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1 **Informal additions to a residential facade.**

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# design

For Shanghai-based Atelier Archmixing, learning from the everyday is practice-oriented, a way to understand the ever-changing conditions of the built environment and to explore new design strategies.

# Learning from the everyday world

*Shen Zhuang and Xiahong Hua*

Since its establishment in 2009, Atelier Archmixing has concentrated on 'ordinary' programmes in Shanghai and its neighbouring cities, towns, and villages of the Yangtze River Delta. The everyday world is where we live and work, where our designs perform and have influence. It is also something we study within the Atelier through the process of moving to different premises each year, a practice which began out of necessity and has continued by design.[1] Learning from the everyday world with a fresh and reflective eye is crucial for both recognition and action. Whether from participant observation, or from various design experiences, we have drawn a similar view that the essence of our surrounding space is ever changing, and its different conditions should be seen as neutral. Working from this position, we tend to treat historical traces and present requirements equally. The current built environment is seen as no more than a particular moment of spatial accumulation and transformation, in which both what is designed and built to plan – that which has long been valued as the core of architectural practice, especially since the modern movement – and its later adaptation, adjustment, and modification – that which has usually been categorised as everyday life and excluded from design field – are considered to be of equal value within what are just frozen seconds of architectural activities.

## Spatial Redundancy: discovering the neutral essence of the built environment

We use the term 'Spatial Redundancy'[2] to describe this everyday status of the contemporary urban built environment, which includes the modification, accumulation, repetition, superabundance, residue, and dislocation of vast material spaces and cultural symbols. These phenomena have long been judged as 'leftover', 'excessive', or 'overflow'. In our opinion, such evaluations and attitudes are too negative to guide architectural practices in the everyday context. When examining without prejudice, those impure, inefficient, and imperfect spectacles are not harmful; to some extent, they are inevitable and

even useful. Just as in the field of information technology, where wasted spaces and desired redundancy are used for error detection and correction to avoid emergency failure, spatial redundancy exposes the natural state of an urban built environment of complexity and coexistence.

Viewed over a longer historical timeframe, spatial redundancy reflects the dynamic evolution of spatial changes and accumulations of both materials and symbols, resulting from the negotiation of different powers. It also emphasises the general character of the built environment that gradually emerges over time, a shared and sophisticated condition inhabited by different individual buildings through processes of congestion, superposition and modification, free from the lonely isolation that a freshly completed project has to bear.

Spatial redundancy is not necessarily a global phenomenon. It happens more frequently in regions with a high time-space compression in urbanisation. Taking China as an example, due to the rapid economic growth of the last four decades, urban material spaces have quickly generated, a large number of which are mutations resulting from discontinuous economic and social development. Besides the worldwide celebration of China's rapid urbanisation, there are also fierce debates about the rapid change, decay, and even death of Chinese contemporary architecture. In short, spatial redundancy is a widespread condition of the contemporary Chinese built environment, and also a common situation that local architects must deal with.

By taking spatial redundancy as a neutral state, we have developed a different insight into what time and change mean for the built environment. Architecture is no longer a destination achieved by execution of an original concept. It is instead an endless recurrence consisting not only of concept and construction, but also of use and change, which may initiate new rounds of design and construction. The influence of the built environment is reflected in its interaction with users, who will accept, adjust, integrate, or struggle with and modify spaces so that they meet their own requirements. In the everyday

world of these developing regions with dense populations like East Asia, there are overwhelming scenes of these kinds of architectural activities, the majority of which are informal constructions for housing. Residents apply various available materials, structures, and technologies to build additional facilities on the surfaces of their dwelling structures: drying racks, planting frames, air conditioners, balconies, kitchens, bathrooms, pigeon houses, and so forth. These proliferating spaces are the traces of outflowing living functions or the adjustment of limited spaces to domestic evolutions [1, 2]. This is exactly why, where and how urban spaces are constantly accumulated and modified, and through which the everyday world of spatial redundancy is gradually shaped.

