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

## **Architectural Landscapes of Resistance: Carnavalesque framings of agency**

**Ruoxi Li, Tom Scholte, and Claudia Westermann**

This presentation endeavours to expand the perspectives of conventional theatrical performance while concurrently nurturing architectural paradigms that visualise theatre as an embodiment of public performance intricately grounded within communal spaces. Here, theatre connects to its carnivalesque origin and actively initiates agency, exploring possibilities of social change.

In the first part, the presentation mentions the carnival as a foundation for performances that inverse established power relationships. It introduces the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* as a basic principle and the introduction of performance to daily life to redefine social order and heal social suffering. Given the amalgamation of architectural elements with the spirit of carnival, I coin the term *carnavalesque architecture* to characterize this distinctive form. The research is based on an undergraduate final-year project in Suzhou, China, which attempted to offer a platform for engaging marginalized voices in dialogue. Through these interactions, which include human-to-human and human-to-architecture dynamics, along with a re-evaluation of the underlying meanings embedded within them, we enable the examination of new approaches to address longstanding challenges. Ultimately, this contributes to the endeavour of fostering a sustainable community. The second section examines Augusto Boal's theory of theatre to explore the diverse connotations of theatre in modern society in more depth with a focus on their potential to generate social transformation through theatre art forms.

KEYWORDS: theatre, performance, carnivalesque, community

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

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## **Ecopoetic Formations for Transgenerational Collaboration**

This presentation is part of the Ecopoetic 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 systemic design and assist them in developing their existing graduation projects or parts of these further by integrating systems theory and systemic design principles. The presentation provides an overview of the "Architectural landscapes of resistance: carnivalesque framings of agency" undergraduate design project and the ideas developed in an associated essay by Ruoxi Li (junior collaborator), which serves as a basis for the collaboration with Tom Scholte (senior collaborator). The presentation further reports on the ideas, designs, and thoughts the junior and senior collaborators have developed from July 2023 onwards.

### **Presentation description**

Near Shiquan Street in Suzhou, a multitude of disadvantaged groups find their voices marginalized due to an array of factors, presenting pressing and unaddressed challenges (Figure 1). These marginalized voices encompass disabled and elderly individuals but also children of impoverished households.

Within the district, an unsettling ambience prevails, primarily attributable to physical impediments like iron fences, security grids, and the ubiquity of surveillance cameras. These security measures, designed to promote safety, inadvertently foster an environment of mistrust. Additionally, the lack of communal gathering areas exacerbates feelings of isolation. A site analysis elucidates an atmosphere characterized by segregation, surveillance, and a conspicuous absence of public spaces (Figure 2).

Most marginalized individuals at the site find themselves passively excluded from discourse, resulting in a profound sense of detachment from the broader societal

context. Consequently, a collective experience of togetherness, as expounded by Fromm (1956), remains notably absent. However, the site analysis also revealed that both issues can potentially be ameliorated by fostering self-empowerment and enhancing community cohesion (Figure 3). To strike at the root of the problem, I introduced the theory of the *carnavalesque*, which was developed by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *The Poetic Principles of Dostoevsky* (1984). The carnival has no stage and makes no distinction between the audience and performers. It is universal. Life itself is performed at the carnival. All the forms and symbols of its language overflow with provocations against the truths of the ruling class and their power. The carnivalesque reveals hidden social inequalities through performance, and the consideration of the carnivalesque's performativity in conjunction with self-empowerment and community dynamics leads to the concept of a community stage. Subsequently, I conducted further research into the historical evolution of such stages (Figure 3).

Theatrical performance has public origins. It can be traced back, on the one hand, to ritual spring dances, which engaged all members actively in dance (Harrison, 1978). Yet another origin is the Carnival, which appears to have developed from ancient festivals in Europe (Britannica, 2023). During these festivities, there was a temporary release from social obligations, permitting established hierarchies to be overthrown (Bakhtin, 1984). The carnival thus represented a period of celebration and symbolic renewal. Later, the ruling class took control of the theatre (Pelletier, 2006). Performance became a one-direction activity. The actors and the audience were divided into those who acted and those who watched, and the joyous celebrations beyond class borders disappeared (Pelletier, 2020, p.194). Carnival diminishes the sensation of detachment from the world as the collective experience within the group intensifies through shared engagement in social interaction (Fromm, 1956).

My project, "Unbound Theatre: Life as Performance," integrates the carnivalesque into contemporary architecture, providing space for symbolic renewal. Physical participation serves as a medium for empowerment. The project offers stages as a safe place for oppressed voices to perform, interact, and gather.

With the objective of crafting a novel stage, fundamental forms were extracted from the site and subjected to analysis, thereby engendering a distinctly unique formal language

(Figure 4). Through a meticulous examination of the site and its patterns, the notion of sites' characteristics was distilled and subsequently incorporated into the architecture (Figure 5).

Audiences typically unilaterally and passively accept the potential viewpoints of the actors in the theatre; eye interaction assists in a shifting views process whereby the audience adopts the views of the actors. In the "unbound theatre," attendees, both onstage and offstage, shift their views as participants of various groups rather than observing actors and their speeches, deconstructing the focus of theatre and authority simultaneously.

In theatre, the audience is normally a passive presence. In the unbound theatre, as shown in Figure 5, the social interaction created on the stage grants the audience agency. The actors, the transformers of the theatrical action, break down the boundaries that separate them from the audience. Both the audience and the actors turn acting into a social performance (Boal, 2009). They are persons capable of thinking for themselves. Here, everyone is the producer and spectator of the performance, and the spectator does not empower the character (or the actor) to act or think in their place; instead, they play the protagonists themselves, transforming the dramatic action, trying to find an approach, discussing a plan for change. Their interactions turn the site into a performative landscape (Figure 6 & Figure 7). Through performance, inhabitants become social agents. The city as theatre shown in Figures 9, 10, and 11 is a dynamic, complex system that advocates for a more inclusive, open, dynamic, and fluid architectural interaction system (Turner, 2015).

Beyond the concepts inherent in architecture, the specificity of the site assumes great significance. When employing theatre as an artistic medium to address social issues, due consideration must be given to the variations introduced by diverse sites, each inhabited by populations with distinct experiences and cultural backgrounds. Figure 12 displays a mix of trendy restaurants, jade carving shops, and retail outlets that are typical for Suzhou. The majority of those living in the area are elderly or disabled individuals. Their income just maintains a low living standard. Some are even supported by living subsidies from the government. There is a contradiction as those inhabiting the site cannot afford to participate in what the place offers. The place is the result of both contemporary urban planning strategies by authoritative urban planners serving the

city's economic development and responses to online trends. It is not the result of a strategy that focuses on serving the people (Sennett, 2018).

My project, in contrast, is dedicated to the marginalized inhabitants. It frames the carnivalesque as the landscape of resistance, affording agency to those with disabilities, the elderly, and the young. An analysis of their daily routines and challenges illuminates pressing issues and potential approaches. This entails the replacement of market-oriented functions with services that hold vital significance in the lives of residents, such as hairdressers, herbalists, tailors, and public spaces that facilitate community gatherings (Figure 12).

The unbound theatre offers areas for residents to perform, interact and gather. Traditional hairdressers, card rooms, and gathering spaces are embedded in the carnivalesque landscape to meet the needs of the disadvantaged and enhance community cohesion and vitality (Figure 13–Figure 16).

