

The Drama of Vernacular Dwellings within Shanghai: A Design Montage

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The conflict between cities and countryside is a social and environmental phenomenon in Chinese history. Shanghai, a city in flux, attracts people's dreams but destroys their memory of home. My comparative study of Zhang Yimou's films and my mnemonic documentation of China focus on the vernacular enclaves within Shanghai to explore the architectural design approach that intertwines memory and theatricality, tradition and modernity, and landscape and urbanity into a montage-like urban fabric.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, I traveled to China with the University of Florida School of Architecture in order to study East Asian architecture. From the beginning, I had anticipated I would document interesting places that exceeded my Western imagination. Upon arrival, I was immediately seduced by the magnitude of the urban development in Shanghai (Figure 1). Modeled as an aesthetic *objet* and a symbol of great economic power, Shanghai's urban skyline demanded attention; however, my point of interest shifted to the unique and endangered community of *Lilong-Longtang* dwellings. Through photography and on-site sketching, I attempted to catalogue the *Lilong-Longtang* neighborhoods, which invited new ideas about presenting and representing the image of Shanghai. In order to understand the character of Chinese dwelling and prepare my documentation of them, I studied Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern*. My documentation produced a visual hybridization of Shanghai as a transitional city. The images produced have become

ambiguous and reflect the personal and impersonal state of Shanghai's urban development and its unique residential communities and ends with a strategic production of images that thematically collage the reality of Shanghai's high-density living (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Shanghai at night.

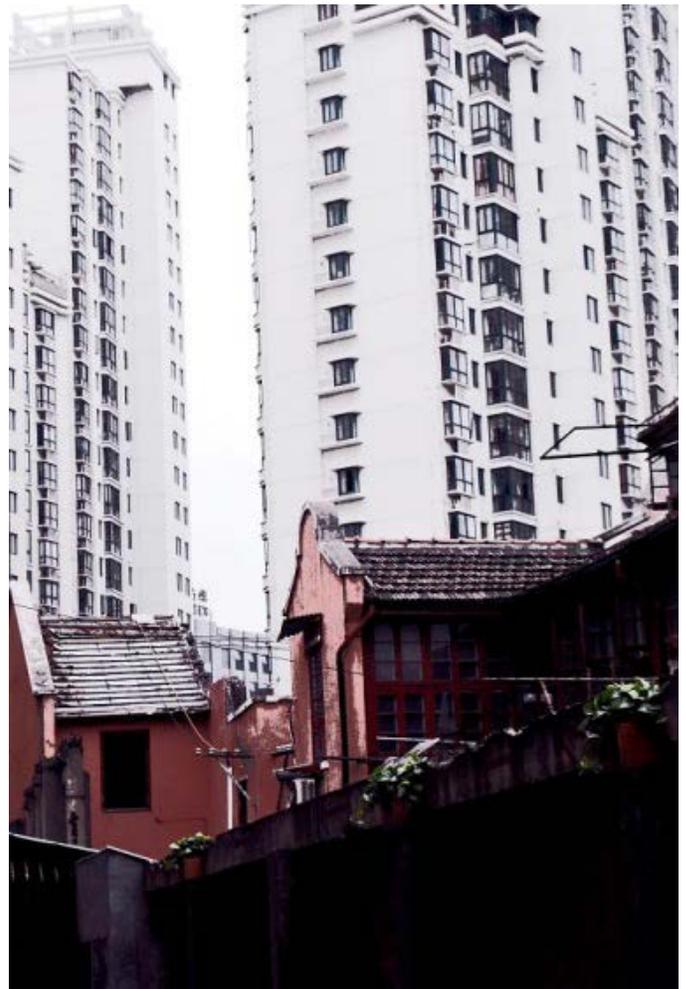


Figure 2. High density living.

