2016 On Site Review Report

by Ahmad Djuhara

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Micro Yuan’er Children’s Library and Art Centre

Beijing, China

Architect
ZAO/standardarchitecture

Client
Dashilar Investment

Design
2012-2014

Completed
2014-2015

Cha'er Hutong Children's Library and Art Centre (Micro Yuan'er)

Beijing, China

I. Introduction

Micro Yuan'er was designed in a very defined and limited location in a calm area of Dashilar, a dense area full of Hutongs, or narrow streets or alleys, to the south of Tiananmen Square in the centre of Beijing. Facing a very fast and systematic process of modernisation, Hutongs are being subjected to extensive demolition, with just 25 areas where they are found designated by the authorities to be protected and conserved. Gentrification is occurring everywhere in the city as a consequence of economic growth. Hutongs are in danger of being seen more as objects of tourism with their form surviving only as an artefact with no soul. The areas which are not protected will be demolished in the near future.

Some of the Hutongs have the potential to survive by changing their function to small retail, most of them serving the community as shops, cafés and restaurants. A government agency, Beijing Dashilar – Liulichang Cultural Development Ltd., was trying to make the best of the change. Architect Zhang Ke was one of those trying to propose ideas. He came up with a more sympathetic approach, providing facilities for social and cultural activities for the local people rather than following the common pattern of opening shops and art galleries, which is a general tendency in the other part of busy Dashilar. The district had become quite famous with Beijing Design Week 2011 where it served the festival with an urban renewal programme and the injection of art galleries and facilities in the area.

The project ends up with a simple space to accommodate activities the local community had never considered before. Focused much more on children's activities, the Micro Yuan'er brought a modern form to the traditional Hutong context. Sitting almost next to the old Qianmen Mosque in a quiet area of Dashilar, it serves as a new public space in a rather semi-private place inside the gate of a Hutong, with the main door almost always open to the public.

II. Contextual Information

A. Brief historical background

Cha'er Hutong is a quiet spot in the busy Dashilar area, situated one kilometre from the Forbidden City in the city centre of Beijing. Number 8, Cha'er Hutong Courtyard is located next to the Qianmen Mosque, first built in the late Ming Dynasty (14th to 17th century), and still serving a considerable number of Muslim communities settled in the neighbourhood.

On the block plan on Number 22 of the Beijing Conservation Areas (Dashilar Region), the architect found a beautiful Chinese scholar tree in the middle of a Hutong courtyard. This particular Hutong was inhabited by several residents, some of whom already decided to move out, leaving three last compounds, occupied by Mr Wang, Mr Qiao and one more family at the end of the small alley in the back.

The situation of these two of the residents in the Hutong set limits for the architect; he had to gain their permission and approval for any additions and programme. Mr Wang's kitchen, which was in the middle of the court, had to stay the way it was, leaving a starting point to design the rest of the courtyard with the big tree.

A proposal for a children's library, an art exhibition space, a dance classroom, a painting classroom, a local handicrafts studio, public terraces and a public bathroom was approved by both the residents as well as by the government agency.

As one passes into the courtyard through a gate, it is immediately clear the small Hutong is dominated by the presence of unique gigantic tree in the middle of the court.

Once inside, the visitor finds the library on the left, providing small spaces for children to explore the possibilities of enjoying the space as they read the books.

Three communal interior spaces are used in very informal and relaxed circumstances without intimidation. One space serves as reading space, the others as an art class and a dance class.

Two small boxes outside could be seen as big toys to play with: a spatial toy to play around and interact with the large tree. The pavilion and kitchen beyond could be used for any purpose when needed, especially if there is a big occasion.

B. Local architectural character

In Beijing, in the past, wooden houses were affordable and sustainable. Wooden construction was a common way to build and supported by building material systems throughout the country But now, most wood is considered expensive.

Brick is common in the construction business. Skilled labour is readily available, and contractors or builders are quite easy to find.

