How to Draw a Ghost

A Lobotomy's Tale: Kowloon Walled City

ciudad amurallada de Kowloon
arquitectura y disidencia
lobotomía
laboratorio urbano
narrativa
Kowloon walled city
architecture and dissidence
lobotomy
urban laboratory
narrative

Jiménez Iniesta, David[1];
Peñalver Izaguirre, María de los Ángeles[2]

[1] Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Programa de Doctorado en Comunicación Arquitectónica (DoCA), Madrid, Spain.
Texas A&M University, School of Architecture, Department of Architecture, College Station, United States.
david@estudiobrava.es

[2] Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Programa de Doctorado en Comunicación Arquitectónica (DoCA), Madrid, Spain.
Texas A&M University, School of Architecture, Department of Architecture, College Station, United States.
maria@estudiobrava.es

Historia de una Lobotomía es un proyecto de investigación sobre la extinta Ciudad Amurallada de Kowloon (KWC), que llegó a ser el edificio más densamente poblado del mundo. El proyecto se fundamenta en la reconstrucción de la historia de la KWC; sin embargo, ¿cómo reconstruir algo que ya no existe, especialmente en ausencia de documentos arquitectónicos como planos o secciones, y en un contexto donde nunca se establecieron normas arquitectónicas? La investigación recurre, por tanto, a lo que podríamos llamar "fuentes bastardas": documentales televisivos de Hong Kong, fotografías encontradas en libros e incluso testimonios de antiguos residentes. En este sentido, el trabajo se despliega como una suerte de transcripción etnográfica, explorando cómo la arquitectura puede ser estudiada e imaginada a través de archivos fragmentarios, marginales o no oficiales. El proyecto reivindica esta arquitectura, a menudo descartada en los debates académicos por su supuesta baja calidad, como un modelo de empoderamiento, participación y disidencia, así como un laboratorio urbano que revela nuevas formas de entender la complejidad de la ciudad. A través del concepto de lobotomía como amnesia inducida, el proyecto cuestiona las narrativas históricas hegemónicas que excluyen posibilidades alternativas, buscando en cambio reactivar historias suprimidas. Cualquier acontecimiento histórico estudiado desde el presente implica aceptar como válido un discurso hegemónico que es, inevitablemente, político y basado en la exclusión. Sin embargo, siempre permanecen otras posibilidades, a la espera de ser reactivadas.

En última instancia, *Historia de una Lobotomía* también funciona como un manifiesto. Sitúa el proyecto final de carrera como un ejercicio que debe responder a realidades más amplias de la práctica arquitectónica, yendo más allá de la mera producción de edificios para involucrarse con cuestiones de memoria, narrativa y disidencia.

A Lobotomy's Tale is a research project focused on the extinct Kowloon Walled City (KWC), once the most densely populated enclave in the world. The project is grounded in the reconstruction of KWC's history; yet, how can one reconstruct something that no longer exists, especially in the absence of architectural documents such as plans or sections, and within a context where no architectural rules had ever been established? The research therefore turns to what could be called "bastard sources": television documentaries from Hong Kong, photographs found in books, and even testimonies from former residents. In this sense, the work unfolds as a kind of ethnographic transcription, exploring how architecture can be studied and reimagined through fragmented, marginal, or unofficial archives. The project reclaims this architecture, often dismissed in academic discourse due to its perceived poor quality, as a model of empowerment, participation, and dissidence, as well as an urban laboratory that reveals new ways of understanding the complexity of the city. Framed through the concept of lobotomy as induced amnesia, the project questions hegemonic historical narratives that exclude alternative possibilities, aiming instead to reactivate suppressed stories. Any historical event studied from the present implies accepting a hegemonic discourse as valid - one that is invariably political and grounded in exclusion. Yet, other possibilities always remain, awaiting reactivation.

Ultimately, *A Lobotomy's Tale* also functions as a manifesto. It positions the final degree project as an exercise that must respond to broader realities of architectural practice, moving beyond the mere production of buildings to engage with questions of memory, narrative, and dissent.

BACKGROUND

The Kowloon Walled City (KWC), located in Hong Kong, was the most densely populated urban enclave in history. Although no official census was ever conducted, it is estimated that it housed around 32,000 inhabitants within an area of barely 2.6 hectares. Originally a military fortress, over time it transformed into a chaotic complex of residential and commercial buildings informally stacked together, with no urban planning or state supervision. Its narrow alleys, labyrinthine passages, and overlapping structures sheltered tens of thousands of people in unsanitary conditions, but also within a high degree of self-management and internal community life. The city was demolished in 1994, yet it remains an icon of extreme urban density, informality, and architectural resilience.

