



Living Chinatown - Familiar Unfamiliar

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Living Chinatown - Familiar Unfamiliar

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

Ethan Lee

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
[Master of Architecture]

May 23, 2024

(Month and Year Thesis Submitted)

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Living Chinatown - Familiar Unfamiliar

Ethan Lee

Thesis Spring 2023

Over the last two centuries, San Francisco Chinatown's resistance towards architectural change has resulted in the identity of the neighborhood becoming increasingly misaligned with the present – a place losing its sense of purpose and serving as a shelter rather than a home. 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 freedom of an evolving identity in buildings, existing Chinatown architecture will only perpetuate the fatigue in the built environment. It becomes critical to ask: how do we design buildings that are sensitive to the cultures of those who inhabit them? How can we move beyond the shells of previous architectural tropes and towards a more dynamic vessel?

Though we have typically considered façade preservation synonymous with honoring cultural identity, many residents create their own communities within these exterior walls. This thesis proposes two residential buildings that demonstrate a new attitude towards a transformed Chinatown; one that prioritizes the people living and working there and respects the connection between past and future.

These humble spaces express deep cultural values and the vitality of the people they house through contextual responses, innovative structural strategies, material sensibilities, and ultimately evocative atmospheres. These animate frames call for an urban change and a shift from the ornament to activity; from iconography to a framing of energy. A constant transformation and an architecture that adds to the air that we breathe. Amidst the growing redundancy and formulas of familiar cities, the two interventions aim to respond to the sincere imperative to prioritize cultural identity in the postulation of tomorrow's world.

Thesis Credits and Attributions

Credits and attributions are listed below for any work shown in the thesis project that is not exclusively my own.

Citations:

Used two quotes in presentation –

Rafael Moneo, *The Solitude of Buildings*, Kenzo Tange Lecture 1985

Rev. Norman Fong, Conducted zoom interview about Chinatown in January 2023

Labor:

The people listed below assisted me while I was working on each respective task.

Assisted with the assembly of one of the two 1/4" models: Hugh Taylor

Assisted with staining wood dowels and sanding the context buildings 1/4" model: Pietro Mendonca

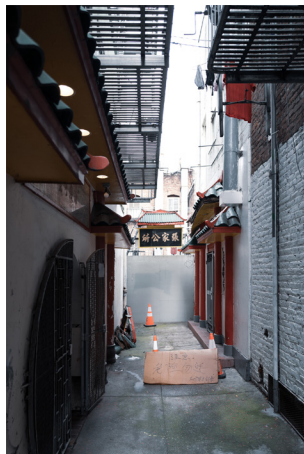
Assisted with one zund drawing: Aggie Fielding

Assisted with taping accordion books together: Michael Kurt Mayer, Connor Merritt

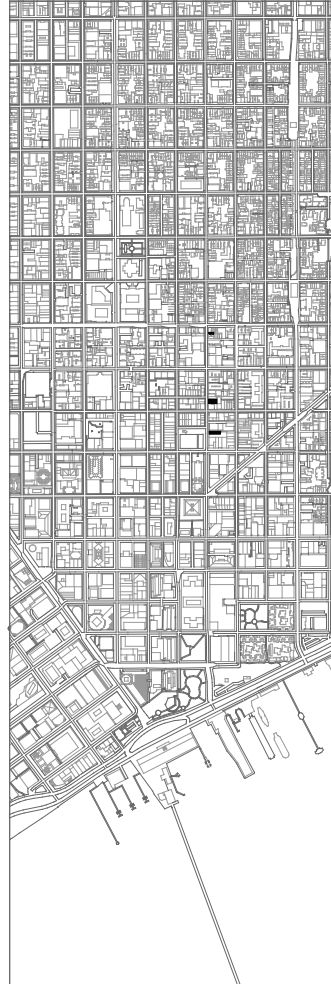


top - SOO YUEN BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION, SACRAMENTO, CA | SOOKY LEE, 1970
bottom - HONG KONG LUM RESTAURANT, SACRAMENTO, CA | SOOKY LEE, 1970

By adopting a westernized mystique and exotic perception of its own Chinese culture and image, Chinatown managed to readjust and cement its position within San Francisco. Appearances leaned on creating an allure and a sense of the unknown. As a survival technique, Chinatown intentionally became a place that was missing in the rest of San Francisco. Chinatown forcibly became its own totality amidst the rest of the city's modernity; an irreplaceable presence. Chinatown became a place of fantasy and mystique through the western image of the exotic. The image of bright colors, exaggerated cultural symbolic motifs, and ornate architectural elements became the new standard in the 19th century. Architects like my grandfather would copy image-based motifs from China and produce buildings full of visual cues and cultural iconography. However, while sincere in their efforts, the approach of starting with a symbolic image were largely insufficient. As these buildings programs changed and walls painted over, the image was sadly reduced to an empty shell of its original intent.



Personal photos of SF Chinatown

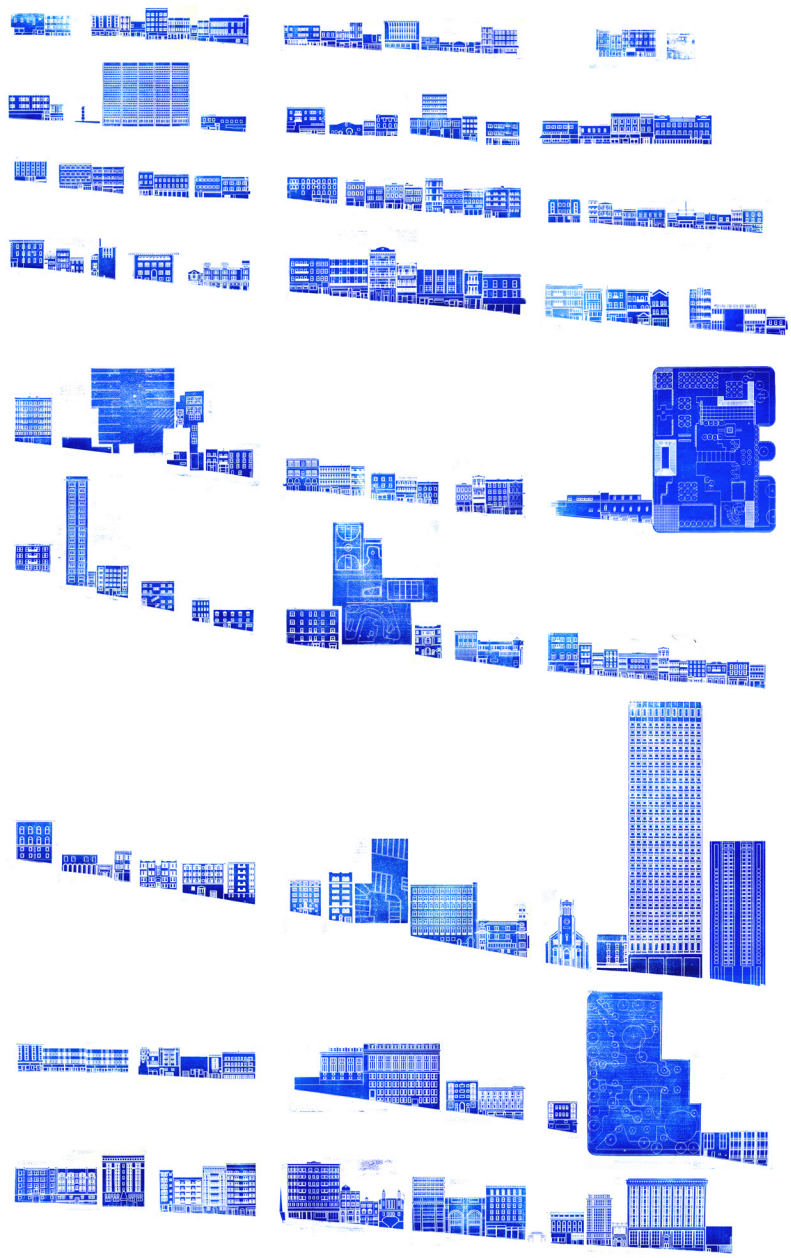


This thesis proposes three interventions as a transverse urban transect along Washington street. Whereas architects of old Chinatowns emphasize symbolism and imagery, this thesis is a search for a new attitude towards building in Chinatown that prioritizes the people living there and the community that 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. Amidst the growing platitudes and redundancy of familiar cities, there is a deeper, sincere imperative to prioritize cultural values and its sensibilities in the postulation of tomorrow's world.