Pitched roofs are common, since the basic form of its construction is appropriate for the climate and because non-specialists can deal with troubleshooting the problems that may arise. From the outside, many buildings look like brick houses, but actually their structure is a wood system carrying its load from the floor up to the roof. Brick walls become independent constructions, protecting interiors from the outside climate.

The Hutong is a typical compound only found in Beijing. Composed by a layering of spaces, in the old times there were two or three courtyards for every Hutong. Through time, squatters occupied the Hutongs and lived in small compounds inside and subdivided all the space. Until recently the Hutong had been considered to be only suitable for lower-class society, almost like a slum. But the strong typology still can be seen in the pattern of the city.

The Number 8, Cha'er Hutong courtyard is a typical da-za-yuan – big messy courtyard – once occupied by over a dozen families. Over the past fifty years, each family built a small add-on kitchen in the courtyard. These add-on structures are usually considered as urban scrap and all of them have been wiped out with the renovation practices of the past years.

C. Climatic conditions

Beijing has a temperate and continental climate with polluted air conditions, with four distinct seasons and big differences in temperature between day and night. Summer in Beijing is hot and humid, while winter is cold and dry. Spring and autumn are short and cool. The monthly daily average temperature in January is - 4°C, while in June it is 24°C. Precipitation averages around 570 mm annually, with close to three-quarters

of that total falling from June to August. Daily hours of sunshine range from an average of 8 in January to 12 in June.

D. Site and surroundings

Beijing is located in northern China, close to the port city of Tianjin and partially surrounded by Hebei Province; Hutongs in Beijing are situated in the middle of the first ring of the city. Typical Chinese houses with courtyards spread throughout the entire old part the city.

Being the capital of the country, it also serves as the most important transportation hub and port of entry. Modernised and being one of the six ancient cities in China, Beijing has all a city can give, and is the location of central political power in the country, and so reacts most quickly to changes in the political paradigm, with accompanying effects on its architecture. Beijing combines the "bigness" of everything, including architecture, but also supports as well the vibrant "smallness" of people's living habitats that hold up power and the society.

E. Topography

The surrounding site is fairly flat. The stone road leading to the site is relatively flat and narrow.

III. Programme

A. History of the inception of the project

Beijing Dashilar - Liulichang Cultural Development Ltd., a government agency, undertook to make a renewal plan for Hutongs in and around the first ring of Beijing. The conservation plan consists of 25 areas around Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City of Beijing.

Jia Rong, the officer in charge of this project, searched for several architects to make plans and the design for transforming the Hutongs into retail facilities to serve the commercialisation of the areas and also to serve the tourist mission to "sell" the Hutong scheme. The very pragmatic programme of the government is to pay the residents of the Hutong to move to apartments. The neglected Hutongs would be then be demolished and changed into multi-storey commercial buildings. The government stated there would only be 25 protected Hutong areas in the conservation scheme. The rest would be subject to demolition.

The architect managed to undertake a two-year-long study to search for a more appropriate non-commercial mode to match the problematic socio-cultural aspects of the Hutong programme. In this particular Hutong, the inhabitants were offered an amount of money to leave and move to apartments. Some of them refused and decided to stay in the Hutong, Mr Wang and Mr Qiao among them. The architect then had to deal with them, and needed to gain their approval as well as that of the government agency.

B. How were the architects and specialists chosen?

The Dashilar Office (Beijing Dashilar – Liulichang Cultural Development Ltd) first asked several architects to renew some Hutongs in the inner city in the first ring of Beijing. The main idea was to convert the old Hutong buildings into shops and other general and common functions to serve the massive growth of business development in most of the Hutong areas. The architect tried another scheme instead. He surveyed

several Hutongs and found one Hutong with an interesting Chinese Scholar tree (Styphnolobium Japonicum, formerly Sophora Japonica) in the middle of a courtyard in Number 8, Cha'er Hutong, Dashilar District.

When it came to formulating a programme, the architect tried a different approach and proposed a children's library instead of a shop or other commercial facility. The agency agreed and carried out the project with this cultural and social mission in mind. Although the budget was very limited and the scale small, the design was still carried out in a very serious manner.

