Urban Fragmentation in the Age of Digital Platforms:
Rebuilding the Nearby in Guangzhou, China

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

In contemporary China, rapid urbanization and the rise of digital platforms have reshaped the urban landscape and urban life. Functional and highly ordered urban space, paired with highly efficient lifestyles has further intensified urban fragmentation and social isolation. The idea of the "nearby", as defined by Biao Xiang, is not a fixed administrative boundary, nor as clearly defined as a formal community. It is a fluid space that shifts with our everyday experiences centered around the individuals. It is the space of opportunities in which to encounter complexity and difference, and yet it is quietly disappearing from daily life. This thesis focuses on Tianhe District in Guangzhou, studying the fragmentation of three contiguous urban fabrics: a university campus, a traditional urban village, and gated residential community. Although they are spatially adjacent, these fabrics are separated by tangible and intangible boundaries are not only physically dividing space, but also shaping how people access space, resources, and interaction with one another. Fences and access control, institutional policies, platform algorithms and social identity together reinforce these divisions.

The study adopts a range of methods, site visits, mapping, and collage as analytic approaches, starting from specific social groups, the research identifies four social phenomena, each of which is then addressed through corresponding design interventions to activate urban boundary spaces, in order to rebuild everyday connections between socially and spatially divided urban communities. The thesis argues that design can help restore social diversity, and promote social resource sharing and empathy and resist our growing urban alienation.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Lola Sheppard for her patient guidance and generous support throughout every stage of this thesis.

I also thank my committee member Adrian Blackwell whose theoretical insights helped deepen the conceptual framework of this work.

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Introduction

Context

21st century China is chasing efficiency, productivity and convenience. with urban expansion driven by economic growth and lifestyles aimed at instant gratification. While the rapid urbanization process and the rise of digital platforms are often celebrated for their efficiency, they also contribute to a divided urban landscape and deepen social disconnection. Urbanization entails spatial and institutional boundaries, while digital platforms continually deepen the boundaries in everyday life. This research focuses on Tianhe district in downtown Guangzhou, examining how these boundaries are reflected in challenges faced by inhabitants living in different urban fabrics (Figure 1).

The rapid urbanization process has resulted in urban fragmentation, where formally planned areas coexist with informal developments. In Tianhe district, three types of urban fabrics intersect—a university, a gated residential community, and an urban village. The University and gated residential community represent top-down planning, characterized by enclosed fences and rigid building patterns. The urban village, also named village in the city, is a special urban form that arose from the urbanization of the Pearl River Delta region. It is self-built settlements originated from natural village. It is like a small society; it provides vibrant and affordable living facilities. During rapid urbanization, the village's agricultural land was expropriated for urban construction, while the remaining housing land was gradually surrounded by the urban developments. It does not have its own walls, but is defined by the walls of the nearby fabrics. Its organic road pattern and 7-9 level height buildings with extremely high density distinguish it from the surrounding urban landscape. Beyond physical boundaries between these fabrics, there are also profound intangible

Figure 1. Chasing speed in 21st century China. 2025. Collage by author

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Figure1.3

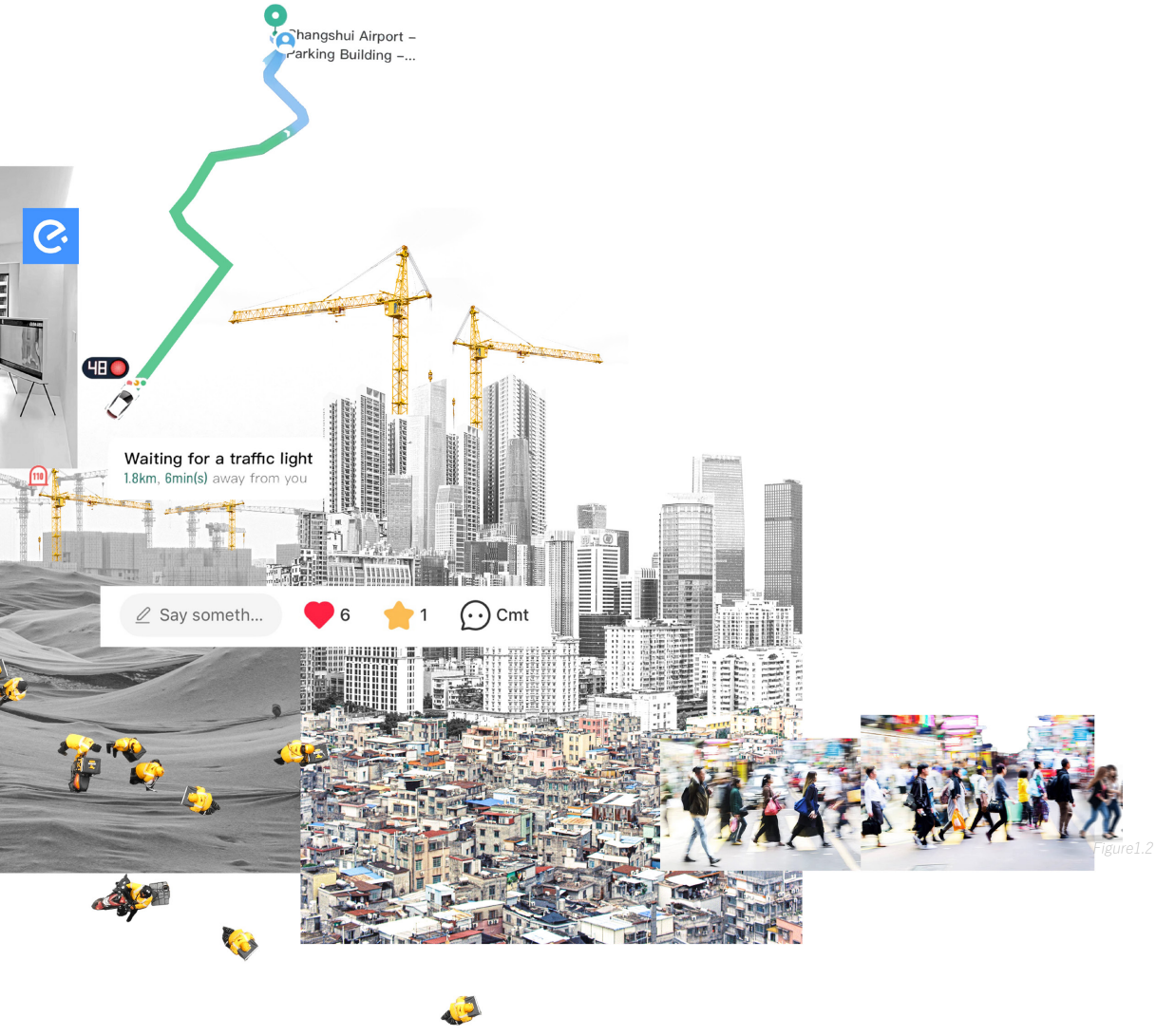

Changshui Airport –
Parking Building –...
48
Waiting for a traffic light
1.8km, 6min(s) away from you
Say someth...
6
1
Cmt

Figure1.2

boundaries between their inhabitants, such as differences in land ownership, access to resources, inhabitants' social identities, classes and social roles. This results in a deep physical and social disconnection between fabrics and communities, even though they are physically adjacent to each other.

Additionally, digital platforms provide the possibility of a society without physical contact, further deepening the disconnection between fabrics/communities. Online delivery platforms, online shopping, social media have made people's daily lives increasingly dependent on digital services. The need to meet daily demands through face-to-face interactions has gradually decreased. Although the online platform has created a sense of connection, it connects individuals to faraway places, while the nearby no longer serve as the foundation for understanding our lives. This deepens the social disconnection between nearby fabrics and communities.[1]

The thesis intends to explore urban fragmentation and its consequences under the influence of rapid urbanization processes and digital platforms. To study the spatial and social fragmentation between the fabrics as reflected in social phenomenon. By inserting design interventions, breaking the physical fence wall between the university and the urban village. It intends to raise the awareness of invisible boundaries and foster the conversation between inhabitants form different but nearby fabrics by everyday activities.

Site

The site is in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province in southern China. It is one of the first coastal cities opened to international trade and foreign investment since the launch of China's Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978. Guangzhou is also part of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) Urban Agglomeration. PRD is the first fastest growing metropolitan region of China. During the period between 1980 to 2015, the urban land area experienced a 26.2-fold increase.[2]

The focus of this research is in Tianhe district in downtown Guangzhou (Figure 2). The site is surrounded by highways on four sides. There are two Central Business Districts (CBD) areas–the Zhujiang New City CBD and Tianhe CBD–right next to the west of it (Figure3). The rapid urbanization process has resulted in different urban fabrics colliding within the same district, including urban fabrics planned top-down according to logics of economic rationalism—including institutional communities and gated residential communities—and an urban village that has grown bottom-up organically.

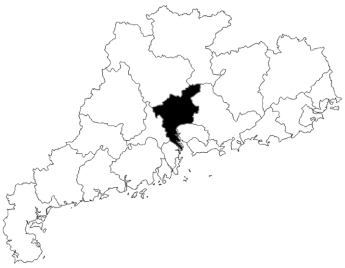
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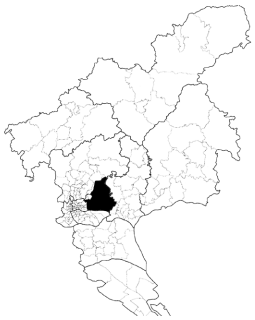
China



Guangdong Province

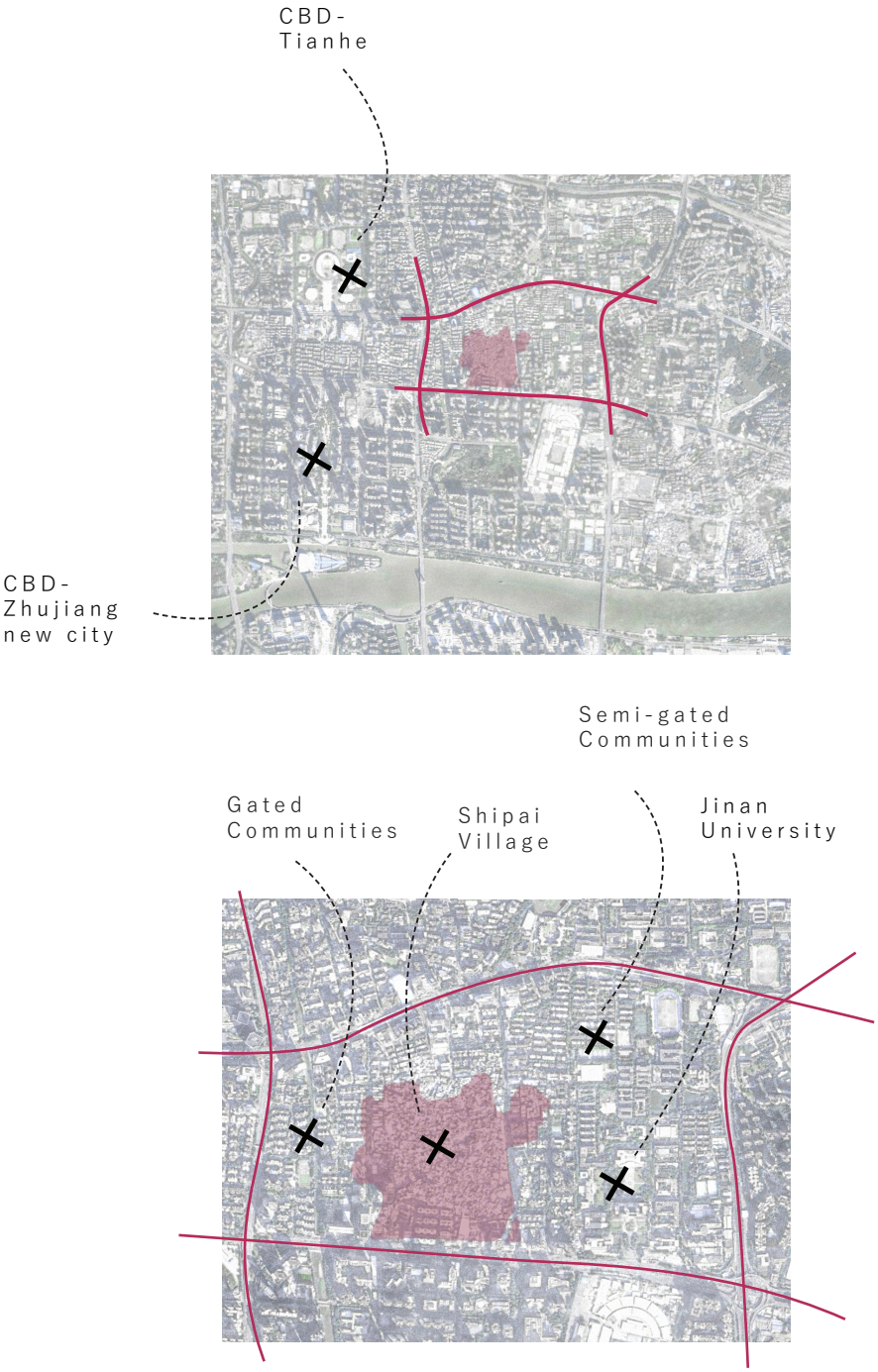


Guangzhou



Tianhe District

Figure 3. Annotated satellite image of Tianhe District. Based on Baidu Maps imagery, captured April 2024. Annotated by author.



The history of Tianhe district can be traced back to 1273, when the Shipai Village was already established. In the early period of establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, there were 3.2 square kilometers (4800mu) of farmland, along with hills, ponds, wasteland, and residential areas, covering a total area of 14 square kilometers. From 1925 to 1935(the 14th to 24th year of the Republic of China), the ruling government at the time, the Government of the Republic of China, requisitioned approximately 5 square kilometers of land from Shipai village to build racecourses, the Zhongshan University, a meteorological station etc. After 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the farmland to the north of the village was taken to build the military station. The government also built more universities and colleges such as South China University and Jinan University on the farmland. The village area was reduced to about 6 square kilometers. Land requisition accelerated following the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978. By the year 2000, the area had been reduced to approximately one square kilometer (Figure 4 and 5).[3]

As urbanization processes, many people migrate to Guangzhou from other regions, especially rural areas searching for work, education, or better opportunities. Shipa villagers gradually built dense rental housing on original village housing land that evolved into today's urban villages.[4]

In general, looking through the history of Tianhe District, we see how Shipai village's farmland transformed slowly into urban development, and its housing land evolved into the urban village. The rock music band WuTiaoRen, based in Shipai Village, phrases it well in their song *looking for pigs in city*: – 'the city has grown scientifically out of the village, and the village has gown artistically from the city.' The lyrics vividly summarized the dynamic between villages and cities in Guangzhou during the urbanization process.[5]

1. Biao Xiang, *Rebuilding the Nearby: How Can Young People Gain Strength from Reality?* (November 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375759352.
2. Mengyu Zhao et al., *Contemporary Urban Expansion in the First Fastest Growing Metropolitan Region of China*, *Journal of Urban Planning and Development* 147, no. 1 (2021): 05020047, https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)UP.1943-5444.0000617.
3. 《石牌村志》[*Gazetteer of Shipai Village*] (广州：广东人民出版社，2003 年 4 月)。
4. Mengxuan Zheng and Shaowang Huang, *Shipaicun in Urbanization* (《城市化中的石牌村》) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, April 2006).
5. Wu Tiao Ren, “城市找猪”[*The City Is Looking for a Pig*], *昨夜我又梦见自己去流浪 (Live in Portugal)*, 2020, YouTube video, 5:05, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXsot7VlbP4.

Figure 4. Re-drawing based on Shipai Village History. Adapted from the Editorial Committee of the Shipai Village Chronicle, September 2002.







1912

The boundry of the Shipai village in the early period of establishment of the Republic of China in 1912

1925-1935

Land requisitioned by the government of the Republic of China in 1925 to 1935 (the 14th to 24th year of the Republic of China)

1949

Land requisitione
the early period o
the People's Repu

Land being requisitioned

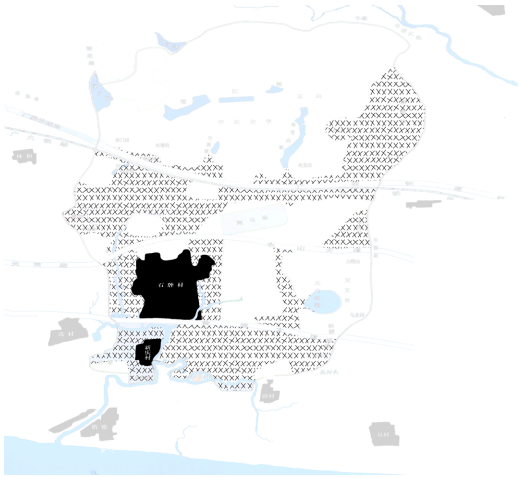
Land of Shipai Village

Other surrounding Villages

Water bodies



ed the government in
of establishment of
ublic of China in 1949



1978

Land requisitioned following the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978



2000

The boundaries of the natural village as of 2000

Figure 5. Historical map of Shipai Village. Source: The Editorial Committee of the Shipai Village Chronicle, September 2002. Retrieved from https://kknews.cc/history/85q5v2e.html



Theories

Boundary defines space, divides space, also connects space. Martin Heidegger mentioned boundary in his book *Building Dwelling Thinking* "A boundary is not that at which something stops, but that from which something begins its presencing." In *Generalized Architecture* (*Guangyi Jianzhu Xue*), Wu Liangyong emphasizes that boundary divides space, meanwhile, connects and transitions space. Boundary space can be understood as a media space, connection space, or transition space.[6] In my context, the boundaries between universities, urban villages, and gated communities separate, define, also connect the different fabrics. The design proposes to the boundary space as a bridge to connect university and urban village.

Traditionally in China, Walls are not only function as physical boundaries for defense and separation, but also have important social function. Walls have been essential for forming and defining spaces. A space is regarded as "meaningful" only when it clearly belongs to a social institution. Public space needs to be enclosed to gain spatial and social legitimacy. This explains why the courtyard is a common urban form in China. By enclosing space, walls can give the space a clear function and sense of belonging.[7]

Most universities in China are enclosed by walls. The university wall is an interface between the campus and the city, acting as a bridge that connects the university with society. The theory of "University without Walls" and "University-City Integration" began to emerge in Chinese academia in the late 1990s in response to growing concerns about the spatial and social isolation of universities from their

surrounding urban environment. As discussed by Dihua Li (Associate professor at Peking University) and Zhishen He (Associate professor at South China University of Technology) during a podcast, university walls not only represent the privatization of resources. Meanwhile, the excessive protection prevents students from engaging in the real and complex social environment, which is essential for them to develop empathy with people different from them.[8-9] In my context, the design aims to break the university walls to encourage resource sharing and develop boundary space to encourage students to interact with inhabitants from different communities to foster their social empathy.

The theory "Urban Village Coexistence" by URBANUS in response to the marginalization and large-scale demolition of urban villages. It re-evaluates the social vitality, adaptability, and urban resilience of informal settlements in the bottom-up urban villages.[10] The vitality, adaptability of urban village reflected in everyday spatial practices."'Making-Do': Use and Tactic" by Michel de Certeau in the book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) de Certeau believes ordinary people tactically making use of and transform existing spaces is a way resist the top-down planning structure.[11] In the context of Shipai Village, the retail owners set up a table and a few stools at the entrance to play Majiang with friends; workers place a reclining chair in the alley to take a nap; the dense web of electrical wires is used by residents as clotheslines. Narrow gaps between buildings to park bikes and store items. The same storefront may function as a breakfast stall in the morning; after breakfast hours, it transitions into a retail shop; and in the evening, it becomes a late-night food stall, selling snacks. These acts embody the informal, flexible, and spontaneous production of urban space.[12] They inspire the design interventions to support everyday life and encourage informal uses of space.

"The nearby" is a theory developed by anthropologist Biao Xiang. (Director of Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany). Unlike communities, "the nearby" doesn't have boundaries, it centers around individuals and moves with them. It emphasizes personal experiences, allowing you to see and meet others around them in daily life. The 'disappearance of the nearby' refers to the phenomenon where modern life is ruled by the logic of abstract time, such as clock time, leading to the diminished importance or disappearance of concrete spatial perception. This is especially evident among today's youth in China. They pay attention to their extremely near selves and extremely distant others at the same time but neglect the "nearby" around them. As a result, many youths feel their lives are out of control, and this sense of losing control leads to anxiety, exhaustion, and fear. The idea of "the nearby" responds to fragmented boundaries and meet the differences. Xiang proposed "Rebuilding the nearby" as a suggestion to today's youths in China. The nearby can be an anchor point for the youths to regain a sense of control over life—or at the very least, a sense of comprehensibility (Figure6 and 7).[13]

Figure 6. The Theory of Nearby. 2025. Drawing by author

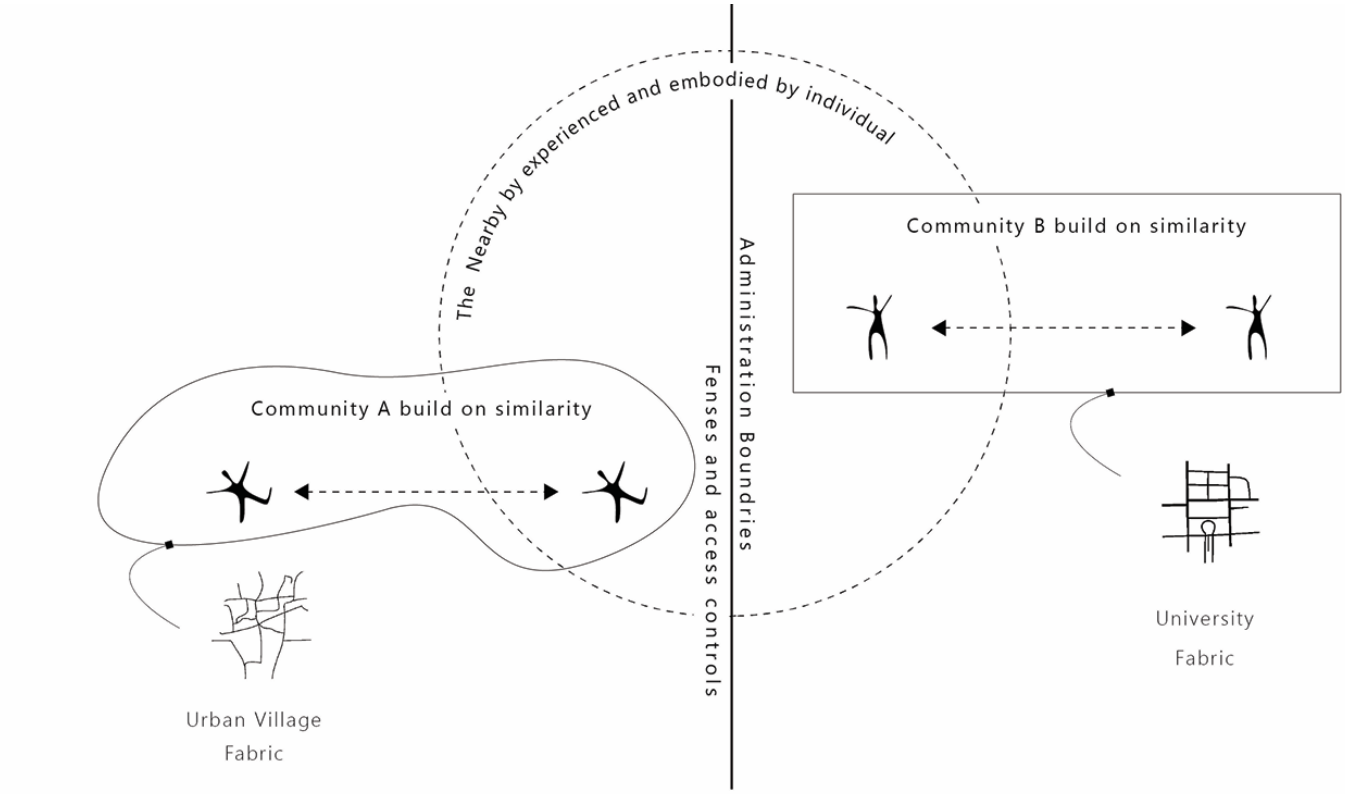
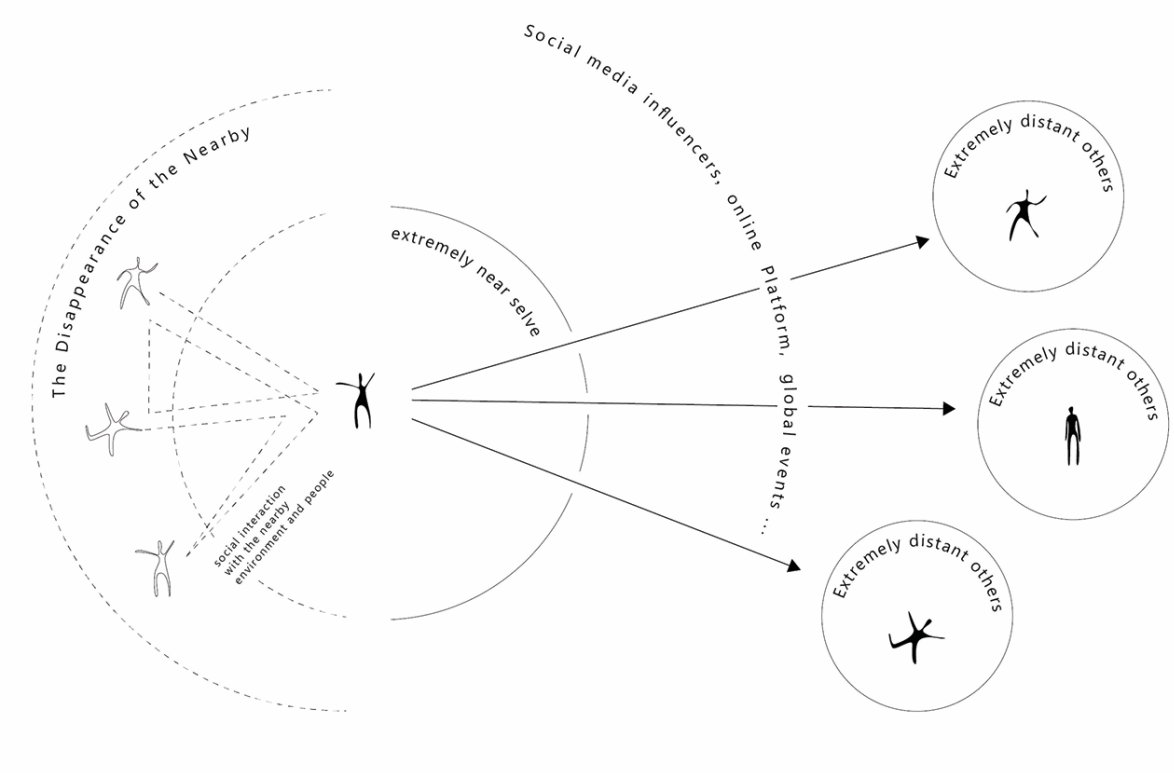


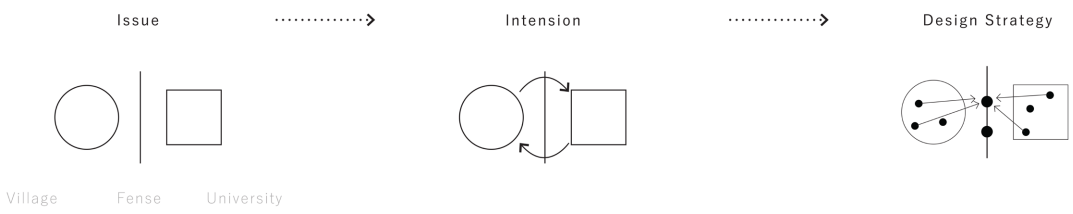
Figure 7. The disappearance of Nearby. 2025. Drawing by author



More important than design is designing relationships between people is a theory developed by Ryo Yamazaki emphasizes that design is not only limited to creating physical spaces, but it is also about building relationships between users. Instead of pursuing only aesthetics and functionality, design should also consider community bonds and interactions.[14] Based on this theory, each intervention is intended to build a connection between certain inhabitants from different urban fabrics.

