Tesseract of montages: the re-animation of urban design through place experiences

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Abstract

"From a lump of clay a vessel is made, what makes it useful is the space within. For a room, we make doors and windows, but what makes a room habitable is the empty space within it". The quote from Lao Tzu perfectly describes a space which is not empty but has gaps that Jonathan Hill describes as fragmentations. In film, we perceive this as arrangements of montages. Montages are a spatial exercise, where fragments from other sites are brought to a new location while at the same time maintaining the essence of the original fragments. The same principal applies when we perceive places, i.e. through a series of fragments. Fragments comprise the spatial, physical or natural components and also many more attributes of the city. Since our visual perception is fragmentary in nature, a single glance is not sufficient to absorb everything. Similarly, in a film, a scene is viewed through a series of glances and must be choreographed and scripted accordingly. In a screenplay contains within it, the opening scene, build-up plots of suspense and climax. This is perhaps the ingredients or prescriptions that make watching movies an interesting, exciting and enjoyable experience. Although places do contain a series of fragments and montages but rarely are choreographed or programmed to behave and be assimilated like watching movies where every moment of the scene gives the viewers very different, unique and distinct experiences. This paper outlines a theoretical urban design exercise that adopts the idea of film making by decoding and translating the screenplay frameworks into architectural montages whereby three components of the screenplay which are the set or backdrop is defined as ambiance of the place, the actors are defined as space and people and lastly the choreograph or script as events and programmes of the place. This framework is used as an approach to reanimate a neighbourhood in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The potentialities and dilemmas of the context is studied, identified and translated according to the screenplay sequence which consists of opening,

build-up or suspense and climax scenes. The diverse relationships and experience of the place to its occupants is explored and *derive* is used as a strategy to enhance the occupants' experiences and the vibrant quality of the place.

1   Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City, commonly known by the abbreviations HCMC, is the former capital of the Republic of South Vietnam. The city is formed by a multi-layered history heavily transgressed by foreign forces and influences, has emerged from the brink of economic and political poverty to become a unified country of what it is today. Previously known as Saigon, the city used to be called the "Diamond of the Far-East", where westerners could partake of exotic women, trinkets and cuisine while enjoying the comfort of French colonial ambiance. HCMC is steeped in tradition, a living museum with a unique mixture of past and present. The introduction of the *Doi Moi* (open door) policy in 1986 by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has shifted Vietnam's economy to a market oriented one which contributed a growing inequality between the rural and urban population and between the rich and the poor. Privatisation and liberalisation increased the social gap to basic social services in general and to education and health in particular. This increased the vulnerability of the poor. The *Doi Moi* policy of economic liberalization also has further boosted and transformed the city with the influx of foreign investments that has contributed to the emergence of the *nouveau* riche often call as *Viet Keus*. The *Viet Keus* with their own imaginative ambitions developed their own new and lavish niche market to fulfil their lifestyle especially in entertainment, while the western tourists sought out places that allowed them to experience the exotic qualities of the city in reminiscing, re-imagining and re-living their memories. This duality of the in- between foreign nostalgia and *Viet Keus'* imagination perhaps becomes the main catalyst that have created and propagated the growth of such places like Bui Vien Street, a haven for entertainment, leisure and pleasure. It is the task of this paper to project an urban design setting that will encompass a place where people come to have fun, enjoy, relax, entertain and experience the uniqueness and exotic flavours and colours of a varied cultural experience of the city.

