

# The Almost Empty That Is Full

A Patient Search in Nature

by

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Bachelor of Science in Architecture  
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## ABSTRACT:

Humans live with Nature, live in nature, and build within nature... We can find ideologies from ancient Oriental philosophies to some of the exemplary architectural practitioners/theorists of our own time that find validity in integrating the human living space with nature. Frugality, simplicity and synchronization of the environment heightens human experiences and purges excess energy.

However, the contemporary trend of thinking has been one that views nature as sources of extraction, either scenically or resources wise. The reverence to the mountains and rivers has largely been lost in the shifting of historical paradigms. The appearance of certain cultural/religious institutions means something. And the disappearance of them

also denotes something equally profound. The specific area of focus here would be a small piece of abandoned temple ground located on a mountain adjacent to the mid-section of Yangtze River called Lushan. Located in a relatively remote but accessible part of the mountain, a retreat complex that can host up to thirty people has been given a great amount of consideration. The project calls for an effort to look into ways of reuniting the modern beings with a landscape that is as large as a mountain, as small as a piece of stone brick and as old as the human history records.

To take a step back in order to make two steps forward, and to empty itself so it can be full again.

Thesis Supervisor:

James Wescoat

Aga Khan Professor

Professor of Urban Studies and Planning

## Acknowledgment

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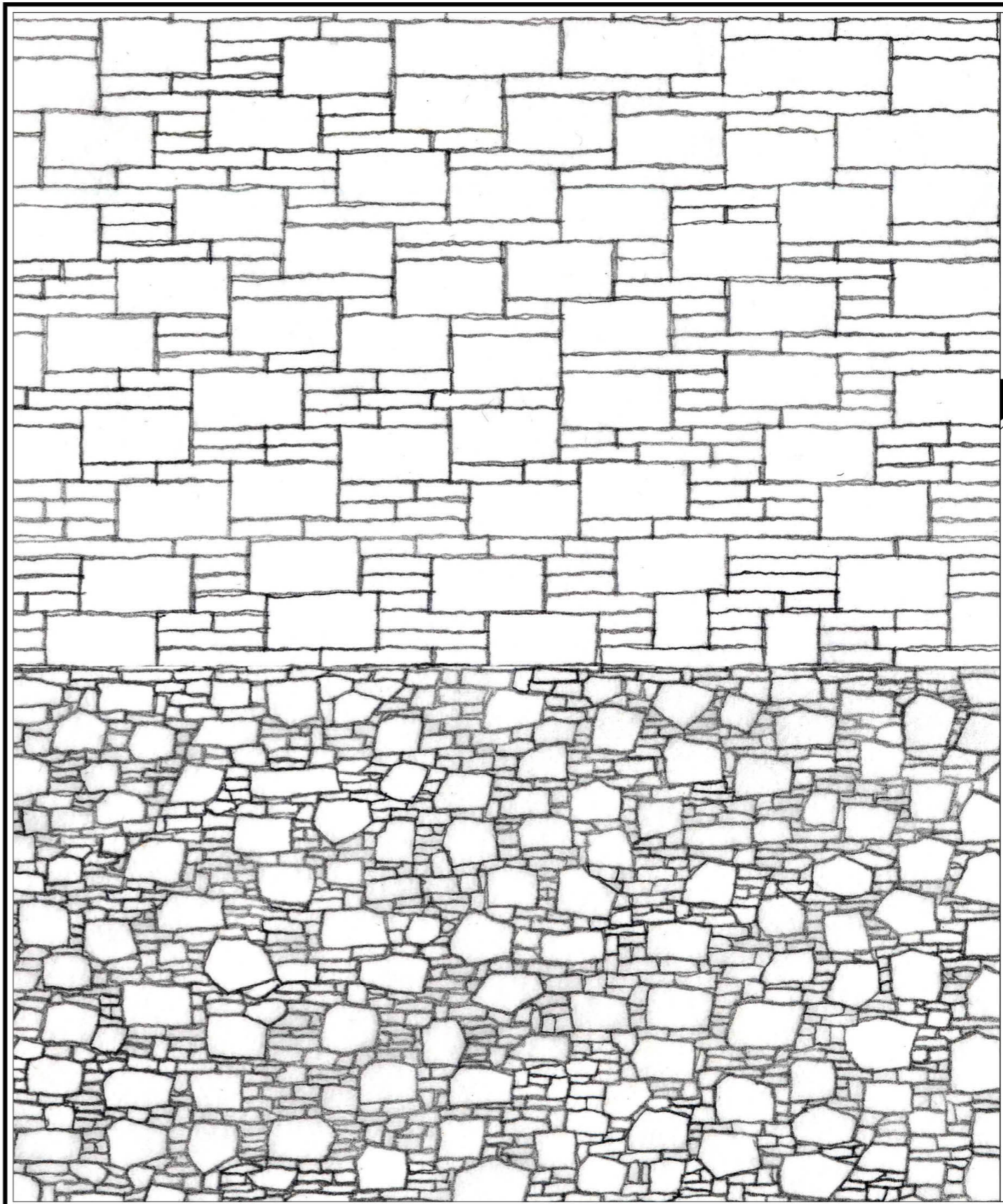
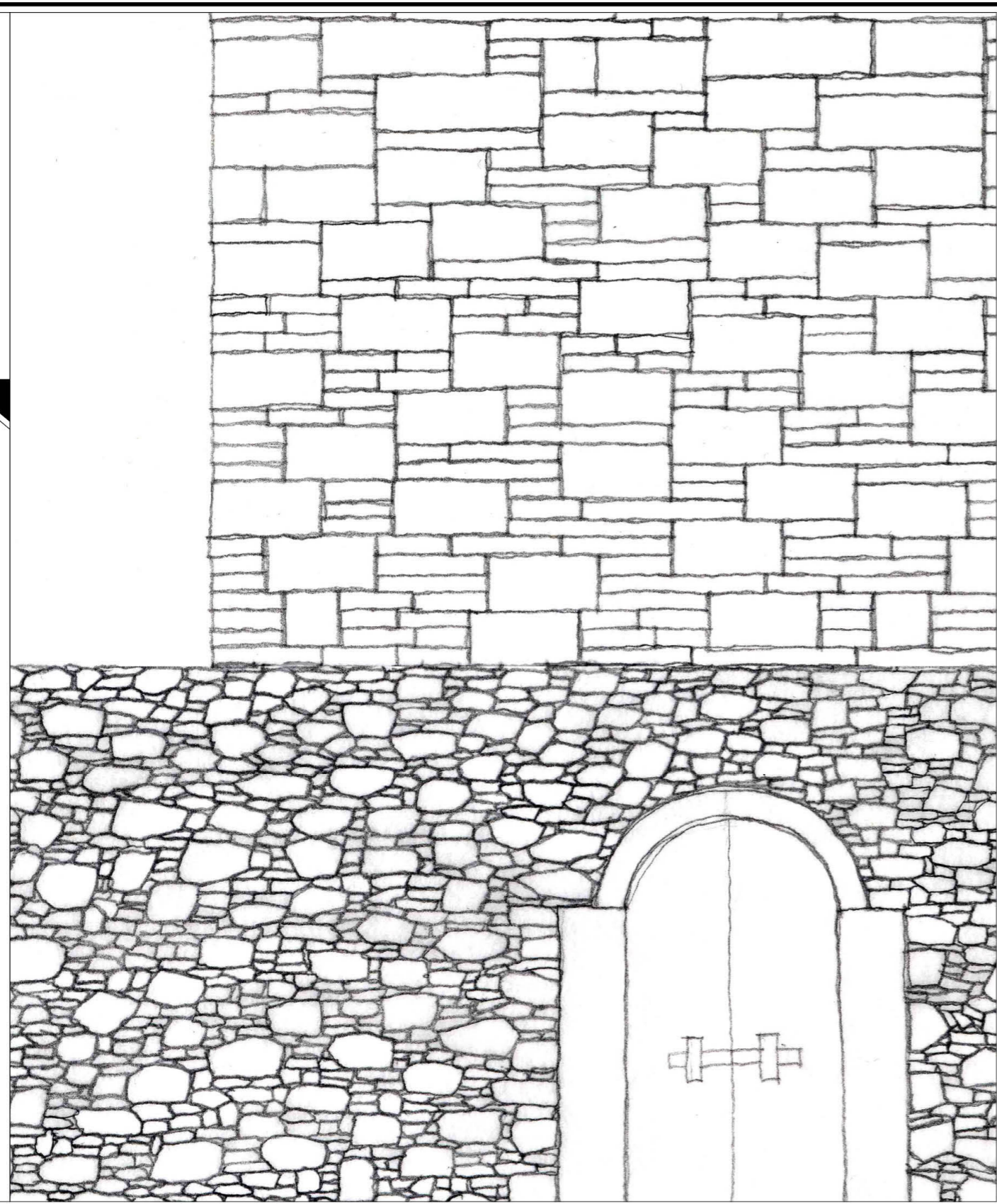
Lorena, thank you for always being there for me. I enjoyed our conversations. They really helped shaping the design formation. Thank you for all the time you offered. They were very precious.

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## Chapter 01

# Naturalistic Understanding of the Chinese Cosmological Conception

### Mapping the World

For many years, the traditional understanding of a universe for East Asia has been a dichotomy. The literal translation for this understanding can be interpreted roughly as "the Sky is of a circle and the Earth is of a square".<sup>1</sup> It is a concept derived from an very ancient text called *I Ching* which was originally intended for divination. It was also an imported book that helped shaping many branches of Chinese knowledge including Taoist/Buddhist philosophy, Chinese medicine, Feng Shui, etc.

The seemly geometrically driven understanding of the cosmos is not only a phrase to describe the physical form, but a way of depicting the universe in terms of energy flow. The "square" is understood as something solidified, flat and stable. It is the anchoring force that represents the ground, the beneath and things that can be perceived by human eyes. On the other hand, the "circle" is of something that is more fluid and more all-encompassing which controls the relationships

between the physical elements. It is the true nature of the metaphysical cosmology. The association with the Sky often indicates that the "circle" is the way of divinity.

With defining the Sky above and Earth below, one is able to understand the positioning of human beings. We are both being subjected to the set of rules prescribed by the Sky and Earth, and being active participants who drive the universe moving.

Early graphical representations of the world are often named "Map under the Sky". It is an indication that the world that is known to human beings is being oversaw by the divinity. Thus the universe is bounded by a circular edge representing the world's confinement to the heavenly order.

Having not much precise knowledge about the geographical conditions outside of the Asian continent, all the other con-



tinents were drawn in a ring adhering to the edge of the universe. The central continent has clear markings of countries that were known during the time the map was made including China, Korea, Vietnam, India, Siberian regions and countries that existed in central Asia. Island countries not only include real countries like Japan, but also include places and regions that exist in legends and ancient texts.

Major rivers and mountains are marked on the map, but the curious part comes from the trees that denote North, East and West. Mountains and islands seem to be much more reasonable marking figures at a scale like this. One can make an assumption that the intention of using an object (tree) which belongs to a much smaller scale is to respect customs and traditions. Indeed, nature worshiping has a very long history in East Asia. To draw a large tree on top of an island mountain that would indicate the place where both the sun and moon would rise (this is the original text that marked East) suggests the status of a natural living being within a scale as large as the world. Trees are sacred.

This is one method of map making which has its origin closely related to histo-

ry and culture. Each dynasty has its own interpretation and copies of this map. The very first one is untraceable. It is a product of a holistic comprehension of the universe that crosses different periods of time and spatial understanding.

Of course there are other means of making maps that focus more on the geographic accuracies, especially after western map making techniques were introduced to China. The 1609 World Map that is titled as "The Comprehensive Map of Mountains, Sea and Earth" is one that is drawn much more precisely. All the continents are recognizable that even include the Antarctica. The concept of latitudes and longitudes is presented here on the side note. Rivers and mountains have much less presence on this map compared with the coastal lines (which is something that the western world values more in map making). The number of political entities far exceeds the number of natural elements. Only a handful of seas and one archipelagos are marked. However the title of this map still reveals the Chinese subconscious perception of the world which is one that is made by mountains, seas and earth rather than countries.



# 山海輿地全圖

外三圈天球定天  
度晝夜長短影候



圖中橫豎三十六  
方每方中各十度

內一圈地球分天  
地五州區境之畧



地球橫豎經緯界  
線別方隅稽度數

Mapping China

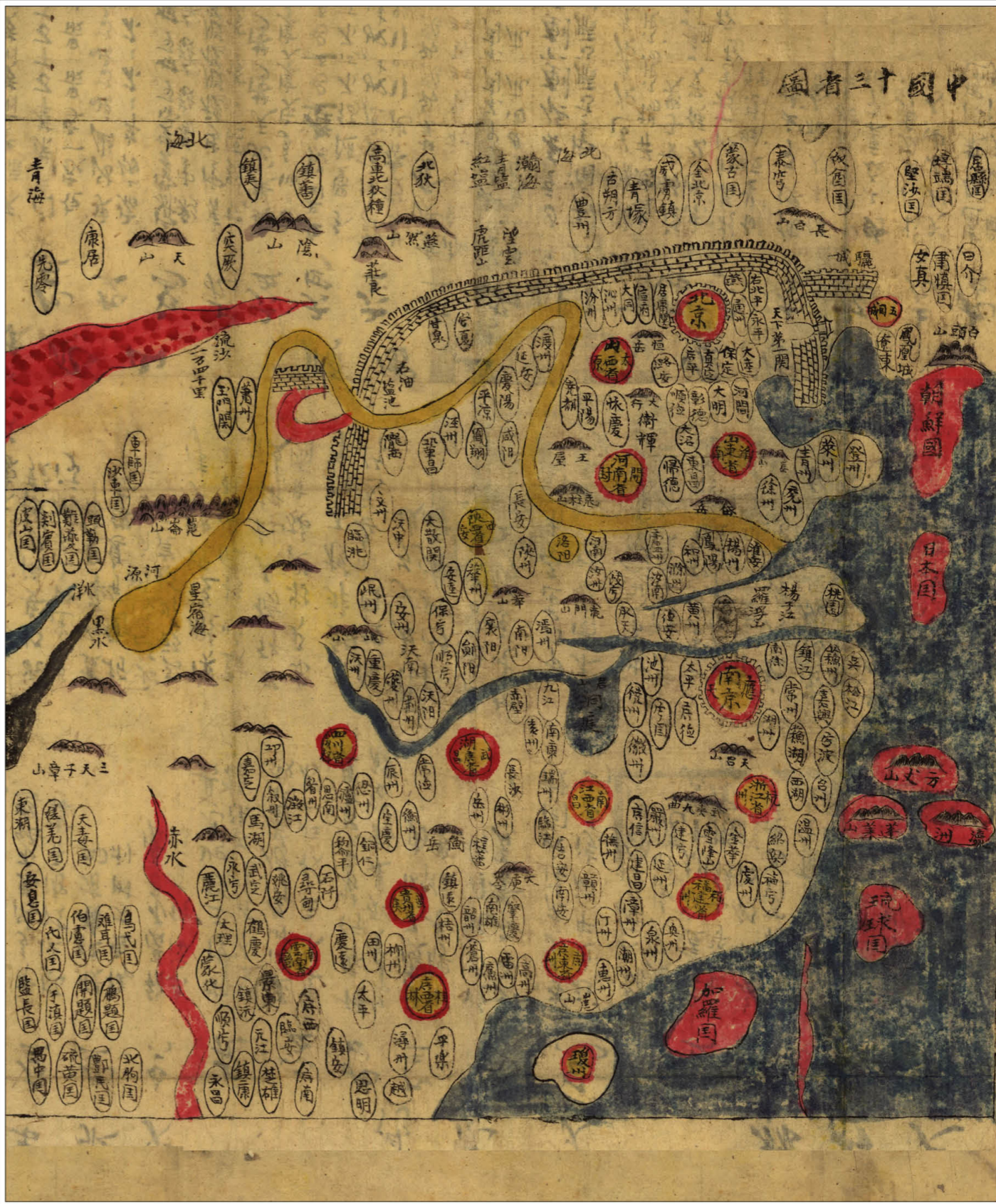
Two types of mapping methods also exist in the country-wide map scale. Similar observations can be made that one type of mapping talks about the integration of history and the interweaving between human made environment and natural environment. And the other type of mapping is more cartesianly drawn with most of the attention given to cities, provinces and adjacent countries.

In the 1177 China Map, not only the current political points of interests were marked, what were included are also the very first known Chinese state division (the first recorded political layout over all of China) as a historic reference. Some of the mountains and rivers have side notes stating their historical names and the geographical changes (ex. River diversions). The graphics are very strong for this map. It can be almost read as a diagram. Yangtze River and Yellow River both have very distinctive ways of representation. Mountains and lakes are very visible to the eyes. The natural environment is portrayed with such importance that one has to intentionally search the names of provinces and cities in between mountains and rivers. Another interesting observation that can be made here is that for the sake of presenting the entire map on a full spread book format and to exclude non-Chinese content

as much as possible, the map is rotated ninety degrees having the North on the right hand side. Such graphic driven intentions further proves the preference of presenting the country with strong visual connections and cultural lineages.

In a contrast, the Ming Dynasty map concentrates on civic functions and municipal/provincial locations. And it is drawn much more geographically correct. Although the two major rivers are very visible on the map, mountains were not represented with much dedications. There is even a major mistake on the marking of the biggest lake which might be an indication that natural formations were not given enough importance in making the map. On the contrary, political features have much more presence. The Great Wall was drawn with equal attention in comparison with the two major rivers that it almost becomes "the third major river".

The maps might have been drawn for different purposes thus producing completely different results. After much observation, one might conclude that the later reproduction map was made for servicing practical governance. And the earlier 1177 map was a map that represents the metaphysical understanding of China as a country.



Map of China, Ming Dynasty, 1800s Reproduction



## Mapping a Mountain

China has a long history of making encyclopedias and reference books.<sup>2</sup> There are ones specify the scope of coverage according to different levels of administrative divisions (ex. country wide, province wide, city wide, prefecture wide, etc.). There are also the encyclopedias that focus on specific locations (ex. mountain, lake, river, temple, academy, etc.). Since these type of books were often not ordered by the government, but produced out an ardent dedication to that place by scholars, monks and travelers. Location based encyclopedias often contain interesting materials that are free from political implications.

The following is a map from the Encyclopedia of Lushan (which is the site of this thesis), the 1720 edition.<sup>3</sup> It is the north side of the mountain range (There is also a south side, but for the purpose of being concise, only the north side is referenced here for examinations.). Since the western style of mapping plan view with contour lines was a much later method that was introduced to China, this map still deployed much of the Chinese mapping style. The representation of mountains was derived from more artistic landscape

painting which emphasizes on a more visually recognizable format. Thus being geographically precise was not the goal. The map provides references of mountain peaks that are in directional relationships with each other. The format is almost closer to an elevation or axonometric drawing rather than a plan. Since a plan view of a mountain requires much more three-dimensional translation in order to grasp an understanding of how a mountain actually looks like, an elevation view works much better with a clear perception of height difference. Mountain peaks with very distinctive shapes can also be easily identified.

The map clearly illustrates all the visible mountain tops. Paths and bridges are visibly close to the bottom of the mountain range. And there is a city called Jiujiang located right at the foot of the mountain. What can be extracted purely from the drawn part is quite limited. The markings have more contents and depths that can be helpful in making some conclusions.

After much research and making assumptions, all the markings on the mountains

were categorized into six groups: water bodies, geological formations, religious designations, civil services, academic institutes and artificial green. First of all, it does not matter which category the point of interest belongs to, it is treated equally compared with all the rest of the categories. A stream is marked with the same font and size compared to a famous temple. The author of this map might or might not had an intention of conveying the following, however, my own interpretation is that all elements on the mountains, regardless of their form and popularity, have equal status on this map. Thus, there is no hierarchy or no premeditated emphasis on certain places in terms of representation. Secondly, there is an almost equal distribution between the constructed environment and natural environment regarding both the number and density. This mountain has a very long recorded history tracing back to two thousand years ago. It is hard to imagine that there are "virgin lands". However, there are also no "enclaves" on the mountain, meaning a community or a large complex. Most of the civil services and academies are located close to the foot of the mountain. Only temples, mon-

asteries and their related features exist on top of the mountain. All the destinations are relatively independent of each other. This is something to do more than with just the author's own representation, but more to do with Chinese perception of a mountain's identity, and what is essentially appropriate to build on a mountain. This topic would be explored more in the later part of this thesis.

By looking at this one map, a mountain can be perceived as a place with both natural and human made elements without a hierarchy and laid out with even distribution.

At this point, one can make some comparison amongst all three scales of mapping. Nature plays a very important role in each of the maps that denotes an integrated understanding of the place it depicts. It does not only represent its own physical existence, more than that under a broader Chinese context it is a devise to get to know and learn about this universe, the way of things, the change of history and essentially how human beings' existence should be.



龍虎山三洞至南湖前圖

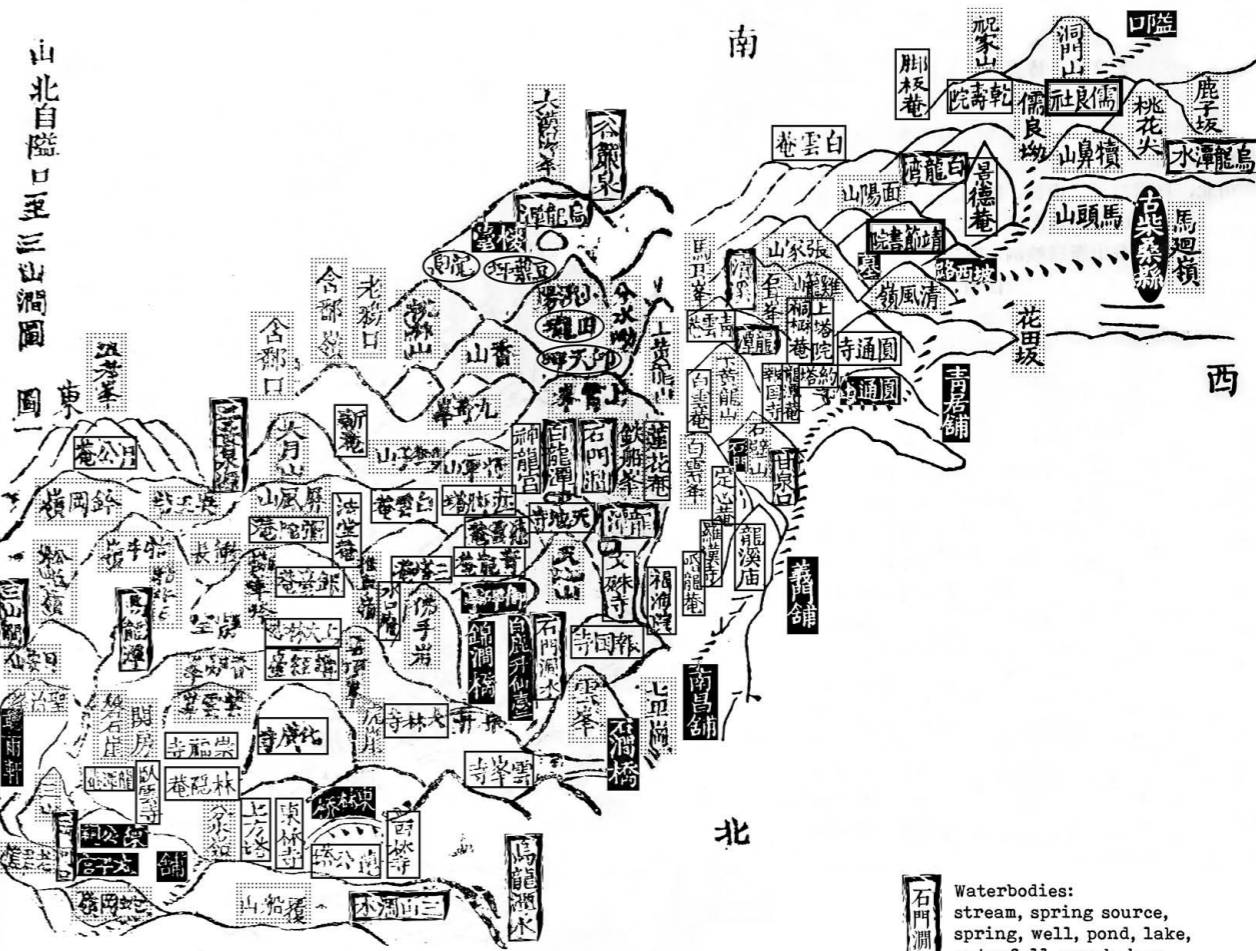
圖三

東



山北自隘口至三山洞圖

圖一



- 石門洞 Waterbodies:  
stream, spring source,  
spring, well, pond, lake,  
waterfall, creek, bay
- 五老峰 Geological formations:  
mountain, peak, ridge, valley  
huge rock formation, gorge  
hillock, cliff, cave, depression
- 東林寺 Religious designations:  
temple, monastery, shrine,  
convent, tower
- city & town Civil services:  
police station, store, retail,  
medicine, gate, entry, road,  
bridge, dyke, dam, hall
- 白鹿洞 Academic institute:  
confucious academy,  
buddhist library, private  
school
- 田壟 Artificial green:  
rice field, tea field, fruit  
landscape forest



First published in 1720  
康熙五十九年由毛德琦編撰的《廬山志》

## Chapter 02

## Some Ancient Philosophical Thinking

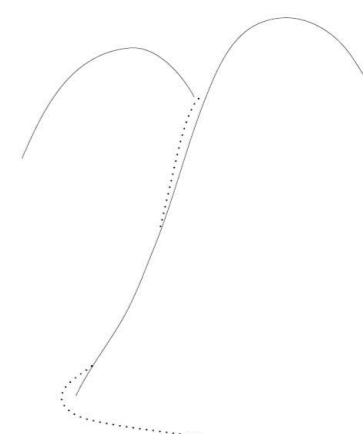
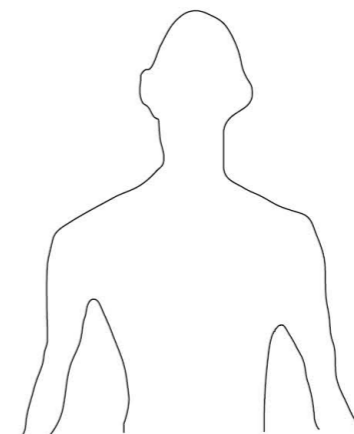
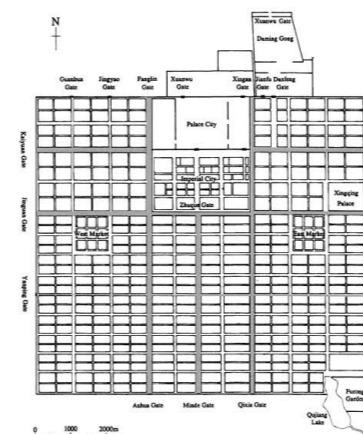
## Taoist Tripartite Notion from Han Dynasty

By the Taoist tradition during Han dynasty (mainly from a Taoist text called Taipingjīn), the understanding of the cosmos is represented by a tripartite notion.<sup>4</sup> First is Taiyang (太陽), the extreme of Yang which is often associated with the sun, the sky, the father figure and the city. Second is Taiyin (太陰), the extreme of Yin denotes the moon, the earth, the mother figure and mountains. And the third is called Zhonghe (中和) which can be roughly translated as the central peace represented by the stars, humanity, the child figure and hermits.

The third concept is not only a simple unification of Taiyang and Taiyin, but a centripetal force that pulls elements together and construct a complete image. Thus the decision made to live in a remote region far away from the city (often in country side or on a mountain) is not merely a transposition from one form of context to another one that is completely different to have an escape into the wilderness. It should not be charged with

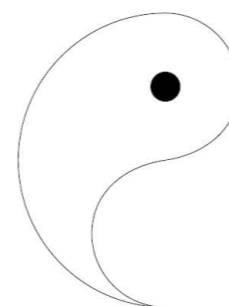
the idea that the over-saturation of one condition leads to the longing of another (although in many cases that is true, but it is only a portion of the entire picture). It is through an intentional move to position oneself within different situations that one is able to have a grasp of the totality and ultimately achieve Zhonghe, the Central Peace.

And within all of these, a mountain holds a strong semiotic connotation of representing the culture of seclusion. It is the ground of operation that one can have the space to contemplate about the validity in the Yang side which is to say the city and the human construct.



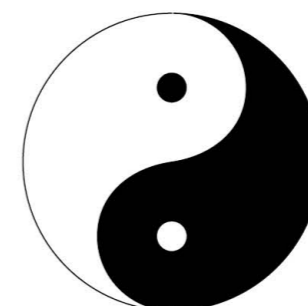
Yang

陽



Central Peace

中和



Yin

陰



## Learning from Darkness, Inspirations from Buddhism

Although Buddhism is an imported branch of knowledge from India, its fundamental nature of inclusiveness and interdependence made it a well-integrated part of the broader Chinese philosophy.

There are some common misconceptions about Buddhist Enlightenment being the ultimate goal of achieving the "infinite Self" and "overcomes this dismal world by sheer will-power".<sup>5</sup> One might draw a parallel comparison between this interpretation and the Western Individualism which values an independent person's creativity and freedom being capable of realizing infinite number of possibilities.

Although Buddhism does believe that humans are capable of reaching to the Other Side, the essential perception of the Self is different from the western notion. One part of the intrinsic Buddhist knowledge is that humanity is never "superior to the rest of natural world."<sup>6</sup> Asceticism and all the associated practices within

Buddhism is to ensure that the amount of thinking and sensation dedicated to the Self is suppressed so that there would be more room to consider and establish a connection with the non-Self. In the eyes of Buddha, all beings are equal and thus the non-hierarchical perception of the world is crucial in attaining the universal compassion.

It is never the intention that all the self-attention should be ignored and personal needs should be rejected. However, the status quo is an over saturation of fixating on the self-centered world views. The over confidence about an individual's ability often does not lead to the correct answer. The admittance of one's own limitations sometimes opens opportunities to an infinite world.

The following is an ancient Zen koan<sup>7</sup> that talks about darkness and enlightenment:

Tokusan asked Ryutan about Zen far into the night. At last Ryutan said, 'The night is late. You had better leave.' Tokusan made his bows, lifted up the door curtain, and went out. He was confronted by darkness. Turning back to Ryutan, he said, 'It is dark outside.' Ryutan thereupon lit a candle and handed it to him. Tokusan was about to take it when Ryutan blew it out. At this, Tokusan was suddenly enlightened.