In general, drawing on theories above, the boundaries between universities and urban villages not only separate and define the space, but also potentially connect them. Crossing the boundary and rebuilding the nearby is essential to encounter difference, foster social empathy. And provide the anxious young people an anchor points in real word. To break the institutional boundary, it is not enough to physically break the wall. The design interventions to support everyday life and encourage informal, tactical uses of space to break the intangible boundaries. Besides, each intervention focusses on certain inhabitants from nearby urban fabrics. Together, they form a collective strategy along the wall to activate the boundary (Figure8).

Figure 8. Design Intention. 2025. Drawing by author



6. Qinyang He. 《校城共生视角下成都地区大学边界空间更新策略研究》[*Strategies for Upgrading University-Boundary Spaces in Chengdu from a Campus–City Symbiosis Perspective*] (Master’s thesis, Southwest Jiaotong University, 2022).
7. Yinong Xu, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), 166-200.
8. 席外话，“大学校门、小区大门都不让进，所以我社恐了”[“University gates and residential compounds won’t let me in, so I became socially anxious”], episode 12, published March 13, 2024, podcast, https://www.xiaoyuzhoufm.com/episode/65f1e0b845dfe9463c57d52c.
9. Dihua Li and Zhisun He, “封闭的大学校园：外面的进不来，里面的出不去”[“Enclosed University Campuses: Outsiders Can’t Enter, Insiders Can’t Leave”], *Xiwaihua*, episode 12 (podcast), January 29, 2024, accessed [June 25, 2025], https://www.landscape.cn/article/68093.html
10. Meng, Yan, Sifei Mo, and Yiqian Luo, eds. *Urban Village Coexistence*. Edited by Urbanus. Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publishing House, 2023.
11. Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110.
12. Haiyan Huang, 《日常生活视角下城中村空间生产研究——广州石牌村案例》[*Spatial Production of Urban Villages from the Perspective of Everyday Life: A Case Study of Shipai Village in Guangzhou*] (master’s thesis, South China University of Technology, 2018).
13. Biao Xiang, “重建附近：年轻人如何从现实中获得力量？”[*Rebuilding the Nearby: How Can Young People Gain Strength from Reality?*], interview article, November 2023, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375759235_zhongjianfujinnianqingrenruhecongxianshizhonghuodeliliang.
14. Ryo Yamazaki (山崎亮), *Community Design: Creating Mechanisms That Connect People* [社区设计：比设计空间更重要的，是连接人与人的关系] (Beijing: Beijing Science & Technology Press, January 2019).

Methodology

The research methodology includes qualitative analysis, mapping, photo collage, and literature review. To understand the issue with context and to propose a potential design strategy. The research methodology is structured in three stages: (1) context and issue analysis, (2) site visit for observation and recording, (3) and design proposal inspired from theories and site visit to address the contextualized social phenomena.

Stage 1 focuses on context and issue analysis including macro background, site history, and social phenomenon that have contributed to the disappearance of "the nearby." This involves literature reviews to understand the dominant value of chasing speed, the urbanization process in China and the influence of the digital age. At this stage, the analysis will also focus on the site history and how it's shaped by the macro background. Then the analysis will zoom into the contextualized social issue by literature review on related phenomena and popular phrases, such as "Floating Children", "Takeaway Factory", Algorithm-Driven Delivery System, 'Involution' Generation and 'Lying Flat'. Along with the literature review, there will be mapping through satellite images and street views to represent the characteristics of different urban fabrics in pattern, density, boundary, programs.

Stage 2 involves a site visit with the method of "drifting". The method intends to deeply experience and perceive the atmosphere of the site through aimless wandering in urban spaces. Through observing and comparing the different atmospheres, walking experience, and characters on different fabrics. Meanwhile, observation will focus on

spontaneous social interaction and activities within and between fabrics to understand the potential social connections. The observation will be recorded by mapping and collage.

Stage 3 draws from literature review, theories and site visit to develop design proposals that aim to rebuild "the nearby" by activating the boundary. This stage further studies the four contextualized social phenomena mentioned in the stage 1 on who is divided in each case and how their connections might be rebuilt. As a result, design will propose a response to each phenomenon with interventions that support everyday life and encourage informal uses of space to connect people across boundaries.

Section 1 Background

1.1 The Ideology of Growth and Speed

Never in the long history of China, has there been such a profound obsession with "growth" or "speed" as which we see today in the country. The ideology of chasing growth at all costs has deeply influenced urbanization, policymaking, technology development, and individual's everyday life and urban living experience.

The prioritization of efficiency and speed as dominant ideologies can be traced back to a political and economic ideology transformation in 1978, marked by The Reform and Opening-up policy. In December 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China represents the moment in which Chinese economic reform shifted from a Planned Economy to Socialist Market Economy which introduced hybrid mechanisms of state control and market liberalization.[15] Before this, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China implemented a highly centralized planned economy. With a planned economic system, the state had control over resource allocation, which led to a relatively closed and egalitarian pattern of production and life. In urban areas, work units (Danwei) provided basic welfare equally to urban workers, including job security, low-cost food and goods (through rationing), healthcare, pensions, education for children, and affordable housing. In rural areas, land was equally distributed to each household within the agricultural collectives. Rural residents farmed together and shared outcomes. The collectives also offered basic social services, like education and healthcare. The different organizational structures between urban and rural areas formed the foundation of Urban-Rural Dual Land System. Although there is a big welfare and income gap between urban and rural areas, income distribution within each sector was relatively equal. After the government adopted a more market-oriented economic

system in 1978, under competitive pressure, state-owned companies began large-scale layoffs, and work units no longer provided all welfare to urban workers. In rural areas, land was contracted to individual households for farming. Market competition forced enterprises to improve efficiency.[16] "Development as the absolute principle[13]" became the dominant theme and motivator of the era. The ideology soon became the core logic for urban planning, policy-making, and social activities.[17]

15. Chinese Communist Party, *Report to the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, delivered by Jiang Zemin, October 12, 1992, accessed June 25, 2025, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/document/txt/2011-03/25/content_363499.htm.
16. Jingxiang Zhang, Dan Zhao, and Hao Chen, "The End of Growth-Supremacy and the Transformation of Chinese Urban Planning" [*增长主义的终结与中国城市规划的转型*], *Urban Planning* (*Chengshi Guihua*), no. 1 (2013): 45–50.
17. "邓小平原汁原味的南方讲话" [*Deng Xiaoping's Original Southern Tour Speeches*], *Wuhan University of Technology, School of Marxism*, November 1, 2013.

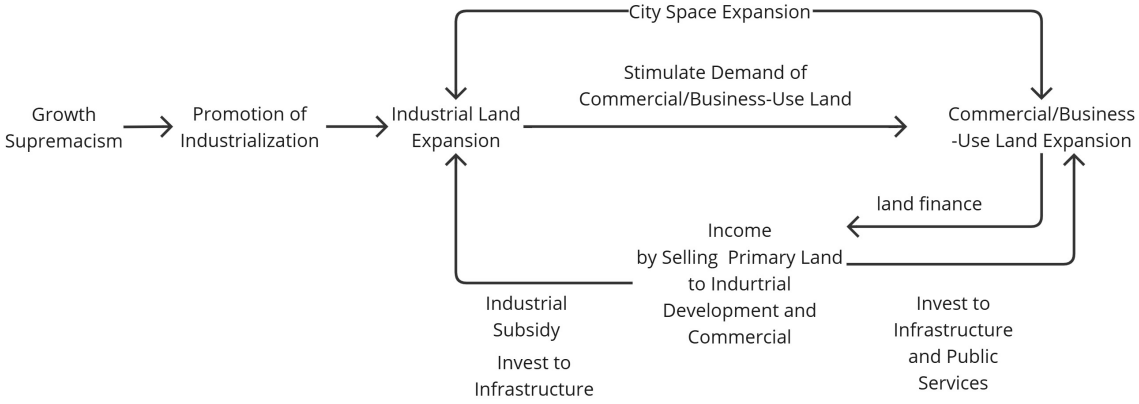
1.2 Urban Evolution

1.2.1 "Growth Supremacism" and Urban Development-Rural to Urban Land

Since the 1990s, China has formed a growth-first mode of political economy. Under this political-economic context, urban planning in China was dominated by "Growth Supremacism". "Growth Supremacism", coined by Jingxiang Zhang, Dan Zhao, and HaoChen, is a critical term used to describe a development ideology that elevates economic growth above all other values. China's rapid economic growth was accompanied by the urbanization process. Since the mid-to-late 1990s, urban expansion has been driven by land financing to facilitate capital accumulation. Under the Urban-Rural Dual Land System, Urban land is owned by the state, while rural land is owned by agricultural collectives. Rural land needs to be converted to urban land before it can be used for urban construction. Local governments take advantage of the Urban-Rural Dual Land System to monopolize and profit from the process of converting farmland into construction land. The use of rural land is determined by local governments and representatives of villages. They negotiate the sale price of the land and the compensation for villagers. The land acquisition compensation for agricultural land is based on agricultural productivity with a maximum limit, rather than on market value. As a result, for most of the last 40 years village farmland has been undervalued. After converting farmland into construction land, the local governments provide low-cost industrial land to promote Industrial development. Industrial development brings population growth and creates agglomeration effects and further brings the growth of the service industry and real estate market. The large demand for operational land use (Commercial/Business and Residential land use) increases the

land values. Local governments then gain substantial profit by converting farmland into urban land and then selling it at high prices for operational land use. Municipal governments use revenue from land finance to fund infrastructure development, public services and industrial subsidies to further promoting urban expansion. Land values increased through the development of industrial zones and new urban areas, establishing a capital circuit where local governments profit from urban expansion (Figure9). Therefore, through land finance and urban expansion, urban space is promoted for the purpose of capital accumulation.[18]

Figure 9. China's city space expansion cycle under Growth Supremacism. Translated from Zhang Jingxiang, Zhao Dan, and Chen Hao, Termination of Growth Supremacism and Transformation of China's Urban Planning, Urban Planning International, 2012, p. 47. (Originally titled "增长主义下的中国城市空间扩张循环", translated by author).



1.2.2 Hukou System (household registration system) in Structuring Urban-Rural identity

As urban expansion occurred, many people move from rural to urban areas looking for job opportunities. The Hukou System (household registration system) plays an important role in structuring new social stratification within the cities. The Hukou System categorizes citizens into either urban citizens (cities or towns, or industrial and mining areas) or rural citizens (villages or state farms) depending on residential location and socio-economic eligibility. Urban citizens are subcategorized into Formal Hukou, Temporary Hukou for Floating Population, Blue-stamp Hukou, etc. The different citizen categorizations created by the Hukou system formed a new social stratification within the city. Many rural to urban migrant workers were employed in low-income and labor work, but without the formal Hukou, they could not enjoy full urban benefits such as access to education for their children and social insurance.[19] Under the logic of "Growth Supremacism", local government promotes rapid urbanization by converting rural to urban land, Hukou policy controls population mobility and resource allocation by categorizing and refining distinctions between urban and rural identities. Together, they reinforce the rural-urban divide both spatially and socially.

18. Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
19. Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, "The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes" [*户口制度与中国城乡迁移的过程与变化*], *The China Quarterly* 160 (1999): 818–855.

1.3 Social Change and Everyday Life

1.3.1 A fast paced and convenient way of living with Platforms

The disappearance of 'the nearby' is a staggered process, from the growth in mobile phone ownership and text messaging to the rise of social media and to various online platforms that fundamentally reshaped people's ways of living.

Mobile phones were first introduced in China in the mid-to-late 1980s. by 2001, the mobile phone penetration rate was 6.72 units per 100 people. By 2010, it reached 64.36 units per 100 people. Since 2017, the penetration rate reached 102.5 units per 100 people. Meanwhile, in the 2010s, the rise of smartphones and the internet supported the emergence of social media. The mobile phone evolved from a tool for basic point-to-point communication to into a multifunctional device for communication, information, entertainment, business, navigation, personal records, and public services etc.[20]

With the rise of online delivery, online shopping platforms, and social media, it became possible to live without physical social interactions. Taking the product delivery software as example, these platforms have grown rapidly in parallel with China's internet development. The industry began accelerating in 2015 and has grown into an essential component of the urban system. Most people's perception of food delivery workers comes from seeing them ride electric motorcycles through the busy city streets, wearing yellow or blue uniforms. The yellow and blue stand for the brand colors of China's two major food delivery platforms, Meituan and Eleme. According to data provided by Meituan, in 2014, the daily order volume on their platform was 1

million; by 2020, it exceeded 40 million orders, and by 2024, it reached an average of 68 million orders per day.[21] [22] Delivery workers play an important role in fulfilling large order volumes while maintaining fast deliveries. Driven by platform algorithms, delivery speed becomes a key performance metric that relates to delivery workers' income and whether they can get more orders. On the customer side, speed is a critical criterion in evaluating delivery workers, data that will go into the performance metric in platform algorithms. As mentioned by Biao Xiang, true magic of digitalization is that it shields individual from the real connections in daily life, making individual unaware, emotionally detached and uninterested in the real-world connections.[23]

20. National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Mobile Phone Penetration Rates in China, 2001–2020*, compiled by Xinhua Media Creative Factory, accessed October 15, 2021, http://www.news.cn/datanews/20211015/C9990584D350000170701D8EE33D14C0/c.html.
21. Sina Finance [新浪财经], "美团：二季度日均配送订单 6800 万，骑手月均收入 6615 元" [*Meituan: Q2 Daily Average Delivery Orders Reached 68 Million; Riders Earned an Average of ¥6,615 per Month*], *Sina Finance*, August 28, 2024, https://finance.sina.com.cn/stock/relnews/hk/2024-08-28/doc-incmfcme1671573.shtml.
22. Dong, Zhendong Luo, and Yibo Qiao, "Analysis of Internal Spatial Distribution and Influencing Factors of Delivery Factories Based on Accessibility Evaluation: Taking Shipai Village of Guangzhou City as an Example" [基于可达性评价的"外卖工厂"内部空间分布及其影响因素分析——以广州市石牌村为例], *Scientific and Technological Management of Land and Resources* 41, no. 6 (2024): 70–84.
23. Biao Xiang, *Rebuilding the Nearby: How Can Young People Gain Strength from Reality?* (November 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375759352.

1.3.2 "Involuted" Generation

In Chinese today's society, rapid development is accompanied by intense competition. As mentioned above, from 1945 to 1978, within urban and rural areas, income distribution within each sector was relatively equal. After 1978, decades of egalitarianism put people who were once relatively equal on the same starting line to compete for resources. "Involution" has become a common phenomenon, especially among the younger generation.[24] The term was originally popularized by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1963 book *Agricultural Involution*. Chinese social historian Huang Zongzhi first introduced the concept of "involution" into Chinese smallholder economy and social studies in 1985, using it to describe a development model in which increased total output is achieved through intensive labor input, while marginal returns continue to decline — a form of "growth without development." Today, the term "Involuted" is used as a popular phrase to describe high competition and anxiety in education and the workplace, as people work harder and harder to compete but get less in return. This never-ending and pointless competition makes them feel tired and anxious. The nature of "Involuted" is a 'voluntary participation' competition mechanism under capitalist logic." 'Voluntary participation' is not real 'voluntary'. It takes place within a constructed competitive environment, and ideology is used to persuade individuals that it is normal and necessary. For example, students have to enroll in extra tutoring, or an employee has to work overtime, not by choice but due to the pressure of collective competition. "Involuted" from education to workplace, resulting in accelerating the pace of individual life and society. From delivery workers to intellectual elites, everyone is caught in an inescapable game of speed.[25] [26]

With the ideology shifting towards growth and competitive ethos, platforms minimize social interactions through algorithm-driven

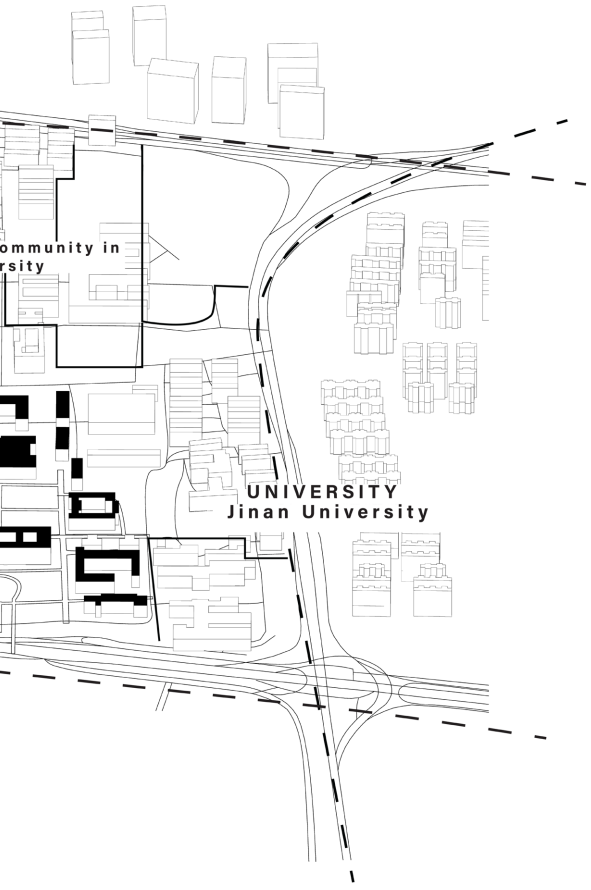
services, Education and workspace pushing individuals into constant self-optimization under the logic of "Involution". Together, they reinforce a society that values productivity over well-being. The attention to humanistic care is often overlooked, creating cities and societies which are increasingly alienating and disconnected.

24. Yi-Ling Liu, "China's 'Involuted' Generation," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2021.
25. Lijie Qin, "从 '内卷' 到 '躺平': 青年社会心态变迁的成因分析" [*From "Involution" to "Lying Flat": A Causative Analysis of the Change of Mentality in Youth Society*], *Advances in Social Sciences* 5, no. 6 (2023)
26. Dingqi Zhao, "Involution, Acceleration, and the 'Making-Out Game' of Contemporary Chinese Society" [*内卷、加速与当代中国社会的"赶工游戏"*], *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), December 16, 2020.

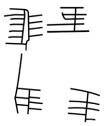
Section 2 Urban Fabrics and Boundaries

Figure 10. Site Analysis basing based on Baidu Maps, April 2024. Drawing by author.





Gated/
Semi-Gated
Community



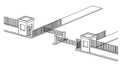
Fabric



Scale of Street



Fense



Access Control

Urban
Village



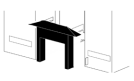
Fabric



Scale of Street



Surrounded by
Fense



Symbolic Entrance

University



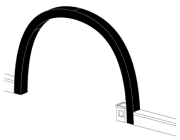
Fabric



Scale of Street



Fense



Access Control

Within the city block, there are three types of urban fabrics. Shipai urban village, Jinan University, and Gated communities formed completely different spatial ecology, physical boundaries, land ownership, and inhabitants.

2.1 Shipai Urban Village

The urban village consist of high-density self-built housing on the village original housing land. The land in the village is owned by the villagers collectively. As urban areas expanded, farmland was expropriated to allow for urban development. Meanwhile, a large number of workers from rural areas move into urban areas like Guangzhou in search of employment. They are named "migrant workers". Due to the downtown location and affordable rent, urban villages have become the arrival place for many "migrant workers" and young people first arrived in Guangzhou.[27] The villagers lost farmland started to build rental units on their land and provide housing to the "migrant workers". The original 2-3 story houses gradually extended to 7-9 stories to generate higher rental income. The two main groups inhabiting the urban villages are indigenous villagers and "migrant workers". Indigenous villagers benefiting from the large number of "migrant workers", shifted from being farmers to "landlords". It has a much richer social ecology and vitality compared to the surrounding urban fabric. Residents utilize the alleys for recreation, storage, and production and shops to serve their daily lives.[28] Although the urban village does not have a physical wall or access control system around, it is surrounded by the boundary walls from the surrounding urban fabrics. The extremely high density with small scale and tightly packed buildings clearly differentiate the village from the surrounding fabrics. The gate of the village is a traditional Chinese archway with symbolic meaning.

27. Yan Meng, Sifei Mo, and Yiqian Luo, eds., *Urban Village Coexistence*, edited by Urbanus (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publishing House, 2023).

28. Haiyan Huang, “日常生活视角下城中村空间生产研究——广州石牌村案例” [*Spatial Production of Urban Villages from the Perspective of Everyday Life: A Case Study of Shipai Village in Guangzhou*], in *Proceedings of the 2020 Annual National Planning Conference of China* (2020), accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.z3060.com/thread-428794-1-1.html.

Figure 11. Inhabitants in the Shipai Urban Village. 2025. Collage by author



Migrant Workers
Deliveryman

Migrant Workers
Labor Workers

Indigenous Villagers
Landloards



igrant Workers & Indigenous Villagers Migrant Workers

cal Families **Business Owners** **New Graduates**

2.2 Jinan University

Jinan University was built in the 1950s during China's planned economy era. In urban areas, work units (Danwei) such as factories and schools functioned as the basic units of production and distribution. They not only provided jobs but also provided comprehensive welfare for employees—including jobs, housing, healthcare, and education for their children. It operated as a self-sufficient community. Within the university precent, there were classrooms, dormitories, cafeterias, and spot fields for students and teachers, while the northern and eastern areas also included residential buildings, kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools originally built for the university's employee. During the planned economy, farmland was converted into urban land by the state, then allocated to universities which as work units (Danwei), carried out the development and construction with public finance. The employer-based welfare housing program was formally abolished after the 1998 Housing Reform Policy. Public housing provided by work units was under public ownership. After 1998, these public housing units were put on the market and quickly privatized by being sold to individuals, thereby transforming into privately owned property. Private ownership including ownership of the building (inheritable, transferable, and leasable) and Granted land use right for 70 years. Today, some university housing is still used by retired university staff and their families, while other units have been sold or rented to new residents. Today's inhabitants in the university consist of current students and faculty members, retired university staff and their families, as well as new residents moved in after commercialization of university housing in1998. The university is surrounded by two layers of walls. The external layer is a concrete wall with access control, separating the institution from the city. The internal layer of walls are steel fences that were built after the 1998 Housing Reform Policy, when welfare housing allocation by work units

(Danwei) ended, resulting in many residential buildings being put on the market to sell and rent. These fences surround the institutional buildings and playgrounds, with the intent of protecting exclusive access to educational resources. [29] [30]

29. Barry Naughton, The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

30. Le Wang and Liang Jiang, “单位大院的形态演变模式分析” [*Analysis of the Morphological Evolution Patterns of Work-Unit Courtyards*], *Central China Architecture* (华中建筑), no. 7 (2010): 151–154.

Figure 12. Inhabitants in the University. 2025. Collage by author





y Employees

Students

2.3 Gated Communities

Gated communities in Tianhe district are typically commercial housing units. The communities are enclosed by fenced walls and always provide controlled accessed. Inside, the gated communities are quiet with green spaces and recreational facilities. On the outer edge of the community, facing the main street, the ground floor will often have commercial spaces, typically shops which fulfill the daily needs of the community residents. As with all commercial housing units, private homeowners hold ownership of the building—which is inheritable, transferable, and leasable and Granted land use rights for 70 years. While they have limited control over public spaces. The public spaces within the communities are managed by property management companies. Inhabitants living in gated communities in Tianhe district mainly consist of urban middle-class families who choose to live there for security, privacy, and amenities. Gated communities on the site were built between 1980 to 2007, and currently are all equipped with access control systems to varying degrees. The multi-story residential apartments built in the 1970s were mostly an open community, even those with walls would typically have multiple gates without access control. From 1991 to 2000, there was a trend of enclosing residential communities that had previously been 'open,' resulting in 5400 communities in Guangdong province becoming enclosed. After 2000, fences and access control became standard features in residential communities.[31]

31. Pu Miao, "Gated Communities: Cancer of Urban Life – Problems and Solutions" [*封闭式小区：城市生活的癌症——问题及对策*], *Time + Architecture* (Shanghai) 5 (2004): 46–49.

These three urban fabrics- Shipai Urban Village, Jinan University, and Gated Communities-formed their unique spatial ecologies, land ownership, communities and boundaries over time. Together, they created a diverse and complex urban landscape. Basing on the site observations, gated communities have the strictest access control among the three urban fabrics, followed by the university, the village does not have access control. As for the walking speed, the walking speed in the urban village exhibits the fastest walking speed due to the narrow streets and high pedestrian flow. The gated community and the university show similar walking speeds.