LANDSCAPE AND URBANITY

The foundation for growth in Shanghai was derived by its unique natural landscape. Located at the midpoint of the eastern Chinese coastline, Shanghai originally cultivated itself as a water town whose composition drew from rivers and canals and its 7000 constructed bridges. As an outlet city of the Yangtze River, China's greatest inland water highway, Shanghai's superior location inherently influenced its urban development. Before it became a treaty port in 1843, Shanghai had already been an active and prosperous city of trade and commerce. The important shipping routes of Yingkou, Shannon, and Yantai (in the north) and Zhejiang, Fujian, Taiwan, and Guangdong (in the south) as well as ports along the Yangtze River (in the west) did not confine nor limit Shanghai's extent of foreign shipping. Linked to other nearby port cities, Shanghai was able to grow in all cardinal directions when political and economic factors were provided.¹ Shanghai's ability to broaden trade not only invited progress but also foreign affairs. The Opium Wars (1839-1841) and the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) granted foreigners, regarded as invaders, with privileges to live and trade within China.² A year later, Shanghai was included as one of the five treaty ports under control of global powers, including America, France, Great Britain, and Japan. Colonial architecture proliferated and shaped the image of the city for nearly a century. As commercial exchanges developed, expansion of the spatial development of the city highlighted its colonial character. Growing rapidly, Shanghai flourished into a landscape molded by Western influence that had subsequently denied the city's original environment as a water town. This suggests that without Western presence, Shanghai would not have been transformed into the world metropolis that we know today.³

Though foreign influence did exist in the nineteenth century, it was limited. The Chinese market's best defense against Western imperialism was the cohesion and flexibility of the traditional economic system and the permanence of the commercial and financial networks connected with it.⁴ While Chinese merchants remained in control of the distribution and collection of products in its hinterland, foreigners remained in contact with the overseas market. Refugees who fled civil wars also migrated to Shanghai. As a consequence of these migrations, Shanghai residents feared cultural contamination, so urban areas were partially restructured, resulting in the formation of segregated living spaces. However, this division was not long maintained. The logic of division evaporated with the advent of foreign investment in developing cheap large-scale housing, the *Lilong* residences.⁵ Although no Westerners ever lived in these developed *Lilong* dwellings, their evolution was still somewhat affected by Western thinking. Despite their Western influence, these houses had become the emblem of traditional housing in Shanghai.

With this century-long colonial transformation, Shanghai's complex history asserts control over interpretation of the past. As Ackbar Abbas describes, "Shanghai today is not just a city on the make... it is also something more subtle and historically allusive: the city as a remake..."⁶ During the Maoist regime, Shanghai before 1949 was regarded as a bastion of imperialism. Still, the colonial character remained despite the disfavor until the early 1990s, when Deng Xiaoping directed Shanghai to resume its drive for progress and fulfill its destiny as a global city. Since then, Shanghai has made up for lost time at full tilt, becoming one of the fastest developing cities in the world, if not the fastest. But as Western developers once again compete to reshape the urban landscape, its model, Old Shanghai (with its inherited Western-built environment), is destroyed. The paradox of the landscape and urbanity is indicative of *Shanghai nostalgia*.⁷ Shanghai's foreign integration means "Shanghai is no longer in Shanghai."⁸

TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY

Living in modern Shanghai is but a fictional and idealized notion. The *Lilong-Longtang* neighborhoods suggest a harmonious integration of Western and Eastern cultures. The reality of the integration, however, is incongruous. Memories of traditional dwellings and the incessant desire to create an aesthetic new city image clash. Given Shanghai's rapid development, its land was highly valued for commercial infrastructure. Its major roads—Nanjing Road, Sichuan Road, and Jingling Road, famous for its extensive line of finance, shops and restaurants—were essential to commercial prosperity. Its reservation of these commercially vital lands, however, was challenged by the influx of Chinese population and the desire to allocate dwellings in spaces that would not interrupt the spatial continuity of commercial facades. The architectural design question arises: How does the city designate comfortable, affordable high-density living without sacrificing high real estate value?

Ergo, the existence of *Lilong* (lòng táng 弄堂) housing.⁹ As a type of urban housing exclusive to Shanghai, *Lilong* dwellings are a constructed form of urban-residential blocks whose street fronts contain the commercial pattern of its surrounding environment. Another name of these dwellings is *Longtang* (lǐ lòng 里弄),¹⁰ a vernacular term used by Shanghai people that has slightly different meanings. Though *Lilong* means neighborhood, *Longtang* describes people living in neighborhoods. *Longtang* also describes houses that are connected by lanes, and as such it is implied to mean vernacular dwelling.