C. General programme objectives

The Micro Yuan'er Hutong should:

- Facilitate children's activities: library, dancing class, puppet shows, paper-cutting courses, etc.
- Facilitate local people's activities: Beijing Design Week (will be one of the Design Week venues in September 2016)
- Be a friendly public facility for inhabitants remaining in the Hutong (Mr Wang & Mr Qiao) and a playground to students from the school nearby (Tan'er Hutong Primary School)

D. Functional requirements

- Community children's library
- Art exhibition space
- Dance classroom
- Painting classroom
- Local handicrafts studio
- Public terraces
- Public bathroom
- Other maintenance functions for the courtyard

IV. Description

A. Building data

Volumetry

Composed in a courtyard morphology, the volumes initially consist of spaces for families in one single-storey compound surrounding a big Chinese Scholar tree in the middle of the courtyard. The architect has rearranged the "messiness" of the functions and masses to accommodate several small public activities.

The total site area is 350 m^2. The ground floor is 190 m^2. The total combined floor area, including ground floor and all upper roof floors, is 200 m^2.

Massing

The massing was designed intentionally by the architect to follow the existing conditions found at the site. Functions were matched to the space available, orienting the tree as the main focal point. Two boxes in the courtyard are also situated to respond the tree as well as the masses surrounding them.

The height of the boxes is dictated by the height of the roof around them, so when people reach the roof-top terrace, they will still have a relatively good connection to the activities and people on the ground without losing the opportunity to see the larger context of the Hutongs.

The tree acts as a central figure to capture all the masses and activities, and offers a varying ambiance through the seasons. It will give a different feel when the leaves fall than when the tree is green.

Number of units

It was stated in the plan that the compound will have filled all the neglected spaces with functions. In reality, the process in still ongoing:

- The library is the first space being utilised,
- Then the boxes in the middle.
- The art class, the classroom and the dance classroom are all functioning well.
- The courtyard already fully functioning in serving the public

The second art classroom in the north side, as well as the guard room, toilet and bathroom next to it, and the office, meeting room and kitchen on the east side are not yet completed.

Surface area

1st floor/ground floor:

• Main entrance hall	15.8 m^2	
• Library	3.9 m^2	
• Reading room/class	24.5 m^2	
• Dance room/multi function	40.5 m^2	
• Art classroom	21.0 m^2	
• Kitchen @ courtyard	9.0 m^2	
• Pavilion @ courtyard	5.8 m^2	
Sum	116.6 m^2	
Courtyard		102.0 m^2

2nd floor/rooftop terrace:

• Terrace above kitchen	9.0 m^2	
• Terrace above pavilion	5.8 m^2	
Sum	13.8 m^2	
Circulation/stairs		3.5 m^2
Sum total	130.4 m^2	

B. Evolution of design concepts

Response to physical constraints

Since the architect chose the site because of the lovely big Chinese Scholar tree, the site serves the space naturally along with the culture of people living in Hutong.

The climate in Beijing nowadays is very harsh; the polluted air is not easy to deal with. But there are also days with good weather and sunshine. The building does not try to deal with the weather too much since the local people seem to accept and adjust to the vagaries of the climate easily to survive the city of Beijing.

Response to user requirements

The architect tried to redesign, renovate and reuse the informal add-on structures instead of eliminating them. In doing so, the intent was to recognise the add-on structures as an important historical layer and as a critical embodiment of Beijing's contemporary civil life in Hutongs that has so often been neglected. In symbiosis with the families who still live in the courtyard, a nine-square-metre children's public library built of concrete was inserted underneath the pitched roof of an existing building.

Under a big Chinese Scholar tree that may be as old as the courtyard itself, one of the former kitchens was redesigned into a six-square-metre mini art space made from traditional bluish grey brick. On its exterior, a trail of brick stairs leads up to the roof, where children and parents can delve into the branches and foliage of the big tree.