I wish to initiate a provocative yet intriguing discourse on the performative and narrative facets of carnivalesque architecture. This discourse is grounded in the concepts of carnivalesque and theatre within the specific contextual framework of Suzhou, China (Figure 17). Performative experience forms an indivisible organic unity with the architectural environment and local society. Theatre created by a designer encourages playful and even ironic interactions. Drawing inspiration from constructivism, the architecture itself becomes performative, as if it were an actor within the carnivalesque play (Figures 18 & 19).

Cathy Turner argued that the interaction between humans and architecture can be considered symbiotic (2015). Narrations of experiences are bound to architectural environments. Likewise, architecture shapes social performance through people's participation. The body plays a mediatory role in this process, driving the interaction between people and the building environment. Participants are no longer passively sheltered within but actively reshape the architectural environment through their actions and perceptions. This symbiotic relationship between humans and architecture not only contributes to creating the unbound theatre but also constitutes a part of humans' mode of normal life.

## **Further development**

### **Transgenerational collaboration**

Aspects of the “Architectural landscapes of resistance” were further developed with the assistance of Tom Scholte in the next phase of the transgenerational collaboration scheme. In this phase of the study, the primary focus is on examining the impact of the built environment on perceptions, drawing upon the framework of Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) and employing strategies inspired by Augusto Boal.

In this phase of the study, it became apparent that control over the residents was not exerted by any concrete authority. Instead, it was the established built environment—long-standing and emblematic of the region—that exerted control. This influence reflects the “imageability” that Lynch identifies as crucial in shaping public perception of urban spaces (1960). In an environment that has been endowed with positive significance by the public, it becomes challenging to oppose it. This is because such an environment is validated through a dual recognition process by both authority and people. In contrast, the self is individualistic, overlooked, and silent. These dynamics underscore the complex interplay between publicly sanctioned environments and the autonomy of the individual, suggesting that the built environment, through its symbolic significance and collective acceptance, can subtly dictate personal experiences and behaviours.

The ancient city district has meticulously preserved a significant array of traditional architectural structures to unify the urban lifestyle with traditional Suzhou values. However, the old city of Suzhou has witnessed the influx of novel information, demographics, and elements, and the erstwhile revered architectural environment has undergone a gradual transformation, transmuting from a preserver of heritage into a hindrance to the residents' pursuit of development (Figure 20). During this stage of research, I have integrated Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) into the concept of the resistant landscape as proposed by Mansell et al. (2023).

In this context, engaging in self-performance represents a form of radical agency. In Bakhtin's theoretical construct, the carnivalesque is characterized as radical for its capacity to authentically challenge established power structures (1984). However, the narrative I am presenting diverges from the subversion of power attributed to specific

political figures. Instead, it centres on the reevaluation of the influence exerted by the built environment (Figure 21). This includes a critical examination of the deficiency in design thinking within the architectural context, all while acknowledging the underpinning effect of the built environment, as comprehended through the theoretical frameworks of feedback pathways and control pathways (Mansell, W. et al., 2023).

Individuals may come to the recognition that their limitations are not predominantly dictated by autocratic or suppressive governance; instead, these constraints may originate from the confines of the physical environment in which they dwell. For the residents, they may establish barriers to protect themselves, yet inadvertently create obstacles in the control dynamics, failing to consider others' needs (Mansell, W. et al, 2023). The physical shelter can be seen to enact "arbitrary control" as it refers to the imposition of a controlling value system onto individuals by external forces because of the absence of design thinking, planning, and systemic considerations in the construction (Figure 2).

In this scenario, the challenge posed by the "carnavalesque" pertains to the power vested in the architectural environment. This power exerts its influence on both behaviour and modes of self-expression through the intricate mechanisms of feedback pathways and control networks (Mansell, W. et al., 2023). It stands in stark contrast to the previously existing paradigms of spatial architectural design (Figure 4).

By acknowledging the role of design and systems thinking in defining human experience, my narrative underscores the transformative potential of architecture and urban planning in liberating individuals to authentically manifest their true selves within functional spaces. It signifies an exploration of the potentiality of orchestrating the intricacies of everyday life simultaneously.

Moreover, the ideas by Augusto Boal, providing an imaginative and artistic perspective to reflect social issues through performance, could assist in further developing architecture as a radical framework for performative agency (2009). Consequently, I utilize playback theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed as basic strategies. In playback theatre, the core aim is to invite audiences to share their stories, which may range from personal experiences to cherished memories or significant emotions. As an audience shares a story, the conductor orchestrates its transformation into a live, improvised

enactment. Actors listen to the story and quickly decide characters, selecting costumes and props to visually embody the narrative. The actors then employ their improvisation talents to perform the story, bringing it to vibrant life before the audience (Figure 22). Playback Theatre is more than just special entertainment; it's a space for empathy and connection. It turns individual stories into shared artistic experiences, often prompting others to share their own tales. This enables us to perceive each "individual" distinctly, strengthening the tightly knit fabric of our community.

In Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, dance is set as a practice of resistance against oppression. Boal's interaction with factory workers, who were accustomed to the monotonous rhythms of assembly line work, was revolutionary. He invited the workers to closely observe and expand upon the mechanical movements involved in their work, slowing these motions down and exaggerating their amplitude to transform them into dance movements. For instance, actions such as drilling holes on a conveyor belt or moving items could be reinterpreted as unique dance sequences (Boal, 2009). Boal's method turned the mundanity of daily activities into dance, elevating the routine to art. This approach provided a unique perspective on finding poetic beauty in the ordinariness of everyday life.

The provision of settings for the collection of spatial transformations in the surrounding environment and the relationship between space and individuals is instrumental. Through multiple media, the exhibition of human lives, memories, and behaviours is facilitated (Figure 24). These facets of human existence converge to form a cohesive and fluid tapestry of poetry and dance. The incremental steps, marked by performance and self-discovery, enable individuals to embark on a journey of perceiving their lives through a lens of symbolism and poetry.

## **Illustrations**

Figures 1 through 24.

