City On-The-Go

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A music teacher, his first grader, and her retired grandpa are rushing through the same subway stop every morning. Each SUBJECT reflects a different set of mobile spatial experiences in the same daily urban space.

A cook, his delivery boy, and their alleyway vendor are syncopating the pedestrian flows at the same corner of a busy street on every working day. Each spatial PRACTICE of its subject intervenes the urban dynamics to spontaneously activate various patterns in a seemingly unchanging setting of an urban pocket.

A zebra crossing between a newly built residential compound and the adjacent business block, an alleyway stretching between a restaurant and a doorway of an apartment, and a revolving door at the gate between a department store and its front shopping plaza are common places in a city. Each SPACE in any generic urban setting can be experienced differently by different SUBJECTs for different PRACTICEs.

Inspired by Tim Cresswell's "Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects", this on-going short exercise from an urban design studio investigates spatial practices of urban mobilities. Each student produces experimental models and drawings, as personalized methods of design research through different modes of representation, and develops subjective readings of urban experiences. These reflective images also project alternative visions of how urban spaces could be diversified.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, clay is a monad of the Sumerian civilization over four millenniums ago: Uruk, as the first ancient city, is entirely made of clay; the book, as a form of technology that recorded this literary history, is inscribed in cuneiform on the clay tablets; people in the story are equally made of clay as well. Clay is paradoxically both permanent and ephemeral: it is permanent as not only a ubiquitous natural material but also a cultural symbol that could be almost indispensable in the historical era; it is physically and metaphorically ephemeral: as a building material , mud walls could be easily eroded and ruined by natural elements like the fate of Uruk; as a book, clay tablets could be dissolved by water (legendarily, the tablets of the Gilgamesh were hardened by the fire when the palace that housed it was burned down more than three-thousand years

ago); as mortals, our flesh in the end would turn to dust of the earth. Gilgamesh, the vigorous, audacious, ambitious, and determined king in this epic, strived to look for the answer for immortality (permanence) during his youthful life, but through his journeys, he was finally at peace with being just a mortal and became a just king for the mortals. Consequently, he has been celebrated for millenniums as a divine legend that transcends his mortal being permanently [1]

Fueled with the will to power, our cities have been irrevocably developed into intricate infrastructural networks and complex building systems with sophisticated materials extracted from elements of the earth, and their physical properties and forms have been persistently advanced to be superior to any natural products can offer for permanency. Paradoxically, the stability of our places of cities has been increasingly dissolved. In Kevin Lynch's theory of the Three City Models, the City of Faith with one dominating center and a hierarchical system is the proto-type of all cities prior to the enlightenment era, and the City as a Machine with free of flow and exchange system has been developed along with the evolving capitalist economy.[2] Michel Foucault asserts, in Of Other Spaces, Utopias and Heterotopias: "For the real scandal of Galileo's work lay not so much in his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space. In such a space the place of the Middle Ages turned out to be dissolved. as it were; a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down."[3]

The flux of urban spaces is not only in the materialist's realities and virtual realities, but also in the realm of our perceptions. The seminal work of Robin Evans, The Projective Cast: Architecture and It's Three Geometries, can be read as three analogies: orthographic projection as abstract/mental reality; perspective as absolute/scientific reality; perception and imagination as subjective reality.[4] The third geometries, subjective reflections of urban spaces, are rather dynamic and constant in motion; our perceptions and imaginations are contingent on and changing with the shifting contexts and each individual observer. It is a humanistic tradition that we design the built environments based on the reflections of our perceptions and values.

