

# *in - between*

【隙间】胡同作为新的文化有机体的形态关系  
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morphology of relations  
the hutong as a new cultural  
organism

in-between / culture / hutong / urban regeneration / beijing / continuity /  
organisms / identity / evolution / morphology / relations / surfaces / time /  
vanishing city / walls / humanism / walls / shared / porosity / dialogue / toilets /  
openness / space / borders / future



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Double Degree Program

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2019/2020



# 隙间：胡同作为新的文化有机体 的形态关系。

(申请清华大学建筑学硕士学位论文)

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二〇〇五年三月

行政审批制度研究——以深圳市为例

李某某

***In-between: morphology of relations.***  
**The hutong as a new cultural organism**

Thesis Submitted to  
**Tsinghua University**  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the professional degree of  
**Master of Architecture**

by  
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**June, 2020**

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## 摘要

中国的传统城市在过去一个世纪的现代化进程中发生了巨变。如今的北京呈现一片空前财富和增长的景象。与此同时，北京内城面临着环境恶化的相反趋势：生活条件很低、社会文化危机严重。本文将北京定义为一座城墙城市，而这些墙既有物理的，也有社会的。在这样的观点下，“隙间”的概念意欲创造独具意义的城市更新，以超越笼罩当今传统城市、有关文化身份和旅游发展的视野。正如联合国教科文组织所言，文化代表了未来城市的新视角。“隙间”找到与“文化”这个概念意想不到的融合点。然而，文化的定义仅限于遗产。

本文的研究成果试图从未来和运用的方面理解“文化”，将之作为积极的工具。“隙间”的理念和物化体现了作为材料的文化并不只是代表过去的元素。北京胡同的通透空间为未来提供了新的机遇，“隙间”因此成为人与建筑物之间的联系和对话基础。遵循这一理念，本文将此视角作为一个城市概念进行分析，主要分为三个部分：第一部分考察了文化的概念，引其入一个维度并使之成为项目的积极组成部分。第二部分分析了胡同作为文化名城的现实状况和危机产生的过程。在最后一章中，本文以城市特定区域的城市更新项目为例，探讨了这些思想的应用。在这里，“隙间”的概念形成并定义了新的对话空间——在密集的城市结构中创造了一个新的城市孔隙，而墙壁不再是边界。它成了开放的表面，促进人与外界的互动。胡同也可以成为真正的文化实体，向未来开放并与世界对话。

**关键词：**隙间；对话；胡同；文化；城市更新

## Abstract

The traditional Chinese cities, during the last century, saw dramatic changes in the pursuing of modernization. The panorama of Beijing nowadays symbolizes the result of new unprecedented wealth and growth. At the same time, the Inner city of Beijing is facing the opposite trend of a decaying environment. Living conditions are very low and the socio-cultural crisis is critical. The city of Beijing is defined in the thesis as a *city of walls*. These walls are both physical and social. Under this point of view, the concept of *in-between* creates the opportunity for a significative urban regeneration beyond the idea of identity and tourism, which are governing the traditional Chinese cities today. The concept of *in-between* finds unexpected points of convergence with the idea of culture, which represent the new perspective of future cities, as expressed in the words of UNESCO. Culture is, however, defined only in terms of heritage. The result of the thesis is the understanding and the use of culture for the future, as an active tool. The idea and materialization of the space *in-between* represents culture as material of the project and not only as an element of the past. The *in-between* become the space of relation and dialogue between people and buildings. The porous space gives new opportunities for a future in the *hutongs* of Beijing. Following this idea, the work analyzes this perspective as an urban concept. The thesis is essentially divided in three part. The first part investigates the concept of culture, in order to introduce a dimension where it could be used as an active component of the project. The second part analyses the processes which brought the city of Beijing to the actual situation and the crisis of the *hutong* as a cultural city. In the final chapters, the thesis explores the application of the ideas with a project of urban regeneration in a specific area of the city. Here the concept of *in-between* take shape and defines a new space of dialogue. Creating a new urban porosity in the dense city, walls are not boundaries anymore. Walls become open surfaces fostering human interaction between inside and outside. The *hutong* could become a real cultural entity open to the future and to the dialogue with the world.

**Key words:** *in-between*; dialogue; hutong; culture; urban regeneration



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Figure 1.1 *Il Comutatore*, Ugo La Pietra (1970)

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 A Poisoned Cocktail

« [...] This however is not enough: it is not enough to meet and spend time together. Because it is not only people who have to dizzily move at the pace of real-time communication. It is not only the political spheres that have to work cooperatively and synergistically. It is not only the markets that have to assure a constant connection between our production systems. It is rather our cultural spheres that have to actually and constantly interact. It is necessary that the "Silk Roads" multiply and that the roads towards knowing each other better - which are never enough, never sufficient, never ending and never entirely achieved - be deepened. We need that the "Silk" component of past millennia be converted into the many goods - material and immaterial - that China, Italy and Europe can exchange. For our cultural spheres to achieve an ever greater and irreversible integration, we need to build a stable basis for dialogue, in such a way as to

*continuously reinforce and enhance it. We need for our two Countries' public and private institutions - and primarily academic institutions - to enhance, with renewed care and passion, the quantity and quality of our cultural relations...»* (Mattarella 2017). With these words, the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, stated the beginning of the dialogue between China and Italy, re-summoning the old idea of the Silk Road, which in the past brought to Europe endless hosts of marvelous goods but not only that. The knowledge of experts in sailing, tales of the travelers as Marco Polo and richness of culture. The dialogue between these two countries is alive and vivid and culture is what represents them most.

The idea of *in-between* is the result of the thesis and the meaning of culture that could be read in the words of Mattarella, a dialogue. Its application is not new in the architectural experiences of last century, but its provocative applications in the Chinese context and urban regeneration, created a great opportunity for the development of the thesis. This concept found a point of convergence with a branch of anthropological studies which had taken place in Europe in the last decades. Cultural anthropology will give us another point of view to see the city and especially the city of Beijing. In order to face its complexity, the tools provided by this specific fields will help us during the exploration and the selection of urban readings. The term culture is what characterized this work, aiming to create the basis of exchange of knowledge, reading contexts beyond the physic of the objects, promoting sustainability beyond the economic revenue and introducing people in the center of the discussion for the future of our cities.

As in Hercule Poirot's cases, born from the pen of Agatha Christie in 1920, the investigation will follow the mental process and the developing of the work during this year of elaboration. The logical development is similar to the investigation of a crime, in which the scene is evident as a picture but the work of the investigator, or architect in this case, it is necessary in order to interweave the network of connections between the elements of the crime: suspects, poison and reasons, which are unknown at the beginning.

After some introductory paragraphs, the thesis is essentially divided in three parts which are complementary of each other and the boundary between them could appear blurred and flexible for the nature of the contents. The first part of the thesis is, then, an introduction in the mental context, basis of the thesis. We are going to discuss here, how the word culture could be useful, and essential, for the development of the project but

also in general as an active element in the toolbox of the architects. In the second part, this ingredient of the cocktail is mixed in the glass, in which the liquid can take its shape and can be defined as a cocktail. This is the idea poured in the reality, the context creates dialogue with the theory. We are going to explore, in these chapters, how the city evolved during last century with the filter introduced by the meaning of culture which now defined the representation, or the absence, of relation. In the third part the cocktail it is finally formed and can take a name or a title. The image and the taste are the only things that really matter. As well the work of the architect become consistent in its project, the result. This is the only moment in which we could appreciate the evolution and the realization, the accuse. Here the idea of *in-between* obtains form and shape in the reality.

What apparently seems to be a straightforward process, mixing some ingredients together, stirring and shaking, pouring and finally drink the cocktail, is, on the contrary, an exploration toward dark lands, in which the reaction of the ingredients is complex, unknown or just unexpected. Understanding what makes this recipe so ambiguous and unclear in the first steps of the experiment, is the key point of the work. In other words, the flexibility of the ideas offered in the first part of the thesis, which are open to interpretations, could be used in many other different contexts. However, for the limits of the thesis we are going to work in a very specific situation, with very specific influences and ideas behind.

These ingredients of which we are talking about, are the words culture and *in-between* and the *hutong* of Beijing are our glasses. However, we will think about the same concept when we are going to use these two terms, because of their solid and essential relationship. A dimension in which all organisms, cities as well, assumes a fundamental role in the survival and adaptation toward the future. Culture represent an ambiguous space in which we are in relation with the world. Culture represents, in fact, a series of tool which organisms use to explore the world in which they live.

The cocktail, then, it is formed by an ambiguous liquid for a thesis in architecture. The thesis is a continuous rethinking and mixing of elements of anthropology and architecture, in which could happen that culture becomes a building or architecture is the topic of many anthropological books. What basically happening is the play of a kid who do not know boundaries of the disciplines and fields. In the light of this, the discussion will be grounded in the reality of things and peculiarity of the specific

context in which we are working. The result aim to improve the future of that context and the complex issues that Chinese traditional cities are facing today. The main question that our Belgian investigator is asking to his mind now is: «*how culture could contribute as an active ingredient of urban design and how the space of culture could take shape in a specific context?* ». Culture is, for every organism, an element of the future and not a fetishism of the past. On the base of this question the thesis has a focus on urban regeneration of a small area in the Inner city of Beijing. It is an area of what we usually recognize as traditional city, famous in Beijing for its *hutong* structure.

The idea of *in-between* represents in this perspective the urban concept that characterize the use of the tradition *hutong*. This represents a spoiler to the question that the investigator asked few lines above. The idea of *in-between* represents the space of culture. The distance between me and you. The space that describe the inside and the outside, the space where the body is free to move and play. The space of relations.

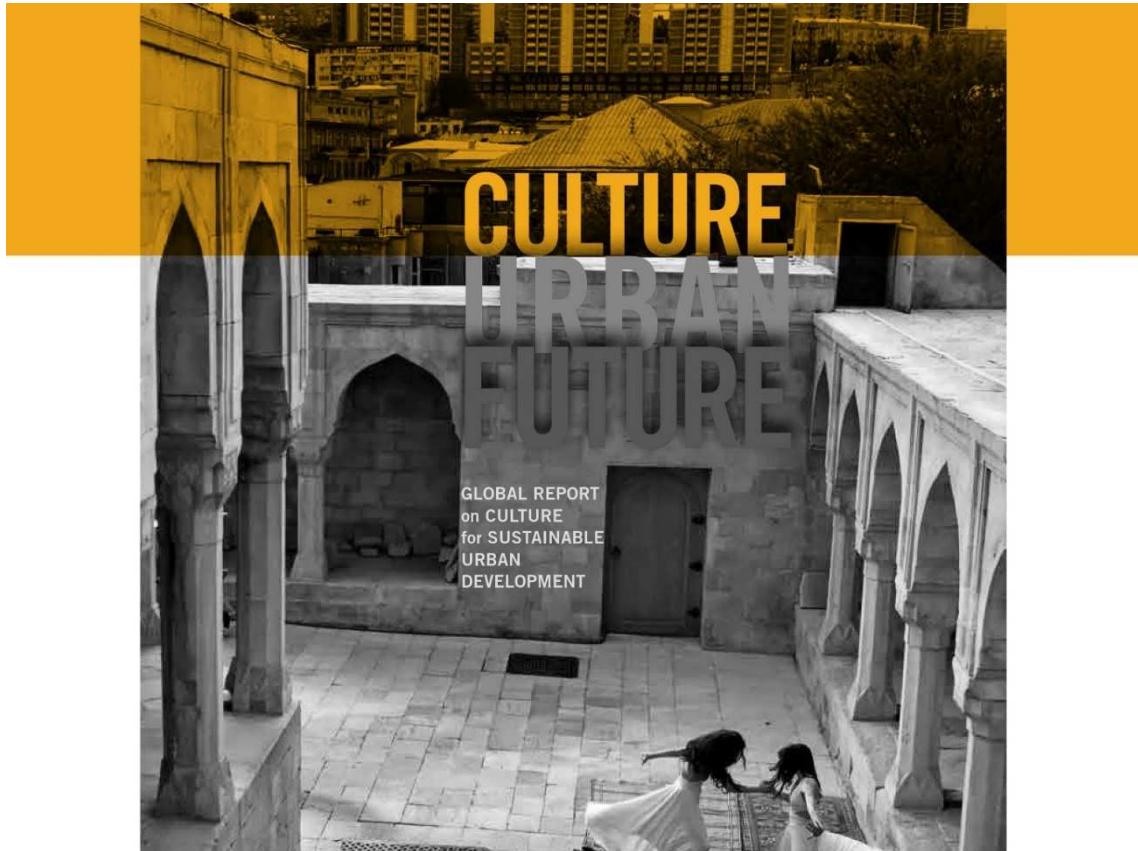


Figure 2.1 Cover of Culture urban future, UNESCO (2016)

## Chapter 2 Reflexive Era

### 2.1 Crossroad of Global Evolution

In order to start this conversation, I would like to introduce the reason why one of the words we introduced before, was culture. Culture, in general terms, is a nowness topic discussed all over the world. However, this happens somehow outside of the architectural discussion or when it happens it is very specific to a precise branch. A vivid discussion takes place in the world of politics, such as movements against inequalities, racism; human sciences, like religions, ethnography, anthropology, social studies; environmental, how many times we heard "*it is culture, it's hard to change it*", "*it is in their culture*" etc.; even technological innovation, especially with the discussion of artificial intelligence, is introduced the word culture as a critical point (Harari 2018). Many of these fields, with thousands of researchers, are introducing this term removing the dust from the shelves. Obviously with different meaning. For architects, this term is

still in the dust, and sometime need to be in the dust. Architects are sometime too shy to *pro-ject*, this word from an immaterial and ancient concept toward the future. Seems that architecture is sterile to this topic. However, the scenario it is not so dramatic. Sometimes architects are using this tool without awareness of it, or better, it is disguised into other things. Unfortunately, many times this word is misinterpreted.

A small tip of the iceberg has been scratched in the last years when United Nations, though the organ of UNESCO, introduced in their agenda a point, “*Sustainable cities and communities*” together with other ten points of Sustainable Development for 2030. The work of architects, designers and urban planners has been called into the dialogue. *«History shows that culture is at the heart of urban development, evidenced through cultural landmarks, heritage and traditions. Without culture, cities as vibrant life-spaces do not exist; they are merely concrete and steel constructions, prone to social degradation and fracture. It is culture that makes the difference. It is culture that defines the city as what the ancient Romans called the “civitas”, a coherent social complex, the collective body of all citizens.»* (UNESCO 2016a)

These words have been written in 2016 by UNESCO talking about culture, cities and sustainability and their close relation that emerged from the discussion. In the light of the global situation, UNESCO is trying to work leading the world to a better future especially in the environment of future cities. In fact, the world conflict is in the center of the discussion started in 2015 about cities.

Urbanization in the world is one of the growing trends since decades moving towards the next years and generations after us. By 2050 over 70% of people is predicted to live in cities, many countries are almost saturated, some of them are going to explode in few years like African capitals. Countries as Singapore base their environment on the urbanity, China has most of its inhabitants condensed in less than half of the national territory. In areas as United States or South America, over 80% of population is living in the urban contexts (UNESCO 2016a).

Cities represent, for certain people, hope of having a future, cities are attractors of culture in the sense that culture is what make them survive. At the same time, for others it is a matter of comfort. However, for many other it is sources of conflicts like discrimination and segregation. Still in other cases are sources of disease.

*«Cities and human settlements have stood at the crossroads of trade routes, have been built as an expression of social order, for protection, serving as hubs for defense,*

*physical security and social continuity».* (UNESCO, 2016)

Population living in slums, for example, is expected to be over 3 billion, almost a half of the total population, if not addressed into a different way of development. Poverty, violence, segregation, identity of the places are some of the problem that UNESCO tries to withstand, introducing this word to the debate. In order tackle these issues, the international association created guidelines and the foundation of knowledge needed, in order to lead different countries to a sustainable idea of progress.

Several documents and global assemblies have been held by UNESCO on the topic of cities in relation with the idea of heritage and how this can affect ours future. Habitat III is the crucial event of this decade. The discussion born in 2015 in Hangzhou with the title *Culture and Sustainable Development* (UNESCO 2016b), lately move to another continent the year after. The assembly hold in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016 Habitat III, it is the first discussion on cities to be approved by United Nation acts and be integral part the Agenda 2030 setting the sustainable goals reported in a document called *Culture: urban future. Global report on Culture for Urban Sustainable Development*, a volume which include several papers from various researchers.

With Habitat III, for the first time, the word culture has been introduced as one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals: «*the integral role of culture across many of the SdGs, including those that commit to quality education, economic growth, sustainable consumption and production patterns, and peaceful and inclusive societies. Significantly, culture is directly addressed in Goal 11, which aims to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’*» (UNESCO 2016a). Culture has at this point became an active agent, in the perspective of sustainability in the world.

Sustainability from this point of view is not only based on the economical or technological field, it is not only a building able to save energy, is not only a productive system more efficient, is not only an electric car. Sustainability is here something more, something that create the opportunity of increase the quality of life, that can address human needs, open a dialogue among people, with inclusion and recognition, fostering the experimentation and expressions. This is what have driven urban development thought centuries producing the heritage we could visit today, driven by human aspirations and creativity.

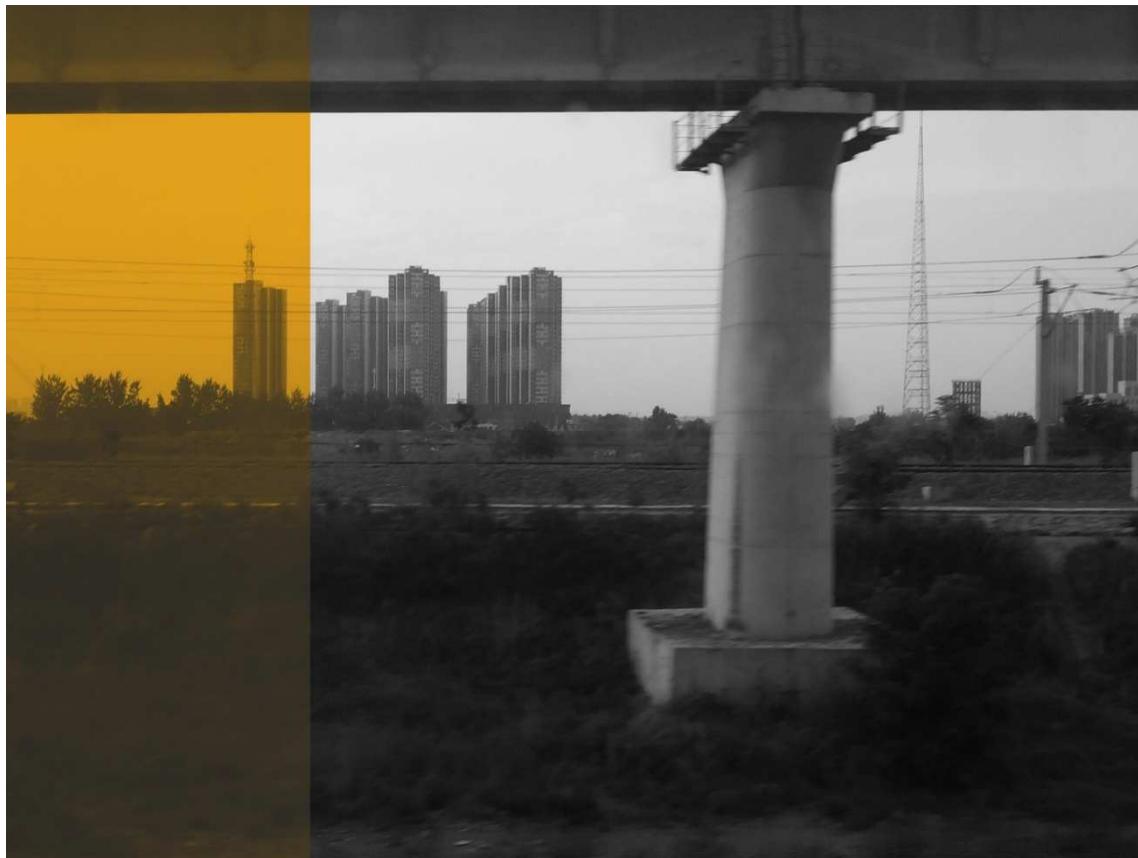


Figure 2.2 Picture from a train window, China, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

## 2.2 Global and Urban

A worldwide phenomenon that we are facing more and more in the recent decades, without judging it positive or negative for now, is globalization. The incredibly interconnected world in which our society is taking shape, it is a revolutionary moment in which processes are influencing people in their lives, identity, interaction and not only markets or politics are taking part into it. On the wave of this, the boundaries of creative expression are fallen, and the distribution of cultural elements is beyond national and local limits, allowing people to access to almost everything, through new technological media and possibilities.

*«The influence of globalization on culture has given rise to concerns related to its impact on local culture, with the risk of homogenization and commodification [...] Cities and their citizens have introduced strategies for conserving heritage and revitalizing local culture for economic growth and tourism policies has also been employed as a means to generate economic return from the cultural assets of cities.*

*Cultural tourism relying on tangible and intangible cultural assets, today accounts for about 40% of world tourism revenue. Increased tourism to a city can result in steep influxes of people that can potentially undermine the authentic values of the city in favor of commercialization.» (UNESCO 2016a)*

With these words we could start to open a critic to the use of culture, in term of monuments and heritage in general, which has produced effect which are not merely the improvement of knowledge or quality of life, also in spiritual terms, as someone could firstly say explaining what is culture and its function. On the contrary, heritage has just produced a monetization of their values, in the best cases if not even a permanent modification of their authenticity. As we will later see in another chapter more specifically, Chinese contemporary panorama in historical cities have seen many of these cases where, even walking toward the monument was a commercial activity as queuing up in a store.

At the same time, the expansion of cities is rapidly increasing in their dimension and intensity, new settlements are built from scratch or exponentially mutating for serving the global need of the population. In fact, the footprint of urbanization could be considered not only in the city itself but even in the surrounding realities, as we could commonly see with our environmental issues. At the same time, urbanization represents a consistent enemy for cultural heritage even in terms of materiality of the tradition of local identity with massive production of homogeneous landscapes and experiences around the world (Jakob 2018) (UNESCO 2016a).

These two processes, globalization and urbanization together are bringing to a relentless standardization of the global environment, in its material and immaterial characteristics. Cities are losing their distinctiveness; citizens are forced to flattening their aspirations for future possibilities; practice are becoming standardized. Migrations are forcing people integrate in different cultural environment often not willing to be part of it. In this delicate context the complexity of cities it is evident how the element of culture has not been deeply explored, or probably understood in its branches and variations. Culture could become a tool in order the plan the future without witnessing the rising of «*banal, ordinary, uniform, standardized, generic, sameness, homogeneous*», borrowing the words of Michael Jakob talking in Harvard GSD. We should introduce the word culture with the energy of Kenneth Frampton in his publication in 1983 *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance* (1983).

*exerts a sort of attrition or wearing away at the expense of the cultural resources which have made the great civilizations of the past. This threat is expressed, among other disturbing effects, by the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilization which is the absurd counterpart of what I was just calling elementary culture. Everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc. It seems as if mankind, by approaching en masse a basic consumer culture, were also stopped en masse at a subcultural level. Thus we come to the crucial problem confronting nations just rising from underdevelopment. In order to get on to the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d'être* of a nation? . . . Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural vindication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.<sup>1</sup>*

—Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*

Figure 2.3 First page of *Towards a Critical Regionalism*, Kenneth Frampton (1983)

Why if the role of industrialization with the invention of screws, and standardization (Jakob 2018), changed its meaning today, our conception of space should still undergoes this process of sameness? In the introduction of the article of 1983, Kenneth Frampton with the words of Paul Ricoeur introduced an essential question which represents, today still with the same power if not more, a great paradox for the development of architecture. On the base of this conflict between local culture and universal society, the idea of critical regionalism is explored from its first conception of Alexander Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre. Critical regionalism is defined as a cultural strategy, as a tool for the mediation between past, where the region come from, and future with its global innovation (Frampton 1983). It is from this perspective that the word culture assumes the idea of not only an element of the past, the heritage of ancient civilization, but a broader and inclusive meaning, a joint between us and the future.

## 2.3 Architects in Complexity

In this changing planet, human societies are overwhelmed by the speed of themselves, by phenomenon that science describes such as climate change, conflicts, economic driven projects, political uncertainty; the whole panorama is a pendulum, unstable, in constant motion in order to balance its weight. People of modernity, born and raised in the XX century are seeing their conviction, believes and value somehow in crisis. This spectacle, which could be judge quite dark and negative, is source of extreme uncertainty about future and, especially, no one really know how to move the next step now (Harari 2018). However, this could be an opportunity. Opportunity of mixing the cards on the board, in other words, to reflect on this situation, in order to evaluate the routes to take. Many fields of science are discussing these topics, in very diverse fields, pointing the discussion onto the ideas that led this world. The transformation is embracing every shade of the world and the way of seeing it.

Without spending the whole chapter in describing historical changes during last century, which perhaps a whole course of contemporary history hardly could process it in its totality, we could better focus on the results that today with a retrospective point of view , we could investigate, especially in terms of society and what societies has majorly produced: cities. With these words I do not pretend to investigate or taking the role of a sociologist or better an anthropologist. If we focus on our field, as architect, it is time to get critical about ourselves and our tools, as Li Xiaodong would define reflexive approach. We have now the time and the opportunity to select the tools, the perspective, and the approach of using our knowledge as architects (X. Li 2018). Especially if we have a clear idea of the complexity and speed of Chinese reality, we could not still see this transformation without thinking about the role of architecture beyond iconic and symbolic buildings.

What is evident nowadays is the complexity, and sometimes the impossibility of reading the processes which are involved in our cities. The feeling of today's practices and studies on urban realities is a general inadequacy of the tools we are using to read these processes or even see these changes. What we generally use for reading the urban space today are tools built during the last century, which more and more seem to be inappropriate because of their theoretical basis or the assumptions on which they are built. We are generally used to see the city with the eye of the of the XX century while centuries of human settlements are built with different and successful tools. «A

*merchant of the XV century would have not considered the distinction between inside and outside in the system of market at every scale, while today this topic it is very well debates»* (Future Urban Legacy Lab, n.d.).

In order to give a way of investigate the city in its complexity, especially in the explosive development of Chinese cities, what we are going to support it's a mix of knowledge drawn from different systems, in this case the aquarium of cultural anthropology, trying to interpret the picture we are in front of. This allow us to see for a while from the outside of the glass the cocktail we are drinking, only afterward introducing back the tools of the architect. What we want to achieve in this work is a new use of culture which was mentioned the Kenneth Frampton. Culture can become a tool for designing the future and not seeing it as a pure and abstract terms of heritage?

*«What we call ‘heritage’ is found in quality public spaces or in areas marked by the layers of time. Cultural expressions give people the opportunity to identify themselves collectively, to read the traces of history, to understand the importance of traditions for their daily life, or to enjoy beauty, harmony and artistic endeavor. These are fundamental social and human needs that must be addressed in the context of urban development processes, not as optional extras. How do we translate these realities into effective policies in sustainable urban planning? »* (UNESCO 2016a).

What we can try to achieve is not seeing culture merely as heritage, but something more malleable, as a construction tool. If we think about culture as something of the past, then we are only destined to lose it, or at least impossible to build. What we want to do is building, or better, allow the spread of the concept of culture. We can understand this work under the idea of either a critic to the UNESCO's report but also as an important starting point from which we could start the really talk about the topic.

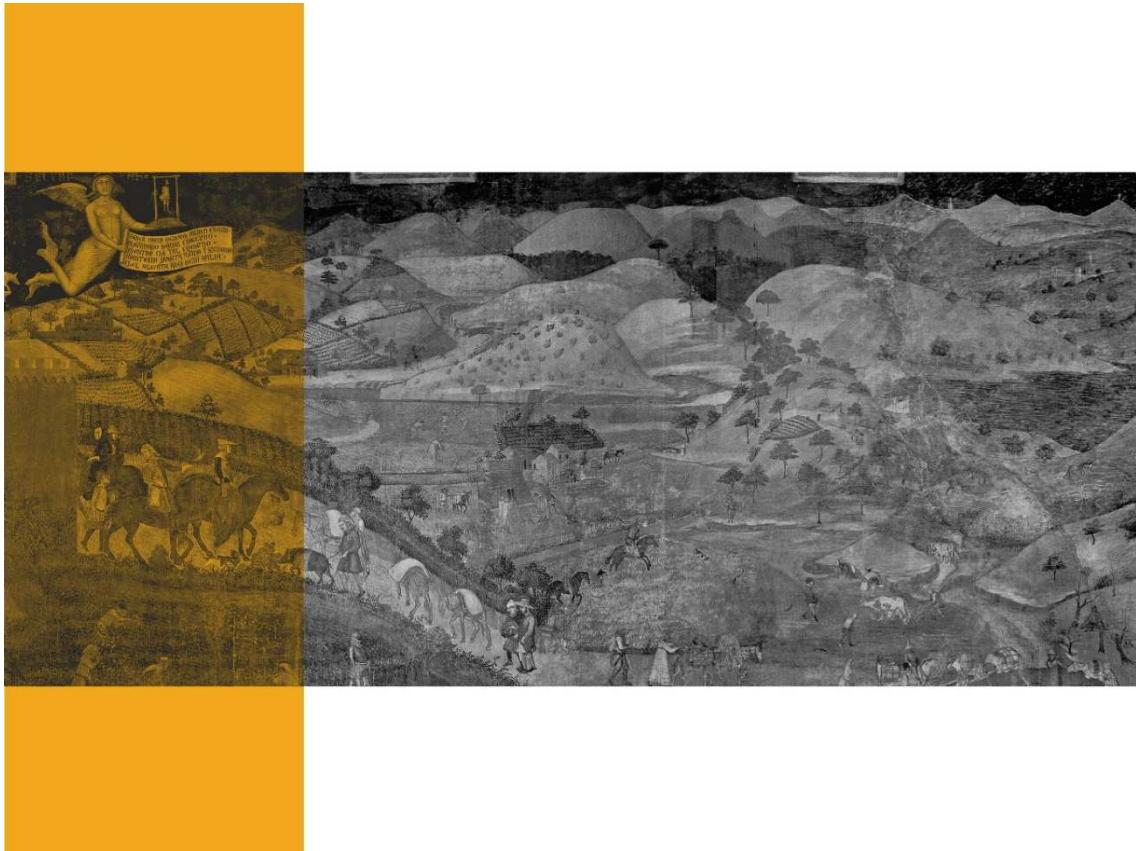


Figure 3.1 *Il buon governo delle campagne* (Effects of the good government in the countryside), Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1338-1340)

## Chapter 3 Culture as Material

### 3.1 Culture Before Buildings: Learning from Farming

The panorama presented till now, about the changing world and the relation with culture seems quite confused if we are thinking on using it as a tool. If it is not confused it is, at least superficial. Many would confirm the importance of history, monuments and diversity in our cities but what is the meaning of this word culture, and why it is important, not for the most nostalgic concepts, but for building the future? What is relatively singular through all this introduction, and we would see as bizarre, is the idea of bringing together the word culture which generally characterize human beings, or at least organisms, with something which is inanimate as cities. On the base of this initial question we are going to try to explore the concept behind culture, in order to use it as an active component in building the ideas of the project we are going to see in the end, with the meaning of *in-between* as a key factor of urban regeneration. This aspect gives

relevance not only to the project itself, which we could consider a test of these words but create a more general discussion about the architectural thinking today around Chinese traditional cities.

If someone, someday, would ask an architect, or a designer in broader sense, *what culture is*, the first image we are going to have depicted, in many cases, are the great monuments of the past or the great thinking of ancient philosophy; the endless system of knowledge built in literature or a piece of art. All these different elements are extremely differentiated in their reality; some are heavy objects, built thousands of years ago, some are colors on a canvas, some are letters on a page or even ideas transmitted from our ancestors to us. What is the connection behind them? Is it culture just an object from the past? These questions are not so direct even if it seems so easy to be answer. What we generally see as first, is a temporal distance between these objects, are grown in the past and us, who are watching them analytically, learning from them. Investigating the role of this objects and the way of seeing them was the base of the great debate during the XX century, especially in the role of the viewer, the receiver and its relationship with the author. The media of art, for example has seen a fertile field of debates through works. This interplay among the figures of abstractionism and cubism, like Pablo Picasso, Mondrian, Kandinsky, key figures of the century, are deeply analyzed by Wolfgang Paalen in his writing *Form and Sense* (1945) and the key sentence of the book is: «*Paintings no longer represent; it is no longer the task of art to answer naïve questions. Today it has become the role of paintings to look at the spectator and ask him: what do you represent?*» (Paalen and Sawin 1945).

Remembering this relation between questions and answers in the artistic environment, we could analyze a similar connection between mankind and culture following to the idea of architectures in our cities and especially how a concept as culture, which belong to mankind, is now applied to cities. As we said before, the last century represented and shaped our contemporaneity in physical and intellectual thinking; our cities are majorly produced during last century, our way of thinking, our society in his complexity and all the backgrounds behind our point of view on sciences are based into the XX century. On this topic, I will briefly clarify the conception of the term culture in order to extrapolate its real meaning and use which is not just a consequence but as protagonist in this evolution. What we are going to consider is not culture as a passive object in a museum but an active agent in our life.

The term culture has been deeply debated with the work of anthropologists and historians, both in the first and the second half of last century. Since the debate started far back, from the transformation of modern society during the Enlightenment period and the development of modern philosophy while the roots are based and researched in the ancient Greek philosophers, if you just take in consideration the western world. If we introduce the conception of culture in Chinese history, we will also have a long story, probably even larger. In order to be precise on the focus of the research, we are going investigate this term with a specific point of view, even though could be consider superficial for some extensions but enough to introduce it for the architectural thinking. We will use the glasses of another investigator this time. With the book *Cultura. Dalla complessità all'impoverimento* (2011) and the point of view of the Italian anthropologist, Francesco Remotti, we are going to define briefly some definition around culture which are useful to integrate culture in the work.

As introduced in the first part of this chapter, we could commonly relate to the word culture in two different ways. The first one is referred to specific individual, of the past or the present, which are elevated above normal people, for their knowledge or specific education, differentiating them from normal people. The same happens with monuments. The second one is, more commonly, used to point out different groups of people with common behavior, values or thinking: the pop culture, African culture, Chinese culture etc. What is, however, involved in the different meanings of culture is a common matrix of the word, which is related to agriculture. In Latin the word *colere* was, in fact, the verb to indicate farming, living, decorates, venerate or practicing a certain right. (Remotti 2011)

On the base of the agricultural matter, there is the idea of culture as a concept of transformation. Farmers, every day, work their fields in order to produce something, or better, cultivate certain products. This idea put the concept of culture in a perpetual movement, in order to produce something, liberating so, since the beginning, the idea of culture as something static, or worst, from the past. On the contrary the only preoccupation of farmers is the future. Joachim Gottfried Herder thought about culture in these terms: «*constantly in a sort of journey through men*» (Herder 1769). The work of Herder is particularly relevant in the recognition and the refuse of the first type of culture we described. This essential root in agriculture was not only prerogative of Europeans, superior race, but spread all over the world. Frequently he referred to this

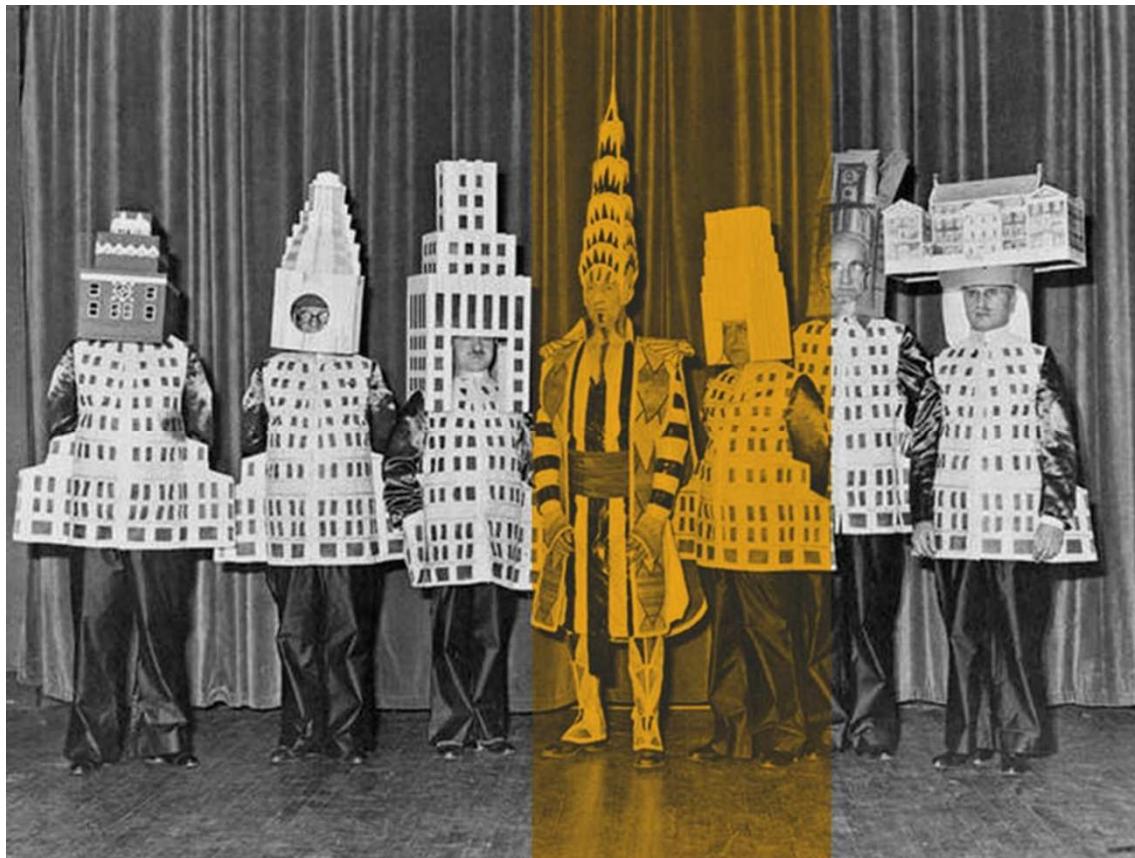


Figure 3.2 Architects dressed as their buildings at the Beaux-Arts Ball (1931)

idea as *Culture of Humanity* (*Kultur der Menschheit*). This influence had a relevant impact on the panorama of that time in a quite scandalous way. It would take few decades before people accepted the idea that culture could be evenly spread geographically in human societies and temporally in the past. We would see in a bit less than a century later works as *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* of Jacob Burckhardt (1860) which are extremely relevant in the fields of historiography marking an essential step in the understanding of the subject. With this work, in fact, «we are able to embrace the complex system of the manifestations of human spirit» (Remotti 2011). In the same years, if we move from Germany to England, we could be able the conclusion of this development in the work of Edward B. Tylor and his work *Primitive culture*, in 1871, where he synthetized the considerations we have done since now: «a) a deformation of the boundaries beyond the ethnography of the notion of culture; b) culture as a set of different activities and not only those related to the intellectual thinking; c) culture is defined as acquired element which is not part of the genetic background; d) the connection between the society, which is the source of the

*transmission of culture»* (Remotti 2011).

Another element defined by the conception of culture, in terms of agricultural uses, is the reiterative nature of working the fields. This everyday concept introduced the terms habits, the repetitive practice which is essential to the success and survival of human feeding. At the same time, the word habits it is connected the word *clothes* (*abiti* in Italian). While the English word *habits* take its background from Latin, the word *clothes* it is not. However, the translation in *habitus*, which is the same matrix for both, indicates what we could translate as costumes). In this sense another characteristic of culture emerged, even if literacy of nowadays abandoned this association “*traditions and costumes*”, which is the irregularity of the actions, or better the variability of costumes. Culture is in fact far from the ideas of stability and repetitive behaviors. A farmer, for instance, must cooperate not only with the desired output he predicts, many other conditions around him shape his behavior, environmental conditions and topography are few of these. These example helps us to explain the extreme flexibility inside the concept of culture, in the reality of the world.

