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Spring 2017

# Urban Archtifice: Regenerating Residential Facades Through Acupuncture

Ran Mei

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Urban Archtifice:  
Regenerating Residential Facades through Acupuncture



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# INTRODUCTION



Collage showing "a global city with Chinese characteristics"



大唐国际

“it tends toward a seemingly contradiction in terms: the over-familiar inhabited by the inscrutable. One day it will be absolutely exotic again, this discarded product of Western civilization, through resemanticization that its very dissemination brings in its wake...”

Rem Koolhaas, *Generic City*, 1995

with an exploration of insertions and subversions in the built environment of the present China. It studies the illegal architectural extensions as indigenous solutions to fight for a place of living in the increasingly densified and stratified cities.

It explores methods for bringing critical reflection to the disruptions and instabilities repressed by the faceless facades of the formal city.

It seeks for a system of small-scale architectural interventions that parasites the official city, reclaiming the anonymous faces of residential towers that saturated Chinese cities, to transform them into forms of active resistance against the generalization of urban space driven by market and political orders, using existing objects just like a sampler to rebuild a whole new track

## Document Structure

### - Conditions

This document begins with an overview of the current situations that initiated the arguments of this thesis. These conditions are addressed and broken down through a series of photographic survey, short essays and analytical diagrams.

### - Precedents

The following section looks at the existing projects and examples that provide potential solutions and ideas to tackle the problems in the current situations.

### - Proposals

Having outlined the lessons learned from the existing conditions and precedents, I develop a set of key principles to test these kinds of interventions in the focus area. This document concludes with a series of what-if scenarios that offers a preview for future development.



Informal Urbanism in Chinese Cities





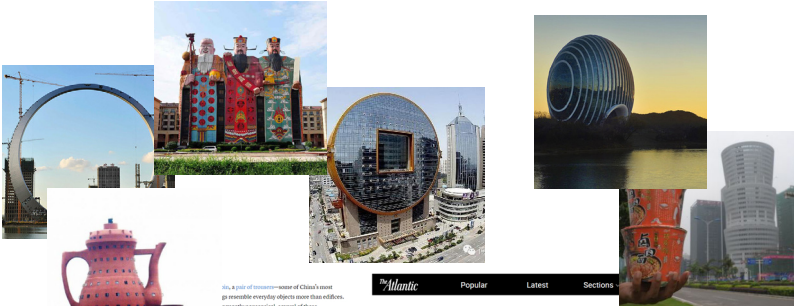
NO  
MORE  
**WEIRD**  
BUILD-  
INGS!

This thesis starts with a deeper look into the architectural phenomenon famously coined as "weird architecture" by President Xi of China in 2014. Initiated by the President's speech in the National Forum on Literature and Art, the phrase "No More Weird Architecture" quickly turned into a world-wide controversy and topic of discussion, especially in the field of architecture. Although there is no following official announcements that specify Xi's criteria of "weird architecture", major news media and websites soon published their own lists of curious findings in Chinese cities. Adjectives such as "weird", "ugly", "bizarre" and "odd-ball" were used to categorize the series. But, more than often, the buildings are addressed not by their location, architects nor names, but as nicknames that were given by the locals according to the popular impression of their shapes and appearances. For example, the infamous/famous CCTV tower by OMA is named as "the giant pants"; the National Stadium by Herzog & De Meuron as "the bird nest". These iconic buildings were designed with various intentions but, beyond the architects' expectations, perceived as familiar objects by the public.

On the other hand, a major part of the listed "weird architecture" are made of buildings that were designed specifically to look like recognizable objects or cultural symbols that thrive on their shock-value, literal expression and kitsch aesthetics. The teapot building in Anhui, appeared in many lists, are designed to look like a giant teapot as an honest and novel expression of its program as the tea culture center. Similar buildings such as the Tianzi Hotel in Hebei, are shaped after cultural symbols and iconography. In the case of Tianzi Hotel, the 15-floors building is shaped literally to visualize the three figures of mythological gods that represents happiness, fortune and longevity.

What's interesting in this debates about "weird architecture" is the contradiction between the perceived image of architecture as anomalous every-day buildings and ().

While the anomalous towers that covers most of the cityscape causes no fuss about their appearance, the iconic buildings are designed with the responsibility to signify certain values and views towards the culture and identity of their context.



As a part of a massive wave of China's most go monstrous everyday objects score than edifices, regularly unexcited, several of these are hailed as marvels, while others have been honored for the People's Daily newspaper in a column. But regardless of the celebratory nature of these projects, nobody China's desire to assert its own architectural identity.

*Mantic* Popular Latest Sections

## The End of China's 'Weird' Architecture

The government is cutting down on the country's more bizarre buildings, which for years aimed to flaunt its economic power.

China's government has introduced a set of guidelines banning "odd-shaped buildings" and threatening "harsh punishments" for those who skirt the new urban planning rules.

"Bizarre architecture that is not economical, functional, aesthetically pleasing or environmentally friendly will be forbidden," according to a report from state media, while greater, more sustainable construction will be encouraged.

The directive doubles down on comments President Xi Jinping made in a speech in October when he called for an end to reflections of "Xi Jinping's

The New York Times  
**China Moves to Halt 'Weird' Architecture**  
 点击查看本文中文版 | Read in Chinese

Sinosphere  
 By CNN  
 More prefabricated  
 The guidelines also that common buildings, would be encouraged.  
 General Chen, one of the Beijing structures could help the construction of the city.  
 "We constantly hear in the media that the conditions, more production could help."  
 The directive also called for strictly control public access to those already in existence.

CNN STYLE FASHION DESIGN

## Future Chinese skyline more uniform

By Matt O'Upde  
 BEIJING — China is no longer a playground and now it is a playground for the world's most powerful nations.  
 The government has announced plans to limit the height of buildings based on the Communist Party's Central Committee's decision, announced last week.



As well as lambasting Koolhaas' trapezoid tower, Xi also talked in Chongqing, which have been his comments follow the construction of a skyscraper-shaped complex for real estate in the Chinese property boom.



BUSINESS INSIDER

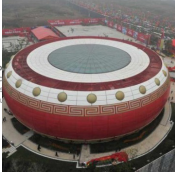
## China is banning 'bizarre architecture' — here are 14 of the strangest examples

dezeen  
 "No more weird architecture" says Chinese president  
 Amy Frearson | 20 October 2014 | 31 comments

NEW REPUBLIC

## China's Ban on "Weird" Architecture Is a Global Power Play

BY BIANCA BOSKER | February 29, 2016



China has been an architect's playground, with lucrative funding and interest in the State Council released new urban planning guidelines. According to the State Council, the new guidelines will be economically, fun and interesting for residents in Beijing.

News - China Takes Steps to Stop its "Weird Architecture"

## China Takes Steps to Stop its "Weird Architecture"

07:00 - 26 February, 2016 | by Kaley Overstreet

Save this article



People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping has been an architect's playground, with lucrative funding and interest in the State Council released new urban planning guidelines. According to the State Council, the new guidelines will be economically, fun and interesting for residents in Beijing.

Twitter Pin It

China's Ban on "Weird" Architecture Is a Global Power Play  
 BY BIANCA BOSKER | February 29, 2016  
 Bizarre architecture everywhere else is impossible anywhere else a triple case of architects' investments in Zouyi, a stock exchange market after Guangzhou, a complex at Venice complete with canal. Meanwhile, and in the capital, the 500m tall it is the world's tallest building.



"architainment" (Fernandez- Galiano 2005)- means that the "surface appearance and visual effect is paramount as buildings are designed from the outside in, from the vantage of an external gaze ... "the public" are positioned as consumers of visual imagery (Grilley 1993)

"idolatry of the market has drastically changed our legitimacy and status even though our status has never been higher... it is really unbelievable what the market demands [from architecture] now. It demands recognition, it demands difference and it demands iconographic qualities"

It almost seem like a love-hate relationship between people and "weird" architecture. On the one hand, these buildings are critiqued for their expensive cost and bizarre shapes; on the other, they represent a cultural fascination with symbols and consumer objects. Although badly publized, these buildings received unexpected attentions that no advertisements could offer.

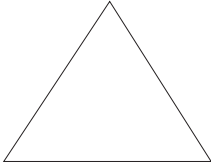
Architecture as enlarged consumer objects and cultural logos. These essentially chinese, from its ideogram-based language to rapid-growth towards captial consumerism. Everything is consumer product, including architecture.

