



**SITE**



SCENES FROM SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN  
*FALL 2022*









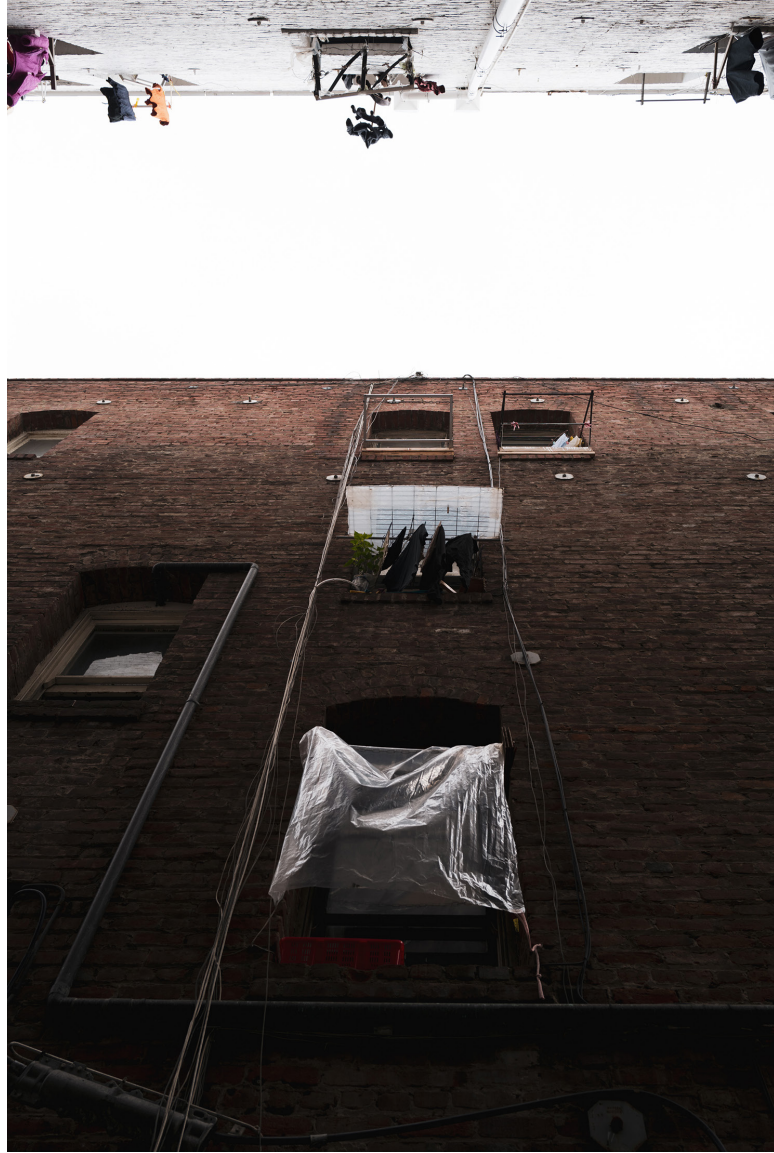


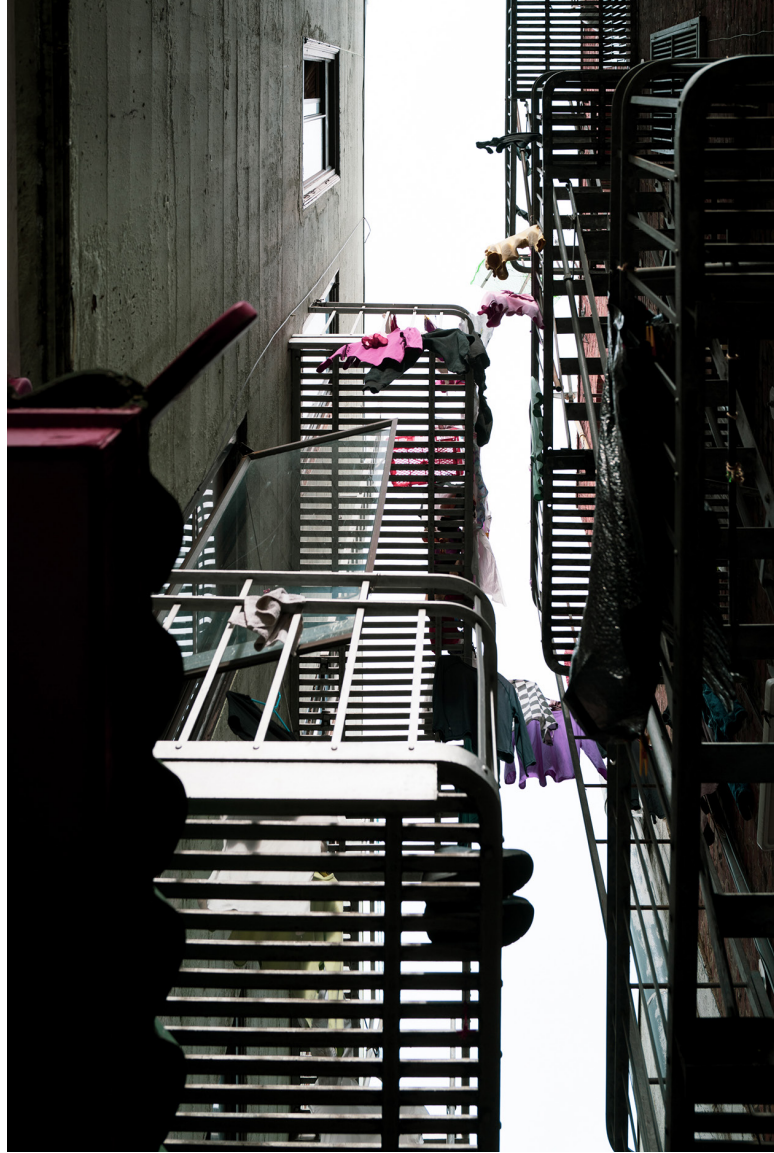














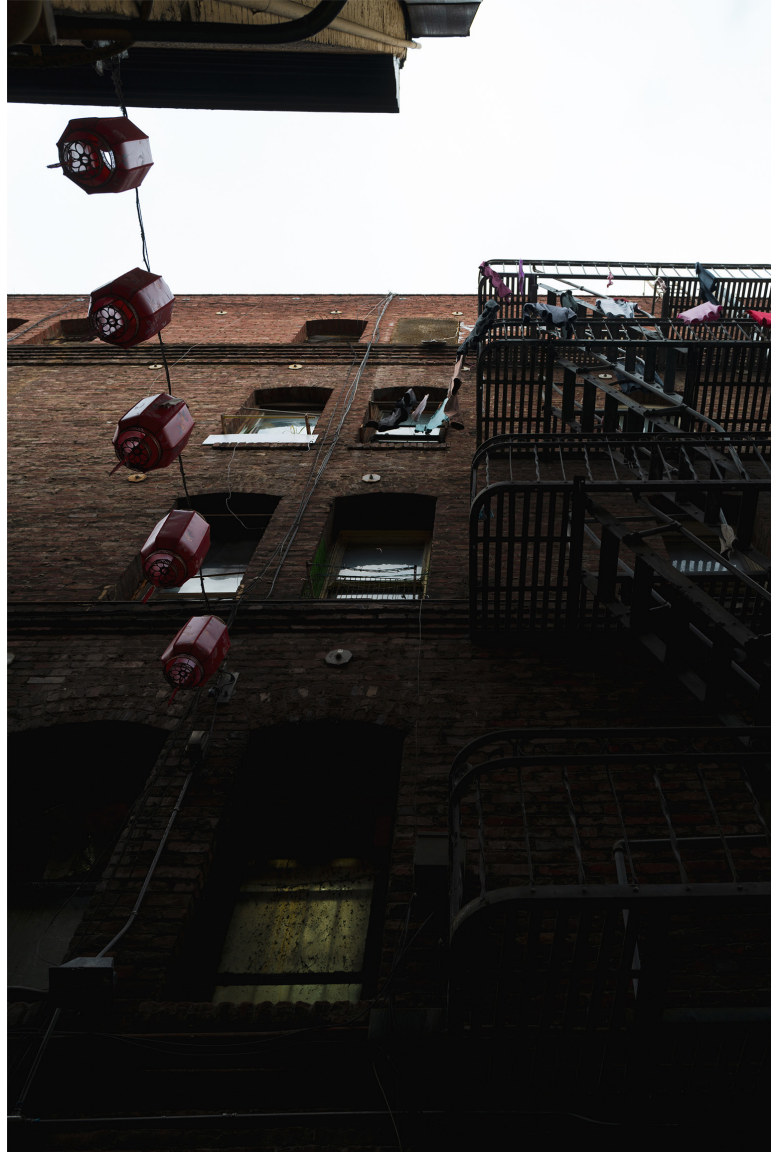






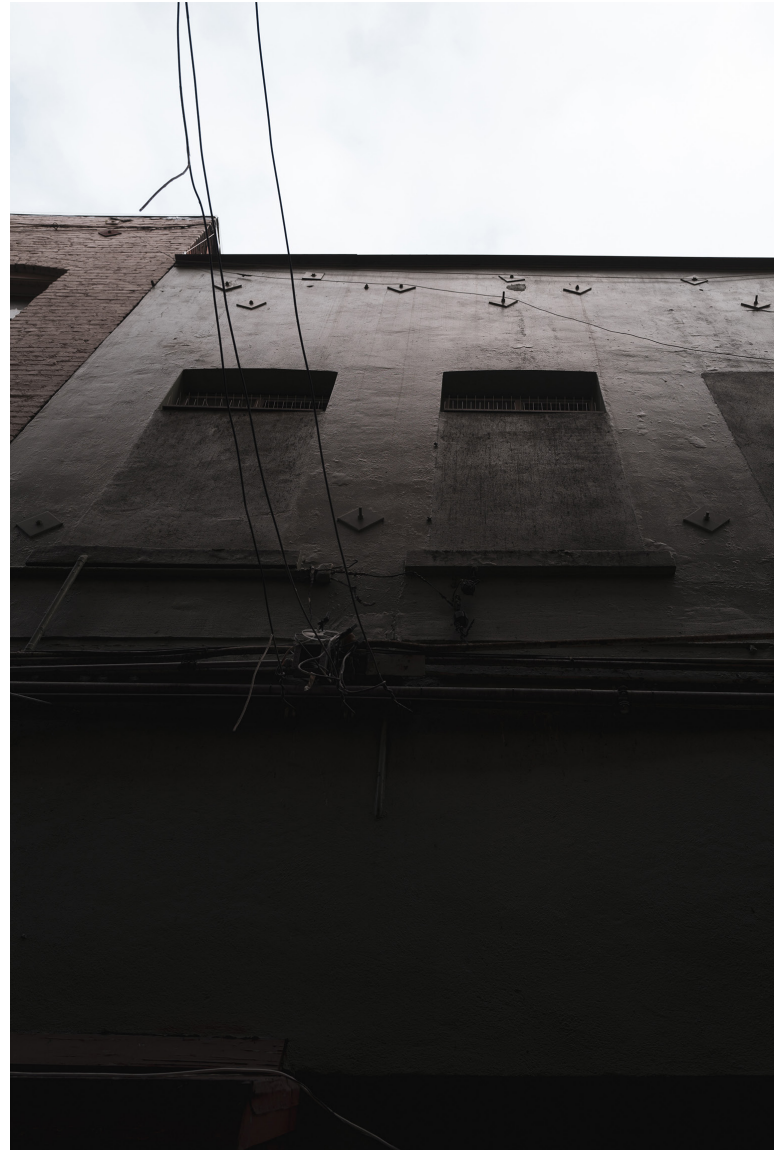


























































**IMAGE**

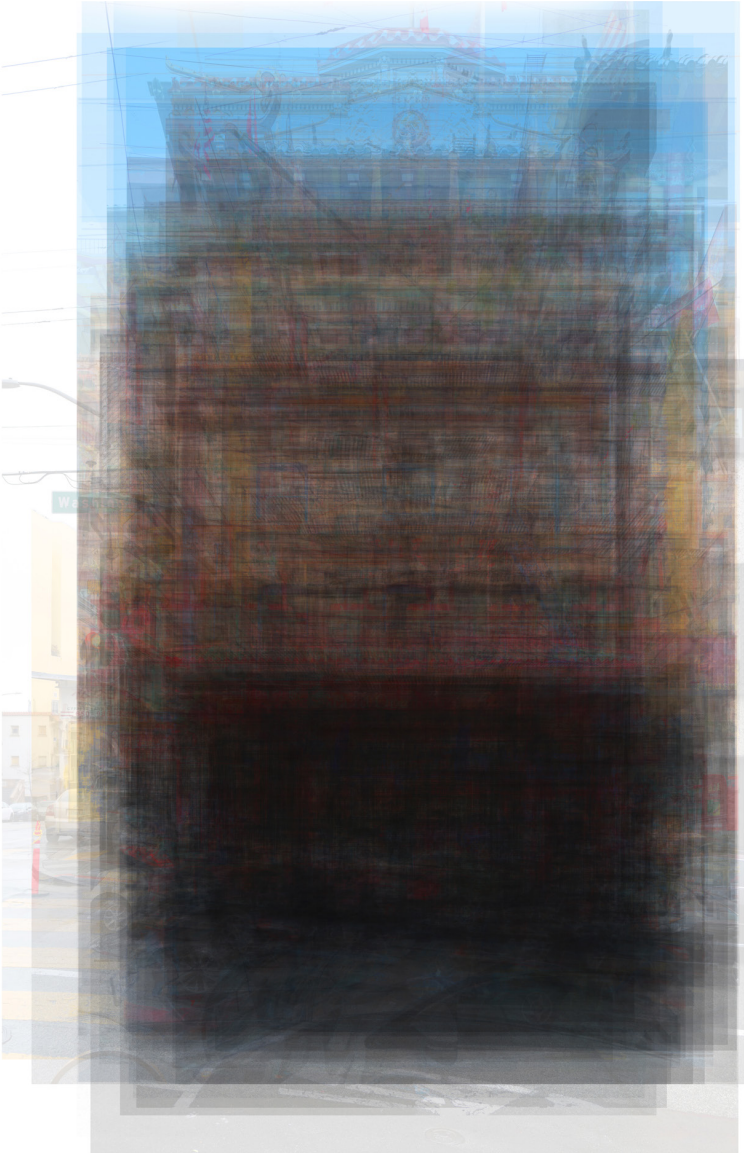


*Soo Yuen Benevolent Association, Sacramento, CA | Sooky Lee. 1970*



*Hong Kong Lum Restaurant, Sacramento, Ca | Sooky Lee. 1970*

PROVOCATION IMAGES  
*SPRING 2023*



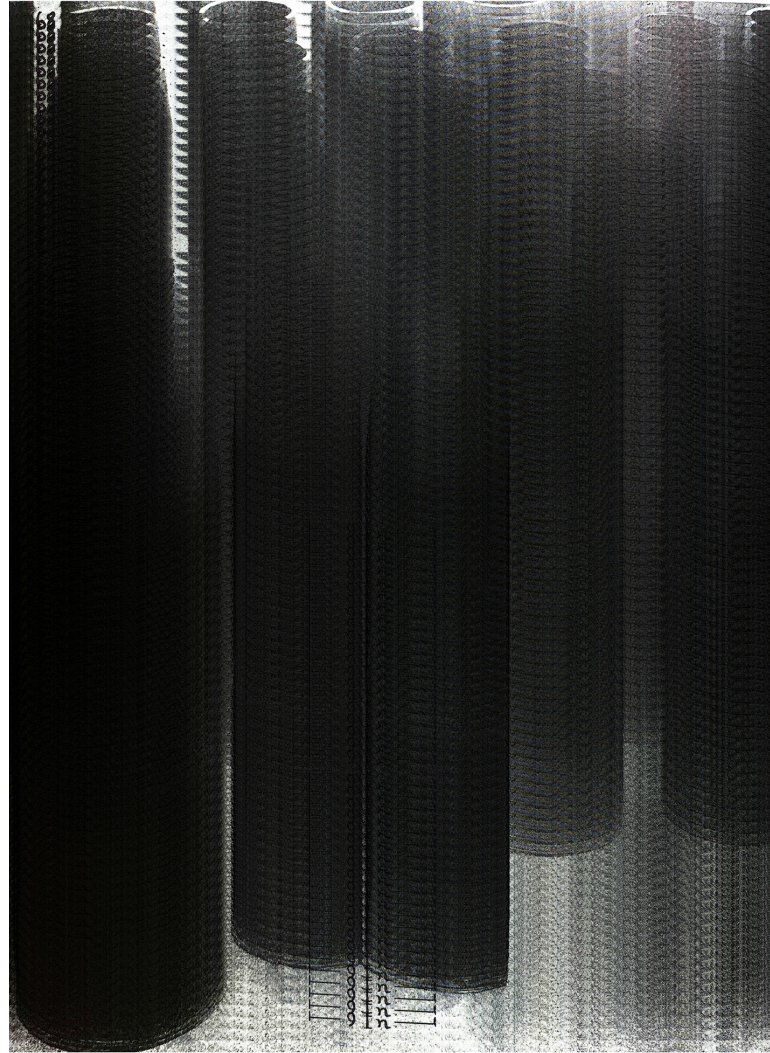
*106 overlaid photos of SF Chinatown facades*



