

WHERE IS DENVER'S CHINATOWN?

Creative Teaching and Research on Reimagining Denver's Erased Chinatown

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with
History Colorado
Colorado Asian Pacific United

2026 ACSA CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD



OVERVIEW



The highlighted area is the most historically intact section of Denver's erased Chinatown. Students were tasked with proposing a collective vision for repurposing the existing buildings in the highlighted district.

Historically, Chinatown in Denver flourished as a vibrant district, once acclaimed as one of the largest in the Interior West. However, persistent acts of spatial injustice led to substantial demolitions within the district, ultimately displacing its entire communities. Due to insufficient preservation efforts, Chinatown has gradually faded from public consciousness. As the city and its diverse constituency continue to expand, it raises urgent questions:

Given the limited documentation, how can we deploy creative tools to reconstruct a spatial narrative that encapsulates the silenced stories of the displaced neighborhood? Amidst gentrification emergencies and political crises, how can we cultivate a shared repository of knowledge and expertise for a Chinatown in the state of *becoming*, particularly in cities where Chinatown is no longer a physical reality but endures in more conceptual forms?

In response to these inquiries, this project, evolving from a research studio, accumulates a body of mixed-media, interactive design outcomes, culminating in a year-long exhibition at the History Colorado Center. It intends to provoke new forms of interpretation, reimagination, and stimulation through four nested creative endeavors: **Repair, Reimagine, Rehearse, and Revive.**

Part One: Repair engages the speculative tools of storytelling to unearth obscured histories impaired by archival silence. It involves combing through historical documents, juxtaposing layers of scavenged archives, constructing speculative narratives, and ultimately identifying areas of remediation that lead to the development of their theses. **Part Two: Reimagine** rethinks the power of the small and informal as resistance to systemic challenges, revolving around the agency of furniture as a tool of advocacy to rebuild collective actions and memories. Drawing upon the hypothesis of Tactical Urbanism (Lydon and Garcia 2015) and Beyond Patronage

(Hwang, Bohm, and Printz 2015), students propose a series of movable and adaptable spatial elements that evolve into a collective framework for repurposing the existing buildings in the old Chinatown district. By materializing these spatial tactics in multiple media, such as films and large-scale models, Part Two stimulates the imagination of a future Chinatown by surrounding the audience with an immense body of shared visions and varied perspectives.

Part Three: Rehearse introduces an interactive framework for design studios to explore novel forms of critique and communication. Students collaborate on an adaptable installation that functions as a "spatial archive" to rehearse design concepts through its multifaceted spatial configurations. Using the installation as the locus for discourse and dialogue, each rehearsal becomes an immersive play that engages all participants as actors, such as a rehearsal around a dining table that involves food critics and community stakeholders in exploring the social value of food and critiquing the design of a food hall. By embracing a participatory approach to spatial production and conversation, the project cultivates an engaged learning culture for students while offering an inclusive experience for the public to engage in design conversations.

Part Four: Revive is a year-long public exhibition at the History Colorado Center, showcasing research and creative work produced in the design studio. It also presents a series of workshops, talks, and performances that interrogate further the ideals and realities of Chinatowns in the United States, which has resonated with a broader community and garnered attention through regional and national media. By enhancing the collective dimensions of the project and introducing creative models of reinterpretation and reimagination, the project aspires to inspire future creative endeavors that focus on the *becoming* of Chinatowns and other marginalized cultural enclaves nationwide.

ACHIEVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

DESIGN AS RECLAMATION

The project positions **design as a critical tool of reclamation**—to challenge historical erasure while proposing visionary futures. It offers a **creative experiment** in reimagining how public space can be reclaimed as a site of power, race, culture, identity, and justice.

A NOVEL PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

Emerging from the scale of the small to the large—from furniture to the city—the project **advances a new pedagogical framework**. Through the lens of architectural interiors, it opens fresh perspectives on researching and reimagining Denver’s Chinatown, demonstrating how interior territories can uncover hidden narratives and inspire civic imagination.

COLLABORATION AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The project proposes a teaching model that actively engages students in addressing pressing social issues, showing how an **academic studio could evolve into a dynamic collaboration with community organizations**—in this case, History Colorado and Colorado Asian Pacific United. It underscores the role of higher education in empowering communities to confront social and spatial injustice. Since its opening in 2024, the exhibition has **generated a broad regional impact**, reaching over 30,000 visitors through K–12 workshops, guided tours, and public programming. It has also **received extensive media coverage** from outlets such as The Denver Post and Colorado Community Media, and The Architect’s Newspaper.

CREATIVE FRAMEWORK

PART 01: REPAIR (4 WEEKS)

Repair engaged the speculative tools of storytelling to unearth the obscured history impaired by archival silence. It involved combing through historical documents, juxtaposing layers of scavenged documents and archives, constructing speculative narratives, and ultimately guiding students to identify areas of remediation.