A child may stop by after school, pick out a favourite book and read in his little niche before getting picked up by his parents. Or kids can climb up onto the roof, sit in the shade and engage in a conversation with elderly neighbours in a familiar but new space.

Purely formal aspects

The massing of the boxes is designed in a very modern manner, attached to a very traditional Hutong style structure. The library has a curved ceiling just to allow the Chinese wooden structure to hold the roof tiles as is usually done. Despite the look of the brick wall from the outside, it was very common for people in the past to use a heavy wooden structure for Hutong houses in the past,

The architect also experimented with making concrete mixed with Chinese ink. The bricks were also done in this way.

Landscaping

The tree dominates the landscape. There is nothing more that could be done except to pave all the ground with brick to ease the way for people to walk.

C. Structure, materials, technology

Structural systems

The main structural system is wood with mortise and tenon joints.

Structural interventions are done with poured reinforced concrete underneath the roof structure. As for the boxes, the structures are rather complex, since the spaces are very tight. Since the structures are made of steel plate, the foundations of the boxes also have a steel structure (hollow steel beams). To give the interlocking space its form, and also to make the stair structure effective and efficient, the whole structure is made of steel plate, covered with brick outside and plywood inside.

Materials

The main materials are (applied differently at different masses):
- Concrete structure for Library
- Wooden structure, construction and roof for the existing structures
- Exterior wall with concrete and wooden doors and windows
- Paint and plaster for interior walls
- Plywood and wood planks for ceilings and walls

Structural members:
- Base and foundation are the existing traditional structure.
- Upper structure is comprised of wood column and beams connected each other with mortise and tenon joints.
- Roof structure is made of wood beams with wood plank as roof plane, covered with a waterproofing agent. Above, the roof tiles sit on rafters.
- For the boxes, the main structure is steel plate with a hollow steel base system for the floor so the structure will not disturb the tree.

Infill materials:
- Plank wood and plywood are the dominant elements in this building.
- Other areas are mostly covered with plaster and painted.
- On the openings, simple wooden doors and windows with good detailing are installed with accessories acquired in the local market.

Renderings and finishes:
- The plywood and wood plank were covered with a local coating.
- The concrete finishes are experimentally mixed with Chinese ink and left rough and exposed.
- From observation, the wooden wall and the concrete rendering seems to be functioning well.

Construction Technology

With all the labour available locally, the cost has been low. The structural system is inspired by local construction methods supplemented by the innovation of a modern concrete system, with rigorous detailing done on the drafting table.

The materials – concrete with Chinese ink and recycled grey brick – were chosen to blend in seamlessly with the surrounding urban context, while exposed warm plywood alludes to the contemporary setting indoors. The concrete mixed with Chinese ink is a new material tested and used for the first time in the world, as far as we know, here, by the architect.

For the redesigned brick buildings around the big Chinese scholar tree, steel panels were used as structure and only lightweight steel frames were laid simply on the ground, to form a “floating” foundation in order to protect the roots of the old tree.

Building services, site utilities

In the Hutongs, traditionally there is no toilet, so plumbing is a common problem. The government provides a public toilet and public bath.

The brick pavement for the whole courtyard, instead of using a cement base (as almost all of the pavements in the city do) was designed to only rest on a layer of sand without any cement, so that rainwater can be filtered into the earth as a supply of underground water.

The need for illumination at night was provided by LED lights.

D. Origin of

Technology

The building design is based on a local indigenous wood structure system, using traditional mortise-and-tenon wood joint. The modern insertion used a simple concrete structure with a very complicated form to construct underneath the existing roof structure.