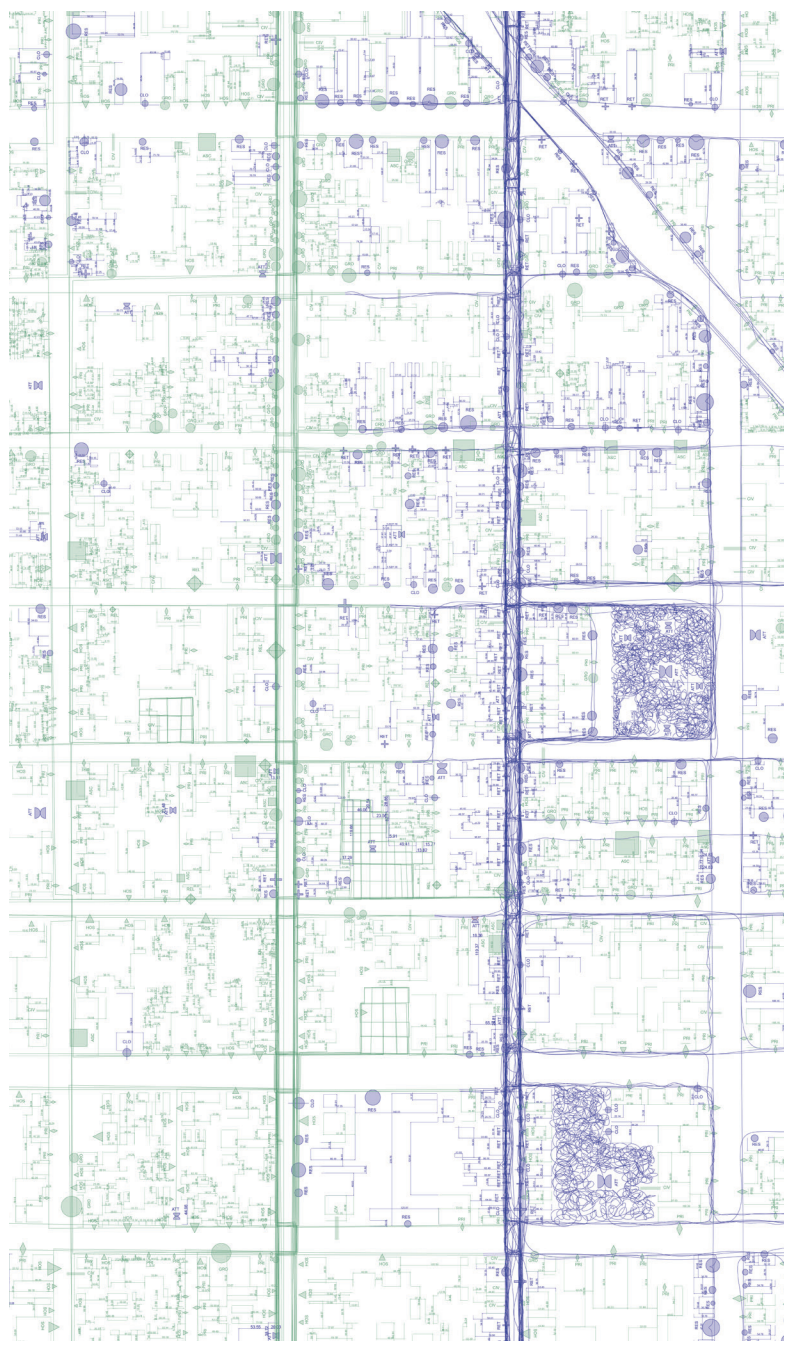


DIAGRAM ILLUSTRATING DESIRE OF REPLICATING THE ENERGY OF PORTSMOUTH SQUARE TO THE REST OF SF CHINATOWN

Portsmouth Square is considered the living room of San Francisco's Chinatown. Somewhere to 'just be,' the park is a place constantly being reclaimed by its public. There is a sense of both order and disorder that allows for a harmony between resident and visitors. How then can we extend the relationship between use, absence of use, fullness, emptiness, and promise found in parks throughout Chinatown?



WOOD BLOCK STAMPS OF SOUTH FACING FACADE IN SF CHINATOWN



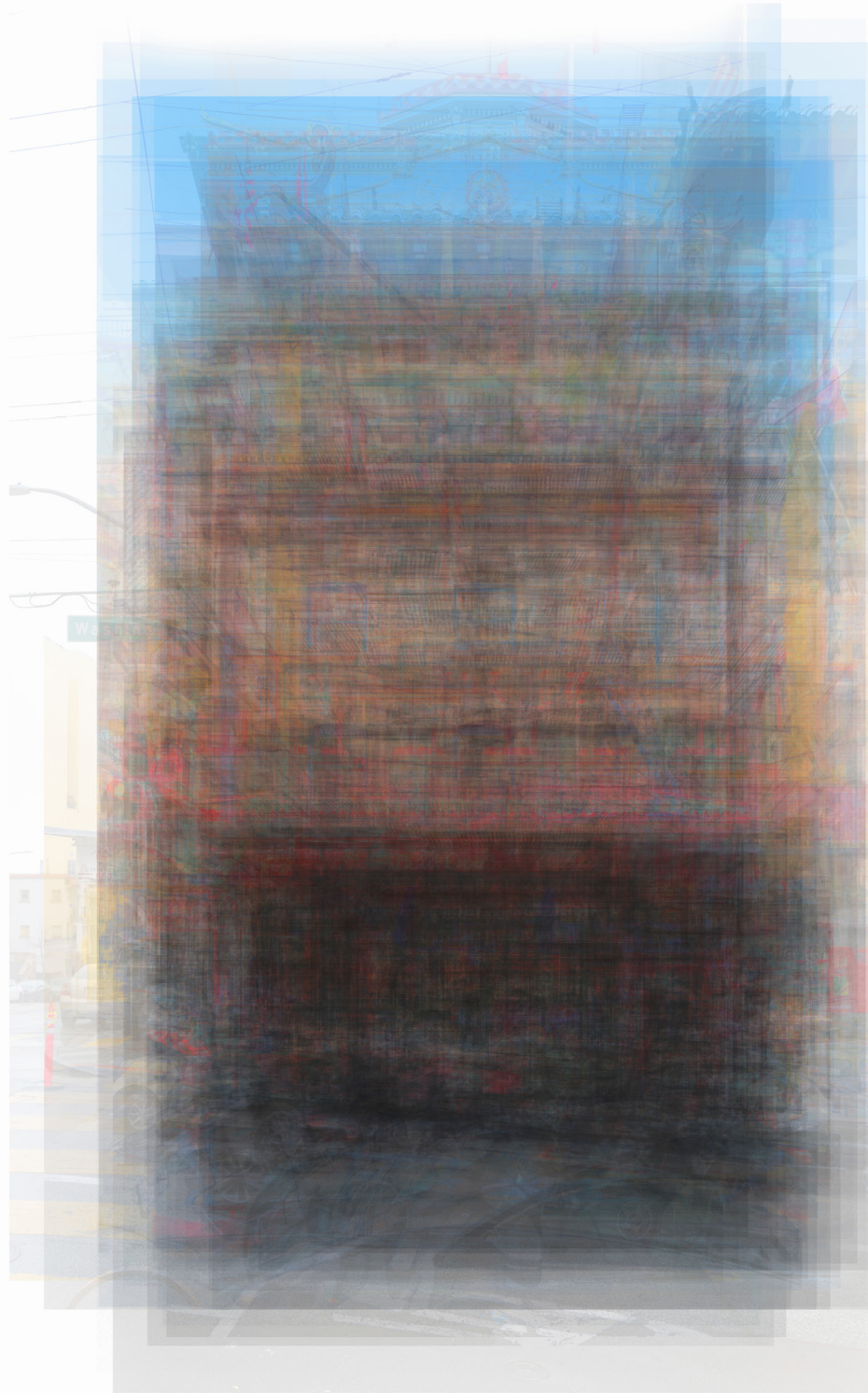
CODIFIED NOTATIONAL MAP SIGNIFYING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROGRAMS IN ATTEMPT TO SHOW THE HYBRIDITY AND HARMONIOUS RELANCE OF THE TWO