PART 02: REIMAGINE (8 WEEKS)

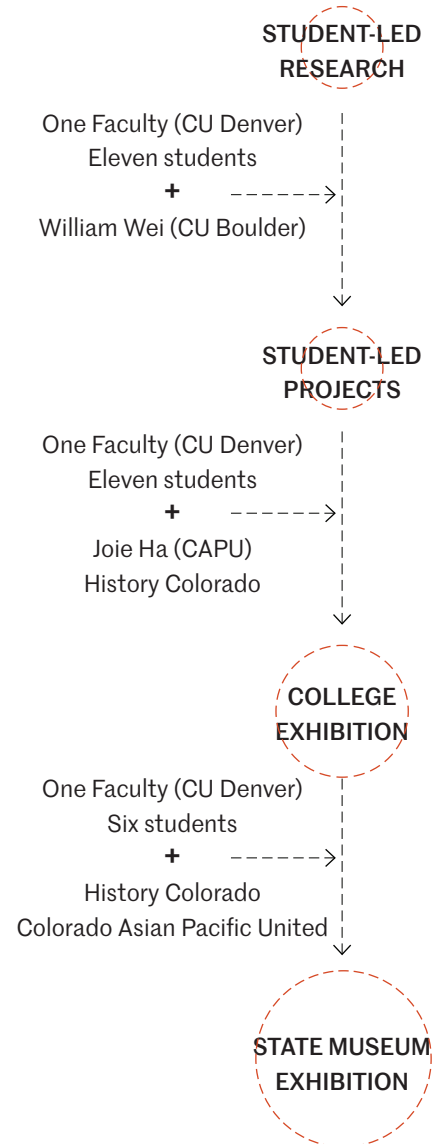
Reimagine revolved around the agency of furniture as a form of advocacy to rebuild collective actions and memories. Students proposed a series of movable and adaptable spatial elements that evolved into a collective framework for repurposing the existing buildings in the old Chinatown district.

PART 03: REHEARSE (4 WEEKS)

Students collaborated on an adaptable installation that functioned as a “spatial archive” to rehearse design concepts through its multifaceted spatial configurations. Using the installation as the locus for discourse and dialogue, each rehearsal became an immersive play that engages all participants as actors.

PART 04: REVIVIE (ONE YEAR)

The studio outcomes ultimately evolved into a public exhibition through a close collaboration between CU Denver students, History Colorado, and Colorado Asian Pacific United. During the exhibition, a series of workshops and talks, themed “Becoming Chinatown,” were held to revive the ideas of Denver’s Chinatown.



PART ONE: REPAIR

PART 1A: REPAIR THE ARCHIVE: DOCUMENTATION

In response to archival silence and material scarcity, students collected photographs, paintings, articles, drawings, and other possible media that established a clear spatial, social narrative of Denver's old Chinatown. They also developed a series of diagrams, drawings, and collages to dissect different layers of the site, understanding a site both physically and conceptually as a geometric abstraction and an aesthetic, socio-political, and programmatic provocation.



Collage that overlays the old photo with the new.

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Denver had a Chinatown, 150 years ago.

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Elevation ^{EXISTING}
Elevation ^{NEW}

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Three siblings, a mule, and their dog, posing outside of their family's paint shop
15th + Market

Significant Events
A B C D E F

Chinatown Evolution Diagram

Site Evolution Diagram

From beginning to ending.

EDUCITE AND MAKE CREDIT

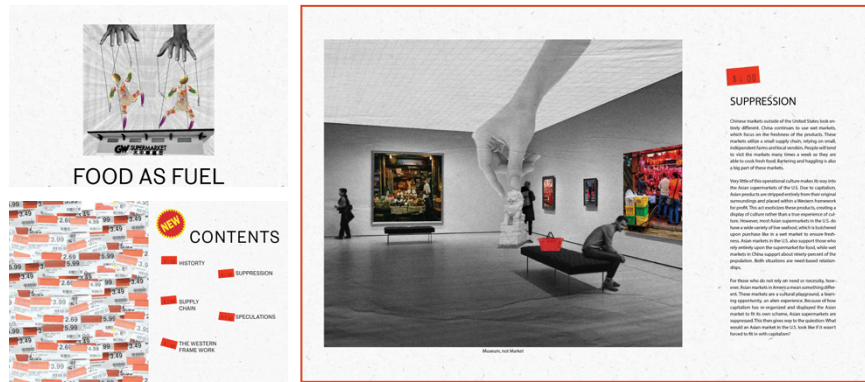
Research booklet (excerpted) produced by students.

PART 1B: REPAIR THE NARRATIVES
CREATIVE WRITING OF THE INTERIOR

THE INTERIOR OF SUPERMARKET

Students: Hannah Drummond, Xandra Lorenz, Julia Schmidt

"...The US uses the European style of market which we see today in the farmers market, instead of a wet market. The US relied on small mom and pop grocers and specialty stores (bakeries, fish mongers, butchers, etc.)... Self-serve grocery stores began in 1916 and before then everything was over the counter. Supermarkets changed the way we shop and think about food. With the growing ease of shipping goods from trains the supermarket became a successful model in the 1930's. Supermarkets hold everything someone could need, shipped from all over the world. Supermarkets became the one stop shop that Americans quickly grew to love. On the contrary, China continues to use wet markets, which focus on the freshness of the products. These markets utilize a small supply chain, relying on small, independent farms and local vendors....Bartering and haggling is also a big part of these markets. Very little of this operational culture makes its way into the Asian supermarkets of the U.S. Due to capitalism, Asian products are stripped entirely from their original surroundings and placed within a Western framework for profit. **This act exoticizes these products, creating a display of culture rather than a true experience of culture...**"



THE INTERIOR OF LAUNDROMAT

Students: Trevor Motzko, Jackson Pedrazzi, Brandon Wunder

"In 1880, there were 238 Chinese immigrants in Denver. Out of these 238 Chinese immigrants, 225 of them were men. Most of these men also worked or owned a laundromat in Denver's Chinatown at this time. Many of these Chinese laundries prospered in this area because they were not stealing business from Caucasian owned laundry mats. In fact, there were almost no Caucasian owned laundry mats in the Denver area because they performed other jobs. Therefore, the Chinese immigrants were forced to own and operate laundries because it was the only operation they could easily perform, as well as it was essential in most peoples' lives...This all changed after the Anti-Chinese riot where most of Chinatown area was destroyed and a lot of Chinese lost their lives or were forced to leave the area. Years later the old Chinatown tried to move and form a new Chinatown area closer to the east side of Denver. This new Chinatown didn't become well established and therefore didn't last long. Since the riot, many Chinese lost their houses and operations and therefore laundries became more likely to be owned and operated by Caucasians."