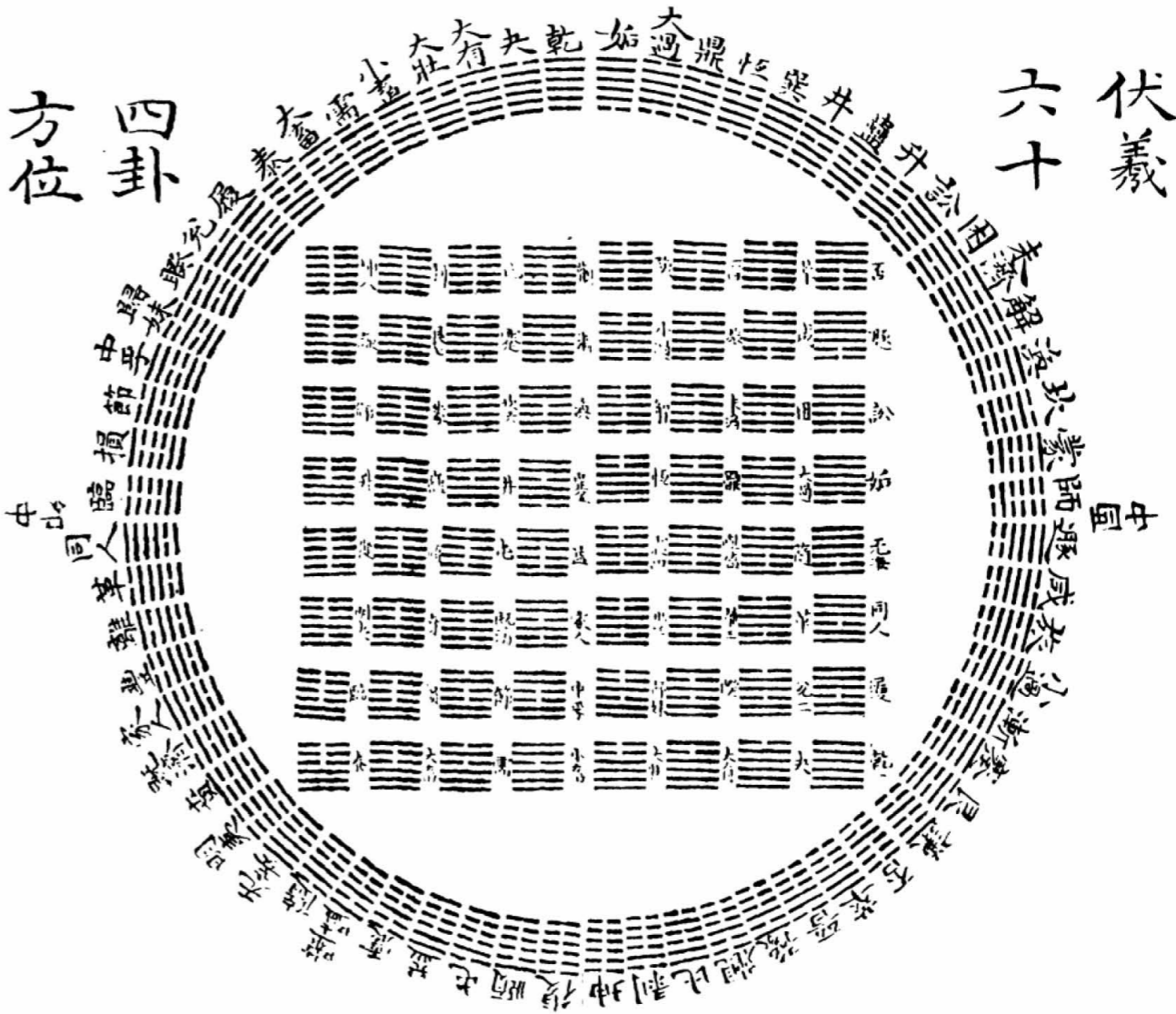
"All Modalities of Being Are Organically Connected"

In the Chinese conception of how the world functions, Qi (Chi in older spelling, 氣) is a very important notion. It can be roughly explained as the flow of energy or the "vital force". All the changes within the world are guided by numerous streams of vital forces. They converge, integrate and synthesize with each other to establish an ever changing but stable universal harmony. There is nothing in the world that is excluded from this spontaneous process.<sup>8</sup> Humans and nature are equally effected by numerous types of energy flow. The blood and breath from living beings is a type. The rain and wind from the weather is another type. It is through the exchanging and intermingling of different flows that knowledge is being passed on, aggressive tensions are being resolved, and a balance is being obtained.

Another example of this universal interdependence can be observed from dissecting the Chinese word of nature called Zi-ran (自然). It is composed of two char-

acters: Zi (自) denotes self, and Ran (然) denotes the action of to be. To be oneself is the fundamental characteristic of one's existence in the world. It is to "posit a nondiscriminatory and non-judgmental position, to allow all modalities of being to display themselves as they are."<sup>9</sup> The condition of "let it be so" provides a foundation of establishing a system where mutual understanding and respect are able to exist within an all-inclusive situation.

Going back to the first chapter, the notion of "Sky is of a circle and the Earth is of a square" is also another rendition of this world view with forces and dynamics being all-converging and continuous.



## Chapter 03

### Pragmatism in Present Day China

#### Efficiency, Quantities and Speed

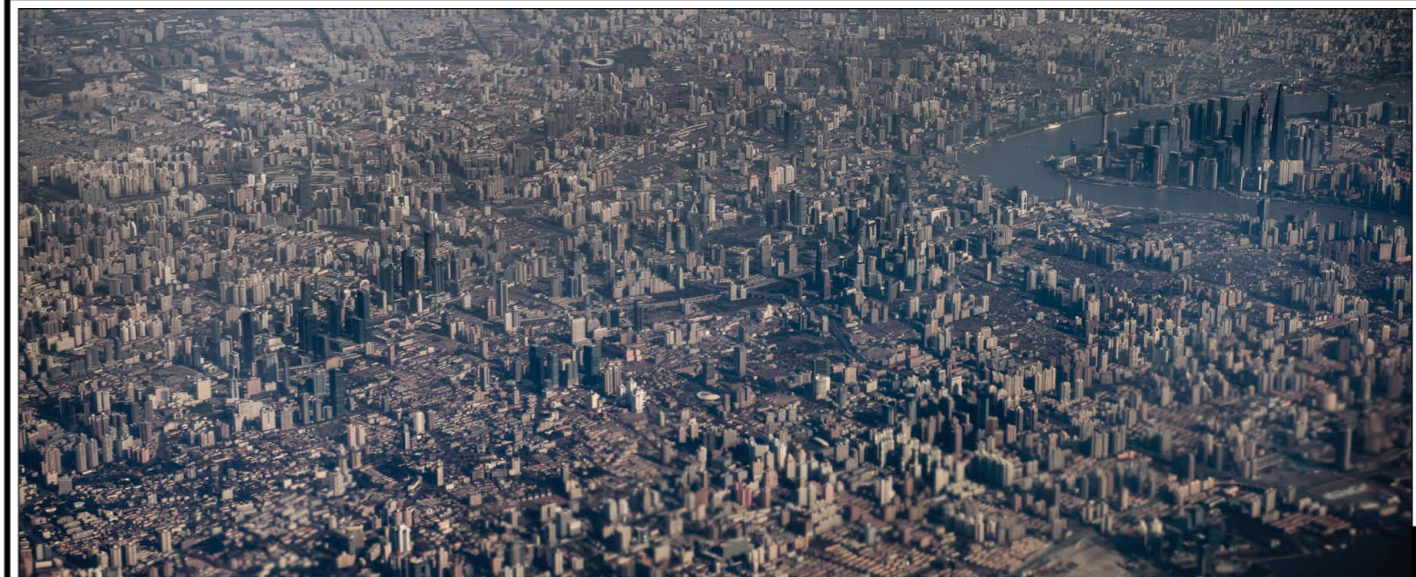
Saturated with productive activities and pragmatism, the Earth has been subjected with a projectile in intense natural resource exploitation. Cities are expanding in an exponential rate. Construction, demolition and reconstruction can take several cycles within a person's lifespan. A comprehensive infrastructure network is being built with incredible speed and scale. Even for places with significant degree of difficulty to reach, like on a mountain that is more than a thousand meters above sea level, development in the name of progression can be substantial. The relationship between men and the living environment has been drastically altered in the past two hundred years.

Especially for a country as enormous and old as China, such decisive and radical changes brought in huge economic success. But in the meanwhile, it also brought in an erasure of memories and history together with a deep wounding to the natural environment that its people had re-

vered for the past few millennia.

Although there are discussions and actions taken by environmental activists to raise awareness of the ecological crisis we are facing, the benefits of restraining human activities in order to restore a healthy ecological system are usually not attractive enough compared with the financial gains from extracting nature.

An abrupt halt of the established economic cycle to salvage our fragmented ecological landscape will unlikely to take place in the near future. What can be done, starting from a place, a piece of ground, is to recover some of the lost dimensions and to relearn the ways of dwelling as human beings in its most intimate relationship with the natural surroundings. And maybe by doing so, we can find a way to slow down and to discover an exit out of the never ending loop of self-indulgence.



Explosion in Tourism

With rising standard of living conditions and personal wealth in China, traveling became more and more affordable for the majority of citizens. Besides making trips during the two "Golden Weeks" of holiday (takes place in the beginning of May and October), people nowadays also travel for leisure during Chinese New Year and throughout the year with paid vacation days.

"It was estimated that the number of domestic trips in China would increase to about 2.38 billion trips by 2020, indicating an increase of over 50 percent compared to the number of trips made within China ten years ago. The total revenue of Chinese travel and tourism industry amounted to 3.94 trillion yuan as of 2016, up 15.2 percent compared to the previous year. The industry contributed 2.1 percent to China's gross domestic product (GDP) and provided around 22.5 million jobs."

There is a steady increase in the GDP

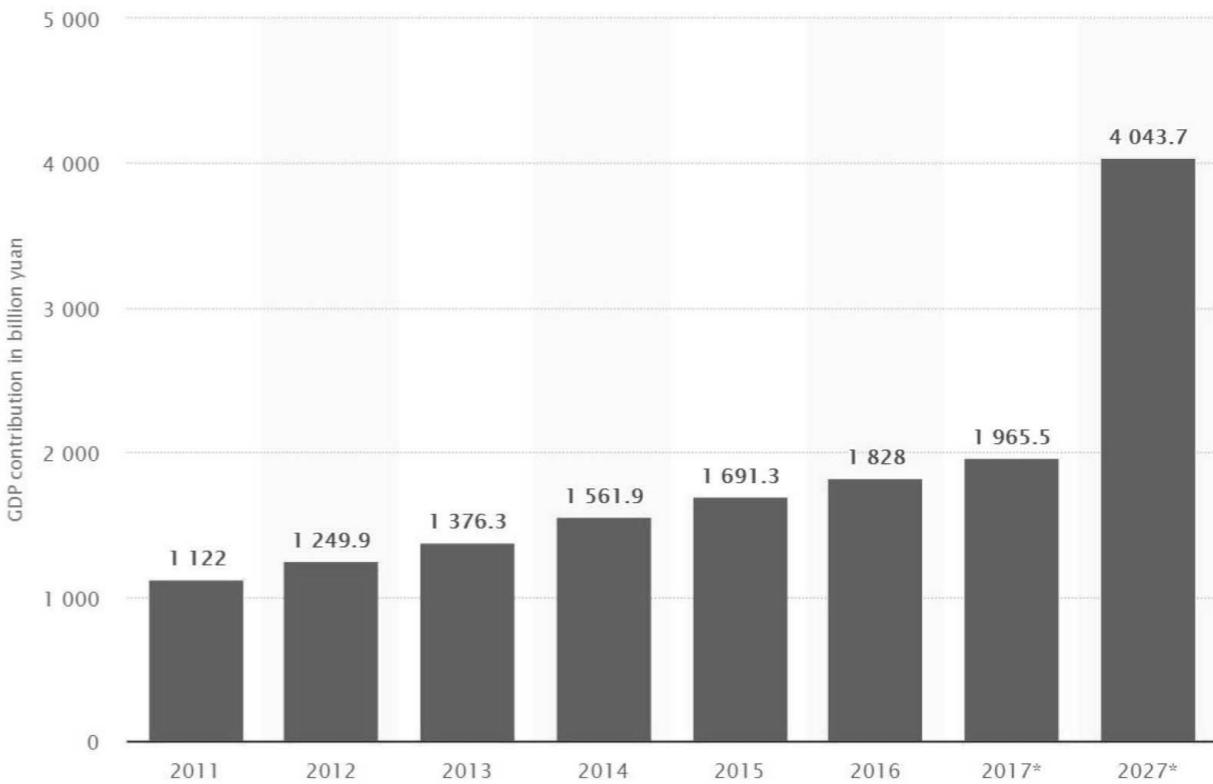
contributions made by the tourism industry over the past few years (graph next page). The projected direct GDP contribution to the national economy would even reach 4 billion Yuan by 2027.

China makes very noticeable contributions to the world tourism market as well. "In 2013, China was the world's largest travel and tourism economy with a global market share of 11 percent, surpassing the United States."

While the numbers and the booming rate feature an incredible input to the economy, site mismanagement and disorganization in the tours offered usually create chaos both in the natural landscape and cultural destinations. Problems arise when the industry concentrates on making speedy processes instead of offering in-depth educational and cultural appreciations.

Direct Contribution Of China's Travel And Tourism Industry To GDP From 2011 To 2027 (In Billion Yuan)

Accessed on Jan. 10, 2018 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249731/direct-contribution-of-chinas-travel-and-tourism-industry-to-gdp/>



Like consumer products, experiences can be packaged and sold in large quantities. Tourism plays an important role in boosting local economy. However, it is also a double edged sword. Sudden injection of large amount of visitors can make drastic changes to a place. The will to proudly present a scenic and cultural designation to a broad audience is ambitious but also legitimate. It is the lack of proper management and a thoughtful traffic diversion that alters the landscape and causes disruptions.

The notorious bus tour has received much criticism both domestically and internationally. While it does offer security and convenience to first time long-distance travelers, the super compact schedule with additional forced shopping destinations make the entire experience more of a check list instead of making a trip. While some might not care about having an actual experience of learning about a new place, tour companies' lack of education in traveling etiquettes for

both the tour guides and the costumers put a great deal of stress to the locals and other non-group travelers who would like to visit with integrity. The inability to act as a group from certain bus tour costumers often forces the tour guides to use super loud speakers to get their attention, which impose a propagandistic environment to other travelers. And the negligence from the tour guides to remind costumers lowering their voices in appropriate places is another reason for noise pollution. Since the largest tour bus can accommodate up to 70 passengers, traffic jam can happen when different tour companies do not communicate with each other with scheduling.

While there are no definitions of what an appropriate traveling experience should be, it would be considerate for the business proposal writers taking into account of the impact and effects those tours can bring and thinking about ways to minimize them.



## Nature Being Exploited and Disrespected

Nature does not only play a part of the packaged tourism industry, more often in the eyes of many decision makers nature appeals more to be a great place for resource extraction. Mining, dam construction for hydro-electricity and deforestation all play or played a significant part in recent Chinese history. Economic developments make both direct and indirect impacts on the ecological landscape that they are significant enough to affect the health of life forms in all scales.

Deforestation used to be a very serious issue in China during the 1990's and 80's.<sup>10</sup> The forest in north and central China has been reduced by half in two decades. Desertification is a serious phenomenon in western China. Logging in Tibet and Sichuan province caused a great flooding to the Three Gorges Dam reservoir thus affecting the entire Yangtze River network in 1998. After this disaster China launched a national wide ban on logging in the natural forest area. Although there are numerous reforestation projects going on, damages had been done would take a long period of time to be recovered from.

Besides resource extraction, unfiltered pollution from other industries causes life threatening diseases not only to humans but also to animals and plants. Pictures taken from rivers and streams in heavily polluted area can be collaged together and make a rainbow. They are filled with chemicals that contain all kinds of bright colours. In certain cases, the carrion odor from dead fishes can be smelled from miles away. Air pollution is another major environmental issue that China is facing. Particles in the air being inhaled not only affect the physical health, constant low level of visibility present a great threat to the mental health as well. There are some recent publications about gigantic air purification projects which drew much public attention. However this is not solving the problem from the root.

If there is no fundamental shift in the mentality of taking responsibilities in regulating conditions that would affect the entire ecosystem, any actions taken would be just patch-work. There is an urgency in returning back to the ancient Chinese cosmology that values nature as the source of producing vitality in human life.



## Chapter 04

### Recent Thinkers and Architects Who Embrace Nature

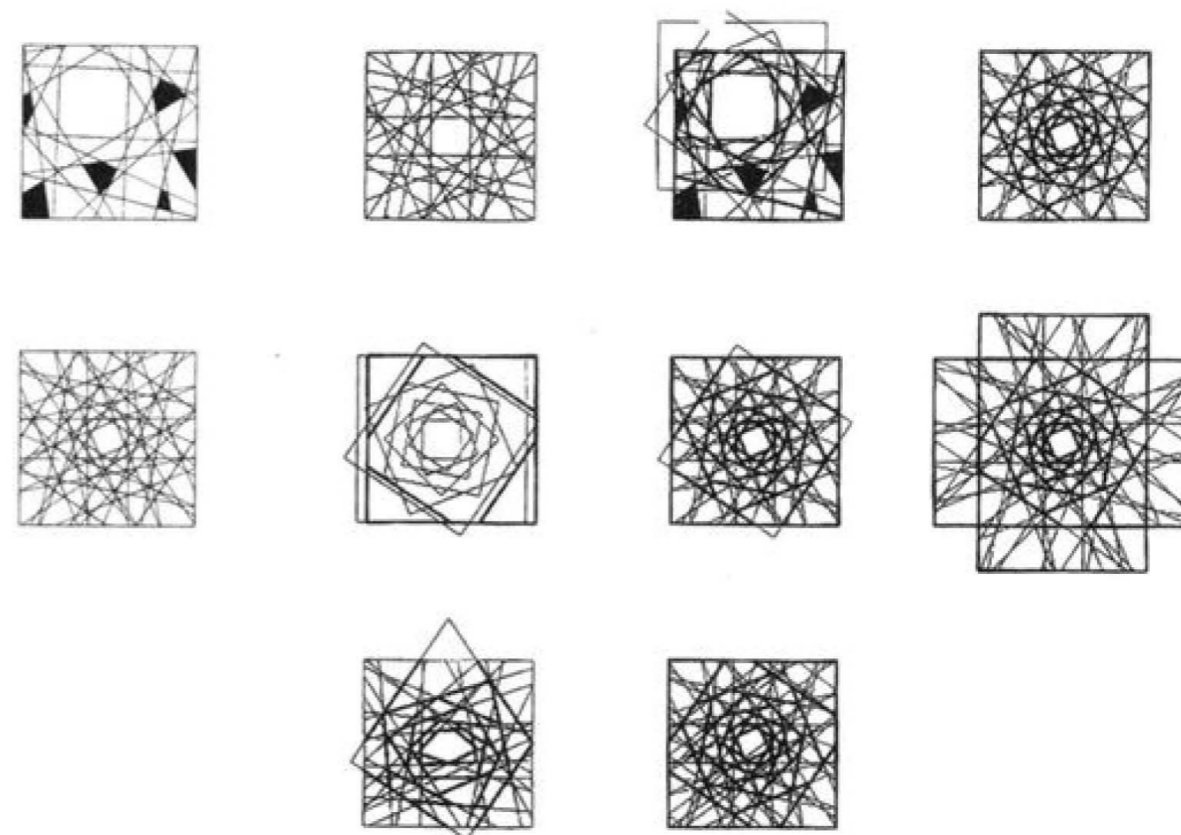
#### Force of Nature, Toyo Ito

"...architectural and urban space...were extensions of nature and therefore fused with it. They maintained a relative position in nature and were alive, breathing in and out in response to the natural flux. The boundary between inside and outside was vague both in architecture and in urban spaces."<sup>11</sup>

Toyo Ito's architecture features a great deal of study about the relationship between the built space and nature. The rules that are intrinsic within the spatial definition are almost derived by observing the growing pattern of a tree. By following one simple order, one can generate infinite number of form and resolutions.

It is simplicity being presented with complex forms, not necessarily geometrically charged, but with a clear perception of a highly developed system. His preference for light, thin and airy materials is a declaration for the keenness of getting closer to the environment around,

namely, nature. His ideas and theories affected generations of contemporary Japanese architects that followed.



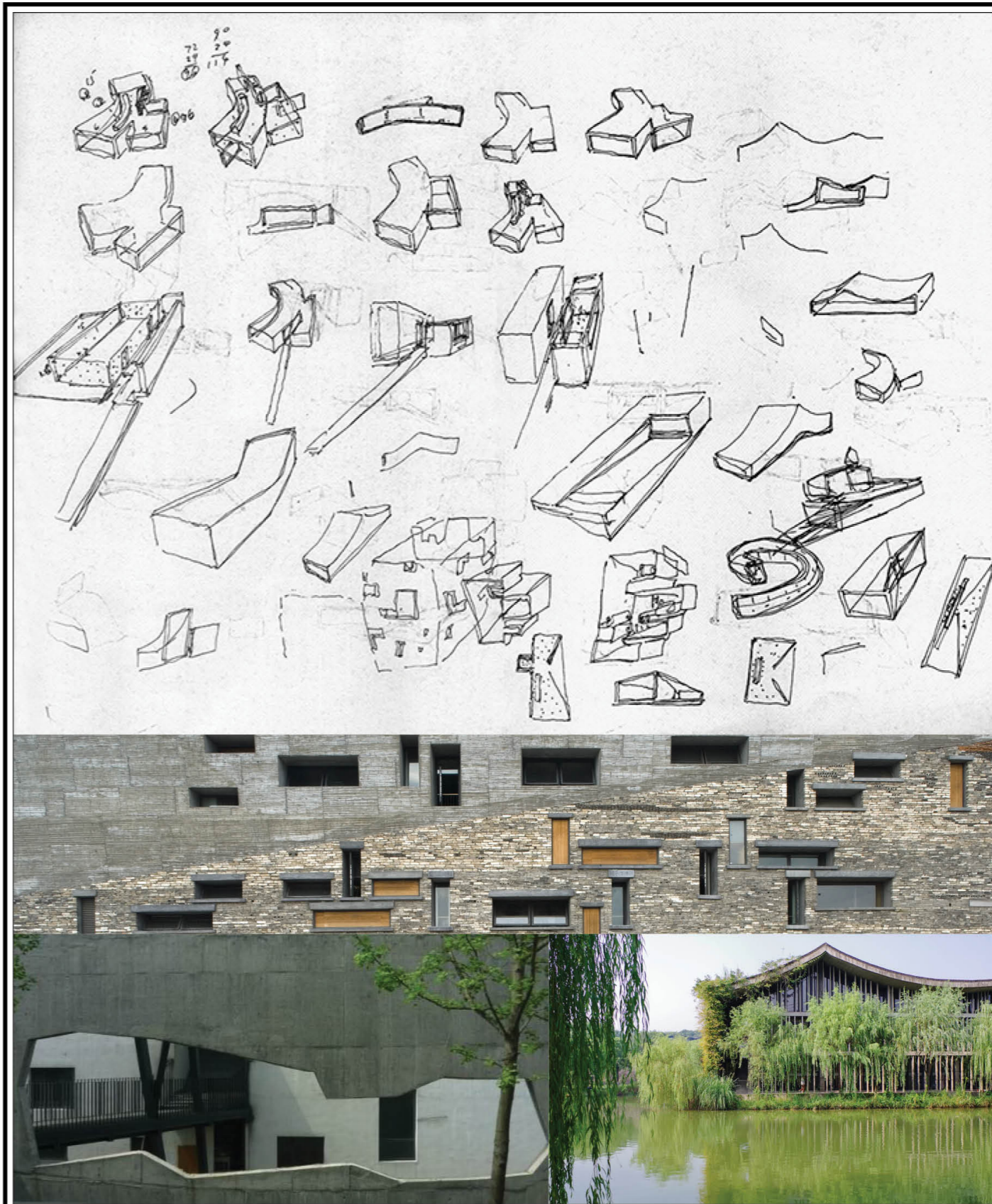
## Construct with the Natural Way, Wang Shu

Wang Shu has a famous motto: "we only make houses, we don't make architecture." His wife Lu Wenyu explained in an interview that "the house and architecture here have their own meanings. Making a house means making it for the people, making it more tranquil, or closer to nature, more humanized. Instead, architecture is an abstract concept, so many designs nowadays are actually architecture."<sup>12</sup>

Amateur Studio's work has always been something crafty, organic and even a little bit "dirty" (Wang Shu's own description). The rejection of abstracting designs is a way to intensify a design project's relationship with the user. Enormous efforts have been given to material selection and constructional experimentation. The final results are usually coarse but charged with very intense sensations.

Wang Shu has a very strong belief in craftsmanship in the sense that the pro-

cess of making itself is the medium of carrying traditions.<sup>13</sup> His rejection of going along with contemporary China's building practice is a statement of longing to go back to the time when making a house is a testimony of how one decides to live his/her life. Thus making houses is not only a public activity, but also highly personal.



## The Nature of Building Is Letting Dwell --Martin Heidegger

"...the nature of the erecting buildings cannot be understood adequately in terms either of architecture or of engineering construction, nor in terms of a mere combination of the two... The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locations by the joining of their spaces. Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build. Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house."<sup>14</sup>

Martin Heidegger spent many of his holidays in his hut at Todtnauberg, on the edge of the Black Forest. It was right in this humble place he considered as his dwelling that many of his influential books were finished. The belief that a building would not attain its character until the dweller of this building

develops an intimate relationship with it presents an interesting challenge to contemporary architects. Like he wrote in the text, indeed many architects focus very much on the space making and the structural engineering. Thinking is only one part of process that completes a building. Making is another part. But by living in it, one can truly understand what a building really is.



Chapter 05

Lushan  
An Eternal Longing for a Landscape Idealism

Brief History of Lushan (Mt. Lu)

Lushan (廬山), a UNESCO world heritage site located in the southern part of China. The mountain range goes from north-east to south-west, surrounded by numerous large water bodies including China's biggest fresh water Poyang Lake and the Yangtze River. The mountain is not only famous for its natural scenery but also for its long and rich history of cultivating generations of scholars, fostering religious institutions, and it has been consistently an inspiration for artists and poets.

There are numerous tales about how the mountain got its name. The most famous one is related to a Taoist hermit during the West Zhou Dynasty (1046-771BC) called Kuang-su (匡俗) who spend many years in a straw hut on the mountain finally attained enlightenment and became an immortal. To celebrate his achievement and also to appreciate his lifestyle in frugality, the mountain was named as Kuang-lu (匡廬). The first character dedicated to Kuang-su and the second character Lu

(lu means hut) signifies the straw hut he lived in. The name was then further simplified as Mount. Lu or Lushan.

Lushan is known amongst the Buddhist circle as the birthplace of Pure Land Buddhism. The Pure Land teachings first became prominent in China with the founding of Donglin Temple at Lushan (廬山) by Monk Huiyuan (慧遠) in 402. As a young man, Huiyuan practiced Daoism, but felt the theories of immortality to be vague and unreliable, and unrepresentative of the ultimate truth. Instead, he turned to Buddhism and became a monk learning under Dao'an (道安). Later he founded a monastery at the top of Lushan and invited well-known literati to study and practice Buddhism there, where they formed the White Lotus Society (白蓮社). Lushan is regarded as the among the most sacred religious sites of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, and the site of the first Pure Land gathering.<sup>15</sup>



Hermit culture has been a huge part of Lushan's identity. There are two reasons one can speculate to explain the high concentration of hermits appeared in Lushan throughout history (other mountains also drew hermits, but this place demonstrates a very diverse range). The first one might be derived from the physical quality of Lushan. Due to its geographical conditions, large amount of water molecules from the surrounding water bodies would form rain, mist, and fogs lingering around the top portion of the mountain for at least two thirds of the year. The landscape is altered every other minute with the absolutely incredible flowing masses which creates a peculiar phenomenon to it. The place hardly has any chances to expose its entirety to a viewer, and this is certainly some thought provoking material to the ones who contemplate on ontology.

Su Shi's poem is unique in a sense that unlike many other landscape poems which praise nature's magnificence or express one's emotional state through the scenery, this poetry has a philosophical take on the mountain. It describes how the perception of the same mountain range can vary with different viewing angles and positions. Also the fact that there is often a layer of added material (clouds) standing between the observer and the mountain is making it more difficult for comprehension. The sheer scale of the object of observation renders the viewer who is positioned within it a tiny existence. All of these are an honest admittance that humans have certain limits. Any judgment made is bound to incur certain amount of subjectivity and there are layers of obstruction for preventing a complete understanding of things. One can indeed go on and explore the cultural implications of things that can be extracted from this poem. But the fact that landscape can be portrayed as means to

explain some of the inert human nature is a demonstration that nature itself has the power of inspiring interesting and profound contemplation.

If nature itself is one attraction to the hermits, the rich historical lineage of fostering famous mountain dwellers is another one. Besides from Kuang-su, the very first well known hermit, there are numerous figures who produced influential work here. Tao Yuanming (陶淵明), the scholar who wrote the famous essay (桃花源記) depicting an autonomous society living within a hidden sanctuary of peach blossoms, also lived in a village right beside Lushan. Celebrating a life with agriculture, poetry and essay, he was a signature hermit who left a page in history being someone maintained independent character and values by resigning from the government.

A bit to the south-east by the foot of the mountain, Bailudong Academy (白鹿洞書院) sits here for over a thousand years. It was the first officially recognized academy by the government which was set up outside of major cities. The person who made the academy prosperous was one of the founding figures of Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi (朱熹). Influenced by this institute's strong academics, many other academies flourished on Lushan.

In a parallel with Buddhist temples and academies, countless Taoist monasteries also existed on the mountain. Besides from the obvious reason that a mountain is a perfect setting for pursuing an ultimate lifestyle and searching for eternal truth. The retreat from a worldly setting (major cities) into nature is making a statement demonstrating one's idealistic difference with the current government's state of rule.<sup>16</sup>

Since hermits preferred time and space



Inscription on the Wall of Xilin Temple  
Su shi (Song Dynasty)

From the side, a whole range;  
from the end, a single peak:  
Far, near, high, low, no two parts alike.  
Why can't I tell the true shape of Lushan?  
Because I myself am in the mountain.

題西林壁  
蘇軾 (宋)

橫看成嶺側成峰  
遠近高低各不同  
不識廬山真面目  
只緣身在此山中

within a holistic natural setting, institutions and religious temples do not have close relationships with each other. This might be the reason why the map of Lushan that is shown earlier in this book (p24-25) has a very even distribution of cultural elements spread out over the entire mountain range.

The cultural landscape on Lushan has been a very stable one until recent two hundred years which is also the time period when the entire country underwent a series of significant transformations.

Starting from mid-19th century, Lushan experienced three major rounds of destruction: Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), Anti-Japanese War (1937-45) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Although there were reconstruction projects and remedies being carried out in between the disasters, most of the cultural heritages almost went extinct by the time when the Communist Regime exercised most of its animosity towards knowledge passed down by the Imperial China.

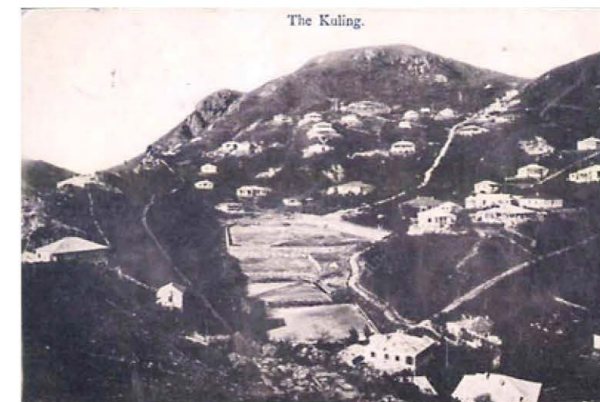
Besides from the aggressive changes that took place on the mountain for each of the individual cultural elements, there has been a major transformation to the non-hierarchical and decentralized layout of Lushan.