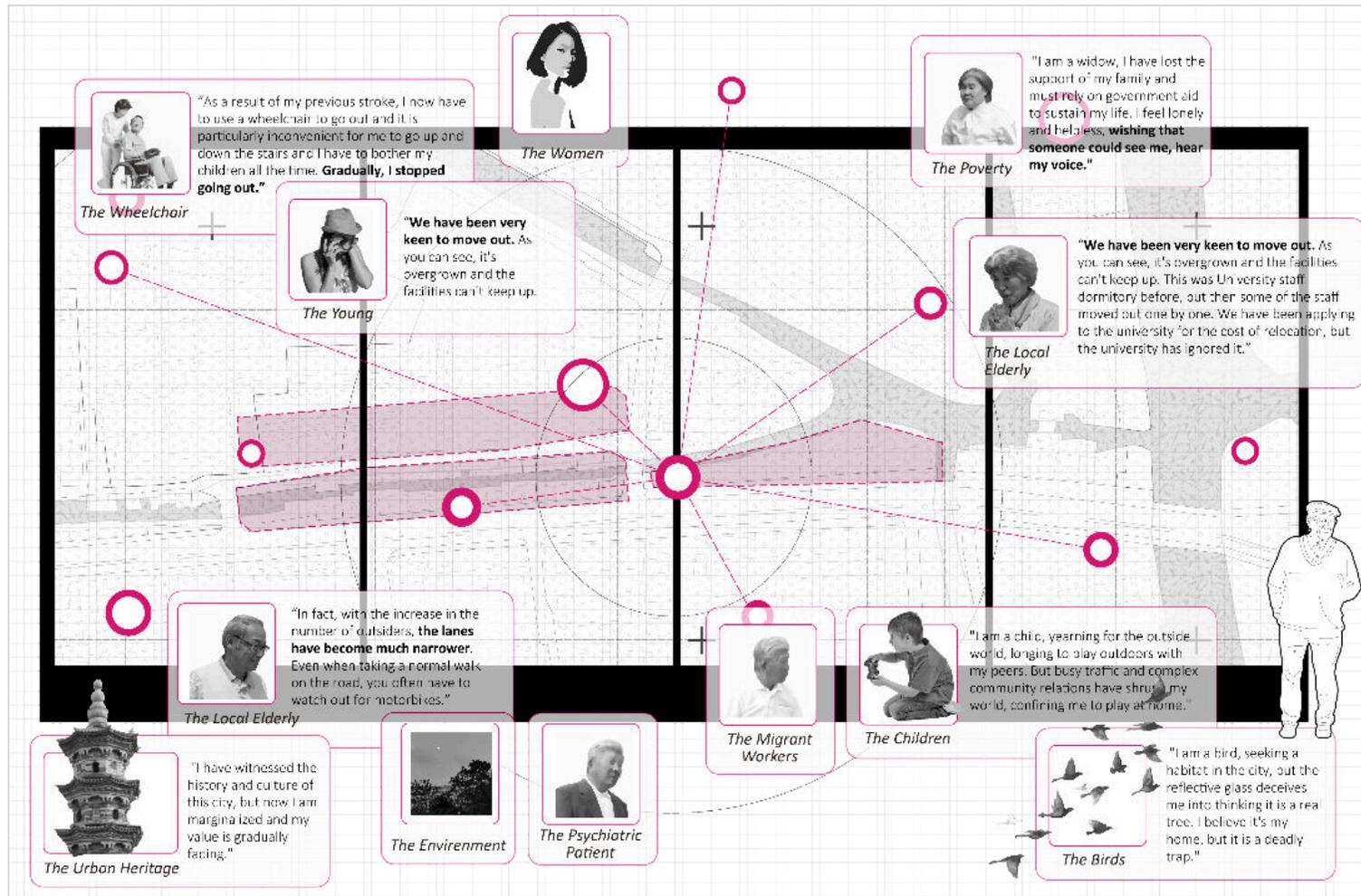


Figure 1: Ignored Voice in Site, diagram by Ruoxi Li.

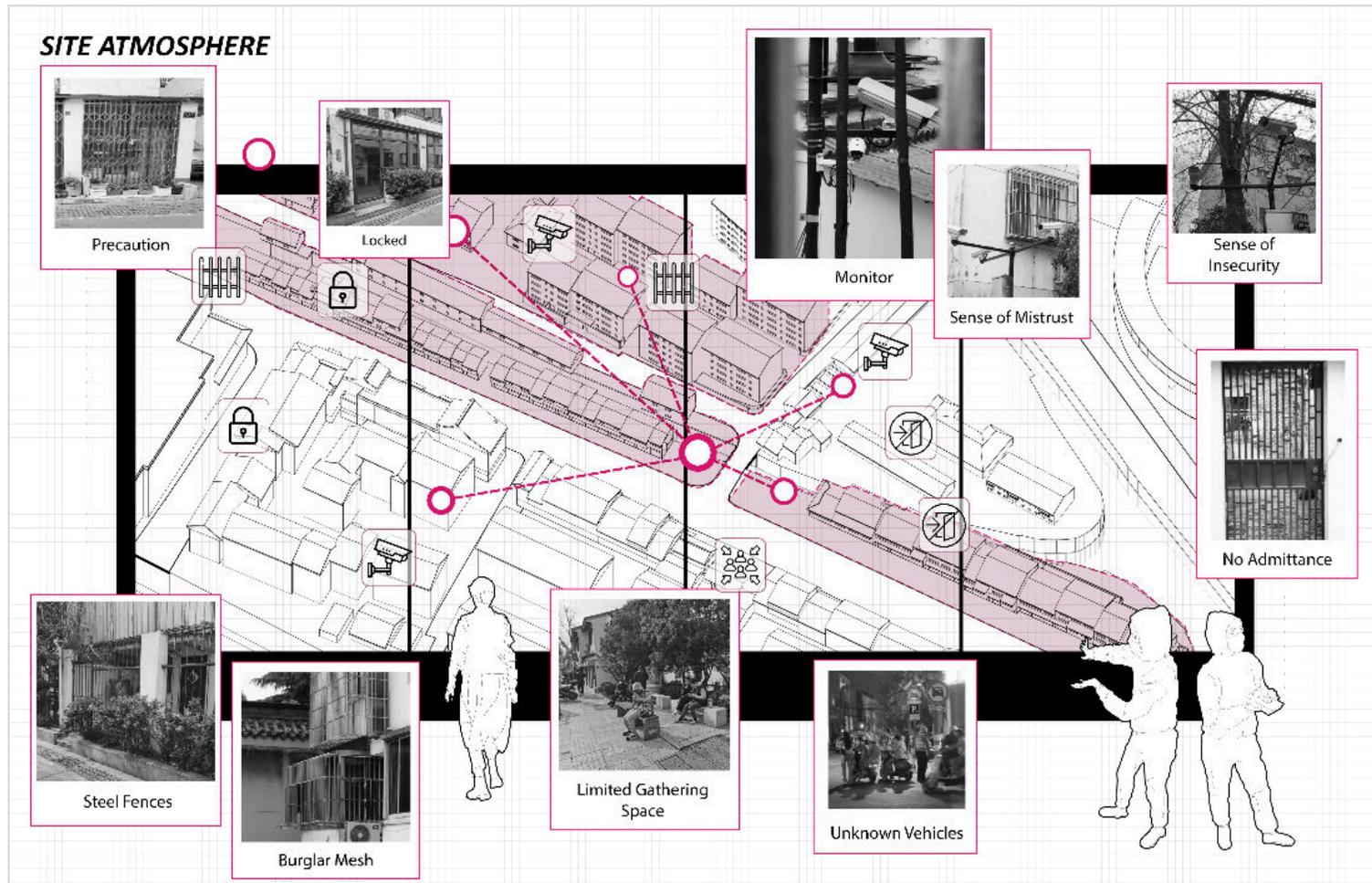


Figure 2. Unsafe Atmosphere in Site, diagram by Ruoxi Li.

