Faculty of Design

2023

# Expanding the Notion of Care in Architecture: Recovering a more-than-human Third Landscape in Kyoto

Zuo, Annan and Steier, Frederick

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

# Expanding the Notion of Care in Architecture: Recovering a more-than-human Third Landscape in Kyoto

**Annan Zuo and Frederick Steier**

Drawing on de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017), this research-design project aims to expand the conceptual framework of care in architecture by incorporating the agency of non-human entities (Fitz and Krasny, 2019). With the declining Satoyama landscape in Kyoto—an agricultural landscape in Japan historically shaped by care—a physical context featuring sika deer, secondary Satoyama woodlands, and Kyomachiya (traditional townhouse in Kyoto). Local remaining residents are reconceptualised as a neglected more-than-human assemblage—a Third Landscape that calls for care.

The presentation, articulated in the form of a picture book, traces the life cycle of a structural column from a Kyomachiya, adopting an animistic perspective—that of the column itself. Within this framework, care is defined as the ability to both receive and provide material, social, and ecological conditions that allow the vast majority of humans and other-than-human entities to thrive. Examining the column in its various states, as Japanese cypress, structural components, and decomposed timber, the study reveals the complex interplay of receiving and giving care that includes the Satoyama woodlands, the deer, the inhabitants of Kyomachiya, and future generations of cypress trees. Within a broader context, the picture book narrates a landscape recovery design project, envisioning the systematic dismantling of abandoned residential structures, thereby contributing to the restoration and reinvigoration of the natural landscape.

This presentation is part of the Ecopoetic Formations for Transgenerational Collaboration scheme, which pairs four junior designers with four senior members of the American Society for Cybernetics.

KEYWORDS: care, architecture, more-than-human, the Third Landscape, landscape recovery, Kyoto, Satoyama landscape

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

---

## Overview

Nature, according to classical empiricism, is a dull affair: it is colourless, soundless, scentless, and it is merely the endlessly hurrying of material. It is only through Latour's "phantasmagoria of our senses" (2008, p. 11). that such forms and materials in nature would have a meaning, and they only exist in the illusions of our minds. Nature is real but senseless; values are meaningful but unreal. Does that mean care, as a human moral construct, is equally meaningless?

Care takes endless forms in a more-than-human context; however, one thing in common is that care is a human matter. Care is both a moral disposition that transcends dependency and interdependency and a material work of engagement and maintenance. In a more-than-human world, care establishes interdependency through transforming and materialising human morality into a physical action that improves the livelihood of both humans and other-than-humans. Following this notion, in architecture, care involves nurturing the flourishment of all forms of life, and it is fundamentally an engaging process that extends the loving and selfless prospects of humanity.

This presentation introduces a proposed architectural design project for recovering the Satoyama landscape in Kyoto, building on this notion of care in a neglected third landscape that requires architectural intervention (Figure 1 & Figure 2). It defines care as our individual and expected ability to provide material, social, and ecological conditions that allow the vast majority of humans and other-than-human entities to thrive.

*Figure 1: Bridging research and design—reconstructing interdependency in space and sustaining engagement through time. Source: Author.*

## Engagement/Maintenance

Care is a material process. In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), Joan Tronto advocates for an integrated act of care that combines the affective and ethical dispositions and concrete work involved in actualising care. It is not enough to only concern, worry, or take responsibility for others' well-being on a moral level since without material practices such as caregiving and care receiving, the ethics and politics of care or the pursuit of the good life may only exist in an abstract form. One can care and love intensely without the commitment to the work of care or involvement in the maintenance work, and vital maintenance alone may not be sufficient for an engagement of care without affection; without constant maintenance work, however, affectivity or interdependency only draws the notion of care closer to a moral intention rather than a complete physical action.

