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The Uncanny City

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The Uncanny City

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

Grace Chee Ching Him

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
[Masterof Architecture]

January 2021
(Month and Year Thesis Submitted)

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(signature)

[Student Name]
Grace Chee

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[Thesis Advisor Name]

The Uncanny City

Grace Chee (MArch I 2021)
Advised by Mack Scogin

"The "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."

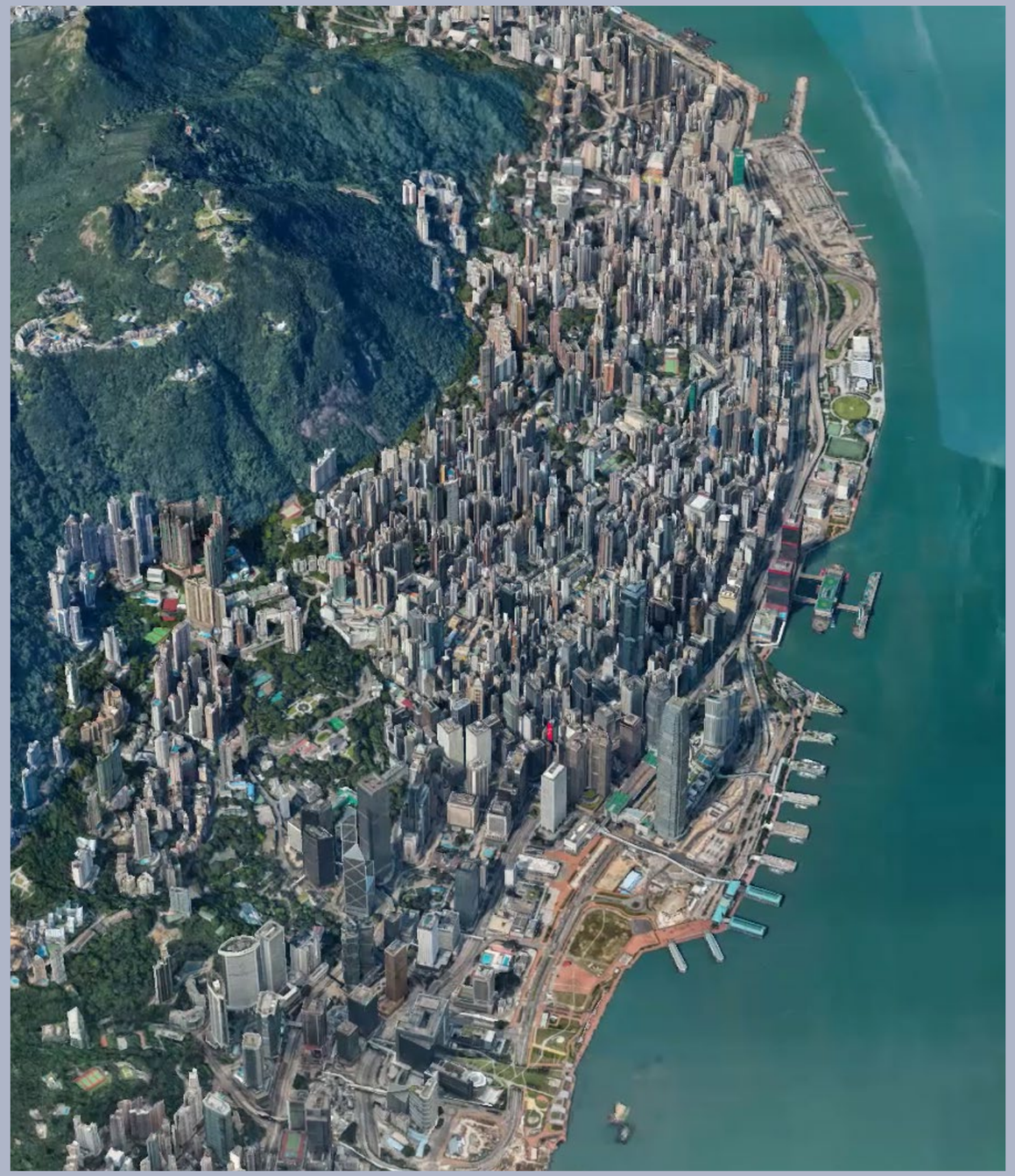
"Everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light."

- The "Uncanny" (1919), Sigmund Freud

The Uncanny—a state defined by Freud to be "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us"—has long been a wellspring for artists, writers, and philosophers. It captures a particular sensibility of anxiety and alienation inherent in the human condition, and is now more than ever a precise distillation of the isolation and hopelessness felt in our modern age.

Unheimlich, the German form of "uncanny," can also be taken to mean homelessness. Amid recent social-political turmoil and perpetually unattainable property prices in my hometown of Hong Kong, the aching lack of a place to call home is a social malaise that is erupting from beneath the polished commercial logic of the city's architecture and urban plan.

This thesis translates the Uncanny from a philosophical and literary state into an architectural form and physical experience that reflects the human condition, lying in a state of delicate oscillation between the foreign and the familiar, the real and the imaginary, the rational and the irrational. The project distills and magnifies the relentless disquiet of Hong Kong's urban experience even as it endeavors to reconceptualize public space as an escape, providing a guise of relief as the city endures on.



Source: Google Earth/ Maxmar Technologies, Terrametrics

PART 1. CONTEXT

un·heim·lich
/ˌʊnˈhīmliKH/

heim·lich
/hīmliKH/

1 heimlich = known, familiar;
unheimlich = unknown, unfamiliar

2 heimlich = secret, unknown;
unheimlich = revealed, uncovered

The Trial (1962) by Orson Welles

Unheimlich

The Uncanny—a state defined by Freud to be "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us"—has always been a wellspring for artists, writers, philosophers and architects alike - De Chirico, Lacan, E.T.A. Hoffman, Hejduk, and Bernard Tschumi, just to name a few.

Freud derived this definition in part from the German form of the word, "Unheimlich", which curiously means both unknown and revealed - a seemingly contradictory state which in fact gets at a very particular sense of the familiar made strange. It is, as Maurice Blanchot put it, "the sudden eruption of what should have remained repressed".

I began the thesis project with a particular interest in Franz Kafka's stories. He is known for his ability to capture a particular sensibility of anxiety and alienation inherent in the human condition, one which is now more than ever a precise distillation of the isolation and hopelessness felt in our modern age. Kafka's writing appealed because, as Sartre explains in his essay *Aminadab*, by depicting a world turned upside down, Kafka is unique in his ability to escape outside of the human condition, thereby seeing and portraying it with a startling clarity of sight. The Uncanny and the Fantastic in literature are closely tied with the Surrealist

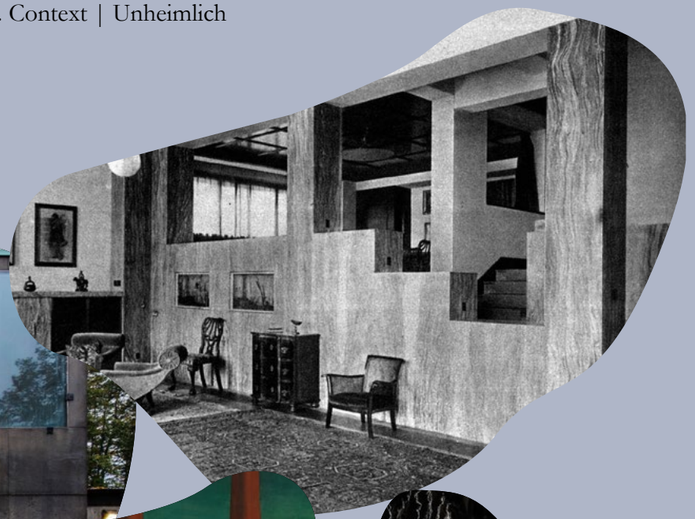
Architectural translations of the Uncanny
Scale Shifts
Disruption of the urban fabric/ground plane
Unconventional materials
Interior/exterior ambiguity
Vertical/horizontal play
Juxtaposition of nature/artifice
Light/dark
Order/chaos

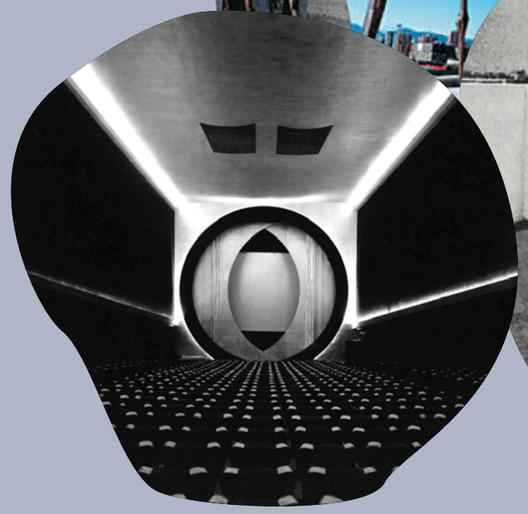
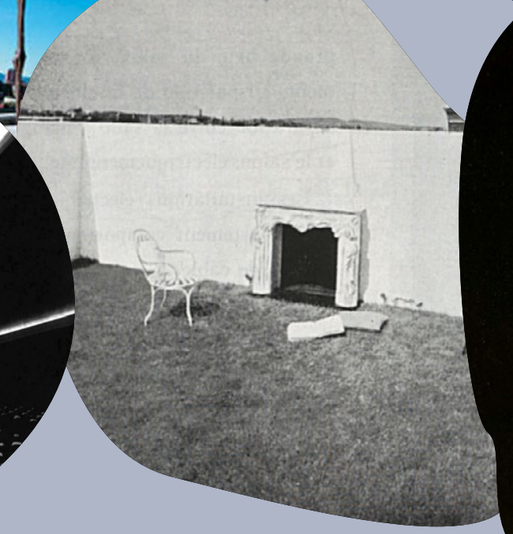
Energy Roof Perugia in Perugia, Italy (2010) by Coop Himmelb(l)au

movement, which similarly sought to access the potential of ideas and images from the subconscious, creating deliberate reversals of what was expected, and juxtaposing the banal with the extraordinary, in order to understand and reflect deeper truths in the world that are not immediately visible.

The word Uncanny comes loaded - it is multifaceted and has been interpreted - in architecture and otherwise- in multitudes of ways. As Anthony Vidler suggests in 'The Architectural Uncanny', the unhomely can cut through stylistic categorizations such as romanticism, modernism and postmodernism, instead offering a common thread of estrangement and nostalgia through which to understand the development of architecture. Contemporary design practices Coop Himmelb(l)au and Diller Scofidio + Renfro have likewise used the uncanny to expose the repressed and undermine the foundations of traditional building.

But I am interested in a more personal, phenomenological interpretation of the Uncanny drawn from a very specific urban experience and harnessed into a more comprehensible physical form of architecture, thereby questioning existing power, spatial and programmatic structures. In other words, Georges Bataille's *l'informe*, a place of delicate oscillation between the foreign and the familiar, the real and the imaginary, and the rational and the irrational.