Life inside the *Longtang*, which is integrated into a pattern of street fronts on the outside and residency on the inside, suited both local and real estate expectations. From a design point of view, the relationship between the outside and inside composition of *Longtang* housing produced two

types of spatial forms: outer-belt shaped space and inner-block type space. Composed of shops along the commercial streets, the outer-belt space enfolds circulation, making Shanghai's exterior image dynamic and interconnected. The second type, the inner-block, is unlike the outer-belt in that it is controlled and enclosed (Figure 3). It is essentially an amalgamation of low-rise housing accessible from the streets. Given that these two spaces differ, one can assume that their daily activities were indicative of their spatial typology. The outer belt became a more commercial infrastructure while the inner block encouraged residential, almost private, engagement. Although the inner block includes inner lanes for vehicles to pass, most circulating spaces remained exclusive in order to preserve the intimate domain. What helped link residency to the urban fabric was the thoughtful design of the shops at the exterior of these residential blocks. Commercial infrastructure not only linked the spaces but also protected residency from noise pollution, thus preserving the intimacy of dwelling.¹¹

In its prototype stages, the *Lilong* housing infrastructure rejected traditional Chinese residences in favor of Western urban design. Originating from Europe, the "row after row" pattern began as the original urban scheme. Bridging the main lane from the exterior, access to the dwellings is a recognizable form, an archway. Consisting of housing and commercial units, every *Lilong* is tightly attached and evenly aligned, allowing for equal distribution inside the row-by-row pattern. Its internal infrastructure is comprised of several main lanes, which are accessible from the urban streets, and a series of parallel smaller side lanes, which are perpendicular to the main lanes. This framework is part of the residential design. The *Lilong* commercial units, occupied as street-front lots, are social-type spaces, usually meant to sell daily needs, such as groceries and newspapers. Although the traditional Chinese residences did not prevail in the design of these vernacular dwellings, its integration of Western rhythms had adapted to Chinese daily life, offering a new and vibrant image of Shanghai culture (Figure 4). In five stages, the *Lilong* housing



Figure 3. Hollow space.

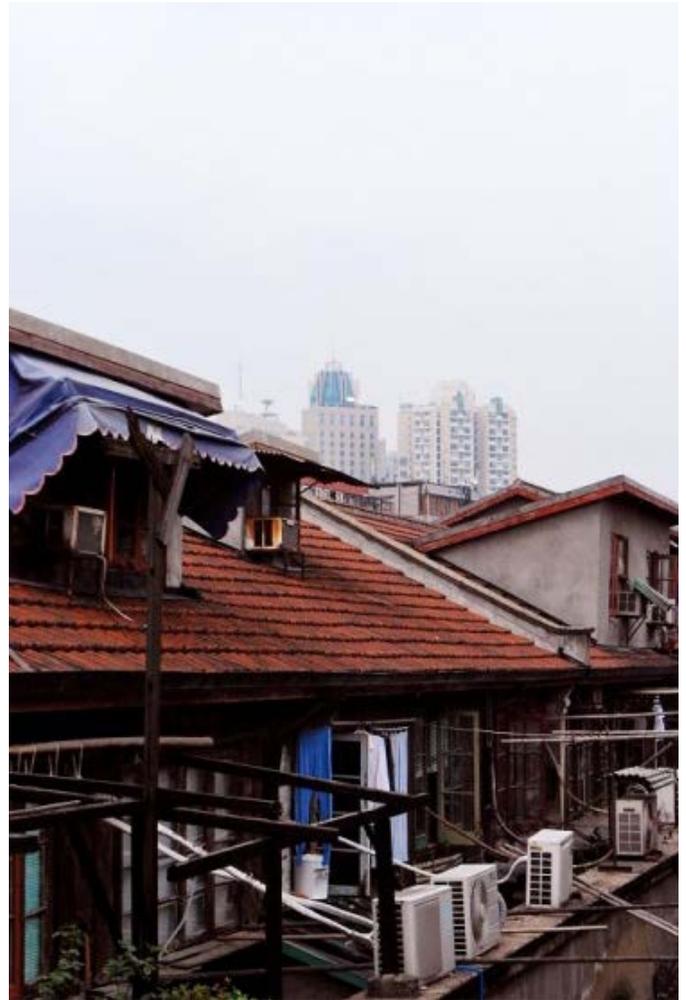


Figure 4. Urban fabric.