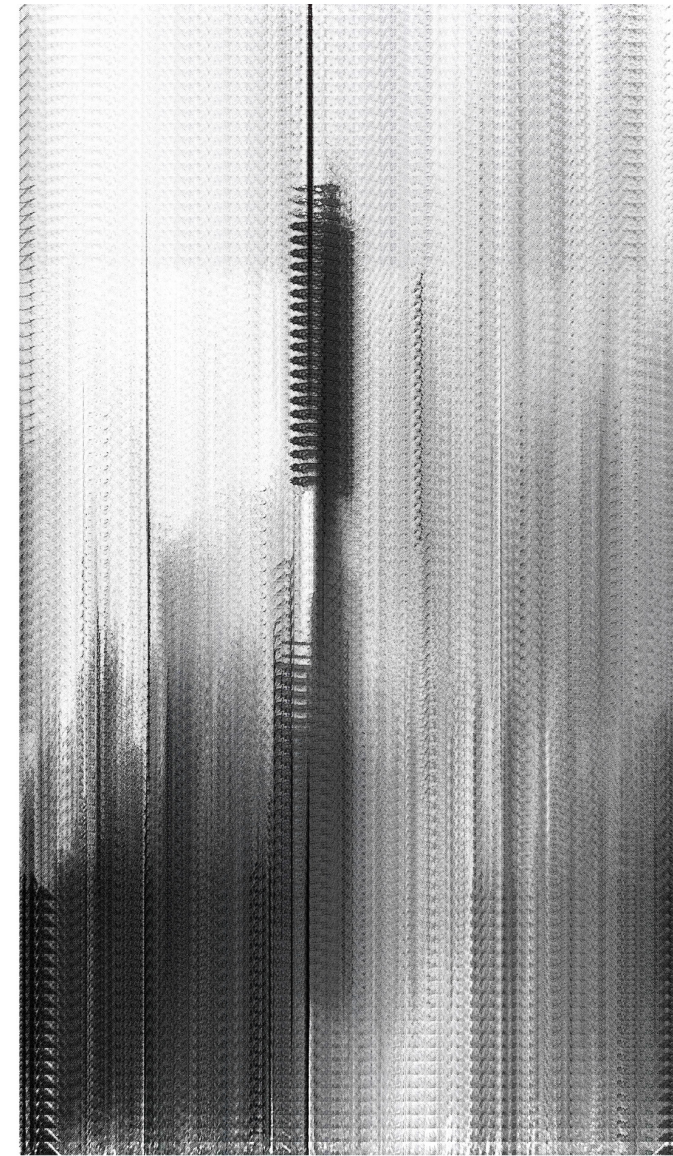
*Chinese tape loom*



*reel stand and bank reels for spooling cotton threads*



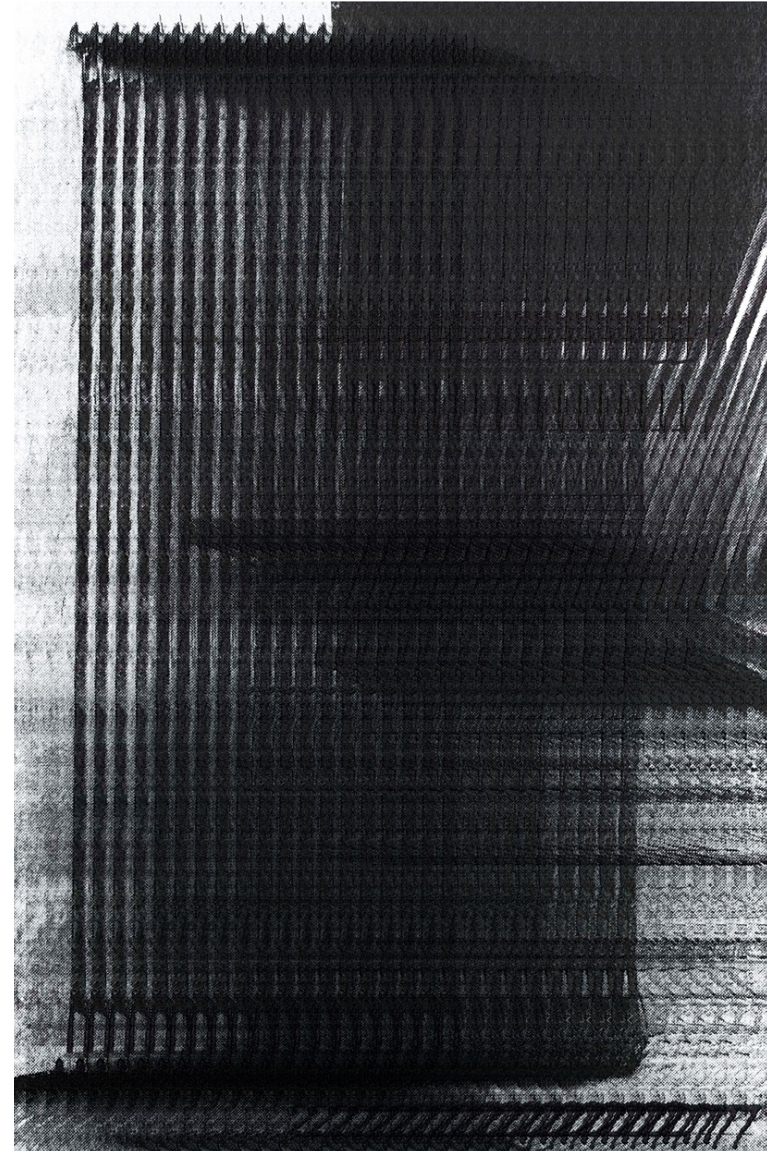
*clay cylinders on the drying floor*



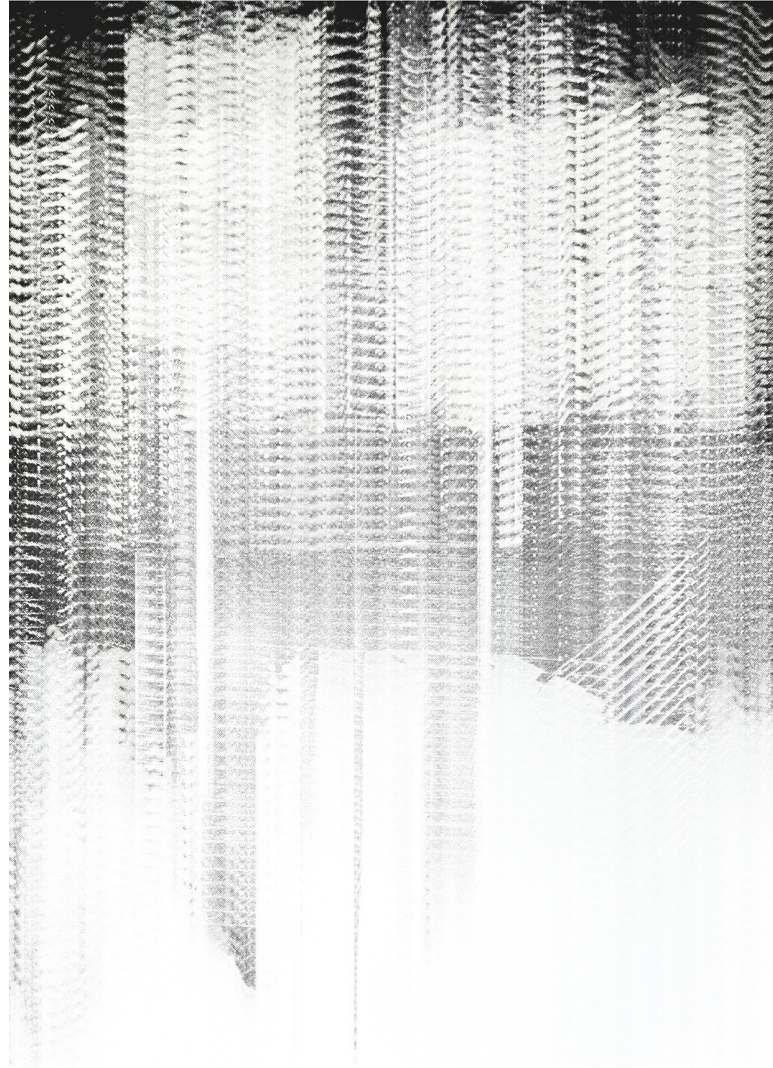
*Chinese hinge for an inner house door*



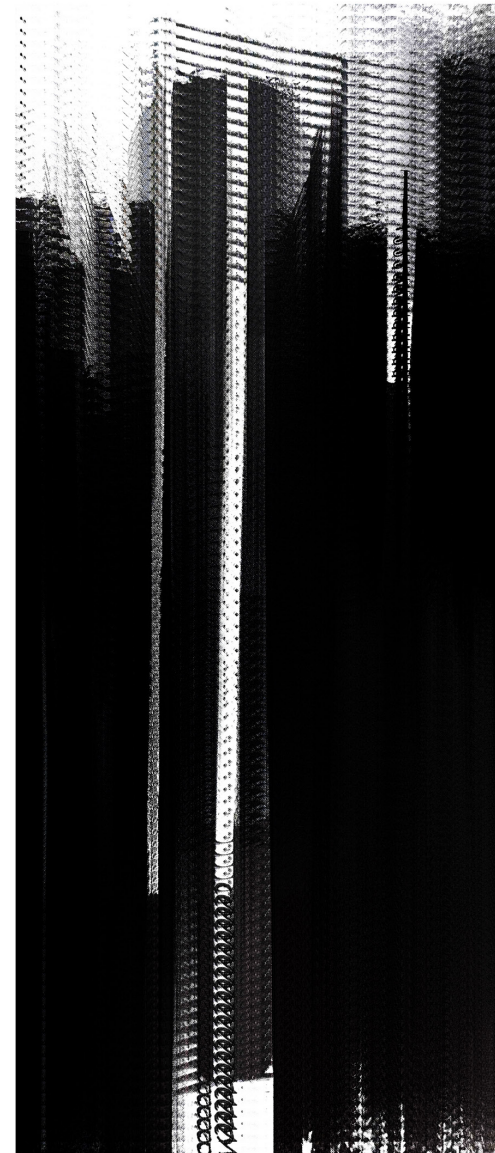
*Chinese coffin*



*board saw*



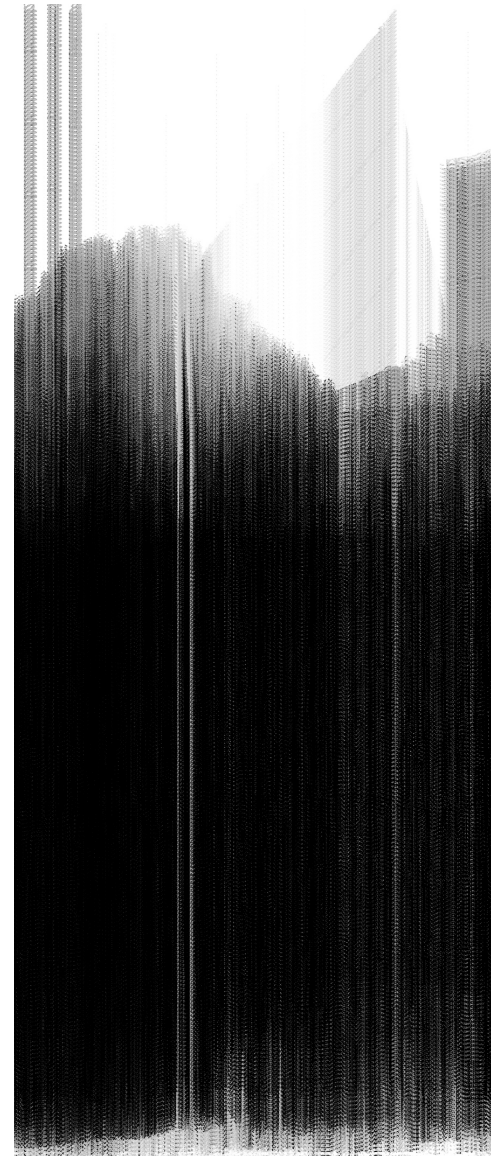
*rammed earth wall construction*



*cross-cut saw*

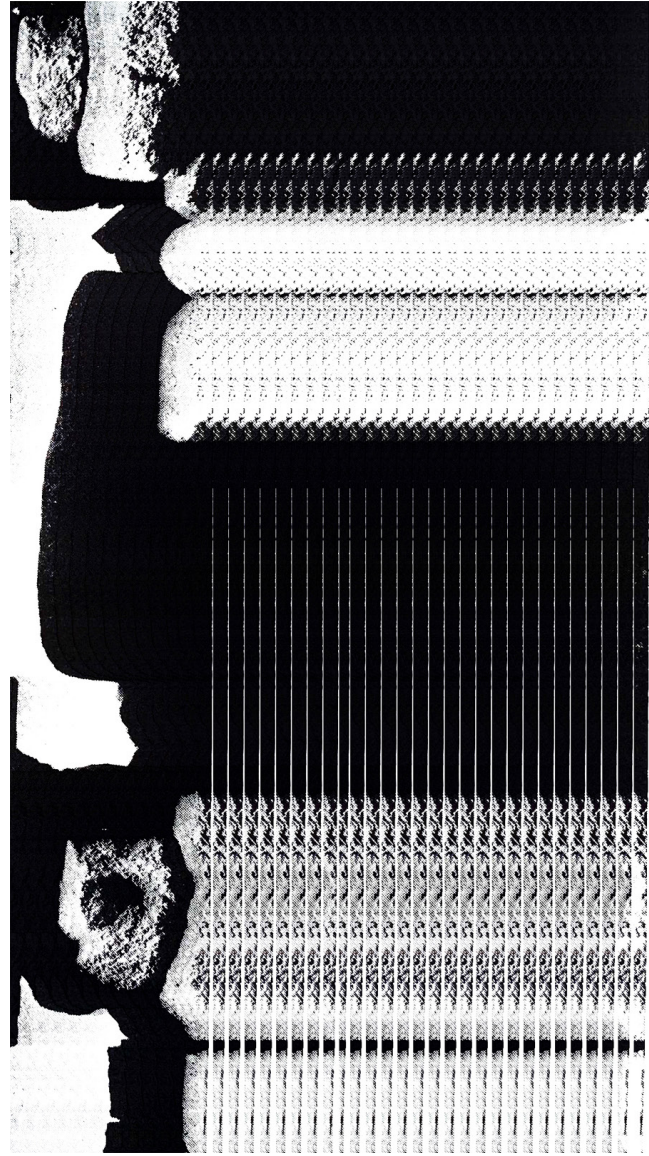


*cotton spinning wheel*

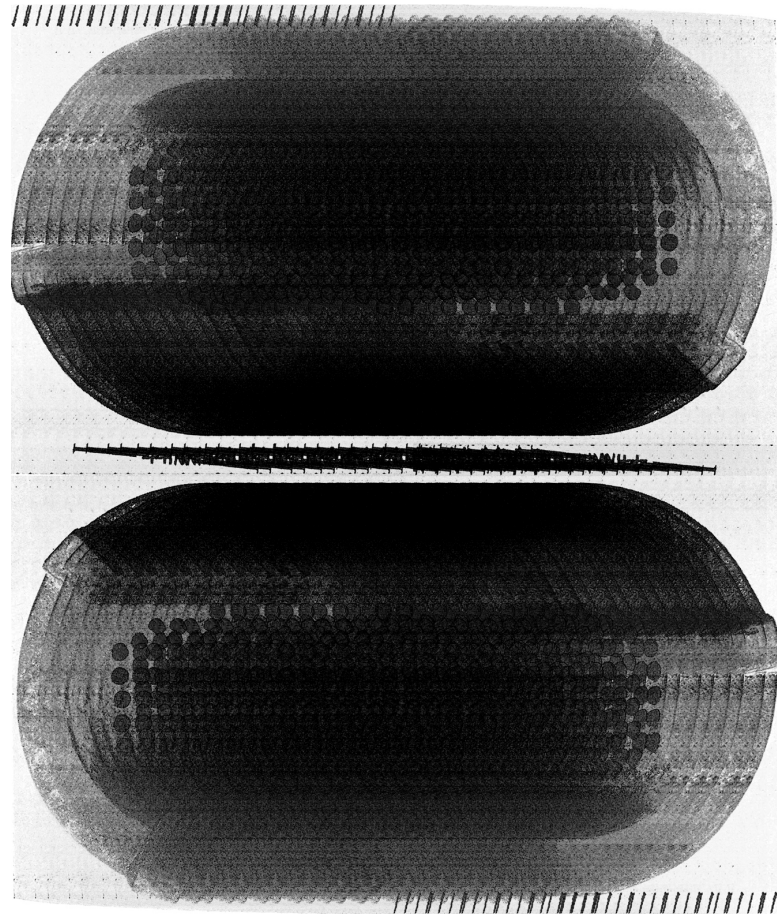


*well sweep*





*cooling kettle used in Chinese liquor still*



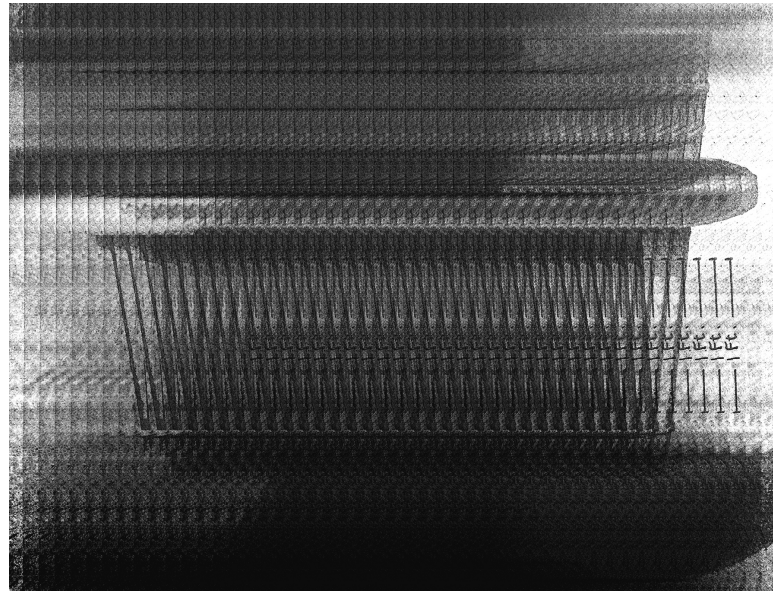
*charcoal cooking stove*



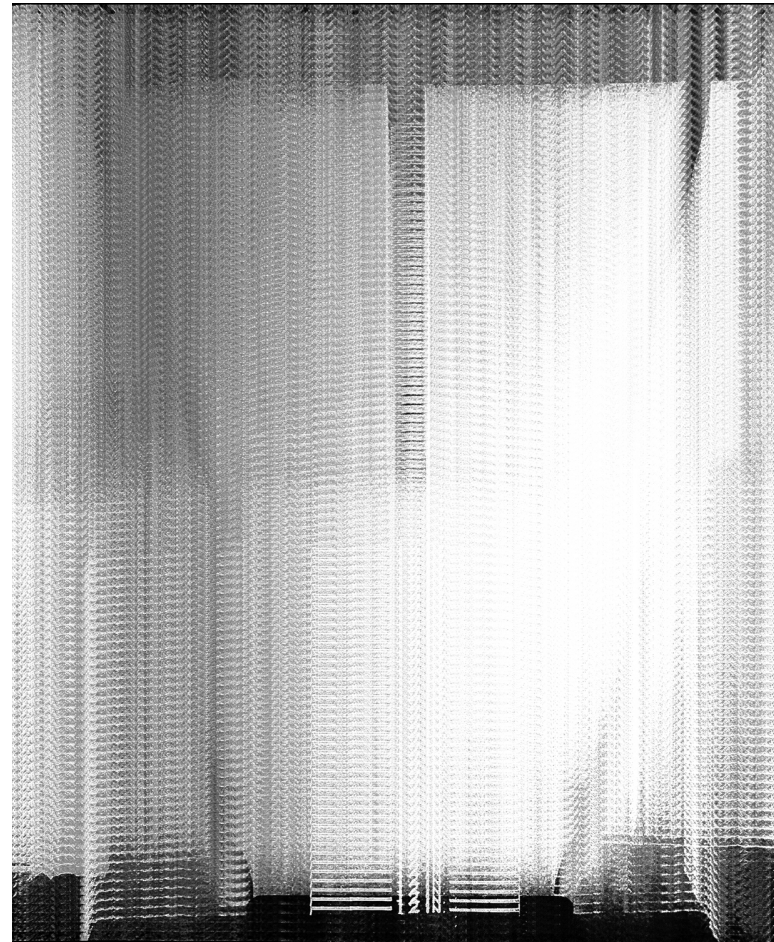
*Chinese flail*



*Chinese threshing frame*



*potter's wheel of the clay stove maker*



*Chinese threshing frame*

~~IMAGE~~

?’s

*What happened in Chinatowns over the last 174 years ?*  
*What is happening to Chinatowns today ?*  
*Are people still moving to Chinatowns ? Will they stay ?*  
*Does it matter who lives there ?*  
*Who gets to care about what happens in Chinatown?*  
*Can you have a Chinatown without Chinese people ?*  
*How many generations in America is still considered Chinese enough ?*  
*Do people need to speak Chinese in order to live in Chinatown ?*  
*What do you call an American Chinatown without Chinese people? America ?*  
*What is the measure of a culture ? What is the measure of a country ?*  
*When do the prefixes and suffixes become more confusing than helpful ?*  
*Do Chinatowns need to reflect China ? Are Chinatowns supposed to be China ?*  
*What is Chinatown supposed to reflect ? What impressions are visitors suppose to leave with ?*  
*What are the most important things to transfer / translate from China to Chinatowns ?*  
*Values ? Language ? Food ? Clothing ? Arts ?*  
*Do environments need to stay the same to preserve tradition ? How do we retell their stories ?*  
*Do the people living in Chinatown even want change ?*  
*What is the extent of desirable change ?*  
*Technology ? Architecture ? Civic institutions ? Transportation ?*  
*How is tradition passed down ?*  
*How are recipes passed down ? Is change allowed ?*  
*Do we eat certain things because our ancestors liked them ?*  
*How much of what we like is because we were told others liked them first ?*  
*Is every generation entitled to their own stories ?*  
*How can the younger generation make their mark ?*  
*Can you rebuild history ? Can you rebuild another culture’s history ?*  
*Should built history remain history ? Should it repeat as a form of preservation / a reminder ?*  
*How do you learn to build like builders 100 years ago ? 1000 years ago ? 10000 years ago ?*  
*How do we build in Chinatowns today ?*  
*What are the qualities of architecture that can reference an entire culture ? How can they ?*  
*Is Architecture really what’s needed in Chinatown ?*  
*What kind of architects ?*  
*Local ? International ? New ? Old ? Singular ? Many ?*  
*Who are the clients ?*  
*The city ? A country ? A community ?*  
*How do we add to what exists without taking away from what exists ?*  
*Does everyone need to be happy before change is allowed ?*  
*Can we even recognize the good from the bad ?*  
*Why are Chinatowns barely connected to other Chinatowns ? Politics ? Pride ?*  
*Can each Chinatown have its own virtues and characteristics ?*  
*Can each Chinatown be its own unique experience ?*  
*How political are foreign enclaves ? Are they a form of an embassy / a cultural consulate ?*

*Do Chinatowns alleviate political or cultural tensions ? Do they exacerbate them ?  