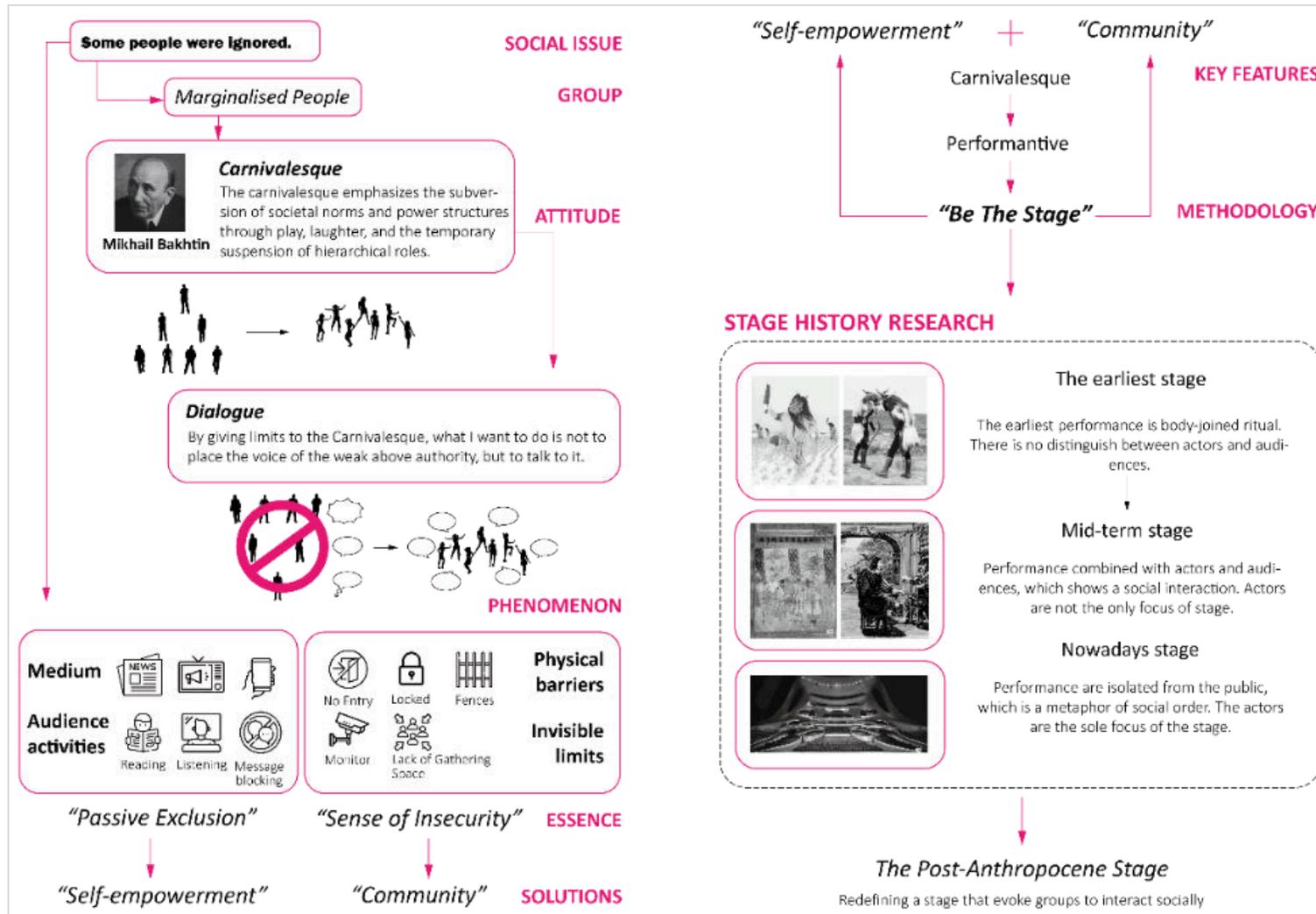


Figure 3. From Theories to Concept, diagram by Ruoxi Li.

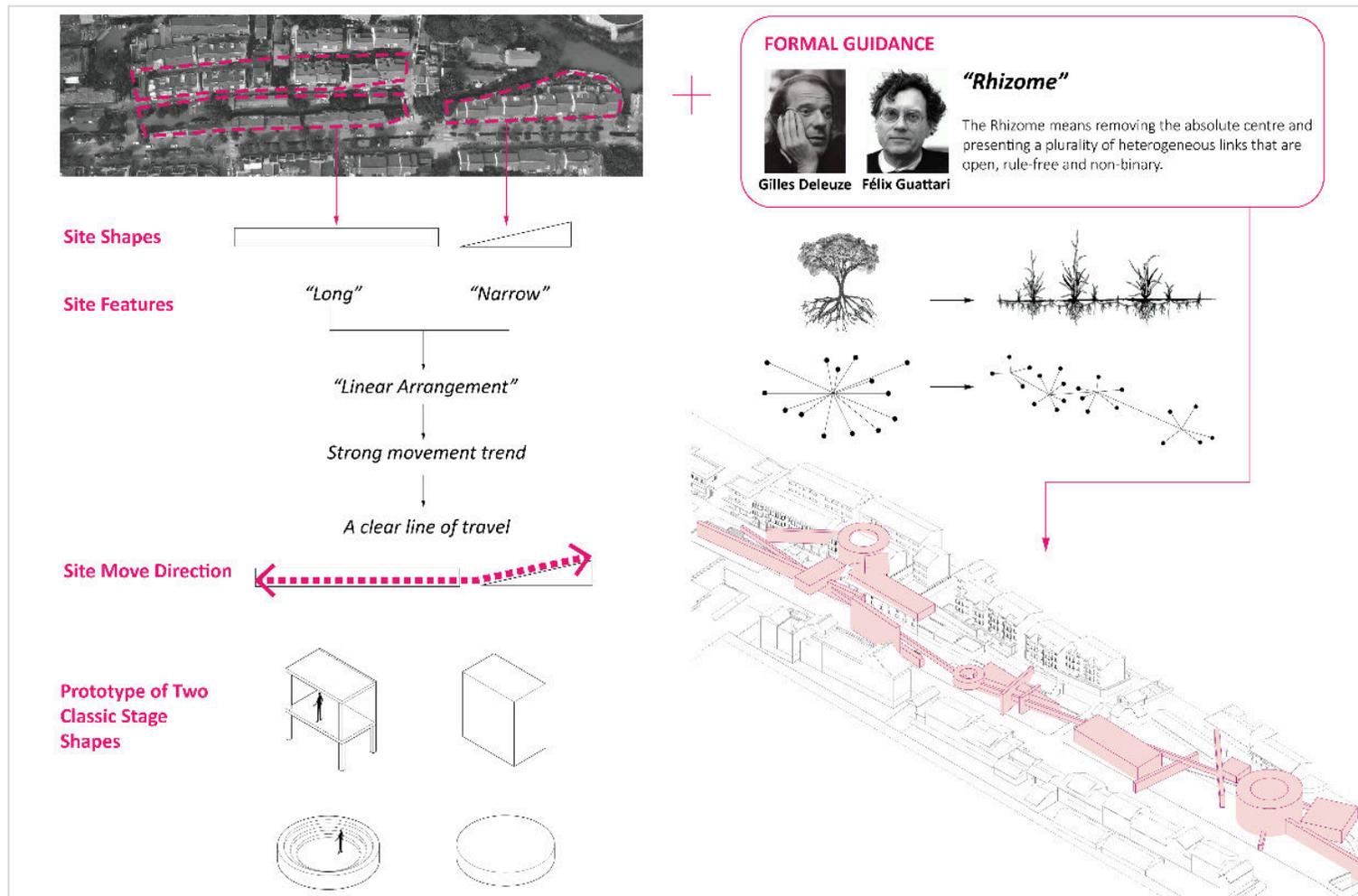


Figure 4. The Improvements of Architectural Form, diagram by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 5. The Improvements of Architectural Form, diagram by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 6. Shifting Views between different groups, drawings by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 7. Shifting Views: the centre of focus is always changing, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

