PLACE-MAKING IN THE FOLDS OF CHANGE
Xihaizi Sports and Culture Center in Tongzhou New Town

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[…] talvolta città diverse si succedono sopra lo stesso suolo e sotto lo stesso nome, nascono e muoiono senza essersi conosciute, incomunicabili tra loro. Alle volte anche i nomi degli abitanti restano uguali, e l'accento delle voci, e perfino i lineamenti delle facce; ma gli dèi che abitano sotto i nomi e sopra i luoghi se ne sono andati senza dir nulla e al loro posto si sono annidati dèi estranei.

Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

China's growth over the past decades has been astonishing – it is pretty much well known – and so has been its supersonic urban development. And even today, despite this rush shows its dark sides, the country is still ambitiously growing at a rapid pace.

From the early 1980s onward, urban development has been mainly carried out by building new settlements from scratch – thus producing the first and second generations of Chinese new towns. And now that continental China is still mostly rural and coastal cities are saturated, New Towns and New Areas are still the main strategy for urbanization.

In this frame, a reflection on what kind of places this impetuous process produces appears crucial. Since the practice of building all-planned cities and towns has had, as a matter of fact, different outcomes – including ghost towns – the issue of *place-making* in such contexts is quite sensitive.

This work is therefore based on such a question: what creates a sense of place? And by this I mean: what are the features that make a settlement – be it the result of either a political or an economic operation – a vital place, a place for people? Also, where is the line dividing theme-park cities, dormitory towns, monumental utopian experiments, eco-manifestos, from actual lively places that may be suitable for everyday human activities?

I do believe in the idea that public space plays a key role in determining the vitality and defining the identity of a place and its community, and that this may particularly apply for newly urbanized areas. This is why public space – with all the facets it carries in the context of contemporary China – is one of the main aspects I tried to deal with in this work.

This project is thus based on the relationships between open urban space, private space, open public space, indoor public space. Meaningful space, meaningless space.

It is an attempt to shape a place in the intricate folds of an urban fabric that is affected by the development phenomena mentioned above. The site I have chosen is located in Tongzhou, the largest and most significant new town in the Greater Beijing Region, currently involved in a huge event: the relocation of the administrative bodies of the municipal government. It is hence an area that has been facing a massive and swift transformation over the last years that is still currently on. This transformation leaves visible marks on the urban fabric, which now needs to be sewn together.

Xihaizi Sports and Culture Center is therefore meant to be a place for sport and culture, where public space takes many different forms and where every corner is thought to be potentially meaningful in its way.

It is located in a crucial area for both its symbolic and logistic connection with Beijing central city and, at the same time, it represents the gateway between the old town of Tongzhou and its newest CBD. This area appeared so interesting to me because it might be seen as a catalogue of the elements that have been shaping the Chinese cities in the last decades, and my design takes the challenge to hold all of them together.

Tonghui River, Tongzhou,
April 2017
Photo by author

WALLS AND MALLS

A look at Chinese public space through time

Since China has been experiencing said recent and rapid development, ideas such as public space, space for community and for society – which in most western countries have been defined and settled over the centuries – are still evolving here. This means that their connotation and features keep taking shape nowadays, as lifestyle is changing, and so are people's aspirations and needs. In other words, "that a 'public sphere'[1] develops in conjunction with the onset of modernity is consistent with the Chinese experience"(Gaubatz 2008: 73).

The Chinese social structure is traditionally based on family and community, and historically this has been spatially reflected in the introvert organization of the city pattern. However, as China opened up to a market economy – which has led to the so-called 'Confucian capitalism' – and the idea of

1 The concept of "public sphere" is here cited after Habermas (1989).

community has been gradually fading into that of society, the Chinese city has been experiencing a consistent extroversion of its spaces.

In pre-1949 China, the "space was long rigorously defined and partitioned"(Gaubatz 2008: 74). Walls enclosed nearly every urban space – the entire city was walled up, and so were its districts and the courtyard houses within – and thus most of the activities took place in introverted wards. Even parks were enclosed and accessible through gates that were closed at night time. Back in those days, the open spaces for public life were essentially the temples, where people gathered for fairs and religious events. Also teahouses, markets, and theatres were essential stages of public relations.

At the time of 1949 revolution, socialism introduced a new conception of the public sphere. It was the era of monumentality: wide roads, large squares, massive monuments. The city was still divided into compounds and partitioned by walls, but significant portions of tangled introverted spaces have been torn down to make room for the expression of socialist power. These monumental spaces, were not intended for everyday recreational activities and casual social relations, but rather for mass gatherings. "In some ways public space was even more restrictive in the new China than it had been during the imperial era" (Gaubatz 2008: 75): due to its scale and its formality, it was nowhere near being considered human.

Courtyard in the hutong area of Gulou, Beijing, April 2017
Photo by author

Tiananmen Square, Beijing,
May 2017
Photo by author

Moreover, during the Mao era live-work self-sufficient cells were introduced, inspired by Soviet models. These so-called *danwei* (cf. Bonino/De Pieri 2015) provided housing, workplace, and facilities, all enclosed into the same compound. "As a result, public spaces in the socialist city were relatively empty, and streets and boulevards were free of the diurnal commuter throngs of capitalist cities" (Campanella 2008: 99).

From 1978 on, as the reform era has brought about – together with strong economic development – a considerable opening towards the West, a new conception of public space has emerged. According to Bin and Qinfang (2008, cited in Gaubatz 2008: 75), the development of the urban space in post-reform China has followed three phases. Initially, from 1978 to 1991, the relevance given to the political value of public space has relatively faded in favour of new attention for landscaping and for developing new spatial standards for new people's needs. Then, during the 1990s, since China has been strongly affected by globalization, the design of public space has been massively influenced by western models, with a number of western-style plazas, promenades, and malls built all over the country. Finally, from 2000 on, increasing importance has been given to environmental aspects and thus green spaces have been emerging more and more in the cities.

Nanjing Lu, Shanghai,
May 2017
Photo by author


SHIMAO 世茂

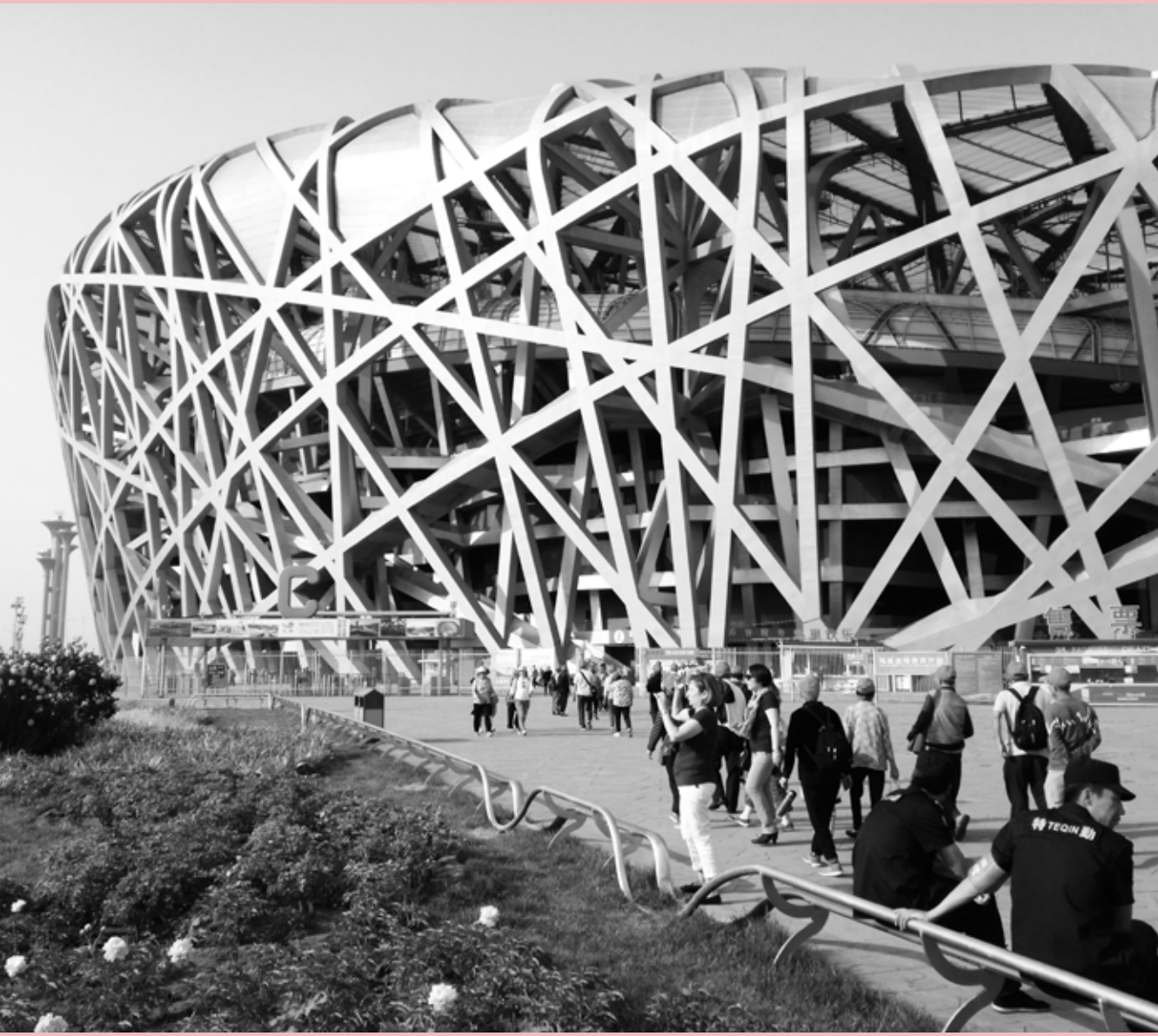
MAHJONG BENEATH THE HIGHWAY

An understanding of Chinese public space today

Today public space in Chinese cities reflects all its history. Although the extroversion of space has been a significant phenomenon and walls have largely been torn down, Chinese cities are still tangibly partitioned. The shift from an enclosed landscape to a more open one, has been in fact accompanied by the replacement of the massive walls with lighter fences and other control measures. Nearly every compound has a controlled access gate with security guards, and many public venues have quite complex access systems. The Bird's Nest by Herzog & de Meuron in the Olympic Park may be a good example for this. The Stadium was designed by the architects to be a permeable space. Its outer shell was conceived to be "the link between the city outside and the interior of the stadium"; the crucial feature of the project was in fact "the transitional space between interior and exterior" that "affords

the opportunity to create a new kind of urban and public place"[2]. Today, instead, the building is surrounded by three security rings – which is understandable, since a stadium indeed requires controlled access. Nonetheless, the quantity and quality of such security measures strongly affect the permeability of the building.

2 Cf. https://www.herzogdemeuron.com/index/projects/complete-works/226-250/226-national-stadium.html



National Stadium, Beijing,
April 2017
Photo by author

Even the monumental political-public spaces of the Mao era are involved in this logic of partition. For instance, Tiananmen Square – the symbolic core of China – is now subject to restrictive access control measures. Entering the square is somehow similar to an airport experience, with fences all around, and security checks at every gate. This is why – these days, as well as in the past – this vast paved open space looks like a void in the heart of the city, except for official occasions.

The Chinese city shows its decades-long relationship with the West – and also its interpretation of western models. Malls and department stores – that first appeared in the 1980s – are now an essential element of the cityscapes across the country. And what is most interesting is that on the one hand, enclosed malls mime outdoor public space and, on the other hand, streets and squares end up being open-air shopping malls. It is the case of Sanlitun and Wangfujing in Beijing, and Xintiandi and Nanjing Lu in Shanghai – to name just a few – where one can experience a mall atmosphere even being outdoors. Such spaces are impressively successful, as consumption is central to everyday life, and many people tend to prefer to meet and carry out their activities in shopping malls and commercial districts. It is thus evident that in the context of this "citytainment"– as Dieter Hassenpflug states – "commerce is the driving force of placemaking" (2010: 32).

Lining at the security checks of Tiananmen Square, Beijing, April 2017
Photo by author

It may not be easy for an open urban space in China to be recognized as meaningful unless it has either a strong symbolic value or commercial use. This could be explained by: open urban space tends to be perceived by the Chinese as less meaningful than closed space, which is instead strongly characterized by its use and thus charged with meaning. Open urban space is often perceived as vague, lacking in content, an undefined grey zone. It is seen as "the space that fills the expanse between meaningful spaces with nothingness" (Hassenpflug 2010: 27), the transit space that links a well-defined place to another. For this reason, what Western would undoubtedly consider as public space, would not necessarily be seen as such in China.

Walking down the streets of Beijing and Shanghai I have encountered countless sidewalks that ended all of a sudden or were entirely occupied by flowerbeds, and a few other times there were cars parked right in the middle. This kind of episodes suggests that, according to Hassenpflug, dealing with public space – as we intend it – is simply not part of Chinese tradition, and sometimes «it speaks a spatial language that [people] do not understand» (Hassenpflug 2010: 26). Nevertheless, the Chinese love to stay outdoors and enjoy collective activities. I spent a few warm spring nights watching the Beijingers turning the square between Gulou and Zhonglou into an improvised open-air ballroom. And I happened to be in the middle of the same situation in many other different places around Beijing. Not to mention all those people exercising by the side of the road or in any

Sidewalk suddently interrupted,
Beijing,
April 2017
Photo by author


TAXI

other available space, and those one can spot playing mahjong in the most unlikely places – including underneath the urban highways!

The traditional centrality of community is reflected in the way people live and behave in the urban space. Walking through Beijing *hutong* or Shanghai *lilong*, it happens to see domestic laundry hanging outside in the alley, people having their meal or chatting and playing in informal corners recreated bringing outside couches and chairs. I often encountered knife sharpeners and other little workshop activities, vendors and informal barbershops on the street. Or even people on tiny tables and stools put outside BBQ and noodle places late into the night. It is also possible to see informal-club activities even in contexts that differ a lot from those of the old city. Under my window in Sanlitun – a few steps from the fancy shopping area – every morning a clique of seniors engaged in *tàijíquán* and ribbon choreographies.

All these images show how open urban space is often used as the extension of the house, the commercial activity, and the workshop, and how it is charged with meaning as it is appropriated by people – especially in the contexts where community still plays a central role. This mechanism of informal appropriation gives these spaces an extraordinary vitality and, in my opinion, a comforting sense of place.

Street chatting,
Shanghai,
May 2017
Photo by author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However, nowadays Chinese cities are not just made of community places. There is an emerging middle class that requires new spaces for entertainment and recreation. More in general, places for the expression of an evolving social structure are now needed. I would therefore add to Hassenpflug's statement that, while China has not a tradition of space for civil society comparable to that of Western countries, a culture of public space is now emerging.

Community needs appropriate stages for its expression, and society requires spaces that can fulfill its aspirations. They both deserve design responses – as well as political ones – and this work aims to provide a meeting point to such demands.

Street haircut,
Beijing,
May 2017
Photo by author

Traffic island mahjong,
Beijing,
May 2017
Photo by author

Clotheslines in the hutong,
Beijing,
May 2017
Photo by author

THE ISSUE OF PLACE-MAKING IN THE NEW TOWNS

Chinese development is taking into account the growing demand for public space, yet it is not easy to deal with such a young need. Government, planning bodies, and designers sometimes respond in quite a clumsy way. Things get even more complicated when it comes to providing public space for New Towns and New Areas[3], or, more in general, for areas that are planned from scratch or that undergo a radical transformation. Planning and design are often carried out according to aesthetic criteria or in response to image expectations, thus producing unfortunate results.

3 "Officially, a New Town is one built from scratch as an autonomously administered town, built according to a masterplan, and often based on a political decision. All the same, there are fluid boundaries within that definition, there are small and large New Towns, and the degree of autonomy varies. Historically, the construction of New Towns has almost always been based on a political decision taken by an organ of local or national government" (Keeton 2011: 14). Further definitions of "new town" and "new urban area" are provided, among others, by Wakeman (2016) and Zisheng (2015).

The massive growth of China has led the Government to adopt a strategy based on new towns, new urban areas, and new districts as the solution to the issues arising from such an extreme development. All these *new* forms of settlements are hence intended to be the answer to the overcrowding of the coastal megalopolis, to the necessity of resettling migrant labors, to the need for urbanization of the still rural central-western China, and to the consequent relocation of the rural population. Also, they are used to develop the infrastructure system, and to move state bodies and state-owned companies headquarters out of the over-congested cities. They aim to offer the population new and better facilities and employment opportunities, not to mention that they are a potent device to affirm state power.

New Towns – and other settlement built from scratch – have represented, over the century, an opportunity for the most adventurous experimentations. They have always been like a playground for architects and planners, a chance to give shape to their "megastructural dream-scapes", that has produced "an inexhaustible series of monumental musings paraded off architectural drawing boards" (Wakeman 2016: 265-266). Most of the time it has been to the detriment of the humanity and livability of such settlements, particularly regarding public space.

From the 1980s onward, an impressive number of new towns have been popping up all over China. Looking at the new town experiences of the last

two decades, it is possible to identify mainly two tendencies in their conception. The first one is based on "recreating some sort of origin and tradition, even not necessarily local" whereas the second one is based on "the projection into a future that is as unprecedented as possible, though often reduced simply to an 'eco, green, sustainable' imaginary" (Repellino 2017, my translation). The first is the tendency that inspired the generation of new towns of the early 2000s, and it is the expression of audacious urbanization based on importing and copying models from the past or other contexts – such as Western countries. The second is the current trend, that is based on the recent policies – as part of Plan 2014-2020 – regarding sustainability and people-oriented development[4].

In recent years, as the frantic growth has shown its dangers, there has been a "shift in the urban development paradigm. [And] different urban projects and strategies have been gradually introduced in order to foster a new type of Chinese urbanization which takes care of the existing local conditions, promoting the quality of living"(Carota, Raimondetti, Safina 2017). The plan and its policies, among others, address China's environmental issues, aiming to achieve new standards of green urbanization, eco-friendly transports, and the use of clean energy.

4 As for such recent policies, see Wang et al. (2015).

To achieve strong, sustainable and balanced growth is still a daunting challenge facing all of us. […] We will implement a new type of people-centered urbanization, address the bifurcation between urban and rural areas and within cities, and grant urban residency in an orderly manner to rural people who have moved to cities. […] We will also promote the development of green industries, new energy, and energy-conserving and environment friendly technologies.

Premier Li Keqiang, Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2014, Boao, Hainan, April 10.

New towns from the previous generation were most of the times market-oriented operations, that tried to grasp the aspirations of a nascent lifestyle. Real estate companies promoted new and higher standards of living to the new middle and upper class. Such operations often turned out to produce ghost towns, since many people brought the properties as an investment.

The most famous case is the program "One City, Nine Towns"[5], launched by the Shanghai government in 2001 with the purpose of easeing congestion in the central city. One bigger city and nine smaller villages were planned from scratch and rapidly built around Shanghai, as reproductions of old and contemporary Western models – with the only exception of Zhujiajiao, designed as the replica of an ancient Chinese village. Songjiang City (also known as Taiwushi) is the English-themed town, Anting the German-themed one, Luodian the Scandinavian-themed one, Pujiang the Italian-themed one, to name a few. The theme was used as an advertisement to attract buyers, but its spatial results are unconvincing. Might the urban space of these Italian, Spanish, English copycats – that resemble theme-parks – ever infuse a sense of place? The transposition of foreign models and their adaption to the Chinese reality may entail the creation of questionable hybrids, as the scale, the proportions and the space syntax are often altered. Mo-

5 As regards this topic, see den Hartog (2011) and Hassenpflug (2010: chap.6).

reover, the imposition of an unfamiliar spatial language makes the appropriation of space by people – hard enough in totally planned towns – even more unlikely. The aesthetic of these postcard-like towns produces a surreal packaged atmosphere[6], that works great for wedding photos, but does not seem to succeed in everyday life.

The case of the Italian-themed new town Pujiang[7] may be a good example. It has been designed by Vittorio Gregotti and Augusto Cagnardi with the purpose of achieving the Italian quality of life. This is what the permeable blocks, the piazzas, the pedestrian paths, the green areas, and all the other gathering places were intended for. Nevertheless, only the northern part of Pujiang was built according to Gregotti and Cagnardi's project. The southern part instead was built hastily and more conventionally, overlooking the project, to accommodate the people displaced from the site of Shanghai 2010 World Expo. What is interesting is that in the two areas two opposite and unexpected situations have occurred. In the north, the open blocks have been turned into gated communities with controlled access, and most of the apartments have been bought as second homes. As a result,

6 This expression, used by Carota, Federighi, Fiandanese (2016/2017) during the seminars of the project CeNTO, is particularly effective for describing the spatial outcome of such theme-towns operation.

7 For what follows, cf. den Hartog (2011), Bonino/De Pieri (2012), Repellino (2017), Xue/Zhou (2007), and Pujiang page on INTI website (http://www.newtowninstitute.org/newtowndata/newtown.php?newtownId=61).

this part of Pujiang is nearly empty. Instead, the southern part is way more lively and vibrant, as the inhabitants have informally adapted the urban space to their everyday needs.

This case reveals that the imposition of a model – although of undoubted quality – may still be very likely to fail. Leaving room, instead, for informality and different possibilities of appropriation may be a key to the design of vital, actually people-centered places in China.