To what degree do Chinatowns suffer from relationships between America and China ?  
To what degree do they benefit ?  
How can Chinatowns serve as a mediator between China and America ? Should they ?  
How different do Chinatowns need to be from the rest of the city ?  
When is a city within a city detrimental to the city ? And vice versa ?  
Where is the line between architectural segregation and cultural pockets of uniqueness ?  
How should symbolism be used in buildings ? What if perceptions don't align with intentions ?  
What are Chinatowns supposed to look like ?  
What can they look like ? What will they look like ?  
China Illinois ? China California ? China Florida ? China Texas ? China Alabama ?  
Dual toned cultures ? Is each Chinatown a product of its 'regional' surroundings ?  
Are we at the end of Chinatowns ?  
To either preserve and return to the past ? Or to preserve in a way that looks to the future ?  
How do we add to cultural heritage without detracting from it ? How do you add to legacy ?  
Can you stop a tradition abruptly ? Is tradition forgiving ?  
Do Chinatowns feel old ? Does oldness imply tradition and richness ?  
When did architecture and planning abandon Chinatowns ?  
Do Chinatowns need to be saved ? Do Chinatowns want to be saved ?  
Why has Chinatown's architecture remained the same for the past two centuries ?  
Where is the future in Chinatown ? In the digital ? In recycling ?  
Can building traditions be preserved with recycled materials ?  
Does this reduce cultural traditions to the surface level ?  
Is Chinatown a series of billboards ? For tourists ? For cultural expression ?  
Or is it a place for cultural preservation ? A second home ?  
What is the sense of place in Chinatown ?  
Can any place be a Chinatown ?  
Is a Chinatown a Chinatown before or after people move in ?  
Are Chinatowns losing its touristic appeal ?  
When did Chinatown lose its appeal ?  
What was the appeal of Chinatowns ? Their foreign characteristics ? Their lack of place ?  
Are Chinatowns still tourist traps of exoticism ? Are they even exotic anymore ?  
What's different in Chinatowns today ? What's new ?  
Food ? Shopping ? Architecture ? Technology ? People ?  
Are the apartments passed down through generations ? Are the owners even the tenants ?  
Where do they live otherwise ? In condominiums downtown ? In China ?  
Who do owners rent to ? Do they care ?  
How many days are they there ? Every 3 months ? Twice a year ? Never ?  
Why do people buy property in Chinatown ?  
Does renting imply an eventual return ?  
Is selling an indication of moving on ? A definitive leave ?  
Can you preserve a culture remotely ? Can people ever leave without feeling guilt ?*

*Is it selfish to leave ?  
Are people happy in Chinatowns ?  
When do people feel at home in Chinatown ?  
Are buildings indicative of self love ?  
Are buildings indicative of self preservation ?  
When did we cease to care ?  
Is there anything left to build in Chinatowns ?  
What is the difference between preservation and conservation ?  
Do we preserve everything ? Even the generic ? What definition do we use ?  
Does meaning lie more in the process of building or the built result ?  
What role does nostalgia serve in architecture ? Is it permanent ?  
Are we obligated to remember ?  
Does it matter how we remember ?  
What is the relationship between Chinese people and Chinatown ?  
Between Chinese American people and Chinatown ?  
Between Americans and Chinatown ?  
Did the growth of modern cities stagnate the growth of Chinatowns ? Can it be reversed ?  
Can the rest of the city learn from Chinatowns ?  
How should we think about Chinatowns ?  