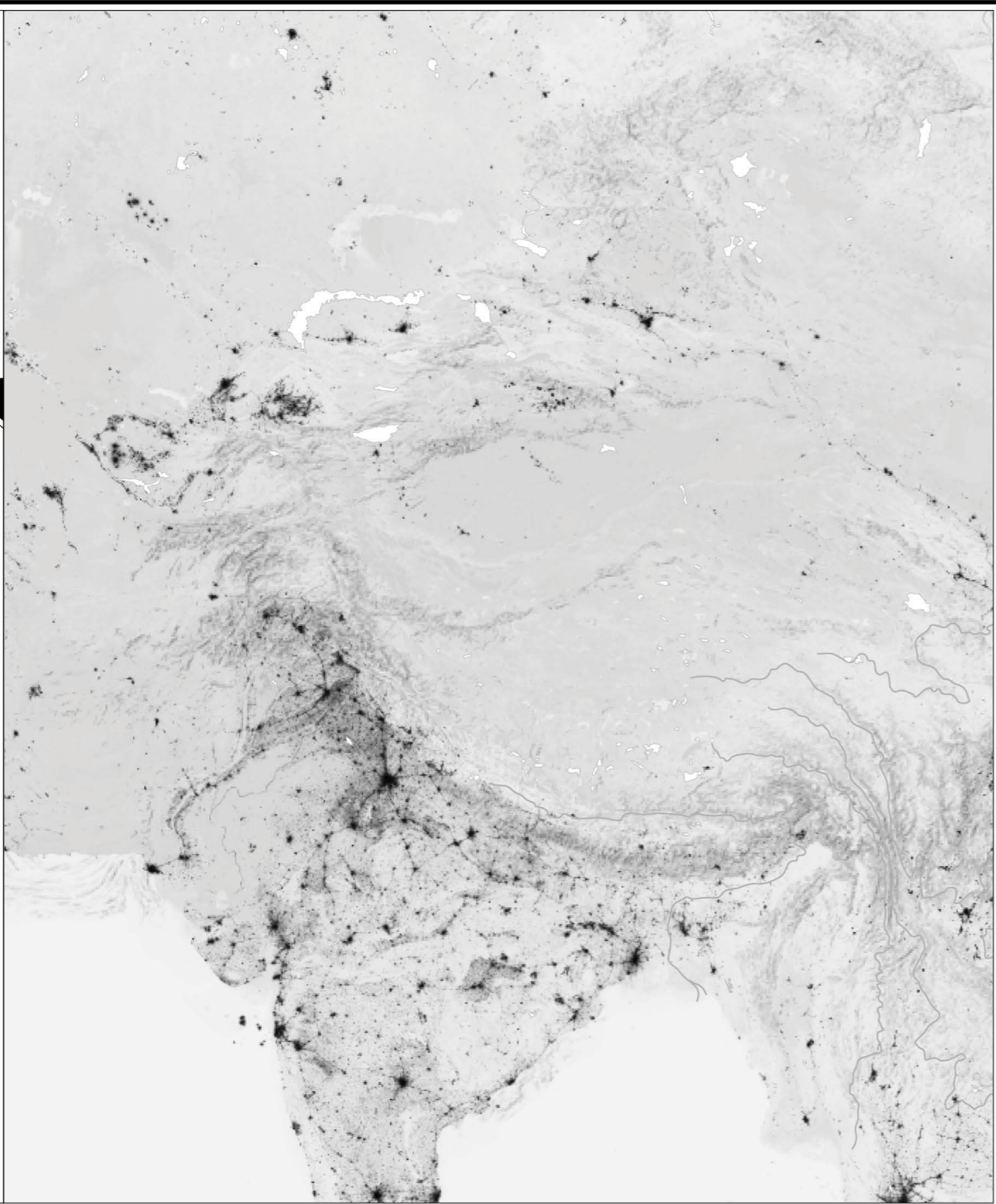
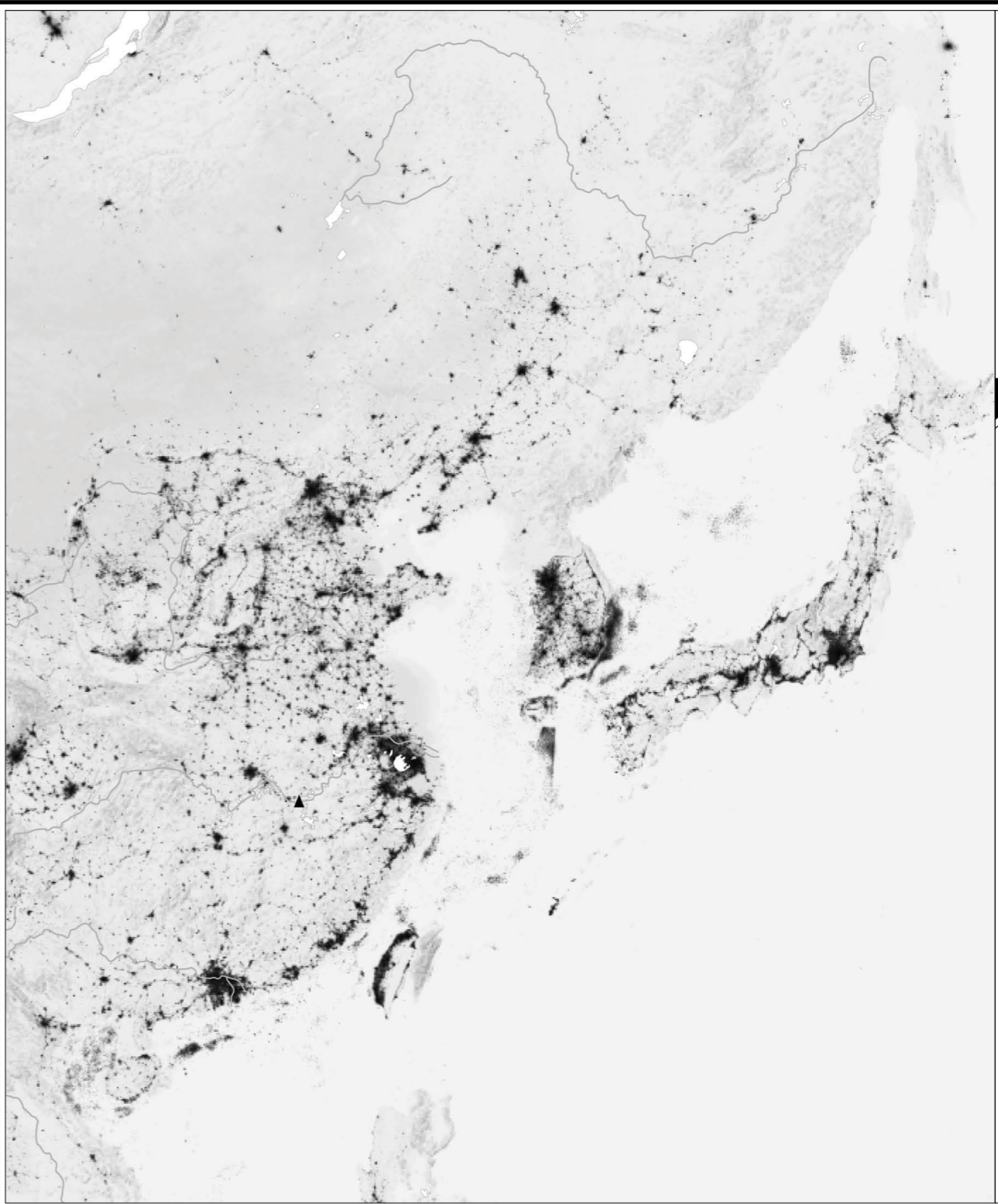
By the late 1800's, many western Christian ministries had reached deep into China's inland provinces. The humid and hot weather caused much decease to the Americans and Europeans who were used to mild dry weather. A man named Edward S. Little single handedly managed the purchasing of a large piece of abandoned temple land in the central region of Lushan.<sup>17</sup> A town was soon being planned and built in order to provide summer houses for those missionaries who suffered severely from the weather. By

the 1920's, there were at least 560 houses being built in this town called Kuling (same pronunciation as cooling). Thus, Lushan started having a "center".

After the Communist Regime took over, the government ordered the construction of two roads that can serve motorized vehicles, which brought in more developments around the town. Today, the town of Kuling has about 10,000 permanent residents, most of whom work for the tourist industry or tea making production. Originally started as a summer resort for the westerners, today it functions as a service center for travelers.<sup>18</sup>

Commercialization is slowly overtaking the tranquility on the mountain. Development was not conducted in a way that preserved the spirit of the place. Instead, history was packaged inside museums and written into books only. What is happening in the city is replicated on the mountain, and residents in general do not realize the natural scenery and the rich cultural heritage they are so proud of is under the danger of being erased.

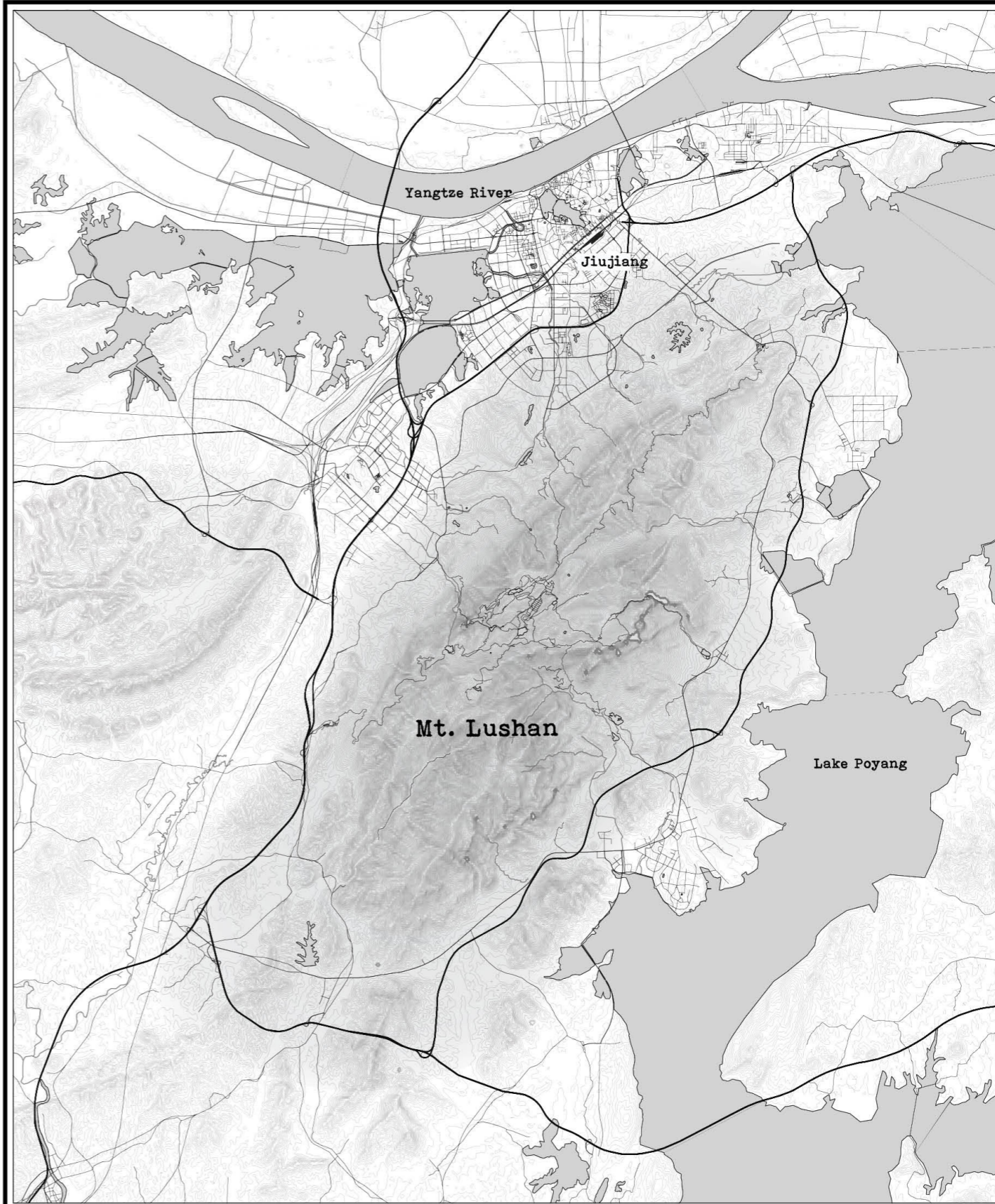




Lushan is not a very tall mountain when compared with famous peaks from other parts of China. The tallest peak called Hangyang (漢陽峰) is only 1474m above sea level. However since it rises singularly out of a large flood plain created by Yangtze River and Poyang Lake, its processes some uniqueness that others do not replicate.

Southern part of China is occupied by large and continuous low mountain ranges, thus creating great barriers for air traffic. Since large amount of water molecules evaporated from Yangtze River and Poyang Lake have not a lot of room to navigate to, they get condensed on Lushan creating clouds of mist. On average, the mountain gets around 200 days of misty or rainy weather each year. With enormous amount of mist plus the help with a windy weather, a unique phenomenon called "sea of cloud" would happen once in a while. Large masses of white would roll around mountain tops and fall from the mountain sides.

The town of Kuling can easily be accessed from city of Jiujiang just north from the mountain range. To the south there is a small prefecture called Xinzi which has recently been upgraded to the city administration. There is also a direct highway connecting Kuling with Jiangxi province' capital city Nanchang within two hours. And with its convenient access to Yangtze River, Lushan, with its incredible long history, has always been a well celebrated destination for travelers.



## Lushan and Chinese Landscape Culture

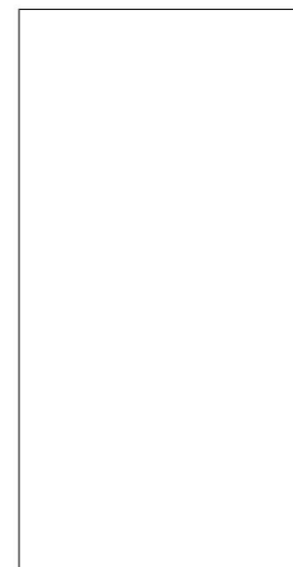
Lushan holds an interesting position in the development of Chinese landscape paintings in a sense that for 1600 years it has been a reoccurring subject that painters go back to.

Gu Kaizhi from the Jin Dynasty, was thought to be the founding father of landscape painting. Before his time, Chinese paintings mainly depicted human interactions as the central subjects. Nature usually acts as a background for a storytelling. And the very first landscape painting he did was about Lushan. Although the original has been lost with no copies survived either, most of scholars were confirmed that Gu Kaizhi's painting of Mt. Lu started a culture that honors, praises and almost ritualizes nature.

Since landscape paintings portrait highly abstracted versions of nature, depiction of the actual mountain form has never been the essence. Similar to many other Chinese art forms, the main idea is

to capture the "spirit" of a something. The success in painting relies heavily on the painter's own contemplation and imagination. It has been verified that at least two out of the six painters listed next page had never visited Lushan in their lifetime. Both Shen Zhou and Zhang Daqian were commissioned with the fact that the clients had been informed about the absence of their direct contact with the subject. However it was not an obstacle for them being selected.

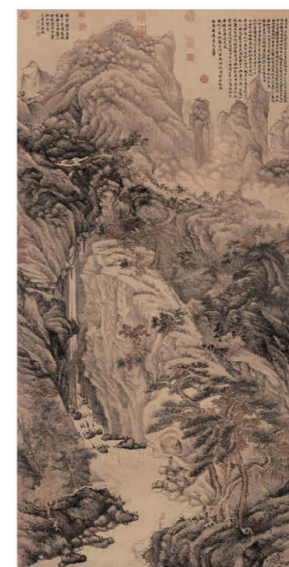
One can make a speculation that since Lushan can be barely appreciated for its entirety due to its unique misty weather conditions. Mystery and curiosity play a much important role in illustrating this place. Therefore, how to "hide" the mountain becomes much more interesting than how to "display" the mountain. Since clouds are hard to grasp with merely observation, to have the subject right in front is not an absolute necessity.



Mt. Lu, 348 - 409  
Gu Kaizhi



Mt. Lu, 850 - 900  
Jing Hao



Lushan High, 1468  
Shen Zhou



Mt. Lu, 1514  
Tang Yan



Mt. Lu, 1250-1300  
Monk Yujian



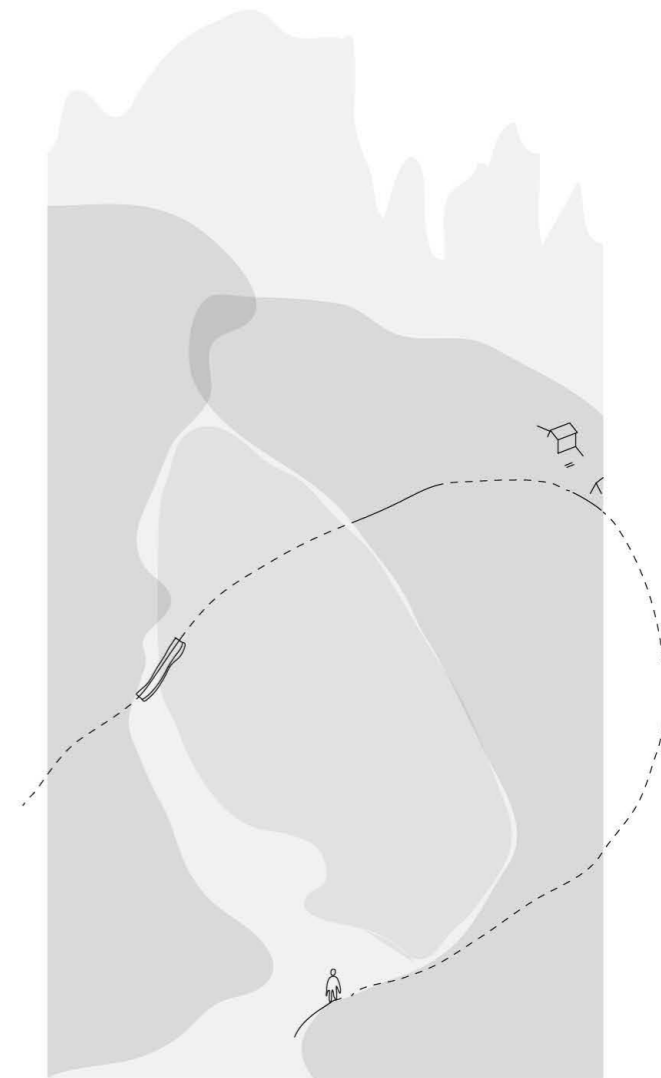
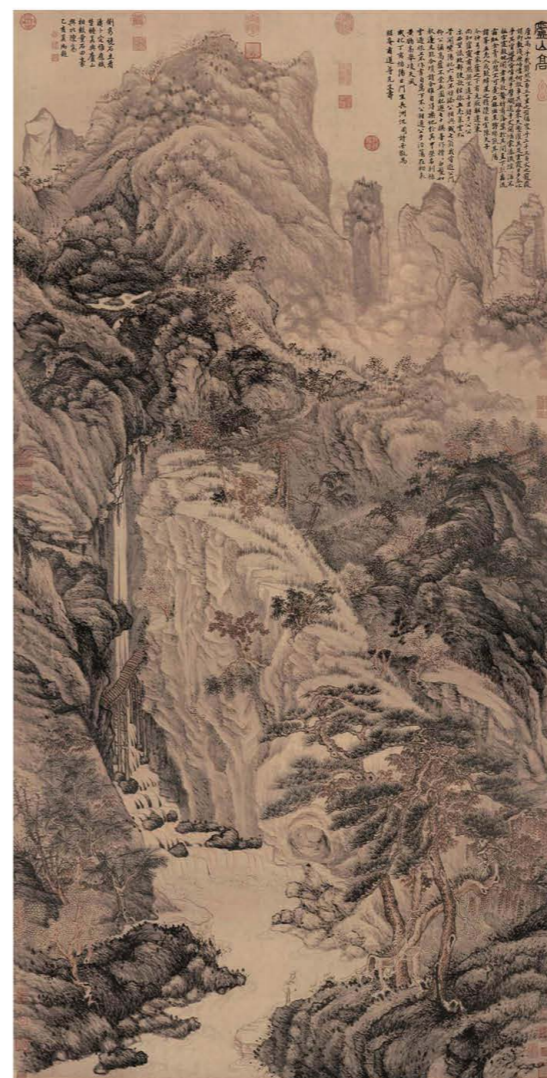
Mt. Lu, 1981-83  
Zhang Daqian

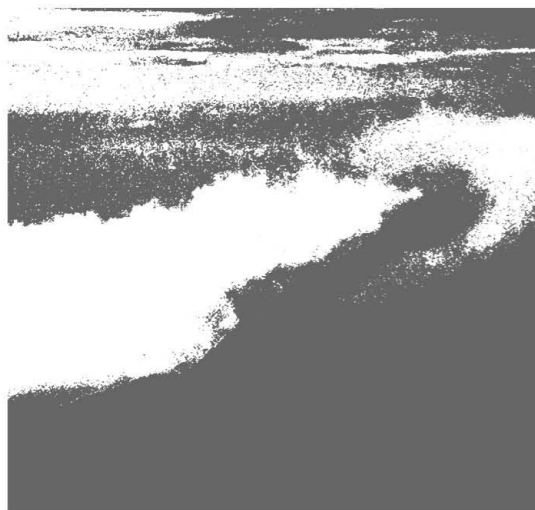
In making a composition of a painting, there are some arch-typical elements that are fundamental to have in order to evoke a "landscapy" effect. Clouds/mist, waterfall/streams, mountains, temples/houses, paths/stairs/bridges, trees and sometimes if necessary human figures are the basic components for a landscape painting.

There are some established techniques one can deploy to differentiate the foreground, mid-ground and the background. Though these sections can be identified, when paying a closer look, subjects in different sections are often connected ensuring a complete continuation within one composition. It might be a path that starts from the foreground and goes out of the picture but make a return somewhere in the mid-ground of a painting, disappearing again and re-entering in the background. It might also be a water stream starting from the background as a small waterfall, being cut by a group of clouds, re-appear again in the fore-

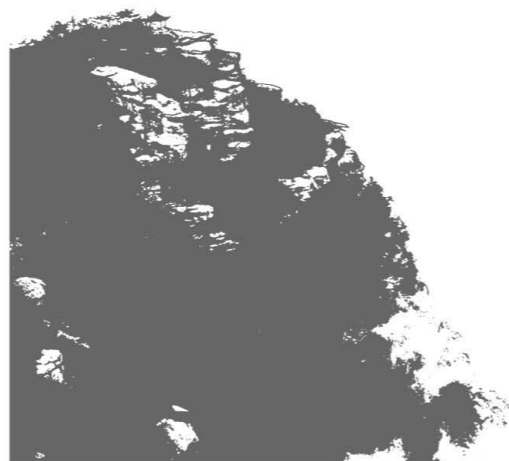
ground as a wider stream that flows into a pond. Mountain arrangement also follows this same "hide and seek" rule that they appear and disappear with different rhythm and dynamics.

In all the paintings, nature has always been the main subject. Mountains, trees, water and sky get most of the attentions. Human figures, buildings and any man-made elements are like small insertions inside a much bigger world. They do not stand out, but being a harmonious part of the greater whole.





mist  
霧



mountain  
山



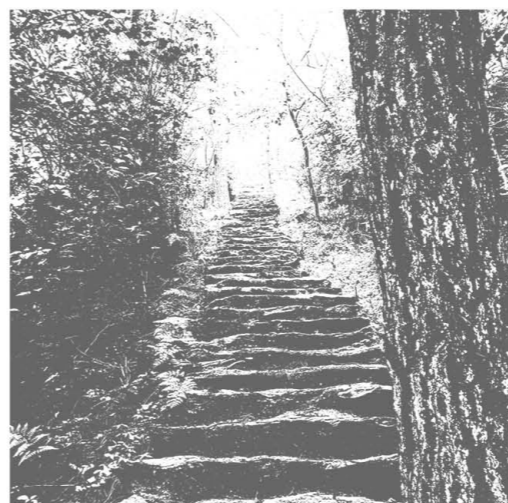
waterfall  
瀑



ruins  
廢墟



house  
屋



winding stairs  
石階



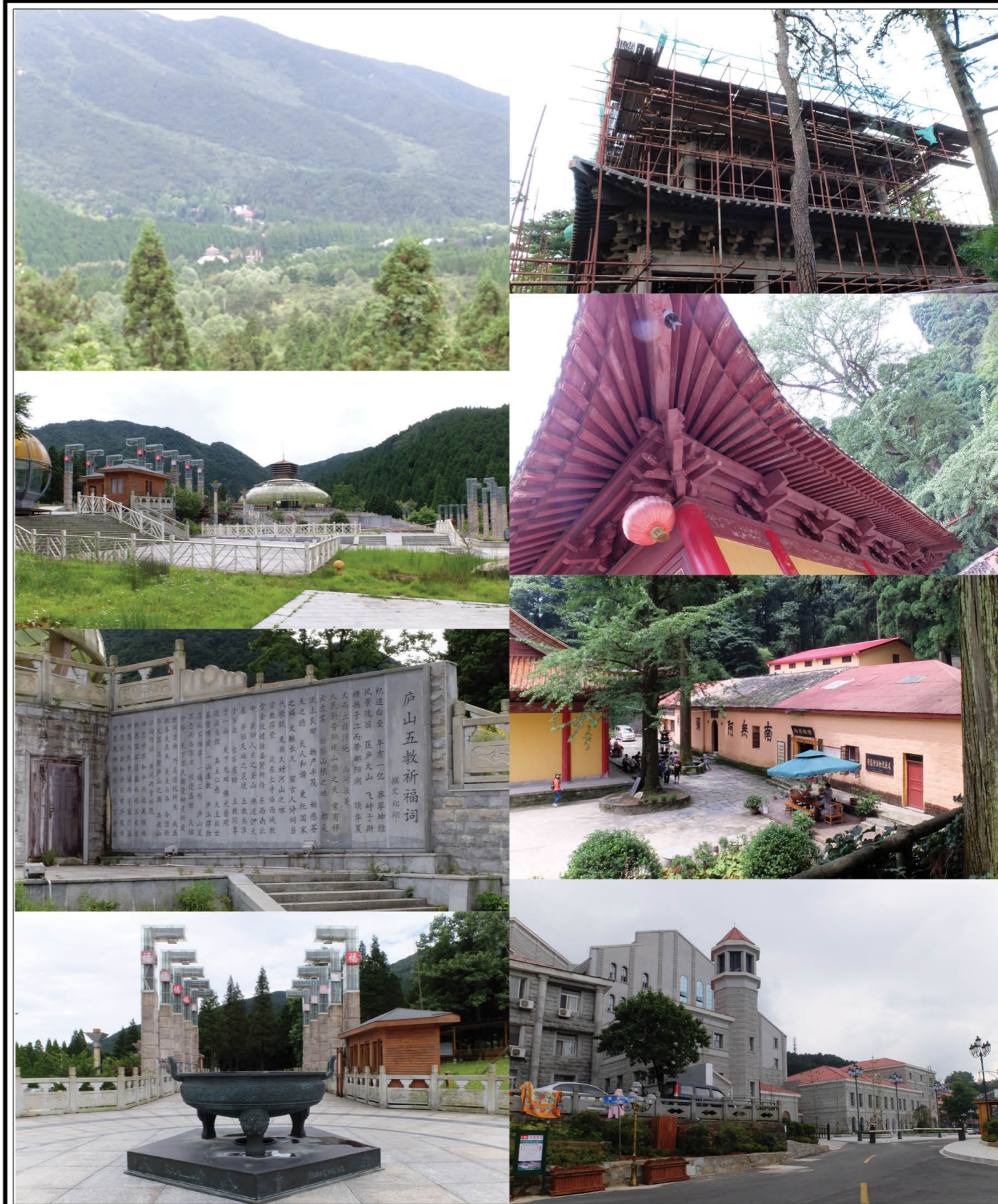
tree  
樹

## Regrettable Developments

For recent years, there has been a round of temple reconstruction projects happening. Many of them were intended mainly as a part of the overall tourism industry expansion. Most of them were poorly done in historical mimicking style. Some were done rapidly with a strange architectural style in the hope that they would become touristy spots. But those projects usually fail with its vague implications and visitors find them uninteresting also. The real historical remains that carried time and significance for many temples were wantonly berried underneath the foundation. This is almost the equivalent of the modern Chinese urban regenerating method, which is to say, taking down every existing piece above ground and start afresh with brand new layout, construction and materials. This form of development has been the prevalent method mainly due to the pressure for achieving projects with high efficiency and following easily understandable procedures. This infiltration of the profane into the sacred realm<sup>19</sup> can

be tributed to the recent massive social experiment which abandoned traditions and all the structured Oriental knowledge altogether.

With the opening up in the 80's, there has been an interest in rediscovering the past. However, this has been a difficult process since most of the cultural lineages (especially the building/construction craftsmanship) had been broken for decades and the easily accessible study model has been the pragmatism driven one.



## Chapter 06

### Designing The Almost Empty That Is Full

#### Site Reading

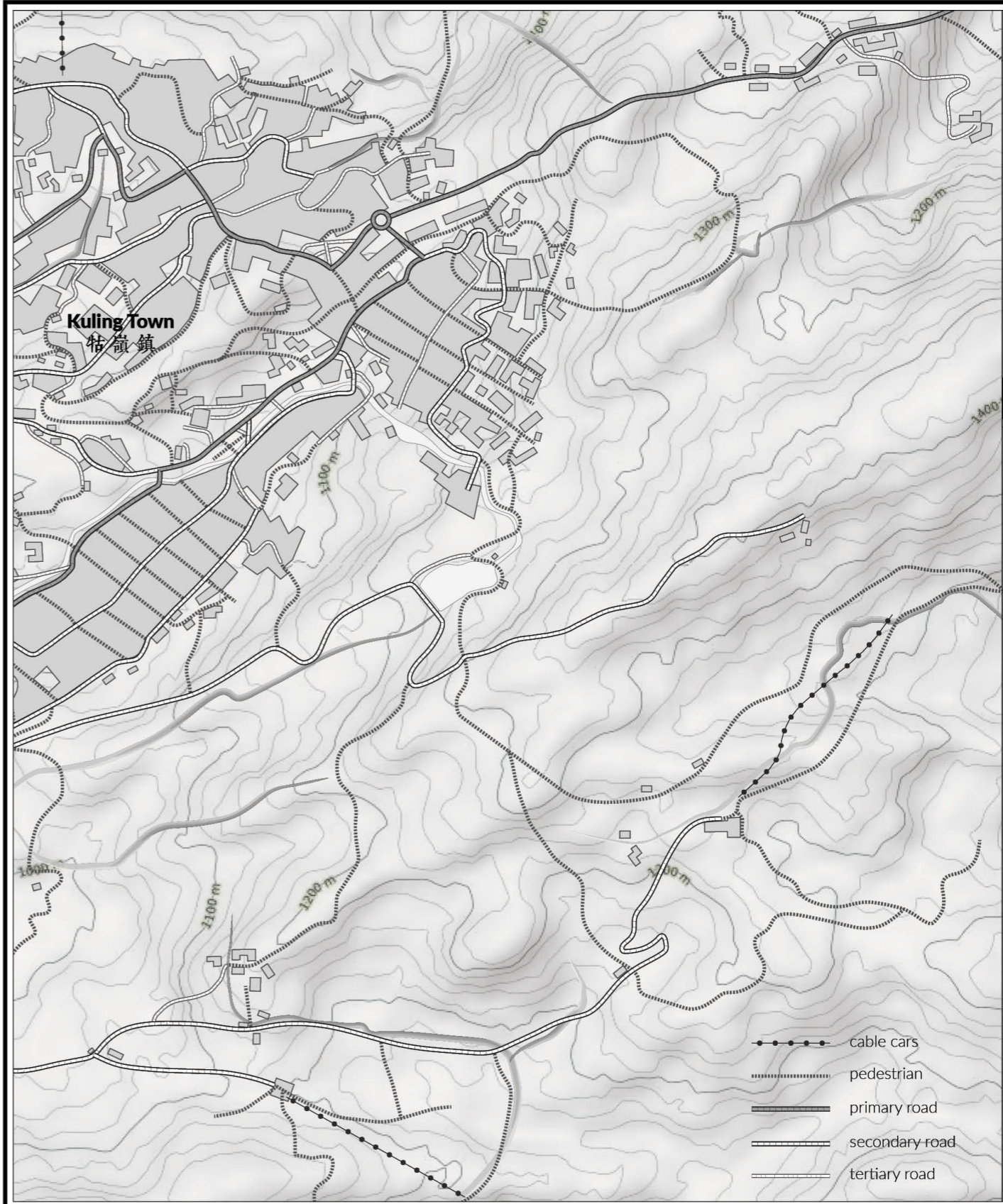
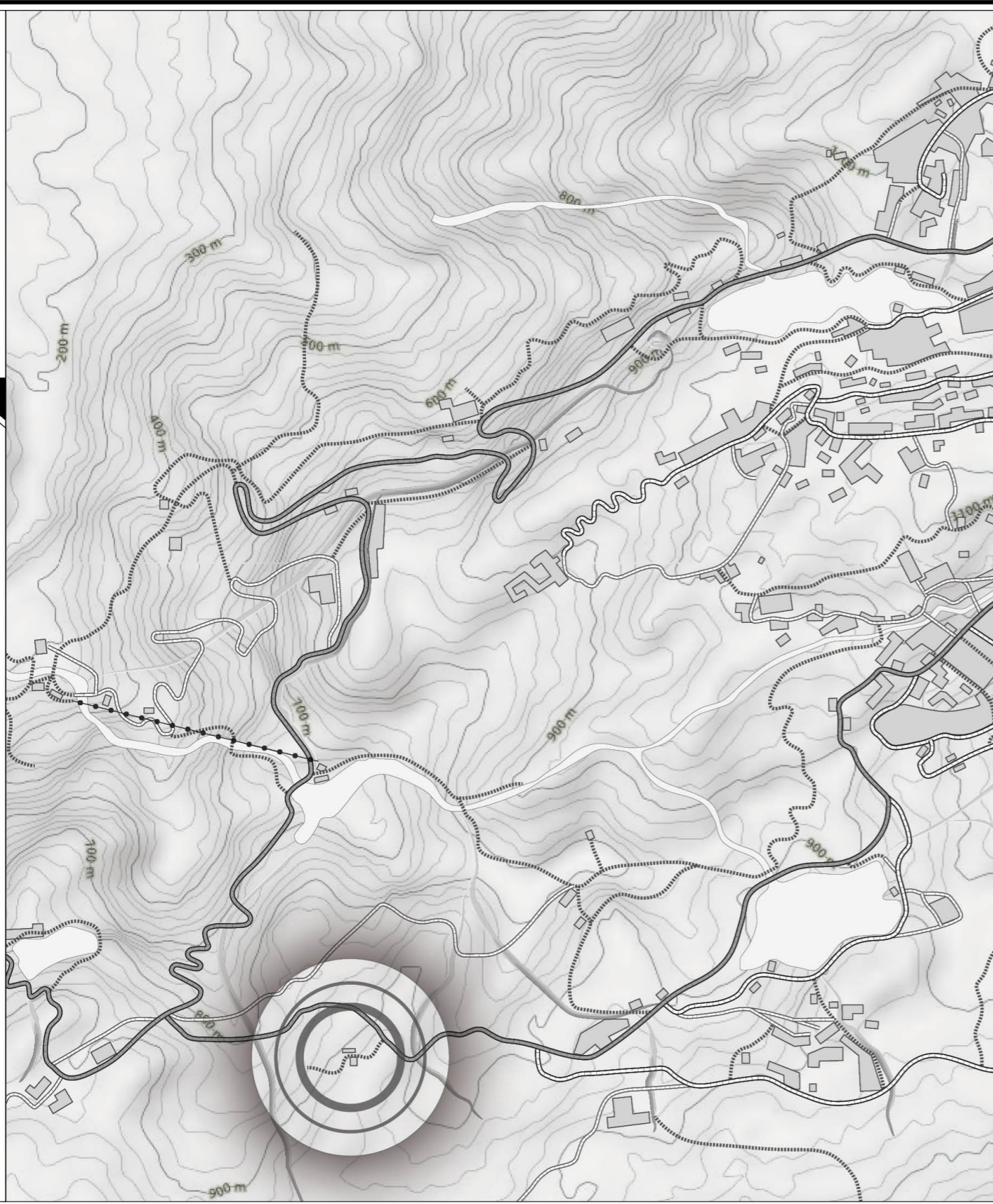
The area of focus here is a small piece of abandoned temple ground located about 1.5-hour's walking distance away from the town of Kuling. It is beside one of the major car routes leads to the highway downhill that connects with other cities. In the meanwhile, it is also isolated from major tourist attractions. The original temple was founded in 1500's during Ming Dynasty as a Buddhist monastery called Qian-fo (千佛寺 meaning a thousand Buddha). It was abandoned after the Taiping Rebellion and was reconstructed by Taoist monks as the Xuan-miao temple (玄妙觀). It was again being abandoned after the last monk passed away round 70-80 years ago.