The expression of costumes is essential for us to understand and to use culture in terms of construction material. This is a key aspect of the investigation, taking in consideration the deepest aspect of human history, which is its evolution, the common thread that guided us from the very beginning. The idea of habit could not only be referred to clothes with its different variations but could be extended to each exterior element used by human bodies to survive. This includes buildings. From the book *The superorganic* by Alfred L. Kroeber in 1917 till the original version of human history presented by Yuval N. Harrari in *Sapiens A brief history of humankind* (2014), the common sense developed is the recognition of humans beings as cultural animals. Trying to go back in time for few seconds, let us imagine ourselves more or less “as we are now” in the middle of the African Savanah. I assume more or less “as we are now” trying to exclude the genetic evolution of mankind and taking in consideration what the expert called epigenetic. In order to survive *homo sapiens* developed a thick coat, sharp claws, incredible agility and strength and sensible senses. We have obviously none of those characteristics, today and yesterday. What allows us to survive was not our intrinsic potential but our ability in model our outside, our costumes and our surroundings. That is how we started to use pelts of animals to survive in the far North, build wooden spears to hunt food and the first human settlements. The great weapon of

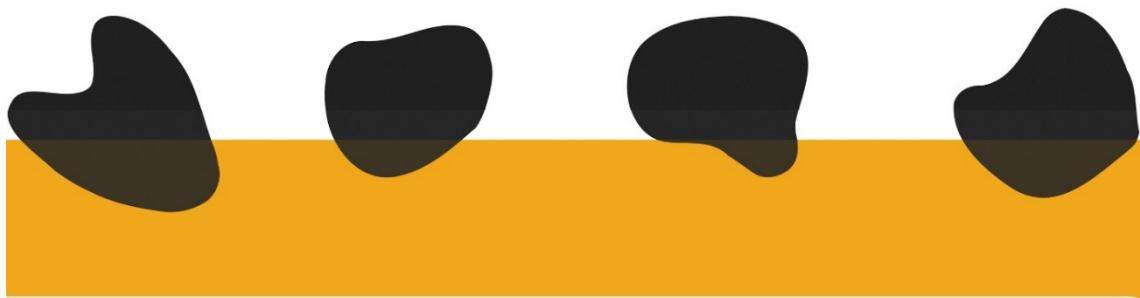


Figure 3.3 Variations of culture in space and time, Marco Giribaldo

humans was leaving out of the game their body. Other animals, on contrary, underwent much more physical developments in shaping their bodies to their environment. This required them time, energy and the changes are permanent. *Homo Sapiens* developed an extreme quality in adapting to the exterior conditions. «*they born naked and helpless [...]»* (Remotti 2011). With these words we could easily understand the exteriority of culture and how culture become me the key aspect in the evolution of human being. The most evident fact of the exteriority of culture is, in fact, human language and the ability of *Sapiens* to communicate among themselves. This is the most relevant point Harari, which put the development of languages as the starting point of an era called *Cognitive Revolution* (Harari 2014). The externality of culture and its production in elements, physical and not, allow us to put together not only the artistic production but also the simple tools of everyday life, which are integral part of the habits. It is for this reason for example that archeologists give great value to the multiplicity of the objects which they discover in order to understand society. The tools for production are relatively richer of information than unique piece of art. These tool are, in fact, able to explain the



Figure 3.4 *On Space Time Foam*, Thomas Saraceno, Milan, 2012

continuity in human evolution, the accumulation of small realities which produced the collective development in human life (Carandini 1979). This is relatively important because we could break down the idea that culture is something that distinguish people in A and B, elevate one compared to the others. This externalization of culture created a plurality of interpretations which we called diversity, different in space and time. Example of this externalization are the sharped stones or house to protect the human bodies from the outside. This evolution in objects created a different relationship between men and the world. On the base of these facts, even if culture find its representation in the production of things, we should not consider culture as collection inventions. On the contrary, we should consider it a preliminary state of human beings. The organic evolution and the cultural evolution took place in parallel (Remotti 2011). So, culture is an essential factor that participated, even in biological terms, to the evolution of humanity. Culture, summing up very briefly is an *in-between* of «*what our body need and what we need to know in order to make it work*»; an empty space which need to be filled with culture (Remotti 2011).

Externality of culture also involves another process, which is the continuous and endless need of restarting, re-inventing itself, generation after generation. The naked offspring need to employ culture in order to grow up. This process required a social interaction, through symbols, practices or in general a sharing space in which happened. The continuous reproduction and interpretation create a tremendous flexibility, or better, resilience in the process of development, with infinites shades of beings. This is the social environment of culture, which is merely immaterial, formless. This allowed the flexibility to the environment, in the diversity of the answers and the reason why this happens is because the connection between the need and its satisfaction is then filtered by culture and it is not unique (Malinowsky 1931). We could say that culture exists in its social interaction among the individuals which realize it and the social reproduction in its various forms, «*Each reproduction of culture is alteration*» (Sahlins 2016), so its existence its represented in its various individual variation and continuous deviation and become effective only in its use, as languages (Remotti 2011).

With these explanations we are starting to visualize culture in a different way than before. Culture is not an exclusive property of someone, but it is spread between humanity, it is not an object, but it is an undetermined social space and it is dynamic and open to changes. If we try to represent it in a shape it now more abstract and fluid.

### 3.2 Culture and Human Beings?

Assuming what we said in terms of culture, as an *in-between* filter, between us and the world, a relative important question should be raised. Is it culture it is only a human prerogative? Can we extend this concept to other realms such as cities? Yes, even if, without any doubts, *Homo Sapiens* is for sure the most cultural entity among the animals, we could. This transition is important in order to break the limits we usually put to the discourse around culture and consequently apply it to cities. On the base of this, we could start to deconstruct that wall between humans with their culture and other natural systems such as animals and vegetables organism. As a matter of fact, with this assumption we are, in a sense putting under pressure many architectural dualities that existed in history, distinction between city and nature, interior comfort and exterior discomfort, architectural style in western world and those “*exotic*” vernacular settlements. Therefore, the word culture could assume a more zoological value and not only for anthropological meanings. Many animal are doing cultural actions, from the



Figure 3.5 *Survival*, Ba'aka Pygmies in Congo, Kate Eshelby (2010)

domestic dogs to the macaques of Koshima, which throwing a bunch of grains in the water they remove the sand from it (Bonner 1980). Thanks to the publication of John T. Bonner in 1980, *The Evolution of Culture in Animals* many examples of how in this evolutive patterns, of learning and reproducing, collection of information and transformation in empirical actions, not only human beings are cultural entities in this world. The conception of culture is, from this point on, put under the spotlight. What in the past was described as a soul , in the Christian environment with the meaning of culture in a sense, is now extended. Not only the condition of transition from anthropological to zoological meaning of culture is changed but also the position in the process of evolution is discussed. The prerogative of culture, as result and achievement of humanity in its development, has been brought in the discussion during the last 40 years together with the outputs of culture. We already mentioned before that culture is no more identified as a product but as precedent condition of evolution. So, it is not consequent to the origin of humankind. A sort of pre-human condition (Remotti 2011). On this principle the work of John T. Bonner is significant. The cultural evolution is the



Figure 3.6 Soybean harvesting in Campo Verde, Brazil, Alf Ribeiro (2019)

progressive use of non-genetic feature with an adaptive value. Information got from learning and transmission are essential in every environment in which a choice is needed (Bonner 1980). This *proto-culture* point of view, extremely present in humans, brought the development not only biological of the brain but also in the collective sphere, the social habitat which is much broader than the organic boundaries of men and women. In this habitat, there is what Remotti investigated as the development of languages as well as art, for example. This parallel evolution between cultural actions with the biological evolution allowed the capacity of *auto-production* and *auto-reflection* which are specific for human culture (Remotti 2011) in a continuous reproduction of itself outside the genetic conditions. Putting this filter of culture as natural element (but not genetic) and for the characteristic mentioned before of reproduction, we cannot assume any society as a simple collection of response to needs for instance, for example, with the linear connection between stimulus and response, because culture inject this layer of multiplicity of possible choices (Bonner 1980). Not only choices, but also the creative responses are multiple: a cultural response is



Figure 3.7 *Plan Voisin* Paris, Le Corbusier (1925)

reproducible and not definitive, in the sense that they are revocable and editable through time in a rapid way showing an intense adaptive feature.

This idea brings to the definition that cultural problems, and other issues as well, like social and public issues, are complex entities to approach. This reasonings are relatively important for us because this linear production of architecture and cities, that we still see nowadays raising up, are actions working in the opposite sense, trying to create universal responses which are direct and unique. Some example are the theories of Adam Smith trying to create a sort of natural society based on economic needs, pretending that modernity was the only way walkable by humanity for a better future, leading to the society of Consumerism (Remotti 2011). For us, this process started when Adolf Loos with *Ornament and crime* hope for erasing all sorts of cultural elements from buildings with the pure element of truthful form, for instance. All these factors were then absorbed by modernism in what we called *International Style*, but we are going to deepen these aspects in next chapters.

However, the crisis of the modern city, could represent for us the end of a functional

attitude of designing the city which started with the *cité industrielle* of Tony Garnier and arrived today with monofunctional zoning systems of big metropolitan areas. The heritage of the industrial city is what people of the XX century had produced as complicated systems (Remotti 2017). These elements as well as the idea of culture, are means through which the world is understood and faced. However, the complicated systems are not adaptable, in the sense that they are born in order to solve simple and singular issue. While complex systems, with multiple interconnections are able to survive, complicated systems are extremely fragile. Our cities are one example (Bianchetti 2017).

What we are focusing now is the interesting characteristic of adaptivity of cultural choices and responses. If we take a stone tool own by *Homo Sapiens* nothing would have been against its transformation in an iron tool. This happened because the response to the need allows many different variations not are not biologically determined. This is the big success that allow the cultural evolution, majorly for mankind, in what we could call a sort of innovative process. With this reliance on culture, mankind, has been freed itself from the completeness and exhaustiveness of biological humans. Since culture it is not a result brought by the natural evolution, as anthropologist and philosopher like Herder and Nietzsche would define a *stratigraphic evolution*, but integral part of the evolution it lets openness and flexibility needed for the adaptation. What we can define is a dual system of completeness and rigidity, given by biological elements, overlapped with openness and adaptivity which break and empties the first one enabling the adaptation and quick responsive behavior to withstand the surrounding conditions. The empty spaces are occupied by cultural elements (Remotti 2011).

### 3.3 Opening

We ended the previous paragraph two important feature of culture which are related to the same target of opening to the adaptation of organisms: the continuous process of reproduction of culture and the dual system where culture scratches and fulfills the biological sphere. Let us start our analysis from this last ingredient. Could be ambiguous the idea that biological entities, are a complete system. When before we said that human beings are born naked, we should consider it as a negative aspect, as something missing. What could be more intuitive is that culture completed the biological evolution on the base of an essential lack of natural characteristics. Lack of

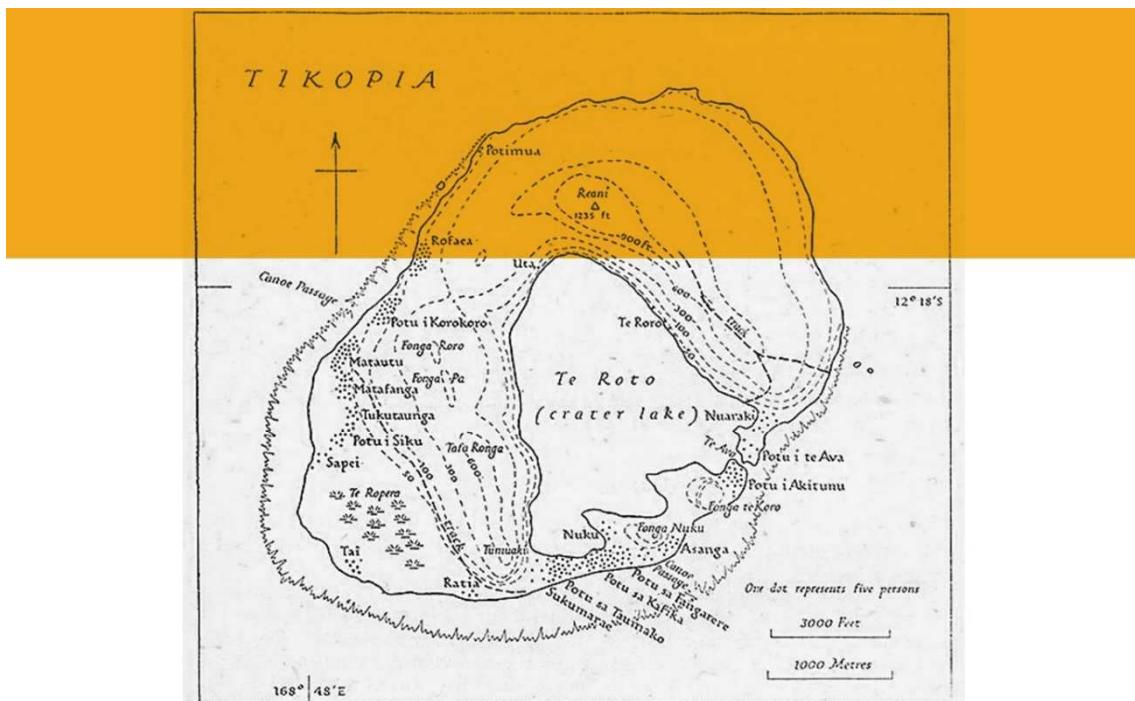
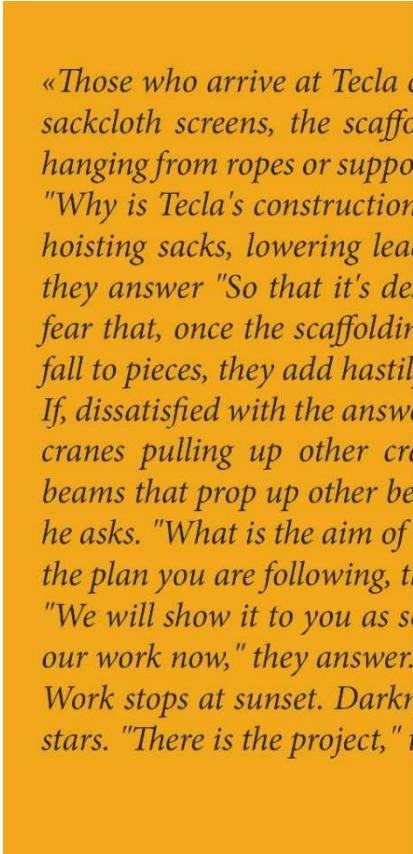


Fig. 227. Tikopia

Scale, orientation, coastline and form lines are only approximate. The reef continues as a very narrow fringe round the northern coast. Two main tracks only are shown; there are also less important tracks through cultivations; and the beach is also used as a highway. Based on: (1) R. Firth, *We, The Tikopia*, pp. xviii, xix (London, 1936); (2) R. Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, p. 40 (London, 1939).

Figure 3.8 Plan of Tikopia, U.S. Navy (1943-1945)

predative or defensive systems, lack of protective elements and many other things. However, it is not the research of completeness, the ultimate meaning of culture. Many times, in the past, this idea of completeness through cultural development led to disparity in the dialogue between societies for example: sometime with the name of truth, sometime with the name of civilization, these processes had seen at least two different societies in contact but one of them has not said any word. We could just think about the debate on the architectural historiography during the last two century and the consideration of the development of other vernacular societies. At the same time if we considered each society completed by its cultural evolution, flattening them on the same plan, we are forcing the reality into close boxes with no need of interaction with the outside. If societies are auto-sufficient there is no need for cultural exchange (Remotti 2011). There would not be any dialogue between society and not even curiosity. The characteristic of culture in its endless reproduction, it is moving in a close circle if we think this way. This idea does not mean that it is not truth, it happened many times that societies closed their boundaries. Many are the example that could be discussed



«Those who arrive at Tecla can see little of the city, beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffoldings, the metal armatures, the wooden catwalks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles. If you ask "Why is Tecla's construction taking such a long time?" the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer "So that its destruction cannot begin." And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, "Not only the city." If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. "What meaning does your construction have?" he asks. "What is the aim of a city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the project?" "We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now," they answer. Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. "There is the project," they say.» (Calvino, 1993)

Figure 3.9 City of Tecla, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino (1972)

from the past, but it is also true that when the Belgian stated to explore the ocean around Tikopia, even the blurred image of the ship represented for the people of the island, a huge breakthrough in the box. Our guide, Remotti, take into considerations the studies in neuroscience to explain that humans are not biologically incomplete, they are complete beings since they born. Human brains are, in fact, born with unexpected richness of cerebral connection and potential functionality. Once alive, they become more and more, in a sense, specialized according to the environment in which they live. We could say that *culture intervene as a reduction factor* (Remotti 2011). Culture represents in this new light, an agent for “*un-completion*”, eroding the solid space of genetic predefinition and where openings are created. That void is, filled with culture, what makes possible the space of adaptability in terms of responses and interpretation. This process, moreover, let the space for the introduction of “*others*” in the creation of the single human being, the relation with similar individuals or the environment. Jean Loup Amselle even said that closed societies never existed. We can agree if we consider the relationship between enemies the same as master and pupils (Amselle 2001). On the

base of this, humans and societies with all their cultural elements cannot be considered as closed systems. In this sense relations and communication in the form of dialogue are intrinsically connected with culture, if not essential terms, in order to engage it forming an interconnected process. «*the idea of un-completed help us to imagine a building site always open, not finished, where we test and discuss [...] and with a strong sense of alternatives*». For these reasons, the first parameter we introduced at the beginning of the paragraph, the continuous process of reproduction of culture requires the introduction of *others*, in order to keep it active. Actions of education, traditions, rituals, symbols, adaptations re-invention through generations are means created in order to guaranty this process. Culture if not reproduced, as well as languages not spoken are projected to die. In this way humans are more open to the changes, assuming *un-completeness* as destination instead of the initial point. Many theories are against this thinking in the western world, from Aristotle for example in the way that artists should imitate nature (because its completeness), in order to achieve perfection and fill the defects of humans. What we are trying to achieve is not the state of stability but getting closer to the Chinese warlords described by Sun Tzu through the words of Françoise Jullien. The great commander is, in fact, not the desperate leader of an epic and dramatic battle, but the one who can read and adapt himself and his troops to the environment, to the enemy or, in general, to the situation (Jullien 2017). This way of thinking it is extremely realistic and flexible, much different from the methodology in which the models of thinking reside in the abstract world, simplifying the reality and it is then applied to the reality. In this sense, *un-completeness*, in terms of openness and adaptivity are strictly correlated in an advantage. Refusing these reasoning means isolationism; completeness means no *others*.

### 3.4 Open System

The introduction of the dimension of relationships between *us* and *other* in a sort of reciprocal enriching taken from the process of opening, bring to the discourse a distinction between the idea of one, solid and complete, and the idea of system, made of parts in connection among the others. These last terms are what for us, more important. We will talk soon about the trap brought by completeness and uniqueness in the next chapters trying to go directly on the core of the architectural thinking. The idea of openness that we introduced before, it is relatively important for us, architects,

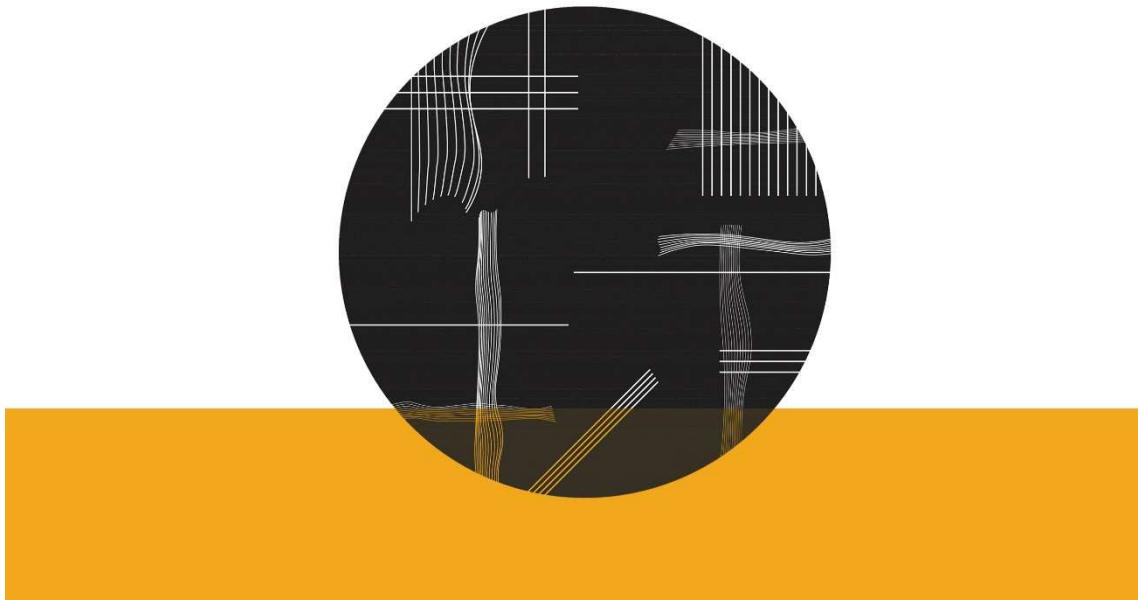


Figure 3.10 *Porous solid*, Marco Giribaldo

especially if we mean by that, the ability of adapting itself through the environment and the external conditions. This act of resilience is in fact what we introduced in the first pages of this work. What UNESCO is trying to promote in terms of sustainability is this resilience of cities and urban spaces. The idea of open system is what could help us in this case to make clear what is this resilience.

The concept of system is quite familiar for us, as architects, if we say, for example, construction system. We could define building as a system made of elements following compositional fundaments, aesthetical, structural or environmental aspects. So, these elements are not only put together, but they follow an organization. We could exemplify this, using a linguistic metaphor. A lexical collection which, in order to form a discourse, follows a syntax (Trisciuglio 2008). The same idea could be extended to cities as well, where people and building are rather interconnected elements, in continuous relationships according to a *morphe*. Human bodies are working as well in this way: organs, bones, muscles are creating not only an anatomic construction but a physiological system (Remotti 2011). What is the real essence of a system is the

composition of part and their relations. This relation become more important when it define the completion of the system itself. This space of relations is important because a system has a sort of void inside able to differentiate the various elements which are kept together by their connection.

What become harder to describe is the distinction between closed system and open system, and this become a crucial point of the work. Can we consider a building on which it has been built the roof as a closed system? And can we consider it complete? Probably yes, if are considering the small scale, but a building is always standing on its site, the site is connected to a context and so on. If we broaden up our point of view on the city things become more complex. Can we define a city a closed system? Is it ever be completed? Considering the problem from a more conceptual point of view, the words of Remotti, helped by the research of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, should help to investigate and consequently use this idea of open system. Closed systems are generally systems which are isolated in order to reduce their complexity. Western modern physics, according to Bertalanffy, treats this kind of issues. The huge advantage of this is the direct connection between needs (or issues) and solutions are, for example, the simplification of complex processes. According to François Jullien, this is the most relevant difference between the technological innovation of western world and China (Jullien 2017). In China, and eastern culture in general, might be simpler the understanding of open system. While closed systems find their only existence in the abstract realm, open systems are more grounded in the reality. Bertalanffy defines open systems as all the natural organisms because they are in a continuous exchange with the environment, not only of energy but also of matter (Remotti 2011).

We could see as relationship are not only between the parts inside the system but also between the elements and the outside through their skin. This sort of metabolism describing the city as an organism has been cited many times during last century. The Japanese experience of the 60s, in this case, or the term *organic* architecture, in the definition of Bruno Zevi in 1945. This concept of open system is the important linkage we can create between culture and cities. The thinking behind this work is starting to consider the city as organism, which in this case is a cultural being, able to define new relations between the built environment and people, city and building, private and public open and indoor spaces. The term culture introduced this layer of *un-completeness* which unable the creative production and response to need which are not

direct. The project on the urban context acquires a point of view of acting in the human perspective and the idea of *in-between* will play an important role in the definition of these connections between the elements.

### **3.5 Toward Openness**

Here we are following the title of the homonymous book (2017) written by Li Hu and his wife Huang Wenjing trying to introduce the relationship between what we are saying, and the issues related to Chinese context. We are connecting the word *OPEN*, which is the name of their office in Beijing, with the meaning of culture. The word *openness* instead of *opening* indicates what for us is an auspicious state of the things towards which aim and not just a blinking action. We are putting this quality in an optimistic meaning, with a great positive power which is going to assist us towards the explanation of the project more specifically.

As we have seen before the characteristics of openness derives from the biological analysis of humans and even the zoological environment. This topic started to change many realities during last century. The idea of atoms, for instance, changed during the development of modern physics. It is no longer a singular entity, full of matter and complete, but its boundaries are unstable, open and uncertain. Moreover, inside of it there are some empty spaces (Remotti 2011). The same could be translated in buildings: its components are in relation among themselves creating empty spaces. Last Biennale exhibitions in Venice are examples in this direction. The idea of space goes beyond the simple idea of mere construction. The idea of *Freespace* brought by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara created a great freedom of interpretations (Farrell and McNamara 2018). This void occupied by culture, with the incredible transformative power, is what Robert Lowie defined as our civilization: «*our civilization is an amorphous product, without any plan, a chaotic jumble, a thing made by shreds and patches*» (Remotti 2011).

The idea of system brought in the discussion the dimension of the relationships between the parts. There is a physical space in which this happens. As we imply before talking about the skin or few lines above, in the strand connecting patches, there is a dimension where happens the relation between the organism and the environment. As Claude Bernard in the XIX century, the survival of organisms, the existence of organisms doesn't take place entirely inside the body nor outside of it (Remotti 2011). The living

process located in the relations between outside and inside, it is essentially located in the in-between. For humans not only energy and matter are exchanged through the envelope but also information, which is absorbed through the filter of culture. For this reason, we cannot simply see human beings acting for the stimulus and direct reaction. The cultural filter act as a protective layer toward sudden changes. From these perspectives, culture act in an essential element for evolution, in fact, it created a joint point between bodies and the outside able to absorb the changes, reacting and modelling itself to protect the elements. The characteristic of openness is intrinsically connected to this topic because it is through openness that humans largely made use of culture as evolitional factor beyond genetic. This phenomena not only act as a passive agent but on the contrary is able to be active, creative and particular (Bonner 1980). For this reason, the open system, able to grab and use the exterior input are flexible and less rigid. Their survival is guaranteed from cultural adaptation. In the infinite multiplicity of choices culture is a guide. A guide in the complexity of the world. Open systems are complex as well. All the organic system, which are open on the base of what we said before, is complex on the base of an interconnection to a network as Alessandro Pizzorno wrote in 1973 in *L'incompletezza dei sistemi* (Remotti 2011). Open systems, and complex as result, are networks which are intertwine with other systems. Therefore, their reactions are not linear due to its intrinsic openness. The interconnection of system could also happen between different systems and according to Pizzorno this is majorly influence reactions and understanding. Also, the intention of this thesis is working on this wave, for example. It is using other systems of knowledge in order to understand, under a certain point of view, the complexity of Chinese cities. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, systems cannot be isolated, they need to be studied in their transformation (Remotti 2011).

I think it is now time to give a definition of culture on the base of what we explained before, with the support of our usual lens of Francesco Remotti. We could define culture as a dimension, what we called *in-between*, where relations take place. Culture is a series of undefined space, between organisms and the world. This space could be identified with material, processes, intellectual, social or symbolic. Culture is the relation, the connection with nature, with other organisms, with ourselves (Remotti 2017). In this definition we could see the nature of culture, which is the complex dimension where intersection and network of relations take place. This dimension is, as

Bonner showed us, even more important than the existence of the single objects. Therefore, culture could be analyzed under the idea of J. Steven Lansing given in 2003, where as well as natural systems, also cultural systems, such as cities, are *Complex Adaptive Systems* (Lansing 2003). These three words together are very relevant for us because cities are put on the same level of the natural organisms, or societies. Those open system we embraced before. Cities and culture, or cultures, are complex, meaning the high level of interaction between the elements. Nonlinear interactions are frequent, while linear interactions are the exception. For these characteristics it is a dynamic system, always moving, sometime ambiguously, and therefore the great potential is to be adaptive, open to changes. John Holland said about complex adaptive system: «*complex adaptive systems are open systems, formed by numerous elements interacting in nonlinear ways, building a unique identity, organized and dynamic, able to evolve and adapt itself to the environment*» (Remotti 2011). The dimension of relation has a transformative potential because we are always different after a relations took place (Remotti 2017). The characteristic of openness is essential to guarantee the continuous exchange and interaction without which, it would lose its characteristic of resilience. This aspect is the first brick to relate our line of reasoning culture to the idea of city. The idea of resilient cities we introduced in the first chapter must use the term culture in this way and not only as an object, as heritage, aware of the potential that culture could bring to the topic.

The influence of these ideas will be reflected later, talking of the project. The space of culture which erodes the dense historical city is going to be the sublime image we are going to depict addressing culture as solution and creating new potentialities, connections, relationship and rediscovering the existing systems of relations between the objects and people living in the city. The idea of *in-between* among buildings and people will be used as the base point from which the urban regeneration of the traditional city will start. Introducing this dimension of culture, which is not a product, but, on the contrary an active agent before the production, we will understand how cultural city can be projected in the future and not only as a preservation of the existing past.

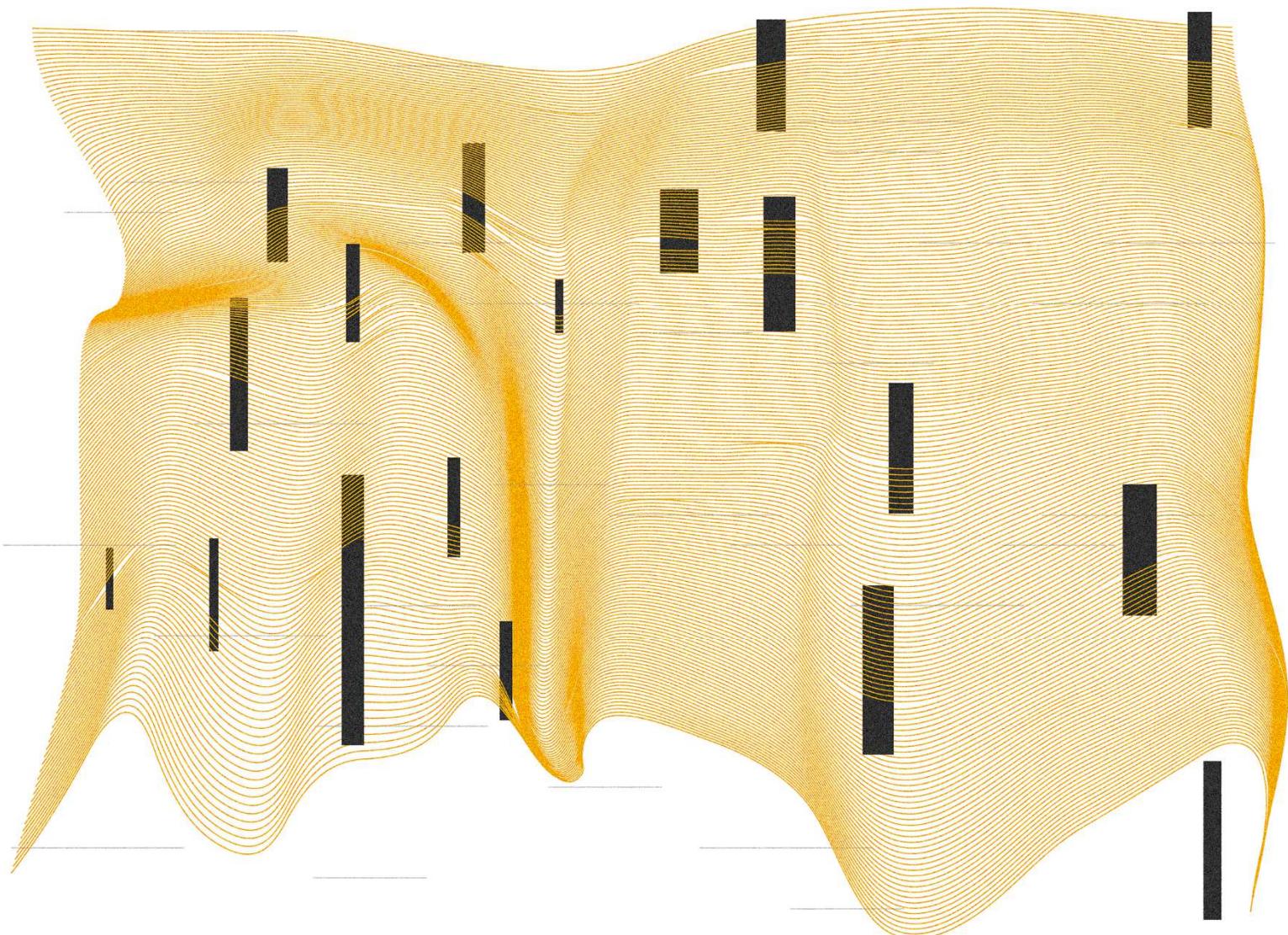


Figure 3.11 *Shape of culture*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 4.1 *Two organisms*, Marco Giribaldo

## Chapter 4 City as Organism (?)

### 4.1 Chinese Cities of Today

Could be strange to see how many pages we spent on the description of the term culture inside a thesis about architecture but I think it is relevant to introduce the specific meaning of this term referred to architecture and especially in using it as a tool for building the future of the city. The use of this word could be, in fact, dangerous. We would briefly see how this happened in Chinese development of cities, specifically in historic cities, even if, this topic could be extended to all new developments. For the limits of this thesis, we will cut the digressions on this topic in order to have a practical example on using this concept where culture is introduced as a pro-active tool just in the traditional city. In this sense, we are going to focus on the historical inner city of Beijing which represent for us an opportunity for applying these elements to the reality.

We are selecting this specific context essentially for its roll played in the city today and its role during last century, where the urban landscape presented conspicuous changes. Not by chance, the main reference of this chapter is a book which has been titled *A century of change* (Y. Wang 2016).

In order to understand why we are choosing the inner city of Beijing as a focal point of our discourse, we need to explain some information about the city and its evolution, reading the space from the inside. Understand every single hint is essential in reading space and culture inside Chinese cities and their complexity. Also starting this chapter is difficult. Difficult in defining which is the starting point of the story. As consequence the next few paragraphs are going to be focused on the premises we have done before about culture and its meaning and its connection to the project we are going to present. In these terms we could see the whole work of this thesis, it is not consequential, nor linear illustration. It could be read from the end to the beginning or starting from the middle. As a matter of fact, the starting point is not architectural and decided following the order in which the research process took place. The idea of starting from an anthropological view, that could read global issues, is due to a matter of reading the complex reality. It is very difficult to grasp the totality of Chinese cities. and the background we built allow us to simplify the order of the ideas. In the work of Dieter Hassenpflug which we are going to use in order to make some assumptions, for example, a straightforward question is considered as primary. *How to read a city?* This is the title of the first chapter. With *The Urban Code of China* (2012), he introduced the idea of reading the city with the use of semiotic, introduced by Umberto Eco and other scientists in the second half of the last century (Hassenpflug 2012). In a certain way, he is also introducing a different point of view in reading the city, which is somehow connected to a cultural reading of symbolic meanings. Beijing in this sense played a tremendous role of symbolic meaning for the nation. It is this one, our starting point, when Beijing, as new capital, stated to see a shift between the destiny of the inner city and its extensions back to the middle of last century. The introduction of anthropological tools for reading the city will give us a point of view out of the system where we are immersed as architects (Remotti 2018).

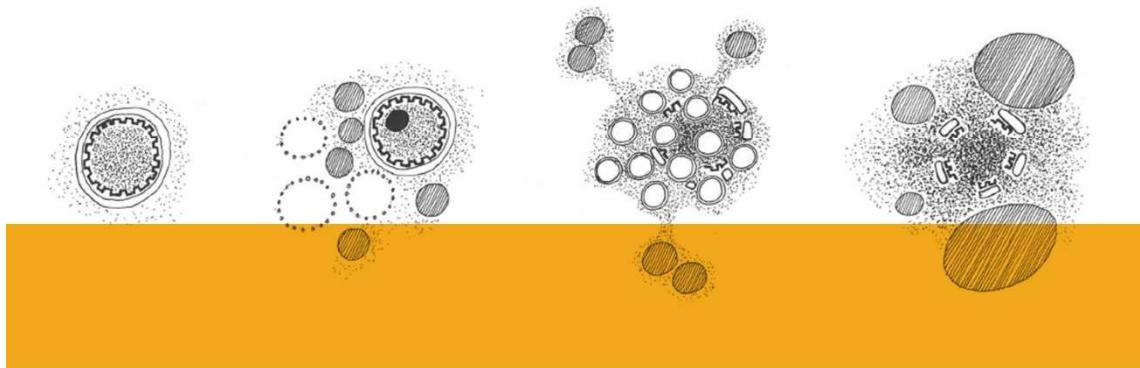


Figure 4.2 *Transformation of the structure of Chinese cities*, Chen Fei & Kevin Thwaites (2009)  
 a) Imperial city b) Cities during XIX and XX century c) Cities after 1949 d) Cities after 1978

## 4.2 Evolution in the City

The panorama of today, exploring the city of Beijing, reveals how last century developed in different layers of the evolution. It is clear the coexistence of the old city center, the core of both social and political life of the past of imperial city, and the tremendous expansion of the city beyond the old boundaries. The legacy of the first city is still present today, even if, it undergoes hard times and transformations. The panorama of the city at the beginning of the XX century appeared as an untouched traditional city from more than 500 years back. The homogeneous pattern of the courtyard houses was interrupted by the presence of the imperial monuments, rising from the flat skyline: Forbidden city with the *Jingshan hill* on the background, the old *Drum Tower*, the pagodas spread on the city together with the temples. While in 1950s the inner-city extension counted a surface of 62.5 km<sup>2</sup>, mainly formed by traditional courtyard houses inscribed inside the Ming city walls, what in 2004 remained was only

12,5 km<sup>2</sup> of it. At the same time the total surface of the city increase of more than ten times and still this process is in place (Y. Wang 2016).

These numbers could briefly summarize the incredible impact the modernization of the city, and the nation in general, in only 50 years. In the 50s, after the first stages of setting up the new reforms brought by the CPC (Communist Party of China), the idea of modernization determined the beginning of the radical transformation of Beijing from a consumption city to a productive system (Chaolin, Xiaohui, and Jing 2010). In these years started a long process of overlapping and substitution of urban fabric, starting from the approval of *The Preliminary Plan of Urban Construction of Beijing* in 1958. Of course, this declaration created great debate in the intellectual environment, which however, did not influence the new wind of modernity. The first result was the complete demolition of the old city walls opening the city toward the outside. The destiny of the historical city came in contrast with a huge need of land for building factories. During these years, millions of square meters of traditional houses were dismantled. During the period between 1949 and 1976, more than 2 mln square meters were demolished while the remaining houses were declared with the status of *dilapidated* (Y. Wang 2016). The major changing to the cityscape was the introduction of the work-units or *danwei*. These spatial elements brought inside the city became micro-cosmos of living environment mixed with the working factories. In other words, these isolated elements created auto sufficient islands where people could live and work, children could go to the primary school and parents participate to the social interaction at the scale of the compound (Bonino, Croset, and De Pieri 2015). Although, the picture we described seemed to be peaceful and ideal, the situation was dramatically critical. The standards of living became quickly the lowest touched during last century in Beijing: *dime houses* were built under the standard of quality and services, for example no heating system in order to guarantee the compellent need of house units for the workers. In this period the density of the inner city reached the highest value of the city's evolution. In 1960, for instance, the amount of space per capita reached 3.24 m<sup>2</sup> (Y. Wang 2016).