This image of the city as a prototype of self-organization contrasts with the dark legend that has accompanied it: a territory marked by unsanitary conditions and illegal businesses such as drugs, gambling, or prostitution, which became a recurring setting in films and manga over the past decades. These productions helped consolidate the myth of the KWC as a dark and marginal space. Titles such as Brothers from the Walled City (1982), Crime Story (1993), Bloodsport (1988), Long Arm of the Law (1984), or Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In (2024) reinforced this narrative, depicting its alleys as scenes of violence and secrecy.

When deciding to write this article based in the Master's dissertation at Alicante University, *A Lobotomy's Tale*, we wondered what sense it made to discuss this architectural object thirty years after its demolition and to what extent this paper could introduce aspects that had not already been discussed about the project in other media.[1]

We used the term lobotomy in the project's title as a synonym for amnesia, as an approach to a history that has been silenced.

Researching the KWC involved an exercise of reconstruction based on scattered traces and fragments.

Throughout the development of this research, we constantly sought to move away from the Hollywood narrative that turned the city into an exotic backdrop for marginality, as well as from the romanticization of the slum as a symbol of resistance. Our interest lies instead in thinking of the KWC from its real complexity: a space that was at once precarious and resilient, chaotic and communal, whose memory needs no exaggeration to be fascinating.

THREE NOTIONS OF RE-MEDIATION.

At the beginning of this research a question arises: what is the ultimate goal of this exercise? The mummification of this space? Its architecturization? We soon realized that it made no sense to offer a remedy to the problem, since from a pragmatic point of view the problem no longer existed. The KWC had been demolished more than twenty years ago.[2]

As Andre Jaque says, solutions to problems only appear through simplification and reductionism (Jaque, 2013). To remediate does not necessarily mean to solve a problem or restore a previous state, but rather to act within a conflicting condition, to mediate between forces, damage, or deficiencies, and to produce a form of coexistence or temporary adjustment. To remediate is to engage in an intermediate practice, situated between repair and invention, where the emphasis is not on reaching a definitive solution but on enabling processes of care, negotiation, or adaptation within a complex context.

Remediation can also be understood in a media sense: as the exploration of alternative formats through which architecture can be communicated. These may include collections of projects, investigations, books, exhibitions, or videos. In essence, this approach defines a multimedia architecture, one that extends architectural

practice beyond the physical building, highlighting the diverse roles and profiles of contemporary architects and their work outside canonical frameworks. Crucially, this perspective challenges conventional hierarchies in architectural representation. Each format becomes a legitimate medium for experimentation, provocation, and critical inquiry.

A BASTARD BIBLIOGRAPHY[3]

Approaching the study of an architecture such as the KWC presents an evident difficulty. It is a place that no longer exists and whose material production lacked official technical records. No plans or administrative files accompany its buildings, since they were erected informally. In addition, the available documentation is fragmentary and, in many cases, written in Chinese, a language we do not understand, which makes the collection and analysis of primary sources a complex task. In this process, we also acknowledge that much of the available information comes from an orientalist fascination that tends to exoticize the place, making it difficult to clearly discern where reality ends and myth begins.

However, there are valuable documents that allow access to everyday life within the city. Among them, the book *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* by photographer Greg Girard and journalist Ian Lambot stands out. Also relevant is the 1988 documentary The Walled City directed by Hugo Portisch, as well as the episode of Hong Kong Connection – Kowloon Walled City by the RTHK aired on 1979 that shows the daily life of its residents.

These materials, using different languages and perspectives, focus on the daily experiences of the inhabitants and reveal a sense of normality that contrasts with the usual apocalyptic portrayals. Within their pages and frames, one can find dentists, doctors, restaurants and small businesses, schools, daycare centers, and temples, showing the

complex social and economic fabric that sustained the city beyond its dark clichés. Moreover, these descriptions are not only graphic but also accompanied by the testimonies of the users themselves.

Another remarkable reference is the extraordinary section found in The Big Map of Kowloon. The work of these Japanese researchers is possibly the first attempt to approach the KWC from an architectural perspective, as they produce a large sectional drawing that simultaneously reveals the architecture and the daily lives of its inhabitants.

A Lobotomy's Tale began with a mapping of controversies.[4] This archaeological exercise consisted of reconstructing history through fragments. Each image, text, and document became part of a digital archive that, instead of delegitimizing non-academic sources, placed them on the same level. Latour's Mapping of Controversies is characterized by recognizing the complexity of

conflicts beyond simple opposing positions. Rarely do all agents act under equal conditions, and this mapping seeks to validate every discourse. Only by observing a problem from the greatest number of viewpoints can we reach something resembling objectivity, if such a thing is possible.

This mapping revealed how the conflict surrounding the KWC transcended the limits of the built environment. The architecture and the situation of its inhabitants reflected a geopolitical tension between China and the United Kingdom but are also a broader social issue regarding housing that occurred in other parts of Hong Kong.