How it looks and the signification of it is always the most primary concern in the design of iconic buildings.

Reference Thought

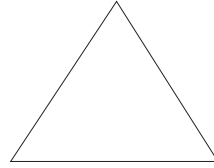
Signifacum (condition)

Symbol



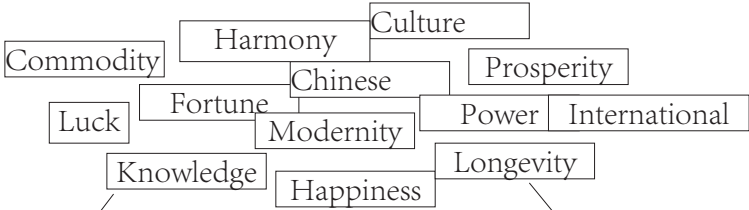
Referent

Sign Vehicle



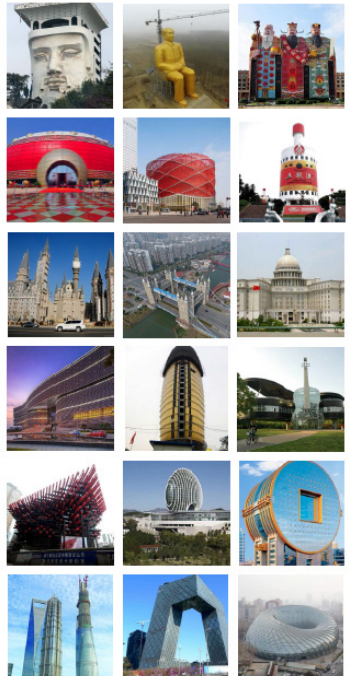
Denotatum  
(physical object)

Signifacum (condition)



Sign Vehicle

Denotatum



The field of semiotics is governed by its elements and key concepts which helps in studying, constructing and understanding symbols.

The elements that governs the understanding signs and symbols are the signified, signifier, and object. For Saussure, the signified is the intellectual concept represented by signifier (which can be verbal or nonverbal). A signified is the sense made by the sign. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea... (Chandler, 2009). A signifier is the visible form that represents the signified. These are the visible signs that where verbalized and brought to reality as the results of cognition process formed in our brain. The object is the empirical form that is being represented by the signs. This is the material object that exist and recognized by our senses.

Also, key concepts add to the deeper understanding in the study of message construction-semantics, syntactic, and pragmatics. Semantics refers to the essence of a specific sign or symbol. Semantics is the process of associating a symbol to a specific meaning. Syntactic is the relationship of signs and the organization of the system of signs in giving meaning to its referent. This is the process of constructing and connecting signs and symbols to create a system that forms a specific message. Language is one of the forms that requires this process which we call grammar. In grammar we follow specific rules and guides in constructing our sentences. When a word is misplace in a sentence, the meaning would definitely change. Lastly, Pragmatics refers to the effect of the elicited behavior drawn out by signs.

These elements and key concepts contribute in understanding the construction and interpretation of signs.

Icons, while maybe or maybe not physically dominating the surrounding landscape, are explicitly positioned relative to a visual consumer – either the visitor in front of the building or more likely the viewer of a mediated image in press, television or film – and, a “successful” building will necessarily develop a strong association to place through an instantly recognizable form designed to be both distinctive and widely disseminated in this mediated form. The “gazes” of a mobile tourist class are overwhelmingly concerned with the facades and surface appearances of prescribed sites of objectified cultural interest, emphasizing the spectacular and ‘out-of-the-ordinary’ .

(The Iconic Aesthetic: The Form is the Function; The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities, Paul Jones,

The Tourist Gaze (2012) John Urry, argues that travel and tourism have become comparable to convectional economic transactions such as shopping, with places and cities “consumed” by tourist and other visitors. Urry argues that, owing to their quasi-economic nature, these tourists’ gazes are directed towards spectacular buildings and other officially sanctioned, prescribed sites of objectified cultural interest. As a result, such gazes are primarily concerned with surfaces and facades, and iconic buildings are a product of this emphasis on externality, with an aestheticized approach to architecture- emphasizing surfaces- prevalent.”



“skyline of absurdity” (Koolhaas, Lecture at American University of Beirut, 2010)



Currently, more than 742 million live in urban areas, approximately 54.7 percent of the total population – urbanization has been ranked as the paramount priority by the government. In order to accommodate the great influx of population, high-rise buildings, seen as a viable solution, have sprouted almost everywhere in China. However, the endless sea of high-rise apartments is creating a ‘sterile’ and ‘one-dimensional’ urban landscape.

In stark contrast to the pursuit of extreme novelty and iconicity in "weird" architecture, the vast majority of Chinese cities are saturated with end-less sea of high-rise apartment buildings that are designed to house more than 55 percent of the total population in its most dense urban areas. What lies behind the wide-spread debate about "weird" architecture is the cultural anxiety in seek of its identity through architecture that seems more and more invisible in the extreme repetition and uniformity of its city fabric.

Is there a way to negotiate between the two extremes?

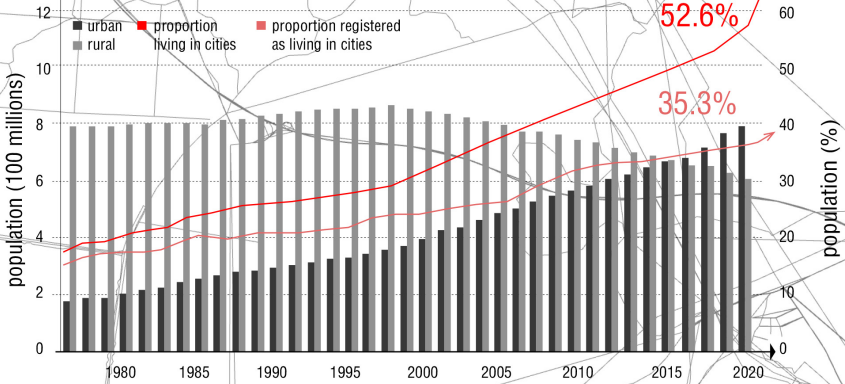
-is there a way that the wierd architecture phenomenon could be put to use?

- taking the advantage of the cultural fascination of architectural object and iconicity, to transform the faceless facades of the residential towers, to provide housing for the increasing influx of urban migrants in the existing urban centers.



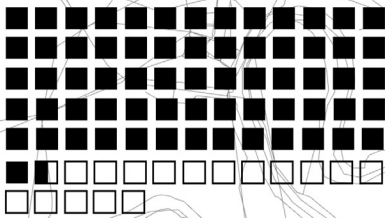
## Urbanization Rate (2000 – 2017 )

**70%** of the Chinese population will be living in cities by 2025



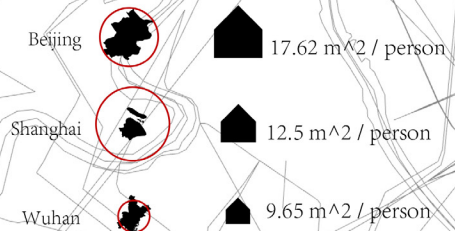
## Total Population of Wuhan (2015)

