Xiahong Hua and Shen Zhuang

# Everyday Change and the Unrecognisable System

BAOSAHN

JIADING

QINGPU

NEXTMIXING
2016-

N1

JING'AN

PUTUO

?

HONGKOU

A4

Xijiangwan Office
2016-2017

HUANGPU

S1

N1

CHANGNING

A1

A5

A1

Changshun Office
2009-2014

STORAGE
2015-

QINGPU

A2

A3

XUHUI

A3

A2

Guiping Office
2014-2015

MINHANG

Kaixuannan Of
2015-2016
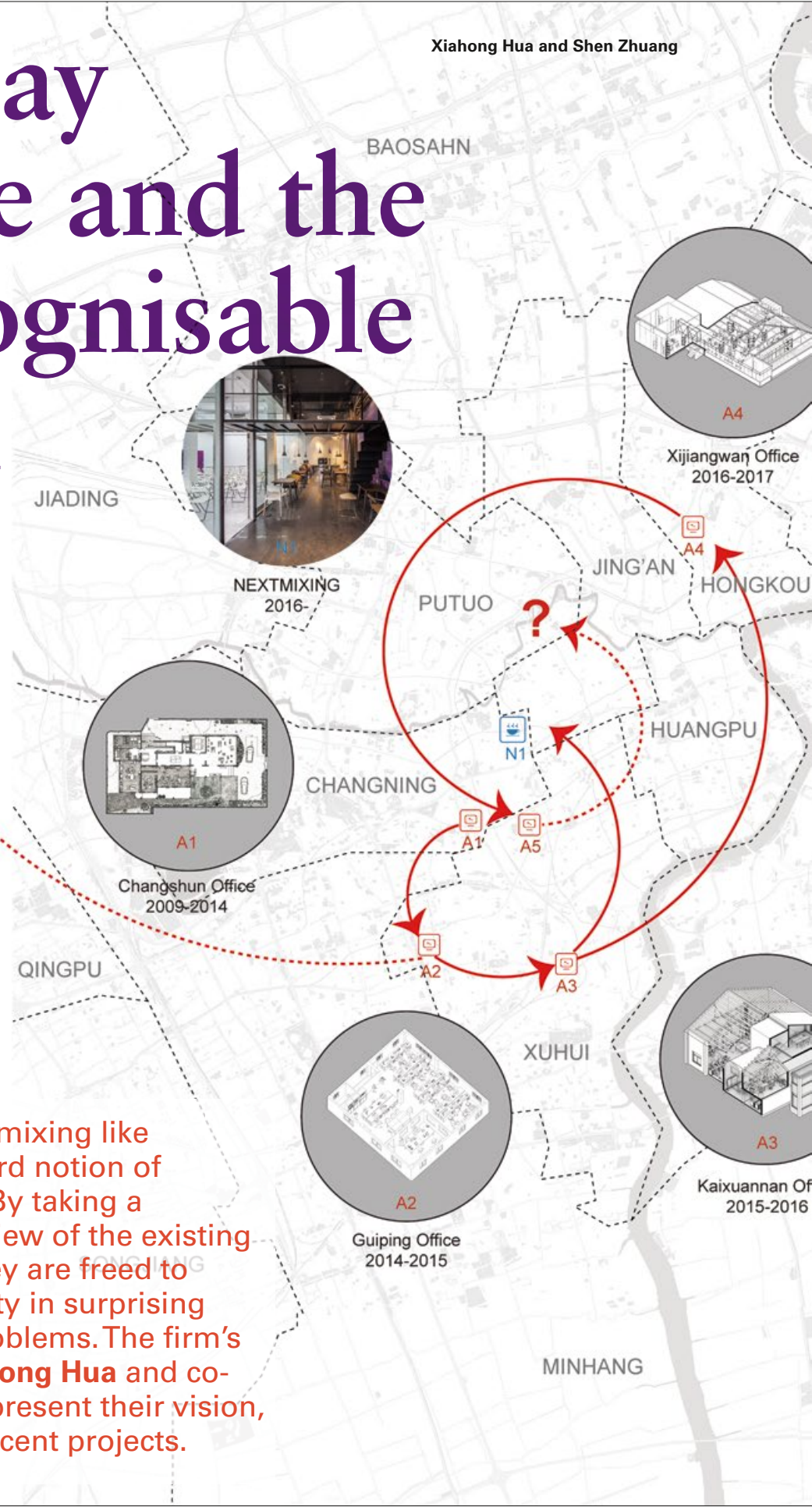
Shanghai's Atelier Archmixing like to challenge the standard notion of architectural legibility. By taking a pragmatically neutral view of the existing urban environment, they are freed to exploit urban complexity in surprising ways that solve real problems. The firm's Academic Advisor **Xiahong Hua** and co-founder **Shen Zhuang** present their vision, working method and recent projects.