2   Project setting

The project site is located in Bui Vien Street (as shown in figure 1) and is home to a lot of hotels, motels, restaurants, cafes, art galleries, handcraft shops, pubs, nightclubs, karaoke bars, travel centres and services for foreign backpackers. The street has become a familiar address and the gathering place for foreign visitors and the young *Viet Keus* to the city [1]. It is also notoriously known as one of the famous hotspots for entertainment and pleasure activities at night [2]. During the day, the street changes its character where activities are concentrated more in areas with mixed-used shops, hotels/motels, restaurants, cafes, art galleries, handcraft shops, travel service centres.
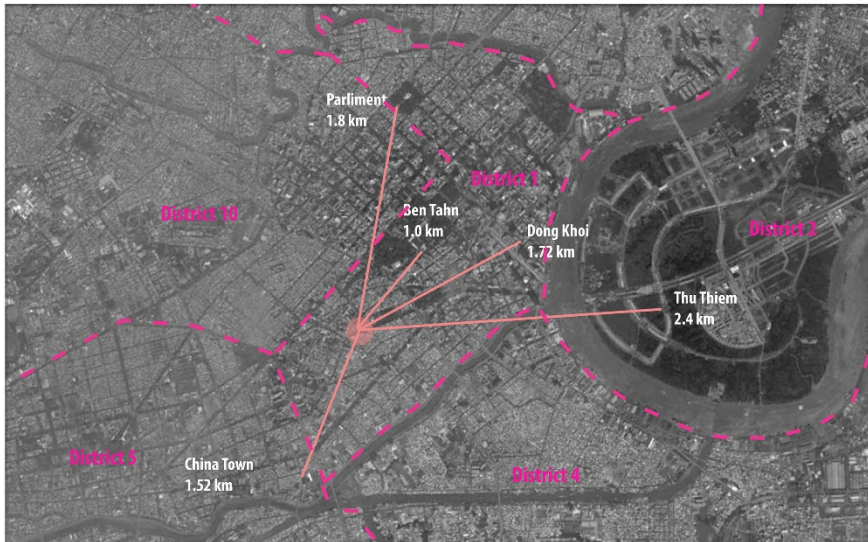
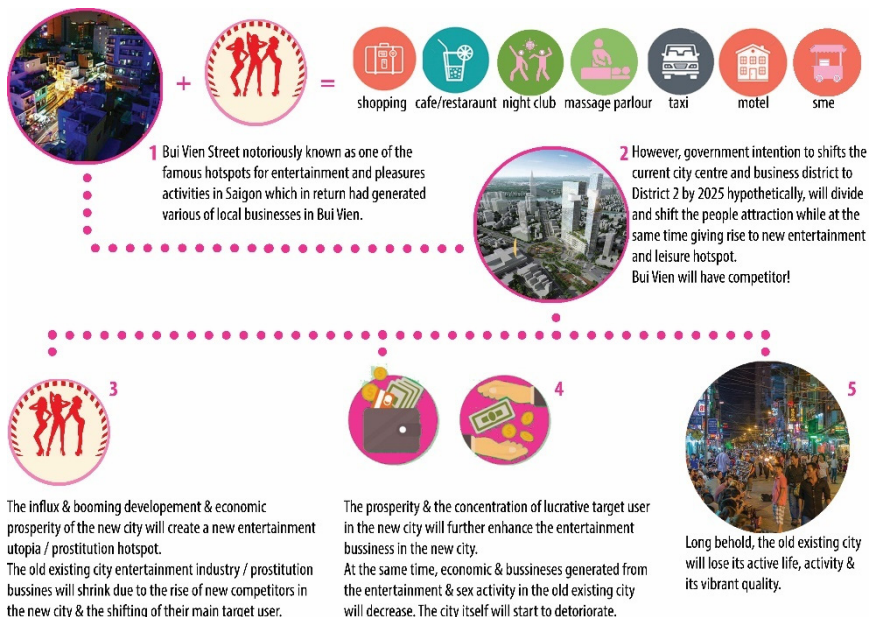Figure 1:   Location plan of Bui Vien Street within the context of the City.

Figure 2:   Hypothetical scenarios.

   In the near future, District 2 will become the new commercial and business district (CBD) in addition to the existing CBD [3]. The government intention to expand the current city centre and business district to District 2 will invigorate the place with more economic activities (as shown in the diagram of figure 2).

Bui Vien Street as it is now is already in a form of constellations of various different parts embedding the different rhythm of city life. It is this district's ability to contains, portrays and shifts its life and activities while at the same time hides parts of its city life to be discovered and explored are the key elements that have sustained the livelihood, image and form of this place. Therefore, it is the task of this design exercise to unveil these hidden potentials of the place and to orchestrate it to a more significant venue for entertainment and leisure programmes.

3 Site potentials and dilemmas

3.1 Imageability

From the visual analysis, the site composed of many types of fragments of the past, present and future. Inspired from the existing physical and spatial components within the vicinity, these diverse fragments of characters and images create a complex diversity of activities and expressions, which, generates the vitality and vibrant quality of the place. This constellation of fragments contributes to the endless episodes one can experiences city, thus creating a kaleidoscopic screenplay of montages. However, this quality is experienced in a telescopic and at the street level only and not visible in the back lanes.