AN ARCHITECTURE OF AGREEMENTS

In 1999, seven years after the eviction and demolition of the KWC, *City of Darkness* by Ian Lambot and Greg Girard was published, a collection of photographs and

testimonies about the extinct city. In Lambot and Girard's book, the architect Peter Popham stated that *"The Walled City became that rarest of things, a working model of the anarchist society. Inevitably, it bred all the vices that the enemies of anarchism denounce." (Popham, 1993,10)*

On the other hand, In March 16th 2013, The South China Morning Post published an infographic by the Spanish illustrator Adolfo Arranz commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the demolition of the Walled City, titled *City of Anarchy*.

Such a casual use of the term anarchy, however, fundamentally oversimplifies the complexities of the KWC and, more importantly, distorts a far richer and more rigorous philosophical and political tradition. Labeling KWC as an "anarchist society" reduces the term to a shorthand for disorder or lawlessness, ignoring the intellectual lineage of anarchism as a theory of self-organization, collective responsibility, and non-hierarchical
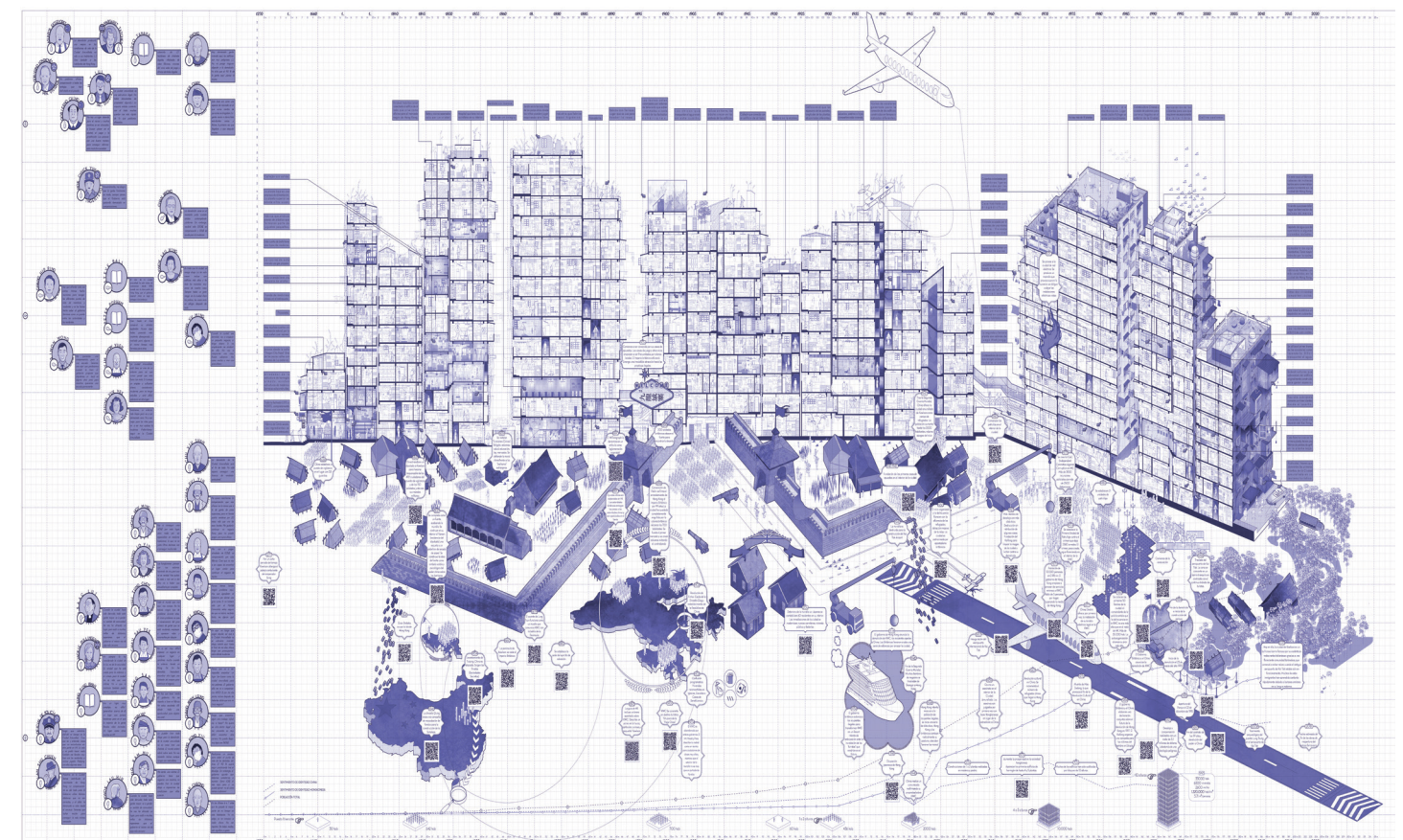

Fig.1 - Controversy Mapping. The mapping simultaneously presents a timeline showing the evolution of the controversy, a sectional view of the complex, the opinions of the involved stakeholders, and a graph of demographic change (Authors, Universidad de Alicante, 2014).

social structures. In this sense, the invocation of anarchy operates less as an analytical category than as a sensationalist trope - one that obscures far more than it reveals about the lived realities, spatial negotiations, and informal governance that sustained the KWC.

