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Assemblage Reframing the Nearby: Resisting the spectacle through anti-communication

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Shucen Liu, Larry Richards, and Claudia Westermann

This presentation explores the potential application of systemic design principles in architectural and spatial design practice. It focuses in the first part on the concepts of assemblage as a possible strategy to resist modernity's tendency to replace meaningful relations with illusions of meaning, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The concept of assemblage further serves as a basis for a set of design principles to foster community engagement and ecological diversity in an architectural undergraduate final studio. Developed in two stages, De-coding the Nearby and Re-coding the Nearby, aim to create resistance against the spectacle of modern life dominated by capital and technology. In the second part, the presentation outlines how anti-communication, defined by Herbert Brün and further explored by Larry Richards, assists in challenging one-dimensional interactions and encourages multi-dimensional dialogue among inhabitants. The presentation then proceeds to explain how these ideas have assisted in the development of the interactions for the public art project *The Order of Things, Rivers and Mountains*, which was installed in August 2023 in the village of Wolong in Yunnan, China. Both strategy and basis for a method of evaluation, the concept of anti-communication has served to develop and test the multi-dimensional and multi-scale interactions between people and the artwork.

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 by integrating systems theory and systemic design principles. This presentation provides an overview of the De-coding the Nearby and Re-coding the Nearby undergraduate design project and the ideas developed in an associated essay by Shucen Liu (junior collaborator), which served as a basis for the collaboration with Larry Richards (senior collaborator) and the extension of the assemblage approach via anti-communication. The presentation further reports on the ideas, designs and thoughts the junior and senior collaborators have developed from July onwards.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, assemblage, anti-spectacle, anti-communication, nearby

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

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Theoretical framework

DE-CODING THE NEARBY AND RE-CODING THE NEARBY

At the beginning of the book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari state, "We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicals. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.15). The provocative statement challenges traditional notions of hierarchical structures and calls for a shift towards a rhizomatic understanding of the world—as an entangled, always emerging system.

This paper embarks on an exploration of design principles inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's writing, focusing on the concepts of assemblage as strategies to foster community life—against the meaningless spectacles that contemporary consumer culture produces. The study is grounded in an undergraduate architectural project located in a traditional alley in Suzhou, China. The project aims to foster spontaneous relationships among a diverse population by reframing the *nearby* through a rhizomatic assemblage approach to challenge the spectacle of modern life (Figures 1,2, 3). This exploration contributes to a wider, yet still evolving, understanding of how architecture can potentially facilitate community engagement, ecological diversity, and a deeper perception of the *nearby*. The study offers a glimpse into the potential of systemic

design principles in shaping architectural spaces that aspire to be more inclusive, emotionally peaceful, and less atomistic and utilitarian.

The concept of assemblage, as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 88-89), challenges traditional hierarchical structures. The authors propose an interconnected and non-linear understanding of systems—a dynamic interaction of diverse elements and underscoring principles of change and fluidity. Assemblage provides strong resistance to Debord's "society of the spectacle," which is marked by one-dimensional communication, maintenance of the status quo, and social alienation (Debord, 1967). Assemblage serves as a strategy of subversion, rearranging elements in new, unorthodox ways as a means to open possibilities for agency. The concept of assemblage also closely aligns with Debord's theory of detournement, offering resistance against the spectacle's homogenising effects, thus promoting diversity and introducing possibilities for transformation (Debord, 1967, p.110). The assemblage approach is an underlying theoretical framework in my final undergraduate studio project.

An assemblage is a whole formed by the interconnections and flows between its components, where the identity and function of the parts and the whole arise from the flows between them (Dovey, 2013). Flow is crucial. However, as Phillips (2006, pp.108-109) points out, the English term 'assemblage' lacks some of the connotations of the original French term 'agencement', particularly in relation to agency. The agency in this context may be closely related to the stimulation of flow. I acknowledge my ongoing struggle with understanding the nuances of this term and its implications for my study. Looking ahead, I'd like to further develop my comprehension of this concept or other concepts that are more useful with Larry's assistance, engaging with systems thinkers and exploring the application of assemblage from systemic perspectives. This will complement my current knowledge with understandings of broader systemic frameworks, enhancing the clarity and coherence of my research.