Chinatown is a paradoxical place of two types of readings. As implicit imprints or traces of memory and as explicit, codified notations of systematic order.



1:25 AND 1:3000 SITE MODELS EXPLORING THE VITALITY RATHER THAN THE ORNAMENTATION OF SF CHINATOWN

In the city, the buildings begin to call for urban change. A shift from the ornament to activity. From iconography to a humble framing of energy.



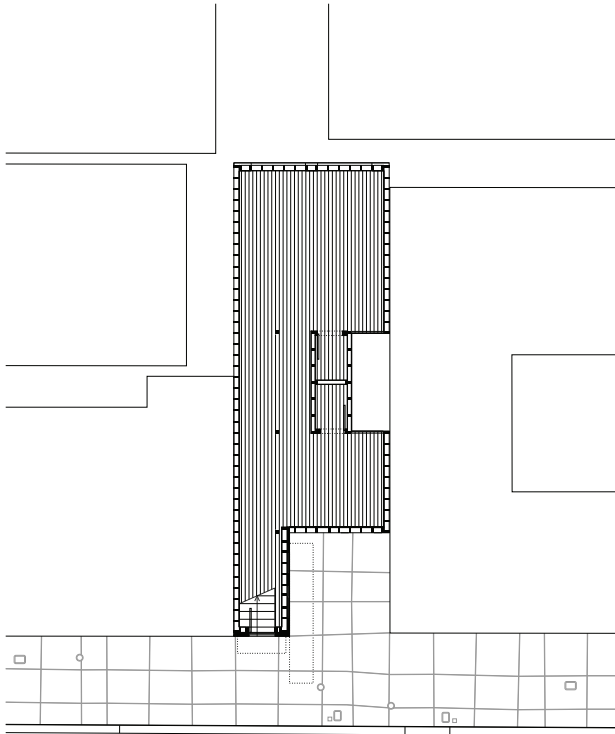
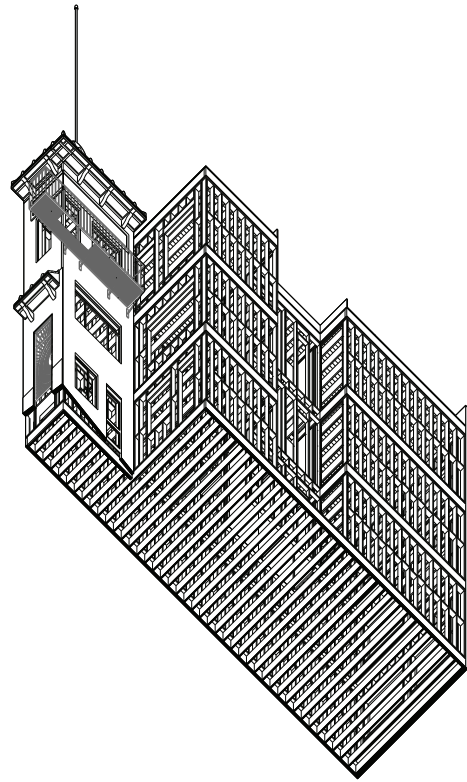
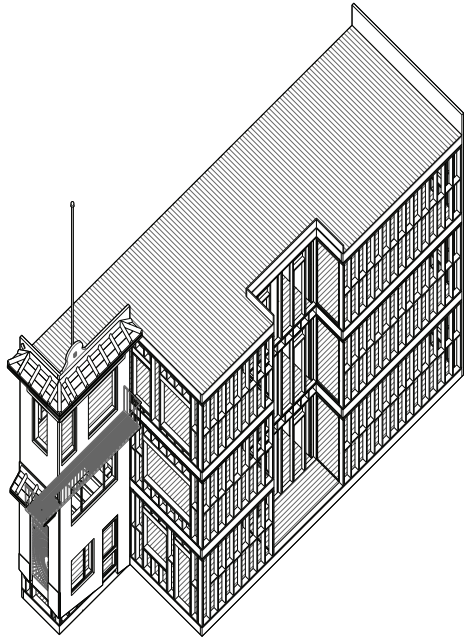
106 OVERLAYED PHOTOGRAPHS OF SF CHINATOWN FACADES

This thesis is interested in this animate dialogue between the rational and irrational. A hybridity, a twoness that manifests itself in terms of size, modulation, construction, and programmatic reliance. On a typical façade, active retail programs sit street side and a more ornamental visual hats on top.



PERSONAL PHOTOS OF TWO SRO UNITS ON 663 CLAY ST

*Current living conditions in a single residence occupancy in SF Chinatown.
Small units of 6 feet by 8 feet house a world of items and an expression of individuality.*

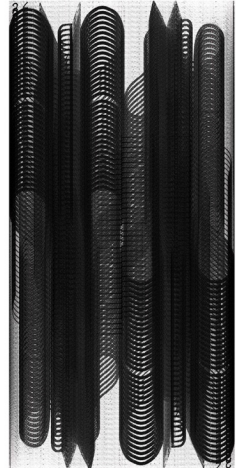
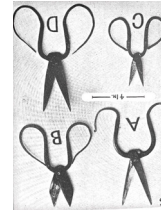
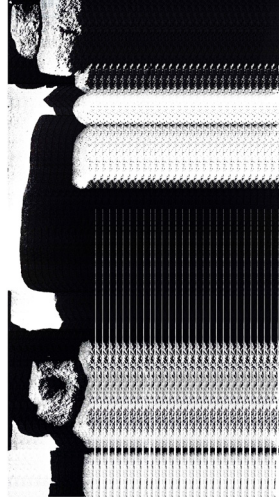
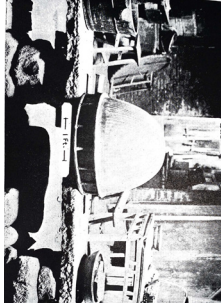
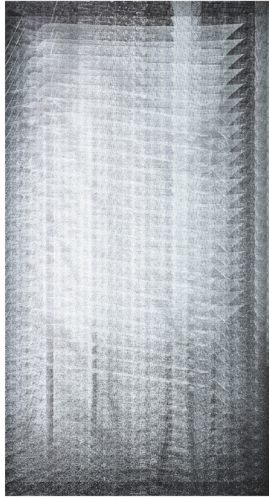
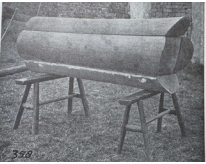


Prior to the two housing interventions I started with trying to understand how I might change a benevolent association to be more opening and active in assimilating immigrants to America. I thought of simple façade operations to create an external room as well as completely reveal the buildings' studs and joists. For a building with the purpose of helping connect two separate domains, the ornamental, flat image seemed inappropriate. Instead I was interested in an apparent threshold and a prevalent relationship between interiority and exteriority. Iconography takes a backseat.