evolved from its urban-residential design, accommodating the social and economic changes experienced throughout its century-long existence. Its evolution, however, did not affect its parts, for its internal framework, despite urbanity, remained the same.¹² Its exterior storefront shops also persisted. Though the surrounding urban schemes progress, the spirit and memory of the *Longtang* dwellings endure.

MEMORY + THEATRICALITY

Shanghai's spaces bear a powerful association with history and memory: they are formed through a continual process of preservation, destruction, and reconstruction. As a cultural constellation, memory is neither precise nor continuous. It transposes. To some degree, history and memory can be interchangeable. Our access to memory is through language, both audio and visual.¹³ Through the use of language, memory can be translated and amplified; however, the translation is never accurate and is instead an interpretation of the real thing. Film has become a powerful mode of visual representation of history and memory. Film's visual production of space mediates between the shifting layers of our personal experience and the story within the film. Therefore, by using film as a projection for our understanding of historic dwelling, we as designers might comprehend the mystic dwelling of Chinese infrastructure. Beginning with Zhang Yimou's famed production *Raise the Red Lantern*, the projection of residential and commercial space will not only reconstruct the history and memory of Chinese dwelling but also activate a unique methodology for mnemonic mapping.

In Zhang Yimou's 1991 film *Raise the Red Lantern*,¹⁴ the use of historical and geographical settings set the stage for a multifaceted composition of space, color, and social hierarchy. Set in a rural landscape, the grand mansion in which the story takes place is likened to a *Lilong* threshold in that the intimacy of residential space pervades the visual context (Figure 5). The expanse of the mansion is so vast



Figure 5. *Raise the Red Lantern* (still frame). Source: <http://filmsufi.blogspot.com/2009/11/raise-red-lantern-zhang-yimou-1991.html>

that it stimulates the notion of a labyrinth, or “perplexing place.”¹⁵ Everything about the life of the concubines in the film is confined by the mansion's stone walls, and life outside seems not to exist. Though the four households are designed similarly, each dweller inhabits and decorates the space differently, suggesting a provocation of the individual's desires. Given that each space is personalized, their remoteness from each other invigorates the confined state of each space.

The spatial complexity of the mansion is comparable to that of a Chinese palace, whose remote and meandering spaces incited the [Master's] erotic ecstasy.¹⁶ Hui Zou explains, “Imitating the Western technique of linear perspective, one room presented a deep view with seemingly hundreds of layers of zigzagging views, which confounded the spectator.”¹⁷ Throughout the film, the room of the main character, concubine Song Lian, is shot in a linear perspective, defining her boundaries of privacy (Figure 6). The room of another concubine, Meishin, though assumed to have similar dimensions, is ambiguous. The opera masks that hang throughout the space distort the proportion of the residential room, creating a new, perplexing spatial realm. Each room is, therefore, set as a stage in which each concubine performs uniquely in hopes of captivating her Master's heart and undivided attention. Residential space is thus an exclusive space, unique and personable to the individual but not to each other.



Figure 6. *Raise the Red Lantern* (still frame). Source: <http://www.moviecritic.com.au/images/raise-the-red-lantern-sitting-in-bed-surrounded-by1.jpg>

A second projection of labyrinth, or perplexing spaces in the film, involves meandering on the dwelling's rooftop. By zigzagging above residential space, the labyrinth of the mansion is revealed not within the walls but from above. In Shanghai's *Lilong* dwellings, a similar design is experienced. The occupation of the rooftop not only allows inhabitants to see their dwellings below but also to realize the expanse of the sky and of their surrounding environment. The occupation of the rooftop becomes a personal stage for awe of the sublime.