□ = 10 million    ■ = urban    □ = rural



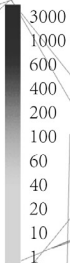
## Living Area per person

○ = urban population



## Population Density (2016)

persons per 1 km<sup>2</sup>



### Wuhan:

**3,200 persons /sq mi**

Shanghai: 9,900/sq mi

Shenzhen: 15,000/sq mi

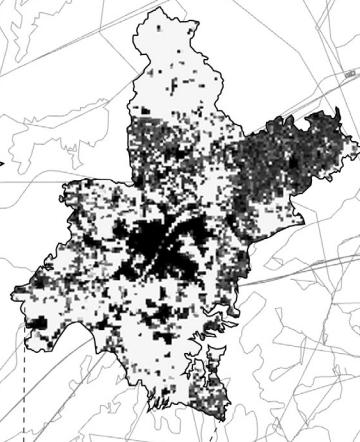
Beijing: 3,400/sq mi

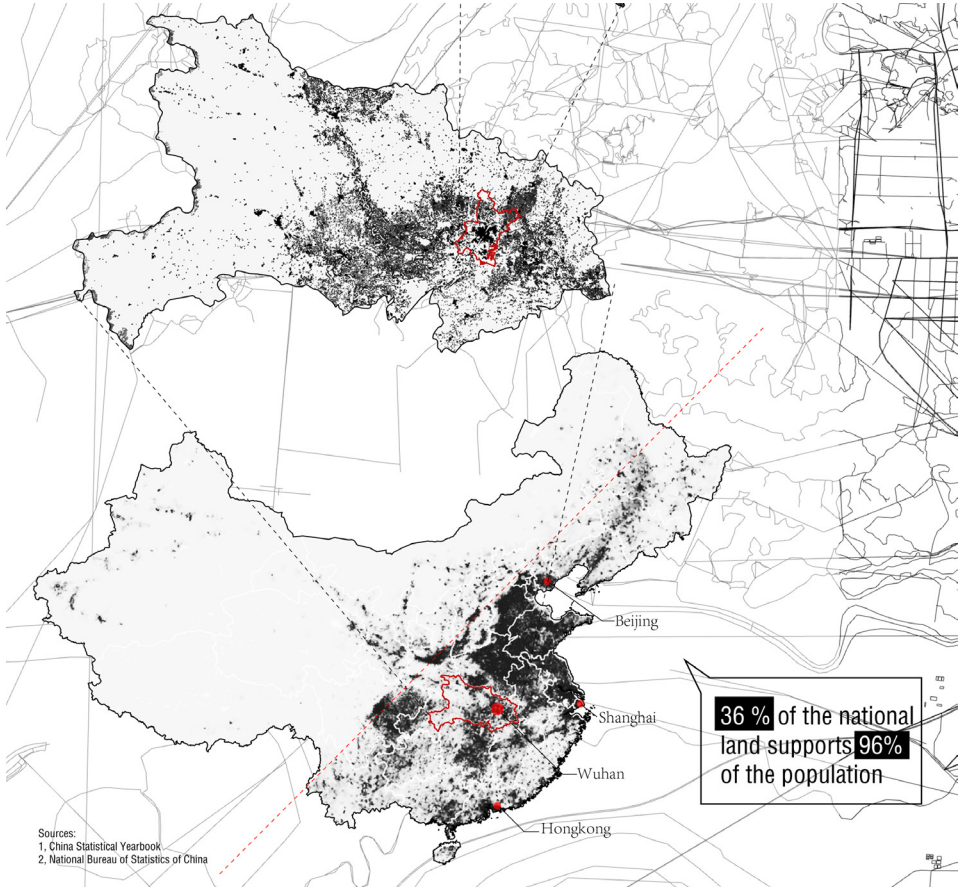
Total Urban Area: 3,279.71 sq mi

Total population: 831,260,000

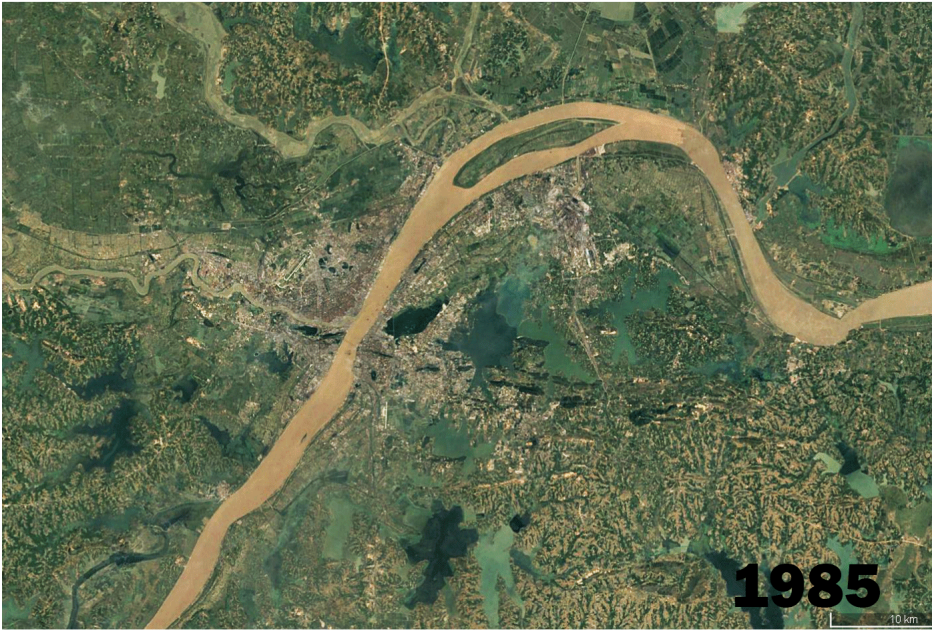
Urban 82.86% ; Rural: 17.14%

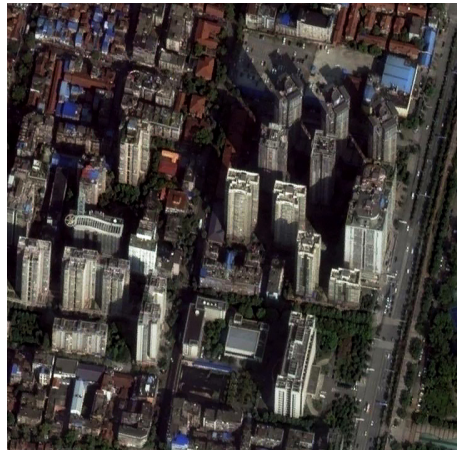
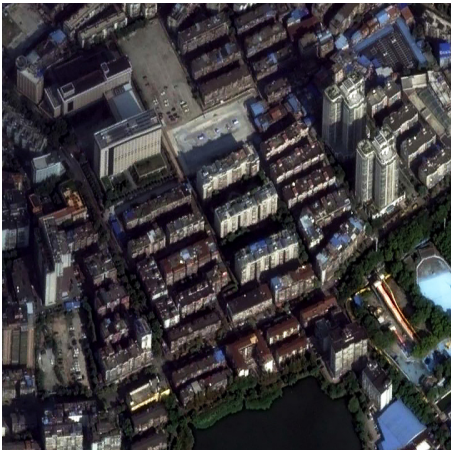
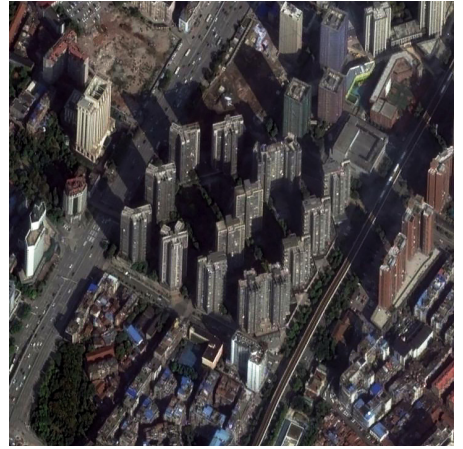
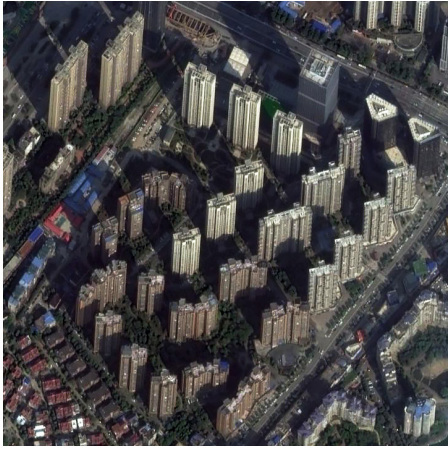
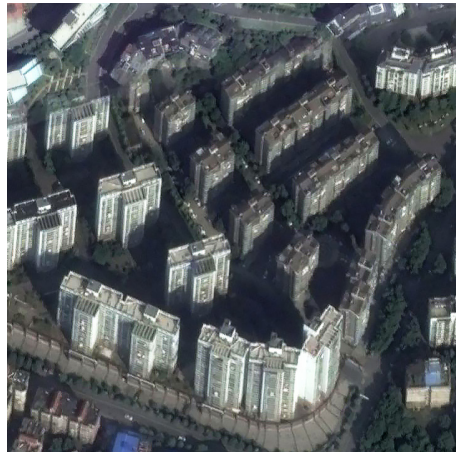
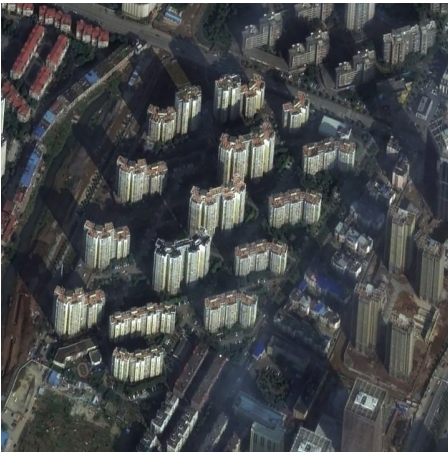
Migrant population: 1,150,000