Section 3: Intangible Boundaries

Figure 13. A typical night in an urban village in Tianhe District, Guangzhou. Children play outdoors. Photo provided by interviewee.
Source: "广州天河区某城中村的一个平凡夜晚，孩子们在外玩耍，" Guangdong Harmony Foundation, accessed July 22, 2025, http://gdharmonyfoundation.org/Home/News/newsDetail/id/79.html.



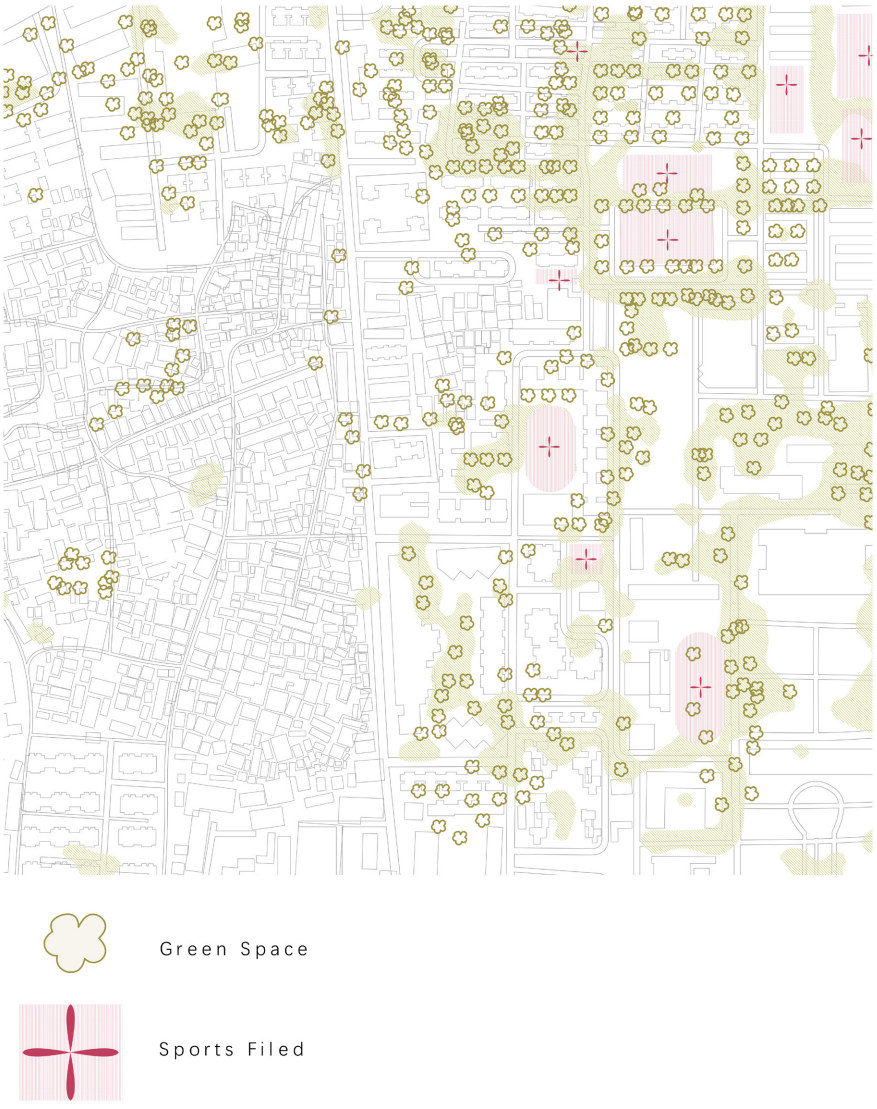
Boundaries are more than just physical walls, they are also spatial reflections of rights, identities and resource allocation. The following four stories with certain social phenomena will reflect how the "intangible boundaries" limit resource sharing and social empathy among the different urban fabrics and inhabitants.

3.1 "Floating Children" and the Playground Walls

In the Shipai Urban Village, the public space and green space are extremely limited. The houses in the urban village are named "shaking hands houses" because the distance between them is so close that people living in the two buildings can shake hands with each other. The street in the village is named "one-strip sky" due to the very close distance between buildings and their 7 to 9 story height. Walking in the inner streets of the urban village, one can only see a thin strip of sky when looking up. There is a significant lack of public activity spaces and green spaces within the village. In contrast, the university campus next to the village has lush greenery, and wide streets. It has spacious open spaces and 6 playgrounds (Figure 14).[32]

Although the urban village and university are near to each other physically, because of the physical boundary and institutional policies, migrant children living in the village have limited access to the public and green spaces compared to local children who go to the schools within the university fabric (Figure 13). These schools are public. However, due to the Hukou policy, migrant children have limited access to public schools than local children. Public schools have strict enrollment requirements for migrant children without formal urban Hukou.

Figure 14. Site Analysis on green space and sports field basing on Baidu Maps, April 2024. Drawing by author.



For example, it requires the parents to have steady employment and pay social insurance continuously for a certain time. However, many migrant workers work for low-income service or labor jobs and have difficulty meeting this requirement. As a result, most migrant children have to go to private schools or return to their hometowns to study, staying apart from their parents who work in the city. Therefore, they are difficult to enroll to the public schools in the Jinan University and access to their sports fields. In a study on the spatial perception of migrant children from Shipai Village, the favored activity spaces for migrant children were the daycare and informal open spaces in the village, Tianhe Park to the east of Jinan University, Zhujiang Park to the south of the Shipai village, and some surrounding gated communities. From the survey, the favored play space for children in Shipai village did not include any activity spaces within the university. Although the urban village and the university are physically proximate, physical and social boundaries limit the interaction of children living in each neighborhood and limit the sharing of public and green spaces. [33]

Therefore, the design intends to break the physical boundary to allow migrant children to access to sports field in the university and active the physical boundary with play structure and daycare to allow migrant children to play with local children after schools.

32. Yan Meng, Sifei Mo, and Yiqian Luo, eds., *Urban Village Coexistence*, edited by Urbanus (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publishing House, 2023).
33. Chun Chen and Hong Zhu, "城镇化背景下城中村流动儿童的空间感知——以广州市天河区石牌村为例" [*Spatial Perception of Migrant Children in Urban Villages under the Background of Urbanization: A Case Study of Shipaicun in Tianhe District, Guangzhou*], *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)* 48, no. 6 (2016): 110–117.

Figure 15. Density of Pure Delivery-Only Restaurants in Shipai Village, Based on Field Research.
Source: Yao Dong, Zhendong Luo, and Yibo Qiao, "Analysis of Internal Spatial Distribution and Influencing Factors of Delivery Factories Based on Accessibility Evaluation," Scientific and Technological Management of Land and Resources 41, no. 6 (2024): 76

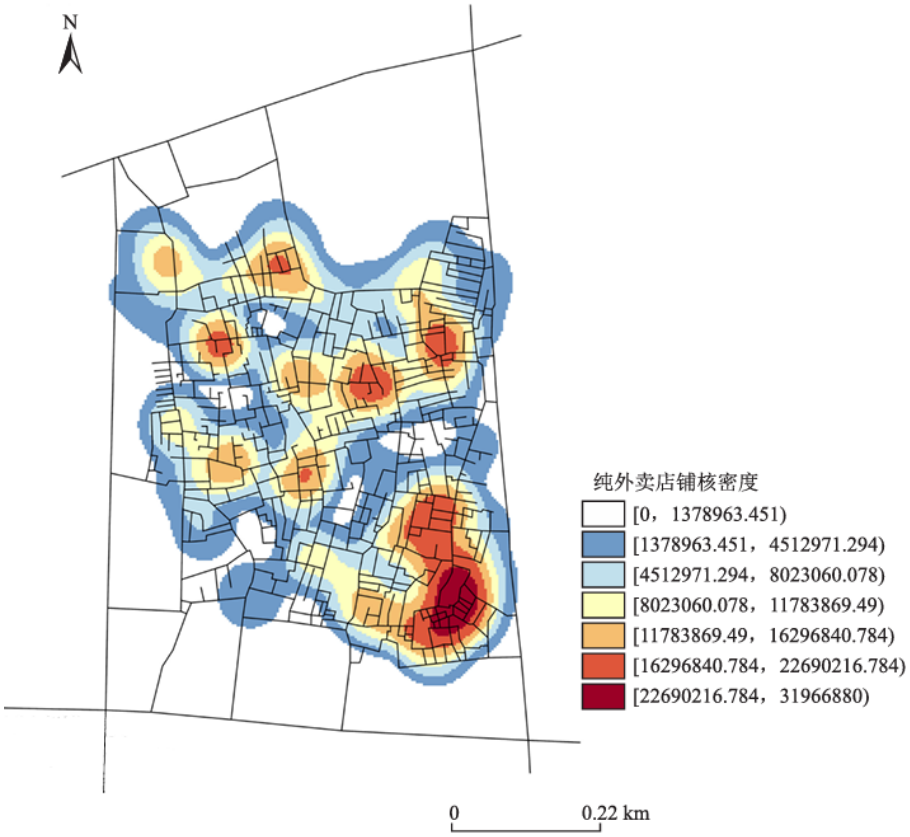


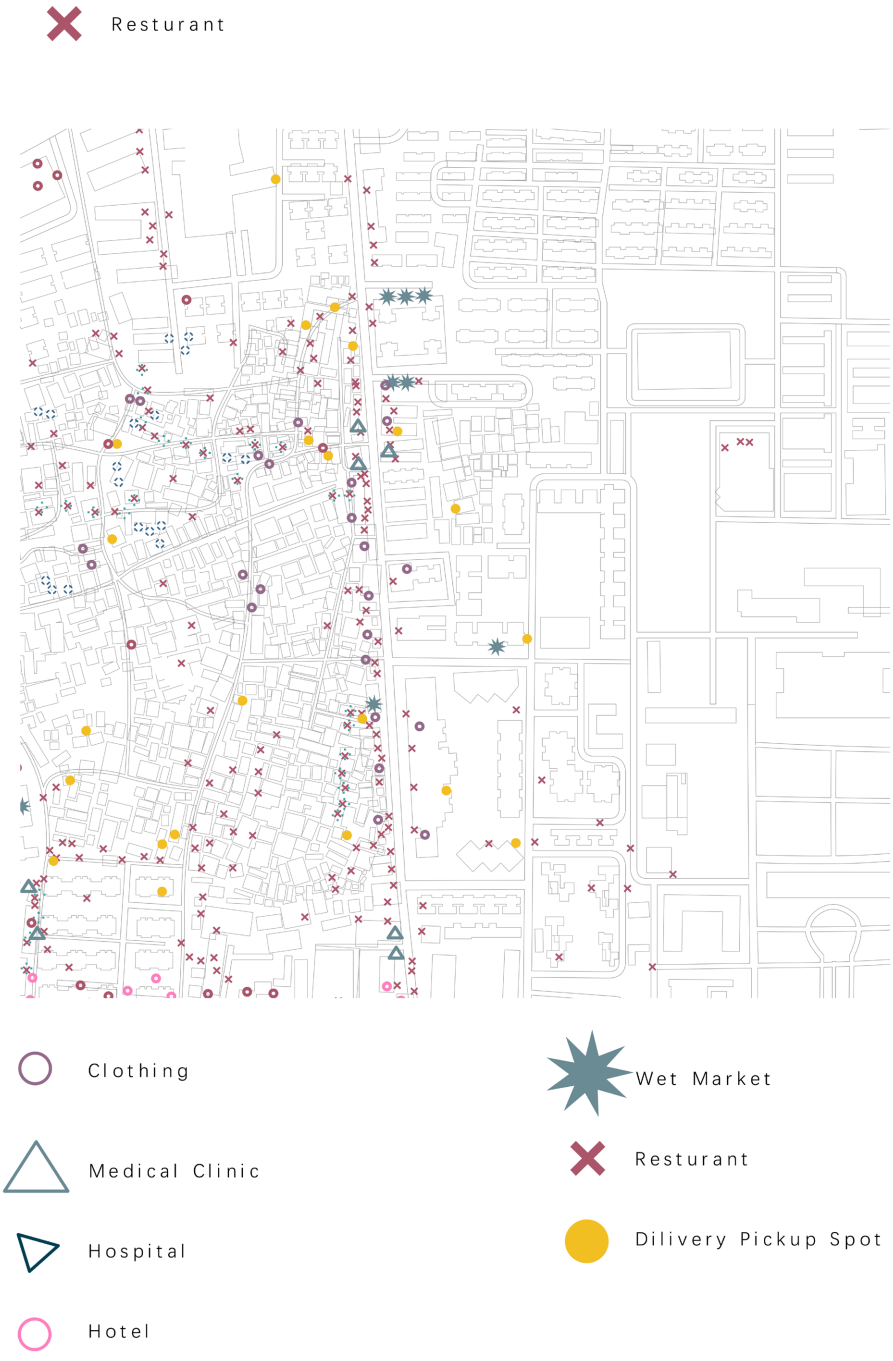
图 6　调研纯外卖店铺核密度

3.2 "Can you give me five more minutes?" and Algorithm-Driven Delivery System

If one searches for restaurants on the map, many options will appear in Shipai Village. Because much of the population living in Shipai Village are migrant workers from all over the country, they have brought diverse regional cuisines into the village. In contrast, food options within Jinan University are limited to institutional canteens. Naturally, the urban village became an important dining destination for university students (Figure 16). Along the streets where the two fabrics meet, there is a wide variety of restaurants and services to offer students a chance to engage with the surrounding urban neighborhoods and experience the vibrancy of the village social life beyond the campus. [28]

However, in recent years, eating in restaurants has been largely replaced by food delivery platforms. Ordering takeouts became the primary dining method for many university students. With its diverse food options, Shipai Village gradually evolved into a hub for the delivery industry. It is now known as Guangzhou's largest "Takeaway Factory" - not a traditional factory, but a cluster of densely takeaway food production businesses in the village. They operate without dine-in service and rely entirely on food delivery platforms.[27]

Figure 16. Site Analysis on retails and business basing on Baidu Maps, April 2024. Drawing by author.



It now produces food, for delivery, for the entire Zhujiang New City area and several surrounding schools and business districts. According to "A Quan", a delivery worker from Meituan delivery, during the lunch rush, there are more than 600 orders dispatched from Shipai Village every minute, (Midnight Takeaway EP05 2023) with students from Jinan University are one of the main consumer groups for food delivery. Not only is the food delivery better and cheaper (due to platform discounts) compared to cafeterias on campus, but also because using digital platforms to get food helps reduce the social pressure students face when having to dine in and socialize (Figure 15).[34]

While the urban village and the university are physically nearby, the delivery platforms have transformed the interaction between restaurant owners and university students from in-person engagement to a purely functional, platform-mediated exchange of services.

Therefore, the design intends to rebuild the in-person social interactions between restaurant owners and university students by breakfast and dinner booths, while also encouraging everyday encounters among inhabitants from different urban fabrics. map showing the restaurants in urban village that only have take out

34. Yao Dong, Zhendong Luo, and Yibo Qiao, "Analysis of Internal Spatial Distribution and Influencing Factors of Delivery Factories Based on Accessibility Evaluation: Taking Shipai Village of Guangzhou City as an Example" [*基于可达性评价的"外卖工厂"内部空间分布及其影响因素分析——以广州市石牌村为例*], *Scientific and Technological Management of Land and Resources* 41, no. 6 (2024): 70–84.

Figure 17. A student picking up food from a delivery locker while a delivery worker waits nearby, on a university campus in China.
Photo by “江河漫读,” posted on Xiaohongshu (RedNote), 2024. Used with permission from the photographer.

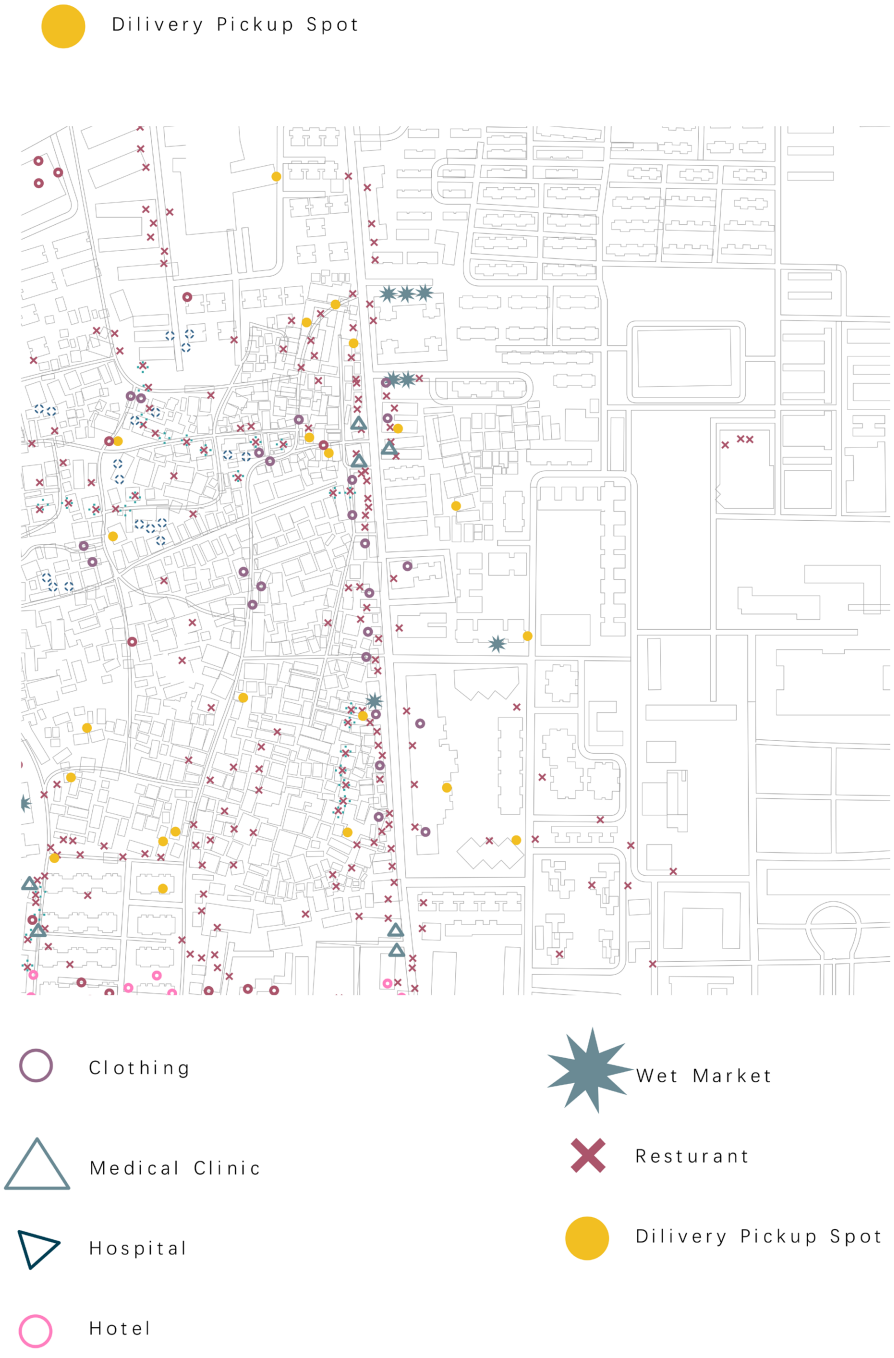


3.3 "Can you give me five more minutes?" and Algorithm-Driven Delivery System

The delivery riders are crucial in offering university students convenient access to diverse food options without the need for offline social interactions (Figure 17 and 18). In recent years, delivery riders have received social attention due to exploitation by platform systems and a lack empathy from customers. On the other side of the instant service, there is a low tolerance for delivery delays. The algorithm-driven delivery system ensures that slow delivery speeds or negative reviews lead to fines and reduced order assignments for the rider.[35]

With the low requirements for education, resources, and experience, food delivery has become a popular job option for young migrant workers and newcomers arriving in Guangzhou. Shipai Village houses nearly 20,000 delivery riders, making up one-fifth of its 100,000 total residents.[36] Delivery riders frequently shuttle between the urban village and the university. They have become the link between the two fabrics. In the urban village, the diverse food options continuously attract delivery orders to the university, meeting the daily needs of students. Delivery riders rush around on their electric bikes, delivering items under high pressure and often in dangerous conditions. However, the process is reduced and simplified into the estimated delivery time shown on the food delivery app, alienating all social interactions. [37]

Figure 18. Site Analysis on retails and business basing on Baidu Maps, April 2024. Drawing by author.



Therefore, the design intends to create a shared space where delivery workers and university students can dine together. By proposing a communal long tables and resting stations for delivery workers to cultivate empathy among university students towards delivery workers, recognizing them as living individuals rather than anonymous figures on the delivery apps.

35. Jiangsu Television, *子夜外卖 EP05 石牌村"单王"逆袭记：用脚步丈量出地图的星光领路人* [*Midnight Takeaway EP05: The "Delivery King" of Shipai Village's Comeback—Mapping the Stars with Steps*], directed by [Director's Name], YouTube video, July 7, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-rOFNxAE.
36. Biao Xiang, *Rebuilding the Nearby: How Can Young People Gain Strength from Reality?* (November 2023), accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375759352_Rebuilding_the_nearby_How_can_young_people_gain_strength_from_reality.
37. Guoshi Luo, "Research on the Relationship between Delivery Platforms and Riders under 'Algorithm Control'" [*"算法控制"下外卖平台与骑手的关系研究*], *E-Commerce Letters* 13, no. 3 (2024): 5599–5605, https://doi.org/10.12677/ecl.2024.133687.

3.4 'Involution' Generation and 'Lying Flat'

To step back from the ideology that encourages efficiency and staying competitive, many young people choose to 'Lying Flat'. It represents "withdrawal from competition "as a resistance to against 'Involution'.[38] [39]

This mindset is also expressed in popular culture. The works of the band Wutiaoren reflect the spirit of "lying flat" and have become very popular among migrant workers, young white-collar professionals with higher education, and university students. Wutiaoren is a rock music band from Shipai village. Both the experience of the band and their song represent the grassroots in the Uban village. The band became known in a 2020 televised music competition. During the show, they were eliminated four times by the mainstream judges but brought backstage four times by the general public's votes. Their nonchalant attitude to institutional evaluations and lyrics that portray the everyday lives of ordinary people, in a sense, fulfills an imagination of resistance to involution and the dominant values of elitism among the younger generation. [40]

Although in the urban village and the university are physically nearby, both young people living in both fabrics are part of the "involuted" generation. They are experiencing similar anxious and attached with similar attitude. there are little opportunities for the young people to have conversation or mutual understanding. The urban walls, educational backgrounds, and class differences are barriers for them to built emotional connections.

Therefore, the design aims to connect the young people from urban village and university by a multifunctional tea house with exhibition/majiang space by day which turns to a bar and outdoor movie screen at night. By creating slow-paced moment of everyday life to let young people to sit, to rest, or even to 'lie flat'.

38. *"内卷"与"躺平"之间挣扎的中国年轻人* [*Chinese Young People Struggling between "Involution" and "Lying Flat"*], *BBC Chinese*, June 2, 2021.
39. Biao Xiang, "专访丨人类学家项飙谈内卷：一种不允许失败和退出的竞争" [*Interview: Anthropologist Xiang Biao on Involution—A Competition That Doesn't Allow Failure or Exit*], *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), October 22, 2020
40. Joost Brokke, "Wu Tiao Ren – Shanzhai, Rock und unvollendete Moderne" [*Wu Tiao Ren – Shanzhai, Rock and Unfinished Modernity*], *SHAN e-Newsletter*, May 2023.

Section 4 Site Visit

4.1 Walking experience



Figure 19. Site Analysis on walking speed basing on Site Visit, April 2024. Drawing by author.



Walking Speed in different fabrics

Expressway

Subway Station

Walking Speed

Almost no pause

Fast

Mild

Slow

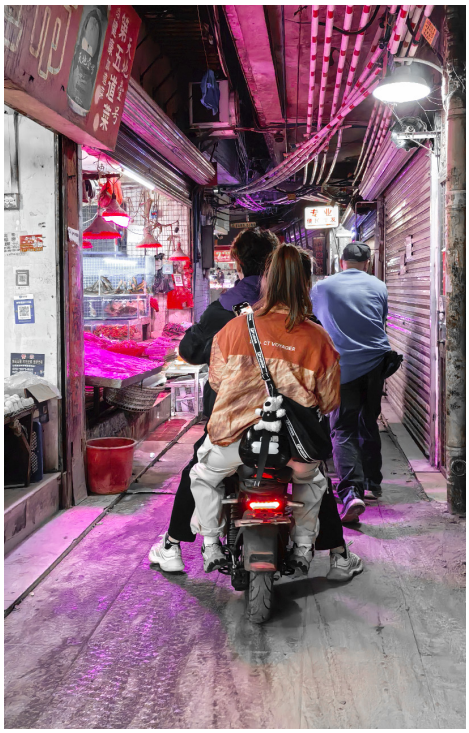


Figure 20.



Figure 21.



Figure 22.



Figure 23.

Figure 20. Young People living in Shipai Village, January 2024.
Photo by author.

Figure 21. Indigenous villager selling vegetables in Shipai Village, January 2024.
Photo by author.

Figure 22. Rental advertisement in Shipai Village, January 2024.
Photo by author.

Figure 23. Delivery worker riding in Shipai Village, January 2024.
Photo by author.

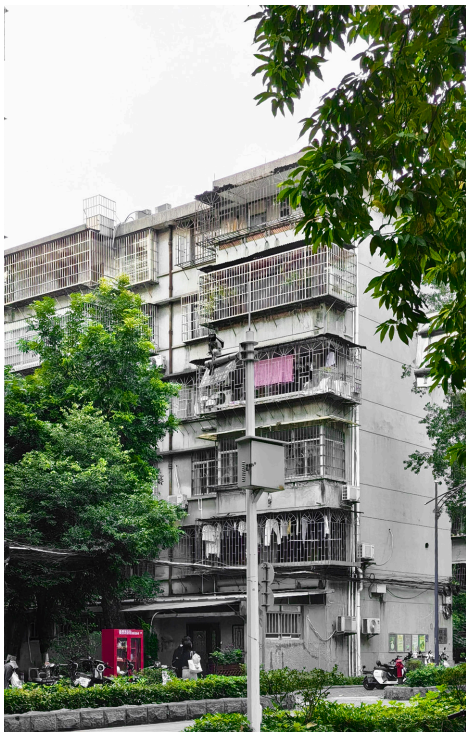


Figure 24.



