

Reading Cities In Transition:
A Morphological Approach to Conscious Urban Regeneration

The Case Study of *Zhen Xiang*, Nanjing

Master Thesis

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Politecnico di Torino

Master Degree in
Architecture Construction City

a.y. 2025/2026

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence was used as a supporting tool to organise concepts, structure ideas, and clarify the development of my arguments.
As English is not my first language, AI was also used for linguistic support, helping me refine the language, improve clarity, and achieve a more consistent academic style.
The research, interpretations, arguments, and design decisions presented in this thesis remain entirely my own.

Cover image. Detail of a plan of Nanjing, elaborated by the author as a symbolic and evocative representation of the city. Not to scale.

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Io credo che l'essere umano sogni solo per non smettere di vedere. Potrebbe accadere che un giorno la luce interiore esca da noi stessi, in modo che non avremmo più bisogno di nessun'altra.

I believe men only dream that they may not cease to see.
Some day, perhaps, the inner light will come out from within us, and we shall not any more require another.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Le affinità elettive / Elective Affinities (1809)

Abstract

In a context where contemporary cities are experiencing continuous urban expansion, there is an increasing need for solutions capable of guiding this growth in a more targeted and responsible way. Urban regeneration projects therefore come into play, seeking to move beyond the demolition and replacement of existing urban fabrics and instead act through processes of reading, interpreting and transforming the city, contributing to the consolidation of its identity and sense of place.

This thesis therefore aims to identify a methodology that can support urban regeneration processes while promoting both historical continuity and contemporary needs.

The research develops a typo-morphological approach based on the reading of cities as urban palimpsests, in which historical layers coexist and contribute to shaping the city as it is observed today. Through the concepts of urban anamnesis and urban surgery, the methodology identifies persistent morphological structures, transformations and transitional conditions as a basis for selective and context-sensitive interventions.

This approach, conceived through tools that can potentially be applied across different contexts, is tested and applied to Nanjing, China, focusing on the area of Zhen Xiang. Here, historically significant buildings, urban forms that have remained relatively unchanged over time, and contemporary interventions coexist. The analysis of the area's urban transition, together with an in-depth understanding of its existing conditions, led to the formulation of a design strategy aimed at strengthening its identity while responding to both its historical character and contemporary needs.

Unlike the methodology, which seeks to develop transferable tools, the design proposal is deliberately site-specific and introduces public and private buildings. It aims to mediate between outsiders and insiders through mixed-use buffer zones and semi-public spaces supporting the existing community.

By working through the existing urban fabric rather than against it, the thesis explores how regeneration can support continuity, adaptability and well-being while offering a framework potentially transferable to other contexts undergoing urban transition.

Understanding Chinese Cities.
Redesigning Italian Methods
Li Bao & Marco Trisciuoglio
2018

What could be the outcome of an ***URBAN REGENERATION*** *project in China nowadays?*

Should we really choose between ***ordinary districts*** *composed of tall, anonymous buildings or gated communities closed into inner villages and dominated by* ***fake restorations*** *in the traditional Chinese style?*

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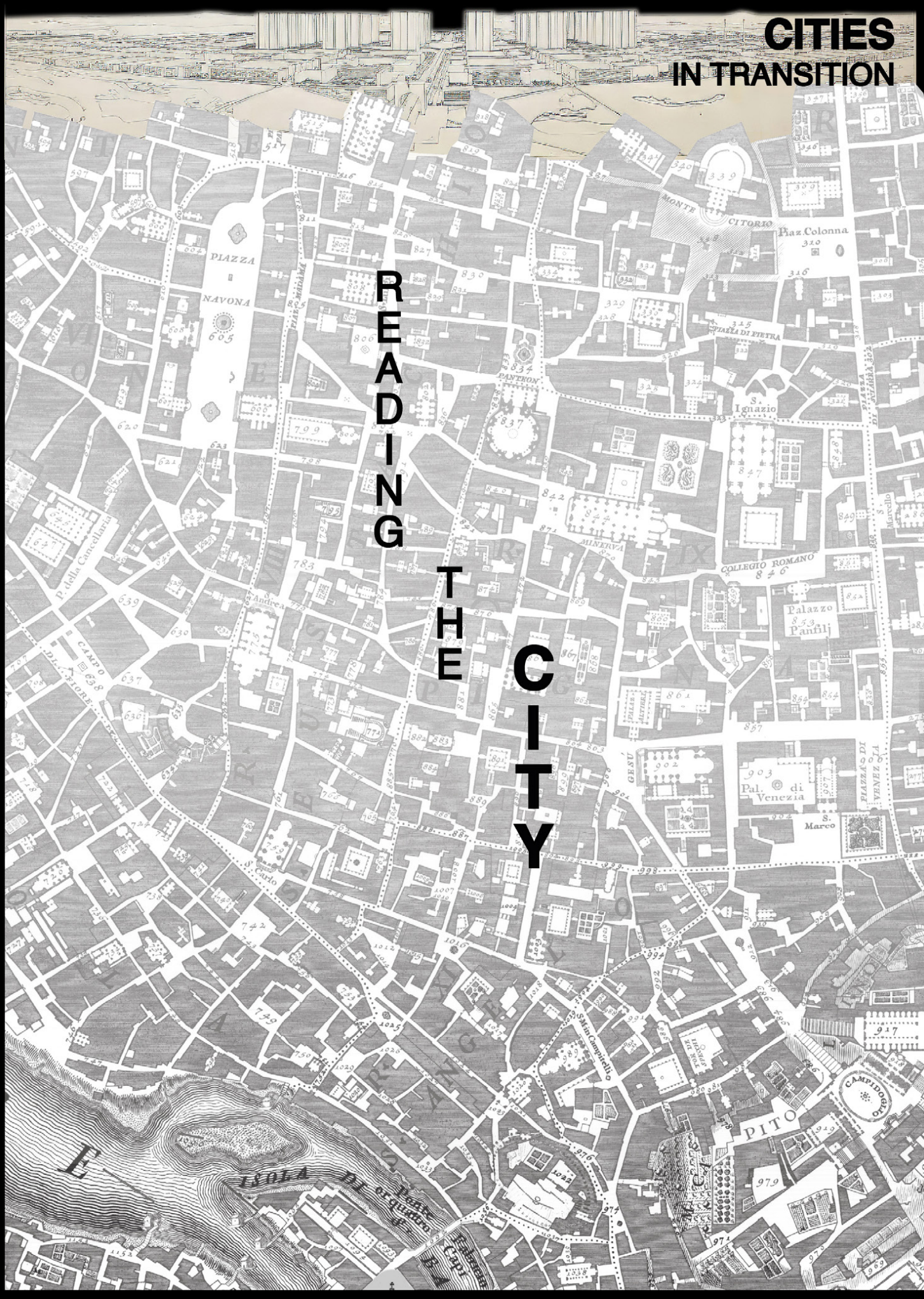
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CITIES
IN TRANSITION
READING THE CITY



Cities in Transition, Reading the City: from cities urban transformations to the Chinese urban condition and the reading of Nanjing and Zhen Xiang.

Introduction

The City as a Living Palimpsest.

The term palimpsest originally referred to a manuscript, parchment scroll, or book that was reused and rewritten multiple times. Since writing material was scarce, it was often repurposed, resulting in documents in which traces of previous texts remained visible beneath the new layer of writing. This characteristic of simultaneous erasure and persistence is what later allowed the term to be extended beyond manuscripts, referring also to objects or places in which "diverse layers or aspects [are] apparent beneath the surface" (The Urban City as a Palimpsest, n.d.). The contemporary city can be understood within this definition, as an entity that has reached its present condition through successive transformations that do not necessarily erase one another, but often overlap, coexist, and become intertwined. Its urban fabric is therefore composed of multiple layers produced by processes of addition, modification, erosion, and replacement. These layers are not exclusively material: even when a physical element no longer exists, traces of its former presence may survive through historical documents, maps, plans, spatial configurations, or collective memory. The city should therefore not be understood as a static object, but as an ongoing historical process, whose evolution can be reconstructed through the different forms of evidence that have been preserved. What has survived into the present should not be regarded as the final stage of this process, but rather as a transitional condition upon which further transformations can take place. **The contemporary city is thus simultaneously the result of previous processes and the ground for future ones.** However, understanding the city as a palimpsest does not mean conceiving it as an archive in which all layers of the past simply accumulate one above another. Urban stratification also involves selection, loss, reinterpretation, memory, and rewriting. In this sense, the palimpsest should be understood as an active process through which existing conditions are selectively preserved, transformed, or replaced. Making use of Paul Ricoeur's distinction between different forms of memory, Abusaada and Elshater (2026) interpret the urban palimpsest as "an active process of selective re-inscription, rather than a passive accumulation" (p. 1).