FACADE STUDY MODELS OF EXISTING BUILDING - LIGHT TRANSFORMATION

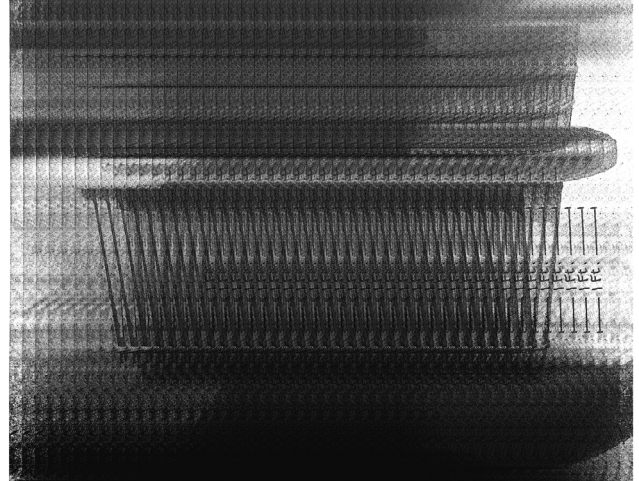
How can architecture serve as a home away from home and as an active tool that helps assimilate people into a new place?



CHINESE COFFIN

COOLING KETTLE USED IN CHINESE LIQUOR STILL

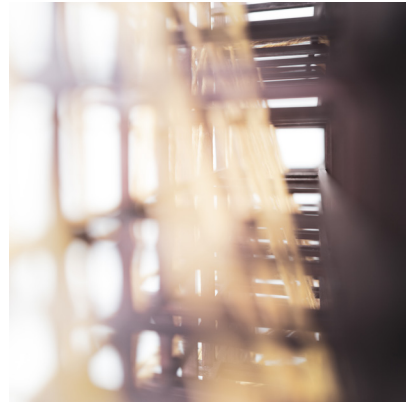
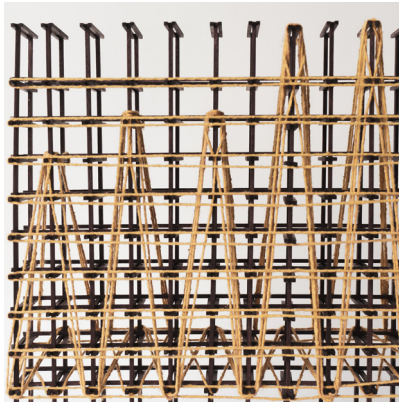
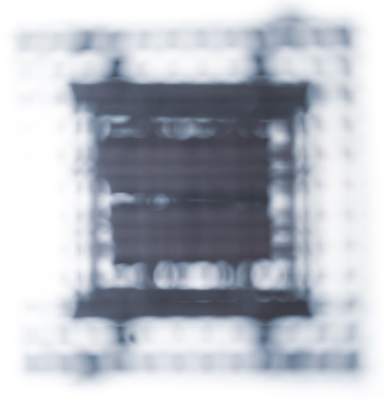
CHINESE SCISSORS



REE STAND AND HANK REELS FOR SPOOLING COTTON THREADS

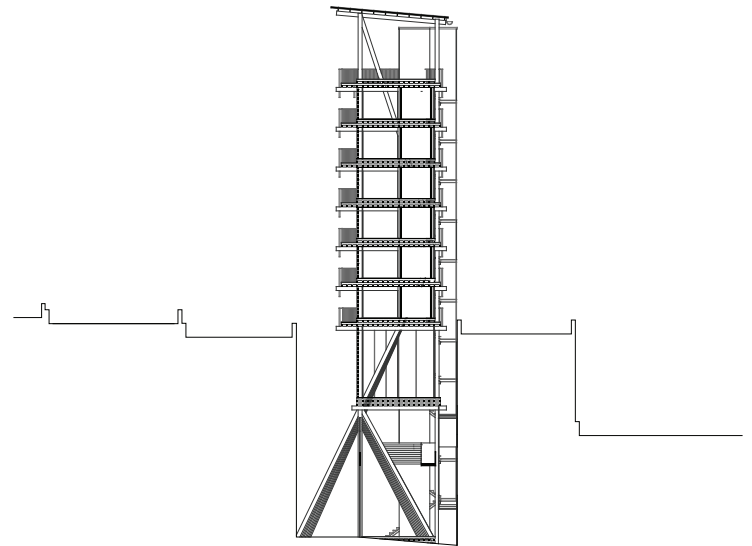
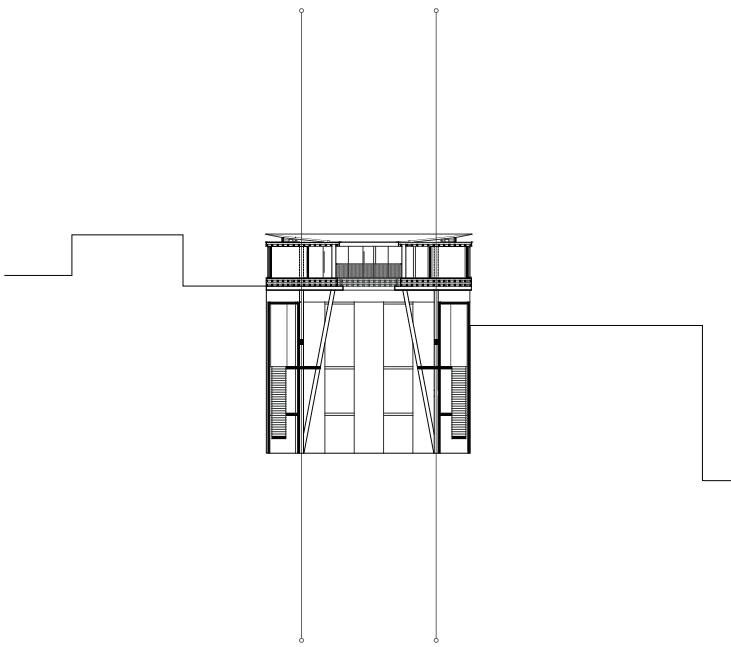
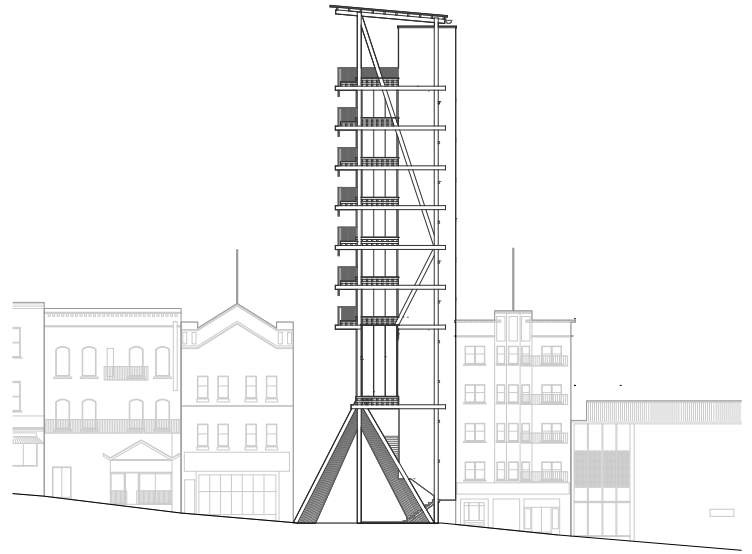
POTTER'S WHEEL ON A STOVE MAKER

So rather than copying symbols I am interested in sensibilities such as many small parts aggregate to create a whole. Very condensed spaces full of life. As well as large public areas of emptiness and fullness.



