

The background of the entire cover is a detailed, light-colored line drawing of a map. It depicts a complex network of roads, rivers, and land parcels, representing a rural-urban continuum. The map shows a mix of dense urban areas with small, rectangular building footprints and more open, irregularly shaped rural areas. The lines are thin and grey, creating a subtle, textured backdrop for the text.

混合现实中的混合形。

HYBRID FORMS on HYBRID REALITIES

Characters and design proposal on
the Chinese *rural-urban continuum*

Chiara Loi

关于中国城乡结合部的人物和设计建议。

罗艺

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the Chinese *rural-urban continuum*

by Chiara Loi

**Double
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To whoever
made me smile

谢谢

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ABSTRACT


The voyage towards the realisation of this Thesis started a long way back and has crossed countless different routes. As in any voyage, the departure was full of expectations, but the realities encountered along the path led to results that were in part different from those expected. If initially the objective was to deal with the canonical rural world, the encounter with the Chinese reality, and in particular with the case study on which the project proposal was developed, revealed a completely different but extremely contemporary course. The few months spent in China helped to discover some dynamics that, because of Covid-19, were then deepened at a distance and on the basis of various and heterogeneous materials, in search of what are the main features of today's Chinese countryside.

In order to operate in a place, **transitional palimpsest** that is

continuously altering, it becomes necessary to know not only its immobile present appearance but also its transition over time. However, this transition should not only be considered in its purely morphological aspects, but also in its historical, economic, cultural and obviously social dimensions. Through an in-depth study of these various and related general transitions, it has therefore been possible to get to know those contemporary Chinese territories defined as the **rural-urban continuum** which, as a result of recent intense rural urbanisation, have become the places where the conventional dichotomy between city and countryside blurs to create space for new hybrid mixed entities in all their characters.

Hufu zhèn, the town under investigation and on which the project proposal is developed at a distance, is inserted in this type of territory, in particular in an rural-urban land-

#rural-urban_
c o n t i n u u m
#hybrid_realities
#blurred_dichotomy
#transitional_
m o r p h o l o g i e s
#identity #community
r u r a l i t y
c o u n t r y s i d e
d e v e l o p m e n t
#human_settlement
c u l t u r e
#courtyard_house
h y d r a u l i c _
c i v i l i s a t i o n
#feng_shui #future



scape of Jiangsu Province in China. It is precisely the observation of this hybrid character that has led the research towards the formulation and application of analysis tools and approaches, both personal and not, useful for understanding first of all the phenomenon of urban-rural blurring and then the case study on which to act.

The analysis carried out led to some conclusions about the close correlation between different morphological patterns repeated throughout history and the society that inhabits them, and how the concepts of identity, community and rurality in their forms have evolved on the basis of the same morphologies. After acquiring knowledge of the site, architectural and urban planning principles were sought to be used as the basis for an alternative design proposal for the future development of the town. The project proposal is therefore an alternative to

the frequent standardised planning that has affected China in recent years, and is addressed in particular not only to today's rural inhabitants but also to China's upper classes, who are increasingly moving from the overcrowded cities to the countryside in search of a place with a greater sense of home and community; this is possible thanks also to the great infrastructural development that makes it possible to live in today's Chinese countryside while working in the city. The formulation of the design proposal was therefore based on successive analyses of the history and culture of the Chinese rural world and, specifically, on the principles that have been the foundation of Chinese settlements over time such as, in particular, the courtyard house typology and the water system as a guideline for human settlement.

摘要

这篇论文之旅始于很久以前，在此期间历经了无数不同的道路。就像每一次旅程一样，出发前总是踌躇满志，但一路上遇到的现实情况却在一定程度上导致了与预期相悖离的结果。起初，我的目标是研究并阐述传统典型农村地区的现状，但是通过对中国现实的逐步了解，特别是通过对与项目提案**相关**的案例进行深入研究后，我发现它揭示出了一条既独特又现代的发展道路。之前在中国度过的几个月帮助我发现了一些动态情况，随后由于新冠病毒疫情的影响，我不得不对这些动向在多样和**异质**材料的基础上进行了

远程分析，以此来探索当今中国农村社会的主要特征。研究一个不断变化的地方（分层对象），不仅需要了解它固定的方面的特征，而且需要站在时间的坐标轴上了解其动态的变化历程。这种转变，不仅须从形态的角度考虑，而且须从历史、经济、文化、特别是社会的角度综合考量。通过对这些具有多样性和联系性的一般变迁过程进行深入研究后，我们有机会了解了那些在当今中国被称为城乡连续统一体的地区。由于日益加快的农村城镇化进程，上述地区已经成为了城市和农村之间的经典二分法之地。模糊二者的概念，为新

的混合实体留出释义空间。湖汊镇，中国江苏省内的一座城市和农村景观兼具的小镇，是此次论文的研究及进行远程项目规划的对象。对这种混合性质的观察，产生了研究以及制定个人的和非个人的应用分析的工具和方法。这些方法有助于理解城乡混合现象，并提供要采取行动的案例研究。本人通过所进行的分析得出了一些结论，即历史上反复出现的各种形态模式与生活在这些模式中的社会之间的密切关系，以及身份、集体和农村的各种形式概念是如何在同样的形态基础上发展起来的。因此，在充分了解该地区的情况后，对城市规划和建筑原则也进行了深入研究，以此作为该镇未来发展的另一种规划建议的基础。作为近年来中国频繁使用的标准化规划方案的替代方案，本项目提案不仅针对目前的农村居民，同时针对远离日益拥挤的城市转到乡村寻找家和集体意义的中国富裕阶层。得益于基础设施建设的不断发展壮大，使得居住在农村，工作在城市成为可能。因此，本项目提案的制定是基于对中国农村地区历史和文化的进一步分析，特别是随着时间推移形成中国人居住区的基本原则，例如，庭院类型和供水系统作为形成人类居住区的指导性意义。⁰

0. Translation kindly done by the formidable interpreter and dear friend Lucia Orrù.

INTRODUCTION

The period between 1950 and 2018 saw rapid and high levels of urbanisation worldwide, with the population living in cities rising from 0.8 billion to around 4.2 billion. In 2007, for the first time in history, the urban population surpassed the rural population and it is expected that the process of urbanisation and thus growth will not stop in the coming decades.¹ The percentage of the world's urban population, which reached 55.3% in 2018, is set to increase to 60% in 2030, when one in three people will live in cities.

Considering that **only 2% of the earth's surface is currently occupied by what can be defined as "urban fabric"**, it can be deduced that the rest of the surface, 98%, is occupied by what cannot be defined as cities and can be summarised by the term "countryside".² Analysing this data can be interesting to reflect on future urbanisation processes and how they could be improved from the point of view of well-being and sustainability.

The strong urbanisation

that has taken place over the last few decades has the countries of the global south as its protagonists ("global south"); in particular, in 2018, 27 megacities - cities with 10 million inhabitants or more - out of 33 worldwide are located in these countries. **China**, which alone has 6 megacities³, is an extremely interesting country in this sense. Its urbanisation and technological development have taken place in a very short time, and the results have provided much food for thought. At the end of the Maoist period, around 1980, the rural population in China was 80% of the total population. It is only since 1990 that there has been a massive migration of rural people to the cities in search of better living conditions. This shows us how spectacularly **fast China's urbanisation** has been: in less than 30 years, from a predominantly rural population, it has gone from having 6 of the world's 33 mega-cities.

This intense growth has

1. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (ST/ESA/SER.A/420)*, New York: United Nations, 2019, p.9.

2. Amo, Koolhaas, R., *Countryside, a report*, Köln, TASCHEN, 2020, p.2-3.

3. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *The World's Cities in 2018 - Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/417)*, New York: United Nations, 2018, p.5.

occurred both through the development of existing cities, which have become increasingly populated and compact, and also through the emergence of new large metropolises, all of which are immersed in a conjunctive fabric of densely populated countryside that also continues to urbanise.⁴ Many villages, which a few decades ago might have been considered rural, have now turned into small or medium-sized urban centres, satellites of other larger cities. Thus, what used to be simply either town or country is now transformed into a much more **complex system in which the distinction between urban and rural is no longer so precise** and is perhaps even becoming obsolete from a descriptive point of view. What is certain is that what we canonically call “cities” in today’s China have in themselves some fundamental problems generated by urbanisation itself, overcrowding, disorder and pollution being among the main ones. To the un-

stoppable development of their suburbs or to the anonymous and depersonalised rural urbanisation, we then want to counterpose **new ideas of progress**, which are already in place, more responsible and aware of all that is involved. It is clear that it is neither possible nor desirable to have total control over the development processes of the future, but the analysis of the current situation as a historical result can certainly make us reflect and generate some guidelines, design and otherwise, to be inserted into the multiplicity of intentions that converge in the future.

In particular, the Chinese countryside and its recent evolution is an interesting field to think about and learn from. **While since the new economic reforms of 1978 there has been a great deal of migration from the countryside to the city, a more or less opposite phenomenon is now beginning to take place.** The current conditions of big cities sometimes

lead to a nostalgic feeling of the past and of how, not so long ago, everyday life was lived in China; **nostalgia, in turn, leads to a desire to live in different places**, less formal and chaotic and more like home. The enthusiasm of development today gives way to the need to live not so much as in the past, but to recover certain values and habits that have characterised Chinese society throughout history. Despite the fact that certain characteristics often reappear in the cities themselves, especially in the neighbourhoods mainly inhabited by ‘villagers’ (called such by the Hukou) who have recently moved into the city’s turbulence, the need to live in slower, smaller realities and the need, on the other hand, to control growing overcrowding and all that it entails, lead to the search for new ideas to resolve them. Often, the search for more local and less standard places to live and the need to feel a sense of belonging to a place lead, outside the big cities, to the creation of new nei-

ghbourhoods of families from the middle and affluent classes. Indeed, the countryside and rural villages have recently been re-evaluated as suitable places for this; the vastness of the continent evidently has solutions that can go beyond the density and compactness of the large metropolises. Even if some villages can no longer be defined as purely rural, they have certain characteristics that refer to the identity tradition of the Chinese countryside; these characteristics, rediscovered in their specificity, sometimes contrast with the standardised urban style. These small or medium-sized rural areas are certainly the places where the next phase of China’s economic and social development will be concentrated; an analysis of their social-historical evolution is therefore necessary for the formulation of new design ideas that are more up-to-date and responsible towards society and the environment. The following work aims to give a summative picture of these rea-

4. Leroux, M., *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, Genève, MétisPresses, 2019, p.10.

lities and to illustrate how history, particularly from the 20th century onwards, has contributed to the creation of certain identity features of these places. Only from a **historical-morphological understanding of the spaces** is it possible to give a personal opinion and design proposal which, in this specific case, will focus on Jiangsu province and in particular on a rural town called Hufu. The objective is therefore not so much to propose a single final solution to the problem posed, as to seek possible new development ideas on an urban and architectural scale in view of the growing movement of citizens towards more rural areas, always bearing in mind the new needs and at the same time the specific features that make Chinese civilisation unique. In order to find new ideas for development, it is necessary to understand how and why certain past choices, in China as in the rest of the world, did not work. Studying past projects, whether for expansion or the creation of new sett-

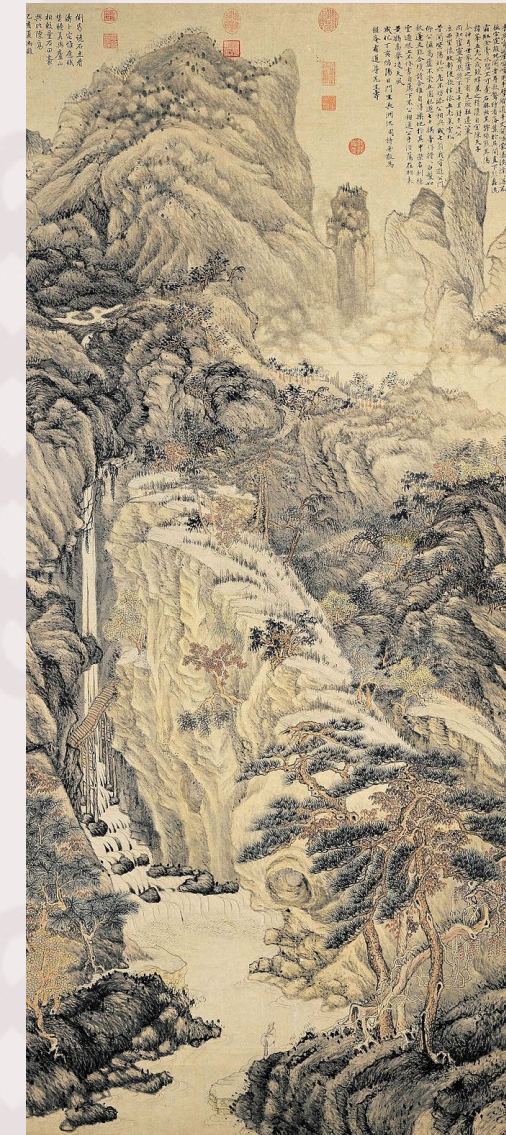
lements, is necessary so that we can **take the good and replace the bad**. For this reason, at the basis of the proposed project, there is not only a historical, social, cultural and economic analysis, but also a morphological analysis of some case studies. In addition, the project focuses in particular on the social aspects, always remembering that **architecture is created first and foremost for man**. Therefore, in addition to Rurality, the key words of the discourse will be Identity and Community.



Figure 1.0 A photo by Samuele Pellecchia, China goes Urban. The new era of the city, MAO Museum of Oriental Art, Turin, Italy, 2019.

#1 A TOUCH OF HISTORY

The Chinese countryside has always been a place of important changes throughout history, particularly in recent times. Since modern times, rural planning has taken many different forms depending on the socio-economic as well as governmental context of the historical period to which it refers. Therefore, a review of history can provide a background “to better understand how contemporary rural development design can be implemented”.⁵



5. Zhang Xiaochun, *Beautiful Villages, Rural Construction Practice in Contemporary China*, Melbourne, The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd, 2018, p.13.

Figure 1.1 A painting by Shen Zhou, Ming dynasty artist, 1467.

Ancestral view of nature

The relationship that man has with the countryside, and more generally with nature, has a centuries-old origin in Chinese culture. Starting with landscape paintings (山水, **shān shuǐ**, lit. mountain-water) in which man's place in the world is conceived, the concept of nature, whether as a place of *otium* or as a place of production or change, has been predominant until recent times. On the one hand, the concepts of **yin and yang** (陰陽, *yīn yáng*) of ancient Chinese philosophy stand out, symbolising a conception of the world in which man is at the centre of a harmonious balance between heaven and earth, from which *Taoism* and then the art of **feng shui** (風水, *fēng shuǐ*, lit. wind-water) and *Confucianism* would later derive; on the other, there is the great **agricultural knowledge** which, from the very beginning, has modelled landscapes to

accommodate fields for cultivation. The countryside and nature have therefore been places for the search for immortality, purification of the spirit and renewal, places in which to meditate and found temples; the wide-ranging philosophical production around the theme of nature and the rural world also influenced the invention of the **Chinese garden**. The Chinese man of the past, in all these beliefs, was always in relation to nature itself, understood as a set of elements that constantly change and interact, in search of moral and physical health based on respect for the elements of nature.

The debut of the 20th century

Between 1920 and 1930 China saw the development of its first modern industries; the advance of the secondary sector led to a consequent slowdown in the primary sector, which was still deeply influenced

by archaic traditions and, in particular, by Confucian moralism. The importance of the family community and of rituals and superstitions is deeply rooted especially in rural society, where agricultural production is still managed according to a patriarchal structure. Despite this, at the dawn of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Marxism began to spread, which from 1949 onwards would lead to the dismantling of this structure and the reformulation of the agrarian production system. The **peasant class** (农民, *nóngmín*), from now on is gradually associated with a category engaged in class struggle, a **symbol of a traditional society opposing modern society**, or an oppressed class opposing the dominant class of the State. This view, however, inevitably leads to the **deterioration of the image of the peasant class**, which begins to be reduced to that of an uneducated and economically backward population and will have repercussions up to the present day.

Maoism

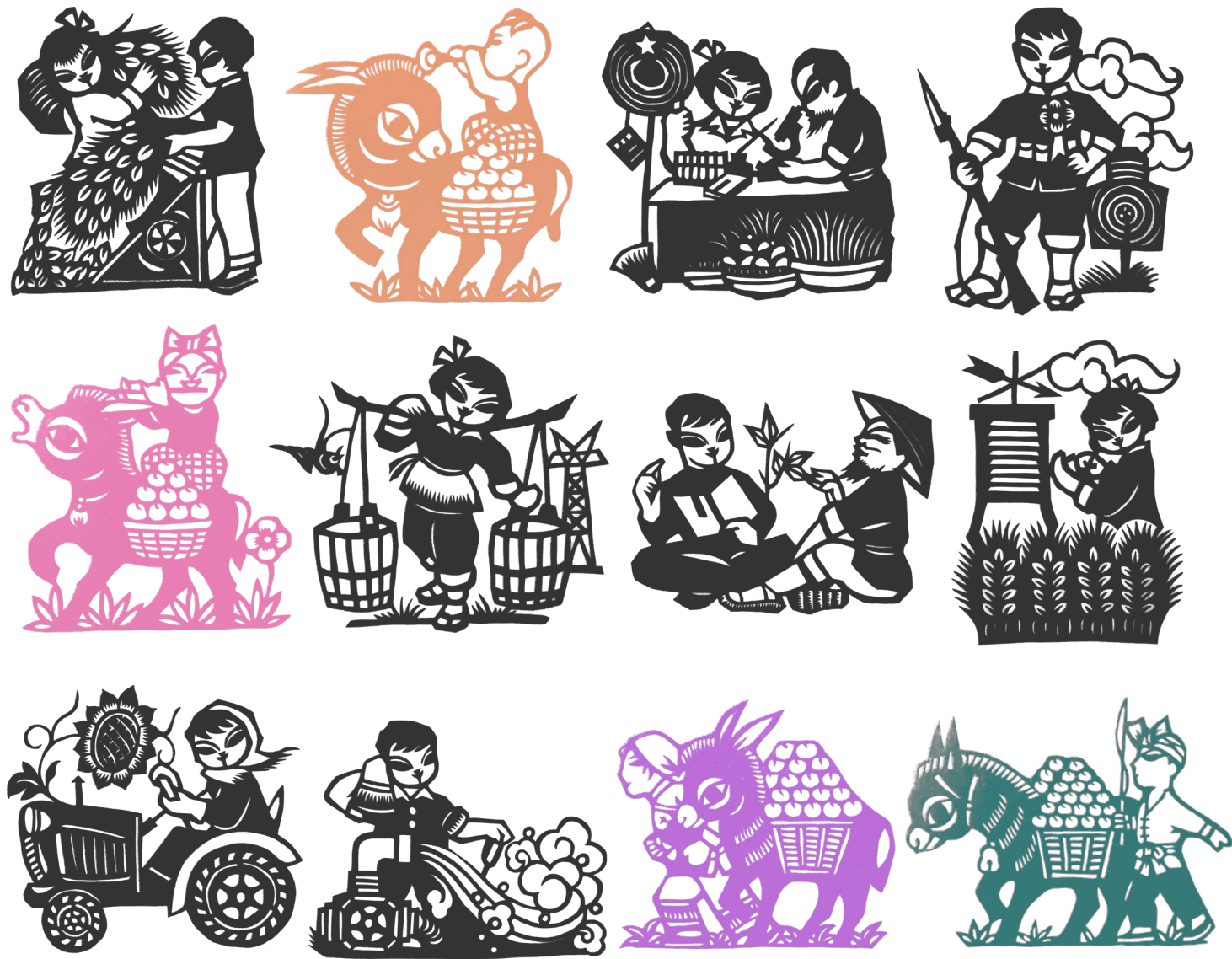
The period from 1949 to 1979 corresponds to the Maoist thirty-year period, a period of great political, socio-economic and cultural change, which inevitably affected rural landscapes and land-use models. At the beginning of the *PRC*, the rural population accounted for 86% of the total population and, with less than 7% of the world's arable land, China fed one fifth of the global population. From now on there is a series of milestones that will lead to a major change in the Chinese countryside. In 1950 there was a first reform centred on the **redistribution of agricultural land to all rural families, expropriating the large landowning families**; the result was an agrarian system made up of a series of private properties owned by rural families with a socialist-Maoist ideology at its base; it was based on the production of the rural population and differed from Soviet socialism, based instead on the struggle of urban

workers. In 1955, with the institution of the division of the territory into two categories, the city and the countryside, saw for the first time an official break that in 1956 would be underlined by the **introduction of the *hukou***, a certification of residence created to distinguish the rural Chinese population from the urban one and to control their movements in the country and prevent the rural exodus; belonging to one of the two categories also established different rights based on geographical origin. From 1956, there was the **complete abolition of private property through a collectivisation campaign and a total reorganisation of the agricultural production system**. From this moment on, the countryside was reshaped, rationalised and homogenised, without much resistance from the rural communities who were given the task of realising the Maoist dream. With the ***Great Leap Forward*** (大跃进, *Dàyuèjìn*) initiative (1958-1962), the life of the peasants changed

radically; called upon to participate in a **collective effort to increase agricultural production**, but above all **to contribute to the country's accelerated industrial and technical development**; they no longer dealt with the management of the fields and crops, which became the business of the leaders of the work brigades. The Chinese rural populations were then organised into ***people's communes***, leading to the **integral collectivisation of their lives**, the personal good in this context giving way entirely to that of the community. Rural humility, altruism and dedication to the country became the greatest aspiration for all citizens. However, as a result of severe famine and hunger, probably due to over-accelerated development, the initiative came to an end in 1962. In the spring of 1966, Chinese culture and tradition, as well as the organisation of the countryside itself, underwent radical changes under the movement of the ***Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution***. During



Figure 2.1 Painting by Chen Yanning, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside*, China, 1972.



this period, which was to end with the death of the *Great Helmsman* Mao Zedong in person, everything that was in any way linked to bourgeois thought was annihilated in favour of the thought of the proletariat, represented by the rural populations themselves. So **away with everything that was linked to old China**, away with the god of money, away with the gods of the earth, away with superstitions and propitiatory rites.⁶ **The countryside again is the solution to urban poverty** and with the slogan “*move the mountains and overturn the seas*”, almost 35 million young educated *Red Guards* are sent to remote villages with the promise of “**purification with countryside values**”, against the old feudal society, reactionaries and capitalism. The influx of urban population to the countryside has a urban influence on the countryside itself not foreseen by political ideology. Moreover, there is a phenomenon of industrialisation that is not accompanied by urbanisation; in fact, facto-

ries are built in the middle of lonely fields (strict control of residential mobility and limited construction of infrastructure) and there is the impression of ‘*ruralising the city and urbanising the countryside*’.⁷ The dichotomy between town and country is thus beginning to blur, both socially and in terms of material and spatial aspects; the Maoist dream of reducing the distinctions between city and countryside within the sphere of an egalitarian vision seems almost to come true. In 1976, Mao Zedong died, and from this moment on, circumstances changed radically once again, leading to further repercussions from both a social and a purely morphological and settlement perspective.

Economic reform era

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping took the helm of the new government and, **moving away from egalitarian political and ideological ambitions**,

6. Li Kunwu, Ôtié, P., *Una vita cinese, 1. Il tempo del padre*, Torino, add editore, 2016, p.116 .

7. Leroux, M., *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, Genève, MëtisPresses, 2019, p.36.

Figures 4.1 Chinese folk paper-cuts found in an Italian antiquarian bookshop, *Typical chinese peasant figures of the second half of the 20th century*, Yangchow, China.

aimed at the economic recovery of the country through the so-called **four modernisations**; the modernisation of industry, agriculture, science and defence, towards the construction of a **socialist society with Chinese characteristics**. The ambitious programme of the new head of government includes three main stages: the first aims to feed and clothe the people; the second, which is expected to last until the end of the century, sees the emergence of a small bourgeoisie; the third moves towards competition with other countries. Thus began a new era which, on the one hand, would lead to the **decollectivisation of land** and the encouragement of private activities, and on the other, to **China's opening up to the outside world** and in particular to the western world, which had been avoided and denied until a few years earlier. A socialist market economy was thus put in place and the countryside was once again the centre of attention: China is still a strongly agricultural coun-

try and peasants represent almost the entire population; agricultural production at the same time is no longer able to meet the needs of the population, as it has remained anchored to traditional farming techniques unchanged for centuries. The *people's communes* of the previous period were not the right instrument for industrial take-off and were therefore abolished between 1981 and 1983. The **Household Contract Responsibility System** was introduced, which was first tested in the village of Xiaogang in Anhui Province and was to be the decisive turning point for agricultural production. This system makes it possible to maintain collective ownership of agricultural land but, at the same time, allows individual families to have the usufruct and therefore to use and manage it with the sole contractual obligation of paying collective and state taxes and being able to keep all the rest of the income for themselves. **The system transformed farmers into producers and managers,**

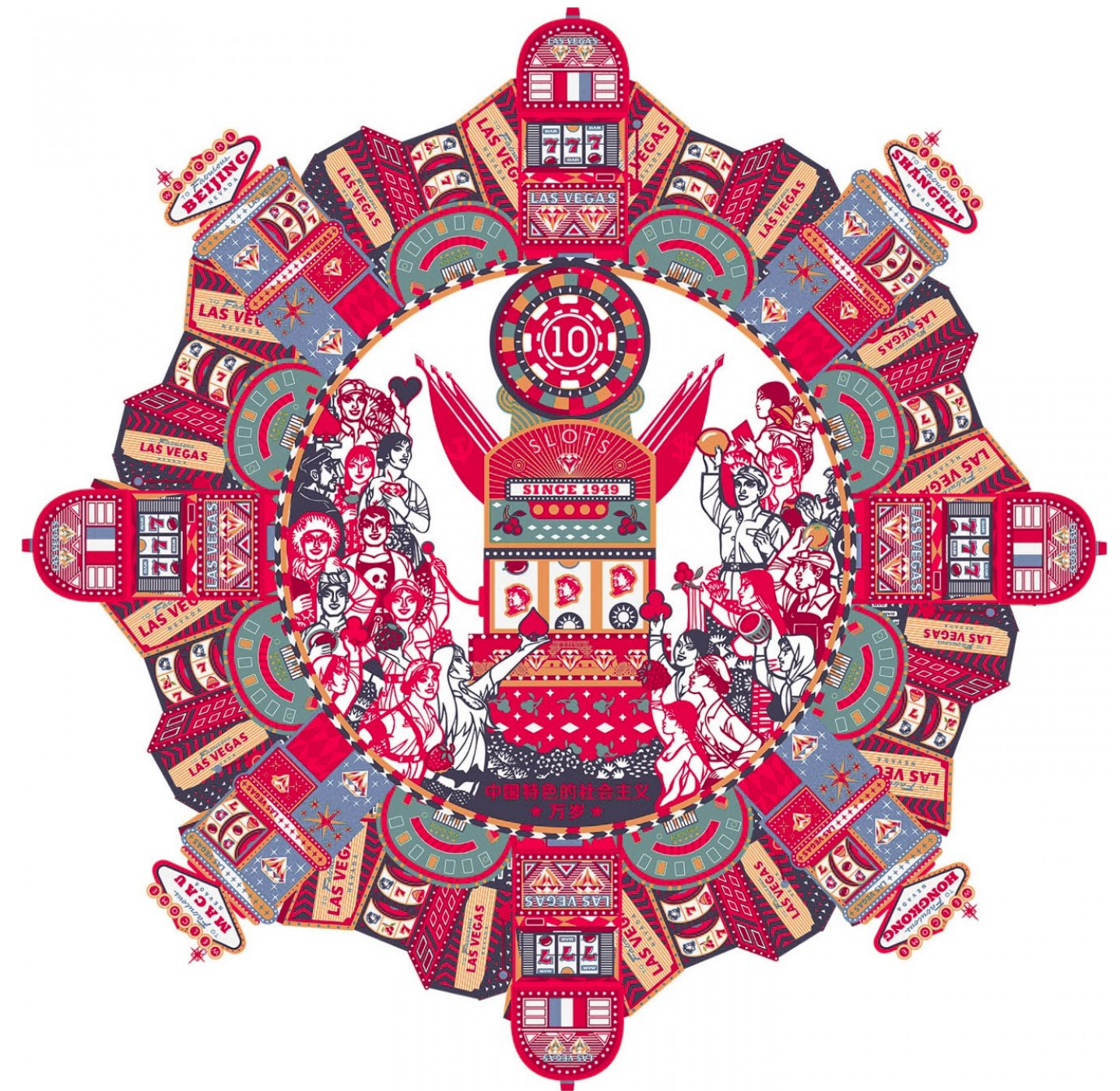


Figure 5.1 A screenprint by Jacky Tsai, *Long Live Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, 2016.

giving them greater importance in the production process. Thanks to these new reforms, the economy has seen, since the 1980s, a vertiginous growth in terms of production, consumption and standard of living. To compensate for the large surplus of rural labour force resulting from collectivisation, it was decided to dedicate 10% of it to the creation of private activities; however, the small businesses that sprang up in the small and medium-sized centres were weak in the face of the big competition and therefore not profitable enough. This factor, together with the lack of national funds for infrastructure development, education, health and culture in rural communities, inevitably leads to **disparities** and inequalities between the countryside and the cities, which are growing year by year. In spite of attempts to regulate the rate of urbanisation of large centres in favour of smaller ones, the search for fortune and better conditions inevitably results in a massive **rural exodus**. From

this moment on, the centrality of the countryside begins to fade, giving way to the large urban realities, a new symbol of open-mindedness, a place of reconciliation between workers and capitalists.⁸ The goal is to reach the level of the other big cities of the average developed countries by the end of the century; this is only possible with the effort of the whole population, especially the urban one, which must follow the movement of the *5 constraints 4 beauties* (*5 jiang 4 mei*) and therefore pay attention to civility, courtesy, hygiene, order, morality and beauty of heart, language, behaviour and environment. Thus, in a very short time, China is seeing an unprecedented evolution on all fronts which, like all things, brings advantages but also disadvantages. The **gap between urban and rural areas** widened considerably and, in the mid-1990s, the so-called **three rural problems** came to the fore; Deng Xiaoping died in 1997, bequeathing to the new millennium a number of unresolved problems.



8. Li Kunwu, Ôtié, P., *Una vita cinese, 2. Il tempo del Partito*, Torino, add editore, 2016, p.185.

Figure 6.1 A bridge image between Eastern and Western culture in a traditional Chinese way by Jacky Tsai, *Harmonious Society, One Night in Macau*, Acrylic on canvas 120 cm diameter, 2017.

#2 AN HARMONIOUS SOCIETY

二

Indeed, at the dawn of the 21st century, China's national policy began to focus on social issues, in search of a more egalitarian society. At the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, it was decided to 'build a harmonious society', which would not only aim to reduce the gap between rich and poor, and therefore also between countryside and city, but also to improve access to health and education, reduce pollution and combat the corruption born of the embrace of capitalism.



Figure 1.2 An image of the the iconic building of China's state-run television agency in the background and happy citizens enjoying China's ample harvest, *CCTV Tower With Bountiful Harvest*, 2013.

Building a New Socialist Countryside

2005 saw the **11th Five-Year Plan**, which aims to revitalise rural China and further develop the economy. In particular, the aim is to absorb the rural exodus and de-densify urban centres. The difficulties faced by rural populations are highlighted and the **three rural development issues** - agriculture, rural areas and farmers - are addressed. The aim is to modernise agricultural techniques, develop basic infrastructure in rural areas and improve the socio-economic situation of farmers respectively. To do this, some of the surplus agricultural labour is being shifted to the secondary and tertiary sectors, which are being developed more in small and medium-sized towns in the rural areas themselves. Although attempts are made to address all three issues, the gap between

town and country is profound. From an administrative point of view, it is clear that the **countryside is closely dependent on the cities** (or administrative regions); on the other hand, *hukou* as a social status, linked simply to filiation and place of birth and no longer linked to a specific activity or territorial reality, generates strong inequality and segregation and, therefore, difficulties in integrating any rural immigrants into the cities. In 2008, the economic crisis caused the global economy to recede and China saw a steep drop in demand for its products. In order to improve the international competitiveness of Chinese products, the search for new innovations in both the city and the countryside is therefore intensified. In particular, the 18th *NPC* of the Chinese Communist Party created a new development plan for rural areas called “*Beautiful China*”, a policy closely linked to environmentalism. Thus, in 2013, the government launched the “*Beautiful Countryside*” project,

focusing on its sustainable development. In the same year, the Minister of Agriculture launched the *Beautiful Villages* campaign, the construction of which touches on various aspects, from economic production to environmental preservation. With the 12th Five-Year Plan, a new form of urbanisation is created as an official development policy. There is great confidence in scientific progress in support of food autonomy, towards the production of more and more food with optimised land use. Thus, urbanisation is advocated that focuses on coordinating the industrial development of cities and towns with rural communities, in order to achieve a more balanced economic growth of the country through the improvement of international transport systems and the standardisation of new cities, so as to accelerate the development of the **New Socialist Countryside**.

Issues raised

Thus, starting from the eleventh five-year plan, the questions relating to the overcrowding of the continent's large cities began to become more and more pressing, and with the economic reforms of the 1980s, these cities grew out of all proportion in just a few years. In a context where, on the one hand, there is an overabundance of population condensed in the cities and, on the other, a stagnant and underdeveloped situation in the countryside, the **rural exodus** remains the **biggest problem to be solved**. In order to understand how to solve this problem, however, one must first understand the causes of the problem itself, which clearly lie in the rural world and can be summarised as the **three rural problems**.

CRITICAL RURAL CONDITION

RURAL EXODUS

CITIES OVERCROWDING

Figure 2.2 An image of people that queue to get into a space rocket. This painting is probably both a symbol of China's space ambition and the enormous migration of country's rural population into cities in the last couple of decades, *City Migration*, 2013.



Figure 3.2 A photo showing migrant workers on the move following 2008 layoffs.



Figure 4.2 A photo by Eugene Hoshiko, returning migrant workers carry their belonging at Shanghai Railway Station, Shanghai, China, 2011.

In order to contain the growing overpopulation of large cities, it is necessary to focus on the roots of the problem, which are clearly inherent in the critical condition of the Chinese countryside in the recent past. Perhaps simplistically, **it was then thought that if the rural populations were going to the city, then the city could simply be moved to the countryside.** So, since 2005, there has been planning for the development of small and medium-sized cities in rural areas, with the aim of redirecting populations to these local destinations. Vice-Minister Qiu Baoxin himself believes that the solution to the three rural problems cannot lie in the rural itself, but that a rational urban system must be created.⁹ Clearly people, in the universal history of the world, have always moved in search of something better and this is the only way to find it. “When you miss something, you go and get it”¹⁰, and clearly this lack has not been fully filled as in contemporary times the rural exodus in

China is still a partially unresolved problem. Despite the fact that the social status of the *hukou* makes the life of “peasants” in the cities very complex and that their relocation leads to the loss of their land, many people still decide to move to the city in search of fortune.

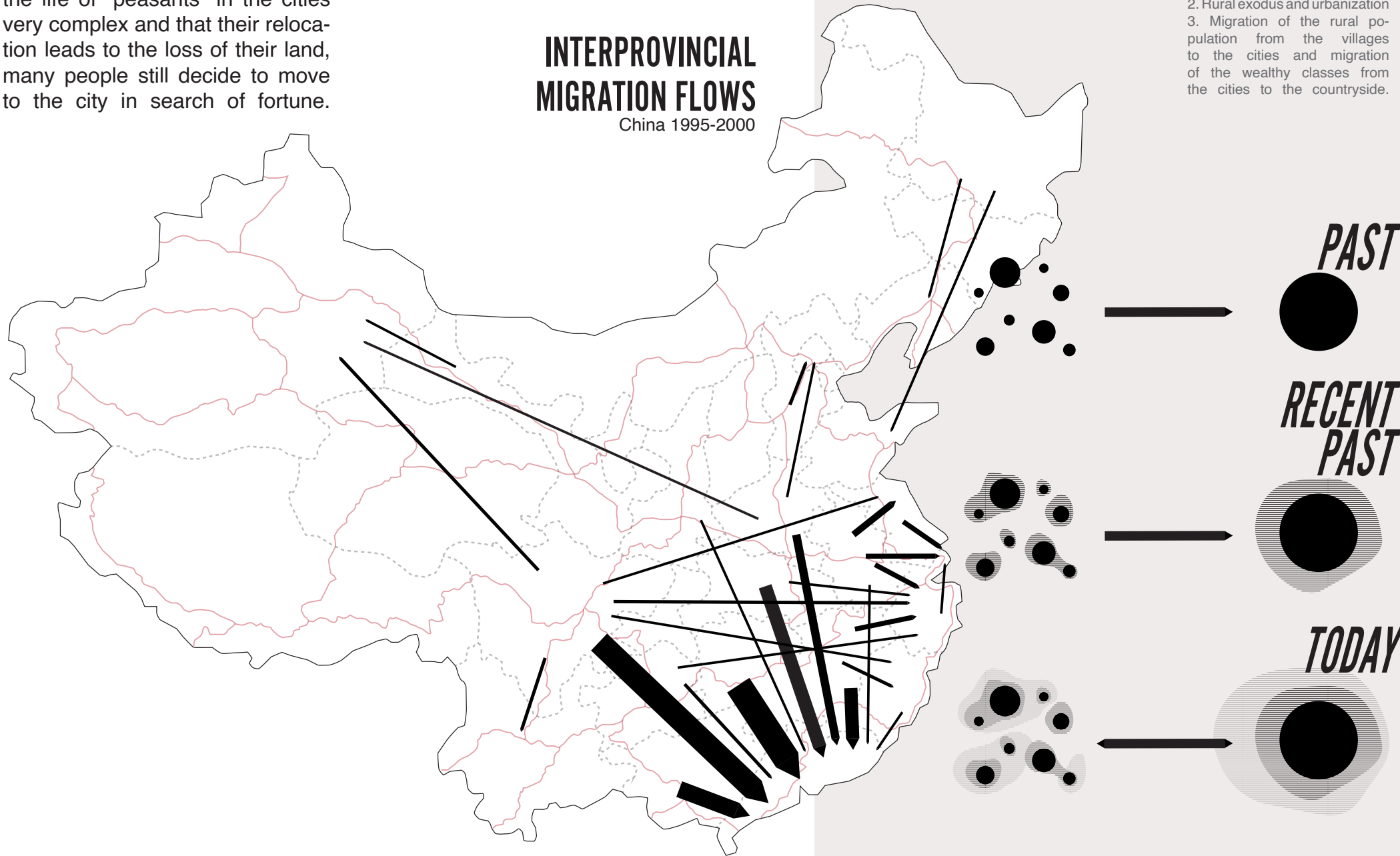


Figure 4.2 Interprovincial migrant flows map and personal interpretation of the Chinese migration development:
1. Rural exodus
2. Rural exodus and urbanization
3. Migration of the rural population from the villages to the cities and migration of the wealthy classes from the cities to the countryside.

9. Leroux, M., *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, Genève, MétisPresses, 2019, p.44-45.

10. Steinback, J., *Furore*, Milano, Bompiani, 1940.

This raises the question, nowadays, of whether it was right to **consider the countryside as a new urban terrain**, whether it was a good idea not to look at its peculiarities, which are certainly different from those of the city. This can perhaps be considered a **first error of judgement**; rural areas are assimilated into purely urban territory, so the **general specificity** of the countryside is lost. Moreover, if we consider that the rural problem is a problem that in those years starts to become more and more serious, the search for a solution therefore requires an **acceleration in the urbanisation of the areas** in question. It is clear that wanting to speed up the process inevitably leads to a **standardisation of territorial planning**, which then follows generic norms, objectives and guidelines for the whole of China. This way of acting on the territory is based on a lack of awareness of the specificity of places and their social, cultural and landscape identity. Homologation to the

same standards and guidelines leads to the depersonalisation of the territory, a bit like the *Modern Movement*. Without denying that there is a real and urgent need to create new places of life for people in the countryside immediately, unfortunately the decision to standardise projects across the continent leads in turn to the loss of **local specificity**, creating a *de facto* anonymous and monotonous carpet.

The strong urgency to realise these minor urban settlements leads to a chain of decisions that result in the current state of China's territory. The countryside and rural villages that are chosen as planning sites possess typical rural characteristics that are not compatible with short-term planned urbanisation. Large areas of land are under-exploited or unused; villages often have a dispersed configuration that makes it difficult to establish infrastructure and public facilities; functions merge with each other and zoning is chaotic; and the flow of traffic wi-

thin them is often not fluid but interrupted by dead ends or roads that stop. These characteristics make the construction of a town resting on a rural settlement complex; the most immediate solution therefore seems to be the **dismantling of the villages** themselves, leaving *carte blanche* for planning. Since the villages are obviously inhabited, an expropriation of the houses and land is necessary first. In particular, while urban land is owned by the state, agricultural land belongs to the rural communities, but they cannot change its use. Therefore, land is first requisitioned and then transformed into urban land owned by the state; through the transfer of ownership it is then possible to modify it. The dismantling of villages becomes an ideal solution not only for urbanisation itself, but also for what follows it; **strong settlement expansion leads to the loss of agricultural land that has to be recovered through the dismantling itself**, in an unparalleled vicious

circle. Expropriation measures, which have affected tens of millions of rural dwellers over the past two decades and led to the erasure of almost 900,000 villages, are one of the main causes of peasant revolts.

Once the space has been freed up, the next step is to start the actual urban planning process which, as already mentioned, is based on standard rules and regulations applicable to the entire continent. A reference work in this sense, published by the National Building Industry Press, is ***Principles of Urban Planning*** (Chengshi guihua yuanli) (Wu 2010), which brings together all the rules and recommendations for drafting and designing general plans for new cities and is one of the basic textbooks for university education at the national level in architecture and urban planning schools in China. Basically, the Town Plan consists of three main elements: the road network, zoning and landscaping. The shape of the road network generally shows litt-

le adaptation to the territory and is everywhere designed in the same form, usually using the “grid” as the infrastructure pattern which, in turn, generates a strong sectoralisation of the various meshes that compose it. Sectoralisation, in turn, is closely related to zoning into functions; for example, residential areas will tend to be closed in on themselves, somewhat in the manner of *American gated communities*, and will have all the necessary facilities within them. This clear definition of zones allows the best management of functions at government level, but rarely corresponds to the morphological reality of the dismantled settlement; moreover, it must be pointed out that attention is often focused only on the planning area without giving importance to the rural territories surrounding it. The **peripheries**, therefore, are often left to their own devices and, less organised, see an expansion generated by ever-increasing endogenous (spontaneous, *in situ*) urbanisation outside official

planning (from scratch, *ex nihilo*).