Therefore, it is necessary to replace the mainstream notion of 'stable architecture' with the concept of 'dynamic architecture' or 'changing architecture'. In developed countries, especially those of Europe and North America, rooted in the spirit of architectural modernism, the purity and integrity of a new building is highly valued and the ideal state of completion may be carefully preserved for a considerable time period. By comparison, in rapidly growing countries like China, there are, already – during the design and construction phases – numerous more unpredictable and uncertain aspects, including irrational and unscientific planning, extremely tight budgets and deadlines, and half-industrialised-half-handcrafted building techniques, not to mention all of the



2 Different elements added to a residential facade.

3 Mainstream architectural design is a linear process between goal and building.

4 Architectural practice involves a recurrence of goal, concept, building, use, and change.
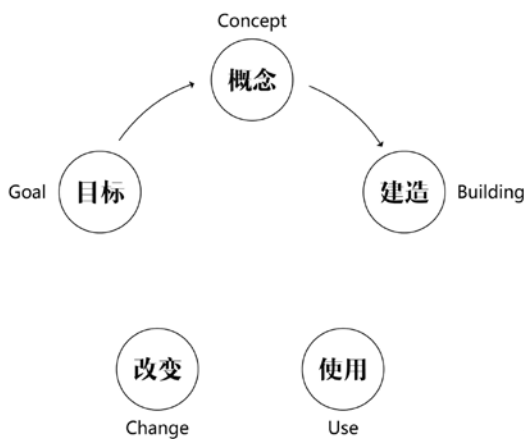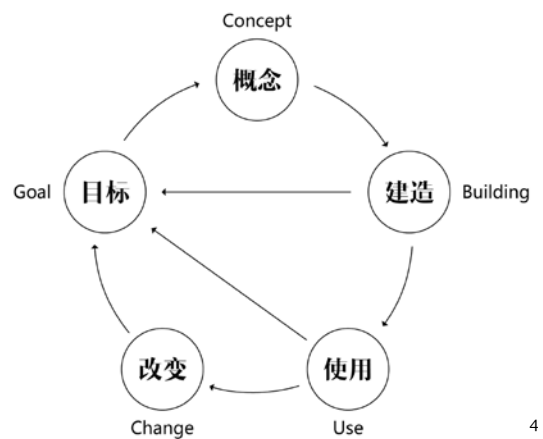
uncontrollable eventualities following completion. Taking all of these potential changes into consideration is crucial for designing in a context of spatial redundancy. In this case, the building should be seen as a dynamic process requiring the ongoing revision of objectives, strategies, and consequences, rather than the pursuit of an ideal moment of completion that would best fulfil the initial assignment – the approach typically learnt from schools of architecture [3, 4].

## Spatial Redundancy or pragmatic efficiency

If 'Spatial Redundancy' is the neutral essence of the built environment that we are examining, are there any architectural principles we can identify embedded in it? Based on our everyday experience, seemingly passive spatial redundancy could be transformed into pragmatic efficiency. As soon as the building is completed, users will begin to adjust it and its surrounding environment, according to the present conditions and resources. The building enters into an independent state, free from its initial meaning as a new completed structure. These kinds of adjustment focus on the part instead of the whole, with pragmatism and effectiveness the most important principles. Existing conditions, together with the constant accumulations of reality, become the starting point for changing urban and architectural spaces, which will never return to their initial state. Moreover, subsequent users will gradually adapt the existing space to render it compatible with their own spatial requirements. In short, fitting, or adjusting the old space to suit the new user could achieve functional efficiency.

'Apple Apartment', a nickname for an ordinary residential tower in Shanghai, serves as a typical example of positive urban spatial redundancy. Although the building's appearance is largely preserved just as it was when completed, almost 80% of the original residences have been replaced by E-commerce shops. The functional adjustment is rather simple. Since the plan of each residence is close to that of a small office unit, the dwelling tower is straightforwardly transformed into vertical streets with numerous shops selling digital products. The silent facade towards the city street is a perfect mask to hide extensive illegal functional and spatial transformations within the urban public sphere [5, 6].[3]

It is natural that the urban building is constituted by numerous such continuous 'independent' moments. When taking the evolution of these buildings as the basis of our research and design, we tend to treat the existing urban spaces of different times, different origins, and different features as equivalent, because they are all immediate circumstances with a common system of meanings, just as different life forms co-exist in the natural world. From this standpoint, we can also draw the following conclusions, that architectural change is not necessary for progress, and spatial redundancy could be neutral.