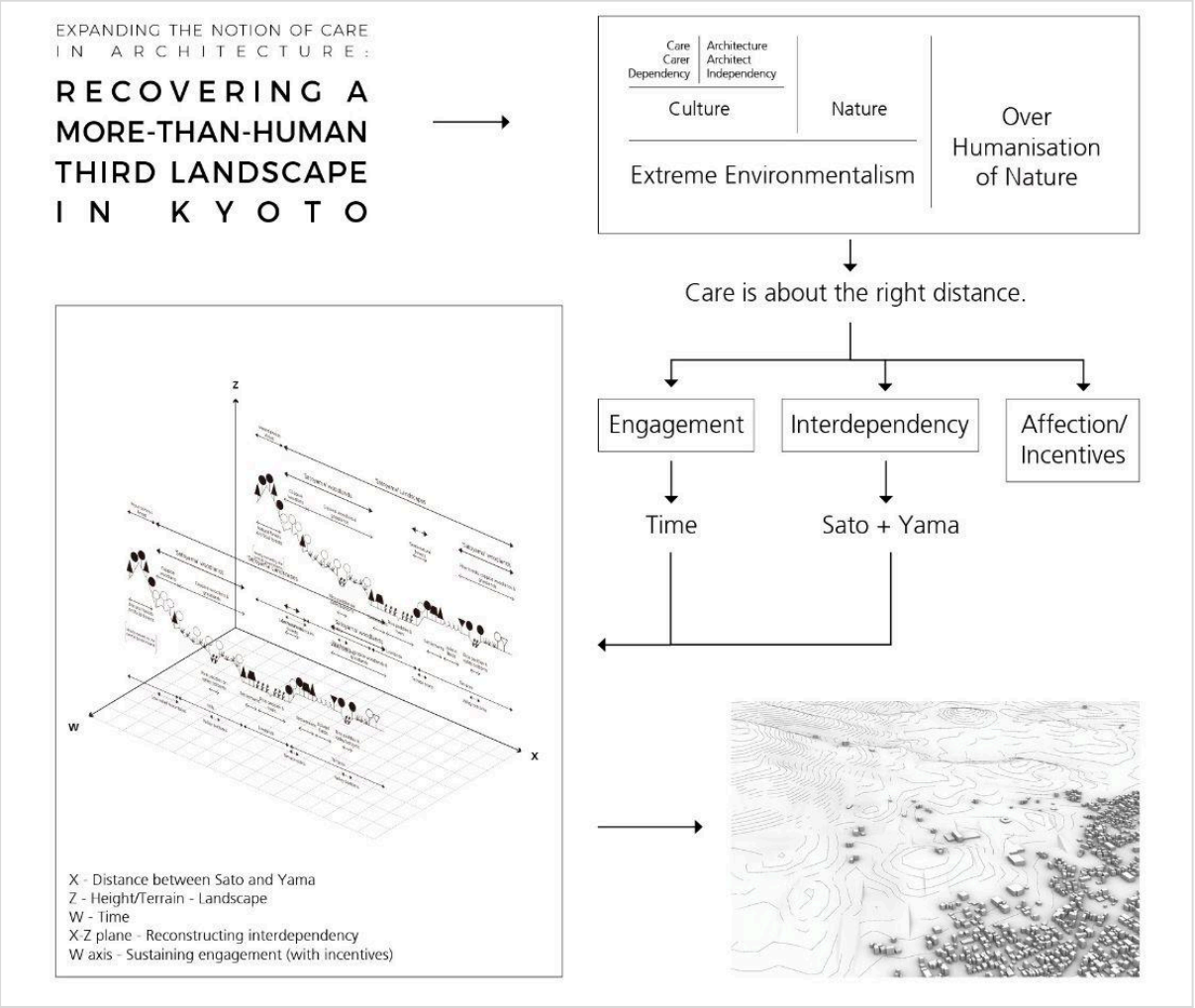


*Figure 2: Design Project Tectonic Model. Source: Author.*

In a more-than-human context, different entities may have different abilities to feel and receive care, but this distinction does not obscure the human agency of offering care. Consequently, the work of the architect in such contexts involves both initialising and materialising care. In landscape recovery projects specifically, since it is by definition a gradual process, long-term engagement is required.

The design project adopts *engagement of care* through its brief:

> Based on a 60-year time frame, this project progressively dismantles abandoned residential buildings (Kyo-Machiya) in Kyoto. In a twofold process, it integrates the remaining occupied buildings into a communal living environment while

returning materials and spaces to the natural ecosystem to facilitate landscape recovery (Figure 3).

In the short term (<2040), given shrinking communities inhabited by a majority of older adults, a well-functioning community is to be sustained through a more compact form of co-living. This project aims to care for the remaining residents by reclaiming materials and components from abandoned properties and reassembling them in between remaining Kyomachiya to form an integrated community living space.

In the medium term (2040–2060), with the local population projected to be reduced to zero, residential spaces are going to be transformed into ecological labs and workshops that facilitate conservation and restoration projects. This site is going to function as a research and communication centre for managing abandoned fields and forests. At this stage, more preoccupied spaces are liberated while timber materials are processed into fertilisers for the regrowth of secondary forests.

In the long term (>2060), when the entire district is emptied from regular human activity, a well-forested natural landscape is restored, while a tourist centre and a museum still exist to serve touristic purposes. With selective preservation of historical structures, traces left by humans are deconstructed, transformed and merged into nature.

