

Research Plan 2021

City Loneliness: A Healing Practice in Amsterdam



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“We are in the midst of a global loneliness crisis. None of us, anywhere, are immune.”
Noreena Hertz, The Lonely Century

KEYWORDS

Loneliness, Belongingness, City, Amsterdam, Architecture

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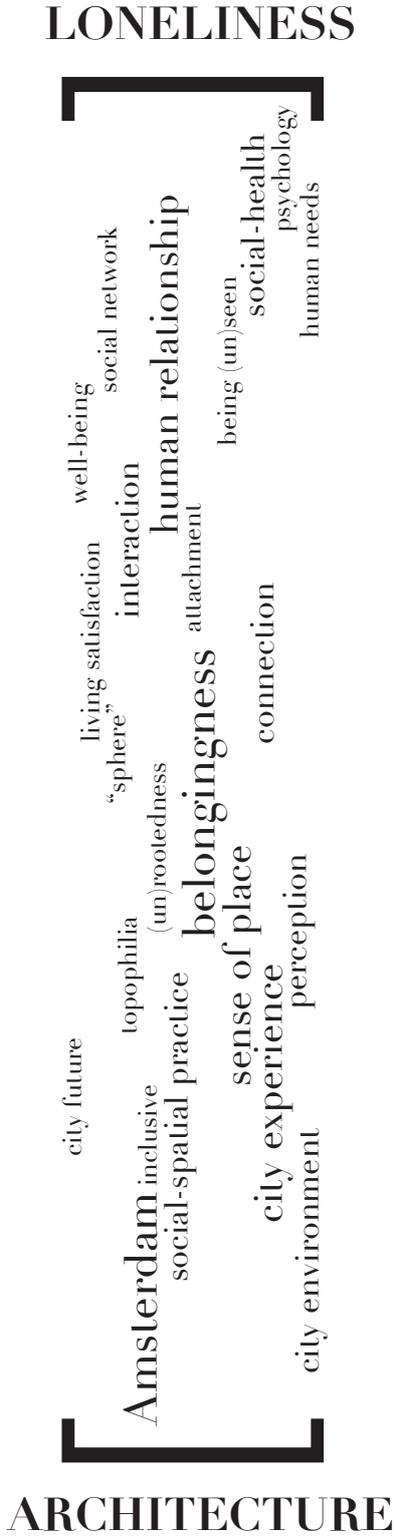


figure 01. Research Keywords
 A bridge between loneliness and architecture
 (Draw by the author)

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I. INTRODUCTION

This research on loneliness aims to explore the relationship between loneliness and architecture, which relates to the belongingness¹ in Amsterdam. The fascination of investigating loneliness, a personal inner feeling, refers to my own experience of feeling unrooted of a place. As I discovered more, I found that loneliness undoubtedly has become a current issue that many people suffer from, which needs an interdisciplinary understanding. Also, the loneliness issue links to the future city development in relation to social health and living satisfaction, which fits in City of the Future studio's theme. It is believed that an architecture innovation should be a tool to create belongingness in the city and heal and reduce the feeling of loneliness, leading to a well-being city future.

Background

As the world exchanges rapidly, the loneliness phenomenon is evident in the big cities, which have an increasing and changing population, overcrowded city spaces, and congestion. As the reports, 55% of Londoners felt lonely (Parsons, 2017), 52% of New Yorkers said their city was desolate (Hertz, 2020), and 47% of the population in Amsterdam was said to be lonely. (OIS Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018) Moreover, the lonely number was 50% for Dubai, 46% for Hong Kong, and 46% for Sao Paulo, showing that almost half of the population in the cities suffer from the feeling of loneliness. (Hertz, 2020) In Japan, more than half a million people withdraw from society for a period exceeding six months, which is called Hikikomori². But what exactly is loneliness? Is it the state of being alone? What is the difference between being lonely and being alone?