The Identity of Place.

When considering the transformations that cities have undergone and those they are likely to experience in the future, it is inevitable to address the question of the identity of place. If the city is continuously transformed, what allows a place to remain recognisable and meaningful over time? And do these transformations strengthen its identity, or do they risk compromising it?

A place is more than an abstract location. According to Christian Norberg-Schulz, a place is given a particular character or "atmosphere," and, depending on its local circumstances, it possesses a specific identity (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, pp. 6–10). The concept of ***genius loci***, therefore, refers to the distinctive character of a place and to the relationship established between the physical environment and human existence.

From this perspective, the identity of a place is not determined exclusively by its physical appearance, but emerges from the interaction between its spatial structure, its particular environmental conditions, its history, and the way in which it is experienced and inhabited. The city can therefore change without necessarily losing its identity; what matters is whether the transformations maintain, reinterpret, or break off the relationships through which that identity is constructed.

This question becomes particularly relevant in the context of the rapid and extensive transformations affecting contemporary cities. As urban environments become increasingly subject to processes of standardisation, mobility, consumption, and globalisation, the possibility of producing spaces detached from their specific historical and cultural contexts becomes increasingly evident.

In this context, Marc Augé introduces the concept of the ***non-place***. If an anthropological place is relational, historical, and concerned with identity, a space that lacks these characteristics can instead be understood as a non-place (Augé, 1995, p. 78). Non-places include spaces such as airports, motorways, hotels, and supermarkets, where individuals are primarily connected through temporary, functional, and often anonymous relationships.

The non-place therefore represents a condition in which the relationship between people and their surroundings becomes increasingly detached from local specificity. The individual becomes, in Augé's interpretation, less an inhabitant of a meaningful place and more a temporary user or *spectator* of spaces designed for transit, consumption, and circulation.

The concern with the loss of place-specific identity is pushed further by Rem Koolhaas through his concept of the ***Generic City***. Koolhaas argues that if human growth is exponential, this inevitably implies that, at a certain point, the past will become too small to be inhabited and shared by those who are alive. Identity, when conceived as a form of sharing the past, therefore becomes, in his words, "a losing proposition" (Koolhaas, 1995, p. 1248).

From this perspective, the continuous attempt to preserve and reproduce identity risks becoming a limitation to the city's capacity to accommodate future growth. Koolhaas consequently argues that the Generic City frees itself from this "destructive cycle of dependency" (Koolhaas, 1995, p. 1249), rejecting the necessity of maintaining a continuous relationship with its historical identity. In doing so, the Generic City becomes increasingly "superficial" (Koolhaas, 1995, p. 1249), detached from the obligation to preserve a specific historical character and therefore able to continually adapt, expand, and reinvent itself.

This opinion introduces an important tension within the question of urban identity. While Norberg-Schulz emphasises the importance of the particular character of a place, and Augé identifies the risks of environments in which historical, relational, and identity-based dimensions are weakened, Koolhaas provocatively asks whether identity itself may become a limitation to contemporary urban development.

The contrast between these positions does not necessarily imply that one condition should simply be preserved while the other should be rejected. Rather, it reveals a fundamental question for contemporary urban transformation: **how can a city evolve without becoming detached from the characteristics that make it a particular place?**

WHAT IS LEFT AFTER **IDENTITY** IS STRIPPED?

THE GENERIC.

HYPER-LOCAL

The idea of layering, intensification, completion are alien to it:
it has no ***layers***.

HYPER-GLOBAL

Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport - "***all the same***"?

This parallel between the ***place***
as an *assembly* of elements coexisting in a certain order and the ***space***
as *animation* of these places

SPECTATOR

The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces ***non-places*** (...)
which do not integrate the earlier places:
instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of
'places of memory'

'***Places of memory***' (...) what we see in them is essentially how we have changed, the image of what we are no longer

Graphic manifesto developed by the author, featuring selected excerpts from Augé (1995) and Koolhaas (1995).

The Question of Transformation.

The starting point, therefore, is that the question is not whether the city should change, but how transformation can occur while maintaining, reinterpreting, or consciously redefining the relationships that constitute the identity of a place.

Transformation is an inherent condition of the city. However, recognising the city as a palimpsest does not, by itself, ensure that future transformations will preserve or strengthen its identity. If decisions concerning the evolution of urban environments fail to take into account the relationships between the layers that constitute the city, transformation can instead lead to their progressive disconnection and, ultimately, to a loss of identity.

It is therefore necessary to understand more deeply why contemporary cities are changing, what new needs and demands are emerging, and why the existing spatial and urban conditions are increasingly unable to respond to them. Urban transformation cannot be approached simply as a necessity to replace what already exists; it requires an understanding of the processes that have generated the current condition and of the new conditions that are calling for change. Only by understanding these processes can transformation become a conscious rather than merely reactive act.

This leads to the possibility of identifying an approach to urban intervention based on a specific methodology: a way of reading the existing city, recognising its layers and relationships, understanding its current limitations, and using this knowledge to guide its future transformation.
Such an approach would make it possible to intervene in cities, both today and in the future, with greater awareness of the processes through which they evolve. Rather than interrupting the continuity of the urban palimpsest, each intervention could become part of its ongoing transformation, adding a new layer to an already stratified condition.

The objective is therefore not to preserve the city in a fixed state, nor to erase it in order to accommodate new demands, but to enter its continuous process of transformation without producing a rupture that deprives it of its layered and historically dense character.

01

Cities in Transition:
Why Urban Regeneration Matters

1.1_The Limits of Urban Expansion

Urban expansion is a consequence of urban population growth because urban settlements consume land (Mulliner & Boyle, 2023, p. 125). However, urban expansion should not be understood solely as the outward growth of cities into previously undeveloped areas. It can also occur within already urbanised areas, where existing parts of the city need to grow, intensify or transform in order to accommodate increasing populations, new functions and changing needs. This can involve the transformation and intensification of the city from within. Such processes, however, involve significant risks, particularly when urban growth becomes incompatible with the existing city. The need to accommodate increasing populations and functions through higher density can come into conflict with existing and historic urban fabrics, potentially disrupting their spatial structures, architectural character and accumulated layers. The challenge therefore lies not only in accommodating growth, but in understanding how much and in what way the existing city can transform without compromising the values that have shaped it over time. Heritage is not constituted solely by isolated historic buildings, but also encompasses urban morphology, spatial structure, landscape, social practices, and accumulated layers. This therefore leads to a reflection on the tension between increasing density and heritage conservation, which becomes one of the major challenges that urban development needs to address. The process can be understood as:



It therefore becomes necessary to reflect on the distinction between redevelopment, which is based on principles of replacement and rebuilding, and regeneration, which instead seeks to transform existing structures while recognising and responding to their inherent values.

1.2_ The Limits of the Tabula Rasa

Although urban growth may appear to be an extremely contemporary issue, given the rates of population growth that some countries are experiencing today, this phenomenon is not entirely new. Such growth had already begun to develop during the previous century, particularly in countries affected by the major armed conflicts of the twentieth century.

It is therefore interesting to mention some of the projects and thinkers who were active during those years.

Iconic examples include Le Corbusier's projects, such as the Ville Contemporaine de Trois Millions d'Habitants and the Plan Voisin (Figure 1.1). The latter was an urban planning proposal for the centre of Paris, designed by Le Corbusier between 1922 and 1925 and presented at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, in the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau.

