Reclaiming the Bab al Bhar

Exploring the Impact of Urban and Economic Changes on Tunis and its Waterfront Connection

Figure 1. Bab al bhar re-named Porte de France [Postcard] (Bartko-Reher., n.d.).

Research Plan
City of the Future
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This research topic will explore the relation between urban and economic changes and the identity change of the city Tunis and how to reimagine the waterfront connection with the citizens of Tunis. In this research the hypothesis is that Tunis has lost it's port-city identity due to urban and economic changes, because of that there is a lack of cohesion and sense of belongingness. To validate this hypothesis the following research question is formulated. What is the relation between urban & economic changes and the loss of the Port-city identity in Tunis?

Keywords: Identity, Port-city, Waterfront, Tunis, Architecture, Decolonization, Post colonial city, Urbanism

I.   Introduction

As I return to Tunisia, each year, whether by boat or plane, a wave of nostalgia washes over me as I anticipate the feeling of coming home. As I journey through the city, I often encounter serene water bodies usually Lac Tunis, where the distant ports appears as if it is sleeping, with only a handful of container ships dotting the horizon. In those moments, I can't help but ponder the what if, what if this lake is easy accessible to the citizens? Then I wonder if this connection might rekindle the essence of being a vibrant port-city once more like it was under multiple empires, from Carthage (figure 2) to the Islamic empires that ruled these lands (figure 3).

Figure 2. Tunisia- Carthage overview, antiquity [Drawing] (Jean-Claude Golvin. 2021).

Figure 3. Tunisia, Medieval Tunis [Drawing] (Jean-Claude Golvin. 2018).

The Port-city Identity is a concept which is intertwined with its maritime history. The port-cities around the world cannot be seen as one entity. Quite the opposite, port-cities have differences in geography, economy, history and authority. These elements shape the different port-city identity around the world. This diversity in identity is highlighted by Carola Hein, Professor of History of Architecture and Urban Planning, in her work (Hein & Schubert, 2020), revealing that while port-cities often went through similar phases, their responses to these phases differ. For example, the case of Hamburg showed that a port and city run by local government institutions can have mutual benefits, while the case of Philadelphia shows that the declining support of the government resulted in the city leaving its longtime maritime path.

Background situation

In this contemporary context, Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia, grapples with the challenges caused by rapid urbanization. Historically, Tunis was a city deeply tangled with its maritime heritage and the port, over time this unique identity has eroded. The city's cultural heritage is influenced by various historical periods and colonial era's.

The French colonization, in particular, left a lasting mark on Tunis. The construction of the new city centre, by the French referred to as "ville nouvelle" or "ville européenne", translated as the new city or European city, (Escher & Schepers, 2008) professor Escher A. is an expert in social and architectural development of historic cities of the Mediterranean region, by the French colonial rulers disconnected the physical connection between the port and the old medina as seen in figure 4. This transformation of the city was not merely architectural; it symbolize the broader socio-political changes brought by the colonial rule. The "Halq al wad": throat of the river, was once the opening for trade, a connection between the Mediterranean and Lac Tunis, it became the opening for the French colonists to subdue the Tunisians to their rule.
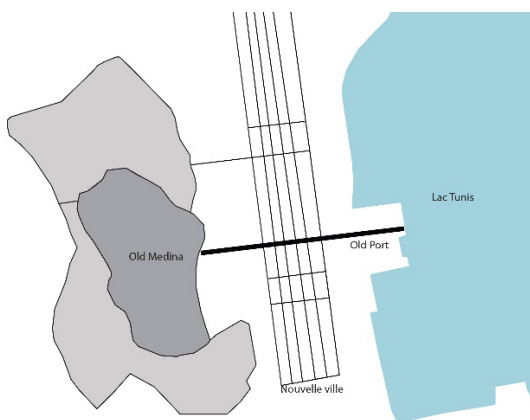

Figure 4. Nouvelle ville dividing medina and port, [Drawing] (Own work, 2023)

During this period the historical landscape of Tunis was significantly redefined. The old medina, referred to derogatorily as the "ghetto musulman" by the French, (Escher & Schepers, 2008) coexisted with the ville européenne. The tensions between these two different parts of the city which had distinct demographic and cultural spheres continued to alter the city's character. According to Amodei, M. (1985), urbanist, The cityscape that emerged from the French rule caused informal neighbourhoods known as "gourbivilles" to sprout. This urban arrangement reflects the enduring tensions between the historical and the contemporary, the local and the colonial, and the cultural and the foreign within the city's fabric.