Loneliness is not necessarily a state of physically being alone, but a state of mind, which makes people feel empty, lonely, and unwanted. It is often

¹ As most scholars' and Wikipedia's definition, belongingness is the human emotional need to be accepted member of a group. However, the belongingness in this research is defined more broadly and clearly based on Antonsich's study, "Searching for Belonging - An Analytical Framework" (2010), consisting of place-belongingness and politics of belonging. The place-belongingness is a personal and intimate feeling of being "at home" in a place, which includes a sense of connectedness to others and a sense of place. At the same time, politics of belonging refers to a resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion, building up and growing out of everyday practices. Similarly with Fenster's definition, "belonging is also associated with past and present experiences and memories and future ties connected to a place, which grow with time." (Fenster, 2005)

² Hikikomori describes people who are totally withdrawn from society and seeking extreme degrees of social isolation and confinement. These people spend most of their time at home, have no interest in going to school or work, feel upset easily, and avoid any relationship.

associated with a lack of connection and intimacy. "In reality, loneliness has less to do with being alone and much more to do with the experience of feeling unseen. It is the quality, not quantity, of our relationships that fulfills our need for connectedness." (Kirmayer, 2021) Being alone is yet distinct from being lonely. Solitary is a state of being apart from others and does not always lead to feeling lonely. However, loneliness can be felt when surrounded by crowded people. "It's possible - easy, even - to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others." (Laing, 2016) Compared to the unwelcome feelings of loneliness, solitary tend to be a spontaneous state that is willing to be alone. Also, the effects of solitary and loneliness are opposite. Solitary has benefits, allowing better concentration and self-recharging, while loneliness may cause unhealthy mental and physical issues. Without a doubt, loneliness creates a phenomenon that leads to unpleasant results and leaves problems, especially in cities the loneliness happens more.

Problem Statement

Compared to those big cities with a similar percentage of loneliness, Amsterdam is the capital city of the Netherlands, which ranks as the 5th happiest in the world, right behind Finland, Iceland, Denmark, and Switzerland. (World Happiness Report 2021)³ Meanwhile, according to the Healthy Lifestyle Cities Report 2021⁴, considering sunshine hours, life expectancy, pollution, annual average hours worked, happiness levels, and outdoor activities, Amsterdam ranks as the best city for a happy and healthy life across all 44 cities. However, contradictorily, Amsterdam also has one of the highest percentages of people that feel lonely. (NLTimes, 2017) In the 2017 report, over 300,000 Amsterdammers suffer from loneliness. Besides, the number of loneliness has increased, from 40% in 2008, 43% in 2012, to 47% in 2018. (OIS Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018) It raises the question of how Amsterdam can be the most healthy city for living, at the same time, has almost half of the percentage of the citizen who suffers from loneliness.

The main problem of loneliness in Amsterdam can refer to belongingness. In fact, the considered factors of happiness reports do not measure the feelings of emotional reliance and attachment, which take a role in well-being. The absence of belongingness, both in relationship connection and in place attachment, is definitely one of the reasons that result in loneliness. (Antonsich, 2010; Franklin and Tranter, 2020) Since Amsterdam is a functioning well city that attracts people to work and live and the foreign immigration grows annually, creating a belongingness environment for taking care of emotions in Amsterdam is vital.

³ In World Happiness Report, the researchers rank 153 countries on factors like prosperity, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, perceptions of corruption, and trust.

⁴ HEALTHY LIFESTYLE CITIES REPORT 2021
(<https://www.lenstore.co.uk/research/healthy-lifestyle-report/>)

Loneliness undoubtedly causes a lower quality of life and the risk of health problems. From an individual health perspective, it directly results in mental problems, such as depression and anxiety; moreover, it alters brain function and increases stress. Loneliness, especially for those who suffer for a long time, results in chronic body inflammation, which leads to a host of diseases. Further, “at the extreme, loneliness can lead to suicide.” (Hertz, 2020) Yet loneliness has greater matters that affect society; it significantly impacts our brain, influencing body reactions and performance. A numerous researches show that there is a link between loneliness and hostility toward others. Loneliness is undoubtedly not only a personal issue that affects mind and body health but a social crisis.

Research Question

This research focuses on loneliness that relates to the belongingness of the human sense of connection to others and a sense of place, and how it relates to the architectural aspect. Thus, the main research question is:

How can architecture create a belongingness environment to alleviate and heal the feeling of loneliness in Amsterdam?

To answer the main research question, there are three questions to be investigated.