Our perceptions reflect values that are different in both degree and kind, and these differences frame the way how we design cities through active imaginations. Renaissance architect Sebastian Serlio, in his Five Books of Architecture, projects three models of urban settings based on Vitruvius' descriptions of Roman theater sets and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream: the Tragic/Noble Scene; the Comic Scene; the Satyric Scene. Serlio's hierarchy of his three urban settings also reflects Aristotle's
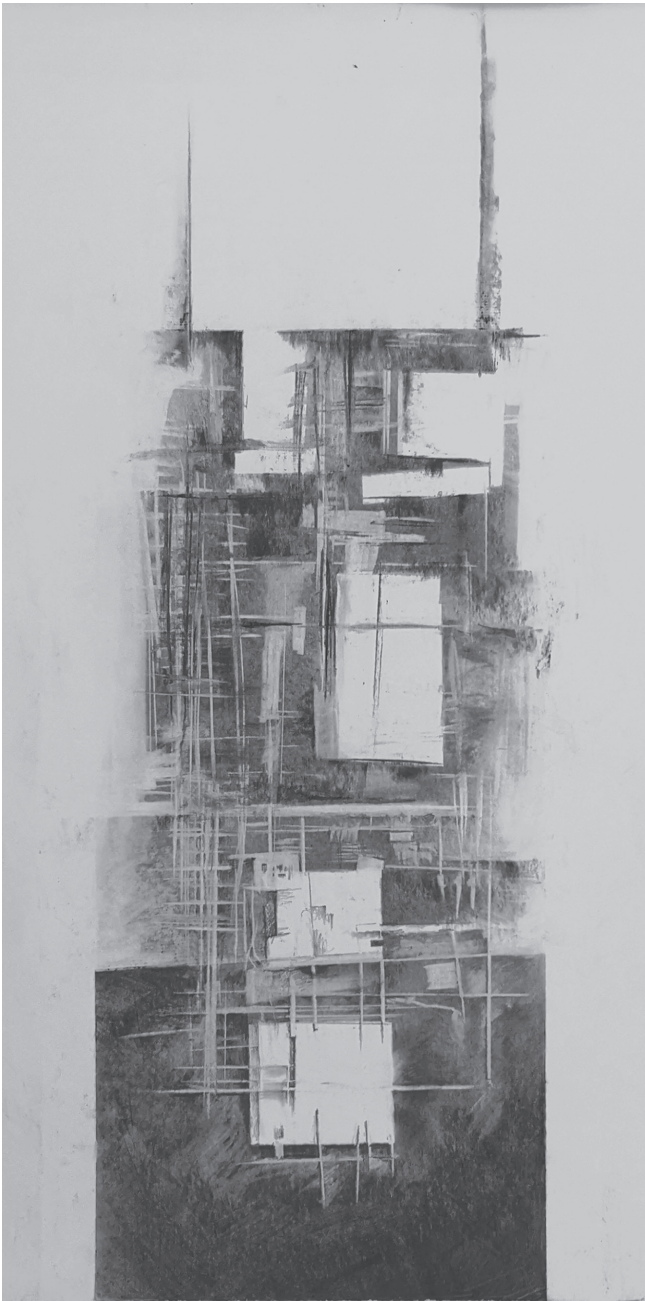

Figure 1: CITY ON-THE-GO: City Flows To The Qiantang River student: Deng, Bo-kang;   advisor: Author

Poetics. Accordingly, the Tragic/Noble Scene is the model of the elevated civic center, the Comic Scene is the model of the chaotic commercial street, and the Satyric Scene is the model of city's periphery that echoes Nick Bottom of A Midsummer Night's Dream as a creature of half human(culture) and half animal(nature).[5] Devised by the emblematic scientific invention, perspective construction for stage sets, Serlio establishes and stabilizes the hierarchy of urban spaces through the manipulations of the three sets of normative geometric ordering systems. Simultaneously, he constructs movements of visual urban design elements through the play of proportions, repetitions, and variations, and the movements are all leading to a point at infinity, of Newton's homogenous and absolute time and space.