This could be considered the first layer that the traditional city has seen, overlapping of linear constructions facing south. These *dime houses* standing today in bad conditions represent the layer of this historical period. They are specifically recognizable with their surrounding walls as boundary of that dimension between working and living. If we consider the morphology of these spaces, we could probably put this urban structure

beside the *siedlung* structure developed in Germany during the first half of the last century (Hassenpflug 2012). The definition of this boundaries not only defined a spatial development of work and living but also created a sort of identity and sense of belonging to the single compounds, in fact, inside the productive working units, social life took place with public facilities under the filter of the Soviet model imported from Russia. Many and substantial were the influences from the Soviet Union on the first masterplans of Beijing in this phase (Chaolin, Xiaohui, and Jing 2010).

Under a new light after 1979, Beijing found a new symbolic meaning with the *opening-up* step of Chinese boundaries. Beijing lost his specific nature of industrial city. The transition from a planned economy system to a market economy had strong effects on the urban landscape of Beijing and other cities. The major cause of changes was the opening of land market (Y. Wang 2016). This is the first step of Chinese cities toward the rise of tertiary industry for example, as well as fall of heavy industries in the urban landscape. Since the 80s the city saw multiple centers born and rise, the new Central Business District in the eastern side of the city could be considered one of the most relevant. The rapid expansion of housing increased exponentially the dimension of the city while, at the same time, the effects on the old city proper have been visible representing great opportunity, caused of the land value, for real estate agencies. From now on, most of the urban developments are housing districts toward the suburbs supported by a massive construction of infrastructures serving the city (Y. Wang 2016). At the same time the role of the Old City became precious for its high land value.

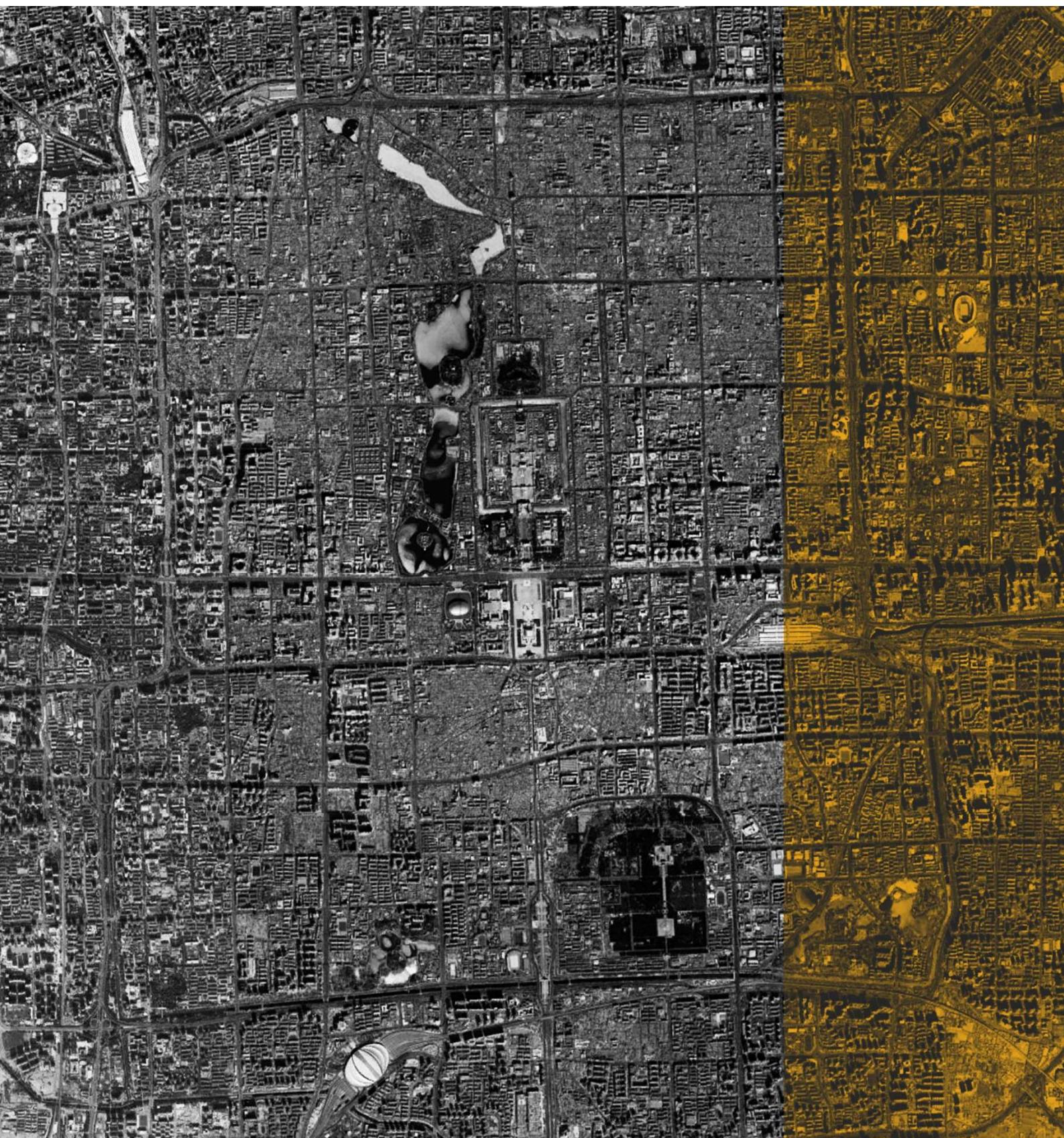


Figure 4.3 Satellite image of the city center of Beijing, Google Maps (2019)

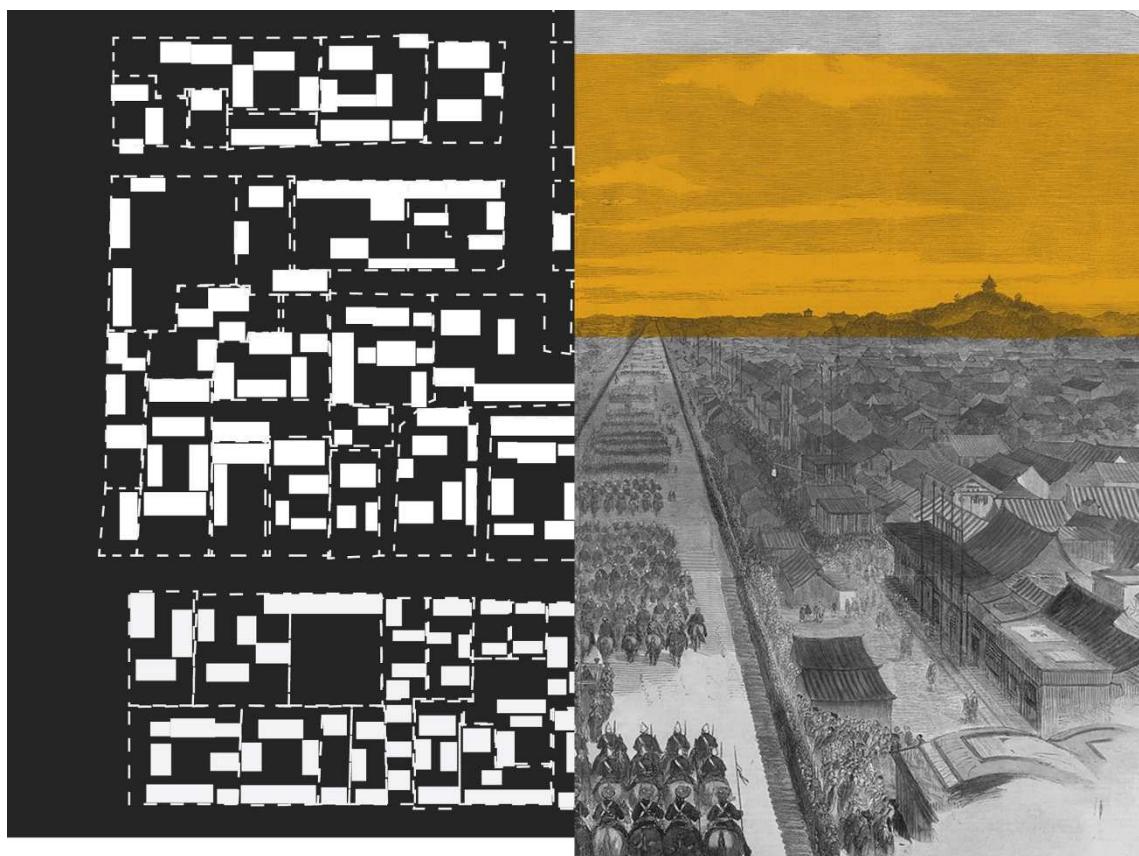


Figure 4.4 Morphology of *hutong* systems (based on Qianlong Map of the *hutongs*, 1750) (left); *Earl of Elgin's entrance into Peking* (1860) (right)

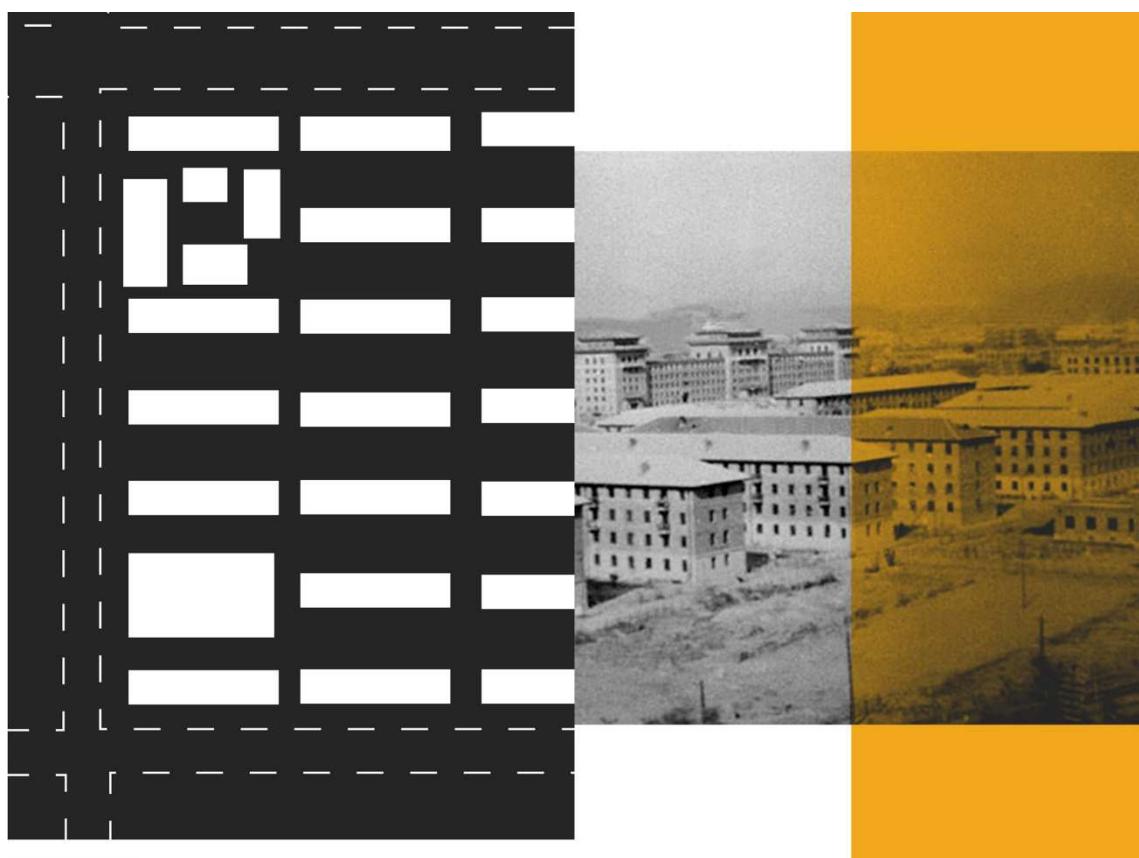


Figure 4.5 Morphology of *danwei* unit between 1949 and 1978 (Rowe, Forsyth, and Kan 2016) (left); *Work-unit compound*, Beijing (1950s) (Y. Wang 2016) (right)



Figure 4.6 Morphology of Wangjing West Garden District 4, Beijing (Rowe, Forsyth, and Kan 2016) (left); High-rise developments, Beijing, Marco Giribaldo (2019) (right)

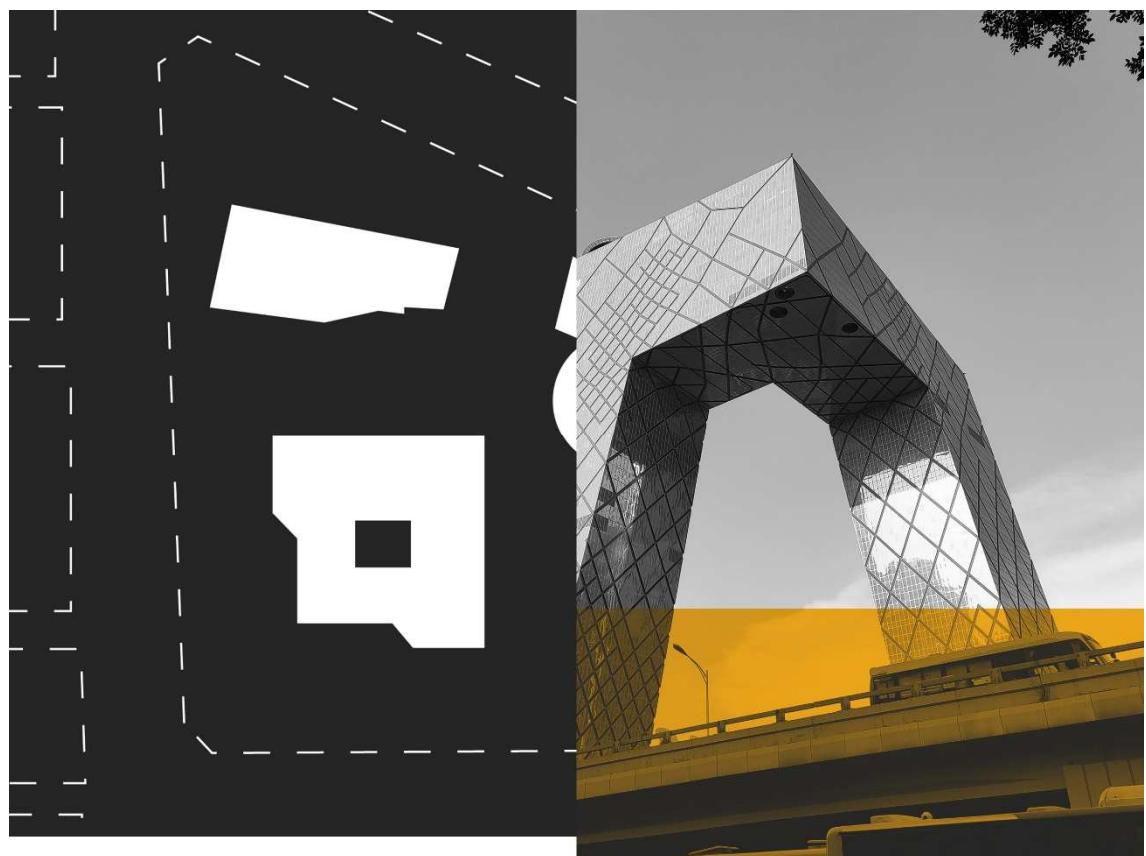


Figure 4.7 Morphology of CCTV block, Beijing, Marco Giribaldo (left); CCTV Headquarter, Beijing, Marco Giribaldo (2019) (right)



Figure 4.8 2nd Ring Road, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

### 4.3 Modernism in China

«We could almost have the impression that the urban design principles of the Charter of Athens weren't actually invented in Europe, but instead, in China.» (Hassenpflug 2012)

With these words, we could summarize the whole panorama offered by a train window during a trip in China. The perpetual repeating of cities and high-rise building popping up in the middle of the countryside, this is the image of the Hassenpflug. An image of responding to the housing demand for millions of Chinese people. This topic is relatively important and discussed nowadays in China with the motto “A thousands cities with one face” (Chalana and Hou 2016).

The process of urbanization, which is still taking place in China today, has been driven mainly by economical new condition as well as the importation of western models of lifestyle and building processes. However, the whole construction maintained a strong Chinese character in the ideology behind the urban landscape.



Figure 4.9 Gated community, Zhongguancun N Street, Beijing, Marco Giribaldo

Beijing is not an exception. During the last 30 years, after the introduction of market economy, the urban structure of the city evolved in new types of housing systems. With the work *China's Urban Communities* (Rowe, Forsyth, and Kan 2016), we could clearly see the fragmentation and the crystallization of urban typologies for housing in the city. Over the already mentioned traditional city and *danwei* system, a carpet of *superblocks* is stretched out, for example. During the 20 years before turning in the new century, more than 75% of the new construction is, for instance, high rise buildings in superblocks compounds (Rowe, Forsyth, and Kan 2016). The massive construction of building, homogeneous and standardized created not only generic landscape as Michael Jakob would define (2018), but also a constellation of enclosed worlds and enclaves, as someone could define.

This interesting, even if unsuccessful under a certain point of view, transition kept the idea of enclosure as foundation of Beijing's urbanization. The character of the traditional city has been pushed forward and forward, as a series of enclosed systems. The idea of Fordist mass production is relevant as systematic application of the

guidelines given by the experiences of *international style* around the world, and in China it found great applications, meeting a sort of Chinese character (Hassenpflug 2012). The main characteristic of Beijing as contemporary city is, as result, a city of walls. Even if, this poetic transitional perspective of reproducing ancient concepts into the modernity, the result has been critical at the level of social life and integration. This dark panorama could be defined *desert of relations* (Remotti 2017). The creation of walls is the materialization of those closed system we mentioned in the previous chapters. Problem of segregated communities, isolations and social inequality is a rising element of Chinese urbanization nowadays. Compounds are not only physically defined in spatial elements, but also in its social role in the city. However, with the pretext of safety, compound got big success in the phenomenon of urbanization. From 2000 to 2007, the largest model for new residential developments was this idea of urban compound. More than 80% of the new houses were gated commodity houses (He 2013). The enclave urbanism created a general reshaping of the urban form of Chinese cities and the material representation of social fragmentation under the name of communities. This idea of mosaic not only has been applied to residential developments, but also to many other activities such as universities, shopping areas, economic zones and pedestrian districts (Douglass, Wissink, and Kempen 2012). With the modernist idea of *machine for living* applied not only to the single house but to a broader context of the neighborhood, similar phenomenon took place all over the Chinese territory. The standardization of space as an enclosed product, cheap in production and affordable for the users, could be described as a success. Chinese cities of today, including Beijing, could be read mainly by the series of gates and fences describing the model of the enclave urbanism (Sennett 2017).

However, complex issues arise today. This idea we described rise for us an important point of reflection about the fragility of this system, which is going in the opposite direction compared to the guidelines we gave for resilient cities, as inclusive, attractive and cultural. The legacy of Modernism brought failures in its baggage, especially with the intention of what we could call *the buildings as a city*. «*Happily, it is possible to date the death of modern architecture to a precise moment in time.... modern architecture went out with a bang ...No, it expired finally and completely in 1972, after having been flogged to death remorseless for 10 years by critics...»* (Jencks 2002).

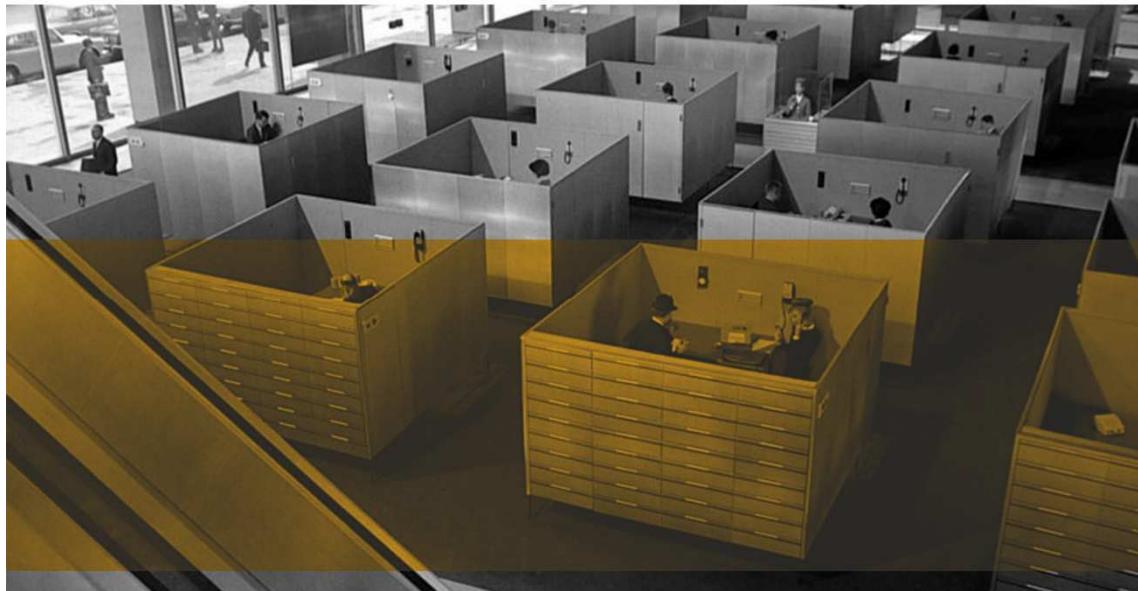


Figure 4.10 Scene from *Playtime* (1967)

What Charles Jencks is depicting is the moment in which the residential complex of *Pruitt-Igoe* blow up in pieces. This is probably one of the most visible examples, but many could be found in the list of the failures. Among them, for a shot period, also the famous *Unité d'habitation* by Le Corbusier in Marseilles. The literature on this urban form found many negatives effect in the social and cultural context of the urban enclave's phenomenon. Beside few positive aspects, the issue of isolation developed not only from architectural perspectives but social as well. The first issue is represented by the emerging resident inequalities which cause episodes of segregation and discrimination based on their income, for example. This phenomenon could create social fortresses, isolated from the outside metropolitan environment (Douglass, Wissink, and Kempen 2012). The privatization of the space, furthermore, restricted the accessibility for good qualities public spaces outside the gated communities, resulting as a public space saved from the vehicular infrastructure.

The city of Beijing represents in this case, not only the application of modern ideas of housing and neighborhood, but also the idea of city for cars and high-speed mobility.

The legacy of Le Corbusier and Haussmann seemed to have great success in Chinese modernists urban planner (Abramson 2008). This kind of development helped to develop further toward a city where the dimension of human scale is missing today. The combination of superblocks and mobility-driven urbanizations contributed to define precisely a top-down development and the construction of mono-functional elements in the city. The isolation was even more visible in the complete deterioration of connection between private and public space or streets (Abramson 2008). The creation of a city made by closed boxes is far from the target of cultural city and, as well, open to a cultural evolution and reproduction, in the terms we described in the previous chapters. A city with isolated images cannot be consider the future. This city is a desert.



Figure 4.11 *Walled city*, Beijing, Marco Giribaldo

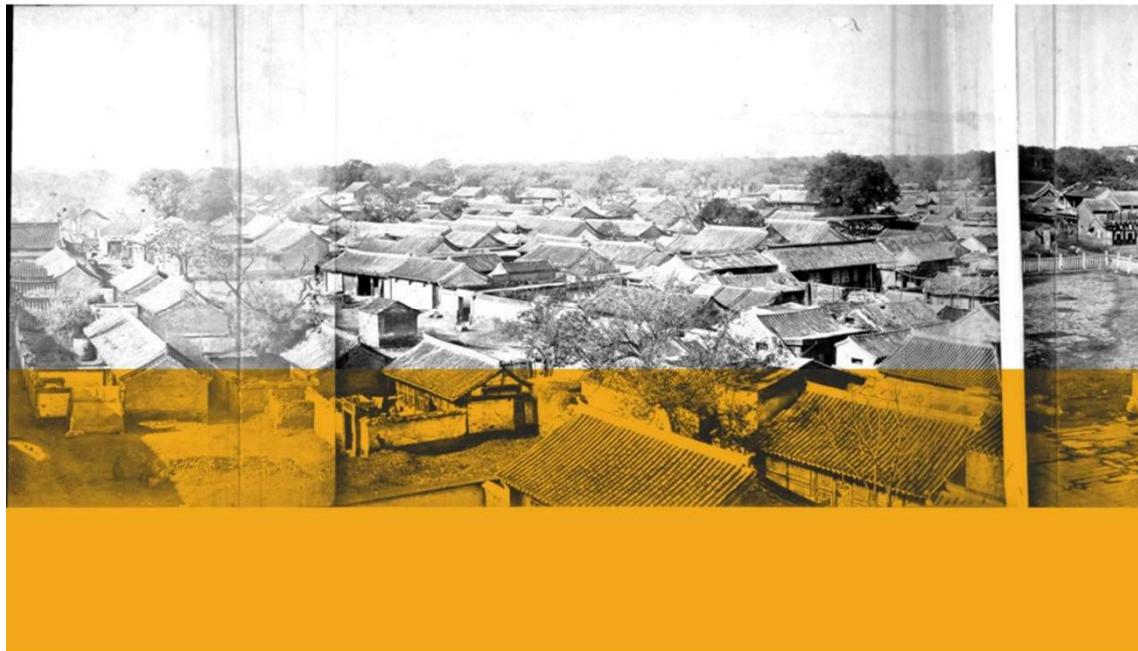


Figure 4.12 *Panorama of Pekin Taken from the South Gate leading into the City. Oct. 1860*, Felice Beato (1860)

#### 4.4 Story of Resistance

While the whole set of the evolution of the living conditions of the city has been summarized very briefly in the previous paragraphs, we won't forget our focus on the traditional city. However, this description has been essential to understand the relationships between the elements of the city and their superposition in the contemporary city. While symbolic developments and rising issues are emerging, our central area, with traditional courtyard houses tried to resist. The physical damages brought by the new wind of innovation are, however, not few. On the contrary, what is resulting today a disappearing city and the role of historical preservation has played a superficial position during these changes. What we are going to analyze in the following paragraph is an attempt to look at the traditional city not as an object, as heritage which belong only to the past, but as potential laboratory for a new urbanism. An alternative. This opportunity is also driven by the goals set by the new masterplan approved in 2017,

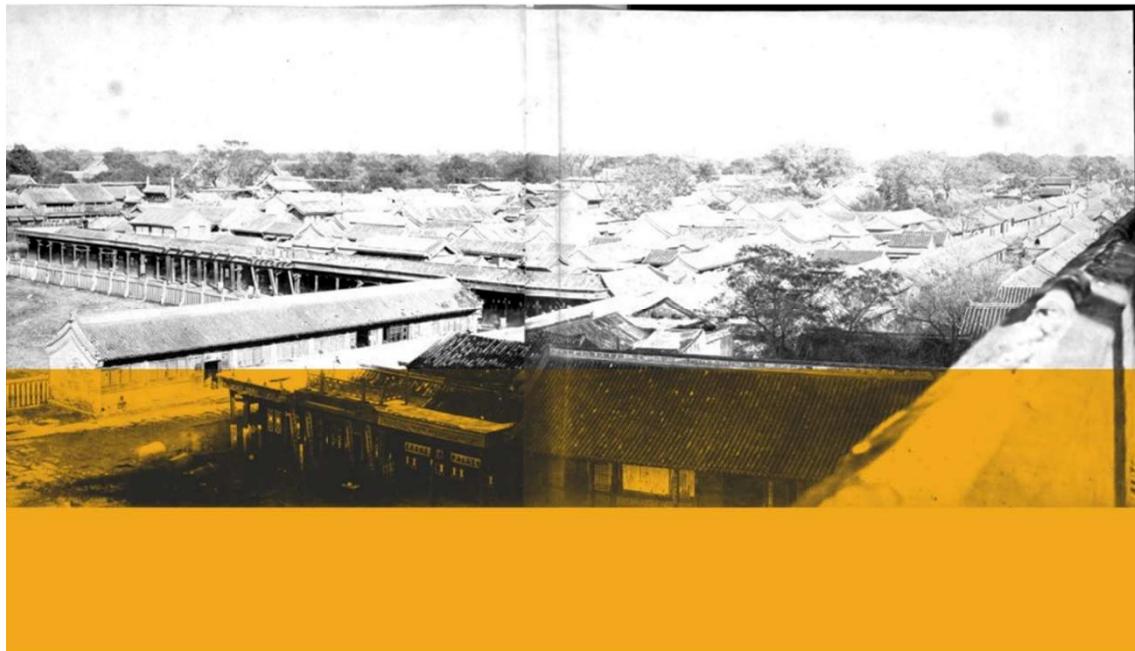


Figure 4.13 (continue) *Panorama of Pekin Taken from the South Gate leading into the City. Oct. 1860,*  
Felice Beato (1860)

by the *Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council* (Xinhua 2017). What is generally relevant in the new plan is a brake to the developments. The word *stop* on urban sprawling and increase of population. The general idea behind this decision is an improvement of urban quality of life. *Modu Magazine* described this masterplan with the slogan *Less is More* (Modu 2018). Together with the improvement of ecological and social issue, the *7th Urban Master Plan* could represent, for us, the opportunity to rethink the role of the traditional inner city inverting the direction of the expansion not toward the outside, but from within.

As we have seen before, the urban structure of Beijing starts from the most elementary cell, which is the courtyard house, *siheyuan*. This elementary system represents centuries of conception of space for residential buildings. The symbol of the order of the universe and the materialization of *fengshui* theories (Liu et al. 1996) is reflected till the domestic kingdom. The quadrangular complex is formed by several building each of one was destined to specific function and hierarchy. The sequence of the spaces



Figure 4.14 Structure of introverted courtyard houses, Marco Giribaldo

underwent a strong hierarchical order, either based on the inhabitant social class and functions. The most important character of the courtyard house, no matter what the construction year and social position of the family is, is the introversion of the space. This determined a great distinction between inside and outside. The house represented the space of the household, since that even the Chinese character for family and home is the same, *Jiā* (Y. Wang 2016). This represent a great symbolic meaning for the imperial city. From the simplest element of the private world, the same concept was expanded to the whole city in temple, palaces and, finally, in its urban structure. The grid structure of Beijing represents its main feature, recognizable across the world.

The combination of courtyard houses in the urban spaces follows the *hutong* structure. The word *hutong* derives for the Mongolian foundation of the city, *Dadu*, base of the contemporary urban framework developed during the XIII century, *hottong* with meaning of “well”, lane, passage (Rowe, Forsyth, and Kan 2016). They represent the urban skeleton of the traditional city and, most of all, the urban public space. This uniform skyline of one floor high preserved its image intact until the revolutions of last



Figure 4.15 Use of the open space in the *hutongs*, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

century. The lane lifestyle is however still visible nowadays in some areas of the inner city, representing a persistent representation of the convivial and social life of the old Beijing. It is, in fact evident the close relationship between private and public space. A close connection between the residential space and the corresponding open space. This contributed indeed in the creation of deep informal relationships between the inhabitants. The main public space are the lanes themselves.

From 1949 however, we could see a progressive decline of the living conditions in the traditional city. Historical courtyard houses and the newest high-rise building represent the most evident contrast in the city of Beijing. The city center of Beijing represents a picture of very poor conditions of lifestyle as well as the building stock while the innovative new glazed façades watch from above. The main term, *Old and Dilapidated Housing* was introduced since the beginning of the 1980s to identify those situations of in serious conditions spread all over the Old City.

The process of decline started worsening from the 60s, when the old city needed to host huge administrative buildings, *The Ten Major constructions*, and, simultaneously,

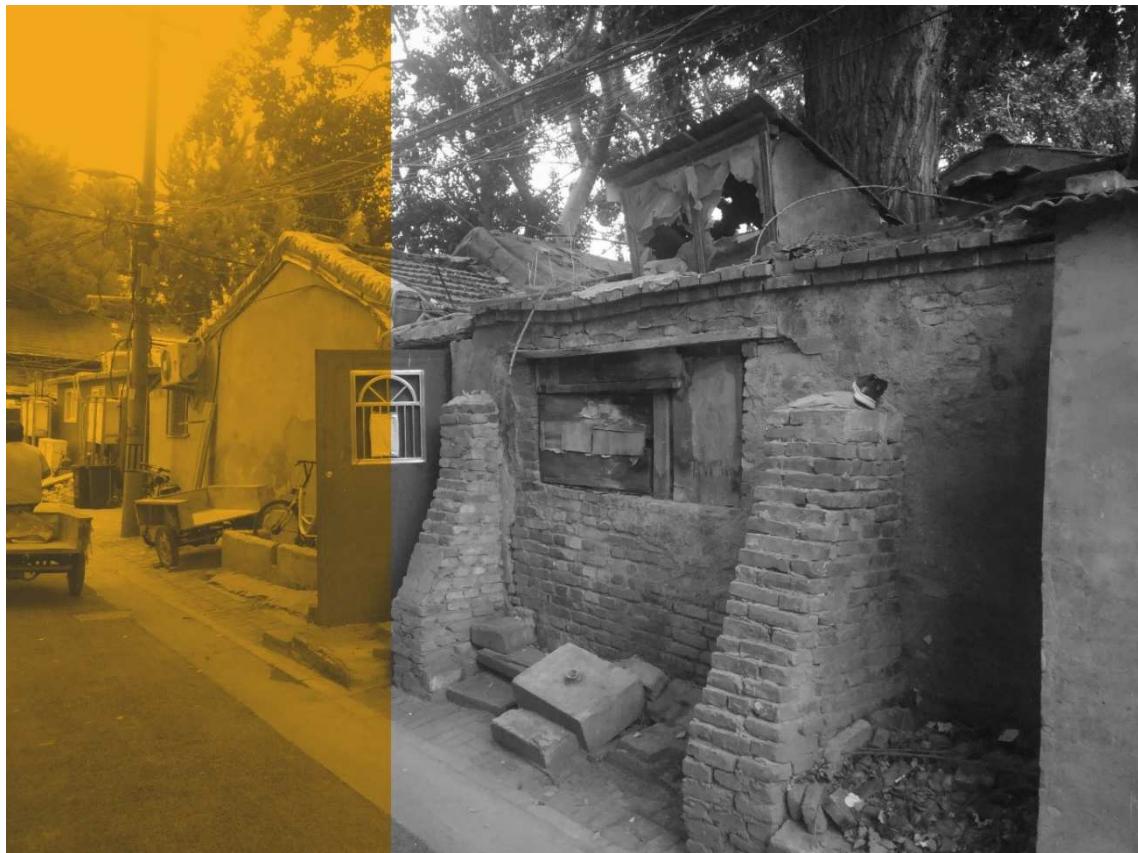


Figure 4.16 Dilapidated house in the *hutongs*, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

responded to a serious house shortage. While the first factor created systematic demolition of the traditional households' structures, over 2.5 million square meters, the house shortage together with the government permission of building new additions inside the courtyard, had a tremendous impact on the existing conditions. In this period the urban density skyrocketed from 15% to 70% in 1986 (Y. Wang 2016).

During the same years, also other political decision contributed to the decline. For example, the creation of the state own property and the *Welfare-Oriented Housing System*, where public houses were given to public residents which were not owner of the buildings. Lack of maintenance was obviously expected.

While the situation was getting worse and worse, the government decided to find a solution to the poor condition of the Inner City and, in 1990, started a redevelopment project called *Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment Project*. However, the project was not a renovation of the existing buildings but a complete reconstruction from scratch. «*but after 1992, the threat came rather from the redevelopment which bulldozed the courtyard houses block by block*» (Y. Wang 2016).



Figure 4.17 Densification of the *hutongs*, a) 1950s, area of 2441 sqm b) 1970s, area of 3197 sqm c) 1987, area of 3787 sqm (Y. Wang 2016)

The economic pressure for the central areas was also impelling over the traditional house. The result of this period was an unprecedented loss of the historical texture of the city inside the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ring, in favor of brand-new *traditional style reconstructions* and real estate developments. This kind of approach has been, and still is, argument of debate nationally in China and internationally.

Since the traditional city could not achieve anymore the modern living conditions, many were the intervention on this path. Particularly the most famous regeneration project was *Ju'er Hutong*, or *Chrysanthemum Lane* in 1990, by Prof. Wu Liangyong. The success of the project was prized by many awards, *World Habitat Award* in 1992, for instance. The main benefits of this project was the preservation of the courtyard structure and achieving high density housing while, at the same time, environmental conditions were preserved and improved in quality (D. D. Zhang 2006).

Unfortunately, not only positive feature could be registered. The impact on social life and inhabitants was disruptive, causing a big case of gentrification due to the rise of the

land use value. The previous inhabitants were relocated somewhere else (Cinà and Mu 2018). Despite the initial intentions of the designers, who were envisioning a settle intervention and *organic preservation*, working for the original inhabitants in poor conditions, the result of the project created a sort of middle-class compound in which commercial and touristic feature were introduced. At the same time, the area lost its character of sharing space, connection between public and private space typical of traditional *hutongs*. In long terms view of its effects, the rehabilitation of *Ju'er Hutong*, could be conceived and interpreted as an overlapping layer on top of the traditional city which interrupt the continuity of the traditional lifestyle. At the same time, the intervention did not improve the public spaces and services expected from the original proposal. The result of the rehabilitation could be more easily seen as a blinding dream on the research of a '*new vernacularism*' more focused on the research of the root of Chinese architecture and identity, launched by I. M. Pei in 1977 with the *Fragrant Hill Hotel* (X. Li 2000). The image of *Ju'Er Hutong* is emblematic of this period in modern Chinese cities. This project represents a great achievement for the awareness of the traditional city and its issues. During the years where Beijing was experiencing its economic boom and large real estate development were starting to invade the city, *Ju'er Hutong* represented the only light in the dark. For the first time the topic of culture was emerging in the debate of architectural developments. For the first time, innovation was linked to an historical respect for tradition and identity. This represent for us an important tassel that we cannot forget in our discussion. We could see the first attempt of putting forward quality instead of quantity.

During the 90s, the process of decline of the old city accelerated instead of reducing its intensity. The main cause was a lack of long-term view and proper guidelines on the use of the old city properties. With more and more high-rise buildings popping-up in the inner city, even if, a *Height Regulation* was introduced in 1990 which restricted the height limit to 30m. The limit, however, was easily overwhelmed by economical pressure of large investments. Also, in terms of conservative implementations, the municipality promulgated the definition of 25 *Historic and Cultural Conservation Districts*, which was real only in paper. The terms of the regulation covered only 22% of the historical traditional area and this aspect contributed to allow more bulldozers playing in the areas not protected. «*Fireworks started to explode in the realm of architecture and urban planning*» (Y. Wang 2016). The conservative plan did not

introduce the desired effects on the protected areas, which saw a large change in its social structure and historical authenticity of the urban morphology. With the new idea of the city as a cultural new value became the opportunity of developing a massive cultural industry based on touristic incomes, since the intention declared by the State Council to designate Beijing as “*Renowned Historic and Cultural City*” in 1982. (Abramson 2001). This general guideline of the government on a new image promotion of cultural Chinese cities, influenced not only the city of Beijing. For these reasons many of the protected area embrace more an image renovation under the value of scenic areas than a real and consistent renovation. This image in evolution is what we could find in today’s Old city of Beijing. One side, old existing realities in very poor conditions, under the name of dilapidated, with the pressure of large economical investments and the on-going demolitions of existing and authentic courtyard houses. On the other side, there is another face of the traditional city branding its image for tourism and tertiary industry, claiming an idea of Beijing identity which become an illusion of the an auspicious future for the inner city, against the idea of cultural city as we had try to define.

At the same time, a top-down development of the city’s infrastructure attacks the historical district with the pretext of welfare’s building as well as new car-oriented developments. Not only the historical object, in their materiality is in danger, but the deep relationship between the private space and the warm and welcoming public space spread along the *hutong* system, in favor of disorienting spaces and roads (Abramson 2008). For these reasons, our intents would be not only pointing out an individual dimension of the objects but a holistic consideration of the interconnected and vital system. The *hutong* will be seen as a cultural organism.