The subsequent sections will delve into the theoretical underpinnings, the project's application of these principles, and the potential reverberations these concepts might have for architectural design discourse.
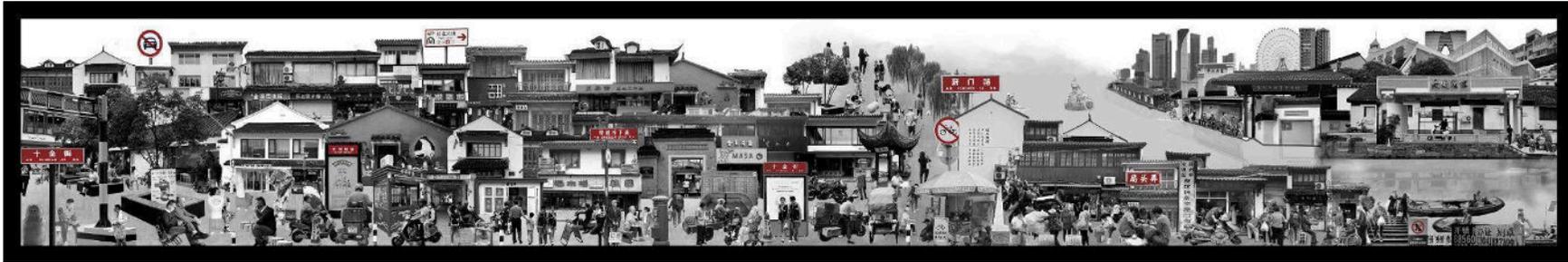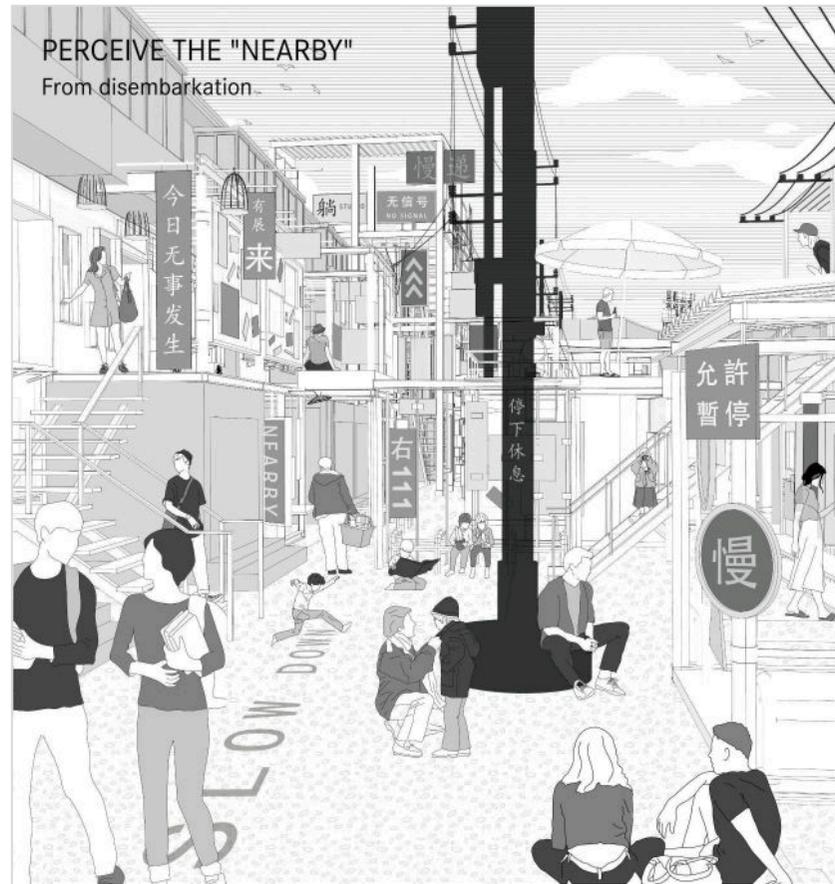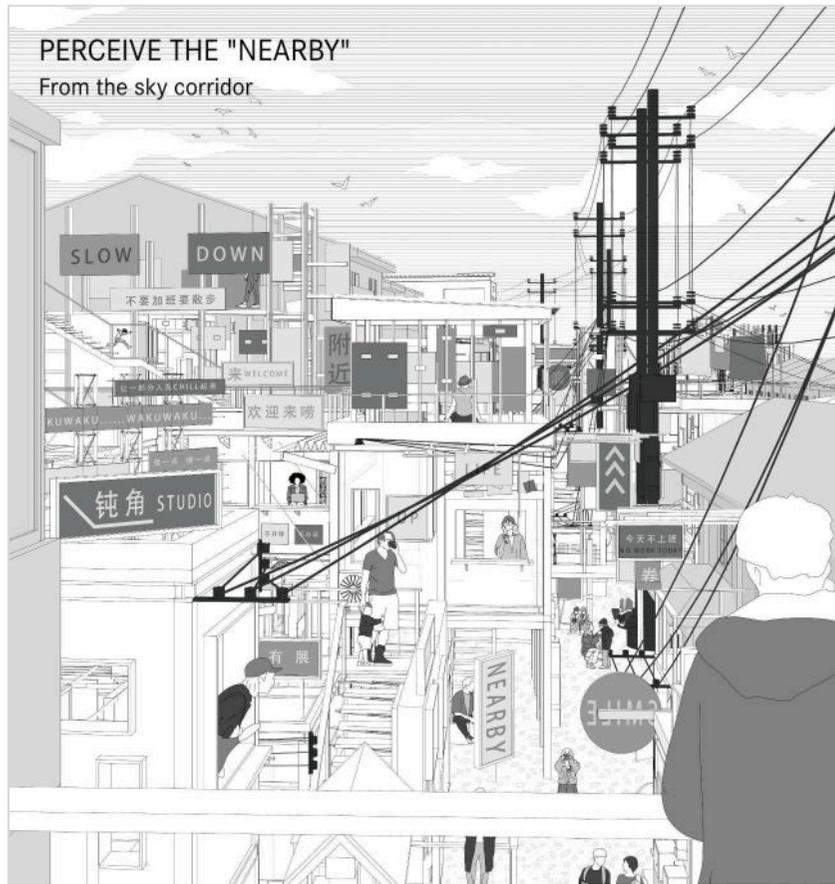
Figure 1: FYP Nearby Collage. Shucen Liu (2023).

Figure 2 &3: FYP De-coding the Nearby. Shucen Liu (2023).

Analysis and application of the assemblage framework

The project is situated in a traditional alley in Suzhou, China, characterised by diverse demographics and spontaneous activity spaces. However, research revealed a lack of intersecting activities among different groups, reflecting the atomisation and diminished perception of the nearby in contemporary society. This decline, driven by the dominance of capital and ubiquitous technology, promotes isolation and individualism, eroding societal solidarity and cooperative spirit, a phenomenon encapsulated in Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" (Figure 4). Architecture, as an interface, can challenge this society of the spectacle, fostering inclusivity and nurturing human connectivity and ecological diversity, thus offering a potent antidote to the pervasive disconnection.

The first phase of the project, De-coding the Nearby, (Figure 5), operates as an unconventional anthropological research centre. This stage signifies my preliminary exploration of the assemblage concept. Instead of a traditional research centre's unified structure, I partitioned it into smaller structures that act as parasites in the existing urban street texture (Figure 6). This approach aligns with the concept of 'a thousand plateaus' by Deleuze and Guattari (Shaw, 2015, pp.158). Each separate structure is considered a plateau, with the entire 'nearby' regarded as the 'earth' (Figure 7). Each unit, a functional space, maintains internal unity but, with its open connection to the street, retains flexibility for self-vibration, preserving freedom and variability. The 'nearby' serves as a foundation, providing support points for units to maintain stability and undergo change.