These hieratical design models and representation techniques in constructing temporal and spatial urban experiences have established a formal method of urban analyses and defined a set of frameworks of how we look at the city, and accordingly, the design of these urban spaces. While these standardized methods have been effective and productive in the normative practice, the heterogeneous relationships between each individual and the city have always been overlooked and suppressed. "Both space and time could be distorted relative to the observer; time could be slowed, accelerated, or even (for some sequences of events) reversed; space could be bent, stretched, and compressed". Influenced by Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, urban design theorist David Graham Shane suggests that the heterogeneous local conditions and specific observers are important in the post-classical, post-mechanical world, and people, such as ethnic minorities, feminists, gays and lesbians, along with disgraced racists, nationalists, and totalitarians, can all make their own choices.[6] Therefore, in theory, the single-point perspective reaches to its limit in an Einsteinian universe. In the post-modern world, the distorted realities (other than the absolute) relative to each observer as a singular individual experience are essential for emerging design researches. Following the precedent of Colin Rowe's Collage City, Shane investigates a range of post-modernist's design approaches that confront fragmented realities and examine heterogeneous relationships between individuals (urban actors) and localized patchworks of urban condition. He highlights these emerging design approaches as the Seven"-Ages": Decoupage (Rossi and "analogical city" design); Collage City (plus Contextualism and Rationalism); Bricolage; Photomontage; Montage; Assemblage; Rhizomic Assemblage.[7] Post-structuralist's approaches generate experimental design methodologies and representation techniques. These explorations of design approaches are both open-minded and open-ended and enable us to continue to develop, discover, and debate.

City on-the-go is a three-week project of an urban design studio at the China Academy of Art (CAA). It is intended to explore subjective readings of the city as well as reconstructing urban

spaces through active representation. The China Academy of Art is located in Hangzhou, a newly urbanized ancient capital with the legendary West Lake in the middle. The new CAA campus is built upon a piece of farmland anchored by the Elephant Mountain ten kilometers southwest of the city center. The campus and more than two-dozen academic buildings are all designed by Wang Shu, Dean of the School of Architecture there. As Wang Shu described, the new CAA campus was meant to be a utopian commune where students could live and study like in the ancient Confucian school. Therefore, every building or space is designed like an abstract landscape element that is inspired not by tangible things, but by imaginations and historical Chinese mountain-water ink-brush paintings. The campus is unique and real, derived from a utopian idea but thoughtfully materialized. While the surrounding urbanized city blocks are constantly expanding and changing, the campus in the middle is like a mountain (as this new city district is named as Elephant Mountain) that resists the flux of the city consistently driven by the forces of economic development.

When the new CAA campus came into being a decade ago, every built element was immerged into and intertwined with the natural landscape without a single sight of the city. However, due to the success and the fame of the academy, the campus soon found itself at the epicenter of a newly developed city blocks, shopping malls, and gated residential compounds and towers. The fate of this campus' neighborhood is like many previously preserved natural scenic sites that have been gradually taken over by developers, and the developments are supported by the local government. At the end, these valuable properties are transformed into mass produced building blocks. Students contemplate these paradoxical and evolving realities, and these emerging contexts become critical topics for design studios as well.

The term city may sound problematic or even negative for this academic community. I led students to read Alex Krieger's The Virtues of Cities to understand density, propinquity, connectivity, juxtaposed reals, heterogeneity, public life, and core values of city in a broader sense.[8] As students were confused by the current urbanization as direct product and process of economic and political developments, I also introduced them the text of Spaces of Neoliberalism by Neil Brenner, in which the production and intensification of uneven spatial development within and between cities are analyzed, and Henri Lefebvre concept of the production of social space is illuminated.[9]

In Hangzhou, neoliberalism is embedded in contemporary Chinese consumerism. The original campus of China Academy of Art is a relatively an open setting next to the West Lake at the heart of the historical city, where the main galleries, art studios, and administration offices are still operating. At such a renowned location, a five-story students' dormitory building along the Nanshan Road of the West Lake is arranged to house

CAA's international students in the recent decade, and the first story is leased to Lamborghini, Ferrari, and a number of sport car dealerships as showrooms. Elegant restaurants and bars next to the CAA along the Nanshan Road are the most popular meetup places for social elites. Hangzhou is historically named as heaven on earth and city of poets, and it has always been celebrated for its economic prominence and cultural significance as a world-class city. The new CAA campus design by Wang Shu was a utopia in a rural area but now has become a center for another newly developed commercial city district. The urban spatial discontinuity and mutation are even more intensified in this Elephant Mountain district than the historical West Lake site.