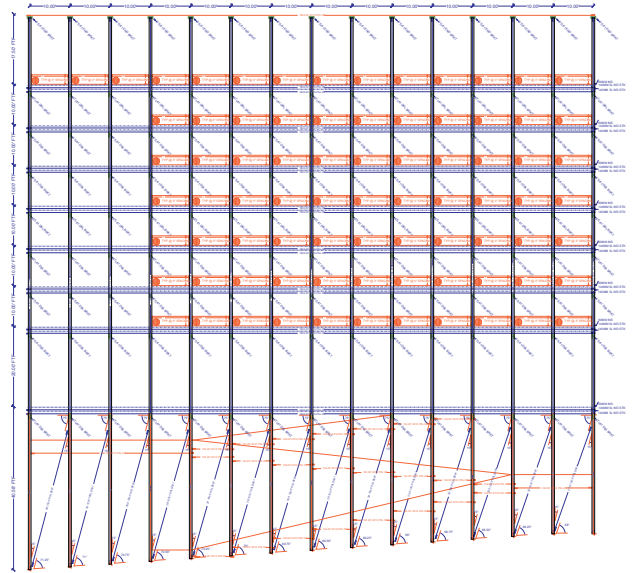
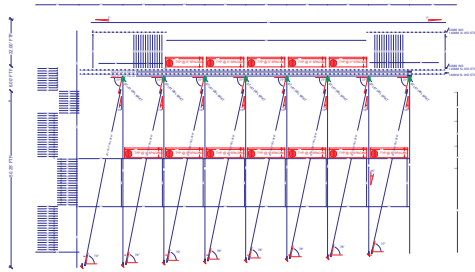
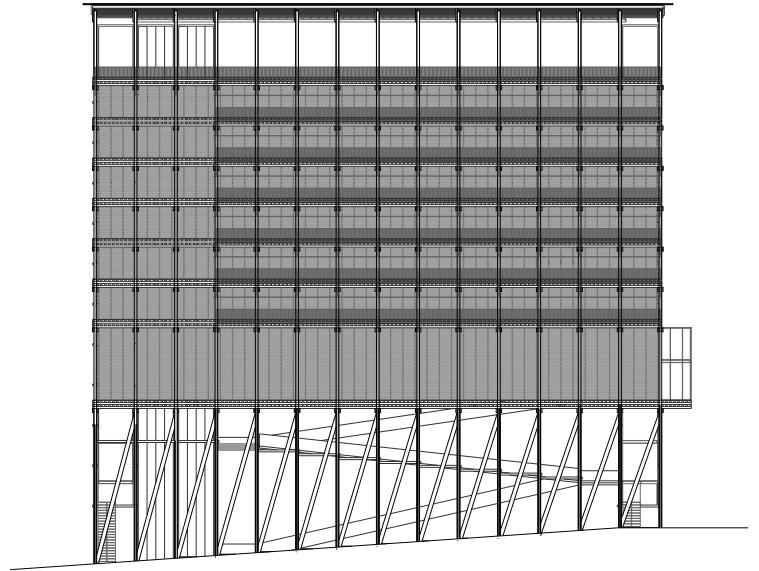
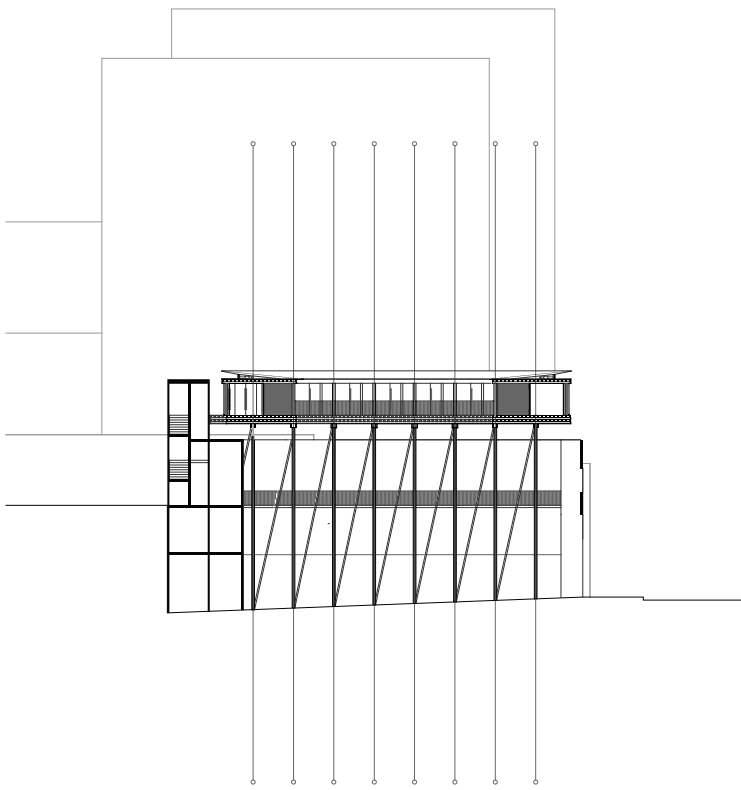
STUDY MODELS OF TWO PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

A greater focus is placed on the surfaces and materiality of each spaces perimeter. Returning to discussions of interiority, exteriority, I was interested in again make animate architecture.



