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A More-Than-Human Architecture

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023

A More-Than-Human Architecture

Puli Li, Pille Bunnell, and Claudia Westermann

The presentation explores the relationship between human awareness and natural order in the complex, interwoven systems around us and how aesthetic awareness emerges from this relationship. We propose that the human sense of beauty arose in the context of our embeddedness in nature and is thus grounded in the forms of nature. However, in our daily lives, we have become disconnected from the natural world and have thus lost the opportunity for re-invigorating a sense of the aesthetic. Based on a studio project, the presentation explores how nature could be reintroduced into people's urban living spaces, recreating a sense of connection that is interwoven with our consciousness. The project explores the possibility of stimulating human perception and creating new stories at the intersection of architecture and nature.

This presentation is part of the Eco-poetic Formations for Transgenerational Collaboration scheme for which four junior designers were paired with four senior members of the American Society for Cybernetics. The scheme was initiated in July 2023. It aims to provide the junior designers with an introduction to the relationship between systems thinking and design and to assist them in developing aspects of their existing graduation projects by integrating systems concepts and systemic design principles.

This presentation begins with an overview of the undergraduate design project and the associated essay by Puli Li (junior collaborator) on the order of nature, which serves as a basis for the collaboration with Pille Bunnell (senior collaborator). Following this introduction, the presentation reports on the ideas, designs and thoughts that have arisen through their collaboration from July

onwards. As the transgenerational collaboration meetings have just begun, the main body of the submitted document comprises the essay as originally developed by the junior collaborator.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, chaos, the order of nature, consciousness, ambiguity

RSD TOPIC(S): Architecture & Planning, Society & Culture, Socioecological Design

Introduction to the presentation

The natural world is an intricate web of life made up of a series of coherent and constantly changing ecological processes. In this world, countless unique and diverse living and non-living elements coexist in harmony, constantly adapting to changing environments and interweaving both interdependent and relational actions on countless levels. In this system, all of nature's beings, all creatures, regardless of their way of life, live closely within a changing and intermittent interplay, the only part which is visible to the human observer and hence is appropriately treated as ambiguous. It is these interactions and interdependencies that make the occurrence of all things possible (Bunnell, 1997, p.3). People navigate through the natural world. In this journey, the human senses acquire new experiences in the process of processing various unseen, ineffable and abstract experiences (Hall & Ames, 1998, p.180-182). In the meantime, we find beauty in the interaction between our cognitive abilities and the natural world. This interaction is very much like a sensibility contact between the conscious world of man and the surrounding reality (Kant, 2000, p. 283).

Human consciousness is not detached from the world; rather, it is rooted in and involved in it. In the continuous exploration and experience of beauty or aesthetic pleasure, the world presents a meaningful order. In other words, for humans, the moment of discovering beauty is the moment when we catch a glimpse of the conditions of empirical possibility (Kant, 2000, p.183- 186). These moments of discovery are usually initially inspired by nature. In the Chinese view of the universe, man and nature are perceived as an interwoven whole rather than as two distinct realms. By embracing the continuity of nature and the world, human consciousness seamlessly traverses through this interconnected fabric (Hall & Ames, 1998, p.182-183).