Decoupage; Collage City; Bricolage; Photomontage; Montage; Assemblage; Rhizomic Assemblage (Shane, 2005: 139-151) are productive techniques for students to explore. However, we need to critically examine different layers of urban realities and social contexts to avoid the tendency of superficial formalism. At the CAA, students are among the very few who can be accepted through the most selective college entry examination process, and recent young teachers of the architecture school are mostly graduated from Harvard University Graduate School of Design. When these young teachers set up their design offices and teach design studios at the CAA, they are also enrolled in current PHD program as students of Wang Shu (a PHD degree is essential for an academic career in China). With the presence of Kenneth Frampton, Rem Koolhaas, and many academic celebrities and the collaborations with MIT and RISD, students are exposed to the avant-garde world design culture. However, among many challenges for both students and faculty, the differences and even calashes of cultural contexts and value systems are always fascinating. The contextualization of theories and methodologies is a creative teaching task.

A provocative introduction to the design studio project can be quite effective. Michel Foucault's opening lecture of The Culture of the Self (Reel 61 in the Foucault Archives at Berkeley)[10] is enlightening for students. Most current CAA students are talented and skillful in the fine arts, and they have been trained intensively under certain standardized guidelines. Although they were all born in the late 1990s and typologically different from their parents' generation who experienced earlier post-Chairman Mao's era, as a smartphone and social media generation, many students are still lack of motivations for critical self-expressions in the public domain. Students enjoy precedent researches and like to follow art forms from both the contemporary world and the historical Chinese as their references, but you can hardly tell if they are authentic or superficial. To discover and develop their design originality, I advise each student to frame her/his topic personally with the attention to unique experiences and memories of urban space. Each student is required to choose a specific site location and a sequence of urban spaces without looking at the
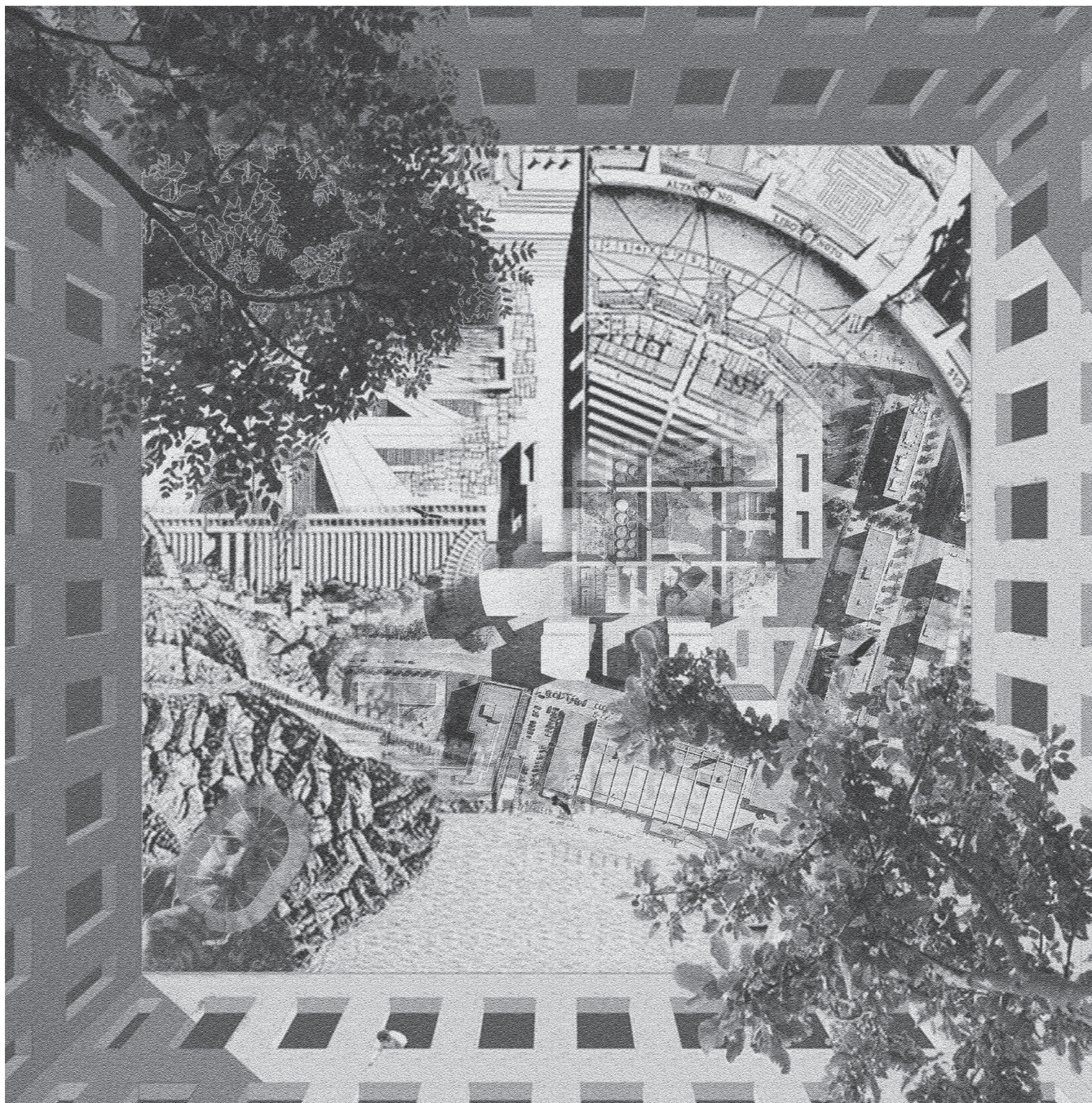
Figure 2: CITY ON-THE-GO: My City   student: Luo, Nan;   instructor: Author