- 1. Why do people feel lonely in the notion of psychology?*
- 2. What is it about the contemporary city that creates loneliness?*
- 3. How do people create belongingness in the city?*
- 4. How do city spaces in Amsterdam have an impact on being unrooted and unconnected, making people feel lonely?*

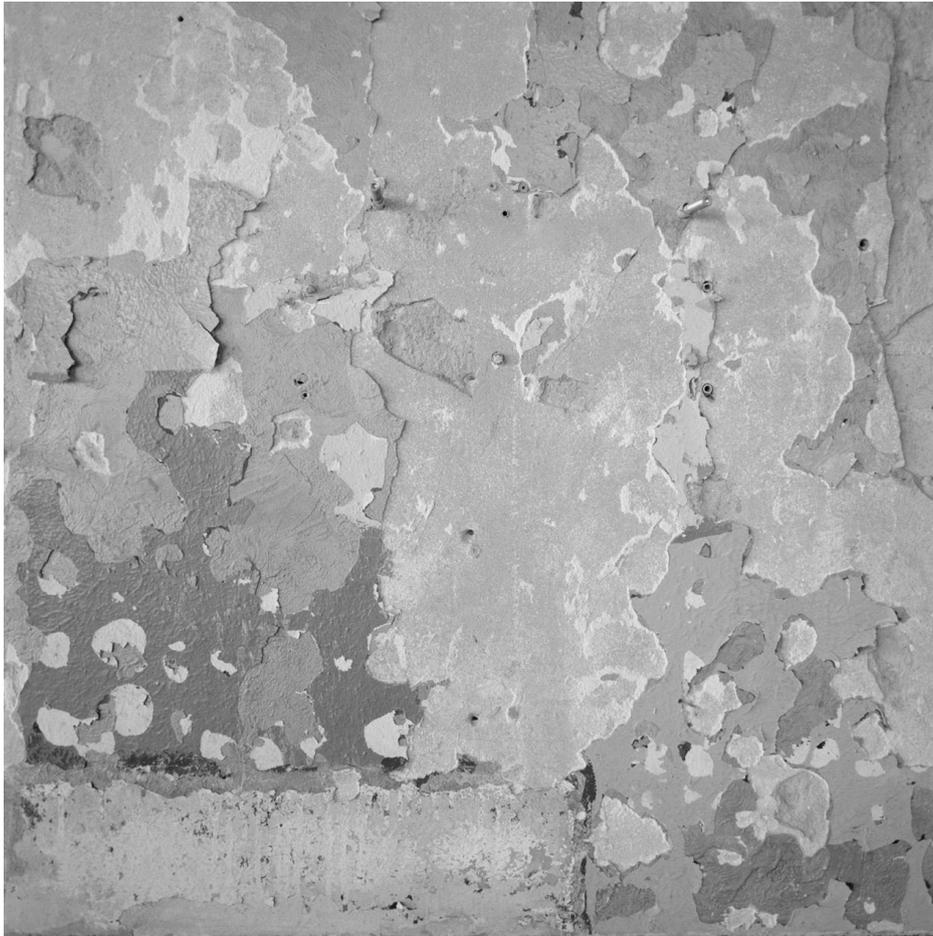


image 01. Wall (2016), Here is where I exist
(Photograph by Bianca Sistermans)

(<https://biancasistermans.com/en/here-is-where-i-exist/>)

“Wall” is one of the photo series of still lifes of the objects which remained behind as markers of a lived life. This series pictures the lonely people in Amsterdam, revealing the loneliness with artworks. “These objects are in the process of disappearing.” (Sistermans)



image 02. Garden (2017), Here is where I exist
(Photograph by Bianca Sistermans)

[\(https://biancasistermans.com/en/here-is-where-i-exist/\)](https://biancasistermans.com/en/here-is-where-i-exist/)

“Garden” is also one of the photo series of still lifes, showing apples that were never going to be collected in the garden. “The photograph is what momentarily interrupts this movement so as not to let them – or their owners – leave unnoticed.” (Sistermans)

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research fits in phenomenology and praxeology epistememes because it relates to perception, embodied experience, and social-spatial practices in the city. The theoretical references introduced from the human relationship, sense of place, and city experience perspectives to frame the research, helping a comprehensive understanding of city loneliness in three different levels.