By applying the assemblage concept, the project challenges conventional perceptions of the street. The observers' diverse use of space triggers the nearby's diversity and potential, with the vitality of the nearby prompting reflections on diversity and inclusiveness and enhancing the perception of nearby entities. This project employs this framework to contest one-dimensional communication, status quo maintenance, and social alienation inherent in the society of the spectacle.
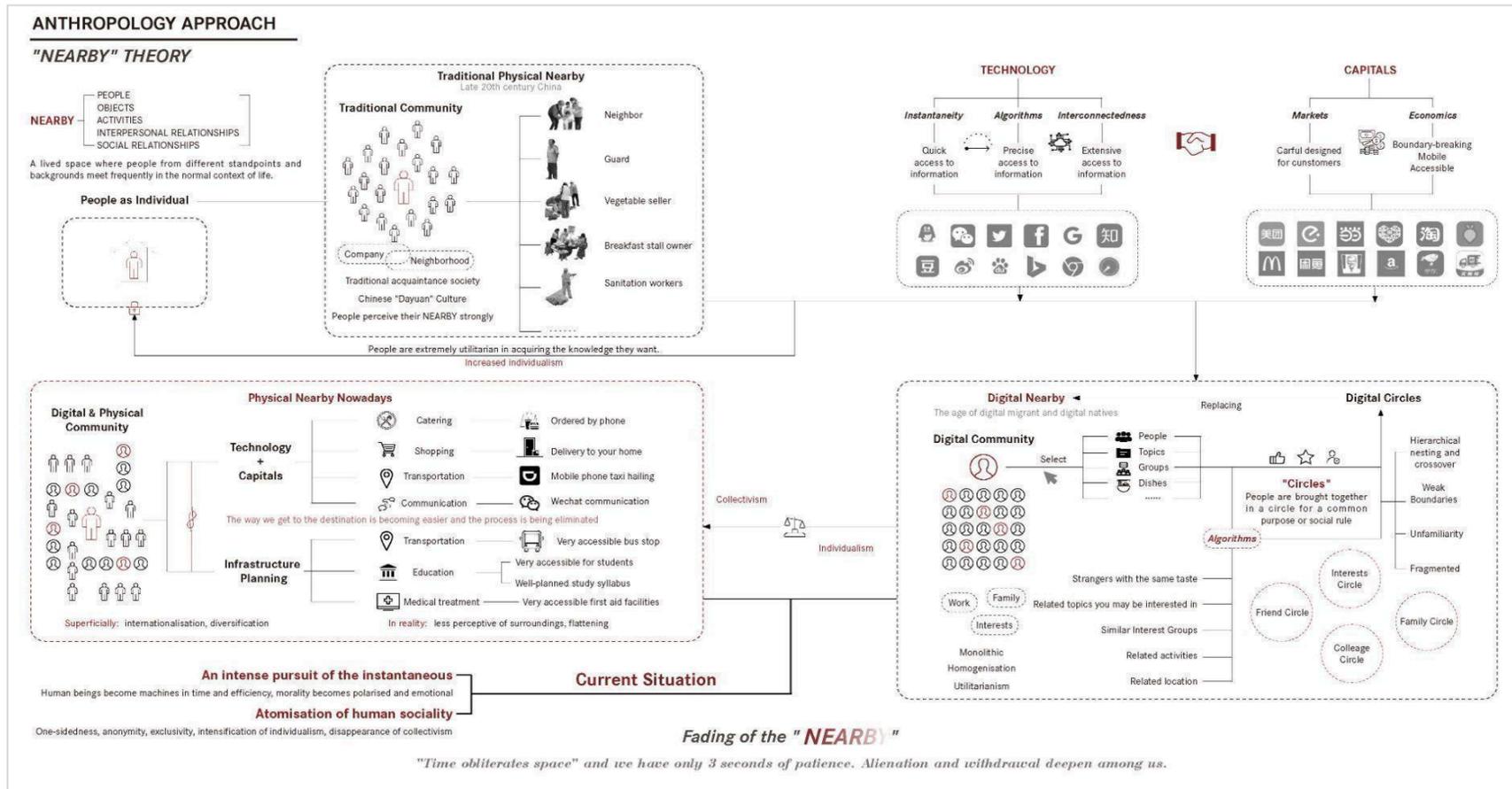
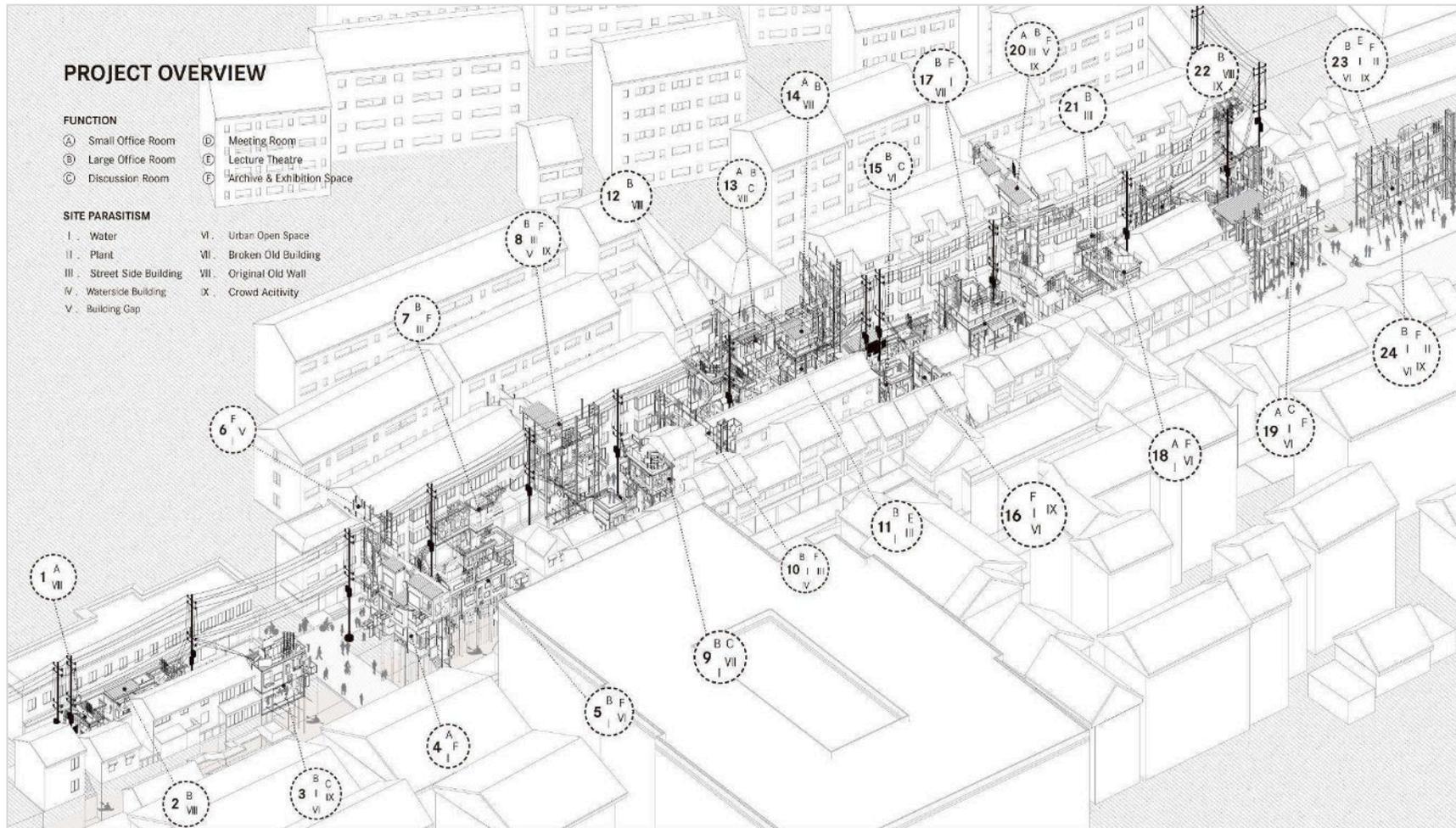Figure 4: FYP Nearby Theory. Shucen Liu (2023).