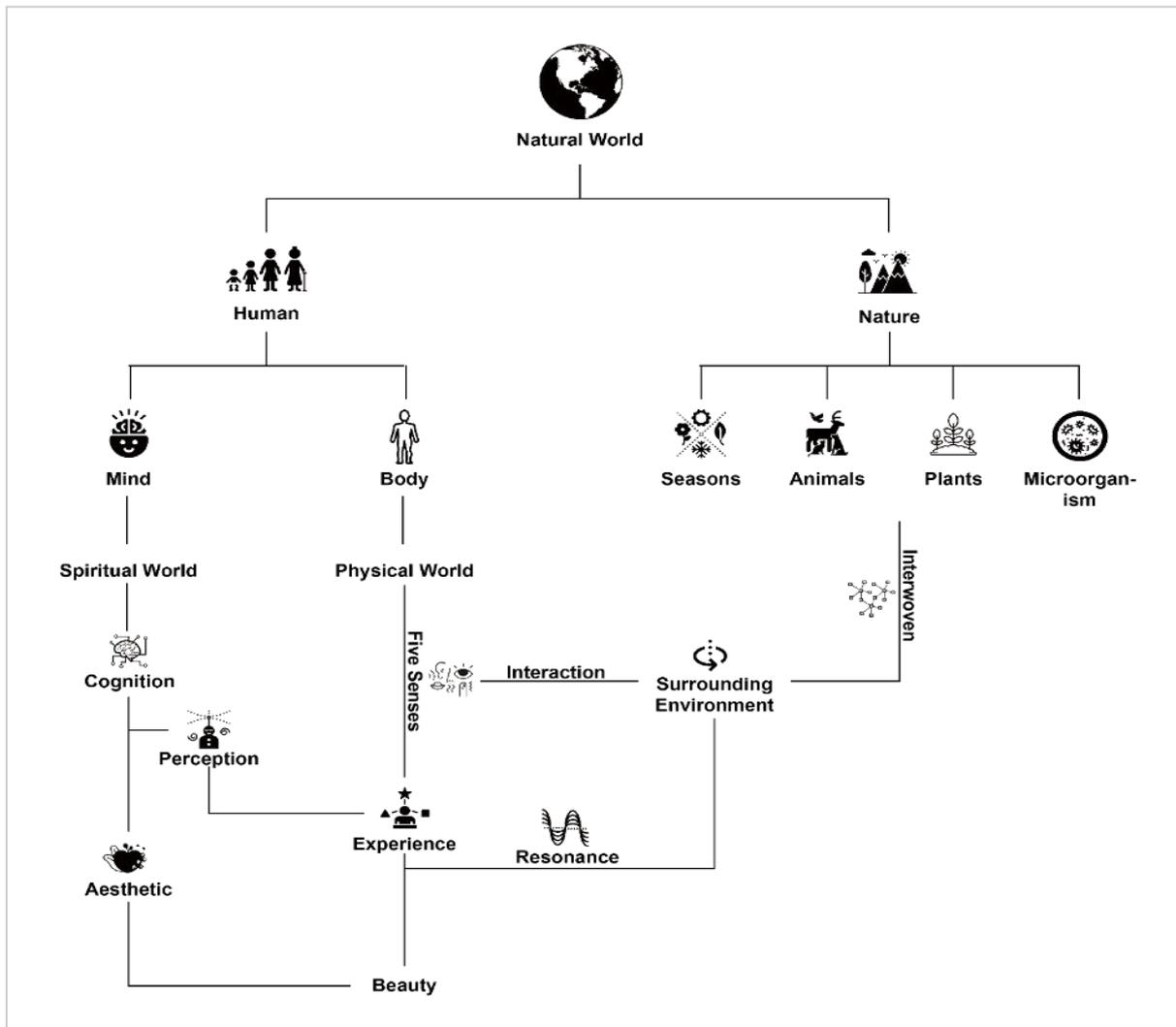


Figure 1: The relationship between human, nature, and beauty.

When the rhythm of people crossing the world resonates with the rhythm of nature and integrates into the rhythm, people experience beauty in this moment (Figure 1). As Hall and Ames (1988) point out, each unique phenomenon is continuous with other phenomena in the field of human experience. In the fluidity of the integration of man and nature, man comes out of the meaningless chaos, experiences an expanded sense of self-awareness and becomes aware of a role in shaping the original and chaotic experience (Li, 2010, p.3). Such nature-inspired experiences act like a kind of reprocessing of nature. In these associations, human cognition breaks down time and space, 'creating another nature out of the materials that actual nature gives it' (Kant, 2000, p314).

It is difficult to describe how humans perceive the order of nature. The relationship between humans and consciousness is not based on linear logic. The surrounding environment is not caused by human tastes. Nature and perception of nature interact and depend on each other; namely, aesthetic consciousness generates imagination and influences people's actions (Li, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, the pleasure experienced in this interaction may be the beginning of art. People will always, consciously or unconsciously, create new stories out of pursuing beauty and pleasure.