Although the film is set in the 1920s, its plot within vernacular enclave depicts and defines the social-political adulteration of society, becoming a parable for modern Chinese corruption. As a reflection of social cruelty and imbalance, the film bears witness to a comprehensive understanding of the role of private residential space. As a case study, the film offers a new idea of the drama within vernacular dwelling. Oscillating between filmic projection and personal documentation, the production of work attempts to harmonize the reality of high-density living within vernacular enclaves.

DESIGN MONTAGE

Heidegger asks, "...Space—does it remain the same?"¹⁸ According to Heidegger, the clearing of space is the release of place. His optimism for harmonization of space and place, however, conflicts with the realization of such phenomenon. When the vernacular *Lilong-Longtang* neighborhoods are cleared away, its memory becomes consigned to oblivion. The memory does not become phenomenological. Upon arrival, one enters the *Longtang* through an archway off a major lane. From its entry axis, the threshold confines the occupant into a narrow lane, establishing the autonomous formation of the

neighborhood. In its current condition, the once lavish and sanitary dwellings have become wretched enclaves. Still, these dwellings remain calm and tranquil as opposed to the exciting kinesis of Shanghai's famed urbanity. Low, dense and intimate, the *Lilong* dwellings are rare, yet once found its space revives the human scale that had been lost in modern Shanghai. For designers, the role of the vernacular dwellings is not a matter of preservation but acceptance of an unrepeatable environment. As designers, we can learn from the characteristics of the dwellings in hopes of proposing more sustainable forms of dwelling. Although political and economic infrastructure plays a heavy hand in the fate of residential living, Shanghai's historic past continues to inspire and shape the image of the city. In favor of producing an outstanding city image, Shanghai has become geomantic. Yet its paradox remains.

With the scrolls displayed in Figures 7–10, I have attempted to document Shanghai as an unforgiving, mutating global city growing devoid of human dimension as it devours the core residential villages that once defined the city. By juxtaposing personal experience with case studies from Zhang Yimou's films, these graphic montages begin to define China's most invasively spectacular metropolis.

Passages: a moment's blink.
The world loses shape,
it is an apparition...

A motionless shimmer...