Conceived as a radical restructuring of the city centre, the project envisioned the replacement of large portions of the existing urban fabric with a new, rational and highly ordered city adapted to the requirements of modern life and the automobile. Its implementation would have profoundly transformed the historical character of central Paris, replacing existing neighbourhoods, streets and buildings with a fundamentally different urban structure (Fondation Le Corbusier, n.d.).

The project was never realised; however, the radical approach underlying Le Corbusier's proposals illustrates the spread of an approach that legitimised the idea of clearing the existing city and reorganising it according to a more rational and functional order.

A similar approach was pursued by several other modernist architects of the period, including Ludwig Hilberseimer, who during the 1920s designed cities conceived as mechanical organisms. Reconstruction was increasingly expected to be based on principles of rationality, standardisation and uniformity. Within the CIAM circles and among many avant-garde movements, the tabula rasa became a premise for a new beginning of society. The vision of a new and total order, however, left little room for memory or plurality.

These urban utopias are therefore fascinating in their coheren-

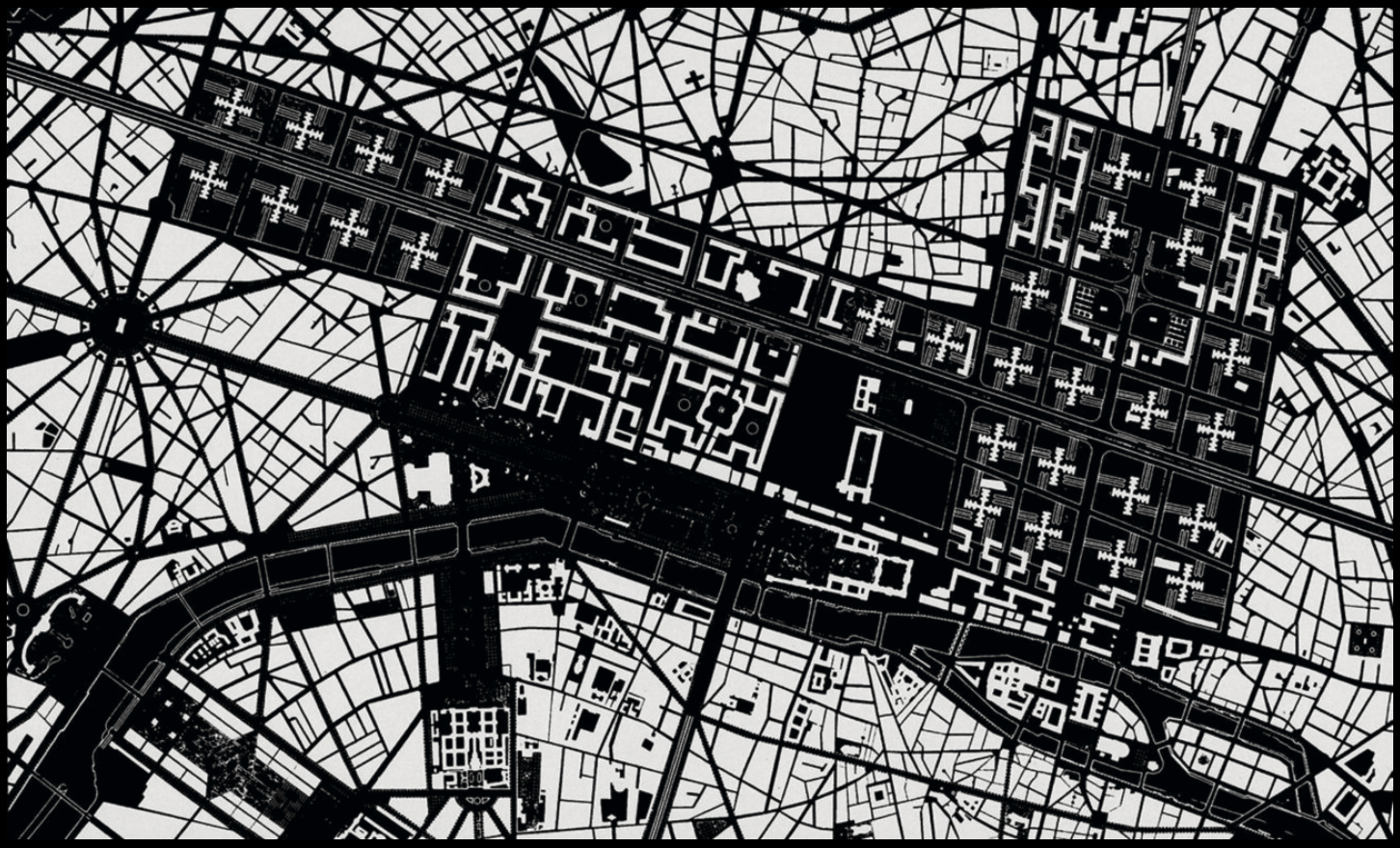


Figure 1.1. Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin, 1925, figure-ground plan, Paris. Author's elaboration based on Primary Structure (2023).



Figure 1.2. Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin, 1925, model, Paris. Source: Fondation Le Corbusier, © FLC/ADAGP.

ce, yet unsettling in their distance from the human being, who risks becoming secondary to the system and disappearing within the grids of an order that is as perfect in its logic as it is sterile in its relationship with human experience.

We know that these projects were never actually realised and that they cannot be decontextualised or treated as absolute representations of the architects' broader ideologies. In other words, the ideas of these architects cannot be reduced merely to this particular type of project. Nevertheless, they remain historical evidence of a way of thinking whose radicalism reveals the limits of an urban model based on the replacement of the existing city.

Although these projects were never realised "in reality" or "physically", we can recognise that transformations of this kind are actually taking place and reshaping our cities today.

Indeed, rapid and large-scale urban transformations destabilise historical continuity in both the material fabric of cities and the theoretical assumptions guiding urban design (Abusaada & Elshater, 2026).

This allows us to understand how a ***tabula rasa*** approach may fail to fully respond to the complexity of contemporary cities, particularly when they are interpreted through their richness and depth as urban ***palimpsests***, as discussed in the introduction.

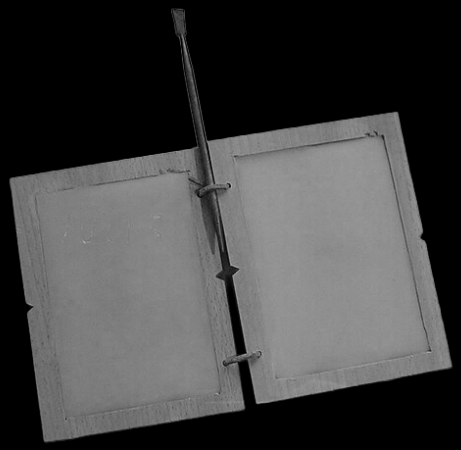


Figure 1.3. Tabula rasa, symbolic representation of the concept of erasing previous content in order to start anew. Source: Wikipedia, "Tabula rasa."



Figure 1.4. The Archimedes Palimpsest, symbolic representation of layered writing and the persistence of previous traces beneath subsequent ones. Source: Wikipedia, "Palinsesto di Archimede."

Disclaimer: Some of the content presented here has been partially derived from material read and learned at Le Corbusier's pavilion in Zurich.

1.3_Designing for People and Place

The city should not be treated as immutable. Urban change is one of its defining conditions. Cities have always evolved in response to changing social, economic, technological and environmental conditions, and they will continue to do so.

As discussed in Section 1.1, however, the scale and speed of contemporary urban growth are placing increasing pressure on cities, which are not always prepared to accommodate such transformations with sufficient rigour and coherence.

Section 1.2 has shown that responding to this pressure through a tabula rasa approach cannot be considered an adequate solution. The city is not a neutral or empty surface upon which new forms can simply be imposed. It is a complex and stratified entity, shaped over time through the accumulation of different layers.

Understanding the city as a palimpsest, and therefore as an entity in transition, means recognising that its present condition is the result of the continuous superimposition of new layers over existing ones. that have taken place over time.