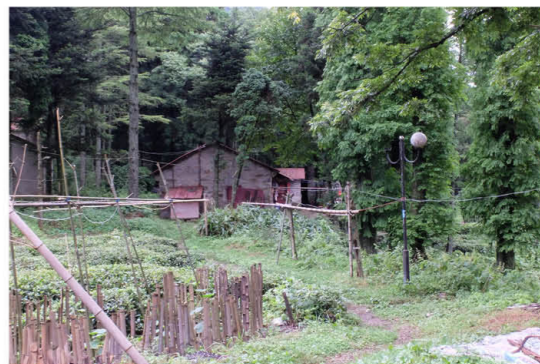
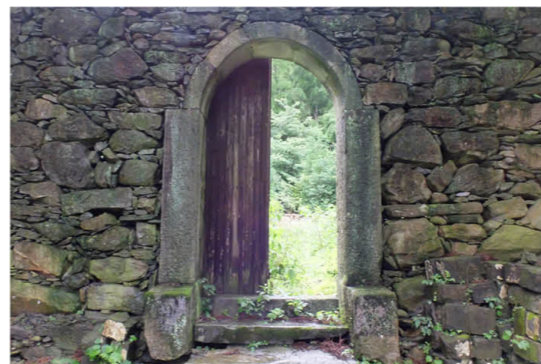
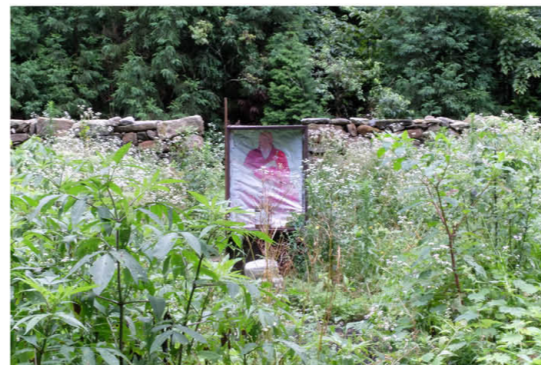
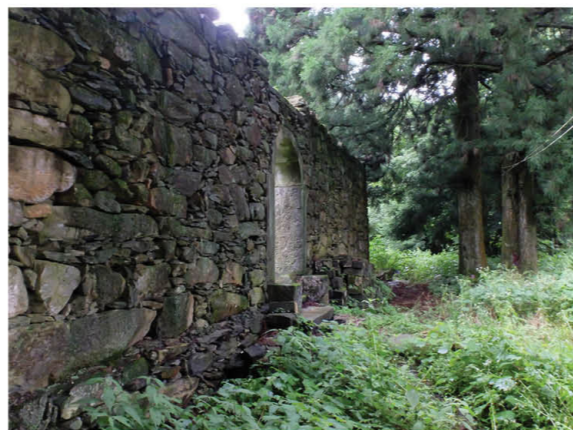
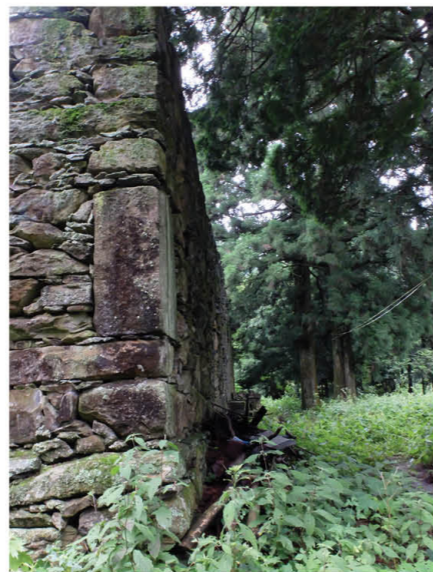
What remains today are three partial stone walls of the temple building. There is a roll of monk residence that is located right beside the temple. They appear to be much recent additions with very poor construction quality. To the back of the temple uphill, there is a Buddhist tower which is dedicated to a well celebrated

monk 400 hundred years ago. Two families live on site and take care of the tea plantations around the temple area. Tea making has a very long history on Lushan. The brand is called "Yun-wu" (雲霧茶) which means cloudy and foggy since tea plants are cultivated by the constant misty weather. Further away from the tea plantations, there is a small circular water reservoir which probably serves the two family houses and acts as the water source for the tea plantations in times of drought.

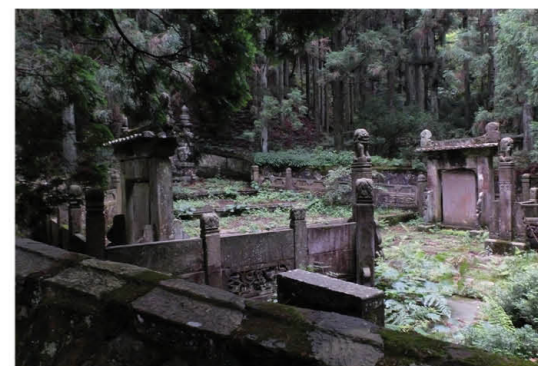
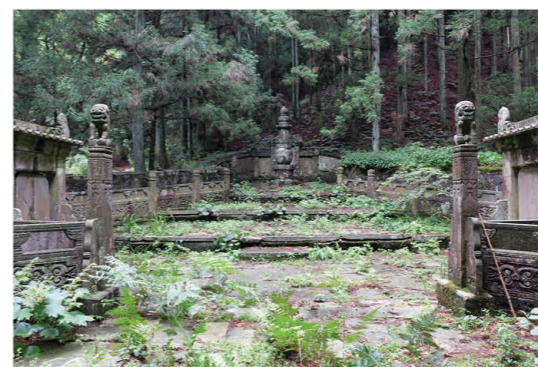
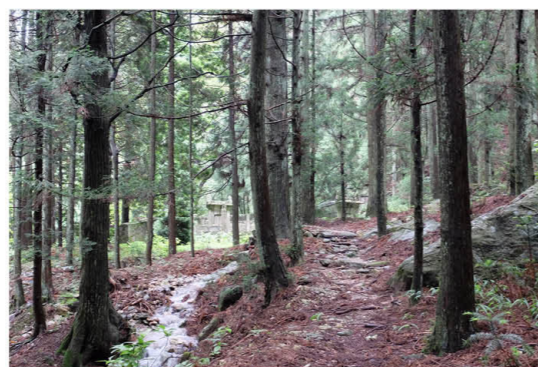
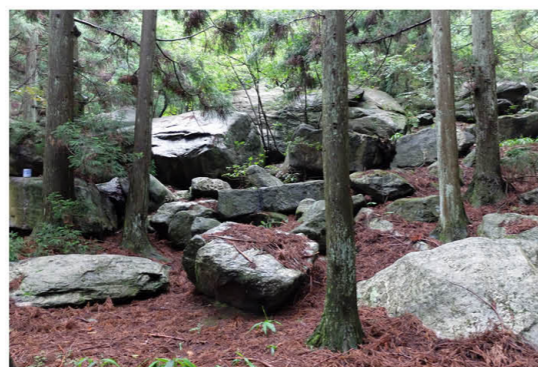
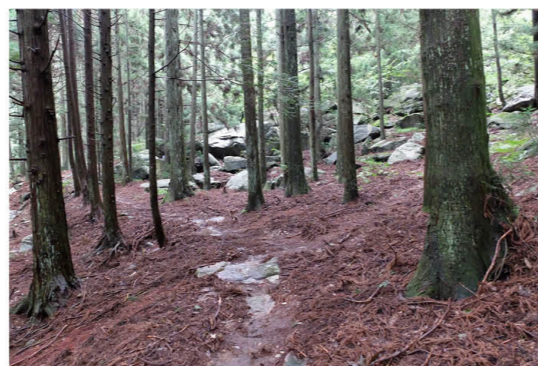
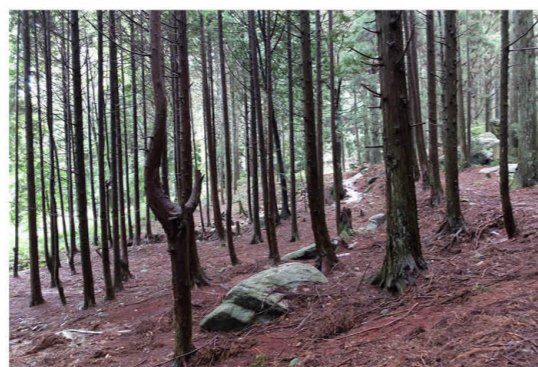
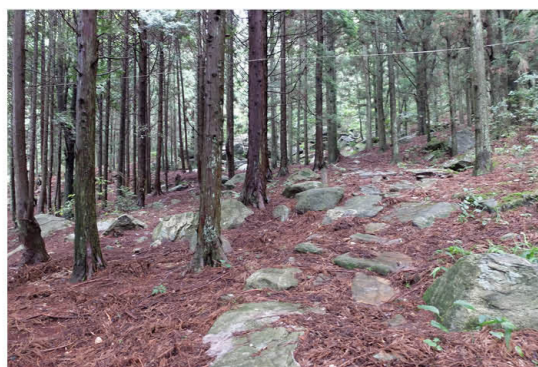
The site has very dense and also diverse tree coverage. Broad-leaf and evergreen types both exist here. Bamboo also sporadically gather together here and there. There are four very prominent Japanese cedars standing right in front of the temple entrance. By estimation, they are around 30 meters tall. They were probably planted by monks hundreds of years ago and regarded as sacred, thus avoiding the tragedy of being cut down by fire wood collectors.

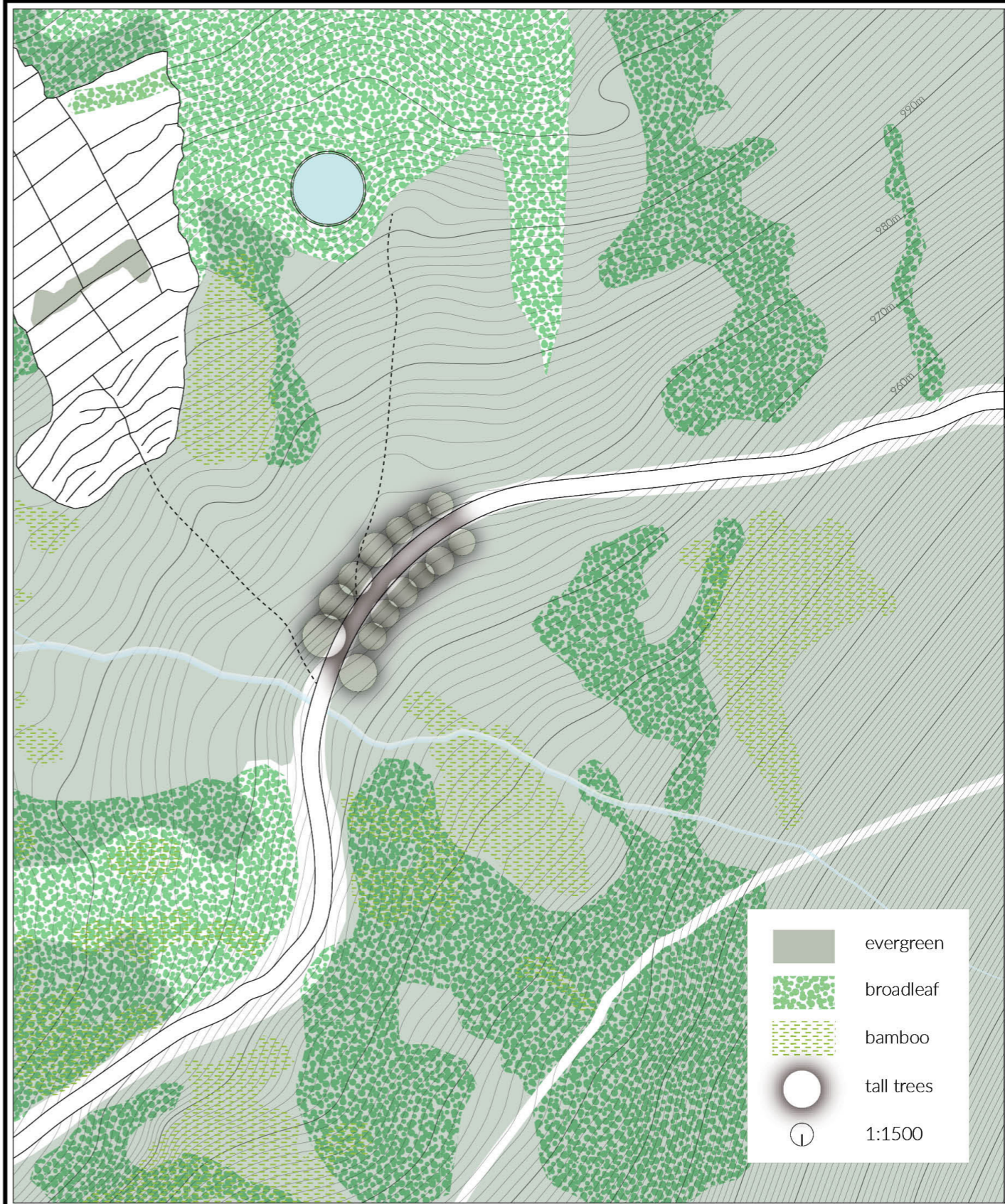
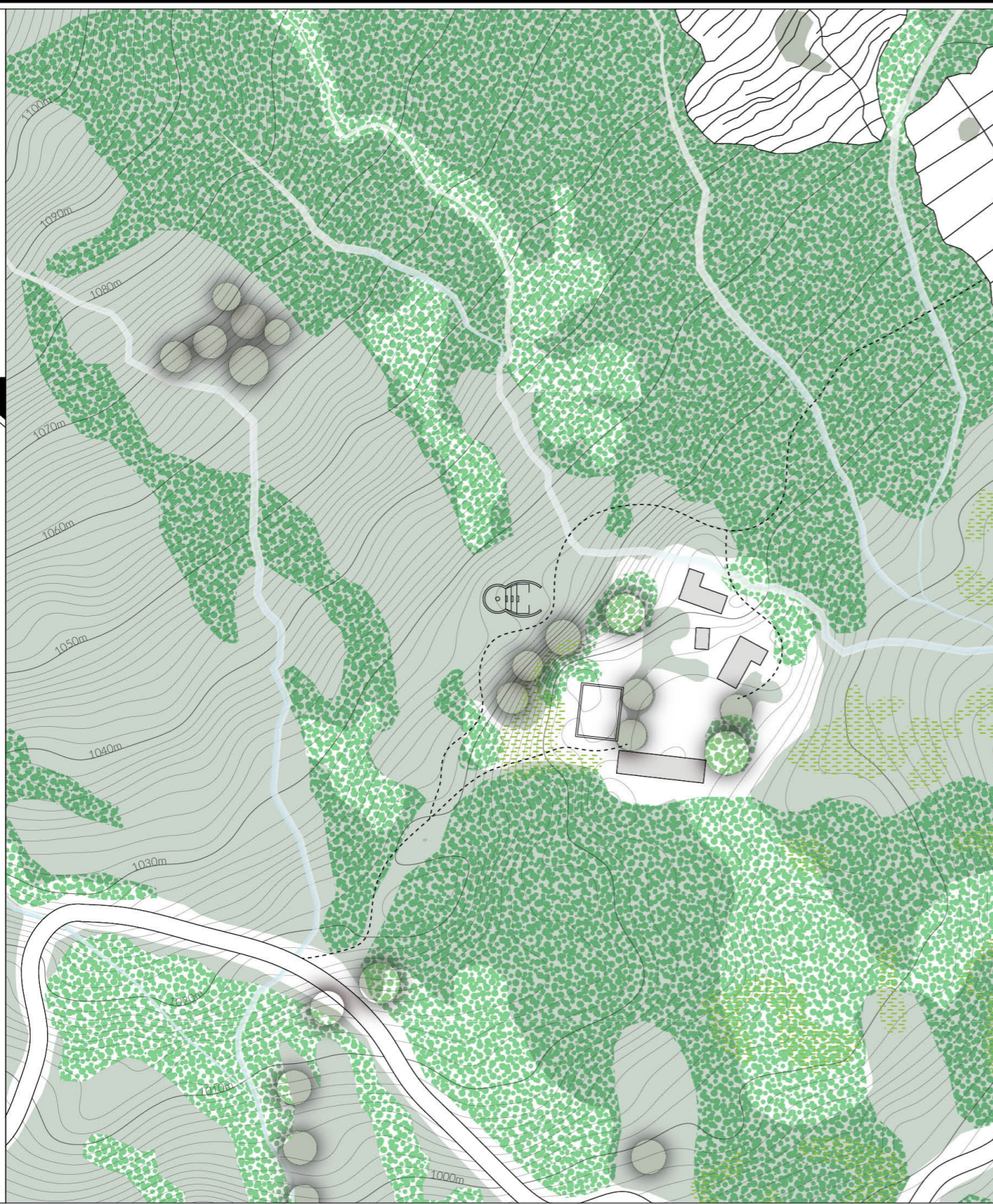
The series of objects that exist on site can be interpreted as important elements that constitute a lifespan: birth, growth, cultivation, worship, dwelling and death. These are the perfect elements to work with since this thesis looks for dignified ways to build and live in a natural setting.

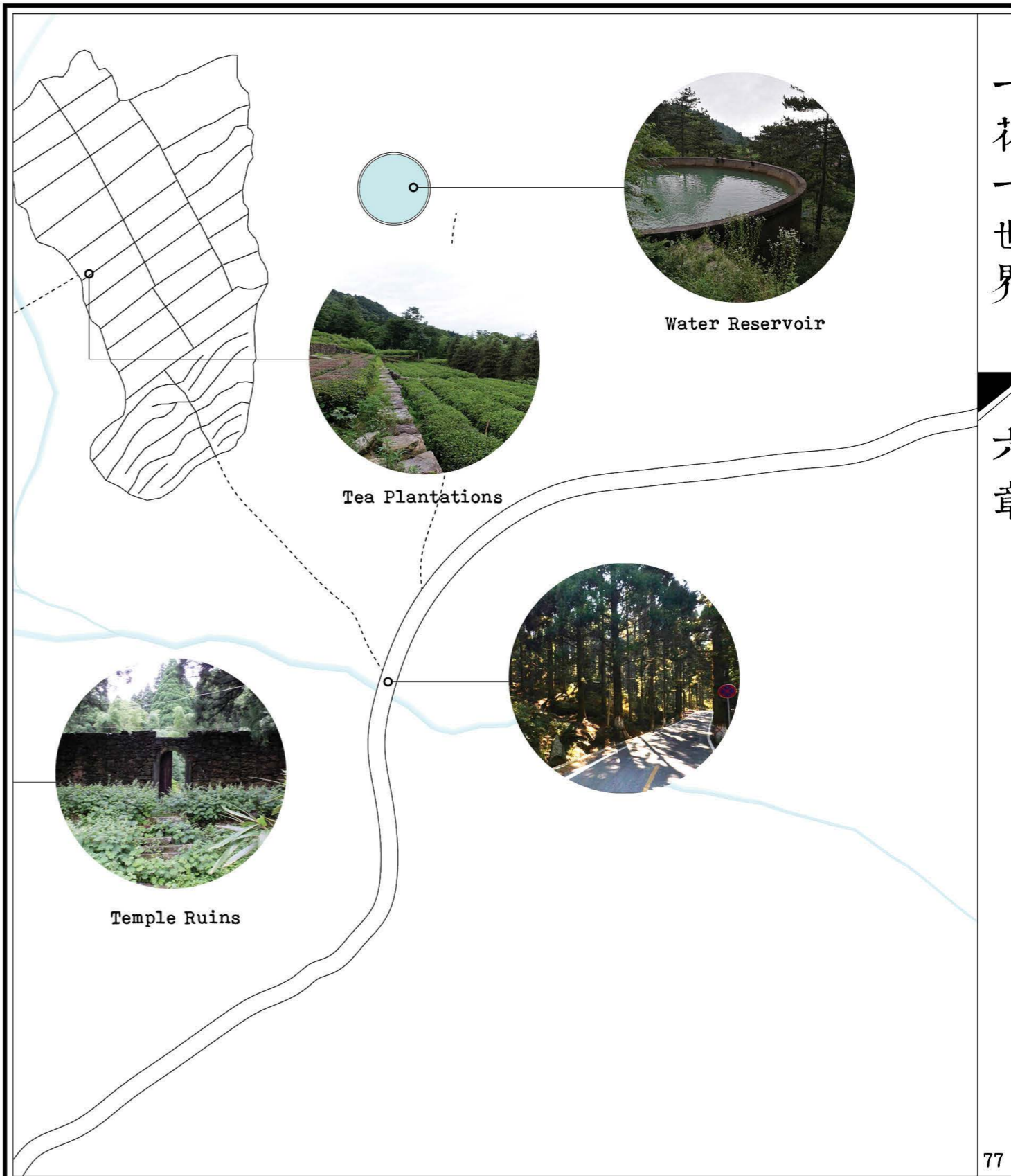
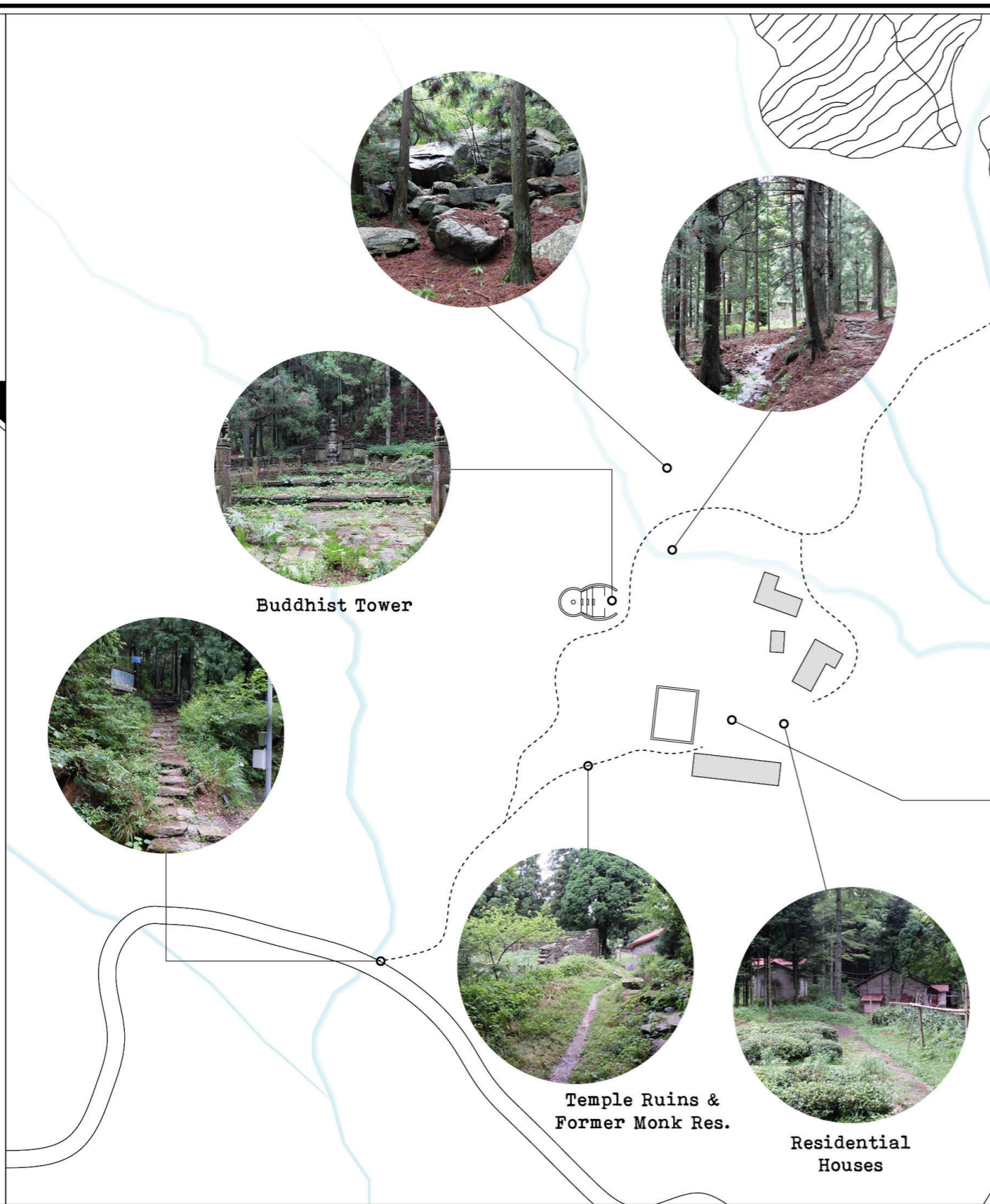




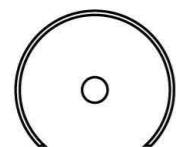








Site Interpretation



Tomb  
/memorial

DEATH

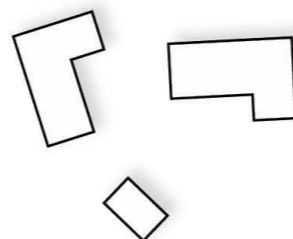
死



Temple  
Ruins

WORSHIP

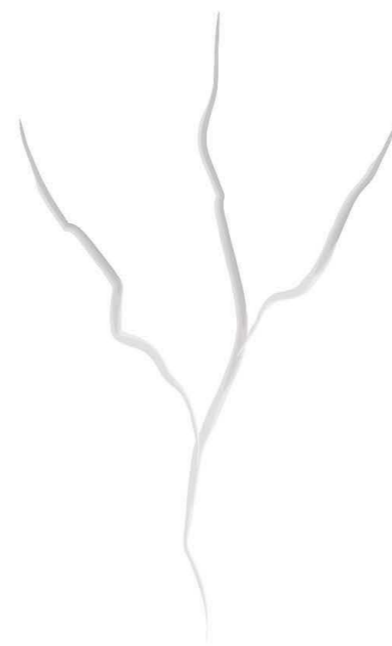
敬



Houses

DWELLING

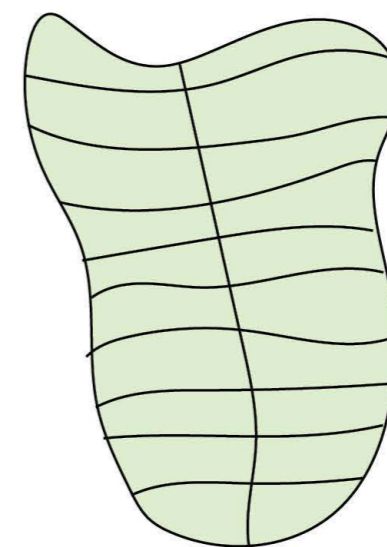
住



Streams

CULTIVATION

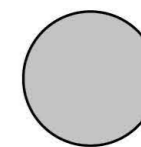
育



Tea Fields

GROWTH

長



Water  
Reservoir

BIRTH

生

A Progression of Simplification and Integration




If the purpose of this design is to re-claim the cultural identity for a mountain, in-depth reflections on the appropriate treatment when living within a natural environment should be made. Borrowing ideas from ancient Chinese philosophy, three guiding principles were established in evaluating the design process. First the design should encompass a sense of balance, a balance between the built and nature, public and private, dark and light, new and old (Yin-Yang/Central Peace from Taoism). Secondly, there should always be an effort aiming towards a simplicity in formal conception and having a minimum impact on the site (Restraining on self-expression from Buddhism). Third but not the least, a consideration for a complete integrate between different design components and with the surrounding context historically, culturally, materialistically and tectonically (Universal interdependence).

The immediate reaction to start the de-

sign was to determine the program, the capacity and the overall siting. The initial thought was to build something that is in between the sacred and the secular. A retreat complex is suitable in this sense that it has some clear spatial requirements but also flexible enough to host different user groups. The program list started with a public section for gathering, a private section for resting and a semi-public part for encountering. Since it was determined from the very beginning that the project would preserve the walls from the temple ruins as a part of the new proposal, the gathering hall has a clear maximum size due to the limited clearance to the back of the temple ground. It was roughly determined by the size of the first designed gathering hall space that 120 people can stay in this retreat complex. Different siting options were tested out. Option A was picked for its compactness plus the tea house location from option C.