Human Relationship

Social connection and close relationships are essential for human beings. “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs” (1943) (figure 02) is a theory that explains personality and human behavioral motivation. The “belonging and love” stage relates to the need for attachment, demonstrating that the craving for connection and belongingness to a group of people is a part of foundational human needs. (McLeod, 2020)

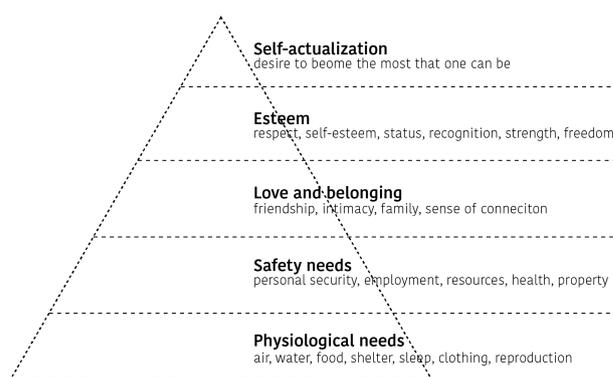


figure 02. Maslow's hierarchy of needs
(<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>) (Redraw by the author)

The philosophical trilogy “Spheres” further claimed that the implications of existence are “being-with” - that is, as part of a containing sphere. Peter Sloterdijk begins the study with an explicit rejection of individualism, saying that to speak of the human being’s essential loneliness is nonsensical. (Mostafa, 2012) It is believed that human beings need to company and interact with others to create a “space of coexistence.” “Souls are possessed and possessing entities. The primordial existential sphere is created every time a moment of inter-psychic space happens.”⁵

⁵ The reference comes from the interview of Peter Sloterdijk in the book “Cosmograms” (2005), edited by Melik Ohanian and Jean-Christophe Royoux.

Sense of Place

The place belongingness and place attachment matter in relation to one's experience and mental health of living in the city. (figure 03) Contrary to those who perceive a city from social aspects among people, another regards to explore the environment, building up their sense of place. It consists of the feelings of rootedness, belonging, place identity, meaningfulness, place satisfaction, and emotional attachment, which in turn play an important role in wellbeing. (Prieto-Flores, 2011) At some points, *who we are* can also include *where we are*. (Scannell and Gifford, 2014)

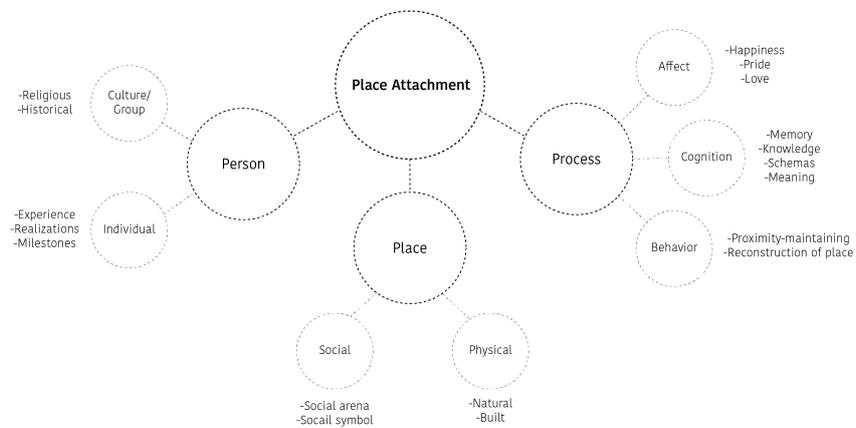


figure 03. The tripartite model of place attachment (Scannell and Gifford, 2010) (Redraw by the author)

The desire to belong somewhere also relates to the nature of the body structuring the situation and experience within the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), creating connection and response. Human reliance and perception on the environment can refer to the concept of “topophilia.” “The place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol.” (Tuan, 1990)

City Experience

There is no doubt that city environment impacts people's feelings, attitudes, and performance, affecting the city experience and relating to health and loneliness issues. It is said that the “intellectualistic character” of metropolis causes human mental changes, contrary to more feelings and emotional relationships in small towns. (Simmel, 1903)

“All emotional relationships between persons rest on their individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable.” (Ibid.)