Figure 25.



Figure 26.



Figure 27.

Figure 24. Residential building within Jinan University campus, January 2024. Photo by author.

Figure 25. Student residence building in Jinan University campus, January 2024. Photo by author.

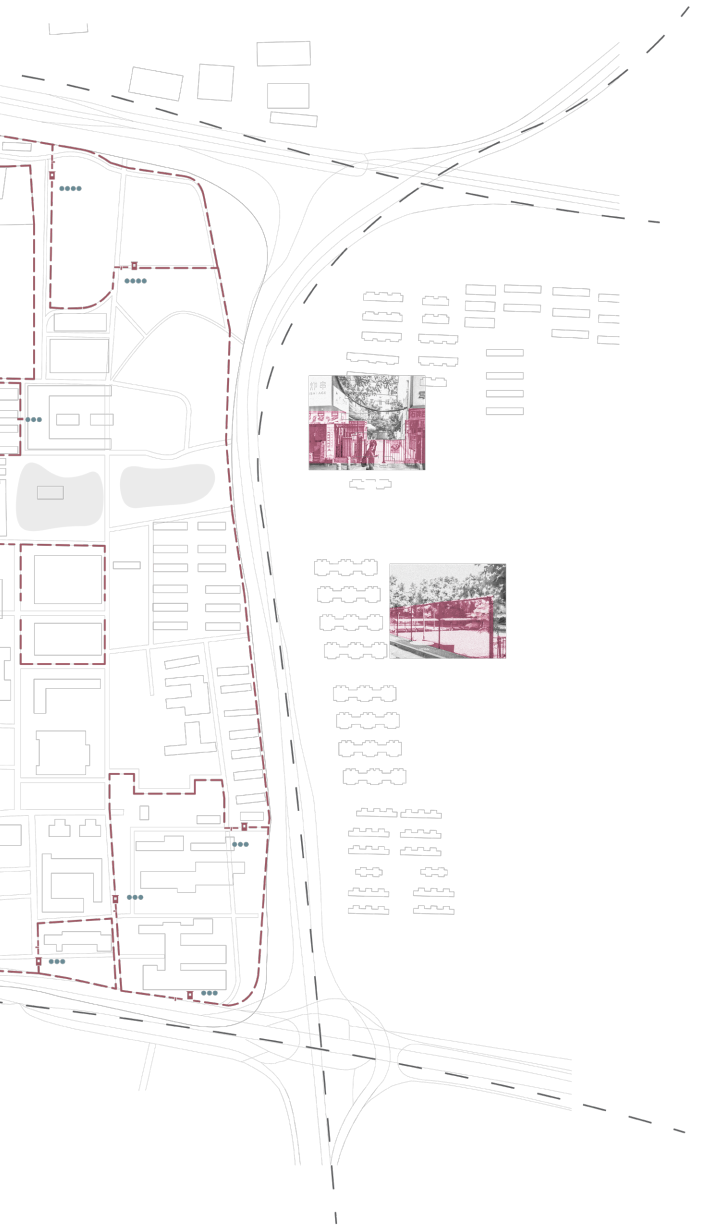
Figure 26. Informal quilt hanging in the public space of a neighborhood area within Jinan University campus, January 2024. Photo by author.

Figure 27. Delivery pickup storage at the gate of Jinan University, January 2024. Photo by author.

4.2 Boundaries and Strictness of Access Control



Figure 28. Site analysis of location and degree of access control strictness based on site visit, Janurary 2024. Drawing by author.





Where are the boundries?

Expressway

Subway Station

Access Control (level of strictness)

Vehical Pedestrain

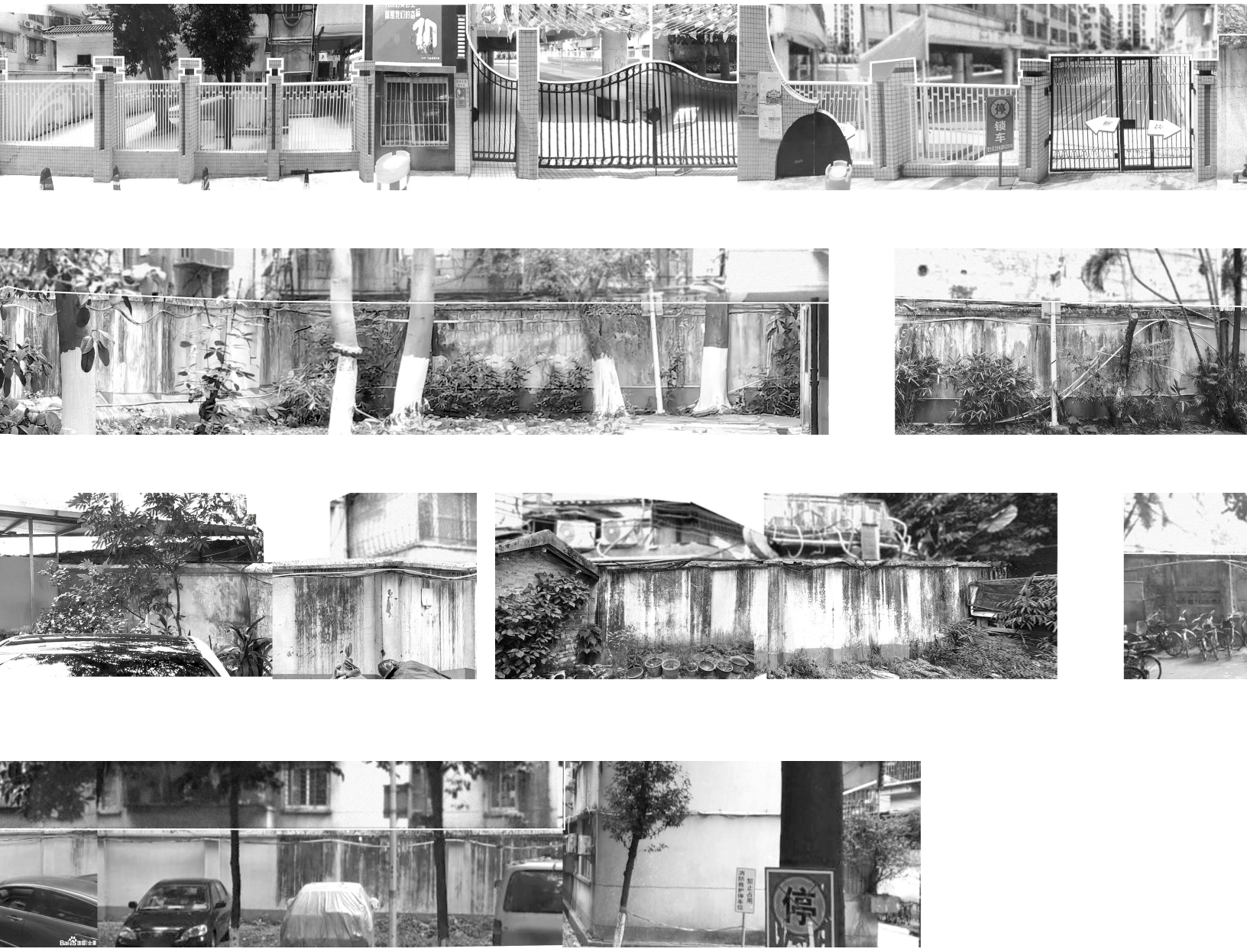
Pedestrai

Solid Conc. Fense

Conc. + Steel Fense

Storefronts

Figure 29. Photos of fences around Jinan University based on site visit, January 2024. Compilation by author.



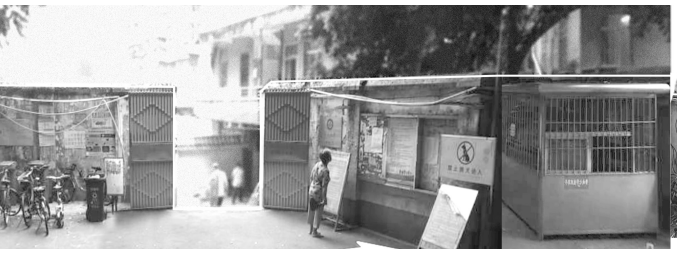














4.3 Informal Use of Space

Figure 30. Figure 31. Informal community garden with potted plants in a residential community in Tianhe District, January 2024. Photo by author.



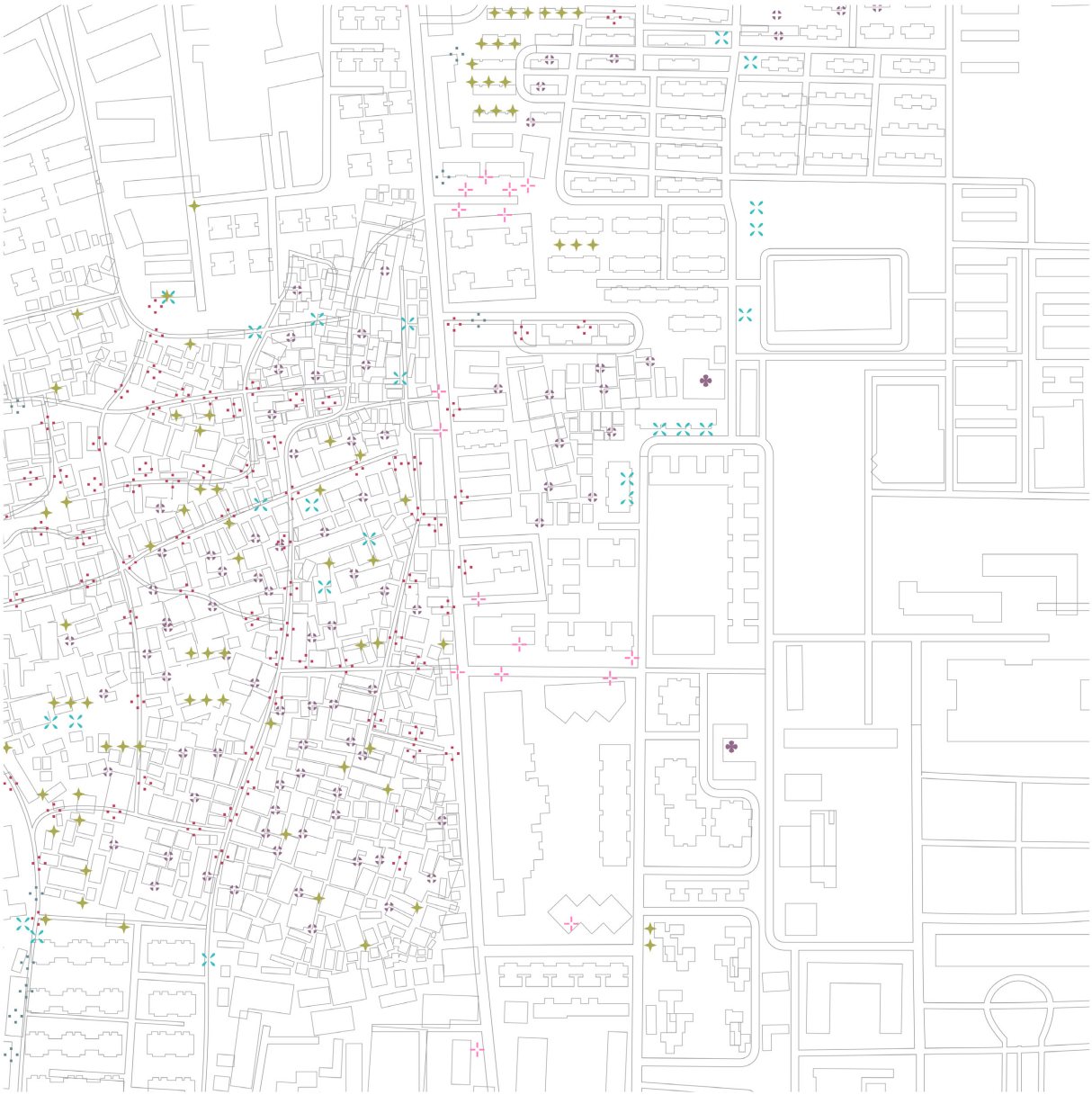


Figure 32. Figure 33. Informal majiang playing spot in a residential community in Tianhe District, January 2024. Photo by author.





Figure 34. Site analysis of location of informal use of space based on site visit, January 2024. Drawing by author.



Informal Seats



Informal Plants



Informal
Community Garde



Cloth hanging



Vender



Stall



Retails expaned
to steet sapce



Restaurants expaned
to steet sapce

Informal Plants Pot by Residences

Informal Seats by Residence

Venders and Stalls

Cloth hanging in Public Space

Retails Expanded to Street

Restaurants Expanded to Street

Section 5 Design

5.1. Design Intentions

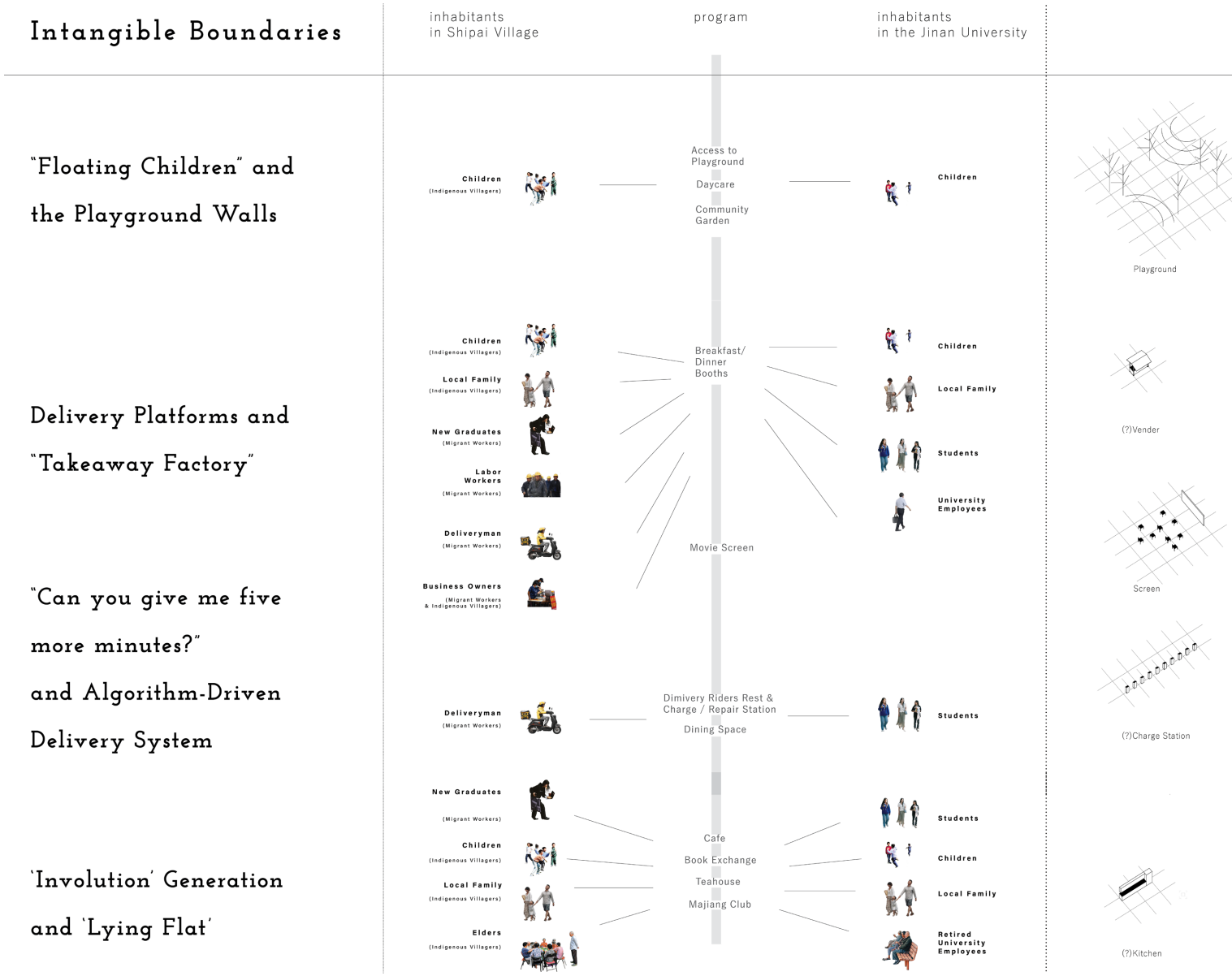
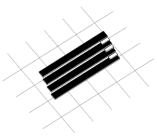


Figure 35. Metrix of design interventions and Strategies, July 2024. Drawing by author.

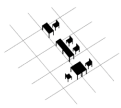
spatial elements

interface with wall





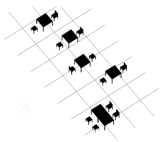
Spectators



Study Zone



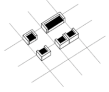
(?)Kitchen



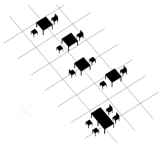
(?)Seat Zone



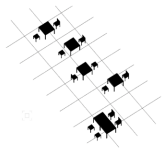
(?)Nap Zone



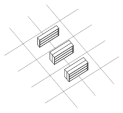
(?)Sofa Zone



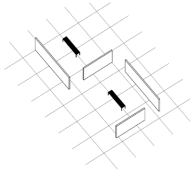
(?)Seat Zone



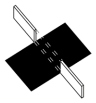
(?)Seat Zone

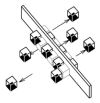


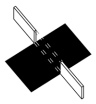
Book Storage

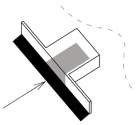


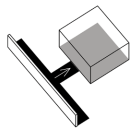
Exihibition Space

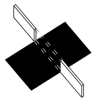


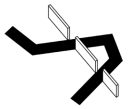




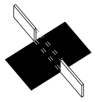




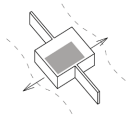


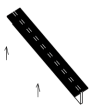






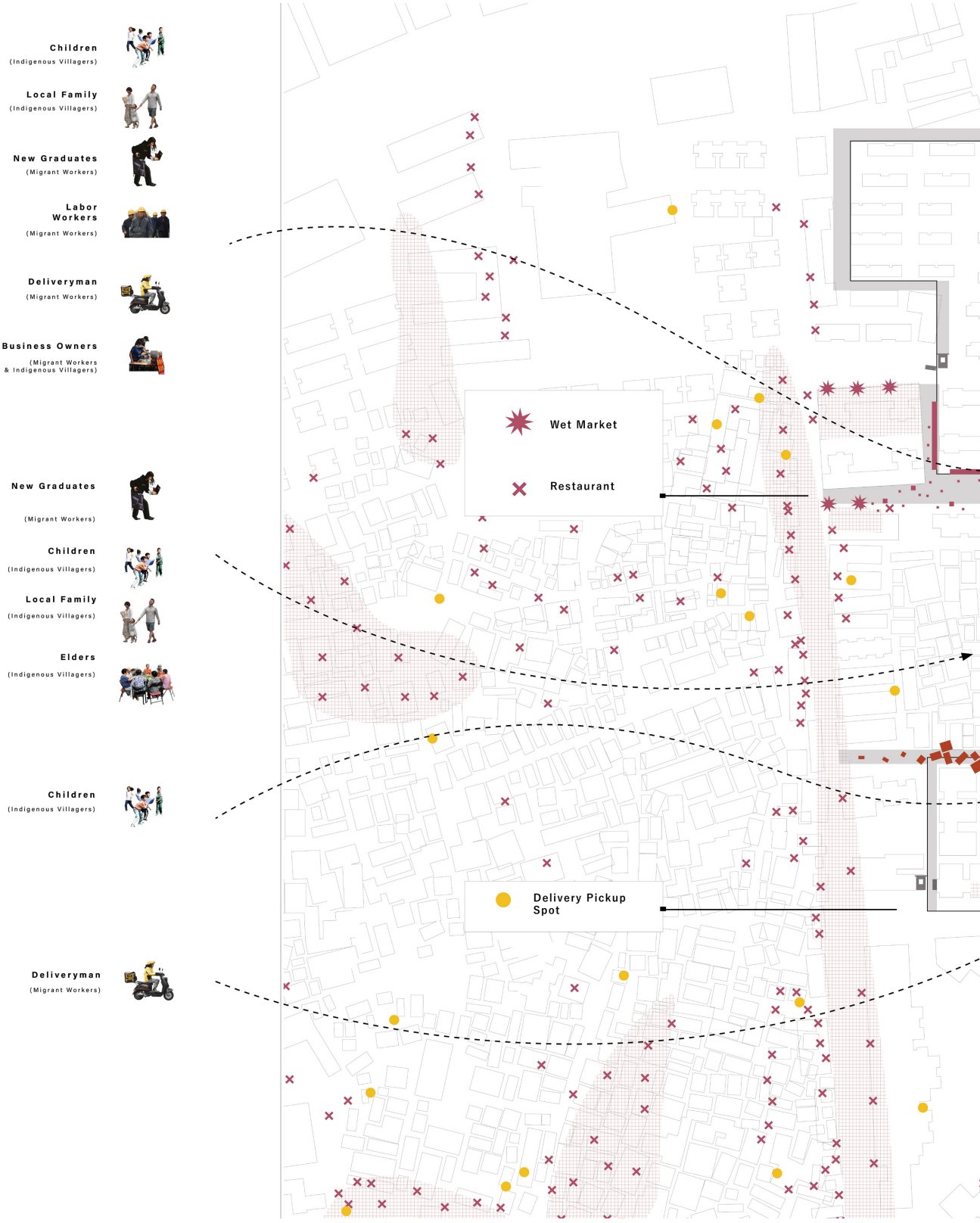


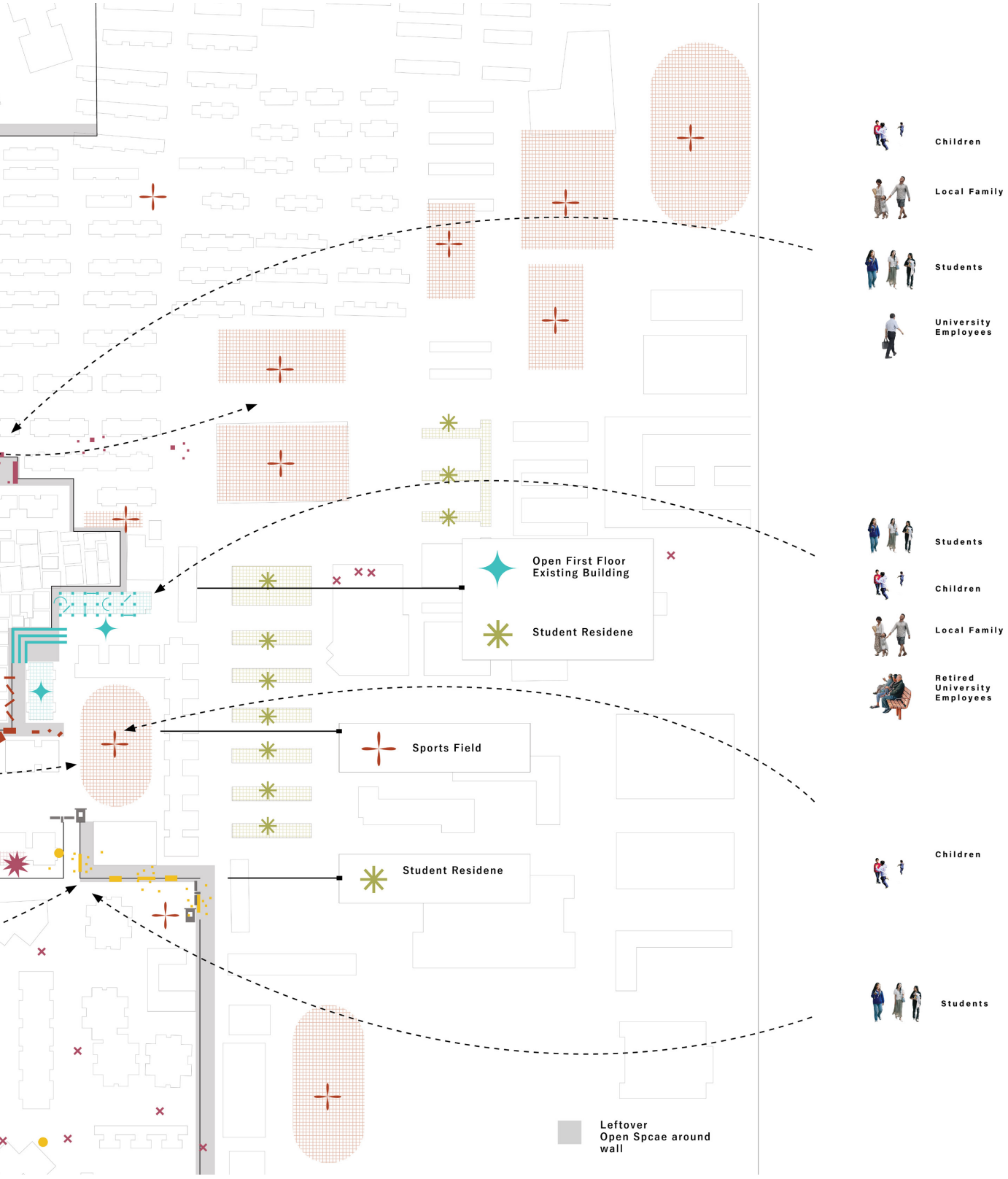




5.1.2 Site Analysis Mapping

Figure 36. Site analysis mapping based on site visit, August 2024. Drawing by author.