Selected precedents:
Flower Shop (1969) by Sigurd Lewerentz, *Bruder Klaus Field Chapel* (2007) by Peter Zumthor, *Maman* at Tate London opening (1999-00) by Louis Bourgeois, *Muller House* (1929-30) by Adolf Loos, *Beistegui* (1929-31) by Le Corbusier, *The Voice of* Silence (1928) by Rene Magritte, *Second Home LA* (2019) by Selgas Canos, *Screen-O-Scope' for Film Guild Cinema* (1929) by Frederick Kiesler, Louis Soutter on Le Corbusier, *The Enigma of a Day* (1914) by Giorgio de Chirico, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* by Francis Bacon (1953), *Casa Malaparte* (1937) by Adalberto Libera for Curzio Malaparte

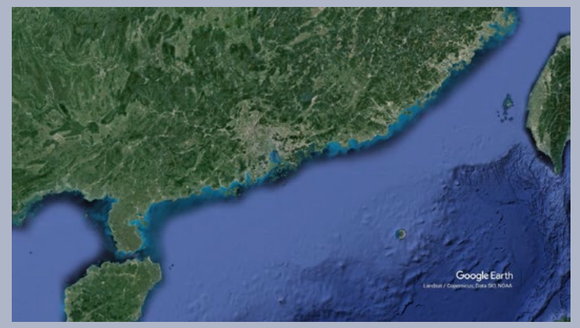
Chungking Express/ Miramax (1994) by Wong, Kar-Wai
Number of registered homeless soars (2018) by Sam Tsang/ SCMP

Homelessness

In the end, there was only one site I could pick - my hometown. This speculative thesis seeks to distill and magnify the relentless disquiet of Hong Kong's urban experience as a form of social commentary, even while it endeavours to reconceptualize public space as an escape from the endless repetition and monotony, providing a guise of relief as the city endures on. At the same time it uses the medium of abstraction as a counter condition, transforming the tyranny of a place where every square inch has to be used. The project allows for a breakdown of the logic that governs the overbearing Hong Kong experience, while still embracing - perhaps even celebrating - the essential characteristics that make the city my home.

Unheimlich can also be taken to mean homelessness. Amidst recent social-political turmoil and perpetually unattainable property prices, the aching lack of a place to call home is a widespread social malaise that is now erupting from beneath the polished commercial logic of the city's architecture and urban plan.

But Hong Kong has never really belonged anywhere. Caught in between Colonial Britain and China as a bargaining chip, it has always had its identity defined in relation to larger powers. The tourist brochures all advertise that we are 'the best of East and West'.



Source: Google Earth/ Maxmar Technologies, Terrametrics

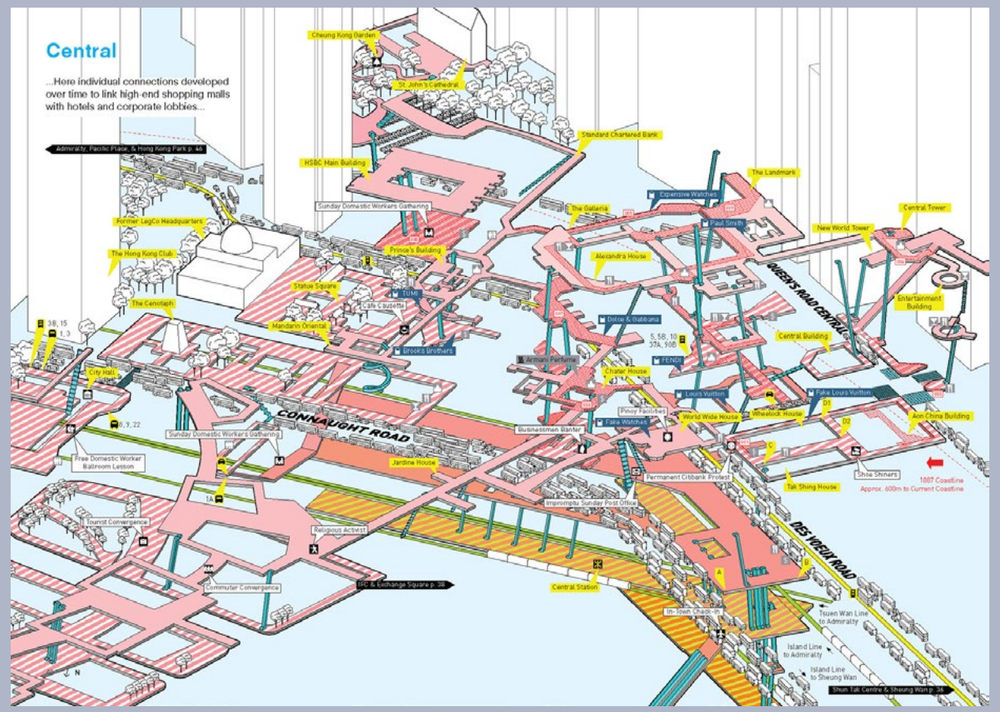
And surrounded by water and squeezed inwards by mountains on all sides, the city is in perpetual negotiation with nature for more space.

Much of the urban development adapts to the steep terrain, the same landforms that create astoundingly beautiful waterfall hikes 30 minutes from downtown, but leave Hong Kong with so little buildable space. Only about 25% of Hong Kong's land is built, with 40% designated as country parks and 35% unused. It is widely known that, as sole landowner, the government colludes with a cartel of developers, keeping property prices artificially inflated and tax revenues high. The city's famously eye-watering rents translate into tiny apartments and a lack of public space, making it difficult to find a place for one to just be and enjoy a moment of stillness. A sense of ennui pervades the urban experience as the middle class runs endlessly on the hamster wheel towards the dream of home ownership, forced to suppress the human desires for belonging and individualism.

If there is one definitive characteristic to Hong Kong, it is efficiency. As it morphed from colony and trading port to industrial city and world financial center, pragmatism has trumped all else, as is evidenced by the tempo at which passersby speed-walk on the pavement.

This also manifests in a unique system of elevated footpaths and underground passageways connecting public transportation, hotels, malls, residences, government buildings, offices and privately-owned public spaces that cover much of the city. One can work, sleep, consume and repeat, all without their feet ever touching the ground.

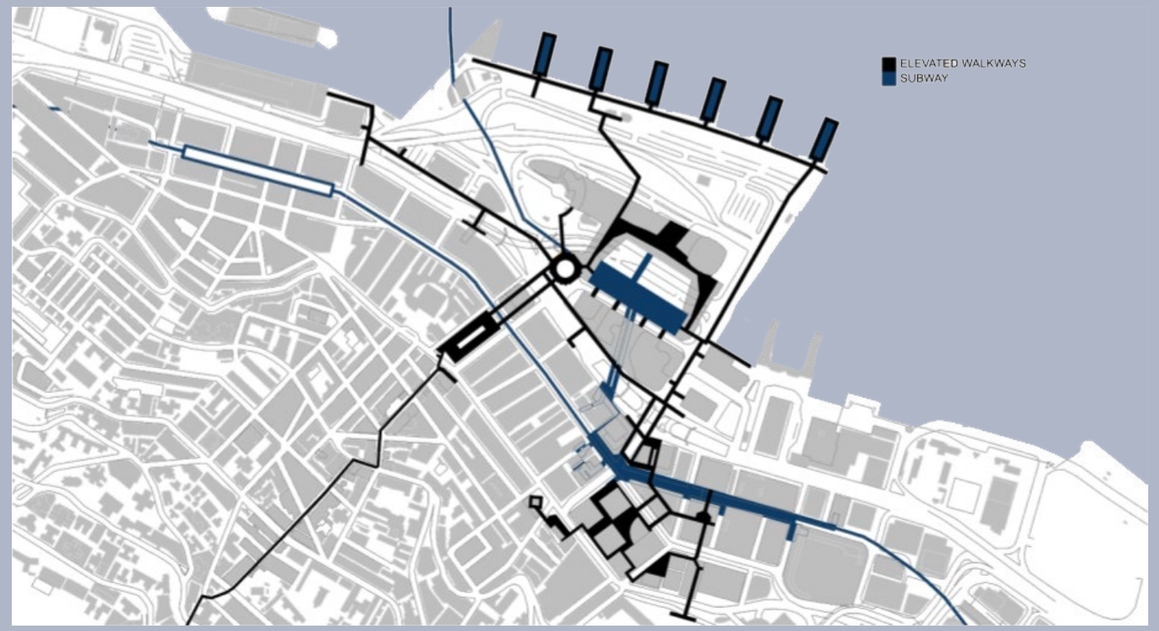
First elevated walkway connecting the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to the Prince's Building (1965), from *The Commercial Motivation behind the First Footbridge in Central* (2016) by Wang Han/Asian Cities Research



Central pedestrian network from *Cities Without Ground* (2012) by Clara Wong, Adam Frampton & Jonathan Solomon

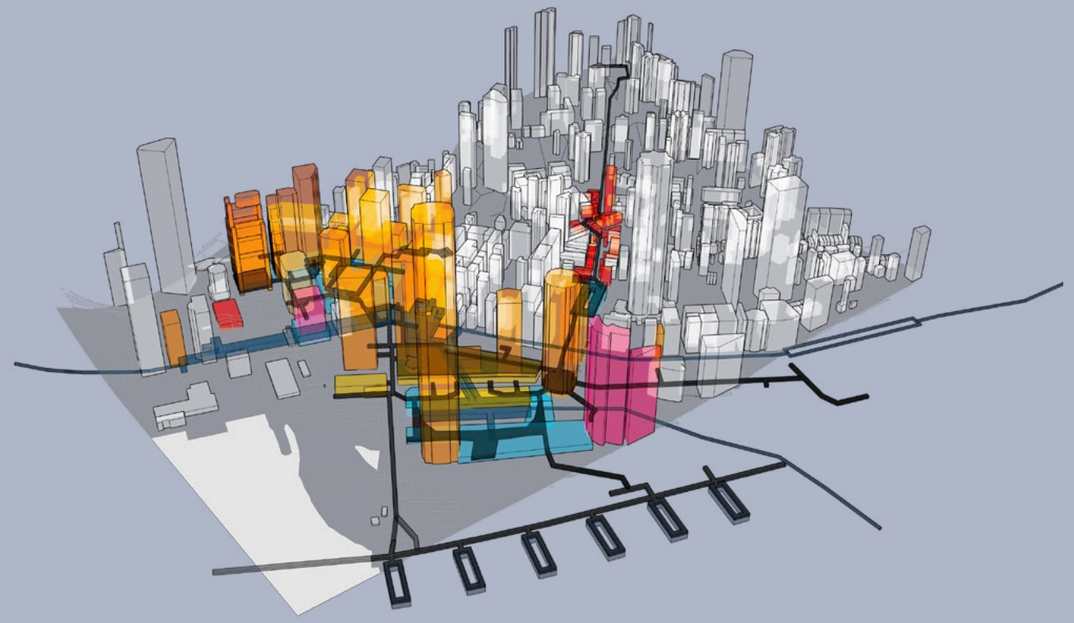
Clara Wong, Adam Frampton and Jonathan Solomon look at this complex network in their book '*Cities Without Ground*'. The system developed piecemeal with a unique and ruthlessly practical spatial logic derived from a combination of top-down master-planning and a bottom-up approach, addressing the immediate needs of developers to funnel consumers, hotel guests and office workers away from undesirable ground level traffic, dust, pollution, heat, and steep terrain. In 1965, the Hong Kong Land company, the single largest landlord in Central which owns several adjacent buildings, built an elevated walkway to connect the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to the second storey of the Prince's Building, a mall that immediately saw rental values of its second-floor units go up.

Interconnected passageways soon spread through the city, and the end result is an incredibly diverse, sprawling web cobbled together from an ad-hoc-looking hodgepodge of structures, something that is more than just infrastructure. A shadow city that mirrors the ground plane, twisting and turning in three-dimensional form. The bridges provide some of the very few covered public spaces available, and the public has, for lack of a better alternative, come to appropriate these spaces for different uses. These include the elderly playing mahjong, domestic workers finding a place to spend their Sundays off, office workers having their lunch, protests, or even entire semi-permanent living setups.