3.2 Morphology

Figure 3 illustrates the morphology of the building types in Bui Vien Street. The Government originally established Bui Vien district as a military cantonment in 1800 and later converted into shops and housing after the reunification to cater for the internally displaced personals. The lands are still owned by the government. The original layout consisted of 3 compartments called "gian" and each has courtyards at the centre and shops facing the street. In 1986, when the Doi Moi
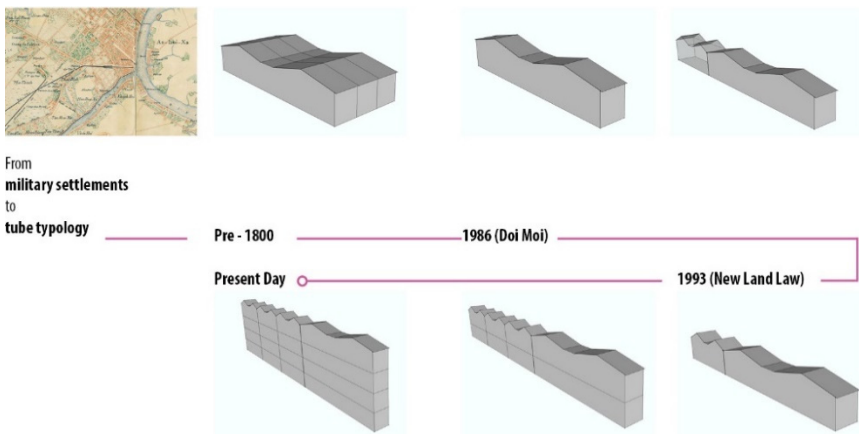

Figure 3:   Building morphology in Bui Vien District.

policy was implemented, tax was imposed on buildings based on the width of the buildings thus, reducing the shop houses width into a single "*gian*" (approx. 3.5m width). Rapid urbanization and migration as a result of the *Doi Moi* policy led to shortages of housing, thus, makeshift dwellings were added to the rear and on top of the buildings. This created multiple dwelling units within one building plot thus increasing the density and contributing to more vibrant activities within the neighbourhood. Nowadays the buildings are higher and lengthier but still retain the slender footprint with high occupancy rate. After the new land law was introduced in 1993, only an elite group whom are called the *Ho Khau* can buy and sell the properties thus creating a monopolised group ownership which is beneficial for an emerging economy like Vietnam by cutting lengthy bureaucratic red tapes during the process of urban development.

It is clear that the culture of shared living and the idea of space (volume) as a commodity have already been ingrained in the Vietnamese way of life that can be exploited and transposed in this theoretical urban design escapade (as shown in figure 4. This would intensify the vibrancy of the place and further introduce more exotic programmes for the place.
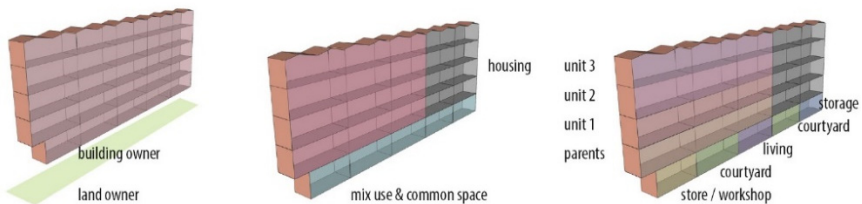

Figure 4:   Single ownership, fine grained building with various different users' programmes intertwined.

As a result of the *Doi Moi* policy, the transformation of the existing building typologies generated deeper floor plan creating spaces with lack of natural lighting and ventilation leading to uncomfortable living conditions (as shown in figure 5 below). In addition, due to an increase in density, buildings need more common corridor spaces for accessibility thus reducing the level of privacy for the occupants.
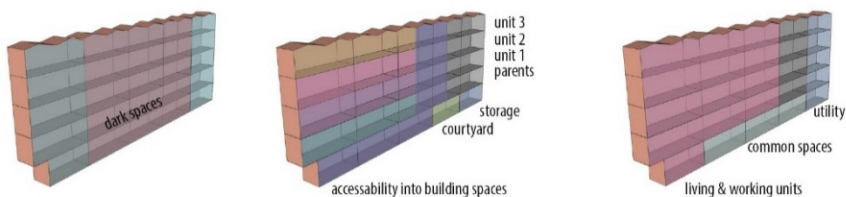

Figure 5:   Dead spaces, accessibility and common space dilemmas.