'Change means progress', 'change is for progress': these are dominant value systems of modern society, including the architectural field. In the everyday built environment, we witness various kinds of change. Some involve vigorous large-scale urban construction and updating, some concern the natural replacement cycles of life and death, and then there are those prevailing everyday transformations, often banal, and even illegal. However, mainstream architecture tends only to stress those revolutionary creations that appear to have complete independence, clear concept and novel form, and are usually the results of abundant manpower and material resources, elaborate planning, and construction. Everyday changes of evolutionary significance are largely ignored. Even if noticed, they are seen as meaningless, without any potential to guide new designs.

On the contrary, Atelier Archmixing prefers to see change as an objective process that is largely outside a particular set of values or priorities. It is neither the upgrading that modern society has become accustomed to, nor the designers' obsession with progress and revolution. Architectural change is, in our view, of neutral essence. That is why, in a series of urban and rural regeneration projects, we took existing buildings as a neutral base, and saw our own work as an adjustment over a short period of time in response to new use requirements. These projects are of diverse purposes and backgrounds. Some of them involve updating urban and rural interior spaces. For example, Zoumalou of Fuchun Academy (Zhejiang, 2014 [7]) transformed a historic house with open courtyard into an enclosed bar and reception for a rural resort. A new umbrella structure combining bamboo and Polyurethane films was juxtaposed with richly carved wooden beams enclosing the vernacular yard. For the *Young Bird* magazine, we renovated the interior space of a former piano factory into a cutting-edge office space (Shanghai, 2015 [8]). Some of them are small renovations of simple and ordinary buildings or structures in both urban and rural areas. For example, the Twin Trees Pavilion modified a village pigpen into a relaxing pavilion in a historic town near Suzhou (Jiangsu, 2012 [9]). We have also built a temporary reading pavilion on the pavement of central Shanghai's fashion venue, Xintiandi, which is a product of extremely intense processes: 15 days' design, 15 days' preparation, 5 days', construction and another 16 days' existence (Shanghai, 2016 [10]).

We have undertaken facade renovations for old buildings in an urban context.[4] In the last three years, Atelier Archmixing has designed and built five such projects successively in different areas of Shanghai, arising from various kinds of opportunities. The five facade renovation projects are: SVA Comprehensive Office Building, Xuhui (2011–14 [11]), No. 8 Building, Hengshanfang (2012–14, [12, 13]), Xietu Street Community Centre (2013–14 [14]), Longhua Elderly Care Centre (2013–16) and Removal Renovation of Chen Huacheng Memorial in Baoshan (2014–15). Due to their different functions, sizes, locations, purposes, budgets and preconditions, the designs adopted correspondingly diverse strategies.
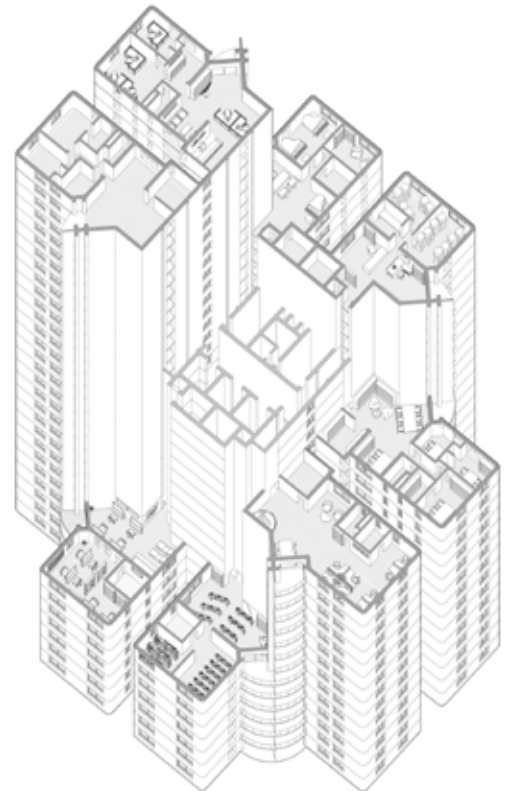
## Unrecognisable System: taking adjustment and application as design strategy

Through processes of global industrialisation and modernisation, architecture seems to have become, like many other modern disciplines, a dominant recognisable and categorisable system. In the context of globalisation, homogenised mechanisms of economic and cultural production, and techniques of digital media communication and transmission, contemporary architecture tends to celebrate even more those practices and theories that are highly-legible, styled, and branded. In our view, beyond this classified and customary system,

there is another rich and active sphere in the everyday world that needs to be discovered.

