

## 21A.00 Commentary Paper

In his presentation, James Shen walks through three freedoms: the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey, and the freedom to change social relationships. Underlying these three freedoms is the tension between agency and structure, a theme that is also covered in *Dawn of Everything*. The exploration of different urban spaces and formations reveals how structure shapes our behavior, how agency exists within structures, and how agency can be used to change confining structures. Seeking answers to these questions at the microcosmic level of urban design yields insight at the macrocosmic level of humanity: that we are not “stuck”, as initially posed by David Wengrow and David Graeber, if we continue to observe and experiment.

A key objective that Shen hints at in his designs is shaping the behavior of individuals through structures. Integral to the design process is observation. Noticing that circular structures and seating areas are a pattern in makeshift areas of play, Shen incorporates these elements in formations designing for play. Similarly, Shen describes how the proximity of the *hutang* hallways facilitates an environment for socialization and close-knit communities. This influence is further highlighted in the interview with the *hutang* resident who shares her reluctance to move into “impersonal” apartment building complexes because the community gardens and crowded alleys of her childhood home catalyze close relationships among neighbors. Using “site” observations and interviews with residents, Shen is able to design structures that intentionally shape behavior and achieve the objective of commissioners, whether it be celebrating the cultural treasures of a city or providing an entertainment space for locals. The design process reflects how, in *Dawn of Everything*, instances of cultural and societal development stemmed from the environment and a need for survival. For instance, Inuit

indigenous individuals cyclically banded together to share resources during the harsh winters. Studying our environment and our interactions with it can yield insights into how our behaviors (past and present) are influenced by the conditions around us.

Observation can also reveal instances when we create agency within structures. Shen presents several behaviors that leverage the surrounding environment in a manner that was initially undesigned and unintentional. From using local parking lots as play spaces to fishing through fences and over barriers designed to keep people away from local bodies of water, people are shown to push the boundaries of the structures around them. The makeshift showers is another example of agency. Living in poor conditions without indoor plumbing, residents build out an extension of their houses in order to facilitate privacy and use kitchen appliances for a shower. The creative manner in which people play with boundaries in their lives provides inspiration for Shen, from designing deliberate structures allowing a kitchen-shower conversion to building a modernized, improved home within an existing house. The incorporation of observed “experimentation” into architecture serves as a metaphor for how we can become “unstuck.” Humans continue to push boundaries and question the status quo, from large scale endeavors such as cryptocurrency and nomadic living to daily practices such as watching (or creating) dystopian fantasies. The agency exhibited at present to expand the boundaries of past and present structures can yield novel ways of living in the future.

Shen ends his presentation with applications of his designs, built from and for experimentation testing the limits of existing structures, in addressing critical housing problems. The “house within a house” grew beyond being a thought-provoking display at Beijing Design Week into a commercialized product. The prefabricated house is now a potential solution for housing crises: support for the homeless in Austin and policy changes on accessible dwelling

units in Boston. The repurposing of the courtyard plug-in not only serves as a counterexample to the premise of humanity being “stuck”, but also sheds light into how we can continue to shape and change our future in novel ways to address existing problems.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21A.00 Introduction to Anthropology  
Spring 2022

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.