If cities are growing and transforming, but cannot simply be cleared and rebuilt, how should we respond? How should the future transformations that will inevitably shape our expanding cities take place? If urban transformation is inevitable, it becomes necessary to develop approaches capable of accommodating new needs while recognising the complexity and accumulated values of the existing city.

We can therefore return to the concept of **urban regeneration**, introduced in Section 1.1, not as a tool to preserve everything or to prevent growth, but as a means of guiding future processes of transformation through an understanding of the place.

Here, place refers both to the built environment and to the people who inhabit it and take care of it. By considering both of these dimensions, urban change, rather than being understood as an opportunity to simply replace the existing city, can be approached through regeneration as a process of transforming and reactivating existing urban environments while responding to contemporary needs.

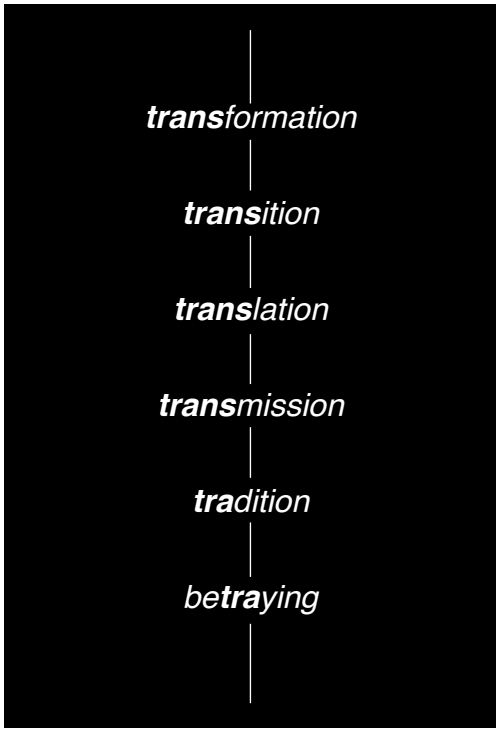
02

Reading the City:
A Typomorphological Methodology

2.1_Understanding Before Transforming

We have understood that transformations are inevitable. There is no way around them. Change and transformation are the driving forces of evolution. If we want to endure, we must evolve.

Let us pause for a moment on some key terms in order to better understand their meaning.



Trans, from the Latin meaning “beyond,” “across,” or “through,” suggests the idea of movement from one condition to another. If **transformation** is the profound and radical change of the form or very nature of a system, **transition** is the journey or gradual passage from one state to another. It means bringing something from one phase to another. Transition can also be understood through the concept of **translation**, which originally refers to the act of carrying or conveying something from one place to another. Here, the idea of movement becomes evident: something is displaced, transferred, or carried through space.

At the moment when something changes, a question arises: is there something from this change that can be carried forward?

This leads us to the concept of **transmission**, understood as the action and result of transmitting — that is, the passing on or conveying of something. During processes of change, we do not necessarily have to erase everything that existed before. Instead, we can choose what to preserve and allow to continue. What is transmitted can be understood almost as a gift. What is transmitted through time creates **tradition**, passing from one generation to the next. Yet when change occurs, we inevitably **betray** that tradition. And perhaps it is precisely through the tension and fusion between these two practices — preserving and transforming

Disclaimer: The concepts reworked and presented in this text are the result of a personal interpretation and understanding of the theoretical lectures provided by the tutor Marco Trisciuoglio.

— that innovation can emerge. Even when we aim to transmit tradition, it is also necessary to adapt it to what is needed, desired, or valued today.

When this terminology is applied to the urban realm, we realise how important it is to focus our attention on **transition**. Transition is a term that encompasses many of these ideas, as it describes and gives voice to transformations that unfold over time.

The methodology therefore lies in studying transition in order to understand what has been transformed, translated, and transmitted over time. By understanding these processes, we can clearly perceive the depth and stratification behind the things that surround us. Everything seems to acquire greater “thickness”.

Studying the transition of a place and subsequently intervening through regeneration projects also implies that we ourselves contribute to this ongoing transition. If change and evolution are necessary — and they are — then we must understand how to continue this process in accordance with the path the place has followed up to the present day. This transition belongs both to the urban context as a whole and to individual buildings. What is particularly interesting about the buildings that are transmitted to us is that they embody **transition** within themselves.

The Mausoleum of Augustus is a great examole which makes visible what transition means in the urban context. What we inherit from history is not a fixed and completed object, but a place already shaped by a long sequence of transformations. Its present condition is the result of everything that has happened before, while any intervention we make will inevitably become part of what comes next.

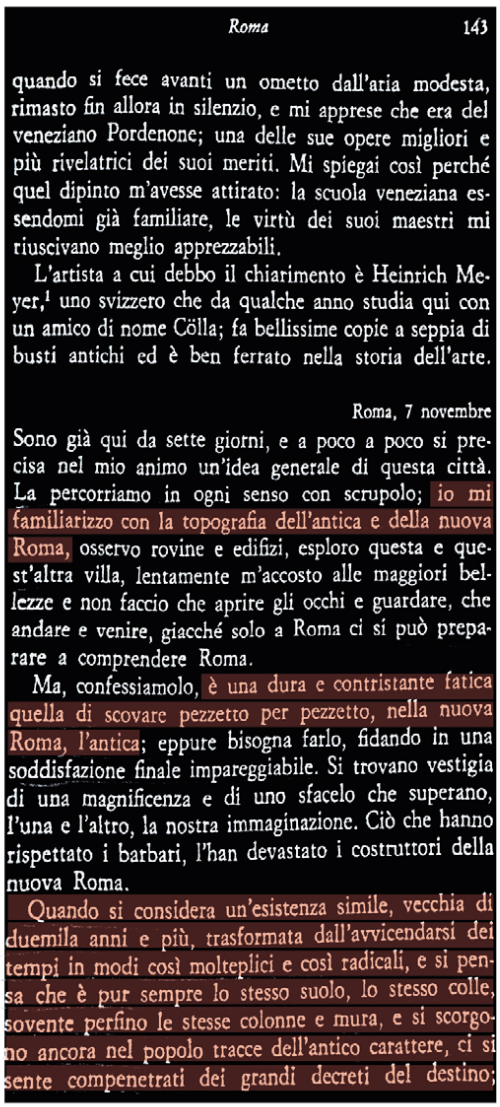
Understanding a place therefore means understanding its **transition**: tracing what has changed, what has remained, what has been translated into new forms, and what has been transmitted through time. **Only by reading these layers can an intervention become more than a new addition to the existing fabric**. We are not simply intervening in an existing city; we are entering

an ongoing process and contributing to its continuation. The question is therefore not how to stop transformation, but how to transform with awareness. This is why understanding must come before transforming. Before deciding what to preserve, transform, or carry forward, it is necessary to understand the path that brought a place to its present condition. A meaningful approach to urban regeneration should therefore be able to read transition not as something to overcome, but as the very condition through which a place continues to evolve. The challenge is ultimately to develop methods of intervention capable of working with this continuity: methods that do not freeze the past, nor erase it, but recognise what is essential and allow it to continue through transformation.



Figure 2.1. Mausoleum of Augustus, Rome. Source: Roma Turismo, Piazza Augusto Imperatore.

2.2_Typomorphology & Urban Form



Roma 143

quando si fece avanti un ometto dall'aria modesta, rimasto fin allora in silenzio, e mi apprese che era del veneziano Pordenone; una delle sue opere migliori e più rivelatrici dei suoi meriti. Mi spiegai così perché quel dipinto m'avesse attirato: la scuola veneziana essendomi già familiare, le virtù dei suoi maestri mi riuscivano meglio apprezzabili.