As a place that should be preserved at all cost ? Or a place that needs intervention ?  
How can Chinatown make a shift from imagery to an emphasis of experiential effects ?  
Are atmospheric experiences more meaningful ? More memorable ? More impactful ?  
How can Chinatown engage with social / political / environmental conditions ?  
Can architectural material explorations produce a dialogue capable of urban transformation ?  
Can Chinatown borrow building attitudes and philosophies of thought from traditional arts ?  
Can craft / techne reemerge in Chinatowns ?  
Will a new frame of thinking lead to a new Chinatown and a new city ?  
How can Chinatowns adopt a more cyclical nature and perpetuate progress ?  
How can Chinatowns become both a place of excitement and respite ?  
Can Chinatowns serve as home away from home and a testing ground for the future city ?  
How does the old and the new coexist ?  
Can temporal specificity and historic continuity occur in the same place ?  
At the same time ?  
How can metropolitan cities and Chinatowns be in a state of beneficial symbiosis ?  
When are Chinatowns going to change ?  
Why can't Chinatown become places full of innovation, tradition, and excitement ?  
How can architecture retell the stories of Chinatown ?*

preface

The notion of identity is an increasing concern in American architecture. As cities rapidly converge towards a similar likeness, a distinct sense of place is becoming progressively difficult to differentiate. Concerns for civic authenticity and appropriateness in the built environment continue to question the agency of architecture, historical narratives, and importance of locality. It becomes critical to ask: how do we design buildings that are sensitive to the cultures of those who inhabit them?

Cultural representation in architecture is typically an empty, allusive aspiration. Though sincere in its design intentions, too often will its architectural language reduce to merely symbolic imagery or cultural metaphors. In places like Chinatown, where built, cultural identity should be most evident or even the most successful, there is an overabundant reliance on visual inclinations toward the 'exotic.' Rather than exploring new design languages of communicating cultural values or new temporal connections between past and future, the exhaustion of symbolic cultural imagery has instead limited the community's prospective possibilities and led to many misguided external perceptions of Chinatown. Chinatown's architecture has only furthered the plight of its residing multi-generational families already hindered by systemic and legislative discrimination.

Chinatown's architecture neither accurately reflects the past nor does it represent aspirations towards the future. Diluted in its essence and illusory in its depiction of China, an overdetermined focus on building in an Oriental style "appropriate for America" has left little room for new interpretations, contradictions, and renewal. Through time, the visual elements - once meant to evoke the exotic and draw visitors necessary for economic livelihood - have imprisoned Chinatown to a reputation of tourism and cheap food. Chinatown's resistance towards change is causing the neighborhood to become increasingly obsolete - a place without a purpose and a home without intent. In this way, what were once distinctive elements within the city have now become fixed iconography more destructive towards immigrants' dreams than an image of opportunity and rebirth. Without the insistence of timely identity in buildings, the existing Chinatown architecture will only persist the fatigue in the community.