Analysing the main features of rural urbanisation in China can certainly be helpful in understanding what improvements could be made in the contemporary world in the light of increasing overcrowding. Certainly, among the various limitations that this system has had, and to some extent still has, is the **environmental cost**. Although the government is no stranger to the issue and tries to manage the problem through large-scale policies and campaigns, the impact of development is extremely strong on the landscape and thus on the quality of the environment. Some of the choices related to the acceleration of planning, such as the standardisation of projects at continental level, lead to serious problems later on. Not adapting to the climatic and environmental conditions of a specific place does not allow buildings to make the most of them; this inevitably leads to higher energy consumption, for

example for air conditioning systems. In addition, the transformation of the countryside into cities also leads to an increase in mobility, especially for individuals, which is one of the main causes of air and noise pollution, an issue that is no longer negligible in today's China. The non-adaptation of infrastructure to the landscape, and therefore its violent imposition, leads to the **loss of the actual identity of the place**, as well as **serious damage to the land itself**. Dismantling villages and farmland in order to create completely new compositions does not only have morphological and material repercussions; such actions also erase **intangible values of the places** themselves. The standardisation *ex nihilo* of spaces literally eradicates the culture and therefore the specific identity of each rural community and everything closely related to it. The populations thus find themselves living in anonymous, banal and depersonalising spaces that cannot be assimilated

to the intimate sense of home (家, *jiā*)¹¹. It should also be noted that uncontrolled urban sprawl often leads to open construction sites that are abandoned due to a lack of sufficient funding, or to entire neighbourhoods that are deserted.

This whole series of realities that have arisen as a result of this type of development make us reflect on **the real need to change direction**. Today, it is necessary to find new ways of developing the countryside, which should no longer be seen as new urban territories but as something in its own right. **It is no longer convenient to look at the rural world with the same eyes with which we look at cities**; we need to start thinking from a new angle, in order to stimulate new ideas for development. China, in this sense, has already started to give rise to some more conscious and responsible ideas about places.



11. 家, *jiā*: home, family. Character made up of 宀, *mián*: roof and 豕, *shǐ*: pig; the result is a picture of a pig under a roof, from ancient days when livestock lived with the family.

#3 CURRENT FRAMEWORK OF CHINESE LAND



The best way to understand how to develop a place in a new way is to study it first, not only in its morphological and spatial characteristics, but also in its economic, social and cultural ones. In the following, therefore, an attempt will be made to highlight some general specific features of today's Chinese rural world in order to grasp its authentic meaning.

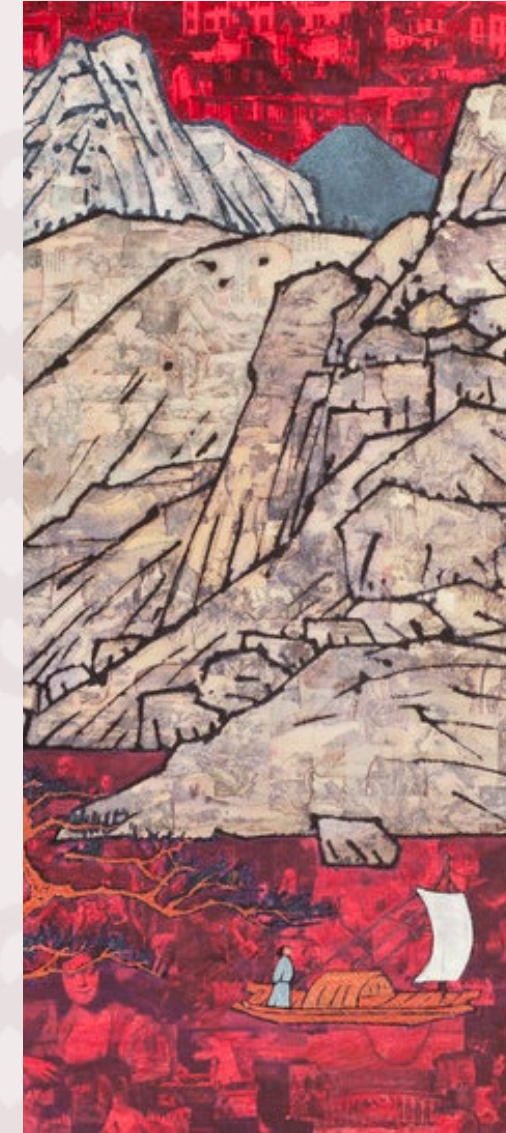
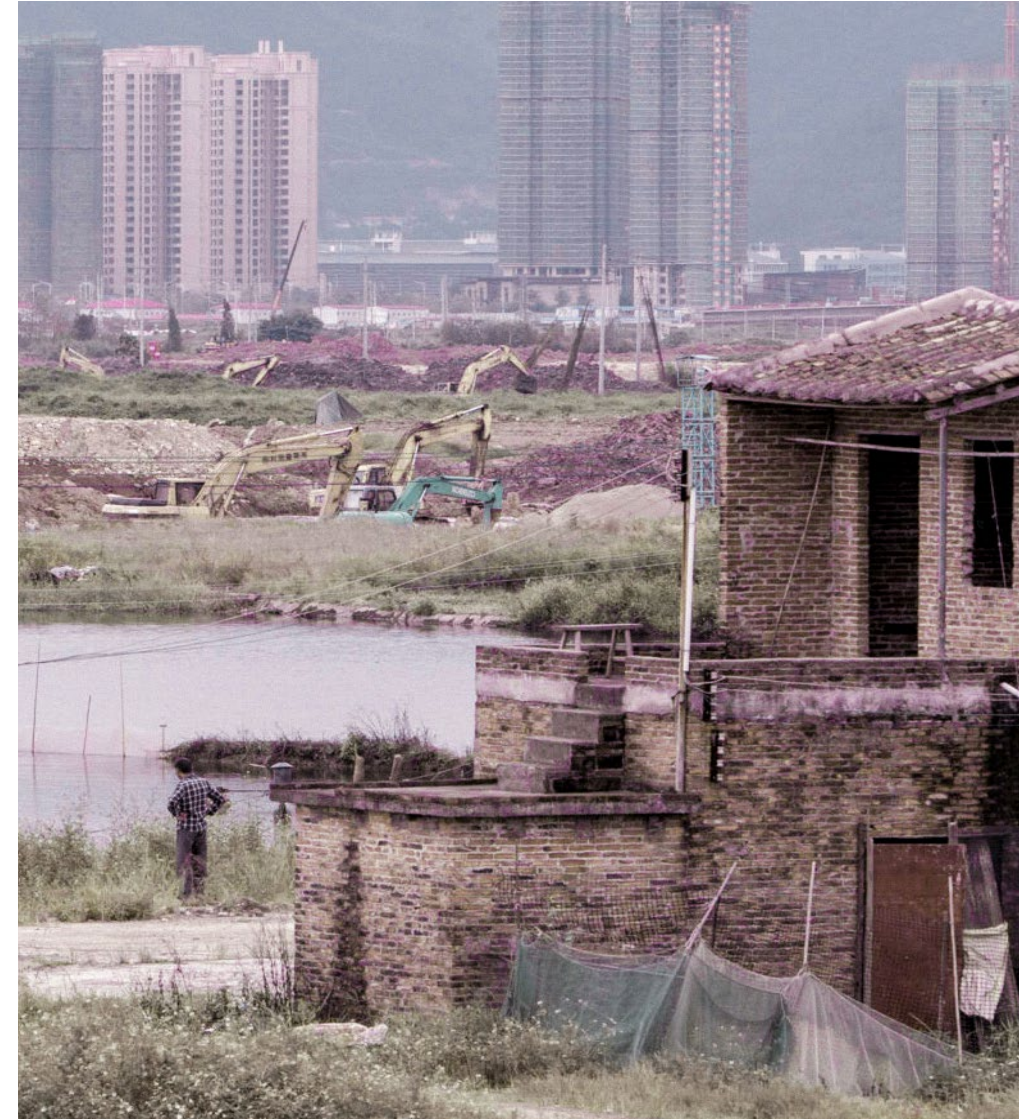


Figure 1.3 A painting by Xue Song, *Bon Voyage*, 2018.

Rural urbanization

In today's China, it is possible to observe a number of very different realities. These include the canonical urban and rural realities, which historically have always been opposed to each other and have constituted a distinct dichotomy. However, the strong development since the reform era has also created much more **blurred realities**. Since the 1980s there has been extremely rapid development in China's large cities, but they are not the only ones to develop; small and medium-sized towns have also become a destination for that part of the countryside's workforce which, at the end of the Maoist era, is overabundant. Thus, many villages (县, *xiàn*) turned into towns and many towns (镇, *zhèn*) turned into cities; starting in 1979, small and medium-sized towns, which accounted for 12% of total urbanisation, reached 45% in 2015, with 2,816 towns producing 84.5% of the country's total economy.¹²

As already mentioned, the urbanisation of small and medium-sized towns in countryside areas leads to a series of stereotypical and anonymous places, repeated across the continent in a very formal and zoned manner. The result is clearly a loss of original character and traditional building techniques in favour of an exuberant globalisation of places. The development of these realities, however, has not been entirely planned. Often, on the one hand, new anonymous residential neighbourhoods have been created in the suburbs or in areas where the pre-existing historical fabric has been dismantled, in order to accommodate the new workforce of the secondary and tertiary sectors; on the other hand, many morphological-settlement changes have taken place more spontaneously. Those of these villages who have moved to the big cities have in turn sent money to their families who have remained in the village. Thus, each family modified and modernised its own dwelling by



12. Meriggi, M., *L'architettura del continuo urbano-rurale in Cina. Insediamenti Hakka nel Guangdong Orientale*, Boves, Araba Fenice, 2018, p.4.

Figure 2.3 A photo by Samuele Pellecchia, *China goes Urban. The new era of the city*, MAO Museum of Oriental Art, Turin, Italy, 2019.

its own hand. As a result, the morphological fabric of the dwellings in these centres is often stratified and also very diversified. Between the villages that have remained purely rural - often abandoned to their own devices and inhabited by an almost elderly population - and the large Chinese megalopolises, there are these new realities, which are still constantly developing. The sometimes **sterile urban development** in these lands is the consequence of two situations that have followed one another in Chinese history: the first is that of the Maoist **Cultural Revolution**, which partly **denied the ancient local traditions and thus part of the country's historical memory**; the second is **globalisation**, starting with China's opening up to the outside world, which likewise partly **denied its architectural identity in favour of more modern technology**. Thus, it can be said that several generations of Chinese have been somehow educated to have

no feeling of attachment to the past.¹³ In particular, the populations living in the countryside, having emerged from a past of poverty and hunger and in view of increasing modernisation, see in the continent's great economic development a beautiful flame to be kept alive even at the cost of uprooting **their roots, the symbol of an archaic past from which to escape in order to improve their living conditions**.

Despite this phenomenon, it must be pointed out that over the years a great awareness of the value of China's historical heritage has grown, especially among intellectuals, and this has translated into increasingly responsible planning and design for it. However, in the recent past, the lack of awareness or deliberate neglect of traditions, added to the urgency of speeding up urbanisation processes, has generated places in rural areas of complex interpretation that no longer correspond to the simple city-countryside classification.

The blurred dichotomy

At the dawn of China's modernisation, the opposition between city and countryside became stronger, both because there was initially a large rural exodus to the big cities, and because the countryside itself began to be characterised simply as an agricultural space that was being industrialised with a view to providing food supplies for the growing cities. As development progresses, however, the issue of overcrowding in the cities becomes more and more serious and the countryside becomes, after not so long, once again the protagonist of the continent's development. This led to what can be defined as **rural urbanisation** which, particularly with the establishment of the *new socialist countryside*, resulted in a complete reversal of the rural-urban dichotomy. In spite of the vastness of natural and rural territories in 21st century China, there

is a growing number of realities that through urban development can be defined as *middle ground*, or rather as an **rural-urban continuum** in which the notion of rural *versus* urban space becomes obsolete. This process can be compared to that which took place in the 1960s in Europe, which was going through a period of economic renaissance and in which rural space began to be considered as interstitial and residual and the territory as a homogeneous space on which to place functions abstracted from the specificity of places.¹⁴ Similarly, the aim is to **pull the countryside out of backwardness by spreading urban ways of life**, the technologisation of agriculture and the development of non-agricultural employment. This phenomenon is well described in the research carried out by Joshua Bolchover and John Lin who, starting in 2006, a year after the 11th Five-Year Plan, made a journey through China's rural realities and recounted the results in the book *Rural Ur-*

13. Gregotti, V., *L'ultimo hutong, lavorare in architettura nella nuova Cina*, Milano, Skira editore, 2009, p.11-12 .

14. Rubino, A., *La nuova ruralità*, Università di Firenze - Laboratorio di Progettazione Ecologica degli Insediamenti (LaPEI), 2010, p. 3.

ban Framework: Transforming the Chinese countryside. Interesting is the description of the landscape they pass over, described as being in a **state of incompleteness and transition**, where distinct urban concentrations alternate with amalgamations of built fabric and farmland. The study was conducted in order to understand what processes of rural transformation and urbanisation have taken place and what new settlement types have been generated, arriving at a true typological classification of villages in the new millennium. It is pointed out that many of these emerging urban-rural areas in China have progressively blurred the canonical dichotomy between city and countryside, becoming in fact **models that are neither rural nor urban, but a combination of the two**. These new areas of transition and overlap no longer correspond to the countryside, which thirty years ago was populated only by farmers and herders; today the society that inhabits them is extre-

mely more complex and stratified in terms of work, leisure, home, income, aspirations, etc., and is also more complex and stratified in terms of the people who live there. Places with built forms, densities and population levels that were once attributed to the city are still legally defined as rural land where the attribution of a rural-type hukou still applies and which, in reality, no longer strictly have the characteristics of the countryside. This generates ambiguous territories from a material and legal point of view and represents a new critical issue that China needs to deal with from both perspectives. In particular, there is an increasing need to find new development ideas for these places, which often find themselves in an in-between situation: half-finished, partially abandoned or half-demolished.¹⁵ It is probably also the speeding up of processes in recent years that is the cause of these indecisive states of places that are not only often anonymous and standardised, but also lack an up-to-date de-

finition of their own and are themselves in an in-between position.

Culture and society in contemporary countryside

It is quite clear that places which are quite difficult to define from a typological or governmental point of view correspond to a society and culture which are equally difficult to interpret. However, by analysing the processes of birth and development of these settlements, and taking into account the historical evolution of Chinese society, it is perhaps possible to define some general characteristics that may be useful for the purposes of a design proposal for the future development of these places. In particular, it must be borne in mind that the spatial changes that have taken place in recent decades in China correspond to very profound changes in the society inhabiting the

spaces. If in the Maoist period it was easy to describe the society, which clearly tended towards egalitarian instances, today, starting from the birth of a new middle class, the society is extremely diversified. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish **three types of rural space** that came into being during the strong urbanisation of the continent: that of the countryside not yet reached by modernisation, subject to abandonment and rural exodus; that of the additional crowns on the outskirts of the cities which, defined as peri-urban areas, present a strong urbanisation often in conflict with the rural origin of the land itself; and finally those areas where the increase in urbanisation, often in the form of densification around the nodes of the old rural villages, depends both on industrial decentralisation and tourist development, and on the growth of the non-agricultural population. As already described above, in the recent past, rural urbanisation was mainly based on the problem

15. Bolchover, J., Lin, J., *Rural Urban Framework, Transforming the Chinese countryside*, Basel, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2014, p.11.

of rural exodus and the consequent overcrowding of large cities; with productive decentralisation and agricultural industrialisation, the problem was therefore partially slowed down. In recent times, however, **these places have seen not only a settlement of populations with rural hukou, but also a displacement of the wealthier classes, in search of a different lifestyle from the urban one.** These phenomena not only generate ambiguous territories from a material and governmental point of view; **the blurring of the dichotomy between city and countryside is also reflected in the social and cultural spheres.** In the social system of these places, different lifestyles coexist, often without integrating, that are closely related to the morphological characteristics in which they develop. The lack of integration between different populations is mainly due to the **different perceptions and meanings attributed to the rural world:** the old inhabitants have a

Figure 3.3 A photo by Aaron Reiss, *Floating Population, While China's strict household registration, or hukou, system limits the mobility of rural peasants to cities, it has not curbed recent massive internal migration to urban centers in search of economic opportunity. These migrants, known as China's 'floating population,' face constant discrimination, economic hardship, and a lack of access to basic public services. Here plain-clothes construction laborers from the countryside are seen in front of Guangzhou's glittering skyline, Guangzhou, China, 2010.*





Figure 4.3 Xinhua photo, Wang Guixian, 61, and his wife Zhang Shumei, with four stools reserved for their four children who left home to work, sit in front of their home in a village of Mawan county, Jingbian county, Northwest China's Shaanxi province, 2011.

Figure 5.3 A photo by Kim Kyung-Hoon, People ride escalators and walk down the stairs on their way to a subway platform during rush hour in Beijing.

vision of it that is more linked to the productive value of the land, while the new inhabitants, belonging to the middle class that has formed in recent decades, see the countryside as a harmonious and homely universe, in contrast to the now too chaotic and polluted metropolises. Thus, these marginal areas begin to change shape and transform in terms of ways of living and dwelling. On the one hand, there are the **villagers** who, usually, going from being farmers to being labourers, live in ways that deny their culture and identity, according to a process of homologation to the urban model of their lifestyles and environments. Their vision of the rural world is that of a place of 'non-possibilities' *vis-à-vis* the productive city, which offers them the opportunity to improve their social status.¹⁶ On the other hand, **citizens** who idealise life in the countryside, exalting its idyllic characteristics towards the ancestral culture of the rural world. Many people in the new middle class belong to the genera-

tion that has seen the drastic changes China has undergone since the Maoist era and then the reform era; many are therefore partly linked to a past connected to the rural world and life. **The collection of memories, often preserved in their most pleasant images, leads to a nostalgic feeling towards past life that is lacking in recent urban contemporaneity.** Thus the idea of living in healthier places, where one's children can grow up, and linked in a certain way to the childhood of these generations is expressed in the need to change the place of life. **It is as if everyone is trying to be something they are not:** the villager wants to be a citizen in order to have access to a series of rights and modernity that are not granted to him in the countryside; the citizen wants to return, even if in an "elevated" way, to the life of a farmer, more healthy and linked to the land and nature. Each has something the other lacks, **both seek a better way of life.** In those villages that have turned into

towns, it is quite usual to identify, in a more or less distinct way, types of society that live in the same town, but in a completely different way. The lack of integration, first of all social and cultural, but also morphological and settlement-related, is an issue that needs to be addressed with awareness.

If mutual aid has always been a fundamental value in Chinese history, then it seems almost obvious that, in such a situation, integration is the first step towards the future. Those who have always lived in the rural world and who now find themselves living in villages that are now enlarged villages, bring with them a series of characters and lifestyles that descend from previous historical eras. In fact, even the peasants who moved to the cities in search of fortune and greater modernity unconsciously retain these characteristics, so much so that it is not difficult to feel that they are in a typically rural world even within one of China's many metropolises. Many of these ways

of doing things, which may or may not be spontaneous, generate one, or rather, several collective identities closely linked to rurality. In neighbourhoods inhabited by people legally defined as rural, very close-knit communities develop, in which the common good often comes before the individual.¹⁷ Many daily actions are lived spontaneously and collectively, creating warm, familiar and intimate environments. This is no longer the case in the cities, where, especially in the new residential areas, the shapes and sizes of spaces combined with the new hectic life of long home-work distances and unhealthy places no longer allow people to enjoy the simplicity of village life. In **hybrid towns**, with a rural village as the original settlement core and new residential districts and industrial poles on the outside, the tendency is towards a levelling of living arrangements, towards uniformity of lifestyles; heavy urbanisation seeks to dismantle the rural character of these places in favour

16. Rubino, A., *La nuova ruralità*, Università di Firenze - Laboratorio di Progettazione Ecologica degli Insediamenti (LaPEI), 2010, p. 4.

17. Confucian derivation: the fulfilment of the individual's responsibilities towards others and society. The individual, in constituting his or her relationship with the other, should not see himself or herself as the centre, but rather as the starting point for valuing the other, submitting his or her own personal interests to the demands of responsibility.

Figure 6.3 A photo by Chiara Loi, laundry laid out in an old neighbourhood in Nanjing, China, 2019.



Figure 7.3 A photo by Jorge Silva, men drink and chat outside a shop in the traditional neighbourhood of Yuexiu in Guangzhou, China, 2019.





of modernisation and technology. In reality, if one takes a closer look at the original neighbourhoods of these small towns, one still sees chickens running away from some amused children, clothes are hung in the street and the smell of fresh onions and beef in broth accompany you along the narrow, twisted alleys: **everything smells extremely like jiā**. Those old people sitting there, drinking warm water and playing *Mahjong*, first look at you and then smile and say hello, even if they don't know you. And, in fact, it makes you think that human beings are not made to live their lives in eternal individuality. Over the years, **China has conquered the individual sphere of people, but today it has gone to extremes**, just as perhaps in the past it had gone to extremes in its collective character. In the large cities as well as in the new residential districts of these small towns, the depersonalising character of the places has exasperated this individuality from which people now

want to escape. The great *Generic City*¹⁸ has supplanted the identity of places and people themselves, who now feel as confused as the space they inhabit. So the rural world, or rather, what remains of it, can represent today, in its evolution, a basis from which to formulate possible solutions. The search for a *jiā* by the new urban elites inevitably leads to the question of what foundations this home should rest on. Moreover, the extraneous work of planners and governmental systems is no longer sufficient; the actors must also include the *wise men*, those who build the house in their daily lives, the villagers themselves. The latter are indeed the proponents of the founding realities of what can be called rural society; these realities can be summarised in the *three concepts* of **identity, community and rurality**. Their definition and evolution can thus clarify how, in the contemporary world, a more integrated and conscious development of the *new rural society* can take place.

Figure 8.3 IUD image, A barber in Guangzhou, China, 2014

18. Koolhaas, R., *Junkspace*, Macerata, Quodlibet srl, 2006.

#4 POLYSEMIES

The three concepts of identity, community and rurality have taken on kaleidoscopic meanings and definitions throughout history; even today, attempts are still being made to interpret and define them in ways that vary greatly from case to case. This leads to the conclusion that they are extremely complex and polysemic concepts, especially when related to the history of China. Starting from the canonical vocabulary definition, it may therefore be useful, for each one, to isolate important characters and salient stages in their historical and conceptual evolution in order to better understand the characters of contemporary Chinese rural society.

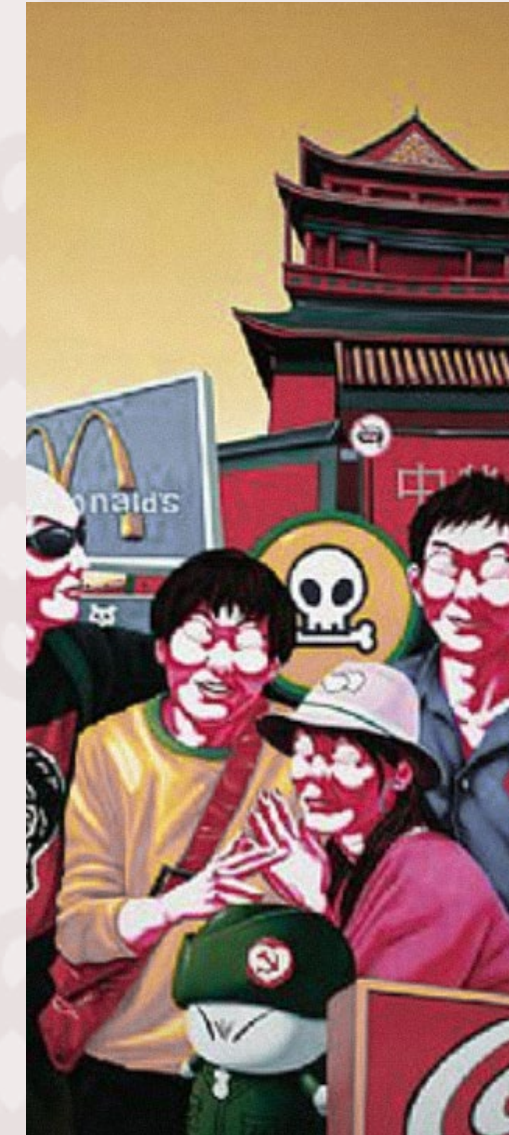


Figure 1.4 A painting by Zhao Bo, *Big Family*, 2009.

Identity

noun [from late Latin *identitas* -atis, der. of *idem* “same”, cast from Greek ταυτότης].

In psychoanalysis, psychological identity, the sense and awareness of self as an entity distinct from others.¹⁹

Identity is the result of an incessant process that influences it without our knowledge or awareness; it is also the result of incorporating and sharing multiple realities, cultures that coexist and contaminate each other, differentiating themselves from time to time.²⁰ It therefore follows that identity is **a product that is never finished and is constantly changing**, a provisional and dynamic entity that is extremely complex. Its continuous evolution in successive stages also determines its inevitable character of stratification and diversification over time; it cannot be reduced to a single specific aspect but to an indefinite plurality of situations and

variables. Moreover, it would be better to speak of plural identities or **multiple identities**: in a reality in which there are plural worlds and not a single unified world and way of life, the formation of multiple identities is inevitable, which converge, influence and interpenetrate each other, but which differ at the same time. The relationships between worlds generate an indeterminate number of possible identities and, as a result of economic and cultural globalisation, the distance between these worlds is getting smaller and smaller. Thus, not only globalisation, but the increasing communication and accessibility of information, the gap between rich and poor, the facilitation of mobility and migration reshape the categories of space and time, distance and proximity between cultures, generating **contaminated hybrid forms of identity**.²¹ Not only is identity not unique, it is also extremely heterogeneous: there is no such thing as a pure identity. Reducing identity to the identical

is tantamount to museifying and mummifying the local cultures and folklore of a given place; we cannot delude ourselves into thinking that we can preserve an identity and thus a timeless culture. All these characters have to be kept well in mind when deciding to lay hands on a given culture in terms of design and planning: extremes on either side are not equally favourable to the development of the identity itself. This means that it is neither right to dismantle an entire village by completely erasing the specific identity of that place but, at the same time, it is not right to museify the same village by keeping it as it is, or even worse, by trying to impose on it a stereotyped identity given from above. Taking into account the dynamism and the continuous development of the identity of places is fundamental in order to be able to understand that the designer, without a careful study of the place itself and without the teaching of those who have inhabited and will inha-

bit those places, cannot be able to modify and/or create morphologies that truly give shape to this aspect. In particular, it is necessary to take into account the **collective identity**, which is defined through belonging to a given group of people who share identity characteristics and feel united among themselves. Like personal identity, collective identity “is never permanently acquired but continually experienced and renegotiated through dialogue or not, with those who belong to the *us*, but also with those who belong to the *them*”.²² It is clear that, if the objective is to study a certain collective identity, its aspects will only be partly observable and detectable by the observer, through the symbols and language used in the group. It follows that the very identity of the group that one seeks to theoretically recompose will be nothing more than a **social construct**.

In order to at least attempt to construct an idea of what is the collective or **national Chinese iden-**

19. Treccani on-line dictionary: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario>.

20. The Federal Commission on Migration FCM: https://www.ekm.admin.ch/ekm/it/home/identitaet---zusammenhalt/identitaet.html#tab0__content_ekm_it_home_identitaet---zusammenhalt_identitaet_jcr_content_par_tabctrl.

21. Di Miscio, A., M., *La soglia io/altro, identità e culture*, Rivista di Scienze Sociali, 2014.

22. Daher, L., M., *Che cosa è l'identità collettiva? Denotazioni empiriche e/o ipotesi di ipostatizzazione del concetto*, Società MutamentoPolitica, n.8(4), pag.125-139.

tity, one probably cannot rely only on contemporaneity, but one must try to summarise an evolutionary identity history of China that keeps in mind some important traits.

It would be presumptuous and disrespectful to give a definite description of the identity of a community as large and varied as China's, but it is useful, for the purposes of a project proposal, to summarise some key general concepts for today's Chinese culture. The rich history that characterises China is clearly part of the evolution of the concept of collective and national identity. Since ancient times, the words of Confucius and then the school of **Confucianism**, as a moral teaching, have clearly influenced Chinese society, especially through the work of the *Analects* (論語, *Lúnyǔ*), a transcription of the Master's maxims by his disciples. Although his principles, considered to be inimical to modernisation, were sidelined from the 20th century onwards, certain notions of moral behaviour

still remain in the Chinese way of life. At the heart of his thinking is **virtue** (仁, *Rén*, humanity, humanness, goodness, benevolence, love) towards one's neighbour, particularly the family and the state; only virtue can elevate man to a higher level and it is the presence of virtue in varying degrees that distinguishes people from one another, not wealth or social class.

Nowadays, Confucianism as a doctrine no longer exists, but a number of identity traits can be clearly identified as being very closely linked to it: respect for the family and elders, respect for the hierarchy itself and, above all, despite the growing modern individuality, the greater importance given to society as a whole than to the individual. This sense of **mutual help** and importance of the common good did not disappear in the Maoist period, despite the denial of the doctrine itself. From 1949 onwards, however, Chinese culture underwent strong changes based on the negation of capitalism, reactionarism and class

division, in favour of an egalitarian society linked to the land; identity in this period became in a sense a political tool used to seek support and validation from within. In a way, an attempt is made to eliminate everything that is linked to the previous tradition, both the bad and the good. However, the material destruction since the *Cultural Revolution* does not correspond to a complete erasure of ancient Chinese identity. With the egalitarian values based on humility and poverty, the legends, rituals and ancient stories, the artistic and craftsmanship skills acquired over the centuries, the culinary knowledge and the pleasure of aesthetics, even as an end in itself, remain dormant. With the opening up of the continent to the outside world, including the western world, in 1979 and the economic and technological development, there are once again changes affecting national identity. With increasing globalisation, it is clear that external influences are affecting Chinese

society in some way, first in the cities but then also in the medium and small villages. Rem Koolhaas speaks of a total loss of past identity in the newly born *Asian Generic Cities* and in the spaces he defines as *junkspace*²³; in reality perhaps it would be better to speak simply of a development of **identity** itself, which **is not a relic but an entity that walks and evolves with humanity**, bringing with it all the stratifications that follow. It is **an identity that no longer has only historical features of China's past, but also global features**.

It is true that the depersonalising sensation caused by extreme **globalisation** is increasingly leading to **disorientation in large cities**. In the post-modern and global contemporary world, people have greater freedom, more experimentation with different identities is allowed and relations between individuals are becoming increasingly complex. Freedom also translates into a **strong individualistic dimension** focused on per-

23. Koolhaas, R., *Junkspace*, Macerata, Quodlibet srl, 2006.



Figure 2.4 & 3.4 A sculpture by Xu Zhen performing a procession of classical European sculptures which, viewed from the front, creates the illusion of a many-armed Buddhist image of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion. This visual Hybrid fuses together the artistic and cultural traditions of east and west, exploring the way in which these cultures collide and how new forms can be created through exchange, *European Thousand-Arms Classical Sculpture*, 2014-2015.

Figure 4.4 A sculpture by Xu Zhen that combines one of the most famous statues of Western antiquity with a Buddhist devotional sculpture creating a hybrid of transcontinental histories, *Eternity - Aphrodite of Knidos, Tang Dynasty Sitting Buddha*, 2014.



sonal fulfilment and defining one's social position; this is the case in the world as well as in China itself. The **multiplicity of choices**, however, translates into **constant uncertainty** and a constant search for one's identity, awakening the desire to have clear points of reference and a sense of belonging to something. It is precisely at a time of increasing disorientation that **people are searching for their own identity**, and this may be one of the reasons why the new urban elites in China decide to move to the countryside; the need is to orientate themselves in more healthy and communal daily realities, which express in a renewed way a **sense of belonging to a place** that is less complex than the big city.

In conclusion, it is possible to simply say that contemporary Chinese collective identity is a layered and multifaceted identity, a product of history up to the present day. At times it is hidden and partly erased, at others exaggerated and iconically magnified in some

skyscraper or other megastructure. At present, however, a more conscious approach is beginning to emerge, an awareness of the need to recover this identity, which is in danger of being erased by compulsive and unstoppable modernisation. The recovery of Chinese cultural and social values is not easy, but it is important to value the differences that represent for China, as for the rest of the world, the only real reason for us to travel and get to know the other.²⁴

Community

noun [from late Latin *Communitas -atis*, der. of *communis* "shared"].

Organisation of a community at local, national and international level.

Group of people having fellowship, sharing the same behaviour and interests; collectivity: doing the interests, the good of the community; national, ethnic c.; family c., the family.²⁵

24. Casamonti, M., *Chinese Identities*, Area 137, 2014, p.4.

25. Treccani on-line dictionary: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario>.

Community is usually place-based and consists of the interdependence and affinity of the people who make it up and who, by sharing it, lead to the development of a certain collective identity; there are obviously different types and levels of community. In general, **territoriality has always been a founding character of the community**; before the development of telecommunications, it was not possible to create a community except in a given material place. Thus, in a limited territory, relationships of interdependence and sharing of certain characters between people usually lead to the formation of a community. This was especially the case in the past, before the radical changes in society brought about by new technologies. The proximity, physical presence and sharing of experiences within a community leads to a development not only of the personal identity of each individual but also, above all, to the development of a collective identity. Of course, there

is not just one kind of community, but there are **countless communities mixed together**, especially in big cities, where distances do not allow for the creation of a single group as can happen in a small rural village of a few inhabitants. Being part of one of these entities means **feeling protected** in a certain sense: everyone helps the other in a mutual relationship without ulterior motives. The sense of belonging makes the members of the community feel united and comforted in a network of people they really and deeply know. Sometimes, however, being in a community can also mean closing oneself off from the outside world, not allowing those outside to have access to the group.

In the **Chinese context**, the concept of community has always been linked to a spatial and morphological-settlement specificity and has evolved in this sense throughout history. The importance of place is also underlined by the term used in modern Chinese par-

lance to indicate community: 社区, **shèqū**, a term first coined by the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, which not only refers to a social group with commonalities, but in particular refers to a socially organised group within an identifiable area. The emphasis on the **place-based nature** of the **Chinese community** is clear. In contrast to sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' definition of community (*Gemeinschaft*), which is a spontaneous unit made up of deep and intimate ties and which is opposed to society (*Gesellschaft*), which, on the other hand, is a rational and non-genuine entity between people; the term *shèqū* relates more to scholar Gerald D. Suttles' definition of community, according to which community is nothing more than a **social construct**, just as identity is. In China, therefore, the community is nothing more than the union of spontaneous wills and rational wills that generate a certain type of social construct. In particular, the *shèqū* varies in size depending on

whether we are talking about a village, a neighbourhood, or the entire nation, but no matter what type of community we are considering, each generally has as its common goals administration and mutual aid among its members.²⁶ The latter objective is clearly derived from Confucianism; the individual cannot live in isolation, but must instead lead his existence within the group and is always in relation to others.

From the earliest communities that emerged in China, therefore, these values were already deeply embedded in it, so much so that, for example, during the *Qing dynasty* (清朝, *Qīng cháo*), in order to strengthen the community, if a family committed a crime, neighbours who were responsible for mutual supervision would be punished equally. In the course of Chinese history, a series of **community organisational types** followed one another, to which a precise spatial organisation always corresponded. Starting from neighbourhoods or-

26. Rowe, P., G., Forsyth, A., Har Ye Kan, *China's Urban Communities, Concepts, Contexts, and Well-Being*, Basel, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2016, p.29.

BAOJIA
SYSTEM
China 1939

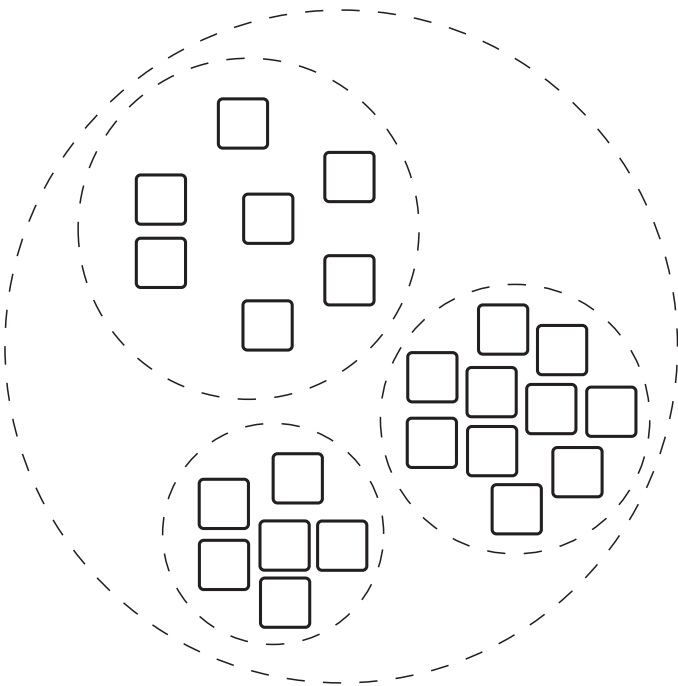
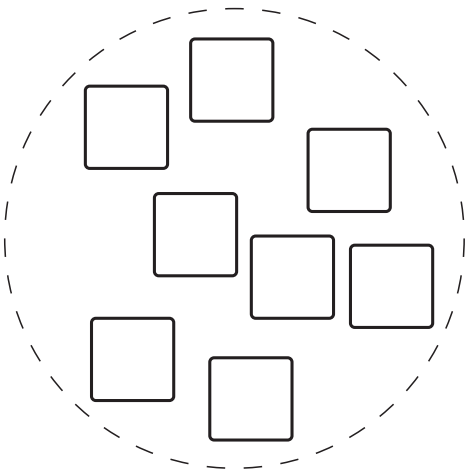
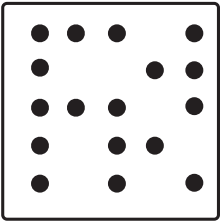


Figure 5.4 A redrawing of a scheme representing the *Nested Scales of the Jia, Bao, and Zhen or Xiang Configuration* Based on the 1939 Regulations Under the Republican Government (by Rowe, P., G., Forsyth, A., Har Ye Kan, *China's Urban Communities, Concepts, Contexts, and Well-Being*, Basel, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2016).

1. Households in a Unit (Jia)
2. Units (Jia) as a Protective Group (Bao)
3. Several Protective Groups (Bao) as a Township (Zhen or Xiang).

ganised into **clans** (族, *zú*), we then have the **baojia** (保甲, *bǎojiǎ*) **system**, a neighbourhood organisation that began around the year 1000 and continued until the dawn of the 20th century. Around the 1930s, in fact, the system whereby several families united in a unit (*Jia*), several units united in a group (*Bao*) and finally several groups united to form a village (乡, *xiāng*) or a town (镇, *zhèn*) came back into use. The *Bao* in the republican era became a veritable tool for the education of citizens and the building of the nation as a whole, in which Confucian morals always formed the basis and collective exercises were held to impart a sense of loyalty, duty and citizenship. This system lasted until the beginning of the civil war in China, after which the **work unit system** (单位, *dānwèi*) was officially introduced in 1951. This system is the basis for the formation of China's urban communities and is not only a system for employing workers, but is also a system re-

sponsible for providing all necessary services to its members. Each of them, therefore, has its own houses, schools, clinics, shops...the result is a real community ordered by morphology where the everyday life of the individual is governed; almost the entire urban population of that period is employed in these communities. In the countryside, on the other hand, the population is organised into production teams united in work brigades which in turn are united in **communes** (人民公社, *Rénmín gōngshè*); this sort of community is the highest stage of Chinese socialist collectivism. The whole life of the peasants is organised in group actions, from breaks and conviviality to the work itself; each member acts for the common good and **community life becomes the only possible life**. These organisational systems of work and life of the Chinese population faded away after the death of the leader Mao; from this moment onwards private action in the market was again allowed and

Figure 6.4 A drawing by Li Kunwu depicting typical life in a Chinese people's commune: "Thanks to this new system of organising the countryside, everyone's life would be dictated by the sound of the bell: the peasants would go to the fields together...together they would come back...and together they would eat at the canteen, morning, noon and night. From one day to the next, any form of private life disappeared", from the book written by Li Kunwu, Ôtié, P., *Una vita cinese, 1. Il tempo del Partito*, Torino, add editore, 2016, p.37.

slowly work units and communes gave way to the new capitalism. In **contemporary times**, the development of private companies and China's entry into international markets obviously have repercussions from a community perspective. As already mentioned, the cities begin to grow and the new middle class is born, **individuality and personal good** become more and more important, almost to the point of supplanting, in the cities, the importance of the common good. Everyone tries to enrich themselves as best they can, dissociating themselves, physically and otherwise, from their community in search of fortune and individual fulfilment in the city which, with time, begins to have very different characters from the more rural and traditional ones.

Today, in China, the very variety and peculiarities of urban communities leads to some reflections that can sometimes generate a certain sense of **nostalgia** for the past. Nowadays, the communities that form in the city no longer need

the requirements of proximity and coexistence: with the ease of communication, space has expanded, making the very physicality of the community null and void and, in a certain sense, undermining its identity; we find ourselves forced into an unknown territory where we no longer know who lives next door. Proximity, therefore, no longer ensures the formation of a community, and it becomes much easier to establish relationships with people thousands of kilometres away with whom one shares common interests and passions. The community's liberation, through the virtual, of its territorial character makes **relationships more fluid, almost evanescent: today we talk, tomorrow I stop answering you forever, just one click and I block you**; in the new network communities it is easy to close relationships, something that cannot happen so easily in person. These are the **new weak links in the communities of the new millennium**; through globalisation, the physical





character is increasingly lost, taking *refuge instead in the clouds*.²⁷ **The uncertainty and superficiality of relationships, the lack of physical contact, the fear of direct confrontation, all generate a sense of anxiety and loneliness in people.** Today more than ever, following the diffusion of Covid-19 from 2020, given the negative social consequences of isolating people in their homes for a long period of time, these issues must be addressed in a conscious manner. Without denying the importance of the network in the development of long-distance communication, the need for humans to interact physically with their fellow humans has become more than clear. This is not to say that there are no ‘old-fashioned’ communities in the big cities today, but urban changes have certainly led to their impoverishment. In the **countryside**, less aggressive urbanisation has led to the **greater preservation of community neighbourhood relations**, but in the dismantled areas,

the new residential neighbourhoods most often do not morphologically respond to the need for interaction between people. In the future development of China, which sees the countryside as a new place of interest, we certainly cannot think of going back to the past of the communes or creating new types of utopian communities imposed from outside on the population; it becomes necessary to seek **new models of development that take into account the new social needs** of those who decide or find themselves living in rural areas. These can be of great help in understanding how, through conscious and involved planning, we can return at least in part to a deeper and more sincere relationship with those around us in a **new contemporary mixed community**.