Children

Local Family

Students

University
Employees

Students

Children

Local Family

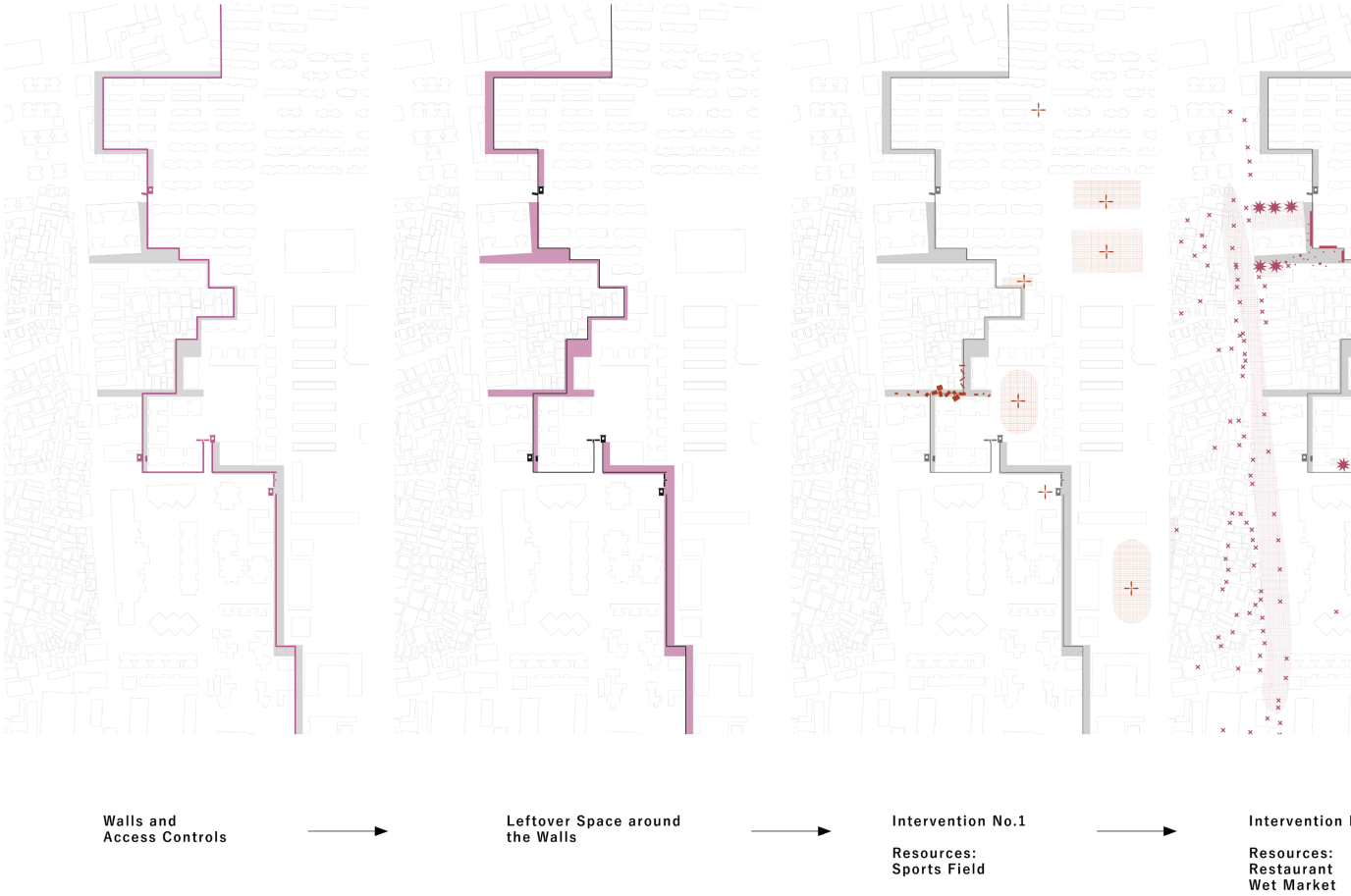
Retired
University
Employees

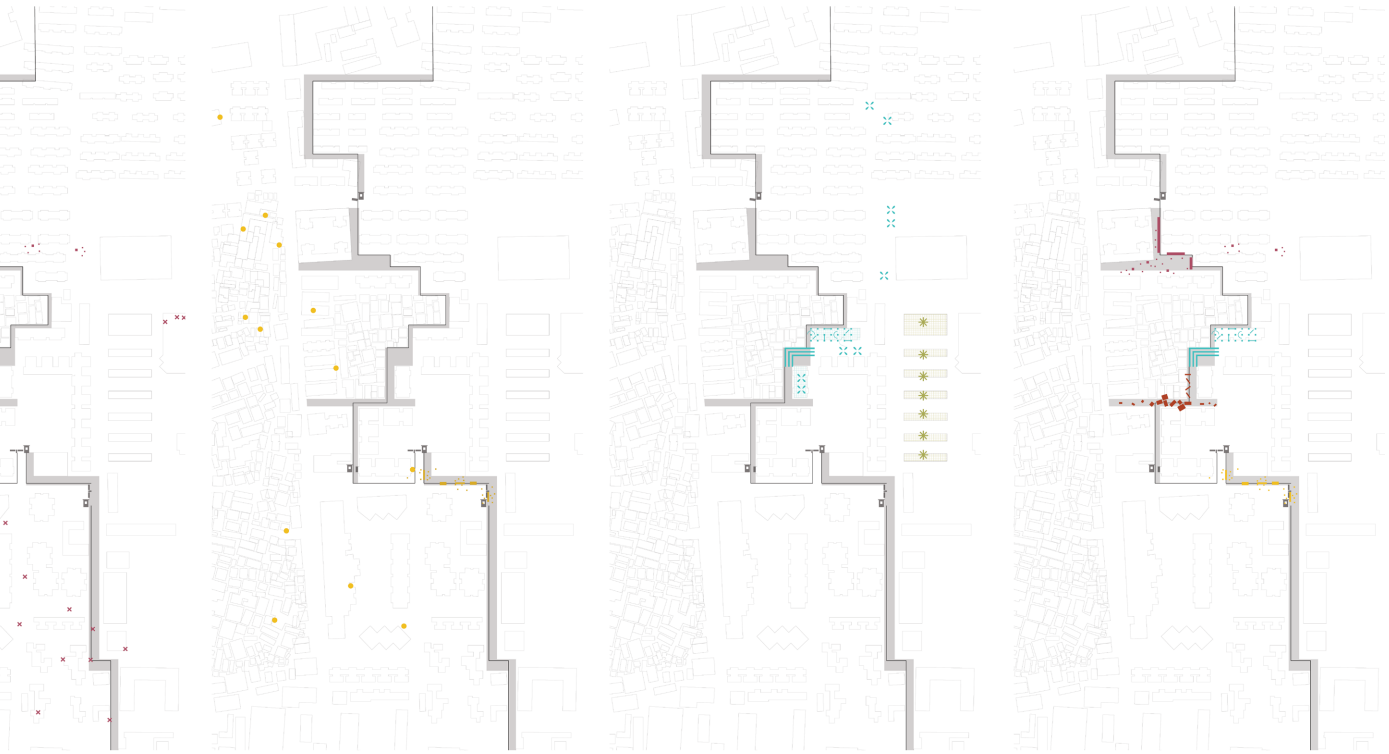
Children

Students

5.1.3 Site Analysis in Steps

Figure 37. Site analysis in steps, August 2024. Drawing by author.





No.2

Intervention No.3

Resources:
Delivery Pickup Spot
Student Residene

Intervention No.4

Resources:
Open First Floor Existing
Building
Student Residene

Intervention Overview

5.1.4 Design Reference Projects

The thesis seeks to provide physical platforms and spaces for village inhabitants and university members to connect through unmediated means. By four interventions in responding to the four intangible boundaries identified in section 3. Each intervention targets a specific disconnection: between children of various socio-economic backgrounds; between restaurants owners and Inhabitants from nearby fabrics; between delivery workers and University students, between young people living in the urban village and university students.

The design ideas inspired by many contemporary Chinese architects. They share common concerns for contemporary urban space, exploring crossing boundary through inclusive, human-scaled interventions that are embedded in grassroots and everyday life.

Yiiie Architects emphasis on integrating architecture into everyday community life with humility. The design of "Judo Coffee" takes a humble approach, avoiding dominance by excessive visual decoration. The project "Yulin Alley Neighborhood · Community Public Space Renovation" and "CACP 'Designing?'" creates spaces where creativity, artistic sensibilities naturally merge with the informal, everyday life.

Jiakun Architect, in the project West Village - Basis Yard, bring together people from diverse backgrounds through a continuous courtyard structure to host grassroots, everyday public programs.

Atelier Deshaus in the project "Riverside Passage", intervenes at a physical boundary- an abandoned coal wall at a former gas plant. The project's name, *Bianyuan* ("a garden on the margin"), echoes the

Chinese homophone for "marginalization," highlighting the site's forgotten status and its potential for renewal.

Songzhuang Micro Community Park designed by Crossboundaries architecture, through the playfulness and permeability of the wall to stimulates community interaction. The intervention transforms what was once a dividing surface into a interactive surface of social and emotional exchange. The design of the thesis draws inspiration from their design intentions and approaches to boundary, community, and everyday life.

Yiiie Co., Ltd., *JUDO ESPERSSO DOJO*, Chengdu, China, 2023, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.yiiie.co/judoesperssodojo-works.

Yiiie Co., Ltd., CACP "Designing?": Community Public Space, Chengdu, China, 2022–2024, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.yiiie.co/cacp-works.

Yiiie Co., Ltd., *Yulin Alley Neighborhood: Community Public Space Renovation*, Chengdu, China, 2021–2022, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.yiiie.co/yulinalleyneighborhood-communitypublicspacerenovation-works.

Jiakun Architects, "West Village – Basis Yard / Jiakun Architects," *ArchDaily*, October 3, 2017, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.archdaily.com/880868/west-village-basis-yard-jiakun-architects.

Atelier Deshaus, *Riverside Passage (边园) / Atelier Deshaus*, *ArchDaily*, May 12, 2022, https://www.archdaily.cn/cn/981836/bian-yuan-da-she-jian-zhu-she-ji-shi-wu-suo.

Crossboundaries, "Songzhuang Micro-Community Park," *Landezine International Landscape Award*, 2022, accessed July 22, 2025, https://landezine-award.com/songzhuang-micro-community-park/.

5.1.5 Design Intentions in Material and Form

The architectural expression of the interventions is inspired by many informal and vernacular shading structures widely present on the site. They can be found on roofs of buildings, in the yards, and along the walls. Residences often construct them with most commonly using iron or stainless-steel frames and corrugated metal panels on top. Such materials are lightweight, quick to build, affordable, and highly flexible to everyday use, allowing residents to modify or expand them according to needs. Guangzhou is located in a humid subtropical monsoon climate; the weather is hot and rainy in summer, and these shading structures can block the intense sunlight and heavy rains. It also extends living spaces for semi-outdoor activities, such as having tea, doing household work, and allowing casual gatherings with neighbors. The humid climate helps plants grow; but it also make building components more susceptible to dampness and corrosion. As a result, the primary structural material of the proposed interventions is anodized aluminum, because it resists corrosion in humid conditions. In addition, the reflective surface allows it to visually dissolve into the surrounding environment. The material reflects and highlights the vivid activities happening within and around them. By making the interventions as unobtrusive as possible, they become a vessel for everyday life rather than dominating it.

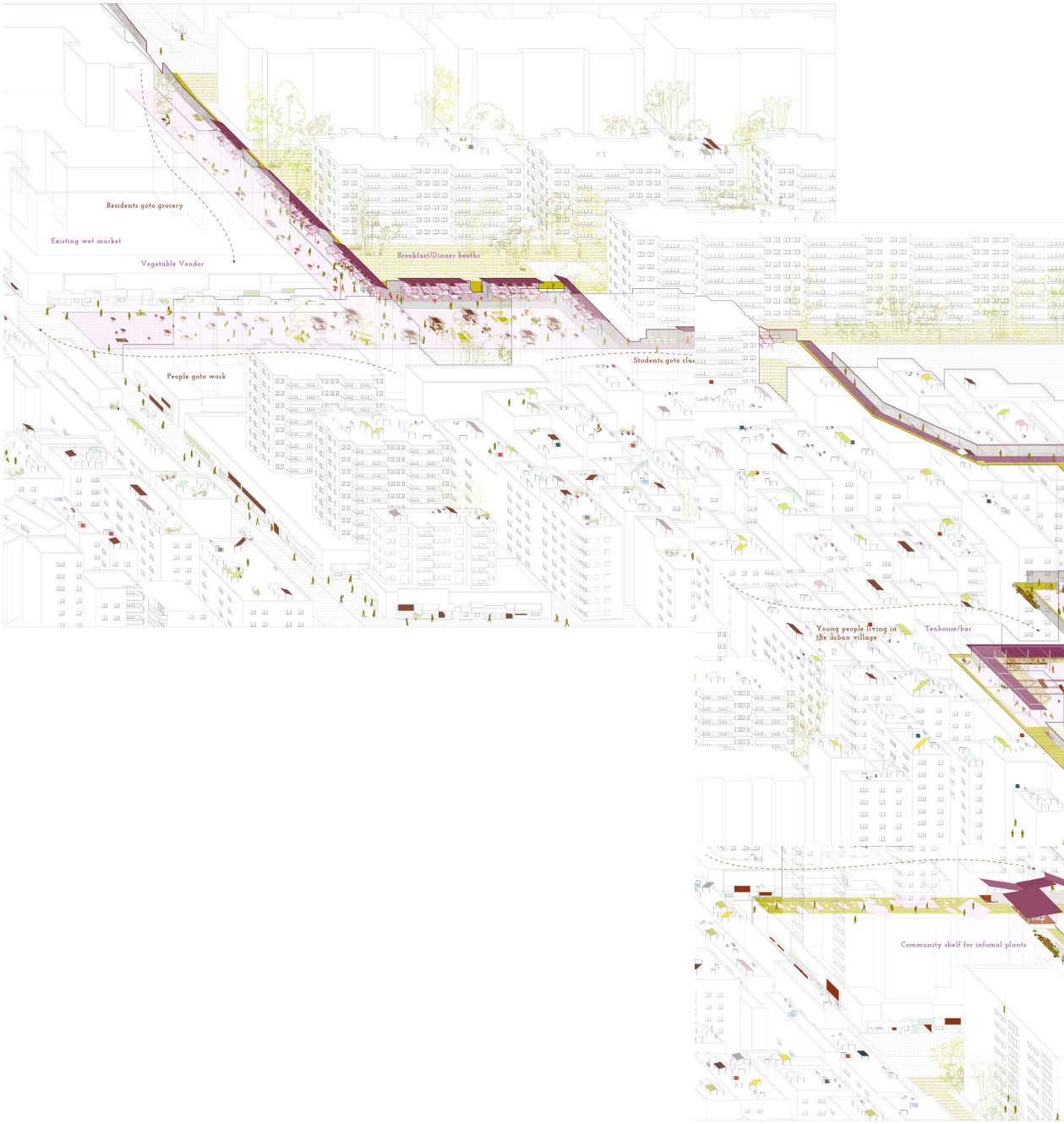
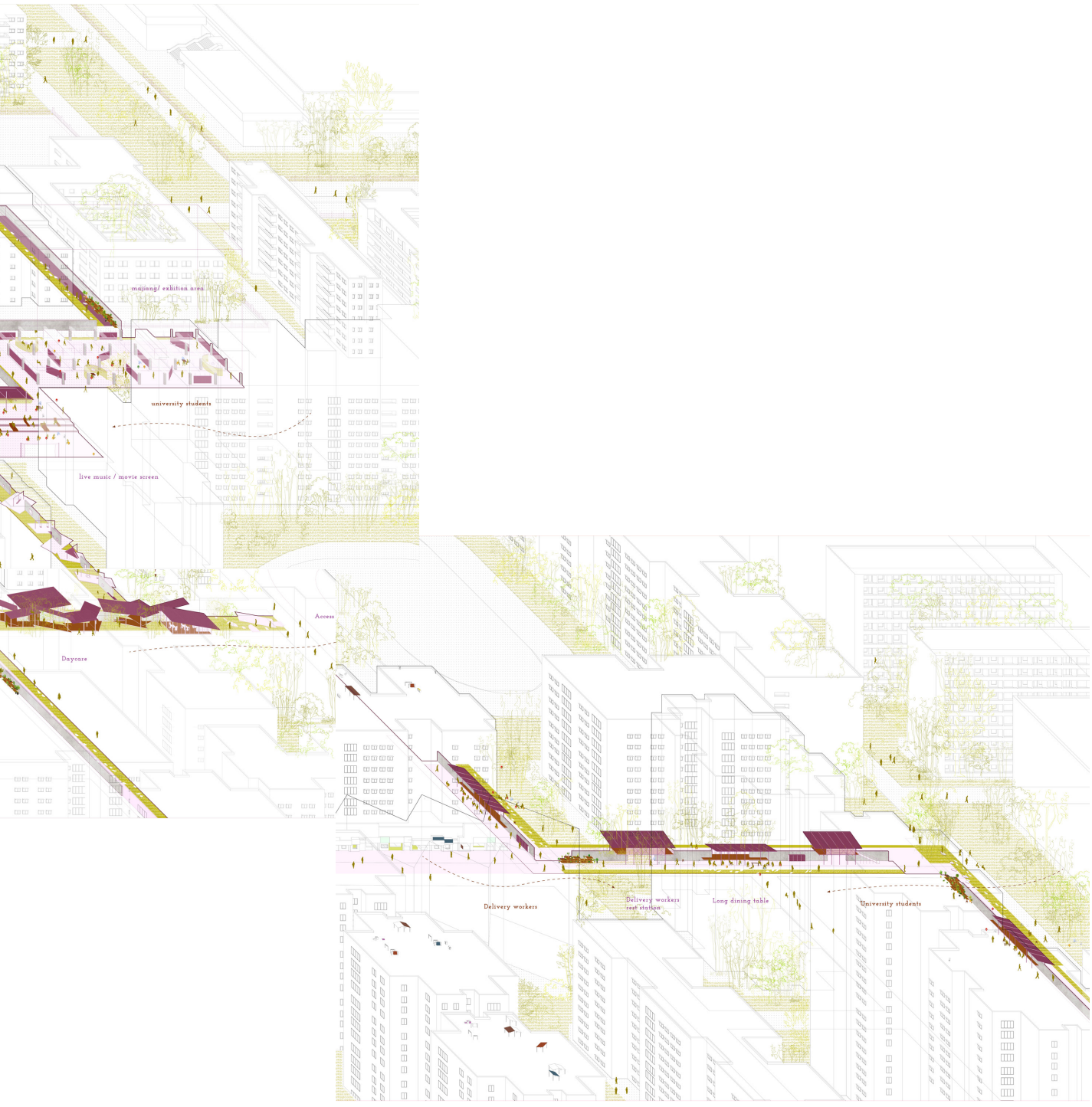


Figure 38. Axonometric view of the entire design intervention, July 2024. Drawing by author.


majiang/ exhition area
university students
live music / movie screen
Access
Daycare
Delivery workers
Delivery workers
rest station
Long dining table
University students

5.2.1 Intervention No.1

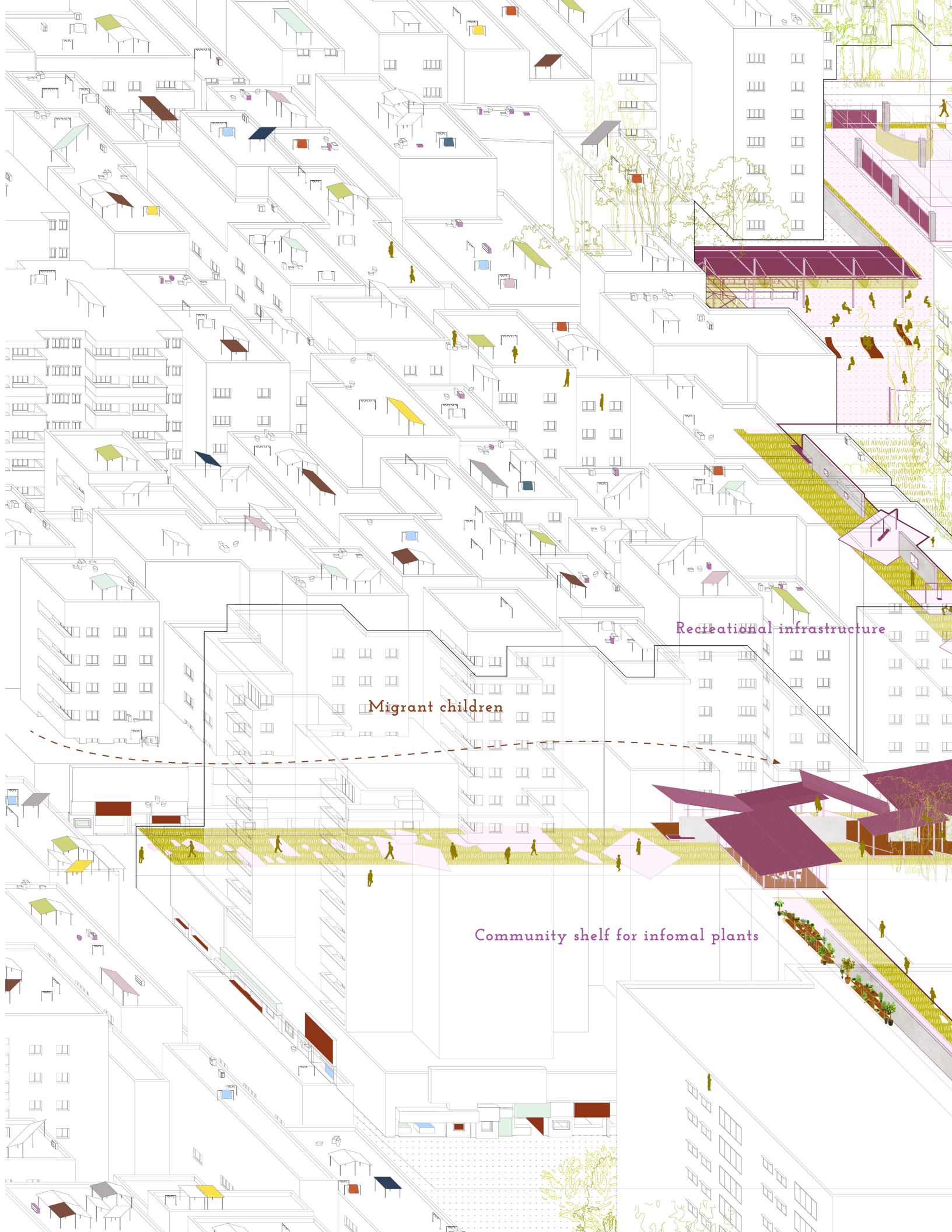
Program: Access to playground; Recreational infrastructure; Daycare

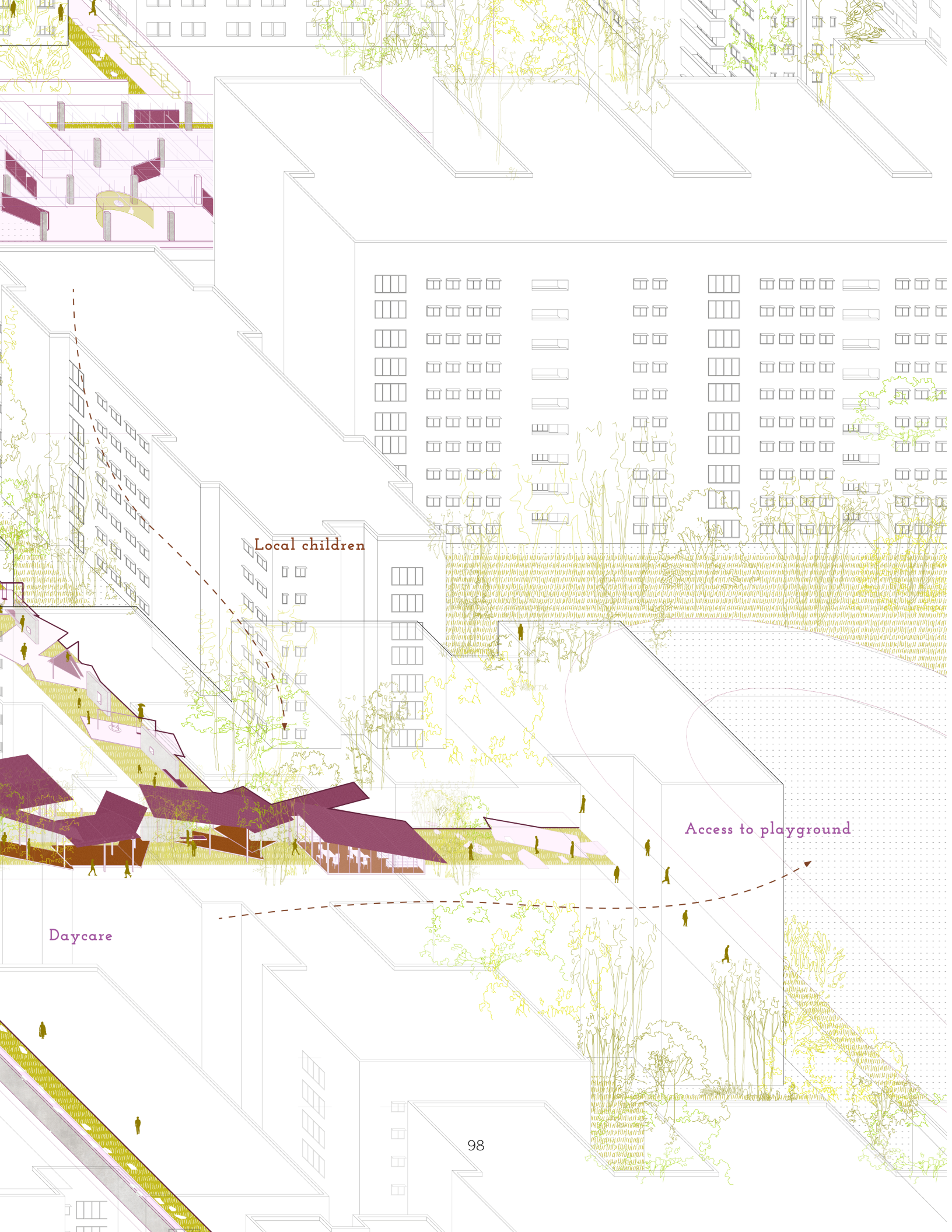
Connection between: Migrant children and Local children

Due to hukou policy, migrant children are difficult to go to the public school as local children (with urban hukou). Accessing to play structure, sports fields in surrounding communities are limited by the walls and access control.