We use the term 'Recognisable System' to identify those architectural phenomena and design canons that are typically included in established architectural discourse; they usually have obvious features, and can be readily traced to a particular source, classified, and analysed. By contrast, we would like to coin 'Unrecognisable System' to describe non-mainstream architectural experiences that are hard to recognise and classify due to their opaque origins and qualities, including marginal, hybrid building spectacles, and others that are rejected because



5 Street view of 'Apple Apartment', Shanghai.

6 Functional analysis of 'Apple Apartment'.

7 Zoumalou of Zhejiang Fuchun Academy, Zhejiang, 2014.

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8 Interior space renovation of Shanghai Young Bird Studio, Shanghai, 2015.

9 Twin Trees Pavilion, Jiangsu, 2012.

10 Shanghai Xintiandi Temporary Reading Pavilion, Shanghai, 2016.



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of their randomness, ordinariness, and lack of artistic innovation. This term not only identifies the characteristics of the everyday world, especially that of developing regions with discontinuous economic and social progress like modern China, but also highlights a largely underestimated source and long-ignored resource for developing new architectural principles and design strategies.[5]

Instead of selecting and quoting from the legitimatised lexicon of the 'Recognisable System' in order to guarantee a pure and clarified building character, this new approach advocates applying



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all kinds of concepts, forms, and techniques without prejudice, using and mixing them flexibly, liberating them from their origins and inherited meanings, be they of the mainstream or periphery. On account of its diverse sources, features and methodologies, this approach can be roughly summarised as the design strategy of the 'Unrecognisable System'. It aims to engage with the reality of 'Spatial Redundancy' and to shape the future of such conditions in a way that maintains their character.

This approach, which is rooted in and leads to further architectural understanding of this 'Unrecognisable System', prefers adjustment to innovation in urbanism. Today's society relies heavily on innovation, taking it to be the strongest driving force in production and consumption. The endless upgrading of lifestyle symbolised by the accumulation of electronic products has become a worldwide fashion that influences all social activities, including urban development. Here innovation takes the form of systematic 'heavy' actions, such as vast-scale demolition and construction, tactics with strong visual impact and significant theoretical developments. Contrary to these kinds of innovation, which are characterised by mandatory intervention and substantial transformation, Atelier Archmixing advocates a strategy of adjustment, gentle intervention, and

11  SVA Office Building, Xuhui, 2014.

12  Xietu Street Community Centre, 2014.

13  No. 8 Building, Hengshanfang, Shanghai, 2014, quietly integrating with the historical context during the daytime.

14  No. 8 Building, Hengshanfang, distinguished from its surroundings by lighting up during the evening.



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subtle control in the built environment. Although it is true that, after decades of rapid urbanisation, regeneration programmes are becoming as widespread and as important as new constructions, this turn to adjustment need not only be limited to repairing and correcting errors and mistakes of many years of brutal redevelopment. Instead of a passive project of clearance, adjustment is a positive action of organisation and utilisation. Through gentle gestures towards existing buildings and urban spaces, the design strategy of adjustment aims at making best use of original features, enmeshing them with the new requirements, reorganising the whole program to satisfy the new users. Although it may result in characters that are hybrid, temporary and ordinary, this design strategy is effect-oriented and thus rather satisfying.

The facade renovation programme of Longhua Elderly Care Centre (2013–16, Xuhui District, Shanghai) designed by Atelier Archmixing is a good example. This is a nursing home located in a dense residential area in central Shanghai. The original plan was poorly organised, in the manner of a hospital, without public spaces. The designer successfully persuaded the client to refocus the brief from surface beautification to spatial intervention. Continuous balconies of varying sizes were built out from the exterior walls and glass meeting rooms were installed on the empty roofs where residents could watch television, play cards, chat, or just sunbathe. These sunny new communal spaces, fabricated from light and inexpensive structures and materials, resemble the informal additions and modifications typical

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15  South facade of
    Longhua Elderly
    Care Centre, Xuhui
    District, Shanghai,
    2016.