From a strictly disciplinary perspective, the architecture of this place lacks any apparent interest. As Atelier Bow Wow describes, these are not-good buildings (da-me, or "not-good" architecture): ugly, architect-less constructions whose value lies in their immediacy and pragmatism. They are architectures that cannot be validated from an academic standpoint. *"The buildings that attracted us were those that prioritized a recalcitrant honesty in response to their environment and to programmatic demands without insisting on architectural form or aesthetics"* (Bow-Wow, 2001, 9).

This idea of an architecture without architects is not something suddenly "invented" or discovered by Atelier Bow-Wow. Rather, it belongs to a longer disciplinary lineage that extends from Bernard Rudofsky's 1964 exhibition *Architecture Without Architects* to the systematic attention paid by Venturi and Scott Brown to commercial strips, vernacular environments, and the ordinary fabric of the city. Many of these movements have been revisited recently, for example in the architecture compendium published by Enrique Walker, *The Ordinary*:

"Objects that the architectural discipline proclaims as outside its territory, and against which it defines its limits (...) that architecture which Architecture itself excludes." (Walker, 2010, 7).

What distinguishes Bow-Wow's contribution is not merely an appreciation for these anonymous or "not-good" buildings, but the way they are read as urban artefacts, inseparable from the specific ecologies - social, spatial, and regulatory - in which they emerge. Their value lies less in their architectural qualities per se than in the relational systems they recognize.

We believe this is precisely the value of the KWC: a gigantic, heterogeneous mass that condenses many of Hong Kong's structural conditions and contradictions. Its extreme mixed-use, its radical hyperdensity, its near-total absence of a conventional ground plane, and the precarious infrastructures that sustain it all operate as an intensified mirror of the city surrounding it. In this sense, KWC is not simply an anomaly or an exception, but a hyper-legible distillation of the urban logics that define Hong Kong itself.

It is from perspectives such as Atelier Bow-Wow's Behaviorology that this urban complex begins to gain interest for us. Architecture is understood not so much as what is built, but as everything that happens through it. It is an architecture of pacts, where neighbors articulate complex forms of sharing common spaces, access to energy, water, or telecommunications. Like the staircase that Georges Perec describes in *Species of Spaces*:

"We don't think much about staircases. The most beautiful part of old houses used to be the staircases. And they are the ugliest, the coldest, the most hostile, the most miserly elements of buildings today. We should learn to live much more in staircases. But how?" (Perec, 1999, 67).

A place where almost nothing happens, that belongs to everyone and no one, here becomes a focal point of activity and not merely a space of transition. The private boundaries of dwellings are blurred, and businesses occupy circulation areas. There is a fuzzy logic in the use of space.[5]

With these axonometric drawings, we identified associations and political institutions created by the residents, but also the agreements that emerged from daily life: the unwritten rules of construction, the technologies that sustained these arrangements, and the deals connected to them. In short, this is an architecture that deeply reflects citizen participation in its construction.

If one must speak about the architecture of this building in terms of detail, it is what happens inside, rather than its materiality, that becomes truly interesting. That exercise of bricolage or ready-made was, in the end, a crystallization of those pacts that dismantled the idea of Kowloon as an anarchic space. The city's supposed anarchy was, in reality, only visual, distorting a much deeper philosophical and political current.

THE DETAIL – ZOOMING VS PANNING

The traditional understanding of architectural detail, both in academia and in canonical practice, has been based on a zooming logic: an operation that increases resolution over a fragment of the project, isolating it from the whole in order to examine it with greater technical precision. However, this hierarchical conception of detail as a mere act of focusing, proves insufficient for thinking about the relational complexity of contemporary architecture. Against this perspective, we propose to understand detail also as an act of panning, of lateral displacement and connection, capable of establishing dialogues among elements that do not share scale, system, or material nature. The detail therefore ceases to be only a question of constructive precision and becomes an instrument of thought that links, articulates, and translates between different dimensions of the project. In the model space of digital drawing, this operation becomes evident. The continuous movement between zooming and panning not only allows one to navigate through the project but also to think of its structure as a network of active relationships, where each part exists in relation to the others.