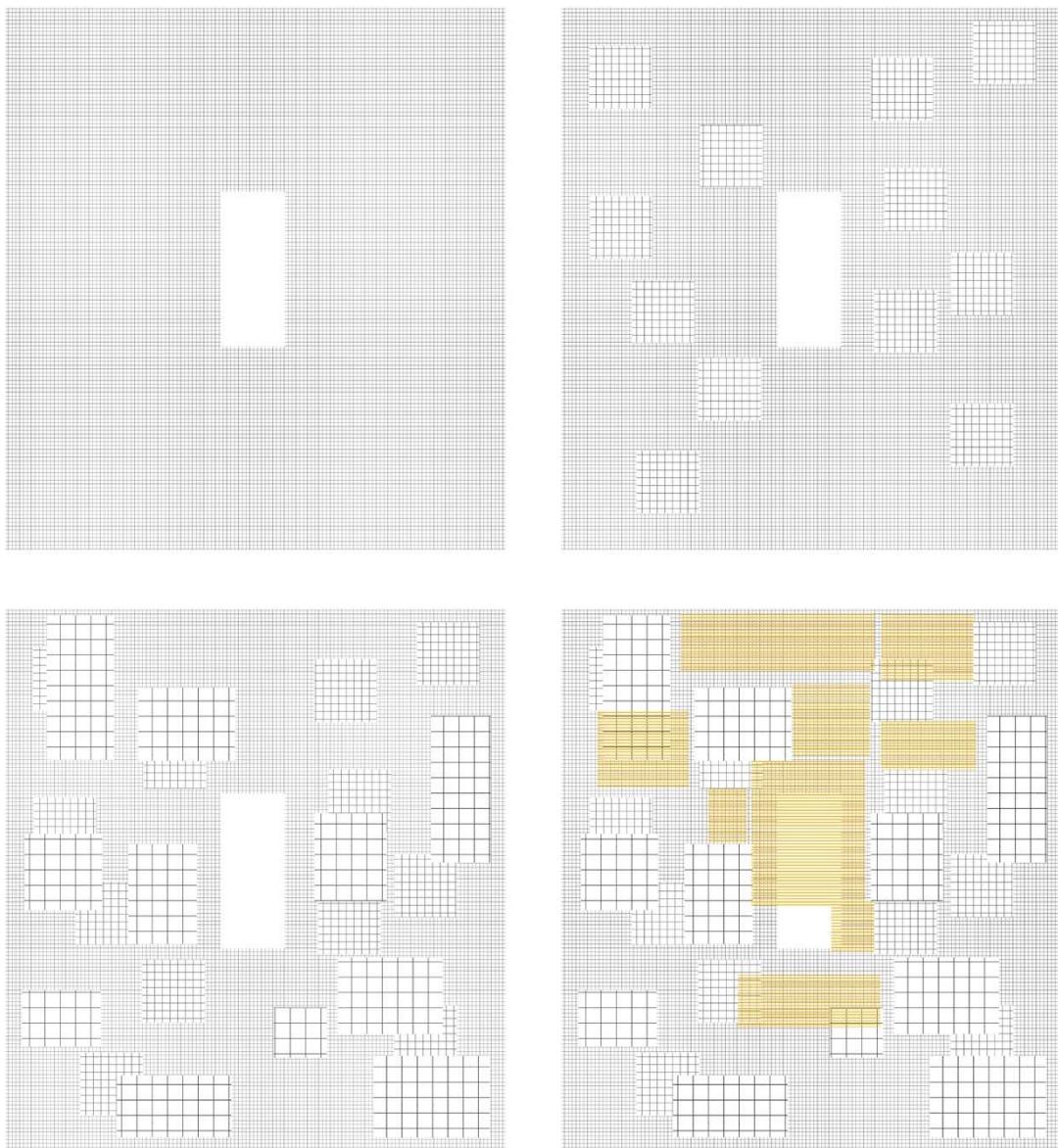


Figure 4.18 Overlapping layers of the city, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 5.1 *Building the future?*, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

## Chapter 5 Toolbox for Architects

After this long, and apparently disconnected, theoretical dialogue with our suspects of the crime, it's now time to create a bridge between a series of definitions and the idea of building the future of the traditional city through the concept of *in-between*. The intention of this thesis is not just giving an interpretation for the reality of traditional Chinese cities in the contemporary era. On the contrary, our intention is to critically and practically approach to the issues and give an example of the approach described, on the base of the reflection presented. Our idea is the construction of a future in historical cities improving the living condition of the area. We are going to approach the traditional city of Beijing because it became during the past, and present, an interesting and example of contradictory developments, overlapping one on the other, creating a disconnected mosaic. Many misinterpretations have been put forward about



Figure 5.2 Scene from *Modern Times* (1936)

the idea of culture, identity and future needs.

It is clear the contradiction presented between the first part of the thesis and the presentation of contemporary Beijing transformations. While anthropological studies refer to the city as a complex bundle of relations, as well as adaptive and organic, the city of Beijing presented an idea of superposition of ideas, ideologies changing during time, and physical objects on top of each other highlighting their boundaries. The objective of the thesis is breaking these conceptual and physical boundaries embracing, what at the beginning we resumed as culture, the territory of relations. This territory is difficult to grasp, it is invisible, and the character of its presence take place in different forms. This is the essence of culture, in its materiality of relations. Culture is formless as well as space. In the first sentence of an article by Li Xiaodong, *The aesthetic of the absent The Chinese conception of space*, he introduced the image of the void: «[...] space is formless, immeasurable, untouchable, vast and contiguous, yet at the same time perceptible and having an objective existence. And because the scope, content and

*significance of space are of an indeterminate nature, man who perceives it can make subjective associations in trying to understand it. To the Chinese mindset, even though space emerges as an absence and exists outside of the physical description of a form, it provides man with boundless material for imaginative associations, the image beyond image, the landscape beyond landscape.»* (X. Li 2002). Our interpretation of culture as an *in-between* within human beings themselves and the world outside is now representing for us, the definition of the city as an organism and the void between the elements it is not just empty, it is the formless void which represents the vital process of adaptation and evolution (Remotti 2011). In this sense the city could really become cultural city, an open system, offering the potential of real solutions, which so far has still need to be find, and opening toward the future. In this sense, the awareness of culture as a concept, as an input, could represent a proactive tool and not only as a heritage of the past with a passive value.

The city of today described by Alexander Tzonis in 2019 is like a desert. This desert is made by the isolate names of the firms around the city (Tzonis 2019). For us, the traditional city is the opposite of this image of egoism and individualism driven by economical profits. The future city is not made by isolated stars, their value will be discussed in the systematic composition, the constellation. This could be achieved only by the design of the connections, between people, between communities, between buildings. In order to do that the idea of void bring us back to the ideas of Team X during the 60s and 70s, especially on Alison and Peter Smithson and Aldo Van Eyck. The series of publications by the Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture* and *The Charged Void: Urbanism*, together with their works introduce us in a dimension where the space get great importance as container of the human activities with the five senses. With the summary of their theories, *The space between* the capability of the architecture is highlighted for charging the space around it (Risselada 2017). So, architecture assume this responsibility of interaction with the space. The idea of working in the traditional city will be an experimentation with the possible reactions between the ingredients in the context. This idea of space introduced in the reality of the traditional city could open new opportunity in the living conditions of the inhabitants with the sensibility toward the context. The space between represent the multiplicity of interpretations and possibility for the people (Ramos 2017).



Figure 6.1 Galaxy Soho Center under construction, Iwan Baan (2013)

## Chapter 6 *Hutong*: New Perspectives

### 6.1 Specific Reality

The objective of the project is related to a deep experimentation in urban regeneration of a traditional area of Beijing's Inner city. After the previous evaluation of the contemporary panorama of the traditional city, we could understand a great lack of projects which are really improving the living conditions of the inhabitants. The living conditions of the central area has been often considered an inconvenient and never observed as an essential and important layer of the city. The Old City has been considered more a vintage scenario, important for attracting tourists and symbol of dreamed identity more than a living habitat with the need of cures and cultivation. It has been at the mercy of economical and speculative intentions. Many are the episode of gentrification or displacement of inhabitants. On the contrary, today's urban thinking starts focusing on the Inner city for a new cultural sustainability. Many are the direction

working on this path: the attention of many architects is looking to the traditional courtyards, the Inner City is space for the Beijing Design Week since 2009, cultural initiatives, involving architecture and projects, are presented in *Baitasi ReMade* and *Dashilan Hutong*, many Chinese and international young people are looking at this reality as attractive. «*Learning from the small, learning from the poor*» (Tzonis 2019). However, this is not enough. Many are still the areas which are in precarious conditions, risking of disappearing from one day to another and many are the issues related to the crowded and unsafe conditions.

Our focus is going to be in a particularly interesting under the point of view of the stratigraphy of different typologies. We are located on the East side of the Inner City, *Dongcheng* district. The area is on the extreme boundary beside the 2nd Ring Road where previously the ancient city walls were standing. Beyond the massive infrastructure starts the big district of *Chaoyang* characterized by high-rise residential buildings and multinational's headquarters, the Central Business District (CBD).

At the same time, if we look toward to the left side of the maps, we could see a homogeneous pattern of traditional city ending in the center with the cultural site of Forbidden City. Our area is then located in a symbolic crossroad between two realities. On one side the city of economics while the other see the city of traditions.

The area of investigation could be inscribed by important vehicular arteries which physically create a cut in the continuity of the urban fabric. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Ring Road on the East, *Dongdan Alley* on the West, *Jinbao Street* on the South and the Northern boundary *Chaoyangmen Inner Street*, which, we will reduce in our focus later because it is not relevant. A bulky presence watching from above is the presence of *Galaxy Soho Center* designed and built by Zaha Hadid Architects between 2008 and 2012. This is one clear example of those high value speculations on top of the traditional city. While the building itself became symbol of richness and quality awarded by RIBA, the *Royal Institute of British Architects*, it received strong and public accuses by *Beijing Cultural Protection Centre* of radically damaging the urban street scape of Beijing's Old City (Wainwright 2013). This is one of the latest and clear examples of contradiction in the role of the traditional city in the urban perspective. The large piece of land dedicated to this construction was already razed to the ground when the architects arrived in 2008 and with this futuristic multifunctional mall, another piece of the traditional city fell under the floor. This kind of area is not an exception in the panorama offered by the

historic city. For this reason, the general approach to the urban issues in specific could be extended to similar urban fabrics in equivalent conditions. However, this area become a provocative terrain in which walk. Nevertheless, the disparity of the resident's conditions and this brand new U.F.O. is evident simply turning the camera angles and taking two pictures. During the construction of the brand-new Soho Center, the *hutong* beside it undergoes small intervention of rehabilitation. Even if there are no evidence from the documents a restyling of the facade of the small houses could be noticed base comparing the pictures of today with those of the construction. The restoration was, however, something more similar to a beautification of the image of the old houses. The existing living conditions beyond the wall of the hutongs was not improved. At the same time, along the East side, on the boundary with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ring Road a beautiful linear park was built. However, quite ironically, the park appears today more as a solid boundary, trying to hide what is beyond, the old traditional houses. In the following pages we are going to see some of the images in order to introduce the conditions of the existing situation which will speak out more than thousand words on it. This are the of the experience on which our project is going to be rooted.

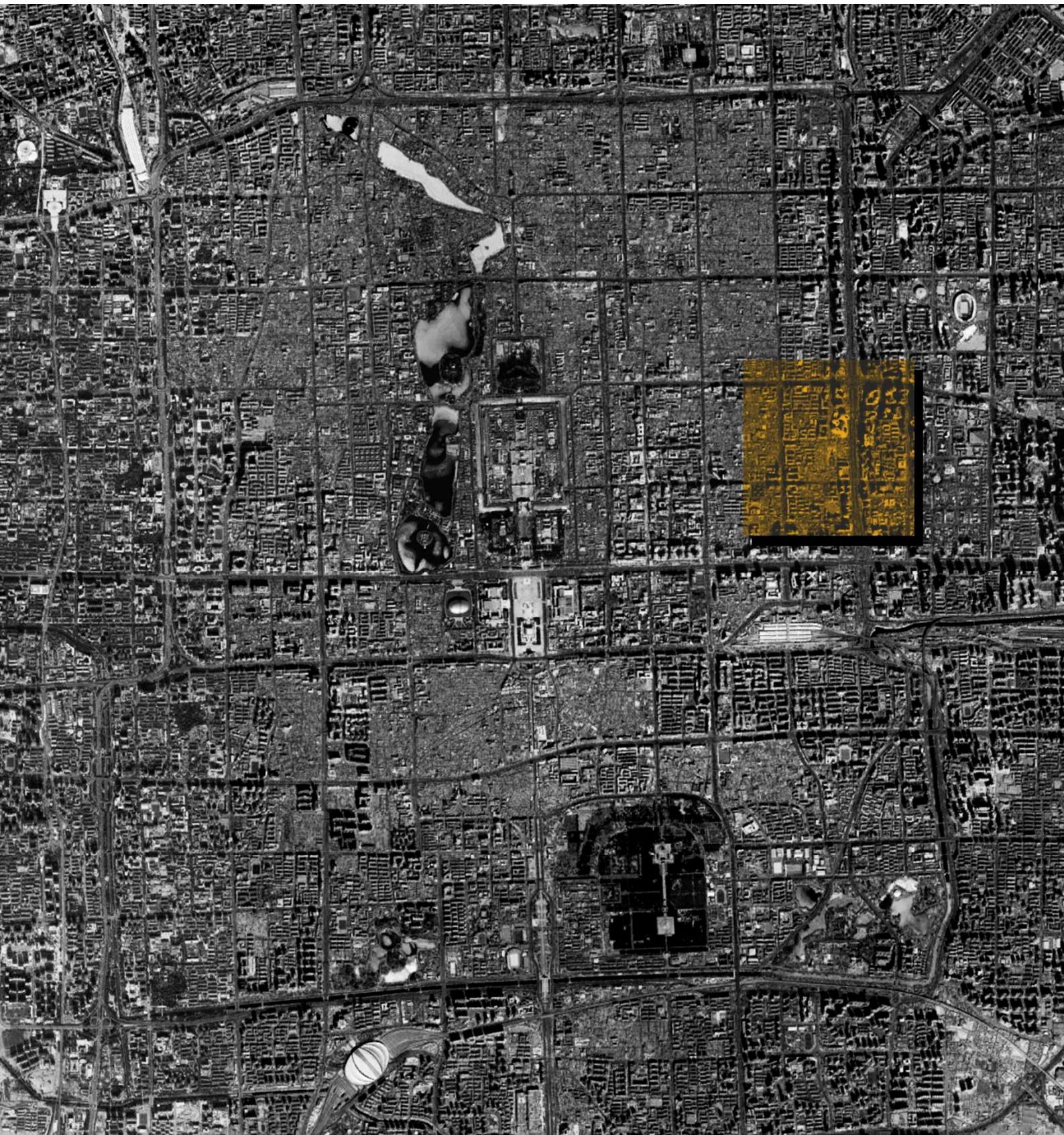


Figure 6.2 Location of the site, Google Maps (2019)



Figure 6.3 Galaxy Soho Center under construction, Iwan Baan (2013)



Figure 6.4 Galaxy Soho Center under construction, Iwan Baan (2013)

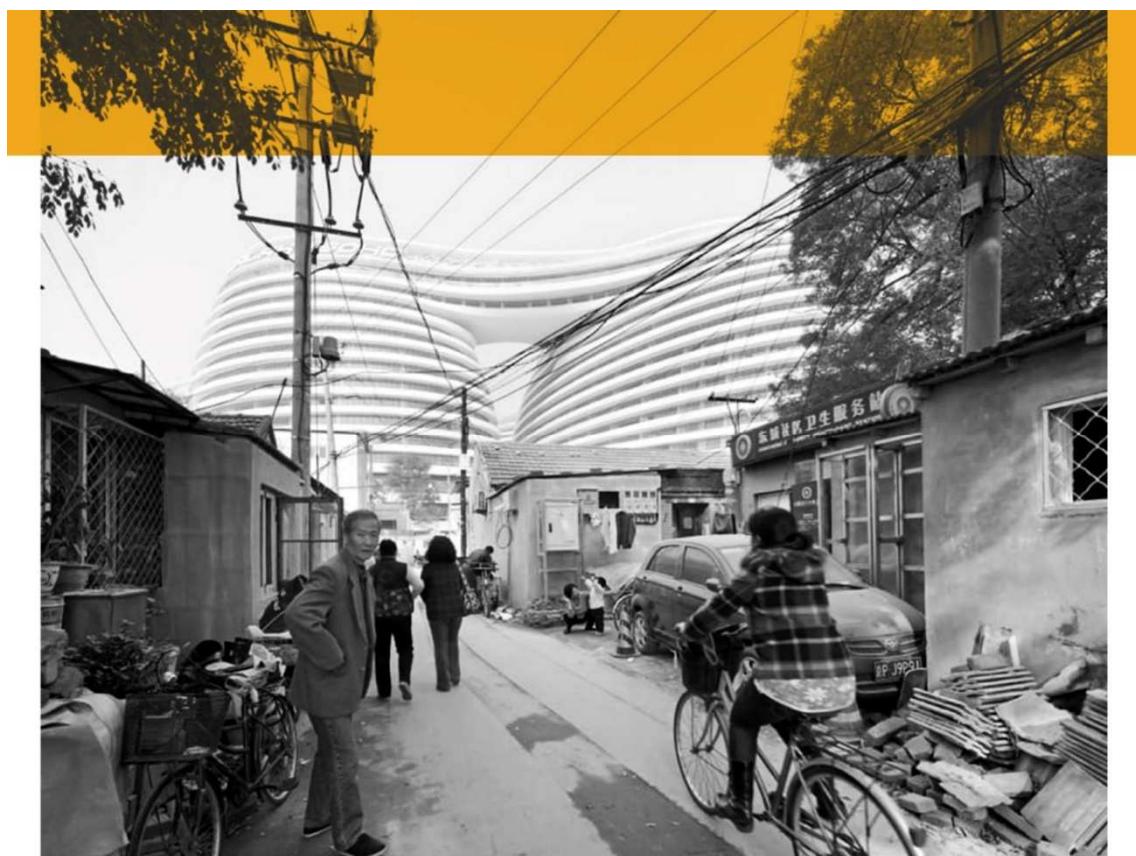


Figure 6.5 Galaxy Soho Center under construction, Iwan Baan (2013)



Figure 6.6 Plaster applied to the old courtyard houses in 2013, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

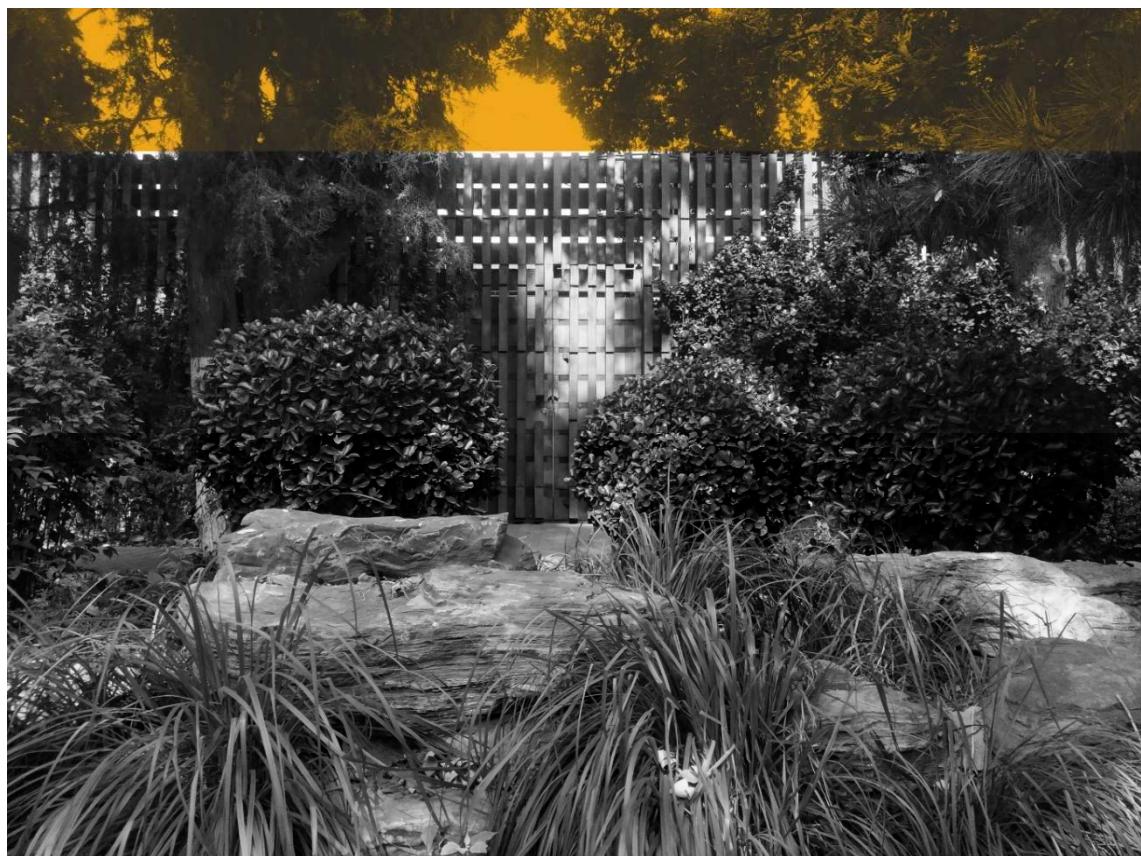


Figure 6.7 Linear park with the wall behind built in 2013, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

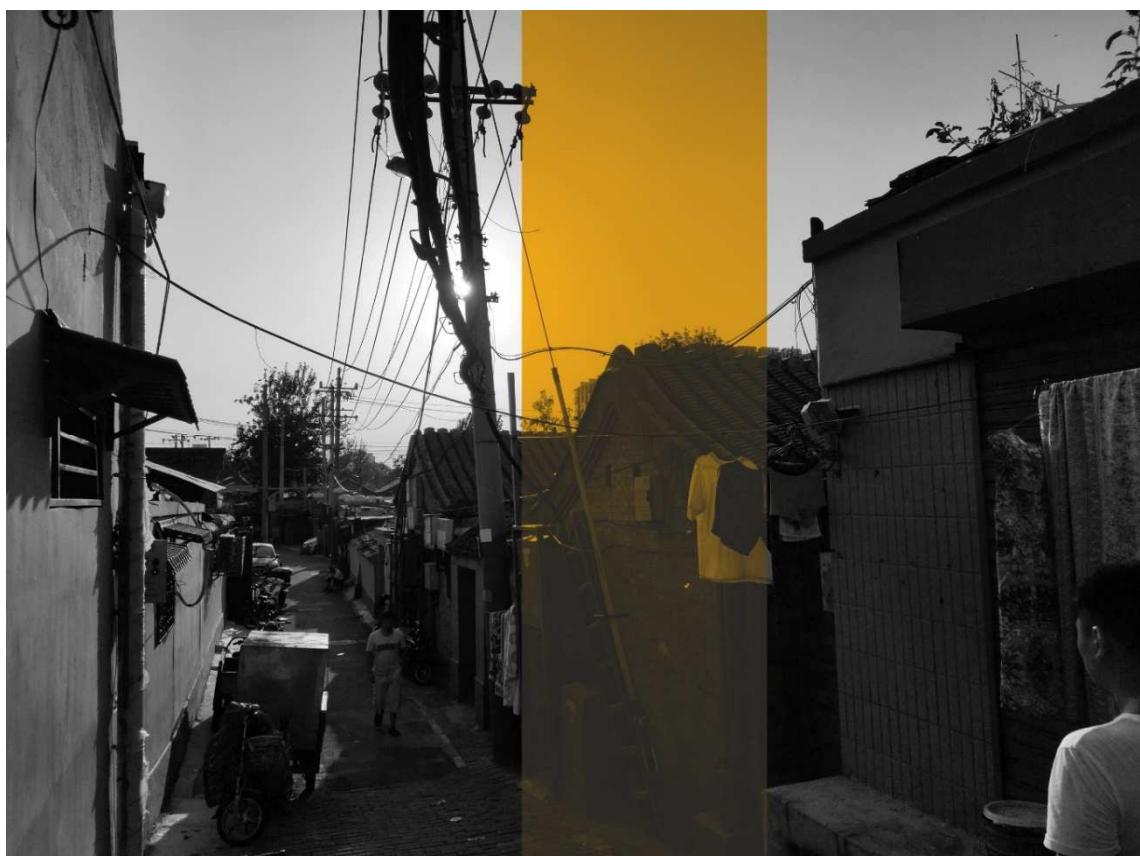


Figure 6.8 Alleys and houses, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.9 Alleys and houses, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

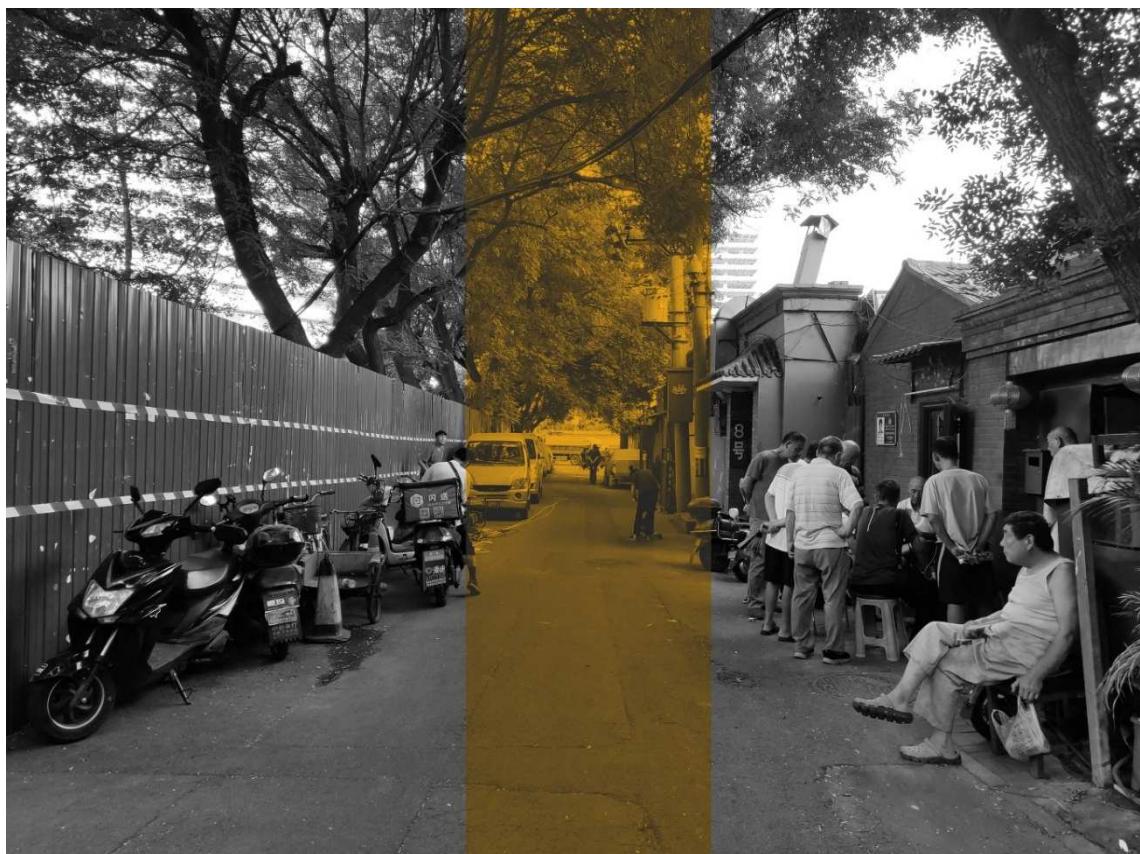


Figure 6.10 Alleys and houses, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

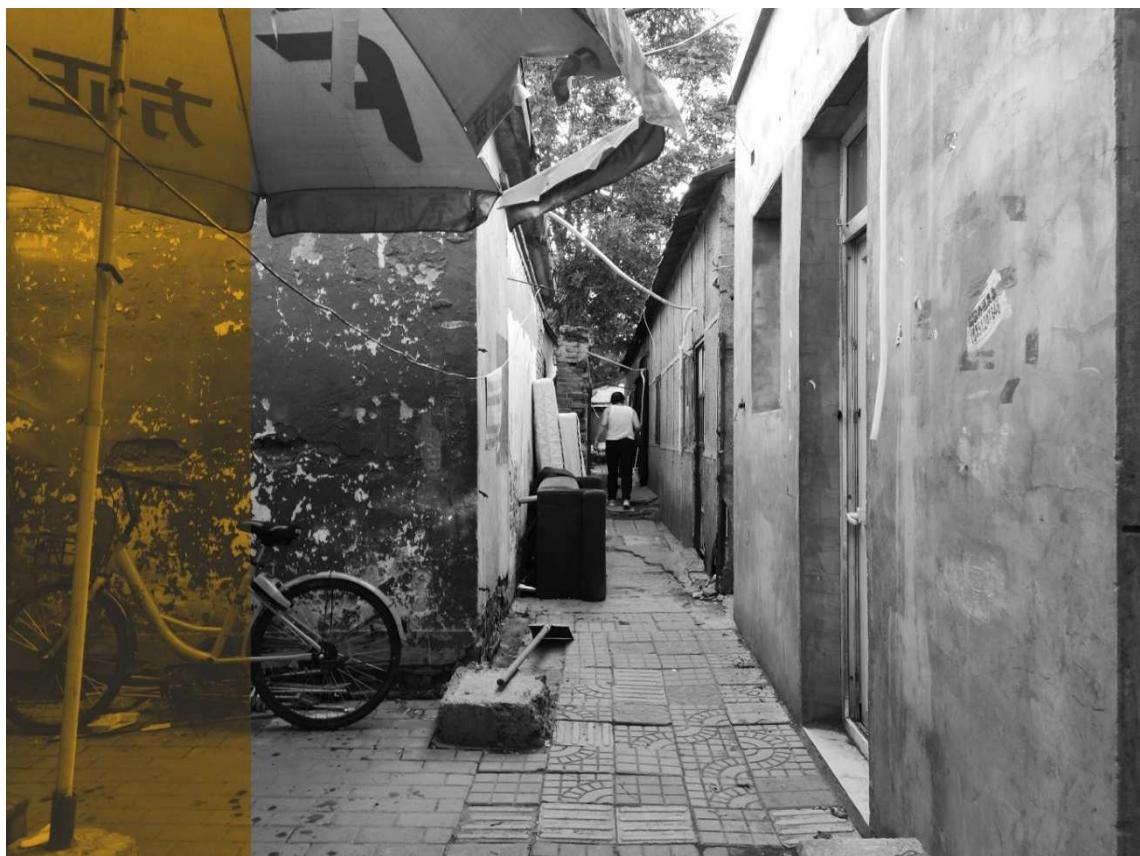


Figure 6.11 Alleys and houses, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.12 Zhihua Temple, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.13 Public space between the *hutong* and Soho Center, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

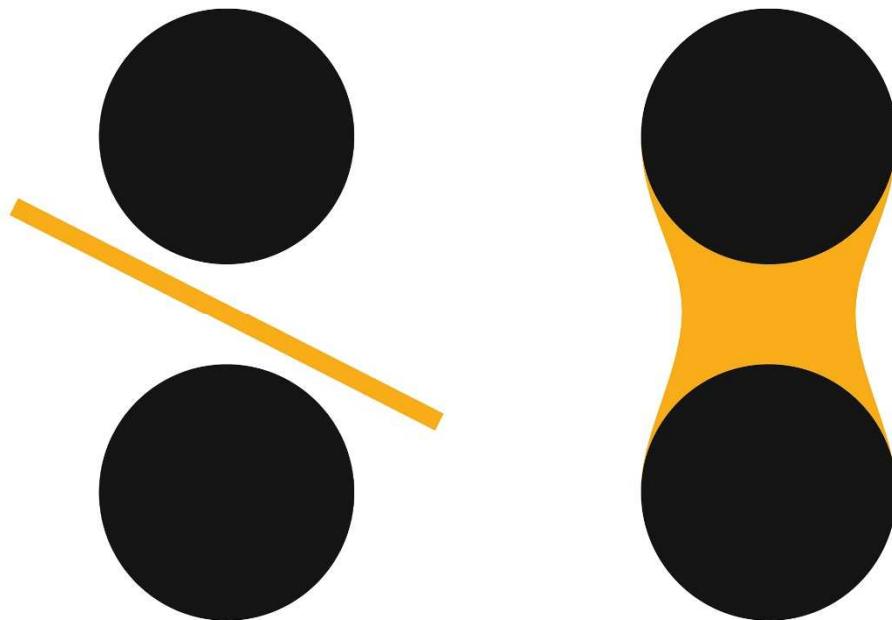


Figure 6.14 *From Existenz to Cohabitation*, Marco Giribaldo

## 6.2 From *Existenz* to *Cohabitation*

The intent of the project will take the distance from a nostalgic view of the historical area and lifestyle. We are going to take the distances from the invocation of a “*new vernacularism*” and abandon the idea of cultural identity in favor of the research of cultural resilience. For all these reasons the investigation of the area will take place in its state of art. We are not interested in the heroic history behind the area so the reasonings will be seen from the pictures and the experiences of today. This is an area with no history apart from ancient temple, *Zhihua Temple*, and the location of one of big rice storage of the imperial period, which disappeared with the modernization of China and the consequent substitution with residential and working units. The history of the area is in its passive resistance toward the modernization. Its strength resides on the small actions of everyday life. The heroism of this area, like many others is the continuity of the Chinese idea of culture, despite the century of revolutions (G. Wang 2010). We are choosing this approach in order to forget any historical reference that

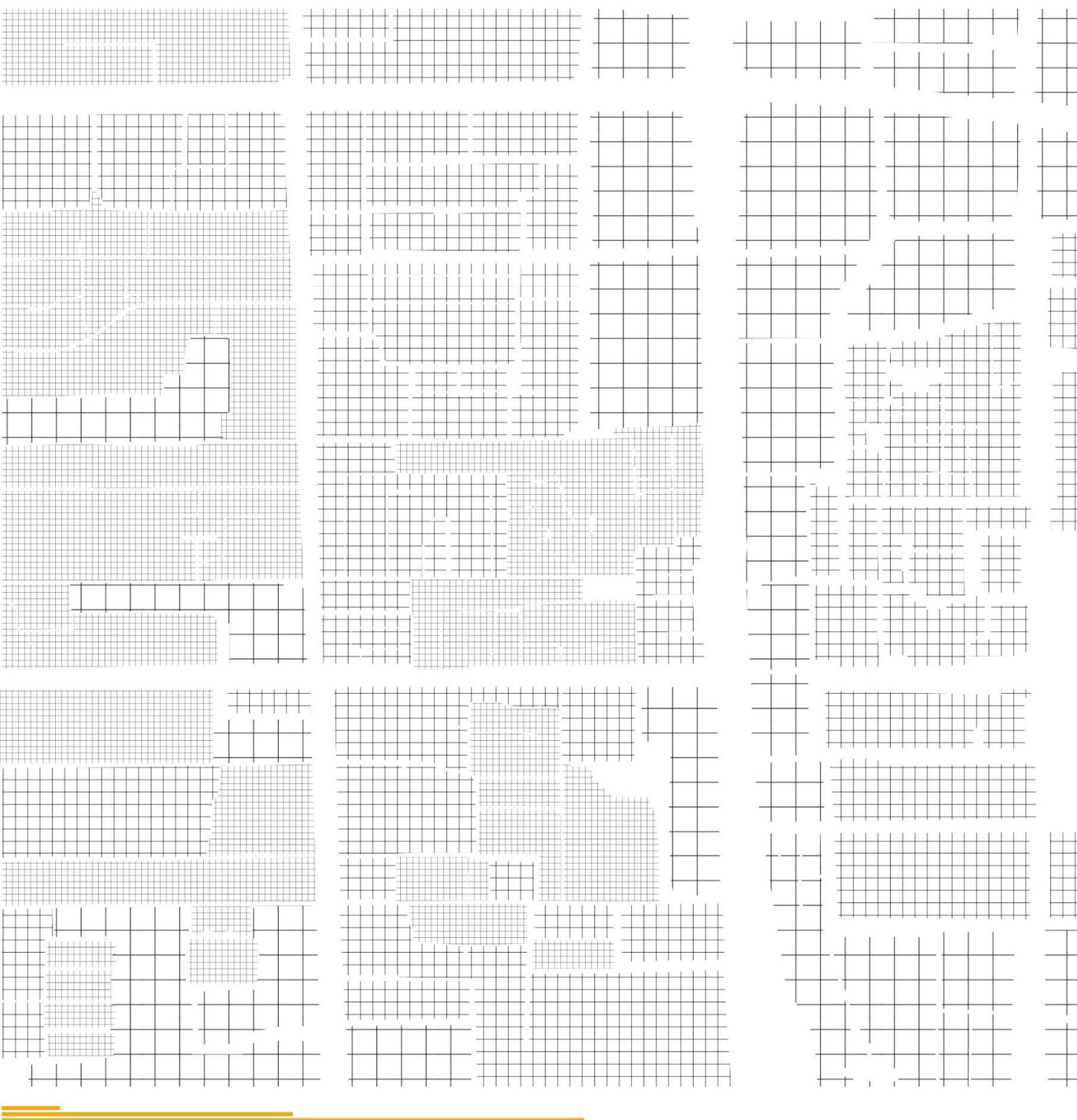


Figure 6.15 Sieve, Morphological regions, Marco Giribaldo

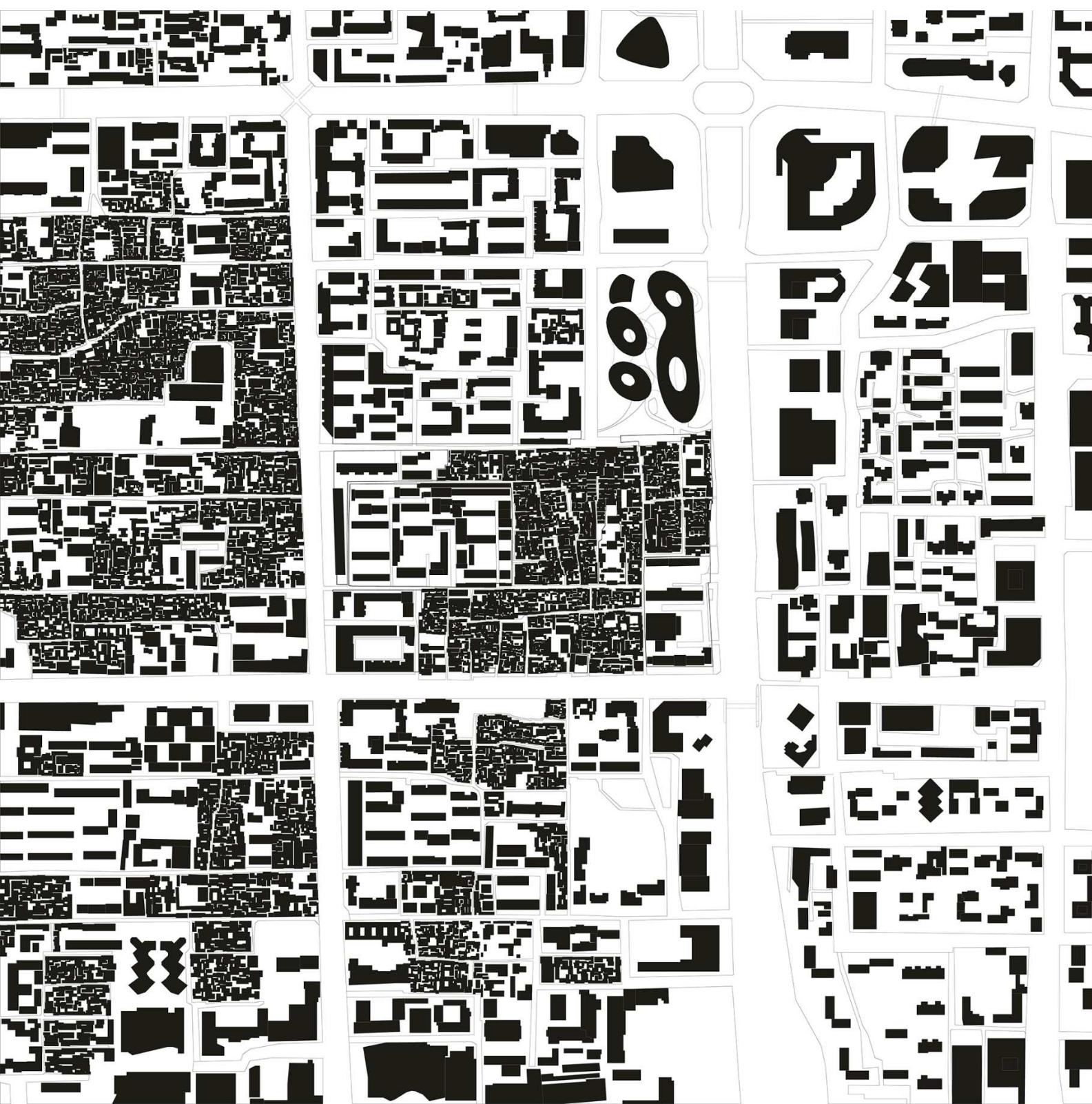


Figure 6.16 Morphology of the buildings, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.17 Morphology of the distributive systems, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.18 Apartment blocks beside the *hutong* divided by a fence, Marco Giribaldo

could represents a dangerous path and umpteenth failure in a formal exercise. At the same time we are working as an archeologist where the small pieces are more important than the piece of art (Carandini 1979). In this sense, this is not going to be an offense toward the modernity with, more or less, successful interventions which improved the overall living conditions of people. We are going to accept the complexity of the city. Our approach would be embracing modernity as an evolutive phenomenon, following the branch of *typo morphological* studies. This is fundamental to understand the site in its dynamic and evolutionary layout. The role of *typo morphology* will help us in the determination of social and humanistic environment in which we could draw knowledge and methodological tools. The task of urban design's dimension could really interpret the local conditions of the site, providing, not the economically driven interventions for a mere image but really entering in the understanding of the potential and the opportunity of the reality (Chen and Thwaites 2013). For this reason, we believe in the transformative potential of the traditional city in a progressive and innovative vision. Working with the full understanding of the context is going to avoid the use of a



Figure 6.19 Windows of a kid-dance gym in Soho Center, Marco Giribaldo

universal formalism focusing on precise and functional elements.