Program Proposal (Initial):

A retreat complex with a hosting capacity of 120 people that is composed of:

|   |                   |   |                        |   |
|---|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|
|  |                   |  |                        |  |
| Public Use:   |                   | Private Use:  |                        | Semi-Public:  |
| Gathering hall:   | 400m <sup>2</sup> | Cabin suite:  | 27m <sup>2</sup> x 5 = | 135m <sup>2</sup>   |
| Dining hall:  | 160m <sup>2</sup> | Dorm (M):   | 35m <sup>2</sup> x 9 = | 315m <sup>2</sup>   |
| Kitchen:  | 80m <sup>2</sup>  | Dorm (L):   | 60m <sup>2</sup> x 2 = | 120m <sup>2</sup>   |
| Outdoor space:  | TBD               |   |                        |   |
|   | 640m <sup>2</sup> |   | 570m <sup>2</sup>      | Total:<br>1295m <sup>2</sup>  |




Program Proposal (Revised):

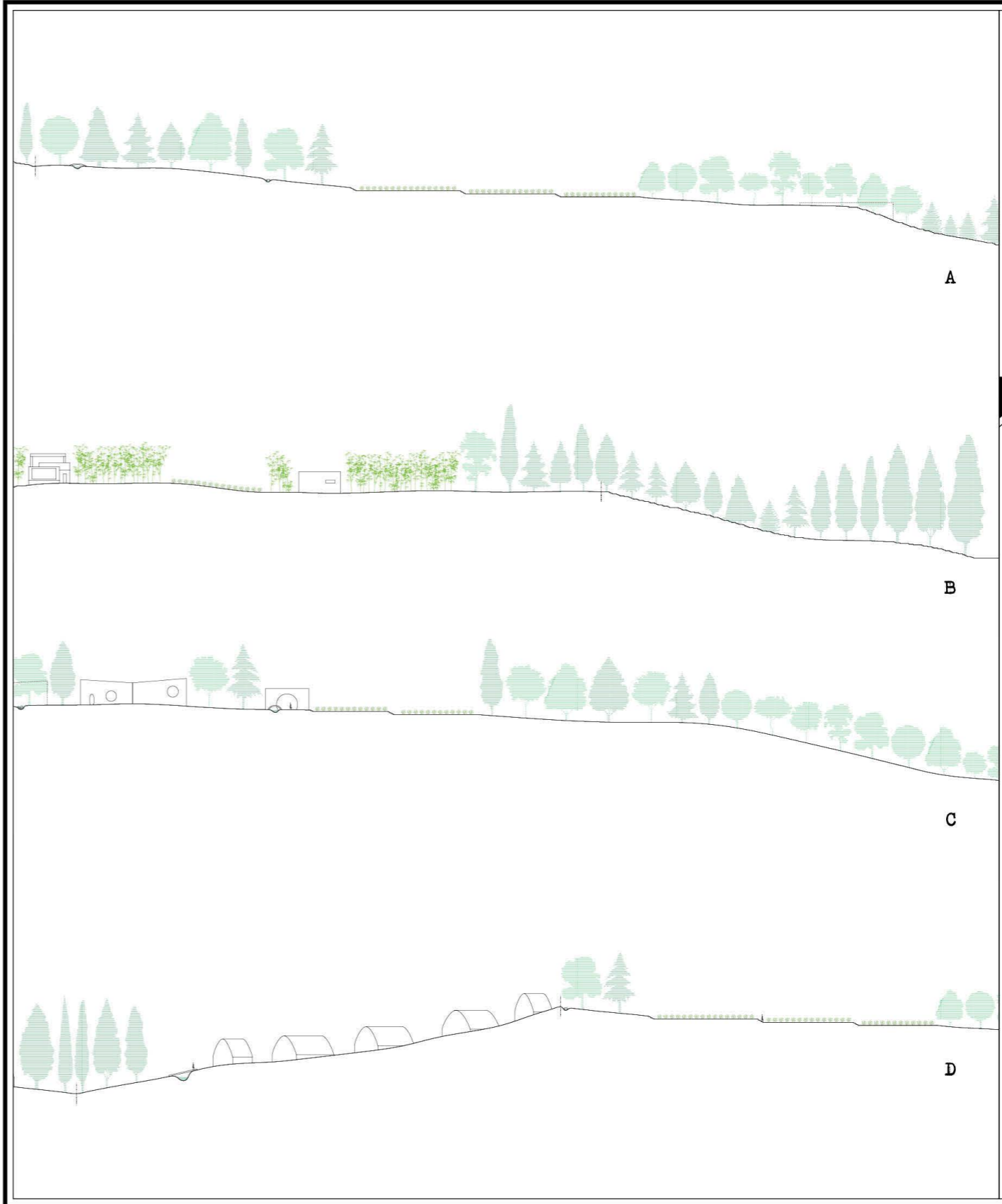
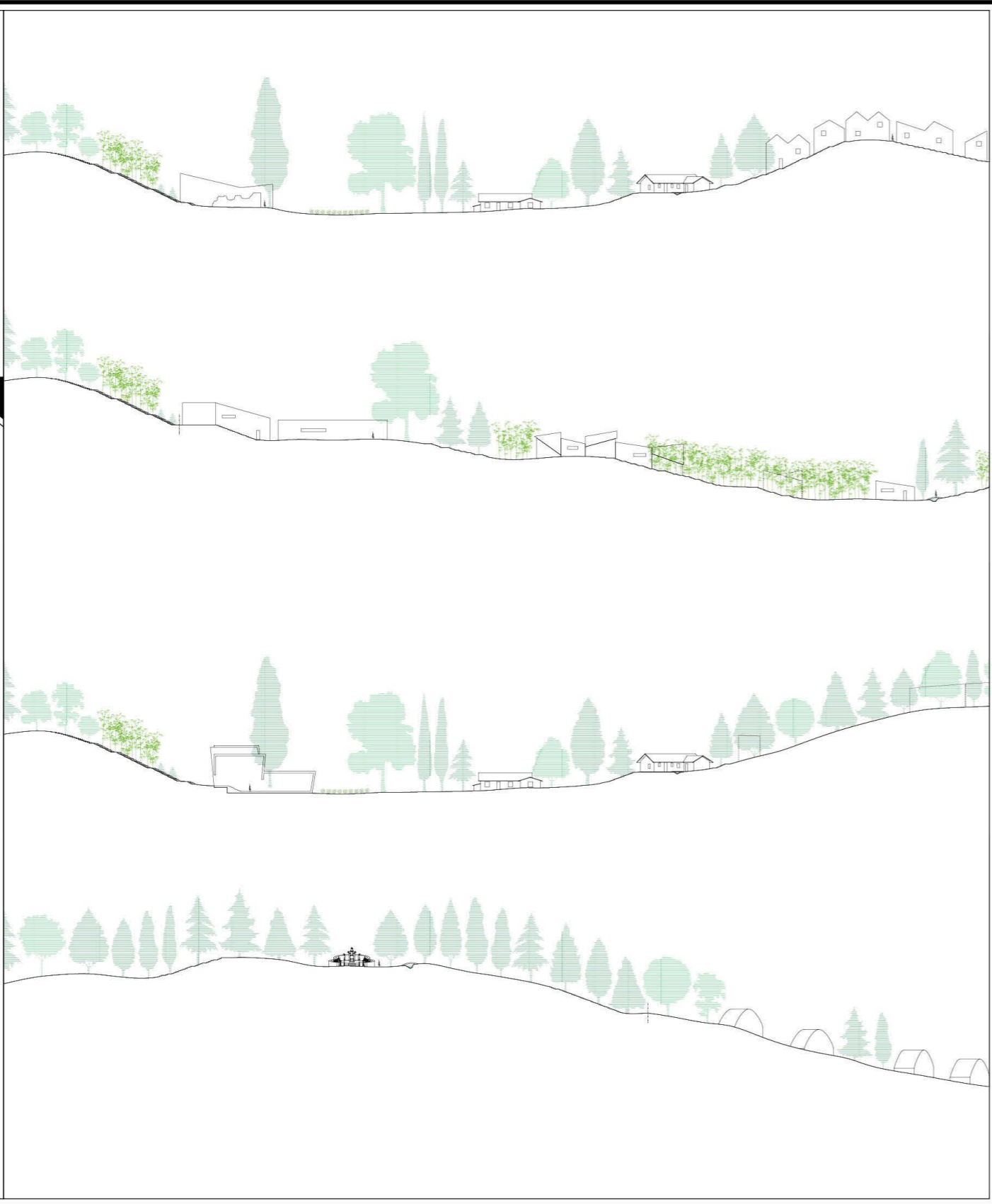
A retreat complex with a hosting capacity of 30 people that is composed of:

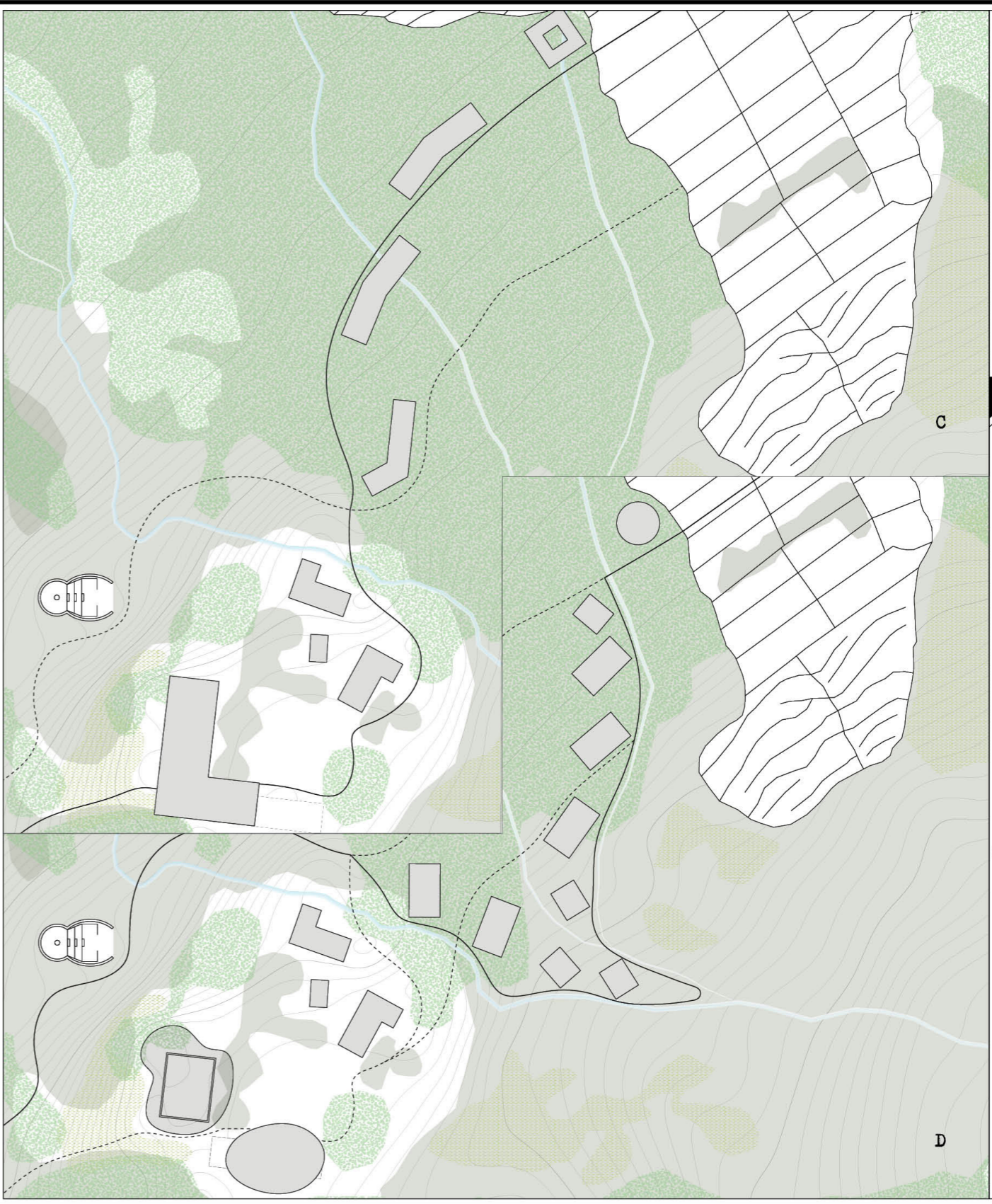
|   |                     |   |                        |   |
|---|---------------------|---|------------------------|---|
|  |                     |  |                        |  |
| Public Use:   |                     | Private Use:  |                        | Semi-Public:  |
| Gathering hall:   | 200m <sup>2</sup>   | Cabin suite:  | 25m <sup>2</sup> x 5 = | 125m <sup>2</sup>   |
| Dining hall:  | 50m <sup>2</sup>    |   |                        |   |
| Kitchen:  | 30m <sup>2</sup>    |   |                        |   |
| Dorm L(6):  | 45m <sup>2</sup> x2 |   |                        |   |
| Dorm S(4):  | 35m <sup>2</sup> x2 |   |                        |   |
|   | 440m <sup>2</sup>   |   |                        | Total:<br>635m <sup>2</sup>   |

Program Proposal (Final):

A retreat complex with a hosting capacity of 30 people that is composed of:

|   |                   |   |                   |   |
|---|-------------------|---|-------------------|---|
|  |                   |  |                   |  |
| Gathering:  |                   | Residential:  |                   | Meeting:  |
| Gathering hall:   | 100m <sup>2</sup> | Combined:   | 354m <sup>2</sup> | Teahouse:   |
| Lobbies:  | 46m <sup>2</sup>  |   |                   | 47m <sup>2</sup>  |
|   | 146m <sup>2</sup> |   |                   | Total:<br>547m <sup>2</sup>   |





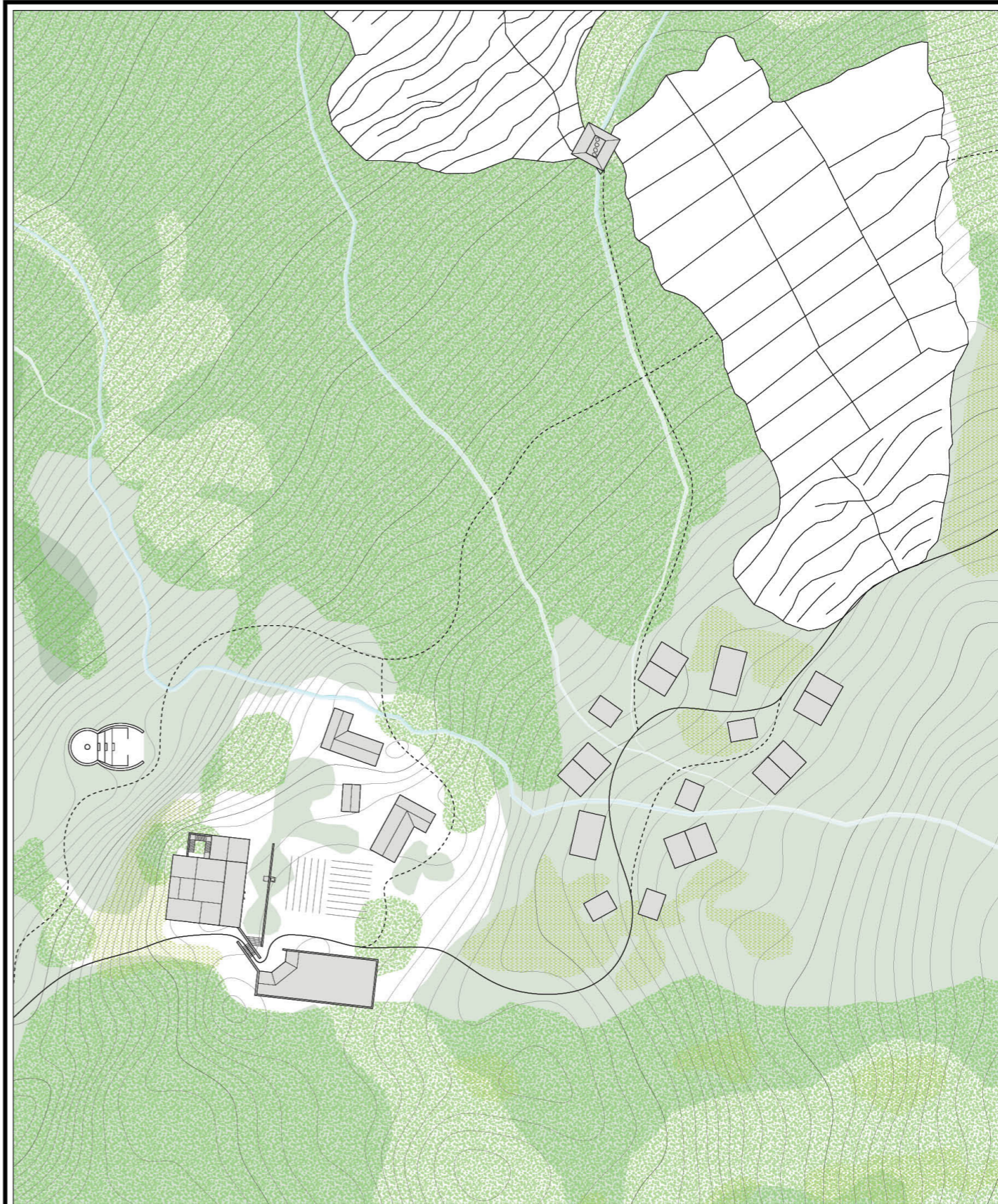
There is a phenomenon of pairing that exist in many aspects: pairing of the gathering hall with the residential components, pairing of the two tea rooms, pairing of two entrances for all the buildings.

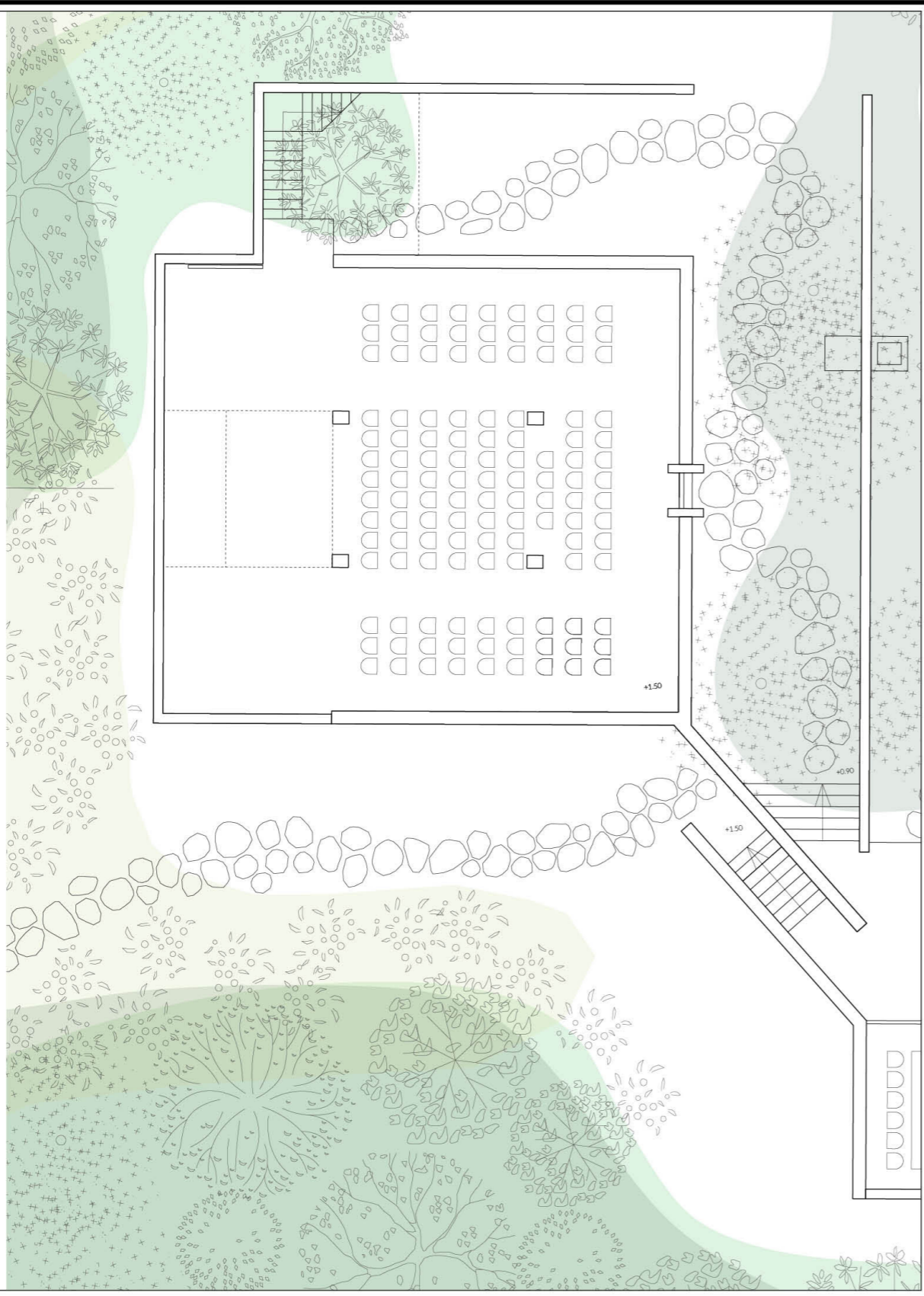
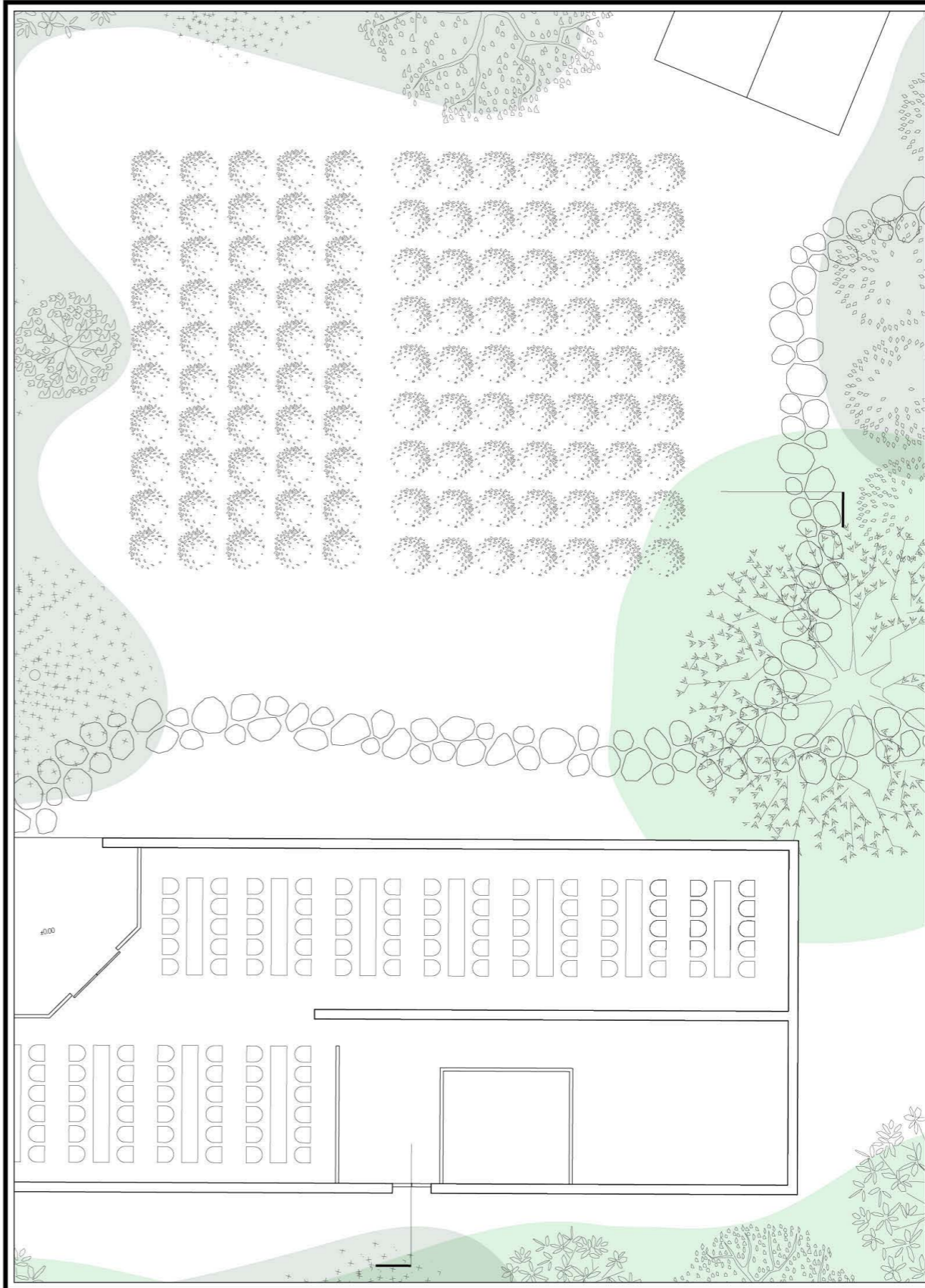
The design of the main sector which includes the gathering hall and the residential component utilizes the original layout of the temple ground. The temple is now the gathering hall, the former monk residence is now the residential component, the small tea field in front of the temple is still the tea field. The two existing family houses are untouched. The tea house is the only brand new addition on site. The locations of water streams and the biggest trees were respected and integrated with the plan. Only a few small trees need to be removed to make room for the space around the gathering hall and the tea house.

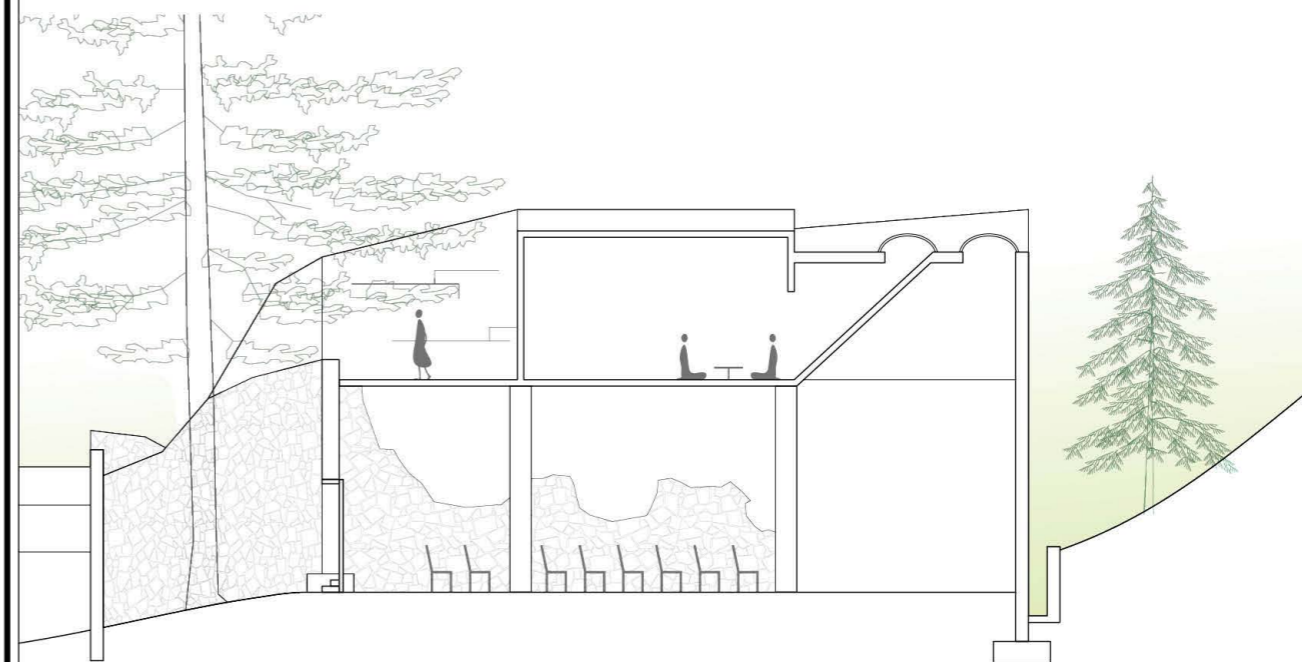
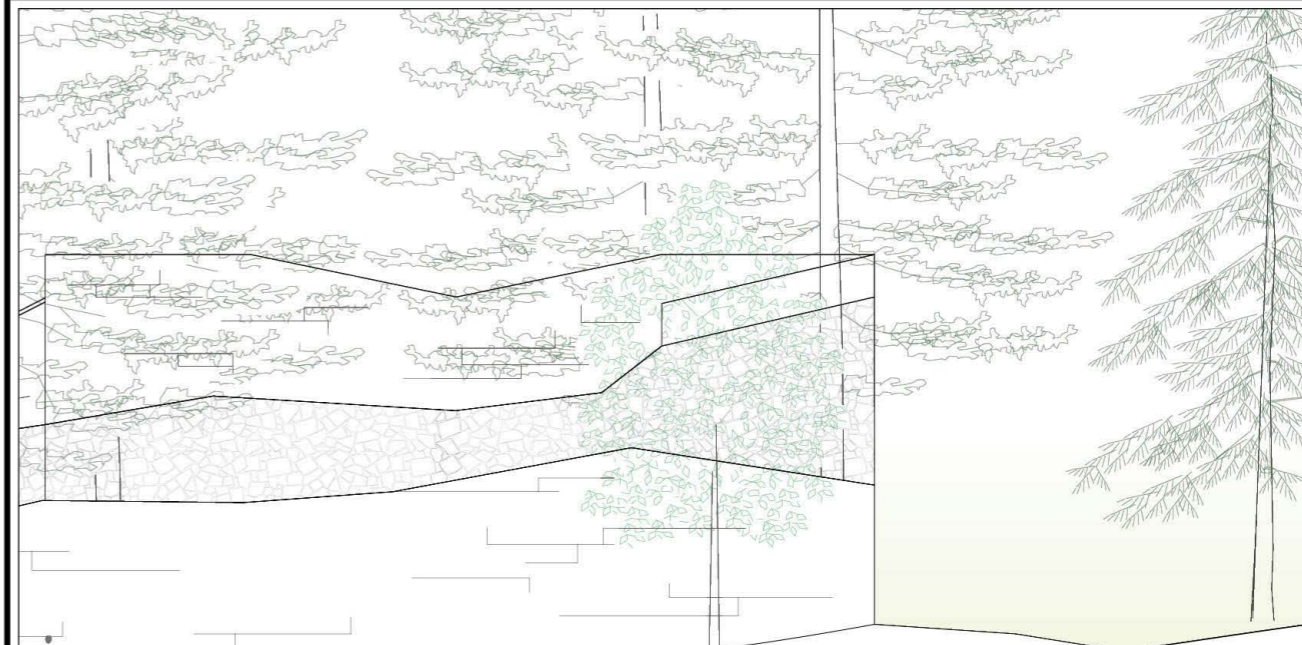
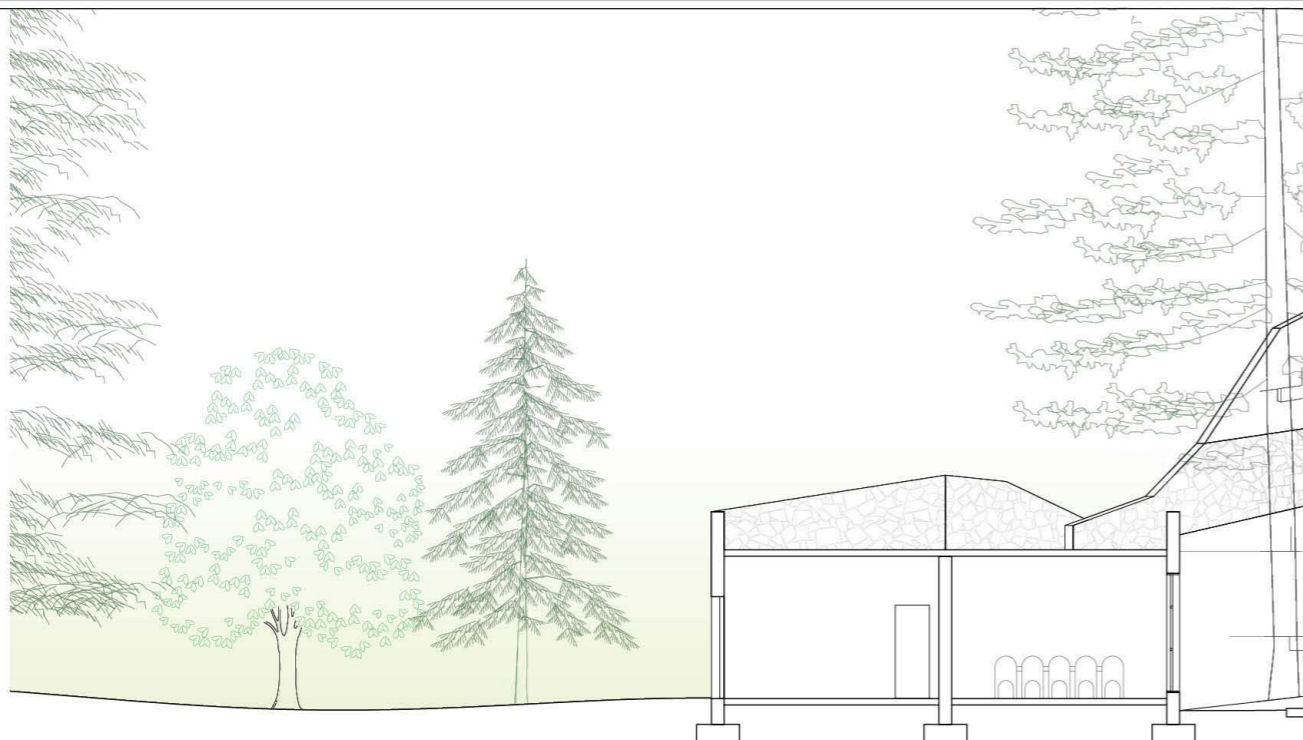
The process of iteration has been one that reduces layers of unnecessary in-