city as a totality. Instead, we view the city as the product of layers of rational planning and irrational desires, and it is a critical challenge for each student to find her/his own way to analyze urban realities through de-constructing the superficial imaginaries of the city. As the world-renowned artist Cia Guo-qiang states in his solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2008, "No destruction, no construction" (He borrows it from Chairman Mao's slogan during the Cultural Revolution),[11] here we are de-constructing and re-constructing

of urban realities, but not in a collective and systematic sense, rather from an individual frame of view. Through the process of de-construction, each student can also re-construct her/his understanding and reflection of urban spaces.

Experimenting the techniques of de-construction and re-construction of urban elements through charcoal drawings or photoshops, we discover that the urban dynamics can be translated into different forces of natural movements.
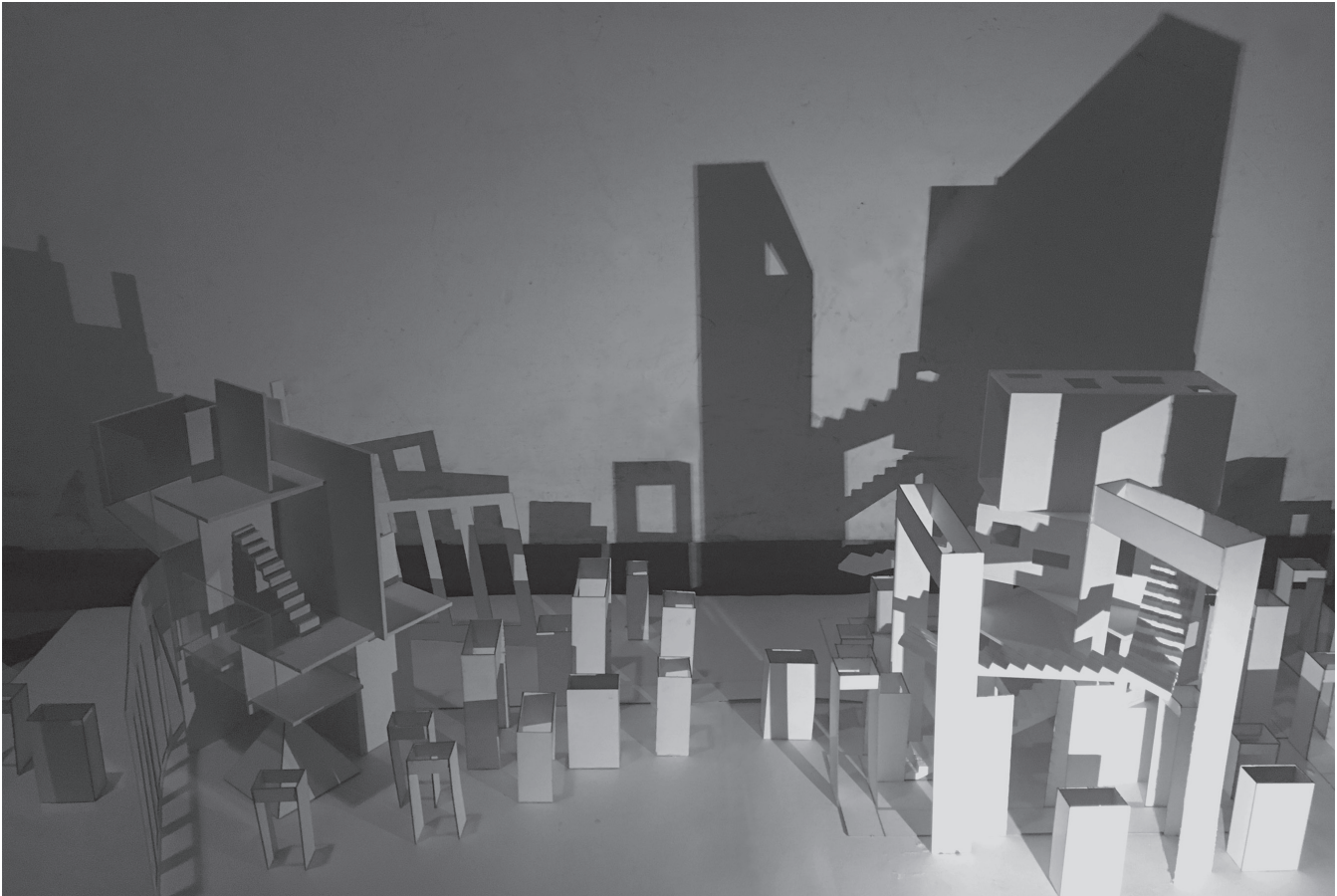
Figure 3: CITY ON-THE-GO: I Am A Restaurant Delivery Boy   student: Guan, Wei-ping;   advisor: Author