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Tunisia was undergoing a process of searching for a renewed identity,

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In the late 1990s, Tunisia was undergoing a process of searching for a renewed identity, characterized by conflicting styles of urbanism and architecture. Overcoming spatial divisions became a central theme, emphasizing the need for the city's various structural components such as the medina, colonial city, emerging lakeside developments, and expanding suburbs to seamlessly merge, fostering a sense of unity. Stambouli (1996), Professor of Sociology at the University of Tunis, says that the development of a renewed and distinctive identity is important, there needs to be a balance between modernity's compliance to the global system and the

opportunity for a progressive reinterpretation of self-identity.

Over two decades later, Tunisia's transition to democracy brought forth complex identity issues.

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Being a Tunisian currently is marked by two conflicting narratives:

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one of semi-Westernization linked to French colonialism and another rooted in the Islamic Arabic past (Fetouri M., 2021), Dr. Fetouri M. is a Libyan academic focused on Political Science, Media Studies, and Middle East Studies. This identity division also influenced urban planning and city architecture. Scholars like Kenzari, B. (2006) highlighted the challenge of preserving Tunis's architectural identity while adapting to modernization. Research by Pegorin, E., & Eula, L.(2018) underscored the importance of thoughtful urban planning to navigate the delicate balance between historical preservation and contemporary development in Tunis.

II.   Problem statement

The general problem is the lasting impact of French colonization in Tunis, for instance the divisions of space or worldviews. Resulting in consequences that continue to shape the city's identity and its socio-cultural landscape, such as the division in societal perspectives, the development of a dual identity among Tunisians and the erosion of Tunis's Port-city identity.

The division caused by colonial rule is still visible today, with areas where the colonial power established French schools fostering a more secular perspective, while areas without these institutions remained more religious and conservative (Blackman, A. 2019).