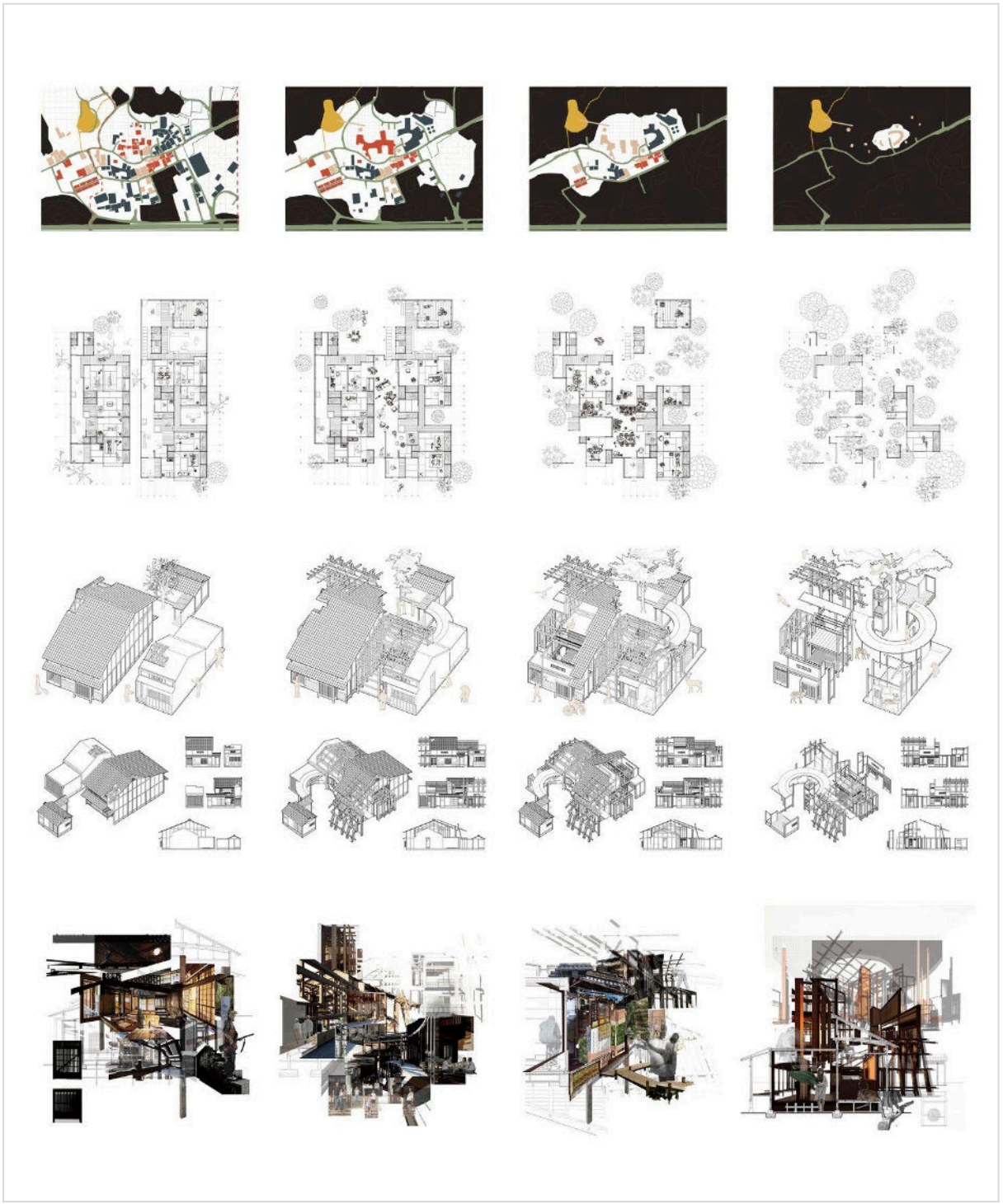

*Figure 3: Engagement through time. Source: Author.*

## Interdependency

Another critical dimension of care is to perceive it as a process of interdependency and interconnection. In both traditional discourses of architecture and in modern industrialised societies, dependency is averted, and prime value has always been given to individual agency. While discussions in this field are often focused on unpacking the specificity of *dependency work*, necessary when individuals are unable to sustain their active agency, they also suggest that interdependency is an ontological state that humans and countless other-than-human entities unavoidably inhabit (Kittay and Feder 2002). However, this does not indicate that dependency is absolute in all situations, nor that independency and dependency are contradictory. In the context of Kyoto, neither an extreme environmentalism scheme that advocates independence nor an over-humanised environment that amplifies interdependency would be able to sustain a balanced relationship between human and nature. For interdependent entanglements in a more-than-human context, relations that are established by care should be multiple and interconnected rather than linear (Figure 4).