An example of this understanding of relational networks can be seen in the water system of the Kowloon Walled City. With only eight standpipes serving the entire community, these points of access to water naturally became spaces of social interaction among
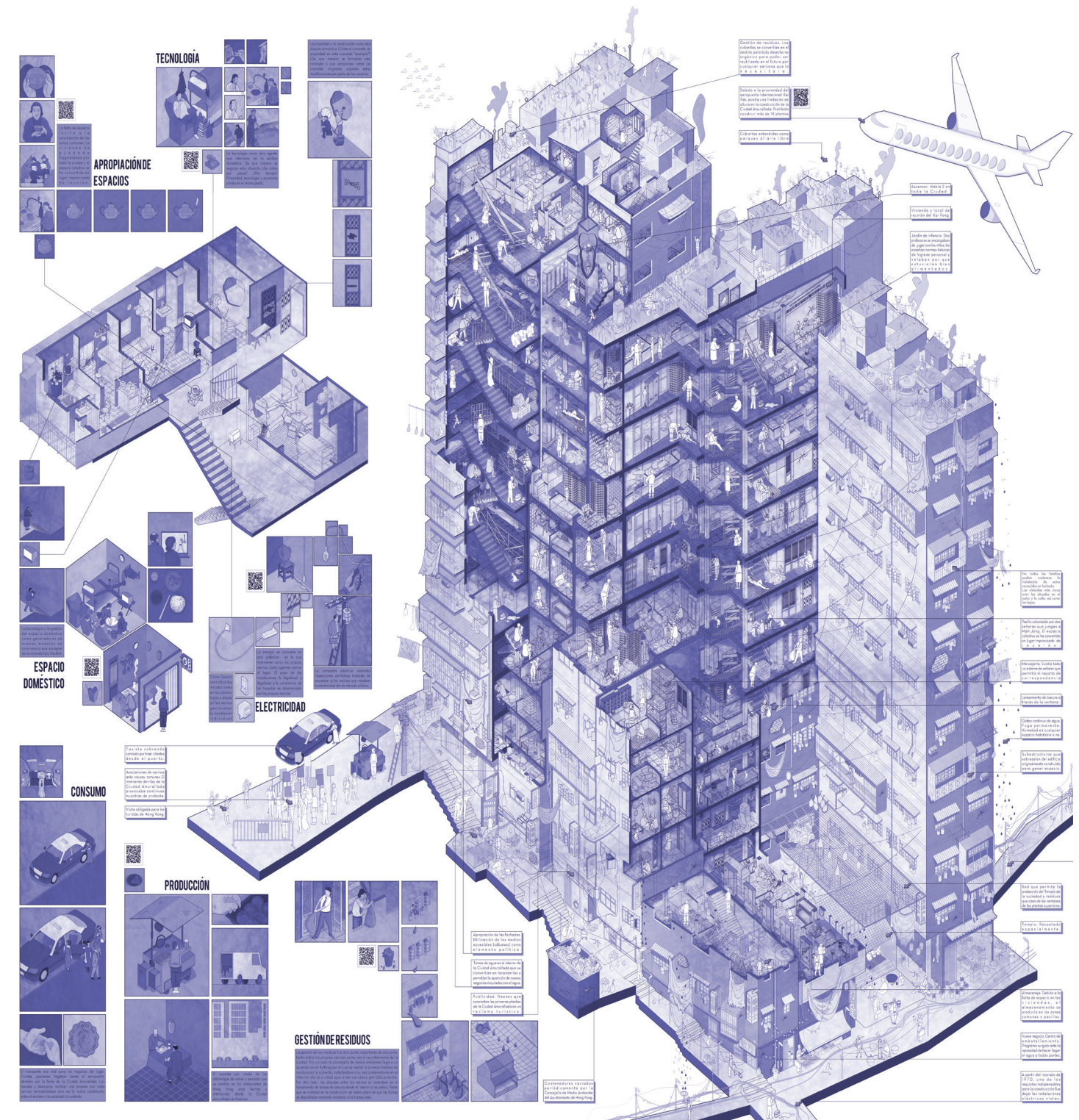
90

HOW TO DRAW A GHOST - JIMÉNEZ INIESTA, D.; PEÑALVER IZAGUIRRE, M.A.