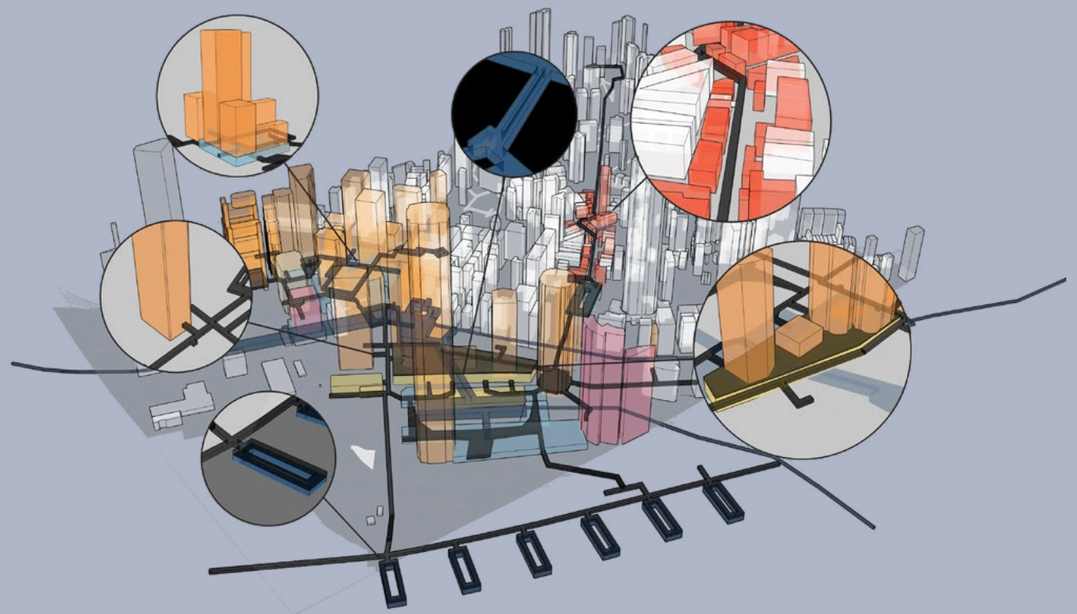


Pedestrian Network in Central, Hong Kong

Land use of buildings connected to pedestrian network

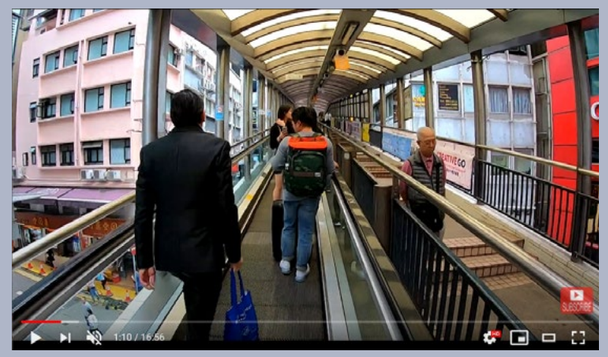


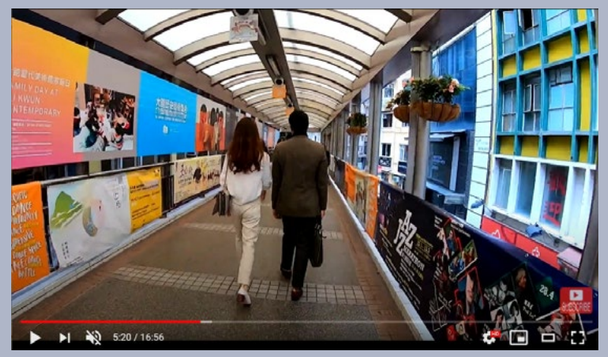
Land use of buildings connected to pedestrian network

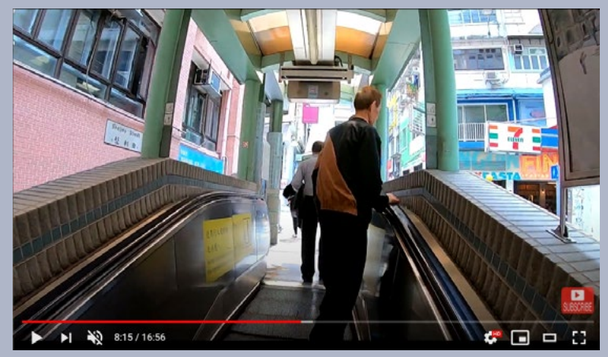


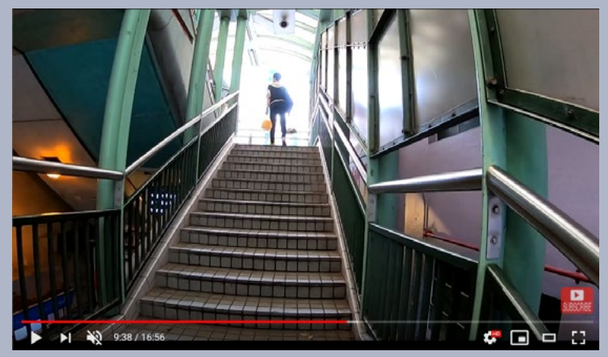
Typical conditions of interaction between bridge and building

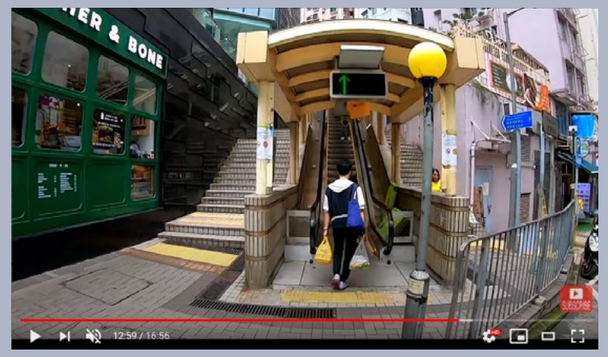
Appropriation of bridges for public activities
Sam Tsang for SCMP, Yonden Lhatoo for SCMP, Jeff Hou for The Conversation, Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

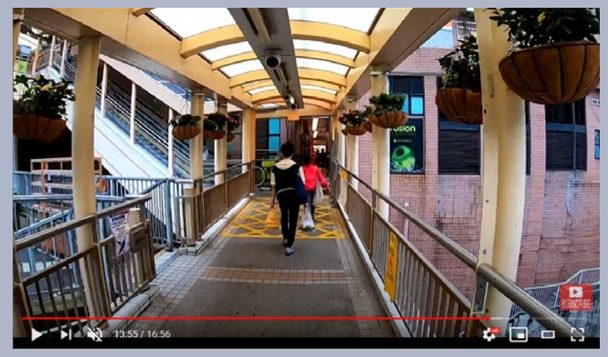


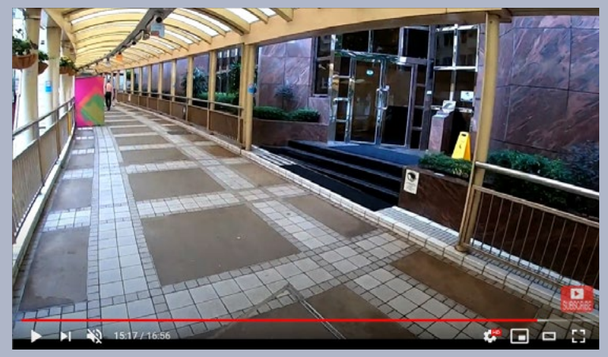








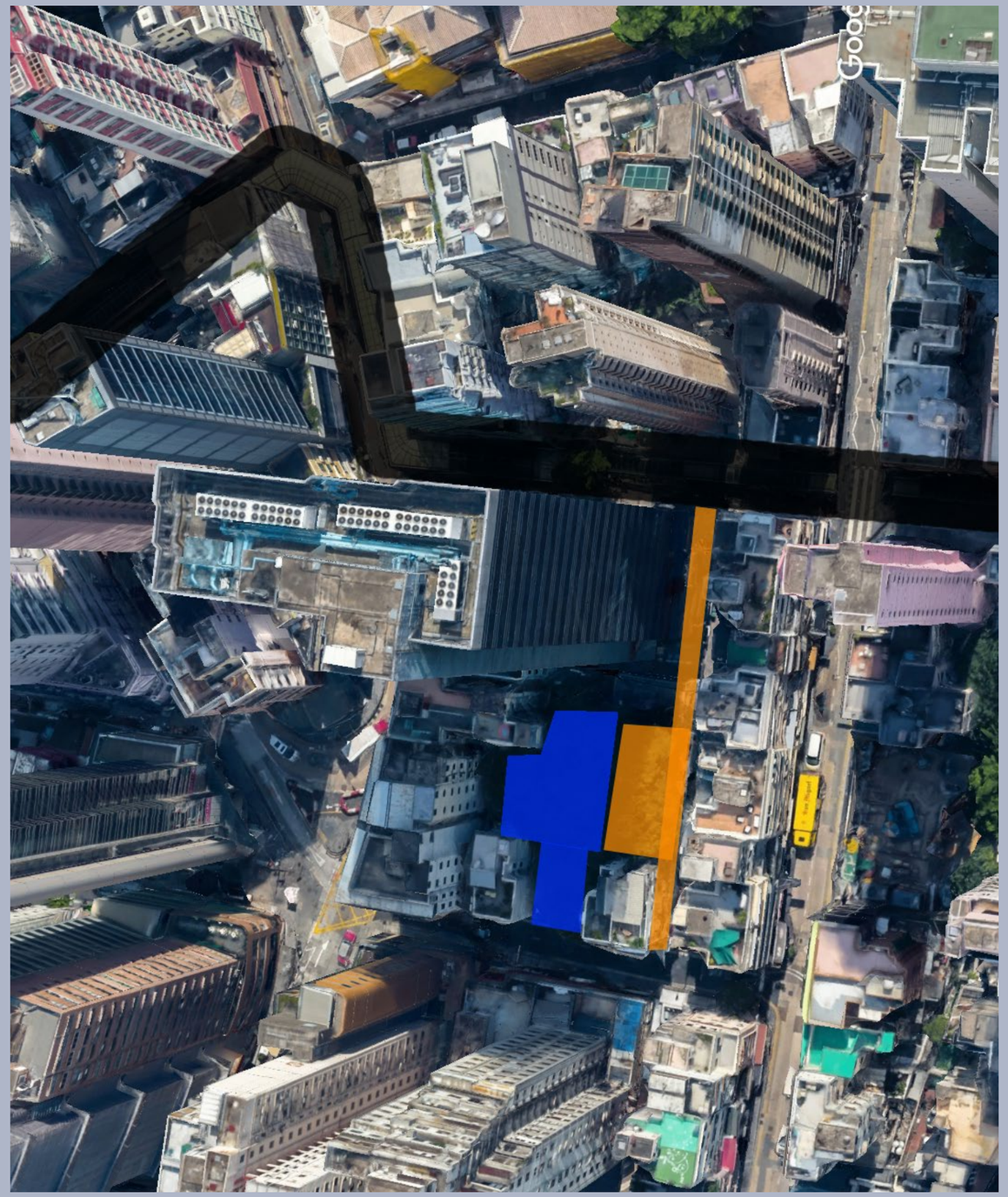




Hong Kong - Riding the Mid Level Escalators all the way to the top (2020) by Brynmag Productions/ Youtube

Can we do more with public space?