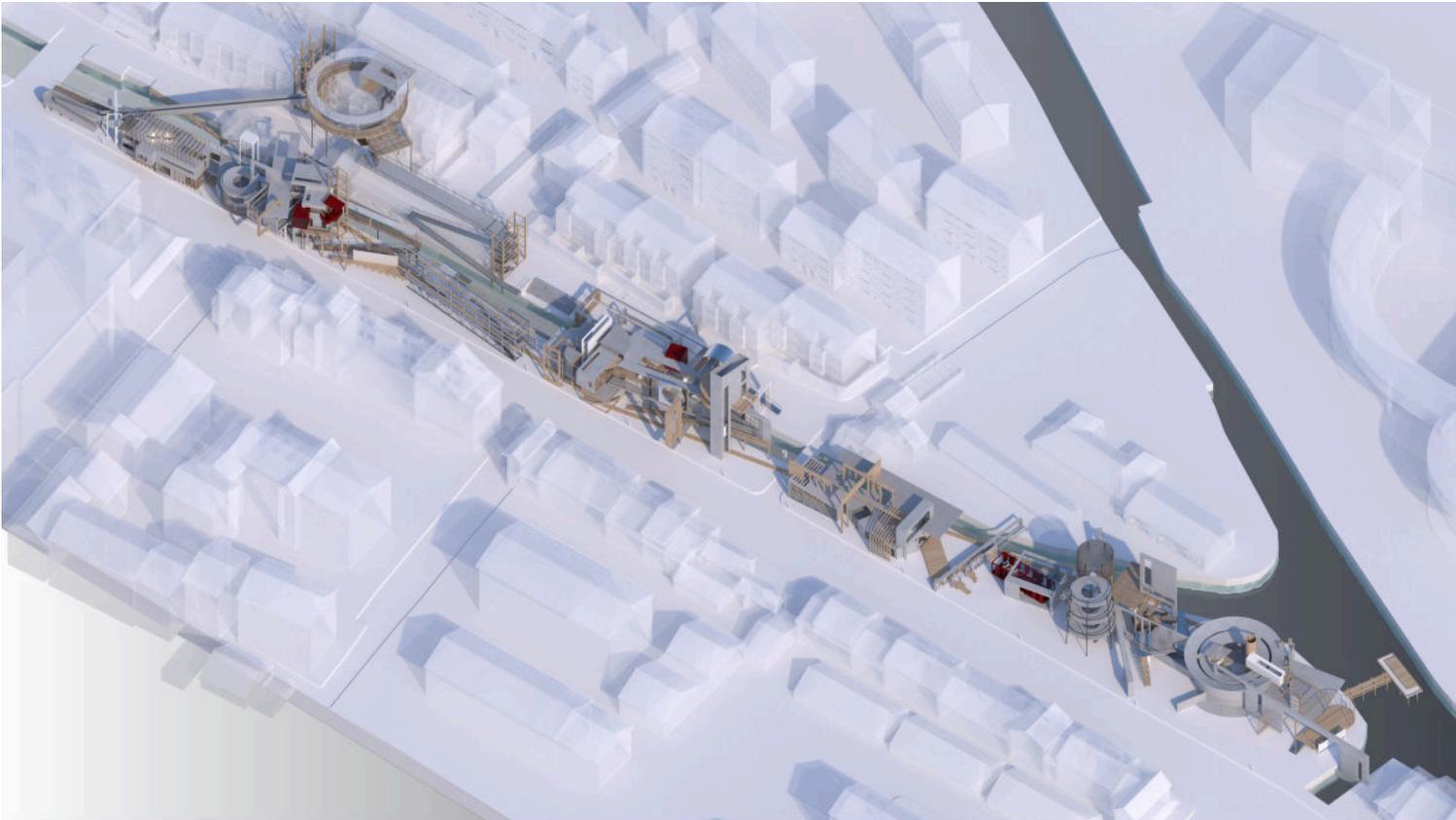


Figure 8. Bird View, drawings by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 9. Final Isometric View 1, open, dynamic, and fluid architecture interaction system.



Figure 10. Final Isometric View 2, open, dynamic, and fluid architecture interaction system.



Figure 11. Final Isometric View 3, open, dynamic, and fluid architecture interaction system.

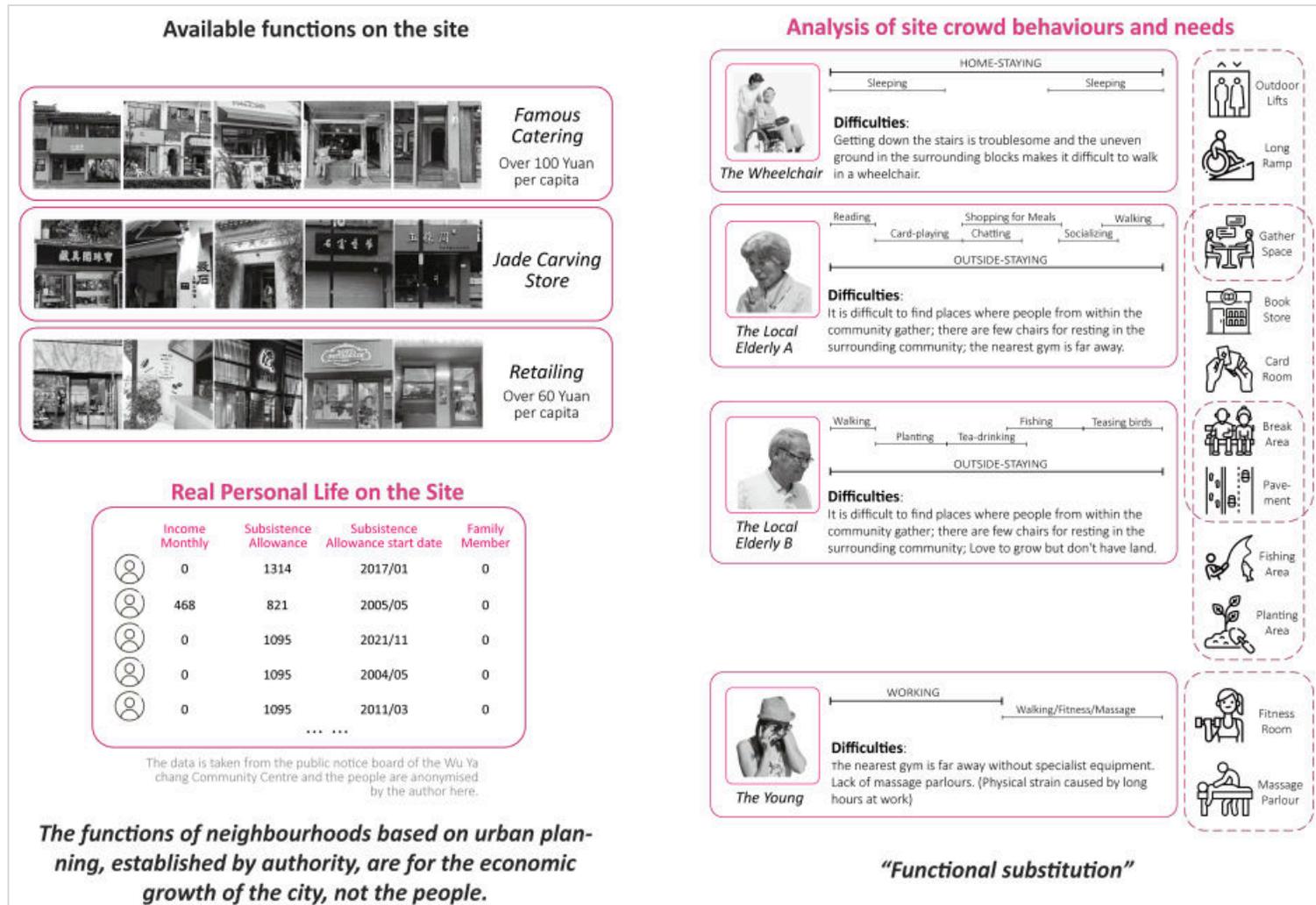


Figure 12. The available function in site and the ignorer's real life, diagram by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 13. Final Section to Show the Social Performance, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