The loneliness refers to not only emotional ache but also the “fragmentation of community” in the cities. Hertz argues that “the way we live now is profoundly atomized missing many of the casual and deeper human connections that used to be commonplace.” (Crisell, 2020)

Since cities densify around the world, depression and loneliness have become normal phenomena in the city. (Sim and Gehl, 2019) To combat city loneliness and explore a well-being city experience, the space strategies are vital and linked to architecture notion. Architects David Sim and Jan Gehl propose the “Soft City” concept to build a better city environment, while architect Ken Shuttleworth publishes the book “Kinship in the City,” exploring the way to combat loneliness.

Belongingness is a key to reducing loneliness in the city; thus, as de Certeau’s word: “space is a practical place.”, walking in the city and experiencing through everyday life practices are the ways to create belongingness. (de Certeau, 1984) “Belonging and attachment are built here on the base of accumulated knowledge, memory, and intimate corporal experiences of everyday walking. A sense of belonging changes with time as these everyday experiences grow and their effects accumulate.” (Fenster, 2005)

III. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This research includes historical, qualitative, and case studies approaches. The selected methods are mainly in the description, mapping, and photographing aspects, which details are listed below, aiming to clarify the problem of loneliness and answer the research questions.

Historical Approach: Narratives Understanding

To build up the understanding of reasons and results of loneliness; there are three parts of narrative research:

1. Psychological and philosophical theory and loneliness study provide a *theoretical understanding* of why people feel lonely and how to create belongingness, giving a hint of alleviating loneliness.
2. News and reports review gives the *fact* of loneliness happenings in the cities.
3. Official statistics review helps establish the first understanding of loneliness in Amsterdam.

Qualitative Approach: Site Analysis

This approach is to know how city spaces in Amsterdam create loneliness in social-spatial aspect; thus, the following two ways are:

1. Mapping the current city status in demographic and spatial perspectives.
2. Photographing, observation, and analysis of spatial conditions in the specific site area.

Case Studies: Design Strategies Finding

The fact is that there is no existing project directly proven to reduce or combat loneliness. Thus, the case studies explore those architectural projects that are seen to create belongingness, which can also be considered as projects with inclusion and connectedness.

Following the list above, the research on loneliness begins with historical narratives: the *theoretical understanding* in psychological and philosophical theories and loneliness studies gains a deeper understanding in the human psychological aspect. From human relationships to a sense of place, it explores loneliness in relation to belongingness, providing hints of how to create a sense of belonging and reduce loneliness. The theoretical understanding is the fundamental and main part of the research. It reflects the first sub-question of why people feel lonely at the basic human needs level and answers the third sub-question: how to create belongingness.

Then, to answer the second sub-question, investigating what it is about in the contemporary city that makes people feel no belonging and creates loneliness, News and reports review provides the *facts* of loneliness in cities worldwide. Besides, loneliness studies also take a role in examining the loneliness problem, which relates to city environments. To further extend the second sub-question, located in Amsterdam, the official statistic review can strengthen the answer and give the research a transition from general cities to Amsterdam.

Moreover, site analysis in two different scale levels with mapping the current city status and photographing and observing spatial conditions in site area answers the fourth sub-question, how do city spaces in Amsterdam impact loneliness. The mapping in demographic and spatial perspectives also helps find out the suitable site area in Amsterdam to deal with loneliness.

Finally, the case study analysis aims to find examples of how architecture can create a belongingness environment to heal loneliness. Since loneliness is a global epidemic, there is difficulty with choosing the most fewer loneliness cities. Thus, selecting relevant projects and looking into their design strategies is the only way to explore the answer. Architect Ken Shuttleworth published the book “Kinship in the City,” exploring the design principle to combat loneliness. Besides, Danish architect Jan Gehl has done several projects based on the principle of “Making Cities for People,” creating inclusive and liveable city spaces and enhancing people’s quality of life. The case studies consider these two discourses to find the hint of healing loneliness and inspire the design concept and proposal.