Wedding photos in Thames Town, Shanghai
Source: http://matthewniederhauser.com/research/2011/10/07/thames-town-a-quaint-corner-of-shanghai/ (accessed on September 5, 2018)


EVALINKA

The new generation of new towns, as mentioned, is part of the great Chinese project to promote a more sustainable idea of development. This idea is based on the aim of making China greener, more equal, more livable. And this, in terms of urban development, results in the planning and construction of eco-cities[8] that aim to ensure high levels of environmental and architectural quality, energetic efficiency, wholesomeness, and inclusive facilities. "Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city's vision is to be a thriving city which is socially harmonious, environmentally-friendly and resource-efficient", claims the website homepage[9] of one the manifesto-cities.

These eco-cities become a showcase for China to display to the world its expertise in terms of technological innovation and sustainability and to prove to be leading among the global powers. They provide opportunities to experiment with new technologies and architectural forms. And this is where the promise of new and better places tends to become slogans, fueled by eco-green-sustainable rhetorics, that are likely not to turn into reality.
Looking at the renders of the new towns of the new generation they all look remarkably similar, with the predominance of immense waterways, lush green corridors, spectacular waterfronts, and high-tech buildings. The urban space appears loose, vast, somehow disorienting. Both the buildin-

8 As regards Eco-Cities, see Keeton (2011: chap.1).

9 Tianjin Eco-City https://www.tianjinecocity.gov.sg/

gs and the open space are designed on a monumental scale. Immense and futuristic high-rise buildings pop up from the ground as if they were sculptures, and what happens in the urban space at their foot remains somehow unclear. Generally, such scapes neither ever show urban blocks nor any other kind of urban fabric, but rather the buildings are individual elements within expanses of greenery. Public space is designed in an aesthetically pleasing way, yet its scale looks far from human.

Therefore, the danger is that even these totally-planned *in vitro* cities – which use performance indicators (Keeton 2011: 93) to measure their quality – would not offer genuinely livable environments and that the need for human places would be overlooked, once again. The concern is that the promises and slogans might have changed, but the outcomes might still be the same "urban fictions"[10] – as if the green dream had merely replaced the Western inspiration of the past generation.

In conclusion, it is doubtless that the products of the 2000s generation of new towns are questionable. That being said, a discussion on what their future might be and how to deal with them should be done. Observing the possible mechanism of appropriation of space that may have occurred in the existing new towns might be inspiring. Understanding how the inhabi-

10 This expression by Hassenpflug (2010) describes the transposition of Western models of the previous generation of new towns.

tants have engaged in creating places within such contexts, and in negotiating their own identity may be undoubtedly useful.

Moreover, the principles and the objectives of the new Chinese urbanization are valid, indeed. Yet, how can they be achieved? How can they be interpreted and applied in practice? Understanding how these ideas of sustainable development may be turned into reality is crucial, in order to avoid that they remained slogans and bright green promises on renders.

Speculative render of Tianjing Eco City
Source:
https://davidwachsmuth.com/2015/11/05/why-does-everyone-think-cities-can-save-the-planet/
(accessed on September 5, 2018)

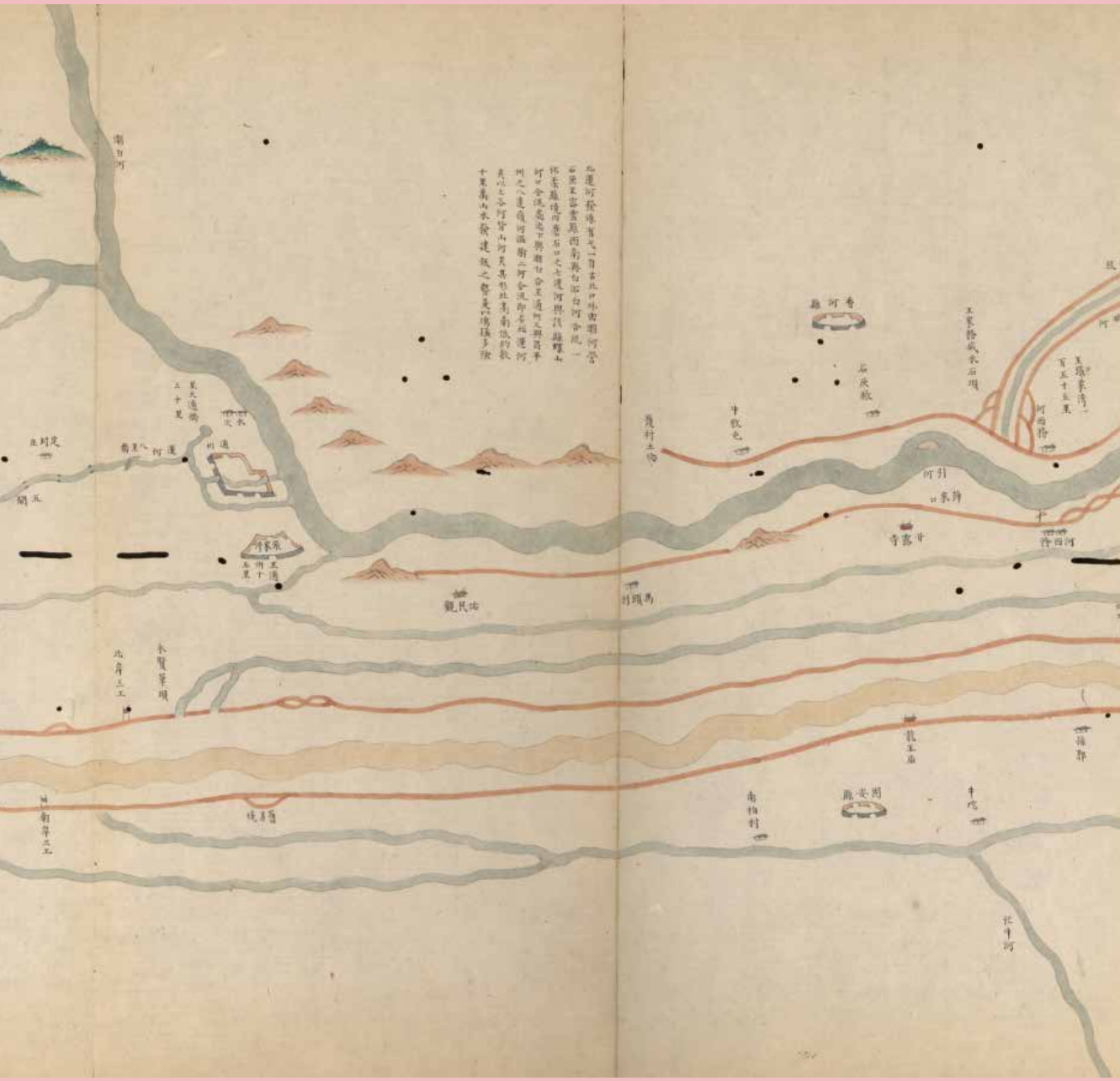
TONGZHOU
AND ITS MASTERPLANS

For this thesis, I have chosen to deal with a project in an area that is representative of the phenomena of urbanization currently occurring in China. Tongzhou New Town is one of the most renowned operations in recent years, as it has been elected to be the new sub-center of Beijing Capital. It has been chosen to relocate Beijing municipal government[11], in order to ease congestion issues in the downtown area – which is overpopulated and choked with traffic – and to avoid further demolitions in the old city.

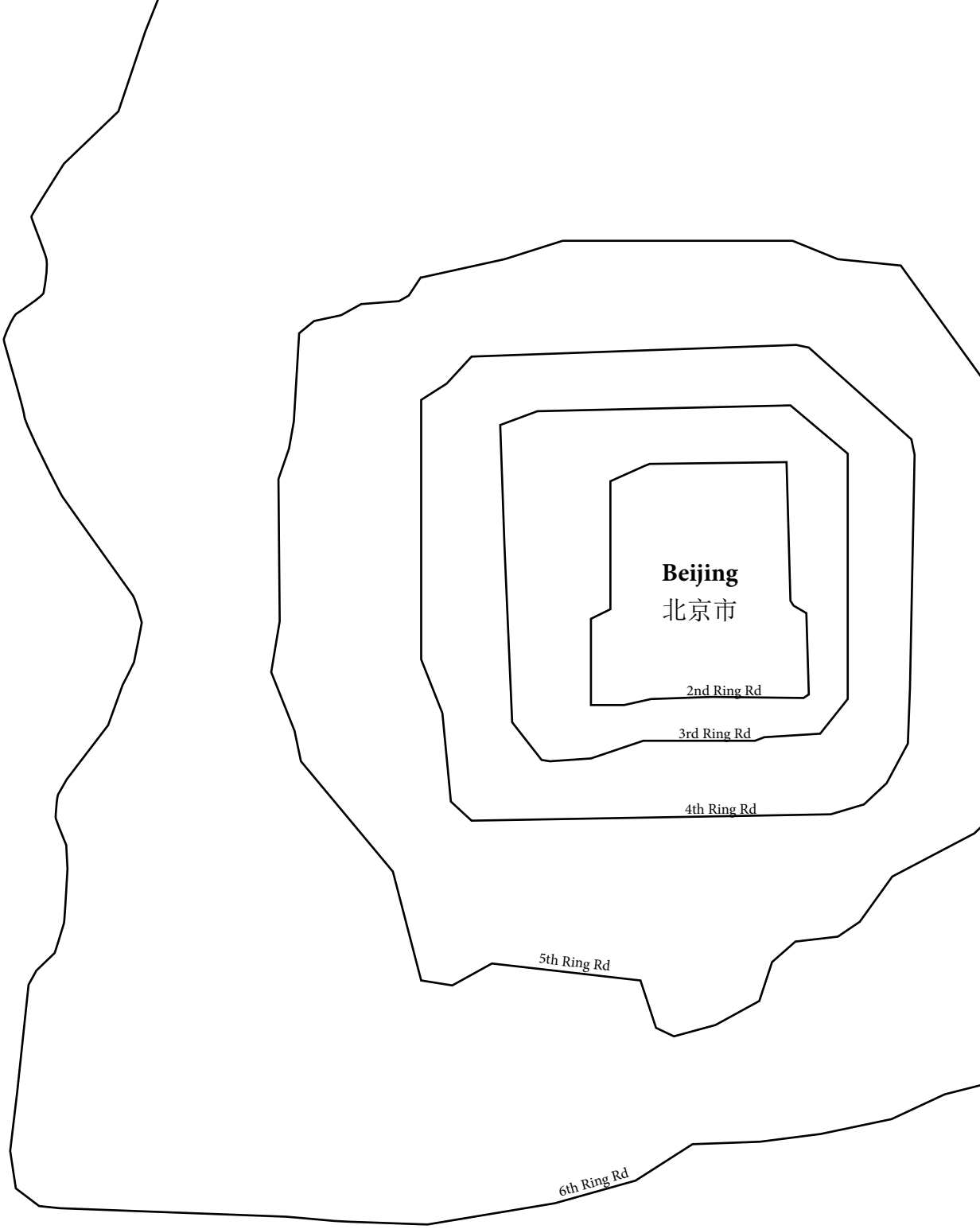
Also, the relocation is part of the broader project *Jing-Jin-Ji*[12], which, in President Xi Jinping's blueprint for China's urbanisation, aims to create a metropolitan region of 130 million people. *Jing-Jin-Ji* stands respectively for

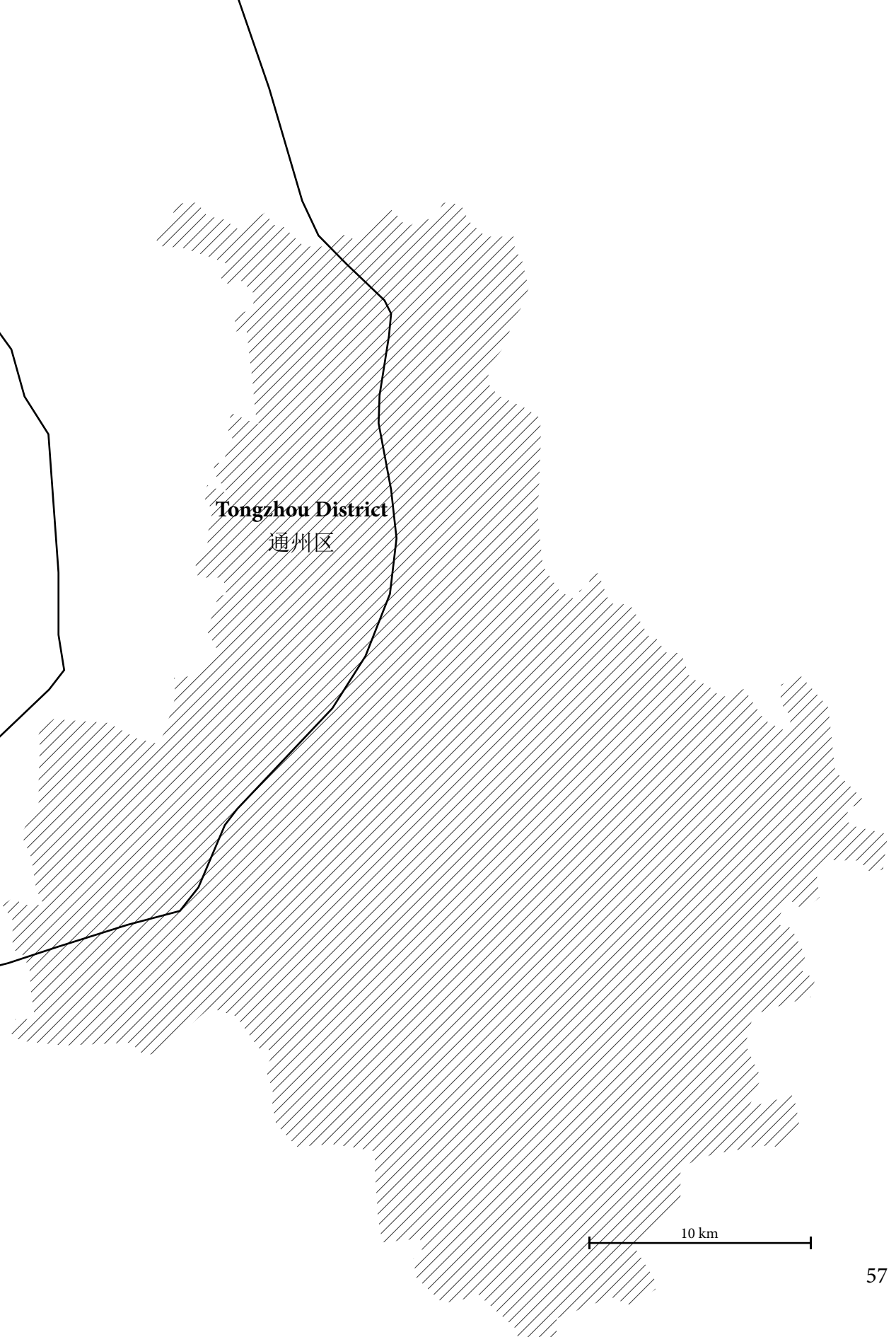
11 Cf. Johnson (2015), Wang (2015), Hu/Lin (2015), Xu (2015), Hu (2016), Mo (2016).

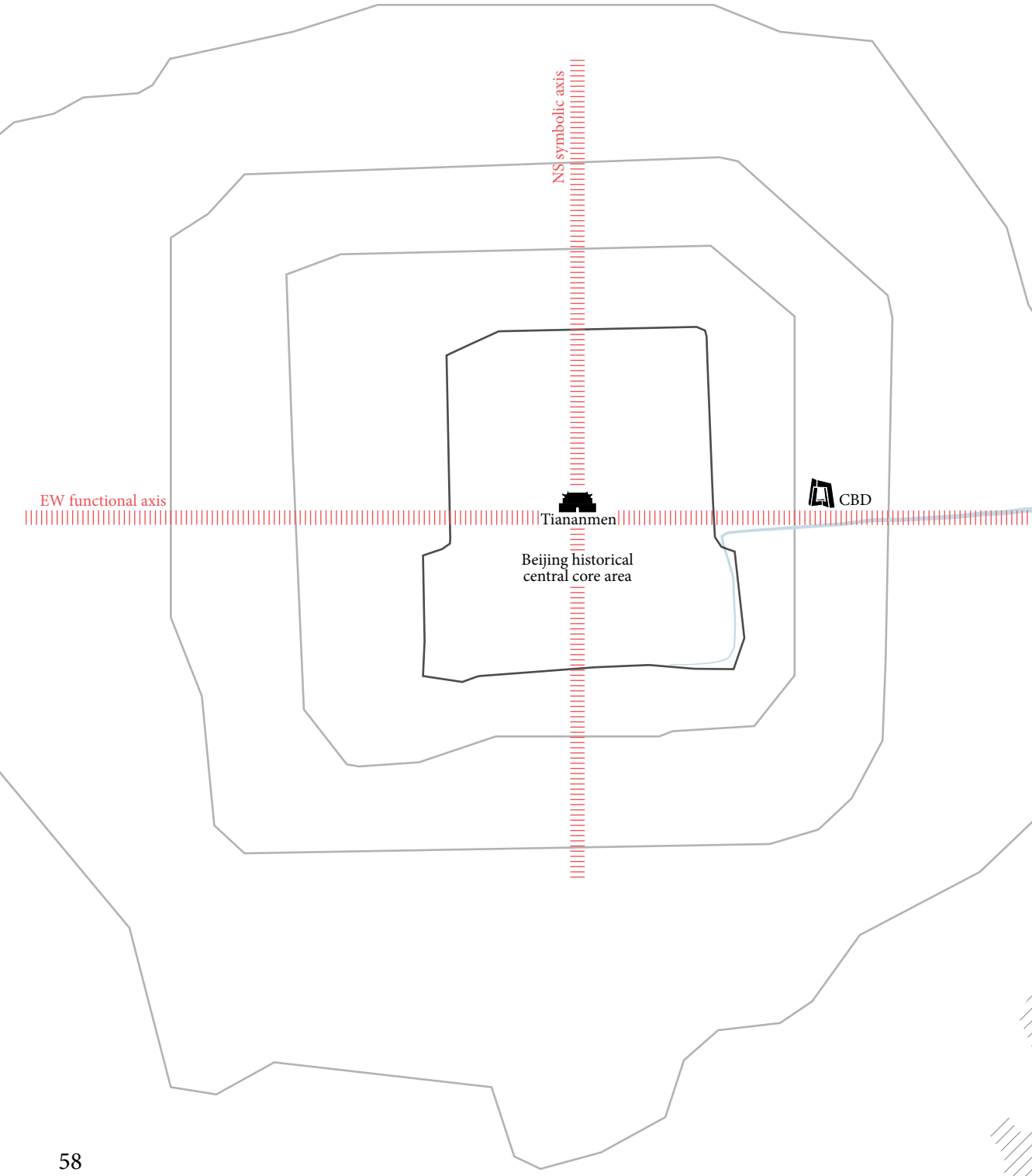
12 For what follows, cf. Yao/Liu (2014), and Johnson (2015).