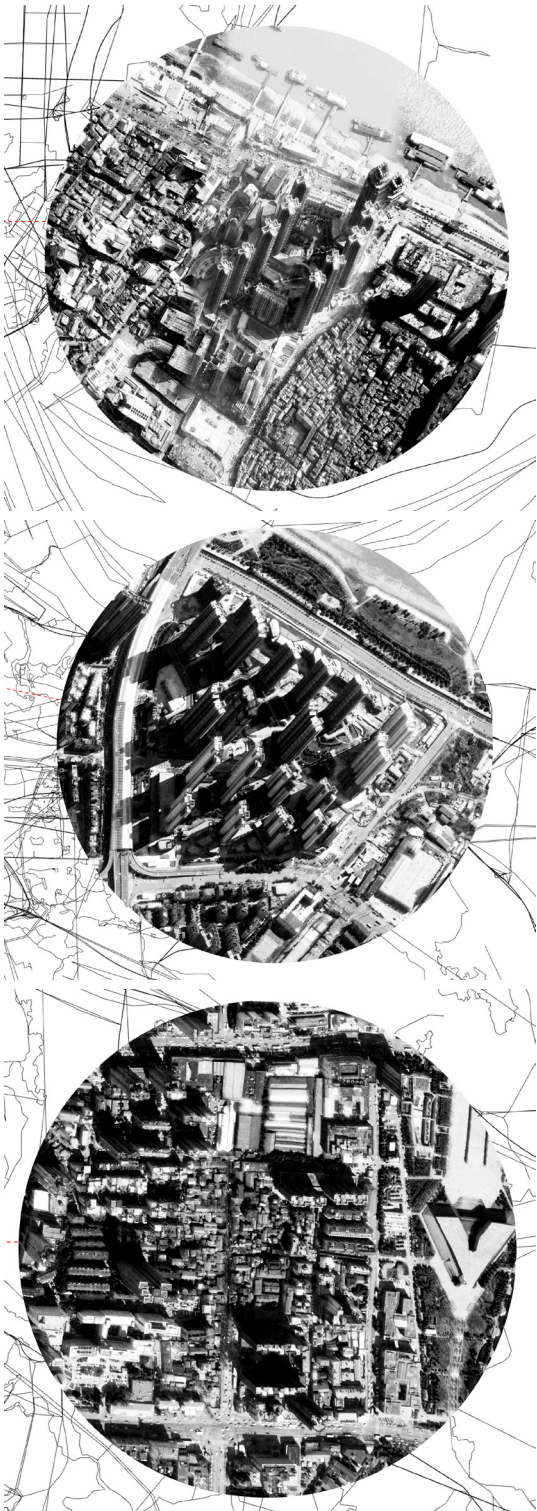
Urbanization in Wuhan: population, housing, identity

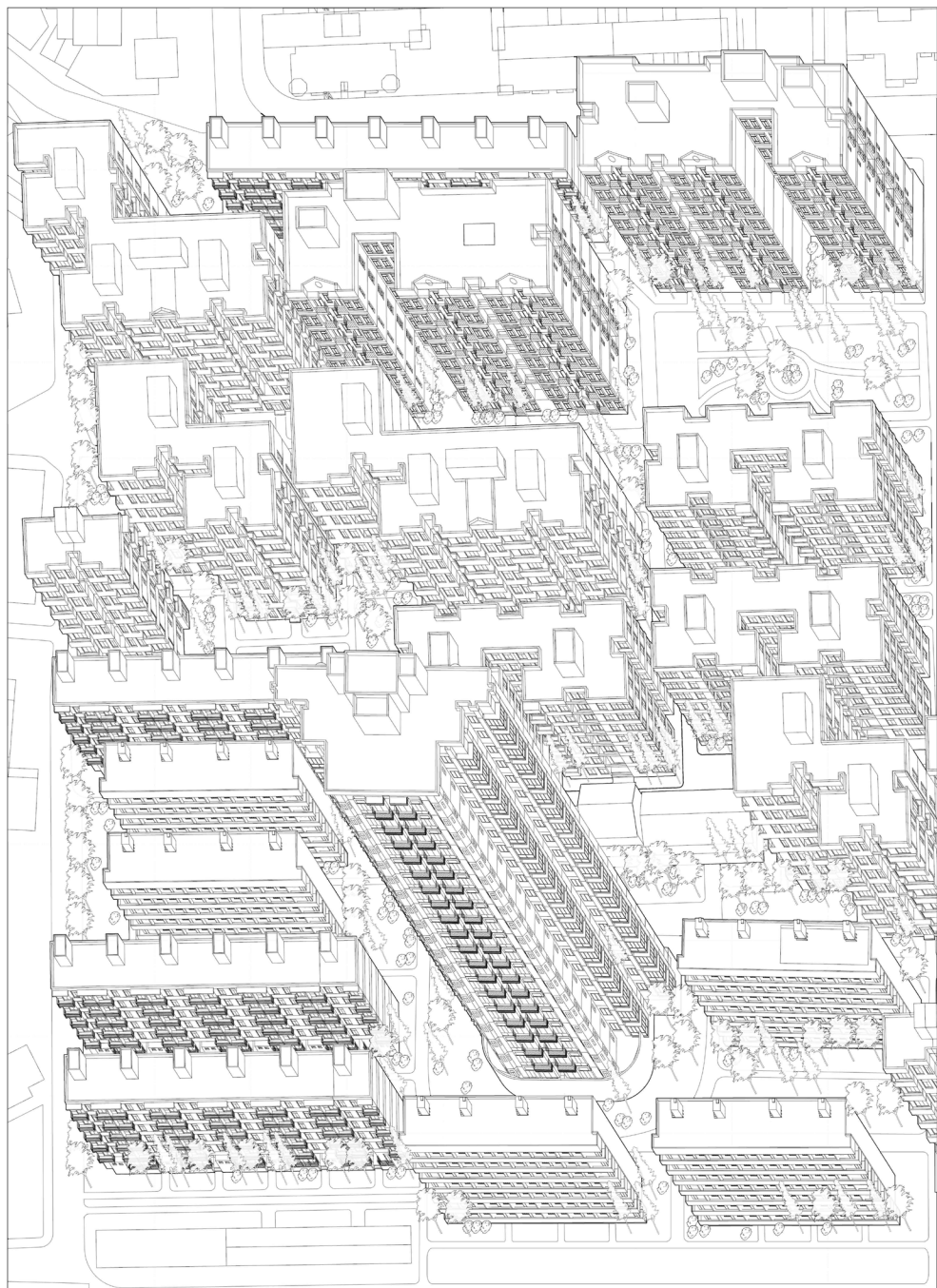




Housing Typologies in Wuhan



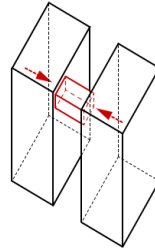
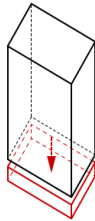
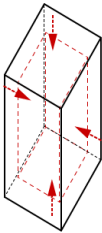
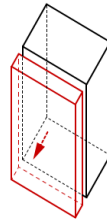
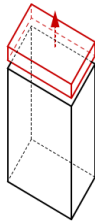
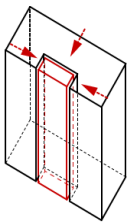