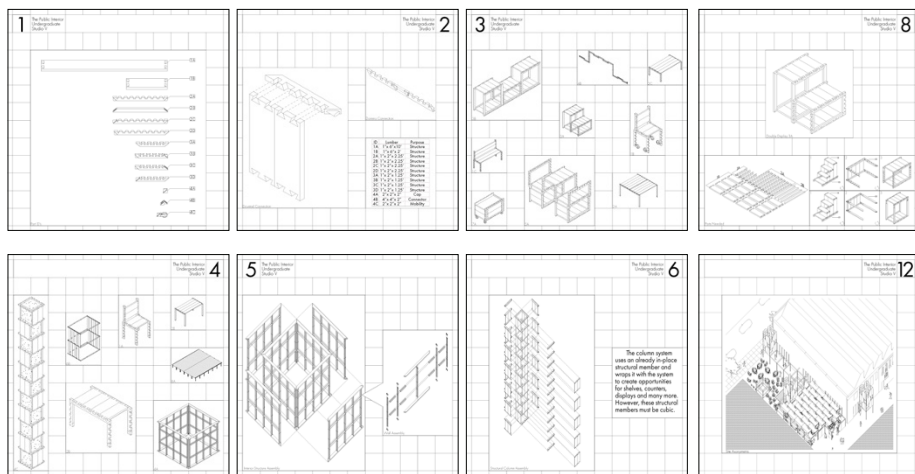
PART TWO: REIMAGINE

PART 2A: FROM FURNITURE TO INTERIOR TO CITY

Students were tasked with the investigation of furniture that evolved into the unfolding of the scalar relationship between furniture, interior, building, and city. Furniture was understood as the most immediate tool that produced architectural programs by directly influencing the user's actions and sensations. It performed as the measure between space and the human body, in a similar fashion that architecture served as the framework between the interior and the urban. Based on the provided spatial framework, students developed prototypes of interior elements that responded to their research of the suppressed interior, proposing a system of small-scale spatial interventions that envisioned flexible, adaptable futures of Denver's Chinatown.

STUDENT PROJECT 01: SELF-BUILT COMMUNITY CENTER

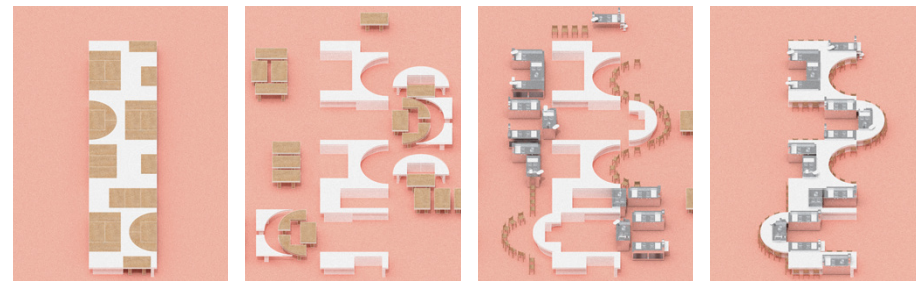
The project proposes a structural manual that enables the community to establish self-built structures in response to diverse events and activities throughout the year, including the Spring Festival (新年) and the Chinese Flower Market (花市). Students: Brandon Wunder, ulia Schmidt.



Drawings by Brandon Wunder and Julia Schmidt.

STUDENT PROJECT 02: FOOD MARKET

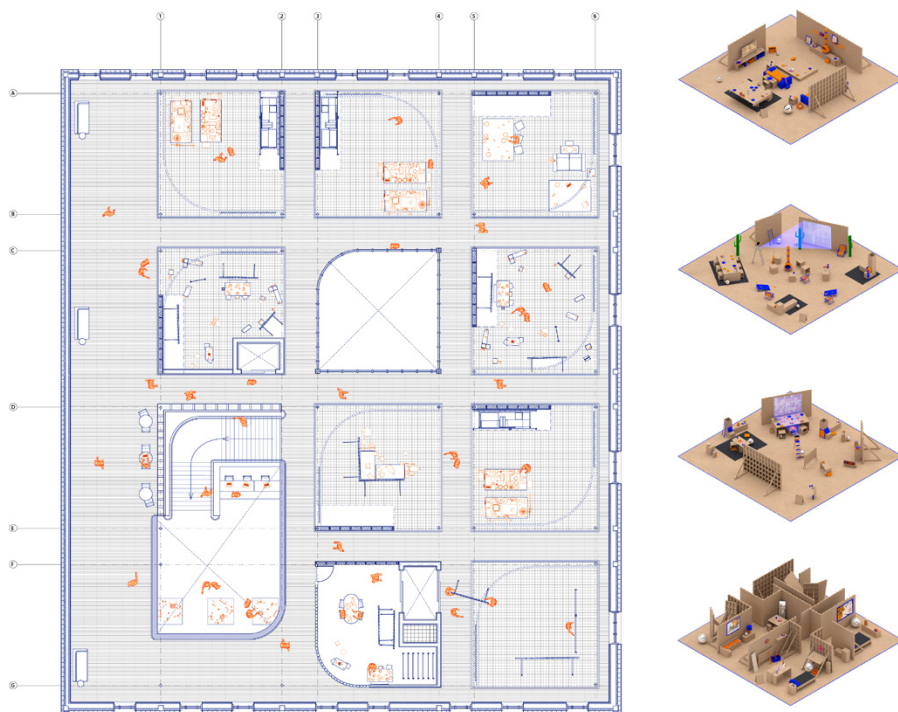
The project proposes a system of tables that transform into a dynamic food market, drawing inspiration from Chinese dining etiquette. Students: Jacob Kloberdanz, Timoteo Mason, Urban Tu.