The morphology of the buildings that appear on the background of the historical city is extremely various. We could see all the layers we described in the previous chapter, from the composition of the single courtyard houses with the whole evolution of last century, the presence of the precarious *dime-houses* in their working-unit legacy the latest mass housing developments with high-rise building and the shining mega-blocks such as the Soho Center. In this sense the plan of the city could be classified with great precision caused of the defined boundaries of the single elements. It is also clear how the mobility system of the area with the surroundings, find a great hierarchical relation the morphology of the buildings and at the same time highlighting the overlapping of those system where one is erasing the other. The extreme fragmentation could be easily recognized from the plan of the area. The morphology of the open space, the typology of the buildings is precisely inside their boxes. The texture of the different areas is relevant in identify the scale difference between the object but mostly the intensity of the use of the ground floor. We will see how that is an essential character later.

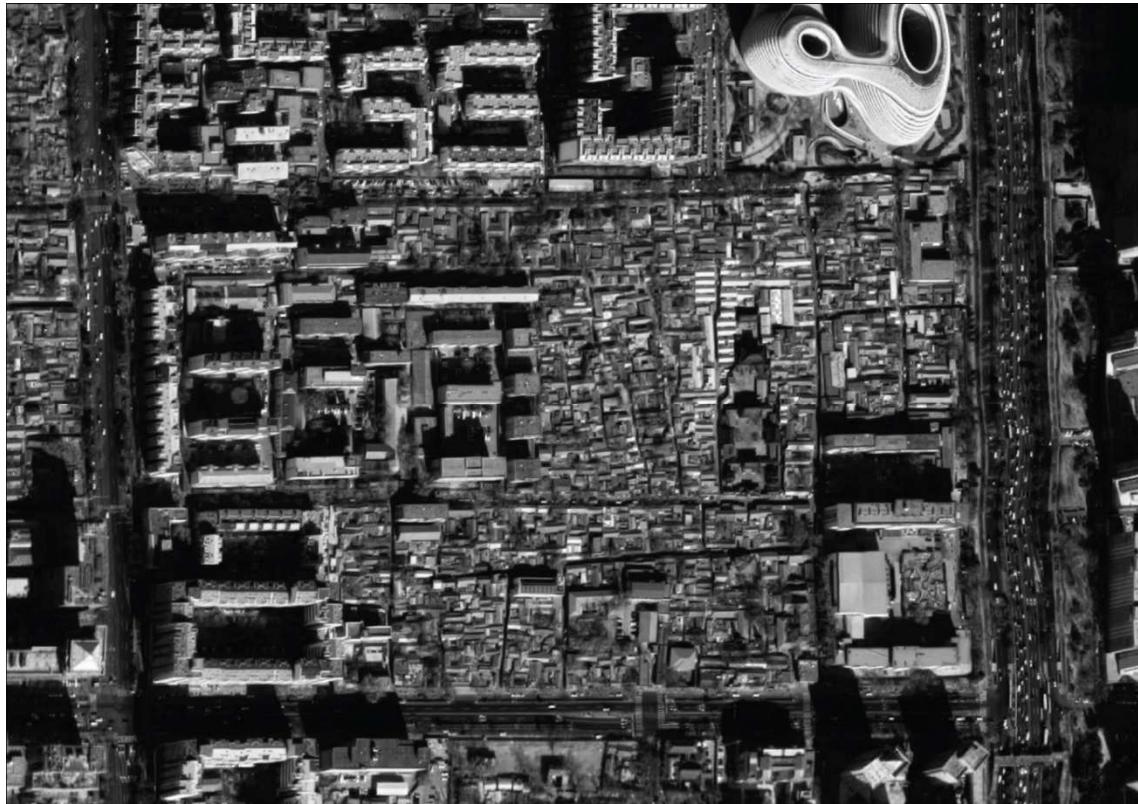


Figure 6.20 Satellite image of the *hutong*, Google Maps (2019)

The work of Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites, *Chinese urban design: The typomorphological approach* represents for us a constitutive pillar for the creation of our story. It is, in fact, the great result of matching the Italian Typological School, of Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia, where the attention is toward urban form in terms of typological evolution and the British Morphological School where the emphasis is declared on building form and pattern of uses.

This joint point reached in the Chinese context will help us in the understanding of the complexity of the Chinese city. This hierarchical reading of the city is what for us could be considered the glue between the elements between different scales. The single elements are not isolated, they are themselves a system. Buildings could be considered systems of rooms joint by distributive tissues. At the same time the smaller scale could be the constructive system of the parts, joint together following a *morphe*, and the same happens at the larger scale where buildings are not juxtaposed one beside the other but represents a specific kind of relations of that time. The city could be read as an urban organism where no elements are really isolated but following precise patterns of hierarchy and relationship (Chen and Thwaites 2013). Open space and built space, areas

of different typological genesis, buildings in their use and their distribution, private and public. It is fundamental for us to appreciate a convergence point between the ideas exposed in the previous chapters in understanding the city as an organism, as an open system. An organism which evolves in time and space, alternating homogeneity and differences and for this reason, could be a cultural body.

However, in reading the organisms in the area they seem apparently without any connections between the parts, or at least mediated by a decision of non-relation. What we could see is the coexistence of areas where morphological region and typological process correspond. The importance of the plan representation helps us in visualizing the *non-relational desert* where the city could be represented as black and white as a binary code. This aspect is particularly evident on the ground floor representation and the experience of simply walking in the street. In the particle size of the urban fabric can in fact be read the conception of the ground floor and the relationships between inside and outside. The experience of the space could be read more like a series of scenes than a smooth transition of the building's morphology.

The perception of the ground level is at this point the key point of the analysis.

The idea of the ground floor is relatively important in the introduction the dimension of relationships. The horizontal plane is the space of interaction between people, this generally happens on a horizontal direction, me and you talking. This hardly happened in the vertical direction. Two people talking from their balconies became rarer, for example. It is simple for us to understand the city, let us say the contemporary city in China, in plan because the large part of the developments are only extrusions of the ground floor. At the same time, what is evident is the physicality of the boundaries. Walls, fences, gates, restricted areas are the main characteristic of this area. And not only in this area: we have seen before how the development of, what we could call, *a city of walls* could be expressed in other areas. The *city of wall* is very important step for us if we look the city from above. It is useful to look at the stratigraphy of the city, the city of the past. We can identify the typological and morphological regions as we said, with tremendous clarity. At this point, a basic question should be raised: *is this one a city which could be defined as resilient, could be considered cultural, with the meaning we explained before?* Of course, the answer is negative. The contemporary city, the city of walls has been evolving with the basic idea of isolated islands. This phenomenon not only happened by chance but, unfortunately, was strongly desired for

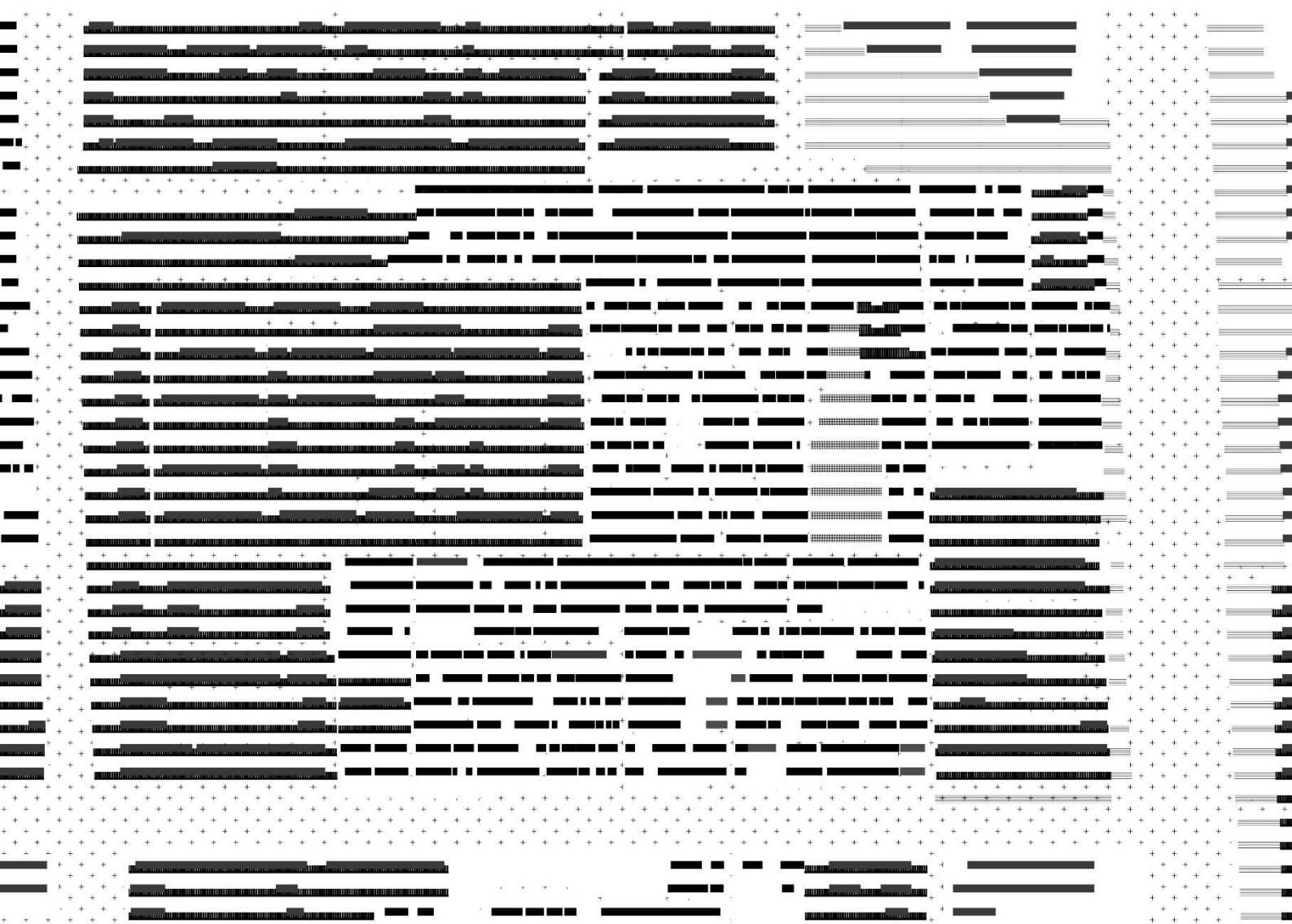


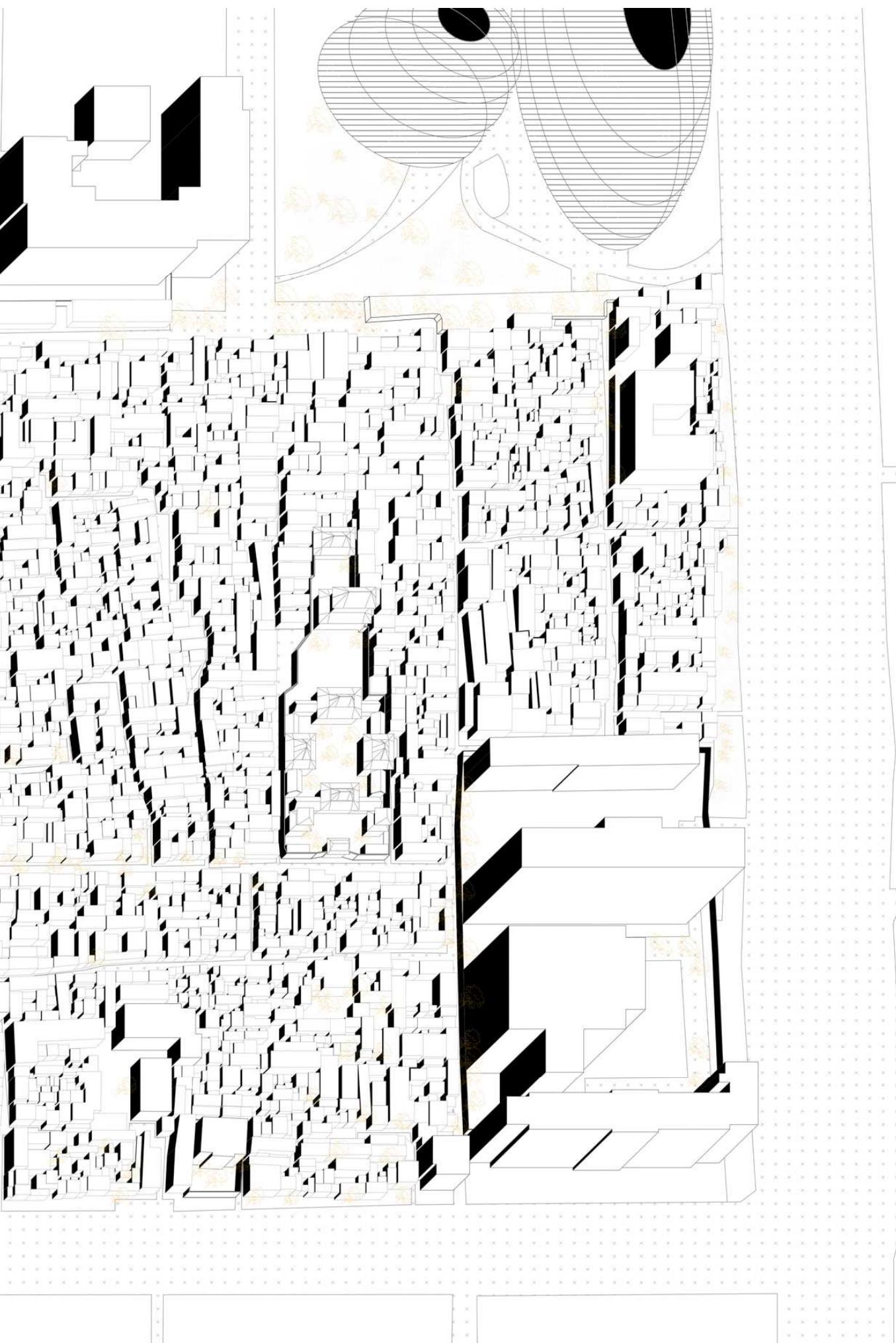
Figure 6.21 Urban sections with the permeability of the ground floor, Marco Girbaldo



Figure 6.22 Axonometry of the existing *hutong*, Marco Giribaldo

Chapter 6 *Hutong: New Perspectives*

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different reasons. If we want to read the city of walls, the city of non-relation with a cultural interpretation, this is what Bertalanffy defined as a closed system theorized in modern physic. These is what the legacy of European and American industrial cities gave to China. The idea where a city is made by functional cell, monocultural fields, or the city of inside and outside became a fragile city (Bianchetti 2017). The result of the blind scientific innovation of work, labors and activities, affected the city as result. The division of the work could be similarly seen in the division of the city.

What we understood is however that city is not only an accumulation of building, but it is an amazing intersection of elements, and especially we mention an interaction of people. The city made of walls is a fictional story similar to considering Tikopia an island with no relationship with the world. It only imagination. The walls are only obstacles.

At the same time, we have the traditional city as a resistance. Despite all the changes, the hutongs are still there. This is for us a great potential. What we could see in this city, with obviously less clarity because it was left behind and because it was not imagine like that, a great flexibility of the complex bind represented by the *hutong*. From the urban sections about the use of the ground floor the traditional city offers more freedom in changes. This flexibility is proved by the adaptability of the urban tissue to the changes which took place during the last century. The great potential offered is for us a new opportunity in which we could play. Zhang Ke linked, in a collection of projects developed in Harvard GSD in 2016, the reality of hutong with the term metabolism (K. Zhang 2016). While the meaning of metabolism, for the Japanese legacy, provided systematic solution for the problems of the city with mega-structures, for us the scale of mega is less provocative and very specific. We are focusing on an adapting system more than a superposition. Zhang Ke describe the studio as following : «*The Hutong Metabolism studio aims to explore alternative perspective of looking at the hutongs and their problems, to consider them as a living organism, to study them both as macro scale infrastructure and in micro scale units, to respond to the problems with both historic and futuristic thinking, and to explore the potential of the hutongs and courtyards as a generator of communal spaces and catalyst of social interaction*» (K. Zhang 2016). For the architect then, the *hutong* is a living organism between past and future, in dynamic evolution. This is the same organism of Muratori and Caniggia. This

is the same organism of Remotti and Claude Bernard. For these potentialities, briefly resumed by Zhang Ke and shared with the premises of this work, we could recognize in the dynamic system of the *hutongs* the matrix a cultural behavior and openness to changes offered by this urban typology. The *hutongs* represent a potential idea of the city where the dimension of relations is not cut but continuous. Despite the infinite abuses and speculations, the *hutongs* are still a feeble flame of a candle which resists to the risk of blowing out. While in this panorama we could define the city of coexistence, where the elements are simply juxtaposed, where it is not taking place a relationships between the elements, the organism of the *hutongs*, on the contrary, represents the dimension of co-living, which is for us the potential cultural city. The richness and the ability of adapting is given by the potential of relationships between the parts and not the efficiency of the single elements. The interaction of people and the habitat will be the main target of the next steps. It is visible from the experience walking in the area, where people know each other, walk and sit on the street, the complete use of the space. The idea of culture as dimension of relationships in the *hutongs* is still hoping for raising again in prosperity. While existence means a state of being without any connection between two object, what we are searching for is the idea of co-living, like human beings in relations with the *other* or organisms with their bacteria inside, where the transformative power of relations could really create a cultural entity. We could find this idea, even if blurred, in the *hutong*. This kind of city, as an organism is the beginning of the project which is going to enhance those potentials. Our efforts are going to take place not in the single object but rather in the connections between them on the scale of the urban design for the future of the area.

### 6.3 Palace in the City

*«If the architectural renovations and breakthrough of early Modernism largely benefited from revolutions in construction technology [...] then the forces behind new architectural innovations will not simply come from a technical level but rather from an invisible and humanistic power»* (H. Li and Huang 2017).

The dimension of co-living elements, and people as well, grow up in time in an evolutionary process. The radical changes of the last century created a slow pace development and secondary respect to the pace of the modern city. The *hutongs* represented, in this parallel direction and island where density and informality defined the rules of the area. The courtyards slowly transform from a single-family house



Figure 6.23 *Palace in the city*, Marco Giribaldo

compound, toward a share environment for multiple people. The intensity of the urban tissue created the need of exploring different dimensions of communal living. Here the elements of the city and the pattern of uses are not simply overlapped threads but intricately woven in complex schemes of relationships on the horizontal plane. Life that takes place mainly on the ground floor of the city represent what we could ideally imagine as a spread building on the city. The extroversion of the house reversed on the streets and the open space. The patron of the palace has opened all the doors for the collectivity. It is permeable from the outside and the inside of the small houses are rooms of the palace. Public toilets for sustaining a spread primary infrastructure is an example. The streets are the corridors. The open space, in its sacrificed dimensions became the living room of many for the informal activities. The introduction of public services like school and other public activities prevented the area to slowly turn off its lights. With this idea the concept of inside and outside become more fluid and difficult to be grasped. The shared space becomes more fluid *in-between* of the buildings.

The connections of smaller systems in a broader organism is what we are going to foster and upgrade. This will bring us, with this humanistic approach considering buildings and people cultural elements, we are going to explore a new relationship between

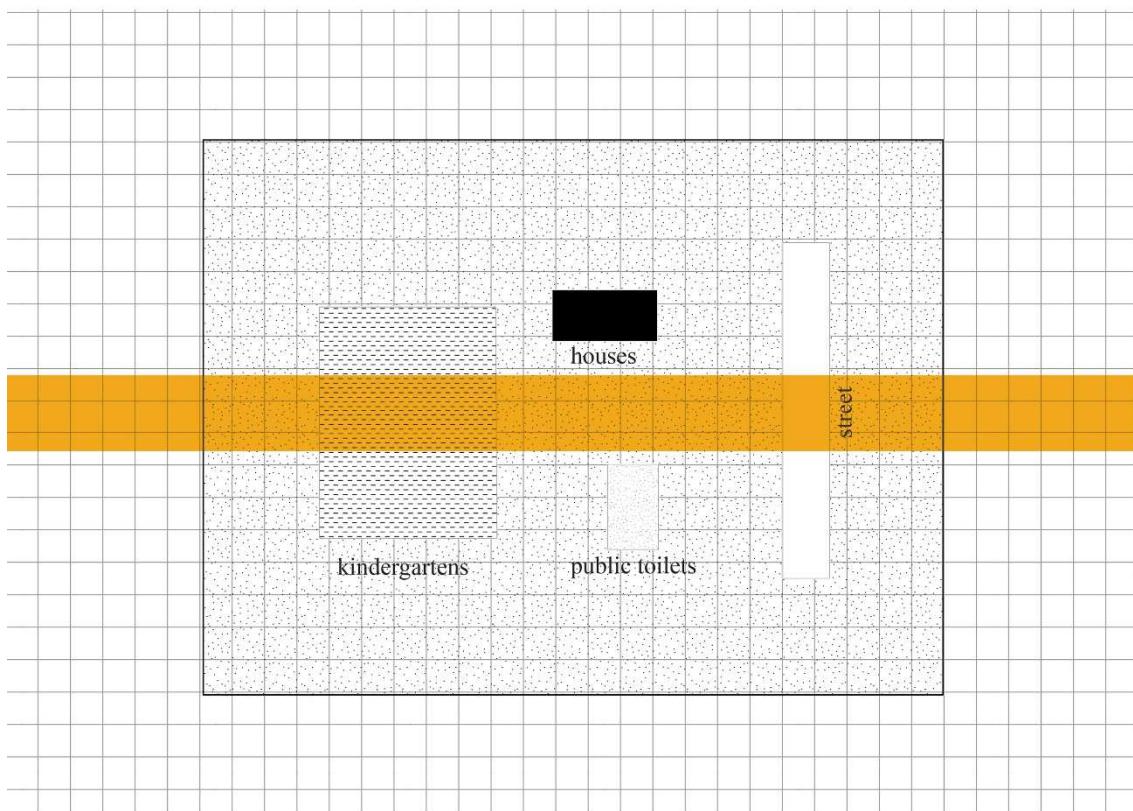


Figure 6.24 Existing system, Marco Giribaldo

citizens and city through dialogue. Architecture and urban design are now a media of new connections and possibility for a bright future in the traditional city in evolution. Not only at the scale of the single element, like a single courtyard but looking at the broader scale between the city and the house, the scale of the cultural organism.

*«Architecture cannot allow itself to subordinate form to the urge for direct, individual expression. It responds, by definition, to a concrete purpose, to the functions of both private and public life, and must thus express itself in a language that lends itself not only to individual but to plural use. Its language must be elementary so that it is accessible to as many people as possible. At the same time, it must, as said, aim to re-evaluate the elementary aspects of life and thereby make existence more simple and joyful»* (Strauven 1998). With these words about the work of Aldo Van Eyck, the system of the hutong must include the broader sense of sharing spaces, from the children to the elderly in a dimension of connection between people. The first step for designing these relationships is the idea of blurring the boundary between the elements. The transition between one element and the other is confused and open to interpretations. The *hutong* shows itself as a scene of a theatre, changing scenario every day, accommodating different activities and different actors.



Figure 6.25 Existing public toilets, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.26 Public social condenser, Marco Giribaldo

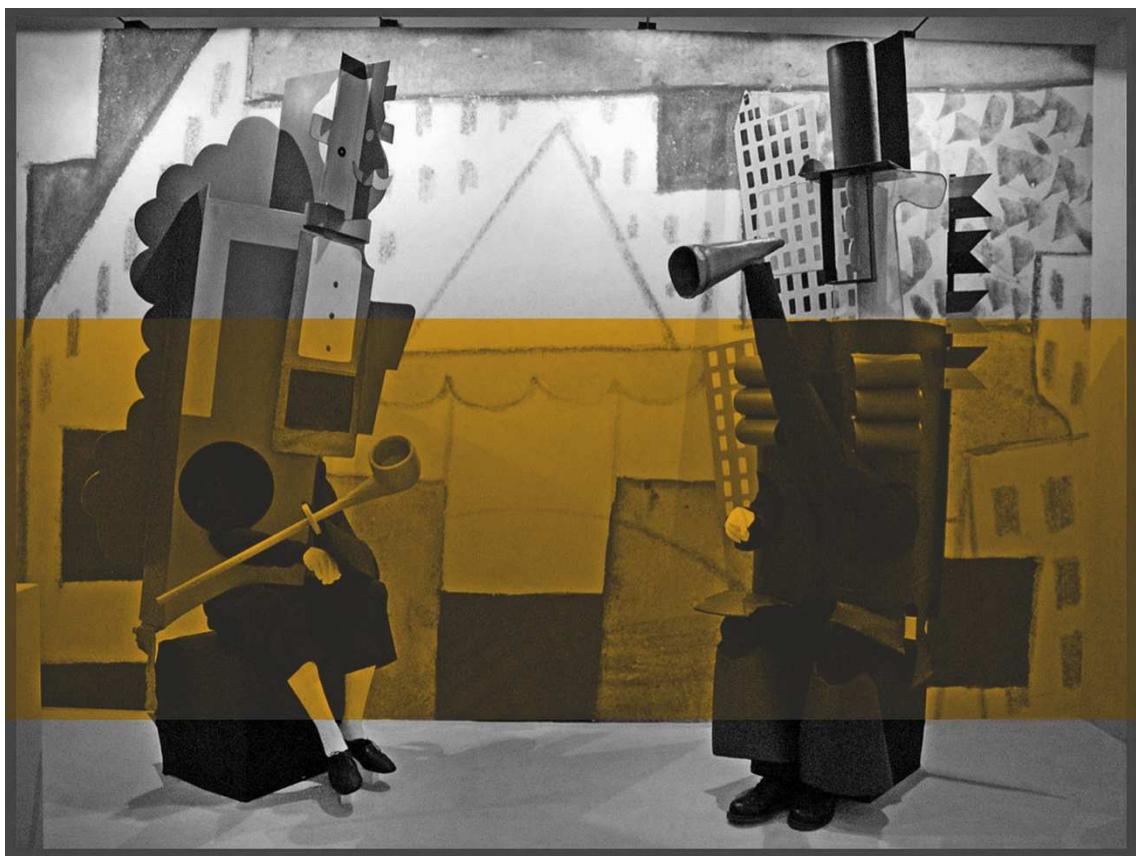


Figure 6.27 Set and costumes designed by Pablo Picasso for *Parade* (1917)



Figure 6.28 Resident going back home from the public toilet, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.29 Group of friends meeting outside of the house, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.30 Residents chatting and drinking tea on the sidewalk, Marco Giribaldo (2019)



Figure 6.31 People eating outside of a takeaway restaurant, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

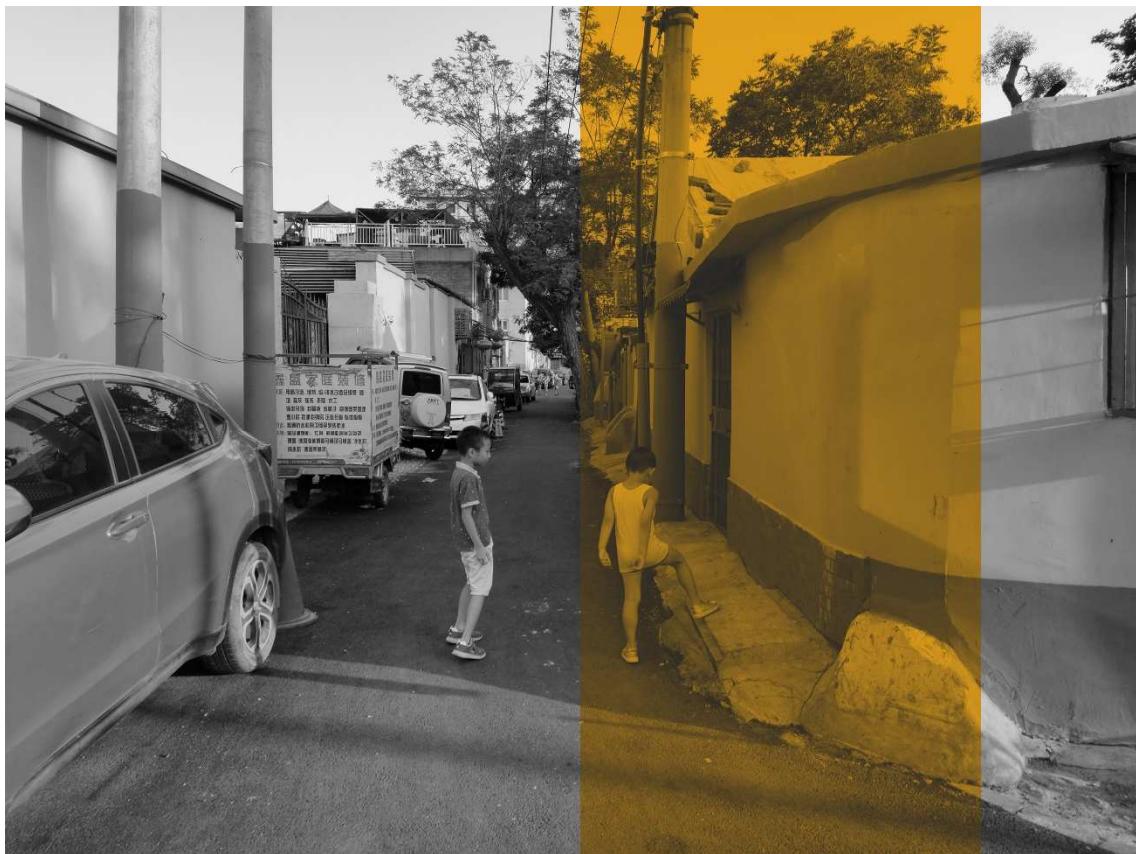


Figure 6.32 Kids playing in the street, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

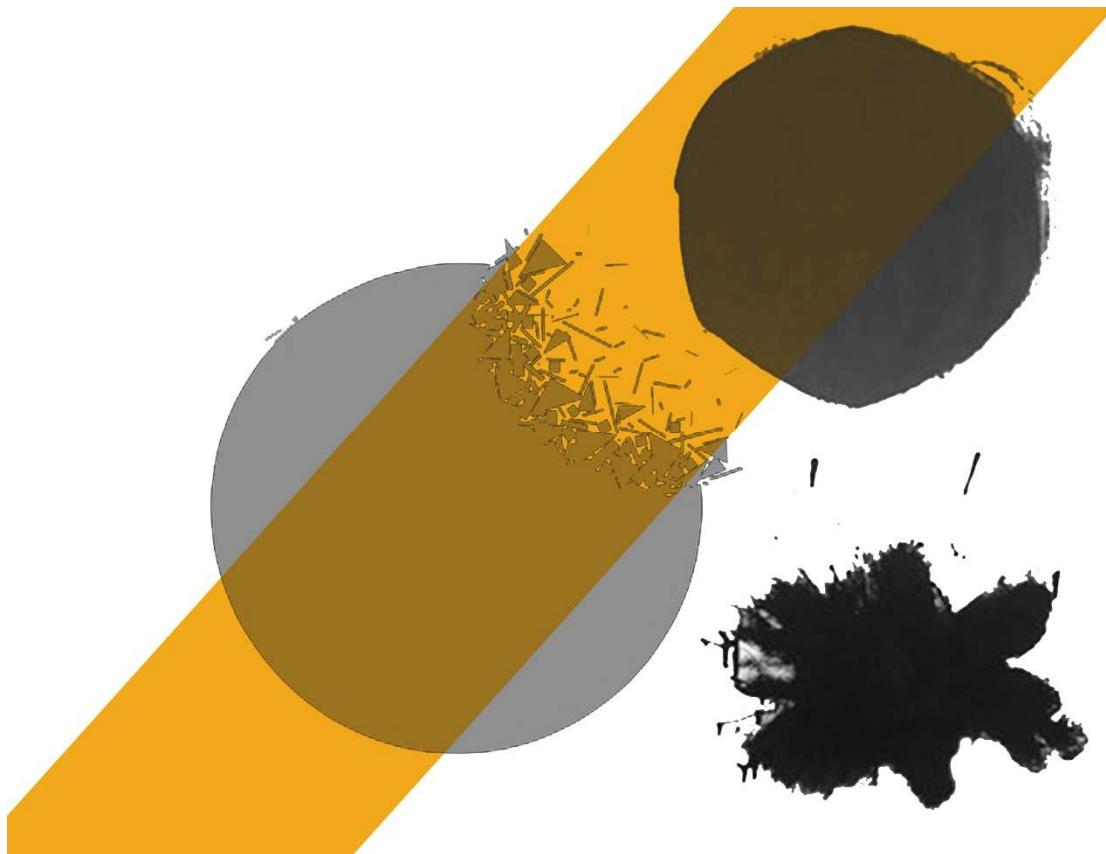


Figure 6.33 *Variazioni su un errore di Parmenide*, Beppe Bonetti (2000- ); *Blast*, Adolph Gottlieb (1960)

## 6.4 Of Identity and Evolution

Before starting the reasonings on the concepts of the project, we need to make a strong premise on the balance between past and future through the idea of evolution and cultural identity. We previously saw how the consideration of the traditional city, as a cultural heritage of Beijing, created different effects and not always positive. For example, in Beijing many have been and unfortunately still are, production of a fake cultural image promoted for tourism which don't exactly tackle the issues of social and cultural sustainability (Chen and Thwaites 2013). For many scholars, the issue that this kind of developments is the preservation of the identity of the place and the cultural identity of its citizens. However, we are going to argue in this paragraph the risks of using the word identity without a full understanding of the term. The basic meaning of identity and culture are, in fact, completely different in their nature. Despite of the common use of the word identity in the contemporary debate on the city, as well as

social studies, we propose here to forget the idea of identity as a horizon to reach. While the action of identify the reality is necessary and inevitable for human beings in understanding the reality, the action of creating or searching an identity is an unreachable dream. We described before how culture works in natural systems in creating a wide network of relationships. Cultural organisms are, in fact, essentially dependent from the outside and other organisms. Culture represents, as result, a crack in human beings giving them the great adaptability and multiplicity. Identity, on contrast, is the refuse of this openness to whatever is outside the sphere. Marshall Sahlins told us very clearly «*if culture is conceived in constant change [...] then something like identity cannot exists*» (Remotti 2010). While culture could be considered, with different metaphors, fluid, a network, a heterogeneous patchwork, identity is made by a unique and complete substance. As we said before, many times, like human beings our cities cannot be considered closed and complete systems. «*a city, a countryside, from far are a city or a countryside, but getting closer, they are houses, trees, leaves, ants, leg of the ants*» (Remotti 2010). Identity is not real; it is only a view of the world. Identity is only a section of the reality, simplifying the reality, a cut on the dimension of relations. It is difficult today to find boundaries of culture (G. Wang 2010). While in the past, culture could have been associate in a specific location under a specific identity, today our world is more open. For us, as architects, a focus on the word *place*, *place-making*, are example of this influence and could be very dangerous. This concept, which sometime is followed by reasonings about urban culture, make us start on defining the boundaries and not really think about the space in its fluidity. We start to understand what is not that *place*, instead of understanding it, in its potential and opportunities it offers. The result of talking in these terms, in terms of identity, make us blind on the present, bring our reasonings in the research of the identity in the past and the roots. Not only, drowning in the past, we are not able to see the future and not seeing the evolution of space. Identity is inexorably static.

The result is what we have mentioned, a ‘*new vernacularism*’ (X. Li 2000) based on the image of the past, a pure and clean space, untouched by evolution. Often the evolution of the *hutongs* was considered degraded, a dark episode of the last century, to be brought back to ancient times. How many are the pictures about clean and modern courtyard houses today? This are only islands outside of the process of the continuity of the evolution. Our thesis wants to embrace the evolution and a sense of culture brought

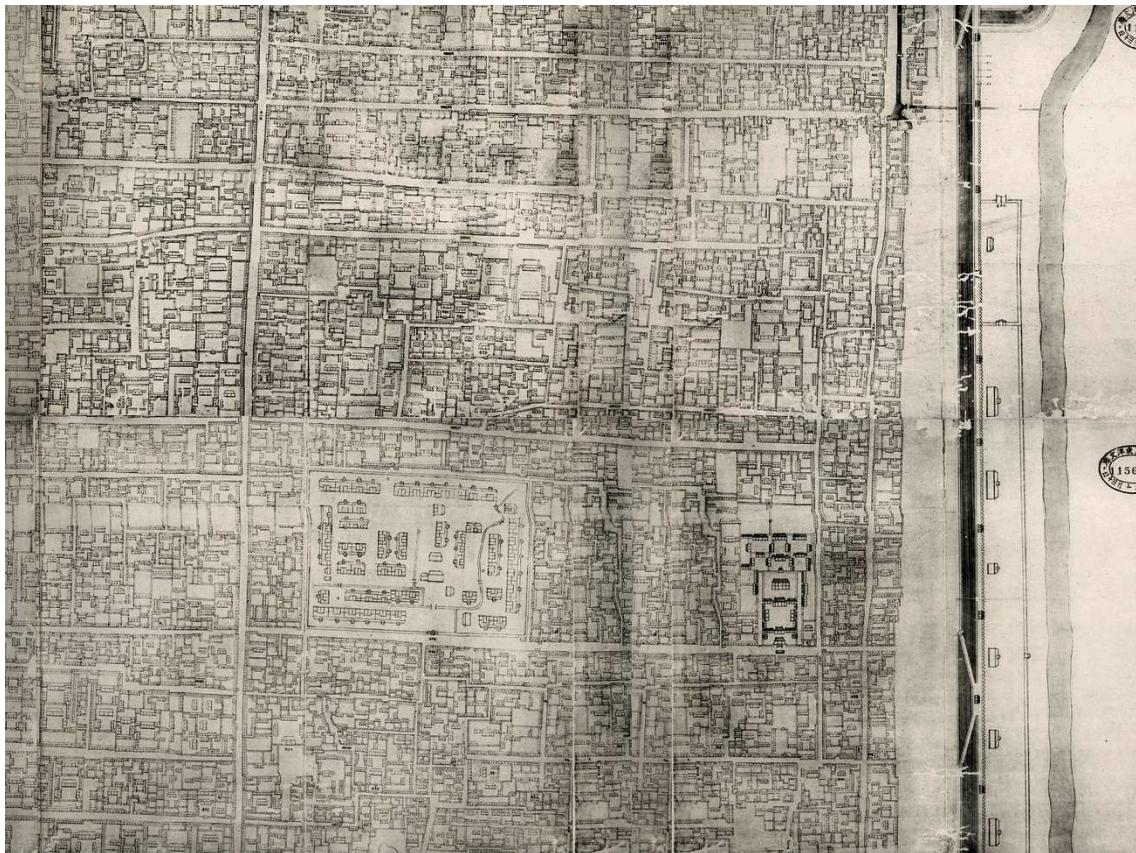


Figure 6.34 Complete Map of Peking, Qianlong Period (1750), published in 1940, Toyo Bunko Archive

from the bottom (G. Wang 2010). We want to embrace the process of the *silent mutations* introduced by Jullien (2017) about the slow processes, relentless mutations. The same importance of these progressive mutations has been described to us by archeologists in understanding the ancient societies. «*Artistic phenomenon of the past are more often only episodes [...], the qualitative expression of the work of artisans and numerous artists has been made by recurring actions*» (Carandini 1979). Carandini declared that the real understanding of the societies of the past is mainly from amorphous and variable stories. A clear convergence cold be found in the publication, we already mention, of Jakob Burckhardt about the renaissance in Florence through the small realities, small mutations and not the great events, by its culture. The same should be, for us, today. The present is the understanding of the continuity of the evolution, in the fluidity of the cultural space, able to adapt, able to change its form and meaning on the selected context. The focus on the small actions of people, in the everyday life, bring to the surface needs and issues, as well the potentiality that the project could create, rather than focusing on formal recognition of a past which is not there anymore.