These scenes ask if we, as designers, can do more with public space. Could it be more than a large open space, where you can do more than just sit on a bench? Could it take the form of different scales, while accommodating different activities? Could it offer some temporary relief from the claustrophobia of our rooms and apartments? And in our shared search for belonging and individualism, could it be a space that offers some ownership of just a small slice of the city?



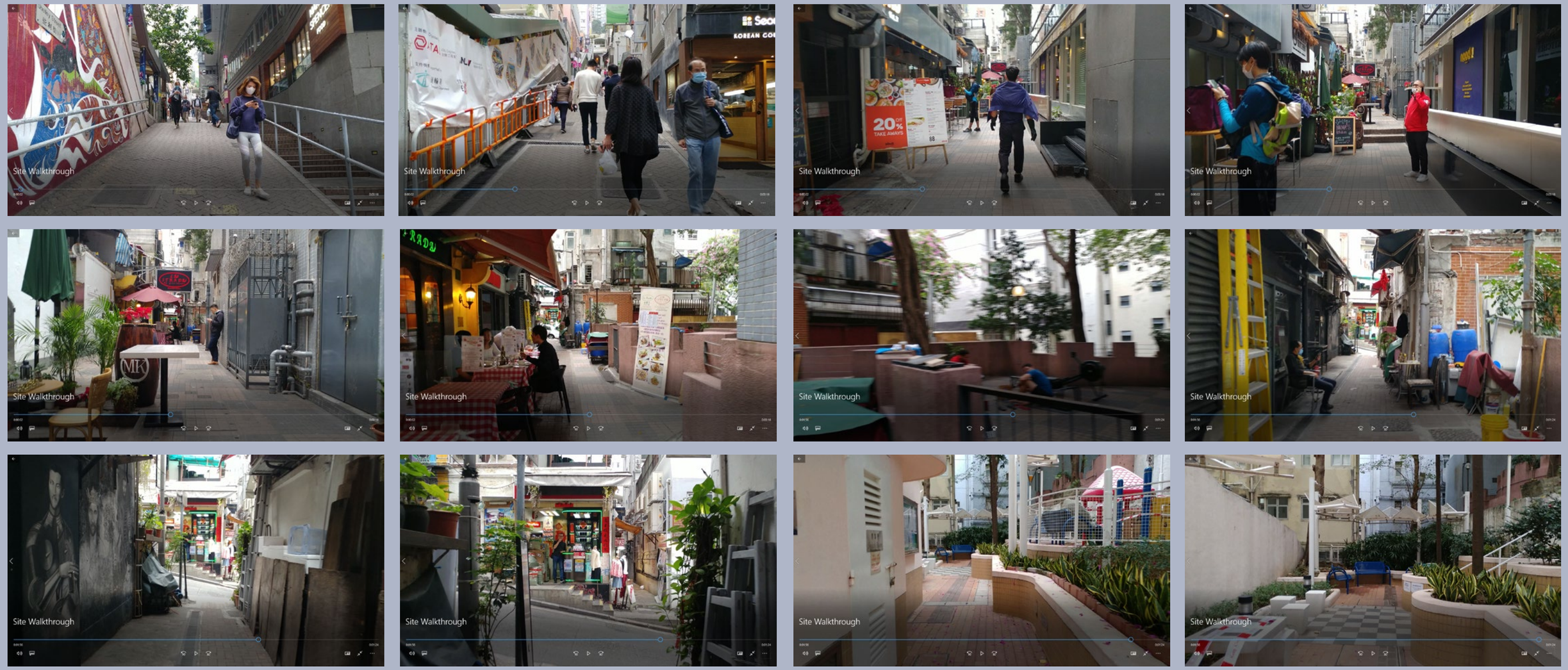
Terrain Vague

Our story takes place as an extension off one particular section of the elevated walkways - the mid levels escalator in Central, the commercial heart of Hong Kong, on the pedestrian-only Shelley Street. It is the longest outdoor covered escalator system in the world, traversing over 800m and built to transport passengers up the steep terrain with an elevation change of over 135m.

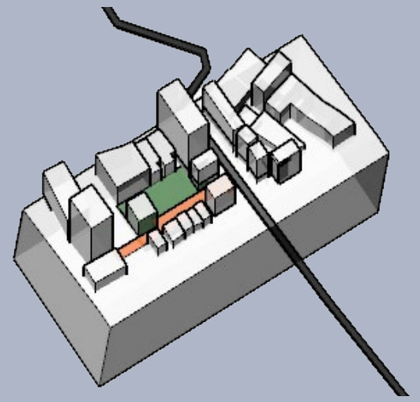
The slope creates an interesting condition in this particular block, whereby the setback in the middle is split into two unconnected levels with a large sectional difference. An alleyway cuts through the block at a higher point in the slope, while a small unused park exits out onto the other side, Graham Street, lower down.

This back side of the city block is what Ignasi de Solà-Morales termed a 'terrain vague': the form of absence in the contemporary metropolis, offering the potential for escape from the ruthlessly productive reality of the late capitalist city. In a city where space is so precious, is there a way we can utilise these unproductive places while maintaining them as 'spaces of freedom'?

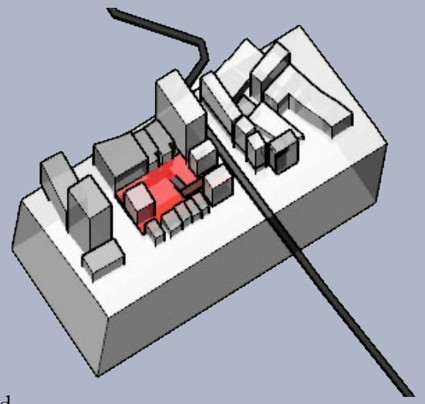
This project's answer is both yes and no. It takes the form of a void in which we are reconnected with the earth, as the most contradictory condition possible to the unrelenting density of the city.