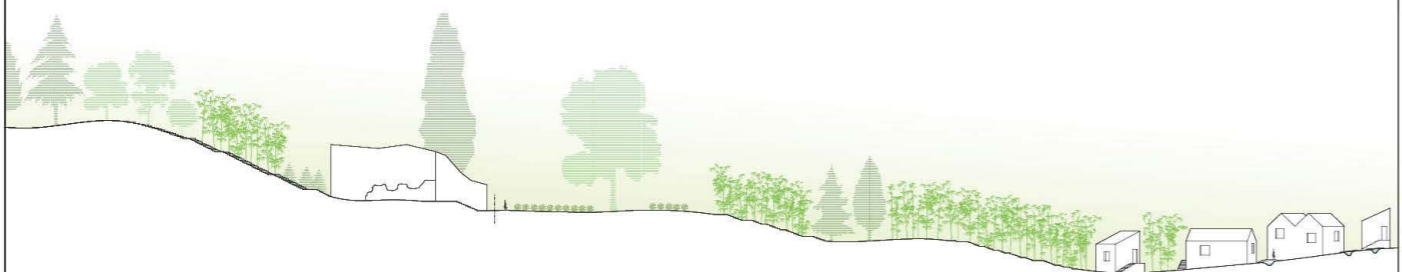
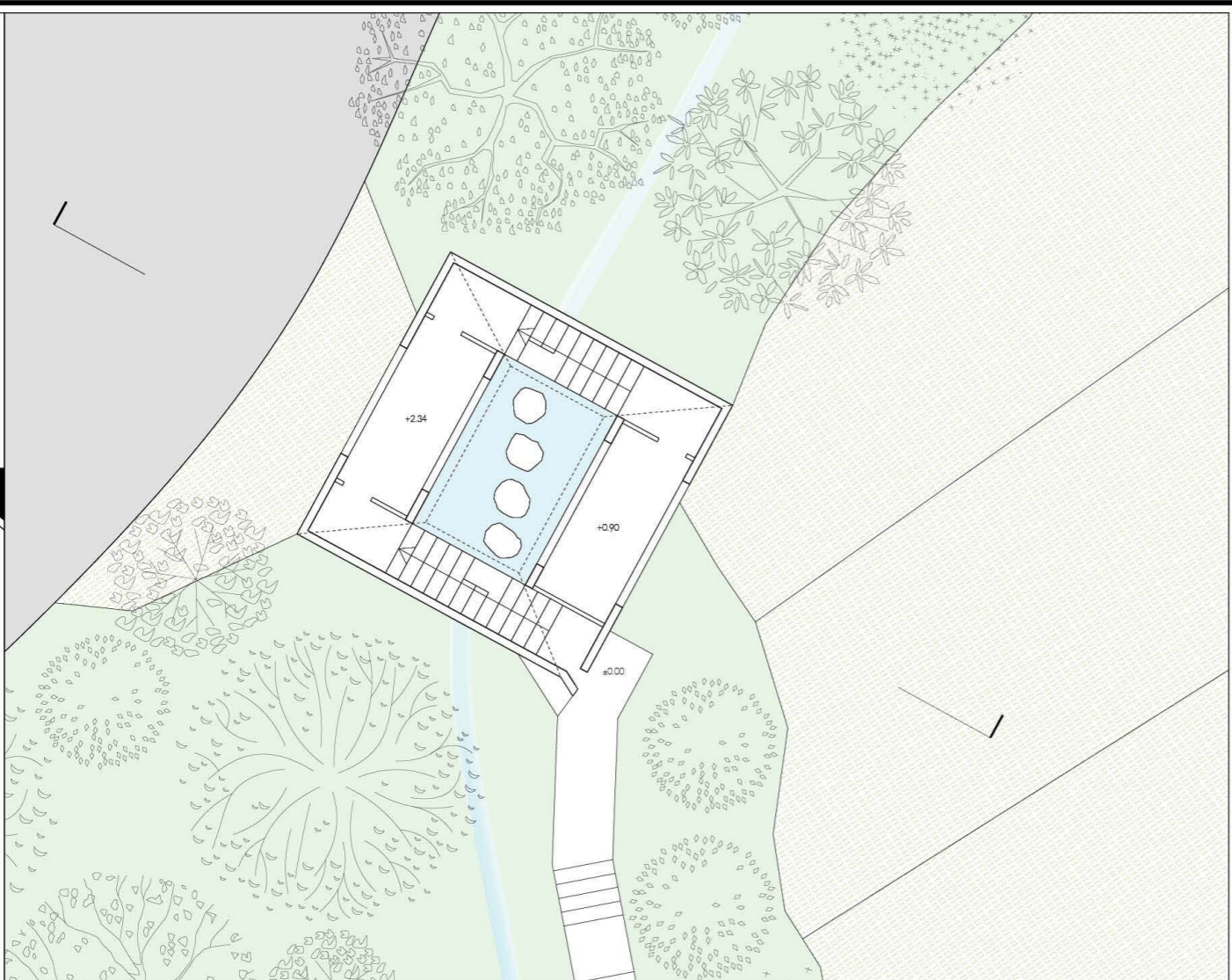
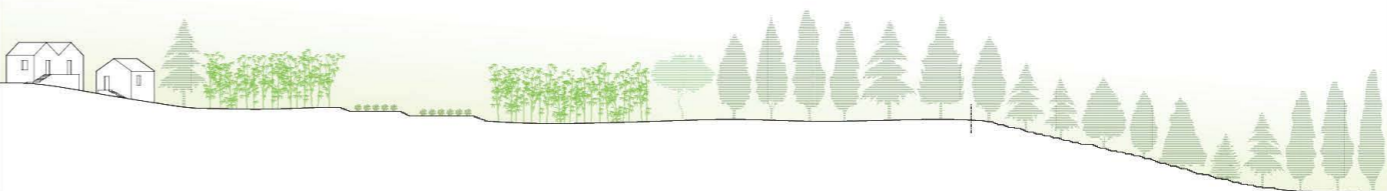
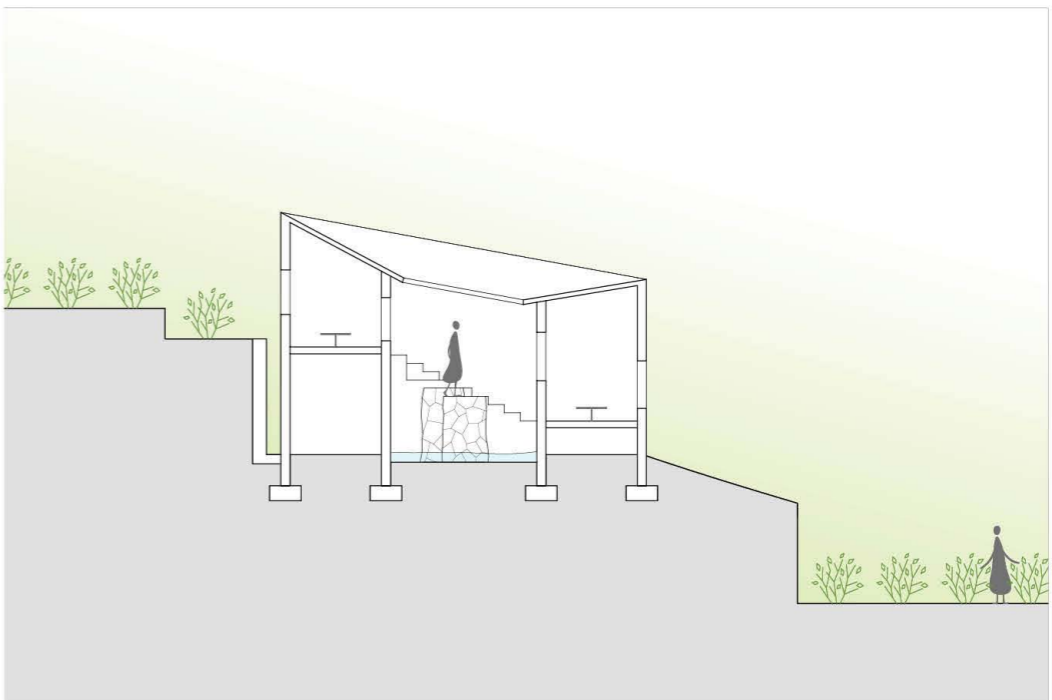
gredients and minimizing the footprints. The size of the gathering hall was reduced to a 10x10m cube with two belts of semi-open space. Individual cabins in the woods were taken out. All the other functional spaces were condensed into the residential component adjacent to the gathering hall. The hosting capacity has been reduced to 30 people as a reaction to commercialized tour bus size which is usually 50 plus. Parking is not included on site. And it would be appealing more to serious travelers who dedicate significant amount of time to walk on mountain trails. The tea house also has a cut-down in roof coverage.

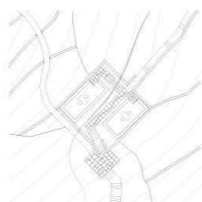
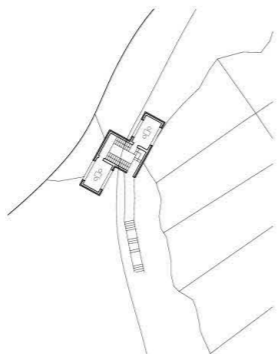
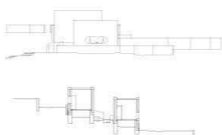
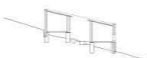
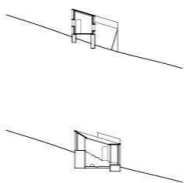
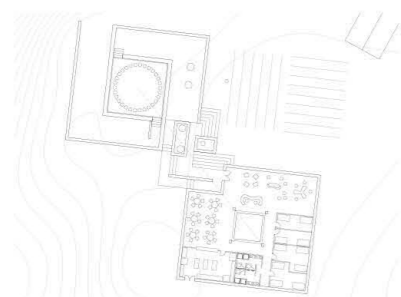
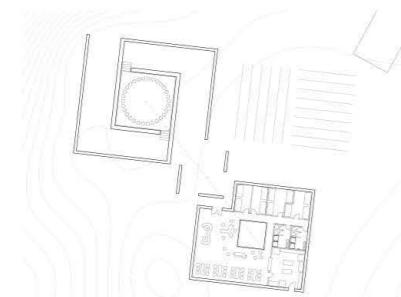
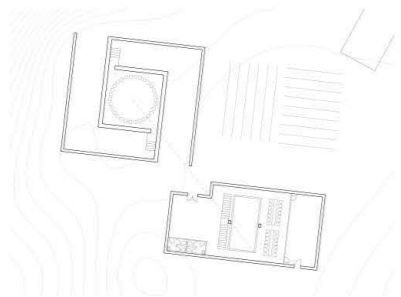
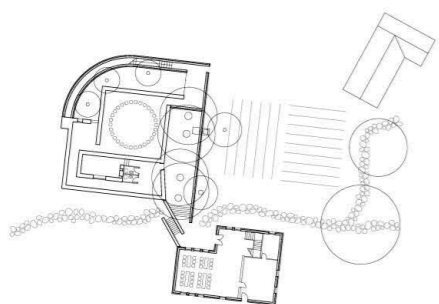
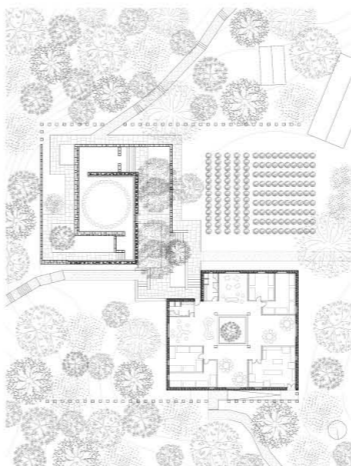
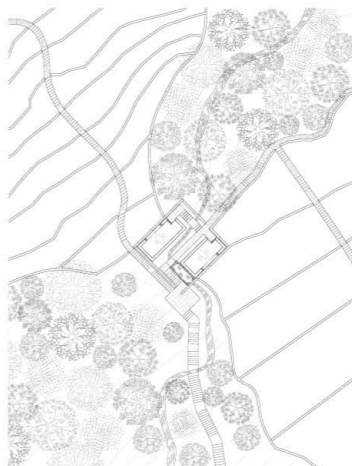
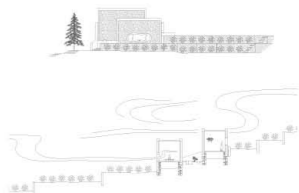
Stone/masonry is the best choice as the building material since it is suitable for the humid weather and resources for them are abundant. Stone has also been the primary building material for the past hundred years. Load bearing system is employed here with either dry laying or mortar laying for both simplicity and durability.











## Final Renditions

The last iteration reached a stage where the majority of guiding principles were well respected. A system of pairing and contrasting was clearly established. Pairing being explained before, the contrast comes from the play between dark and light interior design for both gathering hall and the residential components. There is a contrast between the main sector's introversion (no windows for gathering hall, only perforated openings for the residential component that look to the outside) and the tea house's extroversion (very celebrated cloud shaped openings to frame the view towards tea plantations).

All the buildings have very elementary overall geometries that have proportions talking with each other. The enclosed wall area around the two tea rooms is exactly the same size as the gathering hall. The overall wall area has the same footprints as the residential component.

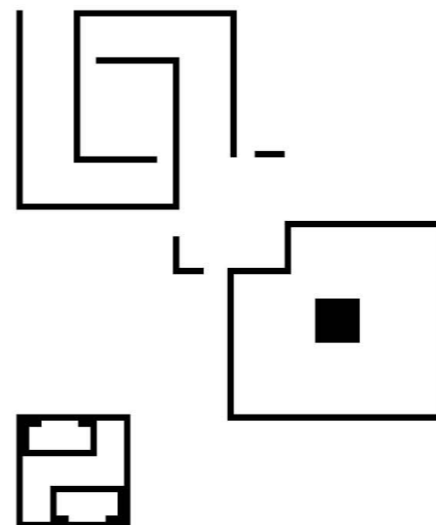
The site planning reuses most of the ex-

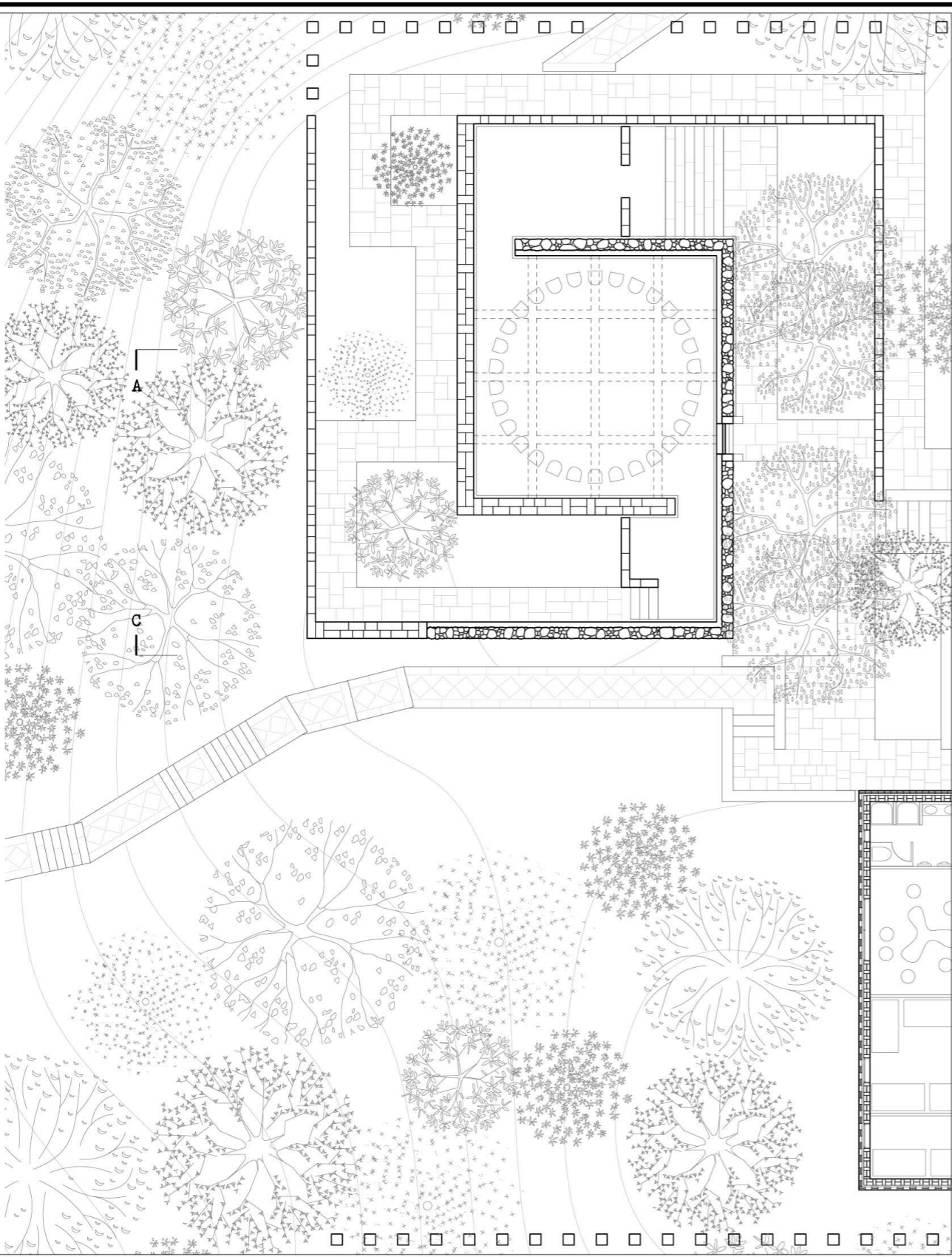
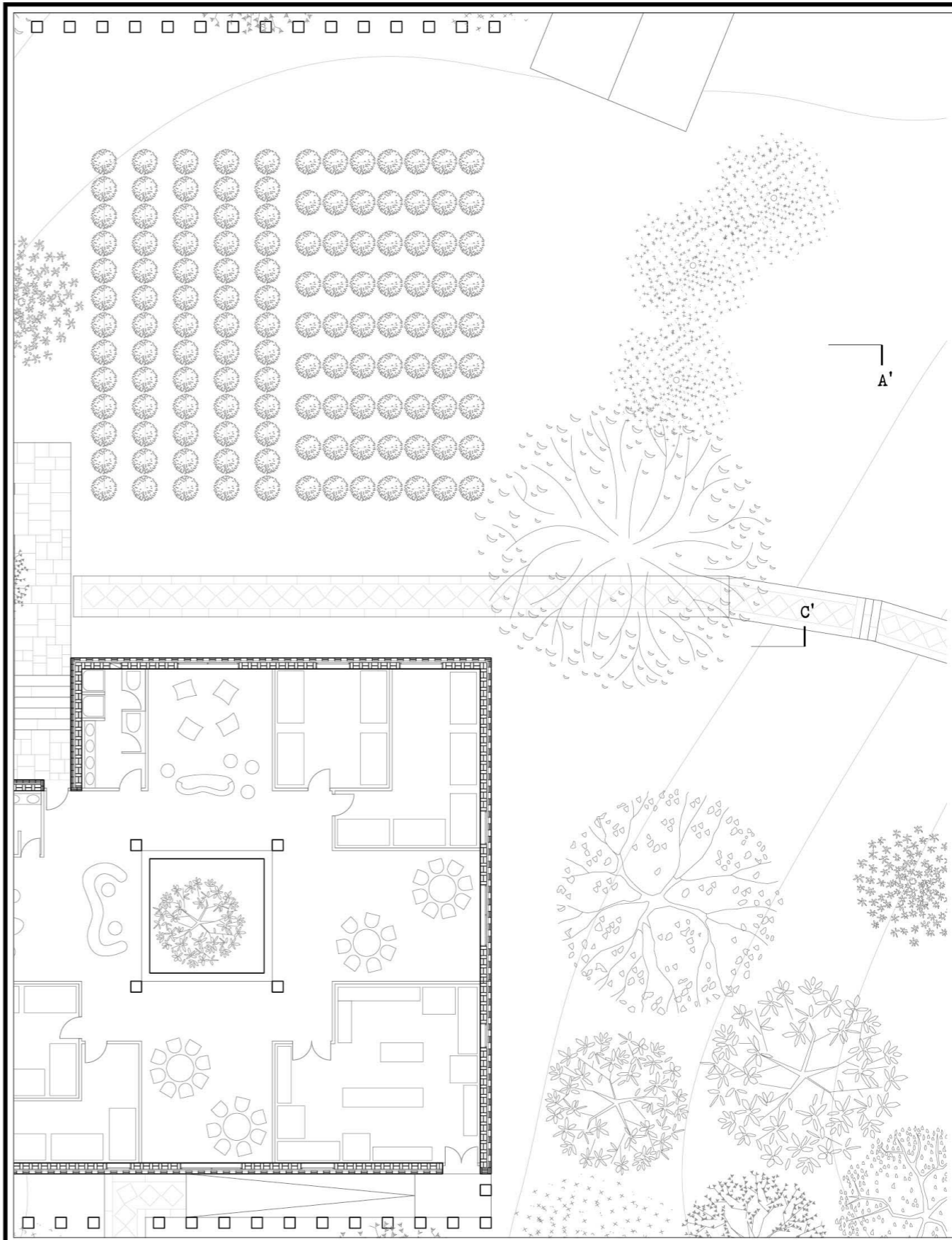
isting paths (most of them need a major upgrade). Only the path leading to the tea house needs to be added.

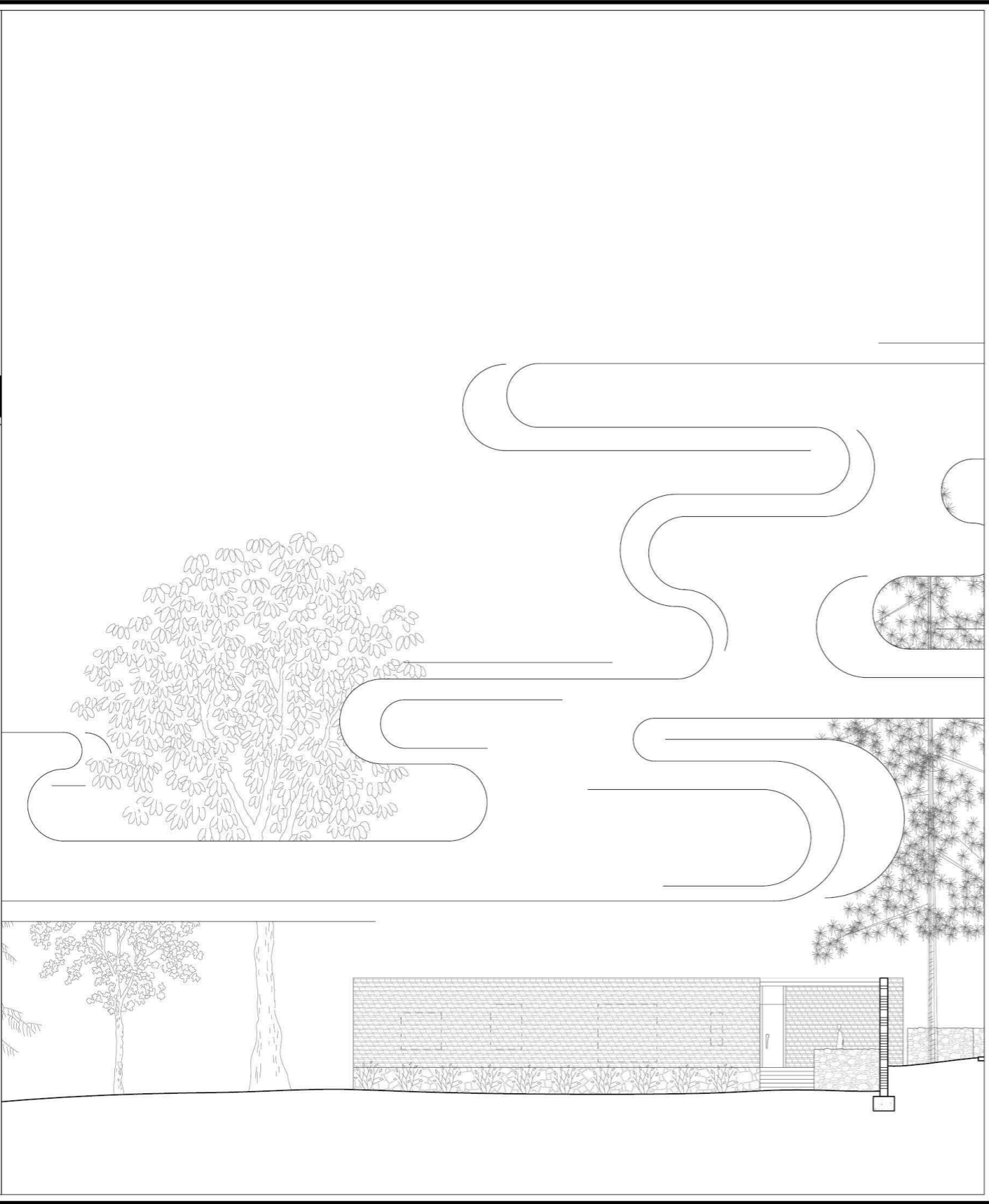
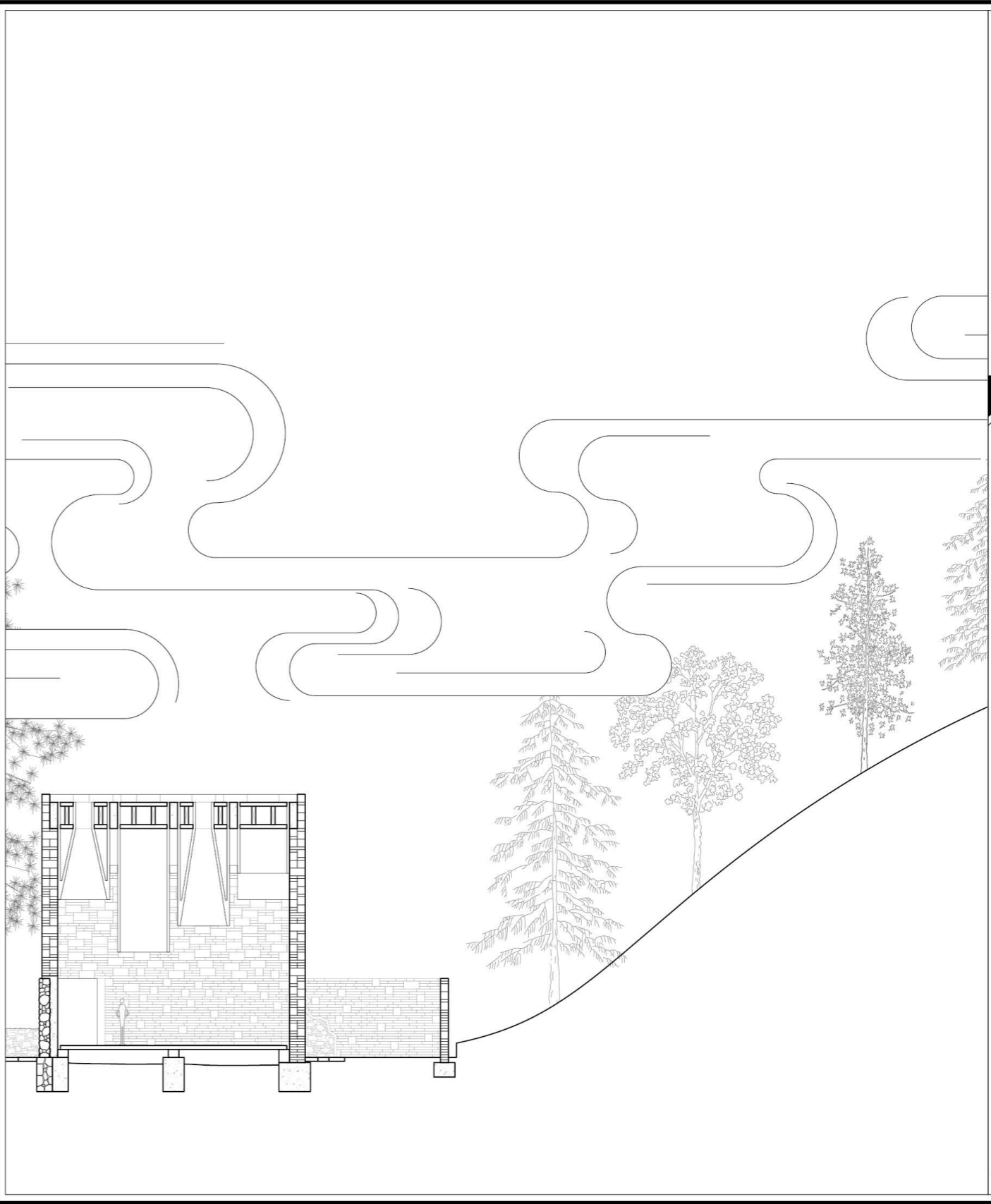
This is at stage where it is ready for further explorations that would allow the design to be even more site sensitive (ex. Integration with sun directions, wind directions, seasonal changes, acoustic landscape, etc.) Essentially decisions that would heighten the experience on the mountain would bring more depth to the design. If there is an imaginary continuation of this thesis development, maybe more answers would be found.