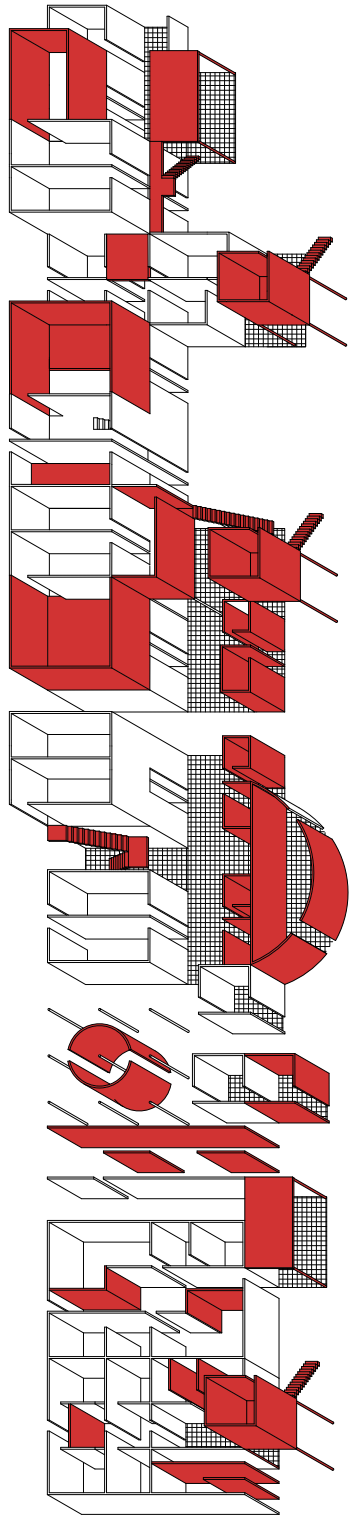
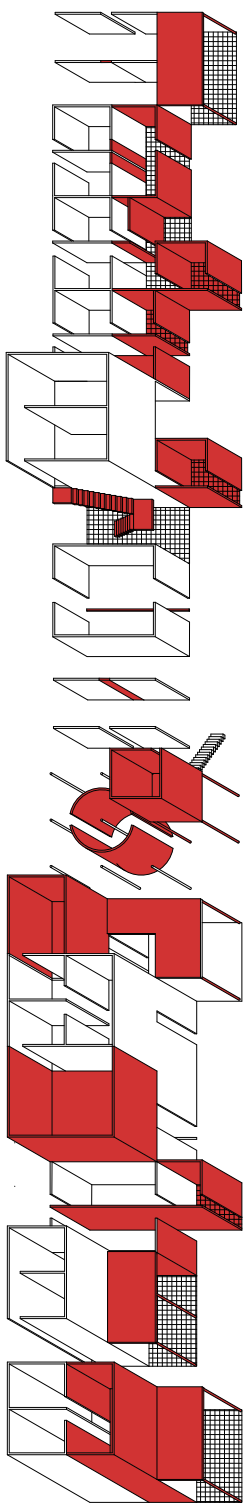
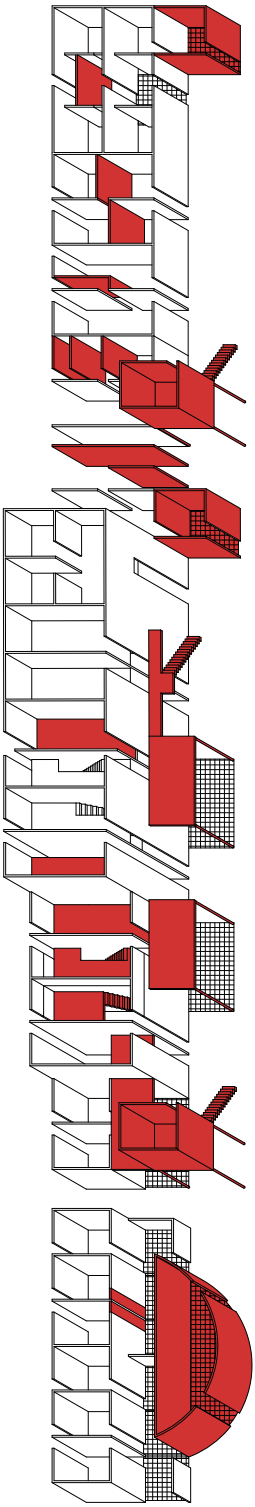


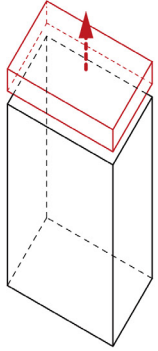
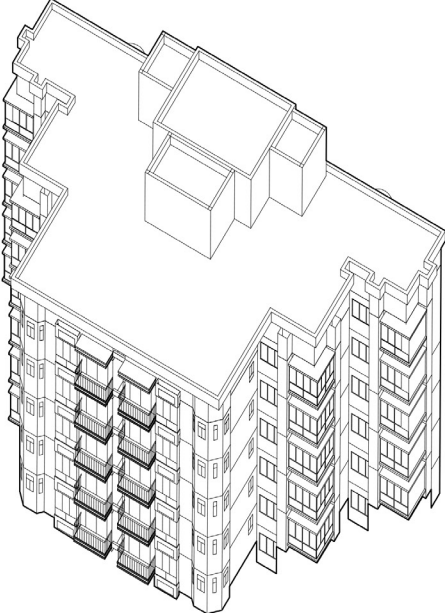
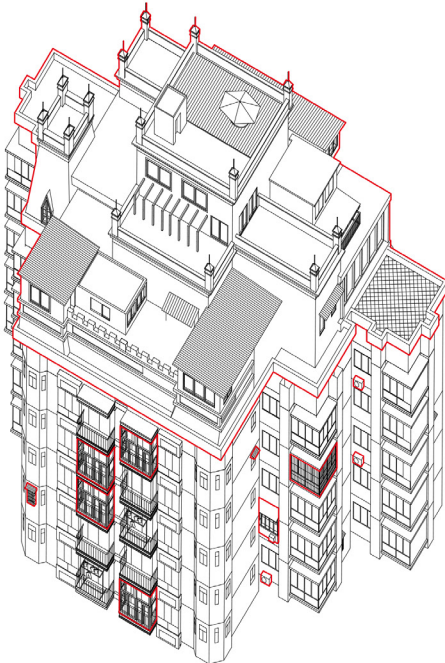


Composite housing block

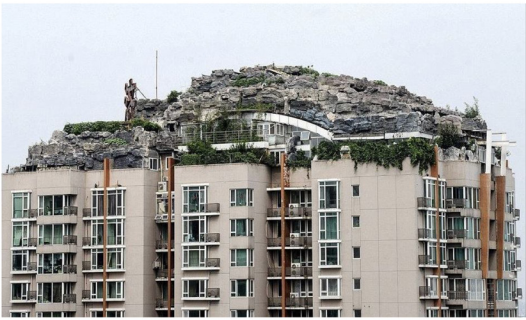


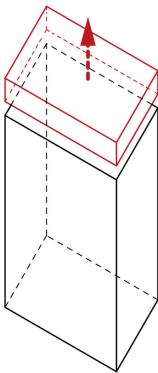
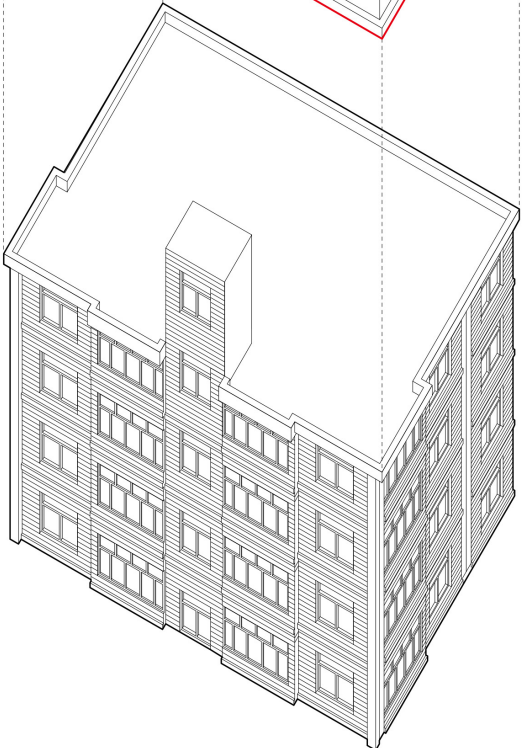
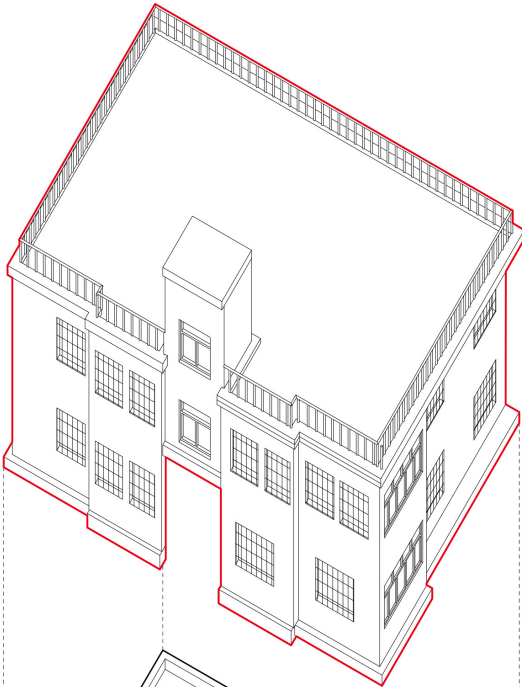






