





ECONOMY CLASS

Mrs Fan's Plugin House in a Beijing hutong
by People's Architecture Office solved
exigent financial and spatial issues





Indissociable from the city's past lives, the hutong neighbourhoods are emblematic of Beijing's social history and traditional urban fabric. But in the last 20 years, more than 70 per cent of the original structures have been destroyed, victims of the bulldozers to accompany rapid economic development and make way for large-scale regeneration. The surviving hutongs are home to a concentration of marginalised communities, including the city's elderly population and migrants freshly arrived from the countryside, condemned to live in squalor. The buildings are made of scraps and jetsam, uninsulated and lacking in basic facilities - only a third

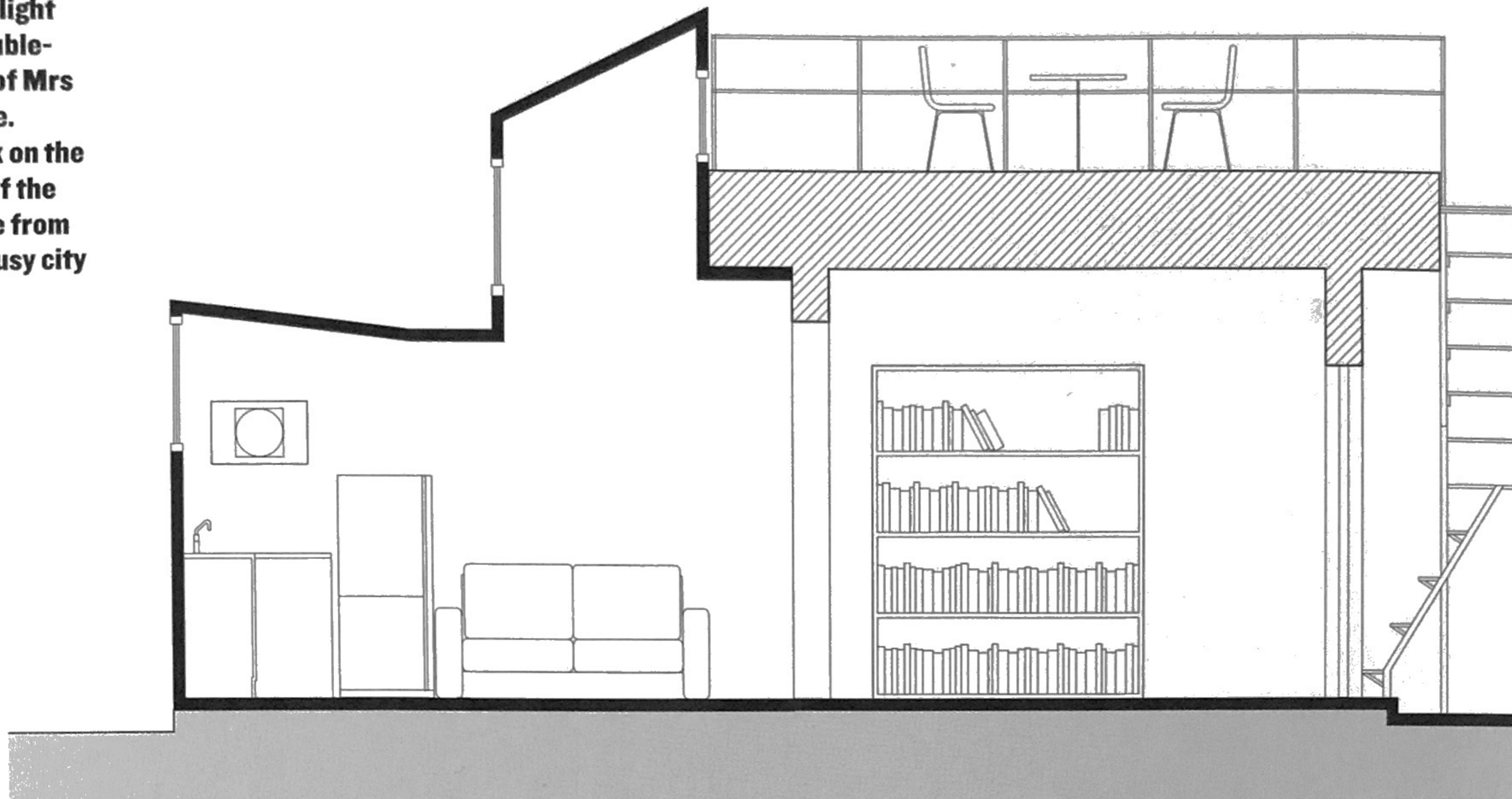
of the families have access to a private toilet. As the timber frames are ageing, it is both the physical and social structures that are slowly collapsing.

While developers do not dare to venture down the hutongs - too complex and risky to invest in - architects have attempted to tackle the compact and often awkward sites, designing experimental prototypes and researching alternative regeneration strategies. In recent years, proposals have included inflatable pavilions, micro libraries, play spaces, compact hostels and tea houses. Injecting facilities for community activities is an honest attempt to introduce new life into Chinese hutongs, and to focus on