3.3 Land use

The area along the street is a high income area, very vibrant and hotspots for peoples watching and to hangout (as shown in figure 6), thus contributes to the economic prosperities of the city. This is also the high income area where most of economic activities are concentrated. In order to improve the economic prosperity of the place, the existing contextual components, programmes and activities along the street can acts as catalyst to spur the economy of the area. Predominantly, this area is crowded with the nightclub, small and mix used business that contribute to the rhythm of the street life quality which are very unique and exotic that could be exploited as nodes of wider attractions in the near future.
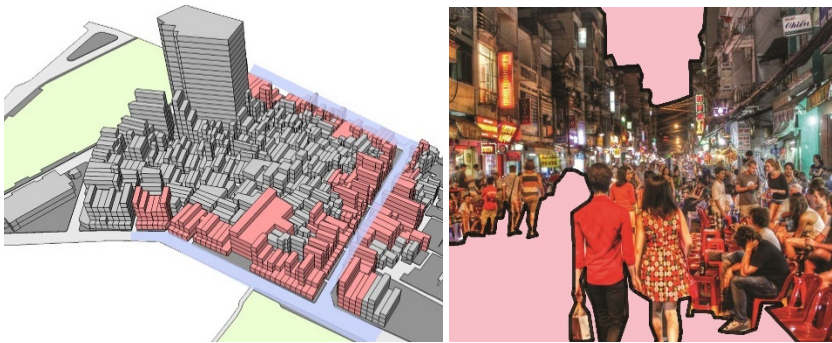

Figure 6:   Exotic and vibrant neighbourhood.

Figure 7(a) below illustrates the housing island in Bui Vien Street disconnecting the vibrant quality of street life from expanding into the back lanes thus reduced the pedestrian flows and creating dead spaces. As shown in figure 7(b), the back

(a)   (b)

Figure 7:   (a) The housing island; (b) Disconnection of street.

lane does not act or form a spine connecting both ends to the main road for the active and vibrant quality and programmes from the main street to flows and grows into the back lanes.

3.4 Massing

Most of the building blocks are very compact which allows excellent permeability for pedestrians, street life and businesses to grow (as shown in figure 8). Because of the nature of the juxtaposition and shared living inside the buildings, the façades and balconies functioned as entrances spaces into the buildings. By injecting new programmes and connecting the street to the façades by staircases and interconnecting balconies, the space will create voyeuristic spaces for existing programs such as people watching and hang out to take place which will attract more people into the business entities of the area.
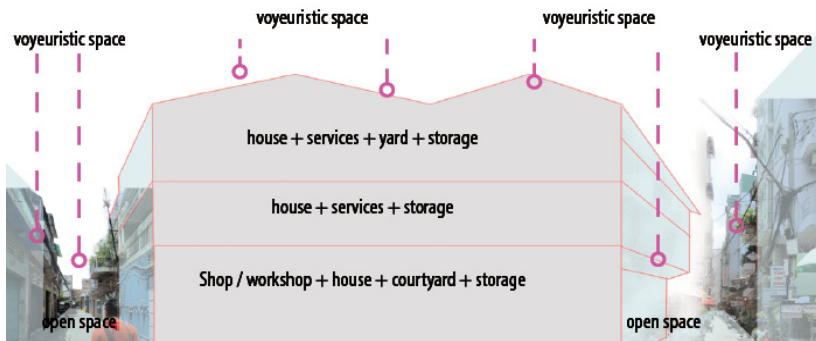

Figure 8:   Generating potentialities for voyeuristic spaces.

3.5 Accessibility

Easy access from the city centre and many complicated back lanes and shortcuts inside the urban labyrinth are very good because its creates easy escape routes and favourite places for the pedestrians and business to grow intimate community spaces developed from the juxtaposition of activities.

4   Design statement

Massey [4] stated that in the current age of globalisation where information technology is at its best, the significance of distance has been reduced. Therefore, the idea of identity and place locality gradually diminishes. A place is now fragments of other places of the past, present or future allowing it to recreate itself, to read itself and to form its own meanings from borrowed fragments [5]. Though places as fragments do not have concrete meanings or relation to context, but when experience collectively it forms a series of fragments akin to a screenplay of montages in movies. Thus, relationships are formed between place and its occupants. Places are no longer bounded areas but collections of montages of relationships (akin to a movie screenplay).