Materials

Structural system:	Traditional Chinese local wooden structure for houses.
Roofing:	Local roof tiles sit on wooden roof construction
Facade construction:	• Bricks • Wooden frame, glass windows and doors
Interior wall finishes:	Wood plank, local • Plywood • Plaster painted
Door and windows:	Wooden and glass doors
Floor:	Wood parquet, local
Insulation:	The architect judged that there was no need for insulation.
Sanitary wares:	No toilet yet installed
Plumbing and electrical work:	• Plumbing runs from kitchen to the public sewerage pipe on the street • Electrical wiring is distributed from the common electrical panel in the gate area

Labor force

Construction worker	149.6 CNY per day = 23.08 USD

Professionals

Director of Client's Office:	Jia Rong
Architect:	Zhang Ke
Design team :	Zhang Mingming Fang Shujun Ao Ikegami Huang Tanyu Ilaria Positano
Contractor:	Liu Shanjie Wang Changjun Wang Zhanjun

V. Construction Schedule and Costs

A. History of project design and implementation

The project was commissioned to ZAO/standardarchitecture in September 2012.

The design process lasted for two years, starting from September 2012 to July 2014.

The construction:

- Phase I from March 2014 to September 2014. The project has been in use since September 2014.
- Phase II from March 2015 to August 2015.
- Phase III from October 2015 to December 2015.

Total costs and main sources of financing:

- The total actual cost without land is 679'000 CNY (105'000 USD).
- Phase I, II, III total built area is 145 m^2.

The main source of finance was from Beijing Dashilar – Liulichang Cultural Development Ltd, arranged and managed by Ms Jia Rong – Director in Charge.

B. Comparative costs

The building cost for similar type of building is lower than that for local vernacular houses by about 15%.

C. Comparative costs

The building construction cost per m^2 is about 4'800 CNY (740.70 USD).

D. Maintenance costs

Operational cost N/A
Maintenance is not regularly done.

E. Ongoing costs and "life performance" of building

The structure will function well through time. All details are done in proper way.

VI. Technical Assessment

A. Functional assessment

The building is functioning really well, serving the purpose of its role as a library and also as classrooms for courses and other community activities. It is even ready for more complex uses like Beijing Design Week.

The social integration is managed well, especially with the inhabitants, Mr Wang & Mr Qiao.

B. Climatic performance

Lighting

The architect consciously used low-energy LED Lamps to cut both initial and operational cost. The lighting details are very simple, although it clearly was thoroughly thought through. All lighting is indirect; the light source cannot be seen.

Natural and/or mechanical ventilation

In the sub-tropical Beijing climate, ventilation is complicated by bad air pollution. All the rooms are provided with operable windows to allow cross-ventilating air.

Sun control

In a very tight space like in the Hutong, sunshine is much appreciated to light the space during the day. With big, tall, glass windows and doors, sunshine came inside in an optimal way during daytime. The tree filters the bright sunshine to light the space below. In the library, the architect made a special skylight to invite sunshine coming inside in a functional way.

Insect control

There are some insect screens on windows, adequate for the purpose.

Acoustics

There is no intention to install any acoustical device in the building, since there is no need to have one. This Hutong is located in a very quiet area during both day and night time. Only when children come is it filled with sound. Since there are so many corners and niches, it seems that all the sound was absorbed well in the courtyard and inside the spaces.

Orientation

The openings of the building were carefully designed by the architect.

All the rooms are facing the courtyard, since there is not much space left. When there was an opportunity, the architect strove to find ways to make window openings to the small alley in the north part of the courtyard.

C. Response to treatment of water and rainfall

Rain is quite rare in Beijing. It seems that the need of a water-drainage system is not a priority for people in Hutongs. The government has already raised awareness of the importance of community health by building a lot of public toilets.

D. Environmental response

The first attempt to preserve and make the Chinese Scholar tree the main focal point has served the basic attitude of honouring the environment. Every attempt to construct has factored in the survival of the tree as well as the preservation of the Hutong itself.

E. Choice of materials, level of technology

The architect chose local ad hoc skills and materials. There is no effort to do too much and make it too pretentious. The level of technology was appropriate to achieve the right effect of having it work well within the community.

F. Response to, and planning for, emergency situations

The community already has a capacity to respond to emergency situations. They know each other and take care of each other well. The design provides a clear way out in case of emergency. In terms of security, they have a local community guard who takes care of the Hutong, Mr Hai, a Muslim living in the neighbouring Hutong.