Rurality

noun [der. of rural]. - Rural character: the pronounced r. of economically backward countries; r. of

27. Bordonì, C., *La comunità perduta. Una nuova idea di comunità*, 2017, p.4.

Figure 7.4 *Blurred figure in reflected cityscape*, a photo from the article written by Williams, A., *Home-grown Chinese architects trained in America return with creative integrity*, The Architectural Review, 2015, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/home-grown-chinese-architects-trained-in-america-return-with-creative-integrity>, 2021.

a custom, of a popular tradition.²⁸

Rurality has always been related, for obvious reasons, to the territory and in particular to the specificity of the place where it has developed. However, the term does not only refer to the production of primary goods, but also to a series of identity and community characteristics that determine what can be defined as **rural culture**. From the dictionary definition of the term, it can be seen that it is often interpreted in its negative sense of backwardness. “Rurality” and “rural” tend to be used as synonyms for agriculture and farming. In reality, rural has a more extensive meaning: while on the one hand the term agriculture is closely related to the activities of cultivating land and raising animals, rurality also encompasses the social, cultural and territorial spheres. Although the rural world has, throughout history, been extremely closely linked to agricultural activity, it is not sufficient to summarise its definition by

referring only to this aspect. It is precisely this association, with the development of the secondary and tertiary sectors in cities and the increasing performance of these compared to agriculture, that has led to a **devaluation of the rural world in general**, which is increasingly seen in a negative light. Rural is always what is not urban and nothing else, *the white between the dots*; synonymous with marginality, economic and cultural discrimination, disadvantage, dependence.²⁹

In China, it is from the advent of *Marxism* that rurality begins to be associated with a **traditional society opposed to modern society**, the rural world as a symbol of class struggle. Theoretically, therefore, during the Maoist era, rurality is seen in a positive sense, so much so that, in the period of the **Cultural Revolution**, a massive number of young *Red Guards* (红卫兵, *Hóng Wèibīng*, a mass student-led paramilitary social movement) are moved to the countryside to learn from peasant

life; in reality, the introduction of the **hukou** (户口, lit. “household individual”)³⁰ does not transparently correspond to this theoretical positive view of the countryside. From this moment onwards, the **countryside begins to be an instrument of production for development** and, with the era of reforms, this usefulness becomes even more accentuated: with the strong development of the secondary and tertiary sectors, the countryside takes on the *double passive role* of supporting the growing urban centres, guaranteeing them sufficient quantities of food, and that of contributing to the development of industry through the provision of large quantities of labour to a growing rural exodus.

On a continent where rurality has always been the foundation of society, **in modern times we look towards the cities and in the same urban perspective we begin to look at the countryside**: small and medium-sized rural centres become new industrial

poles and a new dualism arises within the countryside itself, a new migration from marginal and minor centres towards the new industrial districts; once again the rural is at the service of development, effectively **losing its specific identity**.

In spite of the strong rural urbanisation of recent decades, it is remarkable to note that rurality and the culture associated with it have not completely disappeared in Chinese societies today: in the streets it is still possible to immerse oneself in typical do-it-yourself markets where each farmer and artisan sells his or her own zero-kilometre products, or to see how urban furnishings in the village, such as flowerbeds or gardens, are used to create small vegetable gardens for self-sufficiency. The **daily actions that have always characterised the lives of people in the countryside remain imprinted in their lifestyle**, despite the fact that they are often sent away from their homes and moved to newly built residential areas.

28. Treccani on-line dictionary, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ruralita/>, 2020.

29. Sotte, F., *Scenari evolutivi del concetto di ruralità*, In *Paesaggi del Cibo*, Atti della Summer School Emilio Seregni 2015, Gattatico, 2016, p.2.

30. The Chinese *hukou* system designates a resident's status as being either rural or urban based on their registered birthplace.



This fact, linked to the revival of interest in the rural world in its specificity, makes us think of a **new possible future development** in which the **countryside**, no longer seen as an instrument but as a true protagonist, becomes a **new place for experimentation**. In China, more and more people are deliberately deciding to settle in the suburbs and **rural areas**, which are **increasingly seen as better places to live**. Architecture and urban planning, together with a whole range of other disciplines, are engaged in a careful and conscious study of these areas and *how life can be conducted in the most sustainable way possible*, given the extreme pollution on the continent. **Integration** on several levels will certainly be a key element of future progress: integration between economic activities of different types, integration between tradition and technology, integration between natural and social aspects, integration between local and global markets, cul-

tural and community integration. And along with integration, **diversity**, the key word of rural progress and in opposition to the growing standardisation of urban societies, living and consumption patterns, will certainly be important. **Rural territories**, in China as in the rest of the world, constitute a **reserve of culture, historical heritage, landscape, agricultural tradition and biodiversity** that must be protected, but not in a fixed way. New technologies can be used to find new ways of enhancing these elements; for example, for biodiversity, the agricultural systems of *intercropping* and *permaculture*, so widely used in the Asian and Chinese past, can be revived to replace the current systems of intensive monoculture, which weigh down the land and ruthlessly destroy it. In this sense, the architect can, through design, contribute to the **conservation and progress of the complexity and potential of rural areas, each with its own specificities and peculiarities**.

Figure 8.4 IUD image, Xiancun urban village, village absorbed into Guangzhou, China, 2015.

Indirect influences

In order to understand the current Chinese rural realities in the best possible way, comparison can be a valid tool of analysis. In particular, we speak of a **historical comparison** of certain events that occurred in Italy in a singularly similar way, but also of a **morphological comparison** that can clarify the new Chinese urban-rural systems. Certain **similarities** do not always derive from direct historical relationships between continents and nations but may have an occasional origin. This fact can be “explained by the principle of convergence which applies to certain **functional parallels resulting from the unity of the human spirit and the occurrence of the same stimuli**, from similar processes but independent in space and time. We therefore also speak of indirect influences which are the consequence of the introduction of new economic, technical, political and social principles”.³¹

Indeed, there are some similarities between isolated historical events that took place in Italy and China that may be worth highlighting. Even if the centuries of greatest interest are the 20th and 21st, we should remember the common *ancestral idealisation of the rural habitat and the aesthetics of the landscape as a place of contemplation and otium*, both themes widely addressed both in Europe, and specifically in Italy, but also and especially in ancient China.

From the **1920s** onwards, in Italy under the Fascist regime, state actions were implemented to solve the problems of the rural world, seen only from an agricultural point of view. The actions took place in the most marginal places, especially in the south, and had as their main objective the self-sufficiency of the country through the expropriation of the large *latifundia*, the *sbracciantizzazione* and the *Bonifica integrale*. The latter, in particular, consisted in the hydraulic drainage of unhealthy lands and their agri-

cultural recovery with the aim of restoring millions of hectares of **land for agriculture**. The expropriations and reclamations were sometimes accompanied by the foundation of **new towns**, always linked to Mussolini’s vision of a “return to the land” proclaimed in a propagandistic manner throughout the nation: *agriculture became a political tool*. The importance given to agricultural work for development is reminiscent of the emerging importance of Chinese *nóngmín* for the development of the Chinese continent itself at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the **1950s** in particular, it is remarkable how, **in both Italy and China**, two worlds extremely distant from each other, there was a **major land reform**. In China, this corresponds to the redistribution of agricultural land expropriated from the large landowning families to all rural families. The countryside was thus remodelled, rationalised and homogenised, without much resistance from the rural communities entrusted with the task of realising

the Maoist dream. In the same years in Italy, on the other hand, the landscape of many regions was transformed by a complex work of land reform. A work of demarcation, appoderament and colonisation. The reform, aimed at eliminating and transforming the *latifundia* and keeping families on the land by improving living conditions, also radically affects human settlement: a “*reform house*” is created, evenly distributed throughout the regions in a short period of time. In both cases, the aim is to **control the movement of rural populations to the cities** and to **increase agricultural production**; however, social and morphological consequences follow the reforms.

Between the end of the 1950s and the **mid-1960s** there were two major events that had more or less similar outcomes for the rural populations. On the one hand, the *Great Leap Forward* wanted by Chairman Mao, which aimed at rapidly overtaking England and the United States economi-

31. Barbieri, G., Gambi, L., *La Casa Rurale in Italia*, Firenze, Olshki Editore, 1970, p.404-405.

cally and which required an enormous effort and participation by all the peasants through the collective cultivation of the land; on the other hand, the so-called *Italian miracle*, which led to a real economic boom and a great industrial development. In both cases the majority of the population, before these events, is still employed in agriculture and only a small percentage has electricity, drinking water and indoor sanitation at home. But not even afterwards, in reality, did the conditions of the majority of the population improve: in Italy, in addition to the strong inequality between the city and the countryside, there was also a strong imbalance between the North and the South, so much so that many peasant families, in regions such as Sardinia and Sicily, led a meagre life in dwellings that looked more like huts than houses, shared with domestic animals, and almost always fed only on bread and chicory.

In China too, the enormous effort required ends in the *Great Fa-*

mine, caused as much by drought and hostile weather conditions as by certain political decisions taken, such as the *annihilation of the four noxious species* - rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows - with consequent alteration of the ecosystem.³² The living conditions in the most **marginal rural areas**, in both contexts (in Italy we are talking especially about the south), remain poor and backward and these conditions have dragged on almost up to the present day.

Despite the fact that the new industrial and technological development took place in the two countries at different times, in Italy around the 1980s and in China a few decades later (but with extreme speed), the conditions in which marginal rural areas find themselves, despite the general progress and enrichment, are always one step behind the purely urban context. If, on the one hand, the great attention paid to cities has led over time to a continuous backwardness of the countryside and to a slower te-

chnological progress of the same, on the other hand it has also led to a greater preservation of the traditional rurality of these places. It is true that the countryside, in Italy as well as in China, has not been able to be completely extraneous to development, but it is equally true that in many villages and countries, **isolation has led to the preservation** of traditional agricultural and artisan practices for self-sustenance or for small-scale sales in minor markets or directly from home.

The recent rediscovery in China, and somewhat less recently in Italy, of the intrinsic values of rural society and its spaces takes advantage of these reminiscences handed down and preserved in places.

32. Karoline Kan, *Sotto i cieli rossi, diario di una millennial cinese*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri editore, 2020, p.9.

#5 SPACE AND SOCIETY

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Identity, community and rurality, terms previously analysed that can summarise what rural society is, are closely linked to the morphology of places. The following chapter will try to understand more deeply the actual relationship between the society and the morphology of a place: there are various relations between the two, which, depending on the specific case, see the greater influence of one on the other and vice versa. The examples cited are extreme cases which serve as a tool for analysing more real and common cases, which include the case study of Hufu zhèn, subject of this project.

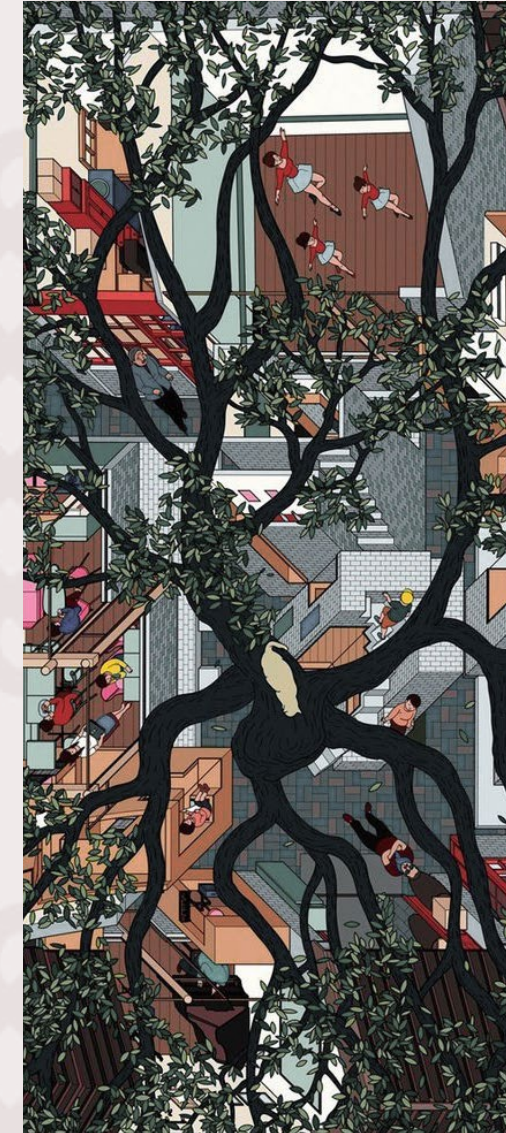


Figure 1.5 An illustration from the book *A Little Bit of Beijing: Dashi-lar* by Li Han and Hu Yan, 2015.

Analysis tool

The analysis of the three concepts of identity, community and rurality in their etymological meanings and their actual transposition into the everyday evolutionary reality, together with the morphological-historical comparison with the Italian case, helps to understand what may be some common features of today's Chinese countryside.

From a purely architectural and urban theoretical point of view, it is interesting to note how the etymological and historical evolution of the three terms in China, closely related to what was and is the Chinese society of the countryside, corresponds to a morphological evolution of the settlements. Given this observation and given the clear correlation between the three terms and morphology, it becomes spontaneous to **ask whether it is morphology that leads to change in society or whether it is society itself that changes morphologies.**

Which of the two is the cause and which the consequence? It may be reasonable to say that neither is the cause nor the consequence. **Morphologies can influence society, in this specific case rural society, just as the latter can modify and influence the morphologies of a place;** each interaction leads to change, to transformation.

Despite the fact that we are talking about a **reciprocal influence**, of an interrelation, it is good to keep in mind that the **influence of one on the other can sometimes prevail**: for example, where there is a **top-down design**, and therefore a planned morphological evolution, its greater influence on society will be clear. In cases where morphological evolution is **spontaneous**, then society is likely to have a greater influence on morphology.

In order to better explain how, in practice, an unbalanced influence on one side or the other can occur, it may be useful to take into account **extreme cases**, both existing and not; to do

this, the comparative tool is used. The aim of this analysis is then to better **understand those hybrid urban-rural systems** in which the strong fragmentation and co-existence of influences of different types leads to the formation of extremely complex and contemporary places in the Chinese countryside.





Ex nihilo top-down planning

The planning of the morphologies of a place from nothing, therefore through an action that is foreign to the pre-existences and specificities, influences the three terms and therefore more generally the actual society that is going to inhabit these morphologies. Often this *modus operandi* is based on the concept of the *tabula rasa*, i.e. the complete cancellation of everything that is in a place in order to create something completely new and very distant from the previous reality. The model is related to the hyper-planning frequently adopted by the **Modern Movement**, whose criticism is the lack of centrality in the project of human factors, a centrality that can be obtained through attention to the natural, historical-cultural context and to the needs of the psychic and emotional sphere, elements that can in any case be taken into account

with the use of new technological knowledge. The masters of the Movement tried to give answers to complex problems such as that of **expanding cities**, for example with Le Corbusier in the IV CIAM Congress (*Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) in 1933 and with the writing of *La ville radieuse* (The Radiant City, 1935) and then the famous *Carte d'Athènes* (Athens Charter) of 1943, a document-manifesto of the Modern Movement's vision of the city towards modernisation. The *International Style*, the name given to the style of the Modern Movement by the book of the same name written by Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932³³, is a model that sometimes seems to have **formal and methodological tools** that can be applied to all places in the same way, without considering the specificity of the location or the specificity of the people who are going to live there. It is a style that seems designed for a **generic type of man whose needs can**

Figure 1.5 A photo by Marlène Leroux in the book *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, exhibition model of the ongoing development in the eastern city of Dengfeng, Henan, China. The balloons indicate the names of the villages that will be destroyed by the real estate operations, 2013.

33. Hitchcock, R., Johnson, P., *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1932.

34. Leroux, M., *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, Genève, MétisPresses, 2019, p.54.

Reading the pictures from top to bottom starting from the left:

Figure 2.5 A photo by Samuele Pellecchia, construction of the city of Tongzhou, a new town located in the eastern suburban expansion of Beijing, China, 2017.

Figure 3.5 A photo of the construction of the new town of Ordos, the world's largest ghost town, Inner Mongolia, China, 2013.

Figure 4.5 A photo by Marcel Gautherot, construction of the city of Brasilia, Brazil, 1956.

Figure 5.5 A photo of the model of Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin and his hand, 1964.

be standardised, often leading to the depersonalisation of places towards serial production indifferent to local cultures; space is almost always ordered on a regular grid and with functions separated by a strong zoning. The underlying thought is that of being able to easily define people's needs and the means of satisfying them without actually knowing who these people are and simply seeking absolute control over their social life, made much easier by the strong schematisation of the plans themselves.

This system is also often used in **modern China**, as it is the fastest way to plan places. The road network is used as the skeleton of a sectoral spatial development which generally shows little adaptation to the territory itself. Actually, the use of the **road network** as the main act of urban development is not new in China; in fact, this process was already used almost two thousand years before Christ for the planning of capitals such as *Chang'an* (Xi'an).³⁴



35. Peghin, G., Sanna, A., Saiu, V., Pisano, C., *Progetto Eleonora di Saras SpA. Analisi paesaggistica del Golfo di Oristano. Sub-Quadro urbanistico-architettonico*, 2012, p.6-10.

36. Zuin, O., *La società e l'acqua ad Arborea, Etnografia delle percezioni di rischio in un paese sardo dalle origini venete*, thesis at Università Ca'Foscari Venezia, 2014/2015, Ligi, G., p.20.

Figure 8.5 A propaganda image by Zhang Yuqing of Dazhai, China, one of the sites of the national agricultural project, 1975.

37. Filippi, F., *Mussolini ha fatto anche cose buone*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri editore, 2019, p.26.

Figure 9.5 A folding of Mussolinia di Sardegna by Di Girolamo G., *Aerial view of Mussolinia*, Mostra Nazionale delle Bonifiche, Napoli, 1935.

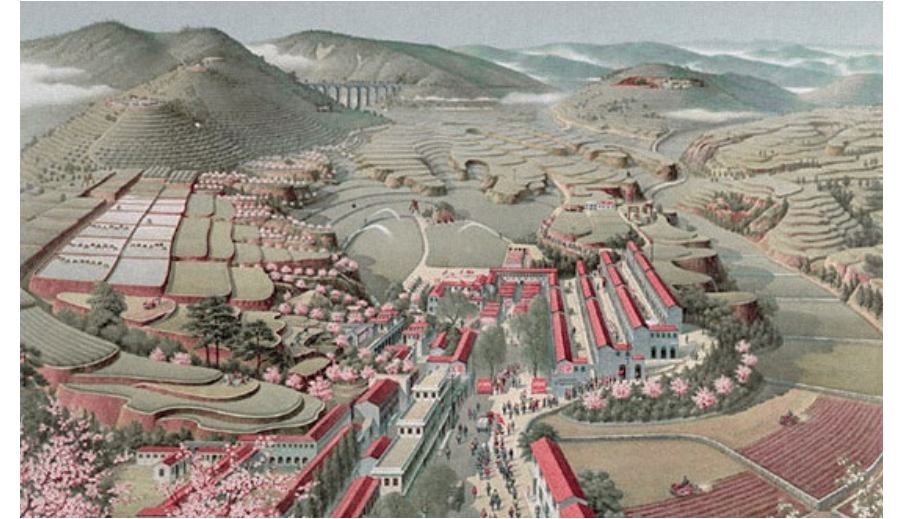
Figure 10.5 A propaganda image by Carboni E. of Mussolinia, *Mostra della Bonifica Integrale*, 1938.

What has changed nowadays is the **sectorialisation** given by the mesh of the road network: each sector corresponds to a specific function and operates independently of the others, with its own services and basic activities. The use of the **orthogonal system** and the **strong zoning**, for obvious reasons, do not give attention to the landscape and socio-cultural peculiarities of the place, eliminating in fact the intrinsic stratifications in favour of total control from above.

This type of planning, however, is not only linked to the *rationalist* and Chinese reality, in the world the imposition of the simple and the orderly has been and still is widely used. The **Italian context**, during the period of the Fascist regime, is an example of this: there were twelve **foundation towns** which followed similar patterns and which can be linked to the Chinese case in that they too were based on the objective of the country's economic development. The first of these was founded under the

name of *Mussolinia* in 1928 in the Italian region of Sardinia, which at the beginning of the 20th century was an extremely rural island. The town, built entirely from scratch and now renamed Arborea, was founded in a swampy and pestilential area that was first reclaimed and only later planned with the aim of making it cultivable and colonisable. There are some interesting observations to be made about this new town: first of all, its nature as a project from nothing (*ex nihilo*), which can be achieved by making virgin territory available following reclamation; the *tabula rasa* is not achieved by dismantling a pre-existing settlement, but by radically **modifying the natural landscape** and thus determining a **new agricultural landscape**³⁵, vaguely anticipating the Chinese propaganda slogan **Move the mountains to make farm fields** (愚公移山, *yu gong yi shan*) of the Maoist era. This work serves as a real pilot project and an example for all the other Italian realities that would

soon undergo similar processes³⁶, more or less like the Chinese model village of *Dàzhài* (大寨), which from the 1950s onwards was surrounded by hundreds of agricultural terraces built literally by “moving mountains” (figure 8.5). Mussolinia had to represent the new rural Italy according to the regime's definition and therefore, in order to guarantee a development of the productive economy in general and an intensification of agriculture in particular, it was decided to increase the density of the population³⁵, moved from other regions to Sardinia; the great need for labour in this new town would then correspond to the taking of measures to **discourage the abandonment of the land**.³⁷ The most interesting observation to make, however, concerns the methodology used to build this town, a superimposition of a plot on the morphology of the places: the streets intersect orthogonally with a prevalent north-south direction, according to a geometric model alien to the Sardinian landscape.³⁵



In addition to this, there is the use of an **unusual variety of architectural languages**, added in the short residential nucleus; at least three linguistic layers in “cardboard style” are superimposed: it is almost impressive the incongruity of forms and stylistic features of remote cultures, abruptly imported to the island and inserted in the planar perfection of the environment of the reclamation. No attention was paid to the typical settlement and rural dwelling of the context, and the decision was made to opt for an architecture completely foreign to the naive creation of an ideal city, as represented by Giulio di Girolamo in his coloured drawing (figure 9.5) for the “Mostra Nazionale delle Bonifiche per la Rigenerazione Agraria d'Italia”: a sugary image of a green and sunny *garden city*, a true urban utopia come true.³⁸

The settlement system of the *garden city*, however, derives from Ebenezer Howard's theories of the 19th century; in fact, in 1898 he wrote the book *To-Morrow*. A

*Peaceful Path to Real Reform*³⁹, (best known in the 1902 revised version *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*) in which he proposes a model capable of resolving the problem of conflict between town and country.⁴⁰ His famous theory of population attractiveness sees cities as magnets capable of attracting people to them, generating the classic problem of urban overcrowding. So the need arises to create new attractions, to build new magnets with even greater power of attraction (figure 11.5), and so between the urban and the rural magnet a third magnet is proposed that can redistribute the population equitably: the **Garden City**, a place where the advantages of the countryside and of the city are summed up and their disadvantages excluded, with a central park around which food self-sufficient residential areas are developed (figure 12.5). This model would then become an example for a long series of theoretical design proposals that have persisted up to the present day; the search for

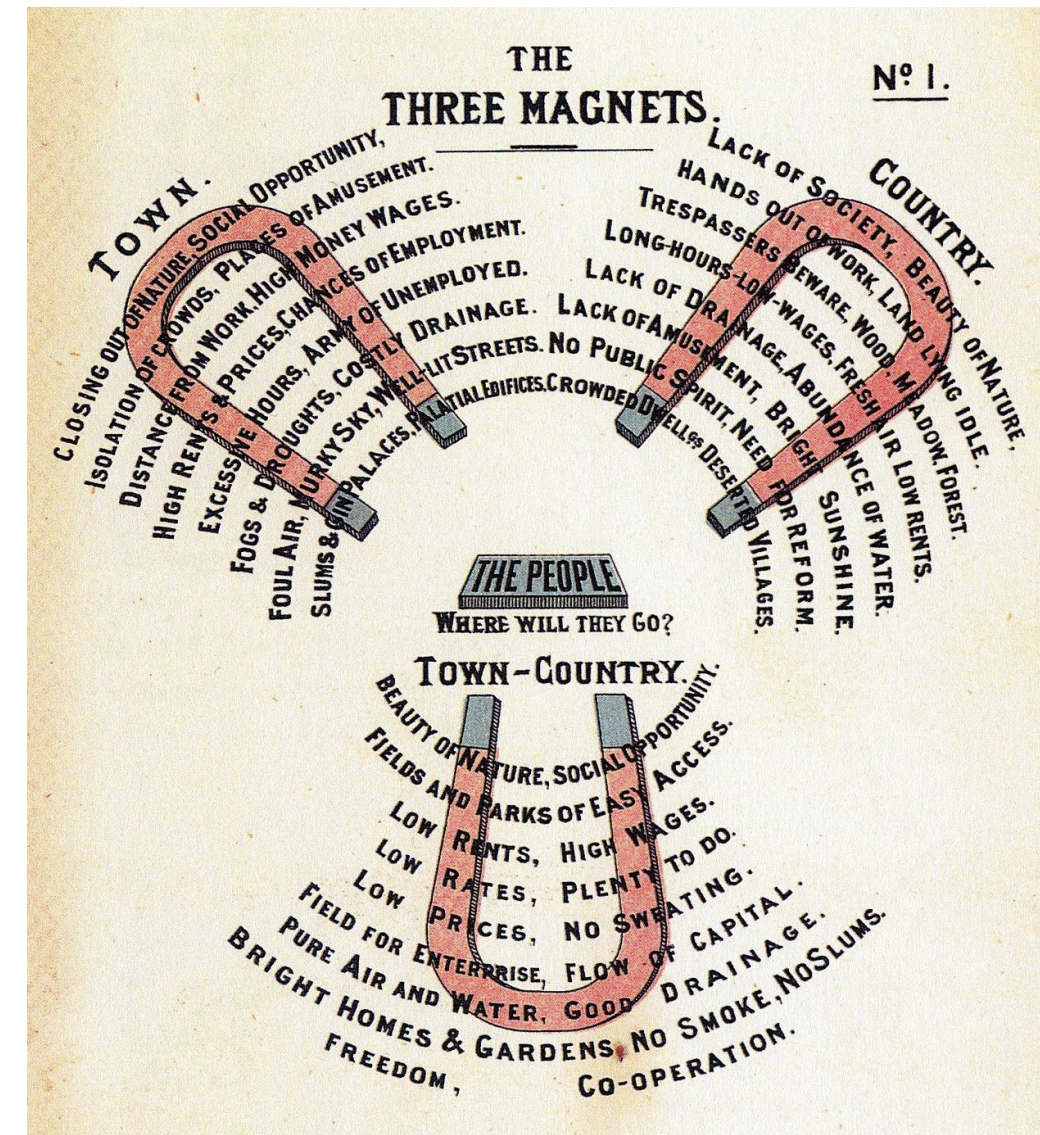
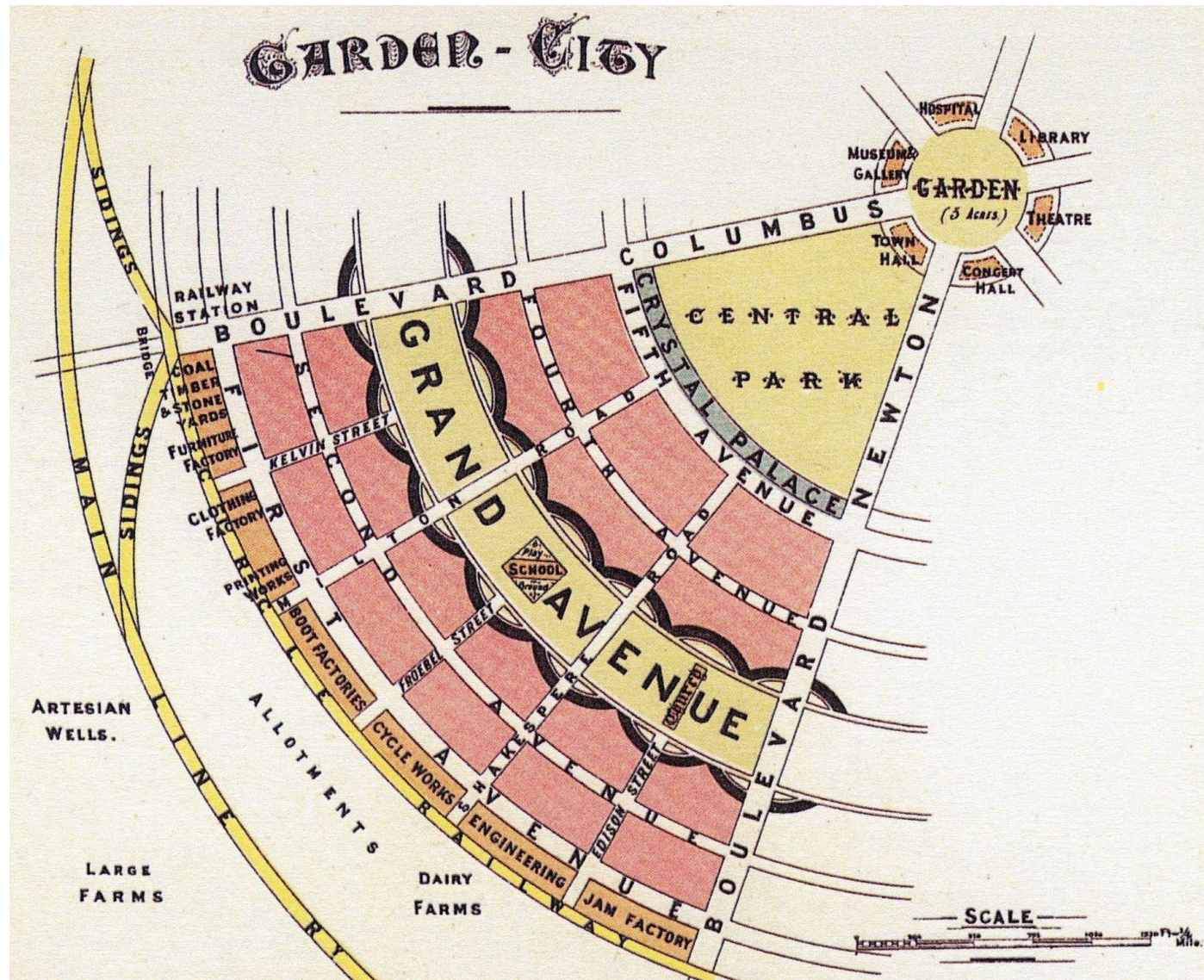


Figure 11.5 A picture of The Three Magnets from *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* by Ebenezer Howard, 1902.

38. Naitana, A., Piano Urbanistico Comunale, *Relazione archeologica e classificazione beni architettonici*, Arborea, 2010, p.4-7.

39. Howard, E., *To-Morrow. A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, London, Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1898.

40. Dellapiana, E., Montanari, G., *Una storia dell'architettura contemporanea*, Torino, UTET Università, 2015, p.113.



solutions to increasingly standardised urbanisation and the consequent environmental pollution has led over time to many elaborations of *eco-cities* or *ecological utopias*. In this sense, the ecological city of **Dongtan** is perhaps the archetype of a **hyper-technological conception** of this model: it is a project developed, but never realised, in 2005 by the engineering firm Arup located on an island in the north of Shanghai, offering a symbiosis of city, industry and agricultural activities. The conceptualised environment is almost **futuristic**, with plenty of electric cars, solar panels and avant-garde recycling systems, multiple and efficient farming systems in terms of land use and savings. The idea **seems absolutely perfect** for our immediate future, except the fact that its realisation involves the complete and irreversible erasure of pre-existing structures: the destruction of old farms, topographical and hydrographic reorganisation, and the replacement of villages with an

extremely regular urban structure. If on the one hand there is a high ecological and environmental performance, on the other hand there is also a profound modification of the local economy and the reinvention of the identity of the place.⁴¹ As Simon Schama says in the introduction to his book *Landscape and Memory*, taking the countless grave problems of the environment seriously does not necessarily imply giving up our cultural heritage and what comes from it⁴², a mistake that is probably made in the planning proposal on Shanghai's island. In fact, if we compare the master plan of the Dongtan project (2005, figure 14.5) with the plan realised for Mussolinia (1928, figure 13.5) it is impossible not to notice their absurd and extreme similarity; this happens for the simple fact that a regular imposition foreign to the peculiar characters of the place can be effectively applied everywhere and at any time. So, even if the motivations behind these two projects are very different

Figure 1.5 A picture of The Garden City from *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* by Ebenezer Howard, 1902.

41. Leroux, M., *Terres Chinoises, mutations et défis urbains en milieu rural*, Genève, MétisPresses, 2019, p.65.

42. Schama, S., *Landscape and Memory*, New York, Knopf, 1995.

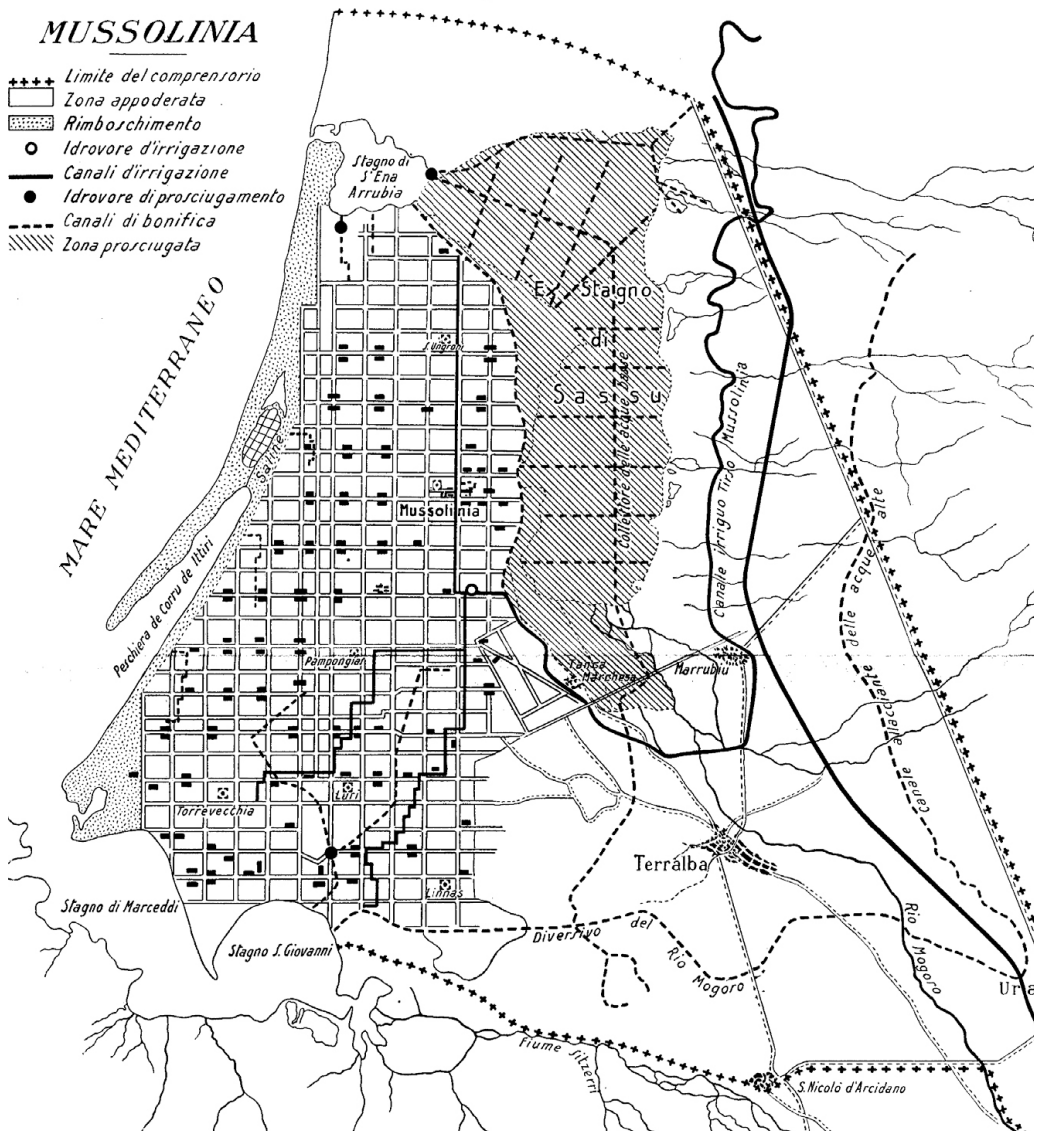


Figure 13.5 Ground plan of the Dongtan Eco-City project by Arup, 2005.

Figure 14.5 A picture of the Mussolinia drainage project, 1928.

from each other, as is the historical period, we find ourselves faced with a standardised model that inevitably changes the way of life and the identity of the people who live there: it is **like undressing the entire world's population and dressing them all in the same colour**; the image is terrifying for obvious reasons, even if the new clothes are made of recycled material and have zero impact. This is also demonstrated by the example of the city of **Ordos**, in Inner Mongolia, **one of the world's largest ghost towns**, which was planned for 300,000 new inhabitants but now finds itself with two out of three empty houses. The project literally **came out of nowhere** in the middle of the desert and impresses with its colossal strangeness: everything is made big: the size of the squares, the width of the streets and the height of its skyscrapers. Its inhabitants are mostly peasants whose land has been expropriated and who, forced to move, are asked to live in a more civilised way.⁴³

43. *The Land of Many Palaces*, Documentary directed by Smith, A. J., Ting Song, Berlin, 2014.

Figure 15.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Ordos, one of the world's largest ghost towns.



The problem lies in the character of this city, which has been described as a sort of Mongolian Disneyland and **has no identity link with the people who live there**. It is clear that planning of this kind, whatever the place in the world and whatever the historical period, does not work. The depersonalising and disorientating character of places that have no connection whatsoever with the society that lives there is typical of planning *ex nihilo*. The discourse, however, is not intended to be about the completely spontaneous formation of settlements; certainly any kind of extremism is not suitable for a good place to live, which must be sought instead on the balanced path of the middle.

In situ spontaneous settlements

The spontaneous evolution of the morphologies of places is determined, and therefore influenced,

by the society that creates them. In this case, rural society, in general and in the specific case of China, can be considered as the expression of the three terms analysed above: identity, community and rurality. The influence of these three terms, and thus of rural society itself, has over time led to the generation of certain morphological evolutions that can be called spontaneous. This tendency to form settlement patterns derived from the generic rural society is typical of every time and place, and has led throughout history to an infinite variety of architectural solutions that cannot be overlooked, but which instead require careful study in order to understand the society itself that inhabits them and thus to plan future development that sees it as the main protagonist of the place. First of all, it is necessary to clarify what **spontaneous architecture** actually is, often also referred to as **vernacular, anonymous, minor, indigenous and rural architecture**.⁴⁴ This refers to that production

made by anonymous builders, where therefore it is not the architect or the planner who imposes himself and his theories on the project, but where instead it is the needs of the community that define the design. On this theme, the studies carried out by Giuseppe Pagano together with Guarniero Daniel⁴⁵, reflected in the *VI Triennale di Milano* in 1936, and the studies by Bernard Rudofsky, who in the 1960s curated the exhibition at the MOMA in New York entitled *Architecture Without Architects*, are interesting, dealing precisely with that architecture without an author which is often forgotten and ignored. Architecture without an author is that silent testimony without manifestos and clamour, without congresses and with little recognition in history; a modest morphological evolution that nonetheless represents the **image of a human way of life**, an antidote that frees us from rhetorical, stylistic and monumental architecture and responds naturally to the climatic conditions

of the place, using locally available materials and technologies.⁴⁶ The anonymous builders are therefore detached from the official architectural language and **do not follow any fashion or stylistic trend**; they do not have any codes to respect, but follow the stratified memory of the **collective savoir faire** for building their own homes, their own environment. The forms are often built by means of adaptations and superimpositions which change with the changing needs of the moment, the action is always honest and transparent and often renounces what is useless and plastic, sometimes reaching peaks of high aesthetic value without any real aesthetic purpose. Throughout history, “dialectal” architecture has often been considered rustic, mediocre and of little interest due to its inferior historical-architectural value, but it has been re-evaluated by various authors, including the aforementioned Pagano and Rudofsky, but also, in the Italian context, Galimberti, Carli, Neu-

44. Rudofsky, B., *Architettura Senza Architetti. Una breve introduzione all'architettura non blasonata*, Napoli, Editoriale Scientifica, 1977, p.3.

45. Pagano, G., Guarniero, D., *Architettura Rurale Italiana, Quaderni della Triennale*, Milano, Ulrico Hoepli Editore, 1936.

46. Manzi, L., *Minimalia, Architettura sacra nel paesaggio rurale dell'Emilia*, PhD thesis at Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, 2017, Agnoletto, M., p.26.



Figure 16.5 & 17.5 Photos from the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City (MoMA), Exhibition *Architecture Without Architects*, New York City, Nov 11, 1964-Feb 7, 1965.

Figure 18.5 A photo of Ho Keou, Yunnan, China.



Figure 19.5 A picture of a water village, *Floating Village*, China, from Erasmus Francisci's *Lutsgarten*.

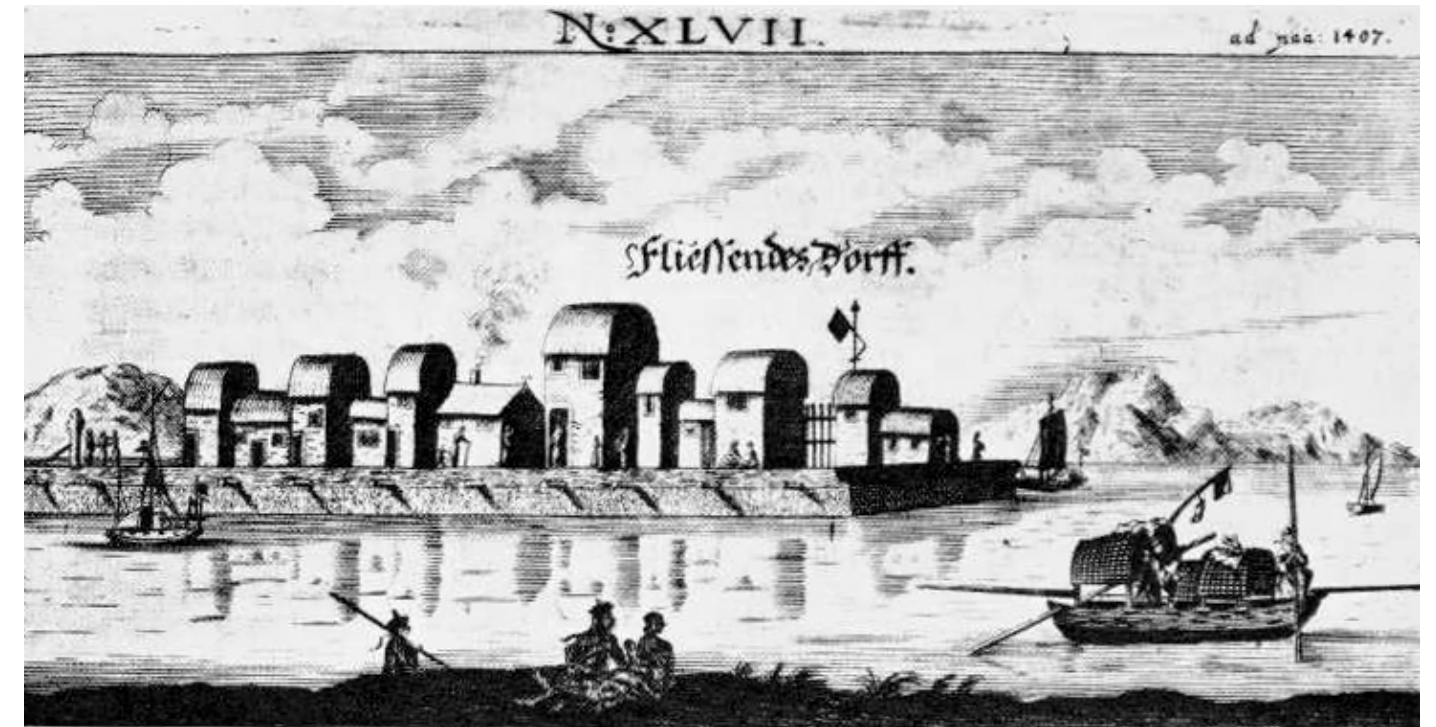


Photo and picture from the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City (MoMA), Exhibition *Architecture Without Architects*, New York City, Nov 11, 1964-Feb 7, 1965.