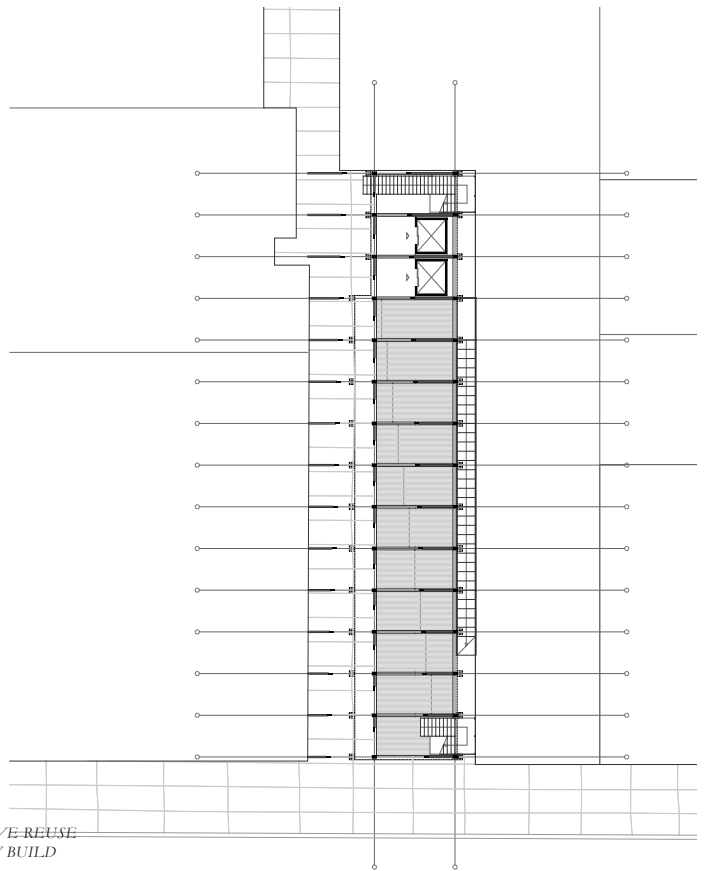
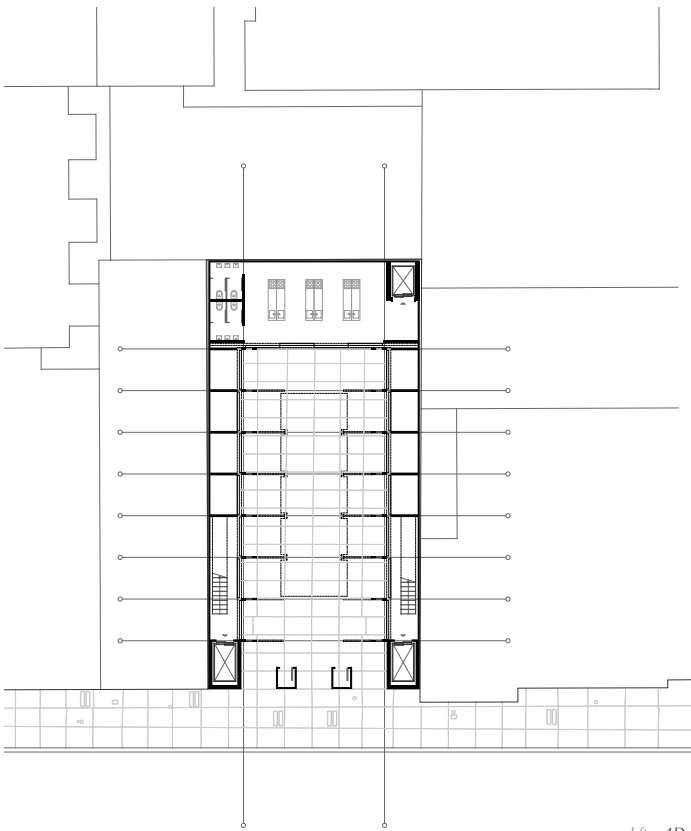
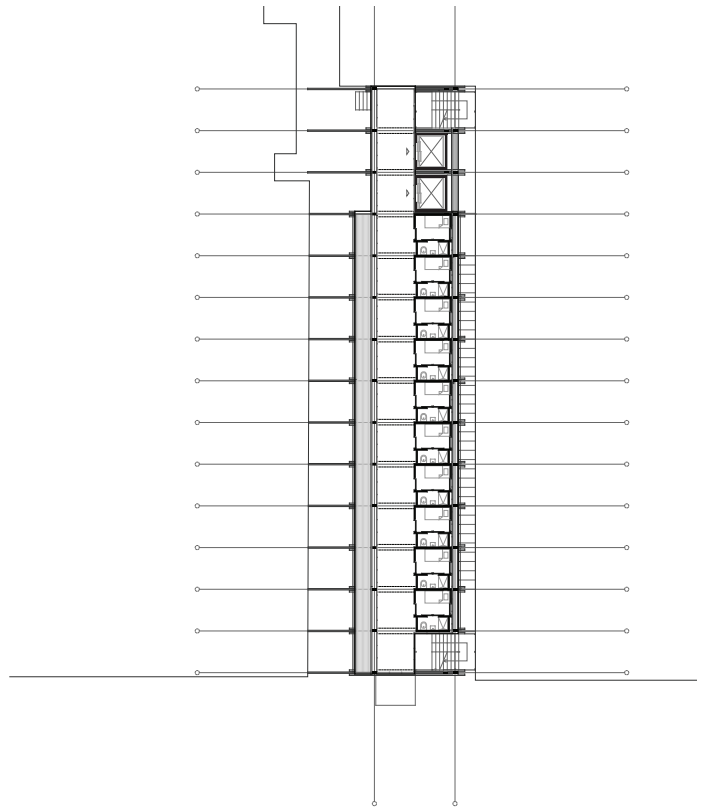
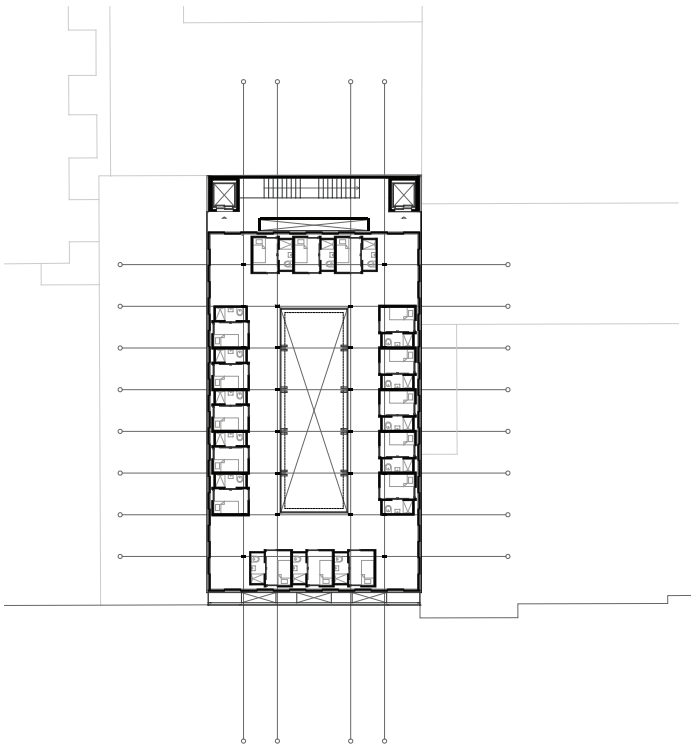
left - ADAPTIVE REUSE
right - NEW BUILD

Two housing interventions for the Chinatown community. The buildings are elevated and try to respect the perimeter of ground floor level. In the existing restaurant, I kept the façade, and perimeter stairs and cores but completely opened the restaurant to the exterior. As an open courtyard, the hope is to allow for experiences otherwise nonexistent. In the new build, beneath the housing are food stalls and outdoor markets. By privileging the right wall, an alley through the block is highlighted connecting Portsmouth square to Jackson street.



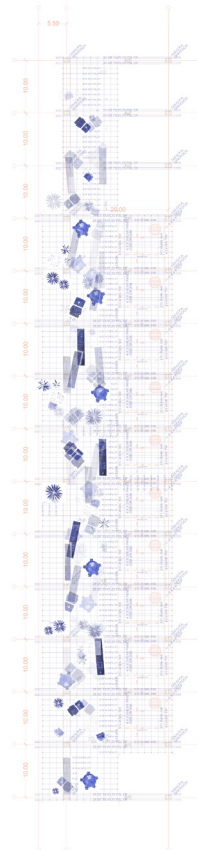
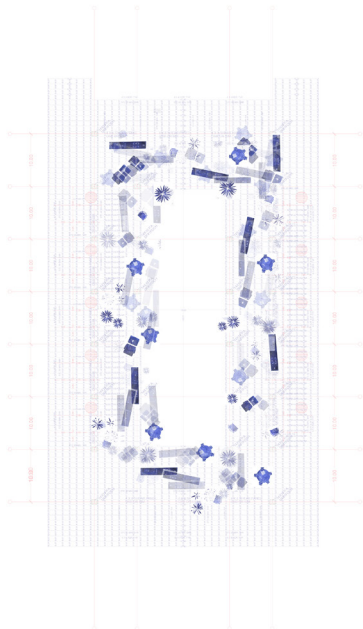
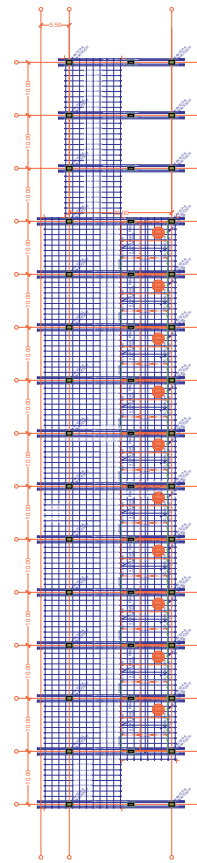
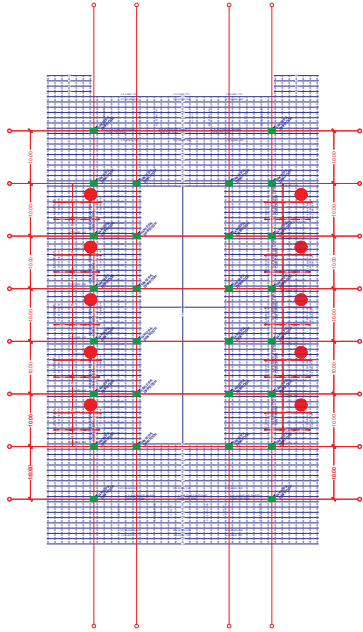
left - ADAPTIVE REUSE
right - NEW BUILD

In attempt to minimize the footprint an sense of opaque enclosures on the ground level, The building is perched on columns and diagonal bracing to allow for different atmospheres and a hybridity above and below. Like the spaces it aims to create, the structure also tries to create a sense of vitality and energy - driven by a structural need to support racking and stabilize the building on a declining double slope.



left - ADAPTIVE REUSE
right - NEW BUILD

Nearly a 50/50 split of spatial division, there is an equal focus on both the explicit rooms and the implicit communal areas. As a pair, a couple, a hybrid, the two live together and depend on one another.