Mastering the forces and movements as a creative technique is essential for the practice of calligraphy and ink-painting, and it requires a similar skill in charcoal drawings as well. As a process, first, each student defines her/his understanding of diverse urban dynamics in a personal manner, next, the concept is interpreted as layers of abstract forces and moments, then, the abstract movements turn into the act of drawing that is not only controlled by a skillful hand but also generates feedbacks to the hand, the eyes, and the mind, which simultaneously in turn enables the student to make analytical and aesthetic decisions. It is rather an intuitive process that is well received by the CAA students. Learning from the process that how Wang Shu designed the CAA new campus through his personal interpretations of ancient Chinese landscape paintings, it is constructive to encourage each student to look at the city through the lens of landscape, and every element of the city is in dialogue with nature and acts as an element of the man-made "nature". An urban landscape feature could be a zebra crossing, or a subway station, or a shopping mall revolving door, or an overpass of the street. Each urban landscape feature also relates different individuals in different ways; therefore, is perceived differently. However, whether part of conflict or resolution, with the belief of oneness, every element of the city contributes together as one holistic and harmonious nature.

The flux of urban dynamics is both a materialist's physical and sensory reality and an idealist's mental and emotional reality. To generate a potentially innovative method that can provide the studio with a basic structure for the study of urban dynamics, interdisciplinary approach can be instrumental. we are intrigued by the research method of human geography and decide to test it in our early process. Tim Cresswell, in his "Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects", creates a foundational framework for the research of human geography. [12] He defines three integrated fields: practice is what we do every day, whether it is repetitive as in a program or unexpected as during an event; space is the site and domain of our activities, whether it is normative and permanent or unique and temporary; subject is a specific individual other than a normative type. This framework empowers students with lively personalities and real authorships to explore urbanisms and urban conditions at intimate scales.