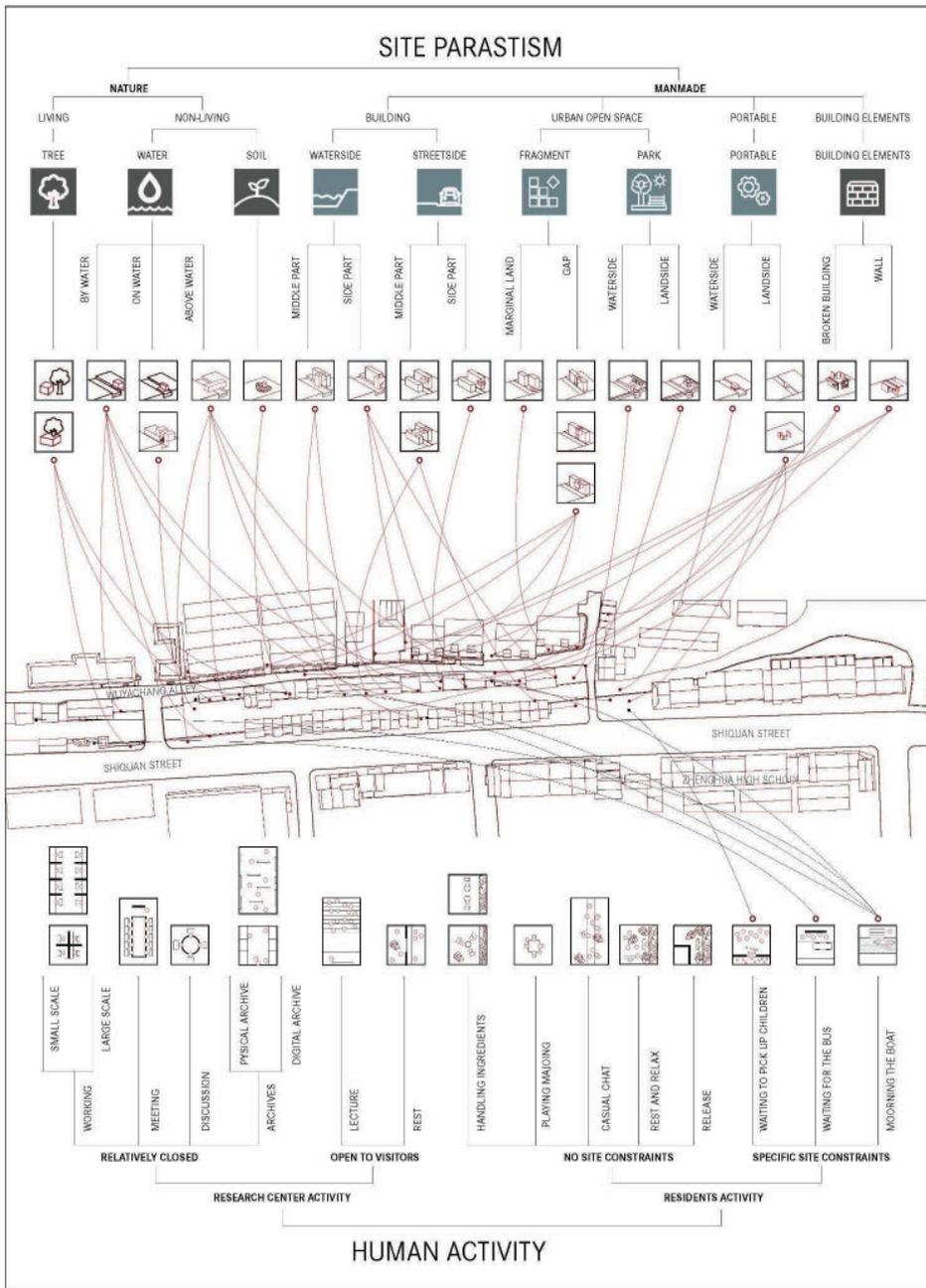*Figure 5: FYP De-coding the Nearby. Shucen Liu (2023).*

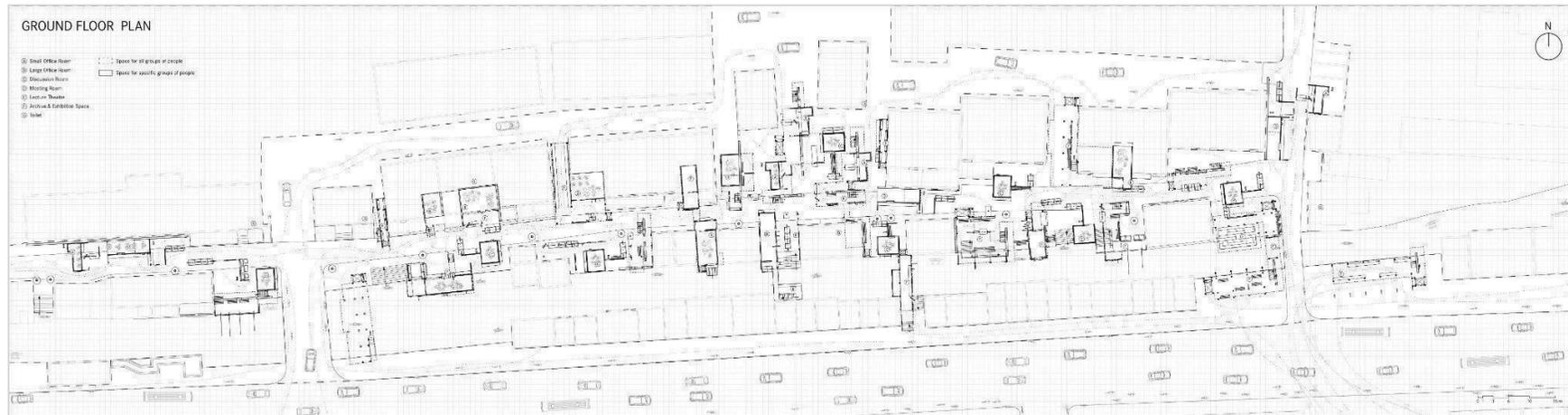Figure 6: FYP Site Parasitism. Shucen Liu (2023).