Drawings by Jacob Kloberdanz, Timoteo Mason, and Urban Tu.

MEMORY MUSEUM

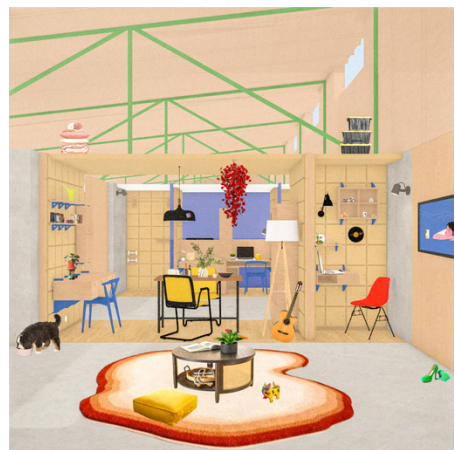
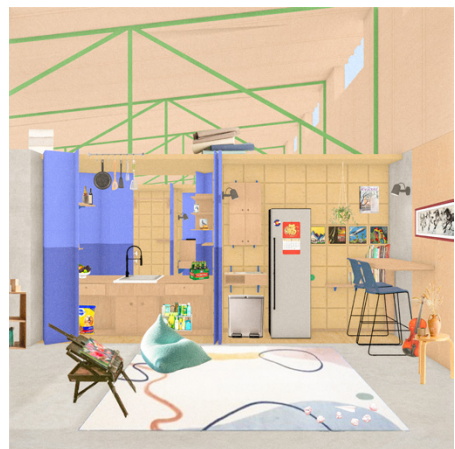
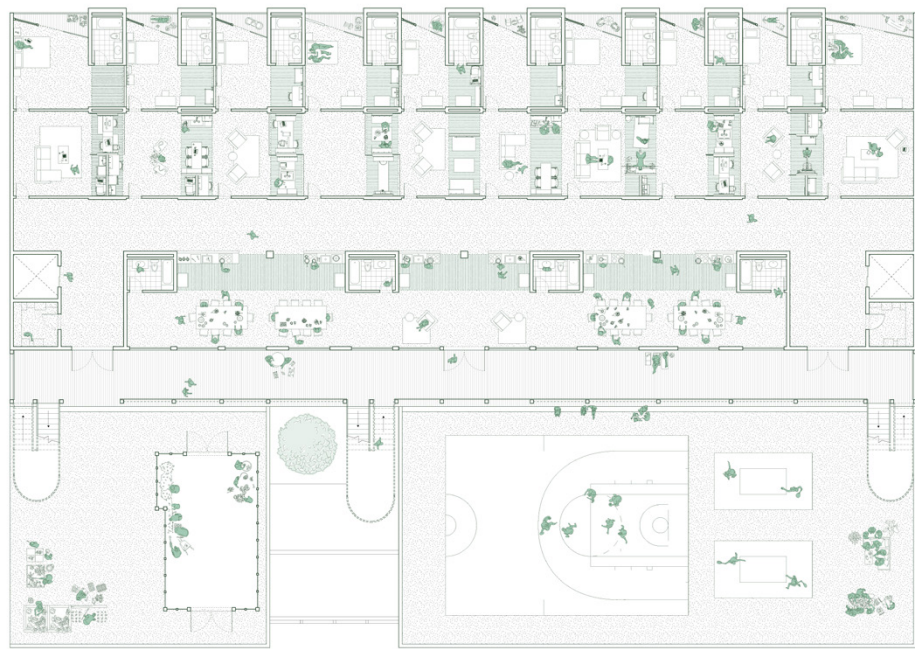
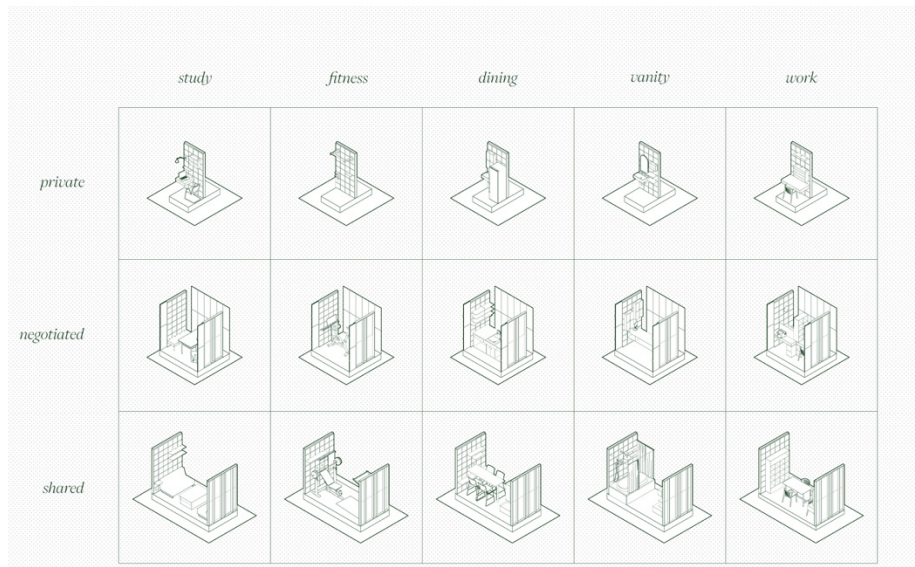
Responding to the limited documentation of Chinatown’s history, the project envisions an adaptable wall that allows visitors to narrate a story with their personal belongings. It also proposes a “memory wall” that collects these personal objects to refresh a collective memory. Students: Trevor Motzko, Hannah Drummond.