16  Comparison of
    facades before and
    after renovation,
    Longhua Elderly
    Care Centre.

of the Shanghai urban context. Whether from the perspective of programme or design strategy, these activities of adjustment are soft and not easily categorised, but they have effectively and efficiently solved functional problems. Moreover, these subtle changes are exactly where a true architectural identity, both rooted in and benefiting the local quality of life, can be developed [15, 16].[6]

Besides the tactics of adjustment, the design strategy of 'Unrecognisable System' also emphasises its methodology of application. Since the changes and adjustments of everyday urbanism often focus only on partial and short-term interests and results, it is more practical and efficient to apply flexible strategies and methodologies instead of systematic frames. Appropriate words, concepts, forms, materials, and technologies should be selected and applied according to their efficiency instead of their purity and consistency with the mainstream architectural system. On one hand, the current everyday built environment characterised by spatial redundancy is an impure situation, resulting from an overall plan and professional design, supplemented by spontaneous everyday modification, most of which are informal activities. It is impossible to settle concrete problems by fitting into guidelines of orthodoxy. On the other hand, as a modern profession and discourse in a developing country, Chinese architecture draws on various origins and influences in its evolution, but there remains hardly any original theories or methods domestically produced. Absorbing nutrition from different sources is necessary and important.

What, then, is the guideline for applying this knowledge about our 'Unrecognisable System' in new design and regeneration projects? First, in an age with various and differentiated building

purposes and technologies, we should actively select strategies of different origins and functions to achieve specialised and appropriate consequences. Furthermore, choosing different strategies according to their efficiency could result in unique forms. Last but not least, taking the uncertainty of the contemporary Chinese built environment, for example the half-industrialised-half-handcrafted building technologies into consideration, exploiting opportunities within this hybrid and ever-changing situation, and applying strategies flexibly with a view to the overall result, these attitudes can lead to positive results.