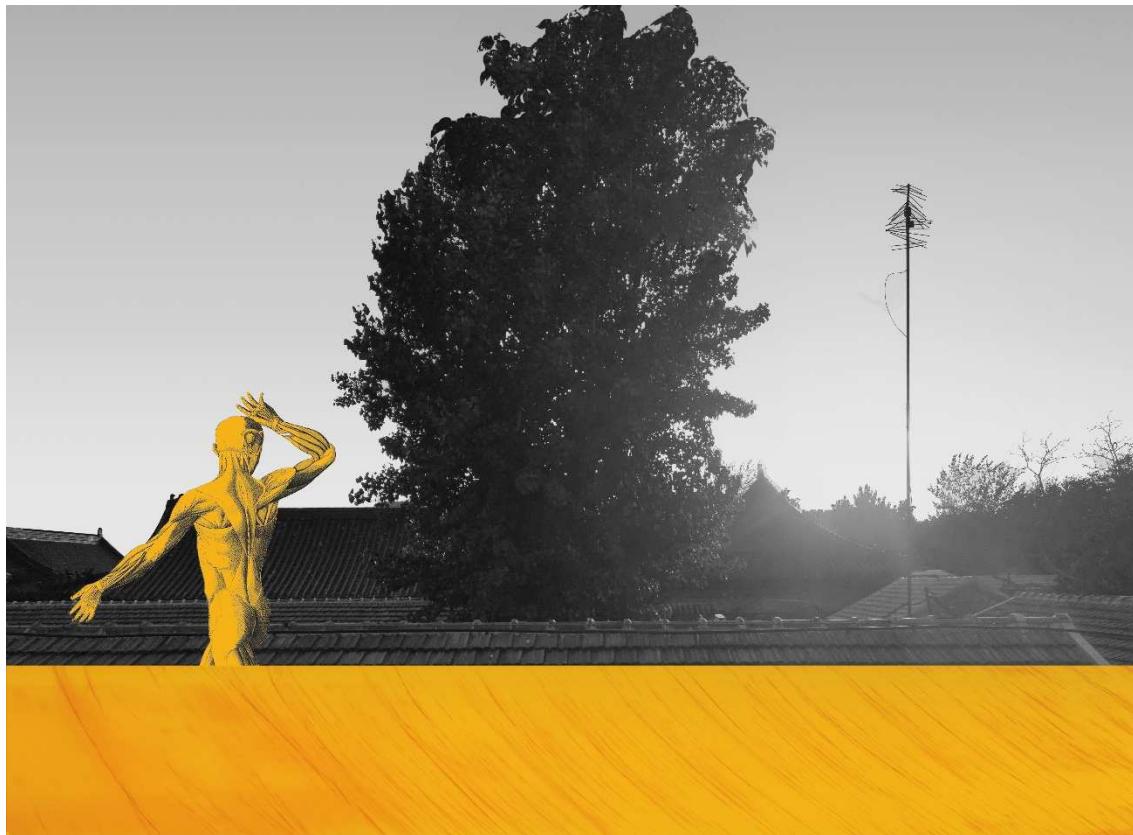


Figure 6.35 *Dance of the Body*, Marco Giribaldo

## 6.5 Dance of the body

As consequence of the previous considerations, we are going to focus on the morphological region of the *hutong* which is offering us new opportunities in the perspective of cultural city, in continuity with the evolutionary process and in the full understanding of the future directions. The project is not going to consider the traditional city as a collection of courtyard houses or any historical re-interpretations. It is evident from what we said before, how the illusion of the identity could intervene in this project for envision a return to the traditional *siheyuan*. As a matter of fact, it is not anymore, the city the city of courtyard houses. They progressively disappeared in order to adapt themselves to the social and primary needs of last century. At the same time, if we consider the courtyard houses as symbolic representation of a society (Chen and Thwaites 2013), we cannot recognize anymore a society based on the canonical family unit. Society became more dynamic in this sense. We cannot understand this area



Figure 6.36 Quality of the addition inside the courtyards today, Marco Giribaldo (2019)

starting from the idea of courtyard house. It is the city of relations, interconnected elements and systems co-living together in close contact. However, the reality of the issues occurring in the area cannot be forgotten. The general level of the living conditions is very low, and the residents may perhaps wait to get a compensation for moving out of an old and dilapidated house. The extreme density of the houses causes danger of fire as well as extremely difficult the mobility in the area, many residents have to walk 100 meters for reaching the closest public dirty toilet. The social structure behind the architecture is also in crisis: the *hutong* is not, anymore, an attractive life for the younger generation, so that only elderly and their grandchildren are walking in the street. Slowly the urban lifestyle of the *hutong* is disappearing under our eyes and behind the grey walls.

The current situation is victim of the city of walls. It is, in fact, visible that, even if, the system of interconnected urban elements is existing in the area, it is not enough to keep a high level of living conditions. The fatigue of the organism is visible simply walking in the area. The obstruction of the movement inside the urban tissue do not allow the



Figure 6.37 Threshold of the courtyard house, Marco Giribaldo

perception of this system, not even to the residents. The presence of walls is, in fact the main physical expression of this lack of relationships even if existing in the same place. Walls are of two different natures: physical walls and informal density.

While the first is represented by proper walls and fences created on purpose as we have seen before, the second one is the non-permeable sequence of spaces in the dense urban fabric. This is the heritage of the evolution we find today, result of the enclosed courtyards and the stratification of rooms inside the courtyards. The thresholds and the narrow path that people use for reaching their small house are, for us, considered as closed boxes. The stress of the narrow space, the uncomfortable friction of the body against the windows is, for us, imagined as a wall. The space of the body and its movement is opposed by this occluded reality, a city where the horizontal movement is essential for the survival of the inhabitants in the actions of everyday life, is the issue of our first stage. The friction of the body, which in this case are the organisms living the area is the obstacle of the elaboration and use of the system with a full potential. This is not a space for movement, and this is not the space of dialogue. The space of relations

between the elements is not explored and it represents the main ingredient for the *hutong* organism to survive. Culture, in a figurative image, represents for us the complex connective tissues of the organism, an invisible layer of social relations, not just empty, but full of connections and where relations take place.

It is, on the base of this assumption, where culture is seen as vital distributive element, the idea is to materialize this social infrastructure that allows the cultivation of the living condition toward new positive futures. A suspended layer of culture creates for us the opportunity to define the representation of the concept of the space *in-between* able to give a new face to the old *hutong*. This idea allows us to think beyond the walls, and beyond the enclosed boxes of the elements. Life will take place beyond these boundaries. Beyond the limits of the house, the enclosure of the kindergartens, and outside of the public toilets. In this sense, we are changing the angle of the perspective from the walled city to something more like a playground, which represents the absolute freedom of the relations between people. The whole area would be seen from this new idea in order to enrich it and enhance the presences of the existing possibilities. However, this abstract vision will face the reality and the dynamics of the context we analyzed till now. In this conceptual idea rely the definition of culture we described at the beginning, leading to a system open toward changes and uses of people.

The adaptation to the reality is what already exists in our nature. Natural systems and their organisms, as we previously saw, found more or less the application of culture as a method of adaptation. One of the extreme examples, which completely fit this assumption we are making, is what scientists generally name *slime mould*, or *Physarum Polycephalum*. It is still debated nowadays what is this organism, between the animals and fungi kingdom. However, what is generally innovative in the recent discovery of this organism is the ability of surviving and adapting to the environment, exploring and learning from it. It is sensationally defined as a semi-intelligent organism «*It is capable of memory, it is capable of adapting its behavior, it is capable of solving problems, of moving around a labyrinth, of optimizing solutions, of behaving a little like an animal. So it's a very curious being, a very curious living being*» (France 24 2019). Its ramifications are what for us will take shape in the city. The organisms of the city would be introduced to the dimension of the *slime mould* where the cells are mysteriously connected. We are not the first to use the same concept. The works of Heather Barnett use the *slime mould* as inspiration of images as well as art performances (Barnett 2014).

It is with this concept in mind that our project is going to sneak inside the urban fabric with the scale of architectural solutions. We are going to introduce, at this point, the



Figure 6.38 *City of Walls*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.39 *Playground*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.40 *Urban social infrastructure beyond the walls*, Marco Giribaldo

concept of urban porosity. This concept it is borrowed from the fields outside of architectural thinking, but it had great impact on the work of some architects like Steven Holl and, his ex-partner in practice, Li Hu of OPEN. The words were introduced to the urban realm by Walter Benjamin talking about Naples in 1925. Benjamin described the city which he was visiting for a short period, finding a strong relationship between the architecture and human body through the idea of porosity. «*Buildings and actions interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways [...] to become a theatre of new unforeseen constellations [...] Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life in a city, reappearing everywhere*» (Holl 2009). Steven Holl, describing this scene in one of his collection of works, defined porosity as an element beyond the presence of solid and independent objects where the space around the body and between the buildings is merged. Urban porosity is a gentle and free movement in the city. «*especially in Beijing where the urban grid layout tends toward super block dimensions, urban porosity is crucial*» (Holl 2009). Of course, he is talking about his project Linked Hybrid, built in 2009. However, this idea could be declined to our context. The experience of the body



Figure 6.41 Movement of *Physarum Polycephalum*, Naksupan (2017)

struggling between oppressive elements need to be transformed in the conformable and fluid use of space. The freedom of movement could create the real connection between the elements which are existing. The inertia of the existing street can erode the compact urban fabric, opening the boxes of the buildings, opening new possibilities and projecting experiences to a bright daily life for the future inhabitants. The complexity of the porosity, it is based on the reading of the morphology and the typology of the open space it is merged in the texture of the existing context. The untouchable presence of culture, able to renovate itself and being dynamic through the sequence of spaces, foster an idea of open city toward the future. The analogy with culture and human being send us back again on the idea of open system and culture as a state of *un-completed* substance, able to adapt the body and change with the environment (Remotti 2011). At the same time the complexity of the spaces is given by the existing texture of our *hutong*.



Figure 6.42 *New public infrastructures*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.43 *New urban porosity's inertia*, Marco Giribaldo

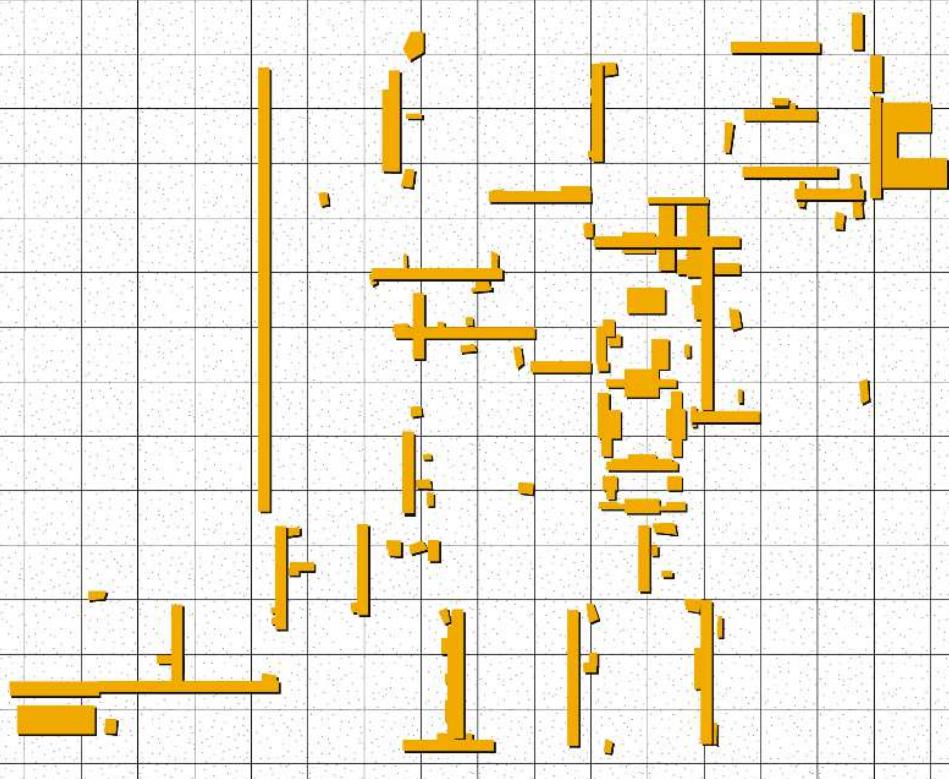


Figure 6.44 *Conceptual design*, Marco Giribaldo

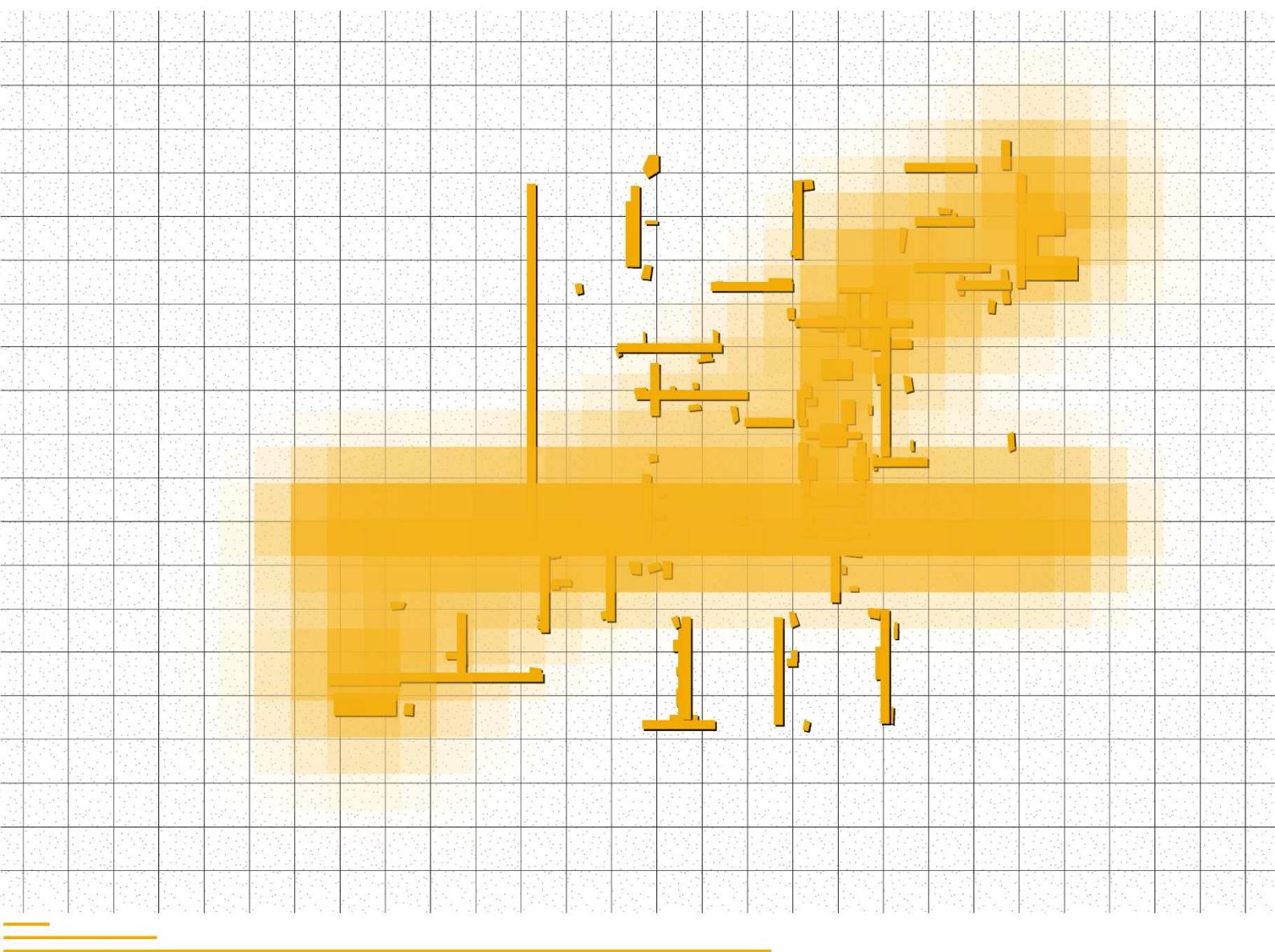


Figure 6.45 *Map of the urban intensity*, Marco Giribaldo

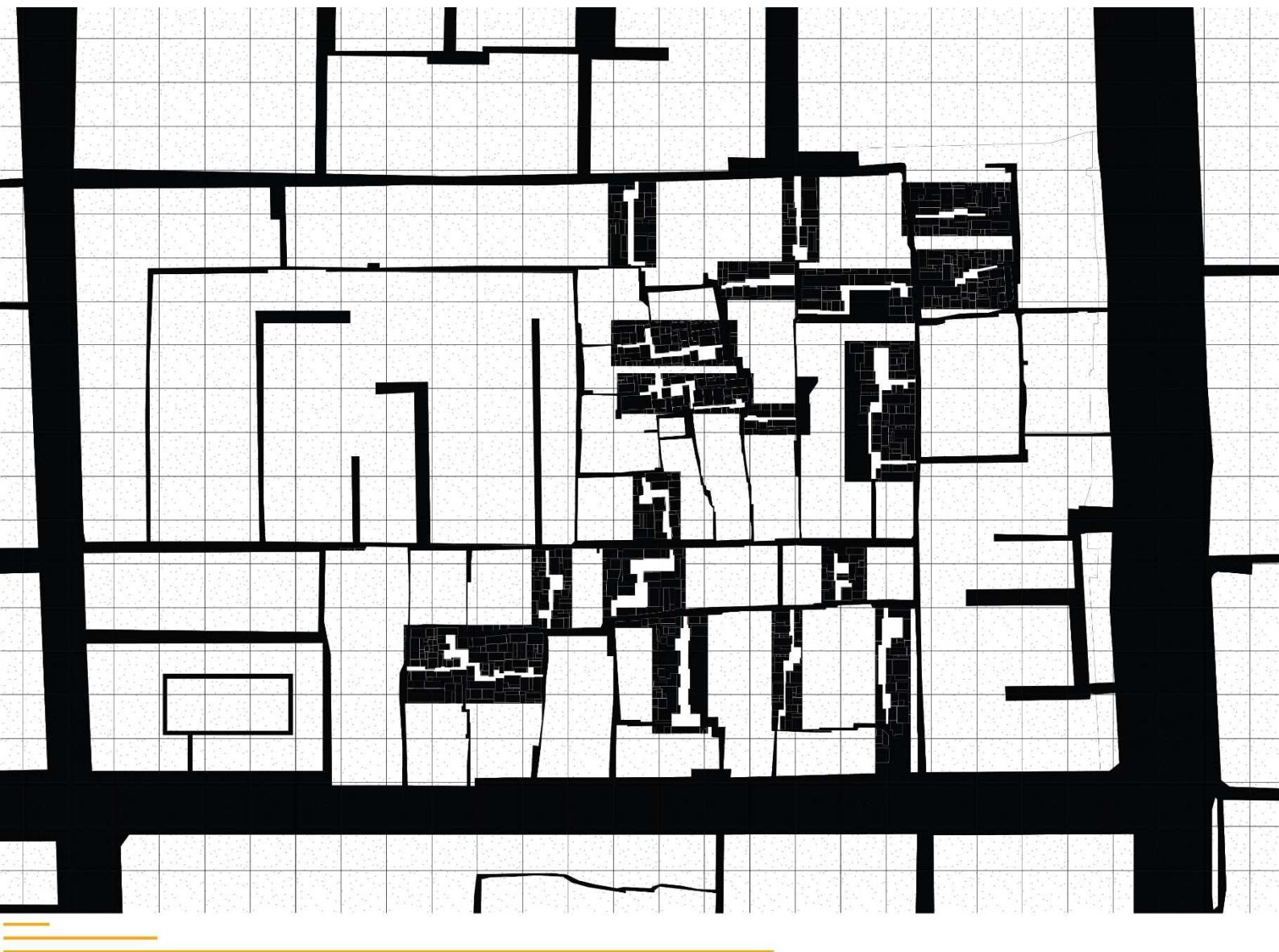


Figure 6.46 *Influence of the new porosity*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.47 *Opening of the elements*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.48 *Open program*, Marco Giribaldo

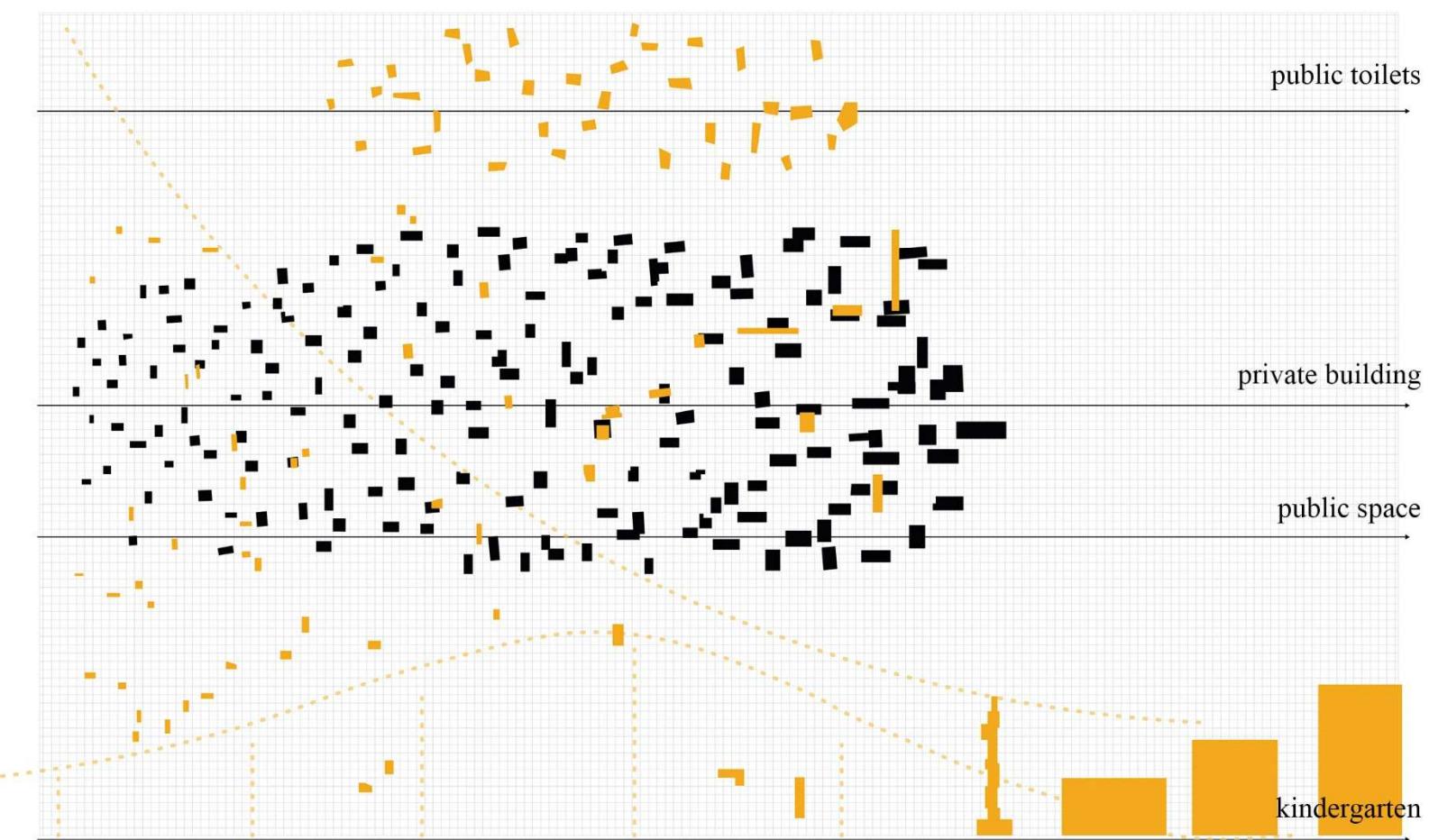


Figure 6.49 *Scale and activities*, Marco Giribaldo

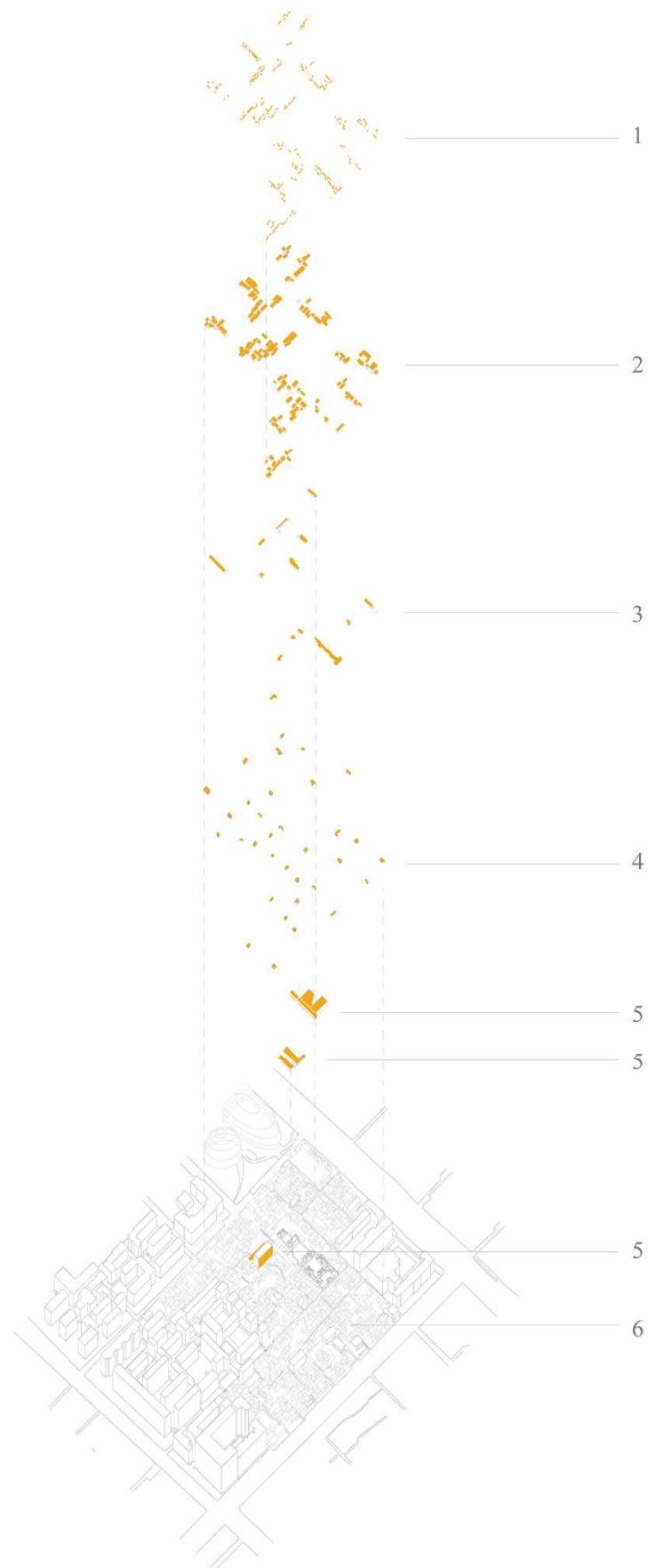


Figure 6.50 *Urban elements*, 1) Porous walls 2) Open buildings 3) Public rooms 4) Public toilets 5) Kindergartens 6) Context, Marco Giribaldo







Figure 6.52 Photograph with the bench of Palazzo Rucellai, Fratelli Alinari, (1860-1900)

## 6.6 *In-between*: morphology of relations

The idea that rely on the creation of urban porosity allow the creation of a cultural organism in the city. The concept of porosity is, however, not a formalistic exercise in order to reduce the density of an ill city, but it has very functional targets of enabling new opportunity and quality of movement. The strategic understanding of the potential intervention created, for us, the opportunity to influence the actions inside the urban fabric. Urban porosity created local fires, chirurgical emptiness, which make emerge a potential void. This void it is, however, the space of relations. We are not just looking at a process of de-urbanization cleaning the unwanted elements. We are not impoverishing the cultural potential of the density, on the contrary, we are adding richness to the organic system, replacing a genetic and static destiny with a cultural and open dimension. The new program we are introducing is very open to the city and people uses. The variety of activities will confront with the existing potentialities of the area:

the *Zhihua Temple*, which the cultural heritage still living today with weekly Buddhist music performances; the small activities such as laundry shops, barbers, restaurants, supermarkets, which are today connected to the central street running from East to West, *Lumicang hutong*; and the three existing kindergartens which are the main reason of attraction of people in the area, especially elderly who come with the grandchildren from the neighborhoods around. The diagonal of intensity of activities help us understanding the dimension and the location of the new porosity, less aggressive moving apart from the diagonal. This intensity is essential for us in order to maintain the need of mobility in the area, which once missing would be naturally replaced by private activities outside the houses.

With this functionalist methodology, we are getting closer to the ideas raising from the architectural thinking about the city during the reconstruction in Europe. Especially we are getting closer to Team X, which started to mine the idea of universal space developed by the Modernists in the previous decades. In this period, we could find a return to the dialogue between room and corridors. The re-introduction of polarization of the elements which disappeared during the *international style* (Tzonis 1999) In this situation we could be guided by the work of Aldo Van Eyck, in the post-war Amsterdam as well as the theoretical support of Alison and Peter Smithson. The title *in-between* is, in fact, borrowed from the ideas born in that period for the aspiration of new changed society. In parallel to the big intervention in the bombed city, extensive masterplans, new welfare infrastructure, urban expansions, the work of Van Eyck was facing a different dimension. An idea of a city built on small actions, leftover spaces and for different generations of people. Our intervention will take its shape and form in each situation which is strongly related to the everyday life of people. While Van Eyck worked with existing voids of the city, for us the void is artificially created in order to sustain the *hutongs* as organism. Our spaces are very similar to the situation where Van Eyck had facing with his playgrounds, even if we are in a different context. The intermediate space represents that dimension outside the building in the city, representing the public sphere. The representation of the void, for Van Eyck, is the space of the dialogue in the city (Tzonis 1999). The multi-scalar idea of urban porosity gave us a great creative space for the dimension of the *in-between*. This dimension is not only the space between the buildings and the open space, but also the interaction between the elements, our *Palace in the city*. The quality of this spaces is then generated



Figure 6.53 *Metafore nel paesaggio*, Ettore Sottsass (1972-1979)

by the quality and the freedom of movement in the city. Architecture is, from this point of view, influenced by the quality of the relations. The *hutong* is not only an accumulation of objects but an interactive organism finding a new balance between spaces. On the bases of this idea we are unbalancing movement but what we need to introduce is a closer interaction between the elements which is more related to the experience of space. We cannot simply open new streets. On the contrary the urban porosity needs to be materialized, need to have a shape in terms of *in-between*. Architecture could, in this idea, create this layer of dialogue between people and the buildings with the open space. This could strengthen our very first assumption on the use of culture in terms of tool. Our intent of creating a cultural city take place essentially in this step, which is not the building itself or the space outside. The cultural characteristic of the space relies in the sphere of *in-between*.

As we have seen before introducing our biology's reference, the *slime mould*, we briefly introduced a relation between the organism and the outside world. Some studies define its intelligent dimension not in a brain, but in the skin. The decision making is taking

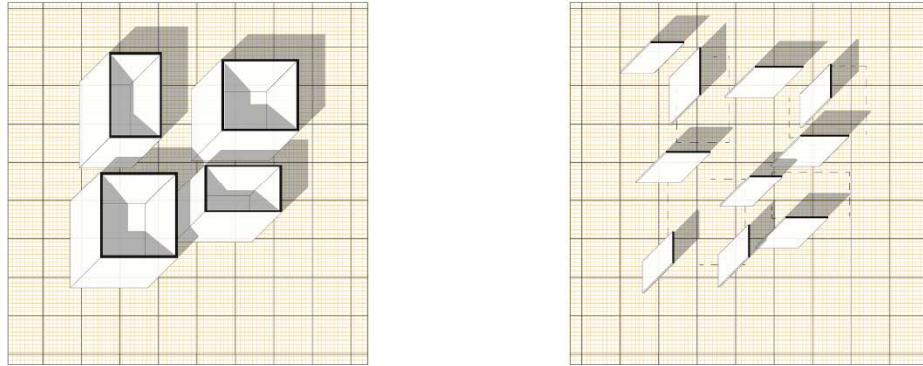


Figure 6.54 *From boxes to surfaces*, Marco Giribaldo

place in the physical and chemical reaction that connects the inside and the outside (Garnier 2016). For us this is a great point of convergence. The single elements and the context are interconnected thought their skins. The idea of the *in-between* touches the urban scale till the detail building. At the same time, the *in-between* is the dimension of interaction of people, which the basic element of living together in a sharing city, *co-living* together (Remotti 2017). The starting point of designing the *in-between* is the opening-up of the closed boxes we discovered. While urban porosity unable our concept to emerge, opening the urban fabric to the potential interaction, the second step, toward the connection of the elements, is the redefinition of their boundaries.

The buildings are not anymore independent but intimately interacting. The boxes of the houses, the boxes of public toilets, the boxes of the schools are not isolated anymore. They become porous among themselves, accepting people, open to possibilities. Opening these boxes, not only allow us the connection between the elements, but also enrich the experiences of them. The porosity of the elements is the opportunity for us to also solve technical problems like natural illumination and natural ventilation,

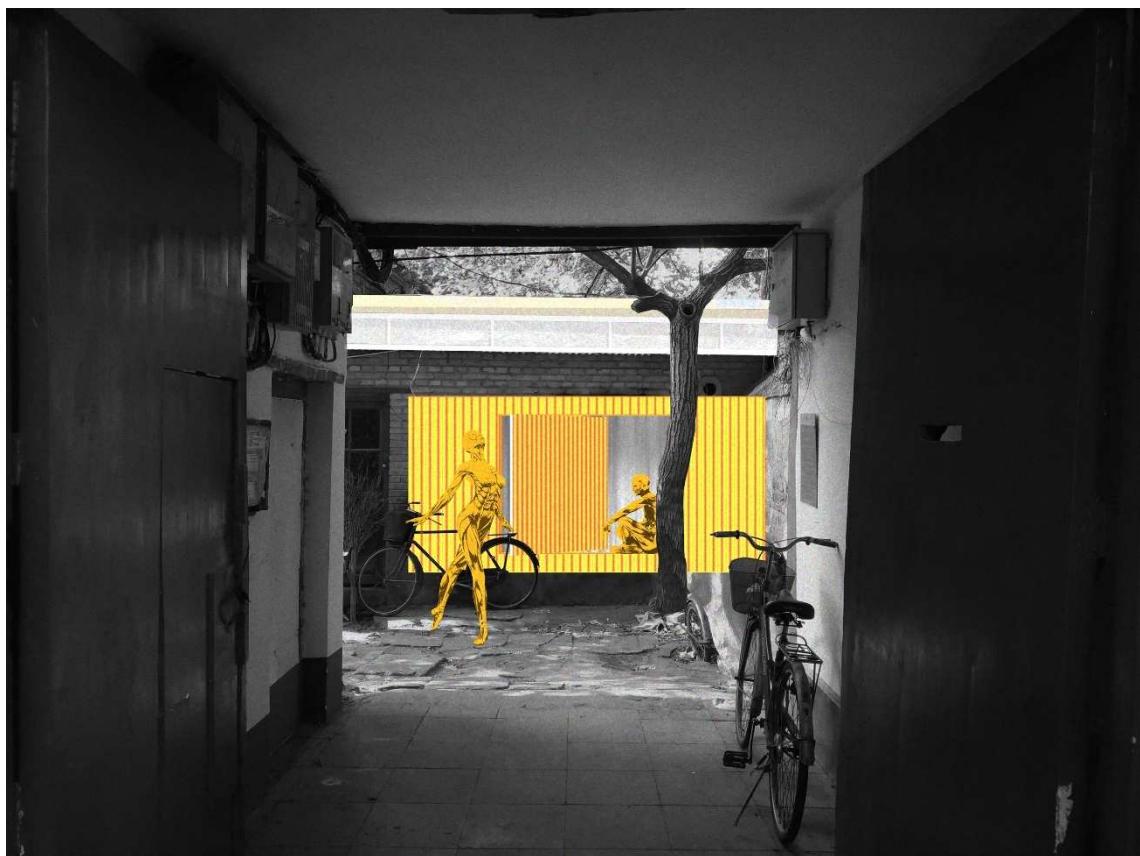


Figure 6.55 *Porous house*, Marco Giribaldo

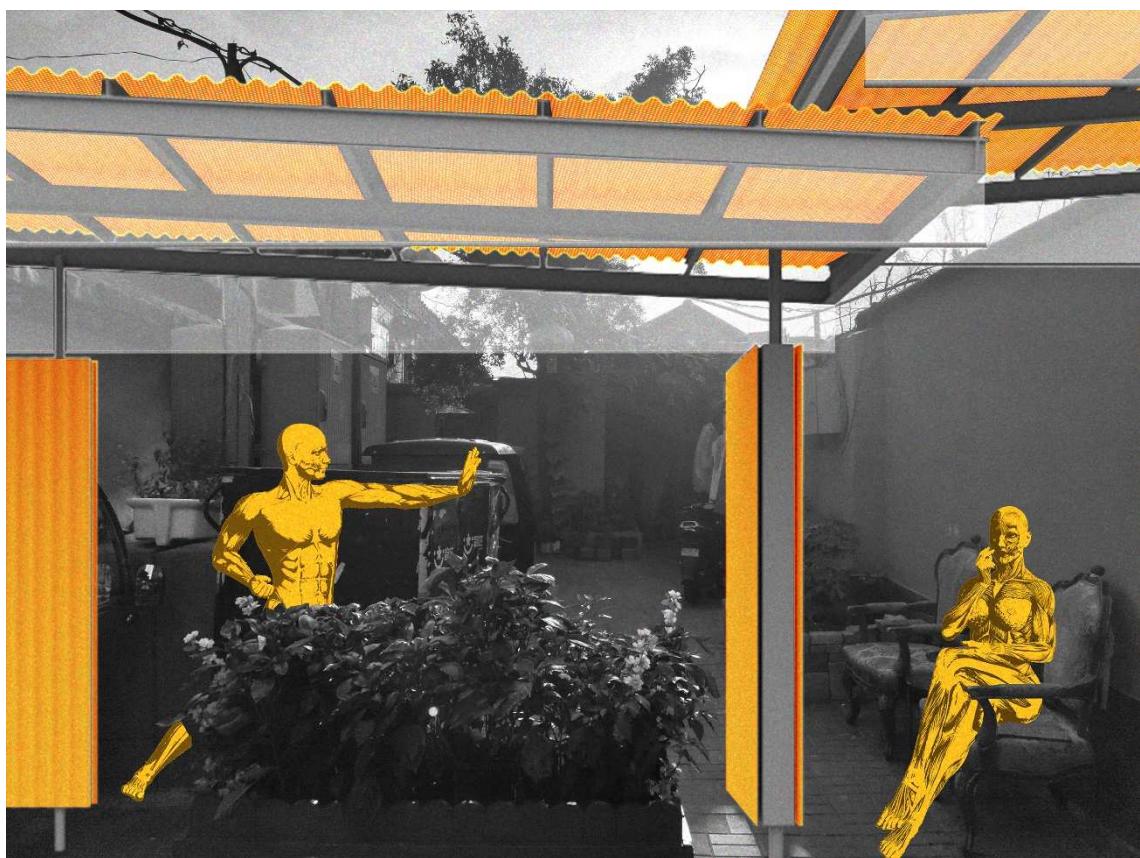


Figure 6.56 *Floating public room*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.57 *Open toilet*, Marco Giribaldo

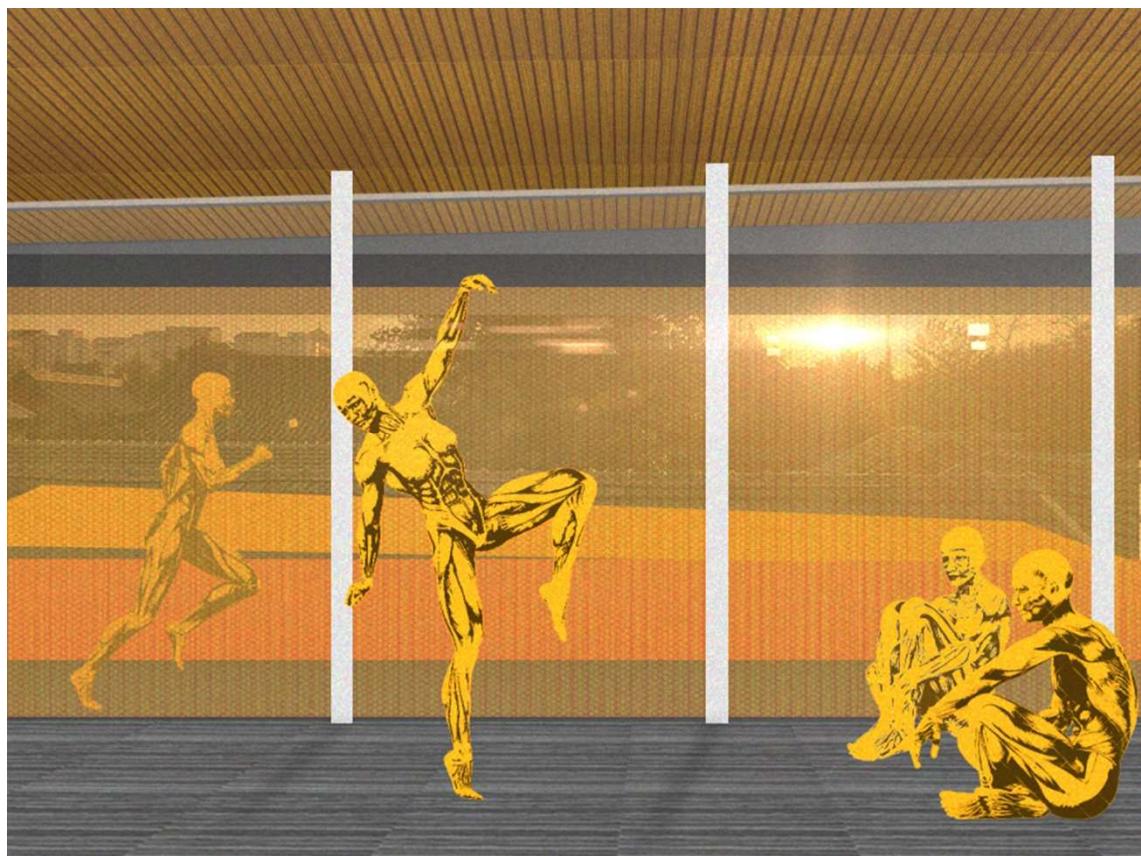


Figure 6.58 *Open school*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.59 A grocery store employee climbs back in a doorless shop, (Liang, Ma, and Wu 2017)

Improving, as consequence, the quality of life, as well as social issues like the education philosophy of the kindergarten and the interaction with the old population taking care of the grandchildren. The porosity of the building opens possibilities that are more public and less individualistic. The fluidity of the space is then, not followed by a series of boxes, but the plan is open and free with the identification of corridors, rooms, toilets and living spaces which are the new intimate public spaces. George Simmel talking about culture was claiming that «*all humans are porous, the bordering creature with no borders*» (Frisby and Featherstone 1997).