47. cf. Galimberti, N., *Colonie Rurali. Case Razionali*, La Casa Bella, n.60, 1932, p.56; Carli, E., *Il genere architettura rurale e il funzionalismo*, Casabella, n.107, 1936, p.6-7; Neutra, R. J., *Tecnologia regionale dell'architettura moderna*, Casabella-Costruzioni, n.144, 1939, p.20; Diotallevi, I., Marescotti, F., *La borgata rurale Metaurilia*, Casabella-Costruzioni, n.148, 1940, p.40-42.

tra, Diotallevi and Marescotti.⁴⁷ The series of works that in the world can be called “spontaneous” are always necessarily works closely linked to **local contexts**, built with **local materials** and **traditional techniques**. The result of a sort of **collective rationality** that has formed over time, these works, which are never bound to any law or language, form real, often recurring models that can become reference models for contemporary design. Careful study of these morphological evolutions can on the one hand help us escape from the standardised, commercial schemes of today’s architecture and planning, and on the other help us understand popular environments and languages which, in the specific Chinese context, tend to be misunderstood and forgotten. It should also be underlined that **the vernacular can be expressed in the most varied forms**, starting with the formation of entire spontaneous rural villages, then moving on to settlements at the level of actual living units

or, finally, to simple solutions or additions to pre-existing buildings; the spontaneity of morphologies is therefore extremely multifaceted and multiform. The distribution of dwellings to form a village that can be defined as *in situ* usually follows the typical characteristics of the landscape in which it is settled, there is no regular grid imposed from above but a more tangled distribution of elements without any plan drawn up on the drawing board; the landscape guides the arrangement, the mountains are therefore no longer aggressively displaced by the imposition of a settlement or agricultural project.

This phenomenon can literally be observed in cases such as the Chinese city-prefecture of Huzhou in the province of Zhejiang, in particular in Changxing county (figure 20.5), where a series of villages are embedded in the passes of various mountains almost like a fluid that fills them, generating extremely **organic and natural forms**. A similar situation occurs in

the Italian municipality of Buggerru (figure 21.5), in the region of Sardinia, which in the same way, despite rising in completely different circumstances and at completely different times, cascades like a waterfall between two mountains directly over the sea. In both cases, the landscape is not tamed or modified, but simply indulged, thus preserving the peculiarities of the place that make the **morphologies unique and unrepeatable**. The spontaneous conformation of more agricultural contexts is highlighted above all in the comparison with that organised and studied from the top. If we compare the aforementioned case the newly founded town of Arborea with the village of Marrubiu, two cases geographically close to each other, again in the region of Sardinia, we immediately notice the **difference between the two systems**: the first is extremely regular both from the point of view of cultivation and settlement, while the second is irregular and tends almost towards the natural gene-

rated by the division of land “from below” (figure 23.5). Such an irregular conformation corresponds to environments that are never the same or banal, and the spontaneity of these environments can only correspond to a social spontaneity. The repetition of similar geographies in different places and at different times of formation is once again disarming: if one looks at the southernmost area of the Pudong New Area of Shanghai, China, one notices the harsh contrast between the highly planned spaces of Nanhui New City, which in this case not only follow the orthogonal logic but also that of concentric circles, and spontaneously inhabited and cultivated landscapes, where the plots of land are visibly smaller and where the crops vary more than in the large fields of intensive monocultures (figure 22.5).

On an architectural level, **Chinese vernacular culture**, particularly in the Chinese countryside, is rich and varied, and obviously differs from province to province.



Following natural sinuosity.

Figure 20.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Changxing county, Zhejiang, China.

Figure 21.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Buggeru, Sardinia, Italy.

Orderly vs. *spontaneous*.

Figure 22.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of the southernmost area of the Pudong New Area of Shanghai, contrast between the planned Nanhui New City and the spontaneous fields and villages in the nearby countryside, China.



Figure 23.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of the southernmost part of the province of Oristano, a contrast between the planned part of the town of Arborea and the spontaneous landscapes around the area of the village of Marrubiu, Sardinia, Italy.





Vernacular villages.



Figure 24.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Hou-gacun, Jiangsu, China.

Figure 25.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Barattoli San Pietro, Sardinia, Italy.

Literature has systematically catalogued and analysed Chinese spontaneous architecture and the types of settlement that have emerged over time: among the best-known types are the **siheyuan** (四合院, *sì hé yuàn*, courtyard house), typical of Beijing culture, consisting of four rectangular buildings arranged in a quadrangular shape to create an internal courtyard. This typology, which has a more or less precise layout, then gave rise to a whole series of evolving **courtyard houses** in different Chinese provinces, where the pattern is always an alternation of full and empty space, between building and courtyard; depending on the context and climate, the forms vary, but especially the materials used in their construction. *Siheyuan* are often arranged in rows to form neighbourhoods; the narrow streets and alleyways between them are called *hutongs* (figure 26.5 & 27.5), but sometimes this name is also used to indicate the neighbourhood itself, made up of this type of dwelling.⁴⁸

Inner courtyards are used as a convivial, familiar and private space with respect to the outside world: typical Chinese life, in its traditional history and especially where the climate has allowed it, has always been strongly linked to **shared outdoor space**, both in the family and in the community. Once again, rural and traditional Chinese culture comes close to Italian and Sardinian culture: the closed-courtyard house is one of the types of rural home identified in Sardinia in Osvaldo Baldacci's study of the geography of rural buildings in his book *La casa rurale in Sardegna*⁴⁹, volume VIII of the collection *Ricerche sulle dimore rurali in Italia*. The geographer Maurice Le Lannou also identified the typical courtyard house in the small and large villages of the Campidano⁵⁰ (figure 28.5), a vast Sardinian plain, as a perfect synthesis of living space and working space, based on the central void which became the **place for domestic work and the centre of relations and collecti-**

ve life.⁵¹ In both cases, the result is an introverted landscape and a **labyrinthine system** of narrow streets and alleys which are often non-carriageable, the sensation of getting lost and never knowing what you will encounter a few steps further on. The experience of these places is never trivial and gives the sensation of an enveloping, protective place, where both the interior and exterior become a welcoming home, a safe refuge. Other typical Chinese settlements include the **tulou** (土楼, *tǔlóu*), a traditional collective peasant dwelling of the *Hakka* people in southern China, usually built of earth and rice straw, but with variations also made of granite stone or terracotta. The peculiarity that first catches the eye is the circular shape of this type of settlement, probably chosen for defensive reasons, making it worthy of recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Only the entrance to the tulou is visible from the outside, while all the other openings face the inside of

the structure, organised in a ring, where there is a well-lit courtyard that serves as a **collective space** for the peasant community living there. The first tulou date back to the seventh century, while the most recent ones date back to the end of the *Qing dynasty*. Many of them are surprising for their perfect preservation, probably due to the strength of the walls, up to six metres thick, which make them real **fortress-villages** (figure 29.5 & 30.5).

This last character once again illuminates how, in human history, one can come across morphological and functional analogies even at enormous physical and temporal distances: the form, fortification and singularity of these works, in fact, fit perfectly with those of the Sardinian *nuraghi*, or rather, the complexes of nuraghi that form the Sardinian *nuragic fortified villages* (figure 31.5). For example, one cannot ignore the fascinating morphological analogy between the Tulou of Fujian (福建土楼, *yuan lou*) and the nuragic village of Pal-

48. Baranyk, I., *4 Chinese Vernacular Dwellings You Should Know About (Before They Disappear)*, ArchDaily, 2017, <https://www.archdaily.com/804034/4-chinese-vernacular-dwellings-you-should-know-about-before-they-disappear>, ISSN 0719-8884, 2021.

49. Baldacci, O., *La casa rurale in Sardegna*, volume VIII of *Ricerche sulle dimore rurali in Italia*, Firenze, Poligrafico Toscano, 1952.

50. Le Lannou, M., *Pastori e contadini di Sardegna*, Cagliari, Edizioni della Torre, 1980.

51. Direzione Regionale per i beni culturali e paesaggistici della Sardegna, *Metodologie per la progettazione sostenibile del paesaggio, Rapporto finale: Linee guida per il progetto sostenibile del paesaggio rurale regionale*, research project at Università di Cagliari, Department of Architecture, p.14.

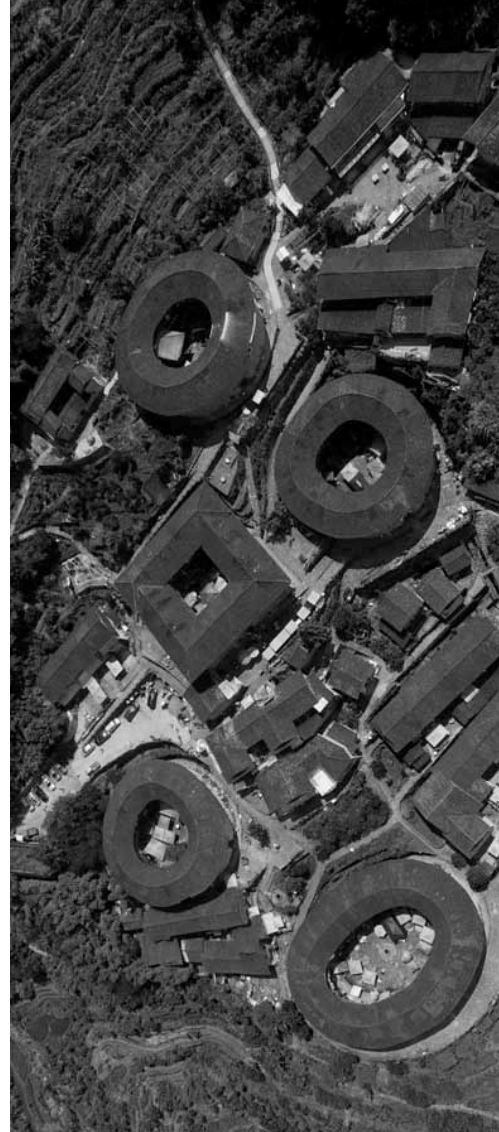
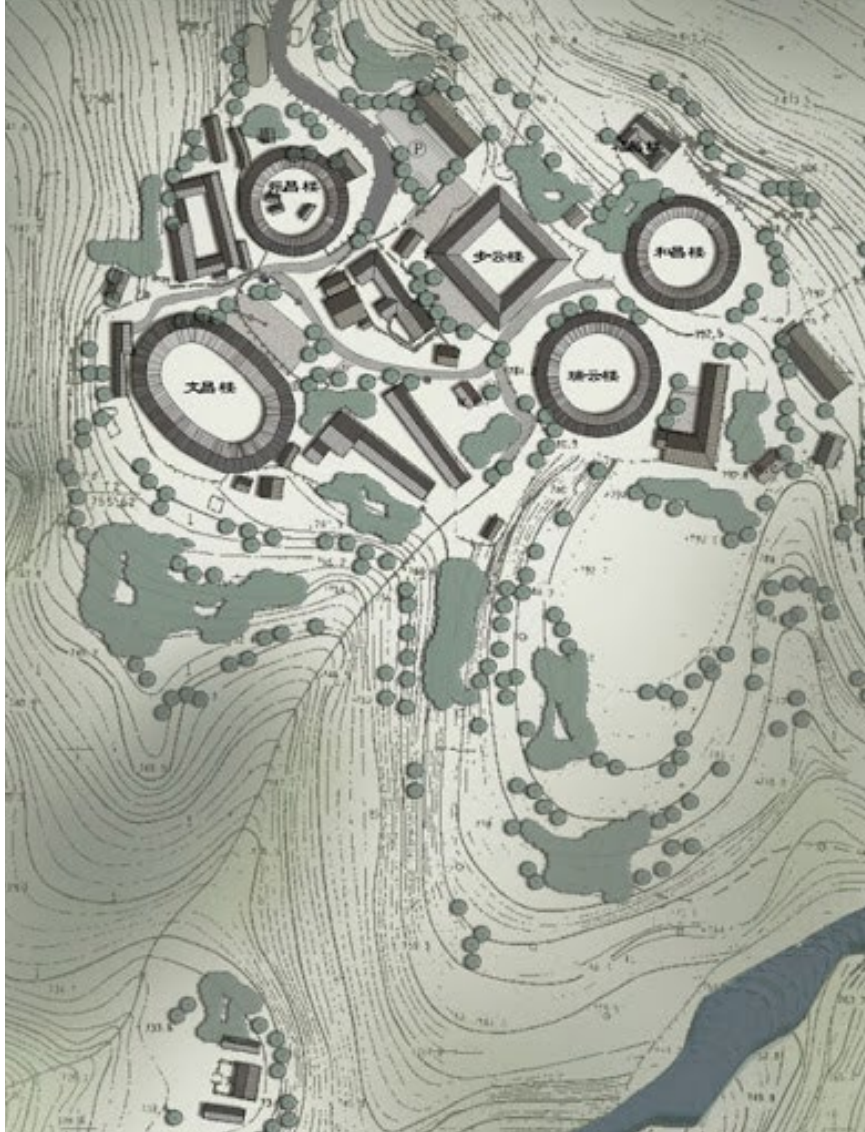


Vernacular courtyard houses.

Figure 26.5 Xinhua photo, aerial view of Tongli ancient town in Suzhou, Jiangsu, China.

Figure 27.5 A photo by Stef Hoffer, aerial view of Lijiang ancient town, Yunnan, China.

Figure 28.5 Aerial view from Google Earth of Nu-rachi, Sardinia, Italy.



Vernacular fortified villages.

Figure 29.5 A design of Tulou architectural complex in Fujian province, China. Provided by Prof. Zhang Song, College of Architecture and Urban Planning (CAUP), Tongji University.

Figure 30.5 Aerial view of Tulou architectural complex, Fujian, China.

Figure 31.5 Aerial view of the nuragic village of Palmavera, Sardinia, Italy.

mavera or the village of *Su Nuraxi*. These two architectural typologies, which are very distant from each other, both temporally and physically, are in reality extremely related, always because the morphological recurrences and uses of certain territories, due to the unity of the human spirit, often coincide. The way in which a population, beyond time and space, experiences a certain situation according to certain needs, can sometimes be expressed in architectural forms that are also very similar.

Although we could talk at length about the vernacular models that have emerged over the course of Chinese and Italian history, we must nevertheless bear in mind that the spontaneity of morphologies does not always lie only in the repeated and recognisable but also, and above all, in the ordinary and random. If initially the study of anonymous architecture was a way of rebelling against the canonical and typological models of architecture itself,

today we must perhaps also move away from the models identified in the vernacular and rural heritage towards ordinary spontaneity. While the extraordinary and the heroic are fascinating features of architectural objects, on the other hand **not everything is fantastic and unique, but often in reality simply ordinary and normal**. It is precisely in the ordinary, jagged, shapeless contexts in which objects do not relate to each other that normality becomes unique. The streets become tangled, the **anonymous elements overlap**, generating a pattern that is not entirely legible, but only noticeable and observable. The apparent ordinary chaos, however, becomes an **expression of the human soul of the inhabitants** who live there and shape it from time to time.

Although the following paragraph deals with vernacular and mostly rural architecture, it may be useful to refer to the research conducted by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Ste-

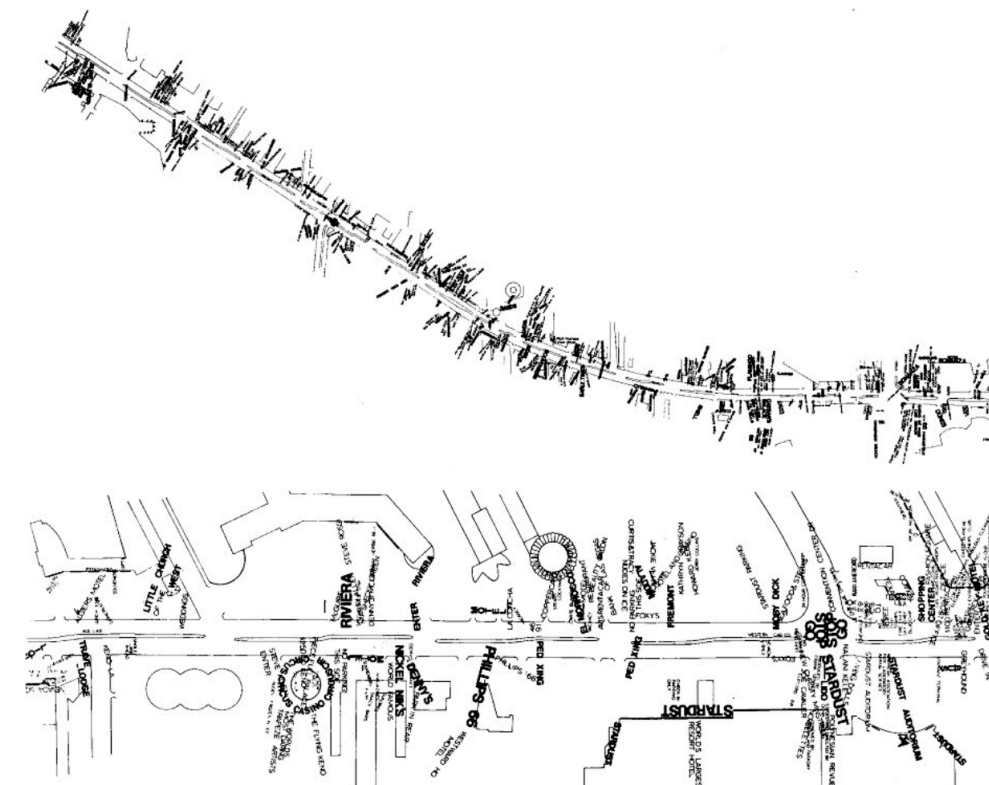
ven Izenour, which is recounted in the 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*.⁵² On a theoretical level, in fact, we are still talking about cities and places where most of what is built is not built by architects and where the object of interest becomes everything that is everyday and ordinary artefact and that depicts man and his needs specific to that place. **Every civilisation expresses itself in a certain kind of ordinary**, so the above-mentioned book explains how the American consumption and commodity civilisation of the 1950s and 1960s is materially reflected in the Pop and Kitsch aesthetics of the *Strip*.⁵³ The spontaneous forms of the landscape, whether in Las Vegas or in a small Mediterranean village, express the essence of the civilisation that lives in them, and studying them allows us to understand it and collaborate with it. It is therefore undeniable that we need to study and understand spon-

aneous conformations, both in their patterns that become repeated types, as well as in their more random and ordinary elements. Only by studying the vernacular and ordinary architecture of a specific place is it possible to grasp certain details that can then become tools for many contemporary design issues. The idea, therefore, is not to establish whether it is better to design a city entirely or to let it go on its own in its spontaneous formation, but to understand how design can find a third, **intermediate way between the two extremes**, which in truth often coexist in a single reality.

52. Venturi, R., Scott Brown D., Izenour S., *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1972.

53. Rossi, U., *Learning from the road. Autopia vs dystopia*, Firenze Architettura 1, 2017, p.158.

Figure 32.5 Map of the Las Vegas strip showing every written word visible along the street from the book *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (v.52.).





Hybrid mixed reality

The tool

In the evolution of cities in general, i.e. in most existing real cases, it is very rare for a morphological conformation to remain intact over time. It is therefore plausible to see that the idea of a city planned only and designed by an external figure, as well as the idea of a completely spontaneous conformation, are extremes that can, however, be used to understand more real cases in which the two coexist in a given place. Although there are indeed cases of large planned cities, such as the large city of Ordos already mentioned, or cases of entire villages that have preserved their more spontaneous and vernacular morphologies, what usually happens is that the two generic morphological systems coexist in a single city or town. It is clear that the historical, social, cultural, political and eco-

nomic evolution of places corresponds to a morphological evolution and sum in continuous being. Cities are mutable entities that are constantly changing, not necessarily enlarging, but also just overlapping from time to time. In particular, the contemporary city is extremely complex to read because of its extreme **plurality of fragments and overlays**; the elements that compose it always have different characters, they can be global as well as local and traditional.⁵⁴ This, for obvious reasons, makes each town unique and unrepeatable and it is precisely in its contemporary singularity that the difficulty of reading and analysing its peculiar morphologies resides. The choice of differentiating the morphological systems planned in the territories from nothing from the more spontaneous and vernacular morphological systems stems from the need to be able to read and interpret the morphologies of the rural town that is the object of the project of this research which, as often happens in

Figure 33.5 A photo by Frank Wang, urban village of Bashizhou, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

54. Governa, F., Memoli, M., *Geografie dell'urbano, Spazi, politiche, pratiche della città*, Roma, Carocci editore, 2015, p.80-81.

the Chinese countryside, turns out to be a spontaneous rural village that in the fast Chinese economic development, which first involved the secondary sector and then the tertiary sector, expanded in a standardised and externally planned way. Understanding how the two morphological systems have functioned throughout history and how they function in our contemporary times may perhaps help to understand how certain spaces and places in **Hufu zhen**, the subject of the study, are currently experienced. The intention is therefore not to understand the general aspects of the contemporary city, but rather to look for tools to understand this city in order to be able to think about how it could develop in the near future. Therefore, identifying and analysing morphological systems that can also be found in other places can be useful in order to understand how these places are experienced and what the morphological characteristics are that can then become the starting point for

added action. Studying the morphologies of a place, considered as a **palimpsest**, necessarily means starting from the observation that, more often than not, these possess traces of **mutations that have taken place consequentially**; studying the traces and giving them meaning, trying to understand them, therefore means giving oneself the opportunity for a more intelligent intervention.⁵⁵ Thus the intention becomes that of rewriting over a territory, which already possesses elements that in turn become our guide in rewriting a text that can be adapted to contemporary needs. It is clear that the identification of **the soul of a specific place** that is as complete as possible cannot be based solely on a purely morphological analysis, but it is also true that in reality the city lends itself to being studied and interpreted through **different perspectives**. There can therefore be parallel readings of the same, ranging from urban sociology to anthropology, and even

55. Corboz, A., *Il territorio come palinsesto*, Casabella, 516, 1985, p.27.

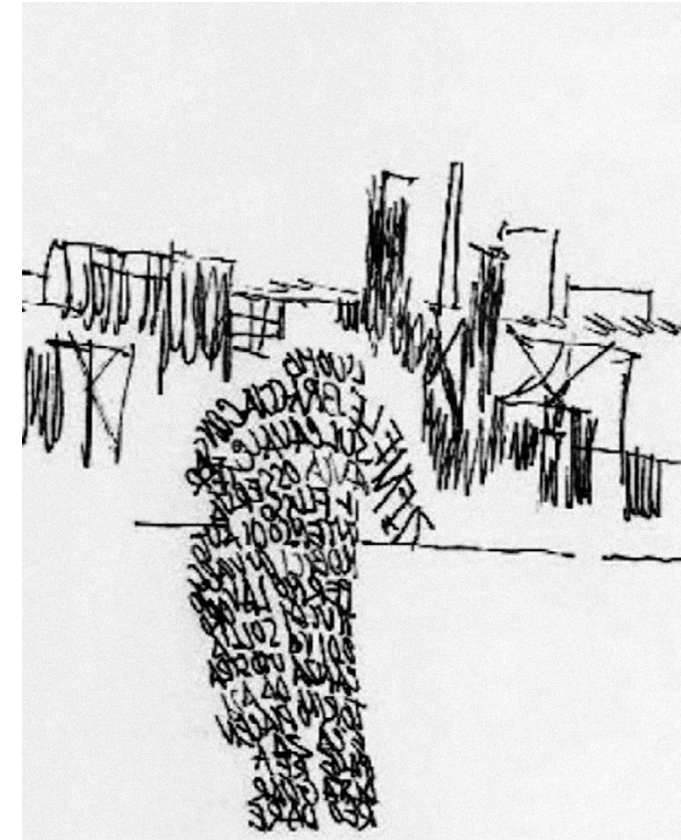


Figure 34.5 A drawing by William Xerra, *Thinking about city*.

Figure 35.5 A painting by René Magritte representing the ambiguity of perception to which every observer is subjected, *La condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 1933.



literary and artistic narratives; the city can be analysed from a variety of angles and methodologies, and in reality each of these will give a different but related interpretation. The search for tools to identify certain peculiarities, therefore, is **not a univocal method** of reading, but an attempt at interpretation among the many existing ones: space, understood as a place, does not speak on its own but thanks to the **filter of perception and the culture of those who read it**.⁵⁶ As a tool, the aerial view of the urban morphologies that compose a town can give some hints as to how the spirit of the place adapts and evolves, but it is undeniable that, for a more complete interpretation and reconstruction of it, the so-called act of *flânerie* is one of the most effective methods of grasping part of its meaning. Reading a place not only from its images, but also and above all by experiencing it, can certainly help to discover the soul of places, the **genius loci**. Certainly, however, whatever

the way and resources available for reading a space, there is no denying the great complexity involved in reading the stratifications of the various epochs. The knowledge and analysis of different cities and places in general can therefore help in the understanding of a specific place, and the analysis of similar or even analogous morphologies can be understood almost as a mental training towards the subsequent reading of the object of interest. Obviously this is not intended as a single method of analysis, but rather as a personal way of interpreting spaces, a bit like Marco Romano himself says in his book *Le belle città*⁵⁷, in which he tries to outline his own methodology for analysing cities, based above all on wandering around in search of collective themes and their transgressions, in which the specific style of each city can be recognised.

The approach

As already mentioned, the morphological structure of a place is

56. Nuvolati, G., *L'interpretazione dei luoghi, flânerie come esperienza di vita*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2013, p.68-69.

57. Romano, M., *Le belle città, cinquanta ritratti di città come opere d'arte*, Milano, UTET, 2016.

almost never homogeneous, but rather hybrid, “something made up of heterogeneous elements that do not fit together well”.⁵⁸ In the specific case of the Chinese countryside, it is possible to identify recurrences of a morphological type that often coexist with each other. Their transformation happened during the great moment of urbanisation that took place above all from the era of the new economic reforms, starting around the end of the 1970s. **Not all villages have evolved in the same way**, some have lost many of their original agricultural traces, some have seen their agricultural plots transformed into large residential neighbourhoods, while others have developed industrial complexes on the outskirts. The rural in these transformation processes is always an important factor in the morphologies of these new complex urban-rural systems, as stated by the previously mentioned Joshua Bolchover and John Lin, who in their book *Rural Urban Framework, Transforming the Chinese*

Countryside, identify five types of rural village (or small town) modified as a result of the urbanisation of recent years, describing their characteristics and giving concrete examples. In particular, the types identified are the *urban village*, the *factory village*, the *suburban village*, the *contested village* and finally the so-called *rural village*. **Urban villages** (figure 35.5) are modern rural villages incorporated into the new urbanised contexts, almost like social ghettos housing mainly immigrants. They lack planning and struggle with difficulty against the incidence of the city, which tends to erase them. **Factory villages** (figure 36.5), which have been formed since the great industrialisation which took place from 1978, are formed in rural areas mainly because of the great availability of “free” land (which in reality was often occupied by crops) and the economic workforce in those areas. In this type of town the industrial complexes are always accompanied, for obvious



Figure 36.5 *Urban village*: aerial view from Google Earth of Bashizhou, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

Figure 37.5 *Factory village*: aerial view from Google Earth of Foxconn company, Longhua, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

Figure 38.5 *Suburban village*: aerial view from Google Earth of the new town of Thames Town, Shanghai, China.

Figure 39.5 *Rural village*: aerial view from Google Earth of the village of Luk, Guangdong, China.

58. Treccani on-line dictionary, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ibrido/>, 2021.

reasons, by a series of residential complexes for the same workforce that goes to work in the new industries. Often, since industry generates wealth, the workers in the industry itself become part of a middle class, which gradually demands better living conditions, and thus better housing estates. This is then reflected in the very morphologies that make up this type of village. **Suburban villages** (figure 37.5) are those villages which come closest to the European concept of peri-urban space and arise with the growth in the number of people in the middle class: large neighbourhoods are generated with urban-type dwellings completely out of context, especially in relation to the traditional houses which are not too far away from them. These neighbourhoods are usually walled off and safely isolated from the outside world, creating residential islands. **Contested villages** are characterised by a strong fragmentation, cultivated fields reduced to small patches of land are mixed

with landscapes of building speculation in a hybrid territory. Finally, the **rural villages** (figure 38.5) are those villages that could be defined as vernacular, i.e. those villages that have not undergone any kind of external modification due to urbanisation. These are villages that have not undergone any kind of external alteration due to urbanisation. Elderly people usually live there and receive a portion of money from their children who have gone to work in the city, which is often invested in renovating their traditional dwellings spontaneously.⁵⁹ The exercise carried out by the authors of the book is therefore to identify **types of village** that are distinguished by their morphologies and causes of formation, in particular the fact that each type of social, cultural and economic context corresponds to certain types of development that generate certain types of settlement. It should be borne in mind that an understanding of the morphologies of these places should be understood more

as an **understanding of the transitions** of the villages themselves, which see in them the passage of different Chinese historical epochs beginning with the centuries of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the period of the Republic of China, the great leap forward and then the more recent period of technologisation.

The **type-morphological approach**, typically Italian, of analysing the **transitional morphologies** of a place, has at present few applications in the Chinese context, particularly if the specific context of the Chinese countryside is taken into account. The difficulty in applying this method, Italian and more generally European and Western, in the Chinese context, lies above all in the difficult availability of cartographic material in the various periods up to the present day. Reconstructing changes in detail in order to understand Chinese urban and rural landscapes is much more complex than for Western ones; often traditional Chinese maps and plans only indicate the road system

and the key landmarks of urban configurations, while drawings representing roads, plots and building block-plans are rare in China over history; moreover, although more accurate maps of cities have been produced since the 1990s, their availability was and still is difficult.⁶⁰ However, it is useful to see two examples of the study of morphologies and their dynamism in order to then be able to try to make a reading of Hufu zhen, as already mentioned township under study located in the countryside of Jiangsu province.

A first example can be the research project using the method of plan analysis of the ancient city of Pingyao conducted by Jeremy W. R. Whitehand and Kai Gu.⁶¹ The city is located in Shanxi province and over the course of the salient events in Chinese history its morphologies have changed, which in their plot patterns and street plans are products of planning schemes. According to these scholars, therefore, the **analysis of the plan** helps in a conspicuo-

59. Bolchover, J., Lin, J., *Rural Urban Framework, Transforming the Chinese countryside*, Basel, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2014, p.13-16.

60. Kai Gu, Zhen Xu, *Applying Conzenian and Caniggian ideas in China: recent research advances and problems*, U+D urban-form and design, n.1, 2014, p.17.

61. Whitehand, J. W. R., Kai Gu, *Extending the compass of plan analysis: a Chinese exploration*, Urban Morphology, n.11(2), 2007, p.91-109.

us way the understanding of the historical development of the shape of towns and cities, in particular referring to the methodology developed by M. R. G. Conzen for the understanding not so much of the shape of things for **what they are as in their historical becoming, in their continuous state of transition and metamorphosis**. We can see how the research identified the main components of the plan of the centre of Pingyao (figure 39.5) and how an analysis of the road system in general was carried out to then move on to the study of each plot and therefore of its conformation, identifying some as more irregular than others that are more ordered; the analysis of the morphology of each plot is always accompanied by the objective of understanding its origin and evolution. Obviously, in the essay cited above, it is emphasised that an analysis of this type can be conducted not only for the purposes of knowledge of a place but also as a basis for urban landscape ma-

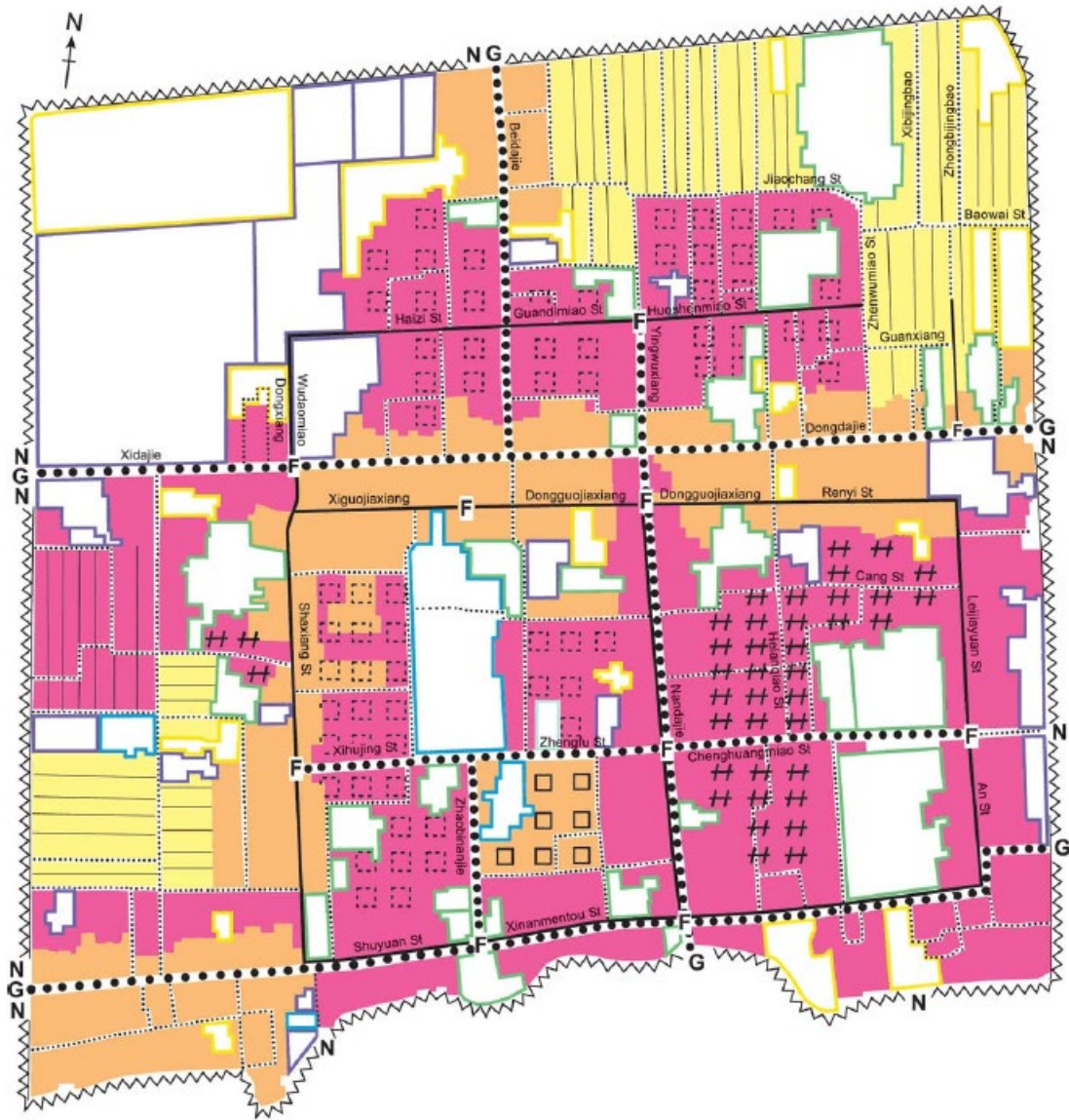
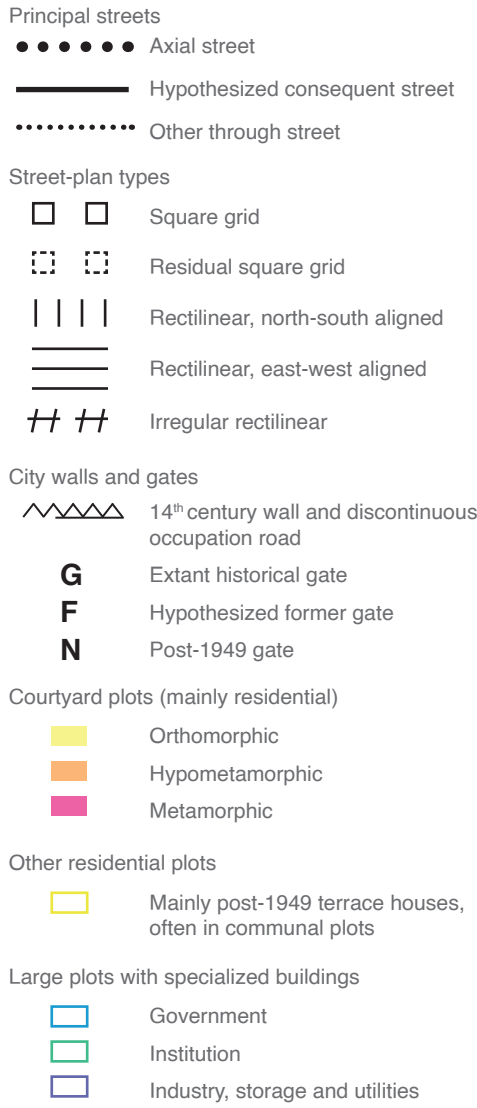
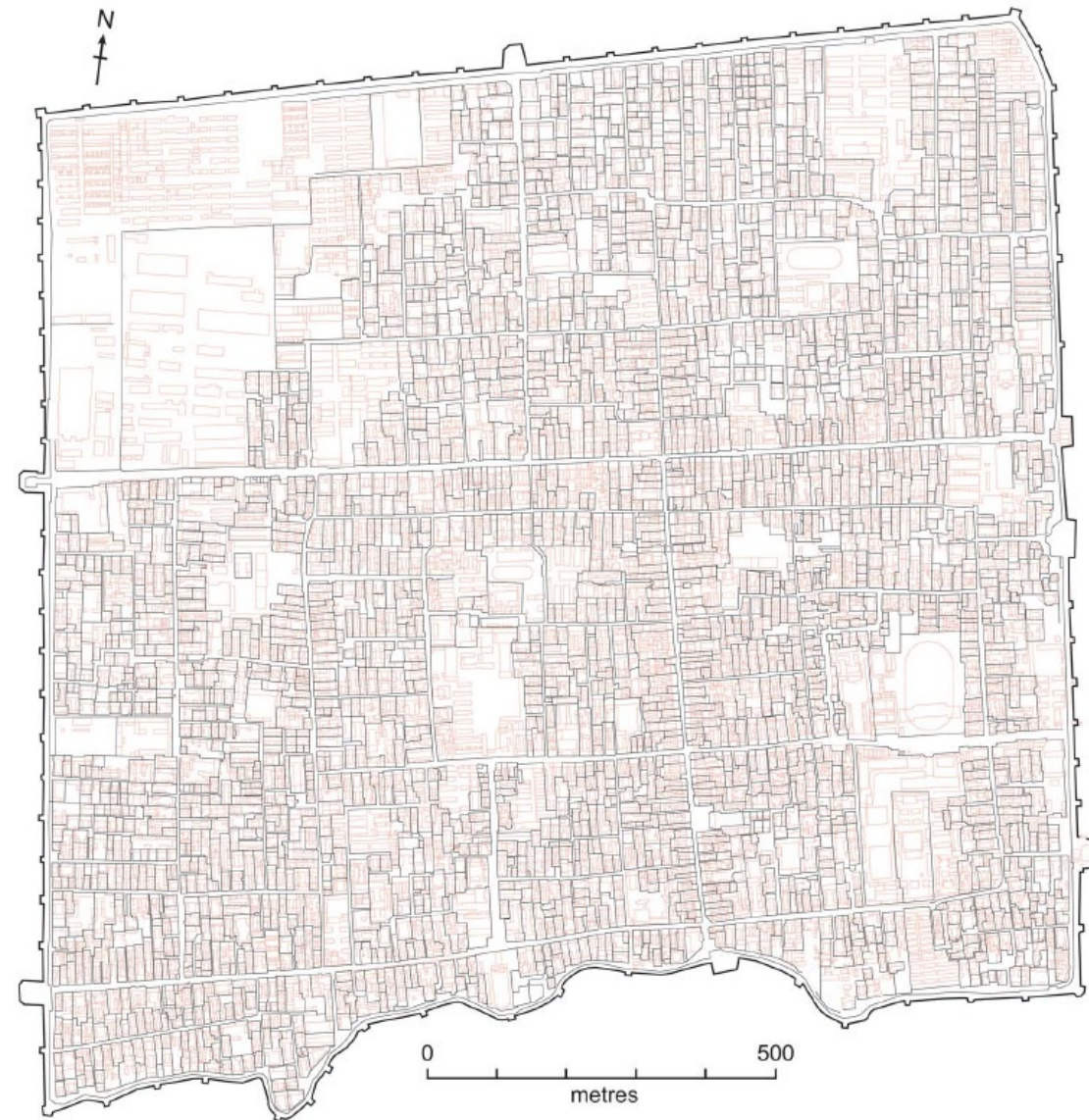


Figure 40.5 A scheme from the article written by Whitehand, J. W. R., Kai Gu, *Extending the compass of plan analysis: a Chinese exploration*, Urban Morphology, n.11(2), 2007, p.99.

Principal plan components of central Pingyao, 2006.



nagement at the planning level. Another example concerns the analysis of the **transitional morphologies** of a neighbourhood in the southern part of central Nanjing called Hehua Tang. Again, this involves a study of the site plans, particularly from different periods, in order to understand how the morphologies have changed over time. Thus, starting from a *Conze*-*nian* approach, the study then moves on to the scale of the building and the urban fabric, drawing on the *Caniggian* school. The aim is to trace the permanence, variations and permutations of the city form over time, reinterpreting the **Italian type-morphological approach** towards the unexplored world of contemporary Asian cities.⁶² In order to proceed with this type of approach, it was necessary to consult historical cartography, archaeological surveys, architectural measurements and cadastral maps. However, as suggested in the essay referred to here, other sources

such as literary sources, old photographs or ancient paintings can sometimes be used, but these will have to be interpreted with a greater degree of difficulty than the analysis of actual cartographies. Through the study of the various cartographies and aerial photographs of different periods of Hehua Tang, it was then possible to create a **typological map** capable of describing the transition of the place itself. In particular, through the study of the urban fabric, the typological-transitional map was drawn from six building types including the traditional Nanjing courtyard house, the compact courtyard house, the multi-storey building, the industrial building, the shop and the informal additions. The aim of this method of approach is always not only the awareness of a place but also the creation of a base from which to start urban regeneration and conscious design in today's China.

The initial analysis

The study of the morphologies of a place, always through the resour-

Figure 41.5 A plan from which the diagram shown above is obtained, from the article written by Whitehand, J. W. R., Kai Gu, *Extending the compass of plan analysis: a Chinese exploration*, Urban Morphology, n.11(2), 2007, p.95.