Today, life and nature are lost within the increasingly repetitive and homogenous urban spaces. Nowadays, most people move through urban spaces in a routine manner. People unconsciously fall into a state of programmed life. This kind of programmed life can sometimes be very productive. But there are also risks. When we immerse ourselves in this oversimplification of life for too long, we may miss out on the richness of our lives that could have been (Richards, 2001, p.5). These come from everyday aesthetic experience, come from the quality we receive from the higher sense, and are unconsciously ignored (Saito, 2001, p.4). Some researchers have shown that the significance of contact with the natural environment is not limited to aesthetic reactions but can also include important effects on other emotions and awakenings (Ulrich, 1983, p.32). These sensory experiences of human beings in nature further affect people's spiritual world. This influence on the spiritual world connects people with the world. In natural interdependence, people create new stories, both on the level of consciousness and on the level of reality. We need those serendipity moments that cannot be replicated.



Figure 2: Elevation of the canal side.

These ideas resonate with my experience of designing a more-than-human architecture (Figure 2) that is aimed at re-integrating the seemingly chaotic natural systems into people's lives, creating a spatial entanglement of all natural things. This seemingly chaotic but orderly environment of interdependent creatures and things may stimulate people's imagination and creativity. By accommodating spaces for human, animal, and plant activities within the architecture, I attempt to evoke an inner resonance with nature and prompt humans to think about the relationship between humans and nature (Figure 3).