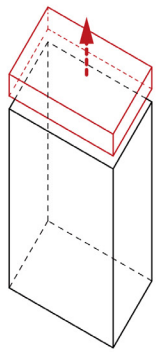
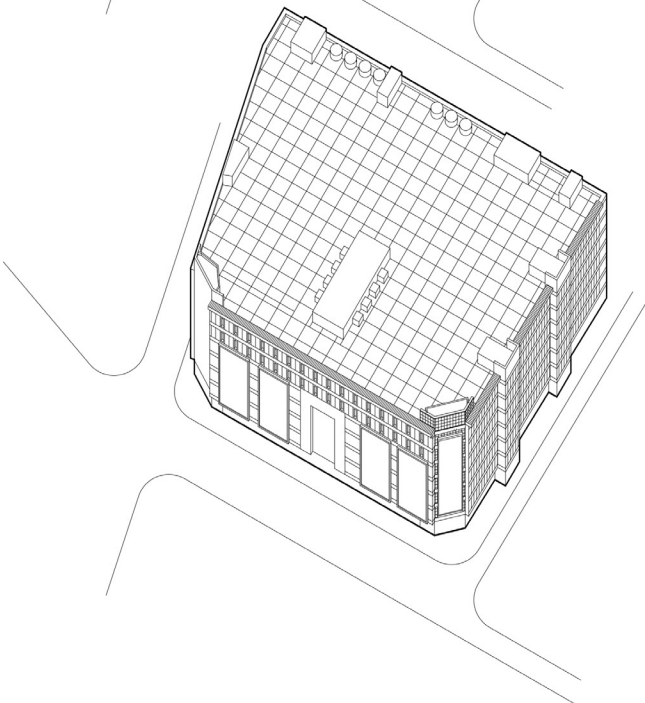
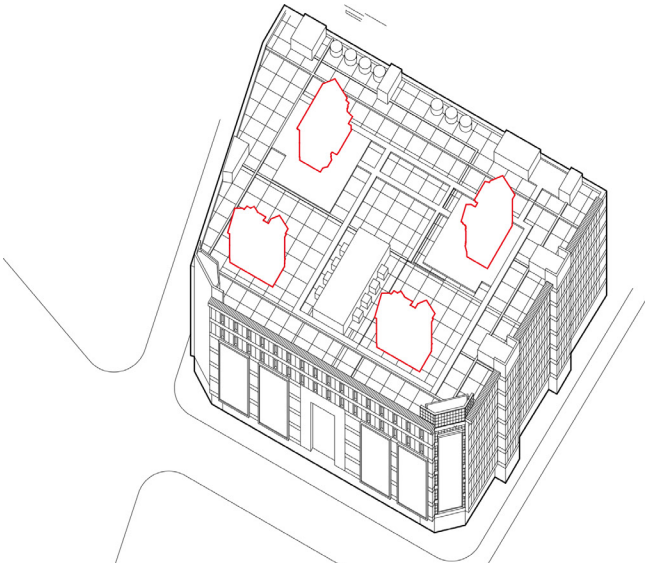
# URBAN HATS





wéi fǎ jiàn zhù

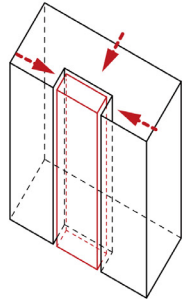
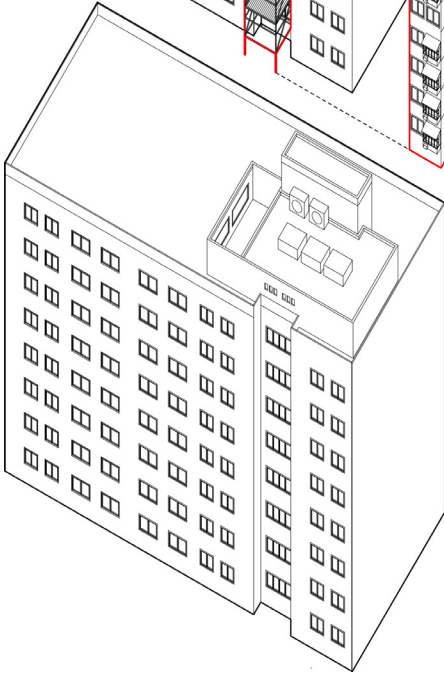
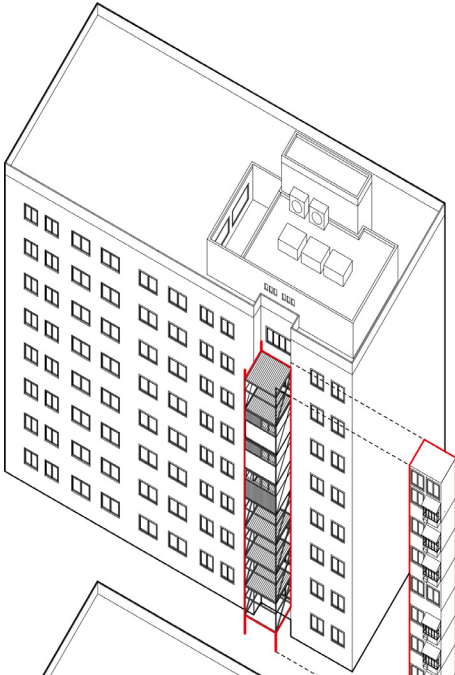




# SUBURBANIZED AT CITY CENTER

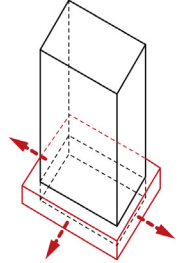
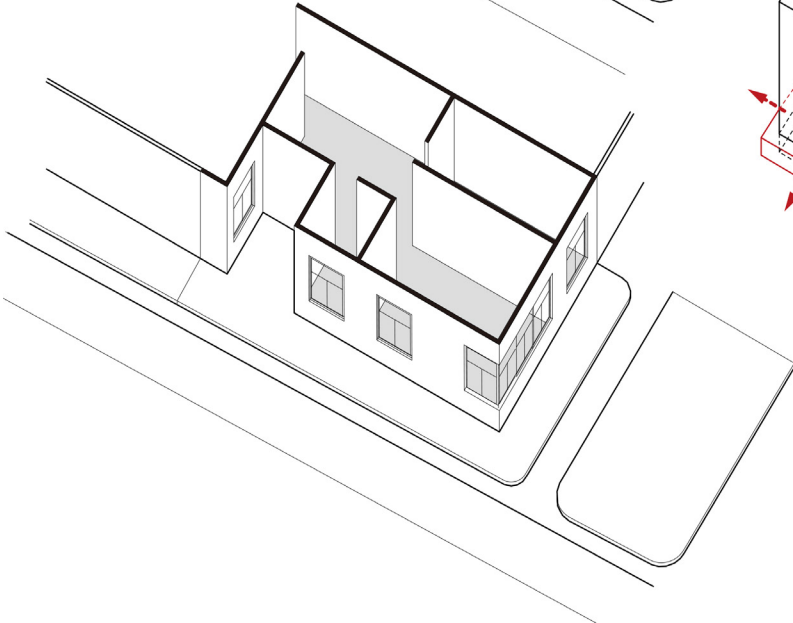
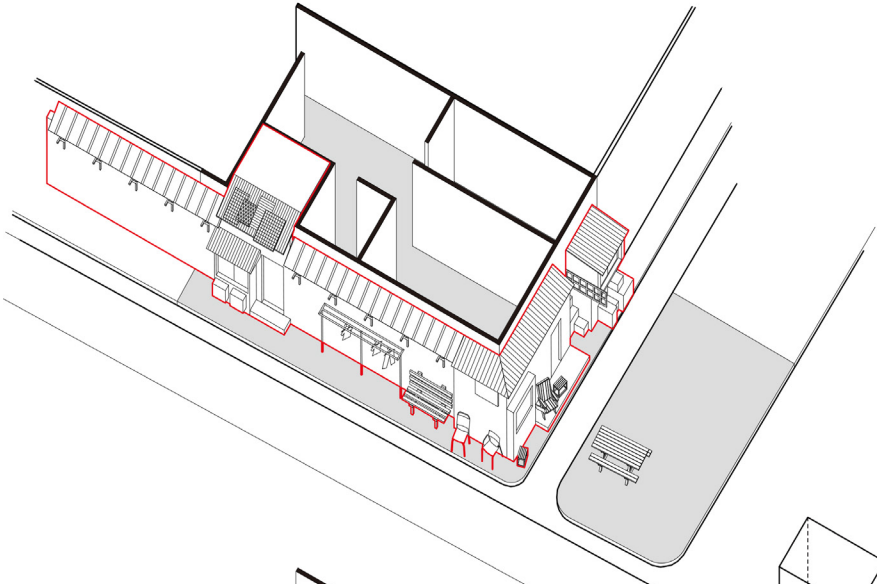