Since their establishments in the 1850s, Chinatowns have had a unique presence in America. Almost in every metropolitan area, Chinatowns are cities within cities and a place of rebirth, hope, resilience, tension, and misunderstanding. In some cities, Chinatowns serve as lively neighborhoods deeply integrated with its surroundings. In other parts of the country, Chinatowns have become dilapidated relics of a past time - abandoned buildings quickly being engulfed by gentrified communities. Yet, regardless of their civic relationship or economic wellbeing throughout history, Chinatowns have remained homes to intergenerational families and immigrant communities. People continue to rely on Chinatowns despite its lacking conditions; residents seem to stay in Chinatowns for its community and not for its architecture. It is a irreplaceable place of strong foundations, symbolic opportunity, and respite. However, with inevitable generational change and impeding gentrification, Chinatowns cannot simply rely on the relational bonds of its residents. Rather, to ensure future growth and security for its occupants, the characteristics of its architecture matter more than ever. Chinatowns need to become places of both history and future - a space where temporality, cultural specificity and historical continuity can all exist simultaneously. This aspiration can materialize most in its built environments. Whereas architects of old Chinatowns emphasize symbolism and imagery, new buildings in Chinatowns should explore a more anthropological look at design inspirations and processes.

Chinatowns of tomorrow need to maintain a careful balance between the past and future. Conservation must be willing to adapt and new suggestions must be willing to remain grounded. Maybe conservation should be less about pure preservation and more about projecting the past onto contemporary questions. Maybe preservation should rely less on western canons of archiving and more on a new, more speculative reading of cultural conservation. What philosophies and ethos of building resonate with new generations, adapt to change, and respect traditions? A number of pursuits may ultimately remain unanswered, but attempts towards suggesting what is next instead of what must remain will inevitably lead to a productive discourse and new developments.

This thesis proposes a new attitude towards building in Chinatown that prioritizes the people living there and the community that it serves. As tourists cycle through, stereotypes continue to fester and hate crimes persist, Chinatown's architecture should instead valorize those who look to Chinatown as a source of identity and sense of belonging. Tomorrow's Chinatown architecture should therefore focus on articulating the essence and meaning of place, memory, time, allegory, and the intrinsic history of tools. Amidst the growing platitude and redundancy of familiar cities, there is a deeper, sincere imperative to prioritize cultural identity and its sensibilities in the postulation of tomorrow's world.

How do we design spaces that retell stories of identity?  
place + time + things



place

As a measurement of appropriateness, the sense of place is often cited as a reason for formal moves, building narratives, or even specific materials. Both constantly changing yet perpetually fixed, the phenomenon of place is a combination of the physical and the imaginative. It is the smell of a nearby bakery, or the sound of a blue robin's chirps, or even the bitter, metallic taste of ammonia in the air. It is also a recollection, a fleeting thought, or even an emotion. Often personal in its nature, the concept of place is individualistic in its meaning yet universal in ownership.

Place is essentially memory. It still exists when one leaves and it remains present in thought. As a figment of imagination, the memory of a place stems from the actual and relies on the make-believe or the fantastical to materialize again. It can change because it does not really matter. It can even differ from others because it does not really matter.

It is the attitude and the personal relationship to a building or to land that is essential to feelings towards place. Locals claim that one cannot really learn about a place through books or the media. Some argue that a second-degree description is not genuine or true to the ethos of the place. They will shake their heads until one tries the local hole-in-the-wall restaurant or experience the same joys and frustration as they do. To them, place is something felt and not just learned.

Similar to the ambiguity of feelings, there is also a certain degree of illegibility in one's mental image of a place. Without photos, the colors of the trees during fall recall to be a little redder. The steepness of a favorite hike seem to be a little bit steeper. Where a perfect recounting of place fails, there is a mystery, a blurriness, and a necessary searching of place that enhance its memory and makes it so profoundly personal.

Place is more than its physical descriptions and its geographic location. Place is the embodiment of memory, mystery, and reflection.

time

Everything is bounded by the confines of time. Regardless of subjective beliefs or social constructs, time exists as a definite reality - as a measurement of life, of presence, and even of relevance. Whether it is a person, a place, or an object, time marks the beginning and the end.

The concept of timelessness is a common aspiration in design. In fashion, product design, and in architecture, there is an abstract desire to create something of such magnitude that defies temporal boundaries. Designers typically think of timelessness as an absolute or a final solution. However, what makes something relevant in perpetuity is its adaptation to changing realities. Without change, designs near an impending obsolescence.

Designs can also have unintended second lives and uses. After its original functionality is deemed obsolete, buildings can assume a new purpose. The past utility remains as a narrative and somehow persists the test of time in its allegorical retelling. Time may limit physical objects, but it also mandates a renewal of functionality and an examination of what is important given new environments.

Somehow the restrictions of time seem to apply only to the congruency of architectural drawings and intent. The degree of incongruence of how people live, work, or occupy space defy the limits of time.

things

Whether in terms of aesthetics or practicality, material things have always reflected period sensitive cultural values. Museums, aside from their problematic ownership rights, exemplify differences in cultural philosophies and virtues. As one walks from one exhibit to another, the things displayed create an atmospheric replica of a past time. Ingrained in tools exist design developed through generations of usage.

How can the history of objects guide how to design for the future? Rather than a mere preservation of the past, can we imbue the philosophies of the past into the contemplation of what's next?

Somehow, there seems to be lessons in cultural things and the process of making cultural things. Aside from imagery and pure aesthetic appearance, the nature of objects resemble their respective culture.

In the reinterpretation of things, is it possible to re-understand, re-represent, or re-interpret our cultures?

place + audience  
*appearance versus meaning*

The role of the audience has long dictated the design attitude of San Francisco's Chinatown. Whether in response to acts of exclusion or in anticipation of financial profits to ensure preservation, Chinatown has always positioned its built articulation to respond to the opinions of the public and its inhabitants. Extremely conscious of its external image, Chinatown has placed a large focus on its physical and perceived place in the city.

After the 1906 Earthquake and The Great Fire, organizations lobbied to relocate Chinatown closer to the Bay and to convert its existing location into a Business Section. Public opinion and some newspaper headlines read:

*SAN FRANCISCO MAY BE FREED FROM THE STANDING  
MENACE OF CHINATOWN<sup>1</sup>*

*Plans Have Been Arranged, and a Corporation Formed to Turn the Chinese Quarter into a Business Section,  
and Build a New Oriental City on the Bay Shore.*

*LET US HAVE NO MORE CHINATOWNS IN OUR CITIES<sup>2</sup>*

The fire provided an opportunity to start anew and to remove Chinese immigrants from a desirable San Francisco neighborhood. While a home to many, Chinatown's origins stemmed from reluctance rather than a feeling of acceptance. Chinatown was viewed as a place where the "lower and vicious classes of Orientals congregated."<sup>3</sup> It was a stain within the city. Chinese immigrants were originally 'permitted' to move into Chinatown because of their willingness to pay high rents for undesirable shacks. However, as Chinatown acquired wealth and developed a sense of presence and belonging, their possible permanence began to scare their neighbors. Instead of encouraging or attempting to add to the development of Chinatown, some advocated for the removal of Chinatown to allow for a rebuilding of its coveted location.

1. Menace of Chinatown article, Merchants Association Review, 1905, Unknown, c. 1900, From the collection of: Chinese Historical Society of America  
2. Let Us Have No More Chinatowns article, Oakland Enquirer, April 1906, Unknown, c. 1900, From the collection of: Chinese Historical Society of America  
3. Ibid

While limited in possibilities, Chinatown responded by hiring lawyers to protect their interests, rebuilding immediately without waiting for city officials, and even signing new leases with white landlords assisting the rebuilding process. To cement their placement and role within the city, Chinatown adopted a westernized mystique and exotic perception of its own Chinese culture and image. Appearances leaned on creating an allure and a sense of the unknown. Architectural and cultural meaning took a backseat to surface articulation and distinguishing architectural elements. As a survival technique, Chinatown intentionally became a place that was missing in the rest of San Francisco; Chinatown forcibly became its own totality and its own world amidst the rest of the city's modernity.

Today, Chinatown is situated in the North East part of San Francisco, nestled between what is now Nob Hill, North Beach, the Financial District, and the Downtown area. To the west, Nob Hill is home to large mansions, ritzy hotels, and grandiose cathedrals. Originally known as California hill, Nob Hill quickly became popular amongst the elite after the Big 4 founders of the Central Pacific Railroad - Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, and Collis Huntington - chose to build their extravagant residences on the hill. To the north of Chinatown, North Beach, previously 'Little Italy,' is a neighborhood that has gradually evolved into a place of multiethnic presence. As Italian immigrants passed away or moved away, Chinese businesses moved into closed Italian storefronts and homes left behind. Still retaining much of its old Italian aura and atmosphere, the neighborhood became more and more of a blend of multiple groups.

To the east of Chinatown, the Financial District further amplifies the difference of Chinatown with its surrounding neighborhoods. Rebuilt after the 1906 Earthquake, the Financial District quickly went from six to twelve storied buildings to skyscrapers such as the Russ building, Standard Oil building, Shell Building, and Hunter Dulin building. While the fear of earthquakes slowed the full committal towards vertically inclined buildings, technology allowed a retrofitted revisioning of the district. San Francisco hence became 'Manhattanized' and continues to display a transformed trend of a city with more vertical characteristics (over 160 buildings taller than seventy-three meters in San Francisco).

To the south of Chinatown is San Francisco's downtown. Again, there is a stark contrast to civic approach of Chinatown. Instead, downtown is largely regarded as the heart of the city with a high concentration of hotels, high end retail, and dining options.

Chinatown has always been in a precarious position. Located in the middle of four distinctly different neighborhoods, it seems that San Francisco's Chinatown never had the opportunity to develop naturally or at an organic pace. Instead, it was in a state of constant reconfiguring and redefining its identity. Furthermore, this identity responded to different sided relationships and proximities to neighborhoods. The westward half of Chinatown consists of more supermarkets and residential units, while the eastward half is comprised of touristic shops, restaurants, and public parks.

So who are the appropriate audiences for tomorrow's Chinatown? Who is Chinatown for and what is Chinatown to different groups? Perhaps audience is too loaded of a word with connotations of performance and display. Yet on the other hand, maybe an 'audience' is what Chinatown has always needed for a symbiotic relationship and civic survival. Maybe the power of Chinatown is in its ability to perform as a spectacle and as a symbolic image. As a place of fluid definitions and intrinsic meaning, Chinatown simultaneously belongs to everyone and yet to no one.

time + audience  
*image versus atmosphere*

Audiences and their receptions can change over time. Whether with regards to a play, book, art, food, or architecture, audiences may formulate new opinions depending on changing contexts, supplementary information, or even personal development. Then, how can architecture remain relevant throughout time? Is it sustainable to assume a life expectancy for buildings and to be content when they grow into obsolescence? What if a building is not even successful amongst the general public in the beginning? How should the factors of time and the audience play in the design formation of a building? Somehow it seems that a building should be defined by the reactions of people who have no prior knowledge of it beforehand.

With varying points of reference across generations, perhaps the symbolic nature of a image based nostalgia is no longer the appropriate approach to culturally sensitive architecture design. Postmodern references to recognizable shapes and iconography seem to hurt culturally sensitive buildings rather than assist its intended community. Regardless of intent, the architectural image evokes different responses and its potency becomes entirely reliant on recognition; narratives deviating from the original concept generate organically and the building is consumed by public opinions over time. How helpful is this for the culture and the people its intended for? Maybe nostalgia should be replaced by abstracted sensibilities and cultural philosophies. Maybe architecture should aim to extract values from a culture's natural history and render the familiar unfamiliar. Somehow, when the origin of a project remains honest in its ambitions and the design development refuses to adopt existing iconography imagery, architecture becomes a space that is strangely nostalgic yet refreshingly new at the same time. Additionally, it seems that the specifics to trigger feelings of nostalgia are also impossible to reproduce. While versions of it may allude to familiar sensations and memories, atmospheres are unique in their totality. Instead, architecture should rely on an edifice constructed from cultural philosophies, texts, and the arts to evoke similar forms of nostalgia.

A theory that works.  
A mania that sticks.  
A lie that has become a truth.  
A dream from which there is no waking up.

*Rem Koolhaas, "The City of the Captive Globe"*

I believe the appearance of the work is secondary to the idea of the work,  
which makes the idea of primary importance.