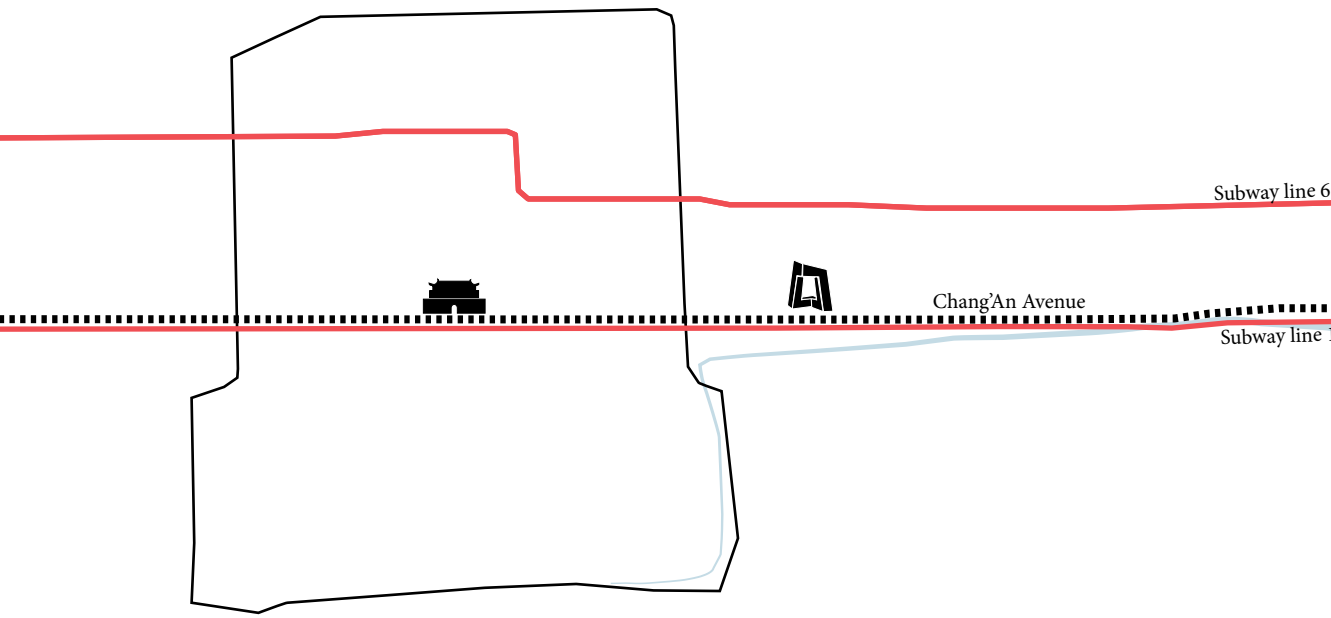
Historical drawing of Beijing-Tonghou,
I heartily thank Professor Zhong Ge for this picture

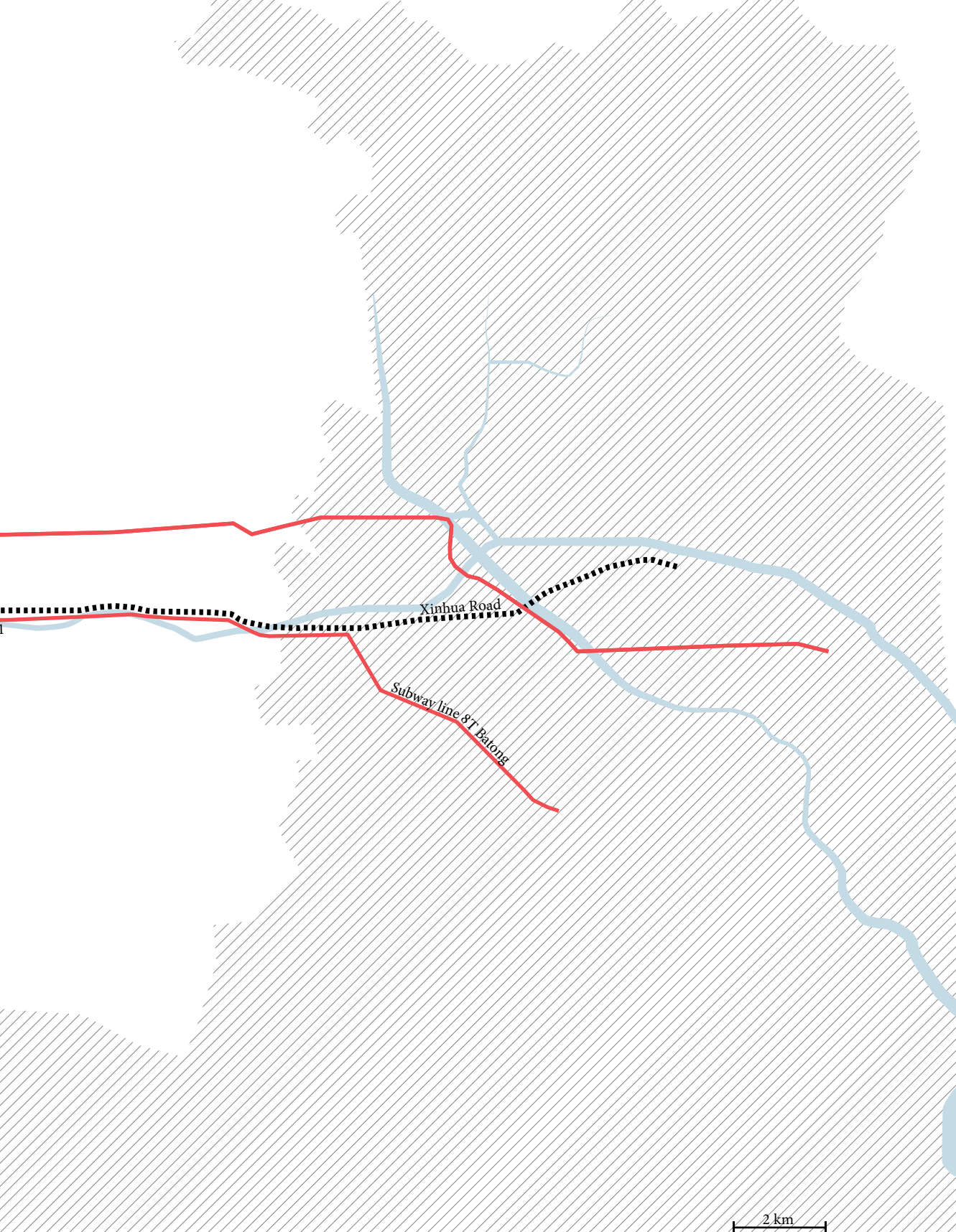

Beijing
北京市
2nd Ring Rd
3rd Ring Rd
4th Ring Rd
5th Ring Rd
6th Ring Rd


Tongzhou District
通州区
10 km


NS symbolic axis
EW functional axis
Tiananmen
CBD
Beijing historical
central core area


Tongzhou
new core area
Tonghui River
Jinghang - Grand Canal
2 km


Subway line 6
Chang'An Avenue


Xinhua Road
Subway line 87 Batong
2 km

Beijing (*Jing*), the strategic port city Tianjin (*Jin*), and Hebei province (traditionally named *Ji*) that encompasses the two cities. The displacement of the municipality and the creation of the new sub-center are thus precisely meant to help this project: thanks to the strategic position[13] of Tongzhou east of Beijing, the municipal government can focus on conducting the regional development strategies.

Tongzhou New Town is located in Tongzhou District, at the intersection of the Sixth Ring Road and the East-West axis. The North-South is the symbolic axis, that reminds of China's imperial power and glorious past, the East-West axis is the functional one, that embodies the rise of the modern nation[14]. The East-West axis corresponds to Chang'An Avenue, the urban expressway that crosses the North-South axis at Tiananmen Square, "the crossroads of the winds and the avenues that run through Beijing"[15]. Where the East-West axis intersects the Third Ring Road lies the Central Business District. And the new sub-center is meant to be the eastern ending point of such axis.

13 Tongzhou lies in a strategic position, as it is 20 km away from Tiananmen Square, around 16 km from Beijing International Airport – efficiently connected through the 6th Ring Road – and roughly 100 km from the port city of Tianjin.

14 See Shuishan (2012: 241, and chap.6).

15 This is the expression used by Antonioni (1972) to describe Tiananmen Square, my translation.

Despite referring to Tongzhou as New Town/New City/New Urban Area, its history[16] dates back to the Han Dynasty, 2200 ago. Tongzhou (通州) means 'place for passing through'[17], as during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (15th – early 19th century) it was the land and water eastern gateway to the city of Beijing. It lies on the *Jinghang*, the Grand Canal that crosses the Country from Hangzhou all the way to Beijing. The canal was intensively used for the transport of goods, which were first transferred to the harbor of Tongzhou before being shipped to the capital. It has thus been a thriving harbor city until the early 19th century when waterborne transport was in fact replaced by rail transport.

16 For the history of Tongzhou, cf. Zhou (2012: chap. 5, 243-267).

17 Cf. Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tongzhou_District,_Beijing (accessed on August 29, 2018).

During the planned economy era from 1949 to the early 1980s, Tongzhou was one of the fourty industrial satellite towns established in the Greater Beijing Region. A large number of state-owned factories were located in the town, resulting in scattered industrial areas. Since 1978, Tongzhou began to be partially deindustrialized, and in the early 1980s its first masterplan, that aimed to turn it into a trade node, was drawn up. At that time appropriate top-down control was pretty much absent.

In 1996 the second masterplan was issued, aiming to make the industrial reality more modern. In those years, spontaneous market-driven real estate development experienced an unprecedented boom in the area. And since top-down management over real-estate development was still inadequate, the use of land was uncontrolled, and Tongzhou lacked in efficient infrastructure, quality housing and facilities. As a result of the estate boom, Tongzhou ended up being a sleeping city, inhabited by white-collars that used to commute to Beijing to work.

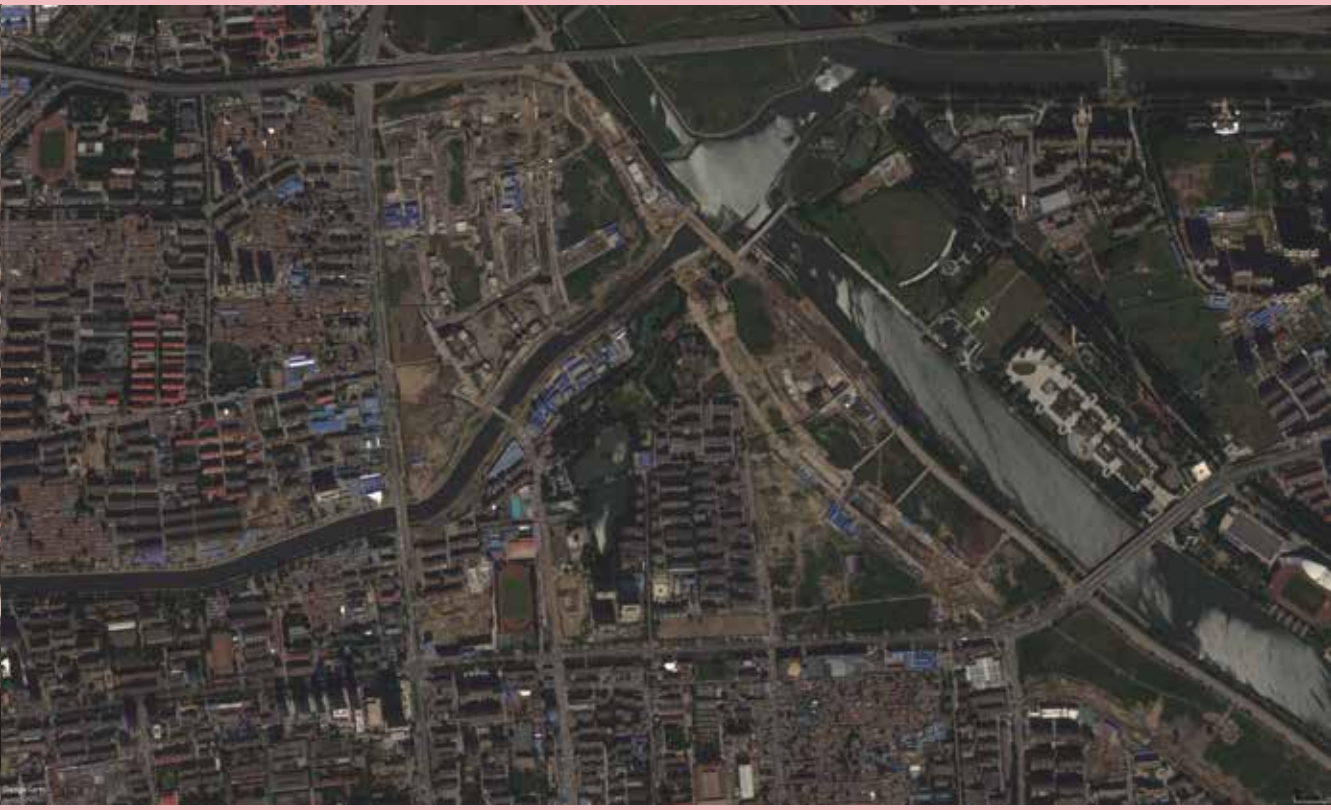
For this reason, the objective of the third masterplan for Tongzhou (2004-2020) is to turn the scattered, loose and inconsistent urban fabric, generated by the previous uncontrolled and spontaneous growth, into a prime economic, service and cultural center of Beijing Region, with high-level urban qualities.

Google Earth view, 10.26.2004

Google Earth view, 08.11.2009

Google Earth view, 05.04.2010

Google Earth view, 09.27.2010



Google Earth view, 10.26.2004

Google Earth view, 09.18.2017

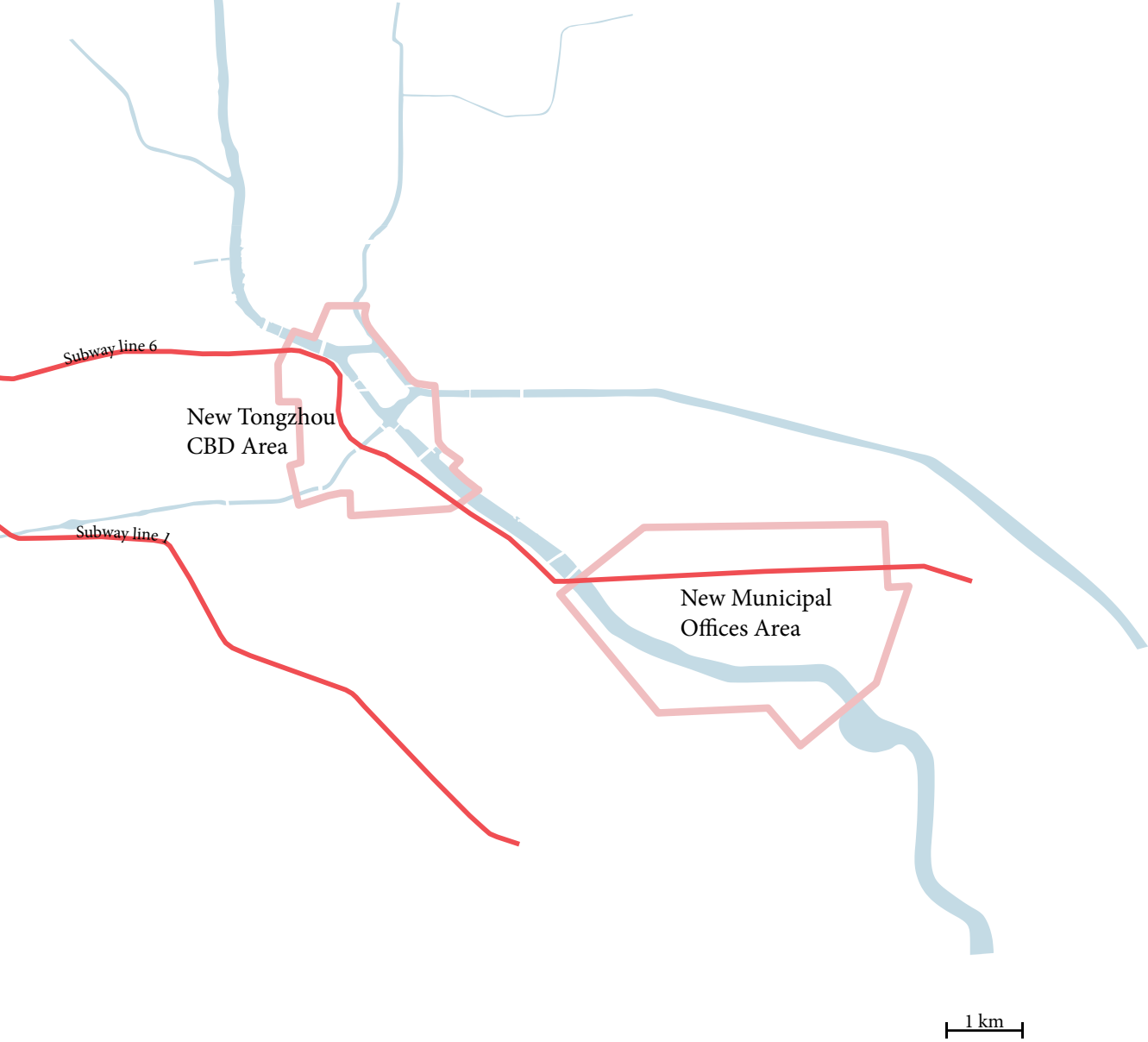
Peking University research group for Tongzhou development as Beijing subsidiary center in its planning recommendations[18] refers to the new town as a future Millennium City. The research group addresses a high-standard development based on the principles of innovation, coordination, greenness, openness, and sharing. It states that it is essential to adhere to a people-centered development thinking, to create a people's city for the people that reflects the Chinese cultural 'genes', but also learns from other cultural characteristics. It is also necessary to delineate a good space pattern to enhance the urban form, providing more high-quality open spaces, reflecting the idea of a green, low-carbon, sustainable and livable city.

Tsinghua University and the firm AECOM are among the three finalists for the masterplan[19] of the core area of Tongzhou, which covers 155 square kilometres around the junction between the Grand Canal and the extension of Chang'An Avenue. The structural plan deploys the area for the municipal bureaus in the south-eastern sub-village of Lucheng. Other major city functions are planned to settle in the central area, such as university branches, high schools, and medical facilities. The very core area will be where the

18 I heartily thank Professor Zhong Ge, for sharing and discussing with me the following information, during my time at Tsinghua University.

19 I collected the following information about the masterplan during my time at Tsinghua University, talking with Professor Zhong Ge, and attending a lecture given by Professor Sisi Liang who is also involved in the masterplan of Tongzhou.

Grand Canal crosses the Tonghui river – which flows all the way to Beijing old city – in the proximity of the east-west axis. This is the site of the new subsidiary CBD that, aligned to the one of Chaoyang District, will also provide a prime shopping area. This area is intended to be the cultural pole, too. Leisure amenities will locate along the waterfront. The masterplan promotes the canal as an ecological and facility corridor and sets up a chain of green belts all around the area. One of the central features of the masterplan are the two loops, one in the area of the new CBD, and one in the area of the new municipal bureaus. The masterplan designs them as two loops of linear no-vehicle/slow traffic space. Moreover, the plan identifies four main community clusters made up of smaller communities, and it aims to provide them with adequate facilities.


Subway line 6
New Tongzhou
CBD Area
Subway line 7
New Municipal
Offices Area
1 km

In 2015, a decade after the release of the general masterplan of 2004, the construction works started. Huge demolitions took place, especially to prepare the construction site for the CBD. In that area, a significant portion of the old town has been torn down to make room for the new high-rise buildings that have risen overnight. The works are progressing at a fairly rapid pace also in the area for the new government headquarters. The municipality was initially expected to move there by the end of 2017, but, according to Sisi Liang (in the aforementioned lecture, see f. 18), the area is still under construction, and the municipal offices will move by the end of 2018.

Massive demolitions have also affected other areas. "We got notice about our village being demolished last month. […] Real estate agents have been coming by to offer us new places to live, but we can't afford it", reported a villager to the New York Times, three years ago (Johnson 2015). The same thing happened to many rural people that used to live in the sub-villages of Tongzhou, who happened to turn from rural to urban residents all of a sudden (cf. Johnson 2015).

At present, relocated people are a significant part of the population of Tongzhou, together with a large number of non-registered residents, immigrants, and commuters (Zhou 2012: 265). Consistently with the grand changes taking place now, nearly 1 million residents – mostly government workers – are expected to move to Tongzhou (Xu 2015).

Today Tongzhou looks like a vast construction site. In the central area, there

is still a strong presence of the residential and commercial expansion of the 1980s and 1990s with predominantly 5-6 stories buildings, whereas along the banks of the Grand Canal stand the recently built high-rise residential compounds. Very close to the future core area, a small historic heritage site has survived the wrecking for the business district. A 17th-century pagoda – "now the tallest in Beijing" (Fiandanese 2017) – a Ming dynasty tomb, a Confucian temple, a Taoist, and a Buddhist one still stand, depicting the past of Tongzhou. Moreover, not far from the very core, south of Xinhua East Road – Chang'An Avenue extension – a fragment of the old city still makes its way through the multi-story buildings, pulling out of time anyone who walked in its narrow alleys.