5   Hypothesis

Based on the above design statement, this urban design intervention exercise will establish the screenplay frameworks as an approach to reconstruct and reanimate the places diverse relationship and experiences to its occupants and *derive* as a psychogeographical tool is used as a strategy to enhance the experiences of the place [6].

It is hypothesized that people enjoy the experience of place and aarchitecture in the same way when watching movies. Every moment of the scene in the movie gives the viewers very different, unique and distinct experiences. This will heighten the sensory experience of the place.

6   Design intervention

6.1 Theoretical framework

Following the screenplay framework or choreograph (as shown in figure 9) which contain within it the opening scenes; build-up plots or suspense; and climax or surprises, as a methodology in the design intervention to make people experience the place. From analysing the context, potential sites are identified and translated to be the setting for the opening, build- up and climax scenes (as shown in figure 10). The opening scene then further defines as the moods of the context that creates attraction and repulsion of the place. Build-up scenes are identified as spatial gaps and non-places or transitional places [7] where people navigate to certain destinations. Finally, the climax scenes will be defined as surprises, shock or pleasure within the place.
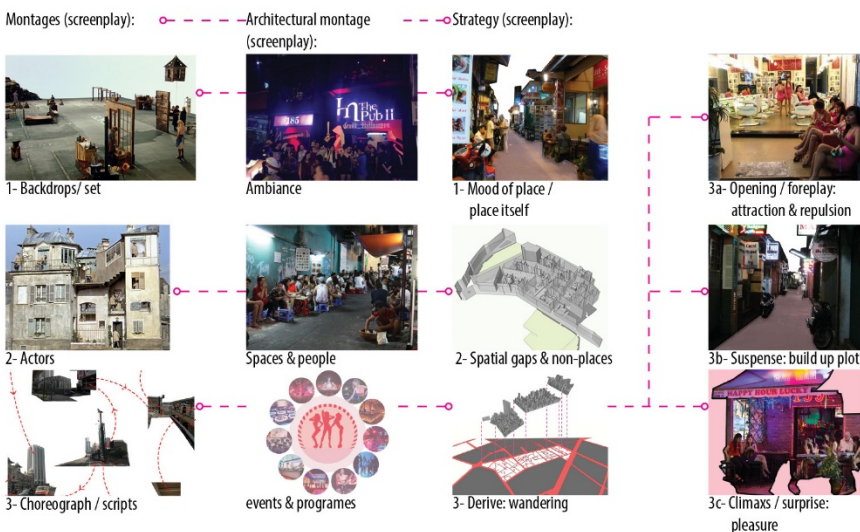

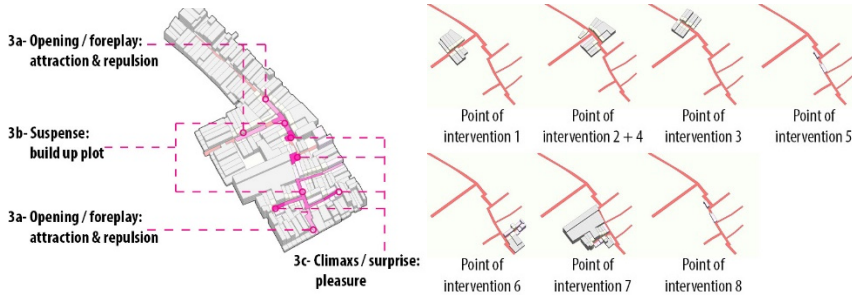
Figure 9:   Site interventions: theoretical framework.

3a- Opening / foreplay: attraction & repulsion

3b- Suspense: build up plot

3a- Opening / foreplay: attraction & repulsion

3c- Climaxs / surprise: pleasure

Point of intervention 1

Point of intervention 2 + 4

Point of intervention 3

Point of intervention 5

Point of intervention 6

Point of intervention 7

Point of intervention 8

Figure 10:   Screenplay, architectural montage and *derive* relationship frameworks.

6.2 Strategy

In order to achieve the aims of this design escapade based on the concept of the *derive*, four main strategies are established (as illustrated in figure 11). First, is to link the main streets and the back lanes together so that the programmes of the vibrant activities from the main street can overflow into the back lanes and vice-versa.

Second, the idea of fiction follows form as a principle and a tool to generate a myriad of experiences of the site by intensifying by multiple layering of the existing activities with new programmes.