*Sol Lewitt, #15 of 100 Sentences of Conceptual Art, 1969*

Radical diatonism, forceful and distinctive rhythmical pronunciation,  
melodic clarity, harmonies plain and severe, a piercing radiance of tone  
colour, and finally, the simplicity and transparency of his musical fabric, the  
stability of his formal structures

*Andre Boucourechliev on the Russian Spirit of Igor Strawinsky's musical grammar*

Architecture has lost its necessary contact with society and, as a result, has  
become a private world...When architecture is produced in cities, it conveys  
a public idea. Cities have a need for an architecture that is both a tool, in  
the sense of artificially transforming the physical environment, and a frame  
for supporting social life...I prefer to think that architecture is the air we  
breathe when buildings have arrived at their radical solitude.

*Rafael Moneo, The Solitude of Buildings*

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room;  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.

*Lao Tzu, translated by Gia Fu Feng + Jane English*

In *Atmospheres | Architectural Environments | Surrounding Objects*, Peter  
Zumthor writes about the personal and the sensitive nature of the  
individual. He questions the *Magic of the Real* as a driving inspiration to his  
designs. To him, the harmony of materials, light, sound, and intimacy create  
a sense of passion and joy in nature and in his own architecture.

*BODY OF ARCHITECTURE* - the material presence and its frame have a  
*bodily mass* that can touch people and make them truly feel.  
*MATERIAL COMPATIBILITY* - the critical proximity and a harmony  
between materials create a radiance and endless possibilities.  
*THE SOUND OF SPACE* - the association of sound to interior spaces and  
the memories and feelings it conjures - spaces speaking.  
*THE TEMPERATURE OF SPACE* - the warmth/coldness of spaces. A  
search for the right mood; a tuning of temperature and the psychological .  
*SURROUNDING OBJECTS* - what people choose to keep around them  
when they live. A deep relationship or organic accumulation.  
*BETWEEN COMPOSURE AND SEDUCTION* - direction + seduction +  
letting go + granting freedom - architecture as a spatial and temporal art.  
*TENSION BETWEEN INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR* - what do I want to  
see? and what do I want other people to see of me? Buildings can talk.  
*LEVELS OF INTIMACY* - proximity and distance. Something like scale,  
dimension, size - bodily comparison of a building's mass to ones own.  
*THE LIGHT ON THINGS* - where and how light falls, where and how  
shadows are casted.  
*ARCHITECTURE AS SURROUNDINGS* - becoming a part of its context  
- the attempt to conceive of architecture as a human environment.  
*COHERENCE* - "Architecture attains its highest quality as an applied art.  
And it is at its most beautiful when things come into their own" (69).  
*THE BEAUTIFUL FORM* - the searching in all scales of a the beautiful  
form.

This thesis aims to produce a sense of magic in the buildings we inhabit.

place + chineseness  
*metaphor versus the abstract*

Is it possible to replace the image of architecture? How does a building communicate more than what appears on its surface? Can buildings build communities? Are buildings able to produce cultural sensibilities? Can a building emulate Chineseness? How does a building serve basic functions but also push its limits and into realms of magic and the imaginary. How can a building produce experiences that make one understand a culture? Maybe to develop cultural sensibilities is not a matter of direct translation or regurgitation of what exists in history but a reintroduction of sensitive ideologies. Furthermore, not as a metaphor or analogy but a reconceptualization of the familiar.

In China, there is a deep, profound passion for stones; stones that display years of natural aging and mystery in its sculptural form, surface coloration, and overall composition. Because of the unknown, dynamic transformation, there is a sense of rawness and beauty exemplified. Ancient Chinese beliefs describe these stones to be imbued with life force, qi, and regard the stones to be records flowing with vital energy. While the collection and actual artifact of the scholar stones are truly captivating, perhaps the true magic is in the subsequent representation of the stone and its perceived meaning.

Every line of ink vividly conveys the movement of the brush. It is as though the energy flowing into the ink through the artist's hand were visible. And this is the crux of the picture: in any picture of qi it does not matter what the energy-filled material is - stone or water or clouds - which accounts for the obscurity of the inscription. The picture portrays a material substance yet is also an expression of energized immateriality.

*Albert Lutz, To Paradise Through Stone: Tales and Notes on Chinese Scholar's Stones<sup>5</sup>*

It tells of a fisherman, rowing past a blossoming peach-tree grove, who discovers a gap in a cliff side. Through it he finds his way into a paradisaical world where the people live peacefully and happily in harmony with nature. They tell the visitor that long ago their forefathers had taken refuge there in time of war. As he leaves again, they ask him not to tell anyone of their hidden world. But the fisherman fails to keep his word and tells the outside world of the existence of this paradise. Yet when he later tries to find the entrance to the valley again, he is unable to do so.

*Recounting of the poem Peach Blossom Spring, To Paradise Through Stone<sup>6,7</sup>*

5. Olsberg, R.N., Müller Lars and Ursprung, P. (2002) Herzog &amp; de Meuron: Natural history. Montréal, Québec: Canadian Centre for Architecture. 109-117  
6. Ibid  
7. A.R. Davis, ed. and translator, Tao Yuan-Ming (AD 365-427): His Works and Their Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 51-53



So what is Chineseness as an abstracted concept? What is it in terms of the built environment? Is it a matter of built rituals or procedural routine that reminds people of traditions and heritage? Or is it a specific set of physical materials that create a specific atmosphere? Can a building's program speak to a culture's needs and lifestyle?

Can architecture share a similar productive obscurity? Can architecture rely more so on the happenstance nature of discovery rather than on literal translation of imagery? Like the varying geological possibilities in shape, material, color, and surface texture of scholar rocks, perhaps architectural spaces should also be equally seductive and abstracted. While structure and architectural details are not imaginary constructs, design inspiration and concept can be. However, there is the risk of projects becoming too metaphorical and relying too heavily on attributed meaning and narratives. Once built, the process matters less. Once built, the ideas seems to matter less. Rather, the resulting form, the collection of spaces, the casting of light and shadow, and the assembly of materials takes precedent in the understanding of architecture.

Perhaps program is the only thing that can replace and provide more than the architectural image:

*community center  
residential  
library  
museum  
school  
theater  
hospital  
restaurant/ bar  
garden/ park  
supermarket  
retail  
gallery  
archive/ storage  
recycling center  
toy factory  
maker's space  
tea house  
temple  
farm  
cemetery  
pavilion/ expo  
bridge*

time + chineseness  
*conservation versus preservation*

conservation *noun*  
the protection of the natural environment  
the official protection of buildings that have historical or artistic importance  
the act of preventing something from being lost, wasted, damaged, or destroyed

preservation *noun*  
the act of keeping something in its original state or in good condition  
the act of making sure that something is kept  
the degree to which something has not been changed or damaged by age, weather, etc.

transformation *noun*  
a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person is improved

## CONSERVATION | PRESERVATION

A building's program seldom outlives its architecture. Over time, as new institutions and programs cycle through, the building remains due to the aspiration to reuse what already exists. Instead of adjusting the building to accommodate the needs of its program, financial limitations often force a change in tenants. But why is a building prioritized over its program? Why does the longevity of materials and structural systems take precedent over specific programs intended to help communities? Surely in civic or community buildings, financial obligations should take a backseat to what the people need.

When buildings exchange occupants, surrounding neighbors grow wary of change, visitors notice a difference in atmospheres, and the community becomes momentarily stagnant as it adapts to new circumstances. Somehow, in a cultural enclave such as Chinatown, perhaps it should be the program that doesn't change and the architecture that does. Only then can the ethos and characteristics of a community become evident and potent enough to replace superficial, misconceived images of what a culture might be. Buildings should always be renovated at the expense of conserving cultural values and sensibilities.

If architecture is constantly adapting, appearing and disappearing, then what is there to conserve? What is made exceptional through adaptation? Somehow there is deep importance on conserving existing values. Rather than importing unusual, distinctive European/western centric motifs and architecture, conservation takes a more positive approach to articulating values of Chineseness.

To restore something back to its previous state without introducing any new forms of design is to preserve without transforming. Successful in the arts, it seems that pure architectural preservation ignores timely contextual opportunities and impending challenges. Rather preservation without transformation is prioritizing nostalgia and a false sense of security over the possibility of becoming more sensitive to cultural, climate, social, programmatic, structural, or material needs.

## LIGHT TRANSFORMATION

How can a project not be a preservation project nor a new architecture? How do you keep two conditions separate yet in a state of permanent, yet light interaction with one another? Perhaps a light transformation of a building consists of introducing new, old, horizontal, vertical, wide, narrow, open, enclosed elements that through its contrast establish a range of oppositions and new experiences.

## RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

Radical transformation borders the distinction of preserving what exists and proposing an entirely new building. Similar to an archaeologist, there is a sensitive procedural design process; examine the current conditions + introduce new forms of organization that renew value.

Conservation is a matter of old versus new. Transformation is a matter of the new old or the old new.

## THESIS PROJECT

This thesis proposes a balance between conservation and transformation - the introduction of variants of the past and suggestions for the future. The aim is through a reconceptualization and reimagination of what is known, unknown possibilities are produced while maintaining the wellbeing of its users as a priority. This thesis will explore a dialogue between three scales of design - preservation, light transformation, and radical transformation.

## STOREFRONT | LIGHT TRANSFORMATION

## ADDITION | LIGHT/RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

## BUILD UP | RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

a collection of interviews with Chinese architects  
*Vladimir Belogolovsky*

*VB: During your student time in Nanjing and in the early years of your career you were interested in Deconstructivist architecture. Could you talk about that?*

WS: Yes, in my third year we had an assignment to design a hypothetical housing project. I modelled my proposal on the famous Fujian Tulou, a cluster of round residential buildings in Fujian province. I designed it in a Deconstructivist style. The project attracted a lot of attention. It was even christened as the first Post-Modernist project in China. Our school had a very comprehensive collection of books and periodicals coming from all over the world. So, it was possible to follow the works by leading architects in America and Europe. I particularly recall following projects by Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, Wolf Prix, Daniel Libeskind, and early paintings by Zaha Hadid. I was also interested in studying Chinese calligraphy done in various styles – from restrained to very expressive, which are somewhat similar to Deconstructivist projects. I was also interested in the work of such architects as Aldo Rossi and Mario Botta and I even argued with my classmate – who of them would become the master to be followed. Another architect who caught my attention was Tadao Ando.

*VB: Ningbo Museum and your other buildings seem to diffuse a notion of a single authorship. Could you talk about diversity, anonymity, and multiplicity of voices in your architecture?*

WS: I pursued this concept of anonymity in my PhD, during which I worked on the idea of anonymous architecture. And already in my Wenzheng College Library I incorporated this idea. For example, by introducing small volumes that accompany the main large structure. This is what you can see in traditional houses in Suzhou – they are delightful and beautiful, but not in a personal way. They are a product of a very organic language. That is what's moving about these structures. And that's what I was trying to express in a different way, particularly in the Ningbo Museum. I call the facades of this building – architecture completed by thousands of hands. I refer to the diversity of techniques in the construction of that building. And we mixed new and salvaged materials side by side. I wanted to build a small town with its own life, which could once again, wake up the latent memory of the city that was built over the demolished ancient villages.

*VB: Could you talk about your Guesthouse on the Xiangshan Campus? People say that they are getting lost there. Was that intentional?*

WS: To respond to your question, I need to refer you to my dissertation project again, where I explored the idea of a flaneur, an urban stroller. I remember watching a documentary on an ancient city in Morocco. The narrator said – there are 1,000 streets and alleys there and every visitor gets lost there. But the city’s inhabitants never get lost. There are many signs and hints that they use to find their ways. That’s what I like about historical architecture, which is designed for overall cohesiveness and long-term use rather than serving an immediate purpose, and there is a tendency nowadays for everything to stand out as a contrast to everything else. So, when I was designing the Guesthouse the idea was to create a building that has a sense of belonging to history and time, not merely representing its purpose in our own time.