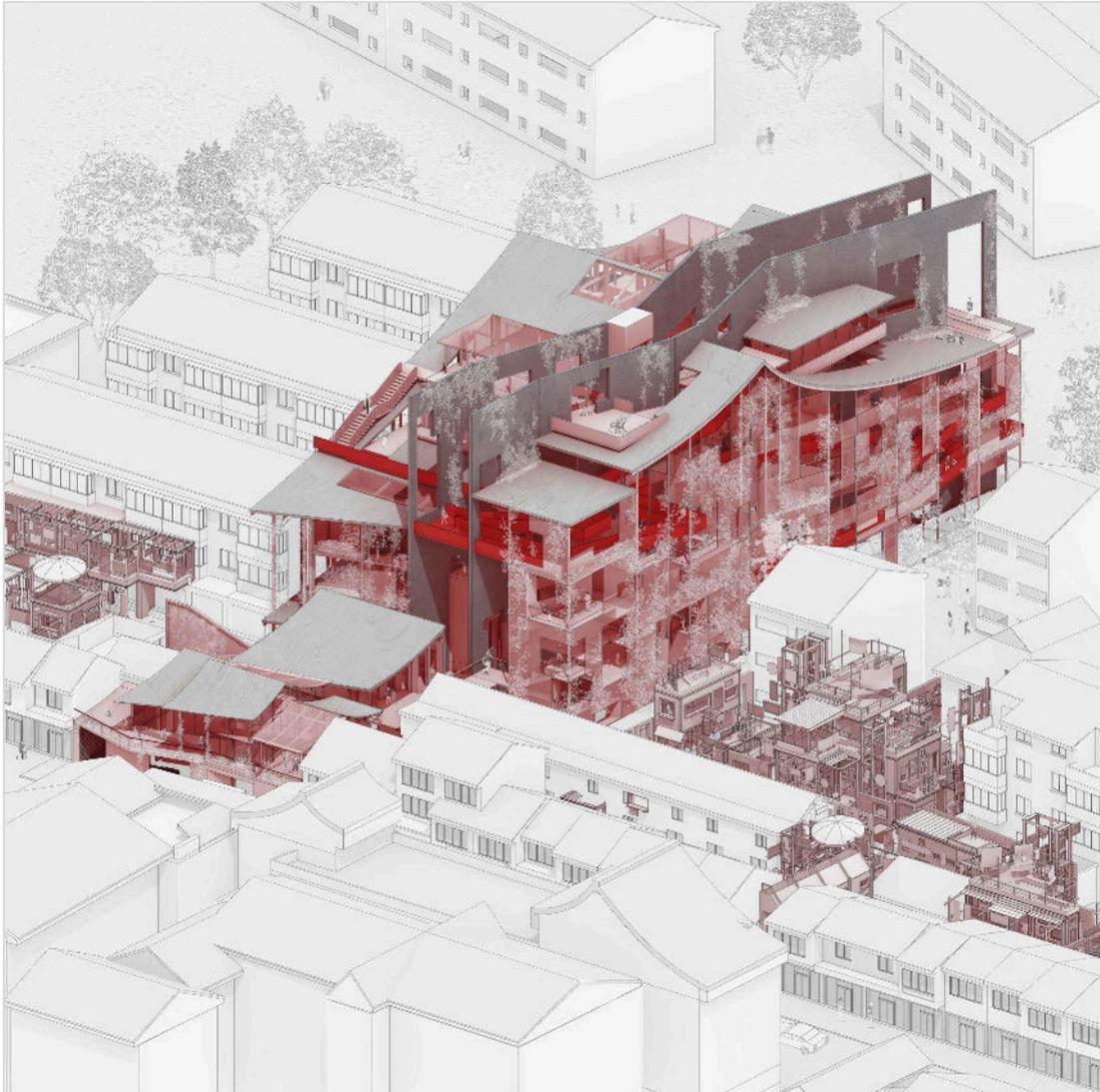Figure 7: FYP Ground Floor Plan. Shucen Liu (2023).

Figure 8: FYP Re-coding the Nearby. Shucen Liu (2023).

In the second phase of the project, Re-coding the Nearby (Figure 8), I attempted to reframe the existing programs on the site using the assemblage approach, integrating various elements into the nearby system. The emphasis shifted from space to a multi-dimensional fusion of materials, visuals, activities, and more, embodying the concepts of rhizome and assemblage. To naturally integrate it, I accumulated multi-dimensional perceptions of the site, including architectural features, street atmosphere, life scenarios, and perception of materials and construction. I sought out everyday elements of the adjacent street (Figure 9) and attempted to integrate them (Figure 10).

In the architectural integration process, I attempt to use assemblage to stimulate the vitality of the nearby system. For example, by preserving the traditional sloping roof form, I challenged the conventional definition of roofs, thereby expanding the possibilities for internal space activities (Figure 11). Additionally, the design employs a traditional Chinese architectural feature of extending living spaces to facade spaces, promoting the flexible and adaptable use of space (Figure 12). Furthermore, by vertically developing Suzhou's traditional alleyways, the project reframes traditional spatial understanding and encourages community interaction (Figure 11). The project also combines local materials and construction methods (Figure 13)

The design introduces *inefficient circulation* and a heterogeneous spatial experience, emulating the shifting scenes found in traditional Chinese gardens (Figure 11). This unique spatial experience encourages observers to actively participate in the system, generating social interaction, dismantling traditional community boundaries (Figure 13), and fostering a sense of belonging or prompting other contemplations among observers influenced by the system.