#10 IN DETAIL   UOU scientific journal   91
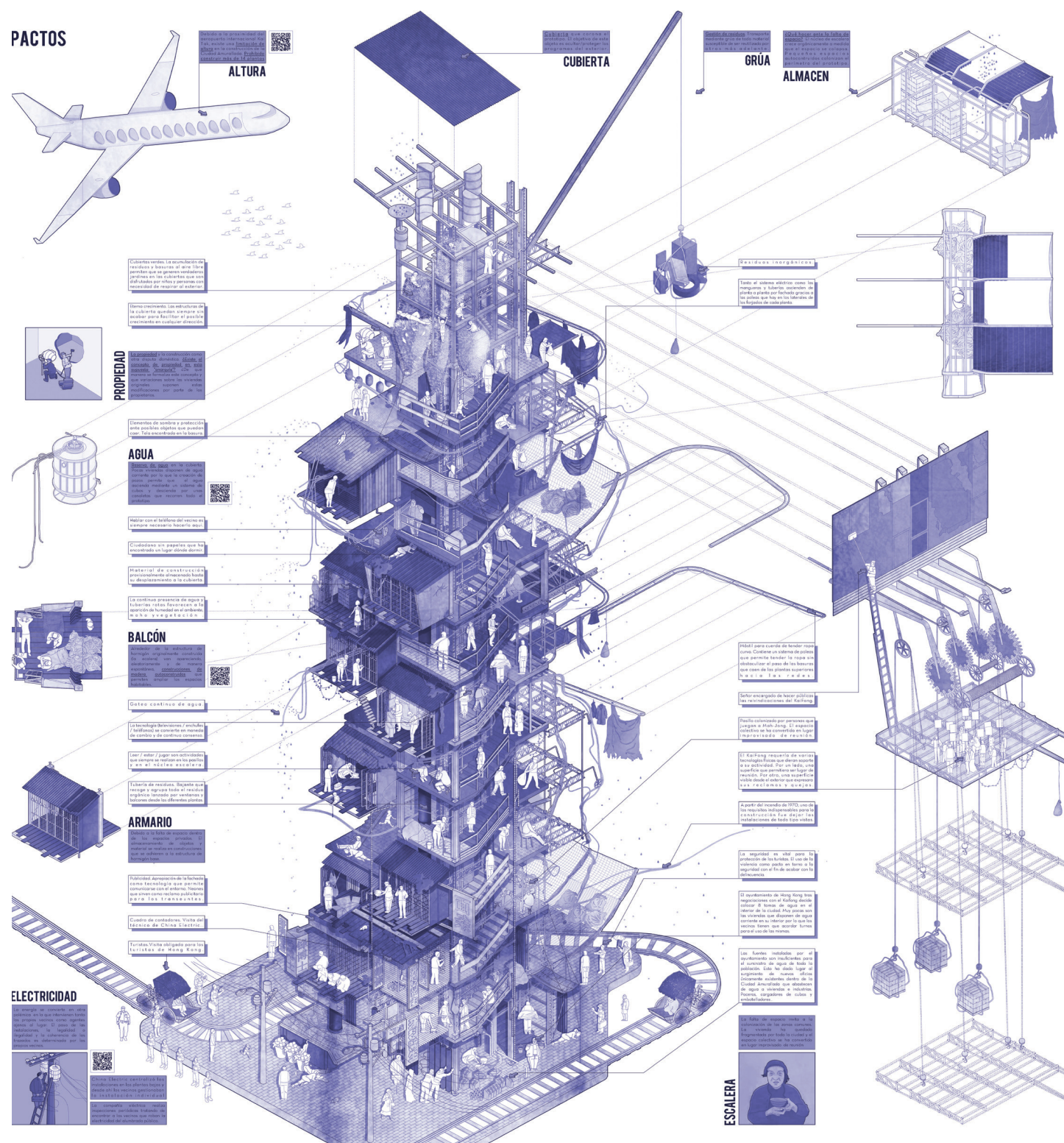
neighbors - a place to fetch water, exchange news, or even share a cup of tea. Beyond their functional role, pipes, cable trays, hoses, and stacks of water containers began to play a fundamental role in shaping everyday spatial life, mediating both private and communal uses. This illustrates the principle of the part standing in for the whole: small infrastructural elements, when observed closely, reveal and structure the complex network of relationships that sustains the city's life.

A Lobotomy's Tale drawings are strongly inspired by three references: *Building Stories* by Chris Ware, *Graphic Anatomy* by Atelier Bow Wow, and the maps of Alexander von Humboldt. The first two, beyond their graphic similarities, are fundamental in this way of understanding architecture because they place the users, life itself, at least on the same level as the buildings, as Bow-Wow describes:

"They are drawings with an astonishing level of detail, where the diversity of the objects being studied becomes evident. The ability to distinguish each element within an illustration is proof that it has been observed, and at the same time proof that these objects guide the human gaze. Within a single drawing coexist the composition of rooms and components, the surrounding exterior environments, actions and locations, and the relationships between objects. This creates the appearance of multiple intentions full of contradictions and encounters, organically connected through specific architectural elements, and it produces unexpected phenomena of light and daily life in response to the physical constraints of each individual house. Without disregarding the places and people that form the initial conditions of each dwelling, these situations embody what could be called a practice of living space. Architecture that opens its eyes and ears to this diversity of spatial practices, encouraging and supporting them, constitutes the rediscovery of architecture itself" (Bow-Wow,2007, 3).

At the same time, Alexander von Humboldt's drawings represent natural, geographic, and climatic phenomena simultaneously within the same plane, establishing dialogues among elements at multiple scales. In all three cases, drawing not only records but connects. It makes visible the network of relationships between things that are usually observed separately. In the contemporary context, the digital drawing space amplifies this capacity even further. It invites us to think of infinite scale, where the site plan, the floor plan, the section, the wall detail, the furniture, or even the screw coexists within the same file, within the same expanded surface, where tags convey not only constructive materials and their properties but also the relationships among them. Everything is connected, everything forms part of the same graphic thought, inviting us to consider problems as a multi-scalar web.