Correspondingly, the design project aims to restore interdependency inside the decaying Satoyama landscape by recreating a new form of material metabolism; the most crucial step being the reclamation of materials and components from abandoned buildings. On a micro level of landscape recovery, abandoned buildings are in a crucial position as they are not only stocks of materials but also stocks of space that has the potential to be repurposed. Developing from the idea of *urban mining*, the practice of recovering secondary resources from obsolete sinks of materials in cities (Miatto et al., 2019), this project proposes a process of *suburban mining* that reclaims deconstructed materials and components and transforms abandoned spaces through the establishment of a material and component bank (MCB).

The MCB is a manager entity that organises the transfer of materials and components obtained from deconstructed structures to new structures (Figure 5). The materials and components will be reclaimed and reused, and their information will be stored permanently for future maintenance of new structures and the next stage of recycling when their new life span ends. On one hand, the MCB liberates spaces from abandoned human structures so that a spontaneous natural recovery process can take place. With

the MCB, objects and building components that contain certain historical or economic values are also selected and saved. On the other hand, with the reclaimed and recycled materials, existing structures can be consolidated and integrated to form a unified community for the remaining residents. On an ecological level, since most components collected from Kyomachiya are timber, they can be easily processed into fertilisers for the regrowth of secondary forests, which will, in turn, facilitate expanded living spaces for the sika deer population. Meanwhile, rapidly recovered secondary forests can also foster traditional cultural events such as the Gion Festival and the Daimonji Bonfire, two of the most important festivals in Kyoto that rely on the traditional Satoyama landscape and have been disappearing due to forest-floor vegetation dieback.

## Affection—Incentives

Interdependency is a crucial physical denotation of care, and engagement sustains care through time. But in the first place, it is an affection that initiates care. There are situations when care work (or extensively in architecture, maintenance and restorative work) is carried out without the affective. In a more-than-human context, it is crucial to understand how an extensive inter-species affection is formed. I no affection is engaged, would all restorative and maintenance work, in turn, submit to a further exploitation process of the care agents? Fundamentally, if maintenance or engagement does not involve affection, is it still about care? Architectural interventions may not be able to directly stimulate affection. What they might able to achieve; however, is providing incentives that motivate the process of care to be carried out.

Preservation and restoration of Satoyama landscapes in Kyoto cannot solely depend on the effort of volunteer groups due to the limited scale and span of their activities. For local communities, manpower becomes increasingly scarce each year with ageing and outmigration. The design project aims to motivate remaining residents to take part in the overall landscape recovery process and provide them with direct and immediate income to take care of the land before they leave (Figure 6).

Embedded in the sustainable and deconstruction industry, the MCB suggests deconstruction/demolition strategies and assists with the transaction and sale of reclaimed/recycled materials and components, which provides a considerable amount of direct cash payback for residents who conduct such projects. Meanwhile, the

reclamation profits are predicted to counterbalance disposal costs of abandoned building components, and the loop potential for reconstruction is enhanced to a great extent. Furthermore, by transforming components extracted from deconstructed structures without DfD (design for deconstruction), which would otherwise be disposed of as construction and demolition waste, into new components with DfD, the MCB establishes a system of circular economy that leads to an eco-construction industry that connects recycling with prefabrication, reaching a high level of material sustainability.

All the income then feeds back to the general process of landscape recovery. With the initial payback from selling reclaimed and recycled building elements, a larger scale of deconstruction and materials and components collection can be initiated. Sites and structures that are liberated through such processes can generate more income through auctions while building elements with historical value can also be sold or donated. With fertilisers provided by the MCB, secondary forests may grow more rapidly and in a 20-year cycle, and they can be partially harvested for coppice wood. The MCB thus transforms abandonment—a diminishing process—into an opportunity for economic regrowth. With residents motivated to conduct a process that is simply profitable, the human-occupied space is gradually decomposed, and the land is returned to nature (Figure 7).

## Picture book

A picture book (Figure 8) illustrates the notion that care transcends human agency—articulating a tangible and material process embedded in all forms of beings. The picture book, by adopting an animist perspective, centres on the life cycle of a structural column from a Kyomachiya, delineating its progression from Japanese Cypress to structural components and, ultimately, decomposed timber. This exploration unveils the complex web of mutual care relationships involving the Satoyama woodlands, the residents, the sika deer population, Kyomachiya, and future generations of cypress trees. By broadening the scope, the picture book serves as a narrative vehicle for a landscape recovery design initiative, envisioning the systematic dismantling of abandoned residential structures to contribute to the restoration of the natural landscape.