So, the idea of working on the borders of the interaction become essential for understanding the process taking place between the elements. With the statement of opening the boxes, we are not only working on the nature of the elements, but we are also mixing the ingredients of the city. The idea of wall it is not strong and perpetual entities. Roofs are not heavy object enclosing the space from above but covers pf activities. The dynamic interaction in a fluid and continuous space, creating a dialogue that could re-unite the community and the urban system. In order to define this



Figure 6.60 *Building by yourself*, Marco Giribaldo

interconnection, we are going to work on the surfaces of the interaction. Boxes are closed systems, they are spaces of univocal interpretation, you are inside or outside, private space or public space. On the other hand, surfaces could be interpreted in multiple dimensions, as a dynamic element. This unique feature gives to spaces ambiguous direction of uses, open to people's interpretation. Surfaces are following the idea of *Opera Aperta* by Umberto Eco, in which the public is integrated in the interpretation of the performance (Remotti 2011). Surfaces gain an active and dynamic role. What we mean with this open interpretation of the surface it is not only a free use of it, windows or doors, benches or shelves, but also the open future. The use of simple panels, which are industrial and cheap, can be accessible to many people and for the future. Of course, the construction of the public elements, like public toilets and schools' expansions are guided by institutions, so it is part of a direct blueprint. However, the construction of canopies and exterior walls cannot be controlled by a project. In the light of this, our solution is one of the infinite possible scenarios. The application of the openings starts from the bottom-up. The scenario could be a growing constellation of

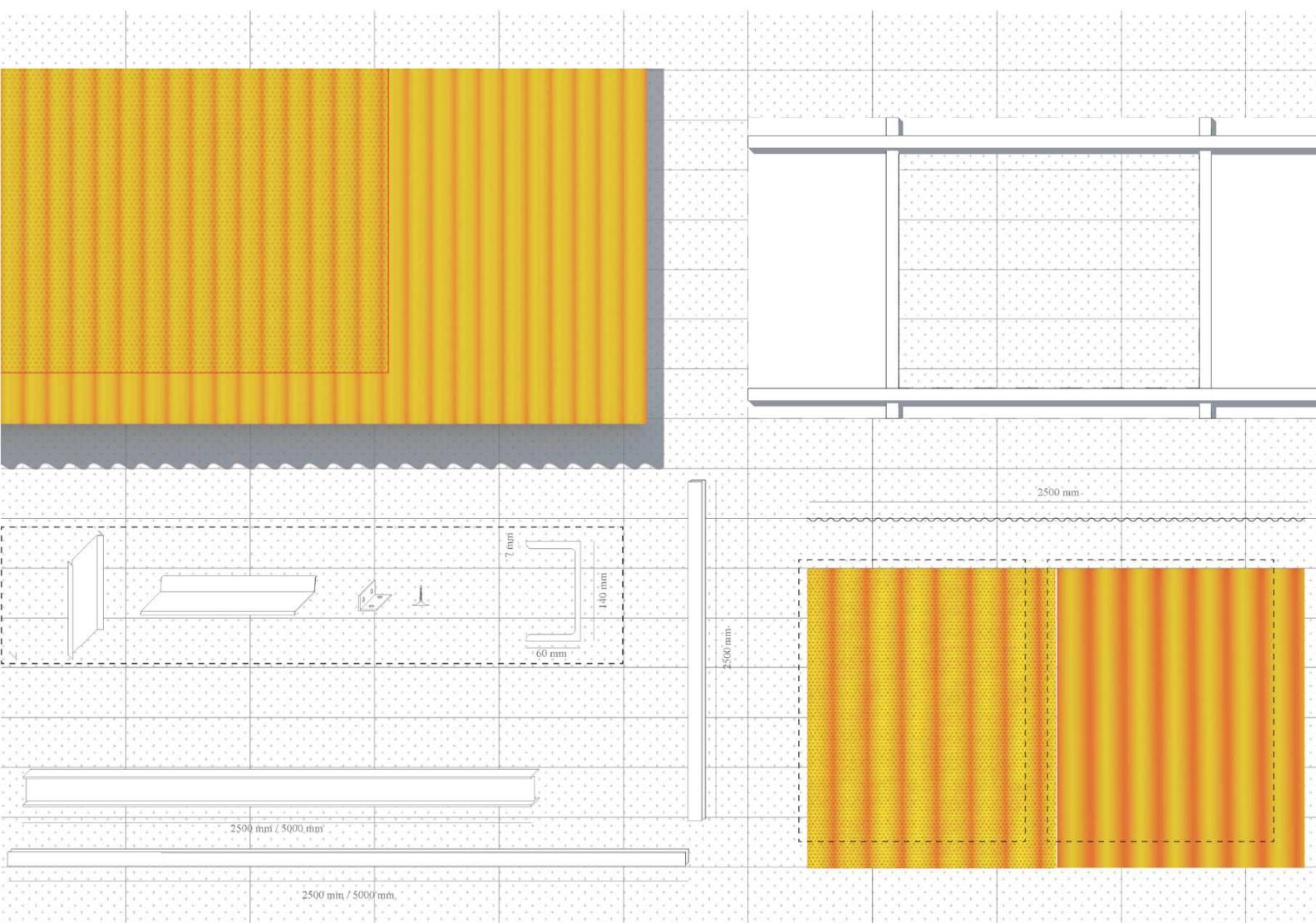


Figure 6.61 *Construction elements*, Marco Giribaldo

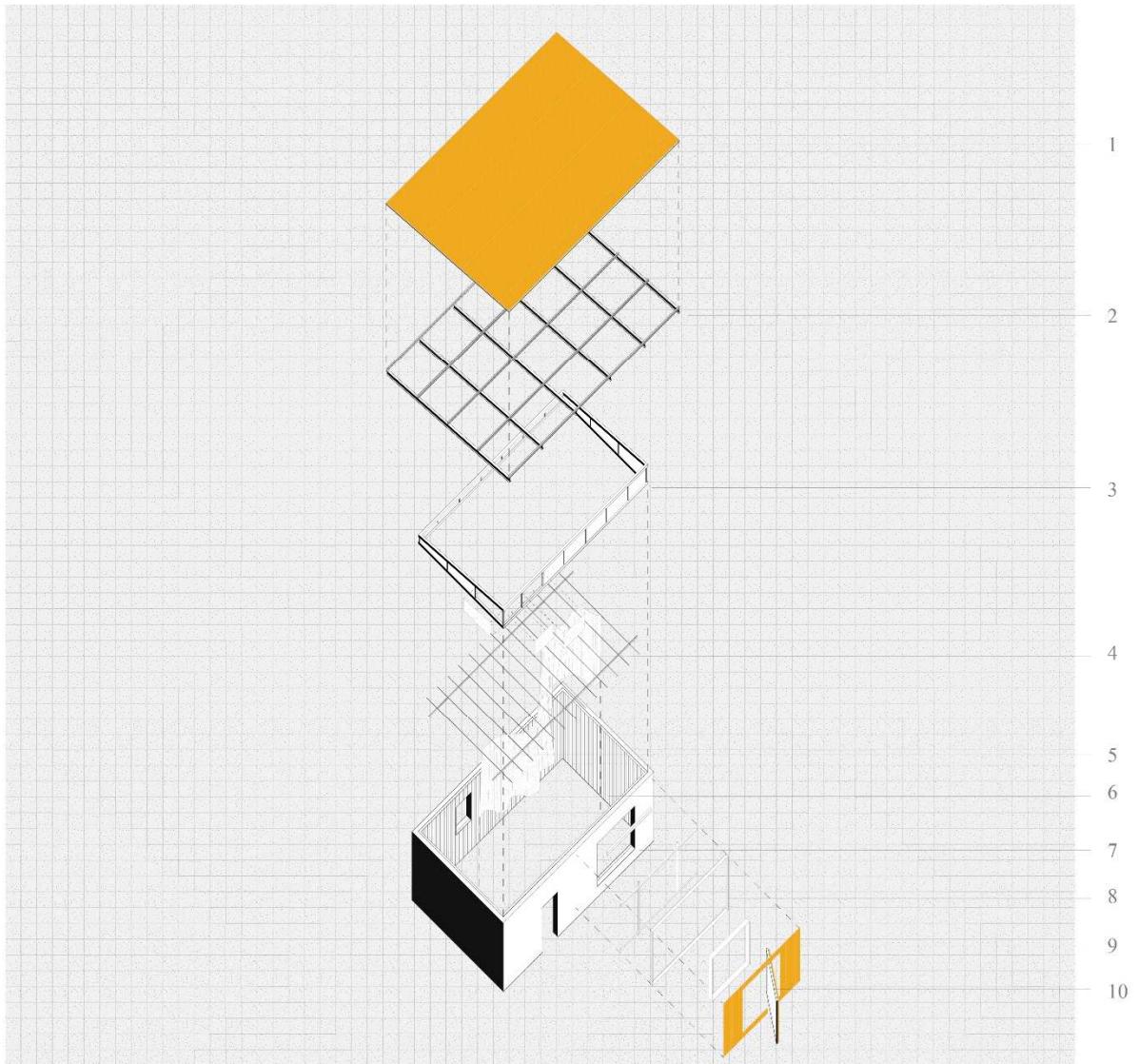


Figure 6.62 *House prototype*, 1) Roof panels 2) Roof structure 3) High windows 4) Curtain frame 5) Curtains partition 6) Internal insulation 7) Existing Walls 8) Hanged structure 9) Panels 10) Screened window, Marco Giribaldo

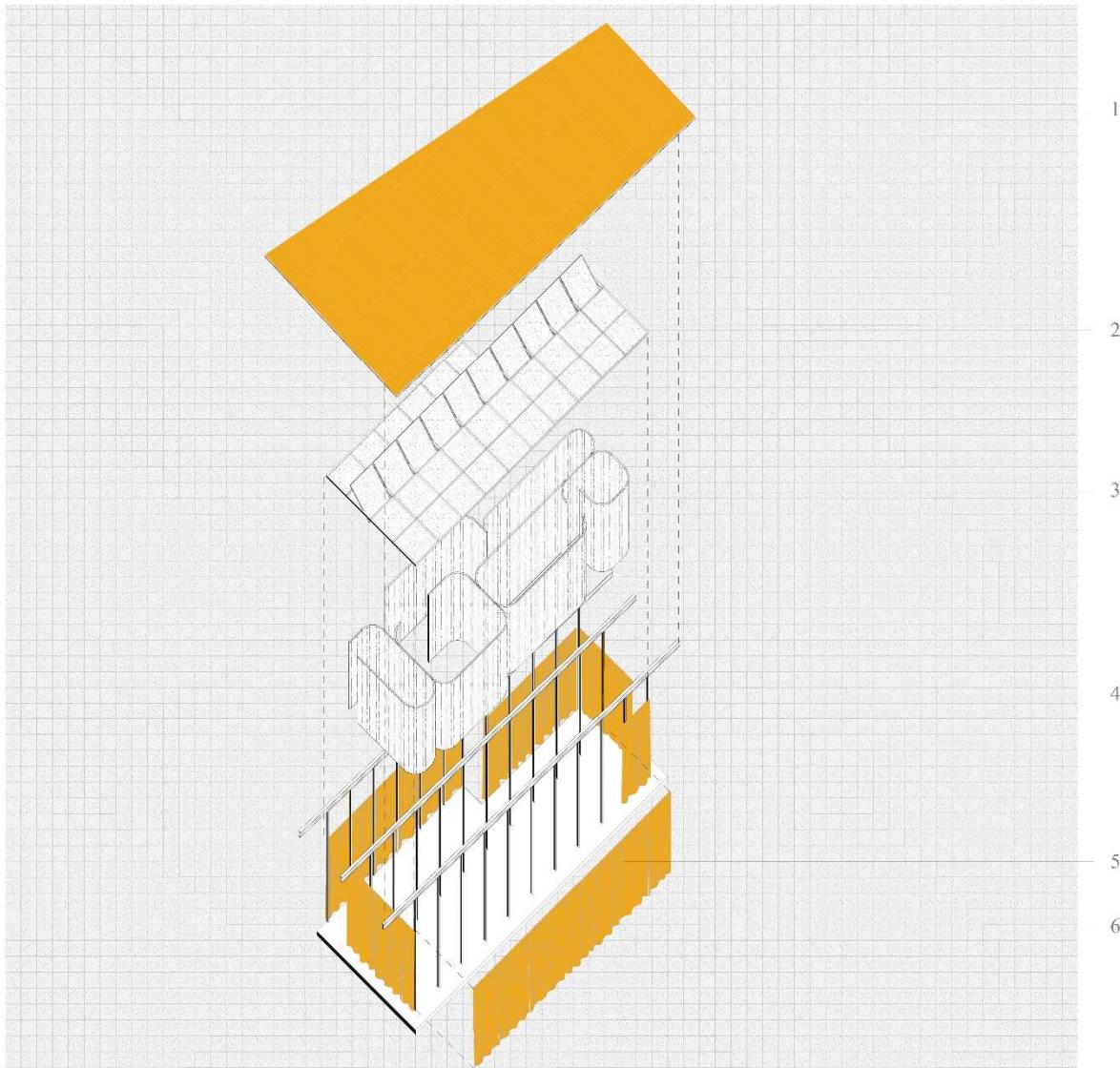


Figure 6.63 *Toilet prototype*, 1) Roof panels 2) Ventilated roof 3) Internal partitions 4) Roof structure 5) Thermal curtains 6) Technical Floor, Marco Giribaldo

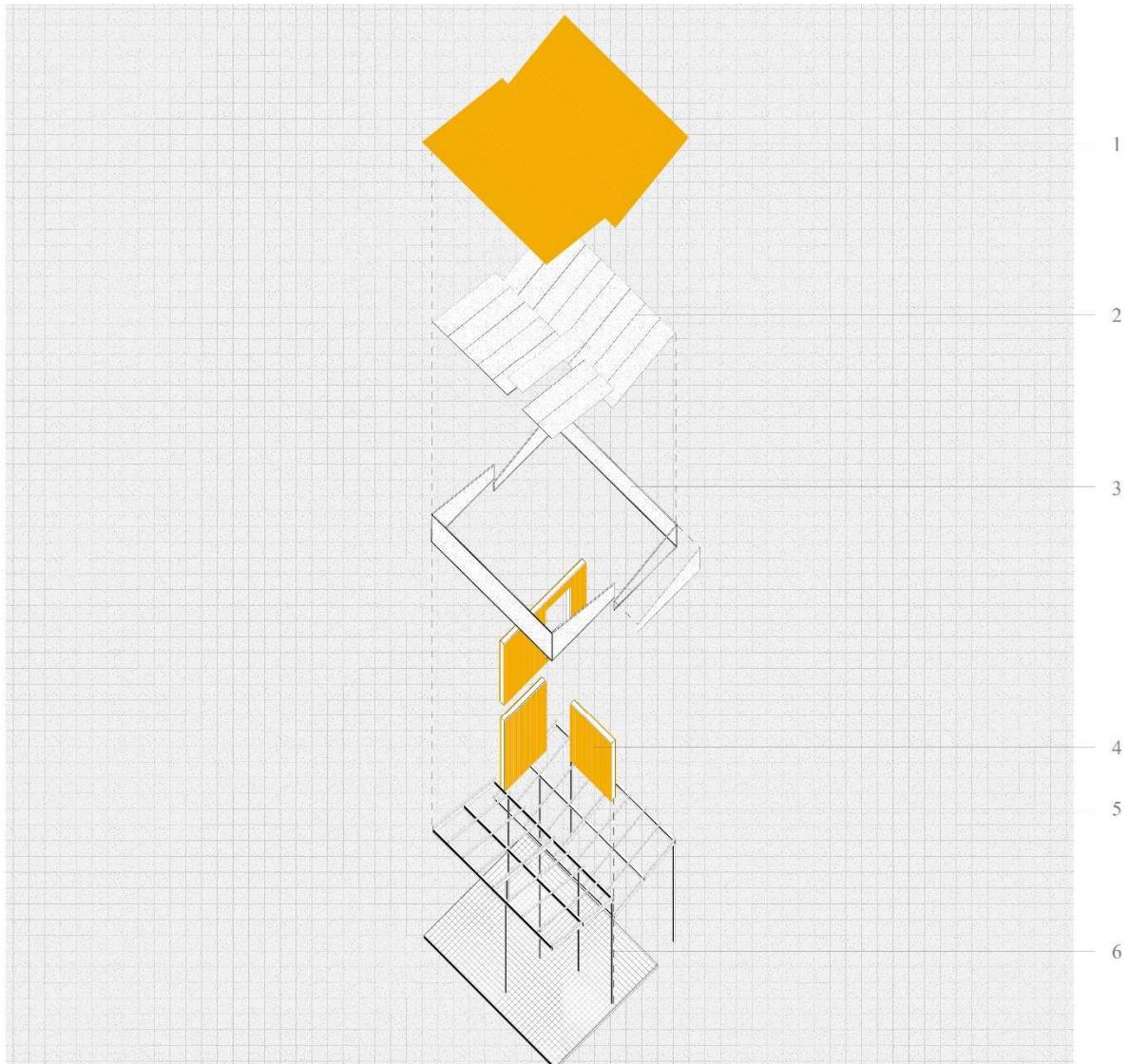


Figure 6.64 *Public room prototype*, 1) Roof perforated panels 2) Polycarbonate ceiling 3) Translucent cornice 4) Room partitions 5) Steel structure 6) Existing floor, Marco Giribaldo

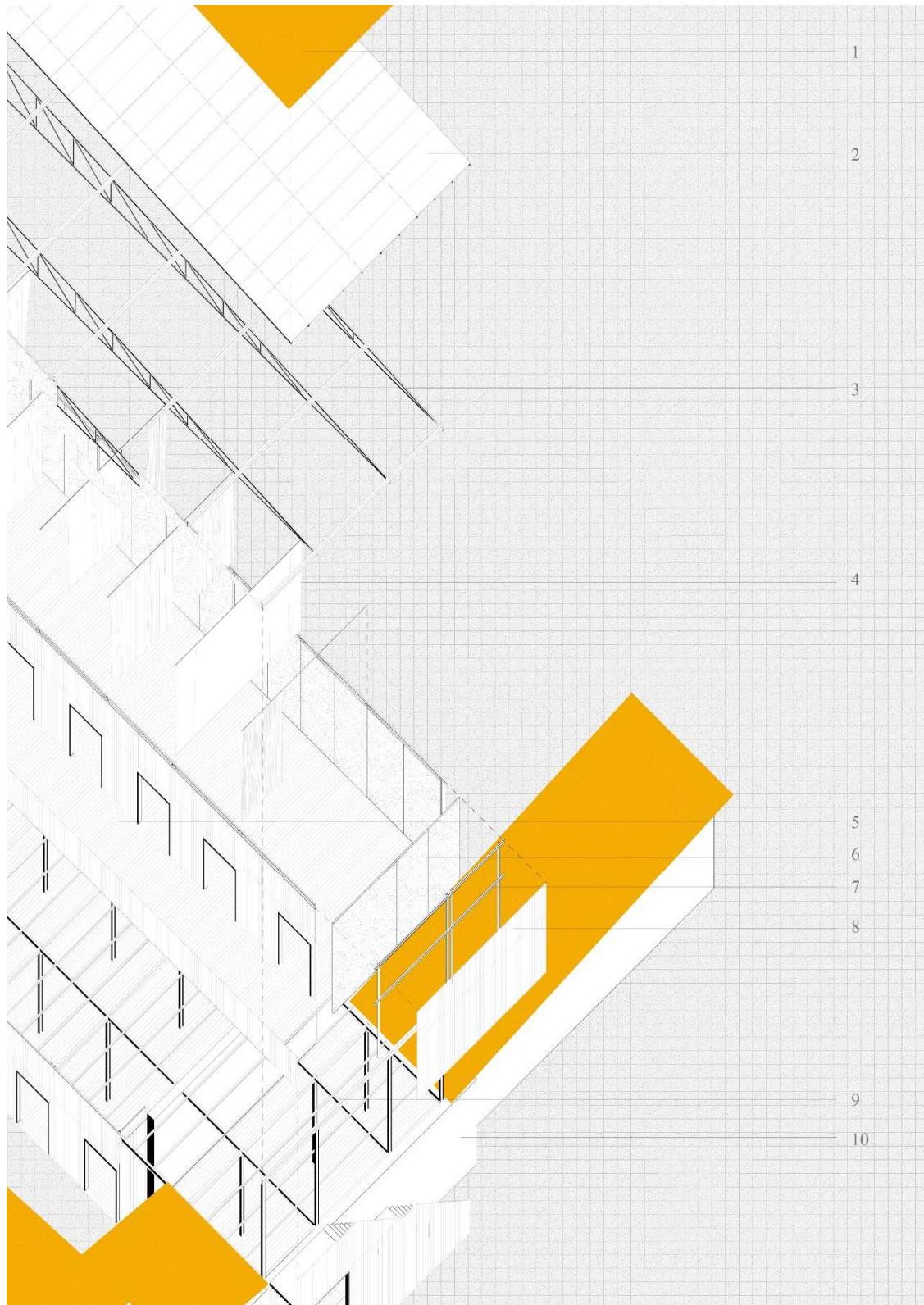


Figure 6.65 *Open school extension*, 1) Roof panels, 2) Roof insulation, 3) Truss beams, 4) Internal curtain partitions, 5) Public walkway, 6) Transparent windows, 7) Curtain wall structure, 8) Perforated panels, 9) Steel structure, 10) Existing walls, Marco Giribaldo

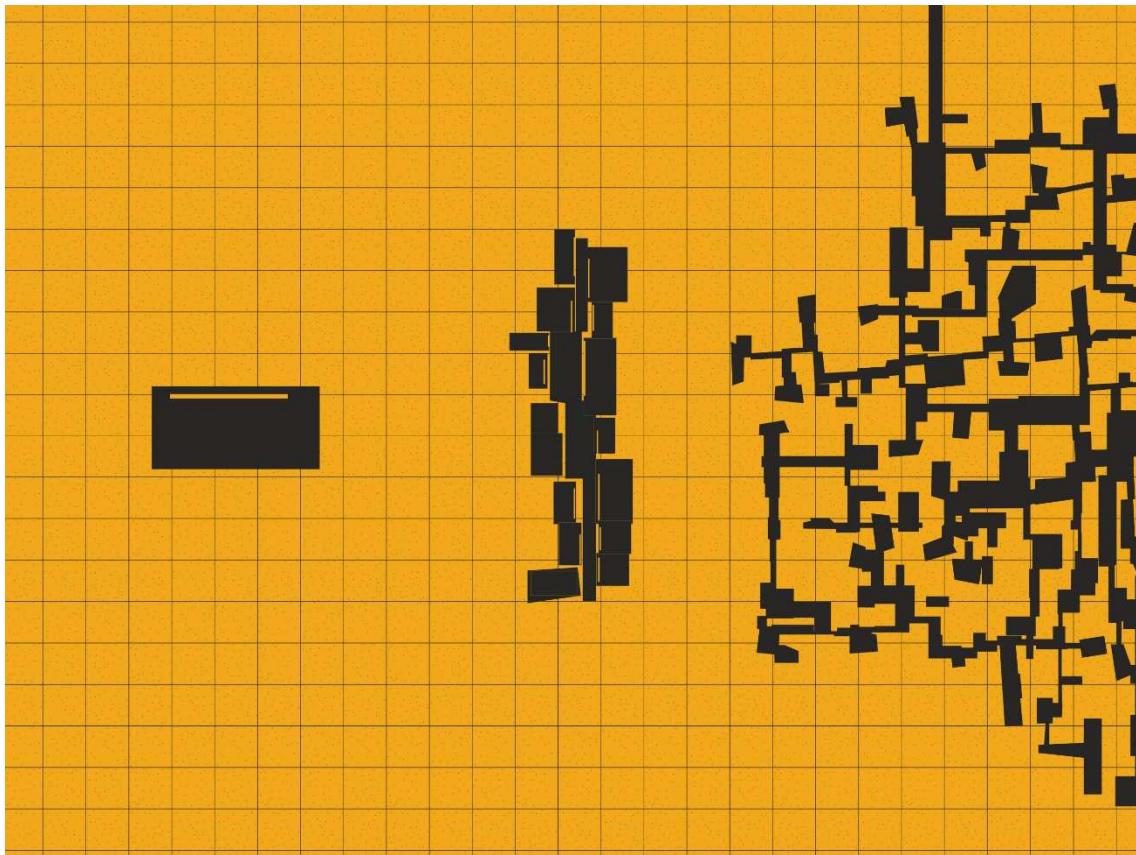


Figure 6.66 *Metabolism of the construction*, Marco Giribaldo

interactions. The solution of the opening surfaces its free to people because it is not a complicated system and it is not expensive cause of its standardized production. Panels are, in fact, aluminum extruded sheet which are applied to a simple steel structure anchored to the existing wall. For the simplicity of the solution it could be applied to any of the existence building. For the limits of this thesis we are going to see only how the new porosity interacts with the building through the porous wall. The physical relationship between inside and outside its regulated from a window which could rotate around a pivot and it is screened by the same metal sheet which in this case is perforated. The thickness of the porous wall, around 15 cm, together with the thickness of the previous wall create a small buffer space which could be used for sitting toward the outside when the door is open or being introverted when it is closed. On the base of the production system of these panels, the porous walls are modular dimension of 2.5 m. larger surfaces are aggregation of the same panels, 5 m (the most common in the project) till 10m for larger functions. Opening these new surfaces follows the phenomenon of the *doorless shops* in Beijing, when the municipality cleaned up the *hutongs* from un-