At this point, it seems clear why Tongzhou is referred to as a new town, despite its long history. The endless transformations it has undergone have entirely changed its face – which, under the impetus of future scenarios, is still evolving. In just half a century, Tongzhou turned from being an industrial satellite town of the planned economy era into the international and modern new town of the future.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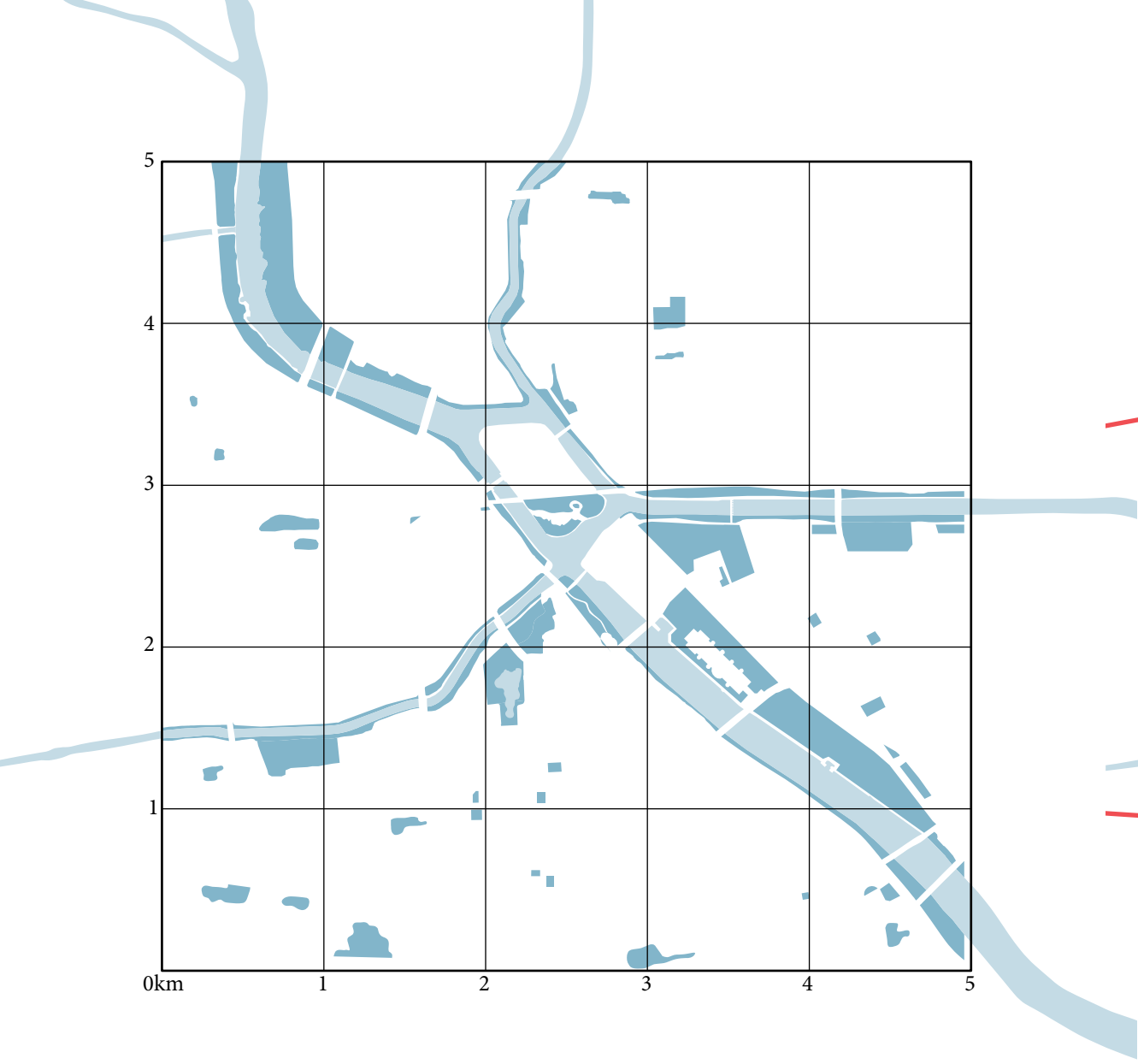
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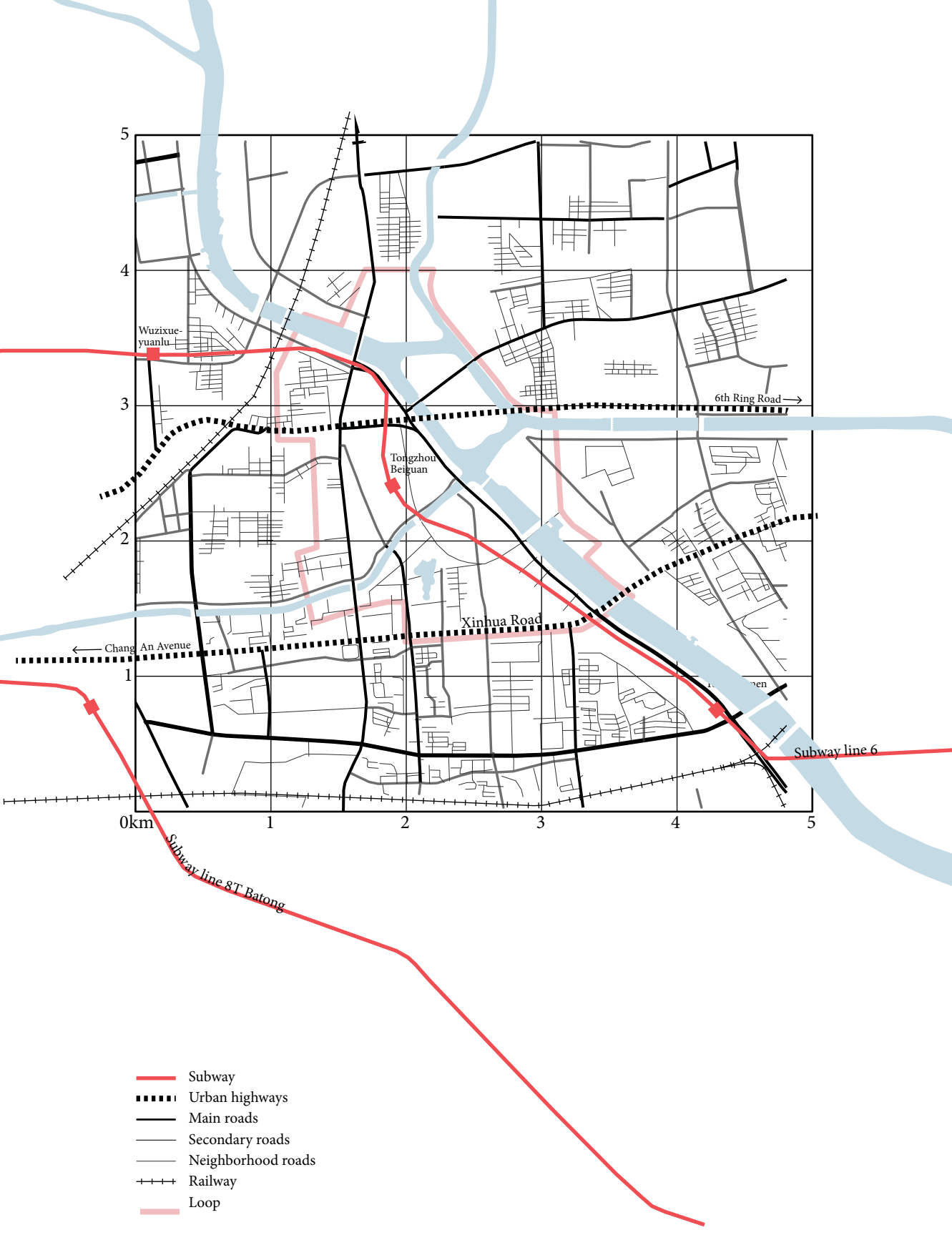
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Wuzixue-yuanlu
6th Ring Road
Tongzhou Beiguan
Xinhua Road
Chang An Avenue
Subway line 6
Subway line 8T Batong
Subway
Urban highways
Main roads
Secondary roads
Neighborhood roads
Railway
Loop

Ancient temple and construction sites,
Tongzhou,
May 2017
Photo by author

TONGZHOU IS THE NEW GULOU

Given its past urban events – that is, the spontaneous and uncontrolled growth of the past decades and the latest twisting changes – it is urgent to understand what kind of 'idea of the city' is now at stake in Tongzhou. The urban fabric, as it reflects all the unceasing and swift transformations, appears at times, loose, confusing, disorienting. Its grain is generally uneven, with sudden leaps of scale – for instance from the small, human scale of the tiny old houses to the massive scale of the high rise buildings. Or even, from the narrow alleyways resembling the *hutong* to the vast open urban space in between the towers. The residential neighbourhoods are most of the times gated communities, and the blocks are thus often inaccessible for several tens of meters. In some other cases the neighbourhoods – consisting mostly of residential slabs oriented along the east-west axis – are surrounded by "commercial perimeter 'brackets'" instead of walls (Hassenpflug 2010:

75-76). This commercial strip slightly mitigates the impenetrability of such "superblocks" (Hassenpflug 2010)[20]. Moreover, the streets are often extremely wide and therefore rather hard to cross, as they are urban expressways with multiple lanes.

Therefore the question is whether there is an 'image of the city'[21], which city dwellers recognise as having an identity, a sense of city. Or whether Tongzhou today is merely a suburb – just too far from Beijing – resulting from poorly planned construction operations. Is Tongzhou a vibrant city or is it just a sleeping town for commuters? Does it have any places with a strong identity?

At the moment, it is hard to answer these questions, as Tongzhou is essentially a construction site. However, there are some interesting realities with their vitality and identity.

Xinhua Street is where in the 1980s the first "department stores, library, cinema and sport facility were allocated" (Zhou 2012: 287). Although it is now considered outdated, as the newer supermarkets and malls along the railway line are way more popular, it is still quite a lively place, with its small restaurants, fruit shops and bakeries along the street.

The alleys of the old town are also an incredibly vital place, with people

20 As regards this expression see already Jacobs (1961), in the spelling 'super-block'.

21 In the meaning of Lynch (1960).

Egg seller in the Old Town,
Tongzhou,
May 2017
Photo by author

Alley life in the Old Town,
Tongzhou,
June 2017
Photo by author

staying outside using the street as the extension of their homes and workshops' space, like in Beijing old city. Walking down those alleys, one encounters people of all ages chatting, playing, selling their vegetables, cooking and selling eggs and *baozi*.

Neighbourhood communities are among the most vital places. Each one has its community committee[22], which organises events, such as music and games events, and other recreational activities, and promotes them online. "[…]Middle-aged and elderly people whose lifestyle are deeply influenced by the social conventions that existed in the Communist era" mainly participate in these activities (Zhou 2012: 341). However, also young people are involved in the community life, especially in sports activities. Many of these activities take place in the neighbourhood's open space, except for "the space-demanding sports […], [which] take place more in schools" (Zhou 2012: 341).

Another interesting spot with a strong identity is the Songzhuang art colony, in Songzhuangzhen, a town of Tongzhou east of the CBD area and north of the municipality headquarters area. It is a "spontaneous aggregation of artists", formed in the mid-1990s, who moved to this rural area in search of a peaceful environment to create their art (Zhou 2012: 343). Many galleries and art spaces have sprung up, and over 5000 artists have found their home

22 As regards neighbourhood communities also see Audin/Throssel (2015) and Ning/Fei (2017).


千里马

Alley life in the Old Town,
Tongzhou,
June 2017
Photo by author

Rayin Temple, venue evicted in 2012, Tongzhou
Source: http://pangbianr.com/raying-temple/ (accessed September 5, 2018)

in this art commune. It is nowhere near anything like the polished art districts in Manhattan – or even like the 798 Art District in Beijing – but it surely used to be a vibrant place. According to Li Xianting, critic, curator, and a central figure in the community, "Songzhouang was one of the first places in China where you could enjoy a free way of life" until the government declared it "a cultural industry base", and took advantage of this move to institutionalize it (Duncan 2015). Li states that the place represents a "microcosm of China [as] they built so much so quickly. Everything is about profit. Culture is irrelevant". The upcoming move of the government in the vicinity, in the artist's opinion, will result in further restrictions over the freedom and the creativity of the place. According to various informal sources[23], the art village seems to get gradually less lively as the great relocation approaches. The possible decline of such a creative and vibrant place may be discouraging, but Tongzhou's subculture may still be a driving force for placemaking. Among the many forms of subculture, music is one of the strongest expressions in the scene of Tongzhou. "'A lot of people think Tongzhou is far, but I think Gulou is far,' says Li Yang, the frontman of local punk band Demerit", when interviewed by Time Out Beijing (Chen 2014). He claims that Tongzhou is no less intriguing than the central Gulou, as over the last years, several musicians, bands and labels have settled here, giving a boost

23 Such as TripAdvisor (https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g294212-d1438718-Reviews-Songzhuang_Art_Community-Beijing.html), and my own discussing with people from Beijing.

to the emerging youth music and cultural scene. This has resulted in "one of the strongest and most innovative music communities in Beijing" (Chen 2014), always in search of venues, particularly since the government evictions cancelled a number of small hole-in-the-wall locations in Tongzhou, as well as in Beijing central *hutong*. Providing appropriate venues for such youth subculture that needs to express itself might be a valuable opportunity for placemaking in a new town.

A 'hole in the wall' in the hutong,
Beijing,
June 2017
Photo by author


HOT CAT
SINCE 2005
RIGHT
TURN

SURVEY

For my first survey in Tongzhou, I was accompanied by my lovely friend Ting, who judged "reckless" my idea of going there on my own. She is a 30-years-old from Shandong province who has been living in Beijing for the last ten years, earlier in Tongzhou for her first years of university, until 2008. When we first got there, I figured out why she told me such a thing. It was nothing about the dangerousness; it was more about the difficulty of orienting in that area. Although I thought I was extremely familiar with the area, as I had previously studied it on multiple maps and satellite images, once outside the Tongzhou Beiguan subway station all my references vanished. I found myself in between two enormous construction sites – those for the CBD – beyond which, other construction sites were visible. And more cranes, and towers, as far as the eye could see. I had to admit that I would not be able to get my bearings on my own. And yet, that is what I had

to do, because Ting, who had not been going back to Tongzhou for a while, did not recognize a single thing of what we had around us.

We got two Ofo bikes and rode along the Tonghui River Park all the way to Xinhua Street and to the Grand Canal Park. The cityscape looked somehow 'normal' and familiar in some spots – similar to many other districts in Beijing –, whereas in some other it got surreal. While sometimes the distances and dimensions looked proportionate, some other times they looked gigantic. Also, it was a Saturday morning, and we met very few people during our ride. There were barely two girls strolling with their dog along Tonghui River Park. Xinhua Street instead was slightly more crowded, with some people in and out of stores.

After exploring for a while, we sneaked into a gated neighbourhood near the Tonghui River, and it was only when Ting stood in front of her house number that she realized that that was the neighbourhood she lived in.

This episode is a measure of the enormous transformations that have occurred and are still ongoing in the area. Tongzhou is reshaping, and if you used to live there until a few years ago, you might find a work site filled with skyscrapers where you remember that there was a tangle of tiny houses, when you are back.

Worksites along the street,
Tongzhou,
April 2017
Photo by author

Construction sites for the CBD,
Tongzhou,
April 2017
Photo by author

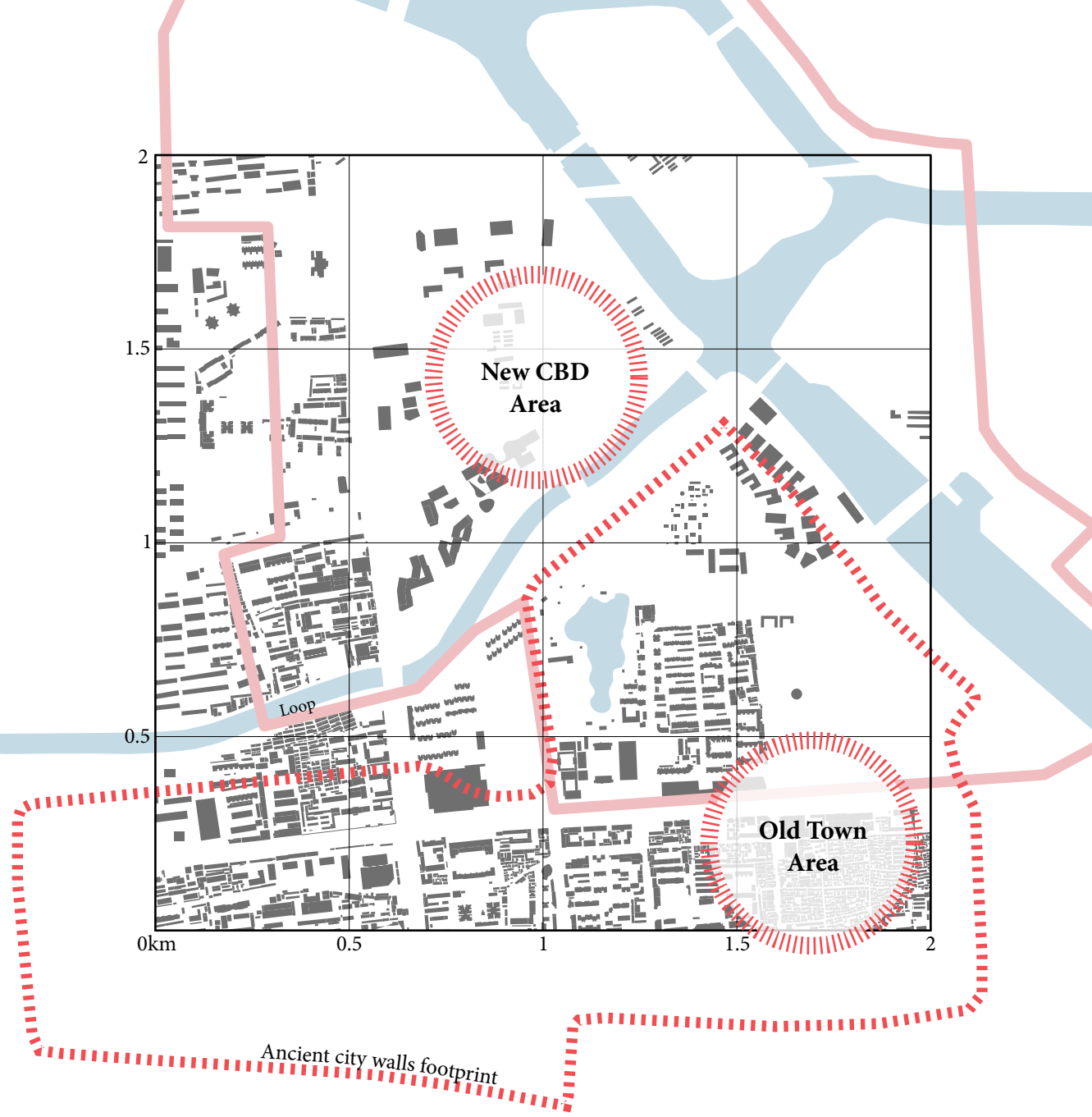
A COLLECTION OF CHINESE THEMES

The site that I have chosen for the project is in the central core of Tongzhou. It is encompassed by Tonghui River, Xinhua North Road, Xinhua East Street, and Binhui Park. It has a strong symbolic connection with central Beijing, as Tonghui River flows along the East-West axis all the way to the second ring; as well as a logistic connection, as Xinhua Street first turns into Jianguo road and then into Chang'An Street, straight to Tiananmen Square. Moreover, Xihaizi West Road, which crosses the area from Xinhua E St to the river, coincides with the western path of the ancient walls of Tongzhou[24]. According to Zhong Ge (p.c.), this area has an important symbolic meaning as it is the gateway between the old city and the new CBD.

During the survey for choosing the project site, I first walked down Tonghui

24 I thank Professor Zhong Ge for sharing with me historical maps of Tongzhou and documents about the town heritage distribution.

River Park and once again I hardly met someone (this time it was a weekday). The river park has a pleasant landscape, but it is not easily accessible. Its banks are extremely steep, and there are not enough paths and walkways. There are no shaded areas, and no way to linger and sit as no seating is provided. Moreover, there is a lack of connections between the two banks, in the long distances from one bridge to another. So it seems clear why it is not so popular. And despite the landscape was not that bad, its desolation made me feel somehow uncomfortable.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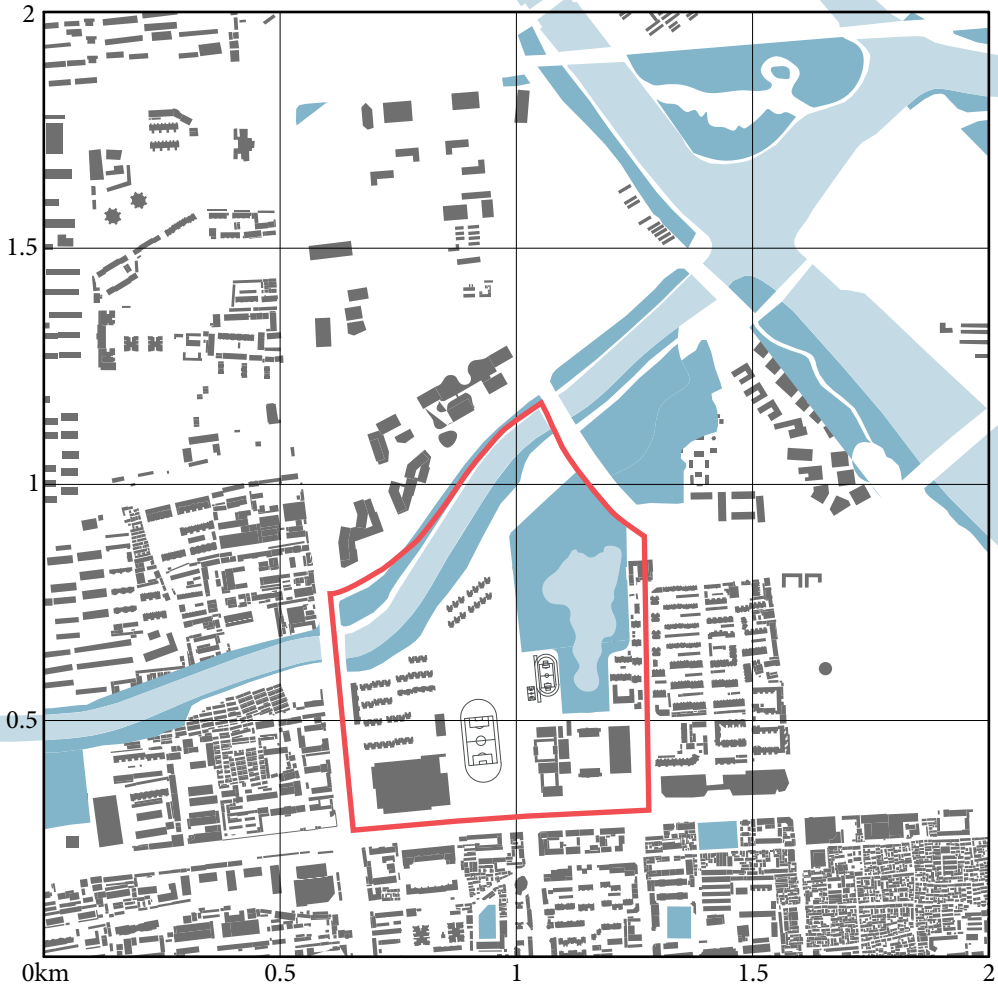
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Tonghui River Park,
Tongzhou,
April 2017
Photo by author

I was really amazed when I got to Xihaizi Road, and I found a surprisingly lively place, just around the corner. Along the main road, there was a colorful crowd of parents and grandparents waiting for their kids in front of Gong Yuan Primary School. Along a side path, there were plenty of people engaged in a variety of leisure activities. Such path runs along five basketball courts and a bigger football field with a running track all around, and it is supplied with outdoor exercise equipment. There, youngsters, middle-age people, elderly and kids were enjoying open-air sports, fitness and games. A clique of seniors was playing mahjong and Chinese checkers; some others were practicing their stringed instruments. That atmosphere was the very opposite of that along the river and made you feel like never going away.