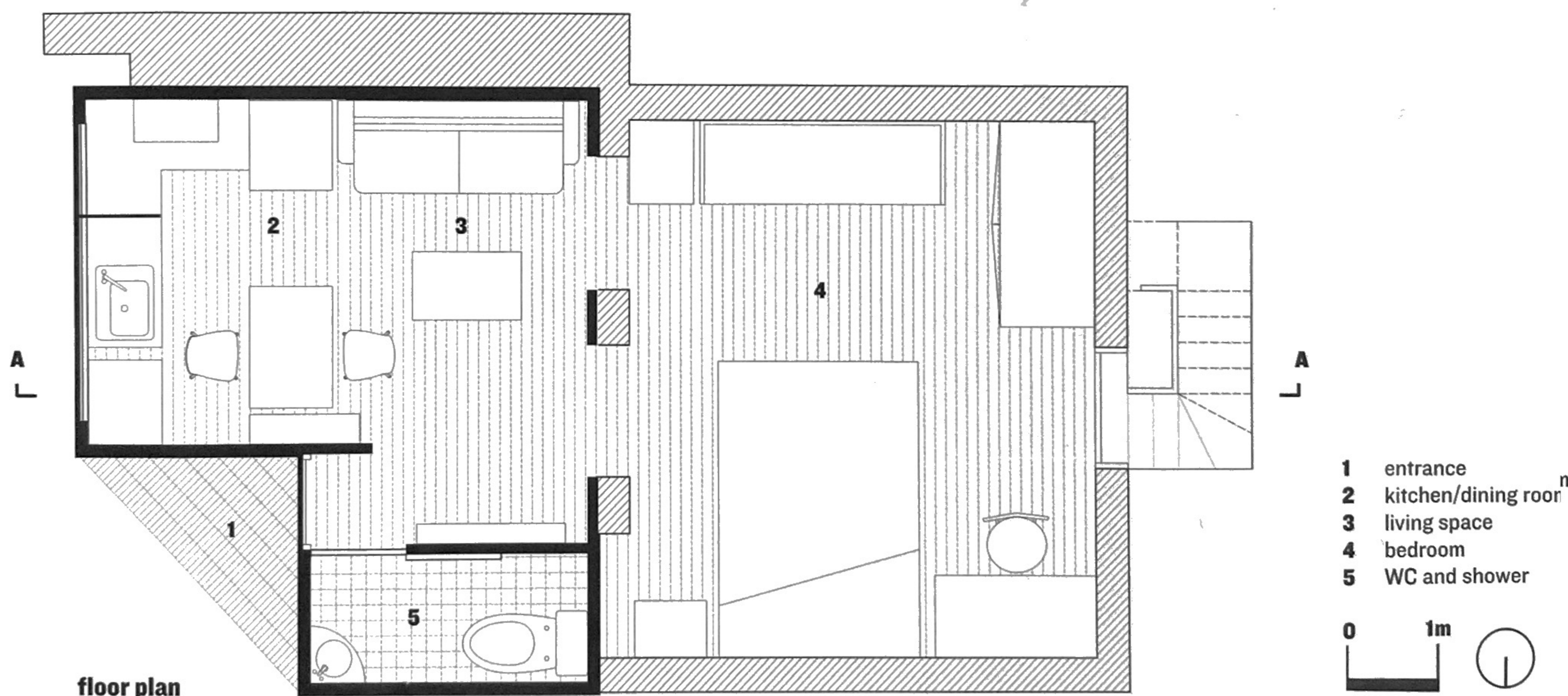
reimagining rather than repairing, but these projects often fail to address the neighbourhoods' primary residential function. And, despite good intentions, they find themselves feeding gentrification.

During the 2014 Beijing Design Week, People's Architecture Office (PAO) proposed a lightweight modular system, the 'Courtyard House Plugin' as a solution to address insalubrious domestic spaces and make hutong living appealing to a generation of young and active professionals. Intended for temporary extensions, the prefabricated panels are light enough to be carried around by one or two people through the labyrinthine alleys.

In contrast to the ancient, ramshackle surrounding dwellings, natural light permeates the double-height living area of Mrs Fan's Plugin House. A timber roof deck on the pre-existing half of the house gives refuge from the melee of the busy city



section AA



floor plan

as well as easily assembled by turning metal hooks with an Allen key. Manufactured out of customised moulds, the 70mm thick waterproof panels have wiring and plumbing integrated to minimise labour once on site.

While PAO focuses on architectural projects, its young studio founders Zang Feng, He Zhe and James Shen also set up People's Industrial Design Office to experiment with product design. They have now evolved the modular system to design a bespoke little home for Mrs Fan in Changchun Jie Hutong, her childhood neighbourhood, out of their proprietary 'Plugin' panels. As a teenager, she moved out to an anonymous tower in the suburbs with

her family and had yearned to return to the city centre, but the astronomical prices of Beijing's real estate made it impossible.

Sitting on a low plinth of dark bricks, the bright cuboid extension grows out of a small existing structure to provide a kitchen, washroom and double-height living area. Windows and skylights let as much natural light into the concise interior as possible – even in the small shower room, where a blue screen ensures privacy, because Mrs Fan is prone to claustrophobia. Seeking to minimise nuisance to neighbours, the polyhedron's strange irregularity results from negotiations with the other residents: as the panels are easily cut and trimmed,

Plugin House was literally sculpted on site. Atop the pre-existing half of the home is a comparatively vast timber deck, a welcome open space removed from the seething streets.

The architects provided their client with a home 30 times cheaper than an average apartment, reduced her daily commute from four hours to just one, and included an off-grid composting toilet – a small luxury in a neighbourhood with no sewerage. As the studio name suggests, the architects believe 'architecture is for the masses'. Rather than the hutongs' physical fabric, it is the unique and intimate social interaction that they feel is worth preserving. *Manon Mollard*

‘Rather than the hutongs’ physical fabric,
it is the unique and intimate social interaction
that the architects feel is worth preserving’



Architect
People's Architecture
Office (PAO)
Principals
He Zhe,
James Shen,
Zang Feng
Project team
Chen Yihuai,
Zhang Zhen
Photographs
People's Architecture
Office, Gao Tianxia