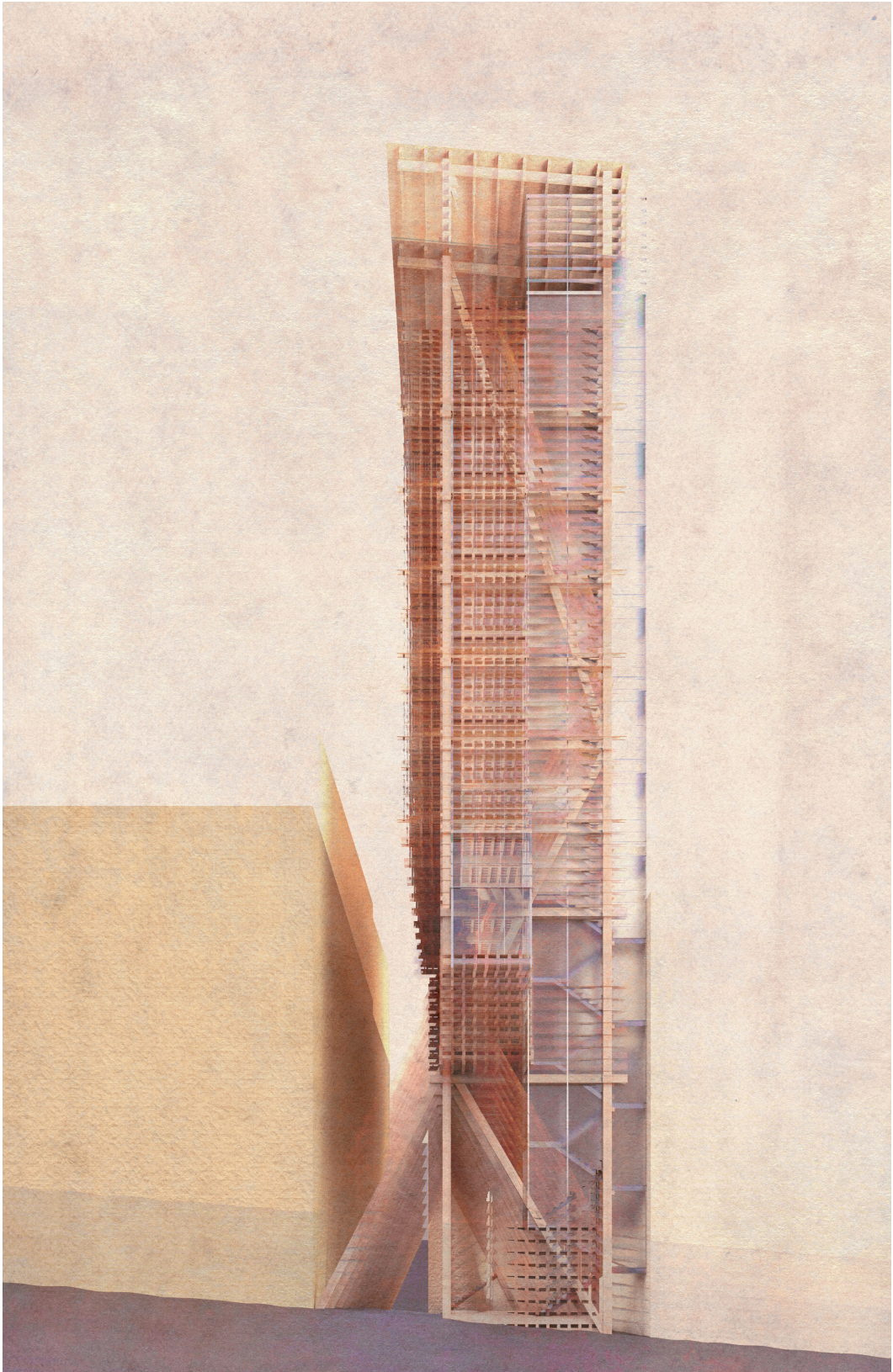


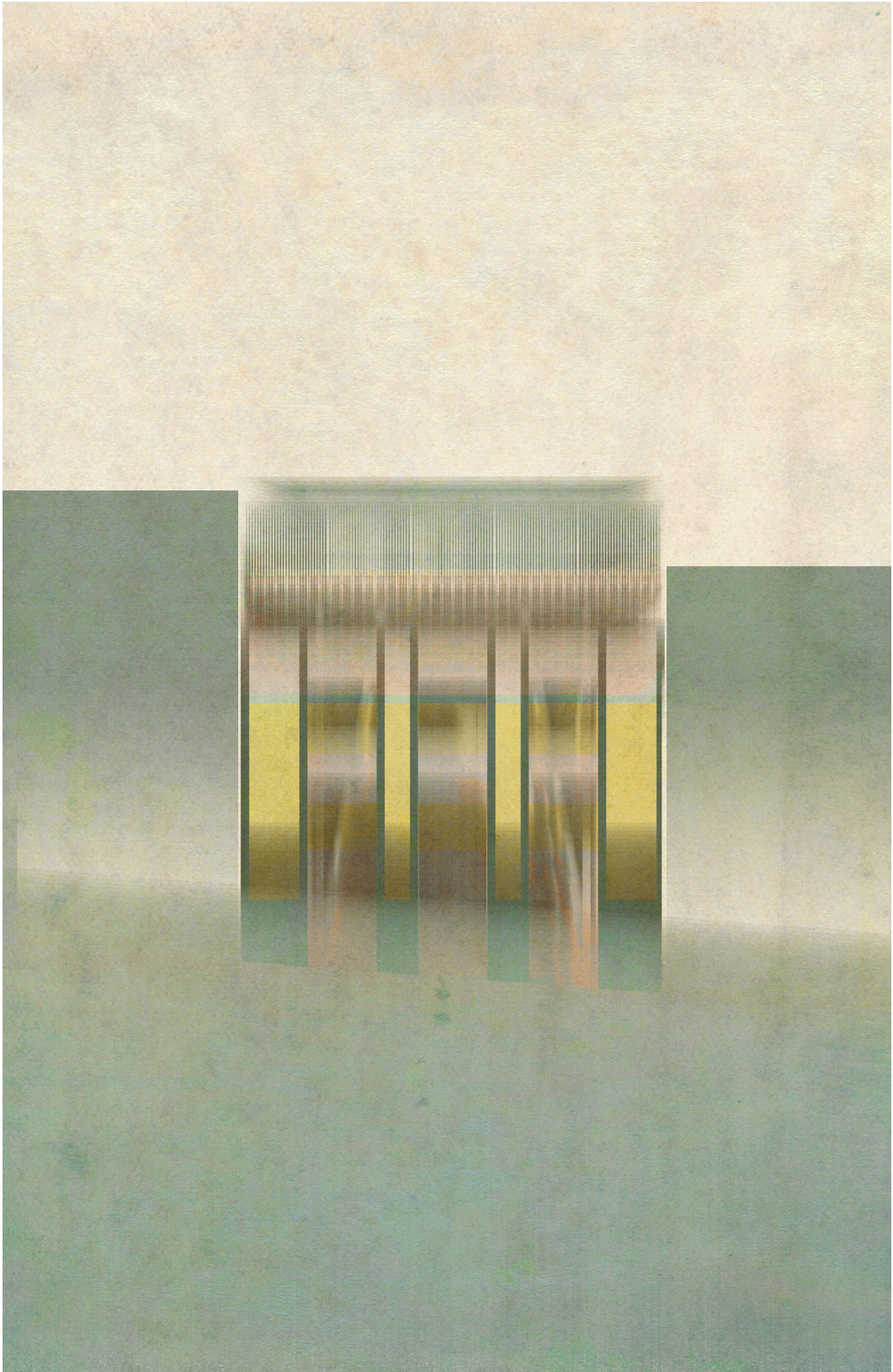
left - ADAPTIVE REUSE
right - NEW BUILD

A dialogue between rationality and irrationality - the two buildings show a possible framing of animate life in Chinatown.