WORKER HOUSING

Project by Sammriddha Shrestha and Jackson Pedrazzi

Responding to the student's research on "Single-Room Occupancy (SRO)," the project proposes a series of wall assemblages that allow immigrant workers to expand housing options in accommodating multi-generational families.



LEYUAN LI, SUPPORTING MATERIAL / 2026 ACSA CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

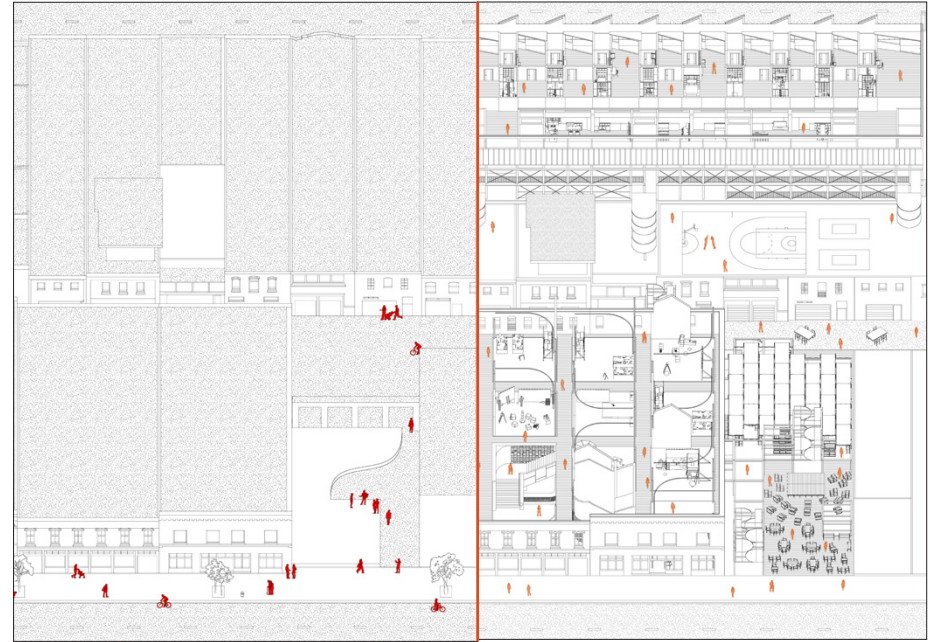
WHERE IS DENVER'S CHINATOWN?

PART 2B: COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

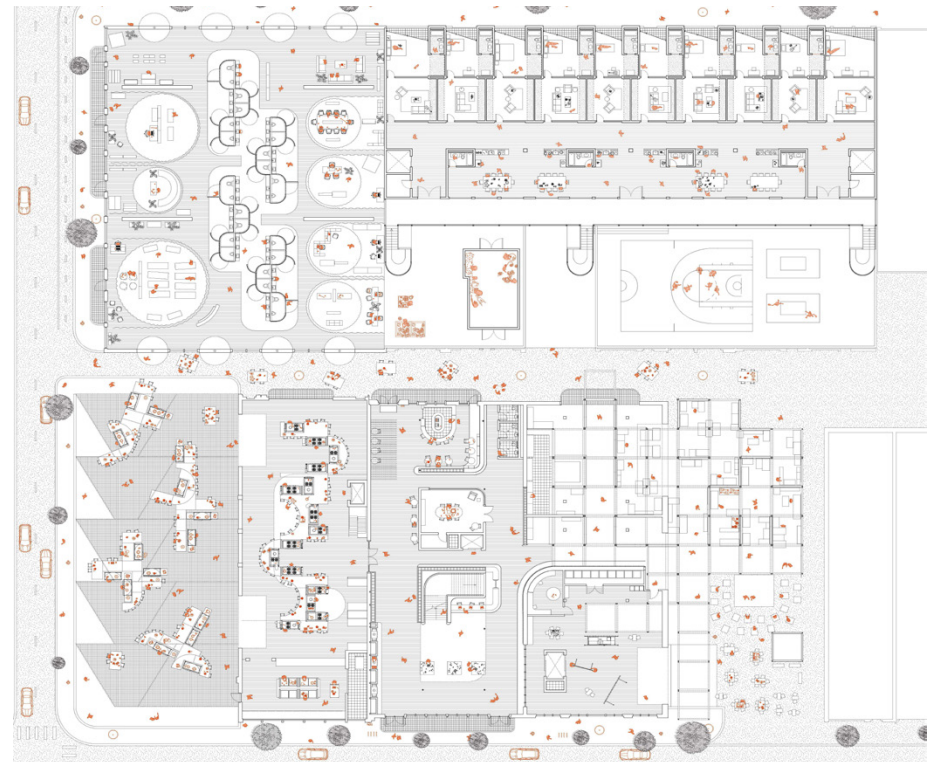
Students proposed a series of movable and adaptable spatial elements that evolved into a collective framework for repurposing the existing buildings in the old Chinatown district. By materializing these spatial tactics in multiple media, such as detailed drawings and models, it intended to stimulate the imagination of a future Chinatown.



Detailed model showing the shared vision.