In the case of fire, the city has cleared out pathways to allow fire fighters to reach the Hutongs. The government has done much work on the public alleyways as part of its effort to revitalise the Hutong area in Dashilar.

G. Ageing and maintenance problems

The buildings are mostly covered by roof tile with a wooden structure which already managed well traditionally through time. The additional structure of bricks and concrete will not have any problems in maintenance in the future since it was well detailed.

H. Design features

The project is designed to be a communal children's reading room and art centre, free and open to the neighbourhood. It is an open courtyard based on the existing city fabric. With a giant, six-hundred-years-old typical Chinese scholar tree as the natural shading facility for the project courtyard, all the rooms of the project use natural ventilation. Due to the northern orientation of the site, roof openings and large facade openings are used for more natural lighting, and the interior artificial lighting consists of warm LED.

Interior wise, glazing was positioned to reveal unusually framed vistas out into the courtyard, and follow the interior functions. For example, steps form an elevated reading nook in the library and are mimicked by a wide picture window, allowing children to climb up and look out as they flip through a volume or two. The spontaneity of childhood is captured in how interiors are elevated, allowing for seating to become ad hoc tables or benches to stretch out, creating multiple degrees of intimacy for children and parents together.

On the outside, by inserting an outdoor staircase alongside each structure, the architect created viewing platforms to survey the neighbourhood while enjoying a breath of rare chlorophyll-laced air within the tree's branches.

The ground of the outdoor space is covered by the sand-based water filtering pavement to let the natural water circulation go on uninterruptedly. A special "floating" foundation is made to protect the old tree in the middle of the courtyard. The main materials of the project are traditional grey bricks, both new and recycled, and the special ink-concrete designed by the architect, to make the project blend delicately into the surroundings. The whole design maintains and improves the existing space composition, using the existing infrastructure system (e.g., electricity, water supply).

I. Impact of the project on the site

The new micro-library attracts the attention mostly of little children. Being more publicised through local media, it also has begun to attract the attention of parents to come and take part in community activities..

Direct access is not convenient for cars, so they need to be parked elsewhere or taxis used.

J. Durability and long-time viability of the project

The programme of the new Hutong will guarantee the sustainability of the facilities.

K. Interior design and furnishing

Decent design has been applied to the interior fittings and furniture from the perspective of scale and the security of children, with possibilities of being transferred into other uses. A factory was donating the furniture on the basis of designs supplied by the architect's office

VII. Users

A. Description of those who use or benefit from the project

Culturally, the people of the Hutong communities will benefit from the existence of the library and other facilities, since they not only link them to the outside world, but also guarantee in children a strong sense of community through their ties with education, art, the people inside the community and people outside as well.

Economically, this facility may not benefit the people living in it, but, socially, the facility will become a laboratory of knowledge exchange among the people and others.

B. Response to project by clients, users, community, etc.

What do architectural professionals and the cultural "intelligentsia" think about the project?

This micro-library has attracted the attention of the local art community, particularly the organiser of Beijing Design Week. They are amazed at how a small space could serve such a very complicated programme. They have arranged with the architect to do a programme together in the next Beijing Design Week. In general, architecture circles and the cultural community are excited by the project and expect more to come and wait for further response.

What is the popular reaction to the project?

For the locals, it is so uncommon to experience such a space. The gate is always open. So many people peek in and come into the courtyard with a high level of curiosity. Happiness is the usual effect on strangers coming out from the courtyards, thinking of bringing their acquaintances to the place next time.

What do neighbours and those in the immediate vicinity think about the project?

Neighbours like it very much. A small girl even dragged her father to see what is available in the library.

Passers-by are curious. Some people would come in and staring at the space and facilities. They think it is cool and interesting, and sometimes seemed envious of the situation.