The De-coding the Nearby and Re-coding the Nearby project in Suzhou, China, exemplifies the transformative potential of systemic design principles in architectural practice. By employing an assemblage strategy, it attempts to challenge traditional architectural norms and offers a model for fostering community engagement and ecological diversity. The project underscores the importance of the nearby in architectural design, promoting a localised understanding of space that counters the homogenising spectacle of modern life.
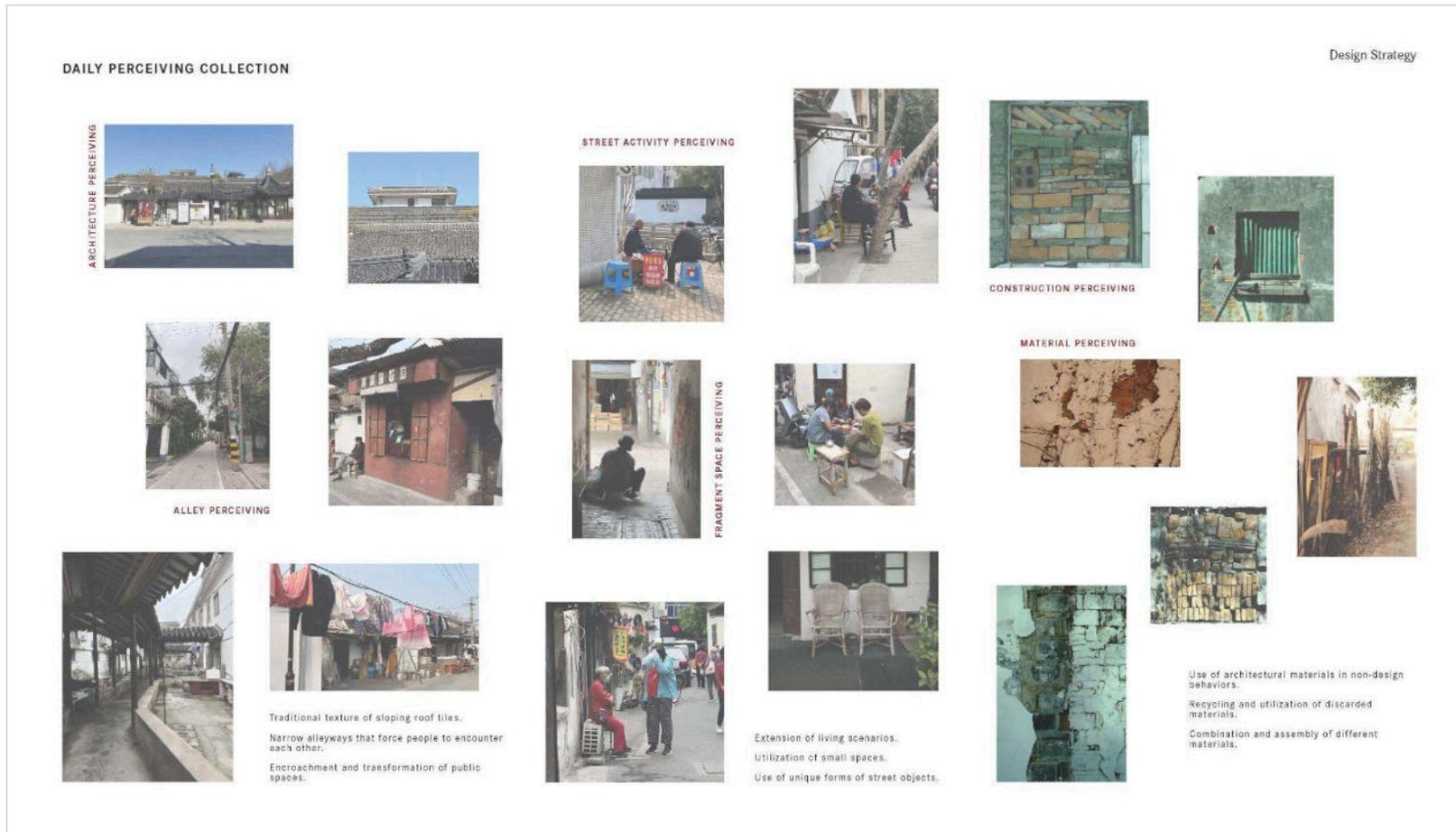
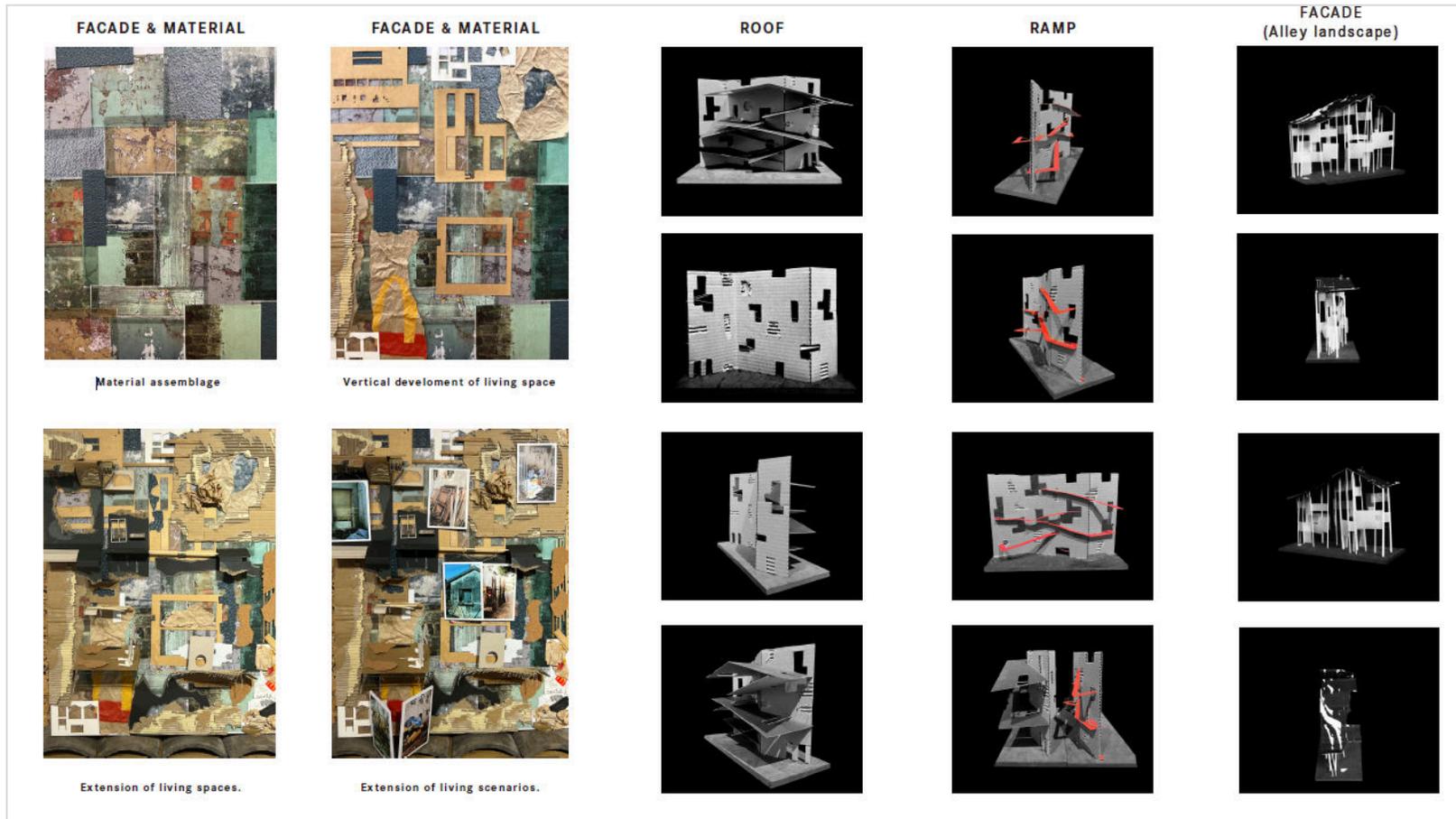*Figure 9: FYP Nearby Perception. Shucen Liu (2023).*

Figure 10: FYP Physical Models. Shucen Liu (2023).

Figure 11: FYP West Elevation. Shucen Liu (2023).