Detailed axonometric drawings comparing the preexisting context and the proposed redevelopment



PART THREE: REHEARSE

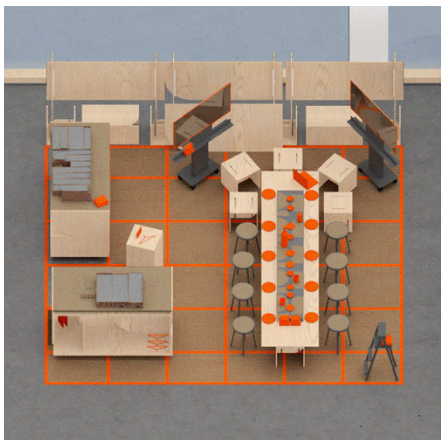
PART 3A: SPATIAL ARCHIVE

Following the design outcomes, Students collaborated to create an adaptable installation aggregated by modular plywood cubes and panels. When fully assembled, the installation functioned as a “spatial archive” that presented different ways of archiving the research and creative work produced in the processes of repair and reimagination. When the installation was dismantled into its parts, these versatile components, designed with notches on different surfaces, allowed for endless configurations that responded to various rehearsals and performances initiated by students and public audiences. Using the installation as the locus for discourse and dialogue, each rehearsal became an immersive play that engaged all participants as actors.

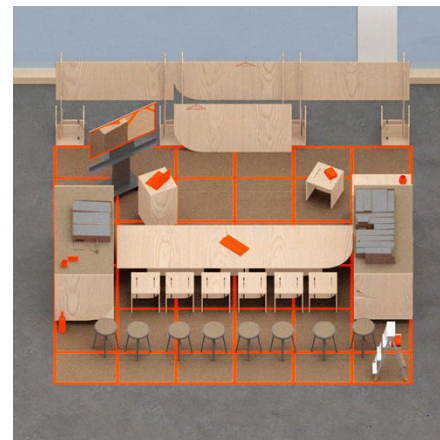


PART 3B: REHEARSALS AND PERFORMANCES**REHEARSAL 01: FOOD AS COLLECTIVE MEDIUM**

Rehearsing around a dinner table with models as plates and architectural drawings as place mats, the students engaged with design critics and community stakeholders to discuss the social and spatial value of food as collective medium.

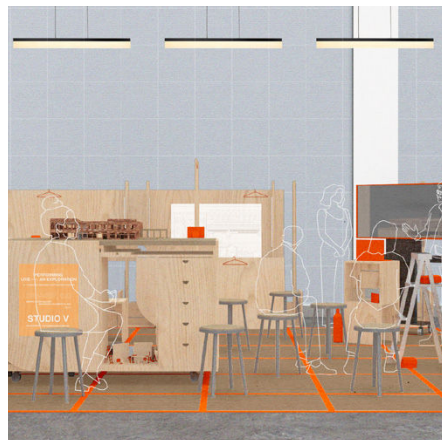
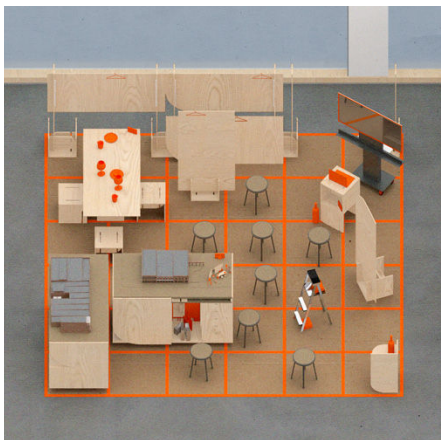
**REHEARSAL 02: COMMUNITY AS FORM OF NEGOTIATION**

The students set up the table with construction manuals, engaging the audience in discussing their project that proposed a revitalization of the community through different forms of spatial negotiation.

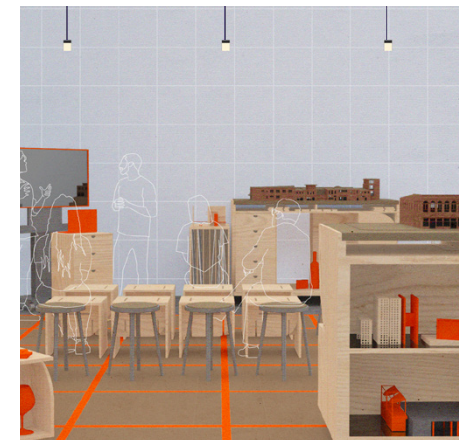
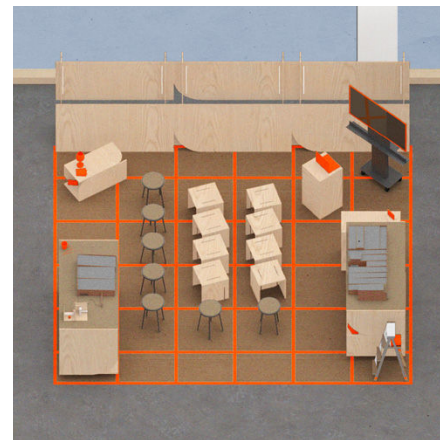


REHEARSAL 03: COLLECTIVIZING PERSONAL OBJECT

Curating the venue with personal objects collected from communities in Chinatown, the students immersed the audience in an intimate environment to discuss how personal objects could be gathered to narrate a collective memory.

**REHEARSAL 04: HOUSING AS SOCIAL INTERVENTION**

With the space set up as a living room, the students presented a film showcasing scenes of his childhood home, a single-room occupancy in Denver, and their housing proposal that allowed for updates to accommodate the growth of an immigrant family.



EXHIBITION AT THE CAP GALLERY

December 10, 2023 - February 15, 2024



PART FOUR: REVIVIE

WHERE IS DENVER'S CHINATOWN?