Therefore, the design is intended to provide play structure and daycare promoting migrant children and local children to play together after school. With a processional path structure guiding migrant children from village to access the sports fields in the university.

The processional path structure is intended to be a transitional space from Shipai East Road to the play space. As body moves through the breaks in the walls along the path, the act forms a dynamic relationship between the body and the walls. Similarly, as children's movements through the walls while using the play structures, there is also a dynamic interaction. Both physically and symbolically, the design emphasizes on boundaries are continuously broken by interventions and human activity.


Recreational infrastructure
Migrant children
Community shelf for infomal plants


Local children
Access to playground
Daycare

Intervention no.1

people brought together

by the intervention



Recreational infrastructure;Access to playground; Daycare

Figure 40. Inhabitants diagram of intervention no.1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

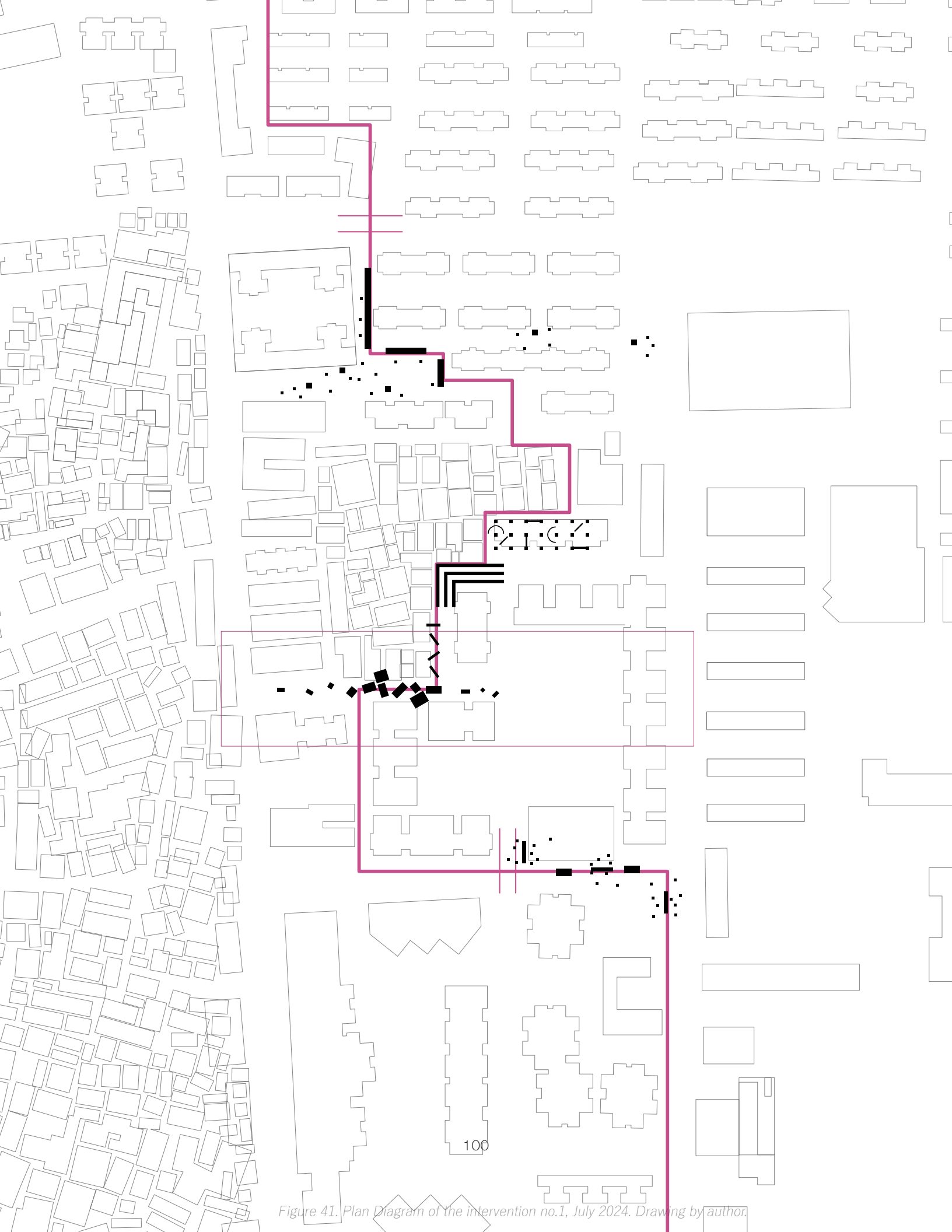
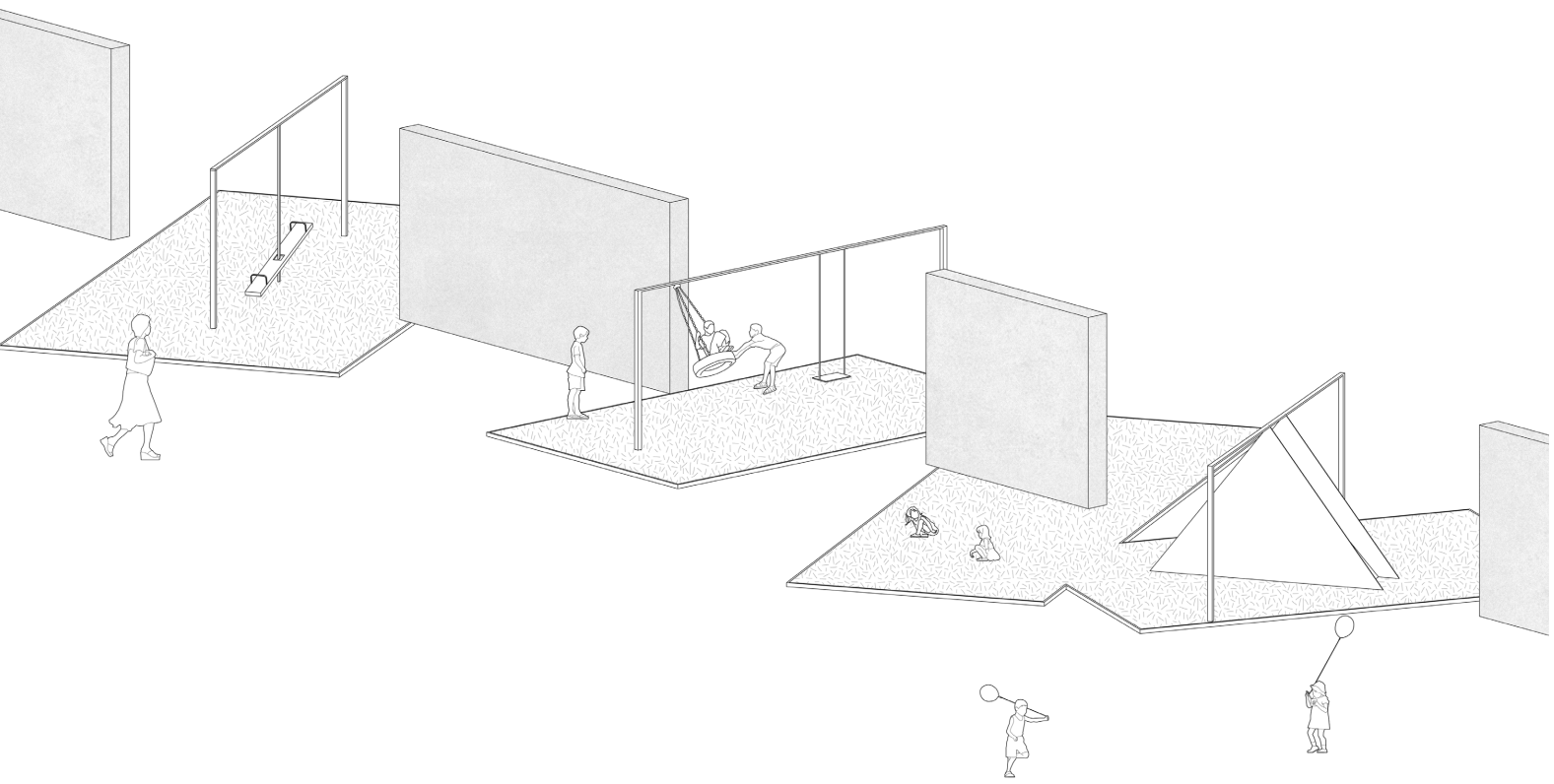


Figure 41. Plan Diagram of the intervention no.1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

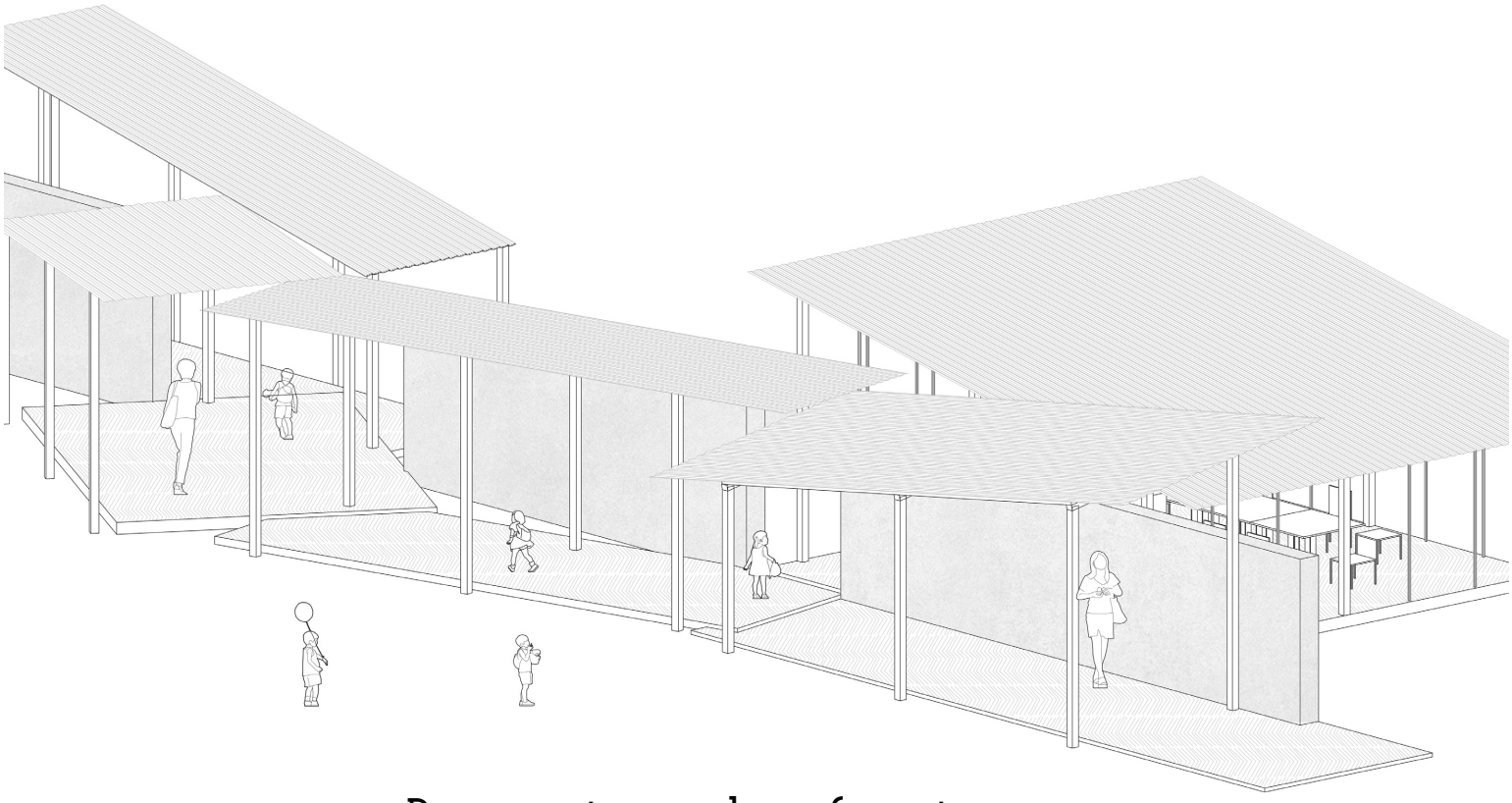
Intervention no.1



Recreational infrastructure;Access to playground; Daycare

Figure 42. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.1



Recreational infrastructure;Access to playground; Daycare

Figure 43. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.1



Recreational infrastructure;Access to playground; Daycare

Figure 44. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.1



Recreational infrastructure;Access to playground; Daycare

Figure 45. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 1, July 2024. Drawing by author.

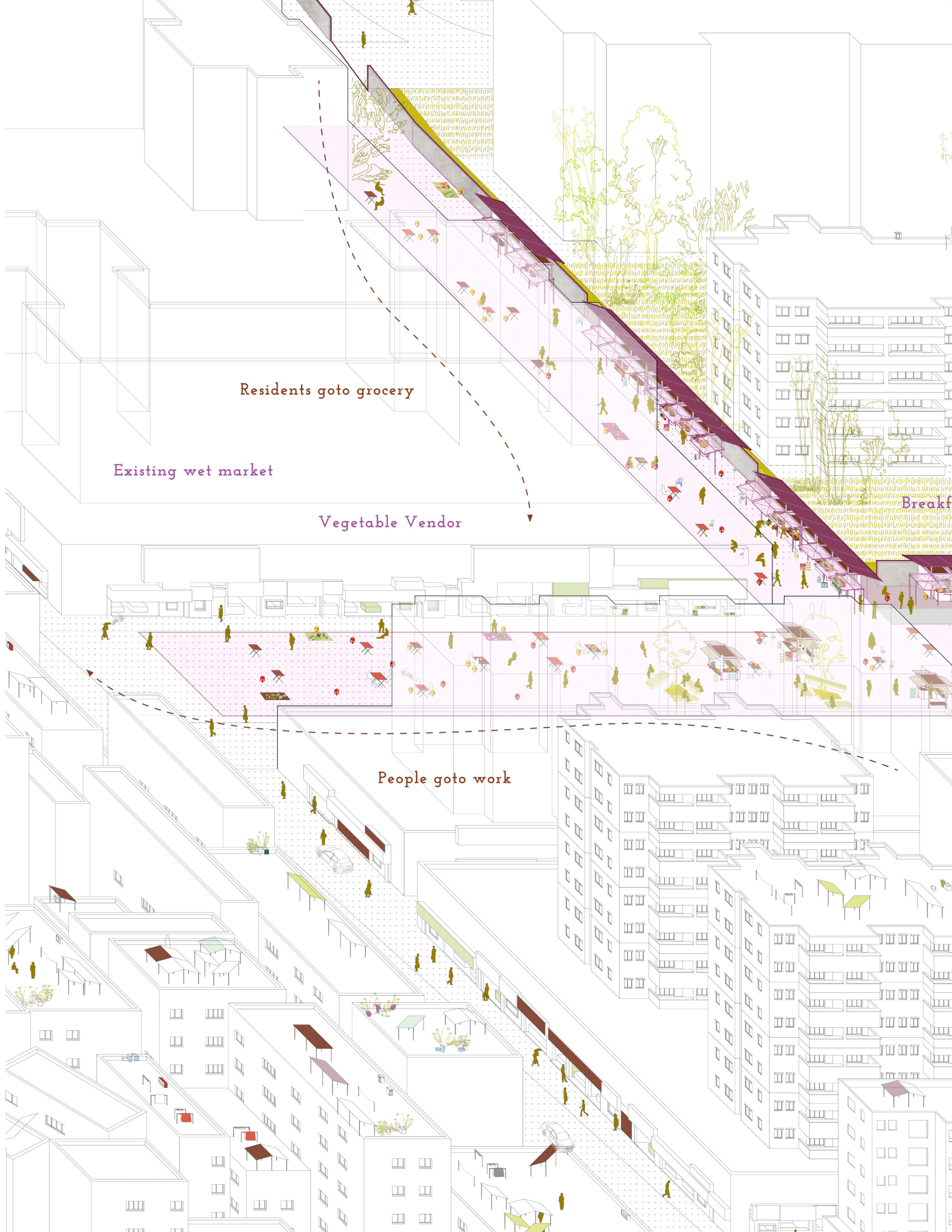
5.2.2 Intervention No.2

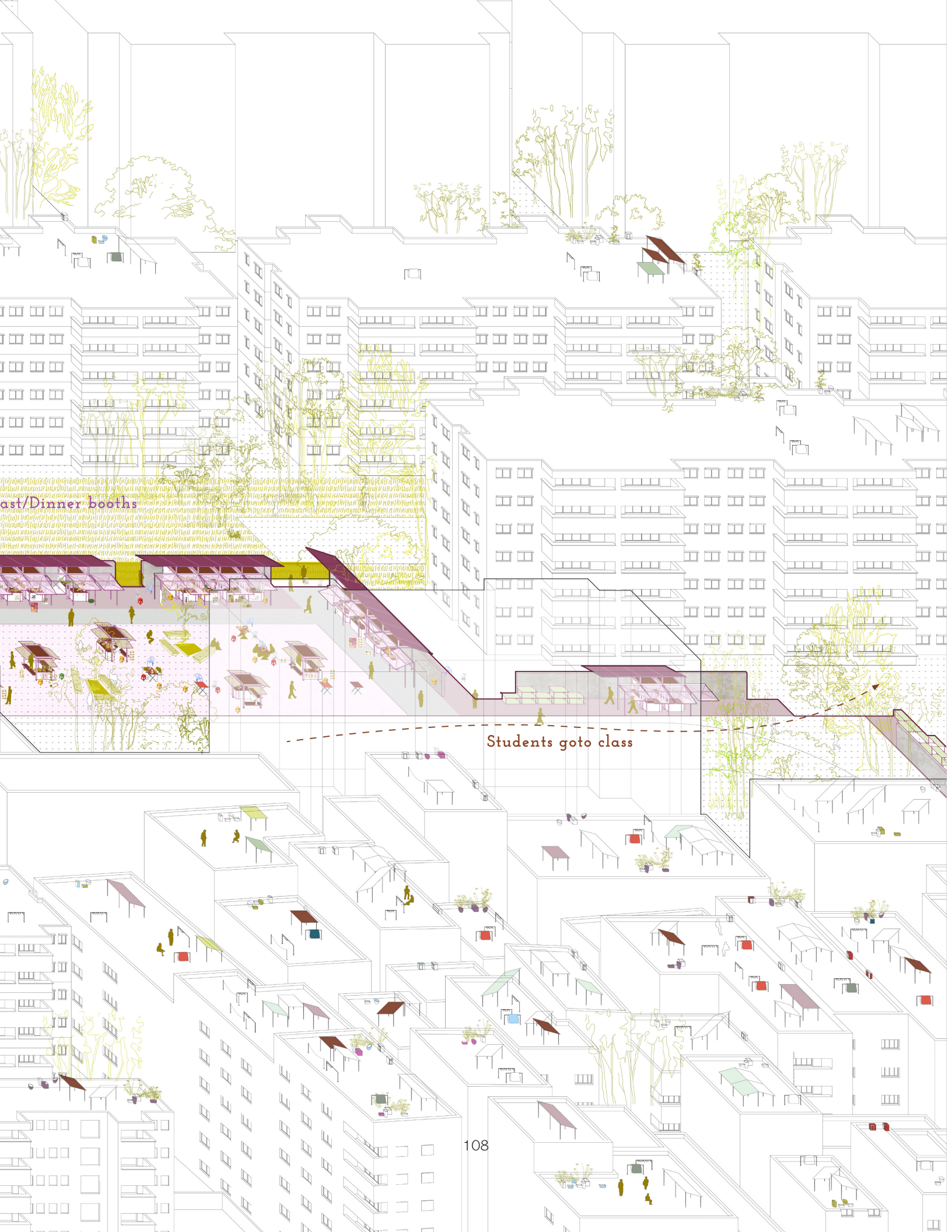
Program: Breakfast booths/ Dinner booths

Connection between: Restaurant owners and Inhabitants from nearby fabrics

Due to the delivery platform, the in person, interaction between students to people living nearby, like to retail owners and to inhabitants from other fabrics are limited. Also, the retail owners in village couldn't be easy access and be found to provide dine in services.

Therefore, the design intended to build a breakfast and dinner booths where restaurant owners can bring their business to the university with a physical space. The intervention on the wall providing storage and shading structure for the venders. The booths are designed to detach from the wall and become mobile units with loose seating around them. This flexibility enables vendors to move freely into the university space.

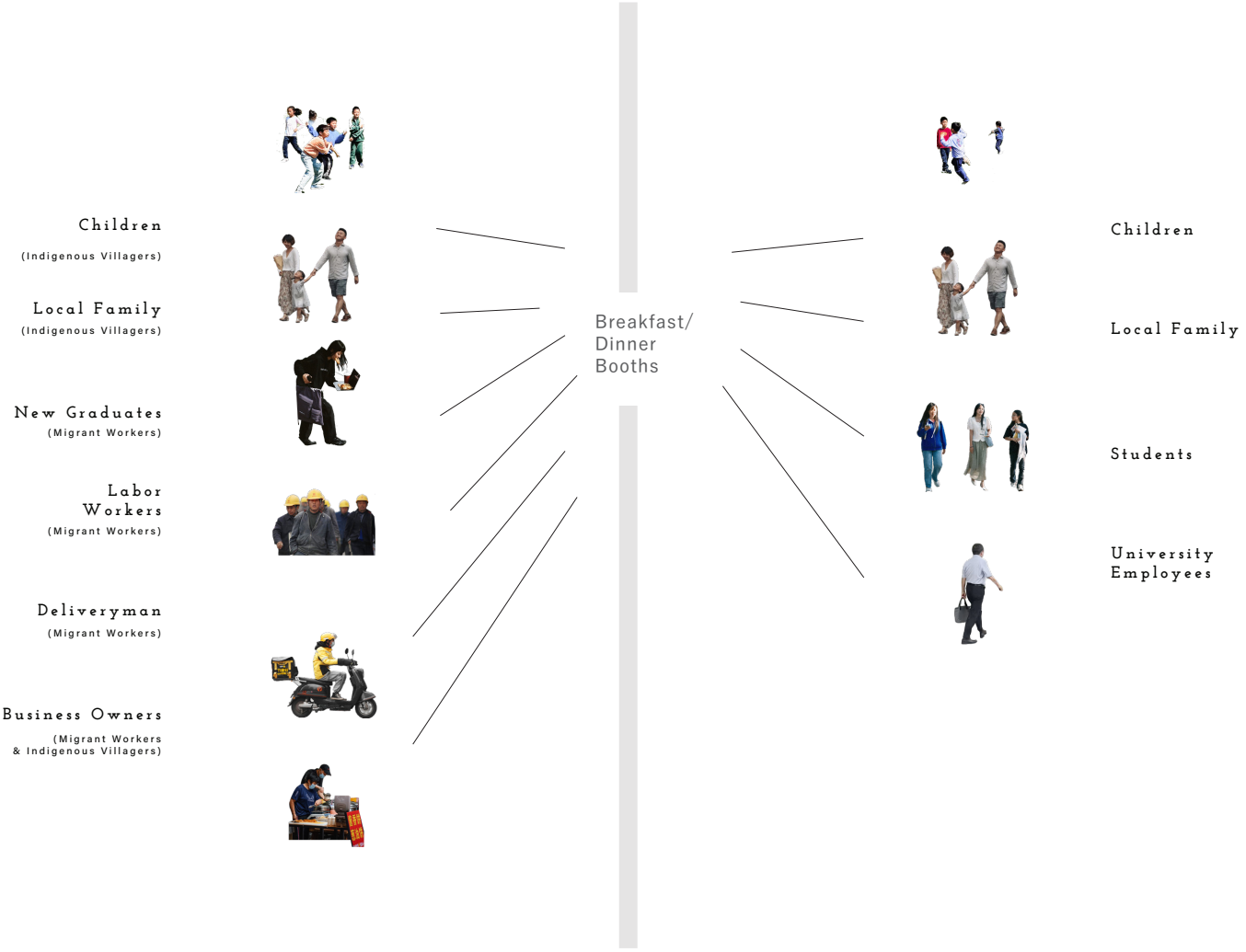

Residents goto grocery
Existing wet market
Vegetable Vendor
Breakf
People goto work


ast/Dinner booths
Students goto class

Intervention no.2

people brought together

by the intervention



Breakfast / Dinner Booths

Figure 47. Inhabitants diagram of intervention no.2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