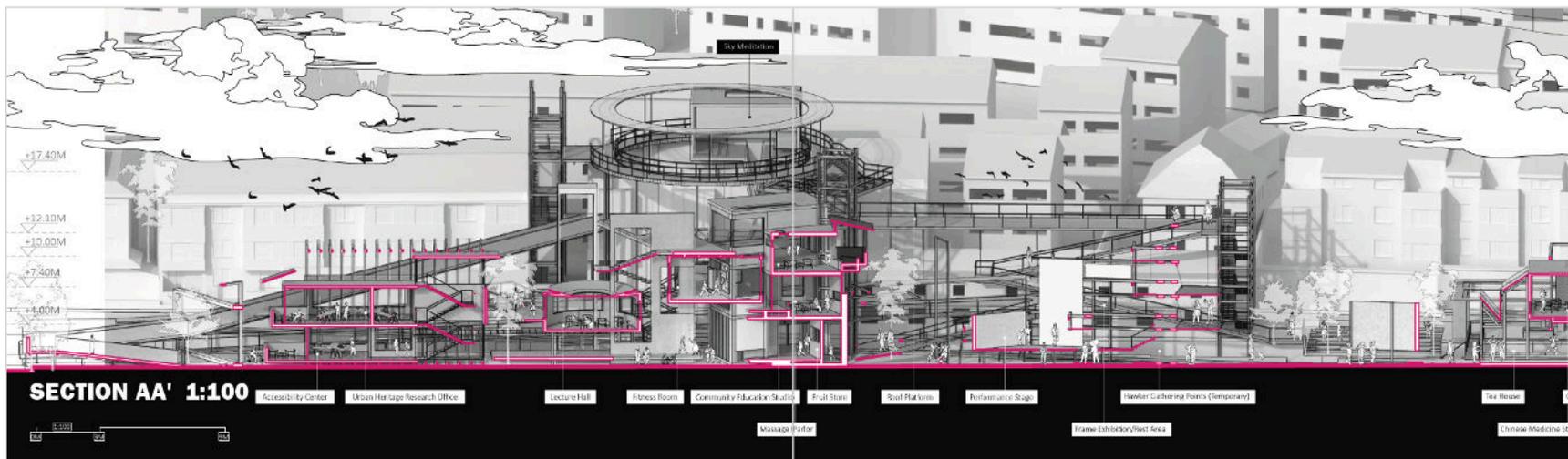


Figure 14. Final Section 1 to Show the replaced function, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

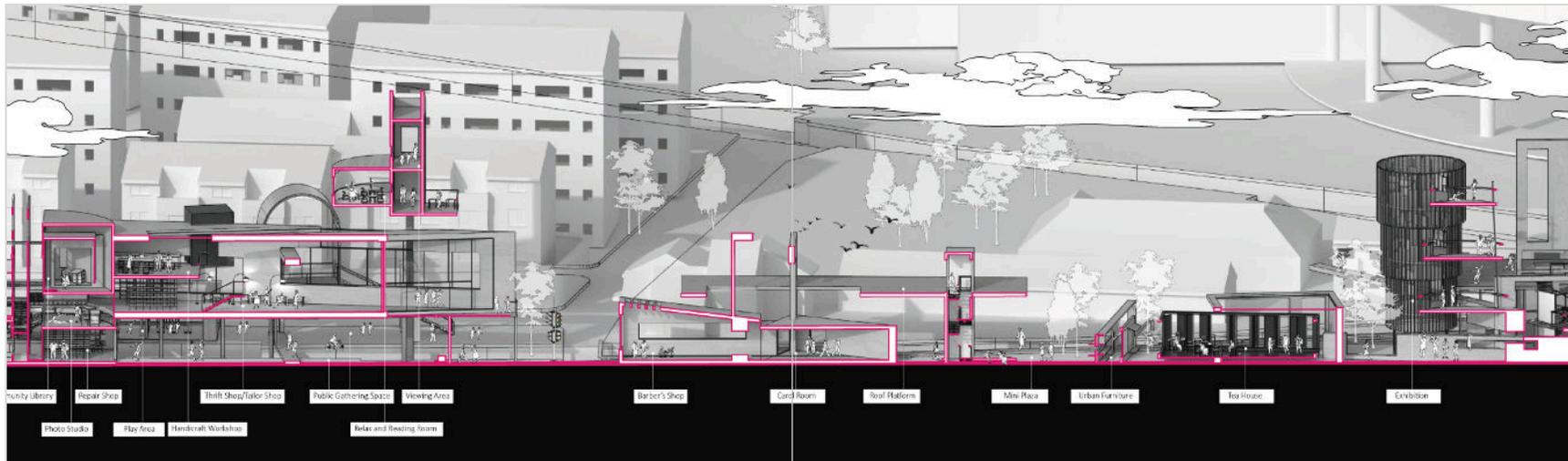


Figure 15. Final Section 2 to Show the replaced function, drawings by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 16. Final Section 3 to Show the replaced function, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