The sky has piled distances
over this reality that will barely last

Figure 5. Floating Source

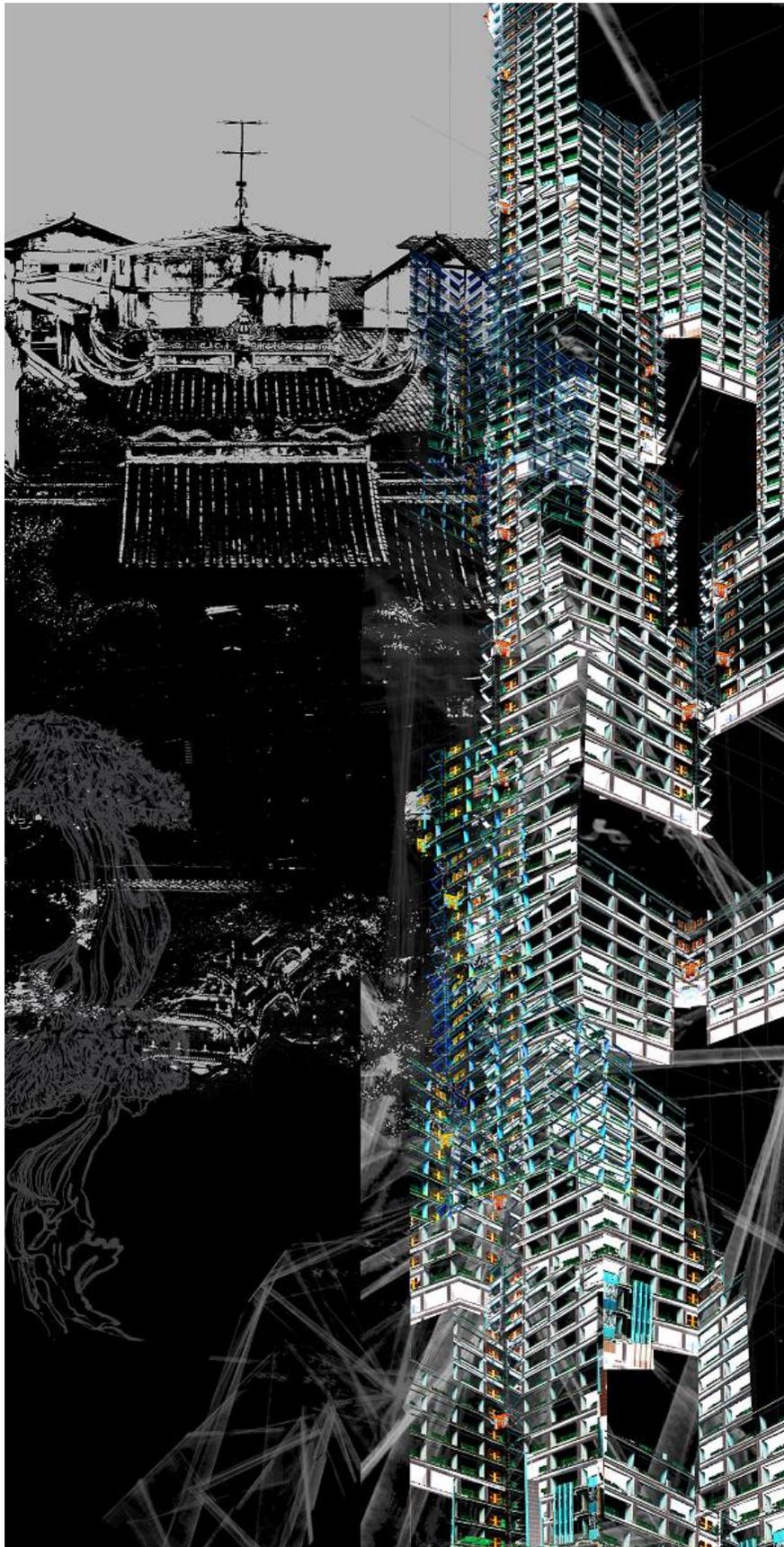


Figure 6. Hybrid Part 1.