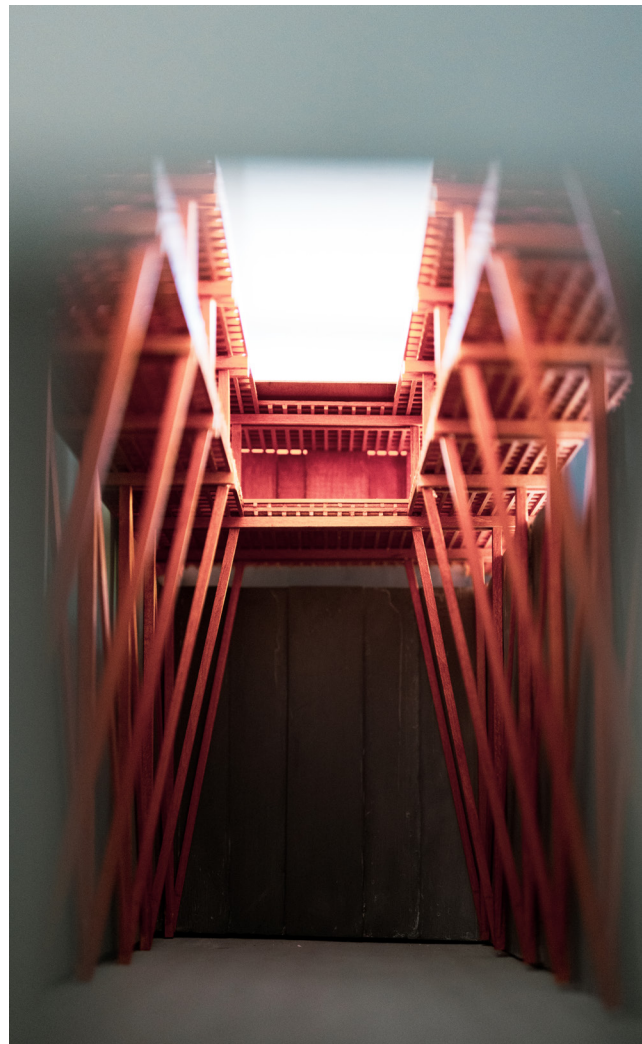






THESIS REVIEW SET UP

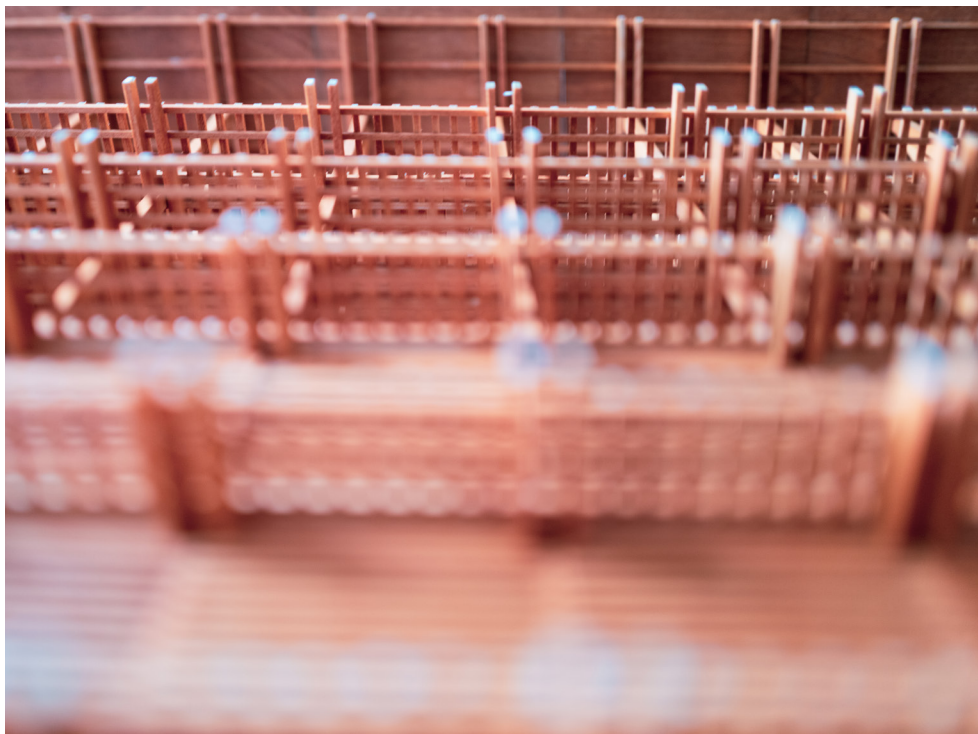
left side of room - accordion books, drawings on wall | right side of room - site and study models | end of room - 1/4" models and screen for presentation



1/4" model - wood stained basswood + pigment smeared plywood



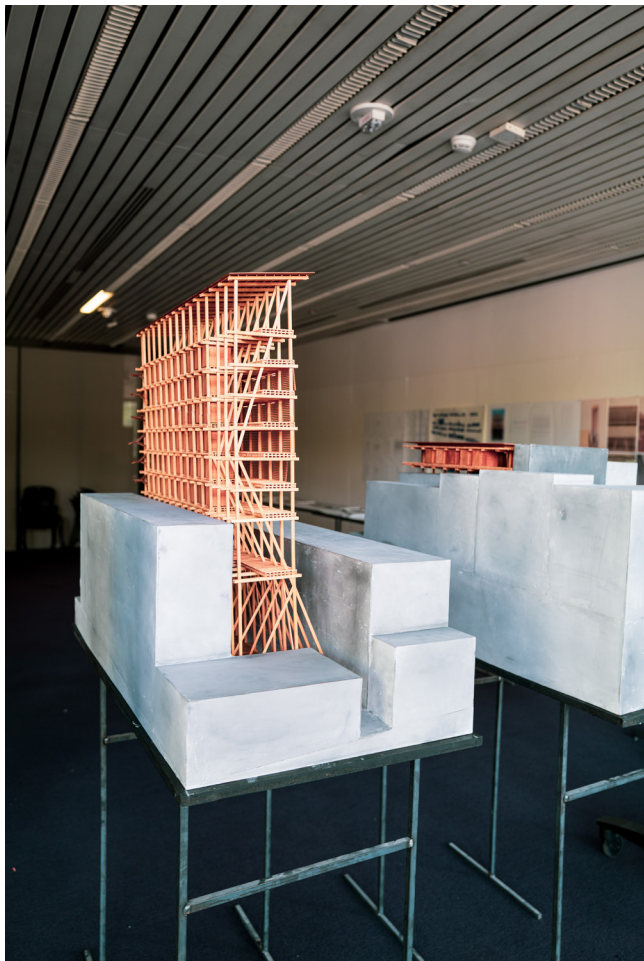
1/4" model - wood stained basswood + pigment smeared plywood



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