VIII. Persons Involved

Client:	Beijing Dashilar – Liulichang Cultural Development Ltd., Jia Rong – Director in charge
Architect:	Zhang Ke
Design team:	Zhang Mingming, project architect Fang Shujun, project architect Ao Ikegami, Huang Tanyu, Ilaria Positano
Contractor:	Liu Shanjie Wang Changjun, Wang Zhanjun

IX. Bibliography

ZAO/Standardarchitecture. Micro-Yuan'er, Xicheng District, Beijing China, A+U, 3/2016

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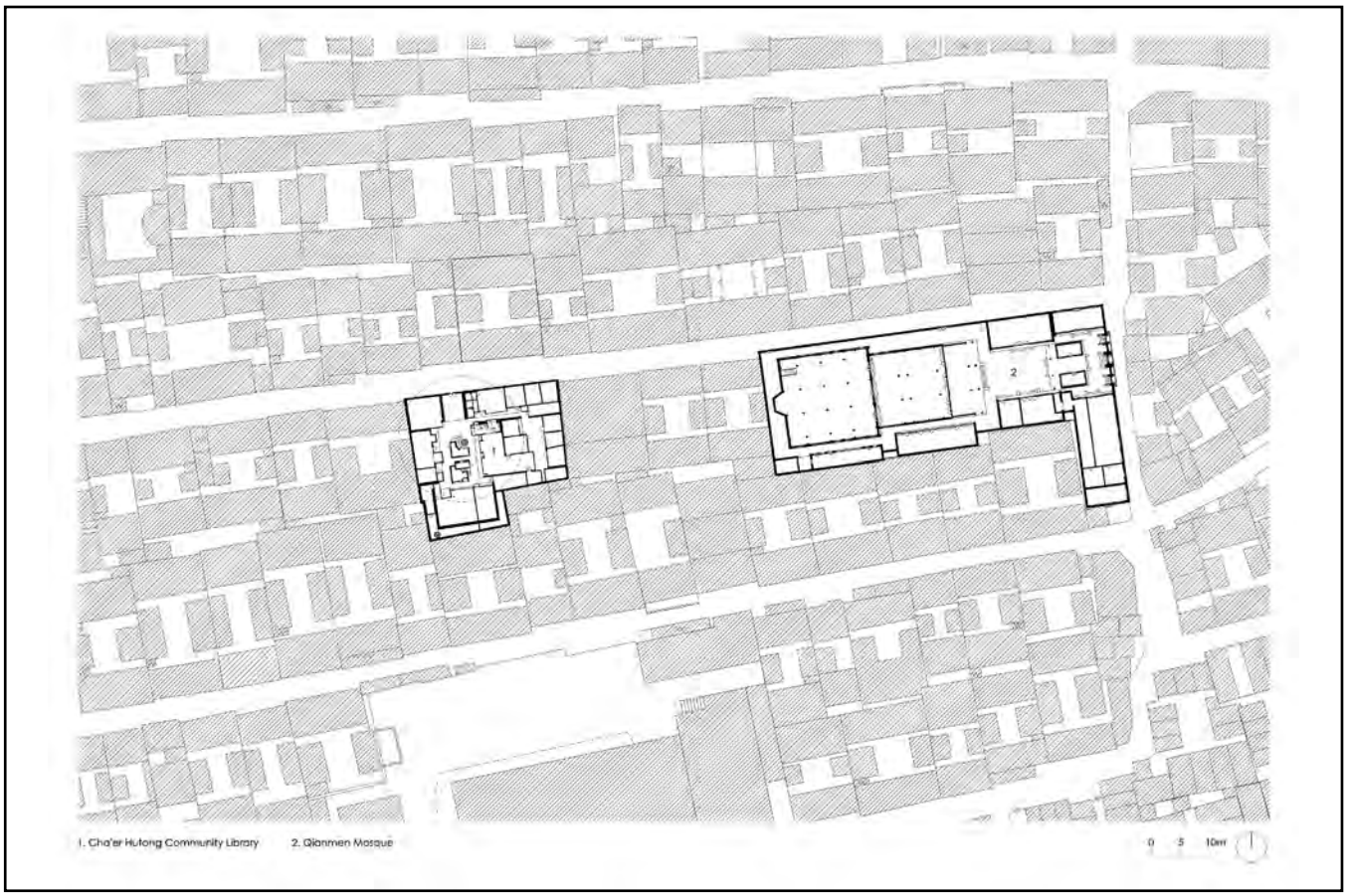
1. Cha'er Hutong Community Library
2. Qianmen Mosque
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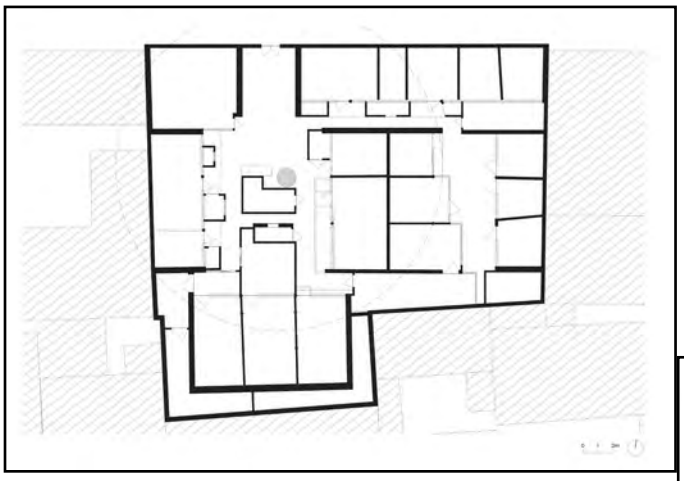
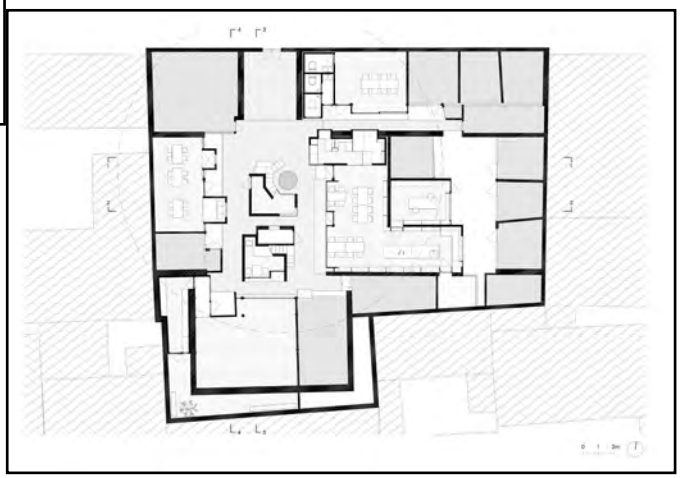