STORIES REMEMBERED, RECLAIMED, REIMAGINED

History Colorado Center, October 9, 2024 - September 2, 2025

COLLABORATION

WITH COLORADO ASIAN PACIFIC UNITED (CAPU) AND HISTORY COLORADO

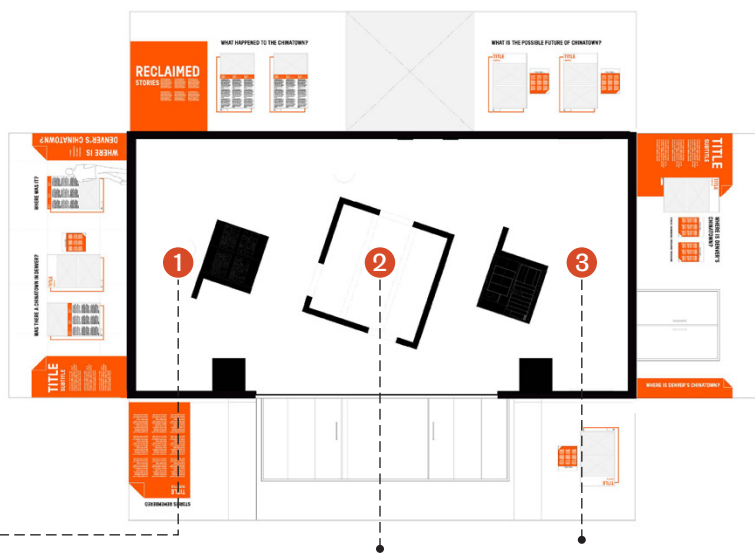
The research and design outcomes produced in the studio ultimately evolved into a public exhibition at History Colorado. Since its opening, the exhibition has attracted more than 30,000 visitors in the region.





EXHIBITION DESIGNED BY STUDENTS

Students were empowered to participate in the design and curatorial process of the exhibition. The exhibition was structured into three distinct chapters, centered around an installation that resembled a building preserved from the former Chinatown neighborhood. Below is the plan and unfolded elevations of the exhibition:



Chapter 1: Remembered

The first chapter, Remembered, showcased archival materials and historical documents retrieved from state libraries and museums. It also included interpretive exhibits made by students, providing a comprehensive overview of the historic Chinatown.

Chapter 2: Reclaimed

The second session highlighted local communities' efforts to unearth obscured historical narratives. The central installation drew inspiration from a historic building in the former Chinatown neighborhood, designed to feature domestic artifacts and personal items donated by descendant families.

Chapter 1: Reimagined

The third session, Reimagined, showcased the collective work produced by students, as well as an interactive wall that collected reviews and feedback from the public audience.



16 Artifacts donated by descendants and drawings produced by students. Photograph by Act One Photography.



The "Domestic Interior" Installation. Photograph by Jesse Kuroiwa.



The second chapter "Reclaimed." Photograph by Jesse Kuroiwa.

The exhibition attracted more than 30,000 visitors, continuing to engage the community in remembering the hidden history of Denver's Chinatown.



ASSOCIATED PROGRAMS

During the exhibition, we organized a series of performances, workshops, and roundtable discussions to interrogate further the ideals and realities of Chinatowns in the United States. This series of events invited students, artists, architects, designers, urbanists, community

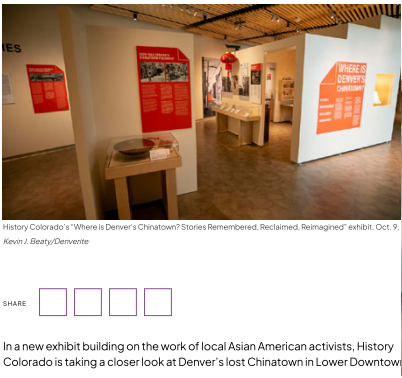
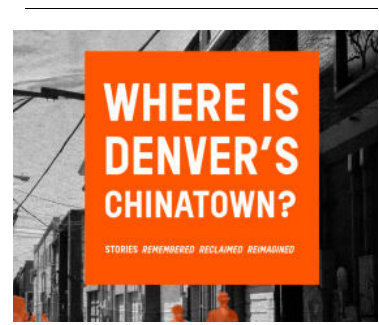
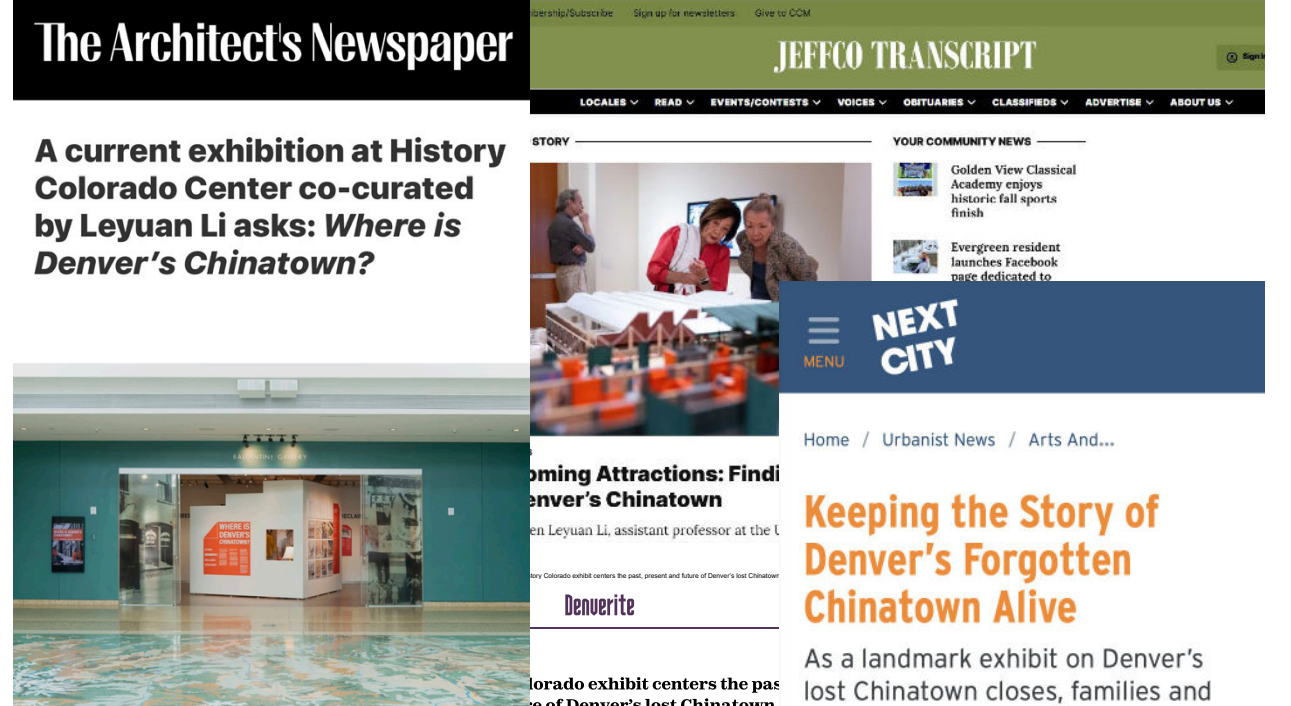
organizers, and the public to rethink the possible futures for Chinatowns amidst gentrification emergencies and collective crises, particularly in cities where Chinatown is no longer a physical reality but endures in more conceptual forms,