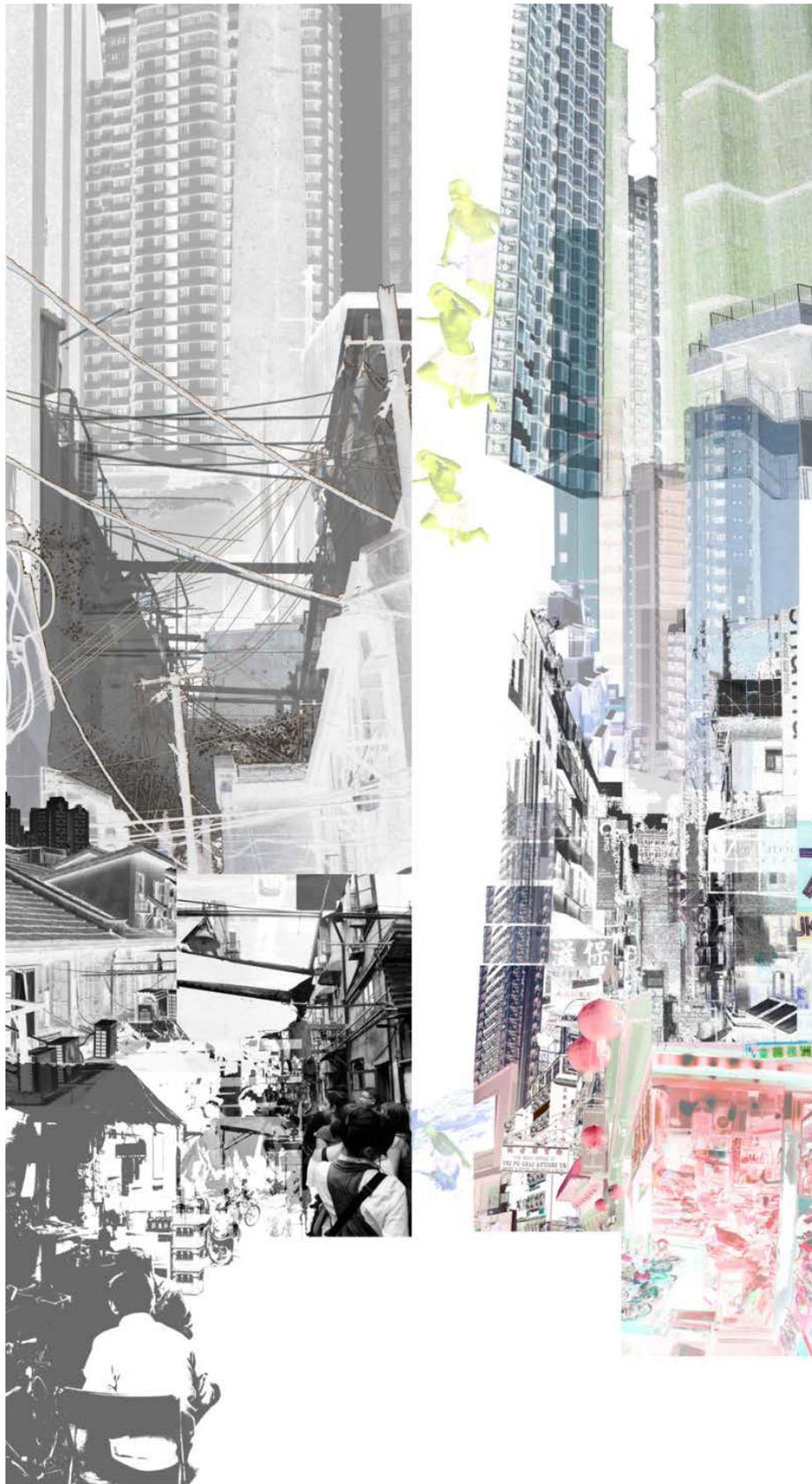


Figure 7. High Density.