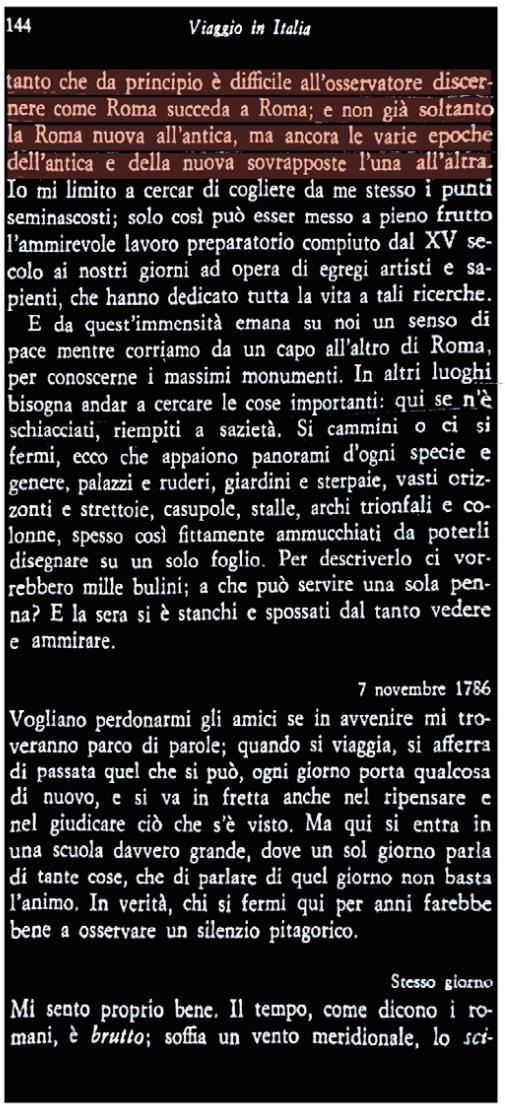
L'artista a cui debbo il chiarimento è Heinrich Meyer,[1] uno svizzero che da qualche anno studia qui con un amico di nome Cölla; fa bellissime copie a seppia di busti antichi ed è ben ferrato nella storia dell'arte.

Roma, 7 novembre

Sono già qui da sette giorni, e a poco a poco si precisa nel mio animo un'idea generale di questa città. La percorriamo in ogni senso con scrupolo; io mi familiarizzo con la topografia dell'antica e della nuova Roma, osservo rovine e edifizi, esploro questa e quest'altra villa, lentamente m'accosto alle maggiori bellezze e non faccio che aprire gli occhi e guardare, che andare e venire, giacché solo a Roma ci si può preparare a comprendere Roma.

Ma, confessiamolo, è una dura e contristante fatica quella di scovare pezzetto per pezzetto, nella nuova Roma, l'antica; eppure bisogna farlo, fidando in una soddisfazione finale impareggiabile. Si trovano vestigia di una magnificenza e di uno sfacelo che superano, l'una e l'altro, la nostra immaginazione. Ciò che hanno rispettato i barbari, l'han devastato i costruttori della nuova Roma.

Quando si considera un'esistenza simile, vecchia di duemila anni e più, trasformata dall'avvicendarsi dei tempi in modi così molteplici e così radicali, e si pensa che è pur sempre lo stesso suolo, lo stesso colle, sovente perfino le stesse colonne e mura, e si scorgono ancora nel popolo tracce dell'antico carattere, ci si sente compenetrati dei grandi decreti del destino;



144 Viaggio in Italia

tanto che da principio è difficile all'osservatore discernere come Roma succeda a Roma; e non già soltanto la Roma nuova all'antica, ma ancora le varie epoche dell'antica e della nuova sovrapposte l'una all'altra. Io mi limito a cercar di cogliere da me stesso i punti seminascosti; solo così può esser messo a pieno frutto l'ammirevole lavoro preparatorio compiuto dal XV secolo ai nostri giorni ad opera di egregi artisti e sapienti, che hanno dedicato tutta la vita a tali ricerche.

E da quest'immensità emana su noi un senso di pace mentre corriamo da un capo all'altro di Roma, per conoscerne i massimi monumenti. In altri luoghi bisogna andar a cercare le cose importanti: qui se n'è schiacciati, riempiti a sazietà. Si cammini o ci si fermi, ecco che appaiono panorami d'ogni specie e genere, palazzi e ruderi, giardini e sterpaie, vasti orizzonti e strettoie, casupole, stalle, archi trionfali e colonne, spesso così fittamente ammucchiati da poterli disegnare su un solo foglio. Per descriverlo ci vorrebbero mille bulini; a che può servire una sola penna? E la sera si è stanchi e spossati dal tanto vedere e ammirare.

7 novembre 1786

Vogliano perdonarmi gli amici se in avvenire mi troveranno parco di parole; quando si viaggia, si afferra di passata quel che si può, ogni giorno porta qualcosa di nuovo, e si va in fretta anche nel ripensare e nel giudicare ciò che s'è visto. Ma qui si entra in una scuola davvero grande, dove un sol giorno parla di tante cose, che di parlare di quel giorno non basta l'animo. In verità, chi si fermi qui per anni farebbe bene a osservare un silenzio pitagorico.

Stesso giorno

Mi sento proprio bene. Il tempo, come dicono i romani, è *brutto*; soffia un vento meridionale, lo *sci-*

In Goethe's Italian Journey, we find several key passages that reflect the concepts discussed above.

"It is a difficult and painful task to extract ancient Rome from modern Rome, but it must be done."

"When one considers an existence that is more than two thousand years old, so diverse and profoundly transformed by the passage of time, and yet still the same ground, the same hill, indeed often the same column and wall, and in the people still traces of the ancient character, one becomes part of the great designs of destiny."

"Thus, from the very beginning, it becomes difficult for the observer to understand how Rome follows Rome, not only the new following the ancient, but also the different

Figure 2.2. Extract from J. W. Goethe, Italian Journey, pp. 143–144. Personal copy, scanned and reworked by the author.

epochs of the ancient and the modern following one another."

These are passages dense with meaning. They reveal how the author does not limit himself to the surface of what he encounters, but immediately questions the stratification of these places. He distinguishes between ancient and modern Rome, as well as between the different epochs that have shaped the city, attempting to understand how they have succeeded one another while remaining embedded within the same physical ground.

Goethe is infact known for developing the concept of **morphology** (***Morphologie***), understood as a means of understanding living organisms through their visible forms and the relationships between their parts. However, he does not consider form to be something fixed or static.

He therefore distinguishes between **Gestalt**, understood as a completed and recognisable configuration, and **Bildung**, which refers not only to what has been formed but also to the process through which it comes into being. Furthermore, **Umbildung** refers to the transformation of one form into another. **Consequently, morphology becomes the study of the formation and transformation of forms over time, approaching what can be understood as a form of morphogenesis** (Tamborini, 2021).

Urban studies may be approached morphologically, by placing questions of urban form at the centre of the analysis. Urban morphology is the study of the physical form of settlements. More precisely, it investigates the formation of the components of the urban fabric and the relationships between them, describing their composition and configuration through time. Urban form has been shaped for as long as there have been human settlements. It evolves continually, and all physical aspects of the city have a form: morphology is everywhere (Chiaradia, 2019, p. 1).

We therefore need to identify the appropriate tools and material through which the complexity of urban space can be studied.

However, a further analytical layer needs to be introduced in order to deepen this reading. It is necessary to introduce another fundamental distinction: the distinction between **morpho** and **typos**.

The terms derive from Ancient Greek and refer respectively to “form” (**morphē**) and “impression,” “matrix,” or “model” (**typos**). Their conceptual relationship connects the external and changing appearance of an object or concept (morpho) with its deeper generative structure or underlying pattern (typos).

The two concepts are complementary, particularly from a graphic point of view. Historically, maps and plans have always been used to read, interpret, and record cities as they appeared at a given moment in time. Of course, they differ in their degree of detail and in their purposes of representation, but they all reveal the complexity of the built environment.

By looking at some examples in chronological order, we can gain a clearer understanding of a morphological approach to the city.

An iconic example is the **Forma Urbis Severiana** (also known as the Forma Urbis Romae, the “Severan Marble Plan”, or Forma Urbis Marmorea), a plan of the ancient city of Rome engraved on marble slabs (Figure 2.3). It was produced between 203 and 211 AD. This example is particularly significant as one of the earliest large-scale representations of an entire city.