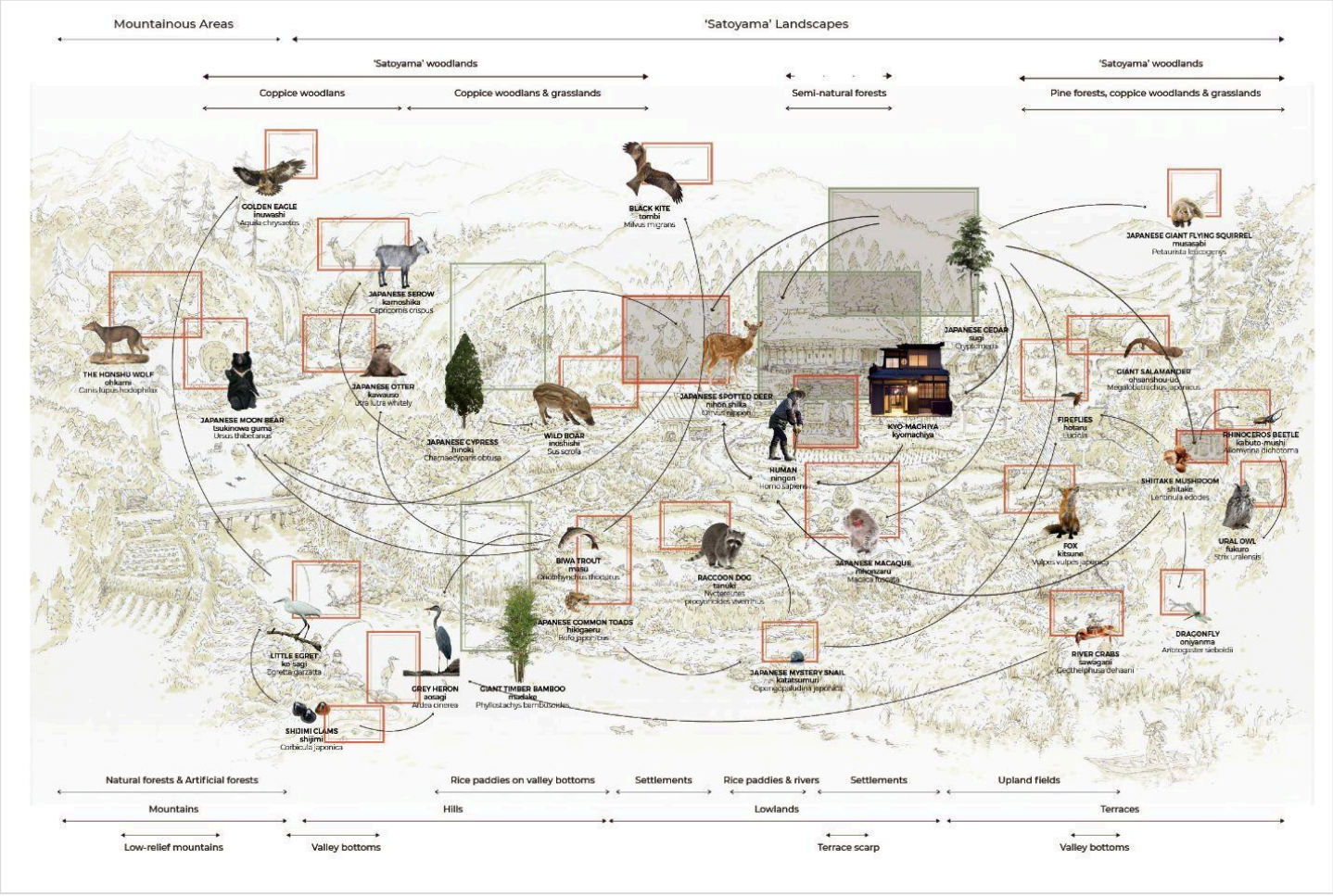


*Figure 4: Reconstructing interdependency in Kyoto's Satoyama landscape. Source: Author*