Even though the colonial era ended, the influence of the colonial period continues to show in the city's identity. The consequences of this colonial history reach beyond the physical transformation of the urban environment. The consequences even extend to socio-cultural aspects, such as the erosion of the Port-city Identity, which had been integral to Tunis's cultural fabric from the Carthaginians to the Arabs.
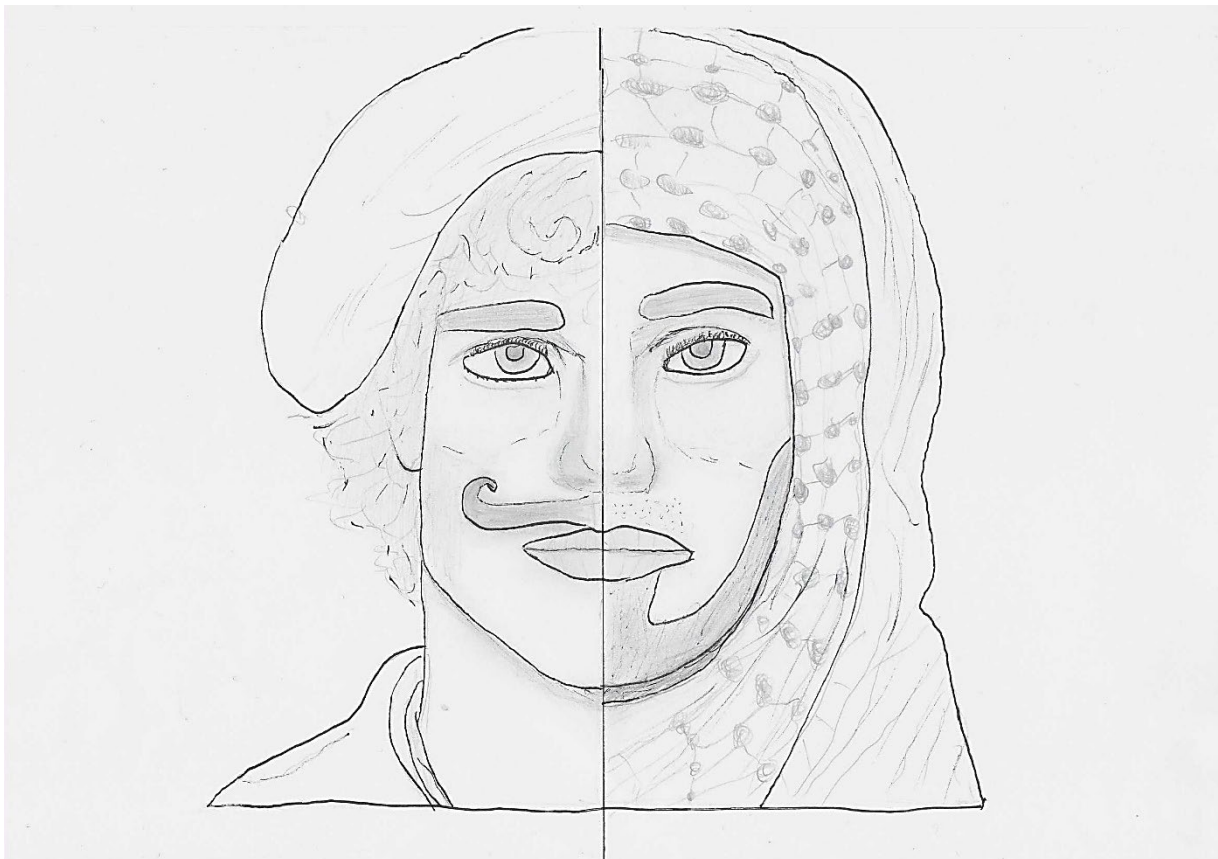
Figure 5. Dual-identity of Tunis, [Drawing] (Own work, 2023)

The city now is set up in a way which divides people as can be seen in the diagram 6, representing a big contrast with its cohesive and vibrant port-city identity of the past. The diverse identities of port-cities around the world, as highlighted by Carola Hein's extensive research, contribute to the unique challenges that each of these cities faces. In Tunis, this erosion has been intensified by urban and economic changes, particularly those triggered by the legacy of French colonialism.
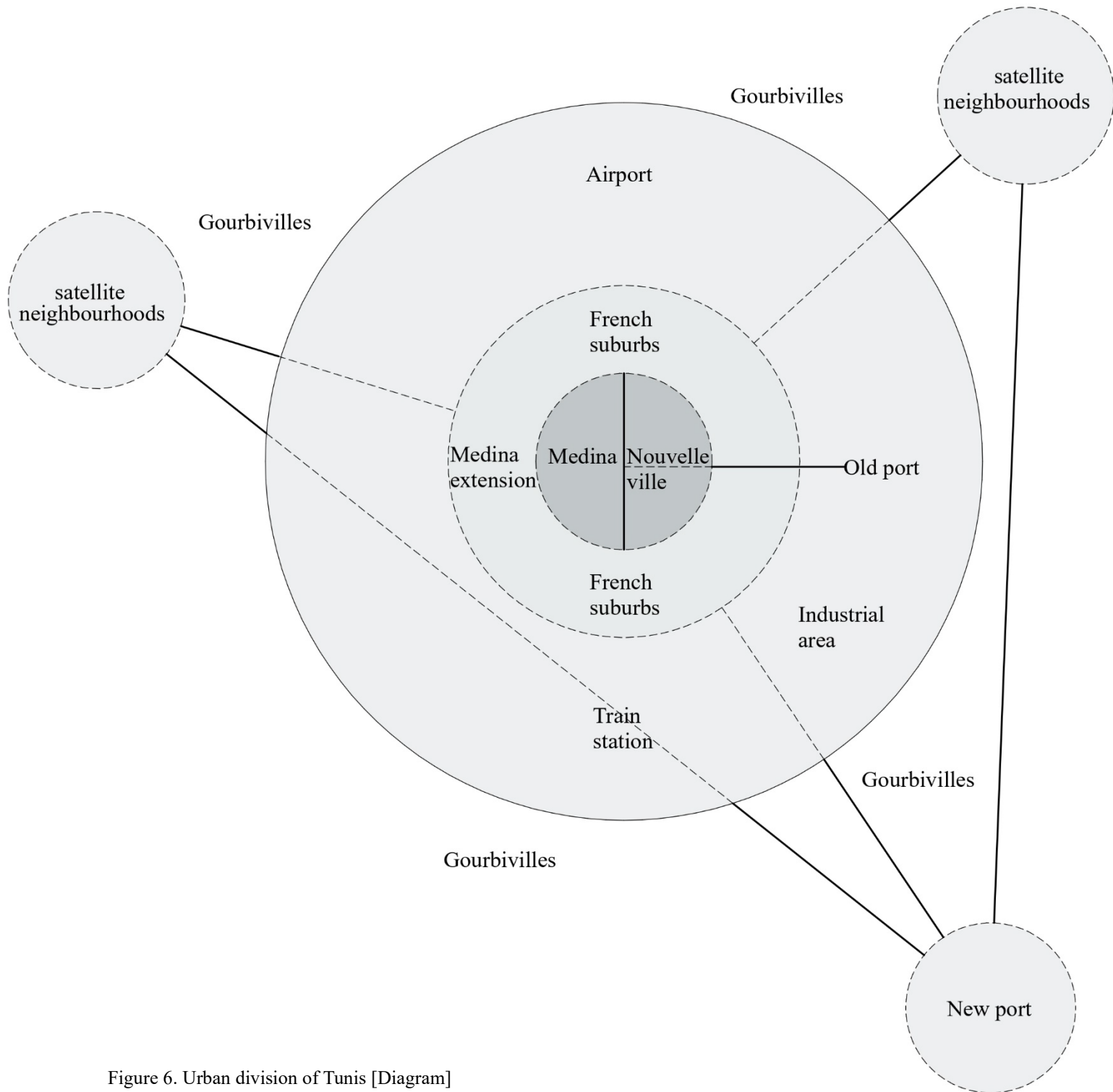