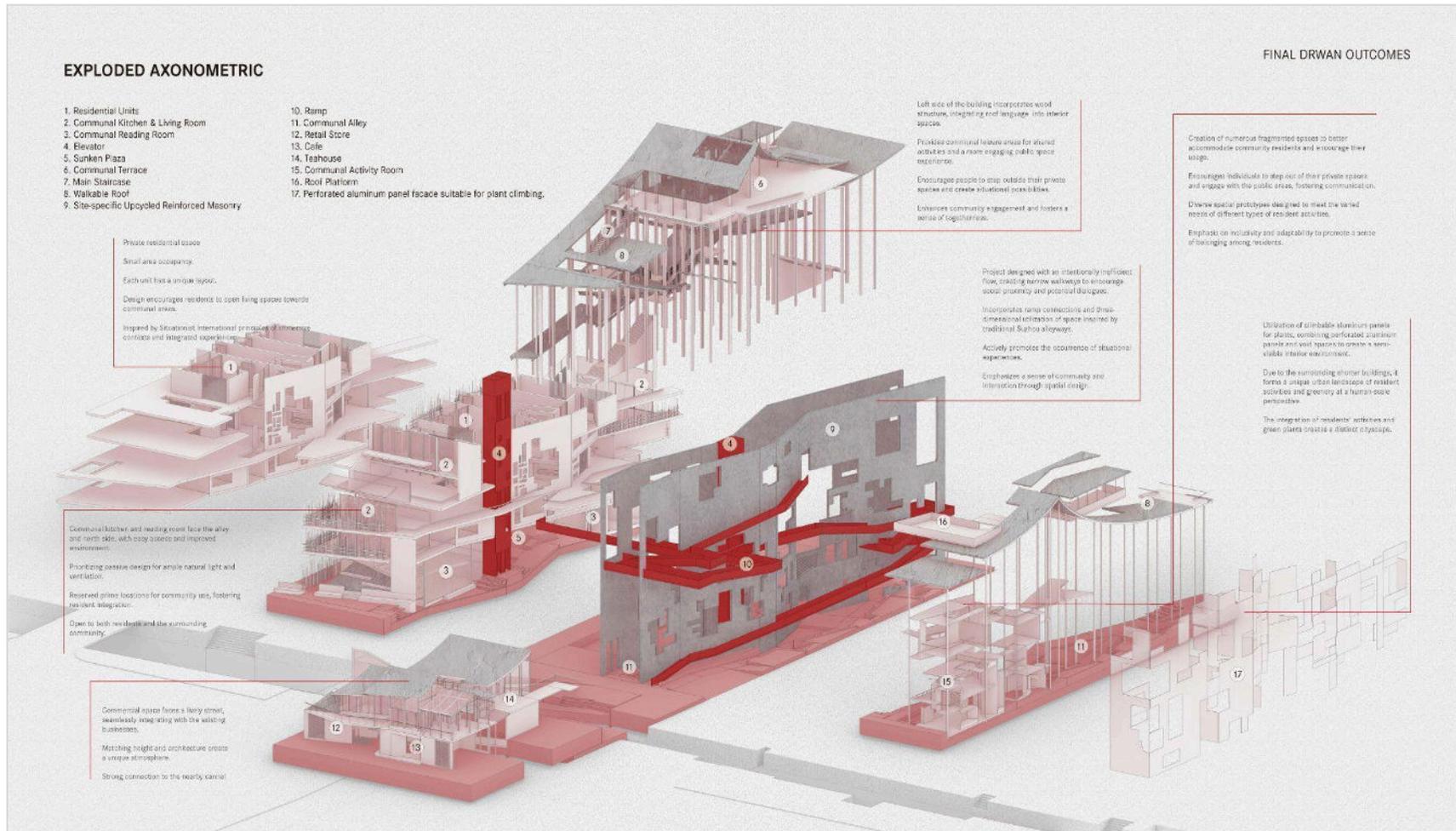*Figure 12: FYP Living Space Extension. Shucen Liu (2023).*

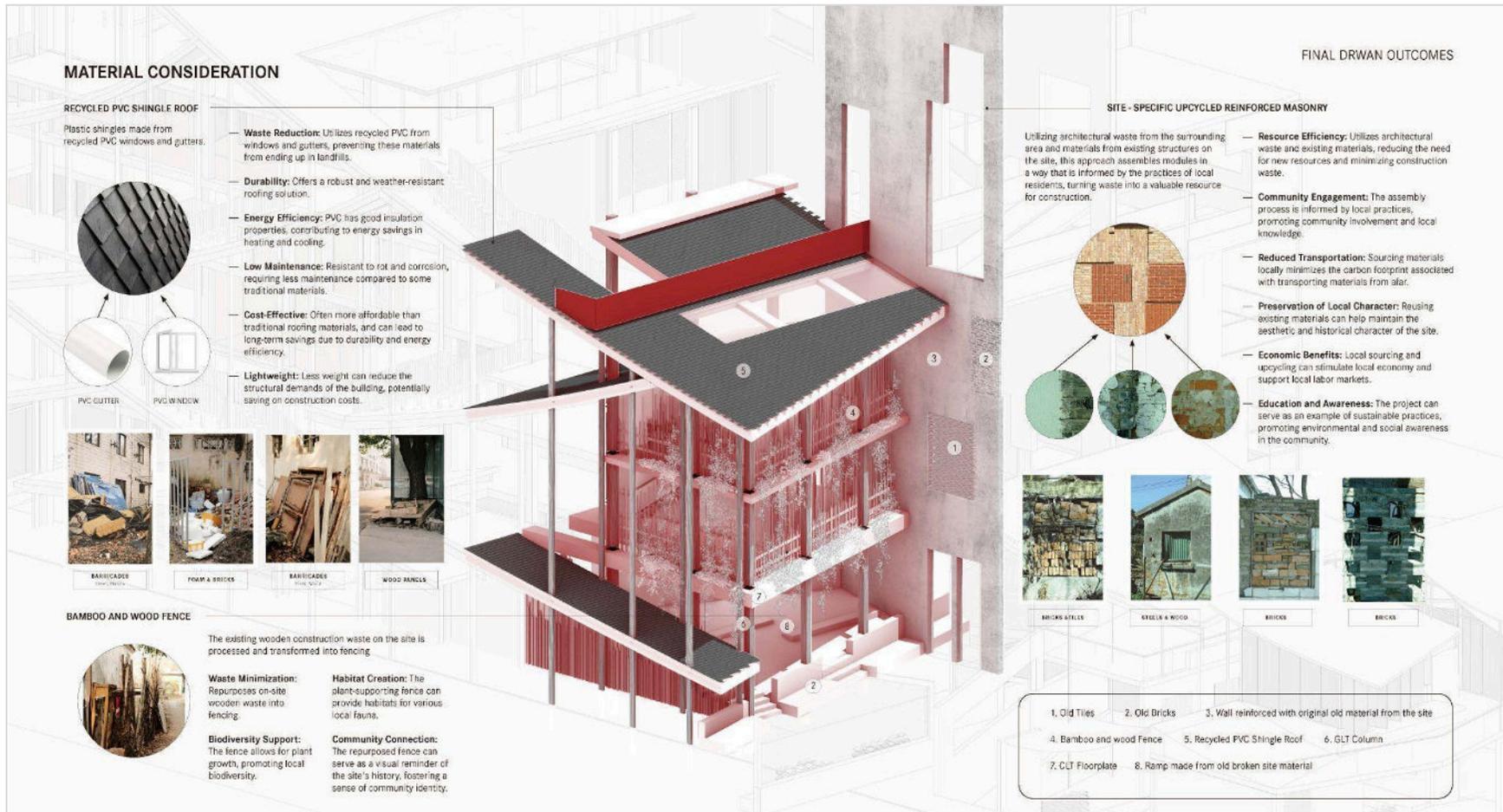*Figure 13: FYP Exploded Axonometric. Shucen Liu (2023).*