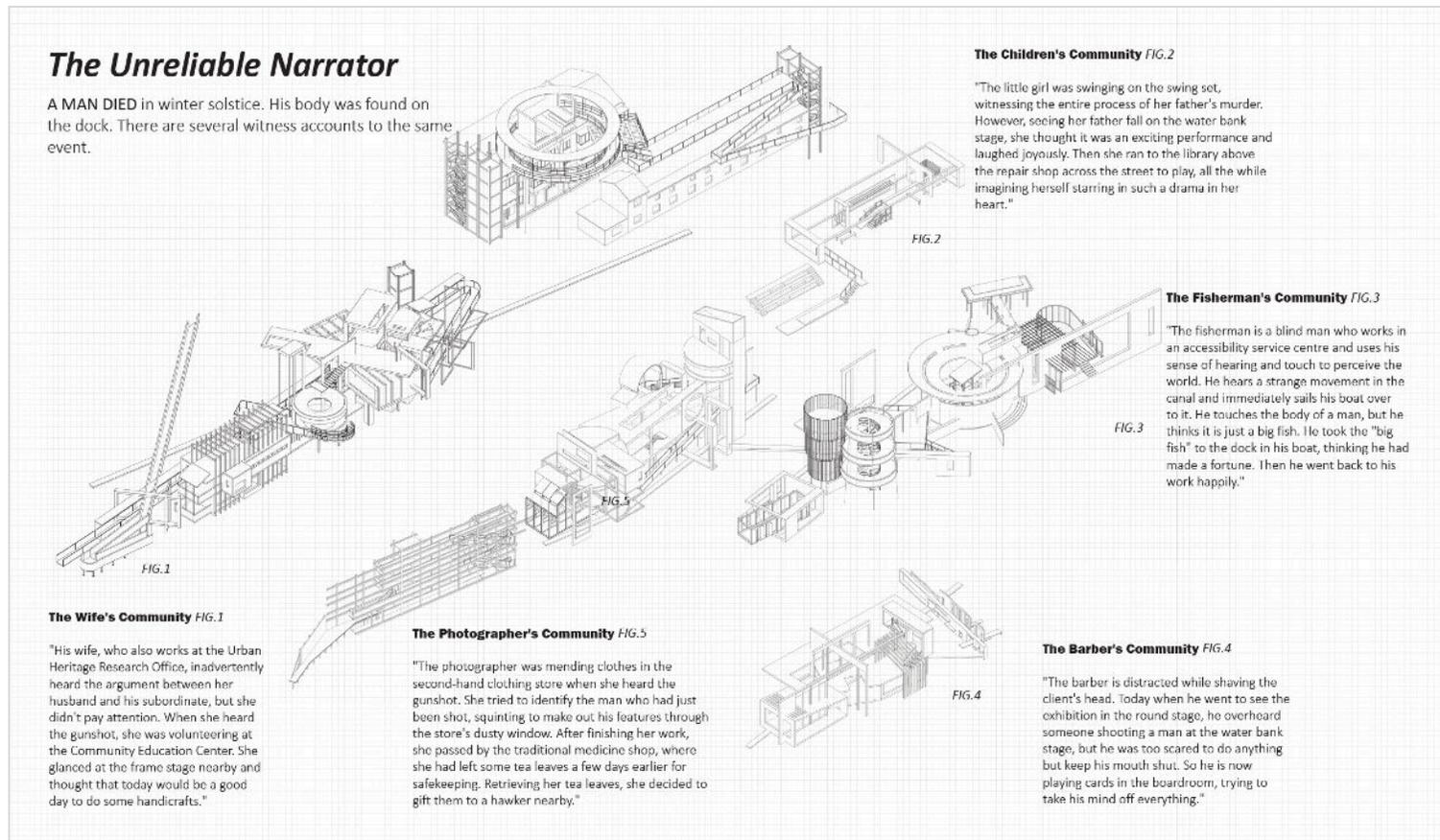


Figure 17. The Unreliable Narrator, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

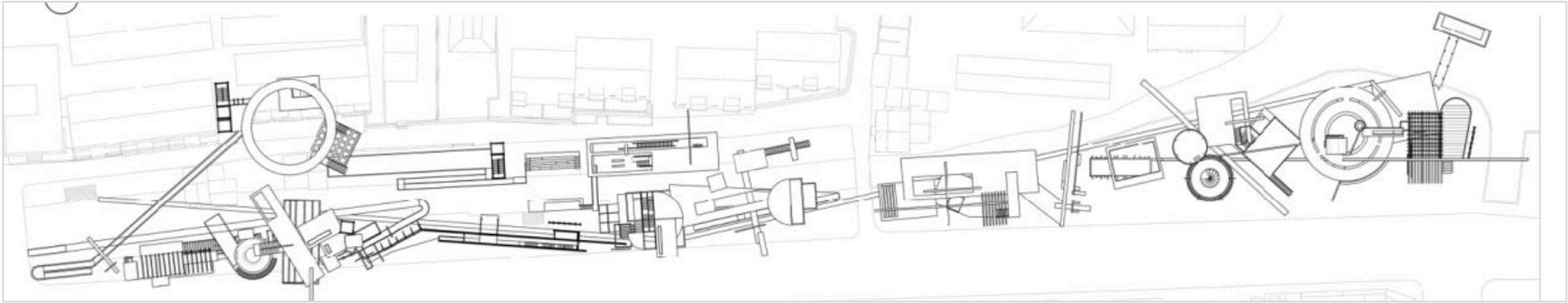


Figure 18. Final Site Plan, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

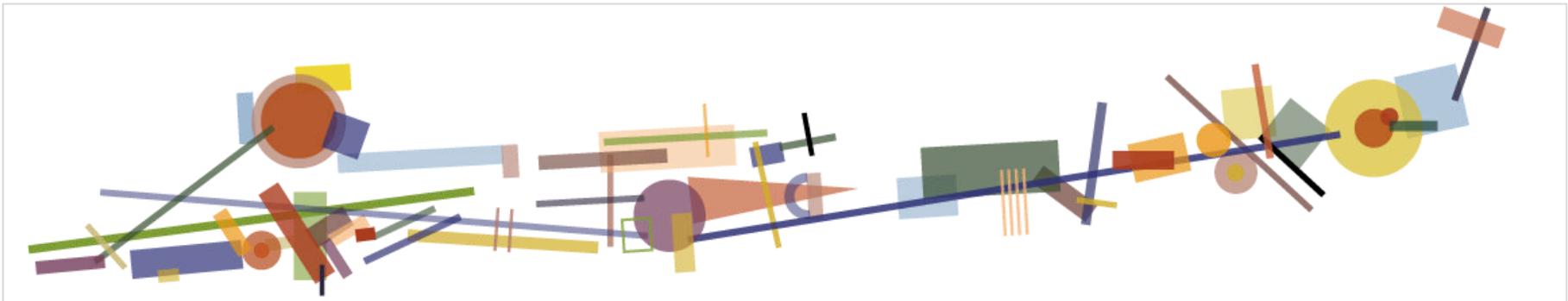


Figure 19. Final Impressive Site Plan, drawings by Ruoxi Li.



Figure 20. Suzhou Old City's situation, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

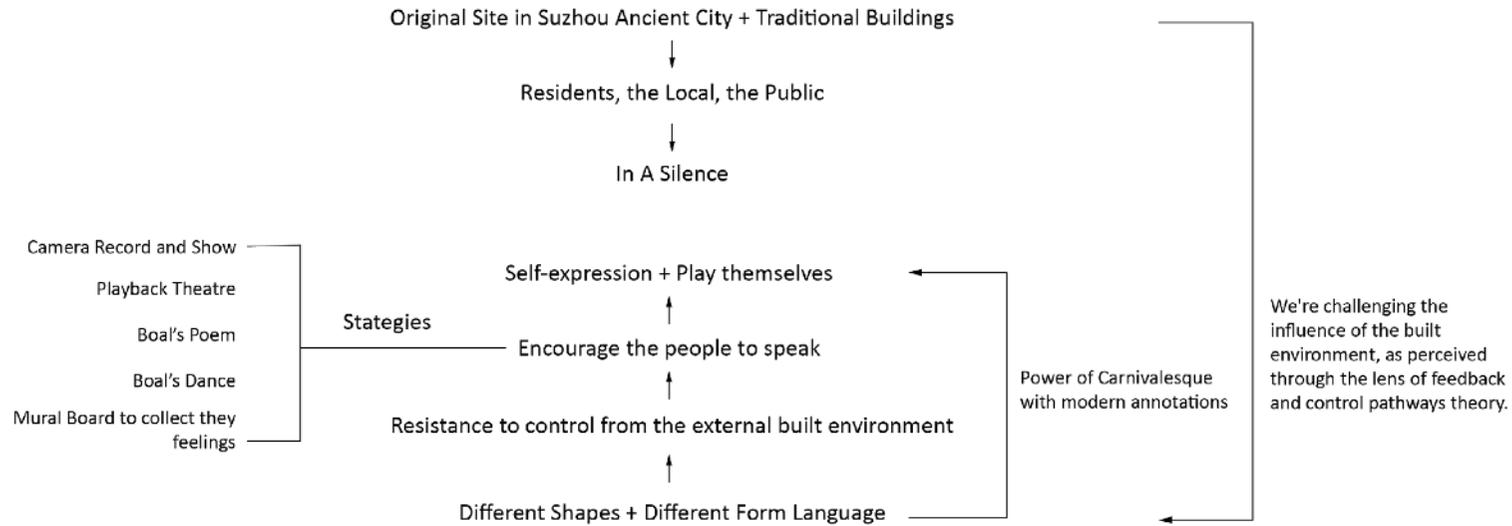


Figure 21. Relationships in between diagram, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