Figure 6. Urban division of Tunis [Diagram]
(Own work, 2023)

Hypothesis

Tunis has lost its port-city identity due to urban and economic changes.

This hypothesis stands as a foundation for exploration, offering a lens through which the different layers of change and continuity that shaped Tunis over time could be unravelled.

Goals, objectives

The goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between urban and economic changes and the loss of the Port-city Identity in Tunis. This will help recognizing the complex aspects of Tunis's identity, its historical and cultural features, and the impact of the French-built new city centre on this identity. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a comprehensive framework for reimagining the waterfront connection in Tunis to help reclaim its Port-city Identity.

The research objectives are:

- To examine and define the current identity of Tunis as a city, understanding its historical, cultural, and economic context.
- To discover the cultural aspects and traditions associated with being a Port-city, identifying any remaining traces of this identity in Tunis.
- To analyse the effects of the construction of the new city centre by the French on Tunis's Port-city Identity.
- To learn from other Mediterranean port-cities that relocated their harbours out of the city, offering valuable insights for Tunis's urban development.

III.   Research question

What is the relation between urban & economic changes and the loss of "the Port-city Identity" in Tunis?

1. What is the identity of the city of Tunis?
2. When did the port city identity fade away?
3. Why is there no interaction with Lac Tunis?
4. What cultural aspects and traditions are associated with being a Port-city? And which traces of a Port-city identity can be seen in Tunis?
5. How did the construction of the new city centre by the French alter the identity of the city and it's citizens?
6. What can Tunis learn from other port-cities in the Mediterranean who moved their harbour out of the city?
7. What if the port-city identity is not reclaimed, what is the actual loss?

A city-region's identity is a unique, inherited collection of assets, history, traits, and culture that distinguishes it internally and externally, and has the potential to unite people and place.