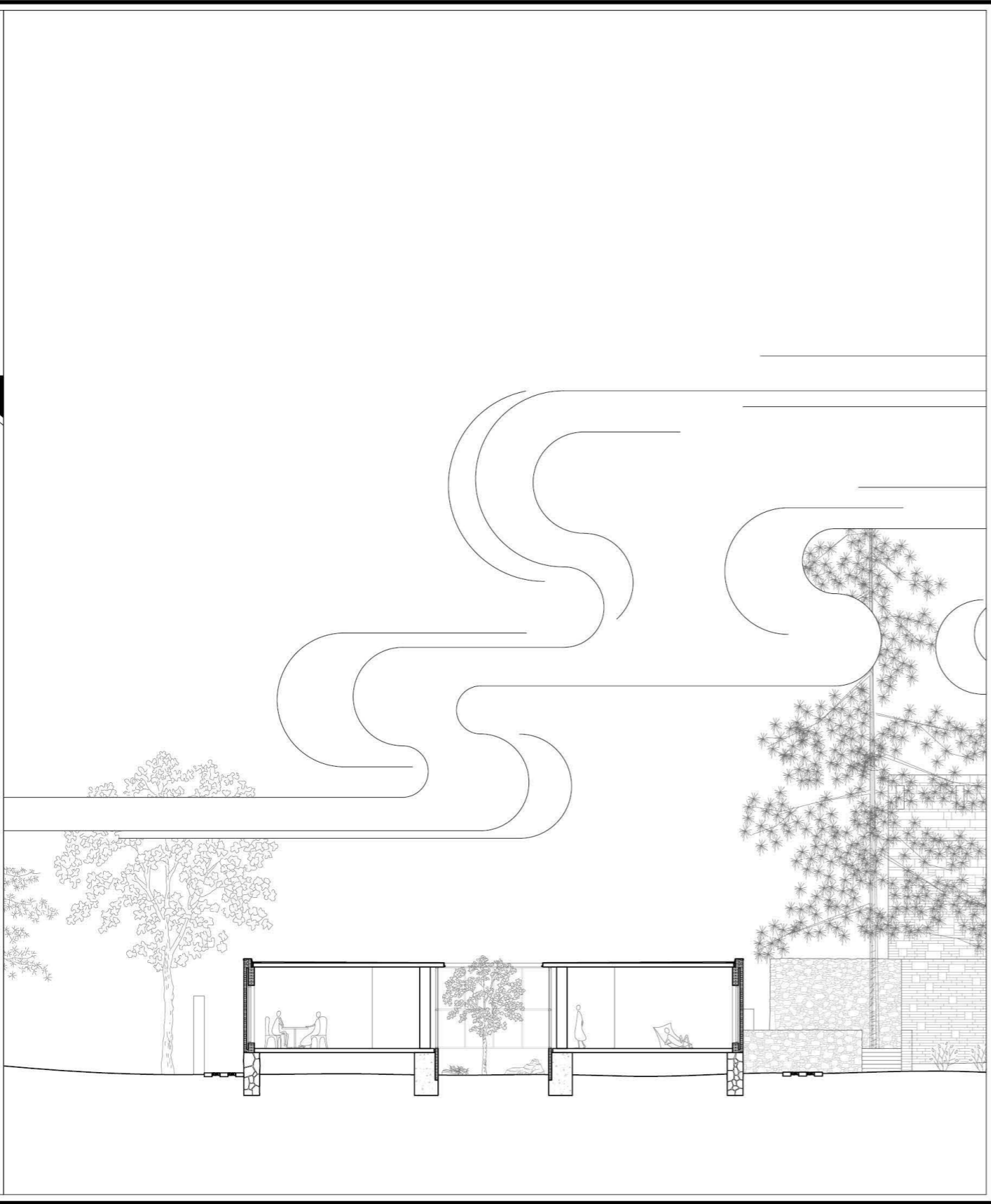
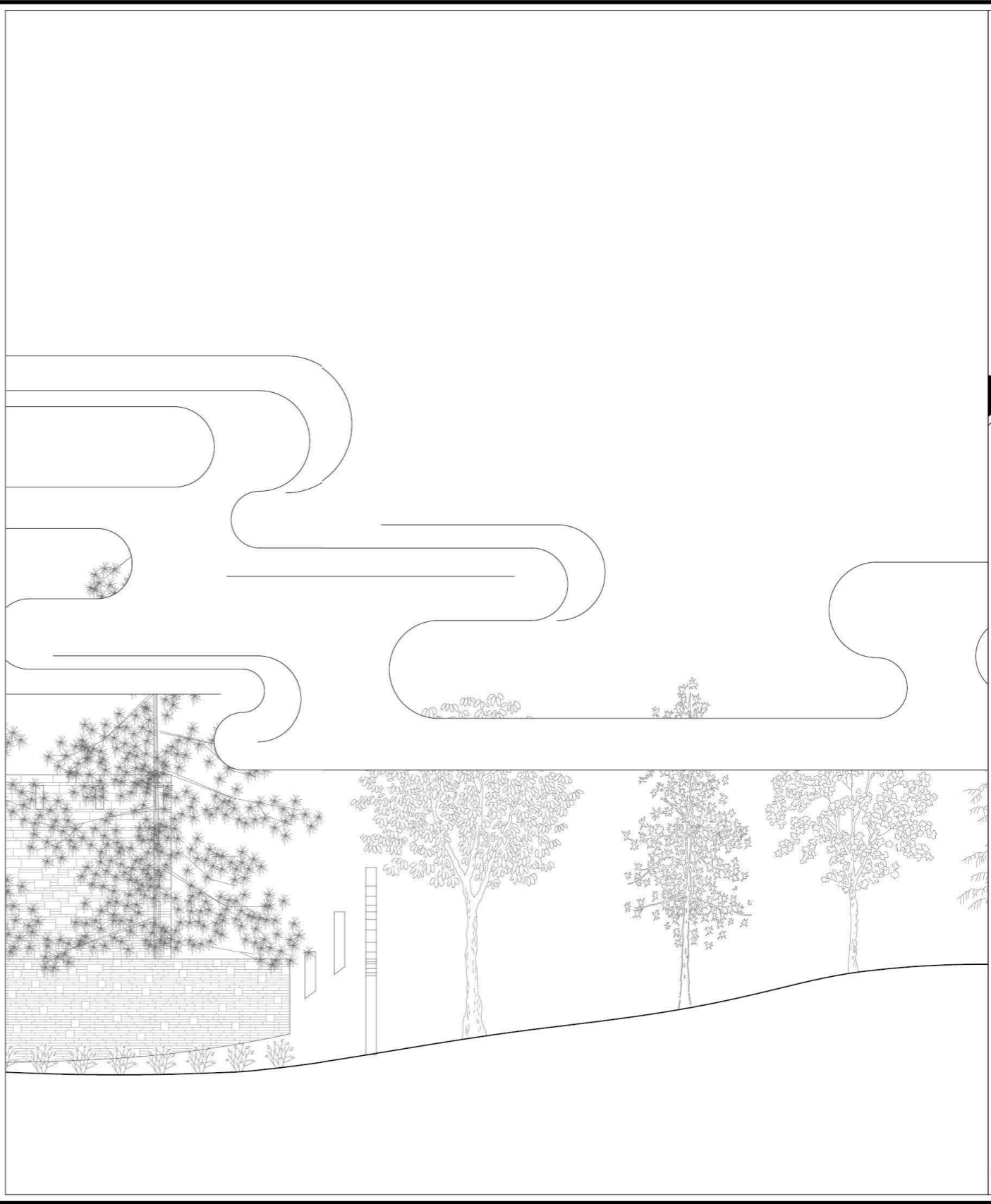
No details are too small and no conceptions are too difficult to comprehend. William Blake's poetry perfectly illustrate this:

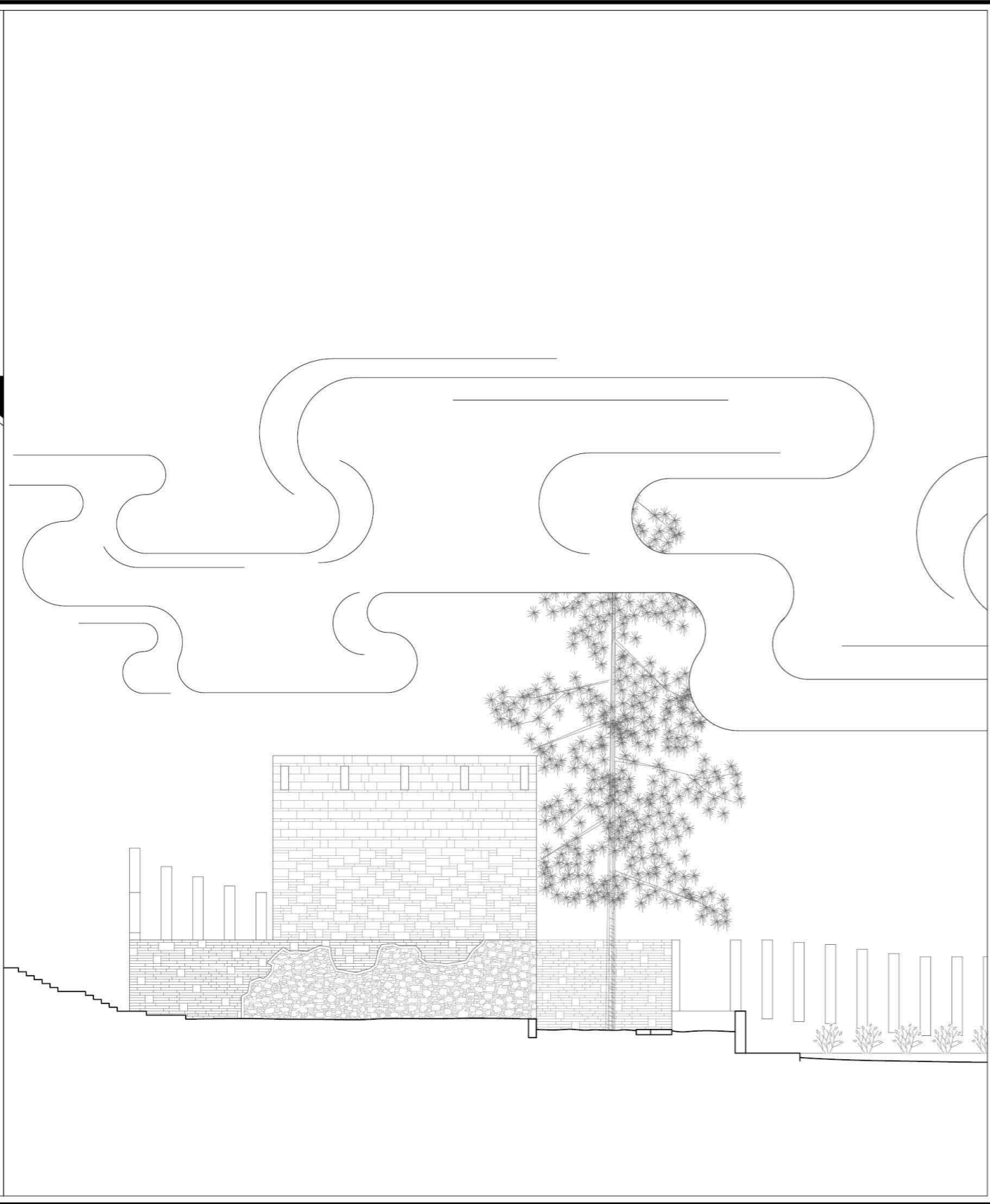
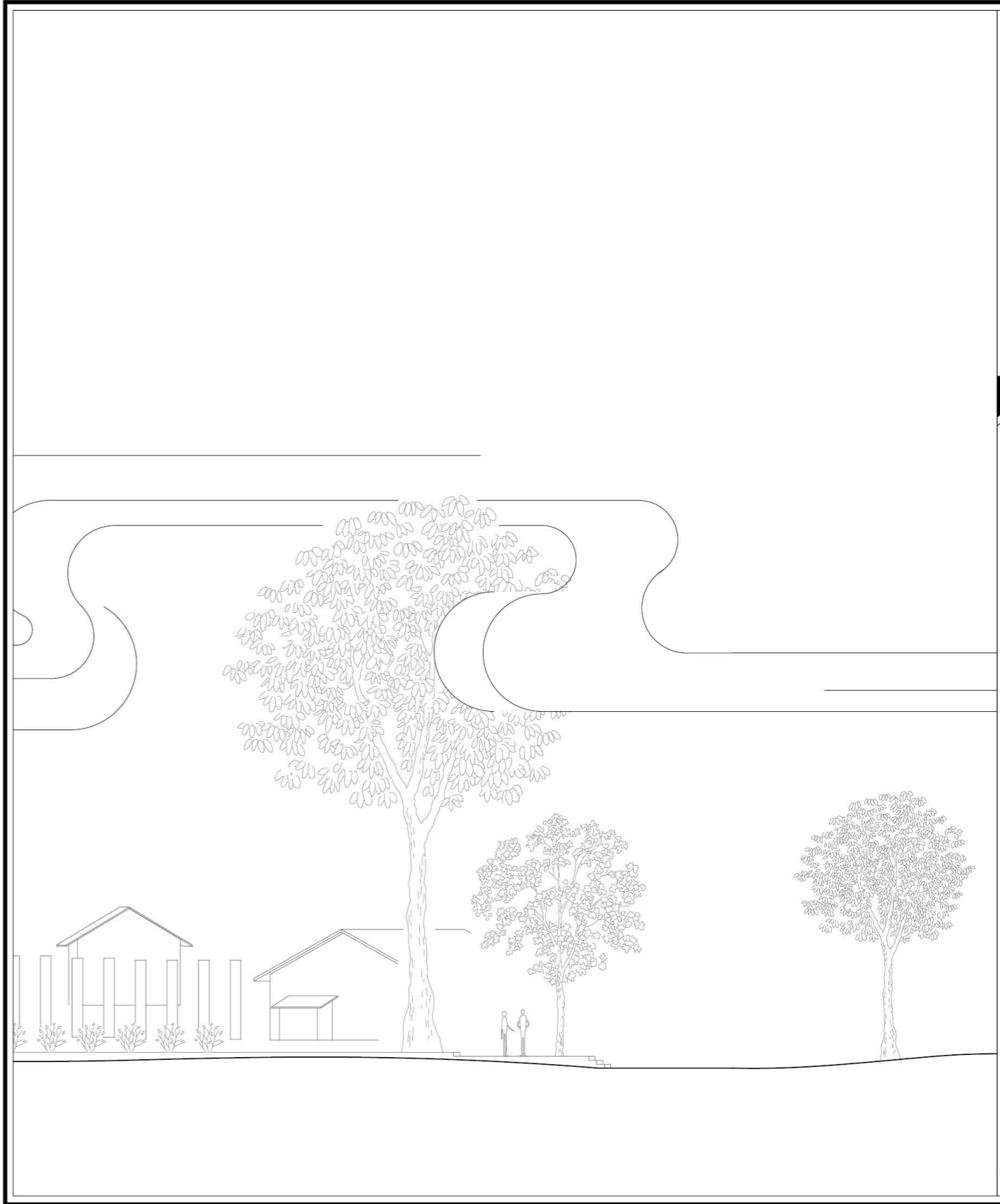
To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of  
your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

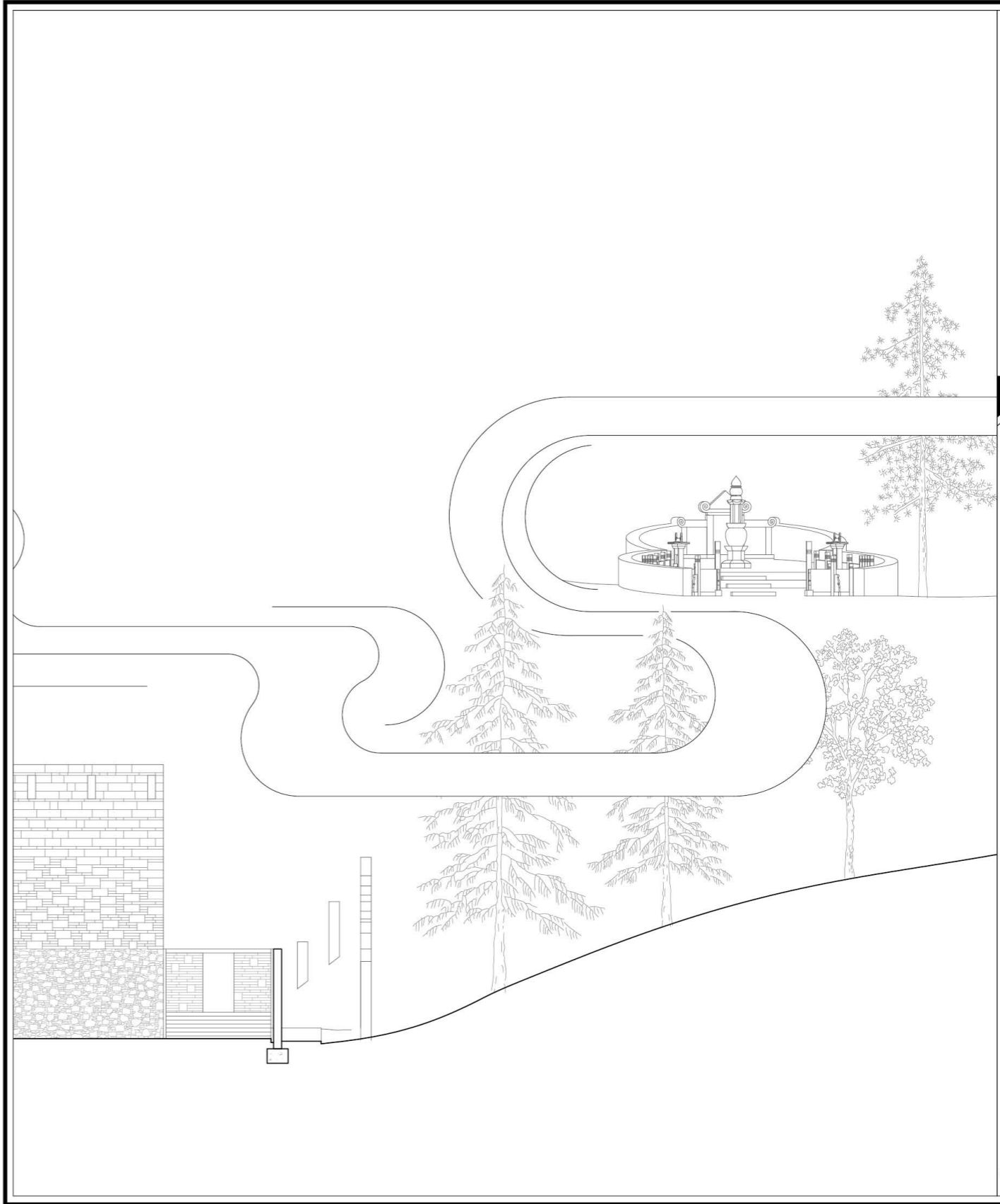
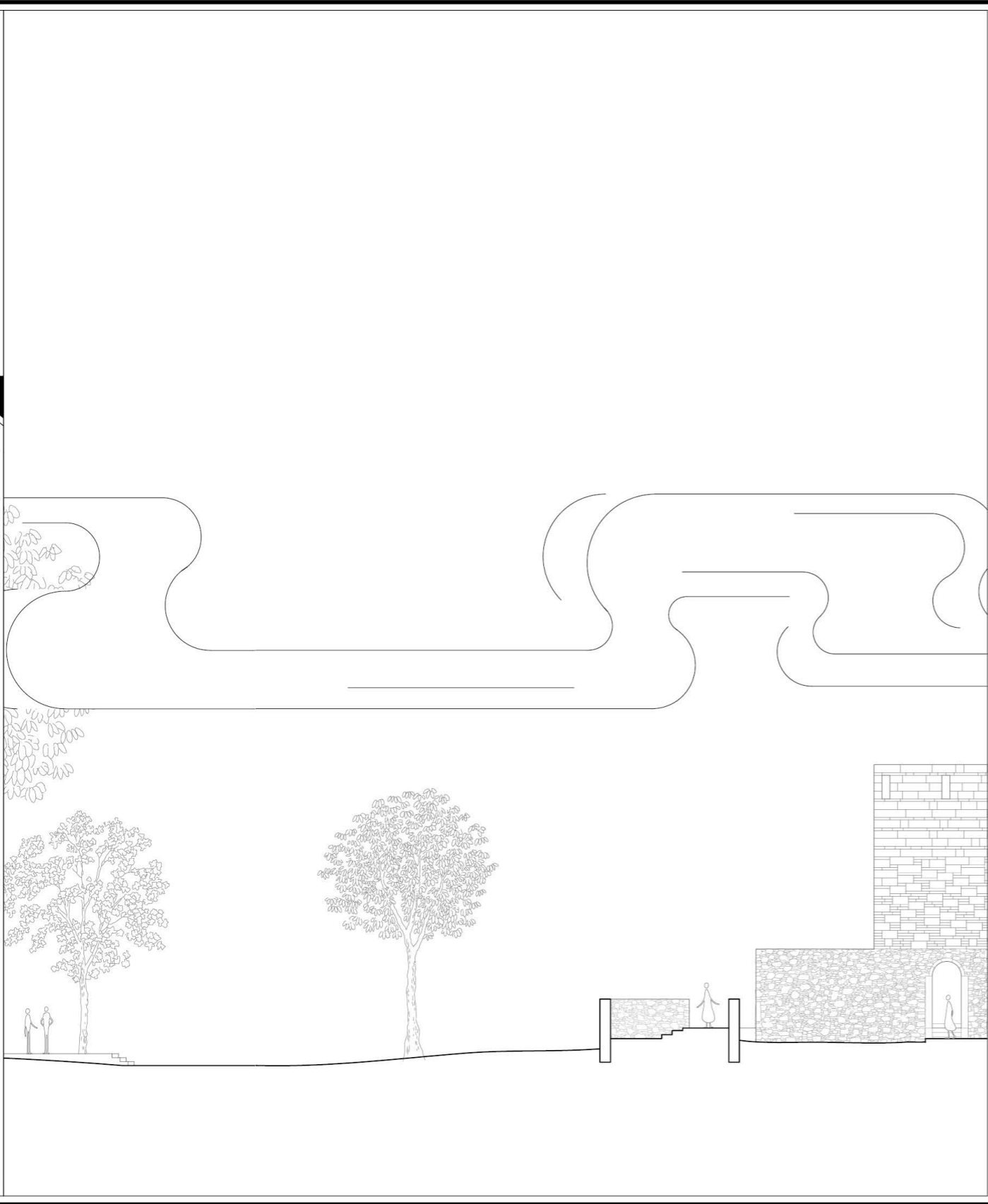


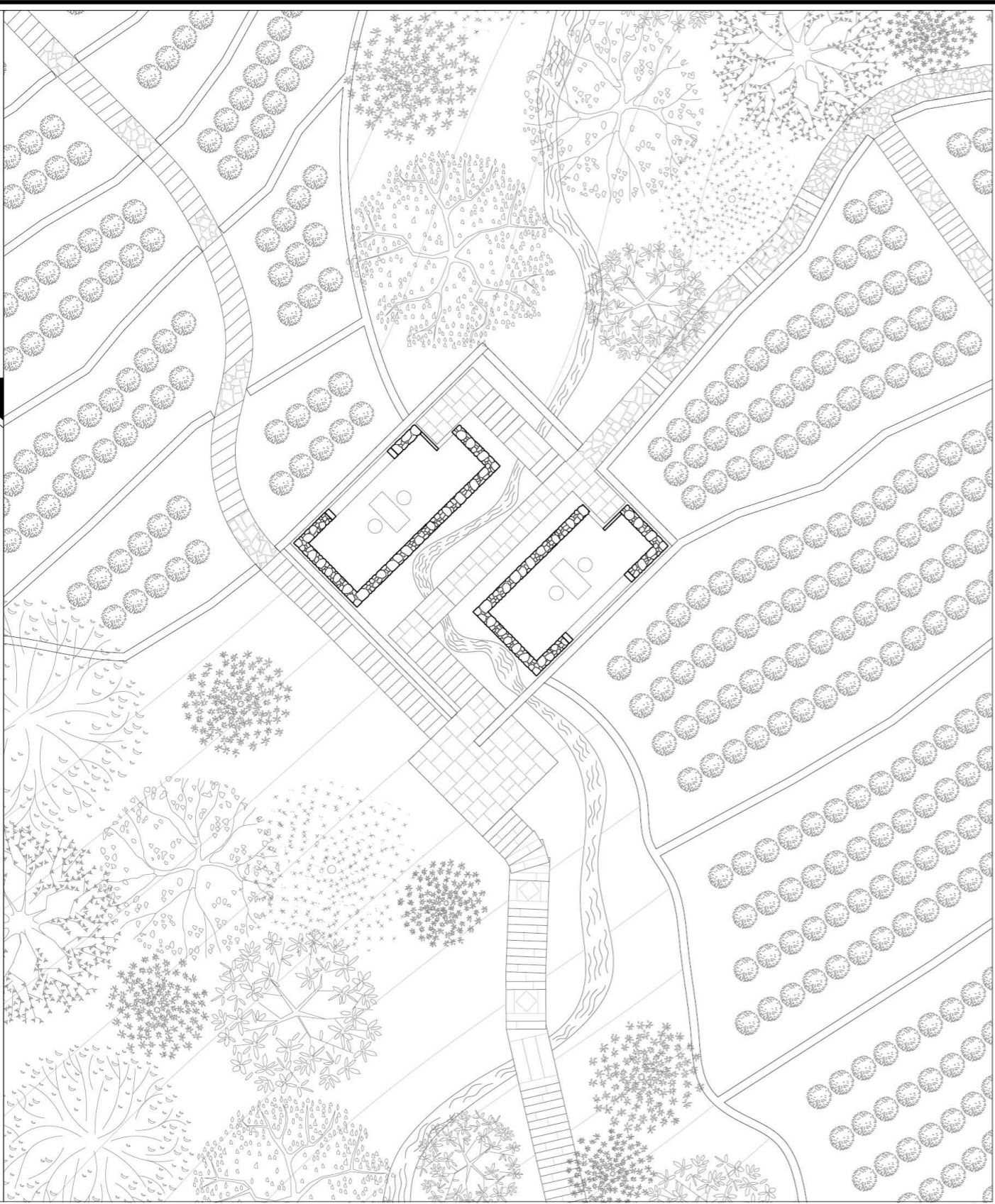
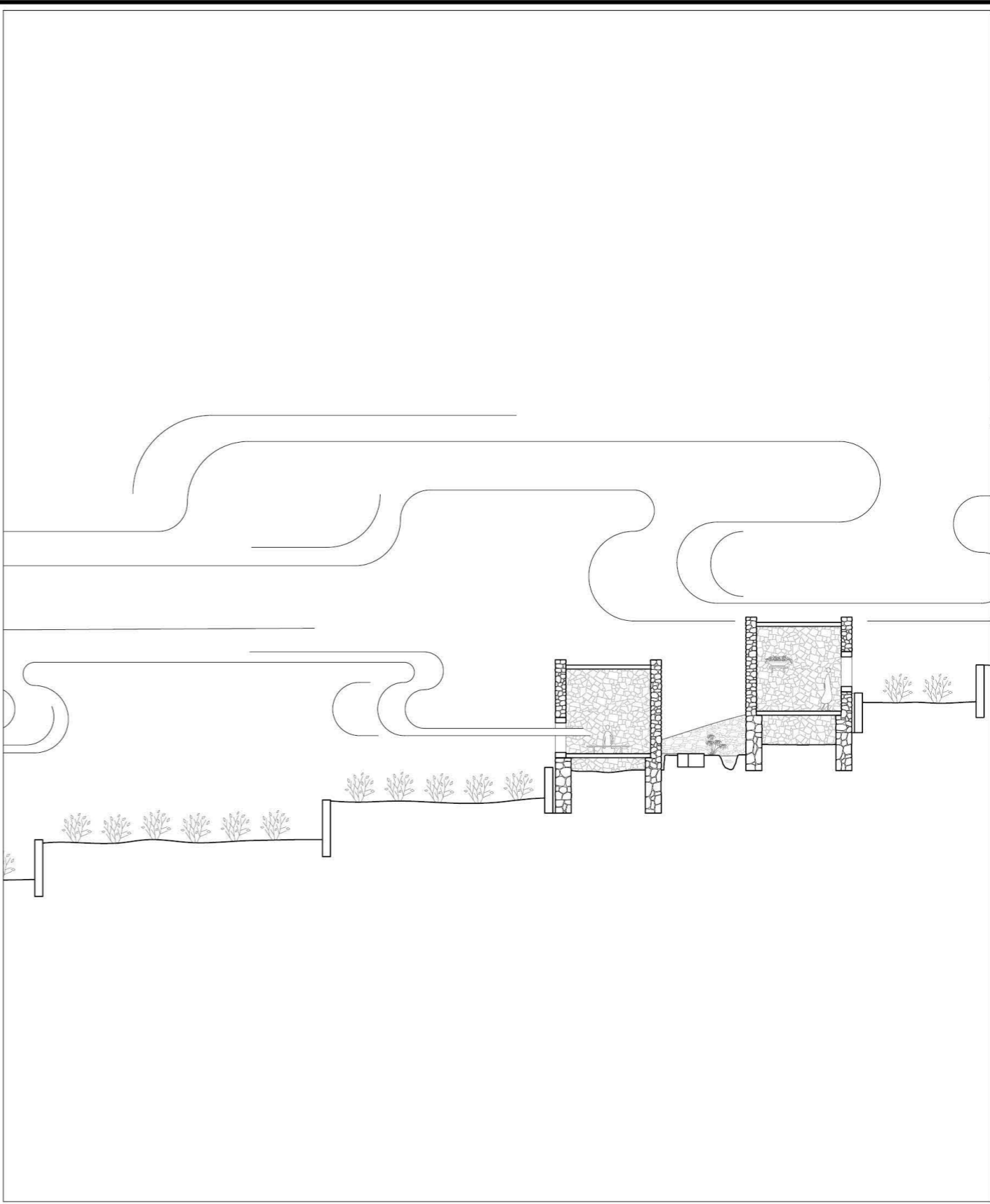


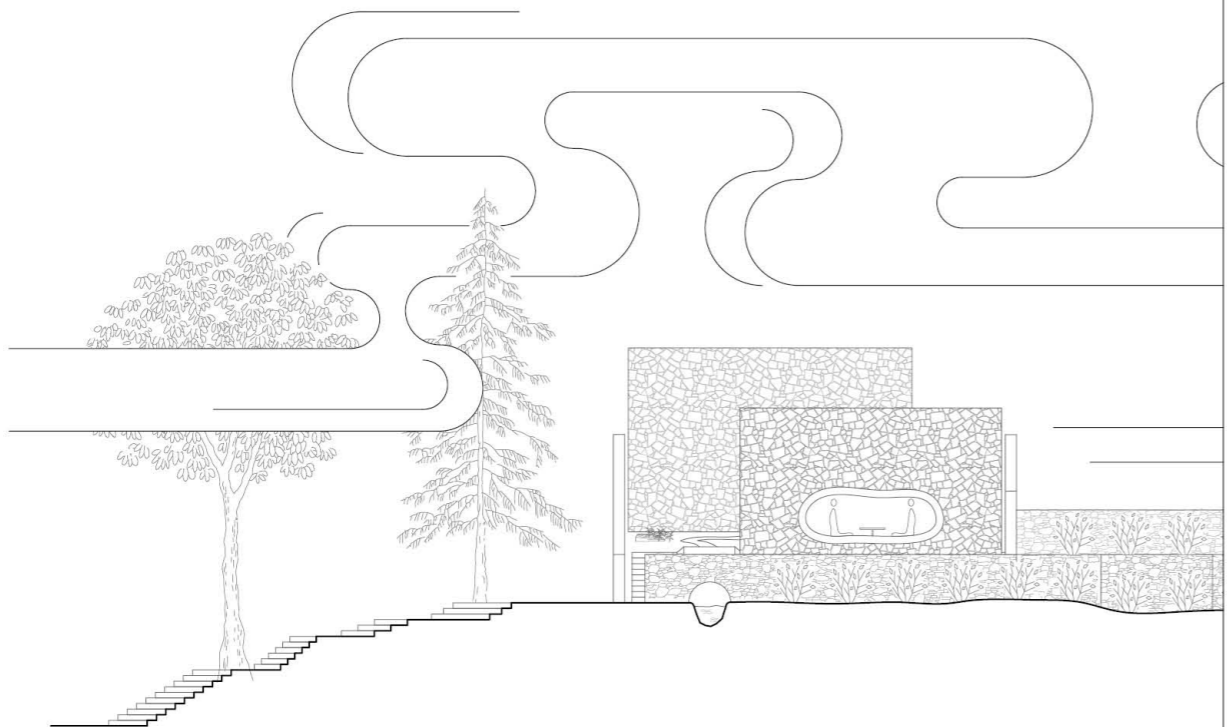
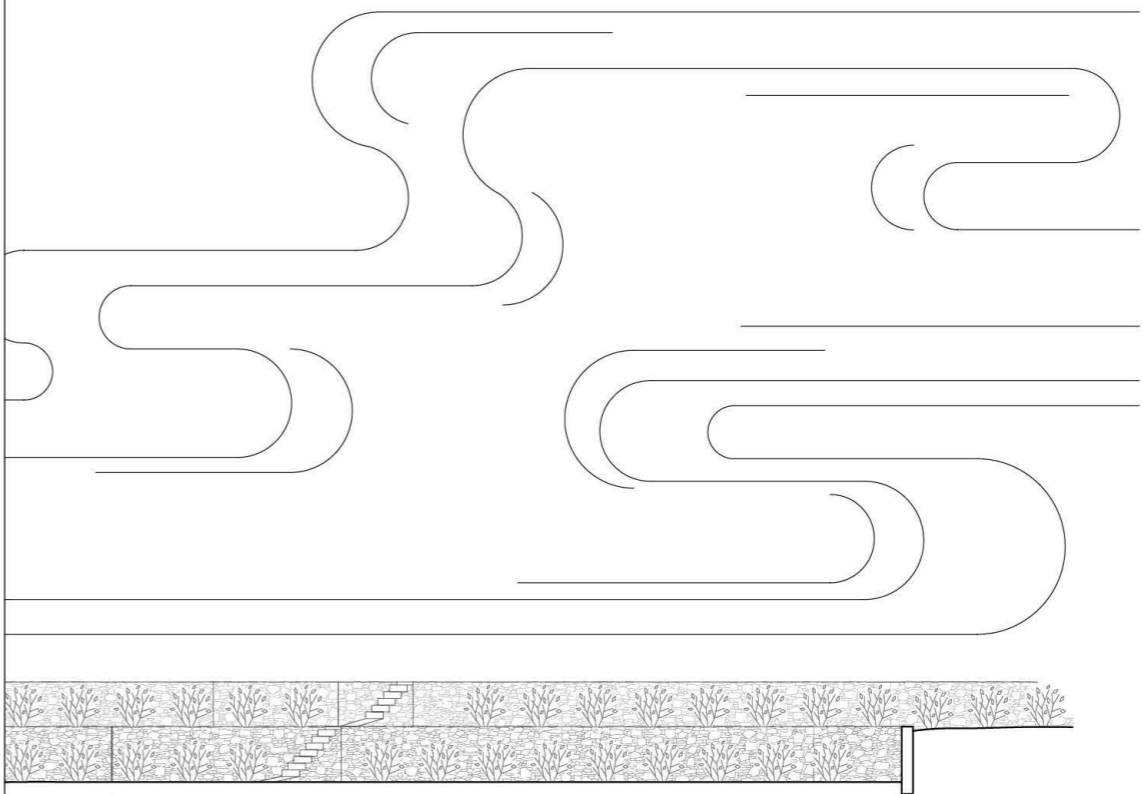