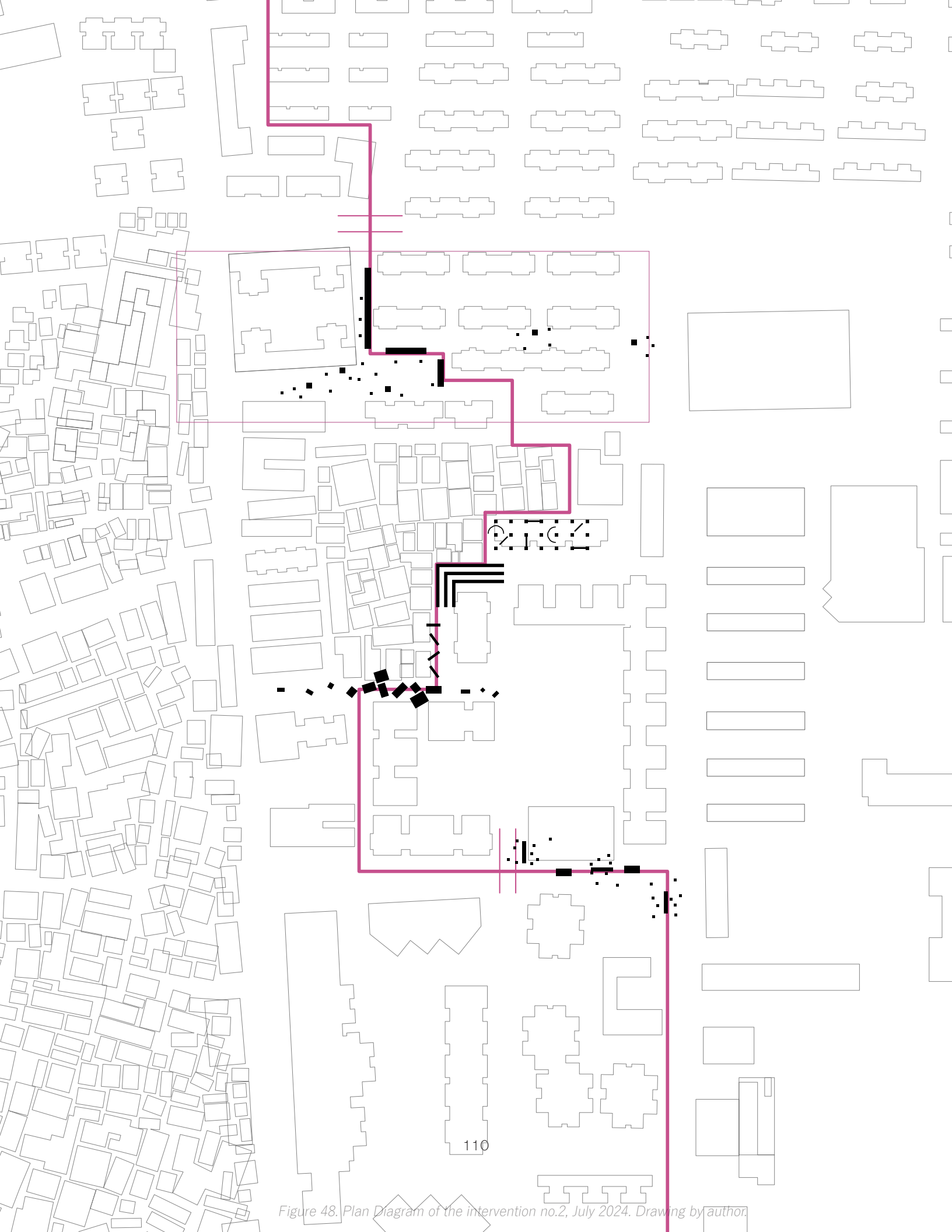
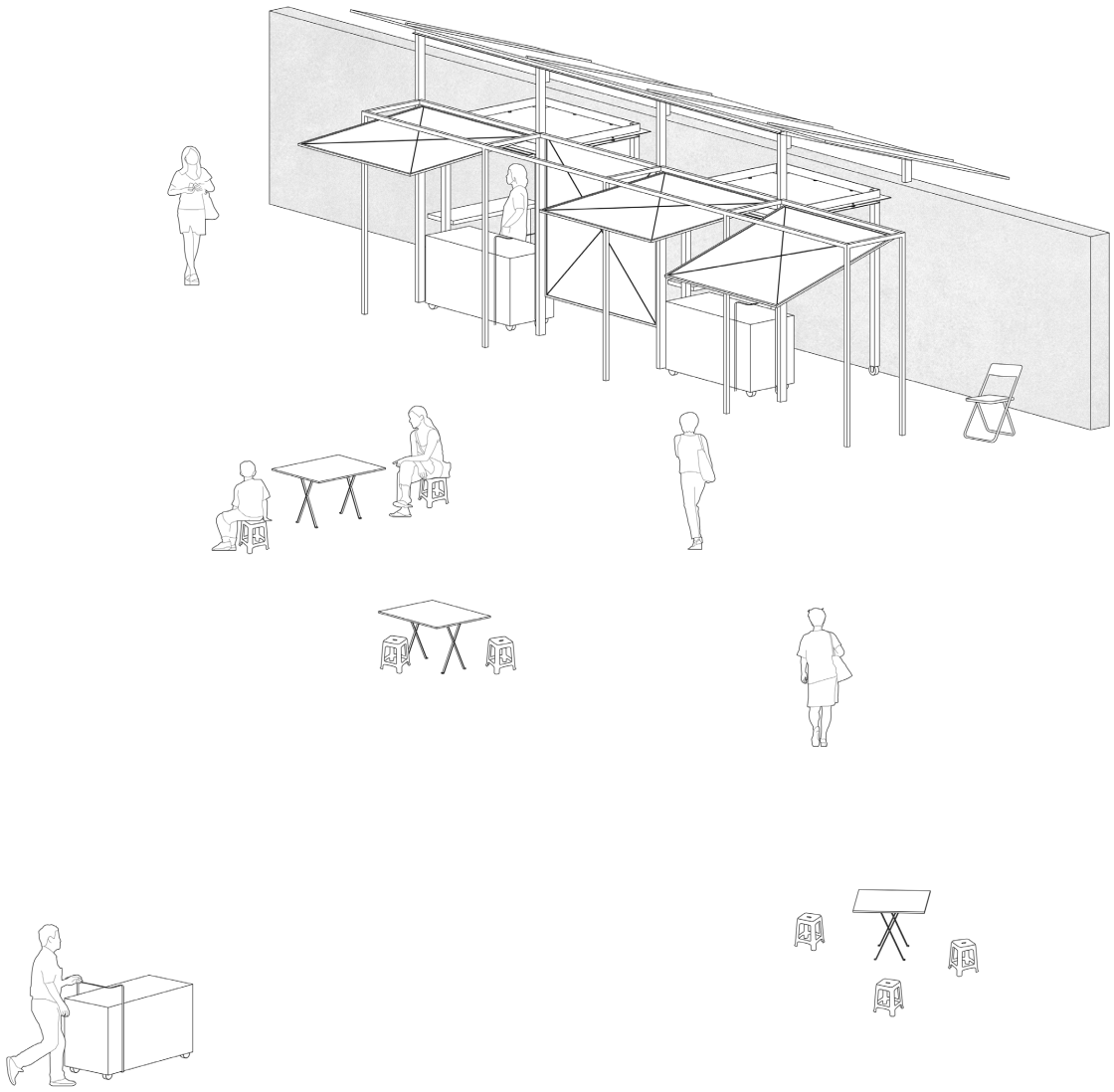


Figure 48. Plan Diagram of the intervention no.2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

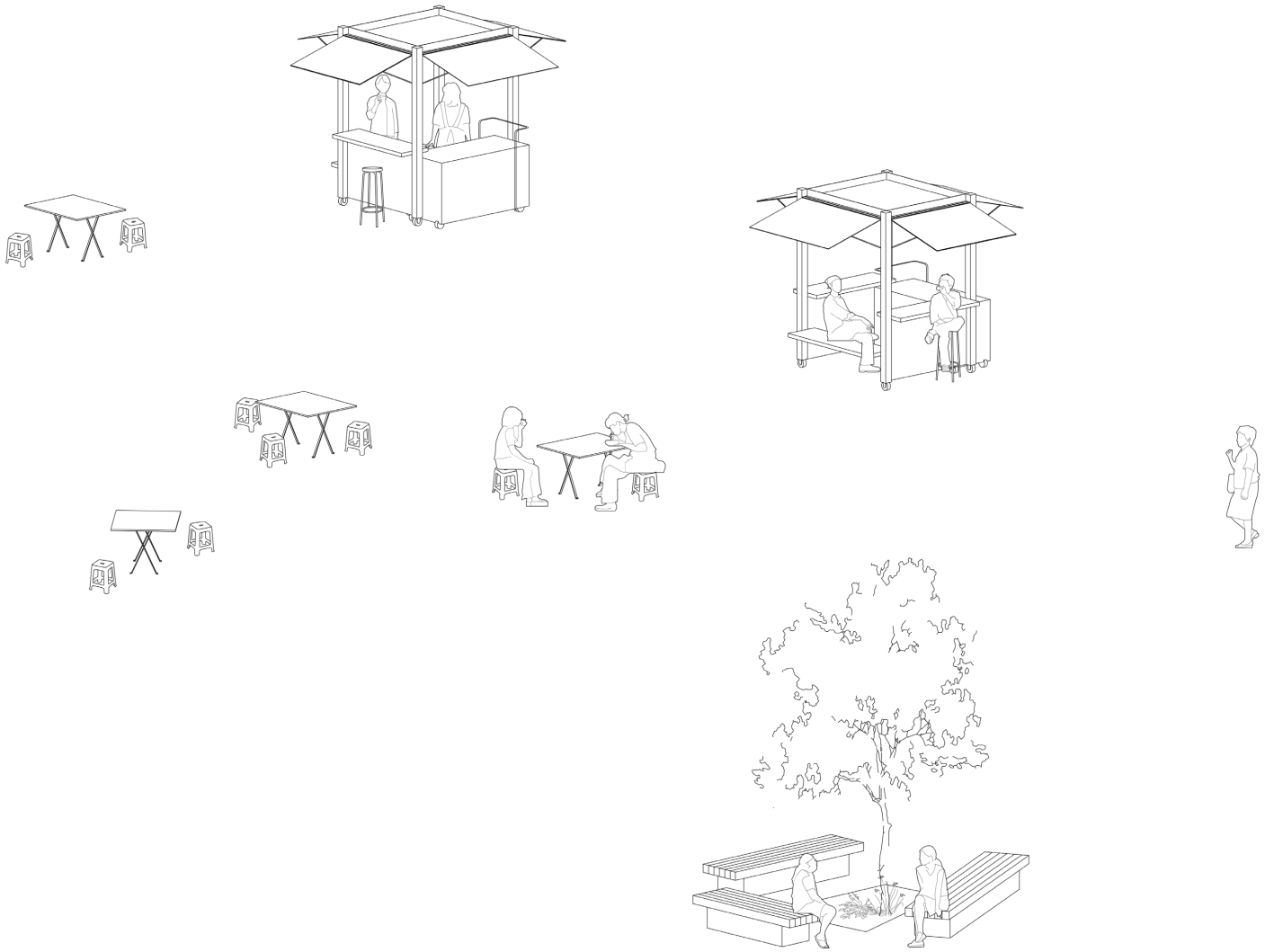
Intervention no.2



Breakfast / Dinner Booths

Figure 49. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.2



Breakfast /
Dinner Booths

Figure 50. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.2



Breakfast / Dinner Booths

Figure 51. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.2



Breakfast / Dinner Booths

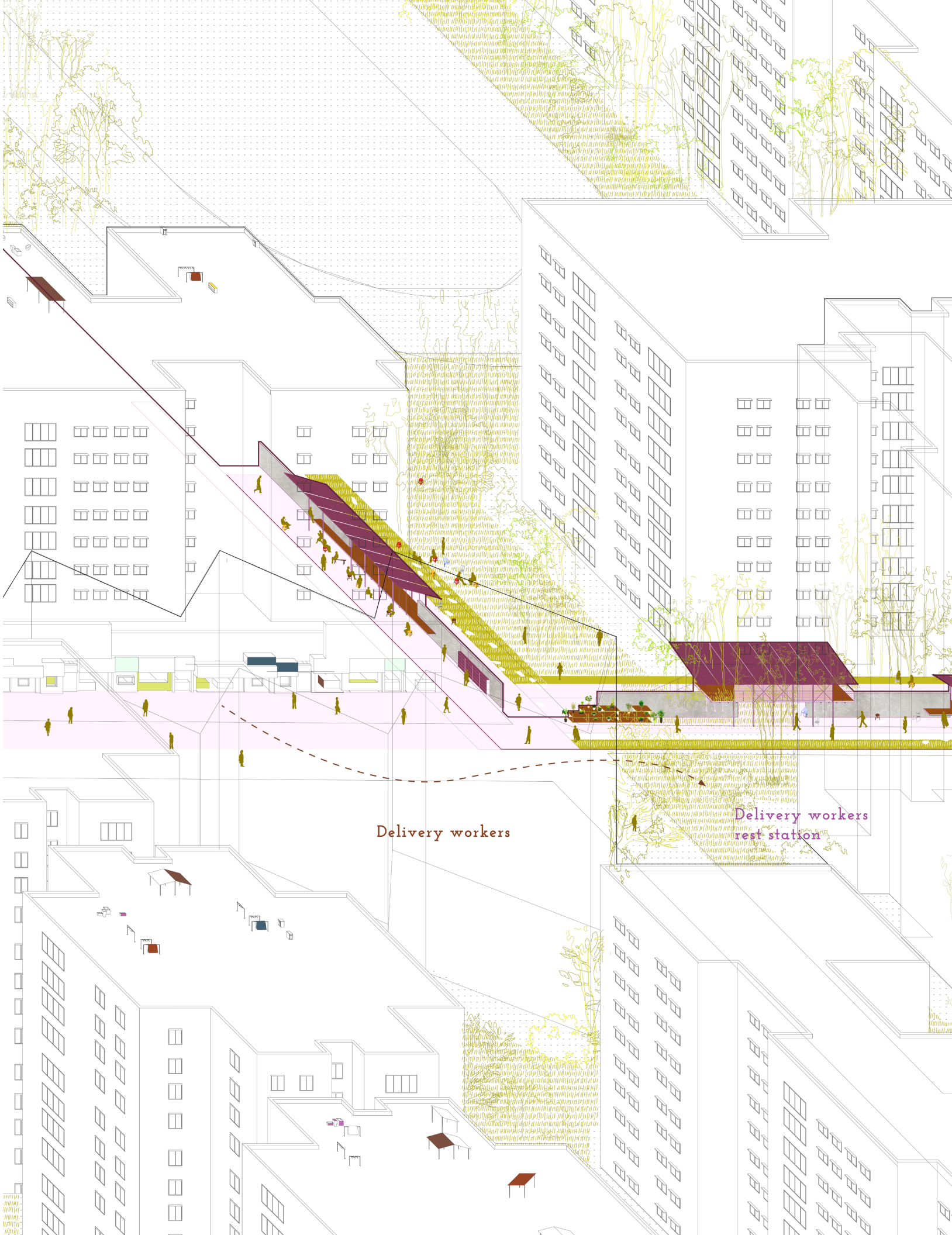
Figure 52. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 2, July 2024. Drawing by author.

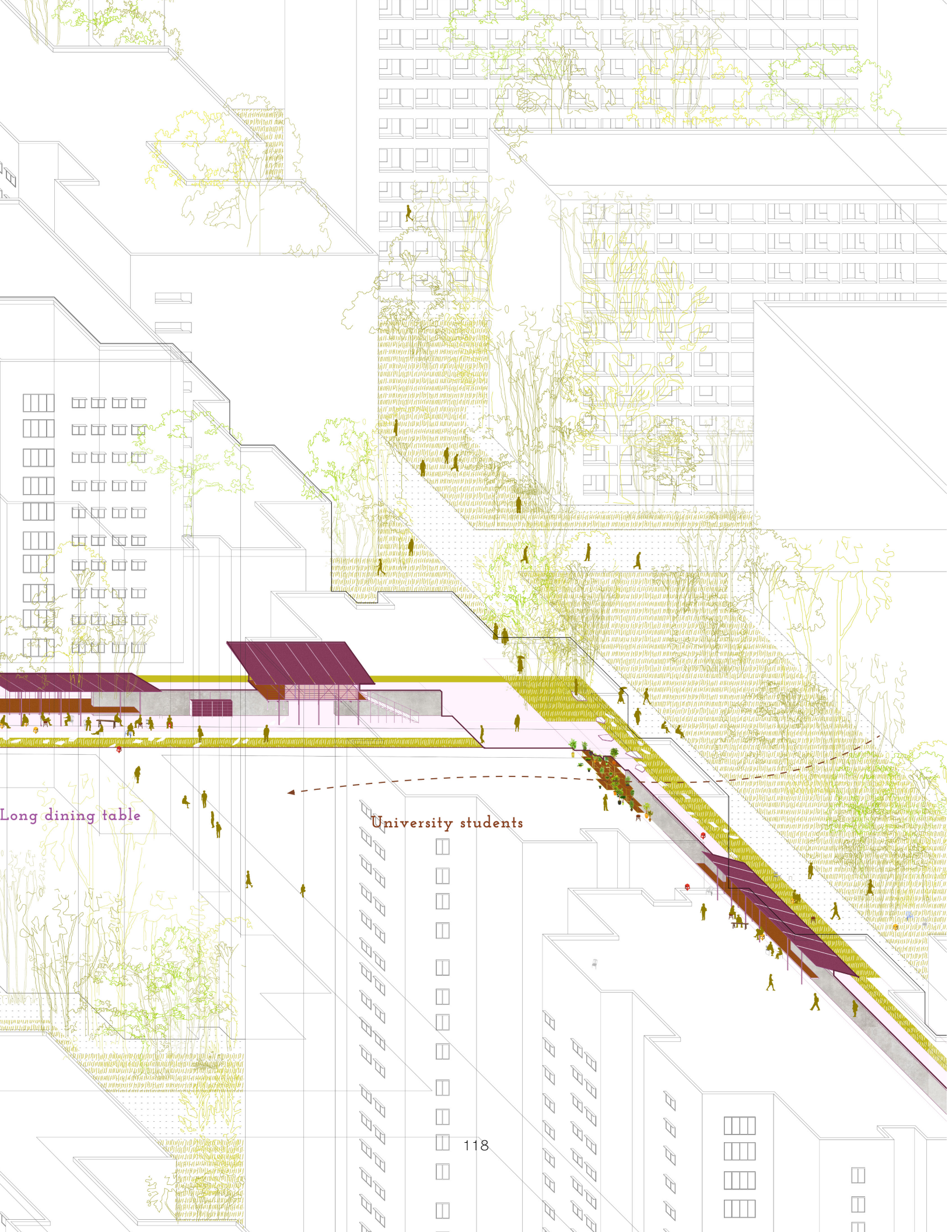
5.2.3 Intervention No.3

Program: Long dining table; Delivery workers rest station

Connection between: Delivery workers and University students

Because delivery workers are aligned and optimized by the platform's data system. They are easily being treated with low empathy. The design therefore intended to create a space where students who ordering delivery a lot with delivery works can dine together at a long table. Program also include a delivery rest on the elevated second floor and charge station on the ground. By breaking the wall with a long table, the space becomes dining area for people with different identities from different urban fabrics – both physically and symbolically breaking down the boundaries.


Delivery workers
Delivery workers
rest station


Long dining table
University students

Intervention no.3

people brought together

by the intervention

Deliveryman
(Migrant Workers)



Long
Dining Table
;Delivery
Worker
Rest Station



Students

Long DiningTable / Delivery Worker Rest Station

Figure 54. Inhabitants diagram of intervention no.3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

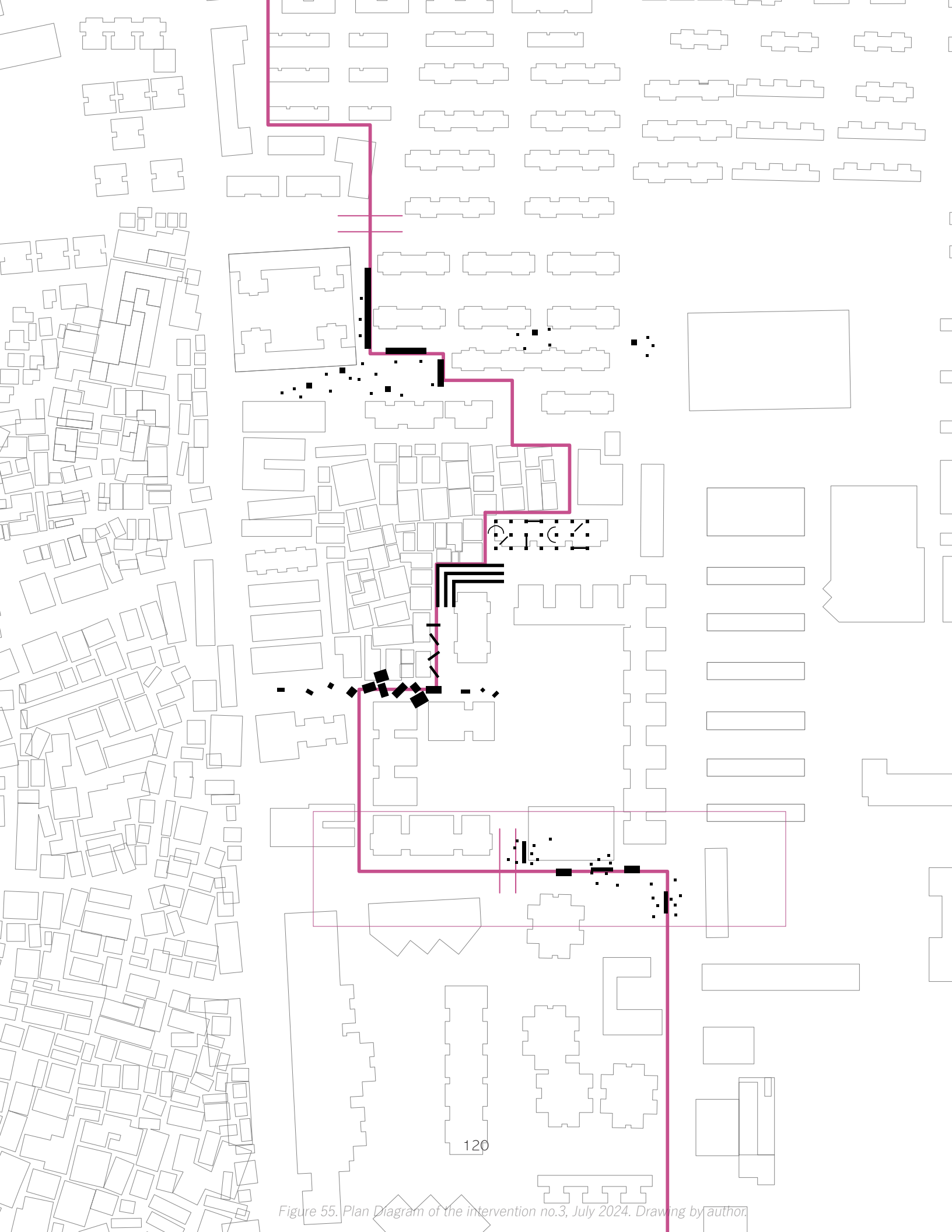
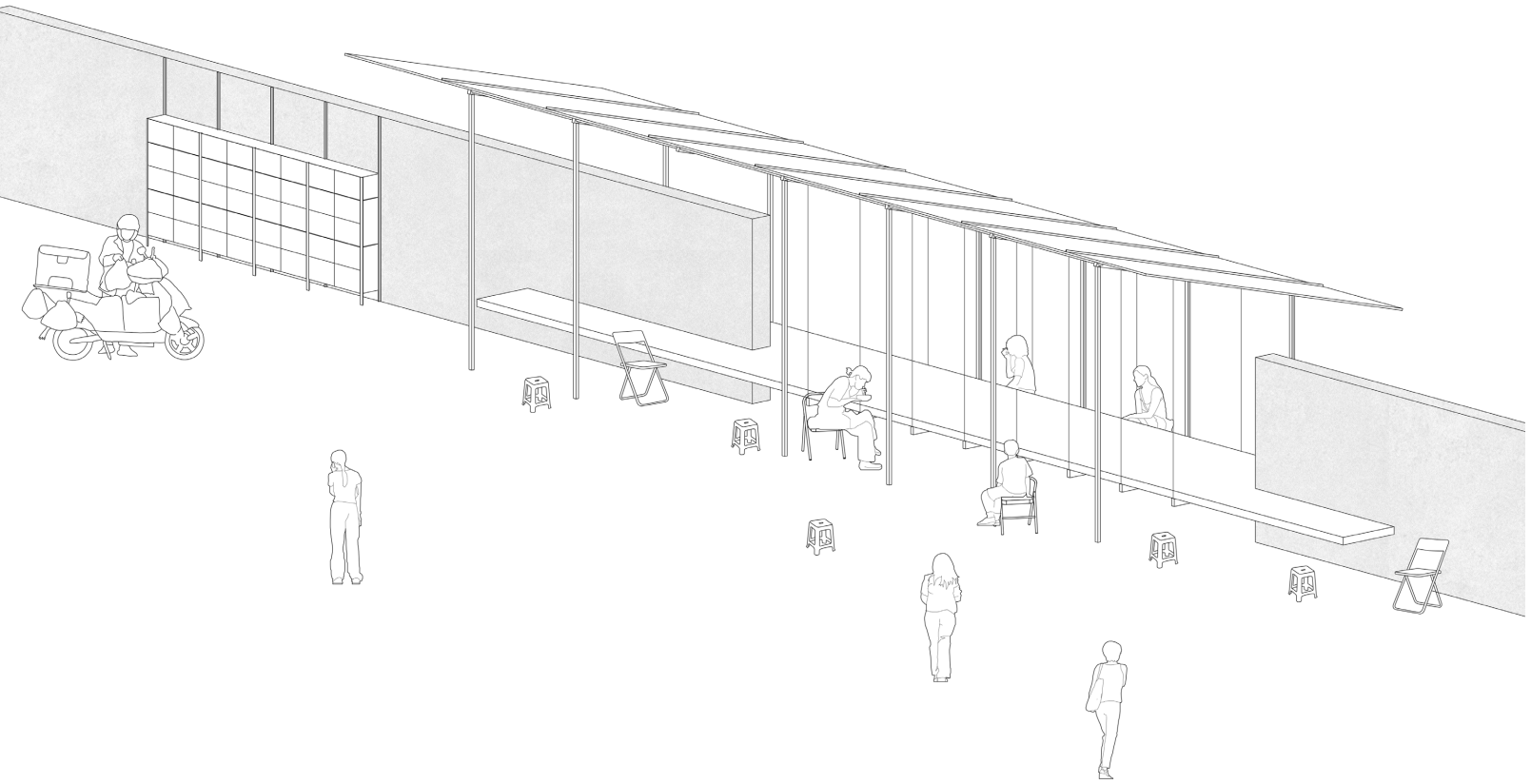


Figure 55. Plan Diagram of the intervention no.3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.3