Plot boundaries and outlines of the block plans of the buildings: central Pingyao, c. 2000. Plot boundaries are shown in black. Building outlines are shown in red (in black where they coincide with a plot boundary). Based upon an unpublished plan prepared by Shanxi Research Institute of Urban and Rural Planning and Design.

62. Trisciuglio, M., *Note on the transitional urban morphologies as a criticism of urban studies in the Chinese context. The typological map on Nanjing Hehua Tang*, U+D urbanform and design, n.14, 2020, p.15.

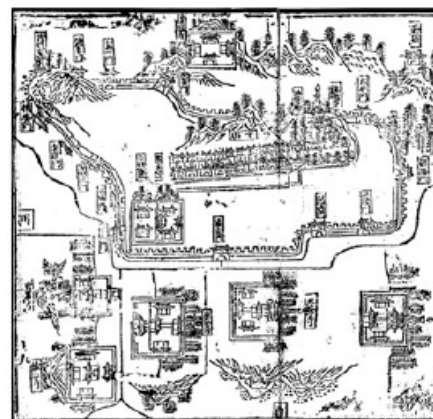
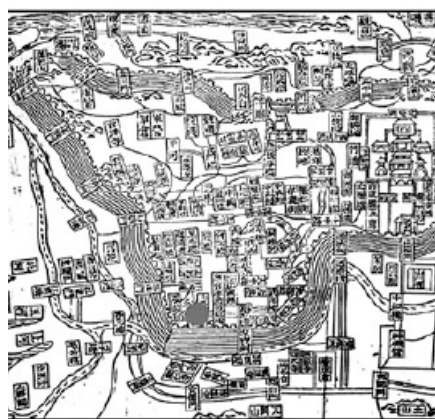


Figure 42.5 Pictures from the article written by Trisciuglio, M., *Note on the transitional urban morphologies as a criticism of urban studies in the chinese context. The typological map on Nanjing Heua Tang*, U+D urbanform and design, n.14, 2020, p.16.

Maps of Hehua Tang in different historical periods, from left to right: Ming, Qing, 1931,1936; Maps of Hehua Tang in four different historical periods: 1911, 1929, 1946, 1975; Hehua Tang in the aerial photo of Nanjing in 1929 and the satellite photo.

ces available, can therefore lead to an understanding of it. In particular, if we refer to those contemporary mixed realities in which morphologies of different types and periods are often juxtaposed, their observation can be useful not only to understand the forms in their evolution, but also to understand in a certain way how people inhabit these spaces. It was decided to make an initial distinction between spontaneous morphological evolutions and conscious design from the top and from outside the context in which they operate, which, coexisting, generate **hybrid cities** in which one can therefore identify not only different settlement types but also **different societies**. It is reasonable to say that it often happens in China, especially in the countryside, that the types of village identified in the book *Rural Urban Framework* actually coexist in a single entity. Over time, medium and small urban settlements have seen an overlapping and an enlargement of different types of urban

fabric: it often happens, therefore, to observe villages with a more spontaneous morphological core, similar to the rural village, which then in the outer circles have new residential and/or industrial districts (suburban village, factory village) to form a hybrid and mixed reality. The types that can be identified will then correspond to different ways of inhabiting space and different types of society living together in a single town or village to form what can be called the **mixed community** of our time: it is as if there were multiply cities in a single entity that can therefore be defined as **fragmented**. The fragmented nature of a place can be determined by variations in factors as diverse as population size, income, levels of car ownership, but also the availability of good, unpolluted water, the preponderance of informal settlements, and sometimes even the presence of topographical restrictions on expansion.

In the specific Chinese



Figure 43.5 A photo by Chiara Loi, *Coexistence of different urban residential patterns*, photo taken from Hui Yuan Li's new gated neighbourhood, Nanjing, China, 2019.

case, the fragmentation of spaces is remarkable, often the result of rapid urbanisation involving a large number of villages that have either been incorporated into larger towns or have seen their own change over time, making them quite urban in terms of their residential and industrial composition. Many of these villages often fit into that broad “*rural-yet-urban*” area where there is usually a dense dispersion of villages with a high percentage of non-agricultural activities and a large number of workers commuting to urban jobs in the city proper.

Thus, as previously stated, the process of urbanisation that has involved China in recent decades is not only caused by the massive movement of population from the countryside to the cities, but also by urbanisation in situ, which has led many villages that initially had a purely rural character to become more urbanised at all levels in our times, generating the so-called **rural-urban continuum**.⁶³ This typology of space described often

coincides with what is known as **desakota**, a term coined by McGee in 1991⁶⁴ to indicate precisely those spatial structures, almost always Asian, **hybrid and in some ways ambiguous**, that are densely populated and that see an intense mix of agricultural and non-agricultural activities especially in the corridors between the large urban centres. The urban processes in these places usually go hand in hand with a **persistent rurality** within them, creating very particular patterns. It is clear that the formation of this type of pattern can be defined as a transition over time of morphologies which, therefore, have changed over time, generating today’s rural scenarios. However, not only the countryside, for obvious reasons, sees a **coexistence of different patterns** (figure 42.5), because even the city is almost never homogeneous and the overlapping and alterations of morphologies lead to very complex spaces to analyse and interpret from a morpho-

logical and social point of view. Moreover, in this specific case, the considerations made are mainly aimed at understanding rural areas, or rather, the new rural-urban areas that have formed over time in China.

The search for Chinese and Western examples from a historical, cultural and above all morphological point of view in rural and urban areas, together with the search for a tool and method for reading these same examples, have made it possible to understand, even from a distance, some of the characteristics of Hufu zhèn. Through the study of different realities that in some ways can be assimilated to different pieces of the town and with few materials available (mostly aerial photos of the present day and a few photos of a survey of the place carried out in 2017 by some students of Southeast University of Nanjing in China) it was possible to make some considerations regarding the morphology and society of this town that is now a **hybrid and mul-**

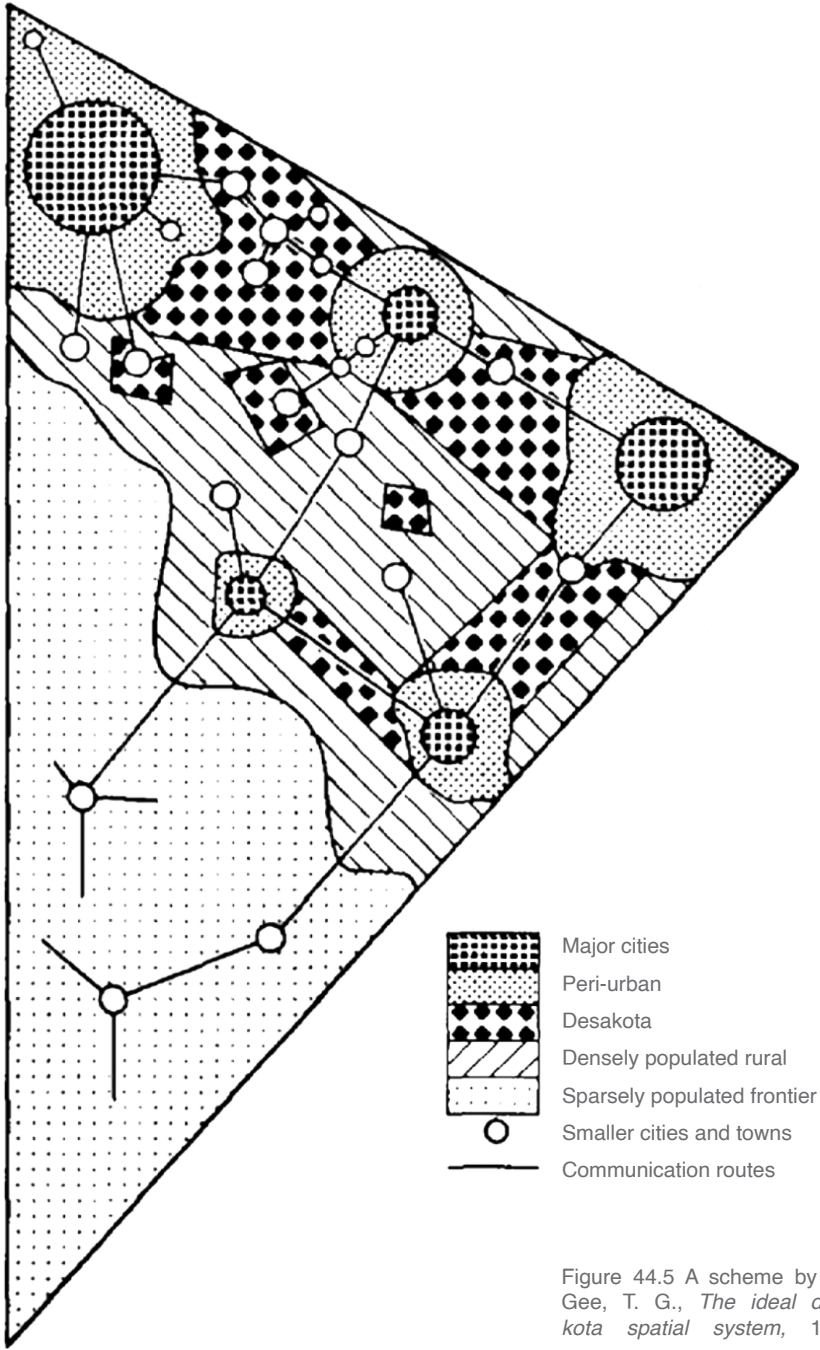


Figure 44.5 A scheme by McGee, T. G., *The ideal desakota spatial system*, 1991.

63. Angel, S., Parent, J., Civco, D. L., *The fragmentation of urban landscapes: global evidence of a key attribute of the spatial structure of cities*, Environment & Urbanization, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 24(1), 1990-2000, DOI: 10.1177/0956247811433536, 2012, p. 257-261.

64. McGee, T. G., *The Emergence of Desakota Regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis*, The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

#6 HUFU AT FIRST GLANCE

六

Through the reflections made in the previous chapters, it is possible to take a more conscious glance at the small town under study. In spite of the distance and the limited amount of material available, in fact, by studying the history and the main characteristics of the Chinese countryside in the present day, together with the study of the morphological patterns that can be found in rural areas in China but also in the West, it becomes possible to identify some characteristic aspects of Hufu zhèn that can suggest how the material and social development of these spaces took place.



Figure 1.6 An old map of the city of Yixing and the village of Hufu zhèn from the archive of the city of Yixing, 1797.

tiform entity extremely complex.

Hufu zhen, the case study investigated in Jiangsu province, was originally a rural village that has changed over time as a result of the historical, economic and social events that have involved China. Observing some aerial photos of the area that includes Hufu zhen from different historical periods starting from 1984 up to 2020 (figures 2.6), it is clear that the development of Hufu zhen took place in a fairly short time and in relation to the development of the largest city near it, Yixing.

Beyond the territorial framework of this place, which will be studied in depth in the following chapters, it is interesting to simply study the **morphologies in transformation** through the photos and maps in order to try to understand how and what were the consequences of the transformation of the place itself through the tool and method suggested above. Although the aerial photos of several years from 1984 onwards

do not allow, due to the quality of the images, a closer look at what has happened in the town of Hufu over time, it is still possible to make some **preliminary considerations** about the evolution of the object in question.

In **1984**, for example, one can see that Hufu zhen is still a small rural village, which will undoubtedly have already undergone some changes following the death of Mao and thus the end of the era of Chinese communes in the countryside, but still remains a purely rural entity. To its right is the larger town of Dingshu zhen which, still under the Yixing city district, rapidly expanded over time to occupy vast formerly agricultural land. We can also see the creation of new major roads and lower infrastructures connecting the various towns to the big city, as happens in the rest of China during the period of major urbanisation. Starting in **2010**, work began on the dam and artificial lake near Hufu zhen (on the left), which were completed in 2013; in

the meantime, urban development continued in the village, both in terms of residential and industrial development, up to the present day.

In spite of the absence of more comprehensible materials, it is possible to date some salient stages in the development of the object of study which, from a rural village, actually began to expand from the 1990s. In fact, first the larger village to its right, which is also closer to the large city of Yixing, was urbanised, and only afterwards the village of Hufu itself began to expand. This happened because urbanisation, which at first only involved the outskirts of medium-large Chinese cities, then also involved small and medium-sized villages, and therefore also many small rural villages, as explained above.

If we take a closer look at the current conformation of the case study, we can then make other considerations of a morphological nature and therefore social deductions; starting from the distinction between more **spontaneous**

conformations and conformations designed *ex nihilo* (figure 5.6), in fact, we can already distinguish different areas, or rather, **different morphological patterns**, and it is also possible to identify **different types of village that coexist** in the entity of today's town. There is thus a more spontaneous, plausibly older part of the town, and a more recent part generated by the strong urbanisation of recent years, which has thus made the rural village no longer just rural but a **mixed hybrid object**. Over the years, new industrial districts and new housing blocks have sprung up on the outskirts of the village, which probably, at least in the beginning, served to house the workforce of the industries themselves. The new housing estates, however, have nothing to do with the spontaneity of the original fabric, but are designed in a way that is completely alien to their context. The fragmentation and detachment between the different morphological patterns is clearly legible at

Figures 2.6 On the following pages: Aerial views from Google Earth Engine of different years (starting from 1984 until 2020) of Yixing city and Hufu zhèn area, Jiangsu, China.



1984



1991



2003



2008



2010



2013



2014



2016



2017



2018



2019



2020



Figure 3.6 Aerial view from Google Earth of Yixing city and Hufu zhèn zoomed area, Jiangsu, China.

Figure 4.6 Aerial view from Google Earth of Hufu zhèn, Jiangsu, China.





Figures 5.6 Some personal analysis on the morphology of the town Hufu. On the right page some cut-outs of an aerial photo showing respectively: part of an original rural village, part of an industrial village, part of a suburban village and part of cultivated fields and rural permanence. The analysis was made with reference to the study *Rural Urban Framework, Transforming the Chinese Countryside* (v.p.125).

first glance and suggests that the way of **experiencing the different spaces** is probably also different. The expansion of the original village does not totally deny the rural and agricultural nature of the place, but it certainly leads several areas of the town to be less linked to the primary sector economy towards secondary and tertiary economies.

The most spontaneous, and therefore definable **vernacular, pattern** is found mainly along the river that runs through the town, so it is reasonable to think that, even in the light of the 1984 aerial photo, **the oldest part of the town of Hufu is indeed that along the waterway**. This is not only true for these reasons but also because, in the history of China and in particular in the history of Jiangsu province, many villages have formed around the waters of the Yangtze River, the Grand Canal and on the banks of Taihu Lake for reasons related to the configuration of the land, the historically predo-

minant Chinese agricultural economy but also in relation to the commercial and communication nature of these majestic routes. Traditionally the **waterways played a more important role than the roads** as goods were shipped into the cities from the countryside and all activity took place on the docks where market squares were then formed.⁶⁵

In particular, streets and **buildings run parallel to the rivers**, given the convenience of access to both water and land, and the houses were built close to the water with the street in front and the river behind, often with the ground floor used as workshops, warehouses or shops and the houses on the upper floor; between the buildings there were often narrow pedestrian alleys where community life was spent outdoors. In these water towns, the **trinity of bridge-water-home** always exists, and in fact all the general characteristics listed above are partly observable even in the most spontaneous

65. Porfyriou, H., *Urban Heritage Conservation of China's Historic Water Towns and the Role of Professor Ruan Yisan: Nanxun, Tongli and Wuzhen*, *Heritage*, n.2, DOI: 10.3390, 2019.

Figure 6.6 A photo by an anonymous showing one of the paintings on the walls of the houses in the oldest part of the town of Hufu, there is thus a depiction of the typical houses parallel to the course of the river in front of which collective and commercial spaces are generated, *Ancients' tales*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.



part of Hufu zhen. Although many houses have been privately modified over the years, there is still a morphological structure partly parallel to the watercourse and some dated bridges still survive. It is clear that the **homogeneous pattern of houses** along the watercourse and the narrow streets has **changed over time**, and has been partly replaced by buildings and complexes of different scales, probably including some working-class communes, typical collective structures of the Chinese rural world in the Maoist period.

Looking more closely at what is presumed to be the oldest part of the town of Hufu (figure 7.6), and which therefore certainly existed before the 1980s, it can be seen that along the course of the river the houses are actually arranged parallel to it, the **traces of the original village** still being legible today. The houses then face the other side of a narrow street, probably a pedestrian street, which still exists in the contemporary

town; it is interesting to note that the narrow street was created precisely because the commercial areas and therefore the trading areas in the old water towns were on the side of the river (figure 6.6), which we can imagine was also the case in this particular instance. The morphologies of this place, extremely **spontaneous** and vernacular, follow the course of the river in its curves, leading to the formation of a **unique and un-repeatable** urban fabric: the waters determine the genesis of the urban morphology, which almost seems to **arch its spine in order to fit better into its context**. Clearly there is no plan whatsoever in the formation of these dwellings, only the need to find a place to live that drove previous generations to influence the place and modify it spontaneously, guided only by the pre-existing landscape.

The **origin of the village** can however be guessed not only from the considerations made, it is in fact possible to observe some

Figure 8.6 On the following pages: photo by an anonymous shows a painting of what must have been the original rural hamlet of Hufu zhèn, with houses arranged parallel to the river and others forming inner courtyards. The typical Chinese idyllic rural life can be seen: collective life, transport of agricultural goods, livestock and symbols of an ancient China such as the dragon, *Ancients' tales*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.



Figure 7.6 Drawing by Chiara Loi, *Vernacular settlements along the river through the town of Hufu*, Hufu zhèn, Jiangsu, China, 2020.



Figure 9.6 A photo by an anonymous showing a newly renovated house in the oldest part of the town of Hufu, at the entrance clothes are hanging on a handmade structure made of three tree branches, *Necessity and permanent traditional invention*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.

Figure 10.6 A photo by an anonymous showing the co-existence of renovated buildings and old buildings in a state of disrepair and the search for a common language with the past through materials and colours, *Different ages coexisting*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.



Intergenerational encounter.

paintings made on the walls of old houses in the area under study which, although they were made in recent times, were probably also **based on the tales told by the elderly** who still live in those places. Beyond the depiction of the houses that originally formed a **scattered rural hamlet** closely linked to the river (figure 8.6), these images show how the rural and agricultural identity of these places has not completely disappeared despite the strong urban development undergone in recent times; many flowerbeds, for example, created to regenerate these old neighbourhoods, are now used as small vegetable gardens for personal sustenance. There are therefore some **clues and traces** that can be found among the photos and maps of the town in question that can suggest how the spaces actually evolved and how life was conducted in them. It is clear that, in these *in situ* conformations, life was conducted in a more traditionally rural way; not only the vegetable gardens cre-

ated from the flowerbeds, but also the small canopies and escamotages added to the houses by their owners, as well as the commercial streets overlooked by the houses of the remaining farmers and craftsmen, suggest a permanence of social life that must have existed even before the last urbanisation. The addition of canopies suggests that, in a geographical area where rainfall is fairly frequent, it is necessary to find solutions for living in the open air. Stowing a few chairs in a circle and talking to the people living next door are gestures that still exist in these places and refer to a typical **life linked to the concept of community and rurality**.

As the village developed and expanded over time, and as not only the waterways but also the **roads began to have a commercial importance**, it is likely that some commercial spaces and streets were created of which some traces still exist today (figure 11.6). In fact, in the most spontaneous part of the



Figure 11.6 Drawing by Chiara Loi, *Vernacular settlements and the market street*, Hufu zhèn, Jiangsu, China, 2020.

Market meetings.

Figure 12.6 A photo by an anonymous showing a few stalls set up at the entrances to houses in the market street in the old part of Hufu zhèn, *Zero kilometre home-grown product*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.

Figure 13.6 A photo by an anonymous showing life in the market street, *Just like home*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.





town, it is possible to see a street flanked by stratified morphologies; there are some older buildings, others more recent and larger. Even today, the street is used as an **open-air market** directly on the street, which becomes a lively reality in which people often sell their agricultural and/or craft products directly from their homes, which open the doors of the ground floor to possible buyers.

The **feeling** you get walking through the streets of these neighbourhoods, where you often come across traditional and older architectural elements inserted in more recent morphological modifications, is that typical village and rural atmosphere. The narrow streets, the elderly man sitting just outside the door observing you, the hustle and bustle of people buying local and zero-kilometre products, the small vegetables grown on some old paint buckets and the children running in the streets are some of the many elements of a traditional Chinese community reality which,

in fact, can in some points be very similar to that experienced in any village in the world. It is perhaps this similar sense of traditional and rural community that unites the way we live in certain places in the world that is now driving many urban people to **seek out realities that feel more like home**, no longer finding themselves in contexts organised in a totally ordered and depersonalising manner and tending towards the more individual sphere of man.

It is precisely these last-mentioned characteristics that are common to many of the **new outer districts** that have emerged from recent rural urbanisation in China and which can also be found in the town of Hufu zhen. The so-called **ex-nihilo neighbourhoods** in the outer rings of the town, which are certainly linked to the industrialisation of the local economy, have an orthogonal composition and consist of multi-storey blocks of flats as opposed to low houses in the centre. Often these new neighbourhoods

Figure 14.6 A photo by an anonymous showing some of the vegetable gardens that now stand in front of the houses along the river, *Permanent rurality*, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.

are fenced off and therefore closed to the outside world, creating an initial level of community isolation that somewhat resembles the model of typical *American gated communities* and is commonly defined in Chinese as *xiaoqu* (小区), although the latter can be associated with different types of residential neighbourhood. In fact, the phenomenon of **gated communities**, which is now globally recognised, has been rooted in the Chinese history of city construction and the arrangement of society within the city; it can be traced back to the *walled cities* of the pre-socialist centralised feudal monarchy, through the *enclosed danwei* of the socialist period to the *contemporary gated communities* found in practically every Chinese city since the economic reforms of 1978. It is reasonable to believe that contemporary closed conformations of this type today are based mainly on the distinction between different social classes, referring in particular to rural migrants living in the cities,

each such community will have a certain level of quality and therefore of services within it based on the level of well-being of the society living in it. This planning system that has recently become widespread in China's large urbanisation is then supported by the state as it becomes a tool for social control and is then preferred by the citizens themselves for its closed management and sense of security.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the practice of closing off living areas and separating private and public life is rooted in the tradition of ancient Chinese planning, the debate among scholars today is focused on **how to reconcile this tradition with the concept of the open city**, finding no small number of difficulties, as new closed residential neighbourhoods continue to spring up both inside and outside Chinese cities. What may seem to western eyes to be a system that does not work on a social level is probably not a major problem for Chinese society, given the tradition of the

phenomenon from ancient times and the habit of living in spaces organised in this way. However, there is an undeniable **lack of connectivity** between the various neighbourhoods and between the streets inside the gates, which are private, and the streets outside, which are therefore public. These neighbourhoods, in fact, being closed, are lacking in permeability, accessibility and street connectivity, and are completely closed off from the outside world, resulting in sometimes dull, unli-

66. Hamama, B., Jian Liu, *What is beyond the edges? Gated communities and their role in China's desire for harmonious cities*, City, Territory and Architecture, 7/13, 2020, p.2-5.

Figure 15.6 Drawing by Chiara Loi, *New ex-nihilo and outer settlements*, Hufu zhèn, Jiangsu, China, 2020.

vely, ordinary and monotonous from a purely human point of view. It is clear that the concept of the Chinese gated community cannot be reduced to this description alone, as there are so many types of gated community, but in general, and probably also in the case of Hufu zhen, this type of neighbourhood is home to closed communities where people do not experience the traditional sociability that is typical of neighbourhoods in the older part of town. However, it cannot be denied that in contemporary China we can no longer just talk about typical and traditional by referring only to the most spontaneous spaces, but we can say that even these more recent and **ordered morphologies, ex-nihilo**, have themselves become, in a certain way, typical and traditional in Chinese planning culture, given their continuous repetition everywhere on the continent.

These new morphologies that have recently become typical since the period of strong urbanisation are

usually accompanied by **new industrial complexes** that **since the economic reforms** have formed not only on the outskirts of the large cities but also in the Chinese countryside, thanks also to the strong infrastructural development that has taken place there. The creation of new major roads and the branching off of new major transport systems has made it possible to create new industrial plants just about everywhere, and this has consequently led to the rapid creation of the previously described new residential neighbourhoods especially for the industrial workforce, and sometimes new large cities have sprung up as a result of this phenomenon. Thus the old village of Hufu also found itself at a certain point with new large industrial plants, which consequently led to its development from a rural village to a new contemporary town.

Figure 16.6 Drawing by Chiara Loi, *New ex-nihilo industrial settlements*, Hufu zhèn, Jiangsu, China, 2020.





The great variety of morphological patterns that have overlapped and flanked each other in a very short time in this area has generated a **new reality** that can no longer simply and banally be defined as a rural village in the countryside. The need therefore arose to be able to define in the right way this new **hybrid reality** which is unique in itself but which in truth corresponds, at an evolutionary level and then at a morpho-sociological level, to a **sort of model which has spread throughout China** over time. Precisely thanks to the observation of both Chinese and non-Chinese examples (such as those previously mentioned, particularly Italian ones), it has been possible, in a certain sense, to schematise the structure of the small town in a simplified way, in order to be able to understand its main features from a distance, even if only in part and from a more or less personal point of view. The aim of this analysis, however, is only to acquire information regarding this object but also

sees in it the basis for being able to understand how in fact, nowadays, it is possible to operate in these new contexts. The search for **new alternatives** for the development of the now urban-rural Chinese territories has been going on for some time, just as there is a lot of research, also in the West, on the subject of the development of towns at an urban level but which refers to many fields such as the obviously social but also cultural, economic, environmental and so on. It may therefore be useful, after having acquired a certain degree of knowledge and awareness of the place, to try to identify **some guidelines** for what could be a project for the future development of a town in the Chinese countryside, defined as a **contemporary hybrid entity at a socio-morphological level**.

Figure 17.6 A photo from Baidu Maps (百度地图) showing one of the closed quarters with an orthogonal layout in Hufu zhèn, *New uncaring order*, Hufu zhèn, China.

#7 TOUCHING THE CONTEMPORARY *CONTINUUM*

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A large part of China's rural territory today is no longer an untouched and idyllic landscape. Many of these territories, although having some rural permanences, are at the same time influenced by the urban sphere and its unscrupulous expansion. Analysing some points can therefore help to understand how, on a conceptual and morphological level, it is possible to act on this type of contemporary Chinese landscape.



Figure 1.7 A painting by Xue Song, *Coca Cola*, 2005.

Prelude

As explained in the previous chapters, today's Chinese countryside often no longer corresponds to the image of an untouched and natural landscape, nor to the idyllic image of a rural and agrarian landscape where life takes place traditionally as in the past. There are certainly places where these characteristics still persist, but the aim of this research is instead to understand the **ambiguous landscapes** generated by recent Chinese urbanisation, where precisely the distinction between city and countryside is no longer defined and where the territory is blurring into entirely new facets towards what is defined as the **rural-urban continuum**.

It is precisely in this continuum that towns such as Hufu, which are usually located in a rural context but also have a distinctly urban character, are situated. In recent years these places have become a destination for many middle-class citizens who have decided to move

from the big cities to less complex, less chaotic and less polluted areas. The fact that there are these **new migratory flows** towards the countryside, almost as if a second Cultural evolution were taking place towards the new Chinese rural world, obviously implies planning and building new neighbourhoods, new parts of town in which these people can settle. In order to be able to make a project proposal in this sense, therefore, it may be useful to look for some guidelines that can support the proposal itself, referring to the context in which it is inserted, to the people who are going to live in these places and to the approach with which they can be acted upon. It may also be useful to compare some Western and Chinese design examples and to refer to the Chinese urban and architectural past in terms of settlement and typology. In the following paragraphs, therefore, an attempt will be made to summarise the main principles for contemporary architecture in today's rural China.

Long-distance relationship

The process of knowing a place is an extremely complex activity that brings into play many factors to be taken into consideration. As already written, of course, knowledge of a place can never be univocal and completely objective, but will depend very much on the point of view, the moment in which it is acquired and the materials available at that time. In this particular case, knowledge of Hufu zhèn came from **a great distance**, without ever having met it in person and with access to certain types of information about it. For this reason, the study of the history and main characters of Chinese territories similar to the one in which the town is located was fundamental to understanding, at least in part, the evolution of this place. The process of **understanding the ambiguous reality** of this small town has been multifaceted and has involved the most varied

fields; traces of it have been sought in novels, aerial photos, maps and similar towns: the *flânerie* has been spiritual and getting lost has no longer been in the middle of real narrow streets but in the ocean of available materials. Despite the distance, it was nevertheless possible to come up with useful considerations for thinking about an alternative way of developing these particular spaces in the future, in search of a balance between the traditional rural past and the new Chinese urban contemporaneity. Not only the aerial views and photos of the town were useful, but also the painting, photographed by students from Southeast University in Nanjing in 2017 in the actual town of Hufu (figure 8.6). Thanks to this it was possible to understand if not what exactly the original rural village looked like, at least what its memory is currently of. Thus, the painting represents the image, the **scenario of the past** of this place, somewhat reminiscent of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fu-



ture scenarios in his fresco cycle *Allegoria ed Effetti del Buono e del Cattivo Governo* (*Allegory of Good and Bad Government*) of 1338-1339 in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, Italy. This last work is almost like an **instruction booklet for the future world**, a recipe to follow, a *scenario urbis* explaining to future generations the right attitude towards the world. Through the images, the author explains how, through good governance, we can live a good future: the representation of society in the landscape is alive, dynamic, everything works in a balanced way between work and leisure, between town and country. Thus, these frescoes represent the utopian ideal of society in the future world, what we would like to strive for and perhaps have not quite managed to achieve in the contemporary world.

On the other hand, the simple painting on the wall photographed in one of the narrow streets of the oldest part of Hufu zhèn can be seen as a representation

of a **nostalgic scenario** of the past now gone, the permanence of a rural and community feeling where life is always conducted in a harmonious manner and in relation to the context in which it is set.

In the past, people dreamt of the future, and in the present, in which we may not have been able to apply Lorenzetti's teaching, they dream of the idealised past that is now gone. However, it is incredible how, from a simple photo, it is possible to make many considerations and try to intuit some of the **feelings hidden within a place**. Not only feelings, but also **morphological and settlement characteristics** can be identified in this small painting, which suggests what the rural village must have looked like physically before it was hit by the frenetic urbanisation that China has undergone in recent times. It would in fact be almost possible to extract the plans of traditional Chinese urban spaces and buildings that stood along the river in the past, a bit like what Liu Diyu does in a study

Figure 2.7 A fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effetti del Buon Governo in città* (*Effects of Good Governance in the City*), Palazzo pubblico, Siena, Italy, 1338-1340.

published at Tongji University in 2014, who redraws Chinese urban morphology starting from the study of the famous scroll painted by Zhang Zeduan during the Northern Song dynasty (1085-1145) depicting the celebration of the *Qinming festival* along the Kaifeng river.⁶⁷

It is therefore possible to understand how, even if it is not possible to physically visit a place, it is still possible to get to know it from a distance through certain materials, and it is precisely through knowledge of it, which will in any case derive from one's own personal interpretation but will always be based on a careful study of the historical, social, economic and cultural context, that it is possible to try to imagine a way of acting on the territory itself.

Influence *versus* collaboration

As we have seen, large-scale planning in China is often *ex-nihilo*, meaning that new large resi-

dential neighbourhoods, planned and built in a very short space of time, make little reference to the context in which they are located, let alone to the actual needs of the people who will live in them. Knowing and becoming aware of a place therefore becomes a fundamental rule in order to be able to try to propose something new which will have a better effect in the area. In fact **the aim becomes not so much to design a form as a social space**, and in this task, knowledge and study of the existing space becomes the first action to be taken. If it is true that the morphologies of a place are able to influence the society that goes to live in them, and if it is also true that therefore a top-down approach to architecture can in a certain sense control and manage people's lives, then it is now necessary to search for a more responsible way of thinking about future morphologies. Taking into account the three terms analysed above in their contemporary relevance, i.e. collective identity,



67. Trisciuglio, M., *Note on the transitional urban morphologies as a criticism of urban studies in the chinese context. The typological map on Nanjing Heua Tang*, U+D urbanform and design, n.14, 2020, p.25.

Figure 3.7 An extract from a colourful remake of the artwork by Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, 18th century.

mixed community and contemporary permanent rurality, the future development of small towns into new intermediate centres between the countryside and the city must take place through architecture and therefore **conscious planning**. The aim then becomes **not to influence society but to collaborate with it**. Only by considering the terms in their traditional but also contemporary meanings, and therefore by understanding the past and present of a place and the type of society that will inhabit it, is it possible to achieve this aim. Working in a landscape that has a rural past but no longer has only rural characteristics does not mean looking for an idyllic image to restore in that place, it is necessary to face the passage from a rural reconstruction to a rural rejuvenation always paying attention to the culture, to the **Chineseness**, to the specific society of this place. A collaborative project, therefore, collaborates with the space in which it is inserted in its entirety, and

therefore also with the people who are going to inhabit it, who modify it in its continuous evolution. This is because the architects' definition of cultural heritage, and therefore of vernacular images useful to the project, is very likely to be different from that of the locals, and **what becomes important for a local to have may escape the eyes of an outsider to the place**. Moreover, it becomes important to participate in the development of the economy, including the rural economy of these territories, the continuation, in a new way, of the agricultural life of which permanent traces can still be found today. For all these reasons, the role of the architect acquires a great responsibility towards the desire for co-operation and social reflection.⁶⁸

68. Zhang Xiaochun, *Beautiful Villages, Rural Construction Practice in Contemporary China*, Melbourne, The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd, 2018, p.7-10.

Between detachment and fusion

The entities that can be identified in today's Chinese countryside, as already noted, are often hybrid entities in which morphological patterns of different types are flanked. The first division into more spontaneous neighbourhoods and extremely planned and unconscious neighbourhoods suggests a third way that can perhaps be taken for the future development of these areas. The almost clear-cut detachment between these morphologies can in fact be replaced in the future by a fusion of the two, where on the one hand there is the design of spaces, this time conscious and collaborative, and on the other the spontaneity of the locals who can actively participate in their design. So searching for a balance, a harmony between the two ways becomes necessary in order to go beyond

the contemporary and usual way of enlarging small and medium-sized cities in the rural Chinese world. The fusion we are striving for becomes **fusion between design by an external hand, i.e. a non-local but technical hand, and an internal, local and vernacular hand, which actually knows its own life needs**. This is why meeting and actively getting to know the local craft is a fundamental task for all scholars and designers involved in the development of these new areas in the rural-urban *continuum*.

An urban village/ a rural city

The **ambiguity of the territories lies in the difficulty of defining them**, in which the distinction between town and country is definitively lost to leave room for a mixed reality in which the **canonical dichotomy blurs to the point of merging**. It therefore happens that certain spaces, previously defined



Rural-urban meeting.

as rural-urban *continuum* or *de-sakota*, have a new and unprecedented profile. In these places one certainly cannot imagine building a new village with purely traditional and rural characteristics to imitate the idyllic landscapes depicted in the landscape paintings of the past, but neither can one continue to plan and build with the city and its exclusive urban characteristics in mind.

These landscapes can therefore no longer be seen as pure nature and agro-pastoral world, but neither can they be seen as virgin territory to be urbanised according to purely urban standards. Given the coexistence of morphological, social and economic characteristics deriving from both worlds, the urban and the rural, it is necessary to work in this direction in order to research what requirements a project for future development in the Chinese countryside should actually have. **So not only are the morphological characters mixed, but also the people.** There will be some

who were born and raised there, others who have come from different villages, and still others, a more recent phenomenon, who come from the cities, belonging to the more wealthy classes. These latter people in particular are part of the new phenomenon of **escapism** and evasion from China's overcrowded and polluted big cities, seeking a new home in the countryside. It is clear that this type of contemporary mixed community has different needs, and the spaces that house it must be able to respond to these needs, which will be both urban and rural.

The city, therefore, will have its merits and its flaws just as the countryside does, and it may be useful to take the good in both in such a way as to imagine a self-sufficient place that can **support a dynamic economy and provide cultural and intellectual stimulation by overcoming the inequalities and divisions that cities currently inflict.** Thus the countryside be-

Figure 4.7 A photo by @btrshanghai from Instagram, Chinese common brand plastic bottles with cultivated seedlings inside: urban and rural characters mixed, Shanghai, China, 2021.

comes a space of equal and plural coexistence, oscillating between the polarities that have defined the spatial habitation of Chinese civilisation: natural and built.⁶⁹ The idea is to accompany a **new urban-rural community** in which social ties go back to being deep and not superficial, and in which there is a **new balance between common and individual interests, creating spaces in which involvement, solidarity, the slow rhythm of life and tradition are rediscovered in a contemporary way, giving space to the technology and open-mindedness typical of the city to guarantee people's psychophysical well-being in healthier places.** In this sense, it is possible to identify some attempts at formulation, both Western and Chinese, that can give an idea of how to actually rethink the development of rural territories.

Western tales

If, from time immemorial and

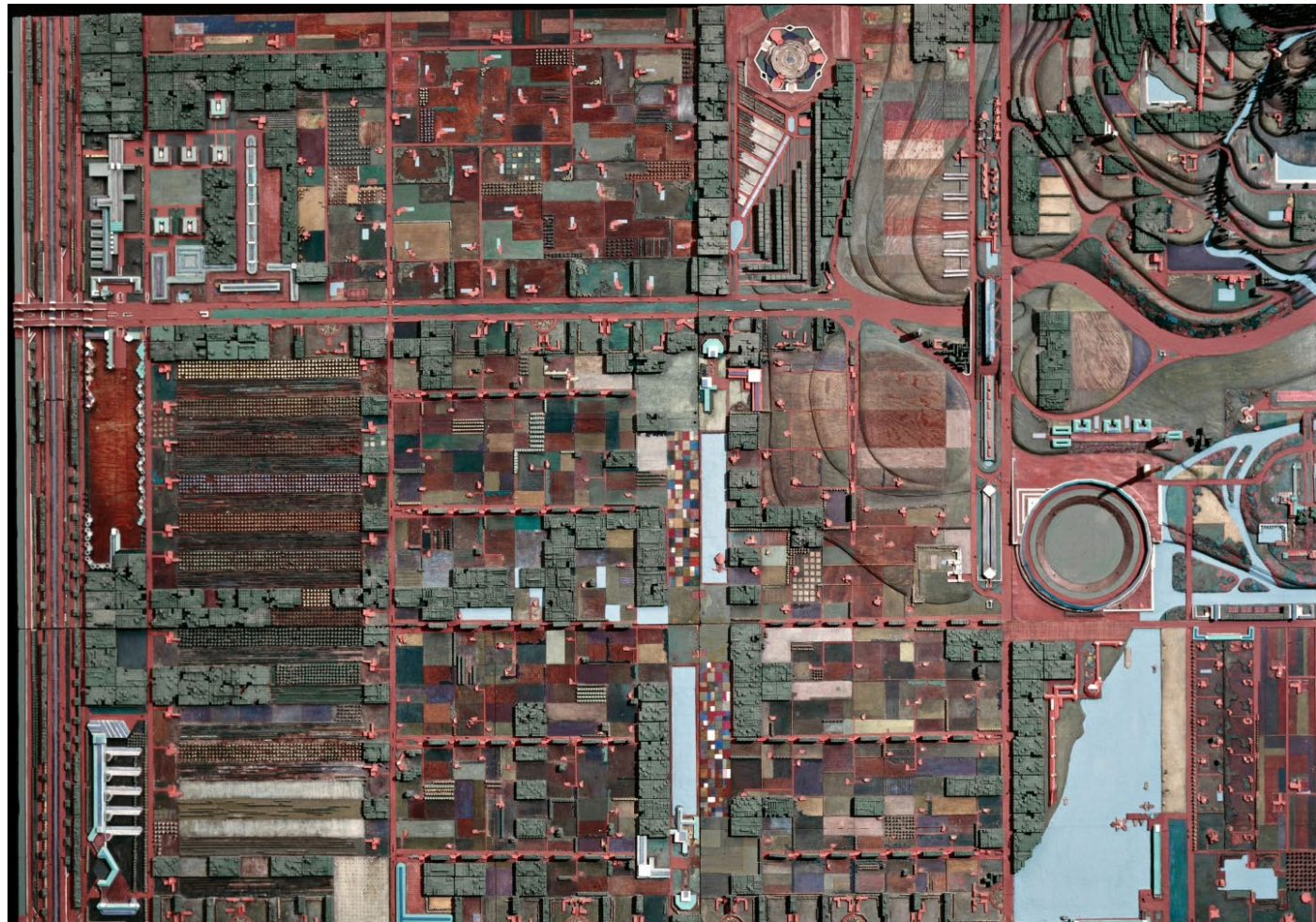
everywhere, **the principle that has driven man to settle in a given place has been necessity**, so too today for the same reason alternative forms of development of rural territories are being sought: the need to find a good place to live and to feel at home there. In the last century development and settlement in the countryside have been seen as **a solution to the inhuman act of urban congestion**, so many design proposals have been made over the years in search of a design solution capable of creating new types of settlement different from urban ones but still linked to new ways of living.

One of the most famous cases from the early 20th century in the western world is Frank Lloyd Wright's project for *Broadacre City*, a **new type of city that spreads across the landscape** as it changes with the land and in which each family has at least one acre at its disposal, a character from which the city's name derives. What prompted the architect to design this new

69. Lee, C. C. M., *Taiqian, The Countryside as a City*, Common Frameworks, Rethinking the Developmental City in China Part 3, Cambridge, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2014, p.8.

Figure 5.7 A photo by @cao_fei from Instagram, *Windows series of IKEA Singapore*, photo by me, actress: my daughter Qing. Location: IKEA Singapore show rooms. Questioning the fictional and reality of the Singapore urban life. Made me thinking about the film "Truman Show", Singapore, 2020.