IV. Definition of Theoretical framework

This research has its roots under the episteme of praxeology and typology, it has some interfaces with phenomenology and semiology. This research deals with the identity of a city, which links to social/spatial practices and the perspective of the user. To understand the context it is needed to research the urban fabric. The genius loci or the sense of place falls under phenomenology, Norberg-Schulz (1991), architectural theorist, has mentioned in his book genius loci, that the genius loci is a vital characteristic for the identity of a place. The genius loci can be seen as the spirit of a place. The embodied experience of places are within this theory very important. The theoretical concepts that will form the research to get a deeper understanding are divided into three sub themes. Identity of the city, Port-city and decolonization, these three sub themes will be the framework where the research will be conducted.

Identity of cities

The Identity of a city represents the unique cultural, historical, and economic attributes associated with cities. Urban and economic changes refer to the transformations in urban structure and economic activities that impact the identity of a city. The effects of colonialism specifically is seen where the changes were made during the French colonization, including the construction of the new city centre in Tunis.

Cities have their own identity, the identity of a city it is viewed as the identity of indiscernibles which is, according to Blackburn (2008), oxford philosophy dictionary, a principle associated with Leibniz his theory that if A and B have exactly the same properties that they are identical and therefor have an common identity.

Another interesting view on the identity of a group is the view from Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Khaldun is considered as the first (and still the greatest) historian of Arabic logic born in Tunis, maybe the most outstanding figure in the social sciences besides Aristotle an Machiavelli (Blackburn, 2008).

From a sociological perspective he focused his research on groups rather than individuals.

From a historical perspective he viewed that man has a nature of domineering and being and war. He regarded humans savage and ignorant. Given these facts he questioned what holds society together. The answer to this was asabiyya, the literal meaning was blood ties but he gave it a new meaning. He viewed this tie as a cohesiveness something that is shared among people even without family ties. This could be formed through being dependent on someone or through cooperation. This would give them a shared identity.

Port-city theory

The main theory about port-city is of "Port-City Dynamics." The multiple researches of Carola Hein focuses on the relationship between ports and the urban environment, emphasizing the crucial role of port cities in shaping global connections, trade, and culture.

This theory contributed to the understanding of how port cities have historically acted as hubs for economic, cultural, and social exchange, and how their design and development have been influenced by maritime activities. This research source highlights the dynamic interaction between ports and cities, and she has examined various aspects of port-city dynamics, including urban planning, architecture, infrastructure, and cultural identity.

Decolonization theory

Decolonization theories in architecture focuses on the impact of colonialism on the built environment and urban planning, as well as strategies for reclaiming cultural and architectural identities. There are several prominent decolonization theories that have been discussed and explored in the context of architecture.

Such as Critical regionalism which is a response to the standardisation effects of globalization (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2005), architectural theorists. It values local identity, culture, and context, seeking to create buildings and spaces that are modern yet deeply rooted in their regional and cultural heritage.

The work of architectural theorist Frampton (1993), "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," is a foundational source for this theory but also the work of Lefaivre & Tzonis (2005) Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World

By following this theoretical framework, the study aims to unravel the complex relationship between urban and economic changes and the loss of the Port-city Identity in Tunis. Through the critical evaluation of existing theories and their application in a unique context, this research will shed light on the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial, rapidly urbanizing cities. Ultimately, the findings of this study hopefully provides valuable insights for urban planners, policymakers, and researchers striving to preserve and revitalize the cultural heritage of port cities facing similar challenges globally.

V.   Methodology, Positioning and Methods

For this research to be conducted, the use of multiple research methods is needed to get a deeper understanding of how Tunis, as a port-city, has evolved over time. A literature research, historical research, case study research and special analysis will be conducted to find the impact of urban and economic changes on the identity of Tunis and it's citizen.

For this research three primary categories of methods will be used, which are:

1. Historical-interpretive narratives
-   Literature analysis: a thorough review of existing literature, including works on the history of port cities, and the impact of urban changes on their identity
-   Legal documents and media review: this will give a understanding of the context and the views at a specific point in time.
-   Photographic research: searching and get a better sense of context, documented changes.