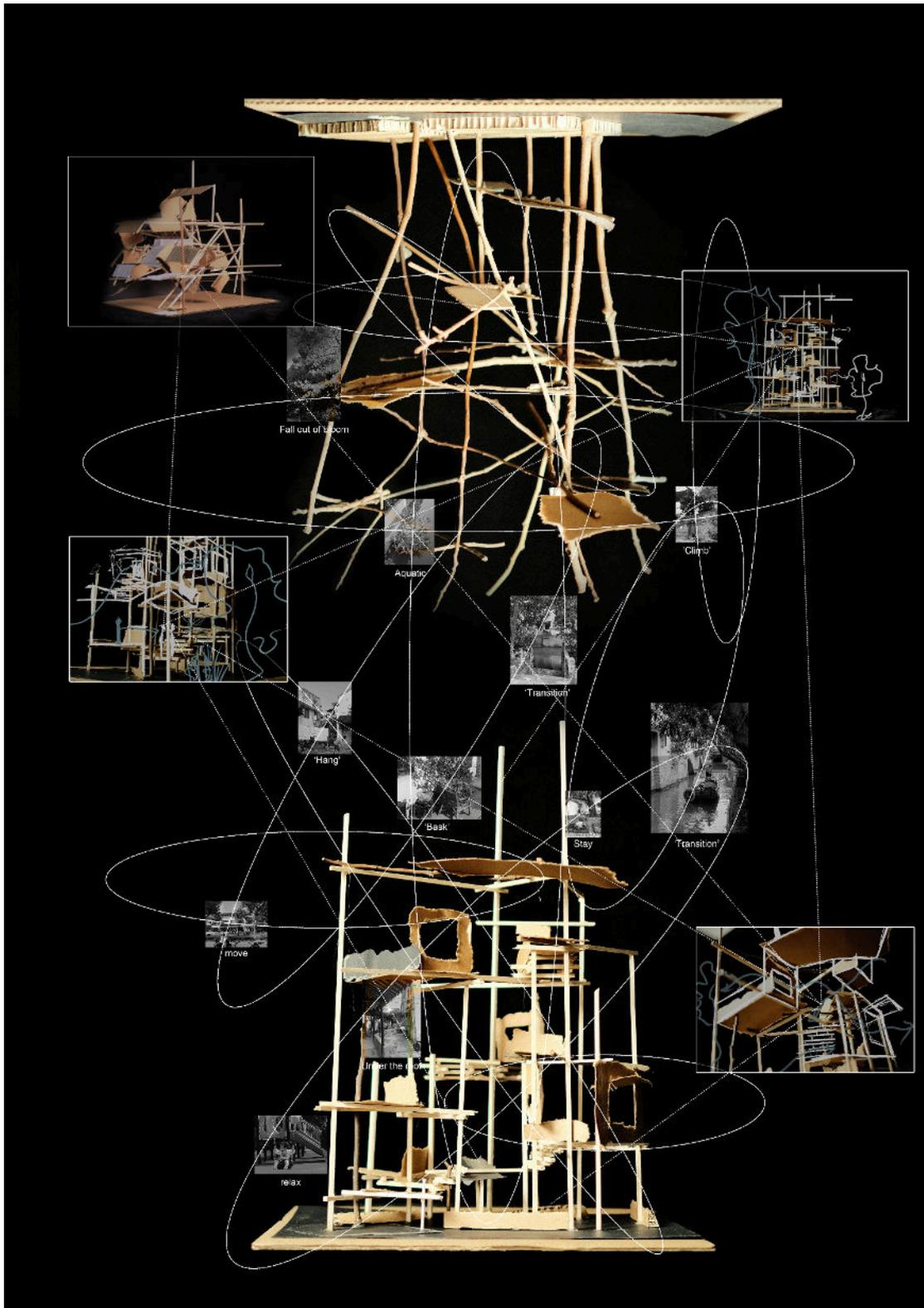


Figure 3: Concept model.



Figure 4: Canal side view of the project.