A noteworthy example is the renovation programme of Chen Huacheng's Memorial (2014–15, Baoshan district, Shanghai), designed by Atelier Archmixing. The biggest challenge for this project was how to transform a supplementary facility in this everyday urban park with an irregular plan into a serious memorial hall for a national hero without sacrificing the public affinity for it. Familiarity and Quietness are two features we wanted to embody in this commemorative structure. Continuous open galleries were employed to give the humble structure a formal and decent appearance, rhythmic spatial order, and an appropriately serious atmosphere. Open boundaries that integrate with the surrounding environment also sustain everydayness. In order to avoid visual shock to everyday users in this park, the design applied not only traditional building forms and tectonics, but also common materials and modest
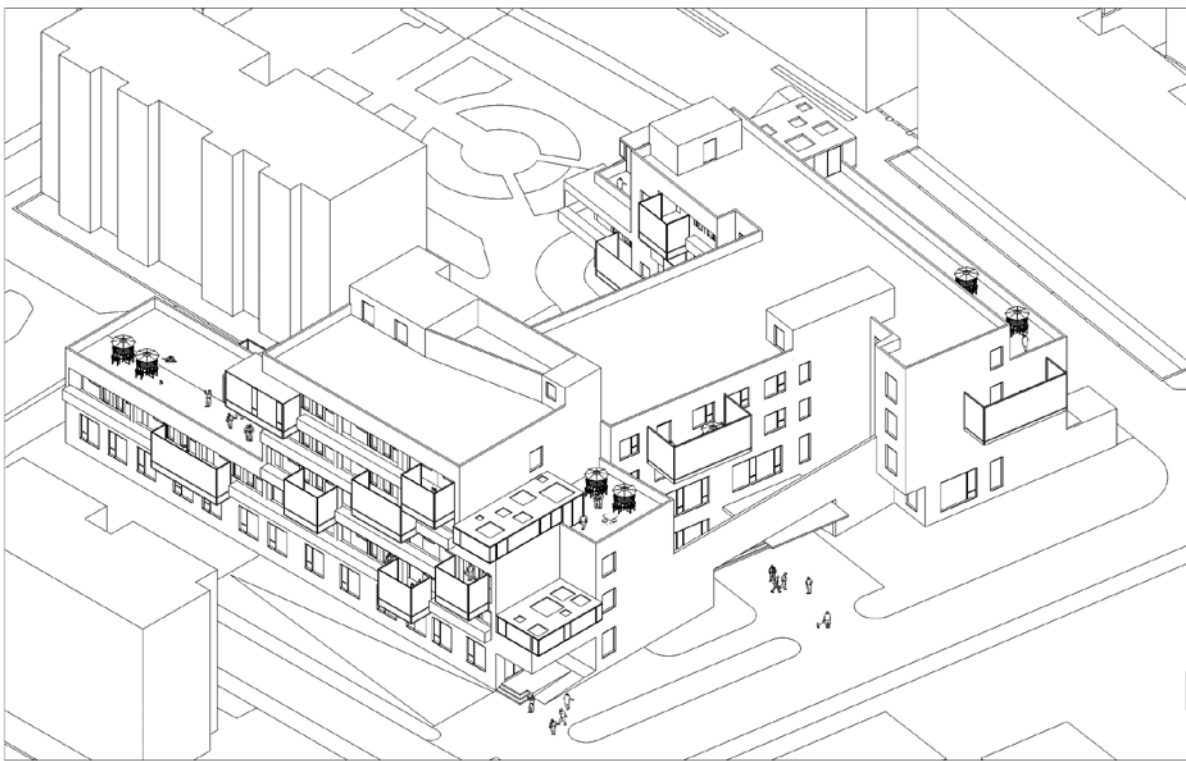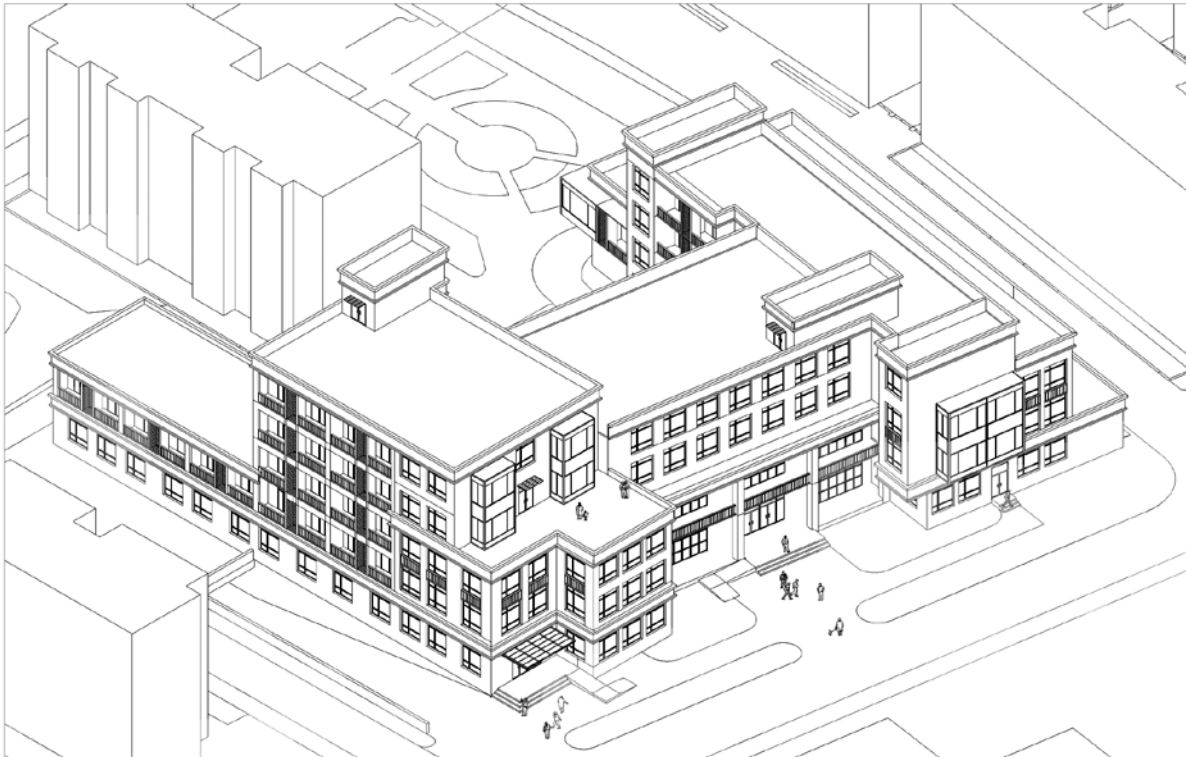
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treatments. The exterior walls and concrete columns were covered with plain cement, the timber columns, beams and rafters were all painted dark, and the modern, precisely connected details of timer and steel structure were oiled to black. In this way, Atelier Archmixing takes a position that, when renovating ordinary buildings in everyday contexts, it is important to restrain design power and desire, placing emphasis on application instead of creation, in the conviction that these approaches offer new potential to explore the intrinsic strength of everyday life *[17, 18]*.