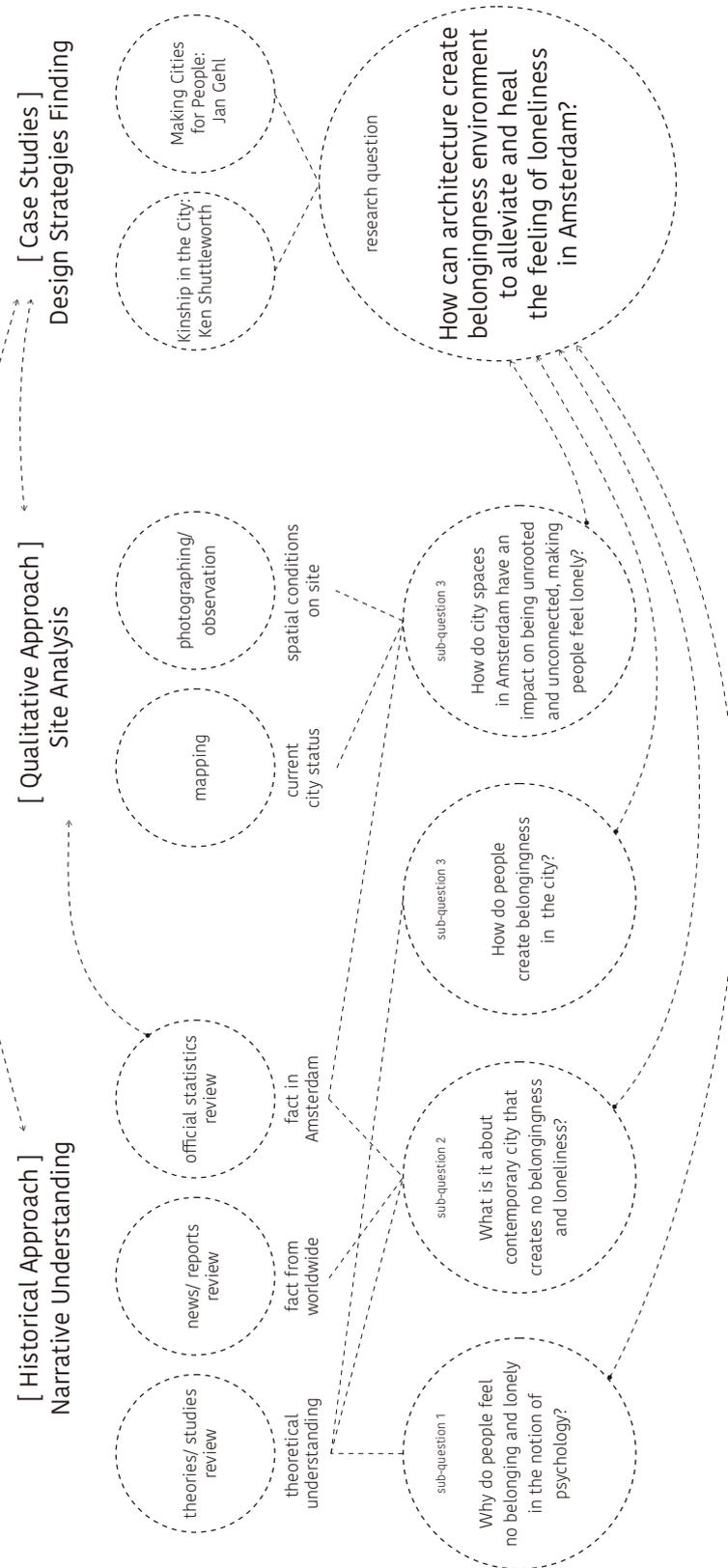


figure 04. Methods and methodology diagram
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[City Loneliness: A Healing Practice in Amsterdam]