Original ground floor.



Actual ground floor.

The Number 8, Cha’er Hutong courtyard is a typical da-za-yuan – big messy courtyard – once occupied by over a dozen families. Over the past fifty years, each family built a small add-on kitchen in the courtyard, which are usually considered as urban scrap and all of them have been wiped out with the renovation practices of the past years.

Keeping a courtyard morphology around a big Chinese Scholar tree, the architect has rearranged the “messiness” of the functions and masses to accommodate several small public activities.

The tree acts as a central figure to capture all the masses and activities, and gives the varying ambiance through the seasons.

One of the former kitchen was redesigned into a six-square-metre mini art space made from traditional bluish grey brick. On its exterior, a trail of brick stairs leads up to the roof, where children and parents can delve into the branches and foliage of the big tree.

The main materials of the project are traditional grey bricks, both new and recycled, and the special ink-concrete designed by the architect, to make the project blend delicately into the surroundings.

All the rooms are facing the courtyard, since there is not much space left. When there was an opportunity, the architect strove to find ways to make window openings to the small alley in the north part of the courtyard.

The spontaneity of childhood is captured in how interiors are elevated, allowing for seating to become ad hoc tables or benches to stretch out, creating multiple degrees of intimacy for children and parents together.

The library provides small spaces for children to explore the possibilities of enjoying the space as they read the books.