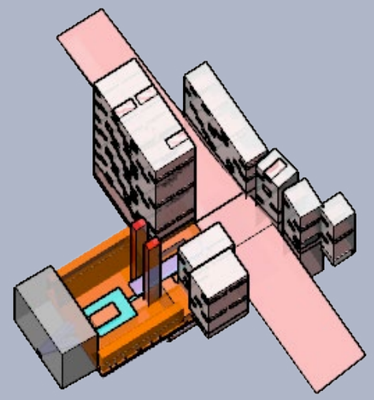
Site walk-through



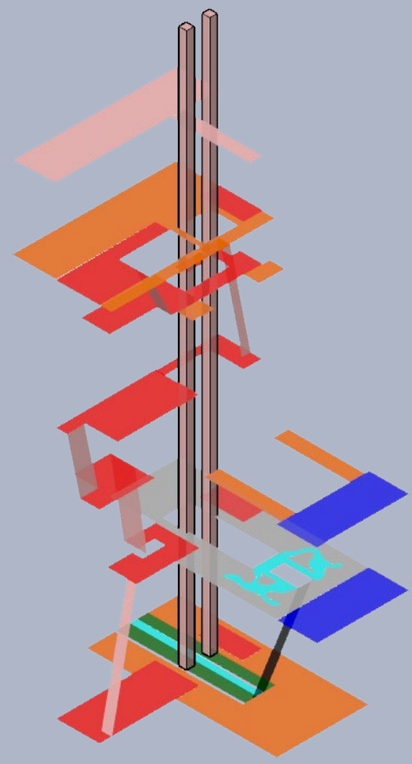
Existing



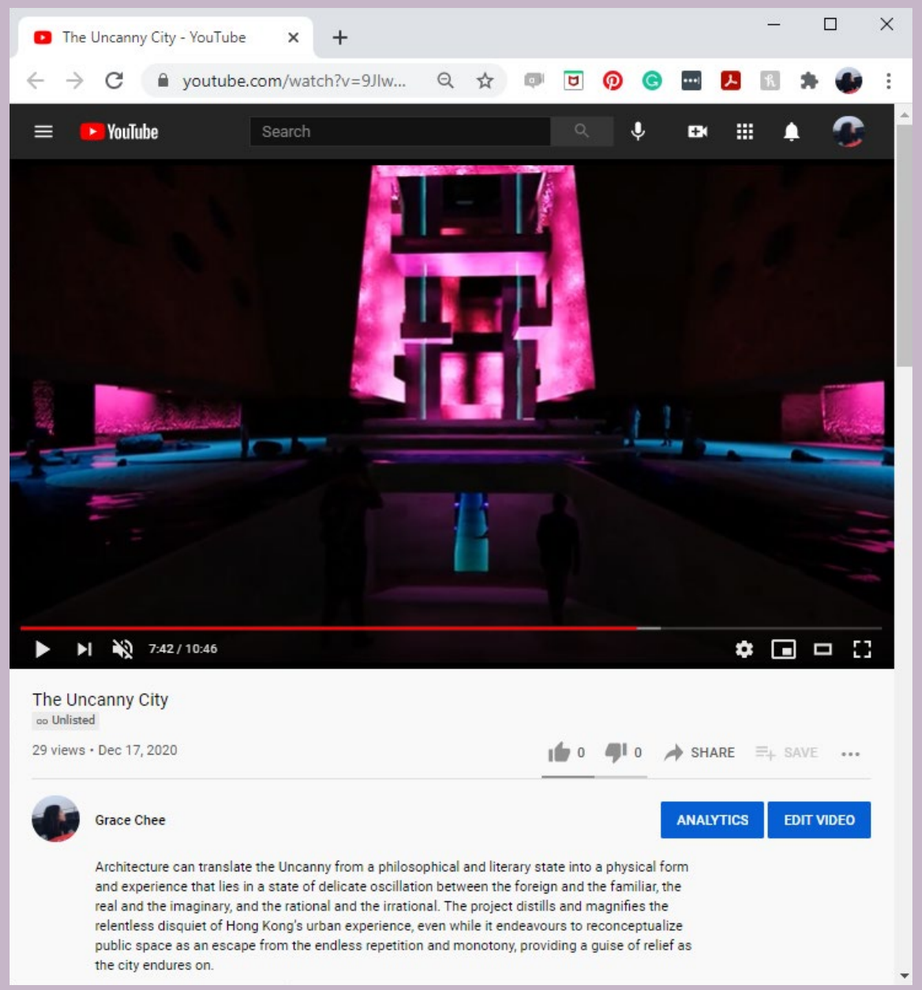
Proposed void



Project diagram



Diagrammatic axonometric


The Uncanny City - YouTube
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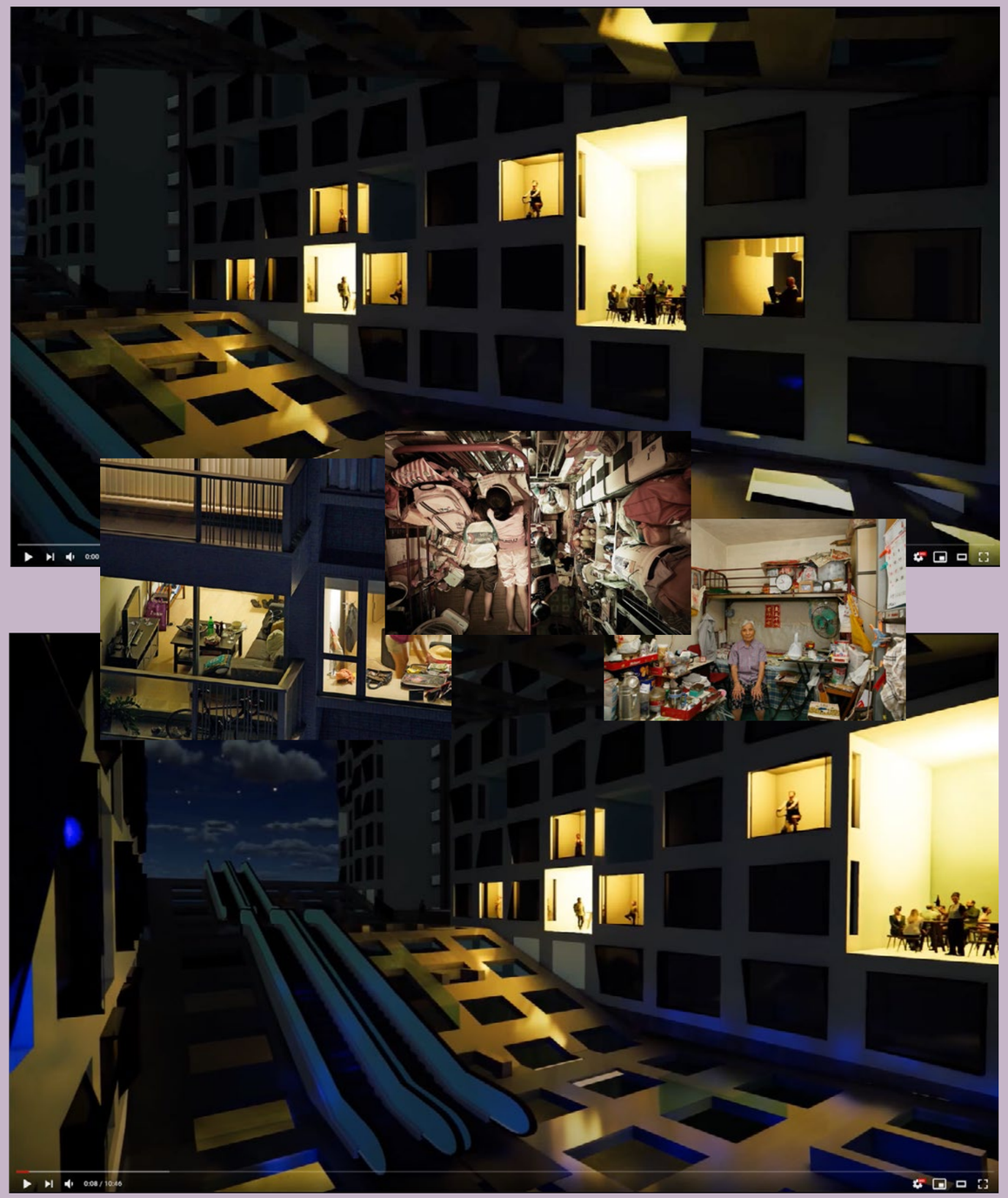
Architecture can translate the Uncanny from a philosophical and literary state into a physical form and experience that lies in a state of delicate oscillation between the foreign and the familiar, the real and the imaginary, and the rational and the irrational. The project distills and magnifies the relentless disquiet of Hong Kong's urban experience, even while it endeavours to reconceptualize public space as an escape from the endless repetition and monotony, providing a guise of relief as the city endures on.

PART 2. STORY

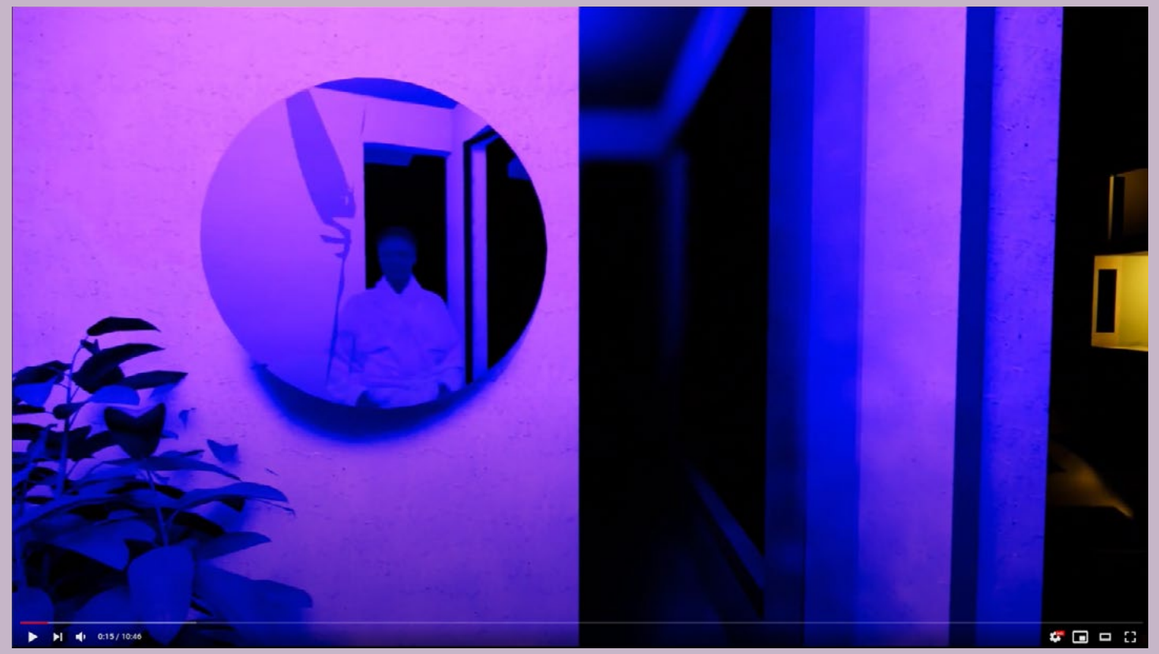


I. COMPRESSION

(the loss)

Residential towers are often built in claustrophobic density, to the extent that everyone is made a voyeur of their neighbors, willingly or not. The district of Mong Kok is said to be one of the most densely populated places on Earth, averaging 130,000 people in each square kilometre. This lack of privacy and personal space is an urban condition common to many metropolitan cities, but few places are as extreme as Hong Kong, where many in public housing may live their entire lives in a single, 100sf room - or worse.