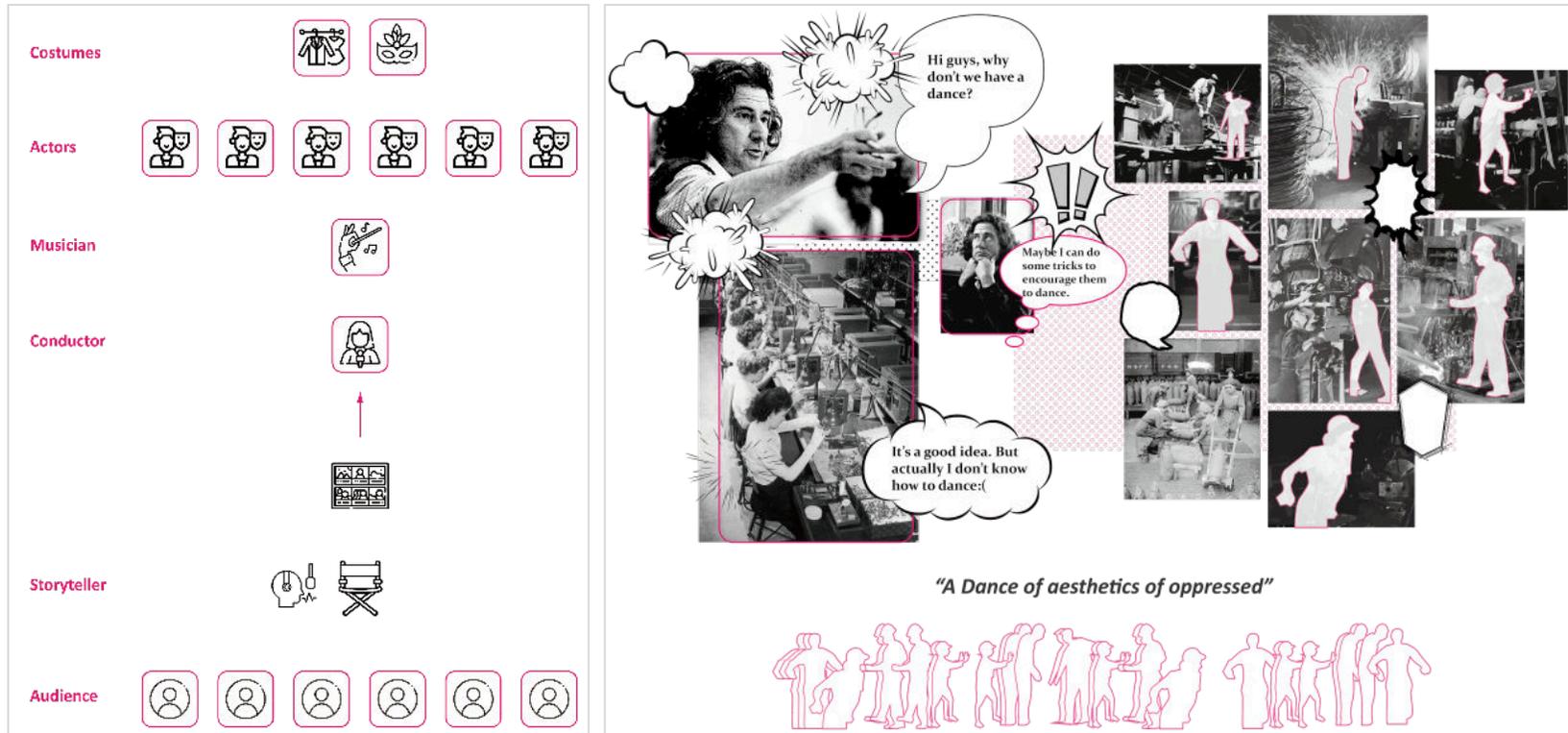


Figure 22. Playback theatre composition | Figure 23 How a dance of oppressed works, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

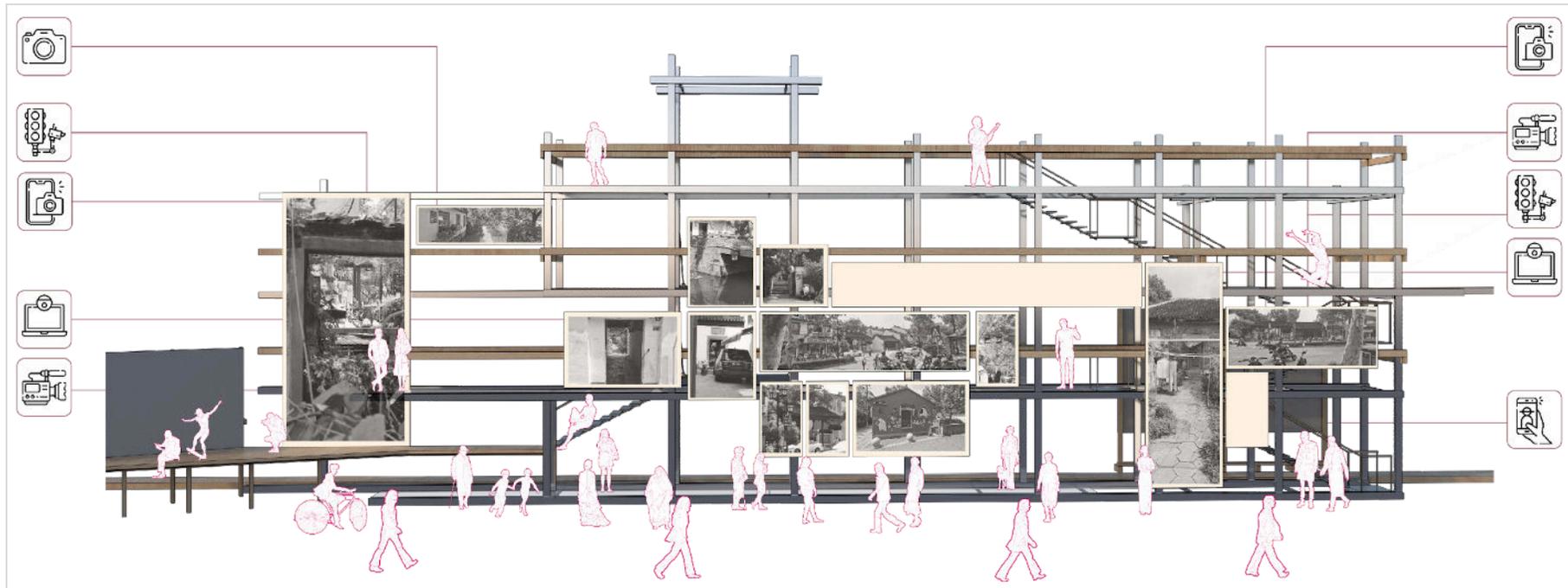


Figure 23. Screen showing stage, drawings by Ruoxi Li.

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