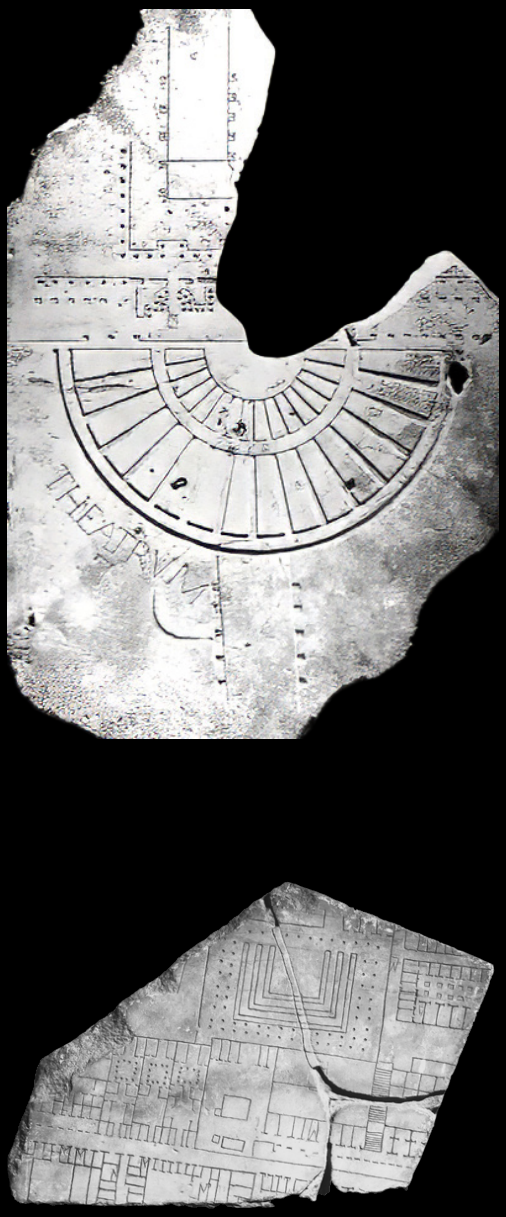
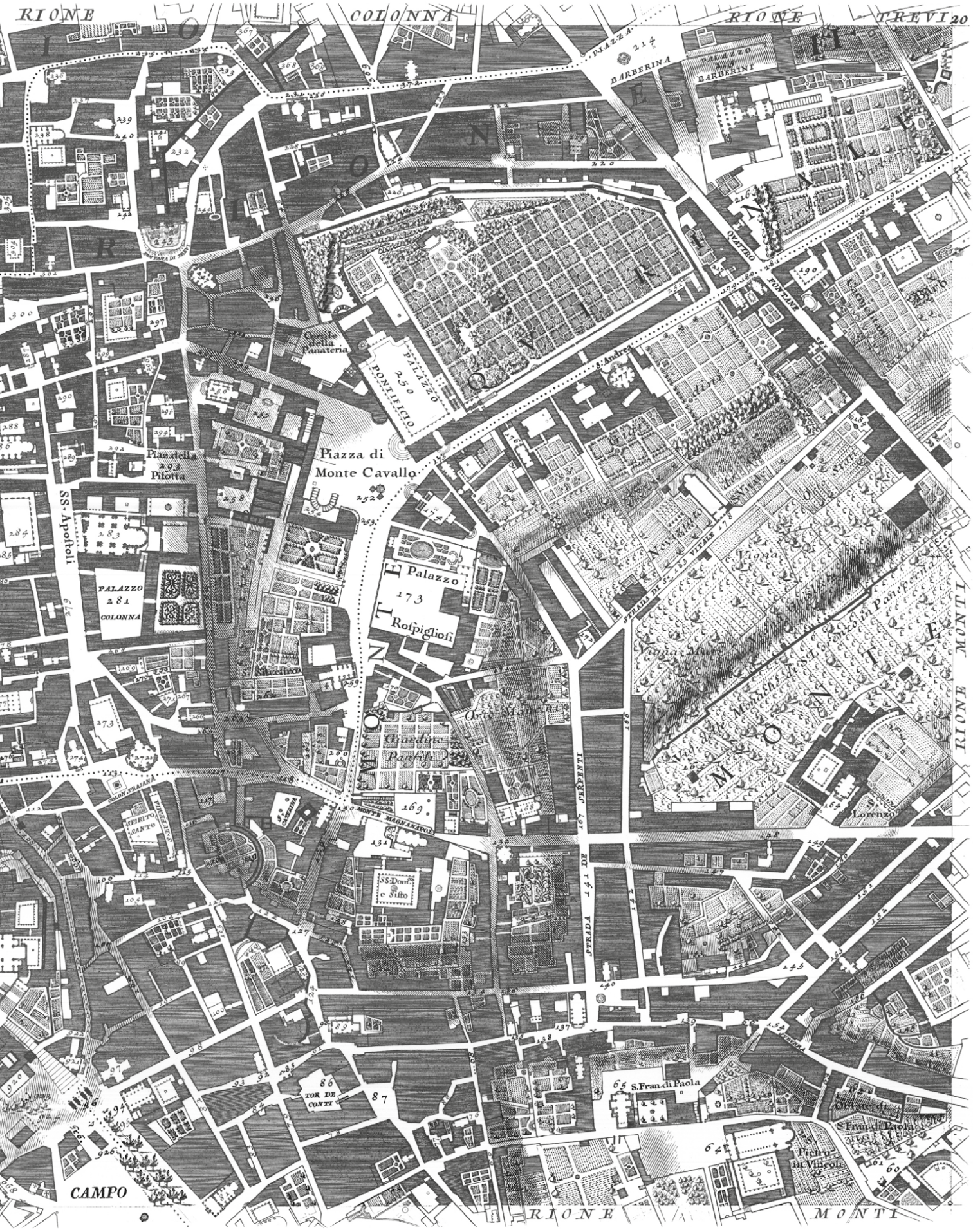


Figure 2.3. Forma Urbis Severiana (Forma Urbis Romae), c. 203–211 AD. Marble fragments. Sources: Wikimedia Commons/Wikipedia and Archaeology Magazine.


RIONE PONTE
RIONE CAMPO MARZO
PIAZZA NAVONA
MONTE CITORIO
Piaz Colonna
PIAZZA DI PIETRA
PANTEON
S. Ignazio
COLLEGIO ROMANO
Palazzo Panfilj
MINERVA
Pal. di Venezia
S. Marco
PIAZZA DI VENEZIA
P. della Cancellaria
CAMPO DI FIORE
PIAZZA FARNESE
S. Andrea
S. Carlo
Isola di
Ponte Quattro Capi
Ponte Fabricio
S. Maria Cammicello
CAMPIDOGLIO
RIONE TRASTEVERE
RIONE
RIPA
RIONE CAMPITELLI


RIONE COLONNA
RIONE TREVI
PIAZZA BARBERINA
PALAZZO BARBERINI
QUATTRO FONTANE
Piazza di Monte Cavallo
PALAZZO PONTIFICIO
Piaz.della Pilotta
SS. Apostoli
PALAZZO 281 COLONNA
Palazzo 173 Rospigliosi
Orti
Grandi Parti
STRADA DE SERPENTI
STRADA DE SS. QUATTRO
Vigna
Vigna Muti
Vigna Panfilj
Vigna Negroni
Vigna Montalto
Vigna Peretti
Vigna Massimi
Vigna Sforza
Vigna Colonna
Vigna Rospigliosi
Vigna Aldobrandini
Vigna Ludovisi
Vigna Barberini
Vigna Pamfilj
Vigna Panfilj
Vigna Muti

We then have Giambattista Nolli's **Pianta Grande di Roma**, produced in 1748 (Figure 2.4). Nolli does not simply draw the buildings; he begins to propose a way of reading and understanding how the city functions. He uses black to represent the built footprint, making the distinction between built and open space immediately legible. Even more interestingly, alongside streets and squares, elements such as the internal courtyards of buildings and churches are also represented in white, as spaces accessible to the public. These graphic choices and this interpretative approach made his plan an iconic tool for reading the city through the relationships between solid and void, private and public, and built and open space.