OUTPUT

During the exhibition, the curators gave tours and talks to K-12 students and local communities. The exhibition also gained extensive coverage from regional and national newspapers, including The Denver Post and The Colorado Community Media.



Session Two, titled "(Un)settling Chinatown," invited architectural historians to discuss the conceptual forms of Chinatowns. Graphic design by Kaming Lee and Julio Correa Estrada. Photography by Jesse Kuroiwa.



COURSE CODE

ARCH 4111, Undergraduate Design Studio V

COURSE TITLE

The Suppressed Interior

INSTRUCTOR

Leyuan Li

TEACHING ASSISTANT

Molly Rose Merkert, Blake Brooks. TAs worked 10 hours a week for 15 weeks at the rate of \$20 per hour.

STUDENT

Hannah Drummond, Jacob Kloberdanz, Xandra Lorenz, Timoteo Mason, Trevor Motzko, Jackson Pedrazzi, Sadie Rafferty, Julia Schmidt, Sammridha Shrestha, Urban Tu, Brandon Wunder

COMMUNIT PARTNERHistory Colorado and Colorado Asian Pacific United
8 non-profit employees donated 200 hours in the collaboration.**CRITIC**

Max Bravo (SAIC), Joie Ha (CAPU), Nero He (Texas Tech), Maggie Hua(HDR), Samantha Martin(History Colorado), Sam Schuermann(UWM), Anna L. Weissman, Ph.D(History Colorado), Kim Kennedy White, Ph.D (History Colorado), Jason L. Hanson(History Colorado), William Wei (CU Boulder), Alex Yueyan Li(CU Denver)

FUNDING

CU Denver Inclusive Excellence Grant, CU President's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Grant, CU Timmerhaus Fund

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Collected anonymously from the university's Faculty Course Questionnaire (FCQ) platform.

"Li as an instructor is amazing and he is so supportive and passionate about his students and projects. His passion and attitude pushes his students to work and produce amazing projects throughout the entire semester. Every aspect of Li's course is effective."

"Li has been by far the best instructor I've had in the architecture program. After the first week, I could immediately tell Li's bar of expectations was far higher than previous professors, which I appreciated immensely as it felt like a significant push this semester. Throughout the term, it was apparent just how passionate Li was about the studio and the project. His passion infected me and all of a sudden I cared more for what I was producing. Overall the studio was an incredible journey."

"Li and his TA Blake Brooks proved to be an outstanding duo in studio V. Li in particular set up one of the most outstanding studios I or anyone I know has either witnessed or been a part of. As such a young and emerging faculty member, Li has demonstrated his passion for teaching and his students."

"Li, this semester has been one of the most eye-opening and transformative studios I've taken thus far as a student here at CU Denver. The disruptive perspectives, ideas, and approaches to design that you bring to our university are precisely what our school needs. Your efforts to introduce us to new and emerging offices as the studio's architectural canon was refreshing and inspiring and your attempts at pushing students to explore a specific theoretical concept driven with real-world purpose was highly effective."

"Li was incredible. I've grown so much in my skills, production, and design knowledge this semester because of Li's guidance and curriculum. Feedback was concise and very helpful. Deliverables were challenging, but within reason, so I felt a lot of personal growth. I truly appreciated Li's perspective on design and architecture and I am leaving this semester feeling inspired, and excited, and I will miss Li as an instructor."

"The most effective aspect was the time you took to walk through everything with us. The objectives of the studio were laid out in a way that helped us grow in our design and creative skills as well as challenge ourselves to push further in what we can produce."

"Thank you Li for a great studio V."

"Li was wonderful in all ways, my only wish is that others would have been able to take part in this studio."

"Leyuan Li is the best professor that this school has to offer. I did not believe that I could learn so much in such a short amount of time. He is the most inspiring teacher I have ever had. He displayed genuine care for his students that no studio professor has ever offered. The brief was amazing, enriching and rewarding. As difficult as it was, it pushed me to become a better designer. If this school hires more people like Li this will be one of the best architecture schools in the country. I just want to tell him thank you for the best studio I am going to have in my academic career."



All ARCH 4111 students. Photograph by Brandon Wunder.



The curatorial team including students and community stakeholders. Photograph by Act One Photography.