Office tower and shequ,
Tongzhou,
April 2017
Photo by author

Gong Yuan Primary School,
Xihaizi Road, Tongzhou,
June 2017
Photo by author

The site may be seen as a collection of the themes of the contemporary Chinese city. As a catalogue of the urban elements that have been shaping the cityscape over the past half a century. All within the same macro-block, there is a variety of Chinese *topoi*. First of all, there is a *shequ*[25], a community neighbourhood, made up of south-oriented six-stories buildings, legacy of the *danwei*[26] model, with the typical commercial "bracket"[27] on its west side along Xinhua North Road, and its community spaces with small front yards. Just south of this walled neighbourhood there is the high-end complex Beijing Greentown Jinghang Plaza. It includes a shopping plaza, a residential tower, with private garden terraces, and an exclusive hotel. The complex, with its glass curtain wall façades, is recently built and hence still empty.

A few steps away, there is an office tower covered in the same shiny curtain wall, which reflects the dusty houses at its feet, in a tangle of power lines. Then there is the loose sports area already mentioned, flanked by the fitness path with the popular yellow and blue fitness equipment which dots the most diverse Chinese cityscapes.

Beyond the fields, there is the Gong Yuan Primary School. It is a complex made up of four four-stories buildings, recently built with traditional Chi-

25 See Rowe (2016), Audin/Throssel (2015), Ning/Fei (2017), Derleth/Koldyk (2004).

26 See Bonino/De Pieri (2015).

27 See Hassenpflug (2010).

Commercial bracket and
Jinghang Plaza,
Xinhua North Road,Tongzhou,
May 2017
Photo by author

nese architectural features. The compound is walled, and the main entrance is a traditional-style red gate. The buildings are connected by red columns porticos thus resulting in two courtyards. North of the school there is Binhui Park, a traditional park – which also contains historical heritages – currently undergoing a complete renovation. The park is walled - like most of the parks in Beijing – and has the typical axial structure and entrance gates. Some posters on the external walls show the renders of the future park, with a big central lake, covered bridges, walkways and pavilions. Some concrete bridges with traditional shapes are already visible. Lastly, also two construction sites are in the area. One of them is just north of the sports area and was once occupied by two outdoor swimming pools. At present, it is not clear what its forthcoming use will be. On the other one – at the back of the school – three mixed-use residential and retail towers are under construction.

This area is therefore like a synthesis of the Chinese urban history of the last decades, of its ambitions, strengths, contrasts and contradictions. Also, it feels like the swatch for Tongzhou visionary upcoming change.

Sports area and
Jinghang Plaza,
Tongzhou,
May 2017
Photo by author

Fitness path along Xihaizi Road,
Tongzhou,
June 2017
Photo by author

PLACE-MAKING
IN THE FOLDS OF CHANGE

At first, following the experience in Tonghui River Park, I thought that an intervention would be necessary in that area, as it seems designed for looking pleasant but not for being used by people. I thought that such a central site needed the features of a 'place'. However, that would mean dealing with a landscape design for the Tonghui waterfront, and this was not what this Master Thesis was intended for. Assuming in any case that such an action would be crucial, I decided to develop an urban and architectural design that would positively affect that area too. Therefore I decided to involve in my design Xihaizi Road and the sports area alongside, including the vast construction site.

One may object: why choosing an area that is already fairly lively for such a design? The answer is that the virtuous forces in the area may be the starting point for defining the character of the place if given more space for expres-

sion. Enhancing the features that infuse a sense of place to this space, its vitality may be the trigger for the surrounding environment.

The basic principles of *placemaking*, as theorized by New York-based organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS)[28] from the legacy of Jane Jacob and William H. Whyte, cannot be applied to the letter in such a context. In this evolving area – and in general in many other similar fast-changing contexts in the cities of China – the existing conditions and the needs are significantly different from those of the North American and European cities that are usually discussed. The difficulty in creating a 'sense of place' in such contexts lies in the fact that the key elements of *placemaking* – such as historical or consolidated urban fabric, consistent block pattern, aged buildings with strong identity – are often missing.

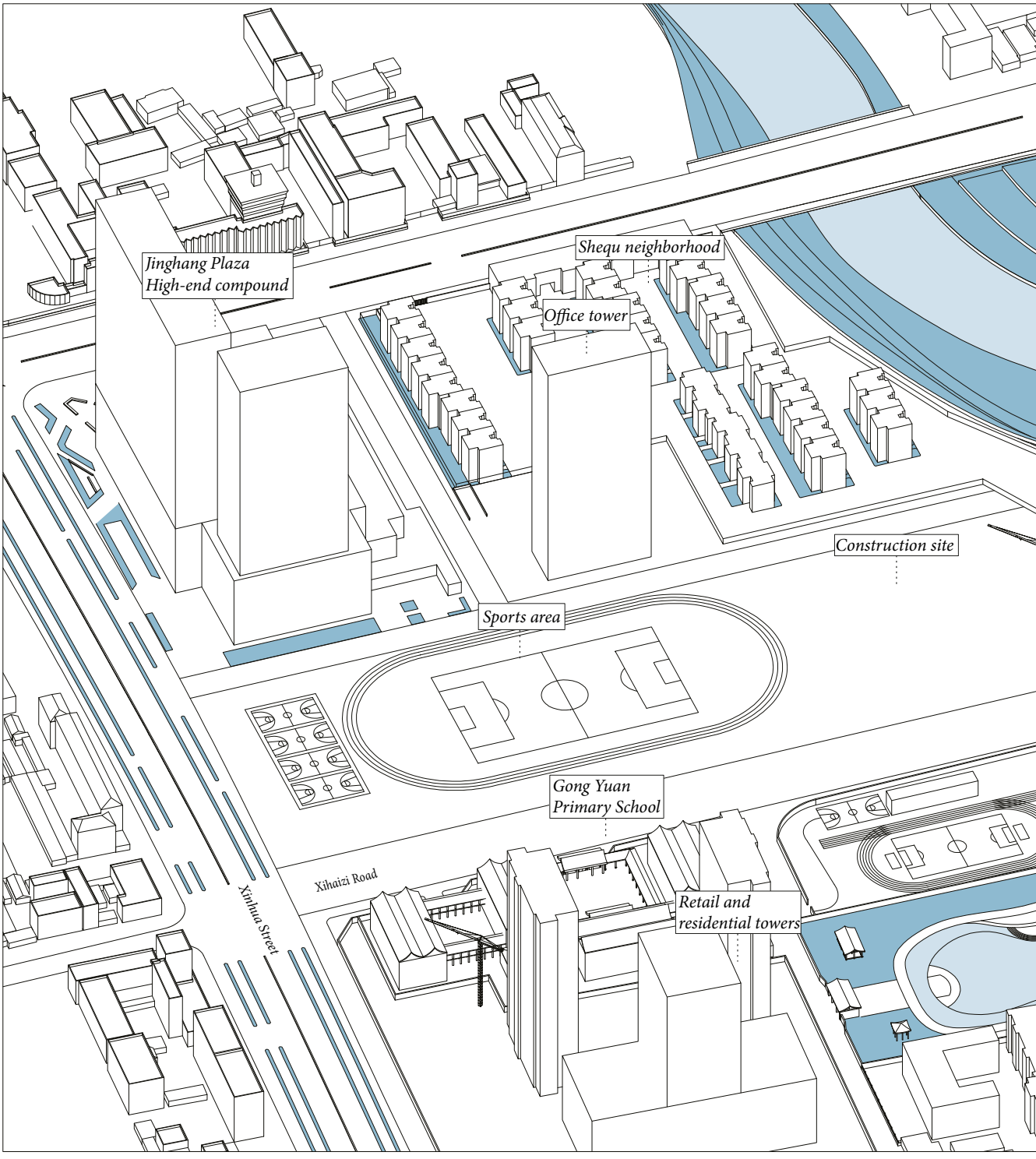
For instance, Jane Jacobs claims "the need for small blocks": "most blocks must be short; that is, streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent" (Jacobs 1961: 178, chap.9). How can this condition ever be achieved where the trend is (larger and larger) super-blocks? Or even, "the district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones" (Jacobs 1961: 187, chap.10). And what to do then when a place has completely changed its face overnight? Even the newest areas need – and deserve – to 'look like the city' and 'feel like places', especially where *new* is the only alternative.

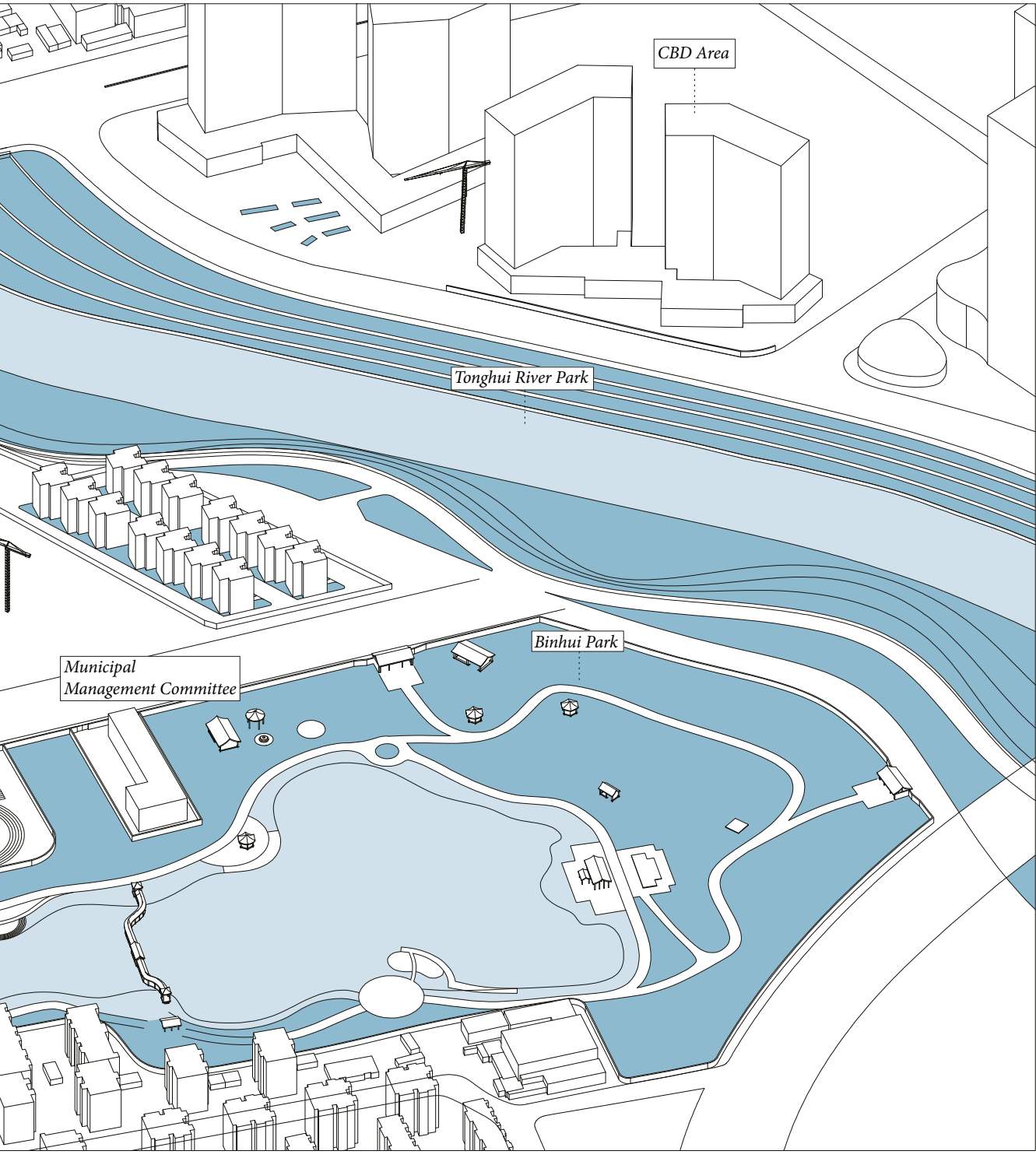
28 Cf. https://www.pps.org/

John Friedmann answers the question "what is a Place?" saying that "a place can be defined as a small, three-dimensional urban space that is cherished by the people who inhabit it" (Friedmann 2010: 154). He considers the property of being small an essential condition for a space to be valued as a place. We certainly feel comfortable walking in the small grain of the *hutong*, as well as we probably feel uncomfortable trying to move through over-scaled districts. Then, what kind of spatial balance should be achieved in a lot where a small dense grain would not be likely?

Architects may already be pretty good at dealing with place and sense-making in small, dense, aged contexts. But how to apply place and sense-making strategies to vast, loose, new, unceasingly changing territories?

In the following pages, I will trace the design choices that I have made step by step in an attempt of shaping a place in the folds of change of Tongzhou.


Jinghang Plaza
High-end compound
Shequ neighborhood
Office tower
Construction site
Sports area
Gong Yuan
Primary School
Retail and
residential towers
Xihaizi Road
Xinhua Street


CBD Area
Tonghui River Park
Binhui Park
Municipal
Management Committee

You don't love me yet. Stories of loops

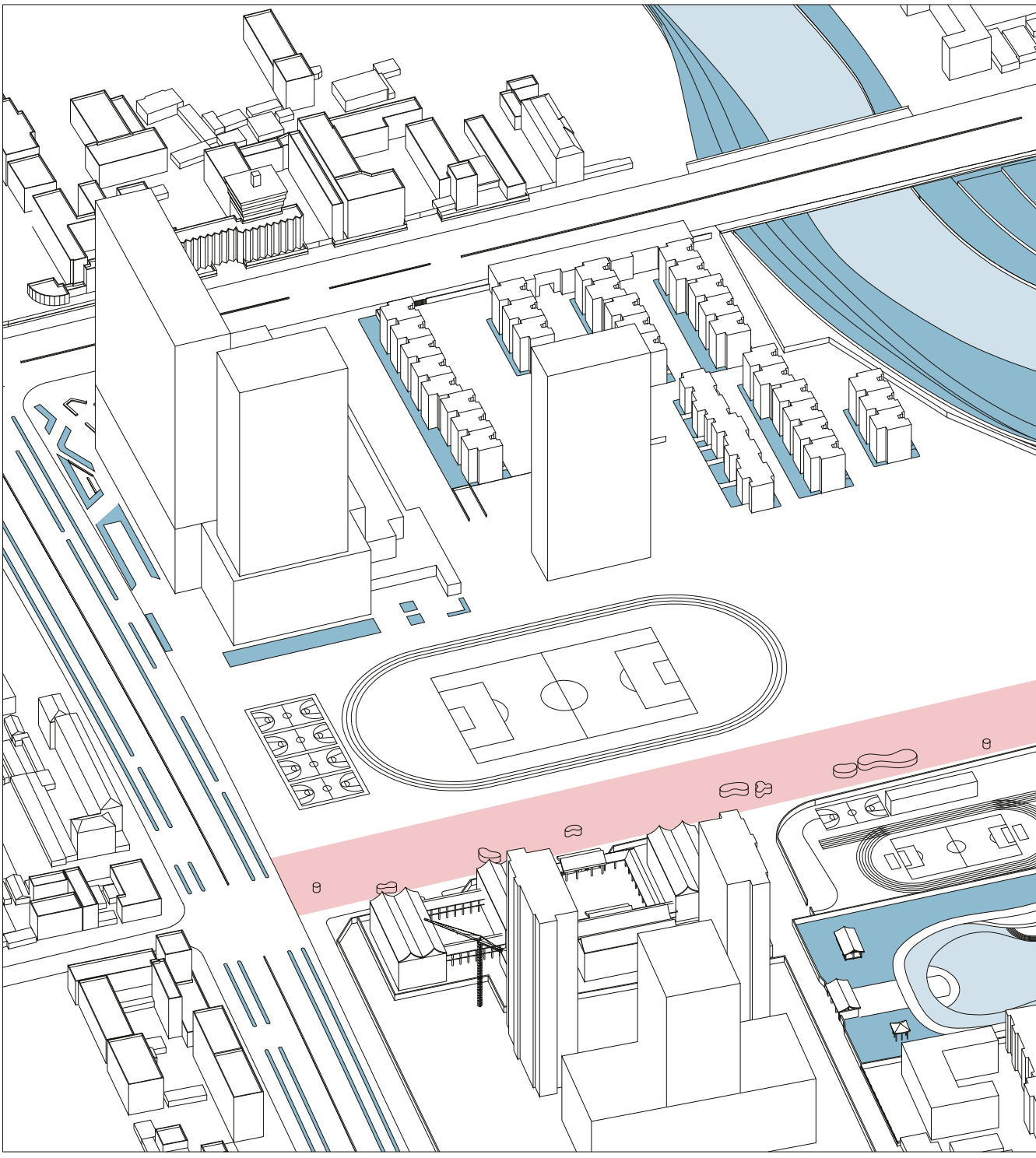
"You don't love me yet" is a project of Swedish artist Johanna Billing. It consists of a 15 years tour, which started in 2002, across 26 different cities in the world where local musicians and bands have been invited to cover the 1984 song "You don't love me yet" by Rocky Erickson. Over 300 live performances have been recorded and collected in an archive. "In this project, the cover version is used as a catalyst to explore ways of maintaining originality and uniqueness"[29]. The different versions flow, one after another, in a mesmerizing loop, that always sounds different, never obsessive or annoying. It seems that each performance says something different, yet the song is always the same.

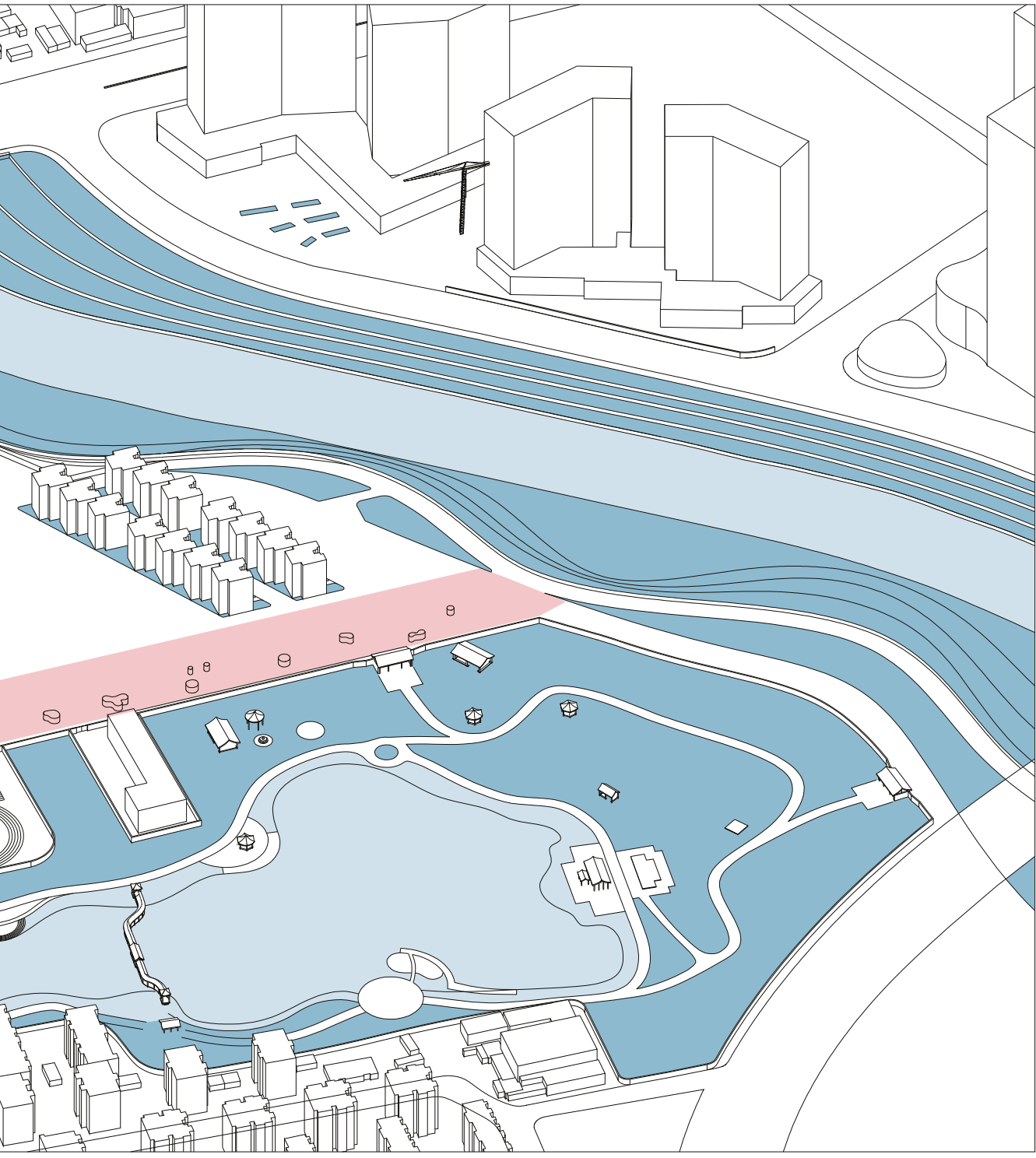
I began the design process starting from the loops traced by the Tsinghua masterplan, which are indicated as linear no-vehicle/slow traffic space. The two loops pass through different portions of the city, through different urban grains and different scales. They have a strong potential to connect the chunks that form Tongzhou, also working as a compass through them. I conceived the loops as linear public space with uniform features throughout the entire path, where 'urban events' follow one another. Such loops may be seen as a device to humanize the space of the new town, providing human-scale urban experiences.