2. Ethnographic site study
-   Site mapping: a qualitative site mapping and analysis of the current elements still visible from the maritime past would be done. This will give a better understanding of the context and sheds light on the opportunities.
-   Observational fieldwork: to document the current use and life on and around the lake
-   Photographic research: visual ethnography, documenting use and life around the Lac Tunis

3. Case study analysis
-   Case study of mediterranean Port-cities: this will give a view on how other port-cities dealt with the location change of the port.

In addition to these methods, other resources such as literature review news and old pictures and media narratives will be utilized. The primary objective is to understand the current context of Tunis, and to define the identity of the city.

To get a better understanding of the identity of port-cities the work of Carola Hein "Adaptive Strategies for Water Heritage: Past, Present and Future" will be researched. Additionally, site visits will help identifying traces of the port-city identity in the present day.

To understand the effect of the urban changes a historical research will help interpreted the effect it had on the city as a whole and It's identity.

To get more insight on the economic effect of changing the location of the harbour out of the city centre case studies will support the literature found by Carola Hein and give a better understanding on the specific situation.

This research is essential for either confirming or challenging the initial hypothesis and, ultimately, providing answers to the research questions about the identity of Tunis as a port city, how it has evolved, and the impact of changing economic and urban dynamics on its identity.
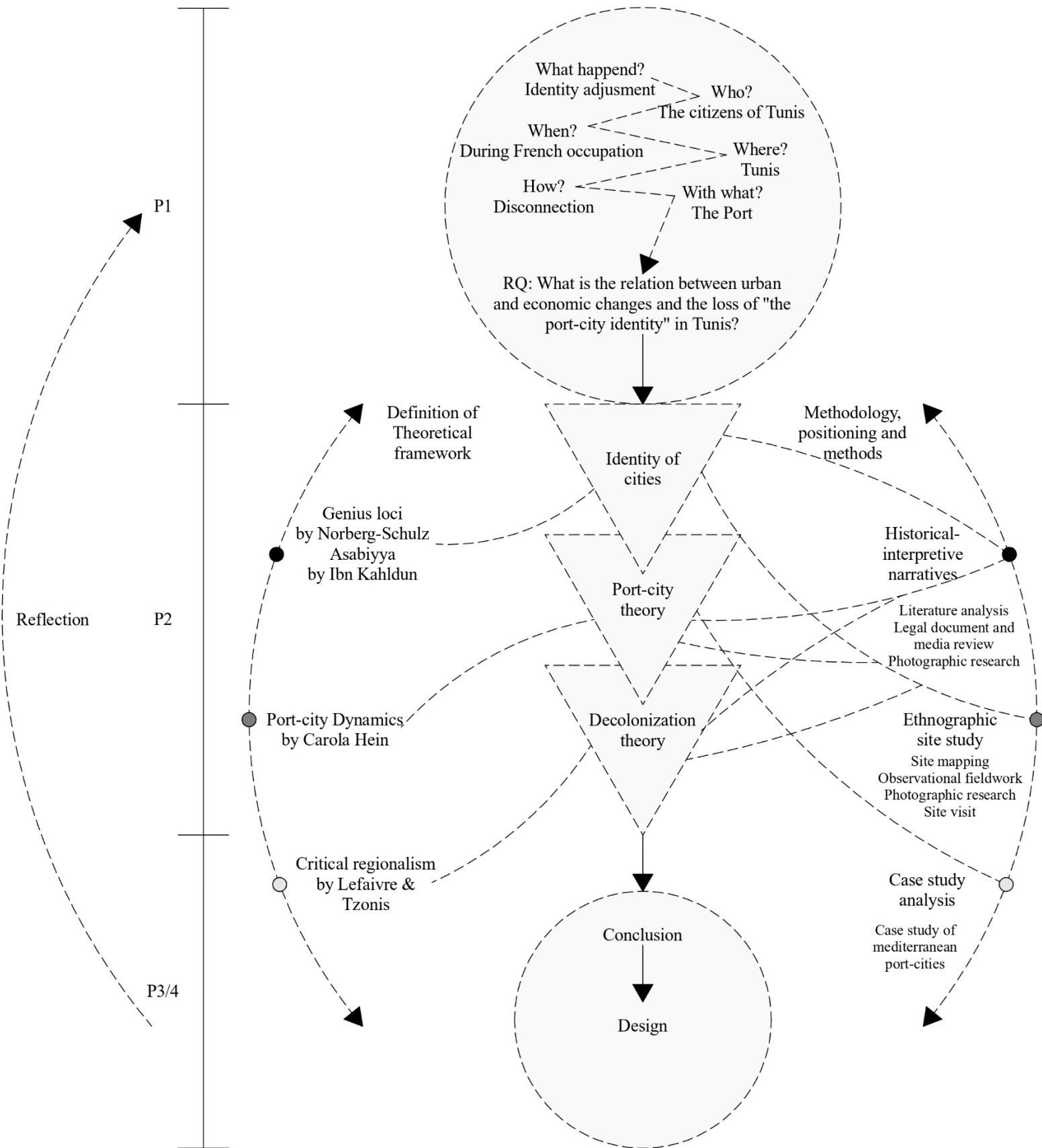
Figure 7. Methodology explanation [Diagram]
(Own work, 2023)