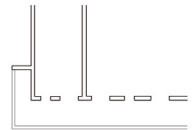
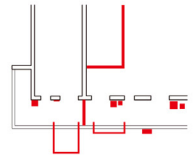
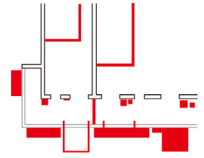
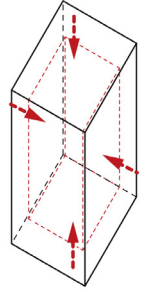
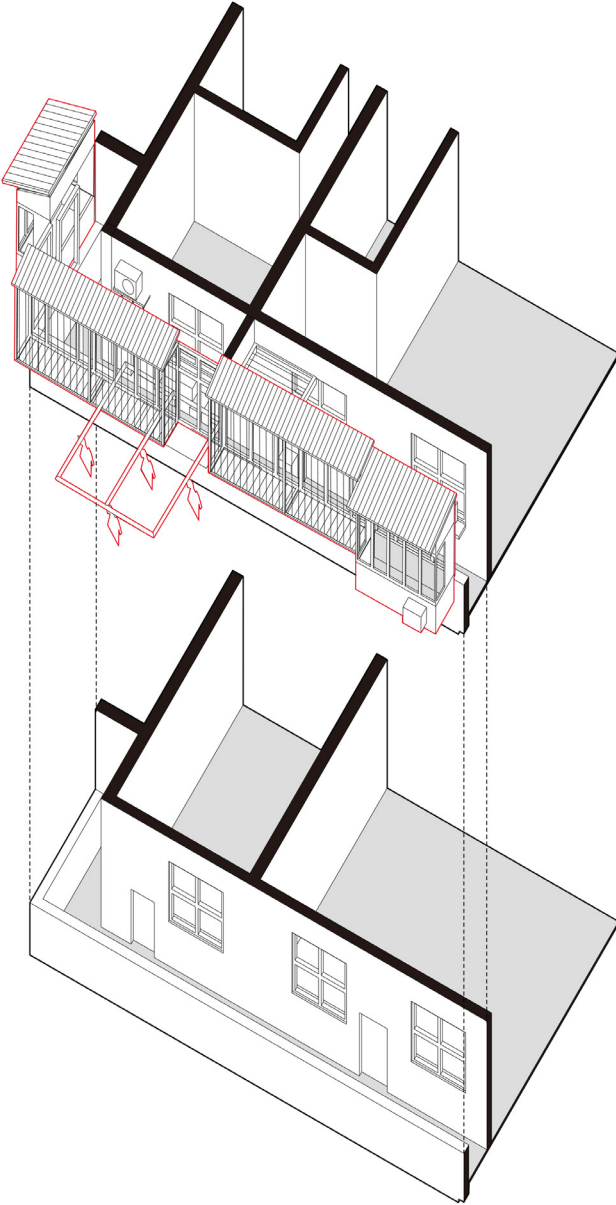
# STRING BUILDING





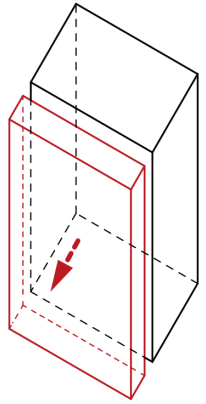
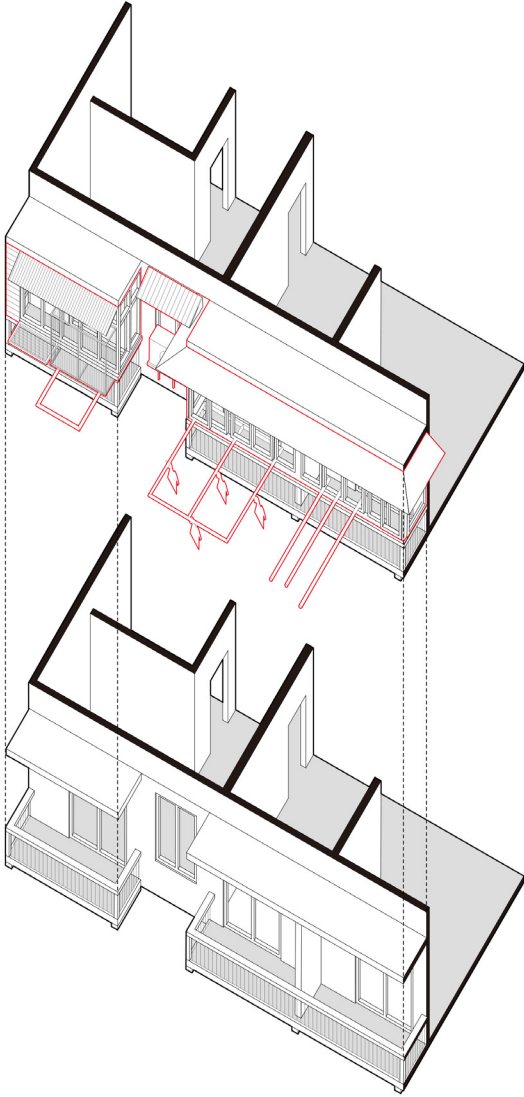
# OVERFLOWING DOMESTICITY





“Ex”trusion of informal activity

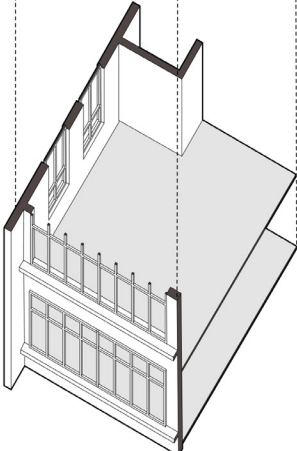
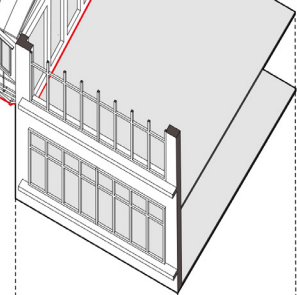
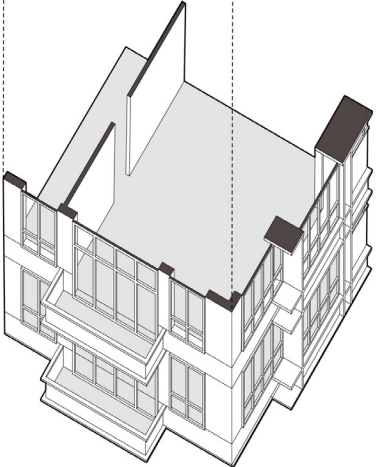
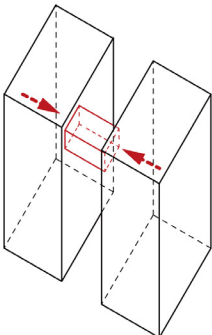
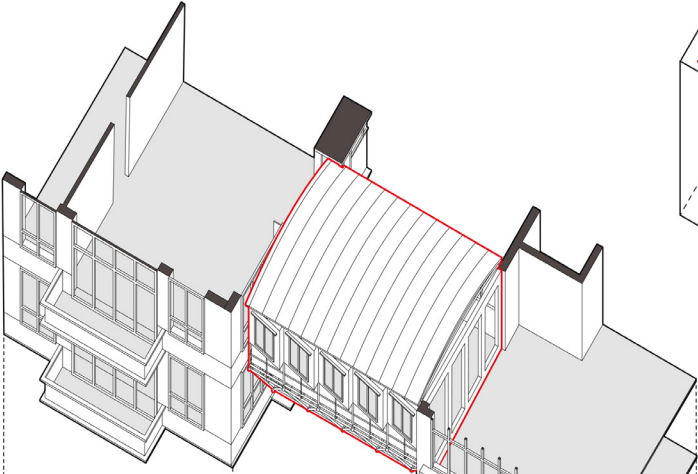