In 2014, failing to find a suitable long-term solution as its lease was coming to an end, the practice initiated a plan of annual moves. The 'New Year, New Office' programme calls for a workplace in a different region of Shanghai every year, with a concurrent urban research programme focused on the new area. The workplace was divided into two parts: storage in the suburbs (S1) and an office. In 2016 the office was further divided, into a nomadic design and research office (A2–A5) and a multifunctional gallery and cultural venue (N1) in the downtown area.

A5

Gongcheng Office
2017–

This was the practice's fifth office, located near one of the city's busiest commercial centres. Punching holes in the walls of this former kindergarten turned separate classrooms into connected offices that were equipped with Archmixing-designed portable furniture. The pink walls, educational accessories and traces of the demolition were deliberately kept.

For Shanghai-based Atelier Archmixing, design practice is informed by a turn to the everyday. Since it was established in 2009, the studio has been concentrating on familiar, typical programmes in Shanghai and its neighbouring cities, towns and villages in the Yangtze River Delta. The majority of the projects have been small educational, commercial and community-service facilities with humble budgets, and the briefs have included partial interior or facade renovations for modest structures of a type not usually considered historically significant. Attention to everyday urbanism has proven a necessary and effective way of grasping the ever-changing essence of the region's built environment, and of developing homegrown design strategies in response.

## New Year, New Office

In recent decades, Chinese cities such as Shanghai have undergone all manner of architectural change, from top-down development and renovation to informal, bottom-up construction and temporary installation. Since 2012, Atelier Archmixing has undertaken a series of urban studies in Shanghai, both independently and collaboratively, and these have contributed to the studio's belief that everyday transformations – large or small, glorious or banal – are not inconsequential to new practices, but rather a source of inspiration.

In 2014, unable to find a suitable new long-term space, the practice initiated a 'new year, new office' plan, moving its workplace to a different quarter of the city each year, meanwhile observing, experiencing and analysing everyday urbanism at the neighbourhood scale. To facilitate this programme, the studio was divided into three parts based on function and frequency of use. Storage is now hidden inexpensively in the suburbs; the seasonal exhibition and lecture venue is in the downtown area, where it realises economic independence as a flexible commercial space, and the main office is nomadic. The practice has so far transformed the functional and formal traces of five diverse spaces into suitable design studios. This constant seeking out, adapting, adjusting and reusing of different spaces has encouraged the architects to focus more on the interiors of both buildings and the cities in which they are set.[1] 'New year, new office' has been not only an experiment in one firm's positioning of itself within the city, but also a laboratory for cost-effective contextual design and the creation of an improvisatory, nomadic work culture.

## Analytic Restoration

The studio's urban research focuses on utility and the requirements of living and how these are expressed in the built environment. The architects have found that changes in the everyday world encompass both adaptation to existing conditions and the application of realisable forms and readily available crafts and materials. Huangma Club (2017), a residential settlement in Shanghai, showcases what an informal construction can achieve both spatially and technologically in a leftover urban corner. In the practice's Hengfengli urban study (2017), the 260-metre (85-foot) long facade had acquired in the course of its living evolution countless structural and mechanical additions. To determine the divergences between current conditions and the original construction, the practice developed an approach called 'analytic restoration', which applies separate diagrams to the various supplements or alterations to the former structure. When classifying these items, according to either orthodox architectural categories or new, ad-hoc groupings, all elements, architectural and non-architectural (conventionally conceived), are accorded equal weight. Each contributes independently to an authentic living purpose, without the aggregate necessarily coalescing into a unified logic. Effectiveness is the only criterion.