Third, is by choreographing surprises. Unlike movies where the surprise experiences one gets while watching it are not intended to be permanent and the setting with the structures and components of the movie itself such as the props, actors, backdrops and etcetera are temporary and some are not even real. In contrast to choreographing surprises in a city or places whereby everything is real and made with the intention to last. This idea of manufacturing surprises, a screenplay by Jacques Tati, entitled Playtimes is explored whereby he disorganises and disrupts the flow of events to manufacture surprises and shock, thus creating endless, open ended experiences. The events and programmes then become contextually reproduced over the passage of chronometric time by spaces, people and by chances (as shown in figure 12).

And finally, is the materialization where the image of the place is created and intensified by multiplying both the backdrops. These comprise gaps that will be re-animated with the various existing fragments of the ambiance of context and the actors will be the spaces and the users. These actors will 'act' and interact with one another performing screenplay based on these events and programmes that are contextually reproduced over the passage of time by spaces, people and by chances. Figure 13 illustrates parts of the existing fragments of the places that are projected back into the urban context embroidered with new hybrid fragments.
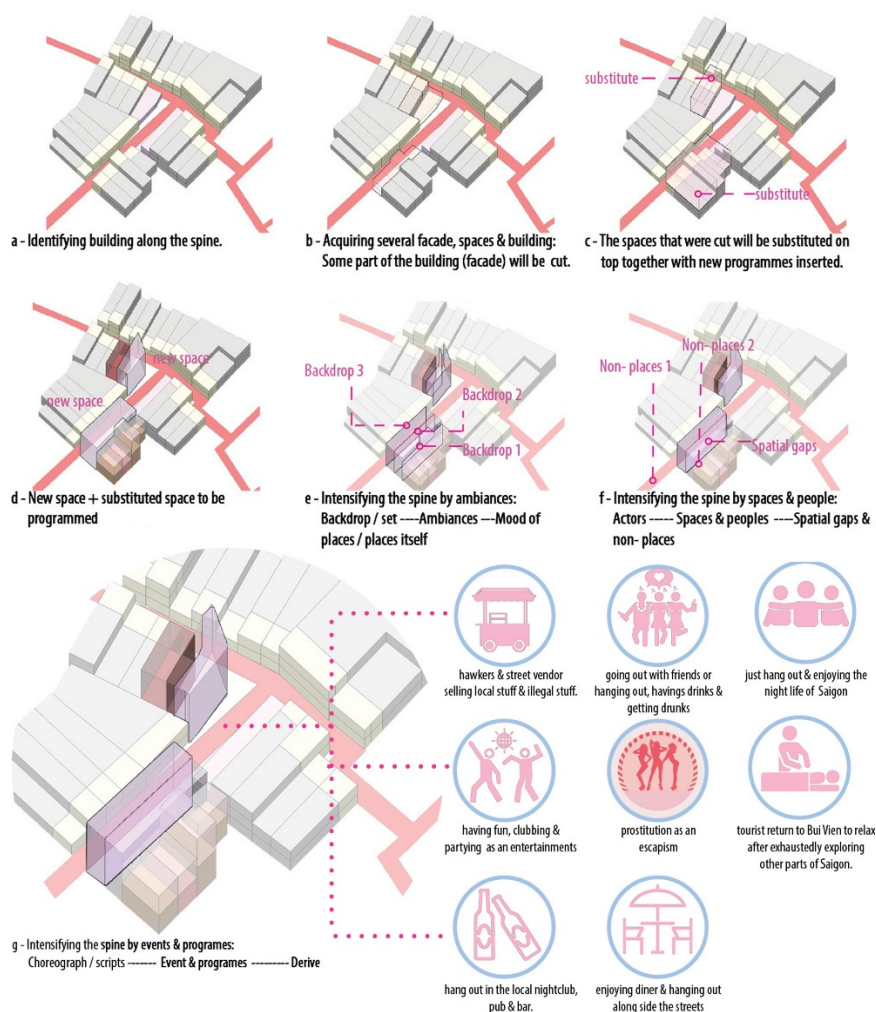
Figure 11: Design strategy: generating montages experiences (fictions follow form).
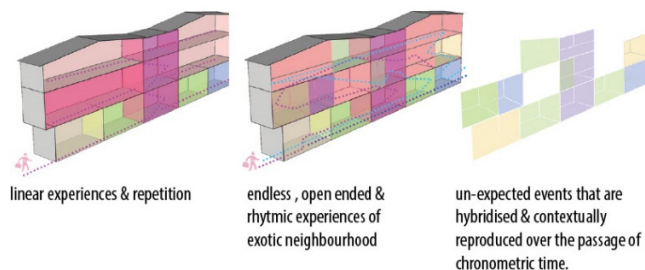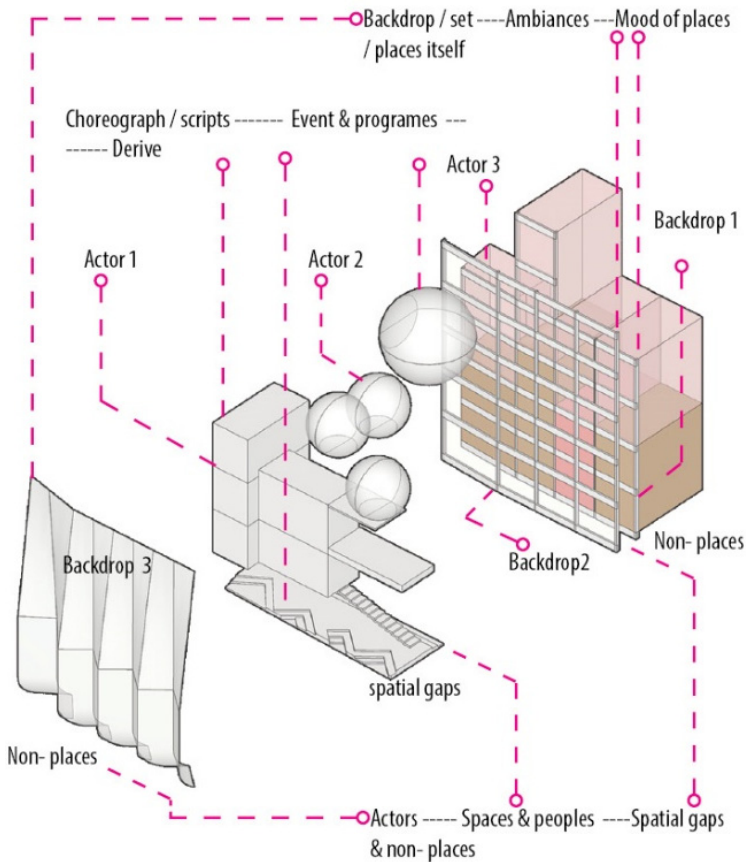