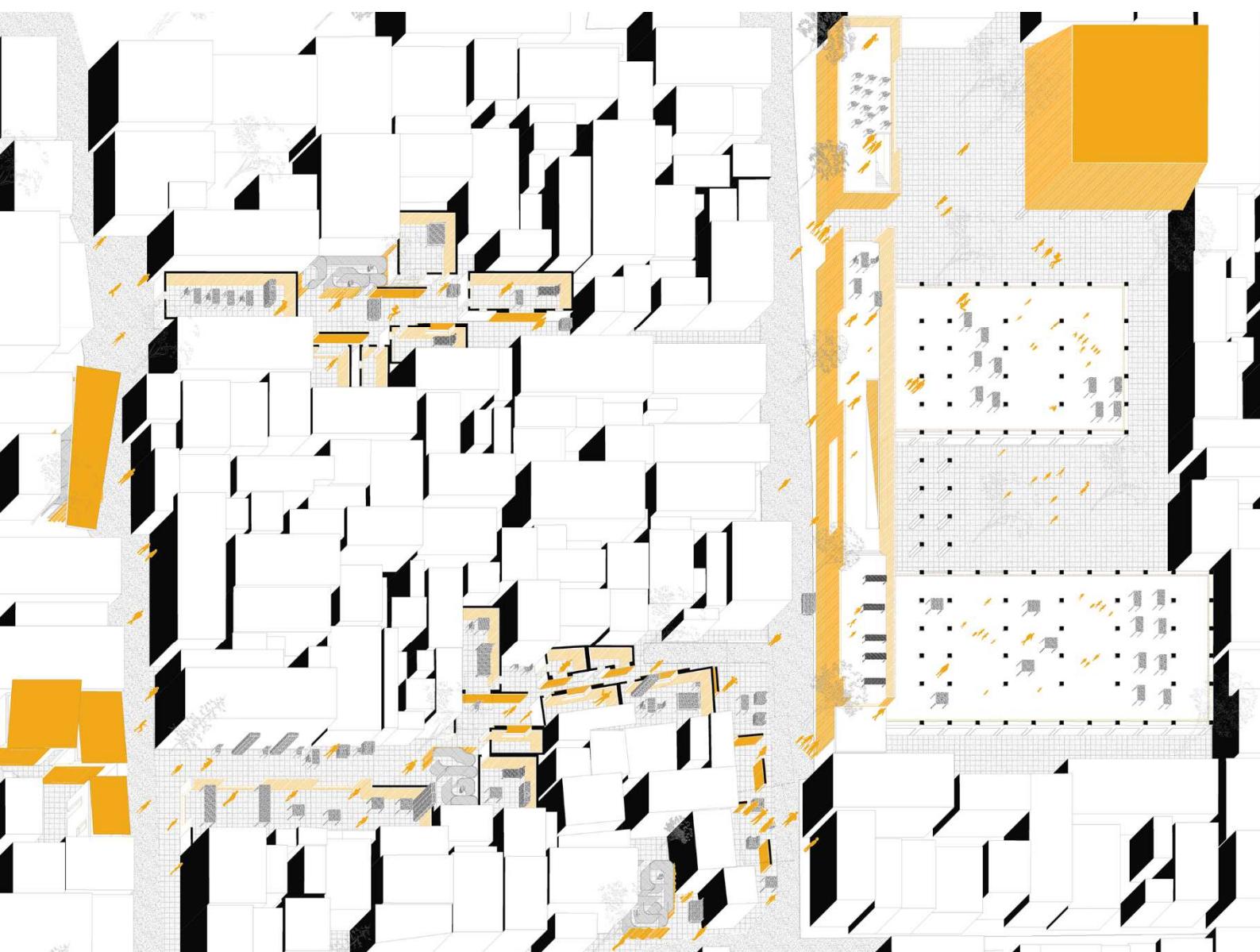


Figure 6.67 Axonometry of the ground 1, Marco Giribaldo

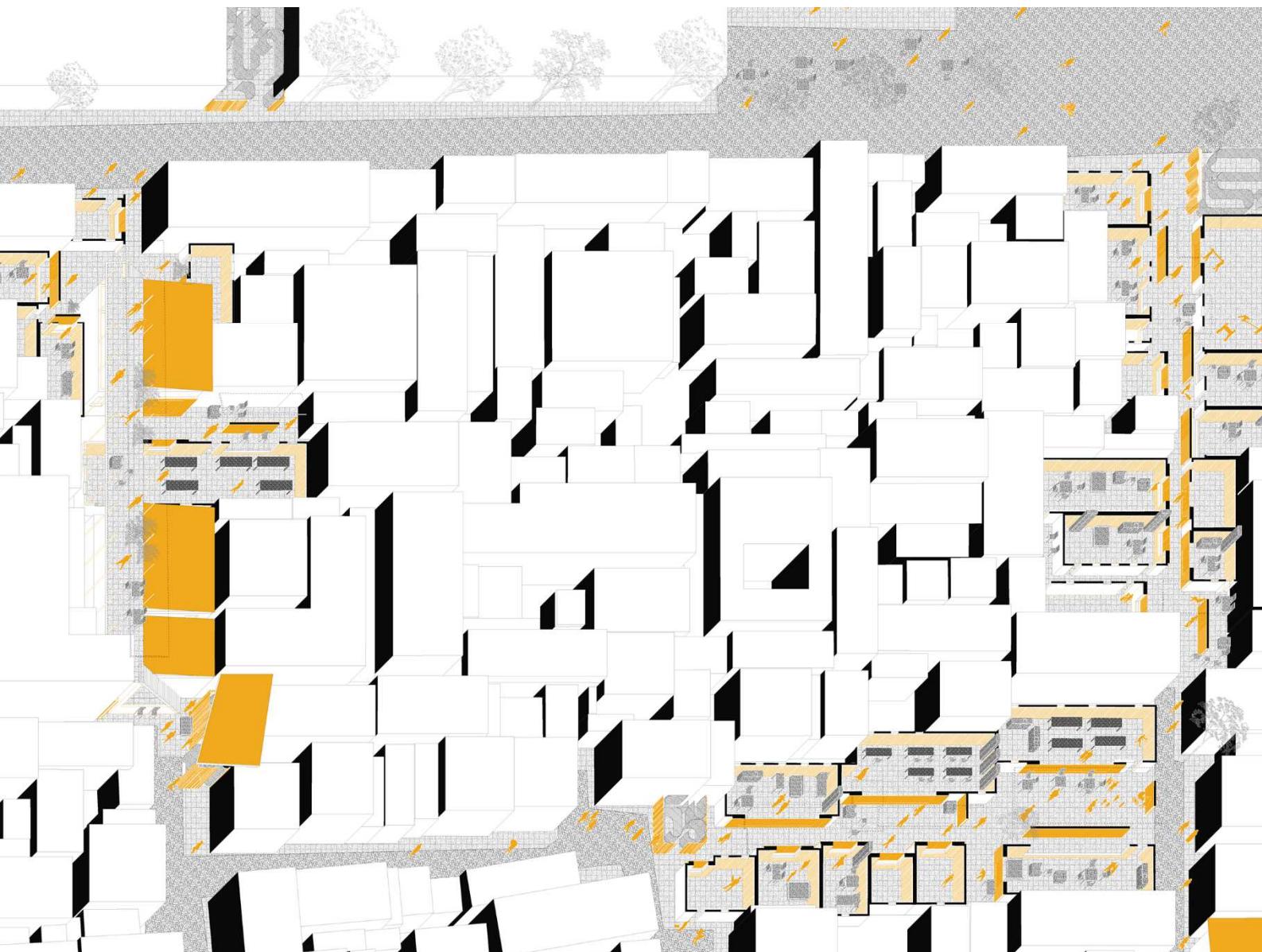


Figure 6.68 Axonometry of the ground 2, Marco Giribaldo

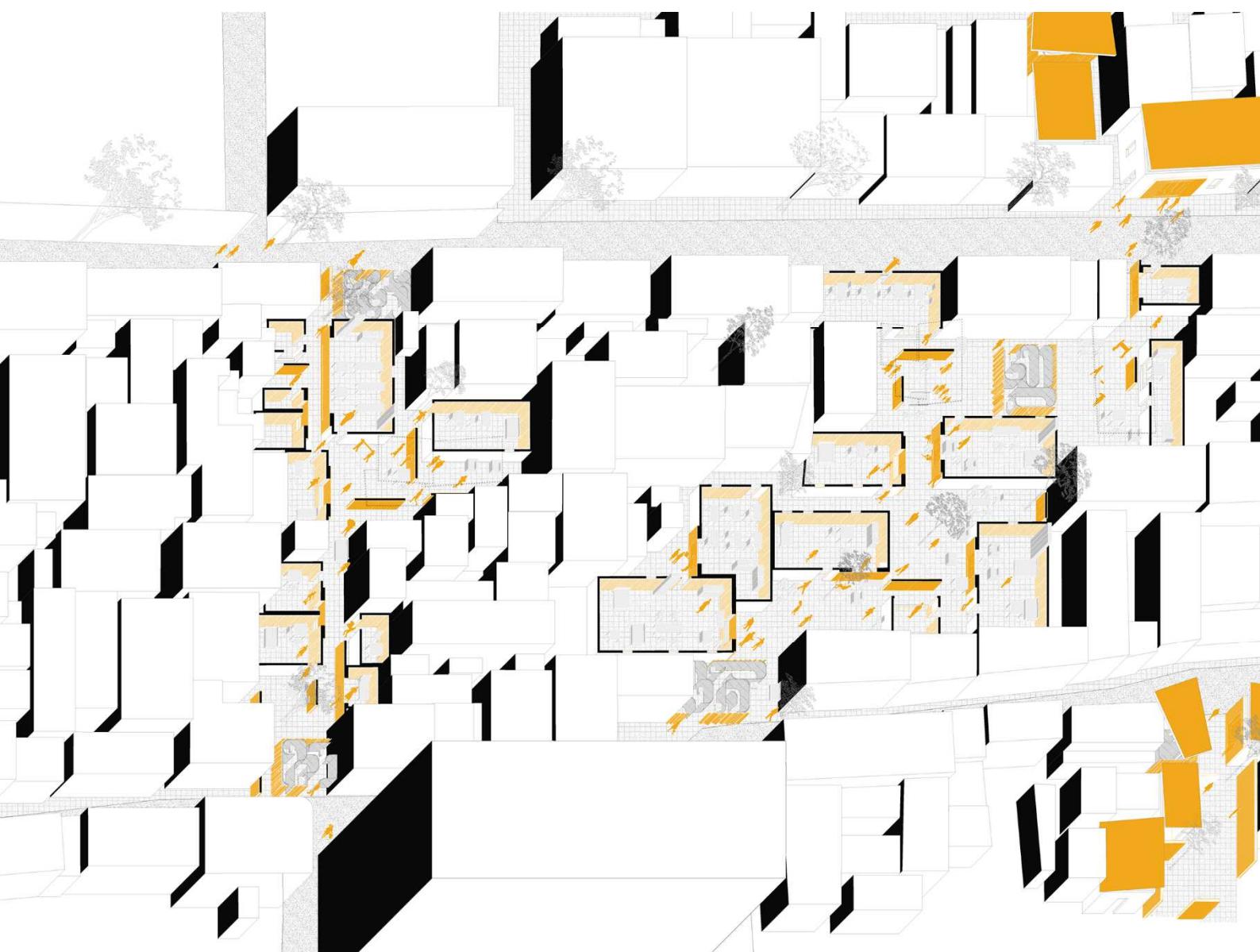


Figure 6.69 Axonometry of the ground 3, Marco Giribaldo

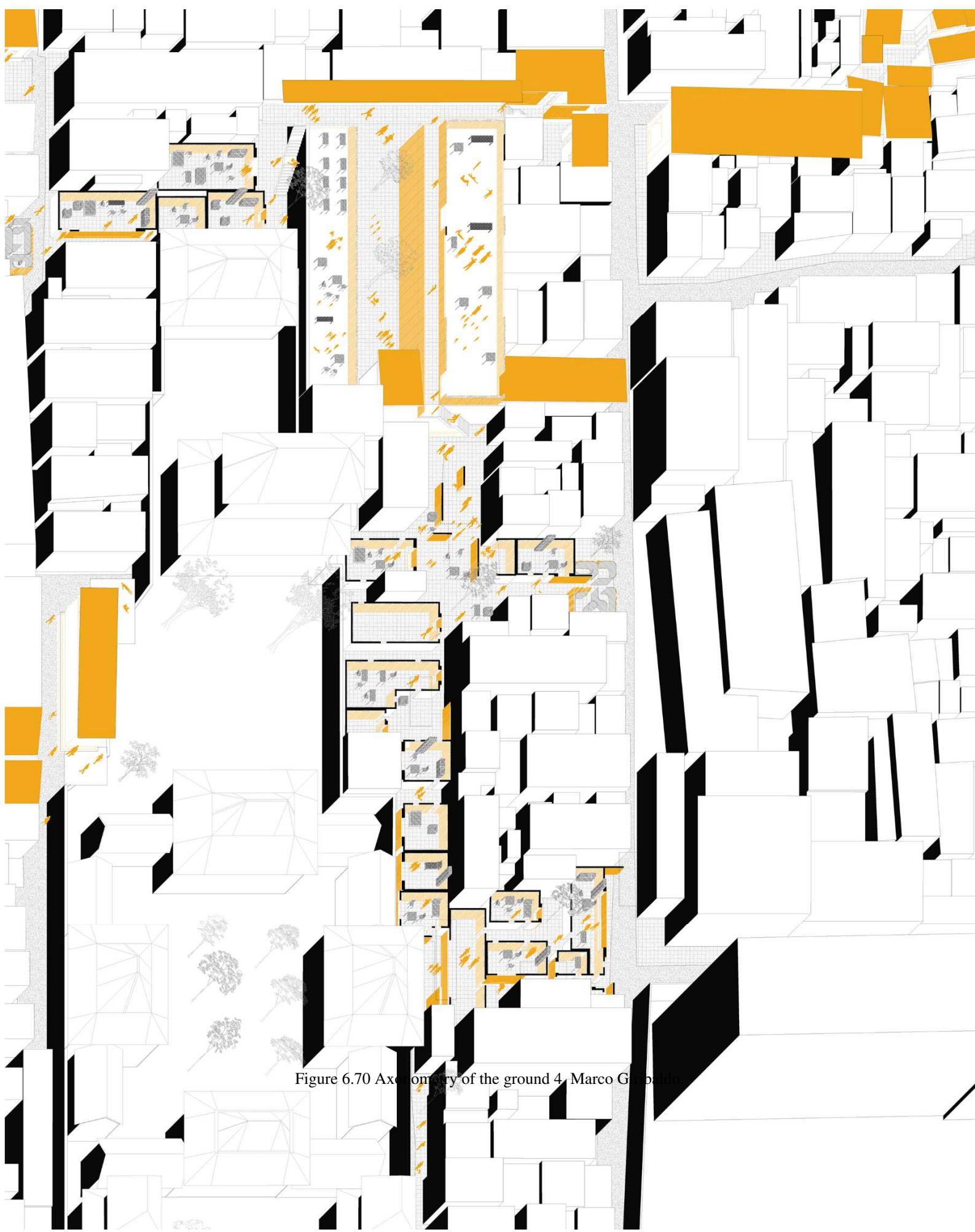


Figure 6.70 Axonometry of the ground 4, Marco Giroldo

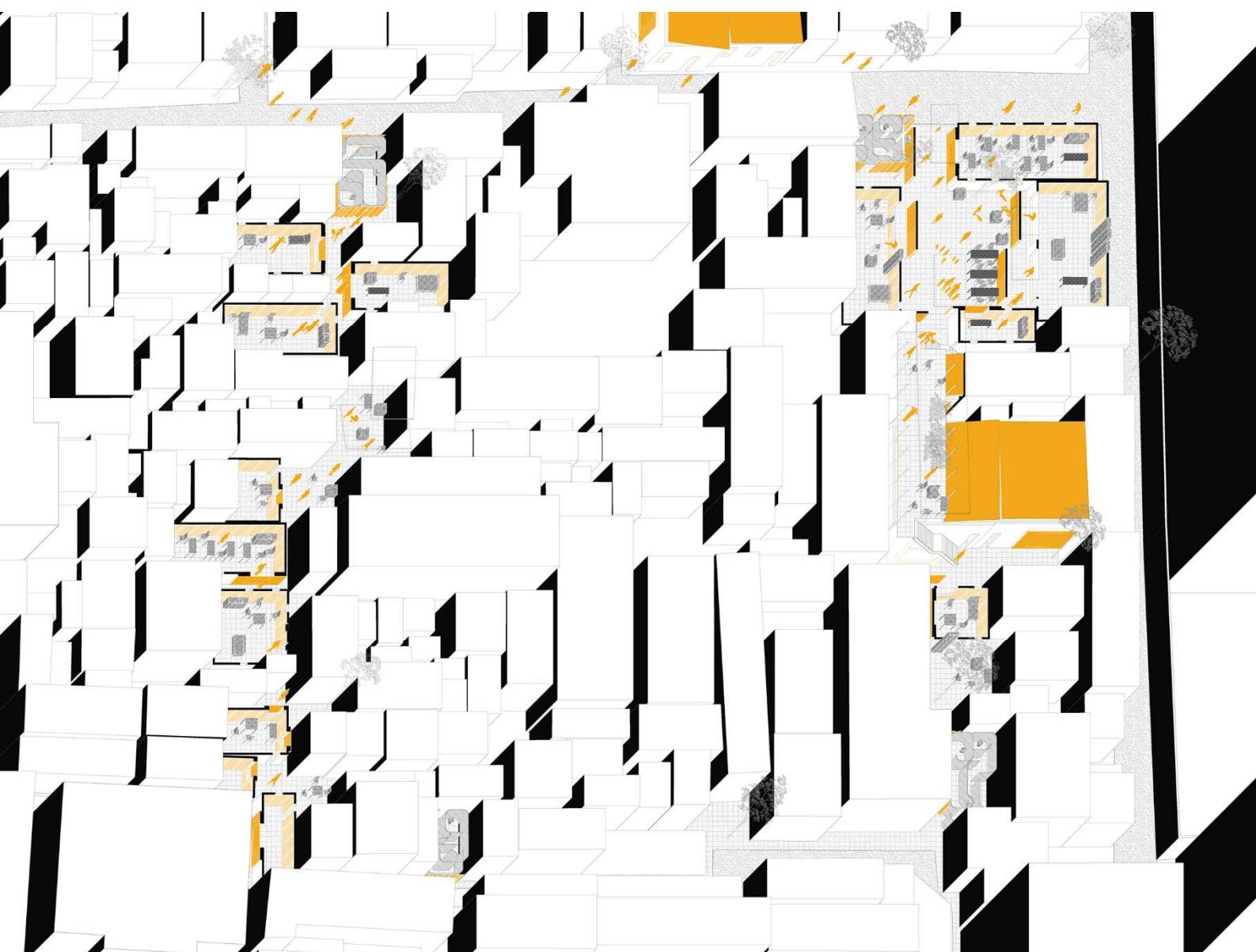


Figure 6.71 Axonometry of the ground 5, Marco Giribaldo

authorized activities in 2017 (Liang, Ma, and Wu 2017). In this case the interface of the wall became extremely porous and rich of meaning with a new systematic solution. For this idea of natural growth, or regression, the idea of the *hutong* as a living organism could be expressed by the idea of metabolism of which we talked already.

Walls are not defining inside and outside, but the dialogue of the two. On this basic assumption the role of wall is structurally compromised. The interpretation of the wall blurs into a more flexible and lighter element. The static image of the wall could be exchanged with the idea of curtain which in the case of the toilets become the real envelope. Curtain are floating element and dynamic with the wind. The new envelope represents not a boundary of an interior but a pocket in the public space which become more intimate inside. The public infrastructure is enhanced in order to create a comfortable level of proximity, supporting the connection with the public and the private space. The thermal curtain could protect from the winter cold while allow the natural ventilation of the space when cleaned. The idea of porosity is not only restricted to people usage, but the permeable boundaries also accept the natural conditions. The idea of the roofs become floating blades which protect and shade the open room in the public space. The public space is created on the possible empty courtyards which people want to abandon. Courtyard become domestic spaces which host multiple activities and support the interior of the buildings which sometime is too small. The daily life of people is not only inside and not only outside but balanced *in-between* the two. These spaces are open as well the activity of the schools transferring the education outside of the boxes in which they are enclosed. The boundaries of a kindergartens are open to the city on the idea of continuous exchange with the community around. Education, especially in kindergartens, should rely on freedom and playground which are not present in the traditional city, in the *hutongs*. The experience of education is inclusive, especially in a situation the elderly people are open to exchange and interaction. The public building could also become a benefit for the community hosting bigger activities which could not find any space outside.

Through the design of the *in-between* we are going to foster this experiment with a systematical organization of space. Walls and roofs are the main tools of this exploration of space in the organic metabolism of the *hutongs*. We are resuming, with these simple elements, one of the concepts that became very important at the time for European architects, in which Team X were profoundly influential, defined architecture

not as a plastic element, but where architecture is the result of movement and association. In this sense, spaces are not open and indistinct but place to stay and place to live together with the space of mobility. The organism is, in fact, the articulation of spaces where the body is free to move (Tzonis 1999). For this reason, the concept of *in-between* is the result of the urban porosity colonizing the space and defining the multiplicity of the possible dialogues. The idea of space as an enclosed and static situation, it is overcome by the openness of the surfaces. Walls and roof are not only boundaries of space, but they became proactive elements contributing to the quality of space and experiences. The idea of *in-between* represents the physical representation of culture in its deepest and true meaning, as we have seen in the first chapters of this thesis. The tool of the *in-between* so the tool of culture could really represent an opportunity where the *hutong* could see the future. Re-connecting a city which has been overlapped by the layers of modernity which was blind to the real need of dialogue between people. The open city represented in the *hutong* represent in the light of this project a bright future which could save a precious environment, resistant thought time, which now could shine more than ever.

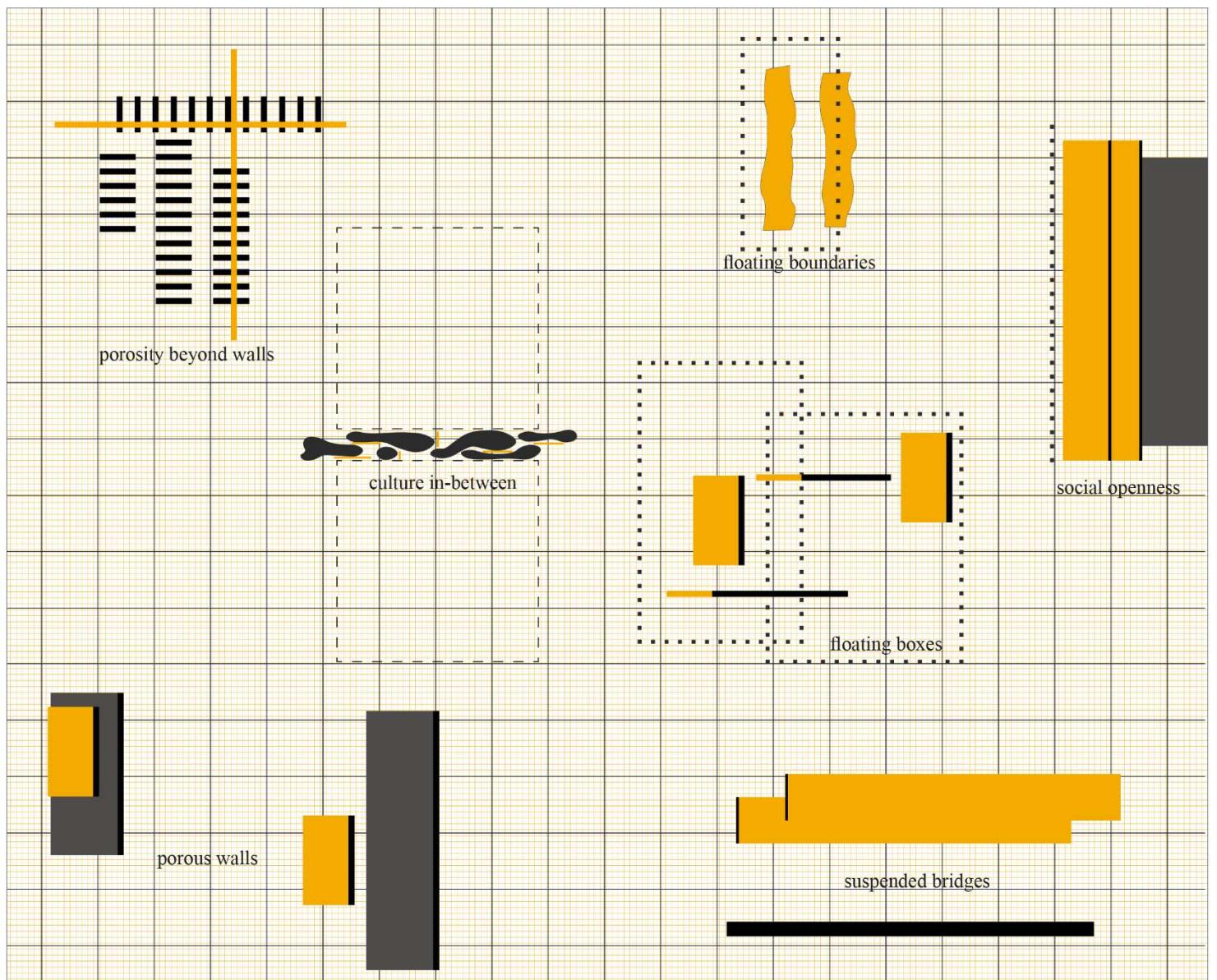


Figure 6.72 *Borders*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.73 *Section: Daily life*, Marco Giribaldo

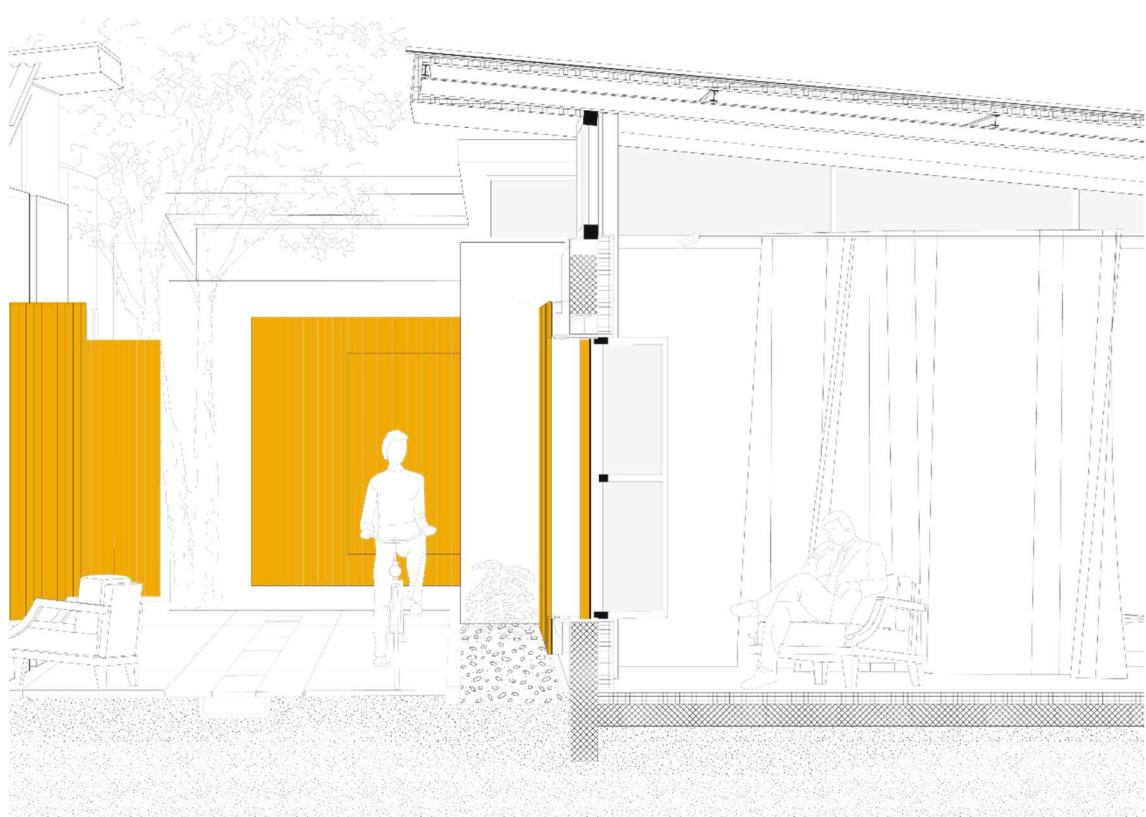


Figure 6.74 House and panels details, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.75 Section: Open room, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.76 Floating roof detail, Marco Giribaldo

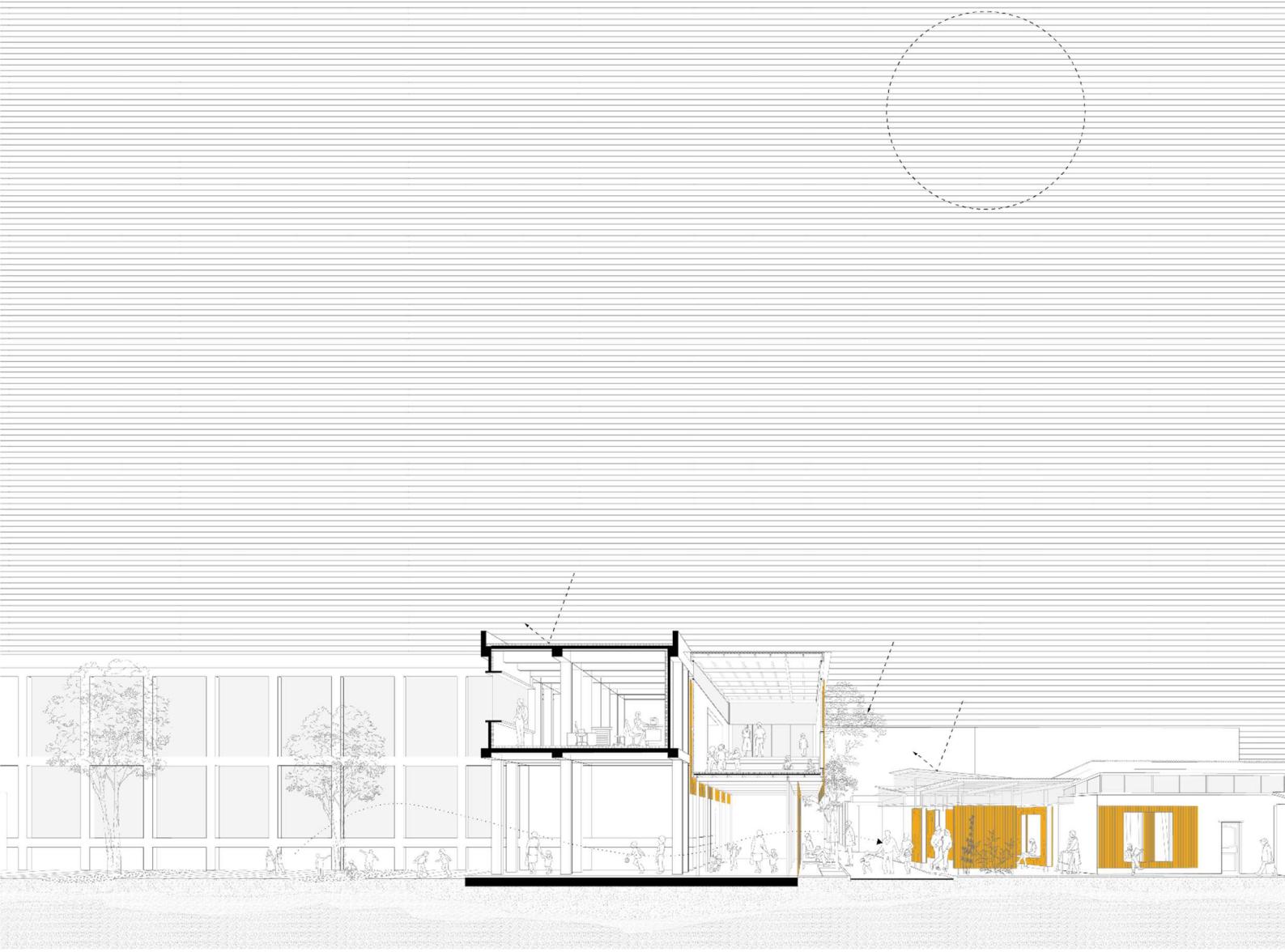


Figure 6.77 Section: School and public space, Marco Giribaldo

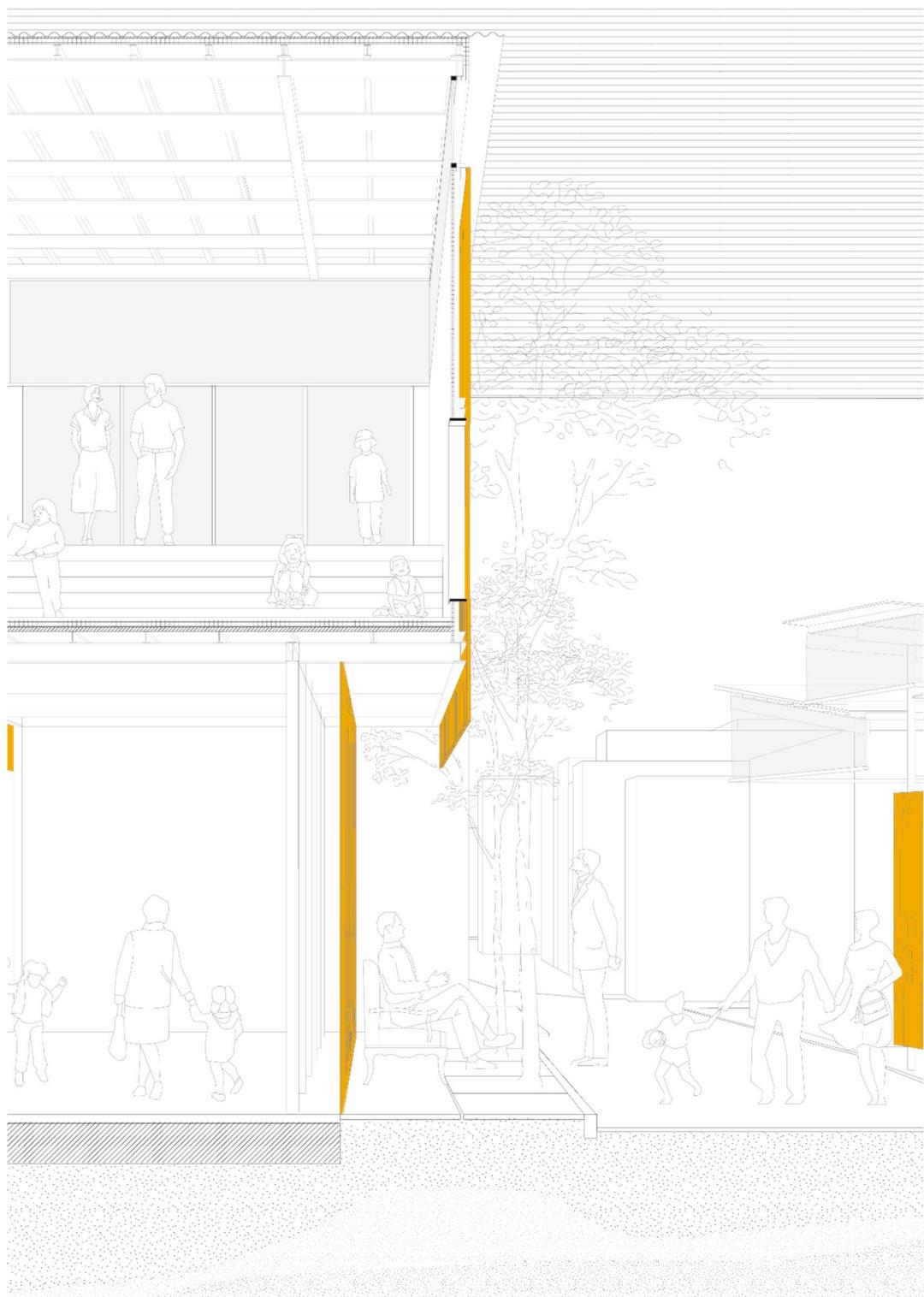


Figure 6.78 *Social condenser*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.79 *in-between 1*, relation of school and public space, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.80 *in-between 2*, open living room, Marco Giribaldo

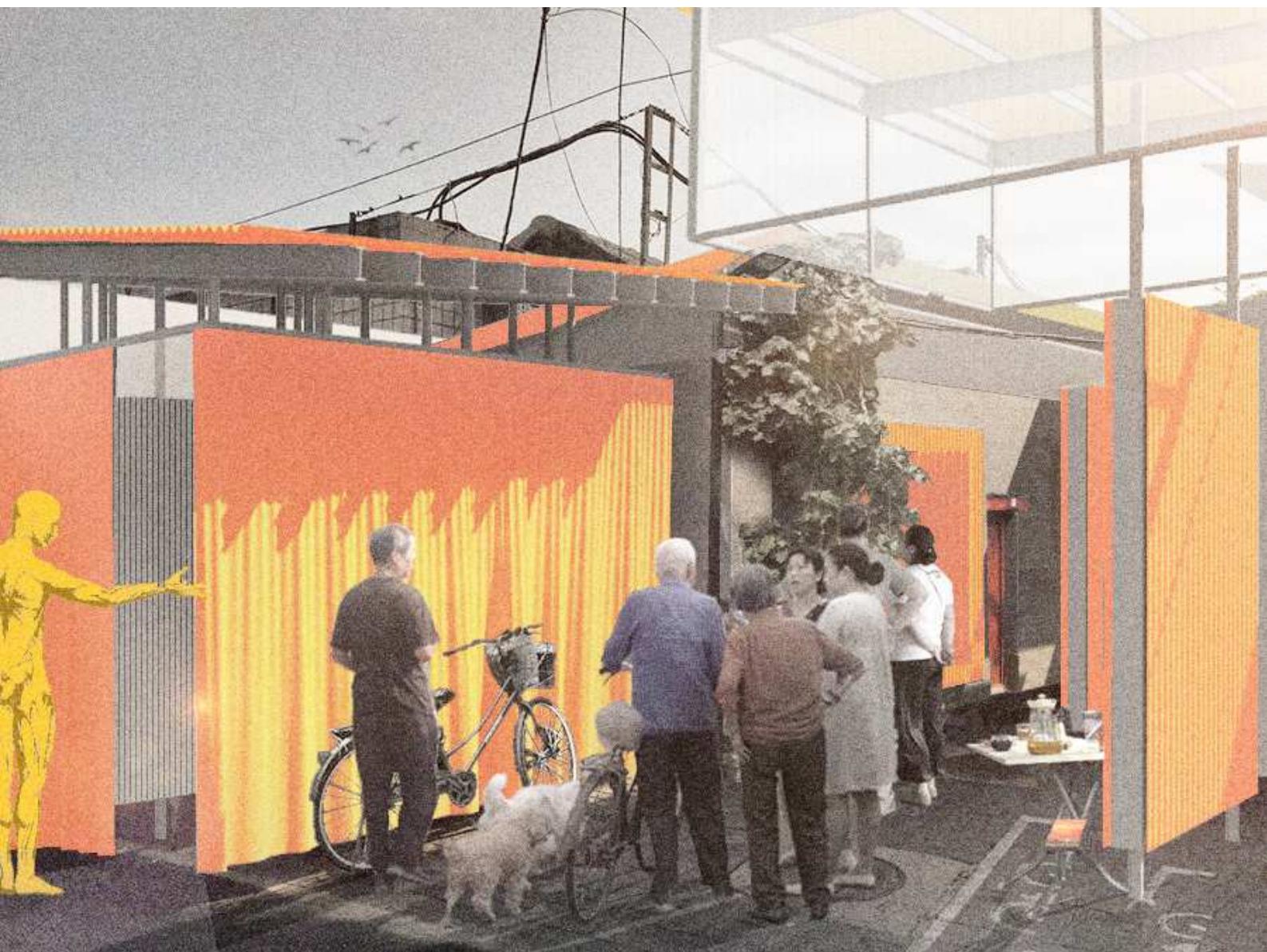


Figure 6.81 *in-between 3, toilets and life around*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.82 *in-between 4*, open boundaries of the school, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.83 *in-between 5*, intersection and interaction, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.84 *in-between 6, beyond the walls*, Marco Giribaldo



Figure 6.85 *in-between* 7, relation between inside and outside in the alleys, Marco Giribaldo

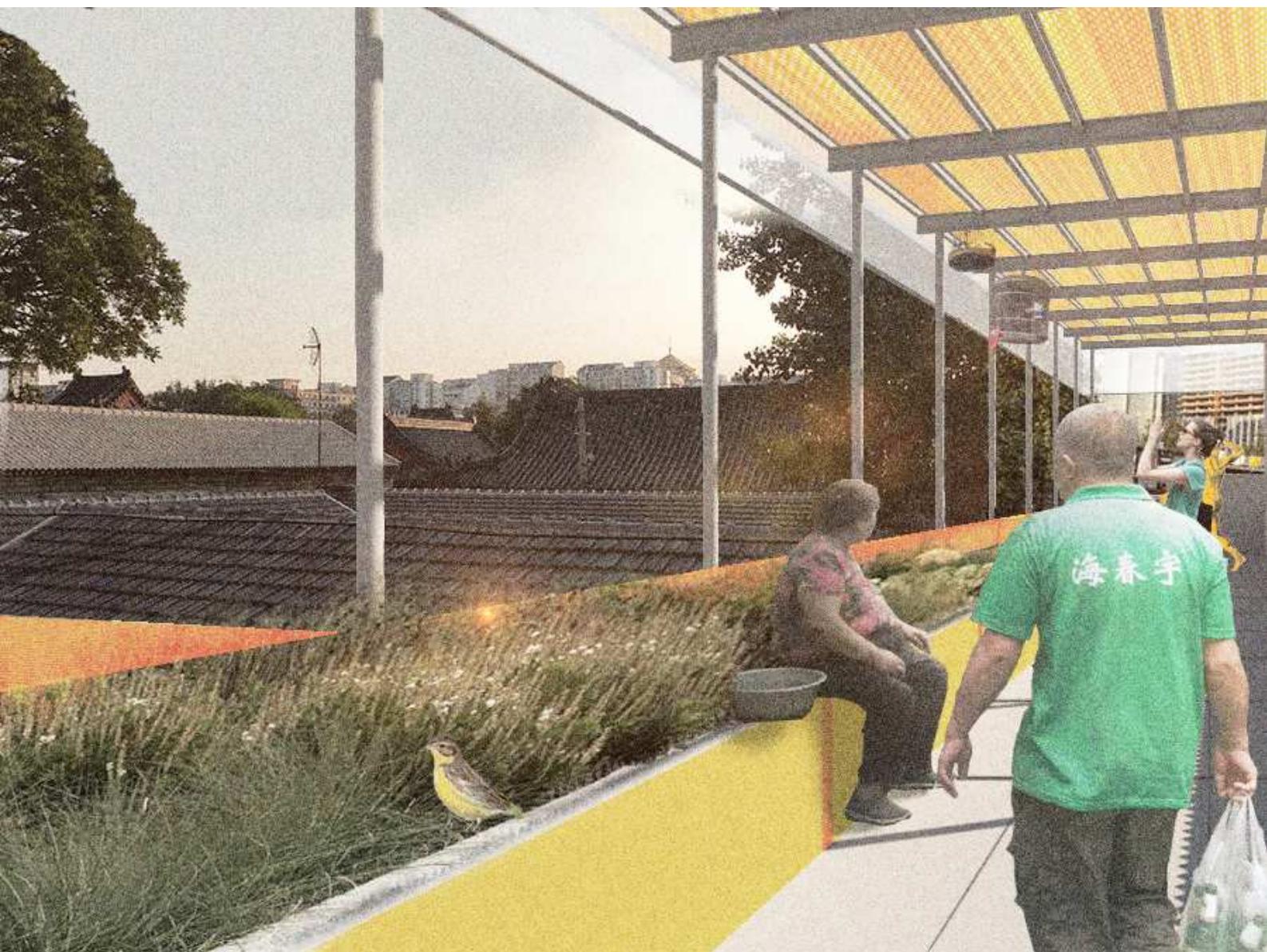


Figure 6.86 *in-between 8, suspended garden*, Marco Giribaldo

## Chapter 7 Conclusions

### 7.1 Act Local, Think Global

As we have probably seen throughout the process of thesis, it could be read as an experiment of research. This could be interpreted differently from a thesis based on one hypothesis and proved by the contents. On the contrary this process was more uncertain and open to changes. The image of the thesis could be read as an exploration, or the investigation of a crime as we ironically said at the beginning. The project in the end represent one of the possible representations of the theory. It is not the only one. The interpretation of the ideas could assume mutation from specific context and from specific input. In this case the idea was centered on the issues around the regeneration of an old and generic hutong. The project started with the idea of culture as a space. In the first part of the exploration we understood how culture become an interface, a sort of space which filtered the information of the world outside. This idea of culture is not only applied to human beings but every organism, some use it more and some less. However, the idea of culture become essentially a parameter which determine the great adaptability of different species, in which *Homo Sapiens* prevailed among the other. Later we defined all these organisms as open systems. They exchange energy and matter with the outside world. With this knowledge in mind we tried to apply the same ideas to the city which we discovered could be analyzed as an open system as well. Many are the experiences in the aim of an open city, the work of Li Hu and his wife Huang Wenjing, for example, but mostly the experience of UNESCO which brought culture on the table of discussion, as a leading element for an open city. However, in their mind the idea of culture is only a foundation from which the open city could take shape. What we have been trying is the idea of culture as an element of the present for the future. *This characteristic of adaptability could be used as a tool?* The answer is yes, and in the architectural representation we explored one of the many. Working in the *hutongs* of the traditional city of Beijing, gave us the opportunity to use the guideline of culture, in the terms we described it at the beginning, in order to solve a situation that we called *disappearing city*. The generic area that we chose was in fact an example of the reality that the traditional city and its citizens face every day. Poor living condition, low quality of the built environment, social crisis of a city made by walls of enclosure and the threat

of the demolition of some banal economical speculation. What we tried is to solve this issue with the use of culture and its concept. An idea of culture that start from the bottom and from the most basic action of a city: the dialogue. Dialogue does not necessarily mean a participative process, which, as a foreigner, was impossible to be undertaken. The idea of dialogue is between people and object of that area. The idea of culture become something that Martin Buber would call *Me and You, Ich und Du*. This concept means not only two entities but also their relationships. This relation become for us relevant for create both social dialogue and physical dialogue. The role of architecture became guide of this dialogue. The idea of dialogue is a basic urban condition (Sennett 2017). This dimension of dialogue and relations became for us a physical form in the materialization of the *in-between*. The *in-between* is the materialization of the open system creating a porosity in the objects, void where relations take place. This space in the *hutong* became the smaller it could be, redefining the intensity of the dense space. The morphology of the *in-between* in the *hutong* open the ancient idea of wall toward a porous system which allows the symbiosis between interiors and exterior, between the elements of the city like the house and the open space or the public space and the public toilets. This open system, which was spontaneously growing in the area, is enhanced by the introduction of *in-between* spaces. The *in-between* unable dialogue beyond the boundaries. For this reason, the boundaries are redefined. Walls are curtain of a giant interior space which is the house of an urban area. The condition of open system is not only related to the traditional city of Beijing it is a global rising panorama. In other words, the issues of closed system are appearing in all its criticality. In this sense the idea of cultural elements introduced in the toolbox of architects is not solving a specific issue, in this case a decaying urban area in Beijing, but is opening the debate on future ideas and projects. The role of architecture is not relegated to a simple problem solving but open to a long term and broader vision.

For this reason, the role of culture, materialized in the concept of *in-between*, could really understand and improve the living condition in the potentialities and possibility of the future. The role of *in-between* flourishing the local condition as well as the global vision of the world.

In the light of this broader view, we arrived at the end of this work with a positive charge, grounded on the test of a project which work with the local condition, opening the future for an area where the image of future was only negative and problematic.



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## Acknowledgement

I would like, firstly, to say thank you to my two supervisors who made possible the development of the thesis till today. Their support has been precious for the exchange of ideas and opinions at the base of this work. The dialogue we had during this here were not only useful for me as student but also as a person. A special thanks to Prof. Marco Trisciuoglio and Prof. Li Xiaodong.

I also need to thank the administrative office for the support during the year in Tsinghua University, since my arrival in Beijing and for making it a serene and joyful experience. Thank you, Linda and Betty, for your help.

Sincere gratitude goes to all my family which supported me throughout all these years spent far from home and especially when I was in China. They are the people that where always so close even if so far. Thank you for all the sacrifices you have made for me and your encouraging for going on. This thesis is also result of their efforts.

I also need to express my gratitude to all my closest friends which has been a constant presence in my life and during these years of university. Thank you for inspiring me during the time spent together and for the shining smiles that we exchanged every time we meet. Another thank and apologies for all the people for who I haven't been present and make them feel so far.

Finally, I need to express my gratitude to all my friends met during the university which were more than classmates. Most of all, to Francesca and Lucia which have been close to me from the very beginning and even if we took different path are still present. Thank you also to Rossella, Camilla, Fabrizia, Fabio and Lorenzo. Thank you also to Lorenzo and Silvia who were extremely important during the experience in China. Thank you, also to all the amazing people I met during the fantastic experience abroad, especially to all the student of EPMA and our professors, with who we created one of the best relationships that will last forever. A special thought goes, however, to my friend Jakub. You represented some of the best memories I have. I hope you could read my deepest gratitude from wherever you are.

Thank you all.

谢谢。

## Statement

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