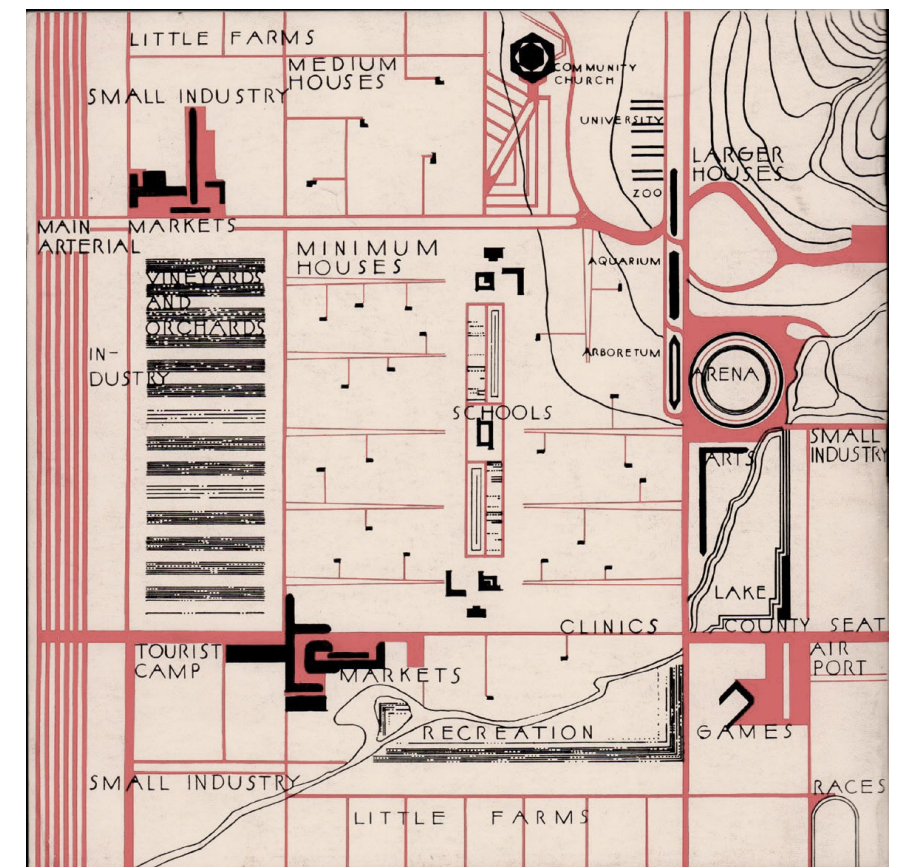


city was the situation in which man, in America, found himself around the 1930s in the big cities: **“frustrated by mass-life only competing with, never completing, life”**.⁷⁰ As Wright himself writes in his book *The Disappearing City* of 1932, before the advent of universal and standardised mechanisation, the city was more human, its life as well as its proportions were more human in the same way, the city he was living in is instead compared to a cancer that has rapidly grown out of the human scale. The project is therefore based on the idea of a **large decentralised community that had as its fundamental unit the union of a single-family house and a cultivable plot** (a traditional rural unit), including a whole series of services necessary for life in order to make the community completely self-sufficient. The city’s buildings are all designed as a combination of standardised and prefabricated elements, responding to **modern models in a purely rural context**.

Figure 6.7 A photo by Skot Weidemann of a square-mile section of Broadacre City, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1934.

70. Wright, F. L., *The disappearing city*, New York, William Farquhar Payson, 1932, p.19.

Figure 7.7 Broadacre City map, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1932.



By integrating the rural environment with the urban one, creating a type of **decentralised low-density spatiality**, it is therefore possible to create a prototype city, the Broadacre city, which, rising in the countryside but at the same time exploiting the benefits of progress, becomes the only possible city looking towards the future.

However, it is not only Frank Lloyd Wright who deals with urban overcrowding and solutions for a new modern countryside, Le Corbusier himself is also interested in the rural area in relation to the increasing rural exodus during his lifetime, proposing some solutions in the countryside in order to modernise it (figure 9.7).

Another inherent example is represented by Ludwig Hilberseimer's studies such as *The New Regional Pattern / The New City* (1945-1949) in which he always talks about urban decentralisation and low-density residential settlements in rural areas. As with Wright and Le Corbusier, for Hilberseimer

the **infrastructural connection** in the countryside plays a fundamental role in encouraging decentralisation and thus in the design of this type of settlement, which can then be connected to the rest. In this specific case, however, unlike Wright, the project no longer follows an orthogonal layout, but is guided by the landscape context itself, and thus by topography, hydrology and vegetation.

The extreme actuality of these ideas was later taken up by Andrea Branzi with *Agronica* (1993-1994) and *Territory for the New Economy* (1999). These are always applications of weak urbanisation and therefore a horizontal spread over a **sparsely populated territory** in which the potential relationships between agricultural and energy production are studied.

More recent examples include Aldo Cibic's 2010 book *Rethinking Happiness*, in which he collects four examples of projects he defines as ideal. The objective is always to generate an improve-

Figure 8.7 A drawing by Le Corbusier, *Description of the phenomena which, as a result of the diffusion of the car, have caused overcrowding in the city.*

Figure 9.7 A drawing by Le Corbusier, *Proposal for high-density clusters scattered across the countryside to provide a solution to the phenomenon of urban overcrowding.*

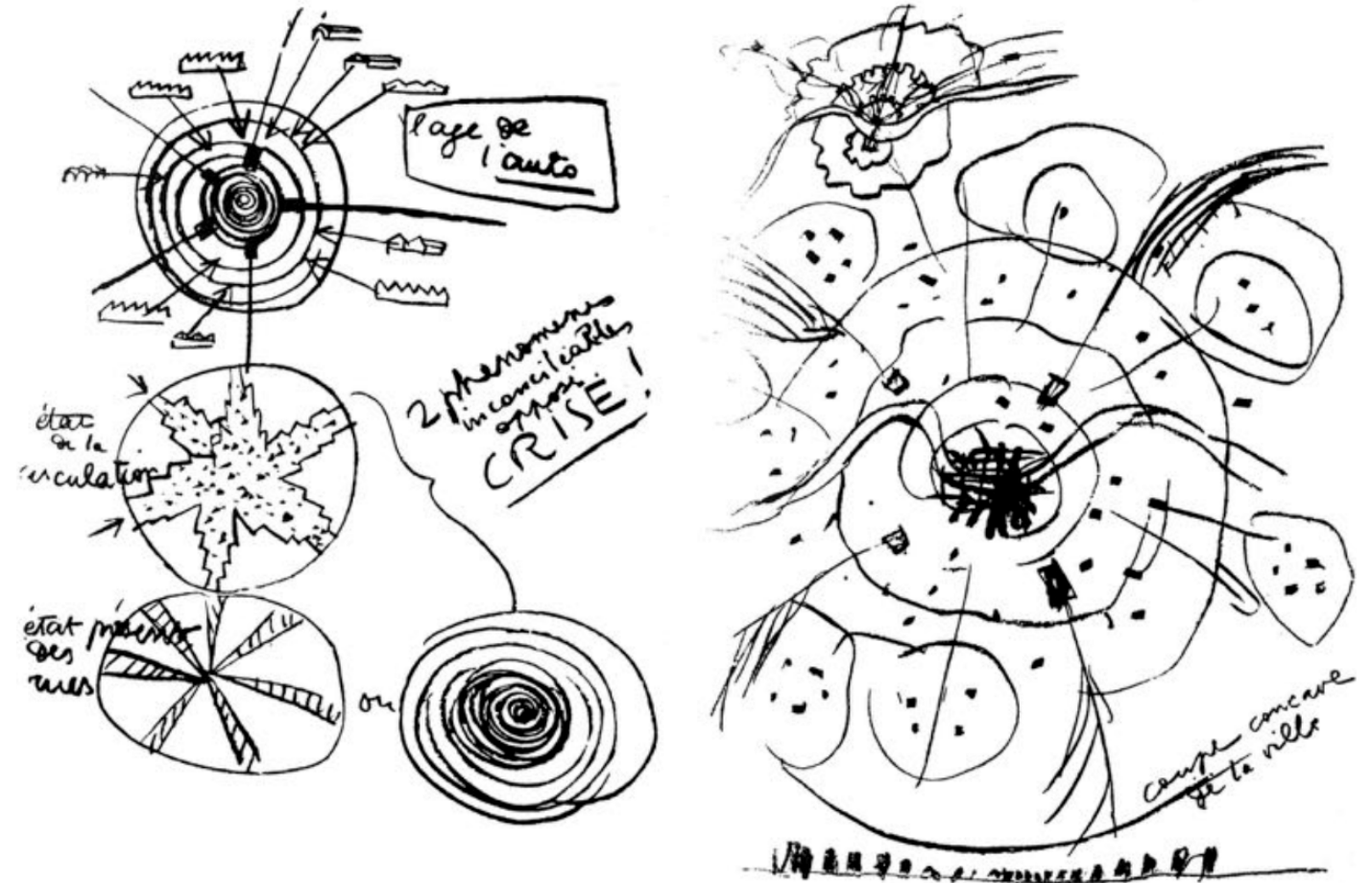




Figure 10.7 A picture of The City in the Landscape, Ludwig Hilberseimer, The New City, 1944.



Figure 11.7 Agronica model view, Andrea Branzi, 1993–1994.

ment in people's quality of life on a social, economic and environmental level through design, which must therefore be based on a **new approach for the 21st century**. The four project proposals include one that is placed precisely in the Chinese context and is called *Rural Urbanism, The city enters the countryside, the countryside enters the city*. In particular, the project area is located in a large rural area one hour from Shanghai, which today is squeezed between an expanding industrial zone and a new city and can therefore be purely defined as an rural-urban continuum. The project then consists of a large rural park of 4 sq km inhabited by 8000 people with low-density housing, preserving agriculture and offering green spaces to the inhabitants. The buildings are raised and grouped together to create a perpendicular mesh on the countryside. In the centre are specialised farms producing integrated crops for sustainable, profitable development of the coun-

tryside. The project therefore aims to create a **new community with shared services and relationships in harmony with the land**.

All these projects and ideas of the Western twentieth century have in common a profound reconceptualisation of the city based on a radical **decentralisation and dissolution of the urban figure in the landscape**. This dissolution in turn renders the classic dichotomy between city and countryside irrelevant, effectively taking a step forward from the past and consequently referring to what is really the actuality of vast rural territories all over the world.

Chinese tales

In China, things have developed a little differently from the Western world. The historical and political events that have affected China in the last century have led to **various phases of rural planning**, which only in recent times,

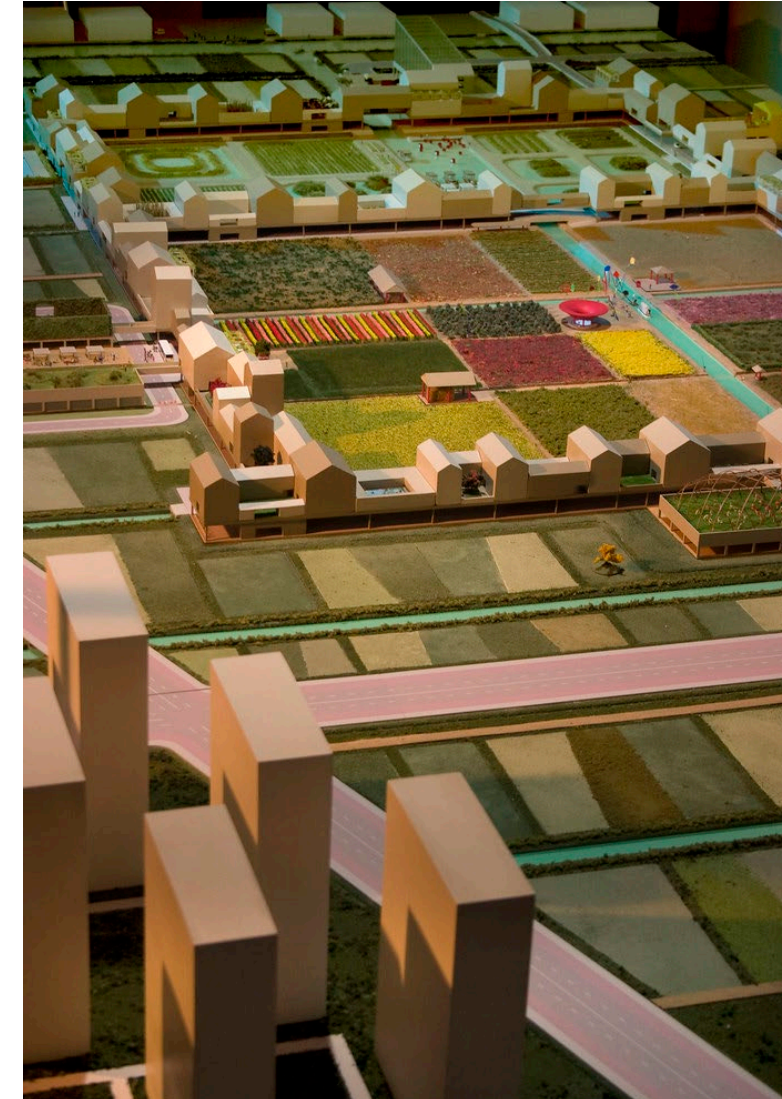


Figure 12.7 A model of Rural Urbanism, *The city enters the countryside, the countryside enters the city view*, Aldo Cibic, 2010.

however, have begun to focus more on the characteristics of the landscape and cultural context in a contemporary perspective.

The period from 1949 to 1978, China's Maoist era, saw the planning of some rural utopias, in particular the planning of **rural people's communes**. At that time the theoretical objective was to eliminate the distinction between town and country, and thus the inequalities, through the planning of these largely collective spaces. Usually the layout used was always the orthogonal one with rationalisation of agricultural fields and the insertion of residential groups and services, but in reality, however, these rural utopias were rarely realised in reality.

Even the following phase, despite the period of decollectivisation and economic and political change, saw an orderly and orthogonal type of planning, with a homogeneity of building types, a typical example being the village of Huaxi in Jiangsu Province which, initially

developed spontaneously, was later guided by a regular master plan. In spite of this, over the years a way has been sought to find a solution to the growing gap between town and country and the continuing depopulation of villages and rural areas, and there have also been some proposals for urban-rural integration such as the Chongqing-Chengdu District of the early 2000s, a Comprehensive Experimental Zone of coordinated urban-rural development which uses integration to stimulate rural development. In particular, the project focuses on the **urban-rural fringe** where architectural prototypes were to be built, bridging the gap between the countryside and the city and where migrant workers and commuters would live. The buildings designed, however, imitated more the urban model, making no reference to the local and rural culture in which they were inserted.

Today, however, we can perceive a renewed interest in the countryside and its special cha-

racteristics, also in view of the new migration of the wealthier classes to these landscapes, fleeing the city. Since around 2015, the Chinese countryside has been attracting a new and more conscious interest in its potential, based on ecological and sustainable ideas towards the rejuvenation of today's Chinese countryside.⁷¹

It is therefore possible to cite a few recent projects that fit into the rural landscape in a contemporary way, experimenting with a way of living that is rural but also urban, traditional but also contemporary. A first example is the Jintai village in Sichuan, built in 2014 following the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. Although it is a village born from nothing, a *tabula rasa village*, its construction becomes an opportunity to create a model of community which integrates rural and sustainable features, always referring to the context, and in which **repeatable prototype buildings** are used and spaces for collective cultivation and breeding of domestic

animals are arranged. The objective is therefore not only to pay attention to the context but also to create a certain **degree of awareness in the inhabitants** of these spaces, trying to propose a repeatable model in the surrounding areas.

Another example is Xibai-po China Resources Hope Town, a project in rural Hebei that respects the original natural environment, cultural elements and different levels of land. The project also preserves the original trees, farmhouses, courtyard gardens and ancient bridges for historical continuity in the new settlement, which is being built in close contact with the local people.⁷²

The innovation of these Chinese examples also lies very much in the context in which they are set, as a very recent phenomenon is the creation of settlements and residential morphologies which refer to the historical, cultural and landscape context of China, as opposed to many settlements which

71. Lee, C. C. M., *Taiqian, The Countryside as a City*, Common Frameworks, Rethinking the Developmental City in China Part 3, Cambridge, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2014, p.23-38.

72. Zhang Xiaochun, *Beautiful Villages, Rural Construction Practice in Contemporary China*, Melbourne, The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd, 2018, p.154-217.

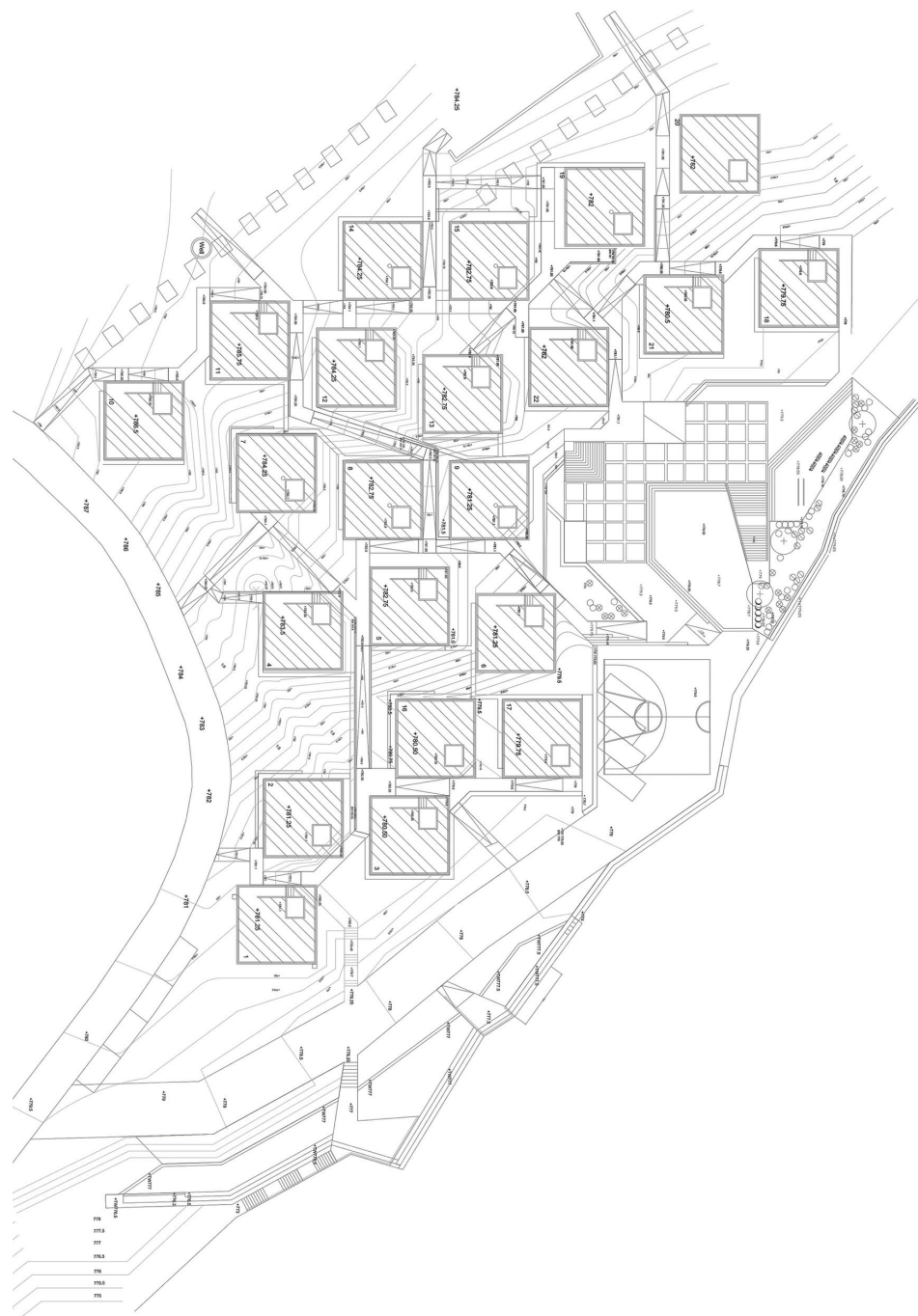


Figure 13.7 Jintiai Village site plan by Rural Urban Framework team, Nanjiang County, Sichuan, China, 2014.

Figure 14.7 China Resources Hope Town designed by Li Xinggong Studio, Pingshan County, Hebei, China, 2012.



are instead extremely organised and standardised in Chinese territories. The rediscovery of the importance of rurality and architectural history now makes it possible to use its teachings to create new forms of settlement and new spaces for living in the Chinese countryside, which is seeing a high population return in the present day.

Foundamentals

For a contemporary and conscious design in the Chinese rural-urban continuum it may be useful to consider some **characterising aspects** that provide a contextual basis for the formulation of proposals.

Among these, for example, the study of **typologies** can have operational validity at the initial stage of design, and in particular, in the Chinese case, that of the closed **courtyard house** can suggest new methods of creating alternatives between closed and open spaces, between built and unbuilt. The Chinese courtyard house has

been the main housing model in China for several centuries, a residential type best suited to accommodating a **social microcosm** as tightly knit as the Chinese family, a safe residential territory and quiet productive land, a symbol of family unity. The courtyard, therefore, takes on high symbolic values, becoming the most important part of the house from a morphological and functional point of view, leading to the exclusion of the external urban reality and the tumult of the city. It takes on a square or rectangular shape, harmonious proportions and a balanced symmetrical placement of trees, pedestrian paths, doors, fish ponds, bird aviaries; it is also the main element of distribution and a place to stop and contemplate the interior space.⁷³ Over time the courtyard, and more generally the garden, became a place that could **stimulate the senses**, give pleasure and create spaces in which to enjoy solitude; its link with the home is so close that the house, or *jia*, is also popularly

called *jiating* (courtyard house).⁷⁴ In these spaces not only solitude is cultivated, but also family and non-family sociability, and its constitution seeks to embody harmony in social relations, following the Confucian teaching, but also harmony with nature according to Daoism. In particular, the theory of **Feng Shui** has been closely linked to Daoism in its practical application to housing, expressing a relationship between man, home and the universe by giving guidance to builders to **find a good living environment** in which to build their ideal home. In detail, according to this theory, an ideal site for a settlement is one surrounded on three sides by higher land or mountains to provide greater protection from inclement weather or enemies; the settlement should also possibly be near a river or water source. So the layout of the site must be arranged in relation to the settlement, almost as if to embrace it, and in the same way the courtyard house becomes an ideal symbo-

lic model linked to this theory, in which the **building embraces an internal space, the courtyard: a reflection of the cosmos of heaven and earth**. For the Chinese, the square figure symbolically represents the earth, while the sky is circular, which is why the courtyard of houses is often square or at least quadrangular; **when man is close to the earth, health prevails** according to Chinese belief. In reality, over the years the courtyard house, depending on where it was built, adapted to the natural environment and climatic conditions, as well as to social conditions, but in any case, for a long period of time, its form did not undergo great variations and its main characteristics remained unchanged.

Nowadays, however, some examples of **reinterpretation of the courtyard house typology** for horizontal planning can be identified, creating a transition from the traditional single family housing form to a contemporary multi-family housing form by using new te-

73. Gazzola, L., *La casa della Fenice, la città e la casa nella cultura architettonica cinese*, Roma, Diagonale, 1999, p.55-59.

74. Knapp, R. G., Kai-Yin Lo, *House Home Family, Living and Being Chinese, Common Frameworks, Spatial Habitus*, 2005, p.73-75.



Figure 15.7 An ideal conceptual and topographic landscape of *feng shui* by Skinner, 2011.



Figure 16.7 *Feng shui* idealization by Schinz, A. in *The Magic Square: Cities in Ancient China*, 1996.

chnological systems and finding a good balance between private and public spaces. A typical application is high density flats surrounding an inner courtyard, this system forms a unit which in turn, together with other units, can be arranged to generate a larger open space for community social interactions. The social organisation of this system, therefore, sees **three levels of sociality**: the **community level**, the **neighbourhood level** (high density flats) and the **family level** so as to form different levels of social interaction. In addition to this system, one can also find the flat unit model that generates the *courtyard compound system*, which is interesting in that it can expand, repeat and detach itself according to the needs of the particular situation.⁷⁵

As already mentioned, the **role of water in Chinese human settlement** has been of great importance throughout ancient history, almost all the great Chinese cities, in fact, were founded on riverbanks for tran-

sport, defence and subsistence. Then, with the succession of waves of industrialisation and modernisation, starting from the period of Chairman Mao and ending with Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, water gradually disappeared from town planning and from the layout of residential areas because **cities became increasingly based on the road system**. Thus, from the great importance of water and canals in settlement principles, we have moved from using them as channels for waste and dirty industrial water, becoming more and more polluted. Before this strong disconnection between water and settlement, China went through a long period of **hydraulic civilisation**⁷⁶ in which the morphological evolution of cities was inseparable from river systems, generating different settlement patterns depending on the area of China. One of the most notable examples is the now immense city of Suzhou, also known as the Eastern Venice, which lies on

the banks of Lake Taihu and the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the south-east of Jiangsu Province, where **a complex system of canals has structured the urban form**, with eight transversal and eight longitudinal canals and an enormous moat, all interconnected with the lake and later connected with the Grand Canal. The purely functional character of these canals has always been accompanied by a more **aesthetic relationship with the water**, so this city has become world famous for its beautiful private gardens, sacred temples, palaces, Buddhist towers and the many buildings with different uses.⁷⁷

Unfortunately, the growing importance of road systems and more generally infrastructures has led to a progressive **loss of connection and confidence between water and human settlement**. However, in recent times there has been **renewed interest** in this theme, including some examples of projects by the Turenscape team such as the Yingzhou Central Ri-

ver Trans-formation (2006-2010) in Ningbo in Zhejiang Province; the Quzhou Luming Park (2013-2015) in Quzhou, also in Zhejiang, and the Xi'an Juehe River Fanchuan Park (2017) in Xi'an in Shaanxi Province.

It is clear that nowadays, in contemporary Chinese design, it is important to take account of these principles, which can form the basis of new design ideas that are always linked to the context and history, but especially to the civilisation, or rather the society that will actually live in the new spaces of the future. The creation of good places to live can therefore also be based on characteristic features of a culture such as the Chinese one, and in this specific case the type of Chinese courtyard house and the practice of interconnecting human settlement to watercourses become guidelines for the proposal of future development in China's rural areas.

75. Ying Liu, Awotona, A., *The Traditional Courtyard House in China: Its Formation and Transition*, Evolving Environmental Ideals, Changing Way of Life, Values and Design Practices: IAPS 14 Conference Proceedings, 248-260. IAPS. Stockholm, 1996, p.2-10.

76. Wittfogel, K., *The Hydraulic Civilizations*, Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth, Chicago, 1956, p.153.

77. Shannon, K., Chen Yiyong, *(Recovering) China's Urban Rivers as Public Space*, Fotoprint 7(1), 2014, p.27-42.

#8 THE CASE OF HUFU ZHÈN

八

In the following chapter, all the drawings were jointly made by Chiara Loi and Michele Tabellini.

In light of what has been written above, the following chapter begins with a territorial framework and an analysis of the landscape and morphological characteristics of Hufu zhèn. The second part of the chapter concerns the design proposal based on the reinterpretation of the traditional Chinese courtyard house that fits into the landscape according to the lines generated by the watercourses. The proposed system has a modular character and can therefore be interpreted and repeated according to the place in which it is inserted.



Figure 1.8 Drawing of the conceptual master plan of the proposed development project for the town of Hufu zhèn.

Framework

Hufu zhèn is a small town located in Jiangsu Province (China). It is home to about 20,000 inhabitants with a population density of 209 inhabitants for square kilometre, and an area of about 98.6 square kilometres. This small town is governed by the district of the city of Yixing and is under the prefecture of Wuxi at the governmental level.

As explained above, Hufu zhèn has a purely rural origin, which has recently undergone rapid development due to rural urbanisation, consequently transitioning it from being a rural village to a town with a mixed character.

The large-scale urban development has also led to the strengthening of a dense infrastructure system connecting the small town to larger surrounding cities, especially Yixing, Wuxi, but also Suzhou and Shanghai. This dense infrastructural network makes it easy



Latitude
31.2309° or 31° 13' 51.1" north
Longitude
119.7918° or 119° 47' 30.6" east



Figure 2.8 An old map of the city of Yixing and the village of Hufu zhèn from the archive of the city of Yixing, 1797.

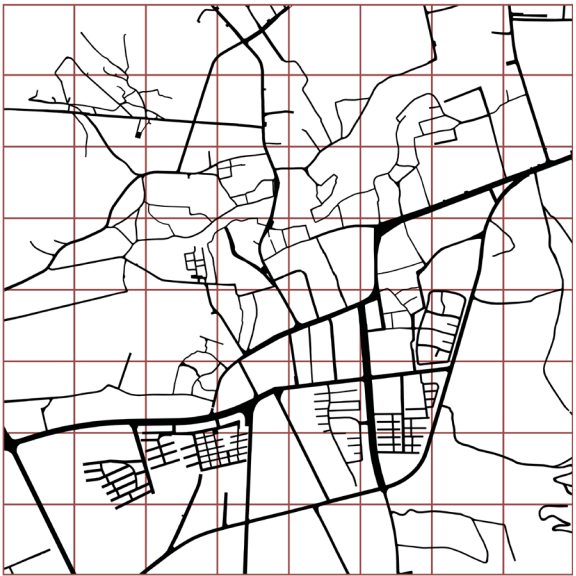
HUFU ZHÈN
RELIEF



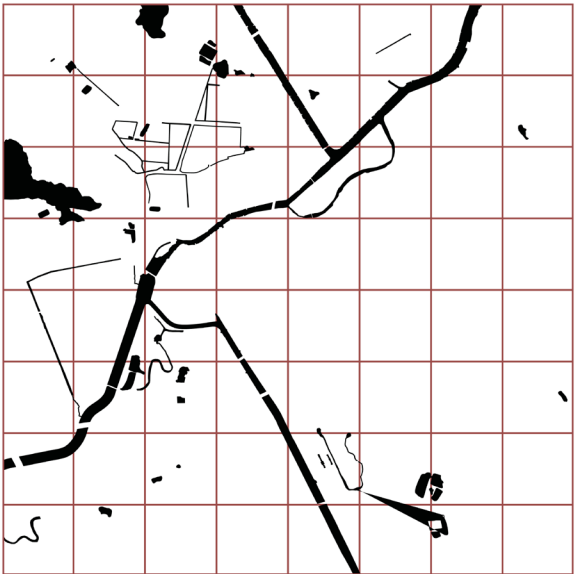
DELAYERING



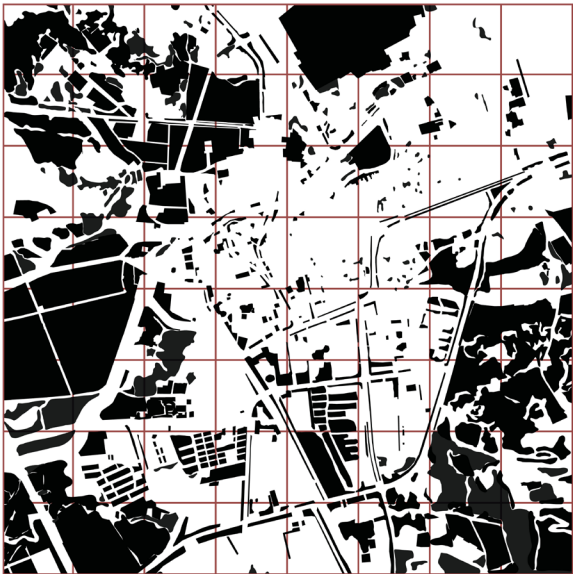
Buildings



Streets



Water canals



Green spaces

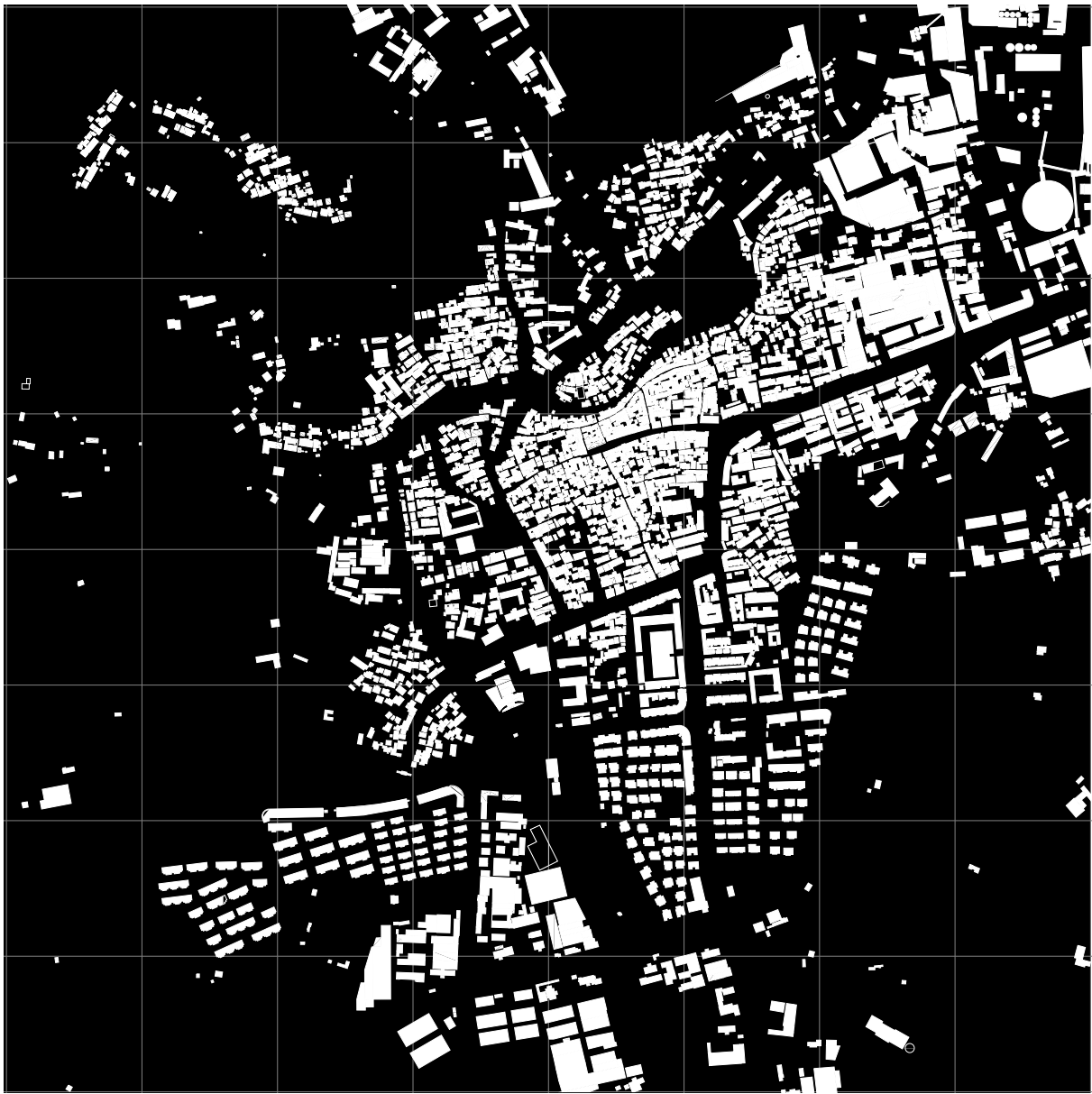
250 m



FULL & EMPTY
SPACES



EMPTY & FULL
SPACES



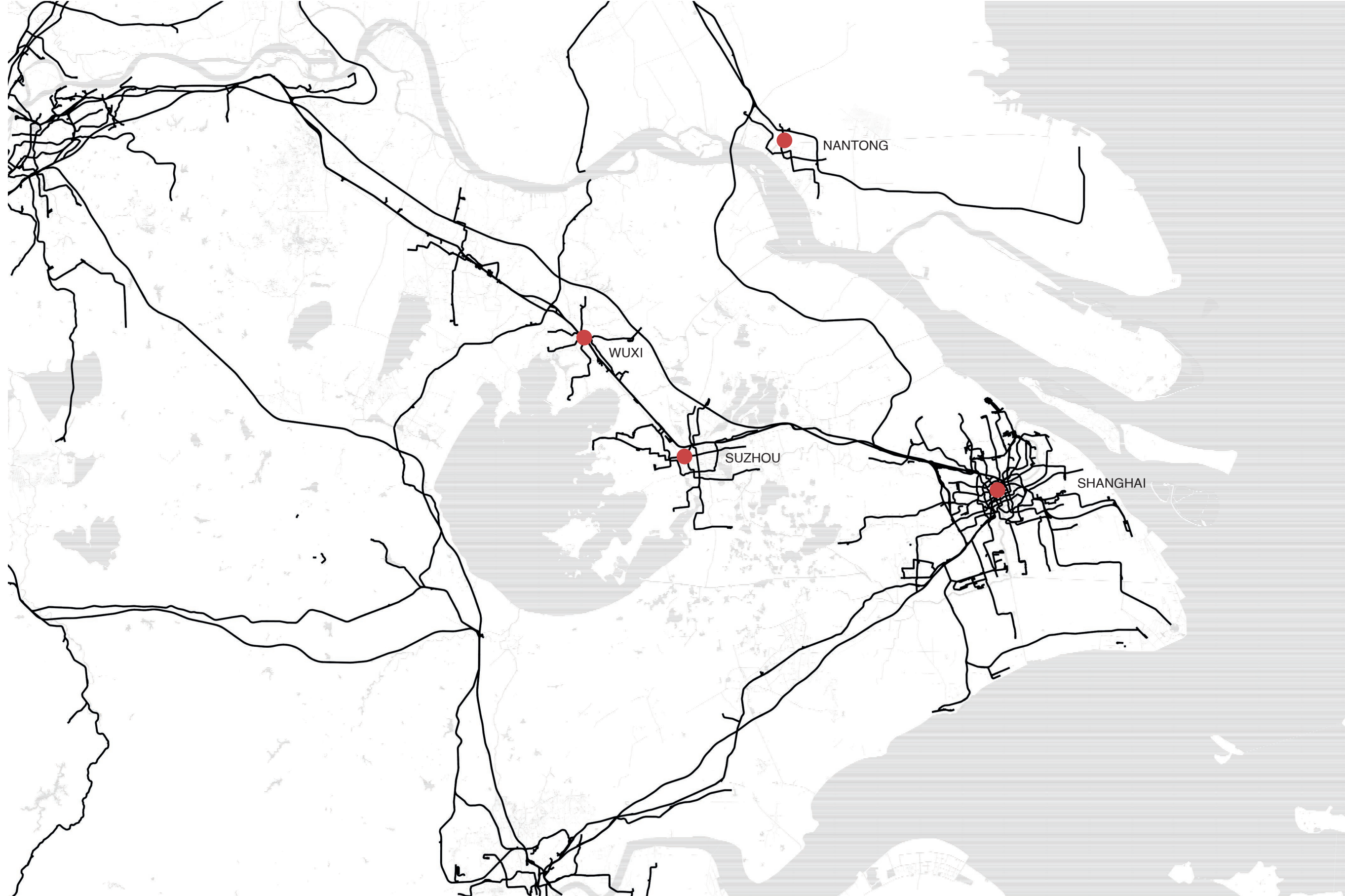
RAILROAD
SYSTEM



35 km



NETWORKED CITIES



35 km



WATER SYSTEM



35 km



WATER CANALS
SYSTEM



to move from this small town to the big cities. People can live in a rural context such as Hufu zhèn and work in bigger cities far from home.

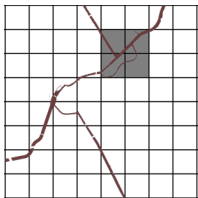
The town is part of a province strongly shaped by its water system and is located near the banks of Lake Tai hu, crossed by a river and marked by a dense network of canals used mainly for field irrigation. It can be seen that, in the oldest part of Hufu, the settlements are arranged in relation to the main watercourse according to traditional Chinese human settlement development (zoom 1 and zoom 2). The more recent morphological parts, on the other hand, do not communicate with the water ways (zoom 3 and zoom 4).

Figure 2.8 A photo by an anonymous showing the arrangement of houses in the older part of Hufu zhèn in relation to the river, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.



WATER CANALS SYSTEM

Zoom 1

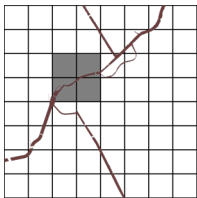


125 m



WATER CANALS SYSTEM

Zoom 2

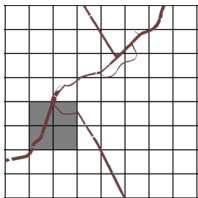


125 m



WATER CANALS SYSTEM

Zoom 3

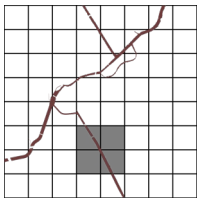


125 m



WATER CANALS SYSTEM

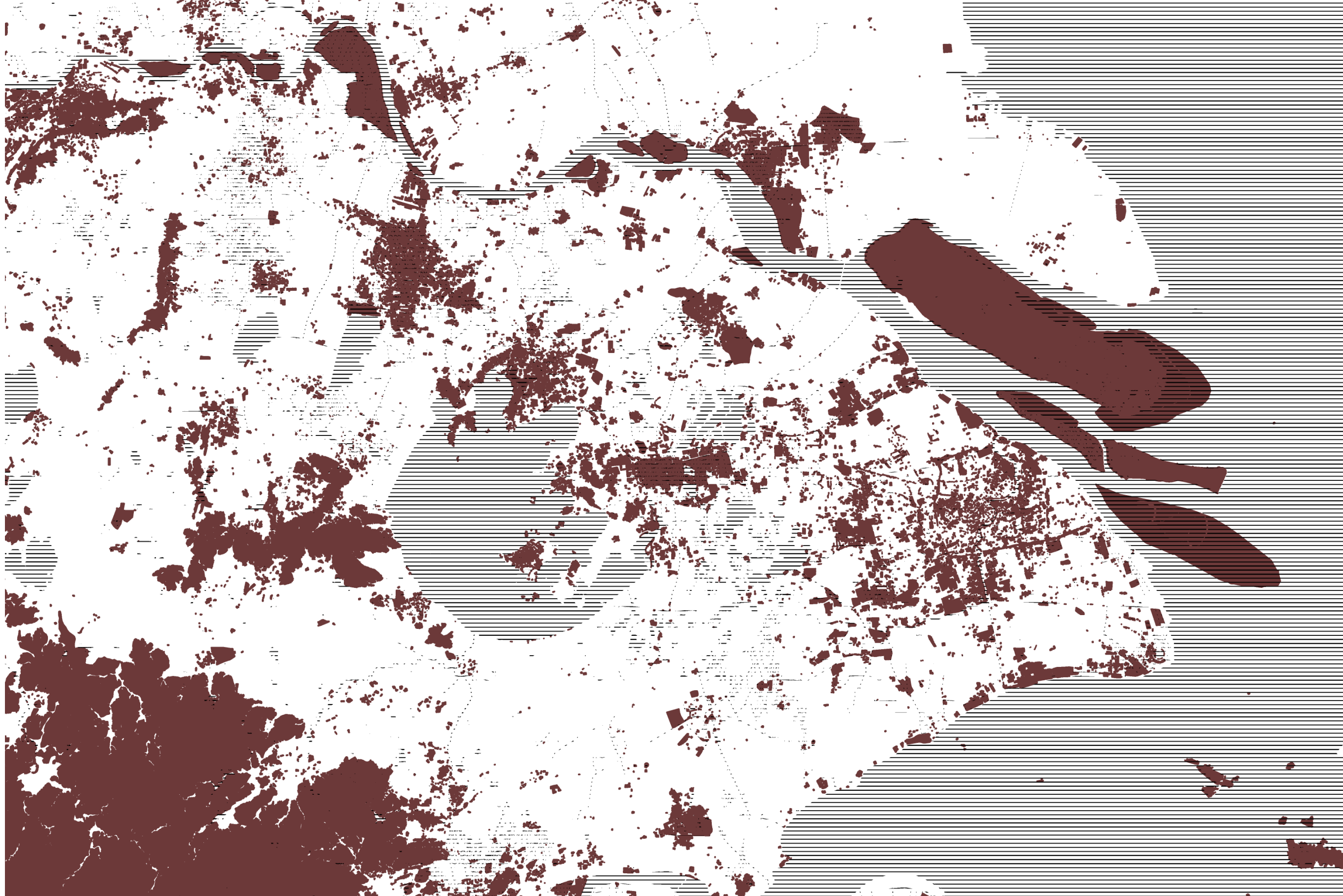
Zoom 4



125 m



GREEN SYSTEM



GREEN SPACES



Despite the strong urbanization that affected Jiangsu Province and therefore also the areas that include the town object of study, it is still possible to identify large-scale green areas that surround it. Focusing on the town of Hufu itself, we can see that green areas predominate, especially in the peripheral areas, in the form of overgrown vegetation, woods and mostly cultivated fields. The latter denote the rural and agricultural origin of the area. Inside the town, on the other hand, urban greenery does not find much space except for a few tree-lined avenues and flowerbeds which are often used to grow vegetables for self-sufficiency. Therefore, the morphological layout as a whole renders the town very compact in its building forms, which are embraced by the surrounding greenery in its various forms.