*VB: I am interested in your idea of re-composition – using salvaged materials in new ways. What would you say is the essence of your architecture? What is it primarily about?*

WS: The essence of my architecture is in trying to maintain a cultural continuity. You can’t protect and preserve culture as is. That is not enough. You have to find a dialogue between tradition and continuously changing life. Each generation has its own understanding of traditions. It is important to be conscious that all of us are taking part in re-composing traditions as we know them – in how we carry on different stories or re-compose and interpret the language. We may not be aware of it, but we are continuously re-composing the reality we know. And how can we forget about such notions of human nature as passion, creativity, inventiveness, and originality that play a definitive role in the design process! So, the main goal of preserving traditions is not about following or copying them, but to find constructive ways to achieve the main purpose – not to allow traditions and classical knowledge die. I am not interested in the past and traditional things; I am rather interested in the difference between the past and our own contemporary time.

WANG SHU

*VB: What I find very attractive in your work is that there is both – there is this connection to the roots, meaning history, and there is this striking contemporaneity that is not passive but very active.*

ZK: I think the work should be active and it may be striking. But my question is this – is there anything behind it? I try to push this first impression further. I am interested in achieving sensual qualities. So I am interested in going beyond the visual effects. Architecture should be intelligent and we should ask such questions as – how can we relate to the place where we build? How can we address the local community and all people that will use our buildings? Is it possible to be innovative and inventive, and yet, respectful of history when dealing with historical buildings? I say – all of these are possible. We need overlaps of histories, programs, materials, spaces; this is where we will discover many new possibilities. This is what architecture is about – discovering, reinterpreting, and inventing new possibilities.

*VB: About the time when you just started your practice you said, “When I returned home, I was quite rebellious and felt that architects at that time were lacking a sense of mission. I was enthusiastic to show myself succeeding in a fine project. I was highly self-conscious and refused to imitate architectural styles in Europe, the US, or Japan. I was thinking of creating China’s original style.” Could you talk about your mission in architecture?*

ZK: Did I really say China’s original style? I don’t think I used the word style, which is something fixed. I would use the word character. In any case, there are many ways to talk about architecture but my way is to do a project and show what can be done. What was good about our education at Tsinghua is that we were taught of the importance of doing something before talking about it. We had to prove whether we were right or wrong by doing, not by talking. [Laughs.] But it is true when I just returned I was very rebellious. I had a lot of anger. I was angry about the superficiality of our culture of architecture. There was so much copying and imitating, while a whole layer of the original, historical layer was being erased. I wanted to find something of my own.

ZHANG KE

ZK: How to express my ideas? How to preserve what was being erased? Architecture is a struggle. I am struggling but I think I am on the right way.

*VB: The Chinese Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale was a revelation for so many people. China is now producing its own architecture. While other countries discuss and speculate, China builds. And frankly, the work may lack risk-taking, but it is much more relevant and compelling than projects brought here by starchitects whose buildings are grossly out of place.*

ZK: Yet, the work of so many Chinese architects is becoming very trendy. We have become very playful with identifying what is local and how to articulate it.

*VB: You said that your mission is not simply about beautifying spaces. How do you see your mission?*

*ZK: Architecture has its own spiritual power. No one can deny it, no matter what is the size. It is possible to create architecture that spiritually powerful, that transmits a very special energy. That's the essence of architecture. This is what will be communicated to many generations to come. The beauty of architecture is that it can touch so many people.*

*VB: What single words would you use to describe your architecture?*

ZK: Spirituality. Will I get there? I strive to achieve subtle, emotional spaces that can have multiple readings.

ZHANG KE

*VB: I am actually having a hard time to detect personal identities in the work of Chinese architects. But now that you are back to China and have been leading a successful practice here for 15 years, do you identify yourselves more as Chinese or Americans, or more broadly as westerners?*

LN: It is not just what we think, it is also about what we were told. Since as far as I can remember, my grandmother always told me, "You are Chinese, no matter what." When you are in a foreign land you need to protect your Chinese-ness because your parents and grandparents are very afraid that you are going to lose it. Interestingly, some of the traditions that you may find in Chinese communication across the world are long gone in Mainland China. So being Chinese is very important. For example, when our kids went to America and tried to identify themselves as Americans it bothered me to the core. I would ask them, "Why are you acting so American?" So, who am I, really?

RH: Personally, I can tell you that I identify myself as both Chinese and Taiwanese, more Chinese. And work-wise, I would say more Chinese and less international. Because here we are often seen as international and when we work abroad, we are identified as Chinese. So, we don't really see ourselves as either Chinese or American. We want to be seen as contemporary architects without this cultural identity label. We are very independent.

LN: So, we just focus on doing good work and we don't worry about our identity. When we started, we did not have any network so naturally, we are not part of a group, so we have no choice but be independent. When we did our Waterhouse at South Bund here in Shanghai everyone noticed and so many, both Chinese and international critics and architects wrote about it. They realized that we have a serious pedagogy behind our work; that's what important. We addressed so many issues in this conversion of a 1930s Japanese army building into a boutique hotel – by exposing the building's historical layers that evoke the archival quality of a museum. There is a play with such polar notions as old and new, privacy and publicness, comfort and discomfort. This project brought attention to many of our other projects on all scales.

*VB: Lyndon, you said, "Have we really had breakthroughs in modern architecture? It's a period wherein people are somewhat lost, and in which we really have to be in search of ourselves, as architects." Were you talking about the current period and where do you begin this search? What inspires you?*

NERI & HU

LN: A few years ago, we started making conscious efforts to visit real masterpieces that we still haven't been to. So, we visited Terragni's buildings in Como, buildings by Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn in India, La Tourette in France, works by Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka, the Parliament complex by Louis Kahn in Bangladesh, Lewrentz's churches in Sweden, to name just a few.

RH: This was quite an experience and we both agree that these buildings are so much more profound than anything built since. We are talking about works by all our contemporaries.

*VB: What do you think is missing?*

LN: In those earlier projects we saw ideologies, deep thinking, real breakthroughs conceptually, spatially, structurally, materially. So, we were thinking – what can we compare that's being built now to that? How far did we progress? Have we done any real breakthroughs as a profession? Nothing really happened in fifty years! We haven't done anything new!

RH: All of us are just doing variations.

*VB: You said, "We absolutely hate projects that are purely decorative." What kind of projects do you like?*

LN: I think lately we are struggling with some of the projects because that's what they have become – decorative. Unfortunately, that's driven by some of our clients. But we try to design our projects holistically. One project that's exemplary for us is Maison de Verre in Paris by Pierre Chareau. Is it architecture, interior design, furniture design?

*VB: Is there a particular project built here in China over the last decade or so that you admire most, either by Chinese or foreign architects?*

RH: If I must pick one such project it would be Wang Shu's Ningbo Historic Museum built in 2008. There are moments about that building that are quite moving. And apart from architecture, what really moves me are the Chinese ancient gardens, particularly in Suzhou. The moments that the poetry of those gardens can offer are magical. I also love the fact that these places are anonymous; we don't know who built them by name.

LN: Personally, I like many of Wang Shu's explorations in The China Academy of Art in Xiangshan near Hangzhou.

*VB: Let me start with your quote, "I believe architecture is something more down to earth, and ultimately relates to how people live." Tell me you were kidding when you said that because it seems to me that your architecture is anything but down to earth. Down to earth is something that we tend not to notice, right?*

YH: Well, maybe something was lost in translation from Chinese. [Laughs.] What I meant is that architecture is tangible. It's about our physical world. Architecture for me is about enjoying life. It is very much about the way we live. And for us architecture is so much more than just buildings. You know, we design furniture, industrial products, clothing, jewelry, and so on. For example, a couple of years ago, since architects like to solve all kinds of problems, I was asked to design a cake. There was a problem – traditional Mille-Feuille tends to get softened by the moisture of the cream between puff pastry layers. We solved it by separating the pastry and the cream, which was placed in a chocolate box in the center, so you can dip the pastry into the cream as you like. This is what I mean by tangible design. I don't enjoy reading philosophical books on architecture. It is too abstract for me. And I am not trying to expand on designing everything. I enjoy life and from time to time it gives me a lot of pleasure to design not just buildings. Still, it is buildings that I focus on primarily.

*VB: This house was originally designed as a paper project back in 1991, as an award-winning entry for the annual Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition organized by the Japan Architecture magazine. This project is such an idealistic and theoretical vision. Why do you maintain that your work is down to earth?*

YH: Because this house has a down to earth moment. [Laughs.] Let me tell you. I really wanted to experience being in this house. But I also wondered – who else?

*VB: Who else?*

YH: May I suggest, today the notion of glass house doesn't belong to Germany, the US, Mies, or Johnson. It belongs to everyone. Liu Ling was a Chinese poet and scholar in the 3rd century. He was one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, the Taoists who enjoyed and celebrated personal freedom, spontaneity, and nature. He was said to be walking around his home naked. He explained to surprised visitors, "The sky and earth are my architecture, my house is my clothing." When I worked on this project I thought he would be my ideal client. The top of the house has a room that is meant to be completely empty. It is a pure space. You sit in the room. You look up and you see the sky. You look down and you see through the floors all the way to the earth.

*VB: Would you say architecture is art?*

YH: My personal, subjective answer is yes. But objectively speaking, of course, not. We live in buildings. So how can they be just art? Spaces have to be livable. So there are two contradictory answers... For me, it is. I try. Sometimes, there is a chance for architecture to rise to that level. But more than art, architecture is a discovery.

YUNG HO CHANG

MY: My approach is different. The Chaoyang Park Plaza is very close to the park and lake, so I close my eyes, I close my ears, I don't want to communicate with the manmade world; I only want to relate to the nature in front of me. And, if you insert our building into a traditional Chinese landscape painting, it fits very well. But if you look around and compare it to other buildings you may see it as something very bold and conflicting. Some people even say it is ugly. I don't think so. Because culturally, it fits very well, but contextually, it is somewhat foreign because the urban context is not Chinese.

*VB: You said earlier that you don't care if your work may be judged either as beautiful or ugly. What is it you care about? What is the main intention of your architecture?*

MY: I don't like what has happened to our cities, as this is the result of us having followed modernism for such a long time. Everything has started to look the same and lacks an inner spirituality. Nowadays, function is prioritized over nature and emotions. My architecture is about making a statement. But we are not making a building as an object, we are trying to create a landscape inside the urban environment. I derive my inspiration from traditional Chinese architecture where nature is an integral part of daily life in the city. I am looking for ways to adapt the Chinese traditions of blending nature and architecture to contemporary architecture on urban scale.

*VB: It reminds me the approach you just criticized... You look around and then you close your eyes, your ears...*

MY: *But I open my eyes to nature. That's my attitude. Many of my projects are built more in opposition to their contexts. Sometimes, they are more integrated. In my Hutong Bubble 32 project built in central Beijing the bubble-like, futuristic form that contains a toilet and stairs to the rooftop seems to be alien to its historical surroundings, but at the same time it reflects everything around it with its shiny surface and, in a way, disappears entirely. Yet, this strange form attracts curiosity and opens the possibility for newly imagined spaces that promise to revitalize the historical fabric of the city. On the other hand, Harbin Opera House is isolated; it stands alone. My intention there was to create a mountain. There was no "crime" there before...*

*VB: You said once, "I treat my projects as art." Could you elaborate?*

MY: Art is all about emotions. Art is about seeing things in a personal way. You can start a project with a site analysis or its function...

MA YAN SONG



*VB: But you don't do that.*

MY: No, I don't. My emotions come from the cultural context. Each location represents a particular culture and brings out a different attitude, and mood in me. I look for different ways to respond to projects that are relevant to their particular context.

*VB: When you talk about your architecture, you often refer to the idea of Shan Shui, which is a style of traditional Chinese brush and ink landscape paintings featuring mountains, rivers, and waterfalls...*

MY: Shan Shui is a cultural typology. It is not just limited to paintings. You can come across Shan Shui music, poems... even urban planning. It refers to both aesthetic and spiritual values.