29 Cf. http://johannabilling.com/you-dont-love-me-yet-2002-2013-live-tour/

The northern loop crosses the project site, and coincides with Xihaizi Road. I thus decided to turn the existing street – that has four lanes but culminates in a dead end – into a pedestrian one, studded with trees, pavilions, and urban furniture. The pedestrian street has shaded areas with seating, sheltered pavilions, and playgrounds, for people to stop by and have a break, to wait for kids outside the school away from either the blazing sun or the rain, and for kids to play. There are areas for the youths to meet, and for the senior informal clubs to play games and practice their music. The surface parking lots along the road are moved into an underground car park that serves the entire area. All the spots along the pedestrian street are conceived not to be asphalted, but rather to be green or paved with white gravel, to limit the urban heat island effect and improve environmental comfort.

These 'urban events' that pop up along the loop are sometimes simple architectural objects – such as pavilions or canopies – and some other times small 'pinpricks' – like a change of paving, peculiar furniture, a drawing on the pavement, a water feature – to perform 'urban acupuncture' and enrich the street experience with unexpected occasions (Lerner 2014). Such 'events' are designed to be as simple as possible, in order to be interpreted and appropriated by users in infinite ways, assuming different meaning each time. Just like in Johanna Billing's loop, people can explore different ways of living the urban public space, resulting in an interweaving of countless individual and collective city stories.

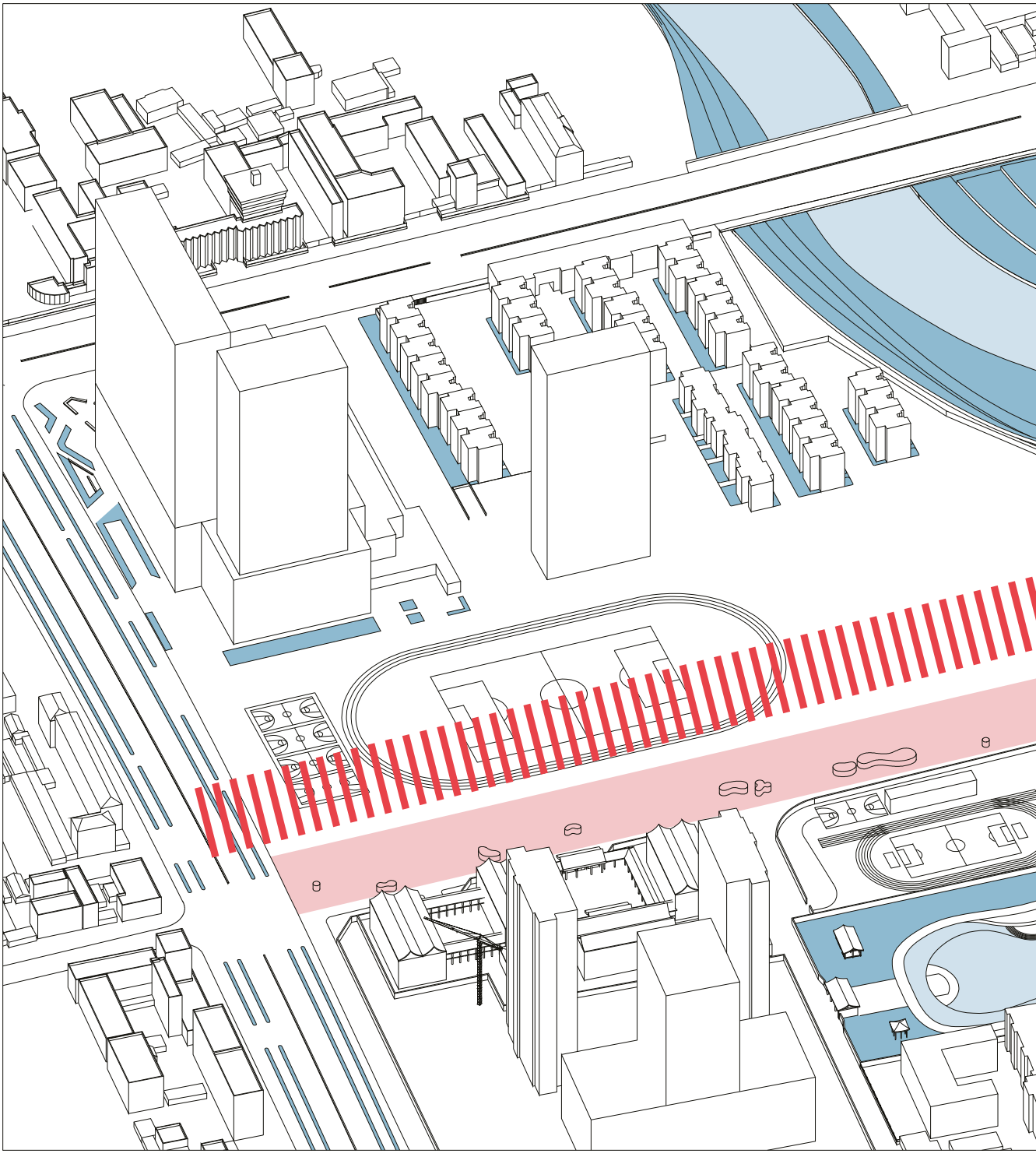


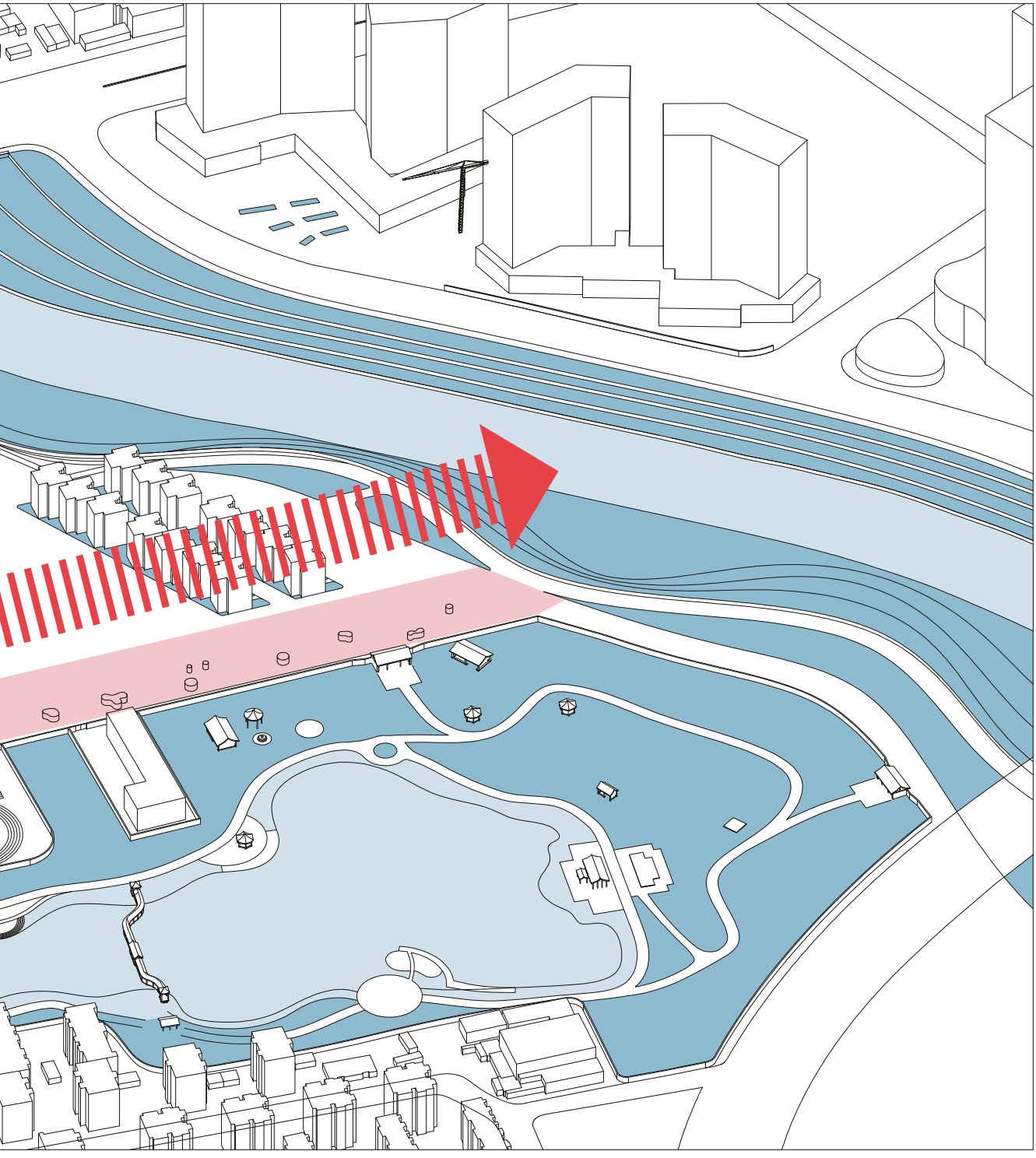


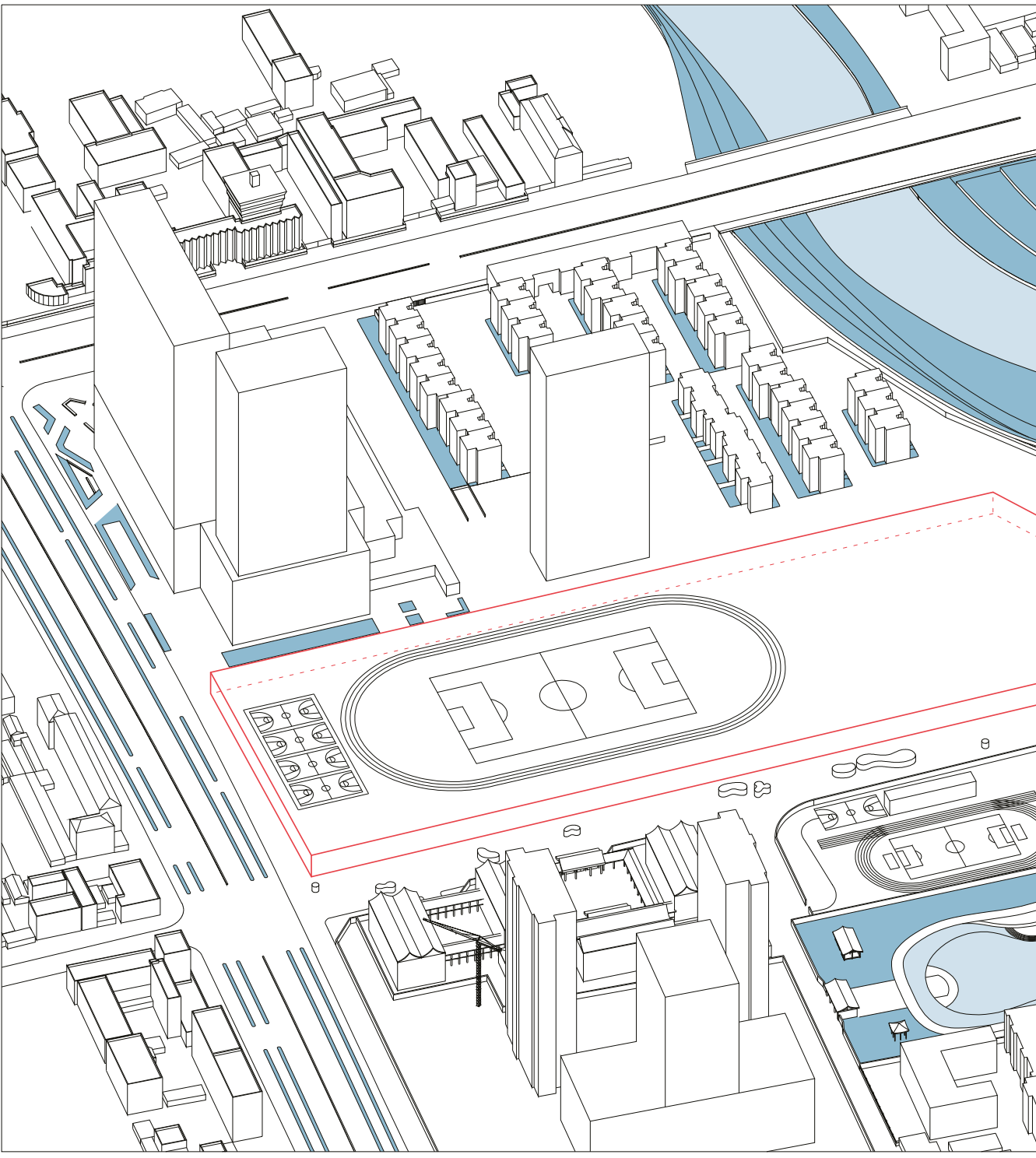
An urban building

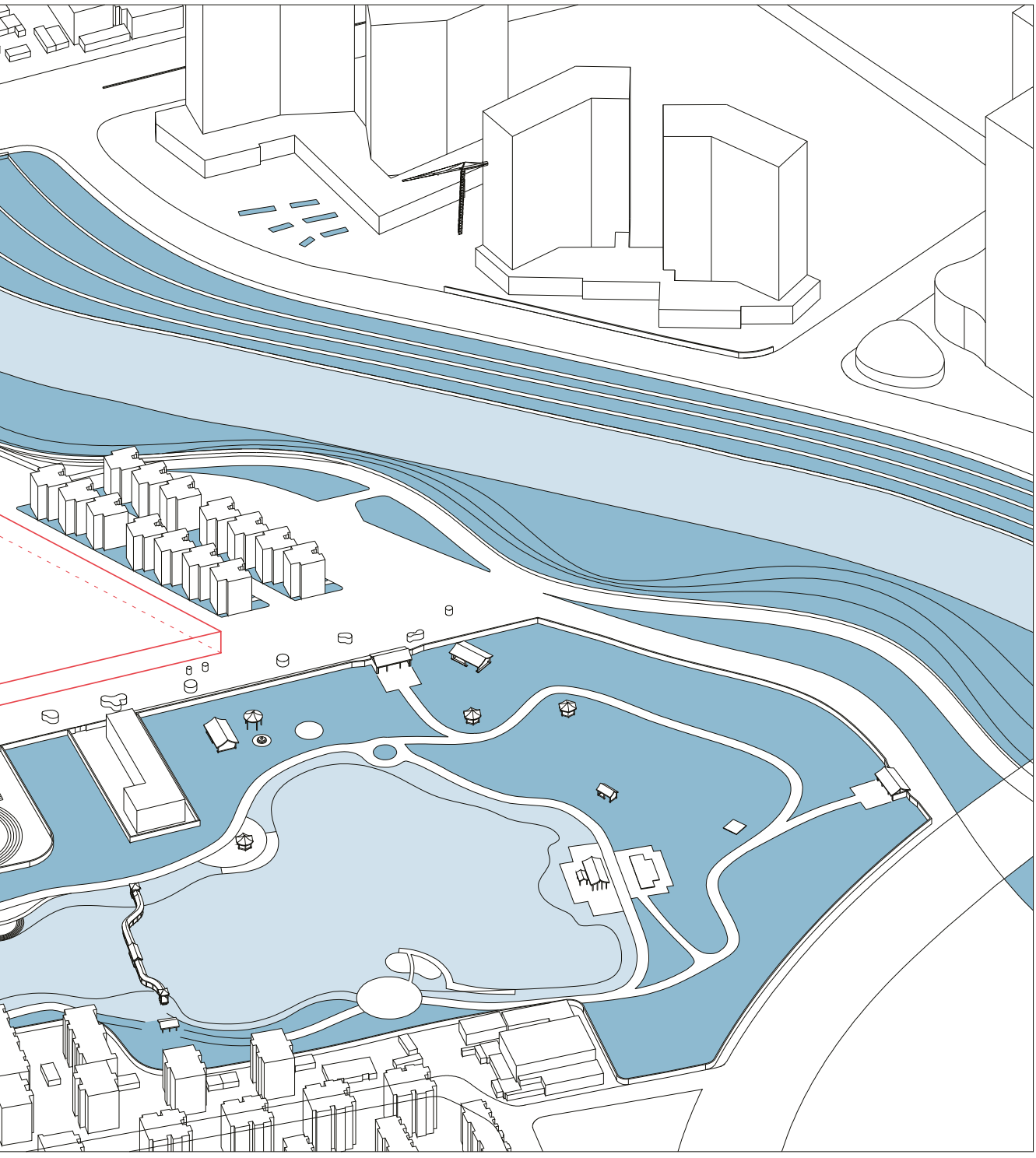
The core of the design may be described as an 'urban building' based on sports and culture. It spans from the East-West axis that runs straight to Tiananmen Square to the Tonghui River that flows up to Beijing central city. At the same time, it stands as the gateway from Tongzhou's old town and its new CBD. It unfolds for over 420 meters along the north-south direction and over 120 meters in width encompassing the existing sports fields and the adjacent empty work site. The urban building relates to its urban context and mediates between the different scales of the surrounding cityscape. Despite the many adjacent high-rise buildings, it maintains a maximum height of 12.5 meters and a minimum of 8 meters in order to feature a human scale. It covers an urban scale, but it also contains the architectural scale, like a *matryoshka* puppet. This building is not like a monolith: it is fragmented in three main sections where interior and exterior merge, and it gets crossed by urban life. No tangible boundaries such as walls or fences define the maxi-block, which is however clearly outlined by the permeable shape of the building. The building fits between different and inconsistent elements, trying to sew the urban fabric together.

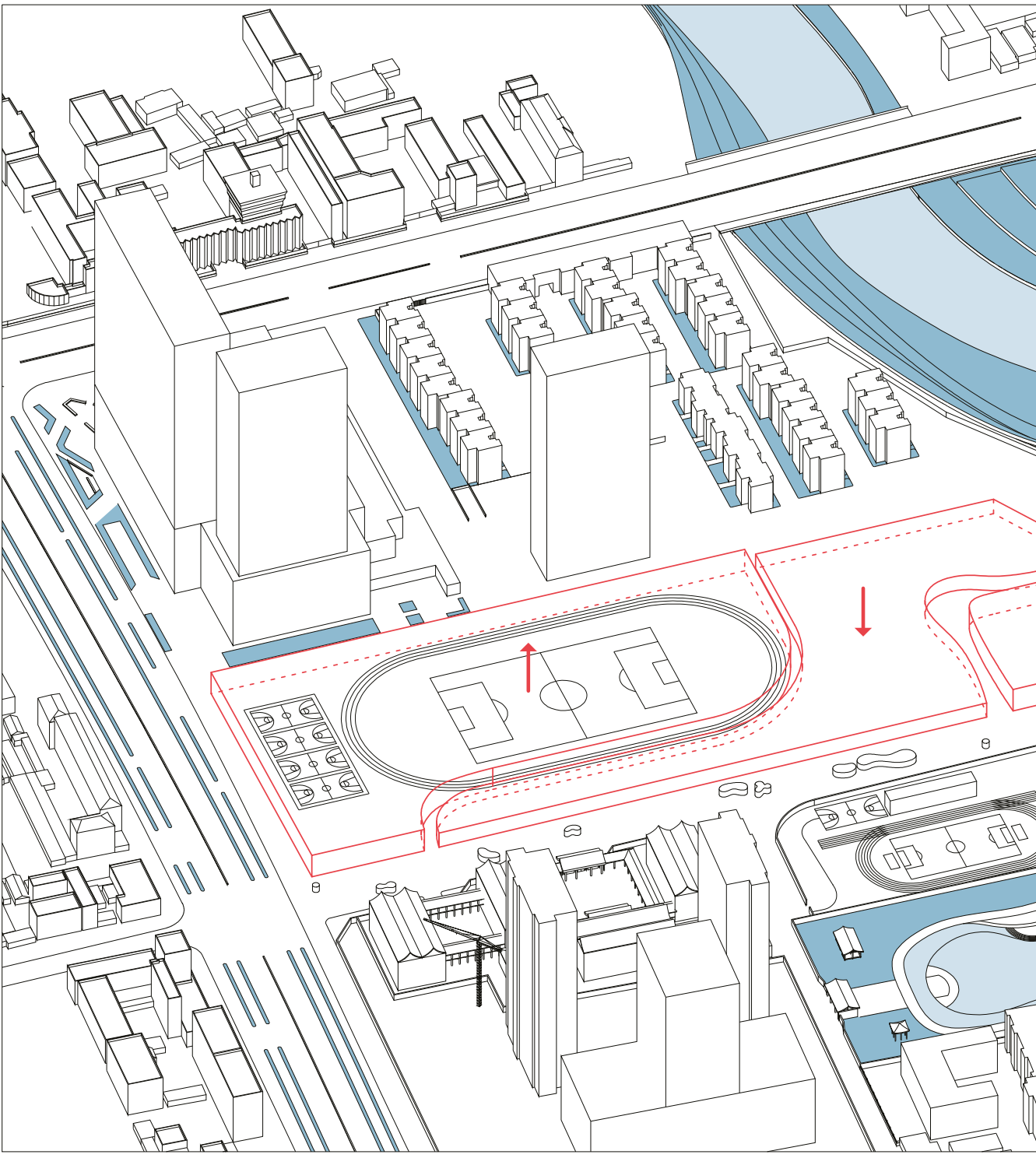
It is designed with the aim of attracting the forces present in the area and virtuously putting them together, thus becoming an attractive place on a metropolitan scale as well as a meaningful one for the local community.