## Spatial Redundancy

In Chinese everyday urbanism, a part or fragment typically relies on a whole system to realise a practical goal. A balcony turns into a kitchen; a staircase supports a room; a roof is home to a magnificent pigeon coop. Such features are revealed, for example, in the firm's research on the 'One Half House' in Shanghai. Hidden in an ordinary residential area, its long linear structure is half dead, with bricks blocking the windows and doors, guarding against illegal occupation after the previous residents had moved
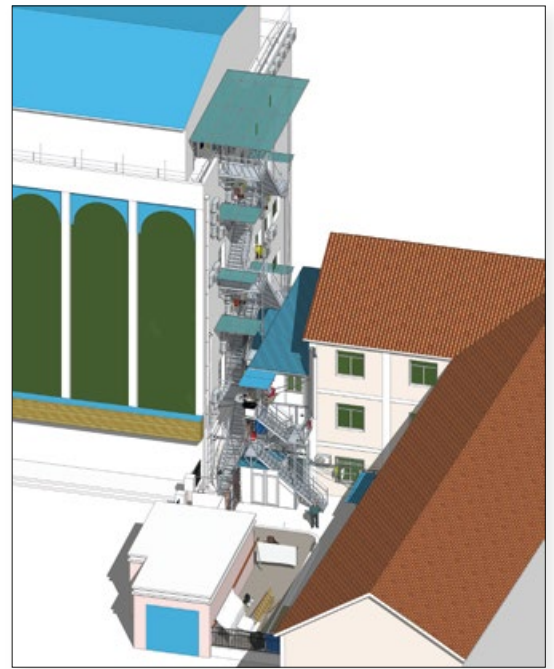


Atelier Archmixing,
Huangma Club urban study,
Tongxin Road,
Shanghai,
2017

An example of an informal, improvised construction, filling the 5.6-metre (18.4-foot) emergency-exit space between two old buildings. To reach the illegal rooftop hostel, a five-storey steel staircase was inserted, accompanied by a three-storey dormitory and its narrow stairs and slim corridors. The entrance yard was occupied by a shared laundry room. Hectic life covered all vertical and horizontal surfaces. Steel or plastic panels, furniture, housewares, domestic appliances and unidentifiable detritus – all were employed as building materials. Unfortunately, the club was demolished soon after the practice's investigation



Atelier Archmixing,
Hengfengli urban study,
Shanyin Road,
Shanghai,
2017

Sixteen *lilong* houses, built in 1920, form a 260-metre (85-foot) boundary along the street. After decades of social movements, these townhouses originally designed for rich families had been separated into various rooms for rent. This 'analytic restoration' drawing shows different layers of supplement and alteration to the original structure.

out. Due to structural, economic and social reasons, the other half, with all its surface additions, including air conditioners, laundries and plants, is still functioning and busy with residents. Here, the unused part can be seen as an extreme example of 'spatial redundancy',[2] such that the modification, accumulation, repetition, superabundance, residue and dislocation of material spaces and cultural symbols is not assessed negatively, as 'remnant' or 'superfluous'. Impure, inefficient and imperfect sites are not necessarily harmful; rather, they are inevitable. In the field of information technology, unused spaces and redundancy are harnessed for error correction and to avoid critical failure; similarly, by the firm's thinking, in the urban built environment, spatial redundancy uncovers complexity and contradiction, especially in developing regions such as China, and reserves otherwise unvalued aspects of the everyday for the future city.

Seen through a historical lens, 'spatial redundancy' reflects the evolution of living spaces. It encourages architects to reconsider what 'interior' – of both buildings and the city – means for future architecture. Interior has long been underestimated in the architectural field, as secondary and not as essential as the exterior. Nevertheless, in a well-developed and constantly changing world, as a space directly interacts with real life, its interior becomes the primary space within which architects can operate. Layer upon layer, the accumulation of the inner surfaces of diverse components results in a new architecture. In the urban context, alleys are commonly encountered that have been gradually built up from various architectural or structural fragments and domestic items: gates and doors, steps, platforms, drying racks, bicycle shelters, canopies, outdoor furniture and even mop buckets can constitute the urban interior, such that no boundary divides public life from private.

According to the systematic thinking embedded in classical and modern architecture, change is meaningful, and, if positive, progressive. By contrast, Atelier Archmixing maintains that all buildings are in a temporary state of present usage. The urban context is constituted of successive 'independent' moments, and the extant spaces from other times, with their divergent origins and features, are akin to the varied life forms simultaneously coexisting on earth.