These spatial constraints create strange bedfellows, with programs colliding in at times horrific, at times delightful proximity. Confronted with this daily reality, would you be willing to trade in some privacy for an escape from claustrophobia?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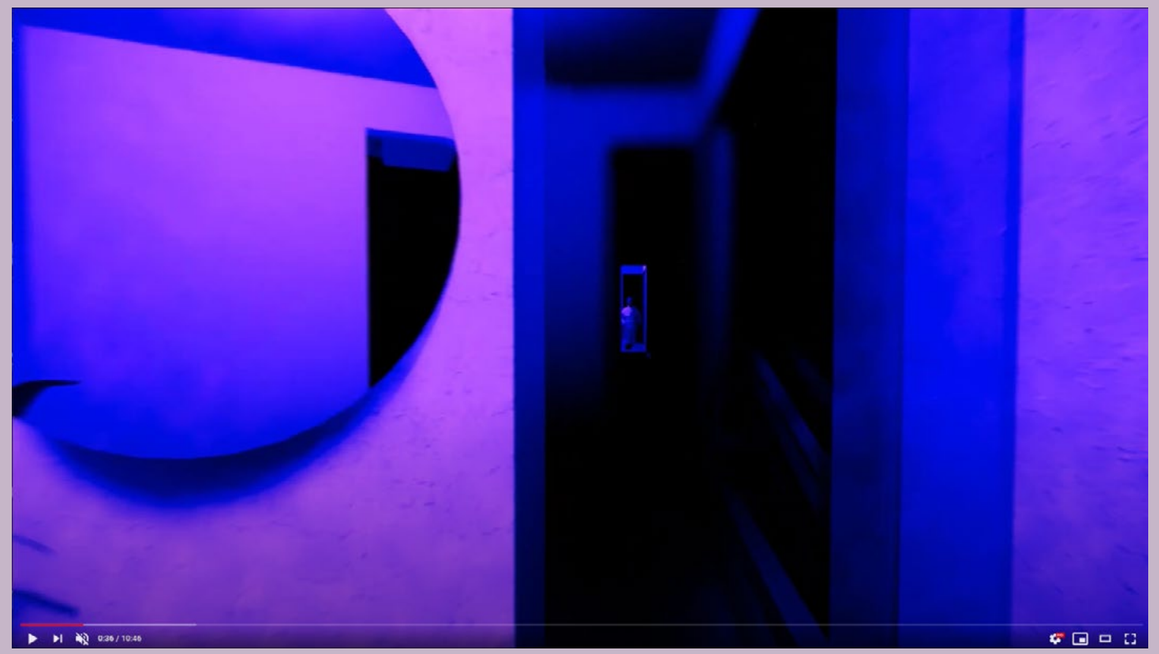
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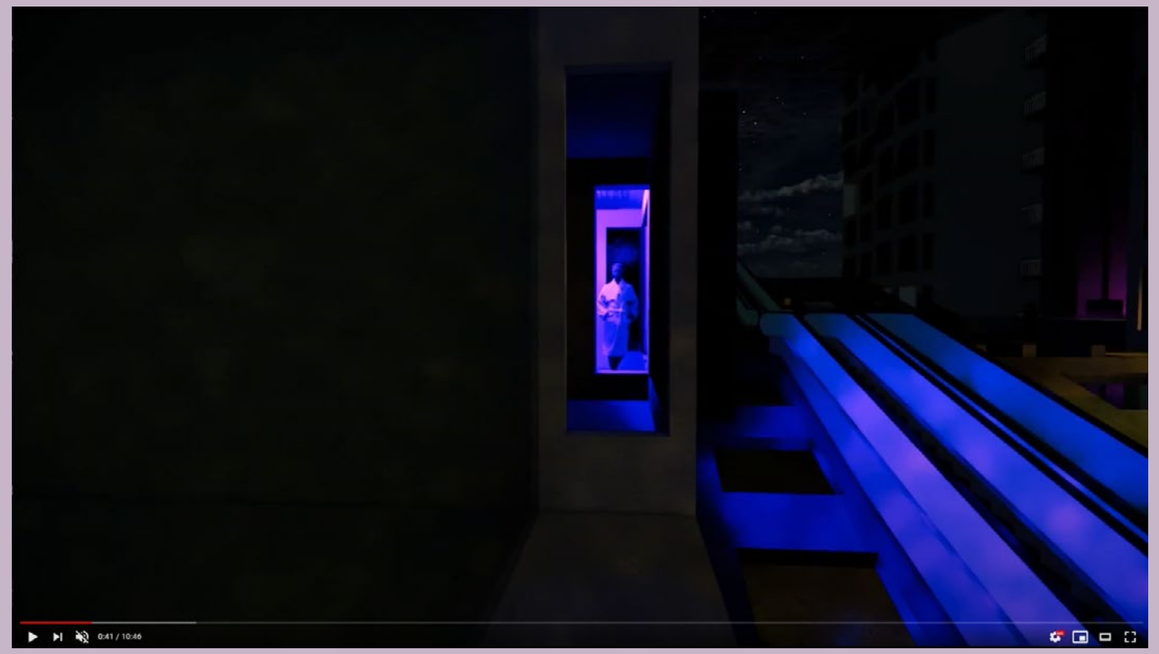
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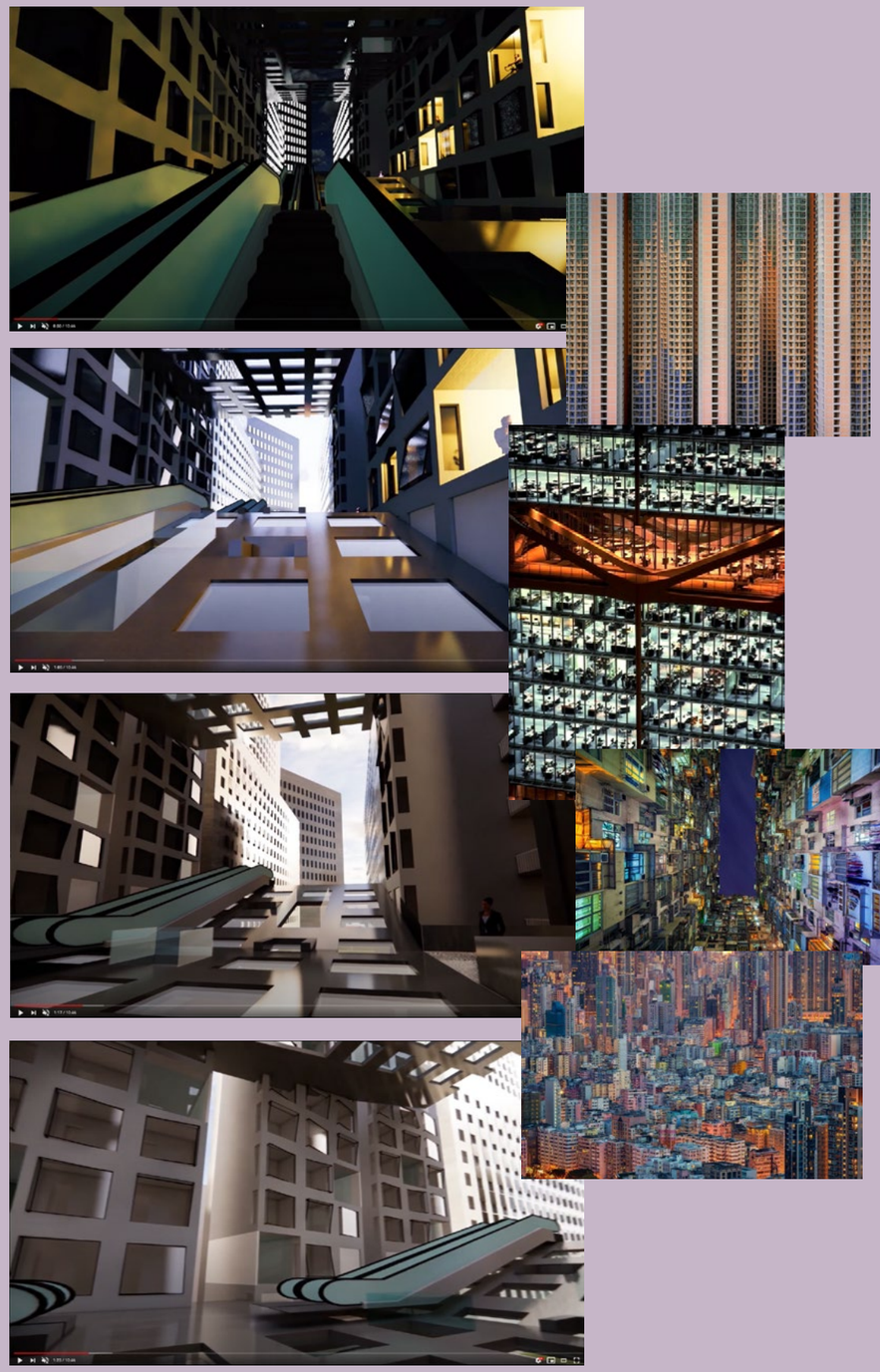
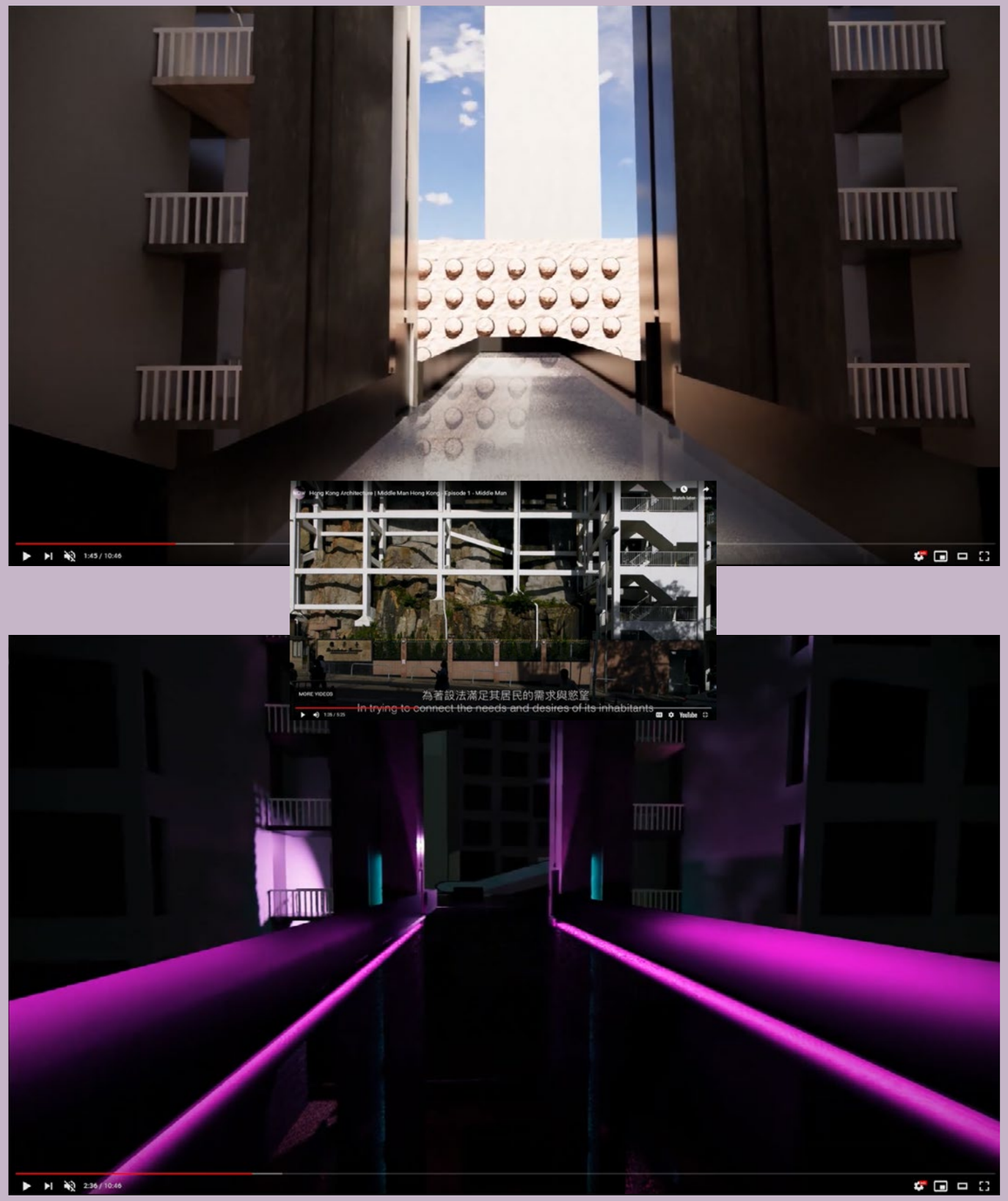


II. REPETITION

(the search)

For maximum use of minimal space, every cubic inch is occupied by residential and commercial towers. As an urban experience, the individual lives of the city's inhabitants are represented by little rectangles propagated endlessly in all directions. The tyranny of the grid is all encompassing - which way is up, and which way is down? What is interior, and what is exterior?

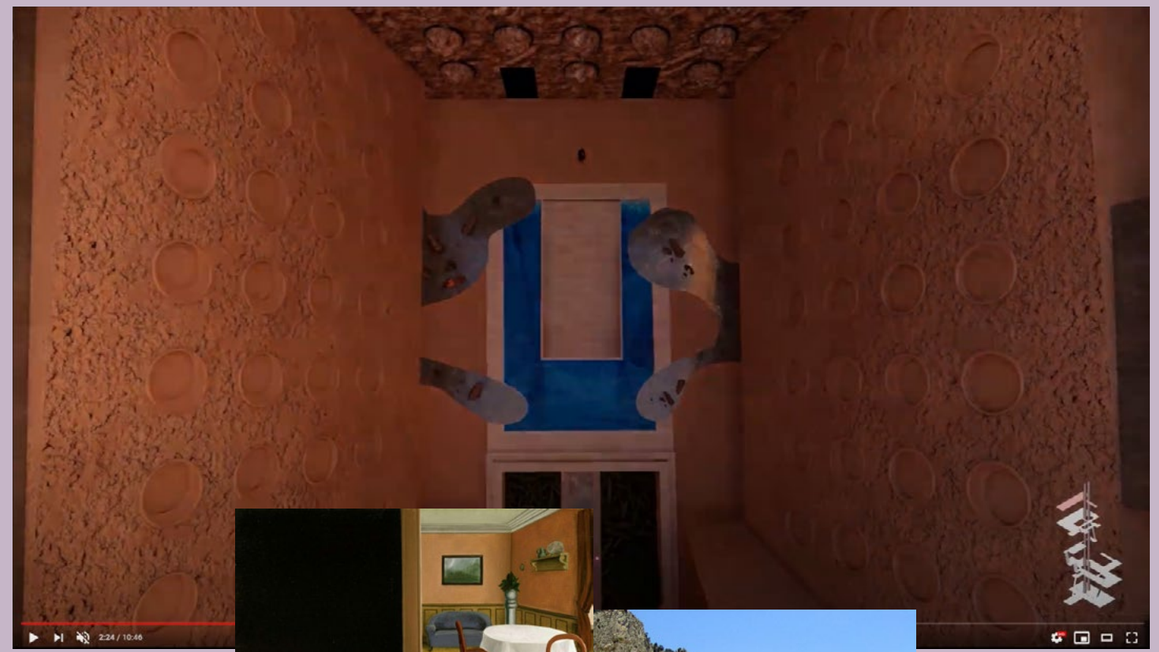
There is no escape, when the monotony of the apartment window only gives way to the office window. Day by day, an itching sense of discomfort grows, morphing into an enveloping desire to escape.