Figure 12: Design strategy: choreographing surprises.

Figure 13:   Design strategy: materialization.

7   Conclusion

Koolhaas [8] claims that urbanism was dead and to survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness, liberated from its atavistic duties, redefined as a way of operating, undermine its certainties, explode its limits, destroy its traditions and smoke out its practitioners. This proposal did not attempt to solve urbanism but embrace it together with its doubleness (good and bad) and try to redefined our relationship with the city as parts of its fragments and as its supporters by emphasizing on the sensory and psychological aspects of its.
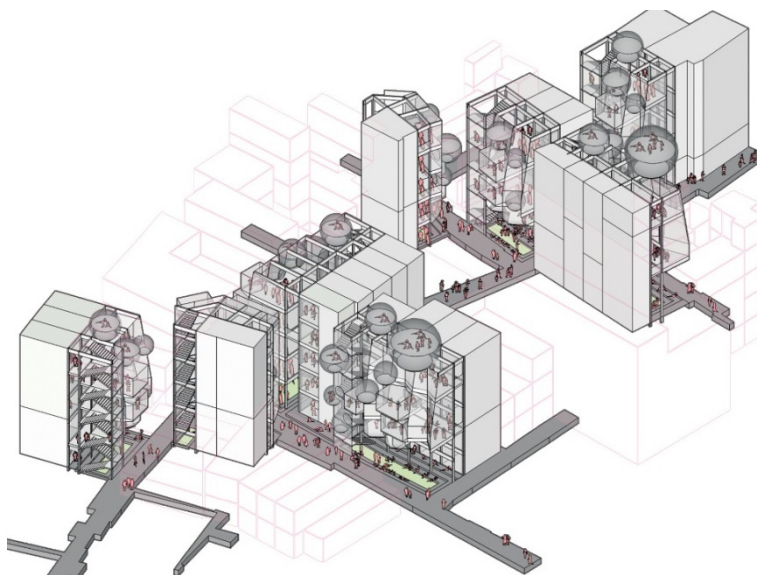
Acknowledgement

Figure 14:   Proposed urban intervention.

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