CONCLUSIONS

Any historical event, when studied from the present, implies accepting a hegemonic discourse as valid, which is inevitably political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been suppressed and can be reactivated.

To think about the KWC today is to accept its condition as a ghost - a territory that no longer exists physically yet continues to inhabit the architectural imagination as a specter, a warning, and a possibility. This ghost embodies both absence and disappearance as well as the force of a myth: a past that shapes the present and that, potentially, can reappear in new forms. Far from simplistic interpretations that reduce the KWC to chaos, marginality, or romanticized resistance, it emerges as an extreme laboratory of coexistence, spatial negotiation, and informal creativity. Its material disappearance does not erase its potency as an object of thought; on the contrary, it makes it urgent to recognize the social, technical, and political dimensions that architecture often silences.

The notion of re-mediation allows this case to be approached not as an exercise in nostalgic reconstruction, but as a critical practice of care, translation, and activation of relationships. To remediate the KWC is not to rebuild it, but to give it voice and presence in new narratives, understanding architecture as mediation, communication, and knowledge. Drawing, archiving, and writing function here as instruments of both design and thought, making visible a complexity that cannot be reduced to traditional disciplinary categories.

A Lobotomy's Tale does not seek to close a memory, but to keep it in friction: a ghost that exists between past and present, myth and reality, ruin and archive, informal and academic. The KWC teaches us that architecture can be an open process of agreements, adaptations, and conflicts, where the unfinished, the marginal, and the bastard are not defects, but legitimate forms of knowledge and creation. This ghost reminds us that even what has disappeared can remain alive in practice and imagination, capable of reappearing and transforming the way we think, make, and inhabit architecture.

WORKS CITED

ATELIER BOW-WOW. Made in Tokyo: Guide Book, Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing Co, 2001.

ATELIER BOW-WOW. *Graphic Anatomy*. Tokyo: Toto, 2007.

JAQUE, Andrés, Dulces arenas cotidianas: notas sobre el urbanismo de las domesticidades no familiares, activas en lo político, Sevilla, Lugadero, 2013.

LAM, Sharon. "Far from the Western Fetish: The Kowloon Walled City Between Extraordinary Space and Normal Lives." The Funambulist, no. 16 (September–October 2018): Proletarian Fortresses.

PEREC, Georges. *Especies de espacios*. Barcelona: Montesinos, 1999.

POPHAM, Peter. "Essay City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City¨, Greg Girard and Ian Lambot. Hong Kong: Watermark Publications, 1993

VENTURINI, Tommaso. Diving in Magma: How to Explore Controversies with Actor-Network Theory. Paris: CSI Working Papers Series, 2009.