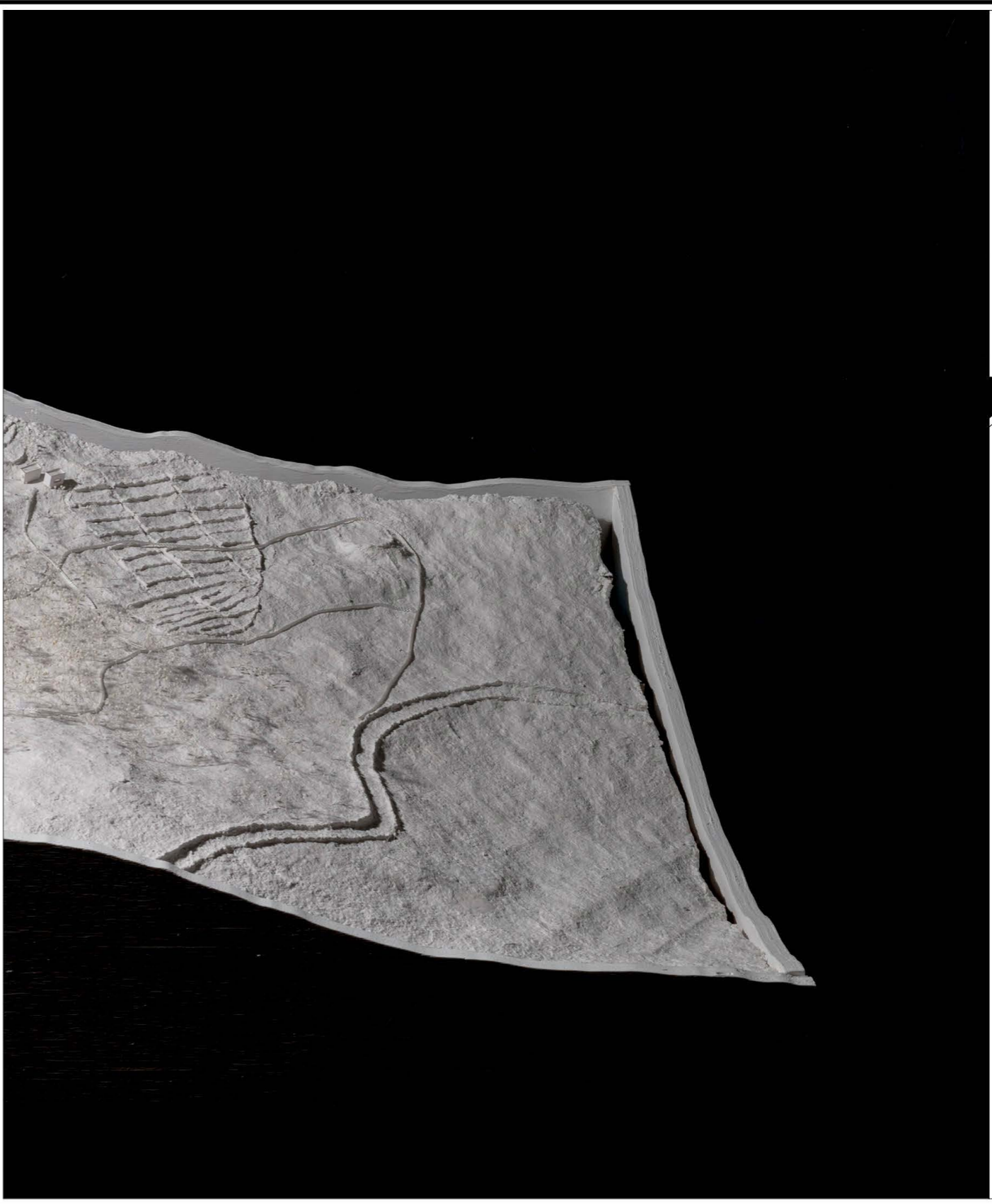


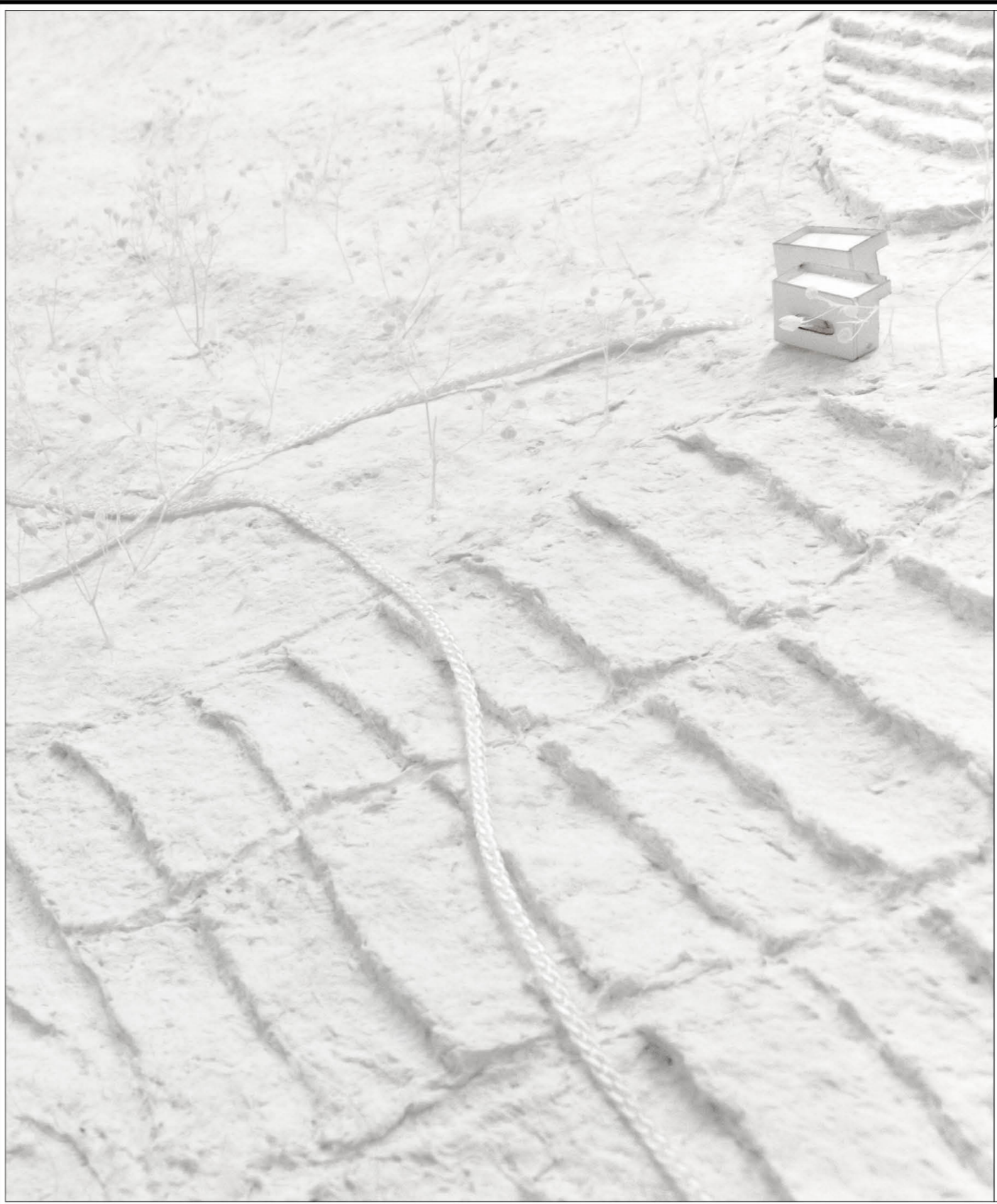


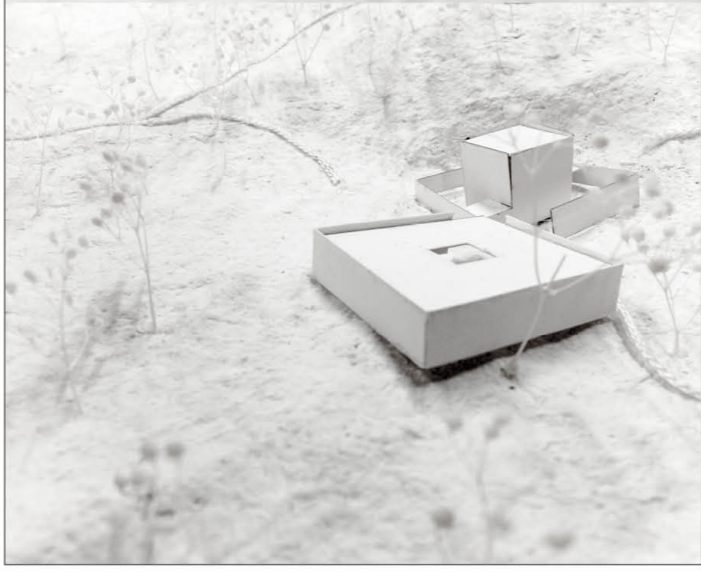
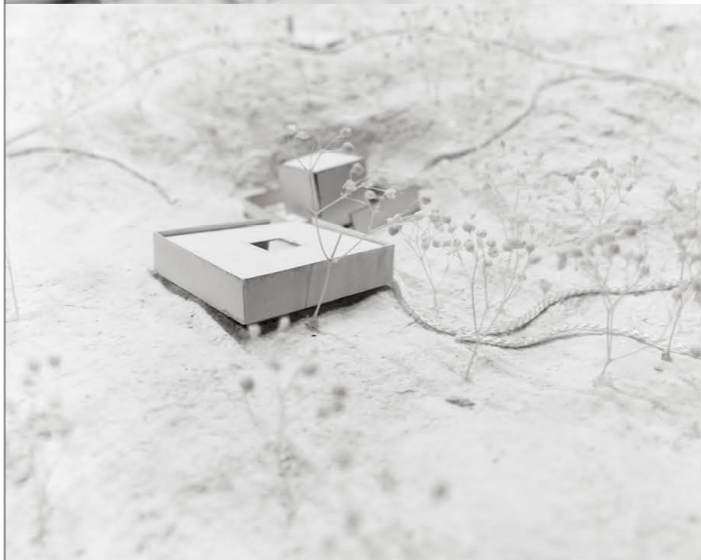
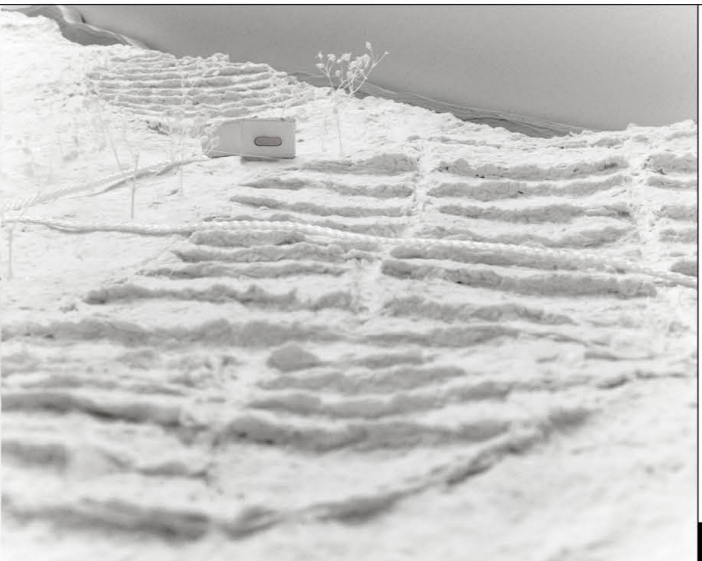
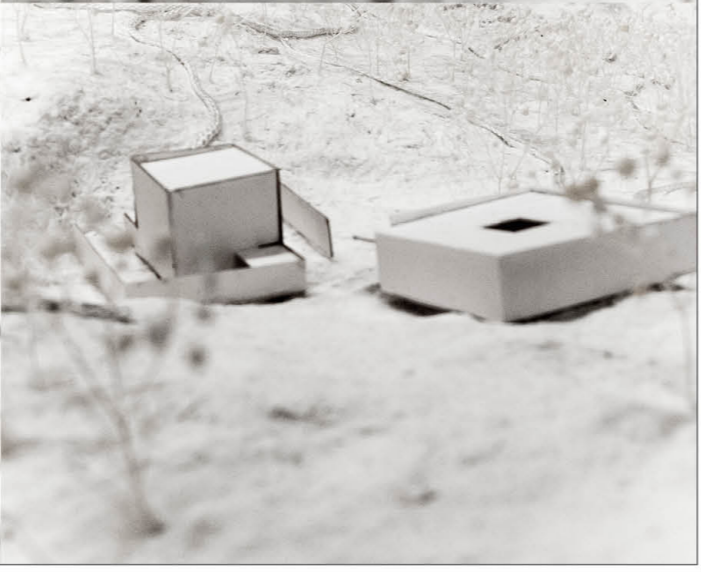
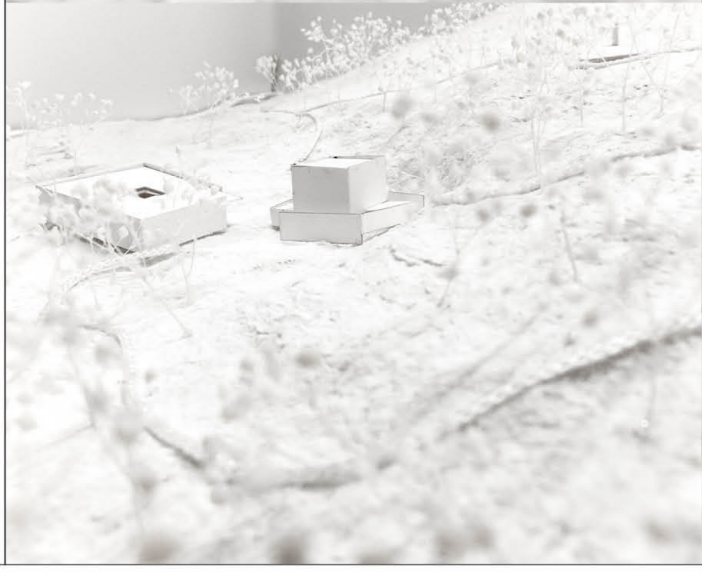


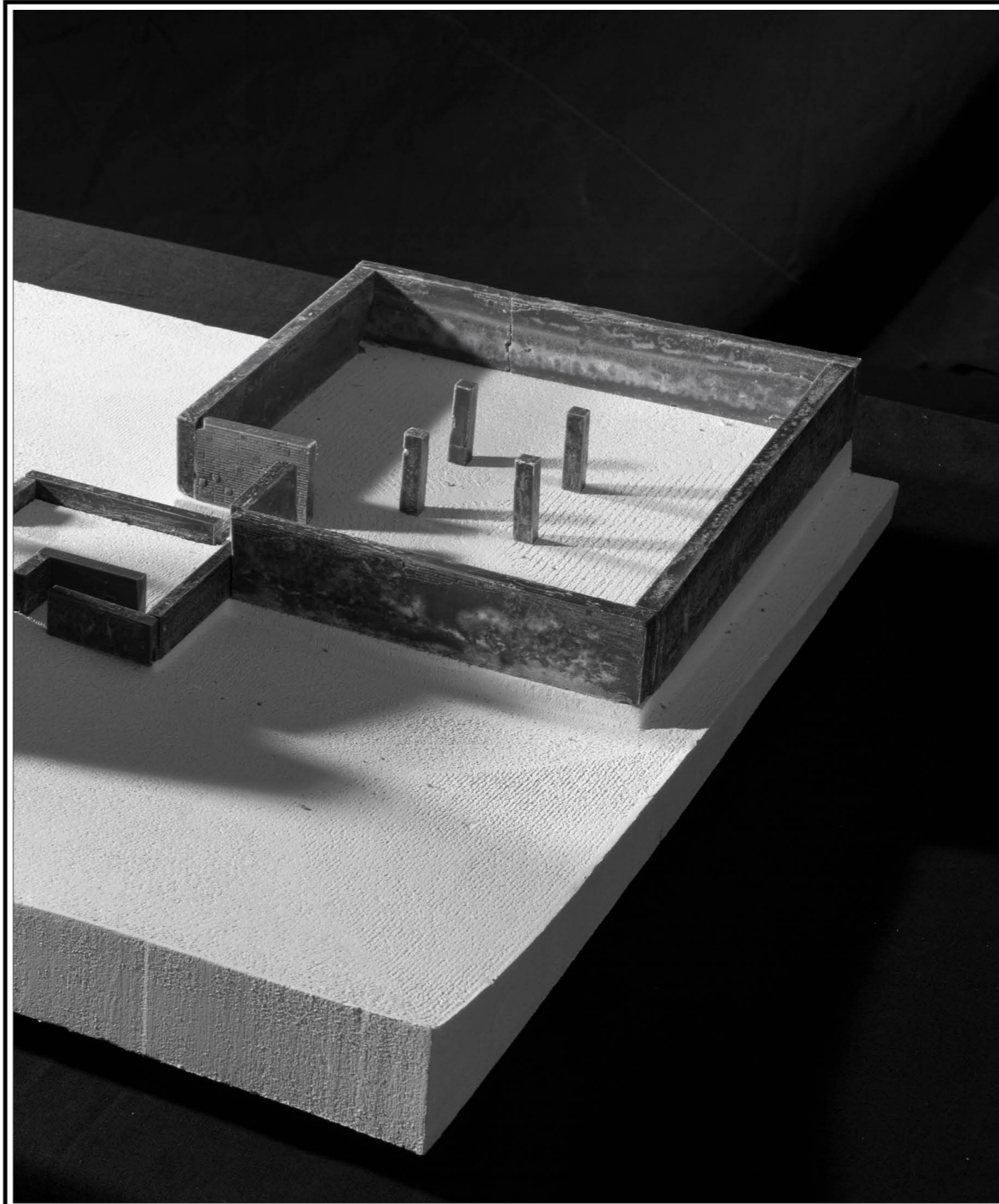
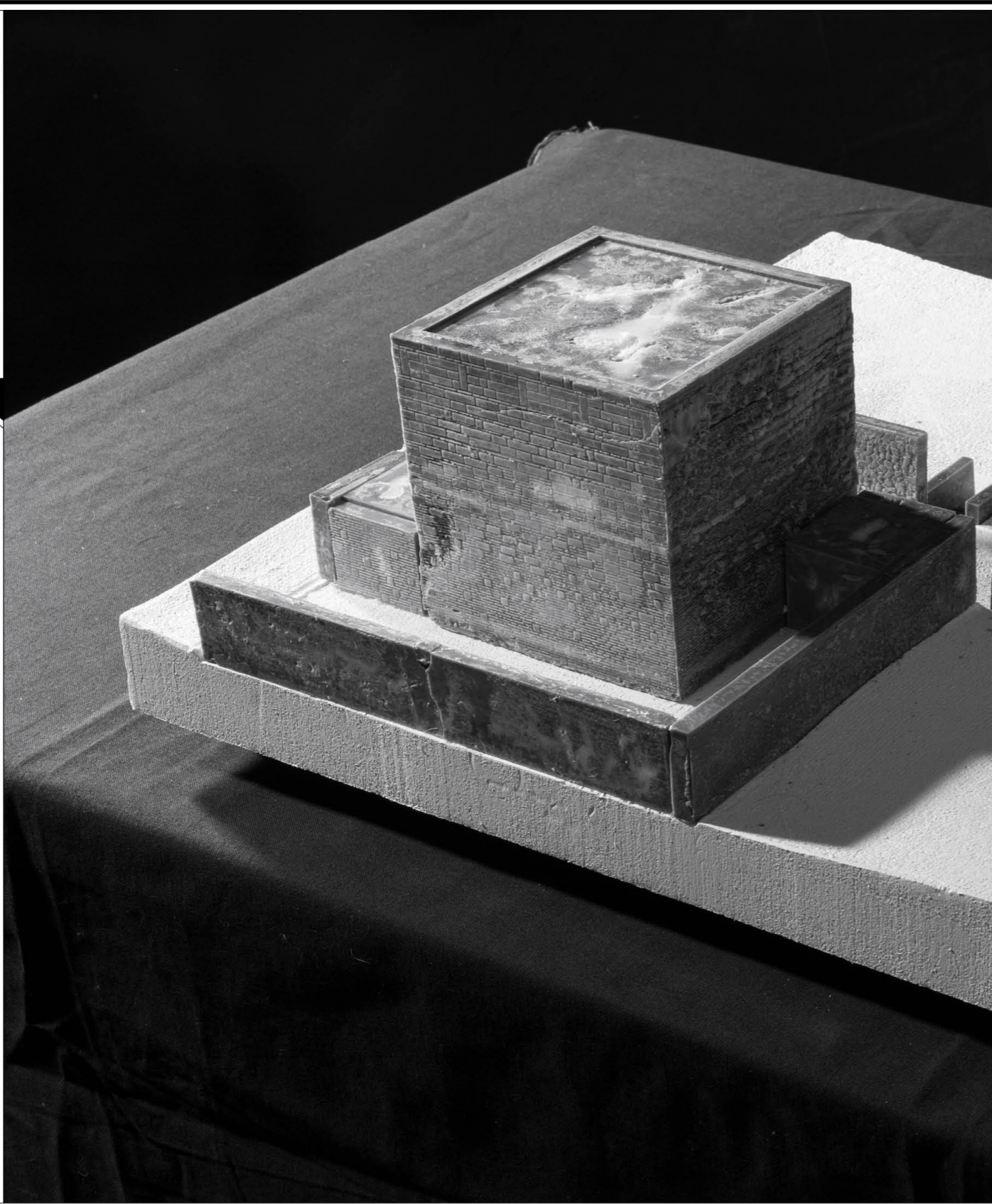


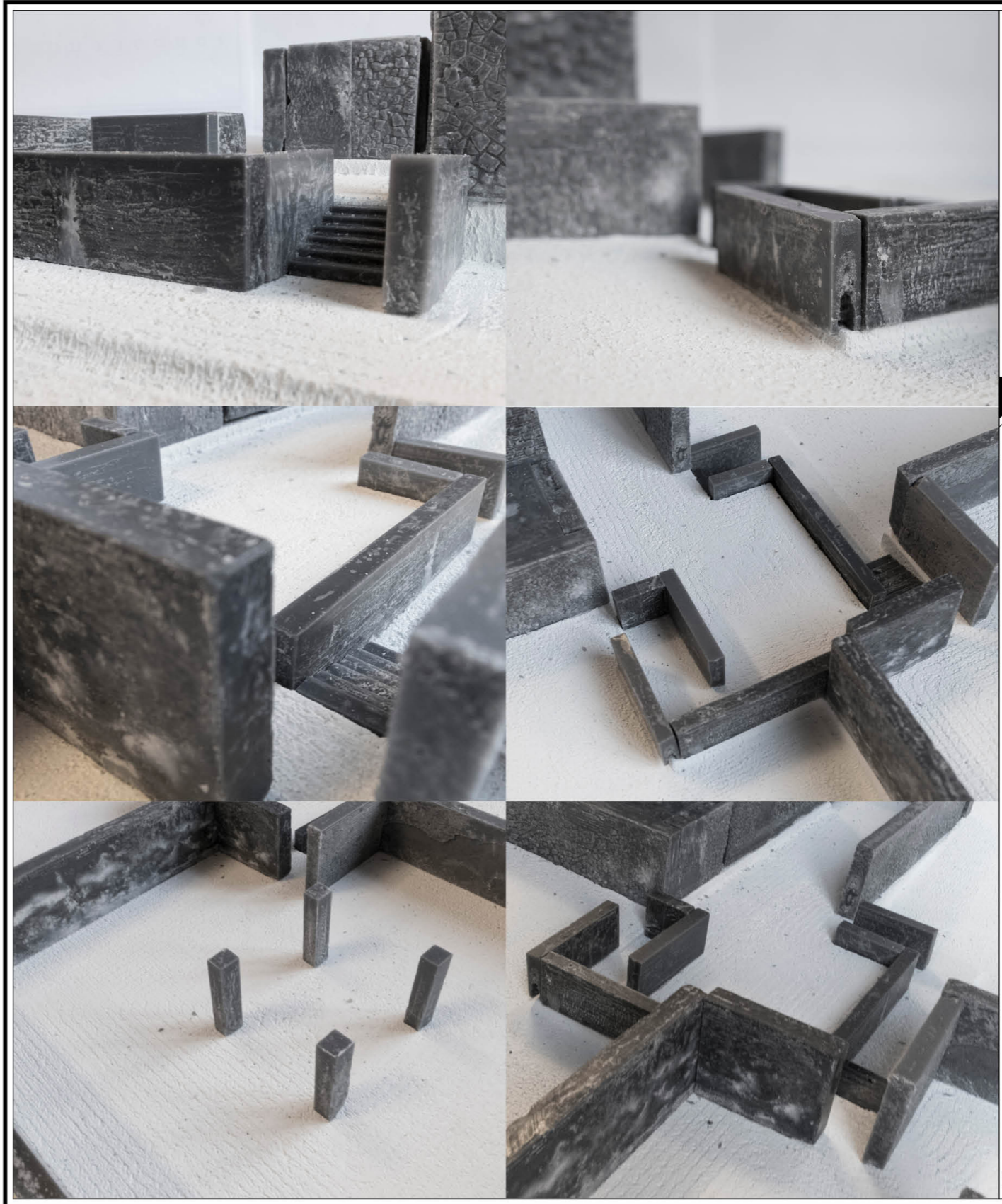
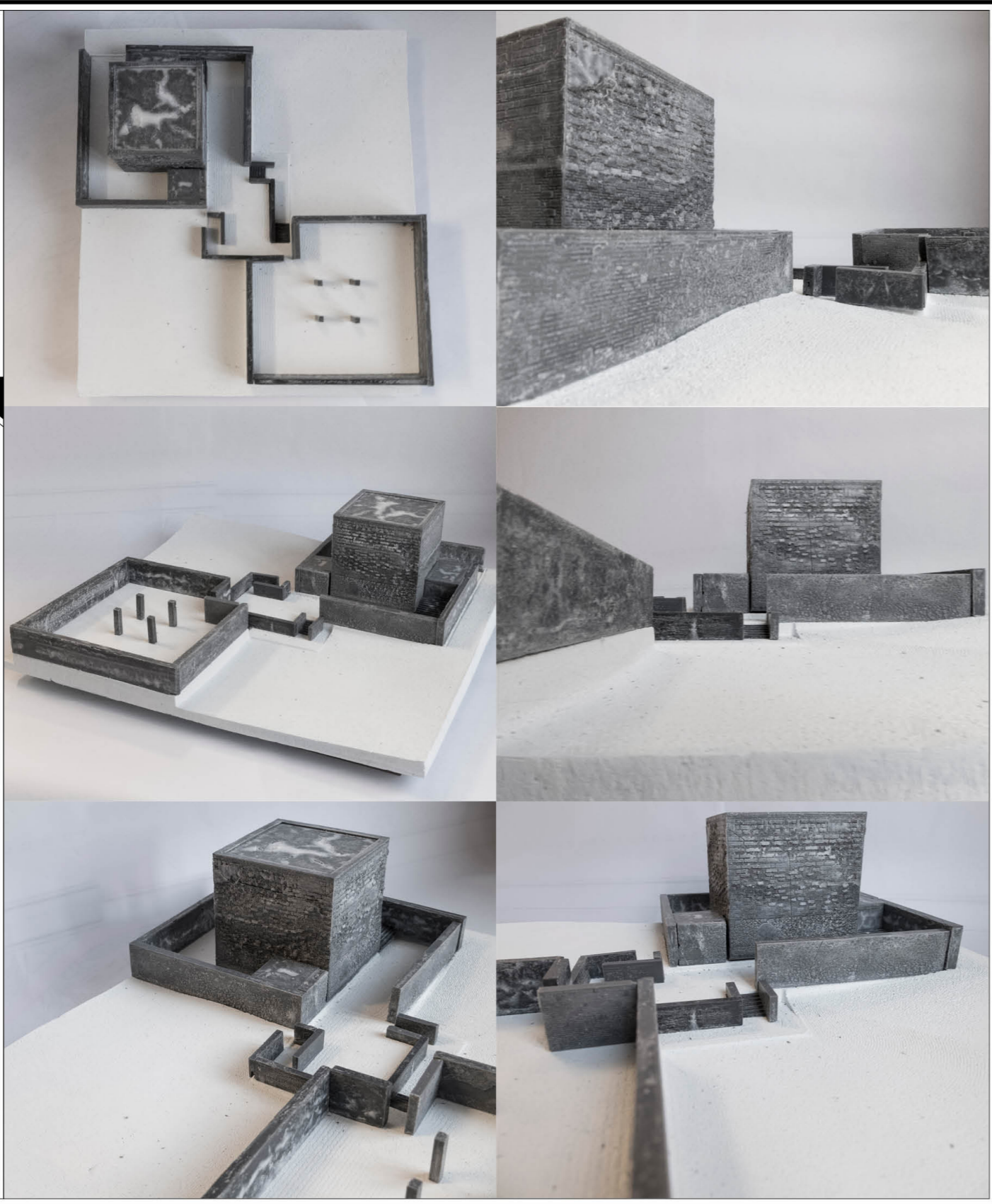






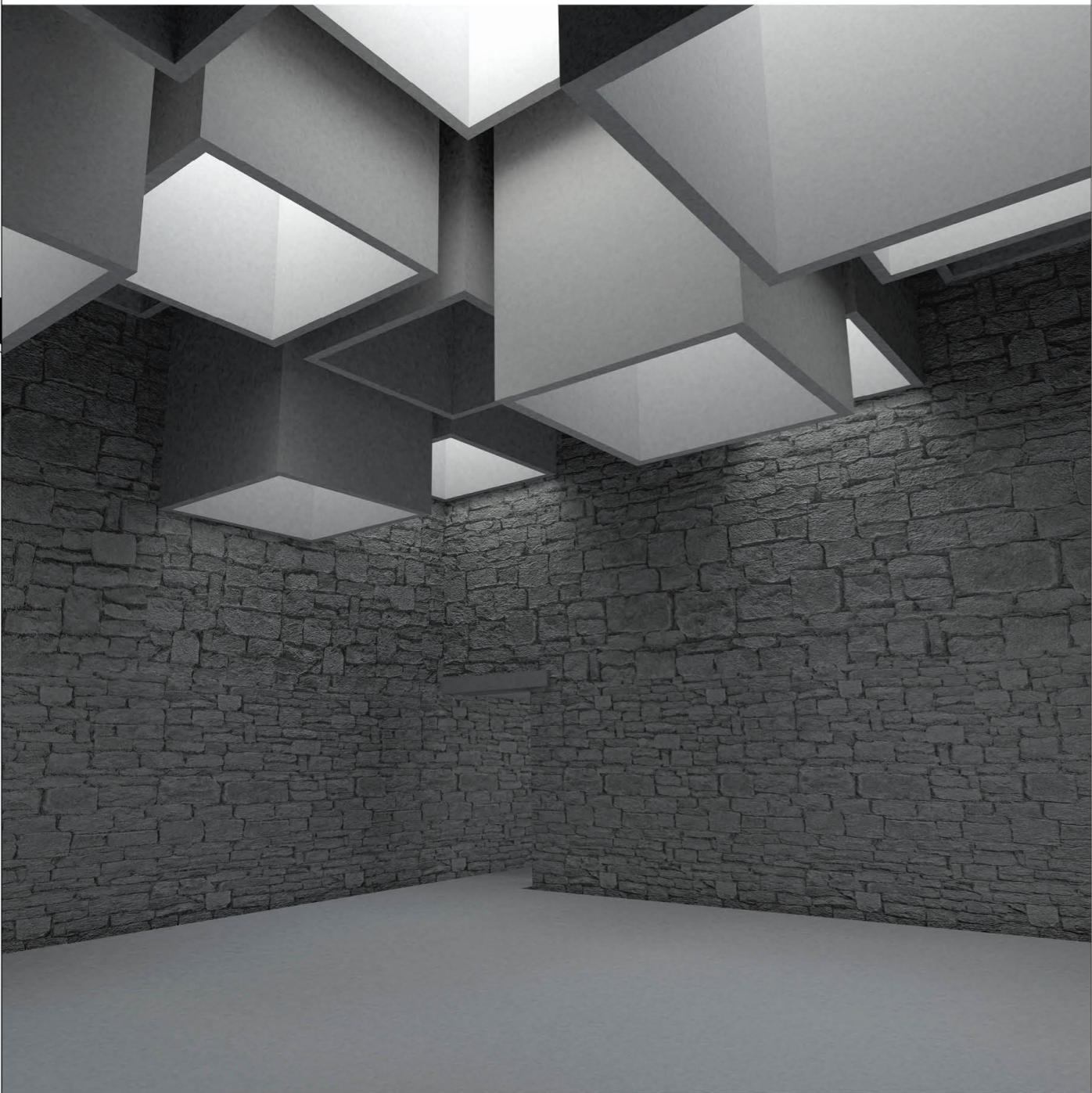














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## Appendix



December 21, 2017  
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