**From ordinary to ordinary; from everyday to everyday**
Atelier Archmixing is not alone in exploring architectural guidelines drawn from the everyday world in order to resist the elitism embodied in architectural modernism. Publications such as *The Death and Life of Great American City* (Jane Jacobs, 1961), *Architecture without Architects* (Bernard Rudofsky, 1964), *Learning from Las Vegas* (Robert Venturi, Denis Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, 1972), *Delirious New York* (Rem Koolhaas, 1978), *Architecture of the Everyday* (Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, 1997), *The Structure of the Ordinary* (N. J. Habraken, 1998),
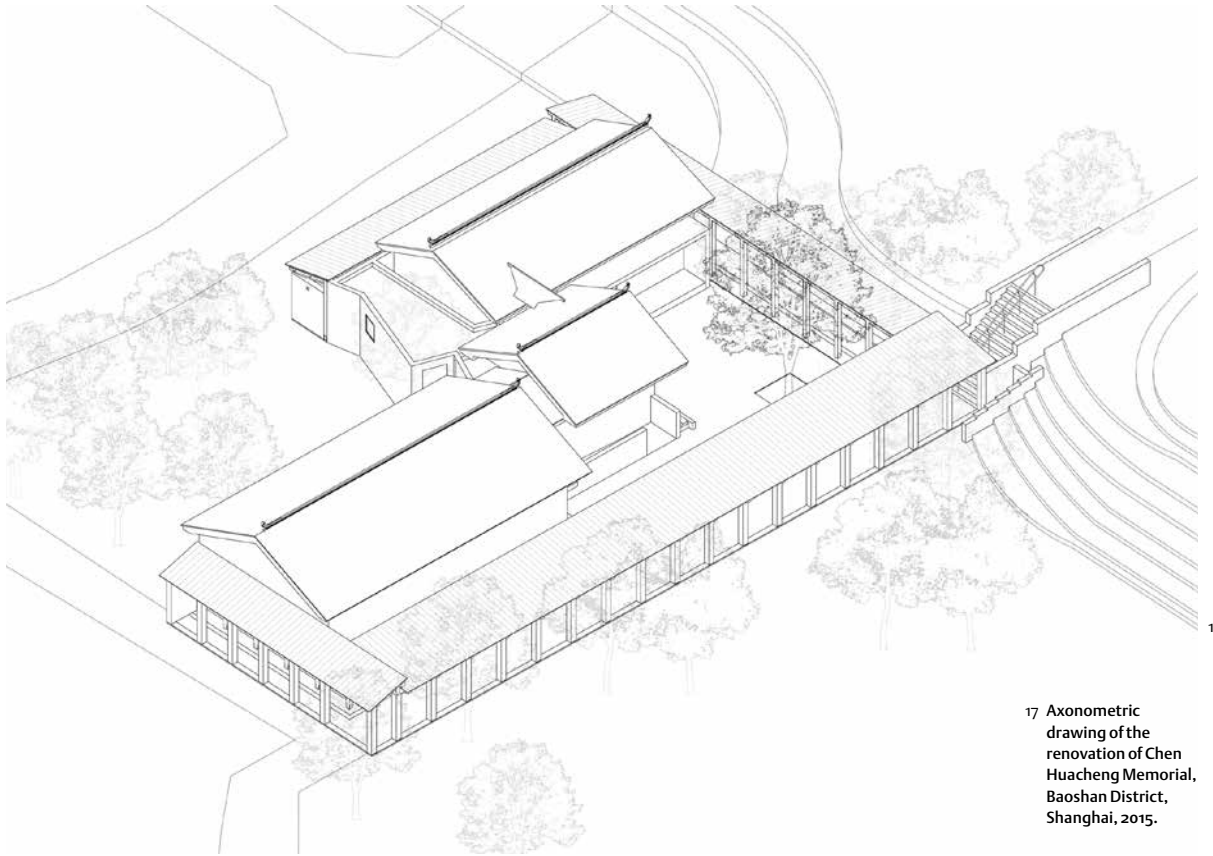
17 Axonometric
drawing of the
renovation of Chen
Huacheng Memorial,
Baoshan District,
Shanghai, 2015.