At the beginning, each student is assigned to play a role in one of the three aspects: practice, such as cooking in a restaurant kitchen of the shopping mall nearby the CAA campus; space, such as an alleyway in the historical marketplace; subject, such as a retired factory worker. Soon we realize that all these three aspects are interrelated and almost inseparable from each other. Each drawing focuses on a set of urban spaces,
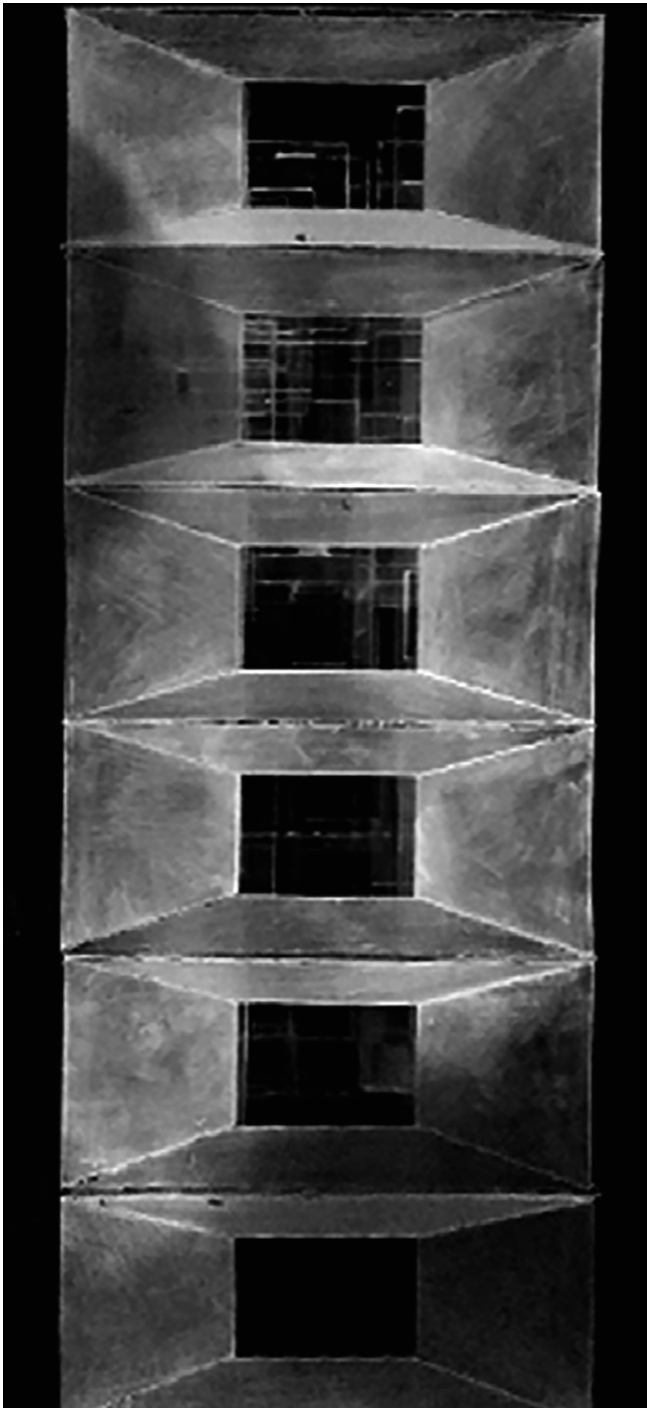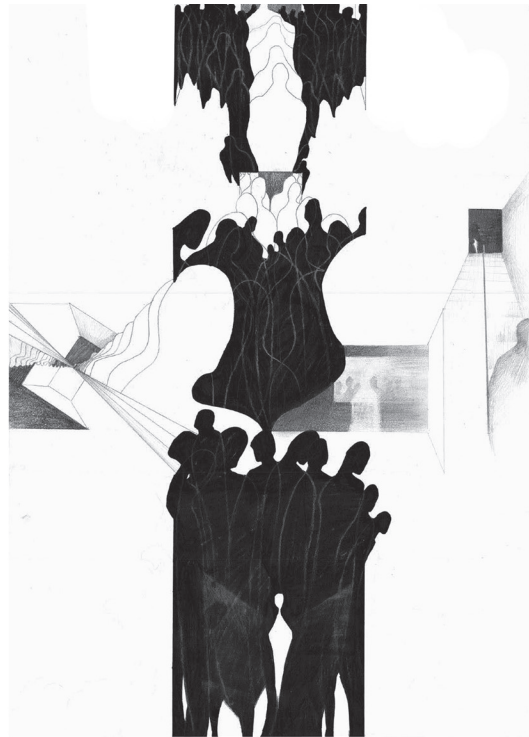
Figure 5: CITY ON-THE-GO: With My Dad And Grandy In The Subway
student: He, Xin-yu;   advisor: Author