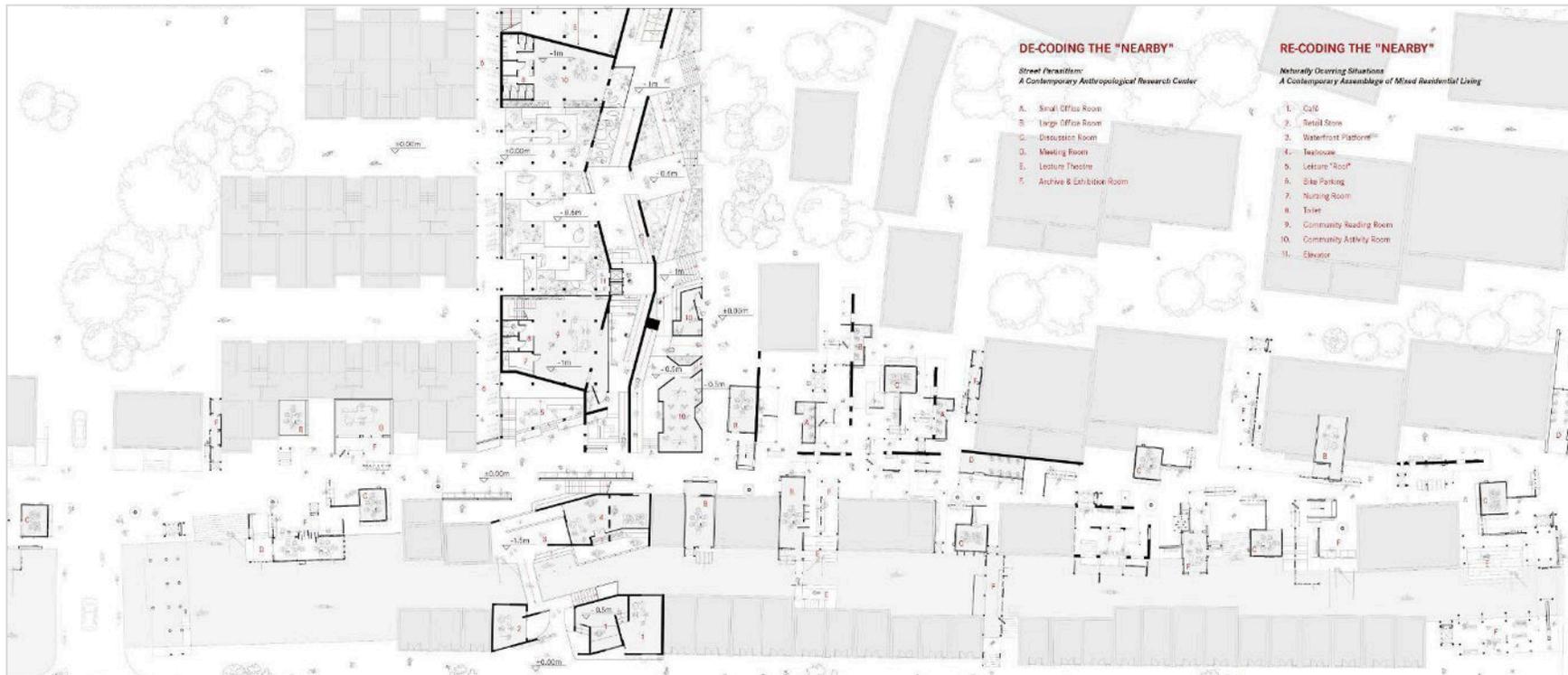*Figure 14: FYP Material Assemblage. Shucen Liu (2023).*

Figure 15: FYP Ground Floor Plan. Shucen Liu (2023).

Next steps: anti-communication

As the assemblage emphasises the systemic whole's influence on the observer, it tends to overlook the individual elements that constitute the system and the impact the observer can have on it. Brün's theory of anti-communication has great potential for complementing the assemblage approach. Richards has elaborated on the concept of anti-communication, referring to it as "composing asynchronicity" (2010, pp. 3 & pp. 11). This concept of asynchronicity introduces friction and conflict and challenges the stability of the system. It acts as a force to retard the decay of the system (Richards, 2010, p. 6). The role of the observer, as proposed by Richards (2010, p. 4), is crucial in linking the domains of relation and dynamics to activate the vitality, complexity, and diversity of the system and fully realise the potential of assemblage. It aligns with Guattari's idea of ecosophy, which emphasises human subjectivity in an attempt to reconceptualise the relationship between humans and their environments (Shaw, 2015, p. 165).

Anti-communication could thus serve as a method to shift the focus to "agency" within the assemblage system and stimulate its vitality. While further discussions between the two collaborators are required to achieve a deeper understanding of the possibilities and challenges of applying anti-communication, the concept has influenced the public art project The Order of Things, Mountains and Rivers, currently (end of August 2023) under development in Wolong village, Yunnan, China (Figure 17). A contemporary and situated translation of a blue-green landscape painting (Figure 16), the project adopts in its design approach the concept of anti-communication as a strategy. Anti-communication further serves to explore the possibilities of the multi-dimensional relationships and interactions between the visitors and the artwork with the aim of encouraging visitors to contribute to the artwork and become participants in the design of their environments (Figures 18 & 19).

As we look ahead, it is crucial to evaluate the long-term impact of such projects and explore how these principles can be applied in diverse contexts to address societal challenges like urbanisation, social inequality, and environmental sustainability. The exploration contributes to the evolving discourse on how architecture can facilitate more inclusive, emotionally peaceful, and less atomistic spaces.

Figure 16: Clipping from the famous blue-green landscape painting One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains by Song Dynasty painter Wang Ximeng (late 11ᵗʰ—early 12ᵗʰ century).

Figure 17: The Order of Things, Rivers and Mountains, Liu Shucen (2023).

Figures 18 & 19: The Order of Things, Rivers and Mountains, Liu Shucen (2023).

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