**The Unrecognisable System**
To challenge the established 'Recognisable System' in mainstream academic thinking, which values architectural phenomena and design canons with legible features and obvious sources, Atelier Archmixing has coined a new term, the 'Unrecognisable System',[3] to signify architectural instances with opaque origins and hybrid qualities. The Unrecognisable System is a theoretical understanding/reading of the existing built environment, as well as a foundation for future design practice. It advocates taking the urban context as a neutral background, applying all kinds of concepts, forms and techniques without prejudice to meet new utilitarian requirements, using and mixing these flexibly, and liberating them from their origins and inherited meanings.

The Unrecognisable System describes both an attitude to design and a methodology. On the one hand, it views the current situation, whether natural or artificial, as neutral; on the other it means never to privilege a new intervention or a contemporary idea over a common tradition. For instance, Olion Kindergarten (2017) was a commission to renovate a former community centre, used only for five years, into a day nursery in an emerging suburban area of

Shanghai. The designers took the banal three-storey building as a neutral platform instead of a final spatial and structural order. The maximum number of classrooms with standard facility units was inserted in a conventional column-and-beam system, but distinctive characteristics achieved with the introduction of double spaces and scales, and the shaping of the 2.25-metre (7.38-foot) high suspended ceilings to form the dominant scale, creating a little world. Scattered boxes, vertical or inclined, solid or transparent, colourful or white, cut through the lower level to touch the structural ceiling 3.5 to 4.5 metres (11.5 to 14.8 feet) high. The resulting houses-in-a-house, like spatial nesting dolls, helped to achieve diversity within standard rooms. All equipment was exposed equally, as building elements. Old and new structures and scales integrate, not only inside but also outside. Colourful squares painted alternately on the exterior surfaces were deliberately organised to obscure the former storey divisions. Using colour patterns to distinguish the renovated building from its surroundings was economical and effective; no change to the old architectural organisation, even of the windows, was needed.

Atelier Archmixing,
Olion Kindergarten,
Baoshan District,
Shanghai,
2017

In an emerging suburban area, a former community centre in use for only five years was renovated as a kindergarten. A light steel zigzag gallery was added as an entrance path and a spatial division setting off the playground. Graphic patterns on the exterior economically and effectively obscure the storey divisions and distinguish the renovated building from its surroundings. No changes to the elevation, not even to the fenestration, were needed.
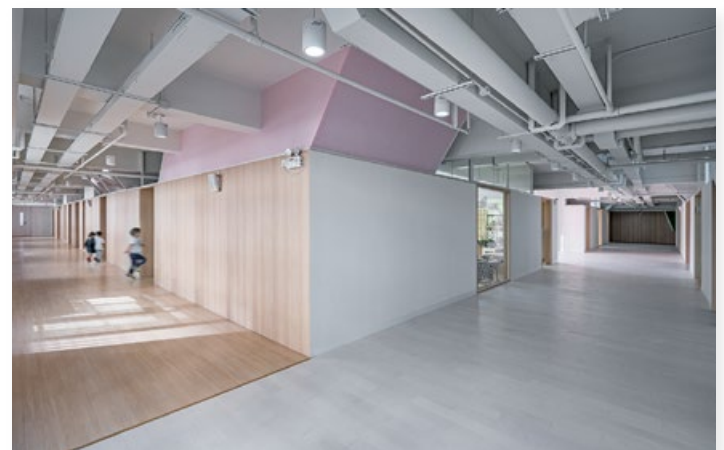




Two scale systems were applied within a conventional column-and-beam system. A 2.25-metre (7.38-foot) scale assembled from standard walls and big windows created an intimate world for the children. Between the lower ceiling and the structural one 3.5 to 4.5 metres (11.5 to 14.8 feet) high, scattered boxes – vertical or inclined, solid or transparent, colourful or white – provide diversity within classrooms of standard size and function.