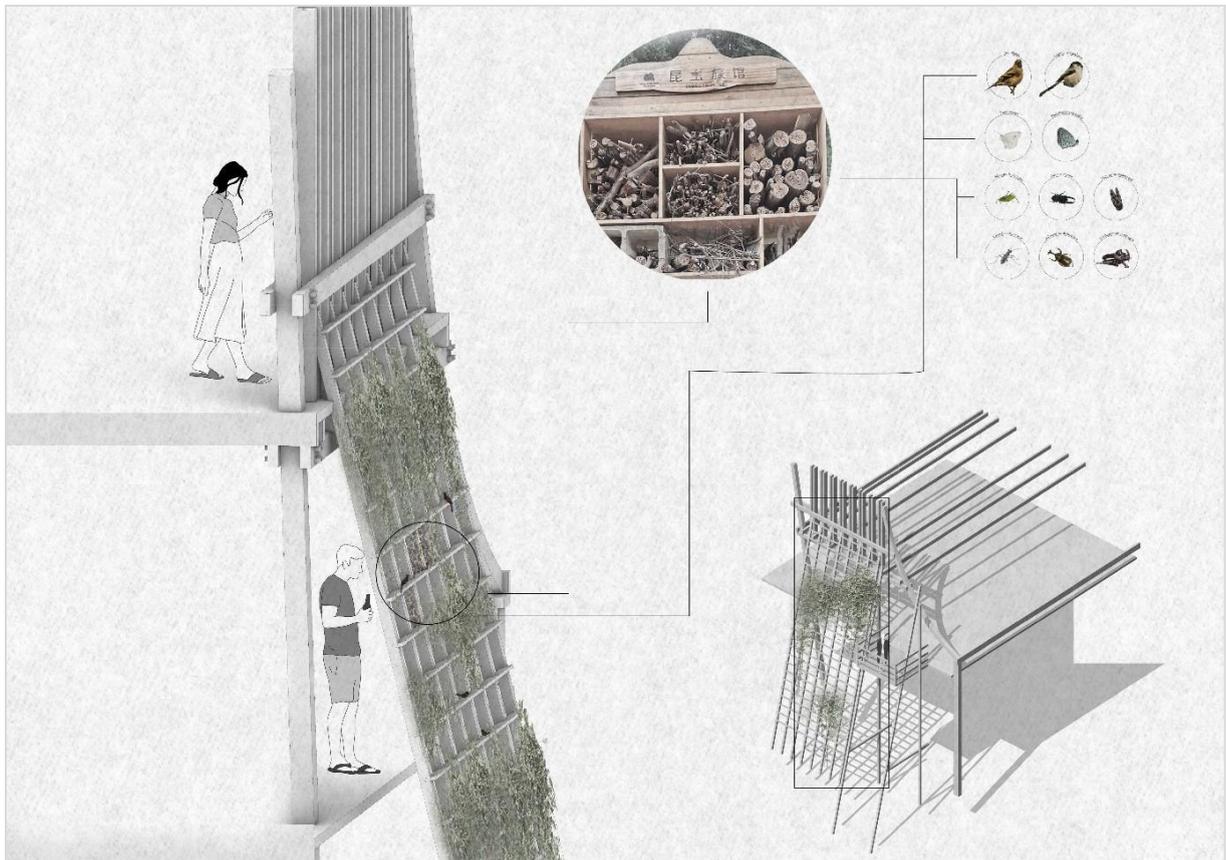


Figure 5: Insect Hotel.

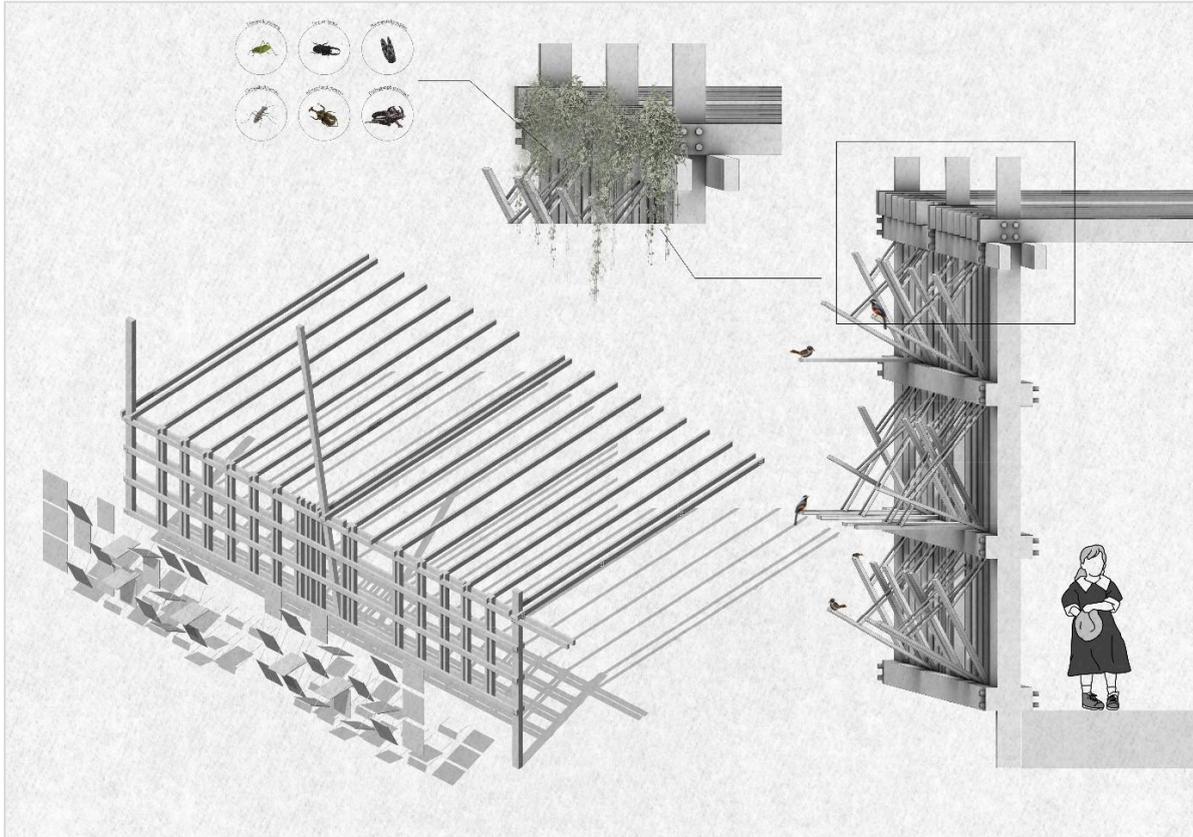


Figure 6: Window design for birds.