Figure 3.8 A photo by an anonymous showing a tree that has survived concrete in residential areas, Hufu zhèn, China, 2017.



Design proposal

The project proposal stems from the **recent issue** involving the more affluent classes in contemporary China. Nowadays more and more families want to move away from the chaotic reality of the city to simpler places with more connections to the countryside in search of a healthier lifestyle.

The project therefore aims to find **a new method for the future development** of the existing rural villages and towns in the Chinese countryside, which specifically applies to the town of Hufu.

For this reason, the project area is located outside the existing built environment. In particular, the northern area of the town was chosen due to its diametrically opposing position to the southern part, which has undergone recent urban development. The project is therefore intended as an **alternative and a critique** of the regular morphological pattern adopted in the south.

The new typo-morphological approach applied in Hufu is therefore based on certain settlement and architectural design principles. **Modular buildings** are studied to be repeated and assembled according to necessities to revisit the traditional typology of the Chinese courtyard house. The assembly of the modules allows to create **private internal courtyards** for private dwellings. Modular buildings are then inserted into the context following both the pre-existing water road systems. The layout of these blocks not only uses these two systems as a foundation, referring to the traditional layout of Chinese human settlements along watercourses, but also generates a series of **large courtyards with open spaces for community** and agricultural livelihood activities. The result is a **system of courtyards within bigger courtyards** where balanced relationships exist between full and empty spaces, built fabric and resilient soil, public and private spaces,

PROJECT AREA



250 m



PROJECT AREA

Zoom



125 m

always **pursuing a continuity between past and present.**

The **different combinations** of residential, commercial and crafts modules create **four different building blocks**: *Dwelling & commerce*, *Dwelling & co-working*, *Dwelling & crafts* and *Mixed configurations* of the previous blocks (v. following page with prototypes).

Modules are based on a grid of 4,8 x 4,8 m, creating **infinite possible combinations of full and empty spaces**. Inner courtyards, called *sky-well* or *light-well* in the Chinese architectural tradition permit the lighting of inner buildings of the block. The structure and organization of **inner courtyards**, arranged alternately with the buildings, takes its origins from the traditional Chinese courtyard houses of the Yangtze River Delta.

The **regular size of the modules** also comes from the **Chinese architectural tradition**. The

square module in the project originates from the *square bay* that is the space between 4 columns in ancient buildings.

The **buildings height** is variable, but it never exceeds three floors in height as in ancient towns, to have a harmonious relationship with the landscape, favouring a **horizontal rather than a vertical development**.

The **orientation of the buildings** follows existing roads and water canals in order to respect the local urban morphology.

As introduced previously, courtyards play an important role within this project proposal. **Courtyard houses** were widely spread in ancient China and were an important building typology in the Jiangnan Region.

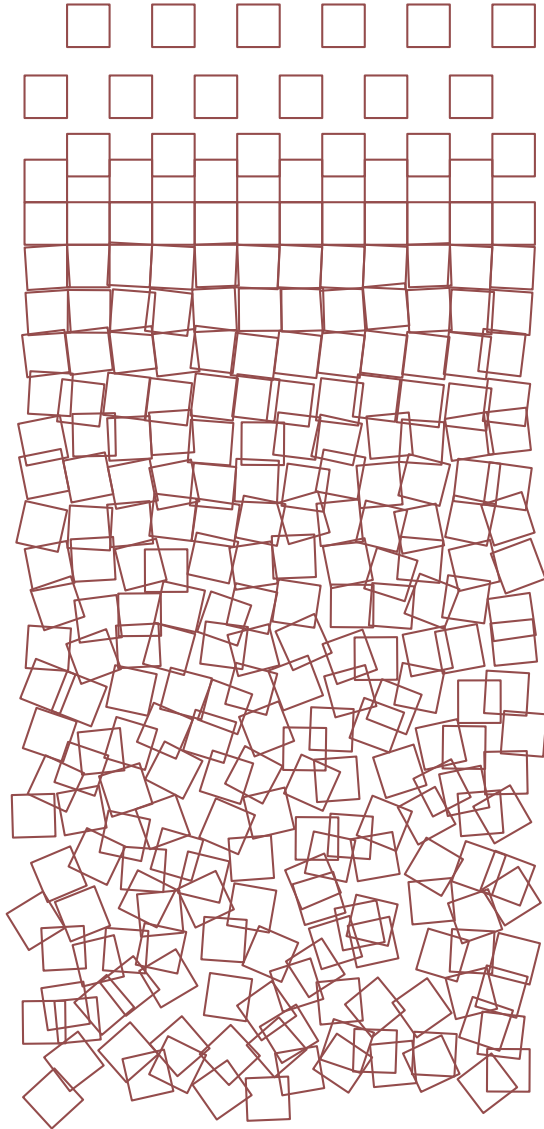
Traditionally, big courtyard houses in the Yangtze River Delta were characterized by small inner courtyards between

PATTERN CONCEPT

New order to disorder

P R O P O S A L
Arranged with a logic
S c a t t e r e d

P R E - E X I S T E N C E
I n o r d i n a t e
D e n s e



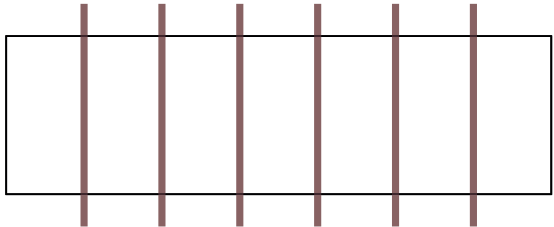
WATER SYSTEM OVERLAP



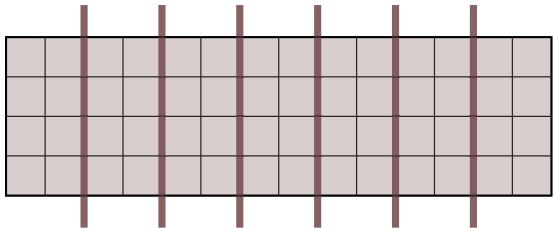
Figure 4.8 A computer graphic
by Georg Nees, *Schotter*, 1997.

DESIGN PROCESS

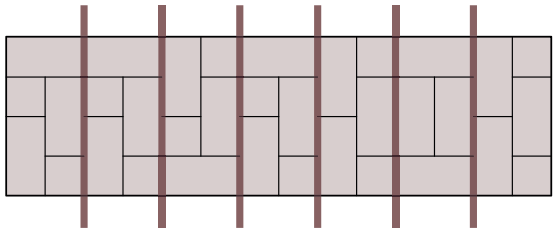
Blocks



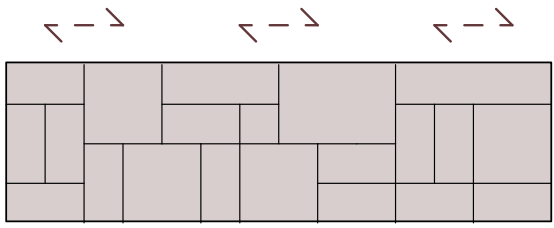
Base module 4.8x4.8 m



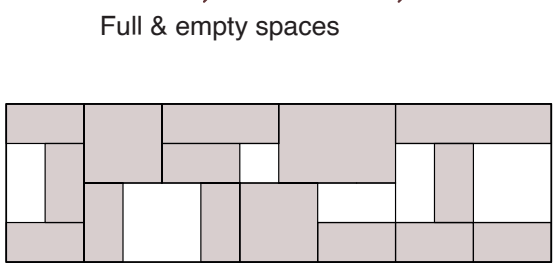
Merge modules



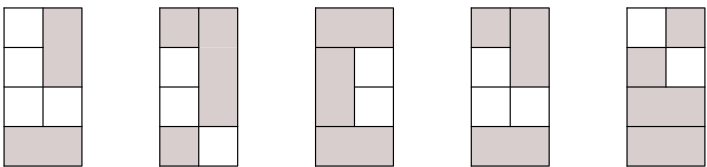
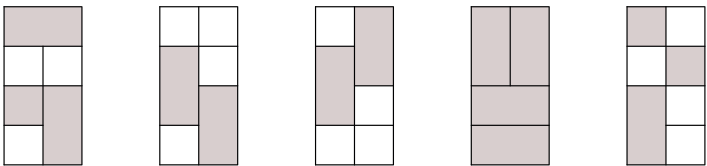
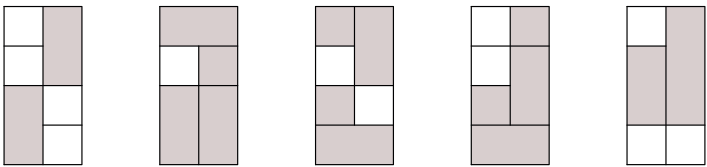
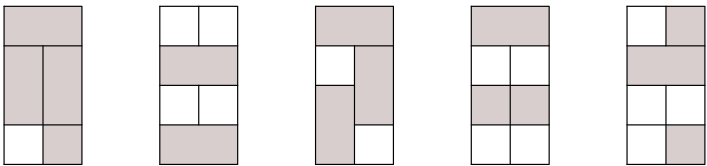
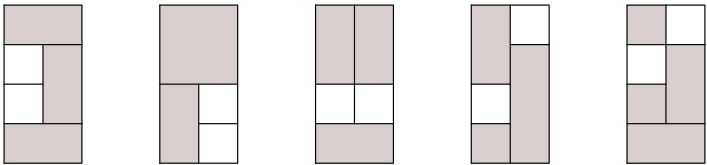
Aggregation between blocks



Full & empty spaces



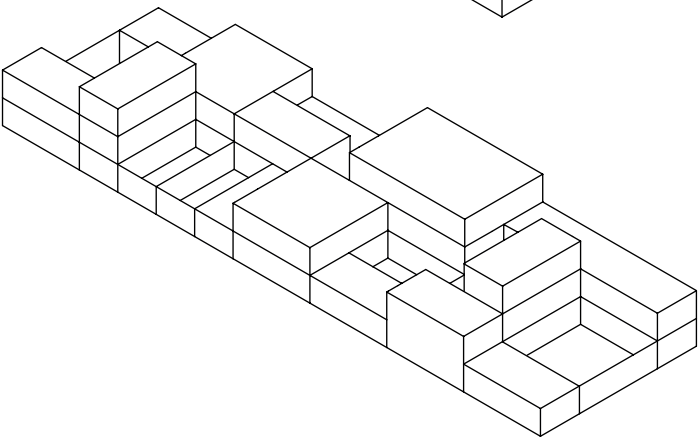
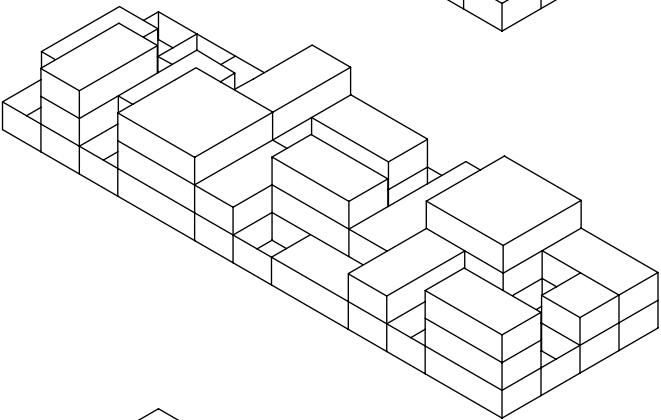
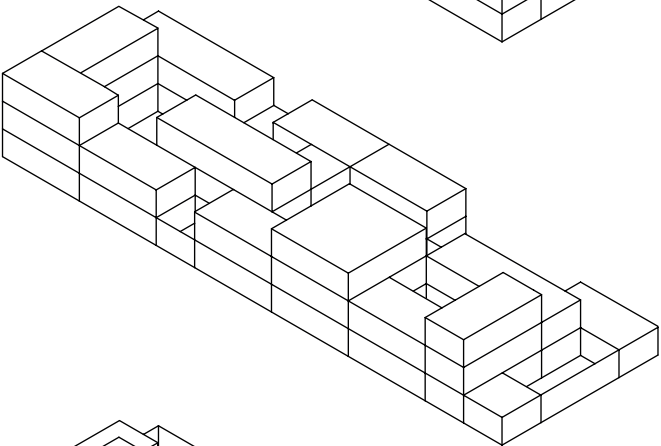
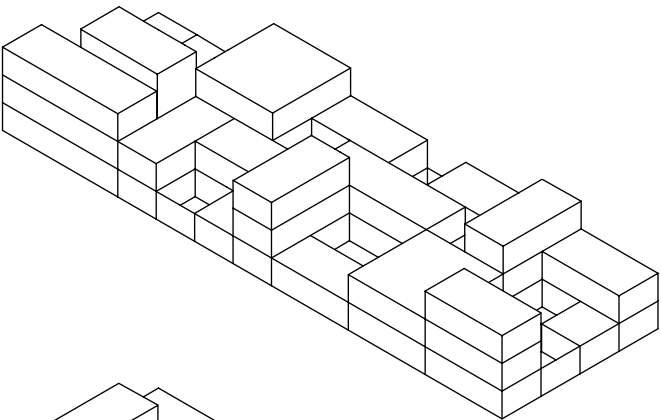
Infinite blocks



BUILDING BLOCKS' PROTOTYPES

#1 Dwelling & commerce block; #2 Dwelling & co-working spaces block; #3 Dwelling & crafts block; #4 Mixed configuration of spaces block.

i n t e r p r e t a b l e
m o d i f i a b l e
f l e x i b l e
m o d u l a r # a d a p t a b l e
r e p e a t a b l e



BUILDING BLOCKS ON PRE-EXISTENCE

Arrangement of building blocks **according to existing watercourses and roads** to form large open court-yards.

On the right page, reading the layers from the top:

#1 Building blocks arrangement; #2 Water canals system; #3 Road system; #4 Pre-existing buildings.

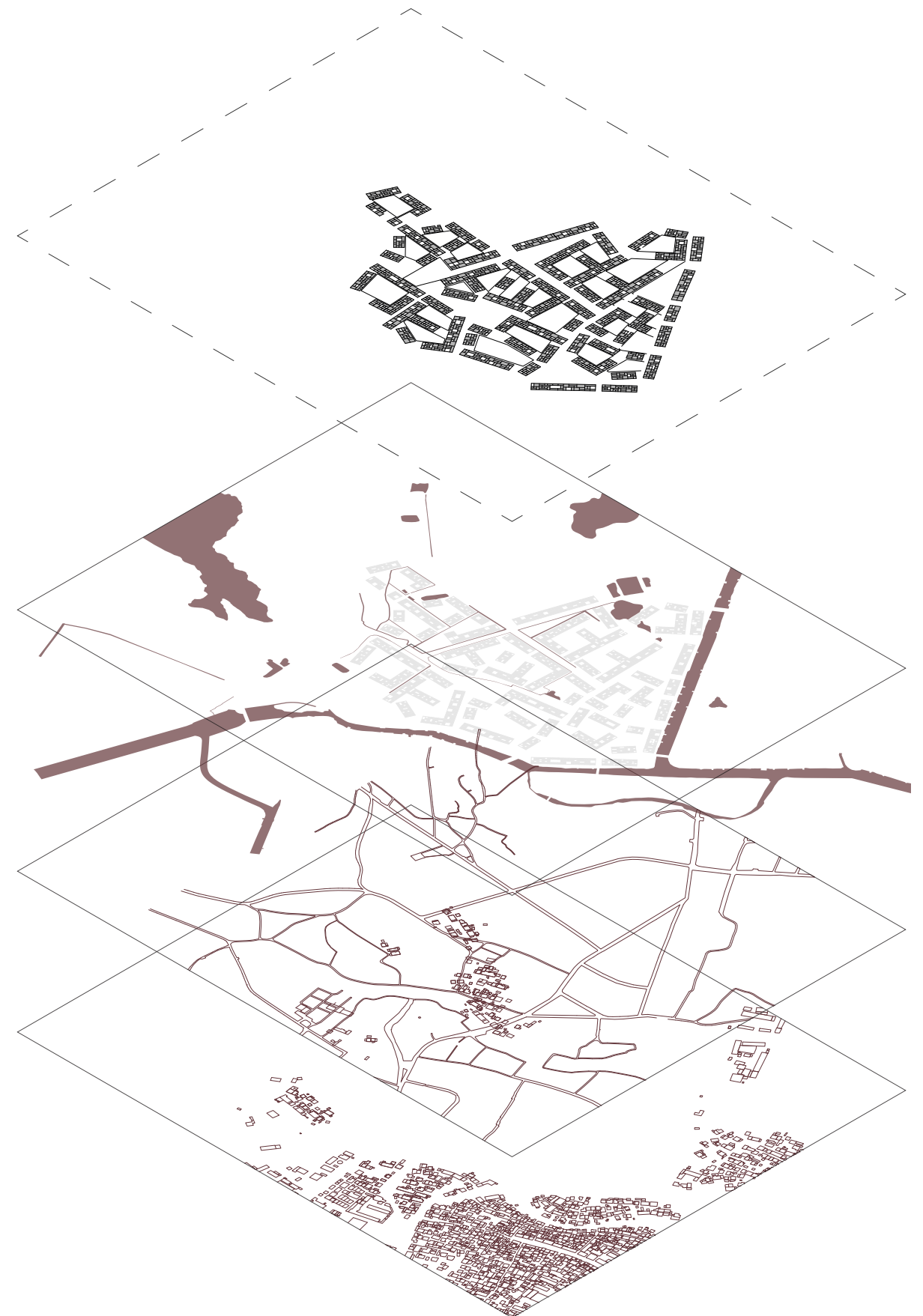
Each building block contains private courtyards

The arrangement of several building blocks forms large public courtyards

A system of *courtyard in courtyard* is created as a reinterpretation of the traditional Chinese courtyardhouse typology

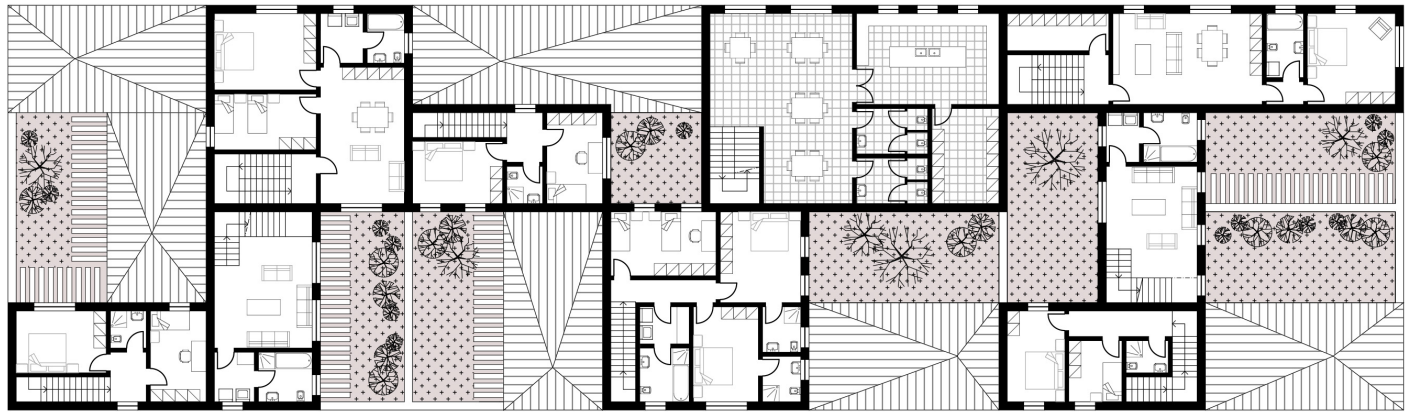
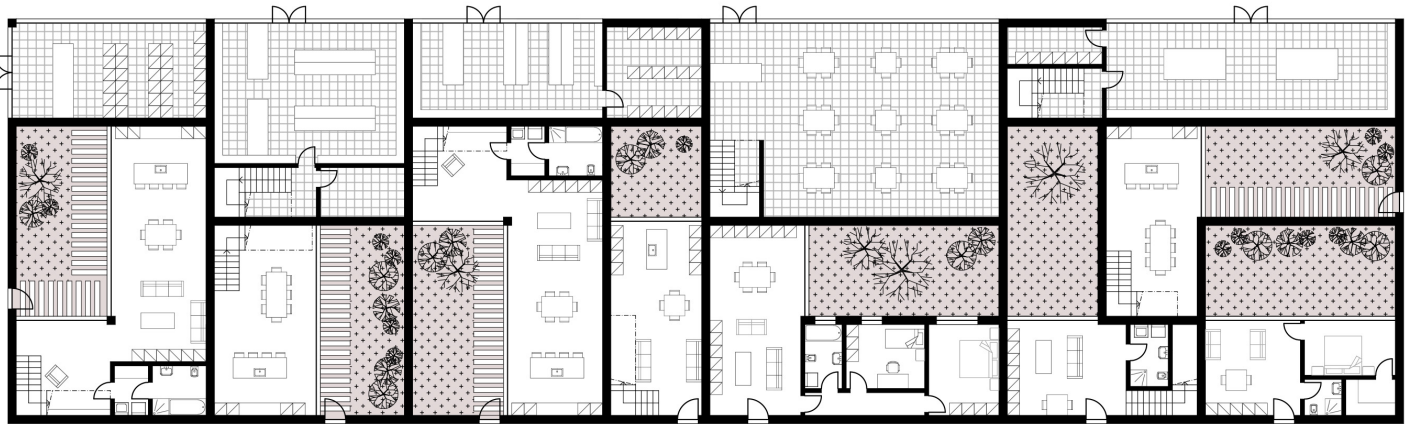
en buildings and bigger gardens in the rear part of the dwelling.

This project serves as a contemporary reinterpretation of this traditional building typology. As can be seen from the urban sections and from the masterplans, it is possible to identify two different types of courtyards: the ones internal to building blocks are private, and the bigger ones created by building blocks allow public access. The project can be considered as an extension of the *rural-urban* landscape instead of the common placeless urban scenario that is nowadays spreading everywhere in China. Large courtyards host public functions such as urban vegetable gardens, playgrounds for children, sports fields, and forests. While inner private courtyards are used as private gardens, light-wells or private patios for restaurants or co-working offices.

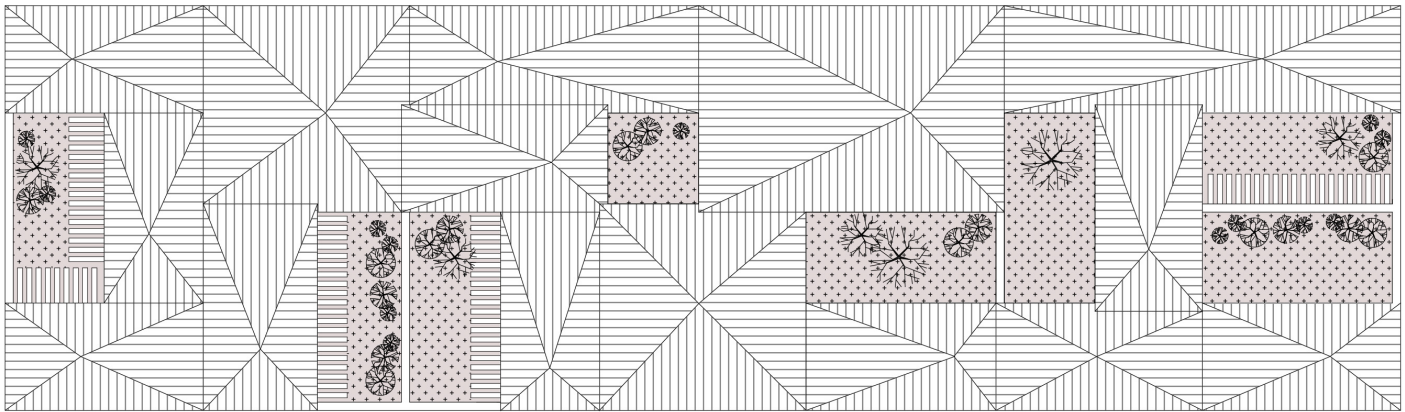


#1 DWELLING & COMMERCE BLOCK

Ground floor & first floor plans



Second floor & roof floor plans

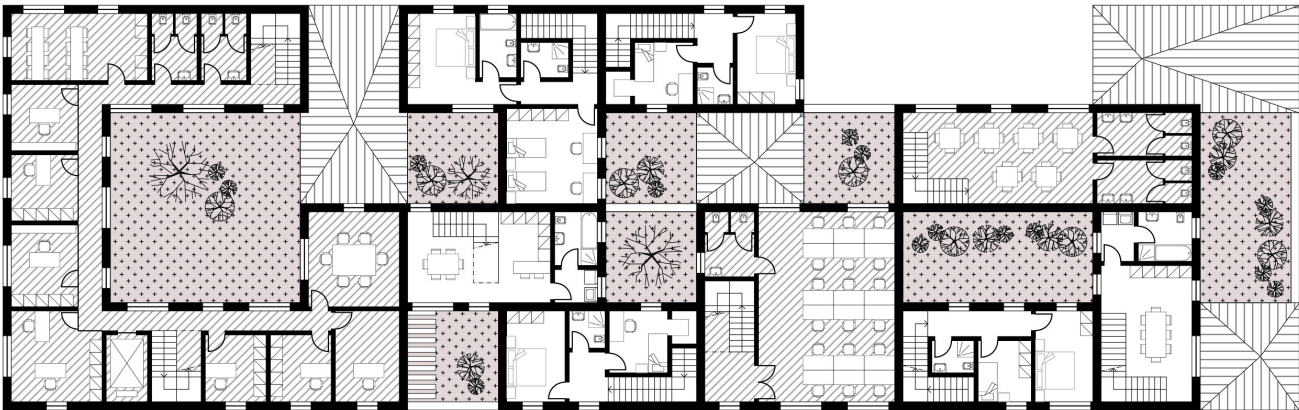


 Residential  Commercial

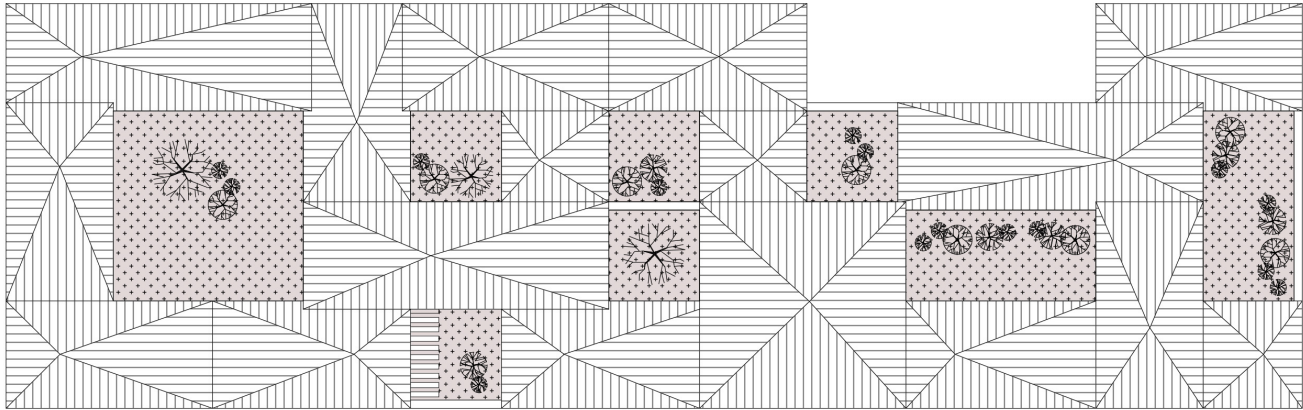
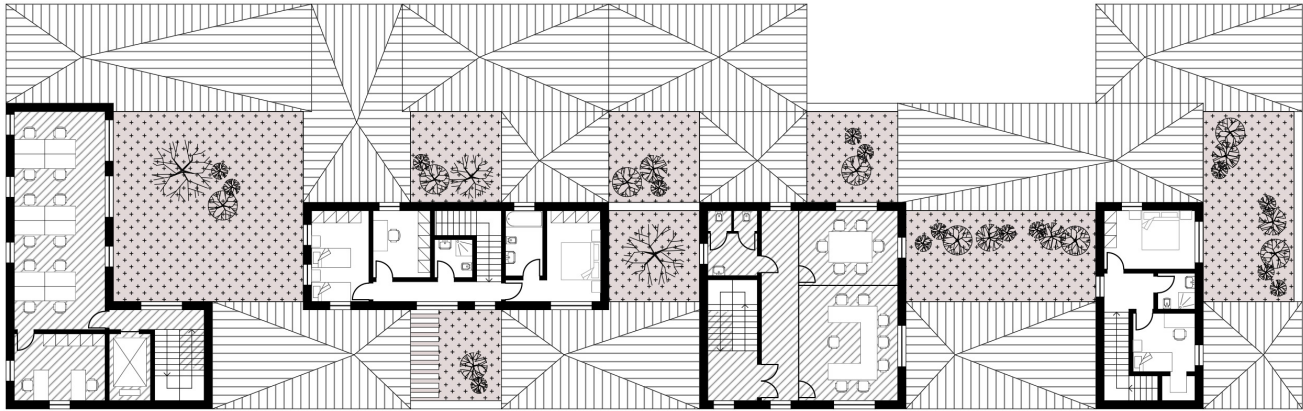
10 m

#2 DWELLING & CO-WORKING SPACES BLOCK

Ground floor & first floor plans



Second floor & roof floor plans

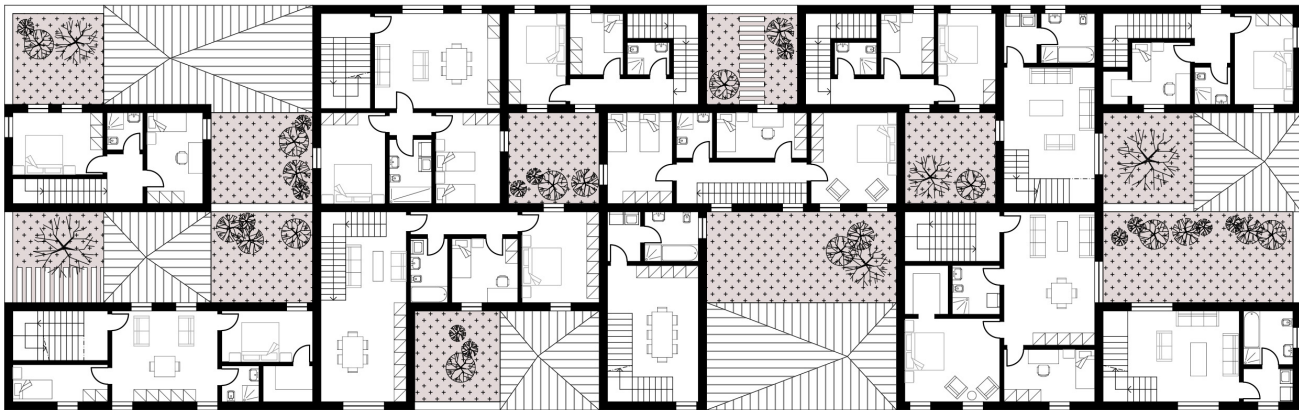
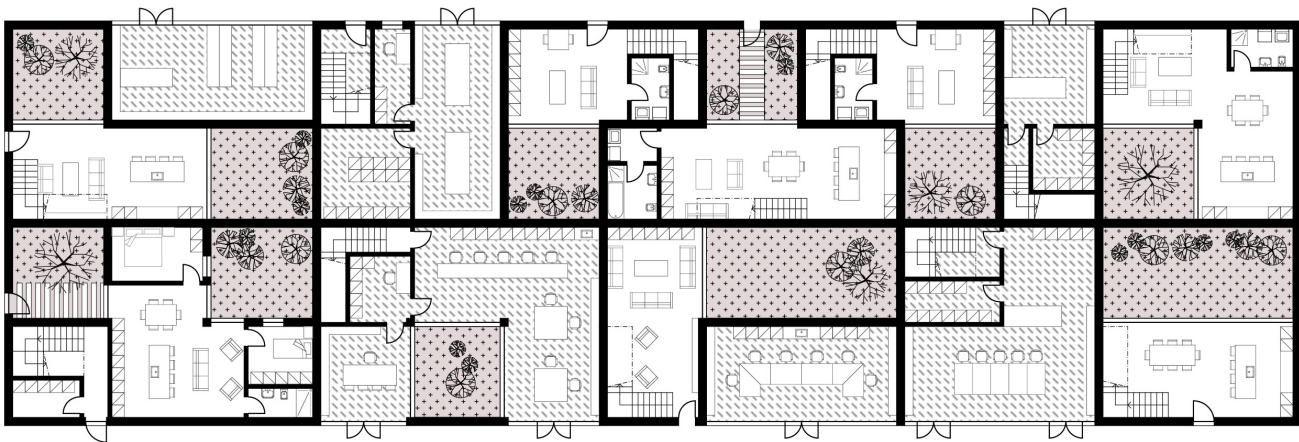


Residential Commercial Co-working spaces

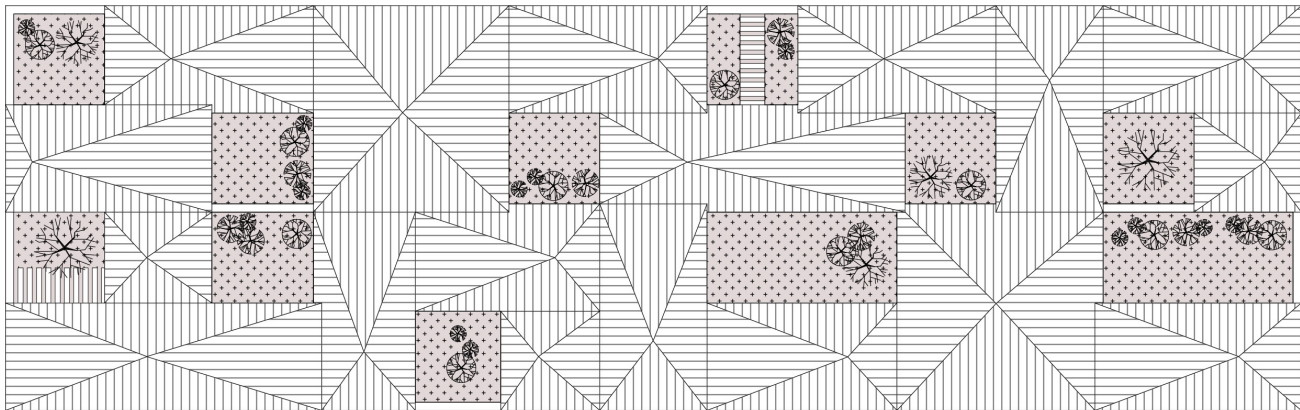
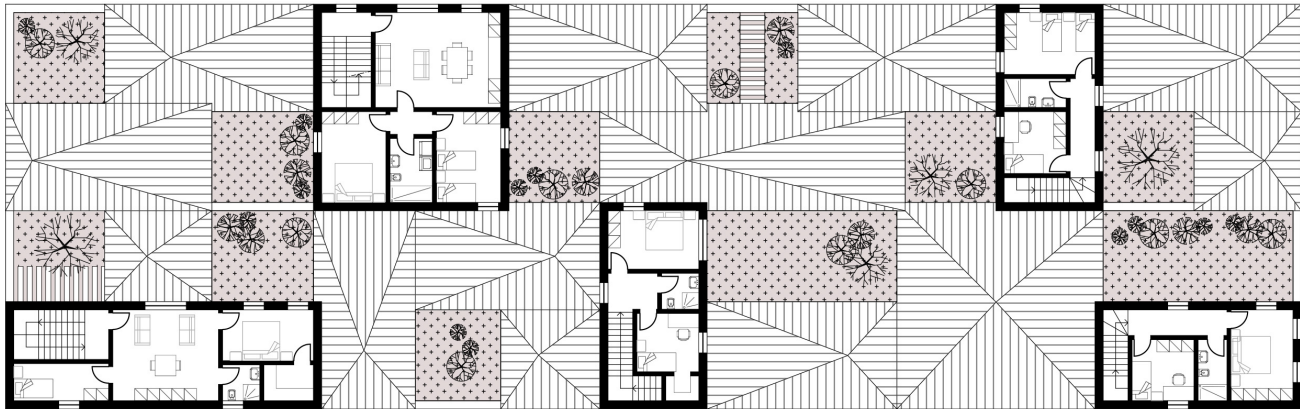
10 m

#3 DWELLING & CRAFTS BLOCK

Ground floor & first floor plans



Second floor & roof floor plans



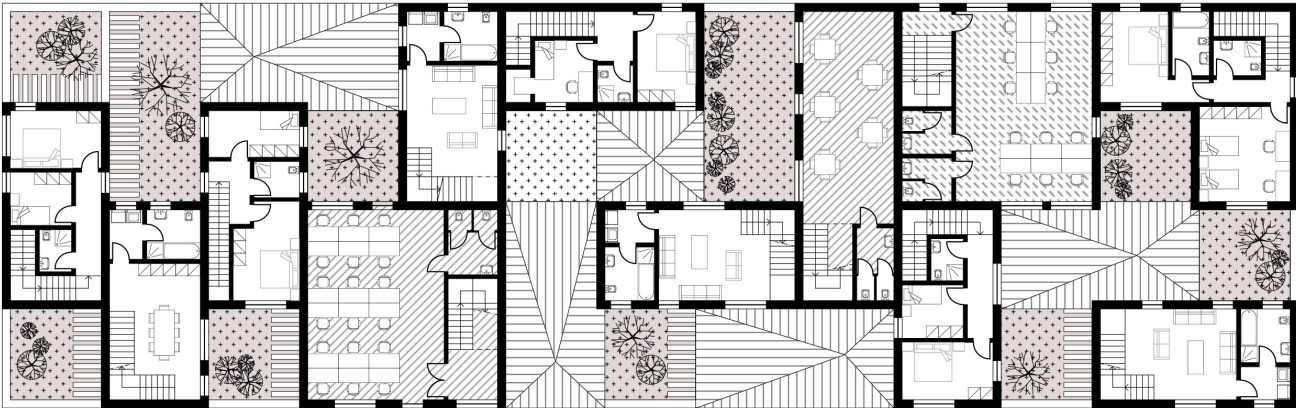
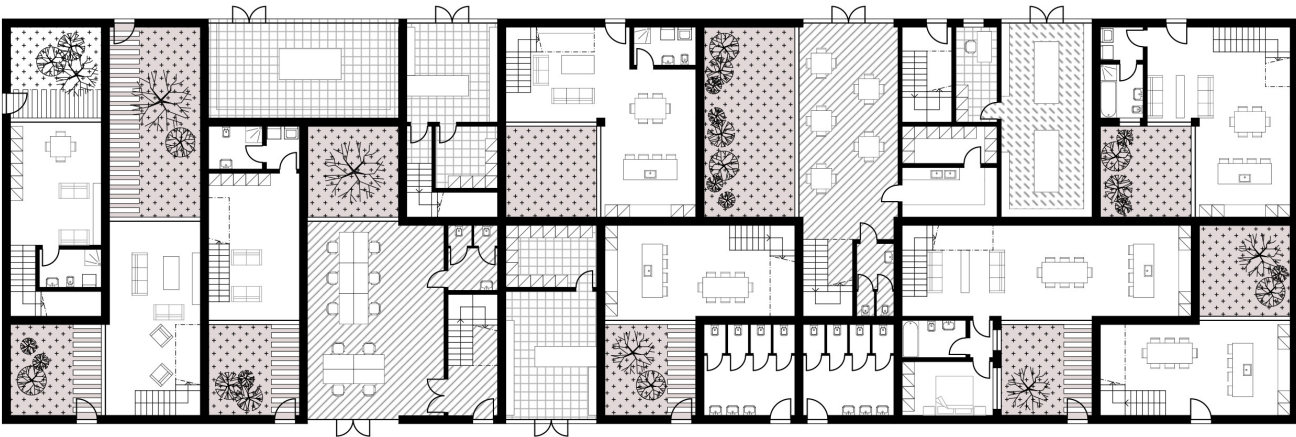
Residential

Crafts

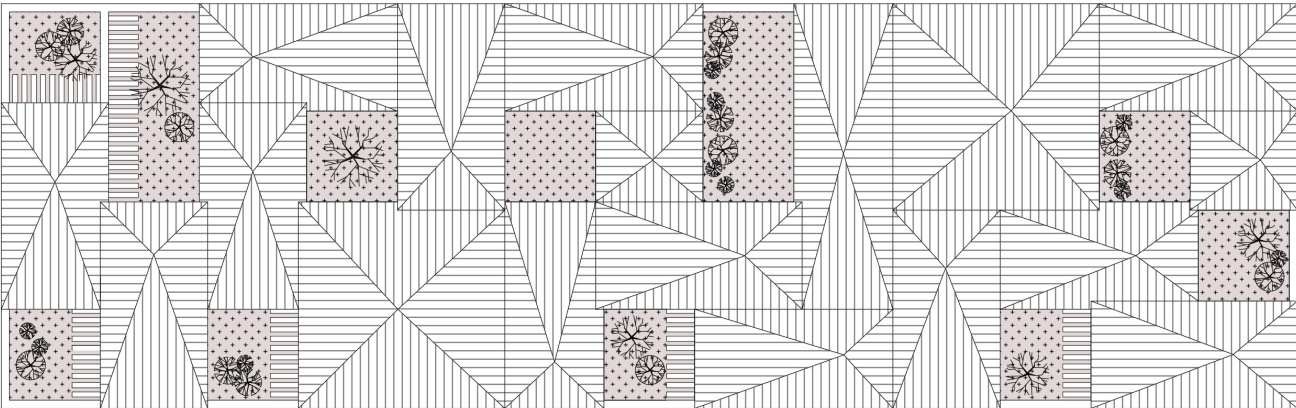
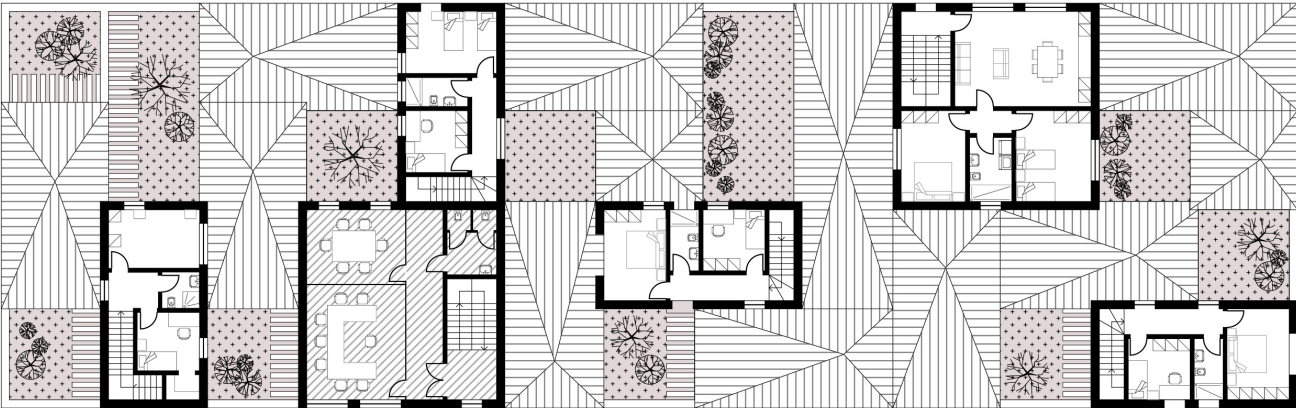
10 m