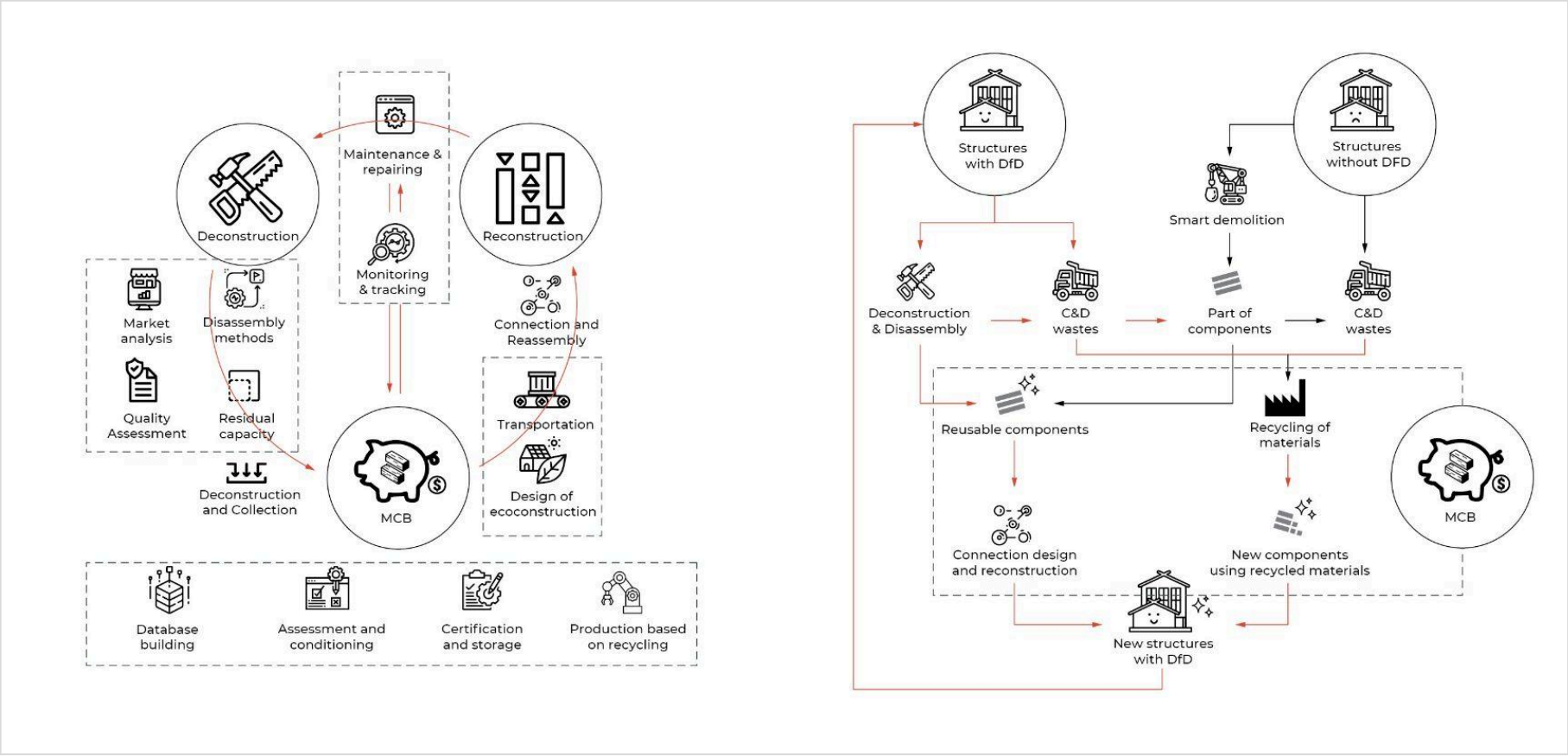


*Figure 5: The Material and Component Bank. Source: Author.*

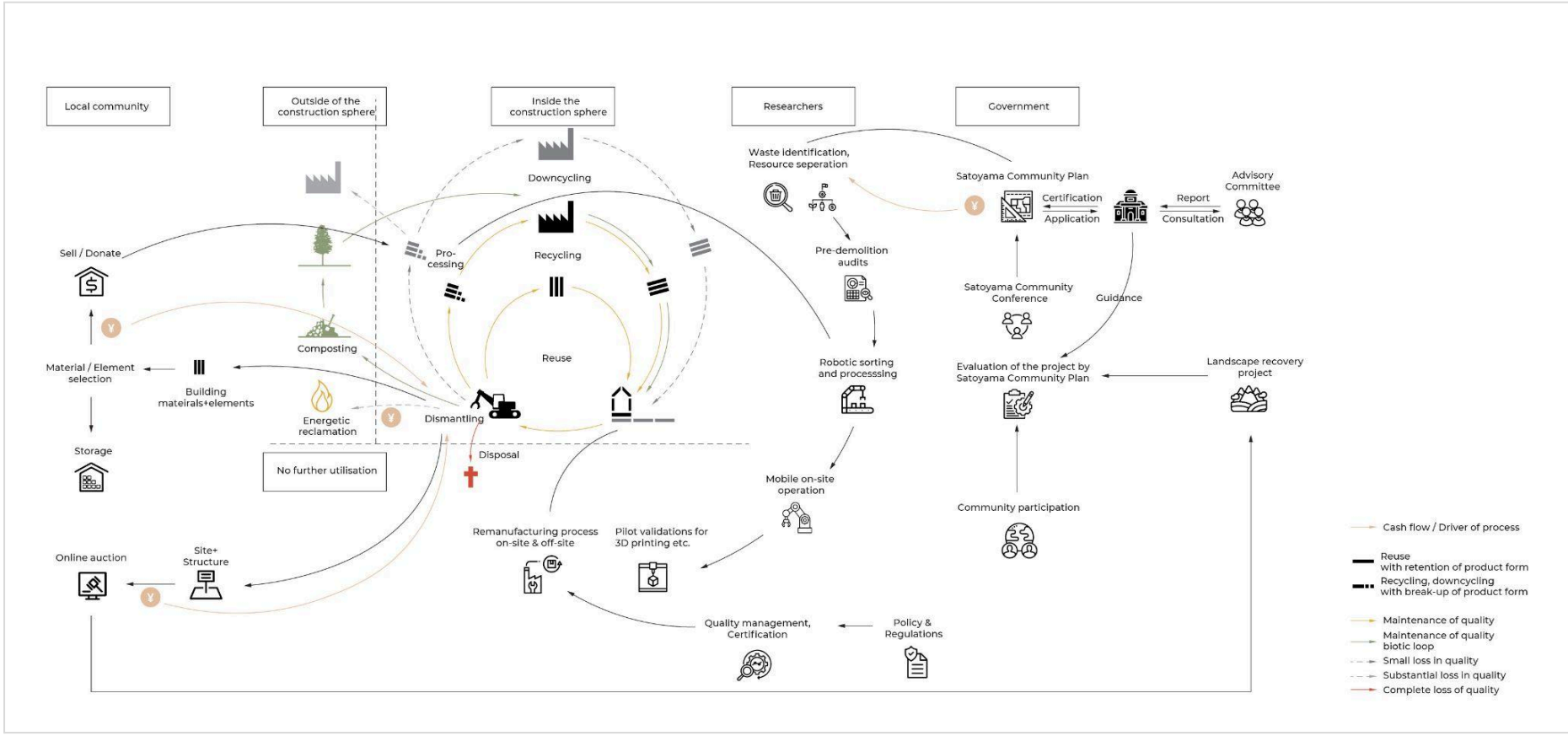


*Figure 6: Enlarging incentives through the MCB. Source: Author.*

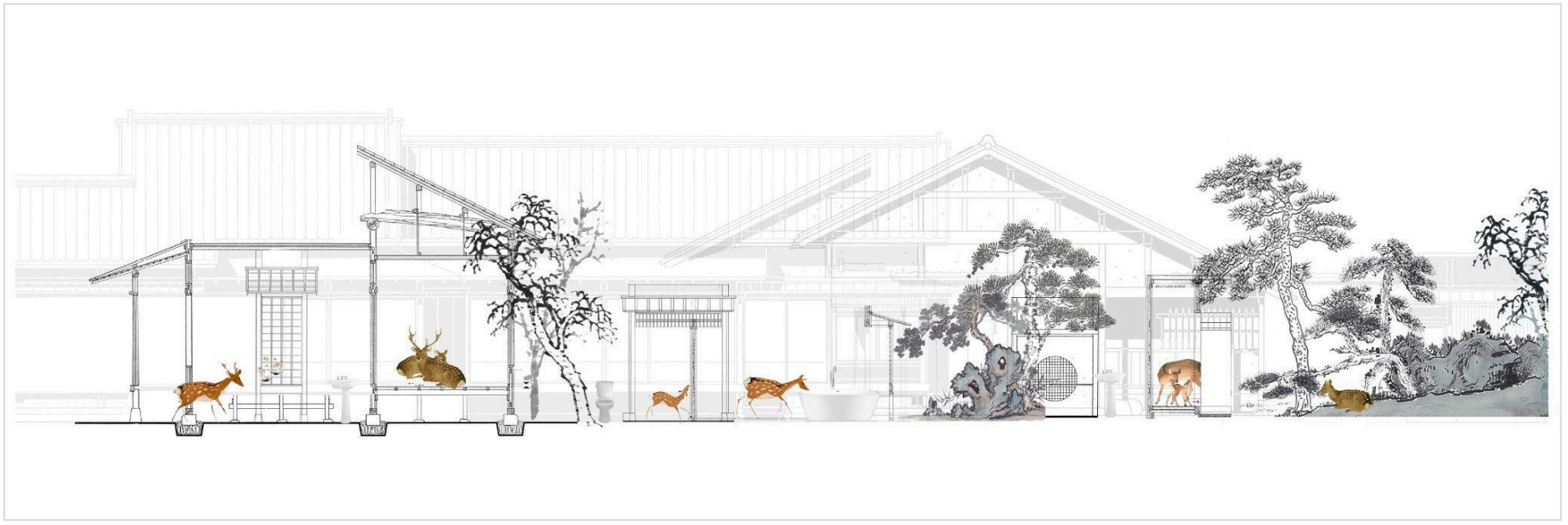

*Figure 7: Conceptual section drawing. Source: Author.*

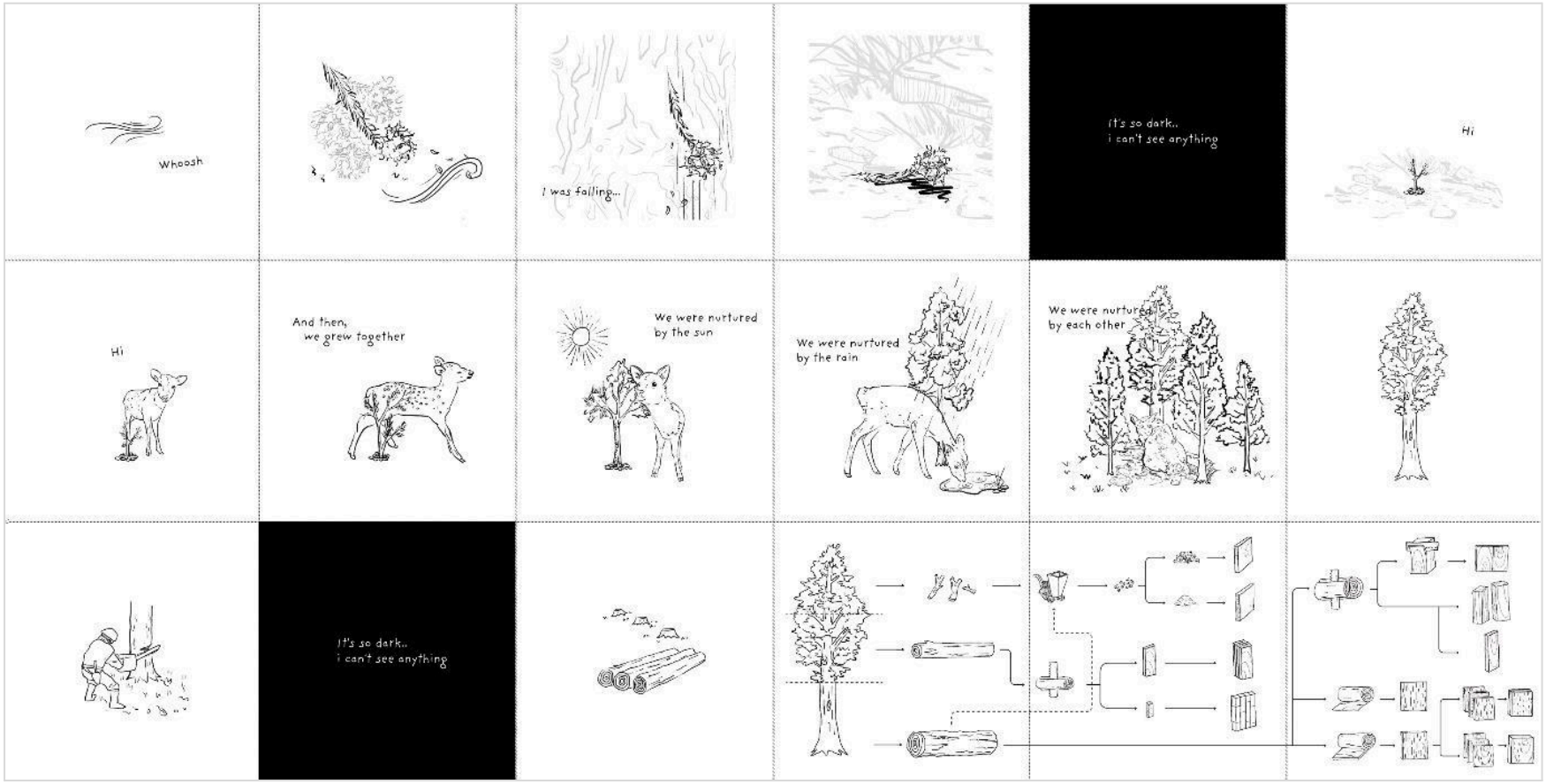


*Figure 8: Excerpt from the picture book. Source: Author*

## References


1. De la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of Care*. University of Minnesota Press.
2. Kittay, E. F., & Feder, E. K. (2002). *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. Rowman & Littlefield.
3. Latour, B. (2008). *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?: two Lectures in Emperical Philosophy*. Van Gorcum.
4. Miatto, A., Schandl, H., Forlin, L., Ronzani, F., Borin, P., Giordano, A., Tanikawa, H. (2019). A spatial analysis of material stock accumulation and demolition waste potential of buildings: A case study of Padua. *Resource, Conservation, and Recycling*, *142 (2)*, 245–256.
5. Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries, A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care.* Routledge.


## Authors


Annan Zuo, graduate student, University of Cambridge, stitchzan@gmail.com

Frederick Steier, Professor in the School of Leadership Studies, Fielding Graduate University, fsteier@gmail.com