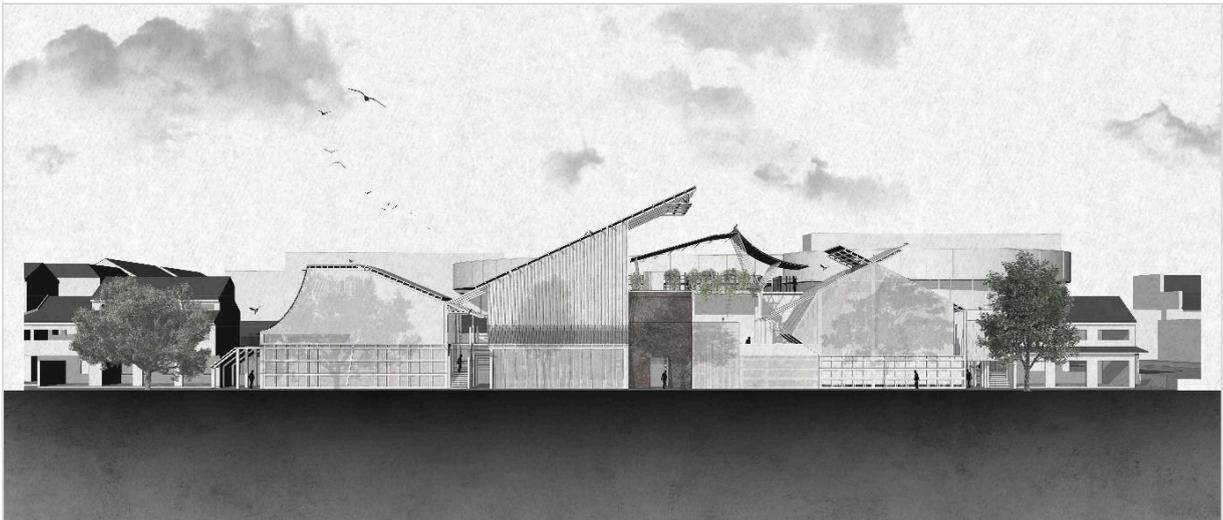


Figure 7: The shadow of a tree gets into interior space.