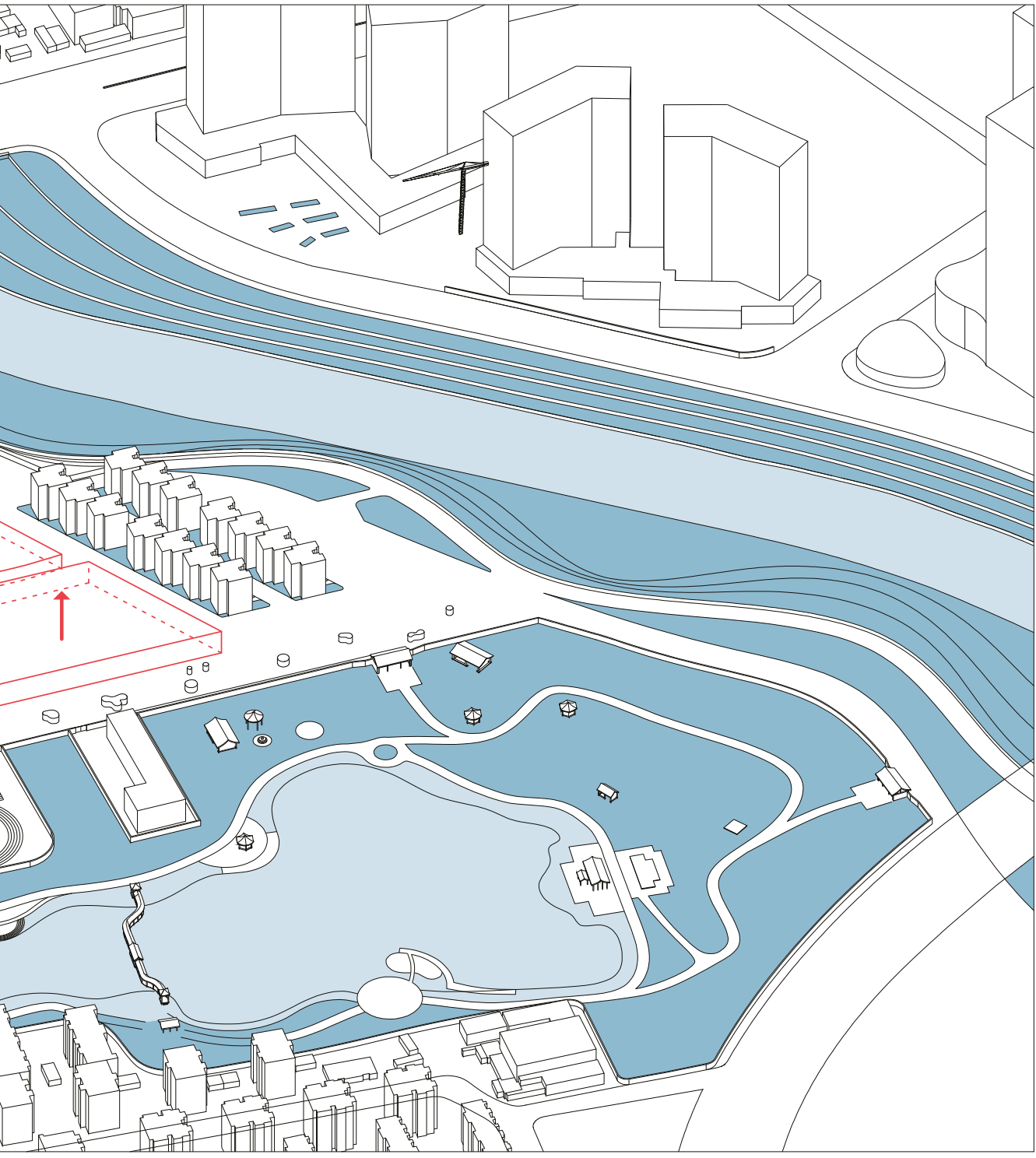


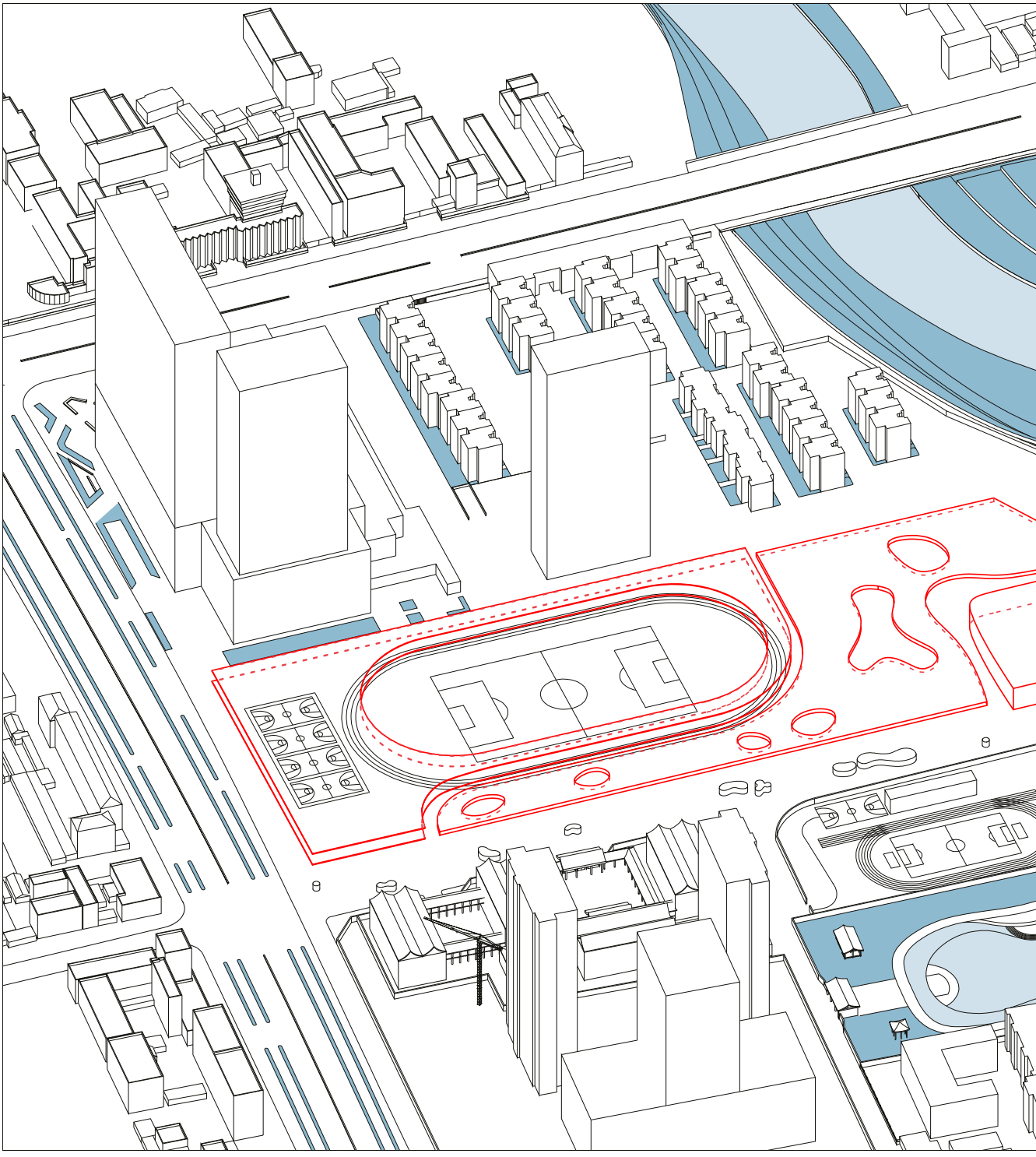


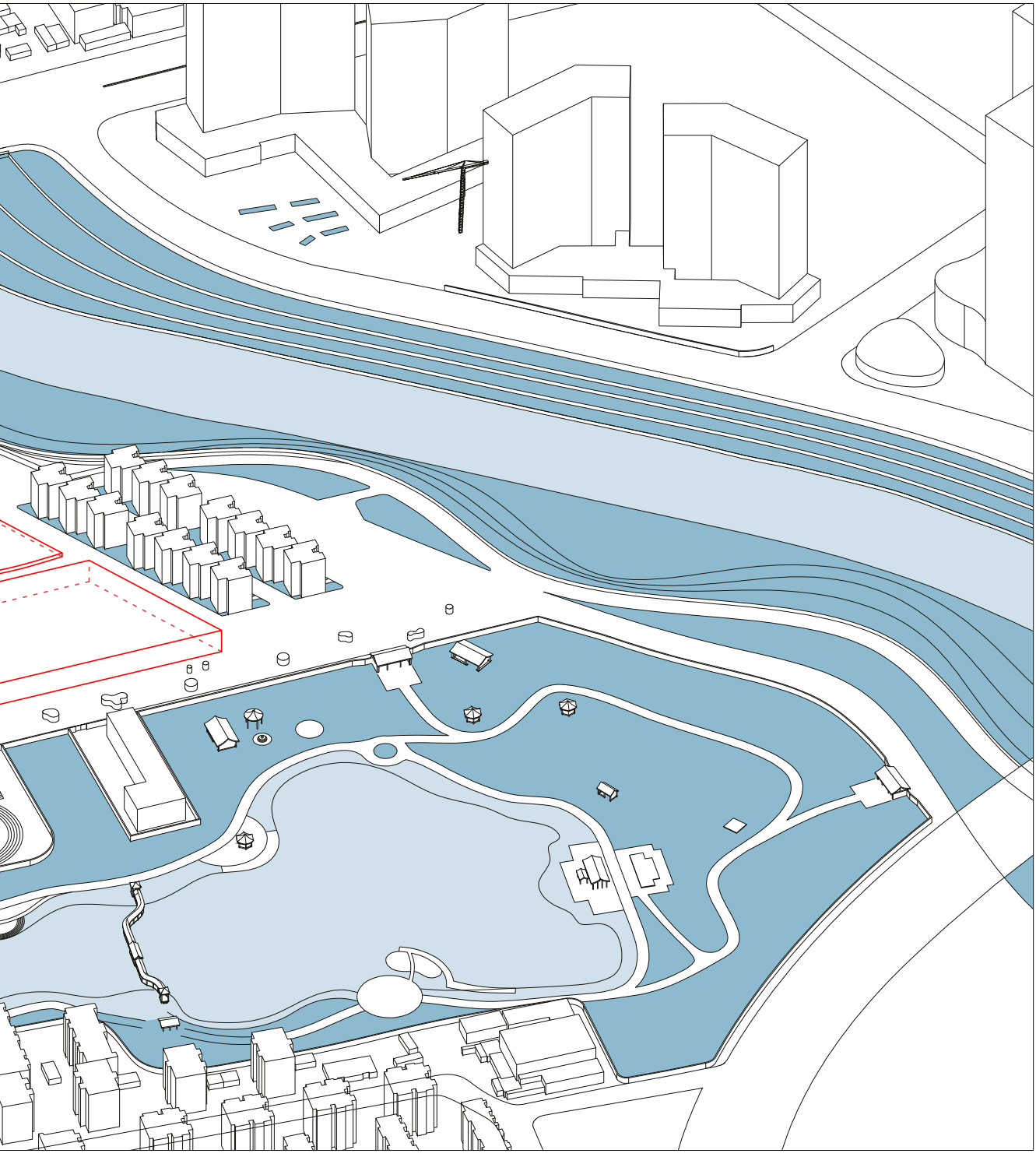












Urban scale/architectural scale

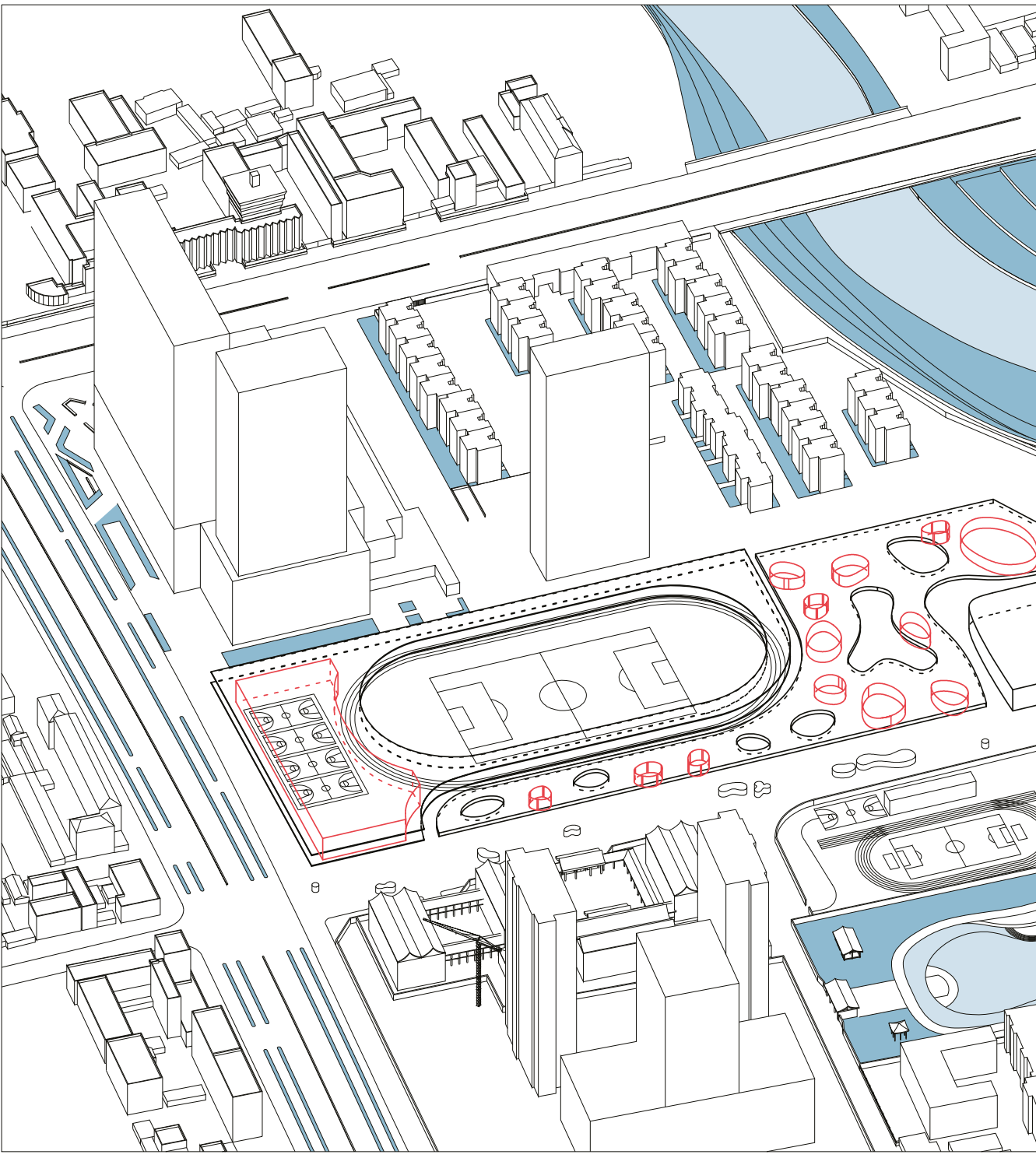
The urban building contains the architectural scale, spanning from the super-block dimension consistently with its surroundings to the human scale. The vast space of the block is fragmented into smaller microcosms: buildings, pavilions with different levels of openness, courtyards and gardens.

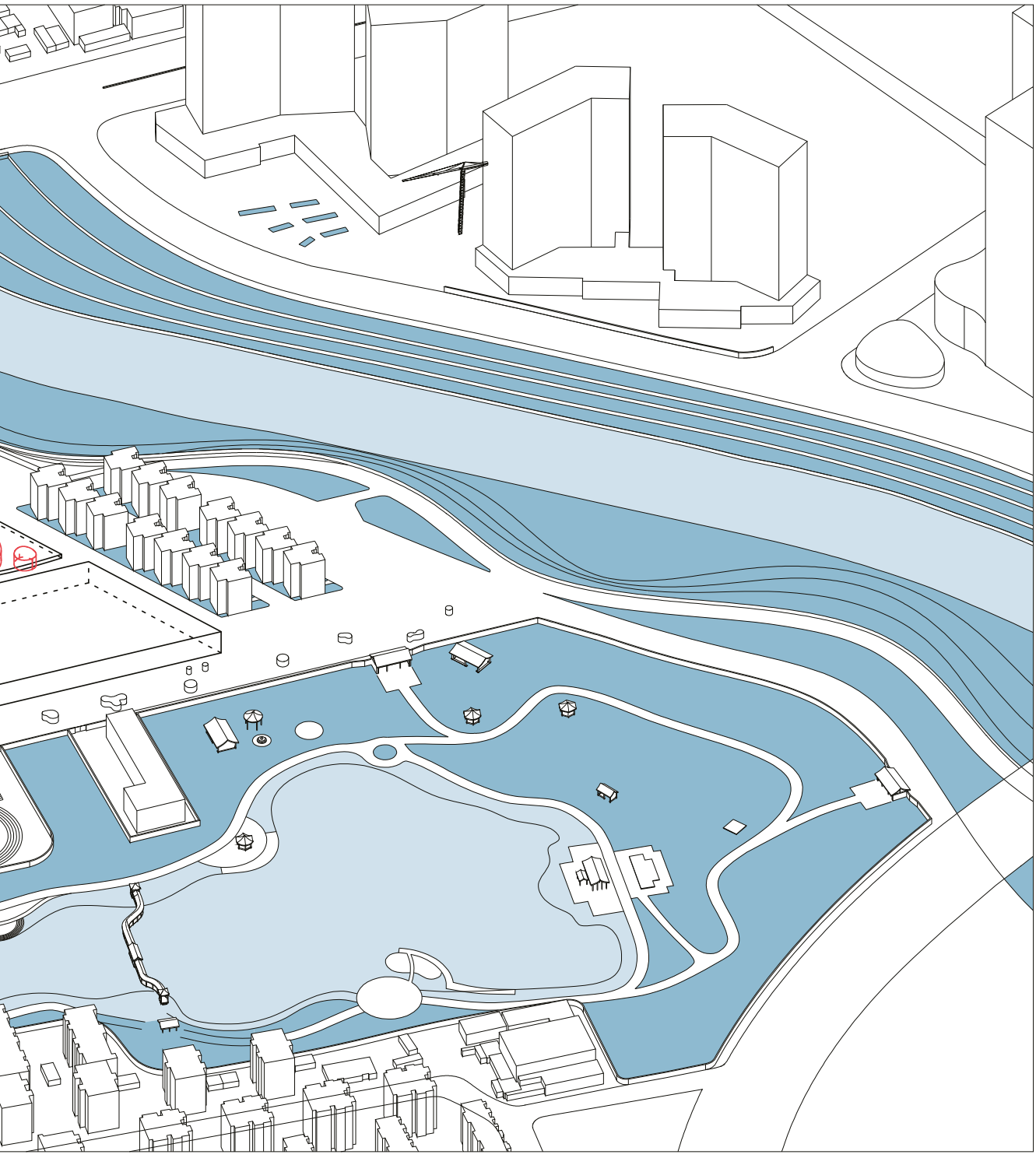
The first of the three sections that compose the maxi-building uses the existing football field and basketball courts. The football field is lowered by 1,50 meters, thus obtaining bleachers all around. The basketball courts are embedded into a building where other facilities are provided such as a dance studio, changing rooms, study rooms, and a cafeteria. Both the basketball building and the football field are encircled by running and cycling tracks that depart from the ground floor and unfold at the height of 6 meters. Continuous roofing covers both the building and the tracks at the height of 12,50 meters, and other outdoor courts and tracks are traced on it. The different levels and tracks are connected by slightly sloping ramps (always less than 8%). The building defines the southern border of the maxi-block on Xinhua East Street.

The north-east corner is defined by the northern section of the urban building. This section consists of an indoor swimming pool with an Olympic-size pool and a leisure one. This portion also has a height of 12,50 meters. The main pool space is full-height, and next to it three levels include changing

rooms, bleachers, a gym, yoga rooms, massage rooms, activities rooms for kids, and a coffee bar. Here again, ramps and tracks run at different heights (6 and 9 meters) along the east and north façades.

In between these two buildings at the ends of the site, there is a vast canopy. It covers the area alongside the football field bordering Xihaizi Road and the central area between the buildings. This canopy lays on volumes with curvilinear ground plans as if they were giant pillars. The volumes along the east side are small open pavilions, whereas those in the central area are bigger enclosed ones. The open pavilions under the narrower part of the canopy are delimited by reeds, and they might be exploited for instance by people to play music or relax. The bigger pavilions are intended to be multi-functional spaces suitable for workshops, exhibitions, meetings, cultural events and so forth. The biggest one is designed as an auditorium. The area under the narrower part of the canopy is planned to be a fitness path (corresponding with the current one). The open space in between the bigger pavilion is designed as a skate park, with basins that go as low as -1,50 and 2 meters. The canopy has holes that create courtyards filled with trees: smaller ones along the narrow wing and two wider ones in the central area.