Then comes Giovanni Battista Piranesi's **Ichnographia Campus Martius**, produced in 1762 (Figure 2.5). Here too, representation goes beyond simply recording what exists. Piranesi interprets, but in this case he goes further by attempting to imagine and reconstruct what might have existed. Piranesi works with what has disappeared.

These are therefore different modes of understanding the city.

FORMA URBIS

recording

documenting the physical city

NOLLI

reading

revealing urban relationships

PIRANESI

interpreting

interpreting the city through evidence

Figure 2.4. Extract from J. W. Goethe, Italian Journey, pp. 143–144. Personal copy, scanned and reworked by the author.


ROBERTO·ADAM·BRITANNO
ARCHITECTVRAE·CVLTORI
ICHNOGRAPHIAM
CAMPI·MARTII
ANTIQVAE·VRBIS
IOANNES·BAPTISTA·PIRANESIVS
IN·SVI·AMORIS·ARGVMENTVM
D·D·D
CAMPVS MARTIVS
PORTICVS OCTAVIAE
THEATRVM MARCELLI
PORTICVS PHILIPPI
FORVM ROMANVM
FORVM TRAIANI
FORVM AVGVSTI
FORVM NERVAE
FORVM PACIS
FORVM IVLII
FORVM BOARIVM
TEMPLVM PACIS
TEMPLVM VENERIS ET ROMAE
TEMPLVM ANTONINI ET FAVSTINAE
TEMPLVM CASTORIS ET POLLVCIS
TEMPLVM SATVRNI
TEMPLVM CONCORDIAE
TEMPLVM IANI
TEMPLVM FORTVNAE VIRILIS
TEMPLVM HERCVLIS VICTORIS
TEMPLVM VESTAE
TEMPLVM VESPASIANI
TEMPLVM MINERVAE
TEMPLVM DIVI IVLII
TEMPLVM DIVI AVGVSTI
TEMPLVM DIVI TRAIANI
TEMPLVM DIVI NERVAE
TEMPLVM DIVI ANTONINI
TEMPLVM DIVI HADRIANI
TEMPLVM DIVI ROMVLI
TEMPLVM DIVI CONSTANTIN

2.3_Transitional Morphologies

Piranesi introduces the question of what existed before. He reflects, imagines, investigates, and attempts to reconstruct the past. This becomes particularly relevant when considering that one of the main factors contributing to the complexity of our cities is precisely their transformation over time.

Indeed, “Each urban phenomenon is deepened by the ‘time’ factor, as a large number of our cities are indeed the result of a long process of construction, developed over centuries, and where different layers are continuously overlapping without erasing the previous layer” (Oliveira, 2022, p. 8).

It is precisely here that the theme of transition, introduced in Section 2.1, becomes relevant.

Transitional morphologies focus on studying the dynamics of changes in urban form and the incremental metamorphoses/assemblages of urban elements and spaces—not only the starting and final states, but also all the phases in between (Trisciuoglio et al., 2021).

The process therefore matters as much as permanence. It means analysing evolution rather than considering things as static, in order to understand how architecture and urban forms adapt to new conditions and survive through time.



Figure 2.6. Conceptual framework for interpreting transitional morphology: the evolution of form through successive stages of transformation. Adapted by the author from Politecnico di Torino, Transitional Morphologies.

To arrive at these considerations and ideas today, we have built upon the contributions of great architects who, through their respective schools of thought, further investigated the concepts discussed in Chapter 2.2. It is therefore important to acknowledge figures such as **Muratori** and **Caniggia** for the significant contribution they made to this field, both individually and through their mutual influence.

Muratori considered the city through its *process of derivation* (Olivei-

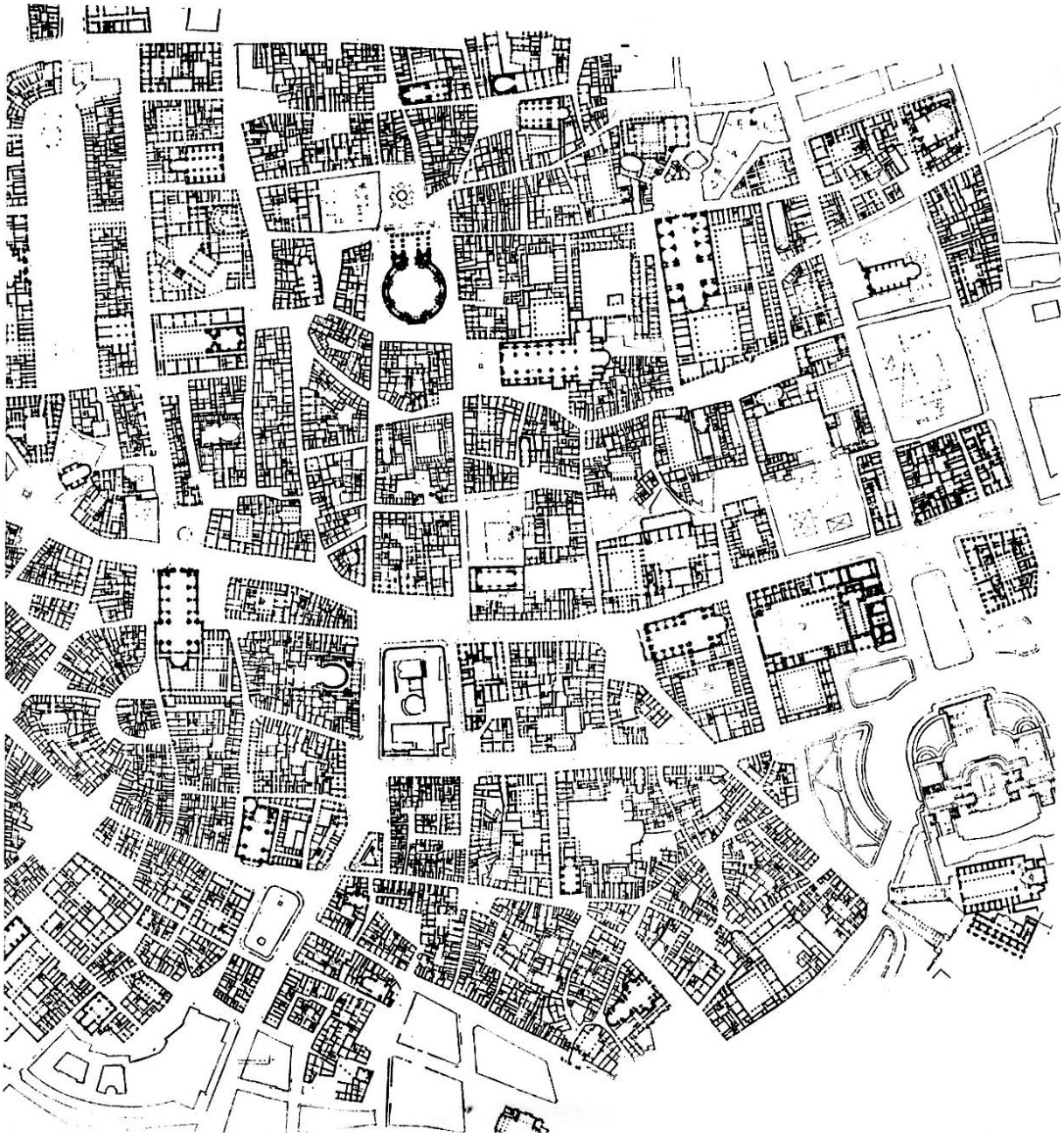


Figure 2.7. Muratori, Studi per una operante storia urbana di Roma , 1963. Source: Castex, 2014.

ra, 2022, p. 88), seeking to understand its processes of generation, transformation, and adaptation over time. As Marzot explains, “it was not possible to understand the richness of any effort at building without constant reference to all the components that it encompasses” (Marzot, 2002, p. 62).

Within this framework, Caniggia further developed the potential of Muratori’s approach. While Muratori was particularly concerned with the broader historical structure of Rome, Caniggia focused more closely on the transformation of urban tissues and building types, notably through his study of Como (Cataldi, 2003). His contribution was to develop Muratori’s concept of building type into a more systematic typological method, capable of interpreting the transformations of the built environment and translating this knowledge into architectural design. Understanding the processes that generated the built environment thus became a means of informing how it could be transformed.