#4 MIXED CONFIGURATION OF SPACES BLOCK

Ground floor &
first floor plans



Second floor &
roof floor plans



Residential Commercial Co-working spaces Crafts

10 m

#1 LINKED BLOCKS



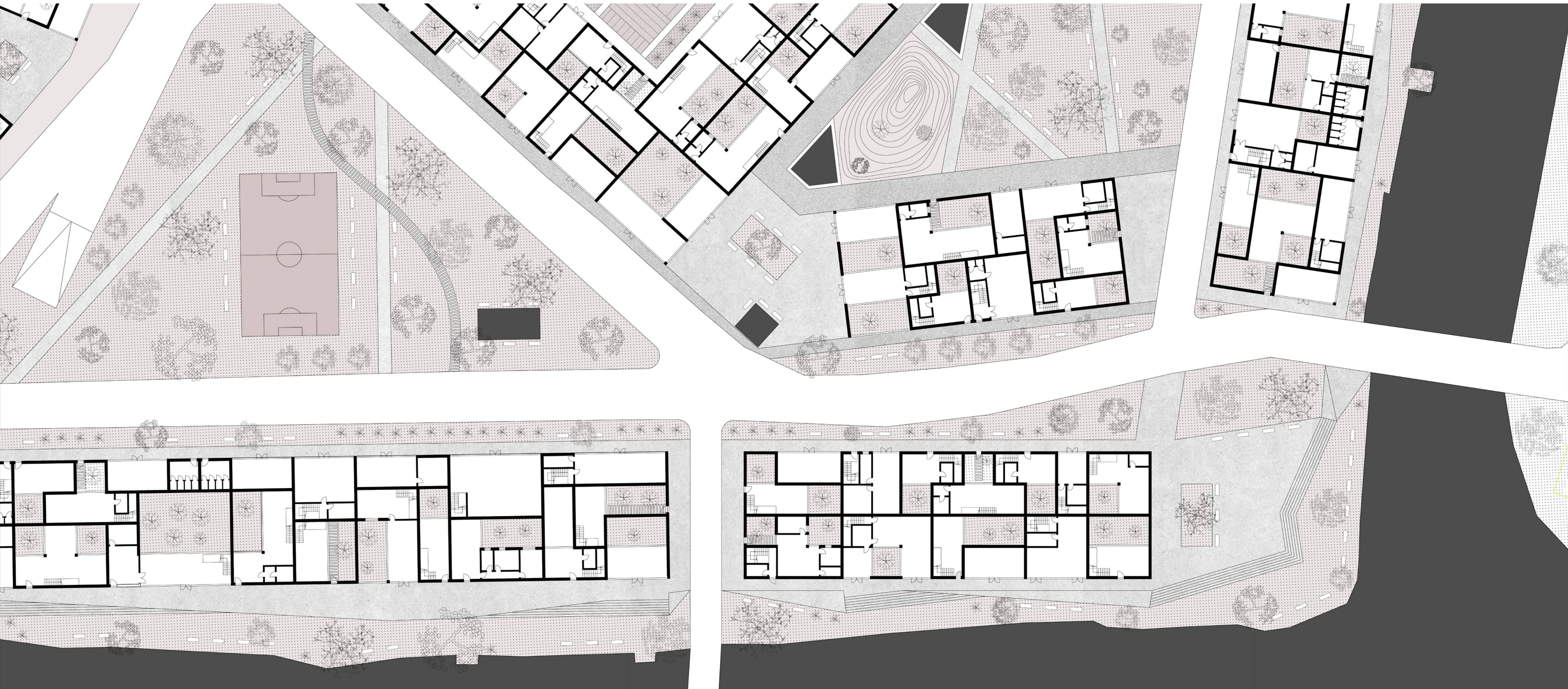
10 m

#2 LINKED BLOCKS

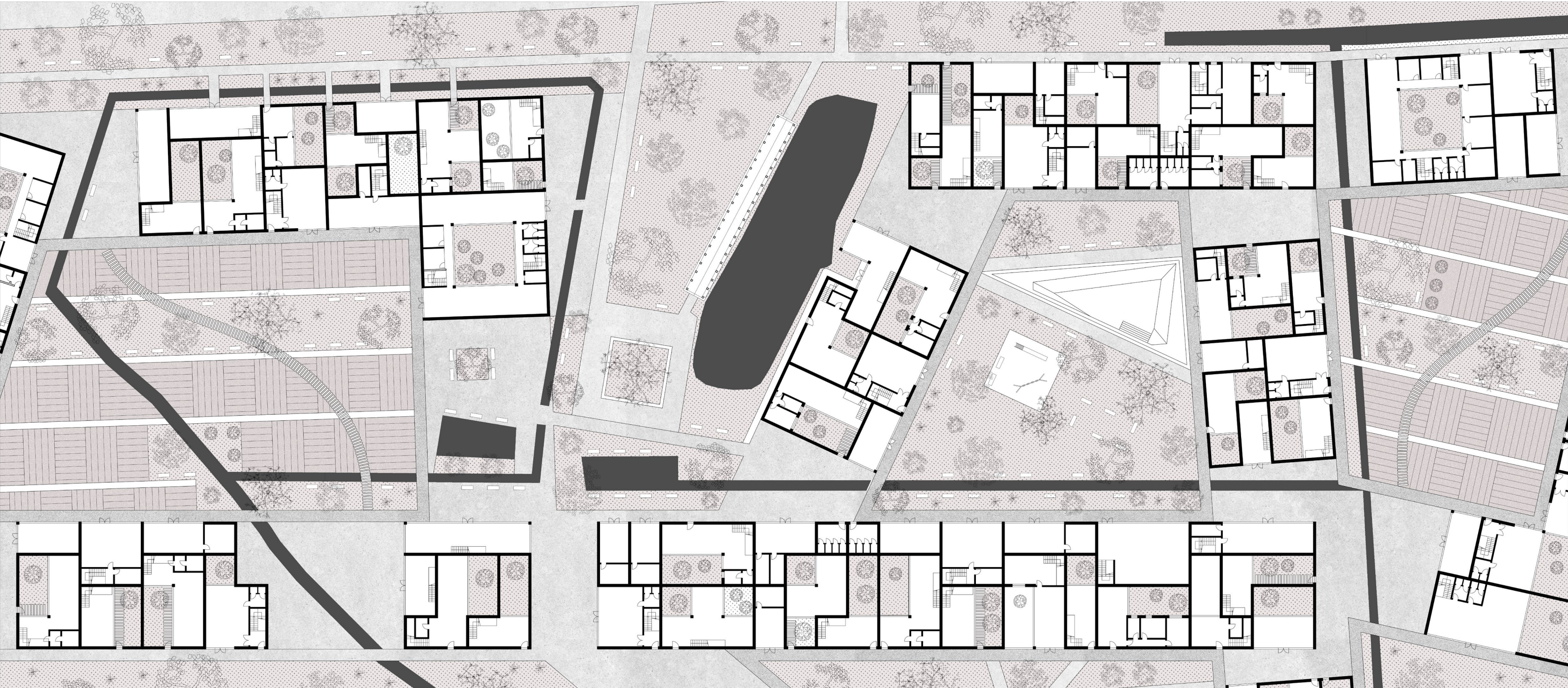


10 m

#3 LINKED BLOCKS



#4 LINKED BLOCKS



10 m

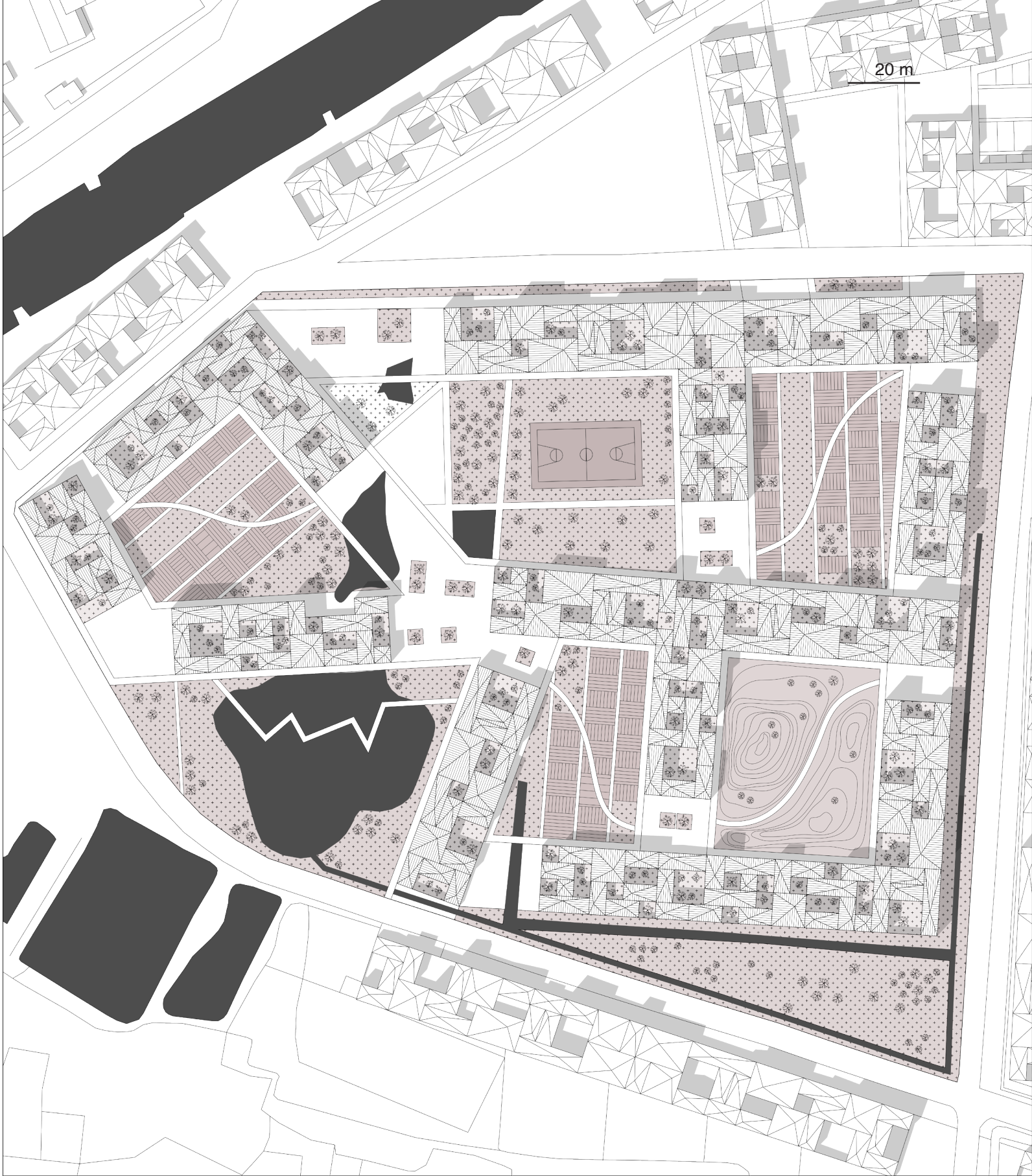
#1 NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pre-existence



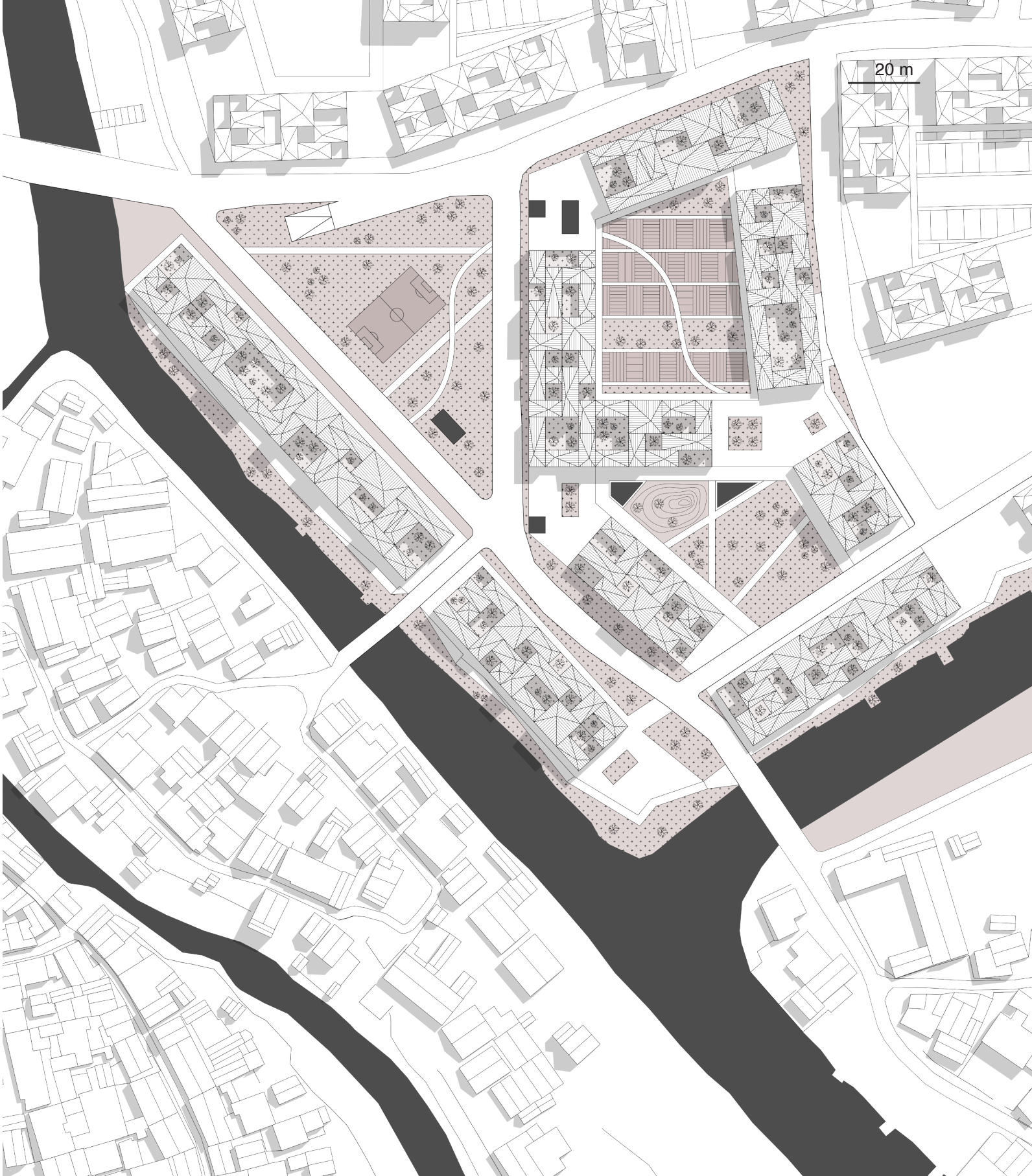
#2 NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pre-existence



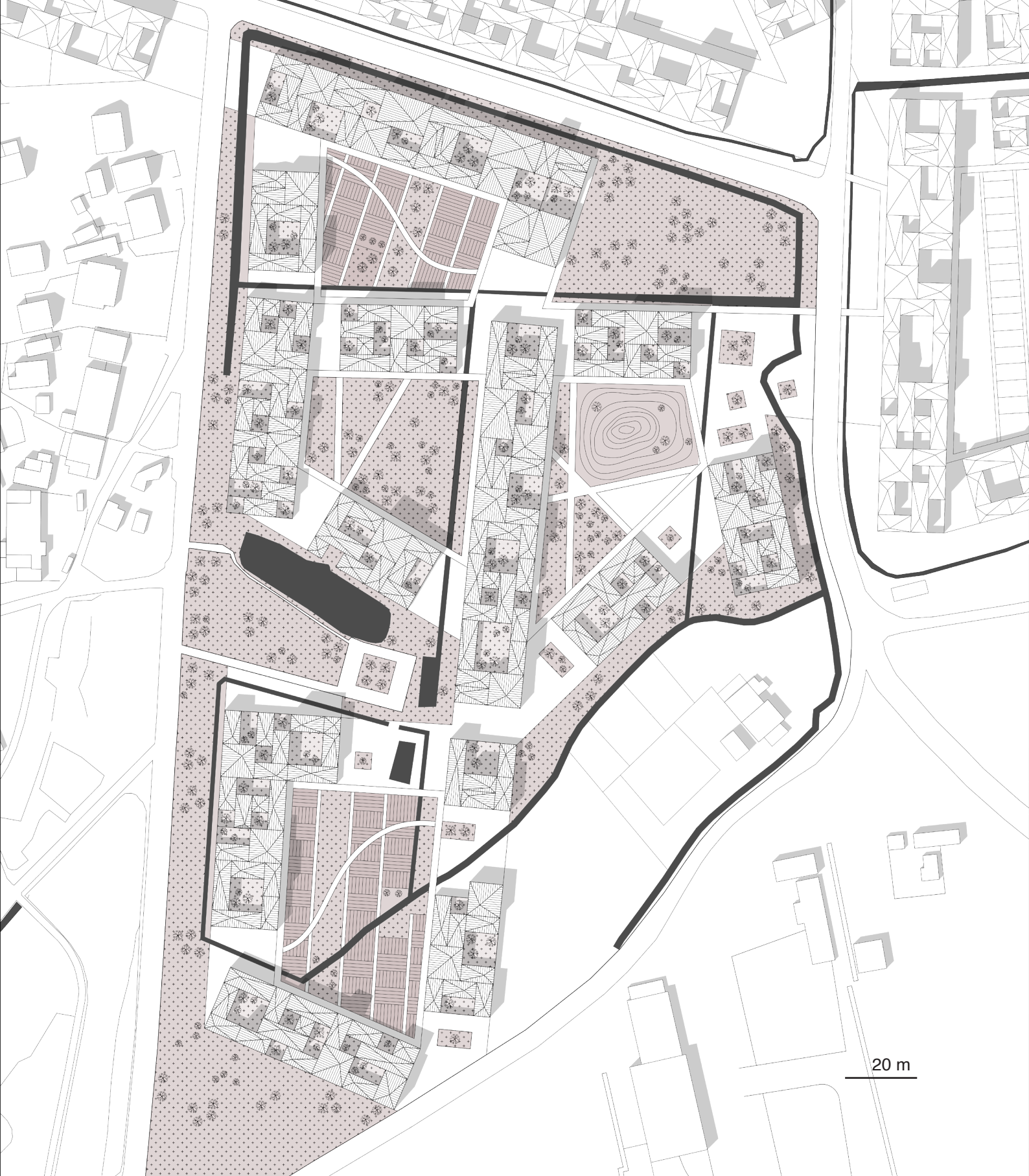
#3 NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pre-existence



#4 NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pre-existence



#1 SECTION STRUGGLING FOR BALANCE

Full & empty
spaces system



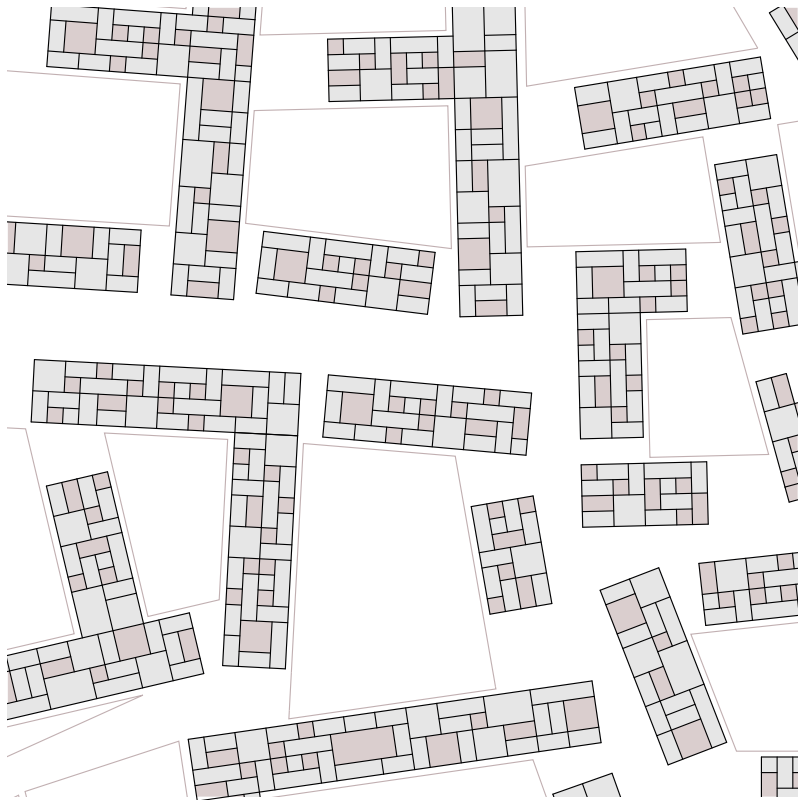
#1 SECTION COURTYARD IN COURTYARD

Full & empty
spaces system



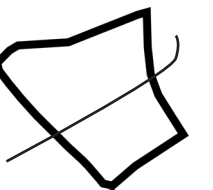
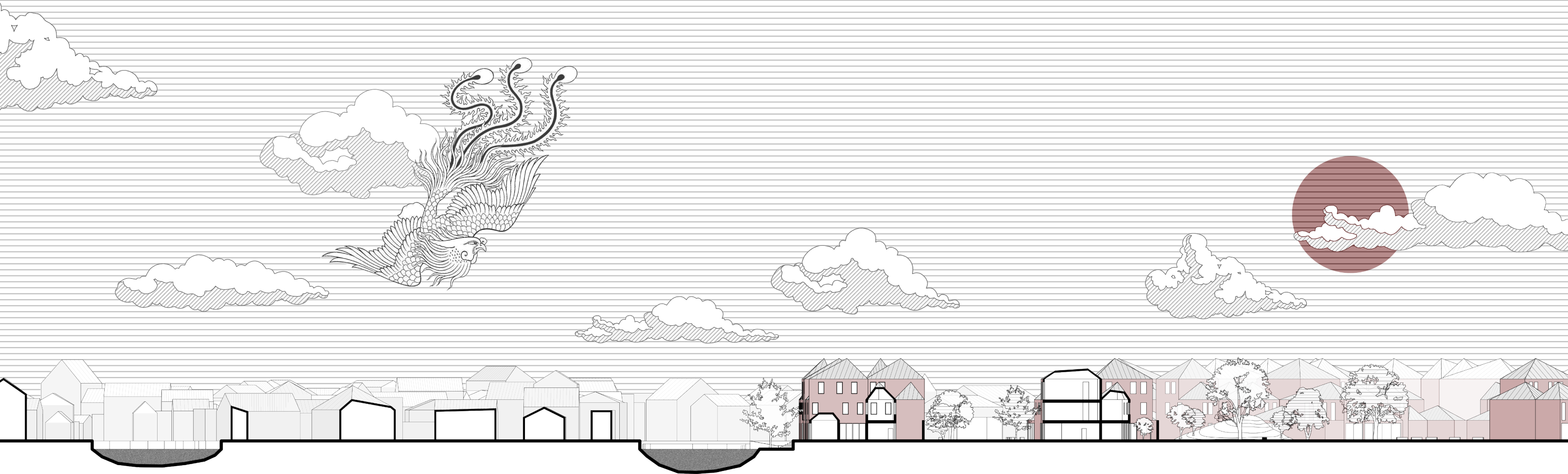
COURTYARD SYSTEM

#1 Large public courtyards;
#2 Private courtyards
inside building blocks.

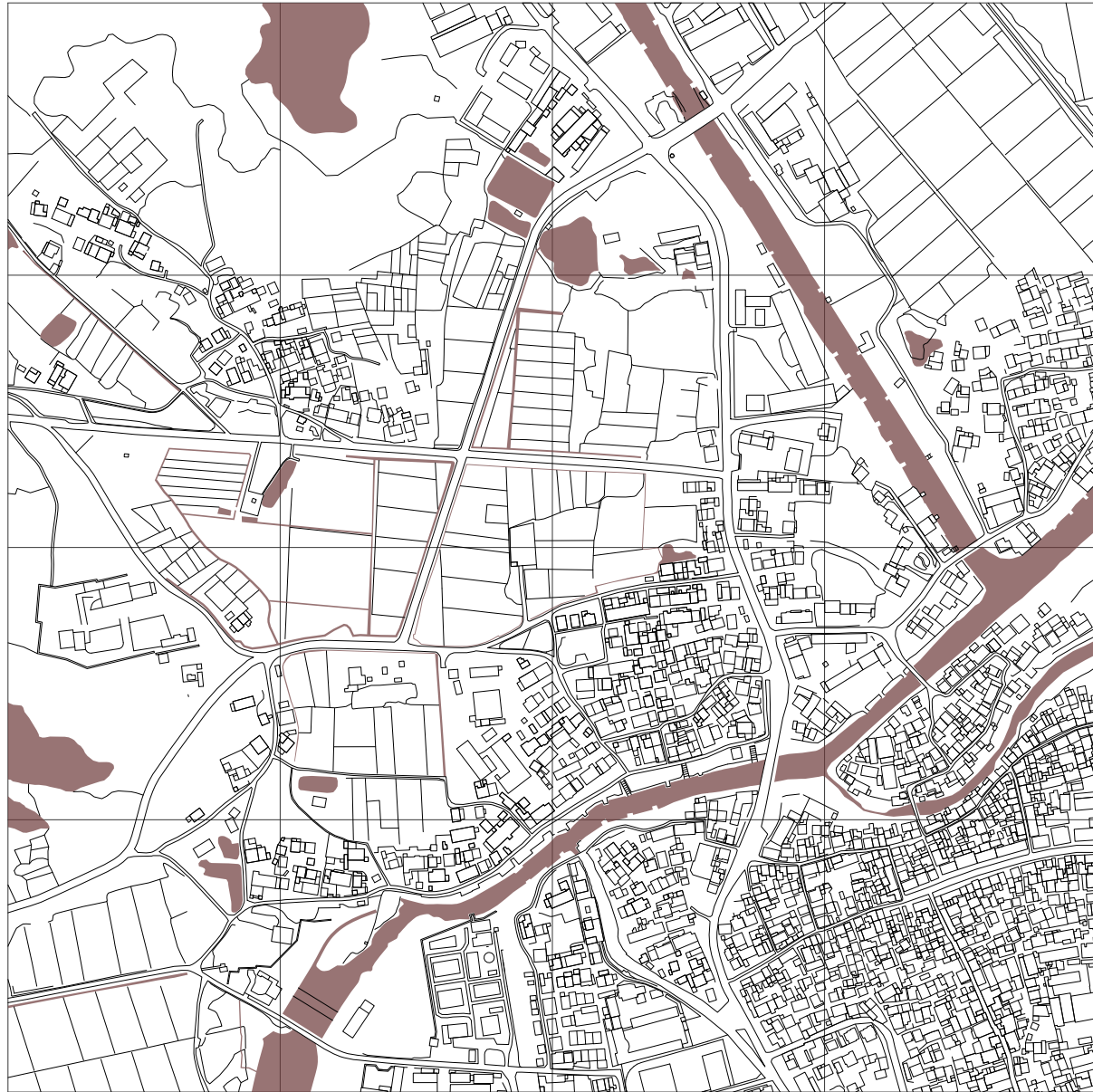


#3 SECTION CONTINUITY

Old & new
built system



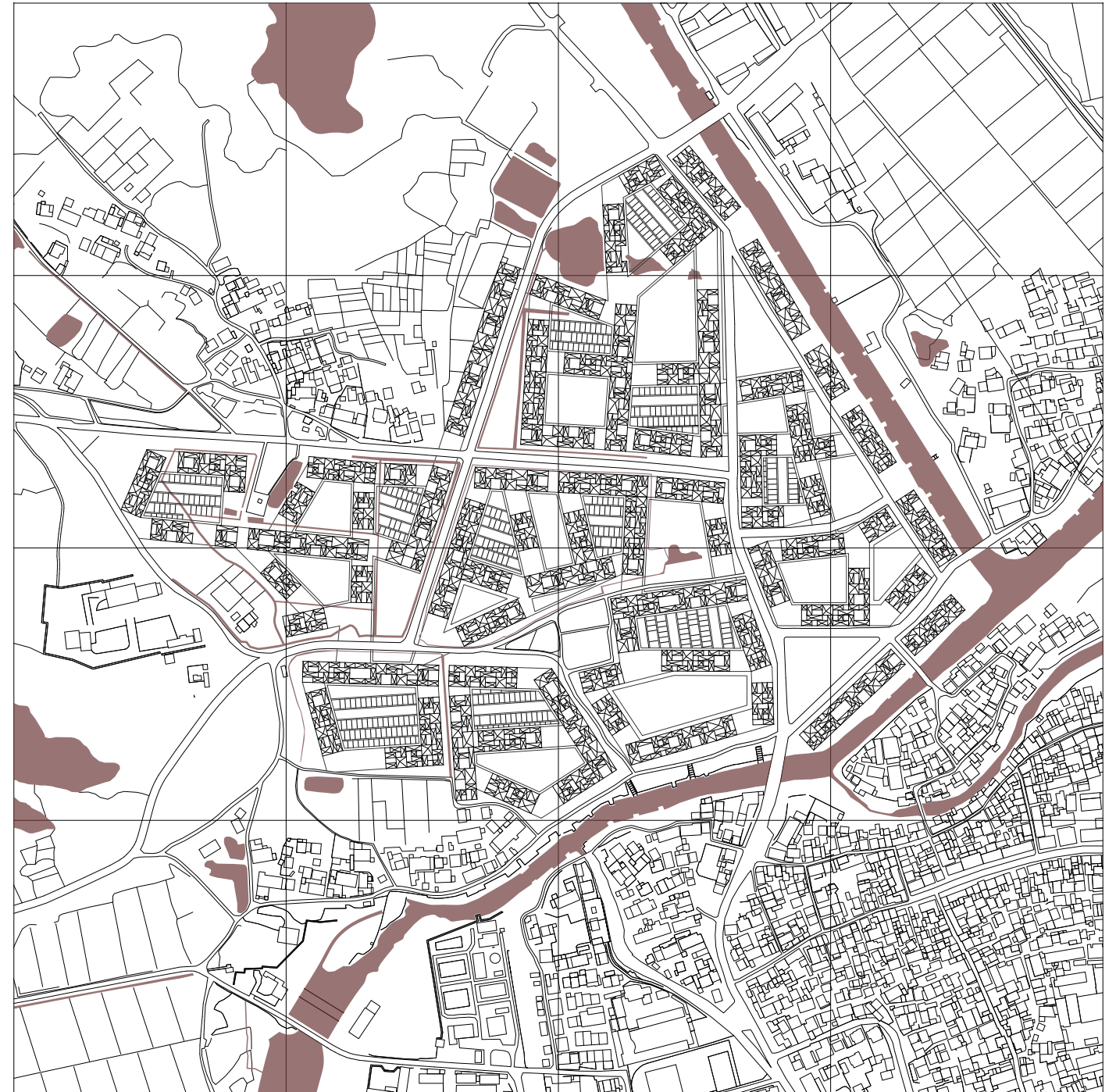
Pre-existence



125 m

MASTERPLAN

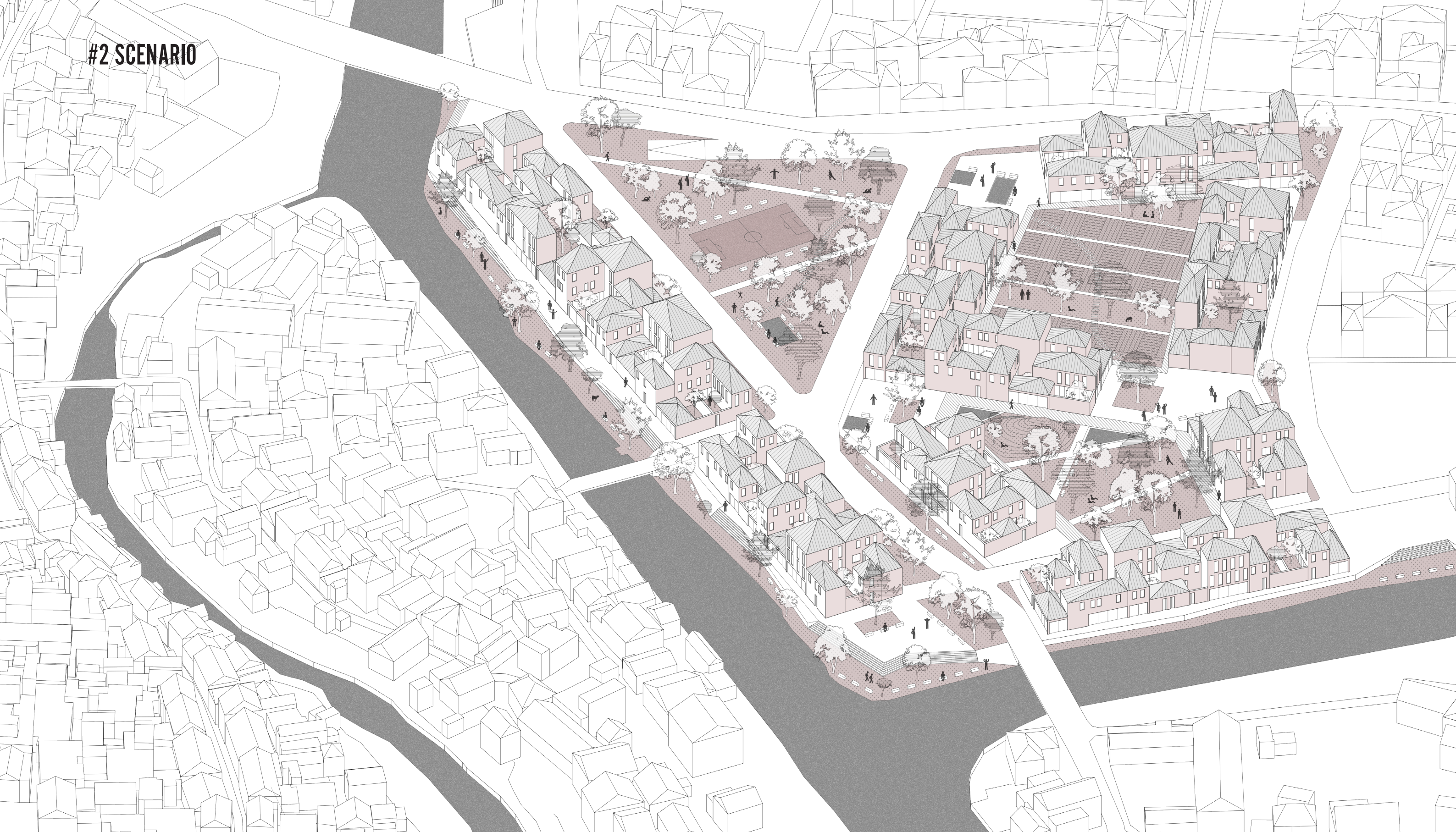
125 m



#1 SCENARIO



#2 SCENARIO



#1 VIEW ALONG THE RIVER

Arrivals & departures



#2 VIEW IN THE KITCHEN GARDEN

Growing & developing



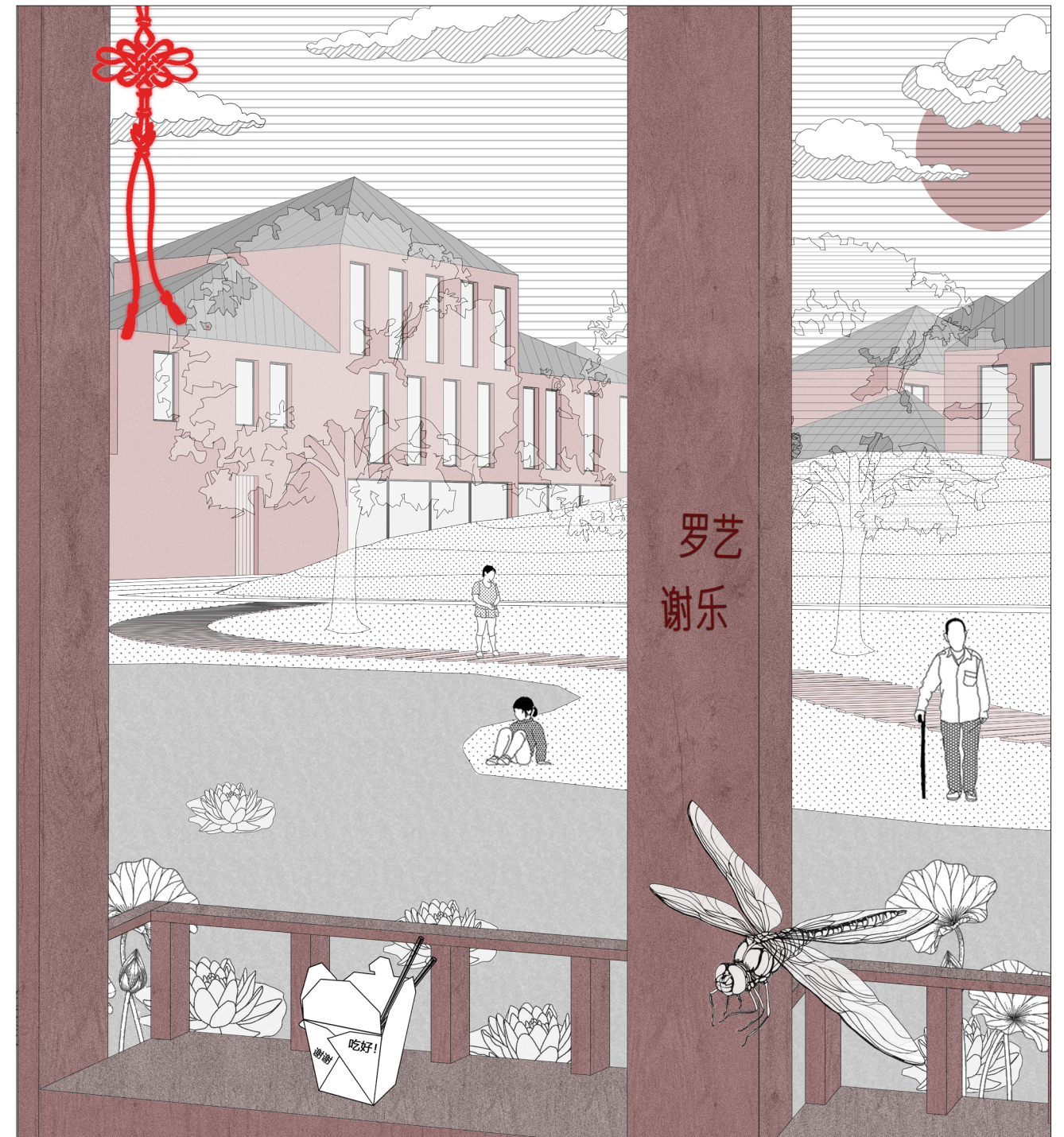
Conclusion

The design proposal is the result of long research carried out from great distance and without ever physically visiting Hufu zhèn. For this reason, guidelines have been identified to support the project. They are linked to the morphological, typological, social and cultural context in which the town is located. These guidelines are based on the reinterpretation of the Chinese courtyard house typology which traditionally is arranged in the landscape following the pre-existing water and street systems. The design proposal is based on prototypes of building blocks formed by the combination of modules that can be assembled in infinite combinations. Mixed-use blocks are generated merging residential blocks with other activities. The **repeatability** of the blocks makes it possible to create **new settlement spaces** in a short time, responding to the new need of many Chinese citizens to move to healthier pla-

ces like the countryside, or better to the new *rural-urban continuum*. This approach is flexible and adaptable in different contexts as it is based on the Chinese traditional settlements: blocks can be modified and architecturally interpreted according to the cultural context in which they are inserted and can be arranged according to the existing layout of the landscape. The results represent a **new way to develop portions of cities in the countryside** that differs from the common way that residential neighbourhoods are built in Chinese suburbs. The outcome are spaces that are never the same and never monotonous, where there is a balance between full and empty spaces, built and resilient land, and particularly between city and countryside. In the future it would be interesting to visit Hufu zhèn and experience this reality first hand to be able to communicate with the locals so as to enrich the design proposal with information from inside the community of Hufu zhèn itself.

#3 VIEW 再见

See you



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I would also like to thank my family very much, without whom all this would never have been possible. Thank you dad, mum and Mauro, with all my heart.

This year I have learned that a smile is enough to change my entire day, that even what seems certain can collapse at any moment, that plants must be cultivated, otherwise they die! I have learned that even the strongest friendships can dissolve, that one detail is enough to change everything, that you should

not go to strangers' houses. This year I learned that I am more fragile than I thought and that I am made not to be alone, but also to be alone, that if someone devalues me it does not mean I am not worth it. I learned that life is a contradiction, that it is possible to get angry every day, that you get gastritis if you keep it all inside. I have learned that people can hurt you deeply, but that you can love again. This year, these last few years have made me grow, they have taught me that nothing is taken for granted and that standing still is useless. To the tears shed, the coarse laughs, the wickedness, all the times I made a fool of myself, the work and sweat. To everyone that supported me till the end, in the middle, at the beginning, in part or in full. To all the friends and people who, even if only passing through my life momentarily, have helped shape the person I am today. Every drop of water has led to this ocean.

To me. Thank you.

谢谢



CLF

*Ci si fa male da soli su una terrazza
Chiedi un parere perché il tuo
non ti basta*

*Ci provo a stare senza
Se ti do l'anima che avanza
Dici non è abbastanza per te
Non è abbastanza, è un tuo limite
Vincere non è niente di che
Vorrei un abbraccio perché
Il successo fa male alla testa
Se pensi di non essere all'altezza
Nel buio guarda tua madre
Ti dirà: "L'amore è ciò che ti resta"⁷⁸*

*We get hurt when we're alone on
a balcony
You seek others' advice because
your own isn't enough for you
I try to get by without any
If I give you what's left of my soul
You say it's not enough for you
It's not enough, that's your limit
Winning is no big deal
I'd like a hug, because
Success gives me a headache
If you think you're not good enough
Look at you mother in the dark
She'll say to you: "Love is what
you've got left"⁷⁸*

78. A passage from a song by
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