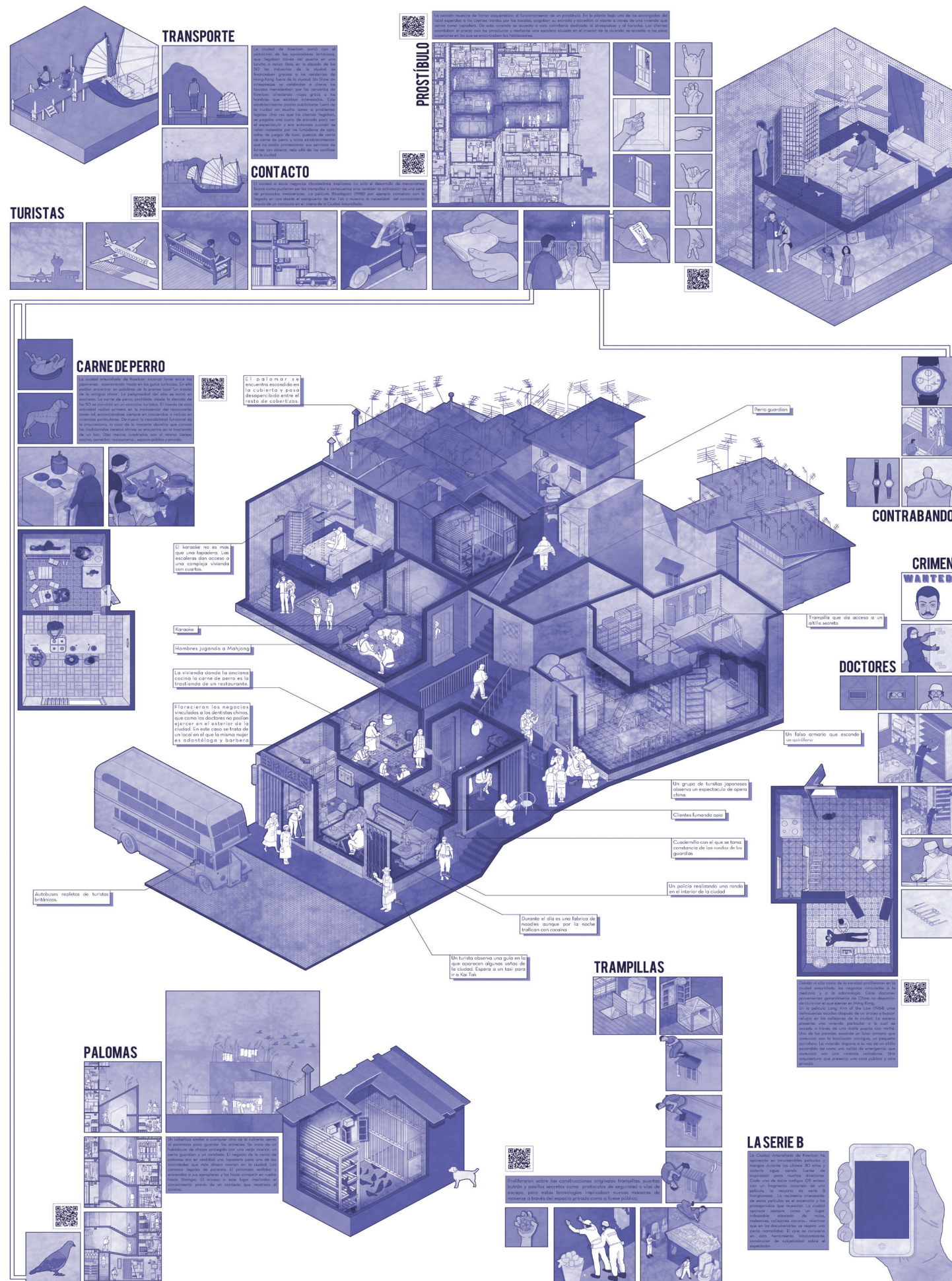WALKER, Enrique. Lo ordinario. Barcelona. Ed.Gustavo Gili, 2010

Fig.4 - An unstable architecture. The mapping illustrates how a fuzzy logic is applied to spaces, challenging the clear distinction between public and private realms (Authors, Universidad de Alicante, 2014).

NOTES

1. All of the documents illustrating this essay are part of the Master's project submitted at the University of Alicante in 2014, which was supervised by Miguel Mesa del Castillo and Enrique Nieto. The project received considerable attention at the time, being published in national and international architectural media, selected for the Archiprix Awards for the international exhibition, a finalist in the IsArch Awards, and included in the Spanish pavilion of the 2018 Venice Biennale Becoming.

JIMENEZ INIESTA, David; PENALVER IZAGUIRRE, María Ángeles. Historia de una lobotomía: una investigación sobre la ciudad amurallada de Kowloon [en línea] Santiago: ArchDaily, 2014 [consulta: 20 septiembre 2025). Disponible en: https://www.archdailv.c/cl/757181/historia-de-una-lobotomia-una-investigacion-sobre-la-ciudad-amurallada-de-kowloon

JIMENEZ INIESTA, David; PENALVER IZAGUIRRE, María Ángeles. FDP | A Lobotomy's Tale [en línea]. Alicante: More Than Green, 2014 [consulta: 20 septembre 2025]. Disponible en: https://www.morethangreen.es/en/fdp-a-lobotomys-tale-bv-mari-angeles-penalver-and-david-jimenez/

2. Lam, Sharon. "Far from the Western Fetish: The Kowloon Walled City Between Extraordinary Space and Normal Lives." The Funambulist, no. 16 (September-October 2018): Proletarian Fortresses. It should be noted that, as seen in this interview by Sharom Lam with one of its residents, KWC is an example of a more serious housing problem in Hong Kong, of which KWC is a hyperbole.

3. Bastard in the sense of being non-strictly canonical.

4. Venturini, Tommaso. Diving in Magma: How to Explore Controversies with Actor-Network Theory. Paris: CSI Working Papers Series, 2009. "Controversy mapping is the practice of developing tools to observe and describe debates - especially social ones -around techno-scientific issues. Initiated by Bruno Latour at the École des Mines de Paris, it was conceived as a toolkit to address the growing hybridization of disciplines and to follow conflicts that cross their boundaries. Rather than reinforcing traditional cause-and-effect models, it invites us to question them. Latour proposes a set of observational lenses - more guiding than methodological-designed not to dictate what to observe, but to help focus attention on the multiple layers that make up a controversy. These lenses are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive; they simply remind us that a complete observation is impossible without overlapping perspectives.

5. The term "fuzzy logic" is used here in reference to Bart Kosko's theory of graded, non-binary reasoning, applied metaphorically to the indeterminate and overlapping spatial practices observed in the building.