Figure 4: CITY ON-THE-GO: I Cook In A Restaurant Kitchen
student: Wu, Xiong-yi;   advisor: Author

Figure 6: CITY ON-THE-GO: Taking A Subway
student: He, Xin-yu;   advisor: Author

and among the three aspects, other than space, both practice and subject can only be implied through architectural settings. This is perhaps the most delightful challenge. To figure out a plausible solution, we deploy different perspectives to imply the subjects and practice at different scales (a kid's eye level is much lower than that of her mom; the view point of standing to cook in the kitchen is different from sitting in front of a computer at an office). The rhythms and intensities of spatial practice can also be reflected by the composition. In this way, a drawing soon becomes a superimposition of layers of reconstructed images. Along the process, we also realize that this technique is partly inspired by the traditional Chinese mountain-water long-scroll ink-painting, where multiple focal points are distributed throughout the entire painting surface to represent different spatial settings in different times.

After four studio sessions of drawing exercise, students move on to conceptual physical models. Subjective reading and imagining of an urban space demand shifting human scales in one seemingly stable physical space. A restaurant delivery boy, moving from a kitchen to the street and going through alleyways, then passing the gate of a residential compound and climbing stairs, and finally knocking the apartment door, will experience a sequence of urban realities different from any other citizens. A grandpa and his granddaughter, heading to the kindergarten and passing through the same subway station every day, walking hand by hand, however, each will reflect different experiences of movements of pedestrian flows, rhythms, and emotions. Multiple reflections relative to different subjects and different spatial experiences generate distorted urban spaces. At the end, a rhizomic assemblage of layered spatial, temporal, and scaled settings turns into one physical model.

The new CAA campus marks an unprecedented urban reality that intends to continue the idealized historical tradition of social spaces for learning and living and liberating human freedom at the individual level. While the paradoxical developments between the ideal community within the campus and the mundane circumstances beyond continue to unfold, we are facing segregated, heterogeneous, and fragmented urban conditions that have increasingly intensified. This experimental studio project proposes a potential dialogue between the two oppositional urban conditions. City-on-the -go interprets urban dynamics into motions and emotions of contemporary human geographic and historical Chinese landscape experiences. The practices of individualized perceptions and imaginations project potential transformations of the urban banality, consequently, as a suggestion to connect the two conflicted realities.

ENDNOTES

1.   George, Andrew (Translations and Introduction), The Epic of Gilgamesh (London, Penguin Classics, 2003).

2.   Shane, David Graham, Recombinant Urbanism: Conceptual Modeling in Architecture, Urban Design, and City Theory (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005), pp. 43-48.

3.   Foucault, Michel, "Des Espace Autres," March 1967, Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité , October, 1984; available at: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

4.   Evans, Robin, The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries (London, The MIT Press, 1995), pp. 366-370.

5.   Shane, David Graham, Recombinant Urbanism: Conceptual Modeling in Architecture, Urban Design, and City Theory (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005), pp. 20-22.

6.   Ibid. pp. 116.

7.   Ibid. pp. 139-151.

8.   Krieger, Alex, The Virtues of Cities (Places, 1995); available at: <https://l87r32c95dp1hz05tig4px11-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/krieger-virtues-of-cities.pdf>.

9.   Brenner, Neil, Spaces of Neoliberalism (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 45-52.

10. Foucault, Michel, The Culture of the Self (Reel 61 in the Foucault Archives at Berkeley, 1983); available at: < http://www.openculture.com/2014/08/michel-foucaults-lecture-the-culture-of-the-self.html>.

11. Cai, Guo-qiang, I Want To Believe (New York, Guggenheim Museum, 2008); available at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/cai-guo-qiang-i-want-to-believe>.

12. Cresswell, Tim, Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects (Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2012), introduction.