VI.   Relevance

The significance of addressing this research problem has two main reasons.

Firstly, it is essential to preserve and revive Tunis's unique Port-city Identity, as it carries a rich cultural heritage and historical significance. Failure to do so could result in the continued loss of culture, which would have lasting consequences for the city and its inhabitants. Also, the erosion of the Port-city Identity impacts the cohesion and sense of belonging among Tunisians, making it crucial to restore this identity to foster a stronger community.

Secondly, the case of Tunis is not isolated, it resonates with urbanization trends and challenges faced by cities worldwide. Understanding how urban and economic changes have affected Tunis's Port-city Identity can offer valuable insights for other cities dealing with similar problems. This research is not just about Tunis but also about gaining more knowledge and providing a better understanding about urban challenges in port-cities on a global scale.

My expected results would be to gain a better understanding of port-cities in general and how this could effect a cities identity. I hope during my journey to talk to locals and to let their voices and ideas be heard. I also expect that my view of Tunis will totally change as a result of this research, just like the identity of Tunis my view of it would never be the same.

VII. Annotated bibliography

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This source provides historical insights into the early identity and governance of Tunis, which can help you understand the city's roots as a port city and how it evolved over time.

2. *AK Tunis, Porte de France*. (n.d.). Bartko-Reher Old Postcards. Retrieved 6 November 2023, from https://www.ansichtskartenversand.co m/ak/93-old-postcard/31701-City-Tunis/12080175-AK-Tunis-Porte-de-France

This postcard offer visual documentation of the city's gate to the sea during the colonial period.

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This source contains historical and architectural information about the impact of French colonization on the city, which can be valuable for analysing the changes brought by colonial rule.

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This paper can provide insights into the political identities and ideologies that have shaped the city's development and identity.

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The concepts of architectural symbolism and form might give a better understanding how the physical changes in Tunis's urban landscape, particularly those brought about by colonization, have influenced the city's identity.

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Climate change can have direct implications for a port city's economic activities and development and therefor might be interesting to read.

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Coslett's research on preservation and tourism in Tunisia, with a focus on the colonial past and its impact on the present can help analysing how the colonial past continues to influence the city's identity.

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This research offers a comparative perspective that can help draw insights and lessons from other port cities' experiences.

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This research focuses on sustainable and resilient urban development in the Mediterranean. This source can provide insights into contemporary urban planning in the Mediterranean.

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This source provides insights into the political and identity aspects of urbanization in the region.

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The muqaddimah is a significant historical text that may offer historical insights relevant to my research.

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This source can provide insights into the contemporary political challenges in Tunisia and their potential impact on the city's identity.

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This source can offer a deep exploration of the postcolonial identity challenges faced by Tunisia,

47. Weber, C., & Puissant, A. (2003). Urbanization pressure and modeling of urban growth: Example of the Tunis Metropolitan Area. *Remote Sensing of Environment*, *86*(3), 341–352. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0034-4257(03)00077-4

This research can provide valuable insights into the physical changes and urban growth in the region, shedding light on how urbanization has impacted Tunis. This can reveal strengths and weaknesses of the city

VIII. List of Figures