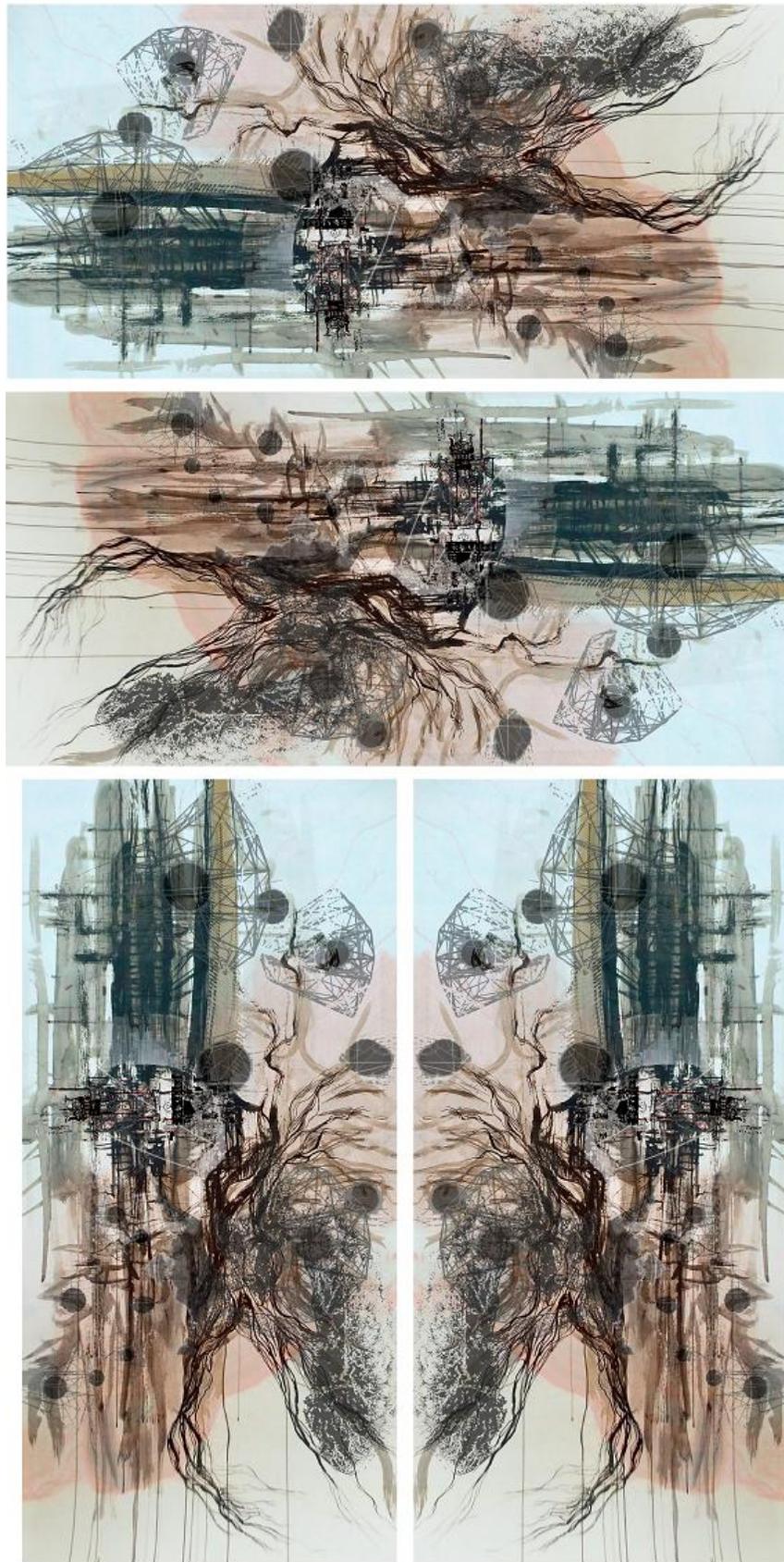


Figure 8. Mnemonic Mapping. Montage.

NOTES

¹ Yan Zhongmin, *Shanghai: the Growth and Shifting Emphasis of China's Largest City* (London: Oxford Univ Pr, 1988), 100.

² Clifford N. R., *Spoilt Children of Empire: Westerners in Shanghai and the Chinese Revolution of the 1920s* (Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press published by University Press of New England, 1982), 16.

³ Marie-Claire Bergère, "Shanghai's Urban Development: A Remake?" in *Shanghai: Architecture and Urbanism for Modern China*, ed. Seng Kuan and Peter G. Rowe (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 36–53.

⁴ Qian Guan, "Lilong Housing, A Traditional Settlement Form," July 1996, *McGill School of Architecture: Minimum Cost Housing Group*, 21 January 2011 <<http://www.mcgill.ca/mchg/student/lilong/>>.

⁵ Wang Shaozhou, *Shanghai Modern Architecture* (Jiangsu, P.R. China: Jiangsu Science and Technology Printing Service, 1989), 75.

⁶ Ackbar Abbas, "Play it Again Shanghai: Urban Preservation in the Global Era," in *Shanghai Reflections: Architecture, Urbanism and the Search for an Alternative Modernity*, ed. Mario Gandelsomas (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 37–56.

⁷ Bergère, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹ *Li* means communities. In Chinese, five families form a neighborhood and five neighborhoods construct a *Li*. *Long* means lanes. *Lilong* housing is a lane-community. They vary in size and range from 0.35 to 5.0 hectares.

¹⁰ *Tang*: important building/front of house.

¹¹ Guan, chapter 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Iain Chambers, "Maps, Movies, Musics and Memory," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 231–240.

¹⁴ *Raise the Red Lantern*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1991.

¹⁵ Hui Zou, *The Idea of Labyrinth in Chinese Building Tradition*, Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies (Cambridge, 2010).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Der Kunst und Raum* (St Gallen: Erker Verlag, 1969), 2.