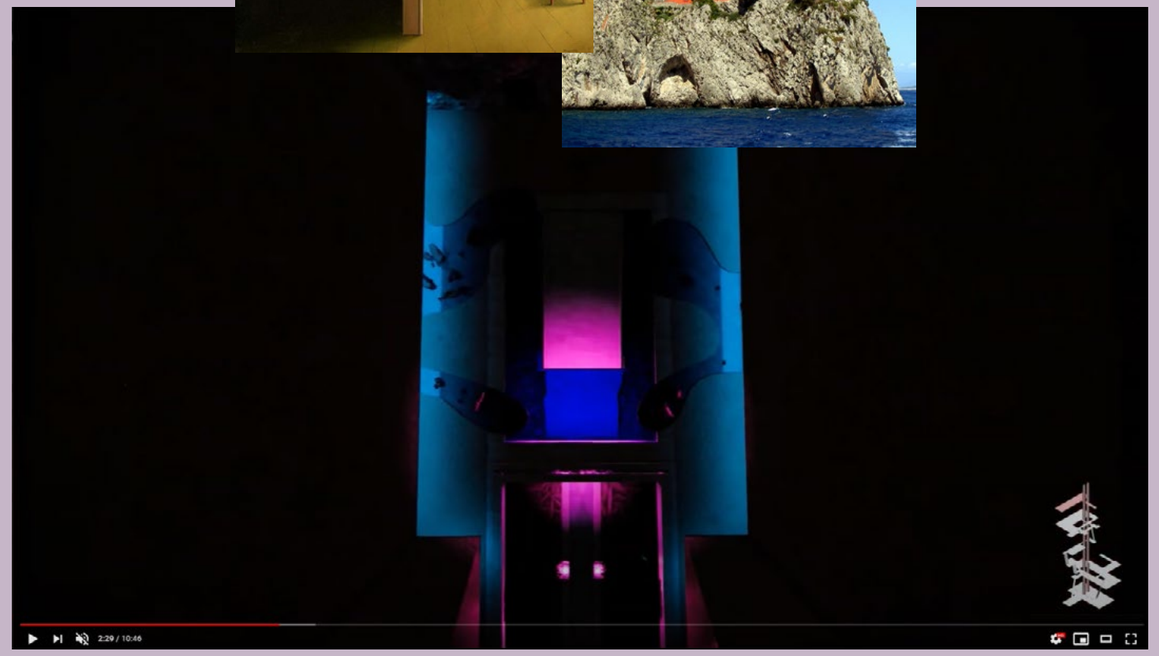


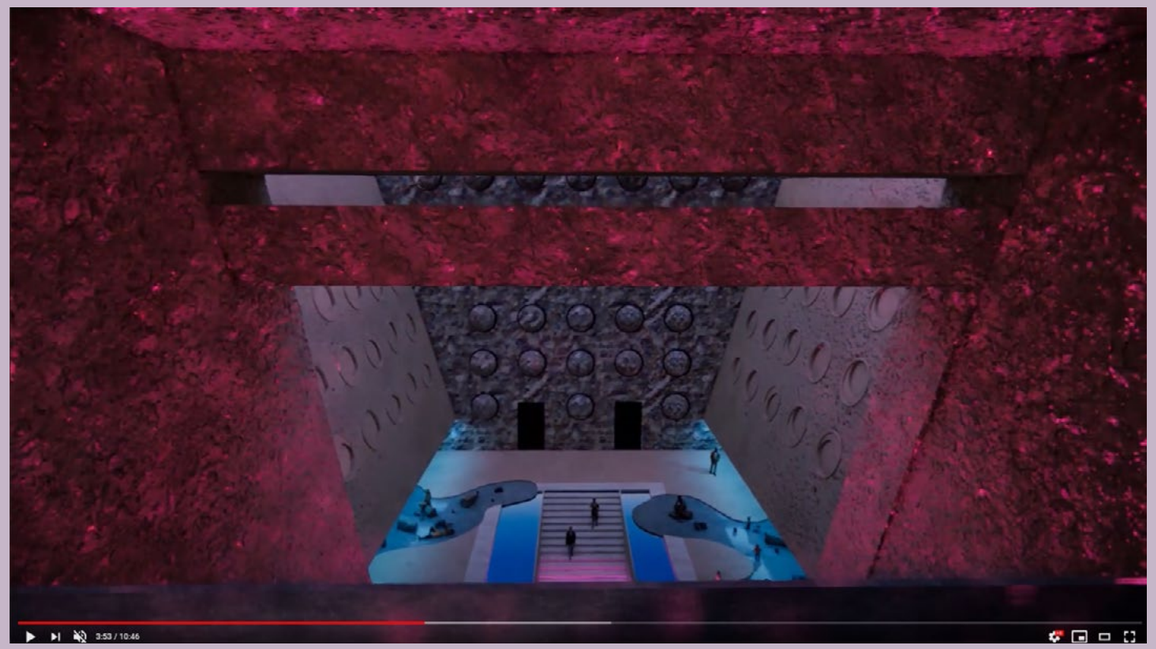
III. VOID

(the encounter)

And then, suddenly an encounter with a huge, gaping void! Inside this space of absence amidst unrelenting presence, Hong Kong's contentious relationship with nature is reenacted in the middle of the city. The disruption of the urban fabric and ground plane spotlights the urban uncanny.





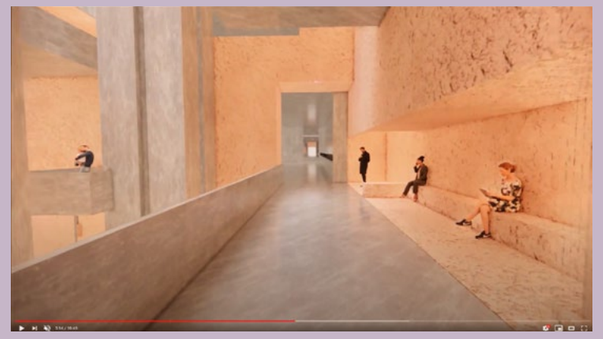


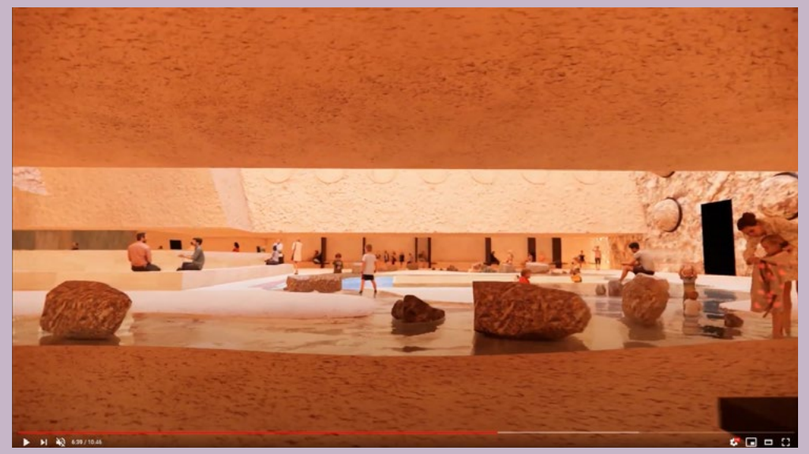
IV. EXHIBITION

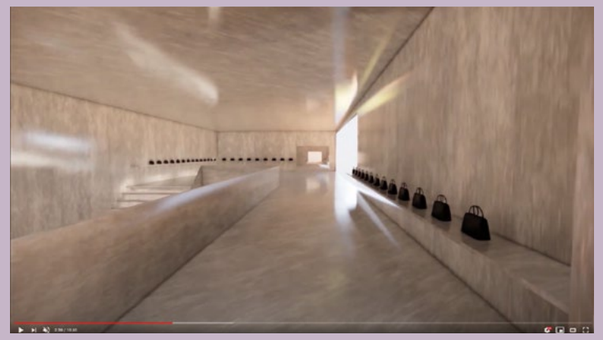
(the excursion)

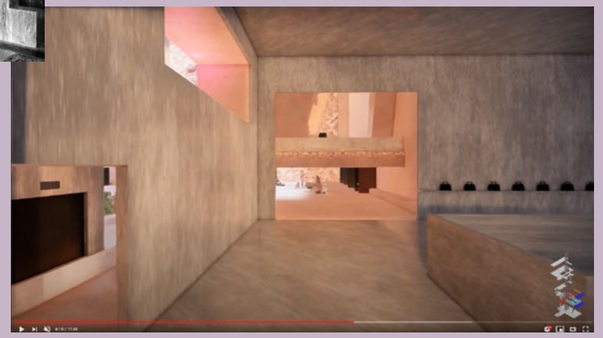
But the familiar specter of consumerism always looms. Like in other 'post-modern' societies, 'consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the waking lives' of human beings' in Hong Kong . Tai-lok Lui, a well-known local sociologist, claims in his book 'Consuming Hong Kong' that consumption is central to the local cultural identity and 'the Hong Kong way of life', tracing the gradual 'malling process back to the opening of its first shopping mall, Ocean Terminal, in 1966. Faced with the limitations of everyday life, shopping malls are an architecture of desire, providing an avenue for aspirational escape. As has been discussed extensively in sociology and anthropology, it is a way of constructing and negotiating identity and status, of belonging and individualization.

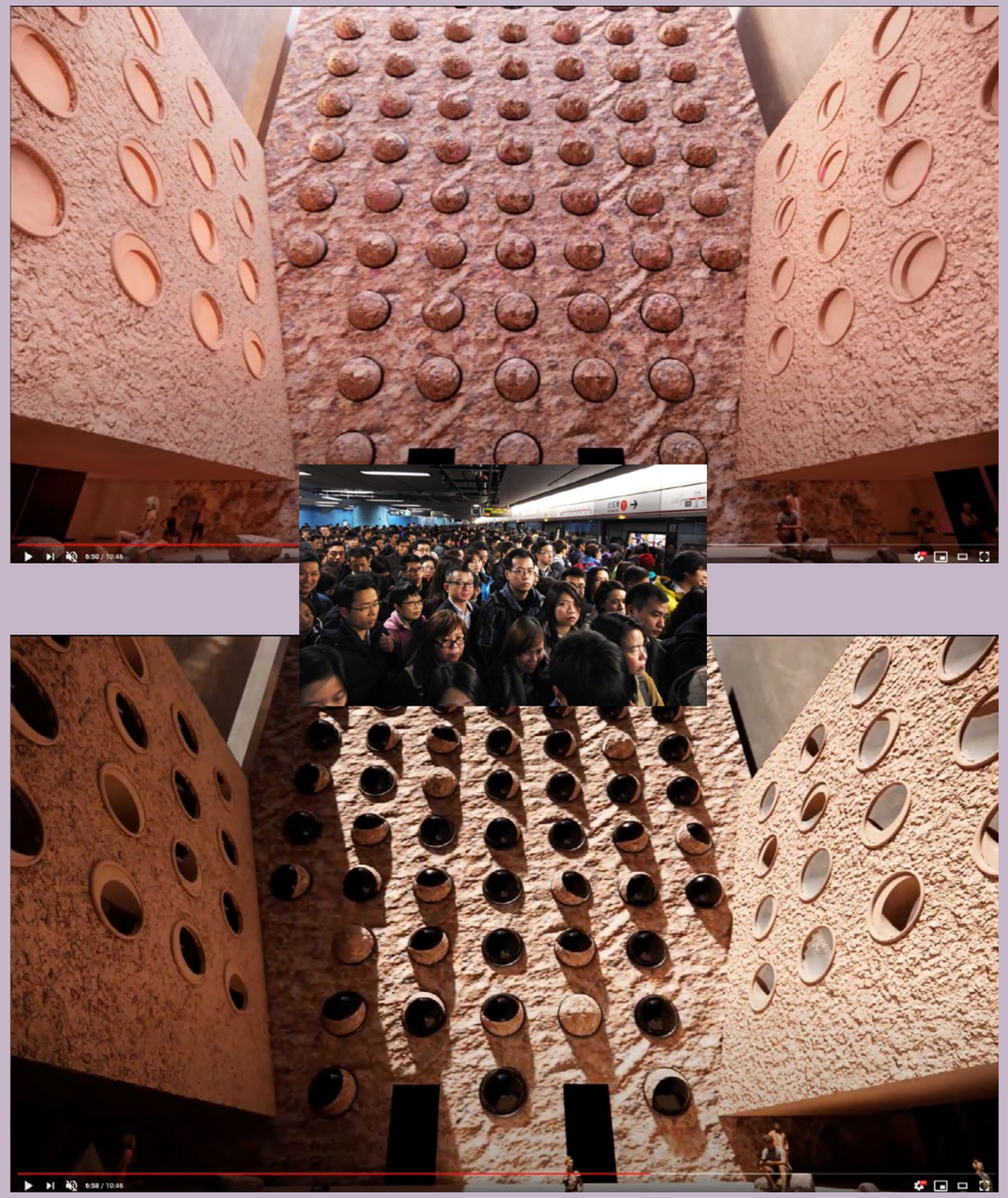
The project posits a rethinking of retail as an experiential promenade with unprogrammed public spaces leading off from the main path, designed to be integrated into essential public circulation routes. It takes existing, highly successful development models of integrating retail with transit hubs and elevated walkways a step further, channeling people directly through stores, much like with airport duty-free shops.