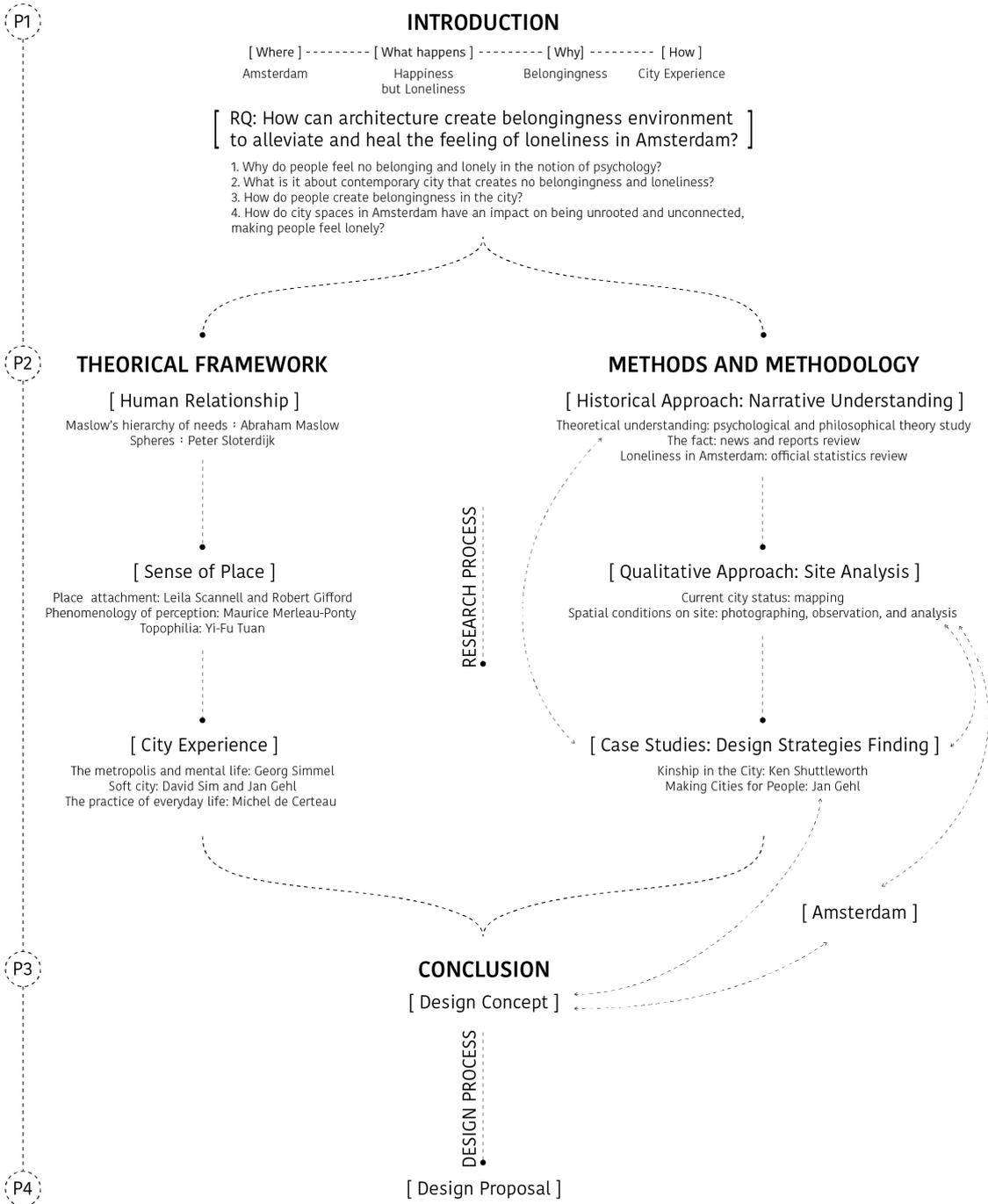


figure 05. Research plan diagram
 (Draw by the author)

IV. RELEVANCE

Loneliness is a long-existing issue in the cities. In “The Lonely City” (2018), Olivia Laing, in a writer’s perspective, examines the lonely feeling and how hard it is to make a genuine connection with others in the city. Moreover, Sagan and Miller gather the most pressing issues related to loneliness into the book “Narratives of Loneliness” (2018), referring to inter and interpersonal loneliness and loneliness in place, space, and identity. Noreena Hertz further analyses the various aspects, with social, economic, technological, spatial, and political reasons and impacts, of city loneliness in “The Lonely Century” (2020). Furthermore, the “Australian Journal of Psychology, Volume 73, Issue 1” (2021) collects the issues of belonging and loneliness and builds a bridge between them.

This research carries on the loneliness research and fills in the limited study in city space and loneliness through belongingness. Although the introduced theories do not entirely focus on architectural discipline, the research aims to investigate the relationship between loneliness and architecture within the target site in Amsterdam. Loneliness matters as we are now in a global crisis of loneliness; it not only hits individuals but also enlarges its influence on the whole world. “Loneliness isn’t a singular force. It lives inside an ecosystem.” (Hertz, 2020) Also, it affects all age groups. Additionally, according to UN and OECD projections, the world population living in urban areas is expected to grow to 68% in 2050. It challenges the city space and architecture strategies to build higher and denser than before but provide a high quality of life and sustainable city environments. The loneliness subject concerning architecture is pressing and inevitable.

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