Five urban facade renovations Atelier Archmixing completed from 2012 to 2017 illustrate well the firm's belief that the fragment matters to both everyday urbanism and new design.[4] One noteworthy example is the renovation for the Longhua Elder Care Center (2016), located in a dense residential area in downtown Shanghai. In this instance, a new building, with only the foundation completed, was redesigned. In the previous construction drawings, the plan was poorly arranged, with all rooms leading off the corridor and no public spaces, just like in a hospital. The corridor was dark, and the one balcony isolated and largely occupied by the air-conditioner. Initially, the only parts subject to the designers' intervention were the exterior walls, balconies and roofs. To explore the potential of these parts to humanise the daily lives of the residents, the architect persuaded the client to refocus the programme, from surface beautification to spatial reorganisation. Continuous balconies of varying sizes were built out from the exterior walls. All rooms were provided two public accesses. Some parts of the corridor were widened, and roof windows were added to improve illumination and ventilation. Glazed meeting rooms were installed on the empty roofs, where residents could watch television, play cards, chat or just sunbathe. These new communal spaces incorporate light and inexpensive structures and materials, in ways that reflect the informal additions and modifications widespread in the everyday surroundings. Whether from the perspective of the programme or the design strategy, such interventions are 'soft' and not easily categorised, but they are effective and efficient in solving functional problems. Moreover, such subtle changes are exactly where a true architectural identity resides.

Atelier Archmixing,
Lili House,
Suzhou,
Jiangsu province,
2012

An old workshop in the ancient town is surrounded by sloped-roof dwellings. The house is designed to be accessed from a narrow lane beside the gable wall rather than from the front yard. A walk along the canal, down the main street, through a dark lane and finally into the building offers an impressive experience of progressive enclosure within a traditional town environment.
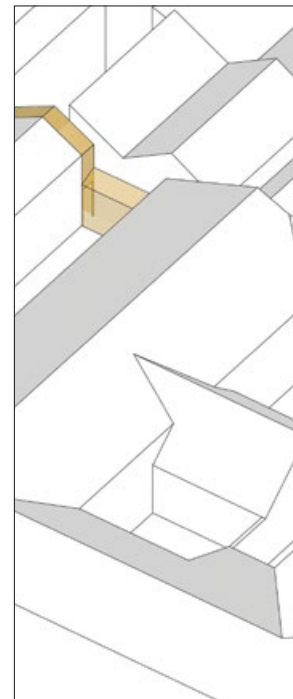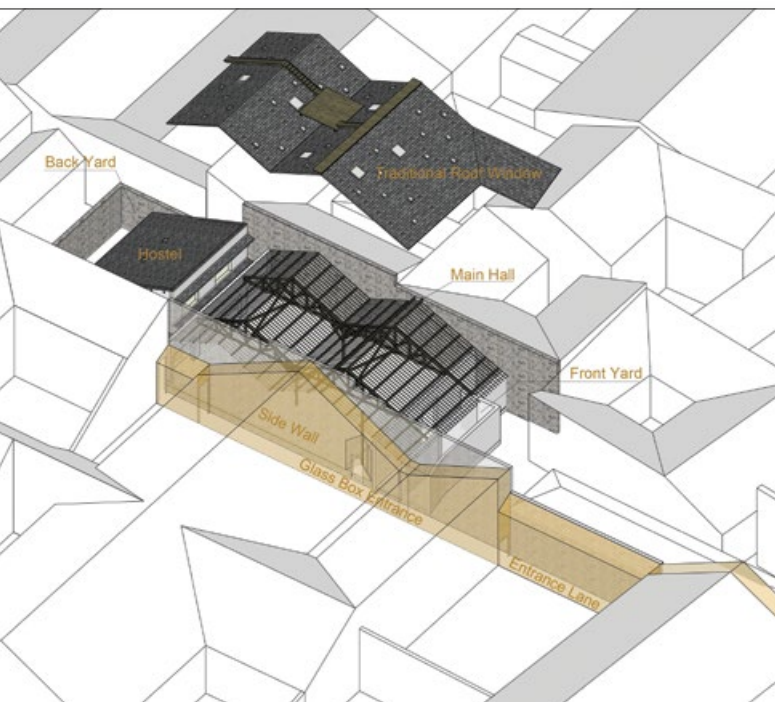
Atelier Archmixing,
Longhua Elder Care Center,
Xuhui District,
Shanghai,
2016

