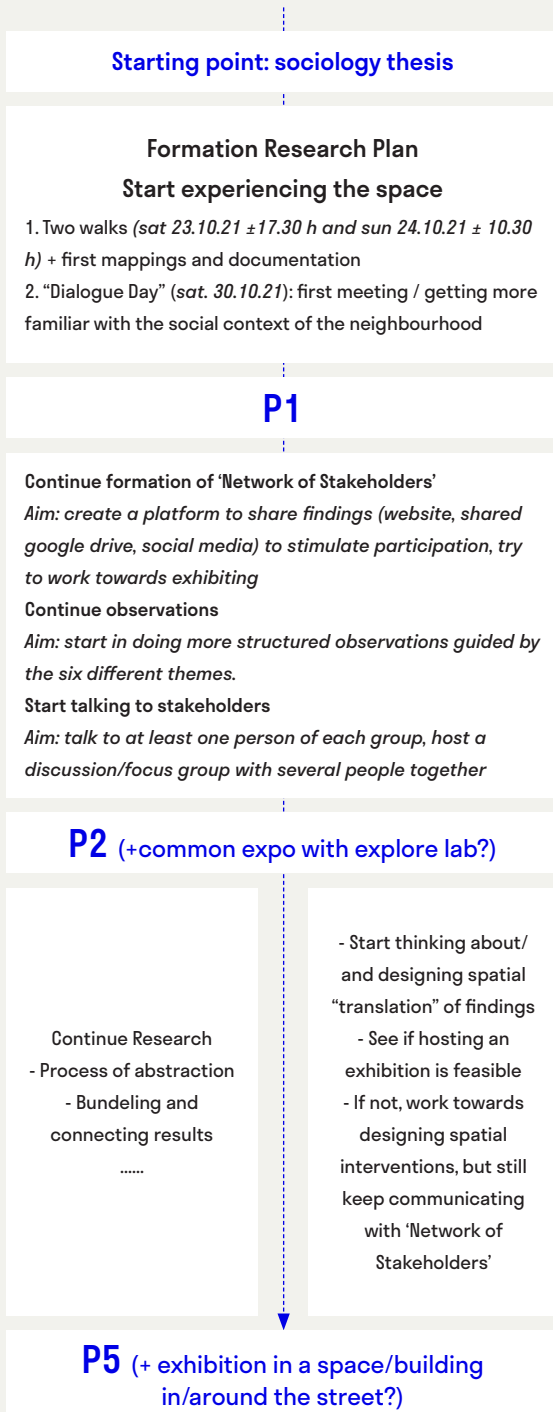
According to Bryman (2015) the “transferability” (the qualitative version of external validation) in qualitative studies, can be found in the very *thick and detailed* description of the results. In focusing on the specific, this is something I will keep in mind during the documentation of my results.

### Relation to the (first) design (ideas)

The main goal of the design will be the translation of the abstracted ‘codes’ into concrete spatial elements. This is in my opinion necessary to communicate the findings with designers (of policies) and politicians. To me, this ‘translation’ can take shape in two ways:

- A real-life exhibition in which this alternative reading of the space and abstracted ‘codes’ can be displayed and, in this way, open up a conversation and discussion about the topic.
- (Imagined) Spatial elements or interventions based on the ‘codes’ that were abstracted from the research. These elements can take up the material form of aspects of the new “definition of liveability” for the people of the Nieuwe Binnenweg. This could also open up a discussion, by envisioning what different (non-policy) interventions could look like. These interventions (in public space) could be applied to the context of the Nieuwe Binnenweg, or to a different context to see and test if lesson’s can be abstracted and generalised.

## Planning



Open up the results and translation of the results; talk again to policy makers I spoke to for my previous thesis and perhaps others involved;

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Image 1: Author's

Figure 1: Author's

Image 2: Dereta, M. (z.d.). *image 2: Rotterdam Blaak* [Foto]. <https://www.bkor.nl/beelden/alles-van-waarde-is-weerloos/>

Image 3: Dereta, M. (z.d.-b). *Image 3: Rotterdam South* [Foto]. <https://www.bkor.nl/beelden/van-alles-is-weer-waardeloos/>

Image 4: Schot, J. (2021, 20 september). *image 4: demolition Tweebosbuurt* [Foto]. <https://versbeton.nl/2021/09/waarom-de-woonvisie-van-rotterdam-definitief-failliet-is/>

Image 5: Schot, J. (2021a, juni 24). *Image 5: demolition Tweebosbuurt* [Foto]. <https://versbeton.nl/2021/06/sloop-tweebosbuurt-is-deportatie-van-mensen-met-een-laag-inkomen/>

Mapping 1-8: Author's

Figure 2: Author's

Figure 3: Author's