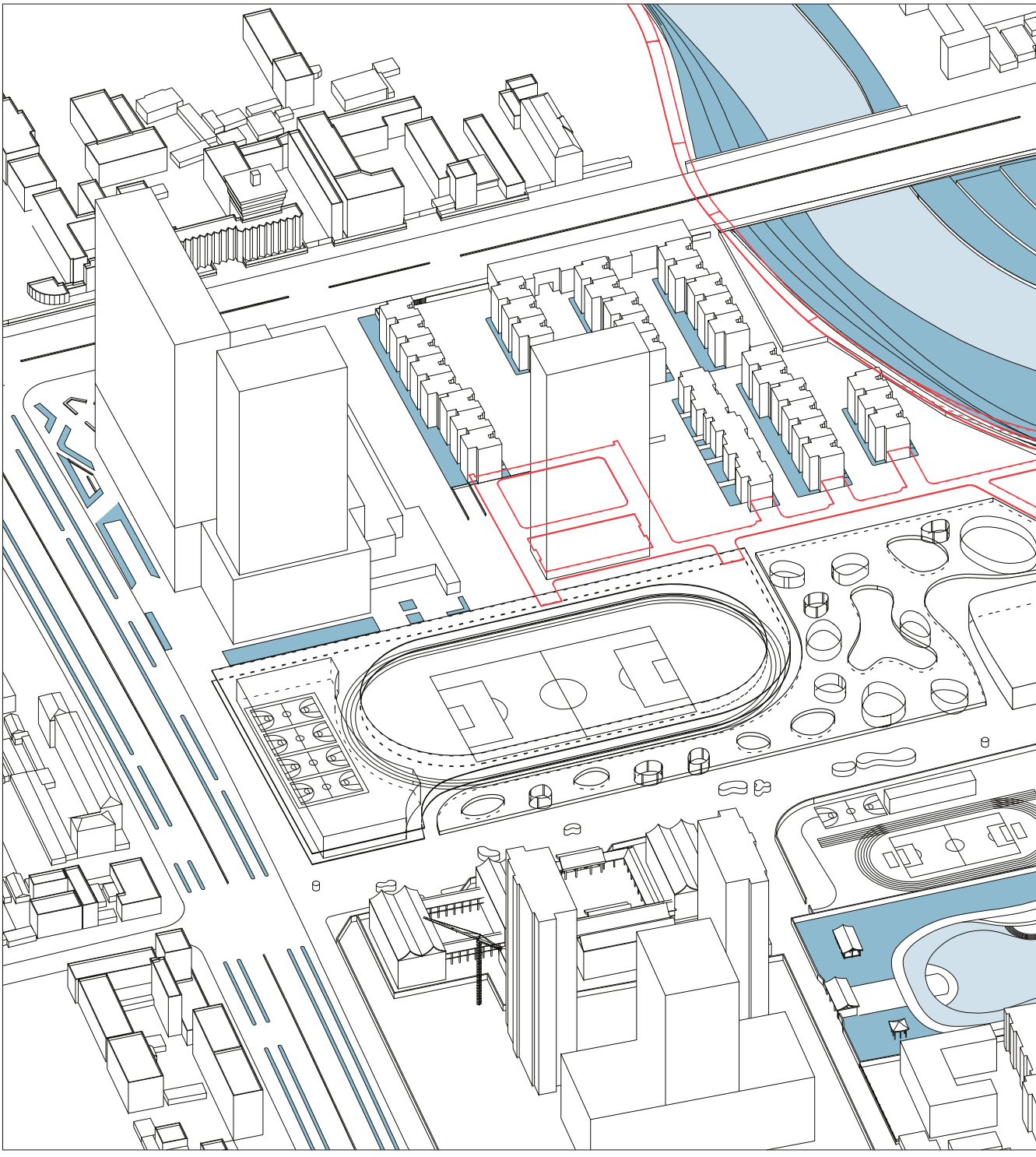
Stitches

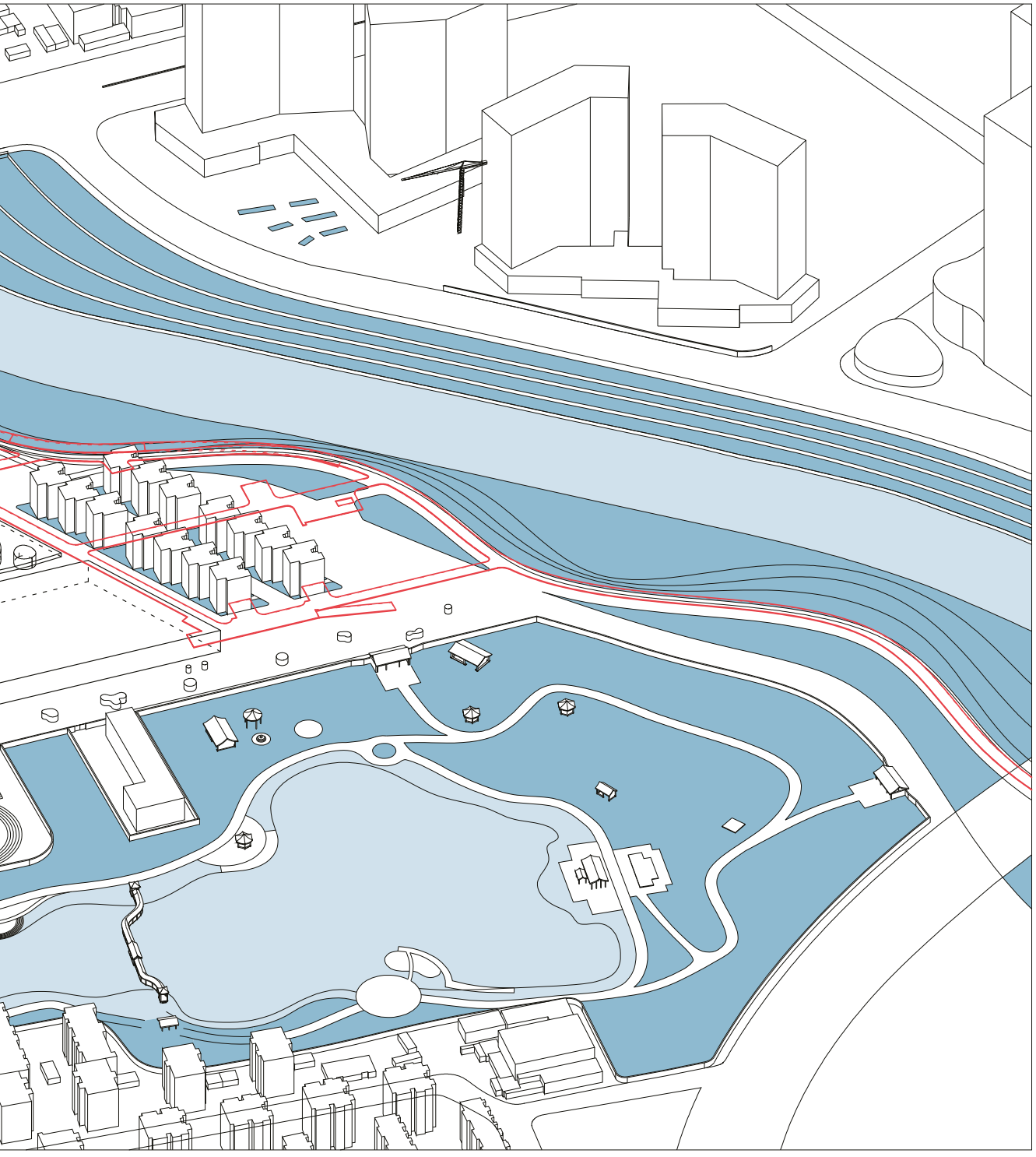
The building relates to its surroundings trying to affect them positively. The suspended tracks and the canopy trace the margins of the block, which hence remains permeable. The tracks characterize the external façades of the urban building, and they also work as stitches. They stitch and give shape to an otherwise loose and disorienting urban fabric, also outlining the boundary of the road between the gated community and the urban building. At the height of 6 meters other tracks depart towards the existing gated community and the river park. The gated community is enclosed by walls. I decided to maintain the external walls along Xinhua North Road and the link road next to the Jinghan Plaza and to remove the walls towards the river park and the urban building. The tracks that depart from the new building replace the walls, suggesting a division but not, in fact, preventing from passing through. Such tracks reach the existing buildings interacting with them. They surround the office tower and terminate against the sidewalls of two lower residential buildings resulting in a square between them. They even extend to other sidewalls of the same neighbourhood, which turn into climbing walls. In this way, such branches connect the new building with its context, and also the different buildings to each other, thus creating shared spaces.

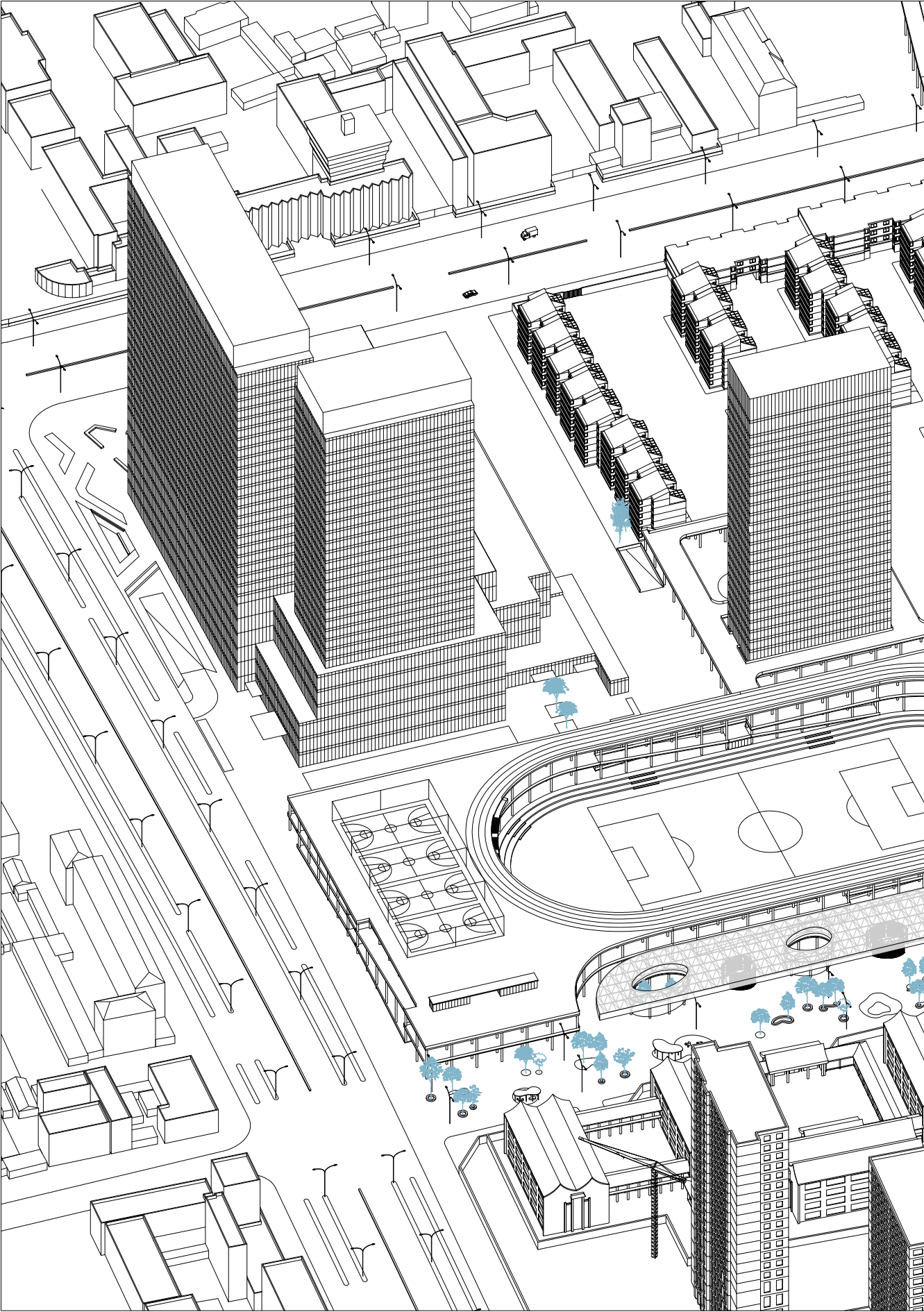
The tracks that extend northwards reach the river park and follow its course,

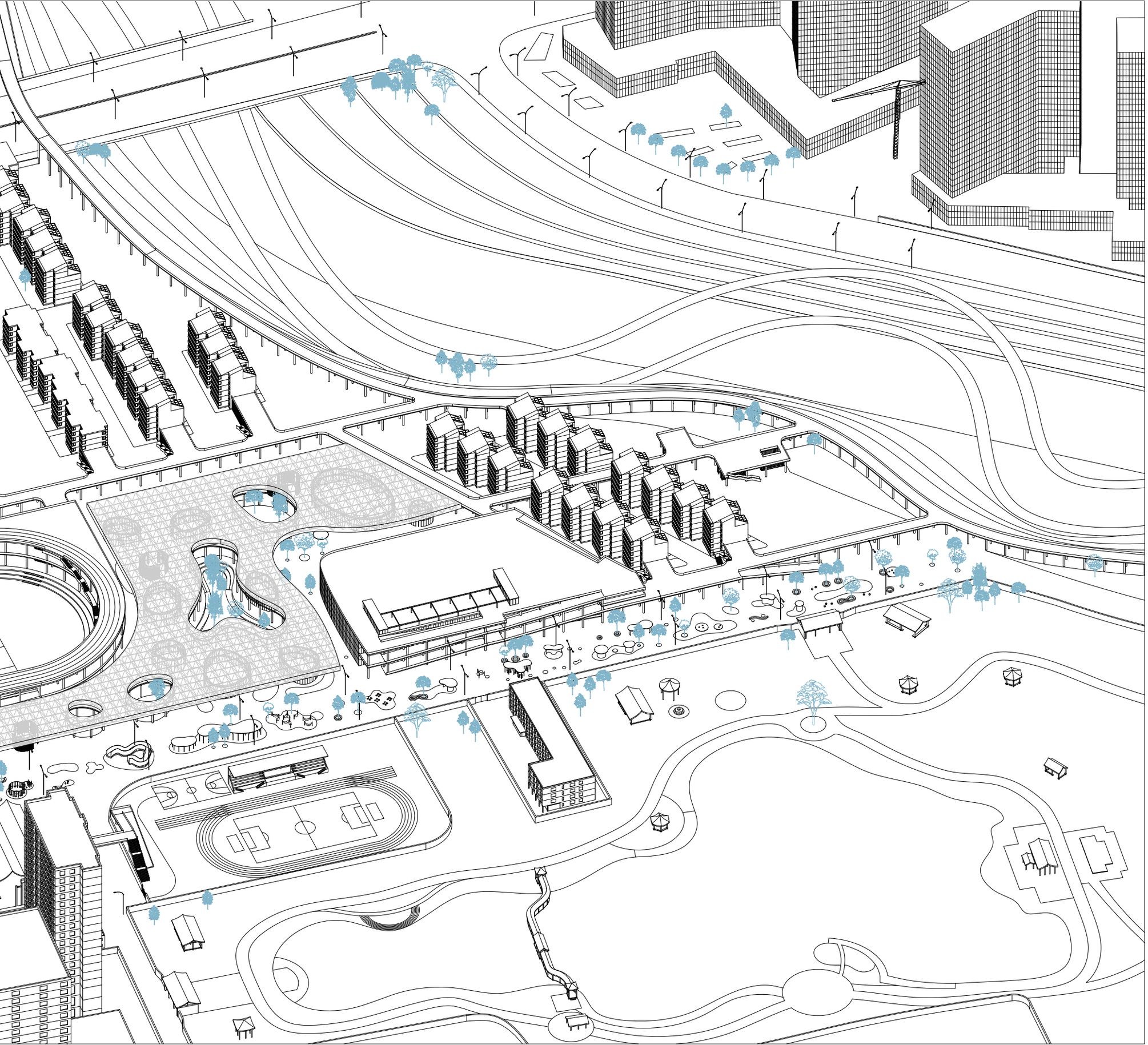
thus creating a connection between the building and the park, where they gradually turn into boardwalks that slope down toward the banks. Also, in between the existing buildings and the park, they become wider and incorporate underneath three new open pavilions.

The tracks, supported by pillars spaced 8 meters apart, result in sheltered paths on the ground floor reminiscent of traditional Chinese porticos.









Interior/exterior

The main feature of this project is the connection between interior and exterior. As already mentioned, indoor public space and outdoor public space interweave. Open public space spreads around indoor public space. Or, to see it differently, enclosed public spaces set in the open public space, remaining accessible. The maxi-block is intended to be permeable and passable in all directions. We may imagine that if this area of Tongzhou was drawn in the 1748 Map of Rome by Giambattista Nolli[30], the whole block would be represented in white – like the squares and churches of Rome.

30 Cf. http://nolli.uoregon.edu/

Translucency

To enhance such relation between interior and exterior, the envelope of the two main buildings and the pavilions is mostly translucent and transparent. The envelope of the basketball building is partly glazed around the entrance hall, the study rooms and the cafeteria, whereas around the courts it is made of polycarbonate. The swimming pool building has a polycarbonate envelope all around too, except for the west and south glass facades facing the area in between the building and the canopy filled with trees. Also the central pavilions and the auditorium have a polycarbonate envelop, with transparent full-height portions and doors. The polycarbonate envelope is supported by steel mullions and transoms structure between the pillars.

Even the canopy is translucent, with two layers of polycarbonate, supported by a spatial reticular structure, that act as a horizontal natural ventilated façade.

The translucent envelope on the one hand allows a glimpse of the internal activities from the outside, and on the other hand, it diffuses a uniform light in the interior. Also, as it diffuses artificial light, the whole urban building turns into a luminescent lantern at night.

Both the canopy and the translucent façades are made up of alveolar polycarbonate panels with low factors of thermal transmittance for good energy performances. They are treated with a finishing technology that pre-

vents overheating in summer and extruded with a UV protection film that prevents them from yellowing.

Flexibility

"In China, things change fast." I heard this statement countless times. It is one of the biggest cliches about China, but it seems actually pretty accurate. For this reason, the entire urban building is designed to be as much disassemblable as possible, using dry technologies that include steel structures. Everything can be dismantled instead of being demolished in order to adapt to different changes and needs – enabling different set-ups – and to be eventually reused or recycled.

Shadow

One of the things that I have learned during my three-months stay in China is that shadow is undoubtedly a big deal. As spring comes, the city is crowded with tiny colourful sun umbrellas. In April and May already the sun beats down in Beijing, and later on in summer temperature gets really high. In general, not many Chinese love to sunbathe, but during summer walking and laying in the sun is impossible for anyone. This is why the presence of shadow is crucial for a place to be lived in and enjoyed. Providing adequate shading is, therefore, a central point of this design. The small pavilions and canopies along Xihaizi pedestrian street, the trees, and the large polycarbonate canopy are intended to shade from the sun, as well as from the rain, and make this place livable all year round.

Sports, culture, music around the clock

Jamie Lerner says that "New York should build a monument to the Unknown 24-hour Shopkeeper". He says that the convenience stores open around the clock "enliven whole neighbourhoods by literally lightening up countless dreary street corners" (Lerner 2014). This partly happens in Beijing too. And when Hassenpflug claims that "commerce is the driving force of placemaking" (2010: 32) probably also refers to this. What both of them say is undoubtedly true, but perhaps commerce cannot always be the solution. This project proposes an alternative trying to promote sports and culture as a driving force for vitality during both day and night time. And a key for this may be multifunctionality.

Xihaizi Sports and Culture Center is designed to be as flexible as possible, in order to host the most diverse activities and events. The spaces that are used for sports activities during the day may turn into venues for concerts, fairs and other cultural events; the pavilions that may be used as classrooms or workshops during the daytime may turn into a location for exhibitions or readings at nighttime, and the auditorium may turn into a movie theatre. These are just a few of the infinite possibility of use that Xihaizi Center offers.

Venues wanted! Community center wanted!

As I already mentioned, in Tongzhou there are many young musicians and bands in search of adequate venues, they say that "Tongzhou is the new Gulou", but there is a lack of spaces to express the character of this nascent scene. Also, I happened to know an incredibly vivid cultural scene of Beijing made of young independent writers, poets, illustrators, editors and publishers, that are always looking for venues for their events, no matter how close to the city center. Sometimes they struggle with finding appropriate places. And some other times they ended up cancelling their events because of the evictions in the *hutong*. This is just one example of those emerging youth initiatives that need space. And Xihaizi Center may respond to such a need becoming a reference point in Tongzhou as well as on a metropolitan scale.

At the same time, the Center is also intended as a reference point for the local community, as it provides spaces and facilities for everyday life. As PPS states in its Placemaking booklet, "it takes a place to create a community and a community to create a place" (Project for Public Space 2016: 12).

Therefore, Xihaizi Sports and Culture Center aims to be a strategic metropolitan pole and a pole for the neighbourhood in which community may identify. It aims to be a place where society and community meet and blend.

Appropriability

I believe that being appropriable is essential for a space to become a place in this context. For this reason, all the spaces are conceived to be interpreted as much as possible by people and used according to their needs. The pavilions, the courtyards, the green areas, the canopies are open to many use options and informal appropriation possibilities. They are designed to be simple and adaptable, in order to take infinite meanings over time.

River Park

As mentioned, the project does not involve the Tonghui River Park, but it aims to affect it. Nevertheless, a project for the park may be necessary, given its centrality and importance for the area. Specifically, the lack of connections between the two banks, their excessive slope, the lack of shading, seatings, and comfortable walkways are some of the issues that should be addressed by a design.

In my design I suggest a potential starting point. I trace a system of boardwalks that connect the two banks, by overlapping the ancient shape of the Tonghui River. They might also result in different levels of the banks and gradually get lower as they get closer to the water.

AN ONGOING PROJECT

I would describe this as an ongoing project for two reasons. Firstly, is it even possible to ever end a project? Urban and architectural projects often do not reach an end even once they are built, as they are always improvable. Secondly, I intentionally leave this project open – "open source", perharps? (Ratti 2014) – to endless possibilities, be they either formal adaptation and implementation or informal appropriation.

Conditions are constantly changing and only by responding to real needs and aspirations it is possible to create a place that fits its context and its time.

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