Continuous balconies of varying sizes were built out from the exterior walls, creating an open public space for formerly isolated rooms.
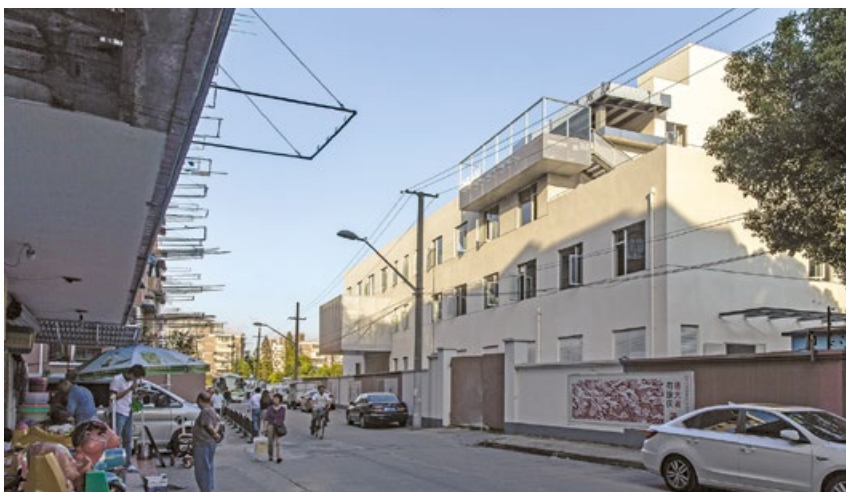
Public spaces from inexpensive structures and materials add light to the elevation and resemble the informal additions and modifications widespread in the surrounding everyday setting.

Forty traditional-style skylights lead to a 'hall' under the sloping roof and the sky. Walking out from a window and standing on the little platform, one is totally embraced by hills of grey tiles.

The Unrecognisable System tends to break the boundaries between inside and outside, private and public. The Lili House (2012), a renovation and extension of an aged, plain workshop building in the ancient town of Suzhou in Jiangsu province, showcases Atelier Archmixing's insight into the architectural meaning of the interior, not only of the building, but also of the city. All around the structure, with its two adjoining gable roofs, are sloped-roof dwellings. The designer chose to access this single-storey house from a narrow lane beside the gable wall, rather than from the front yard. A walk along the town's canal, down its main street, through the dark entry lane and finally into the building offers an impressive experience of progressive interiorisation within a traditional town environment. Since the sloping roof is another interface with the surroundings, a small bridge was built to connect skylight and slope. When walking out onto it, one is totally embraced by hills of grey tiles. Under the roof, patchy sunlight penetrates through 40 traditional-style skylights that connect the otherwise gloomy inside with the blue sky. At one corner of the hall stands a diagonal glass-box entrance. When reaching the end of the dim back alley, a passer-by will encounter this bright portal, a kind of lamp onto the alley, and glimpse the private scene.

**The Architecture of Change**
Following years of urban studies and design practice, Atelier Archmixing advocates an 'architecture of change' fostered by the belief that the meaning of building is to provide a temporary vessel for ever-changing life. As a dynamic process, the building incorporates a continuously evolving set of objectives, strategies and actions; it is not its own end, as a design product or artistic creation.

Architectural change is not synonymous with progress or innovation. Design practice entails applying effective strategies and technologies to meet present demands rather than chasing revolutionary concepts, pure forms, novel materials or elaborate constructions.

To a large extent, all architectural changes are equivalent. The system has no priority over the fragment; unity has no priority over parts; the exterior has no priority over the interior. For everyday urbanism, typical features are never monumental landmarks of permanence, but fragments of highly compressed space and time. In a region with a large population and rapid urbanisation such as China, a signature architectural performance is seldom around for long, whereas utilitarian efficiency is ever more urgent and pragmatic.[5] ⌂

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Notes
1. Zhuang Shen and Hua Xiahong, 'Work Within the City', *Time+Architecture*, 5, 2015, pp 100–07.
2. Zhuang Shen and Hua Xiahong, 'Spatial Redundancy', *Time+Architecture, op cit,* pp 108–11.
3. Zhuang Shen and Hua Xiahong, 'Everyday Change, Unrecognizable System', in *New Architecture* 6, 2014, pp 16–19.
4. Hua Xiahong and Zhuang Shen, 'On Façade Renovation', *Time+Architecture*, 4, 2016, pp 24–8.
5. This paper was funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China programme 'Study on Design Strategies of Ordinary Building Renewal Based on the Everyday Efficiency of Urban Space' (No 51778419).