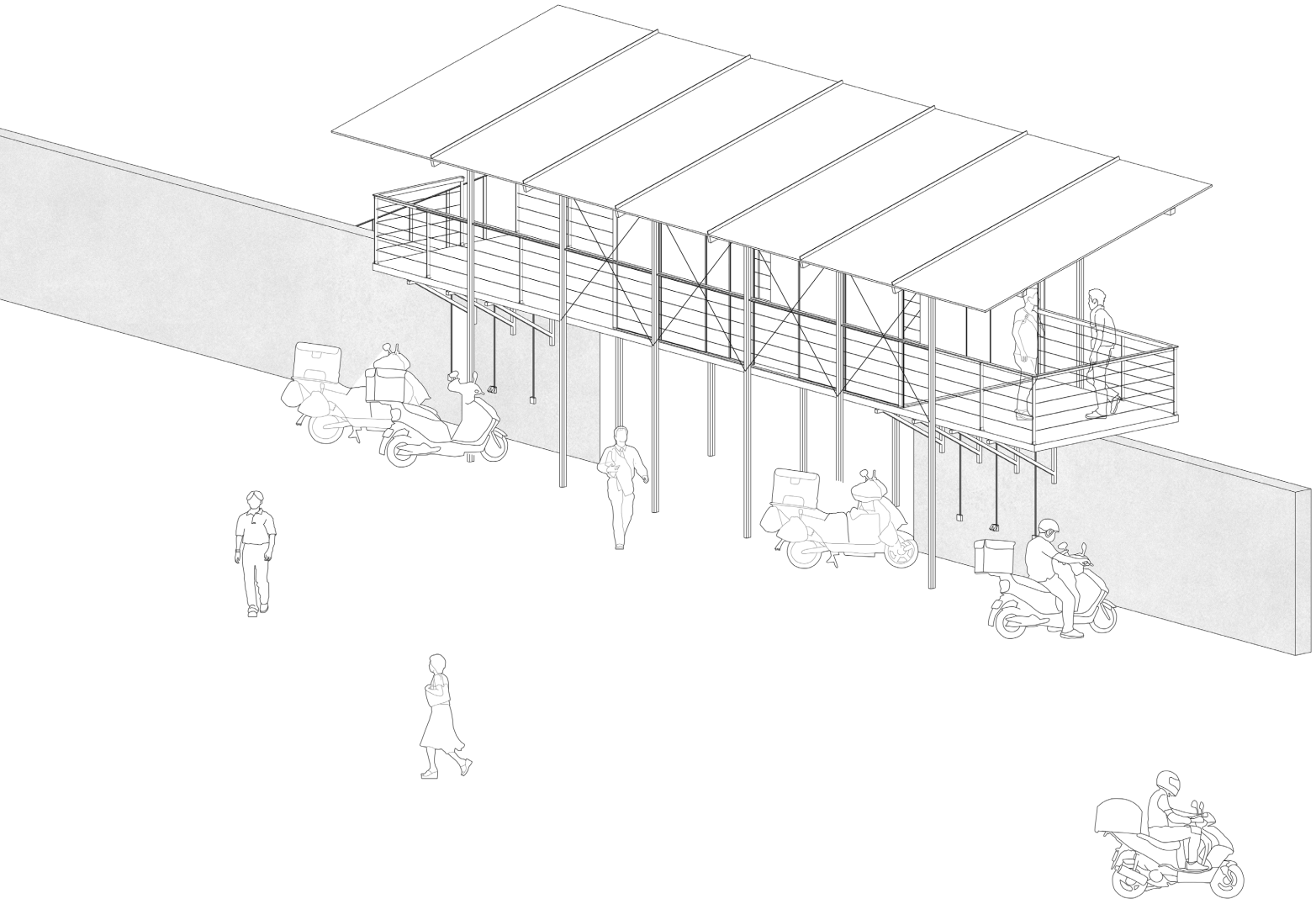




Long DiningTable / Delivery Worker Rest Station

Figure 56. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.3



Long DiningTable / Delivery Worker Rest Station

Figure 57. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.3



Long DiningTable / Delivery Worker Rest Station

Figure 58. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.3



Long DiningTable / Delivery Worker Rest Station

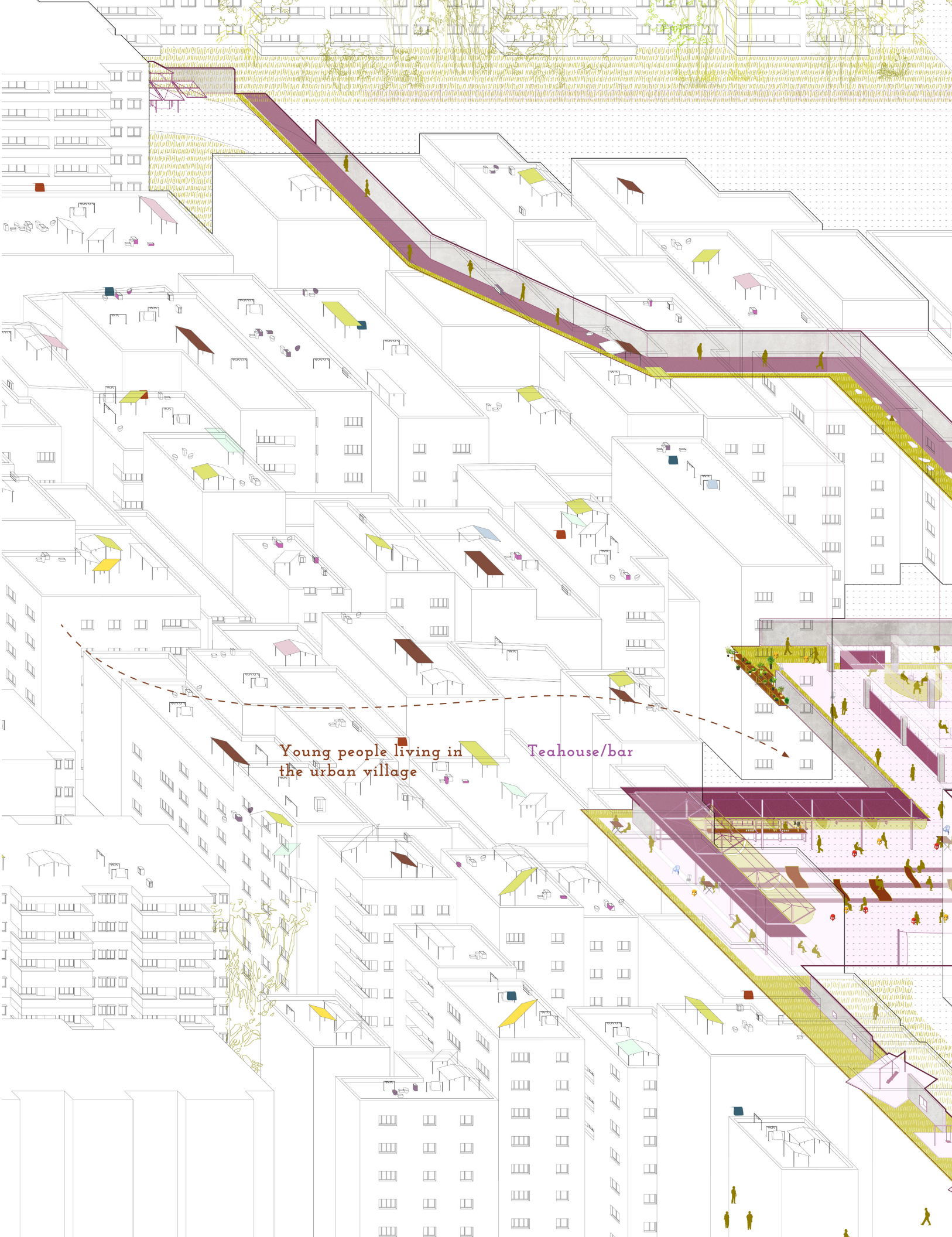
Figure 59. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

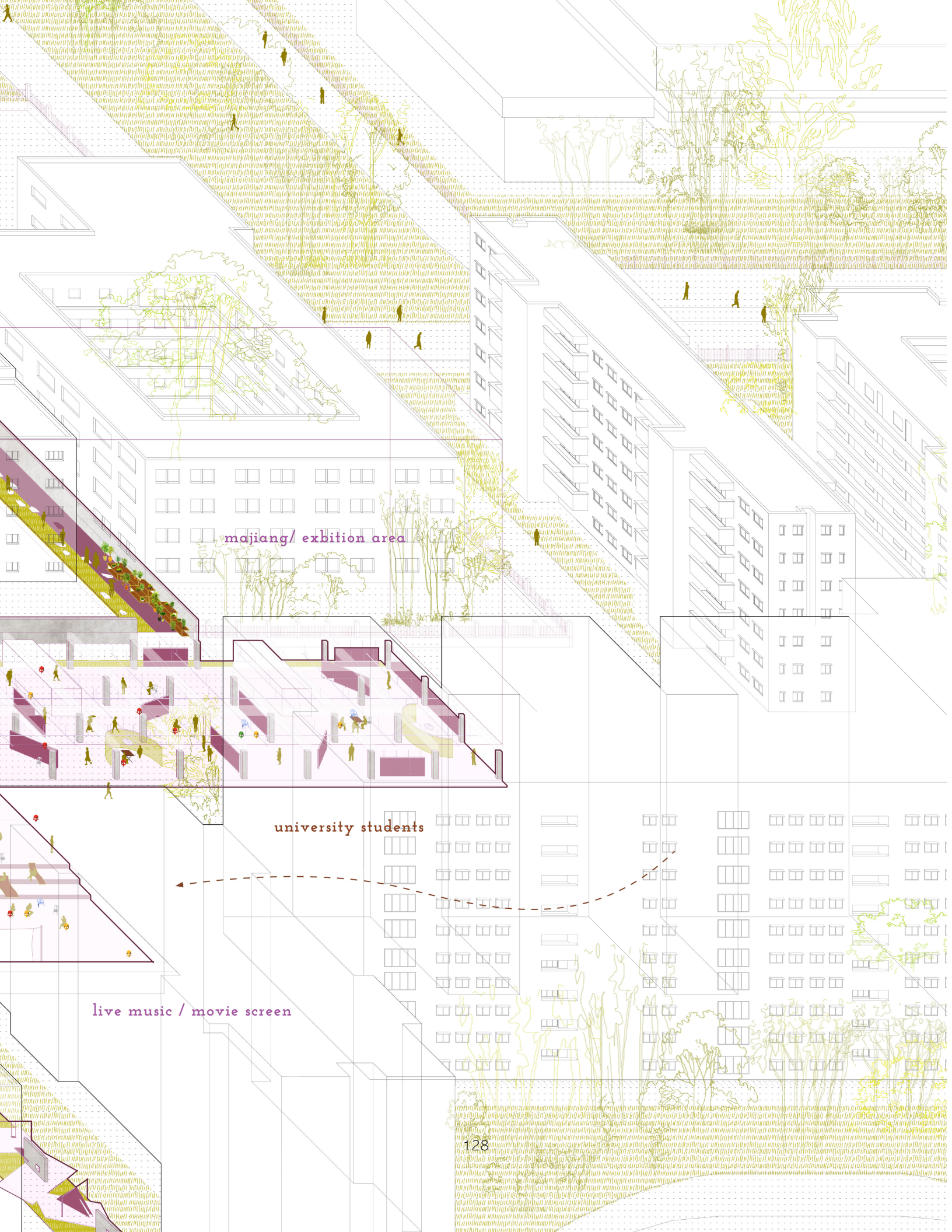
5.2.4 Intervention No.4

Program: Teahouse/bar; Majiang/ exhibition area; Movie Screen/ Live Music Performance space

Connection between: Young people living in the urban village and university students

In the fast speed high pressure living environment, 'Lying Flat' is not easy for young people. And even young people from the village and university shares a similar anxious and attached with similar attitude. there are little opportunities to share thoughts and feeling. Therefore, the design intended to create a space with slowing and chill lively environment. Informal chairs, lying chairs are cultural symbol of 'Lying Flat'. In this space, the young people from different fabrics can meet. They can slow down, sit down to play Majiang, even 'Lying Flat' to enjoy movies.


Young people living in
the urban village
Teahouse/bar


majiang/ exbition area
university students
live music / movie screen

Intervention no.4

people brought together by the intervention



Teahouse/Bar;

Majiang/Exhibition Area;

Movie Screen/ Live Music

Performance Space

Figure 61. Inhabitants diagram of intervention no.4, July 2024. Drawing by author.

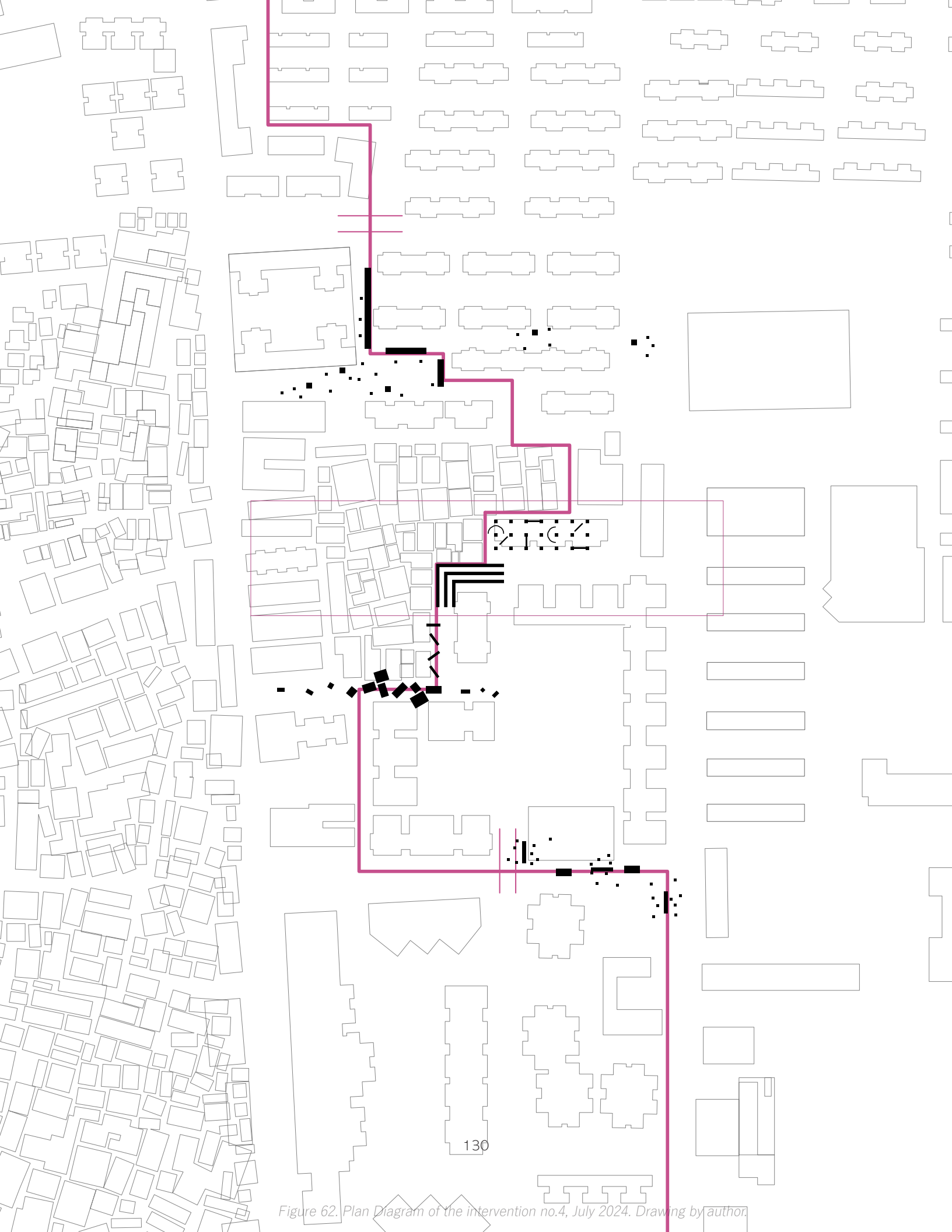
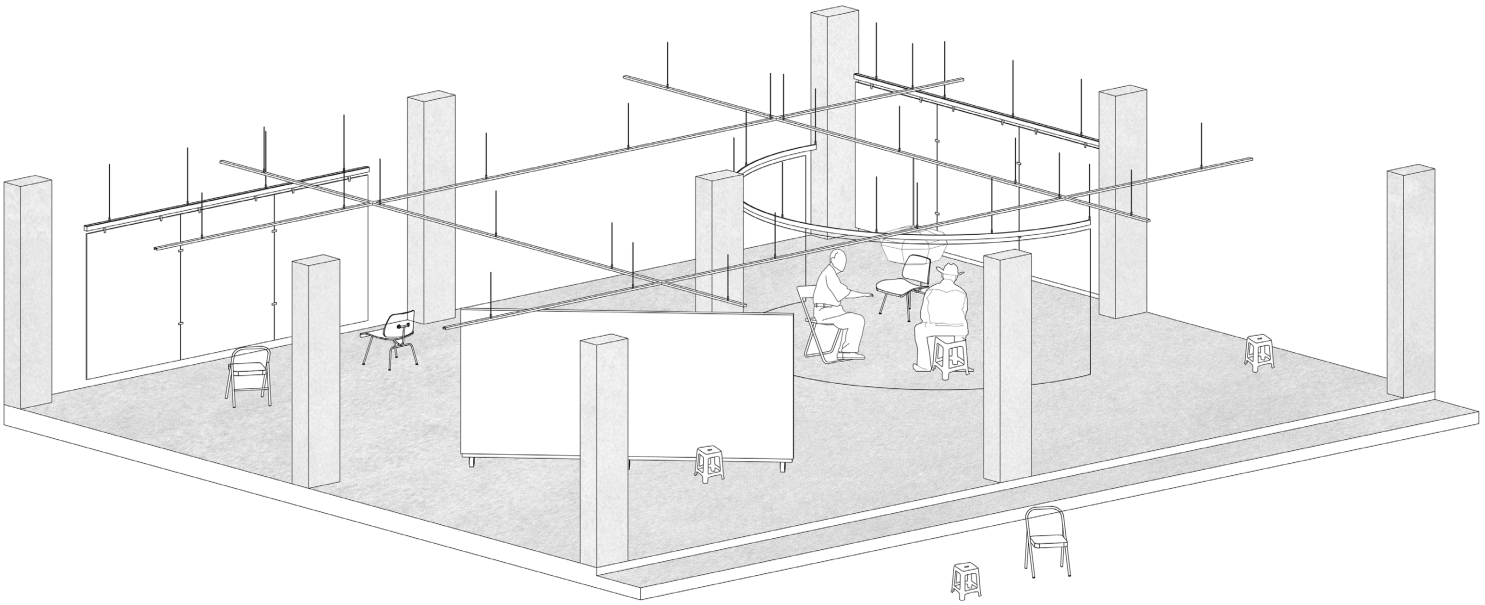


Figure 62. Plan Diagram of the intervention no.4, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.4



Teahouse/Bar;

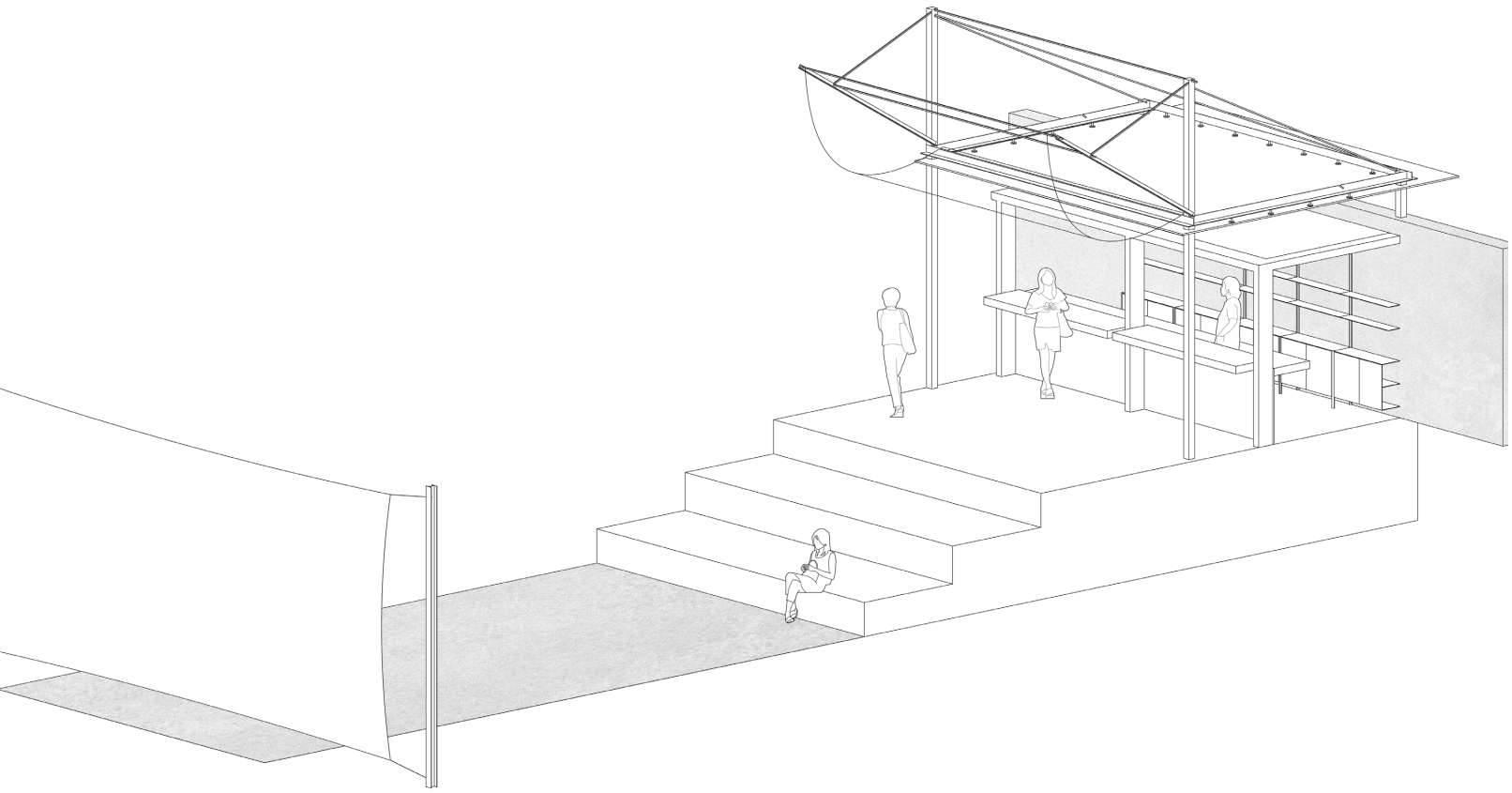
Majiang/Exhibition Area;

Movie Screen/ Live Music

Performance Space

Figure 63. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 4, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.4



Teahouse/Bar;

Majiang/Exhibition Area;

Movie Screen/ Live Music

Performance Space

Figure 64. Zoom-in line drawing of an element from Intervention No. 4, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.4



Teahouse/Bar;

Majiang/Exhibition Area;

Movie Screen/ Live Music

Performance Space

Figure 65. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

Intervention no.4



Teahouse/Bar;

Majiang/Exhibition Area;

Movie Screen/ Live Music

Performance Space

Figure 66. Perspective drawing of Intervention No. 3, July 2024. Drawing by author.

5.3 Phrase 2 Vision

In the vision presented in the postscript of my thesis, I propose architecture interventions that further facilitates a cross- boundary between the university and the urban village. These interventions are plug into each other's spaces at a small scale, allowing adaptability to change. Inspired by the work of Atelier bow wow who explore small-scale, leftover space and by the German firm raumlaborberlin who focuses on informal, temporary structures, adaptable to change as per the users' needs. The potential programs are rooted in their context and respond very directly to local communities. For example, university programs—such as workshops, exhibitions, or student services—can be plugged into the urban village, while village programs—such as food stalls, craft shops, or community events—can be plugged into the university fabric. These interventions also encourage embodied, multisensory exploration that goes beyond only visual consumption. They aim to avoid short-term viral aesthetics driven by social media, which often lead to superficial engagement and accelerate tourist-driven gentrification.

Atelier Bow-Wow, *Pet Architecture Guide Book: Living Spheres Vol. 2* (Tokyo: World Photo Press, 2002), ISBN 978-4-8465-2327-5.

Raumlabor Berlin, *Raumlabor Berlin* (Berlin: Raumlabor Berlin, founded 1999), accessed July 22, 2025, https://raumlabor.net/. The firm is a Berlin-based research and design collective that conducts "research-based design" and urban interventions through collaborative, community-inclusive processes

Section 6 Conclusion

The thesis focuses on both spatial and social perspectives to analyze how the logic of pursuing speed and efficiency has deepened urban fragmentation and social disconnection. Physical boundaries and digital platforms; make the gated university community and residential communities feel like a safe and comfortable space, however this safety and comfort are achieved by isolating inhabitants from the diverse social ecology of the adjacent urban village.

The biggest issue with the boundaries is they are invisible and embedded in the hukou system, digital platforms, and a algorithmic control, and reinforced by a generation trapped in competition, who see cross-boundary opportunities as unproductive. Therefore, the first step of design is not to simply subvert these boundaries, but to make them visible and to make people aware of the different communities nearby and build the conversation across the differences.

While it seeks to encourage interaction between existing groups and particularly empower and give visibility to the urban villagers, there is always the risk of such interventions changing the very social fabric of the existing village, or causing gentrification, and turn the area into a trendy "check-in" spot driven by social media.

Similar ideas have been tested in other Chinese cities. In Shenzhen, interventions in places like Dafen Village and Nantou Ancient Town aimed to introduce public programs while preserving local character but often drew criticism for prioritizing image-making and tourism over the needs of local residents. These cases reflect a deeper dilemma:

in an age where efficiency often overrides connection, even well-intentioned design may risks reinforcing exclusion.

We are living in an era of deepening boundaries. The world is becoming increasingly fragmented. Individuals are becoming more and more isolated. Our tolerance for difference is declining. Efficiency and functionality dominate how cities are organized.
As Biao Xiang said, today's cities have excessive functionality and insufficient social ecology. Crossing boundaries challenge our sense of comfort and familiarity. Communities achieve a sense of safety through enclosure. But that safety is built by isolating us from the complex and diverse surrounding social ecology. It is in that real and uncertain world beyond the boundary that we may rediscover connection and draw strength from.

Tiancheng Zhou et al., "The Neglected Voices within Urban Village Regeneration as a Historic Urban Landscape: A Case Study of Nantou Village in Shenzhen," *Current Urban Studies* 10 (2022): 763–86, https://doi.org/10.4236/cus.2022.104044.

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Appendix

Image Usage Permission

The following is a screenshot of a conversation with the photographer “江河漫读” on Xiaohongshu (RedNote), in which permission was granted to use the photo titled *A student picking up food from a delivery locker while a delivery worker waits nearby* (Figure 17).