# WALL-ED UP BALCONY + STICKS

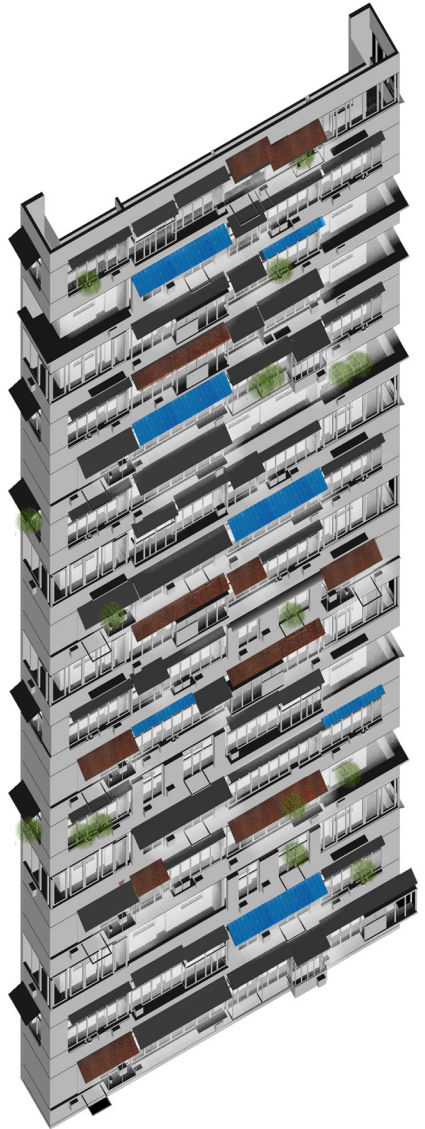
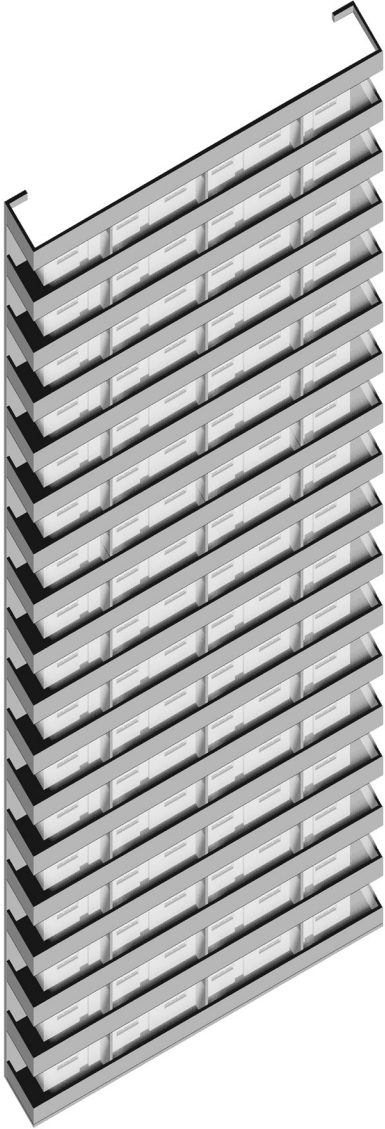


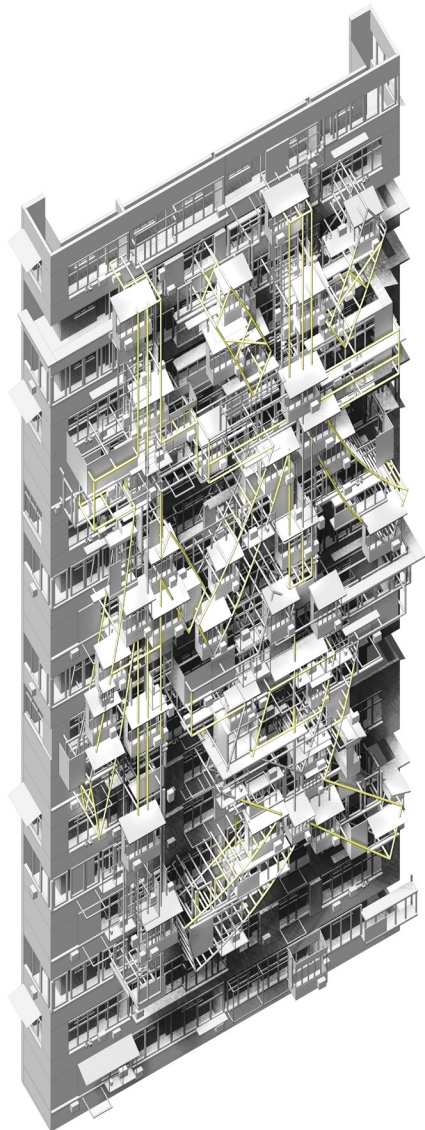
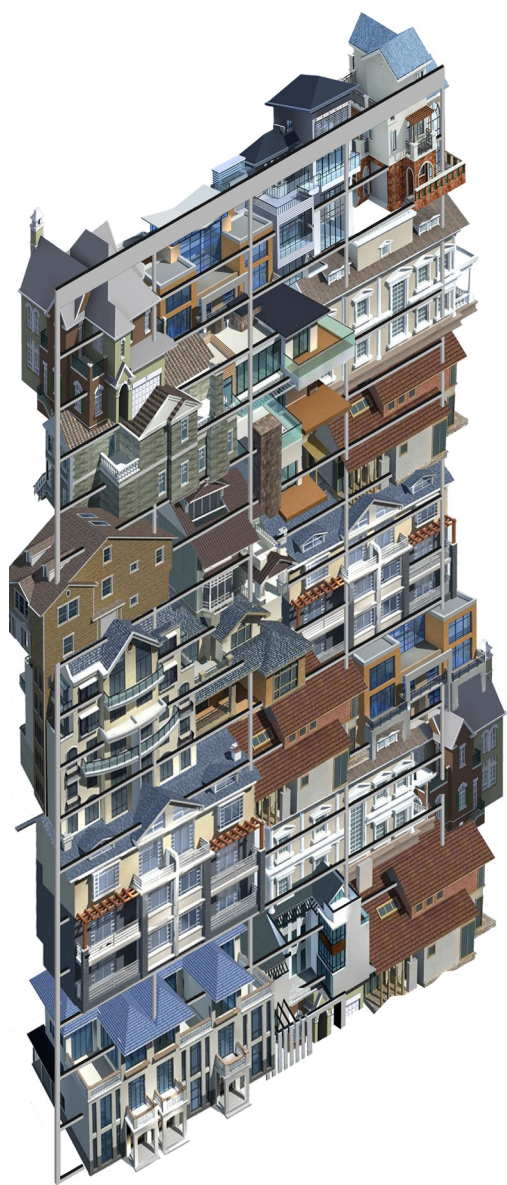




# INFORMAL BRIDGING







# Thesis Statement

To legitimize and make use of weirdness in the Chinese cultural fascination of symbolism and objectified architecture, I decide to put it in the most function-oriented program in the city \_ collective housing, or more specifically, the transformation and regeneration of existing housing types in Chinese megacities. To inject iconicity into the most banal and repetitive structures of Chinese cities, the residential high-rises, I aim to

1. Create a human layer that parasites the faceless facades of housing blocks
2. To take advantage of the novelty value of collectively generated iconicity to legitimize the personal appropriation of “public” space
3. To bring back people’s right to build and self-improve their personal dwellings in a designed framework, through everyday agency and means.
4. The economic value of the collective iconicity of the transformed facades would act as an incentive for the residents to open up their gated communities to the city.

**It seeks for a system of small-scale architectural interventions that parasites the official city, reclaiming the anonymous faces of residential towers that saturated Chinese cities, to transform them into forms of active resistance against the generalization of urban space driven by market and political orders, using existing objects just like a sampler to rebuild a whole new track**