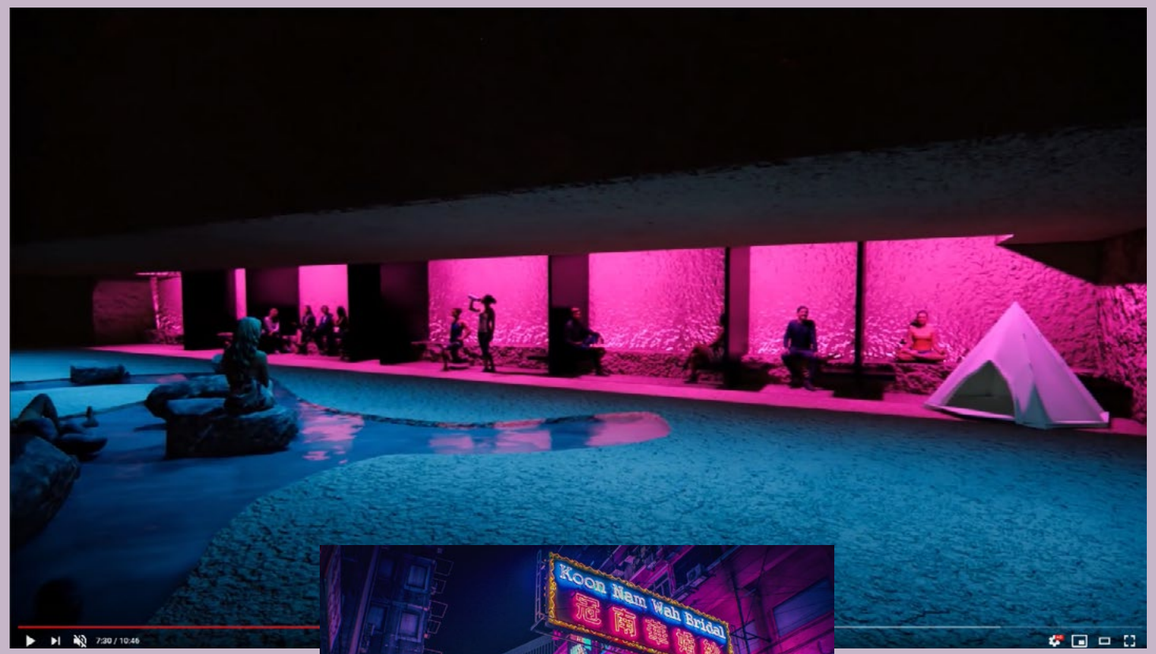
V. ESCAPE

(the watcher)

The addition of public spaces at various scales accommodates a greater variety of uses, many of which currently take place informally in appropriated spaces. The project imagines public space as more than utilitarian, but as an opportunity for transformative spatial experiences that can change our relationship with the city.

Beginning as a terrifying, gaping hole in the ground, in the process of descending into the depths of the void, one's understanding of the surrounding mass of earth is transformed. Its solidity is undermined by the emptiness on which it floats, now revealing the giant block to be as light as a feather.

On reaching the base of the void and walking beneath the galleries, the full weight of the mass suspended above falls upon the individual. The all-encompassing presence of Earth is a transposition of the Burkean sublime into a contemporary urban setting. Nature is given center stage, holding resistance against the inescapable pressures of the city bearing down from without.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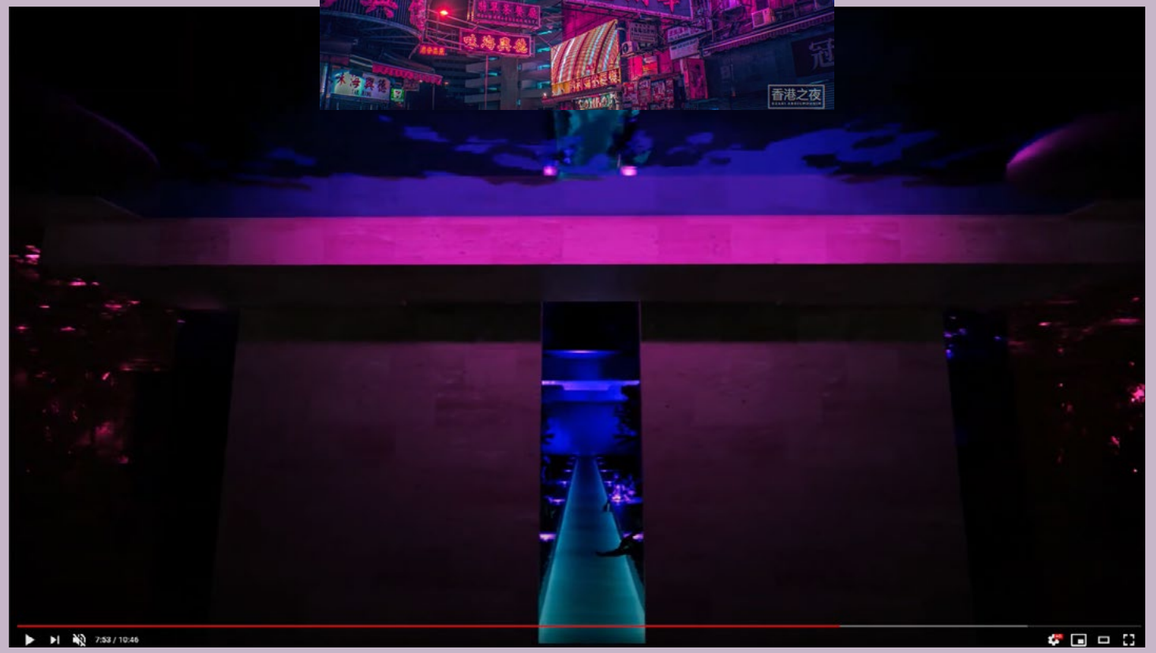
Koon Nam Wah Bridal
冠南華婚紗
冠南華
香港之夜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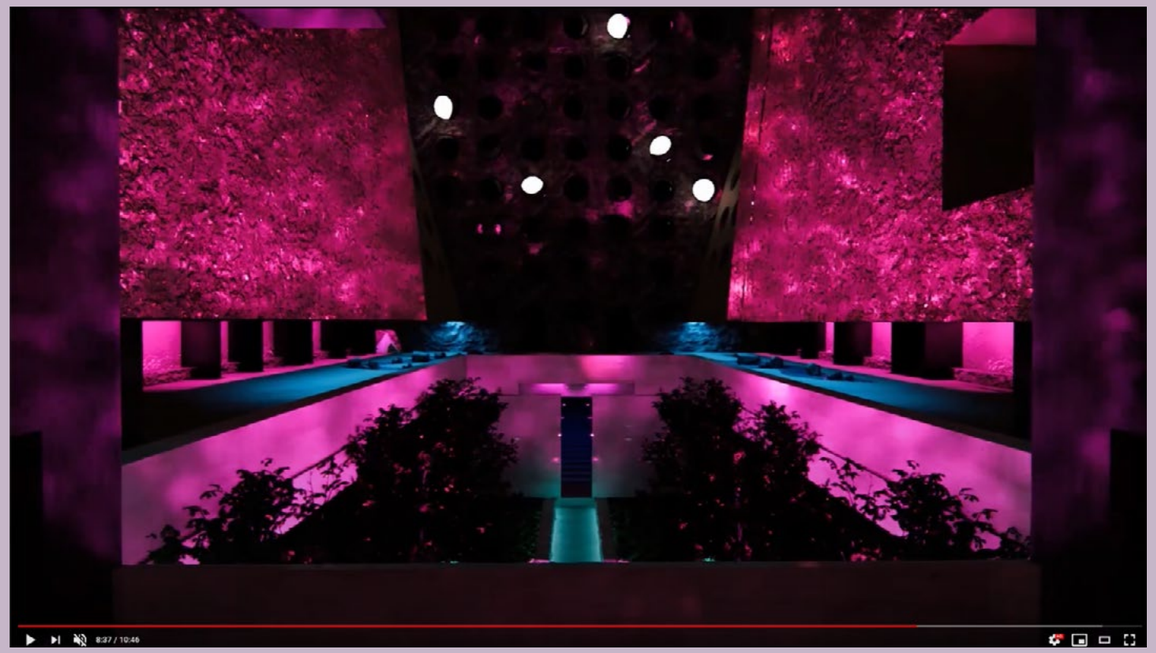
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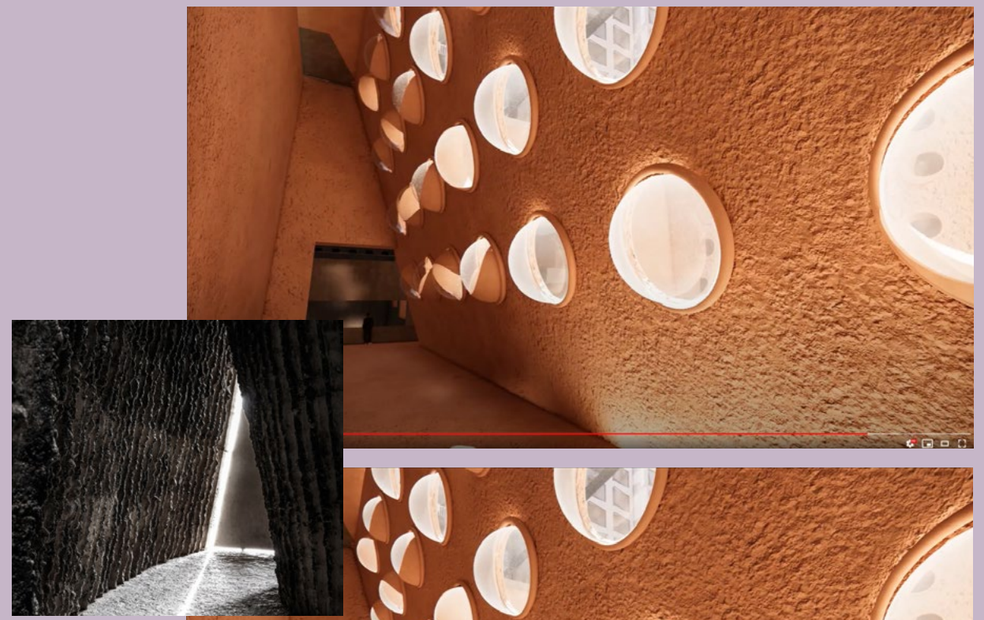

VI. HOME COMING

(the reunion)

A temporary retreat from the intensity of the urban condition, a small pocket of space that celebrates what it means to live in Hong Kong.

THE END

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