*VB: Also Shan Shui paintings are not representative but rather contemplative. Shan Shui painting is not an open window for the viewer's eye, but rather a tool for the viewer's mind and a device for reflective thinking. Could you talk about the relationship between your work and Shan Shui?*

MY: I grew up right here, in old Beijing. The city was originally planned around lakes and gardens. They are all manmade, but collectively the interweaving aesthetics with functionality gave the feeling that we were immersed in this verdant landscape; while the nature created here is imaginary nature, it is what people perceive of as nature, not nature itself. This is what modern architecture is lacking, an inner spirituality. I want to bring this into our urban centers. Shan Shui is a philosophy; it is about establishing emotional connections to nature. And this concept can be applied to projects on many different scales, even the large urban scale, in both our existing cities and newly developing ones. This is what I am trying to do with my Shanshui City vision, as you can see in my project Huangshan Mountain Village. The village blurs the boundaries between the geometries of architecture and nature; it is part of the local landscape and geology. I like how nature is a part of the city here in central Beijing, but I don't like how it is missing from new neighborhoods. So, as an architect I want to take these key features of traditional architecture and translate them into new developments on a much bigger scale than we are building today. And I want to bring something unfamiliar into these new projects. I want to build buildings that no one has ever seen before. I don't want the middle ground. Some people may say my work is futuristic, but I see it as traditional because I carry old Eastern philosophy and use it to respond to new challenges.

MA YAN SONG

*VB: Here in China, I heard this term "pragmatic regionalism" a number of times. Do you think you fit into this description at all?*

DG: I don't want to see my work this way. I think the important question is this – what is the problem? I believe in questions that are eternal, no matter what is the time we are living in today. So many architects think today that it is more important to respond to whatever is going on immediately around the site and other most pressing concerns that we have at this moment. But I believe there are more important issues that we need to address. It is very fundamental – it is about your body, your scale, your physical limitations, and senses. Look at all the changes around us. Our way of life changed so much over time, but our body is still basically the same. So there are some constant values that don't change. There are certain constant relations of our body to the outside world. Of course, architecture has changed despite what I am saying, but I believe in achieving a balance between these core values and our modern world. Architecture is made up of two entities – inner core that responds to the eternal values and the outer skin that responds to all the changes. That's the power of architecture – no matter when you live you always have to answer these questions – how do you live? What is it like being human? These are very basic questions and architecture has the power to answer them on a very personal level. What is humanity? What is the relationship between the human and the world?

*VB: What is a good building for you?*

DG: A good building should provide a feeling of intimacy. That's very important and this is what so many contemporary buildings lack. No matter how gorgeous a building may be, if you don't feel a part of it, it is very cold. And within this intimacy, some space should be left to allow for a kind of spiritual connection to the place. If that intriguing balance is achieved that for me is a good building. It is important not to go too far and not to turn a building into a spectacle. There are quite a few good examples. But the two that jump immediately into my mind – the Pantheon in Rome and the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria by Peter Zumthor. They were built at different times but I don't think that matters. Architecture needs to deal with the limitations of the technology of a particular time. It needs to come up with an intelligent solution that goes beyond these limitations. The materials, forces of gravity, atmosphere... When I go to such spaces it seems that I can talk to the architect in person. The message is there.

VECTOR ARCHITECTS - DONG GONG

*VB: I had a chance to visit your Alila Yangshuo hotel near Guilin. Unquestionably, it is a seductively beautiful place. The only thing I would question is a lack of tension between what is new and what is old there. The result is somewhat ambiguous. Do you see this project as a contemporary place? What, in your view, is the role of contemporaneity in architecture when it engages history?*

*DG: I am not quite sure why you insist on having “tension” between “historical” and “contemporary.” I like the word “ambiguous.” For me, the ultimate design goal of this architectural intervention is to pursue an atmospheric harmony with the existing industrial structures, as well as the surrounding characteristic karst peaks and the Li River. I think of all of them together as a new place.*

*VB: What single words would you use to describe your architecture?*

*DG: Boundary – beyond boundary. Limitation – beyond limitation. Dark – light. Time – timeless. Weight – weightless. I am intrigued by these paradoxical opposites. This is what ultimately humanity is about. But I get lost when I am looking for the right words. Feelings are very imprecise.*

VECTOR ARCHITECTS - DONG GONG

*VB: You seem to avoid composing your buildings into freestanding, clearly defined objects. Your architecture seems to refuse to be defined by clearly perceivable edges.*

*LY: The idea is not to create an object but to construct a path. Our projects are not about proposing new forms but about how they are explored and experienced. They are about space and movement around, inside, on top, and through it, without any particular sequence. And often it is not clear where the entrance is; you need to discover it. A building is a path. You encounter and experience it before you realize that you are already inside of it. A building turns into a landscape and landscape turns into a building.*

*VB: In one of your texts you said, that you “believe that pragmatic solutions related to contemporary architecture in China require a rational approach that is linked to a personal touch.” Let’s talk about this “personal touch” in more detail. What do you think differentiates your work from other architects?*

*CY: Our work has many uncertainties but they are our uncertainties.*

*LY: We don’t focus on creating our own identity. We simply work on projects, hoping that our identity will come through. Architecture for me should manage three things: first, it is designed to be used. Then, it should be suitable for the site. Lastly, it must be emotionally touching. The solution might be varied for each project, but each one reflects its time, place, and use by people.*

*VB: Being one of the most original architecture offices in the country it is hard to believe that you are not focused on newness. You seem to downplay your role as creative authors. But let me assure you that your Long Museum and many other of your projects propose something I haven’t seen before and that is probably because you set that as your goal. You are pursuing architecture without relying on any established rules. You are setting rules up yourselves. Your buildings are like nothing I have ever seen before. How can that be achieved simply by trying to solve things pragmatically?*

*LY: You are right, our architecture is about newness. But the new is the result, not the starting point. Primarily, we focus on context and program. The new is a subtext. But sure, it is there. It is the focus on the specifics that leads to something new, not the other way around.*

*CY: What leads to a unique solution is our recognition of something particular and unusual in the site or program. Unique conditions lead to unique solutions. We are aiming to create unique atmospheres in each project. These atmospheres have to have memories of the past and look into the future at the same time.*

ATELIER DESHAUS - LIU YI CHUN, CHEN YI FENG

*VB: Our interview is taking place at the Architecture and Design Centre at Beijing's Tsinghua University. You designed it just a few years ago and built in 2014, but could be easily mistaken for the product of the mid-20th century Modernism. You don't seem to be concerned with the latest trends in the profession; there is a certain misalignment between your work and the work of many other Chinese architects. Would you agree? How do you see your architecture?*

LX: I see myself as a reflective regionalist. I address specific conditions such as the budget, the program, and the climate. It is complicated, and nothing is preconceived. I don't believe in architecture as the expression of an individual style. I don't think it is sustainable. Architecture is not a painting or sculpture. A painting has a compositional logic. But architecture is functional. And architecture has neighbors, whereas a painting can be a world in itself. I am interested in identifying solutions to address very particular conditions. Architectural solutions should be based on reality. They should be natural and adapted to real-life conditions. And when I say natural I don't at all deny the importance of individuality. Beijing is different from Shanghai and very different from Yunnan, and we architects all have our very different ways of understanding architecture. You can be natural and individual. There is no contradiction in that.

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*VB: You said that when you start working on a project you first analyze the site and the flow of energy through it. Could you touch on your design process; how do you begin?*

LX: It is a secret. [Laughs.] Well, I have practiced tai chi for many years, which is about simultaneously looking inwards and outwards; it is a system of breathing and energy flow. It enables you to focus your mind so intensely that all your senses become more alert. So I understand energy better than those who don't study it.

The first thing I do when I start a project is analyze the site and the flow of energy through it. Most people identify forms with shapes, color, and materials. But I identify forms with energy. It is very abstract, but it is very real. Also, I try to be very minimal in my designs. I only use what's necessary. The key difference between Chinese and Western cultures is that in the West people use all kinds of devices to be efficient. But Chinese have to practice with the simplest tools we have to do very complicated things. Chopsticks is a good example – you can pick up anything with chopsticks if you practice well. You don't need to use knife and fork. In my practice I try to reflect this attitude. Architecture is a creative solution that identifies a contemporary lifestyle.

30 years ago, we were all looking for discovering personal styles. But now I don't think that kind of approach would be sustainable. We know how limited our resources are. Styles cost money.

*VB: So, it is the focus on space that you take from traditional Chinese architecture to your contemporary work, right?*

LX: Absolutely. You can see that the form did not change in traditional Chinese architecture for hundreds of years. Just like Lao-Tzu said, what is important is what is contained, not the container. Again, forms were never important here. It is more about identifying original conditions than inventing original forms. Throughout its history, Chinese society was largely agricultural, for which you need a collective mindset. For example, Confucius talked about the importance of hierarchy to ensure political stability. Our society was not about the individual but about how we could work and progress together. Otherwise, there is chaos. Creativity needs individuality, but individuality was never an important issue in Chinese society historically. Collectiveness was more important than expressing individuality.

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VB: You said, “The most important moment for architecture is not the completion of the building, but when the spaces intersect with people.”

ZP: When you look at a traditional Chinese painting, it looks incomplete. It is the job of the observer to complete the painting in his mind. Chinese scholars have never thought that landscape painting should simply capture the representation of nature. Instead, they consider landscape painting as perception, experience, and meditation. Chinese scholars never set down in front of mountains to sketch them, they would travel for months in the mountains to experience them. Only after coming back home, they would try to recapture these moods by putting together all the memories in their paintings. Chinese gardens and architecture are also focused on the experience, on creating spaces to rest, observe, and to wander. No building should be completely finished. There should always be some space left for people’s interpretation. Architecture should be just like a Chinese painting; it should strive to explore possibilities beyond the immediate function and programs. A building created just to perform a particular function is a dead building. Look at the traditional hutong with its courtyard in the middle. There is no particular function for that. It is just space, emptiness, nothing, but it also means everything. People eat in the courtyard, socialize, get married there. We call it the incomplete space. But this is the most important space in the house, its heart, and soul. When we work on our buildings, we try to avoid providing fixed solutions; we leave space for interpretation, so different functions can be imagined beyond our own expectations. A building should be like a sponge; there should be many incomplete spaces in between.

ZHU PEI

VB: Together with such architects as Yung Ho Chang, Wang Shu, Li Xiaodong, and Zhu Pei you belong to the first generation of independent architects in China. I wonder how you see them – as moving in one direction and sharing a particular common ground or do you perceive your work differently, and if so, in what way?

JL: Compare to some of the architects you mentioned I see myself as a latecomer. I went away for more than a decade and rekindled my interest in architecture when these architects were already practicing for quite some time. I think what we all have in common is a certain hunger for learning and opening up to many ideas that were out of reach before. And most of these architects were exposed to living and studying abroad for many years before coming back, so their work was infused by what they have learned overseas. And there was a kind of urgency to innovate and build after a long period of official government-approved style. Then in the 1990s, we all became free. I relate more to Wang Shu because his focus is on analyzing and reproaching our own culture and utilizing traditions in new and innovative ways. One fundamental difference between my work and Wang Shu’s is that I would never directly recycle ancient materials as entities. I respect tradition. I hope my work carries the spirit of Chinese traditions, but I don’t want to bring ready-made traditional techniques and materials into my architecture, preferring to use contemporary techniques and materials. There is no ambiguity about what is contemporary and what is not.

VB: I read that in one of your interviews you pointed out that “Many contemporary buildings don’t have shadows.” What did you mean by that?

JL: Let me correct that. I must have talked about the necessity for buildings to have what can be described as an atmosphere. Let me refer to the notion of “shadows” in In Praise of Shadows written by Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki, not typical shadows we find in nature. A shadow is a physical phenomenon, but I referred to qualities that may not be quite visible. Yet, they are very important, nevertheless. For buildings to project a particular atmosphere or aura is very difficult to achieve. It is important for buildings to contain stories, even secrets.

LIU ZHAKUN