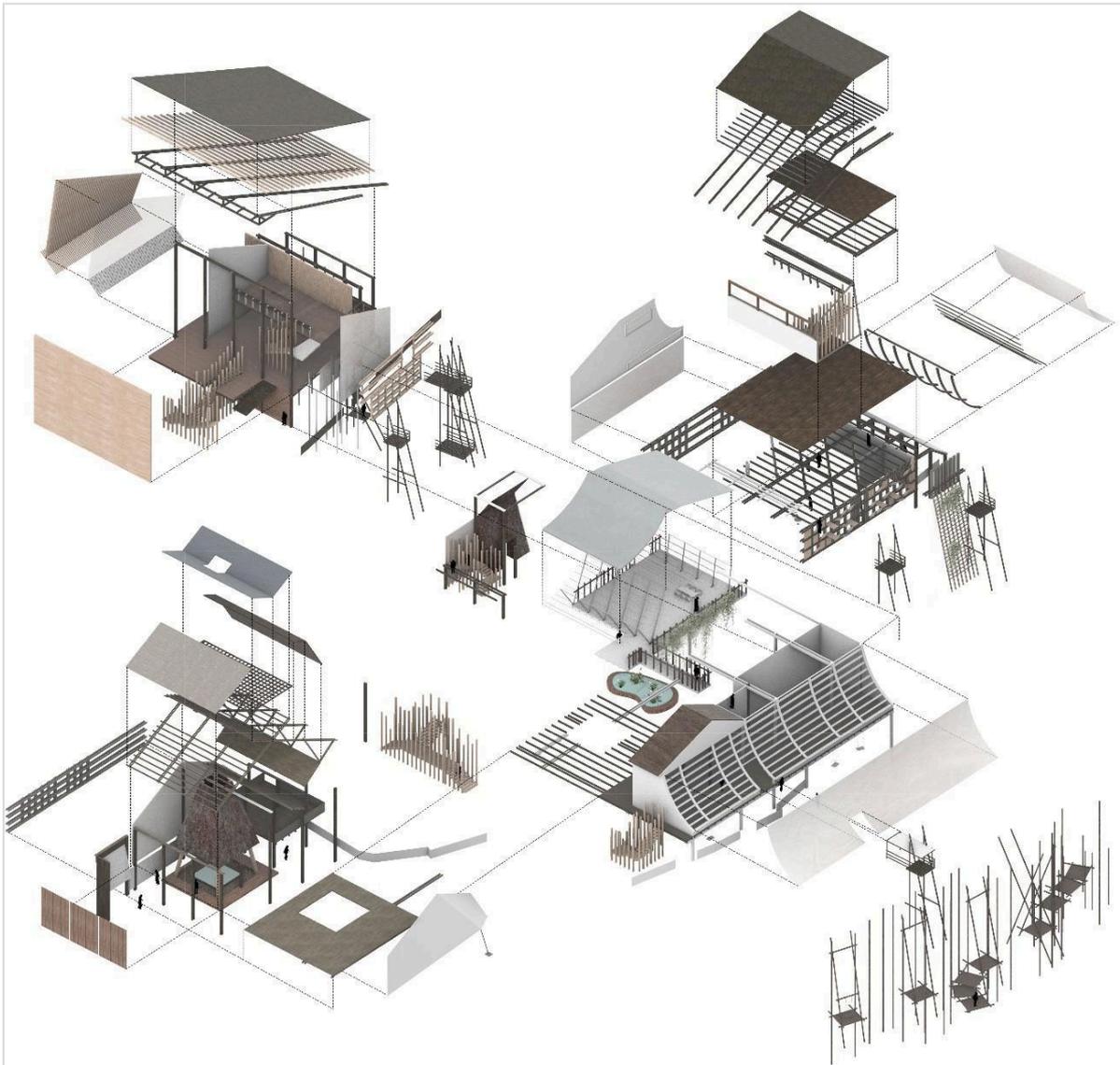


Figure 8: The choice of different materials in the building space.

The studio project has many waterfront platforms extending toward the canal (Figure 4). They are designed to evoke a sense of entanglement – noisy or calm. Some of the building's façades are equipped with insect hotels (Figure 5), or spaces where birds can stay (Figure 6). At certain special moments, people will feel the wind breeze and experience the birds singing, see small animals crawling, and hear tiny creatures moving. Sunlight projects the shadows of trees into the inside; the people on the street are visible as blurred silhouettes; there is a wild mixture of sounds and images (Figure 7). On rainy days, raindrops create different rhythms on different building materials

(Figure 8). In these moments when everything is redundant and entangled, we detach from our human positions and generate thoughts on other dimensions of the world. In the midst of chaos, we are awakened to sensitivity, to the beauty of subtle change and disorder. Unexpected discoveries of things in hidden corners, chaotic arrangements of shapes and materials, and sudden changes in sound and light all challenge our perception and understanding. Our senses are guided to encounter the uncertainty that stimulates our curiosity and desire to explore the world. In this dynamic equilibrium, people's concepts of time and space are redefined and expanded. We no longer perceive linear processes or fixed spatial boundaries. There is now a fluid and expansive existence. We interact with our environment, transcending ourselves and integrating into the whole. The chaotic and dynamic balance of the encounter with nature guides human beings to transcend norms and discover the sources of creativity and self-discovery.

Next steps—the phase of transgenerational collaboration

As Pille Bunnell mentioned, it is through systemic thinking that connections are made and understanding is integrated. Being inspired by seemingly unrelated events, we wake up from a vision or dream to find the contingent I in a sensory sense (Bunnell, 1997, p.7). This point of view confirms the significance of reintroducing other-than-human beings into today's urban architectural spaces. How to integrate human activity space with nature without disturbing the rhythm of life of plants and animals will be further explored in the next phase of collaboration that began in July but is likely to continue well beyond the scope of this paper.

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