18 Eastern stages to the
hillside at Chen
Huacheng Memorial.

*Everyday Urbanism* (John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski, 1999), *Incomplete Urbanism* (William Lim, 2012), and many others advocate the re-examination of urban disorder to discover an essence of contemporary architecture different from the modernist orthodoxy.

As a contemporary Chinese architectural studio practising in a context of rapid urbanisation and its aftermath, where 'Spatial Redundancy' is a common situation, the search for an alternative approach outside the 'Recognisable System' is inevitable and necessary to achieve pragmatic effectiveness and efficiency. In our view, the enduring questions include: what and how can architecture achieve and contribute today? And is it possible for Chinese architects to seek out original design strategies and methodologies from the heterogeneous everyday world in contemporary China? Instead of pursuing extraordinary landmarks or monuments with idealised permanency, we therefore prefer to start from the ordinary conditions of the local built environment, applying various concepts, technologies and approaches without prejudice to achieve a product of 'Unrecognisable System'. The results may be ordinary in appearance and ephemeral in existence, but this is a consequence of the decision to restrain design power and avoid showcasing exaggerated formal or tectonic innovations. In our view, ever-changing is the essence of the everyday built environment and also its source of diversity and vitality. Under the hegemony of globalisation and its homogenising power, 'an authentic contemporary Chinese architectural identity will emerge and develop only from the solid soil of reality',[7] which is constituted mainly through the ordinariness of everyday life.

## Notes

1. Atelier Archmixing has moved offices five times in the past eight years (2009–17). After working stably for five years in the first workplace located in an old residence in the city centre, the practice failed to find another suitable long-term workplace for stable rent. The partners then initiated a plan of ten-year 'moving', namely moving the workplace once a year and adjusting its spatial organisation. The workplace was then divided into three parts, a fixed and cheap storage space in the countryside, a multi-functional space in the city centre, and a flexible office space that changed each year. This plan is not only a laboratorial action, but also a kind of mental experiment. Faced with an office space and city environment of constant change, will we finally become used to this instability? The experience of constantly seeking, adapting, adjusting and using the workplace in Shanghai makes Atelier Archmixing pay more attention to the internal architectural and urban space. See Shen Zhuang and Xiahong Hua, 'Work within the City', *Time Architecture* 5 (2015), 100–7.
2. Shen Zhuang, Xiahong Hua, 'Spatial Redundancy', *Time Architecture* 5 (2015), 108–11.
3. Shen Zhuang, Jianjia Zhou, Danfeng Li, 'An Alternative to Open a City: A Work Session on Urban Research towards Contemporary Shanghai', *Time Architecture* 5 (2015), 114–15.
4. Xiahong Hua and Shen Zhuang, 'On Facade Renovation', *Time Architecture* 4 (2016), 24–8.
5. Shen Zhuang and Xiahong Hua, 'Everyday, Change, Unrecognizable System', *New Architecture* 6 (2014), 16–19.
6. Xiahong Hua, 'Quotation and the Construction of Chinese Architectural Identity', *Perspecta* 49 (2016), 216–27 (p. 224).
7. Ibid., p. 209.

## Illustration credits

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