This process-oriented understanding provides an important conceptual foundation for **transitional morphologies**, making the process of transformation itself an object of study. It therefore extends the question from what the city is to how it became what it is, and how it can continue to evolve.

This is precisely the contribution that should be recognised in the work of these thinkers: a step towards the development of a method that could be systematically applied and reproduced in the study of cities. Understanding transformation is not only a way of reading the contemporary city, but a necessary step towards developing approaches capable of intervening in it.

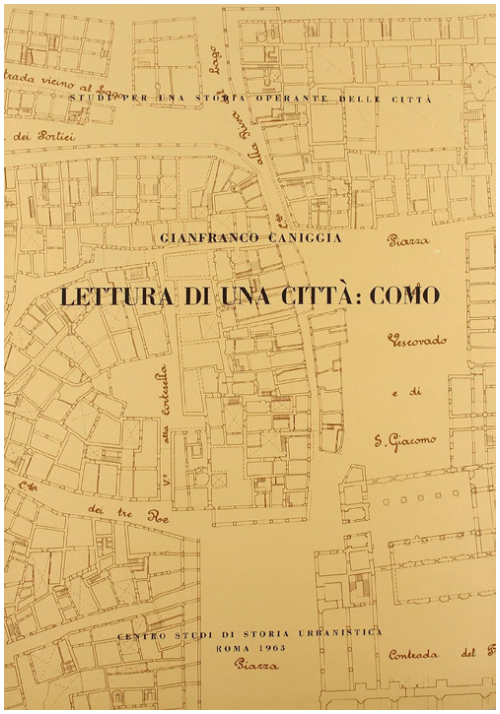


Figure 2.8. Cover of Gianfranco Caniggia, Lettura di una città: Como (1963). Source: Libreria Universitaria.

2.4_Urban Anamnesis and Urban Surgery

Over the centuries we have come to recognise the importance of understanding, studying, and analysing places before intervening in them.

Indeed, through the depth and complexity that we have gradually learned to attribute to urban environments, together with an understanding of their processes of transition, the contemporary city must be recognised and treated for what it is: a complex, layered, and continuously evolving construct. It is not a place to intervene in without a rigorous understanding of its history and processes, as was sometimes assumed in the past, but rather one to be approached “with care”.

It is precisely within this framework that the concepts of **Urban Anamnesis** and **Urban Surgery** can be introduced. **Urban anamnesis**—derived from the medical term referring to a patient’s medical history—can be understood as the deep reading, recovery, and critical interpretation of a city’s collective memory, historical layers, and morphological past. **Urban surgery**, in turn, refers to the application of targeted, precise, and often decentralised physical interventions, rather than wholesale demolition, with the aim of healing, reconnecting, and revitalising the urban fabric.

Applied to urban regeneration, these concepts emphasise the importance of carefully studying the history and morphology of a site and its surroundings, describing its condition through its transitional morphological phases and identifying spatial configurations, alignments, and relationships that derive from the past. This knowledge can then inform a cautious approach to urban regeneration design, in which intervention does not begin with the imposition of a new form, but with the understanding of the processes and traces already present in the place.

The underlying idea is that knowledge of a place and its surroundings plays a fundamental role in urban design, and that every city contains a series of often hidden traces that constitute an essential and, in a certain sense, untouchable heritage of the urban landscape.

Disclaimer: The definitions and concepts presented in this section are informed by theoretical material provided by Southeast University.

03

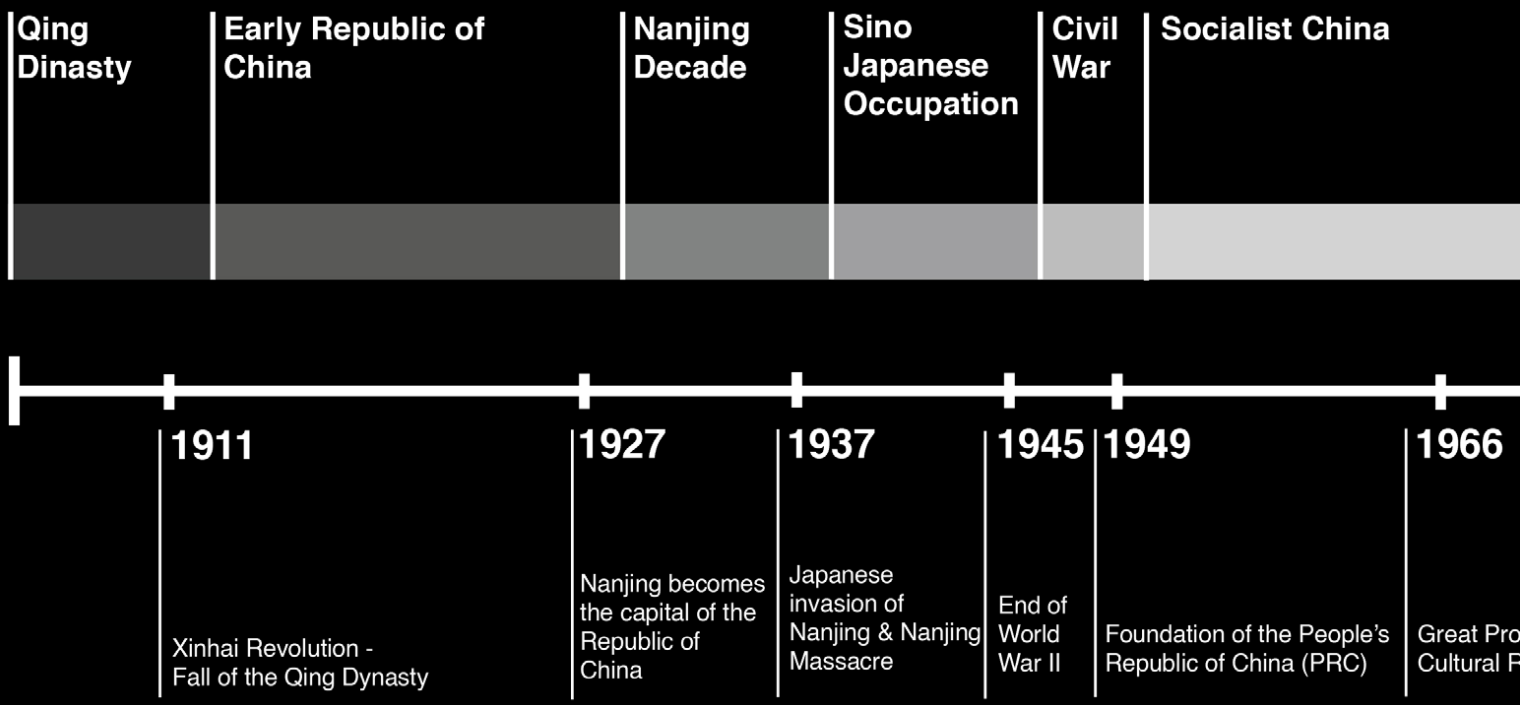
China in Transition:
From Rapid Urbanization to Urban Regeneration

3.1_China's Historical Evolution

The discussion now gradually moves towards the heart of the case study. Although this thesis aims to investigate and apply a methodology that can be adapted to different case studies, the methodology cannot be separated from the specific characteristics of the place in which it is applied. Each context requires a thorough understanding of its historical, cultural, social, and spatial conditions before any form of intervention can be proposed. This is precisely what is intended by the concept of Urban Surgery introduced in Chapter 2.4: before intervening on the urban fabric, it is necessary to become familiar with the "body" on which the intervention is performed. After examining in Chapter 1 the major transformations currently affecting contemporary cities and the factors associated with them, this section therefore focuses on understanding the specific context in which the project is located: China, and more specifically the city of Nanjing.



Figure 3.1. China in transition. Photographic collage illustrating China's transition between tradition and contemporary development. Source: Expertise Asia, "China on its path" (2017). Author unidentified.

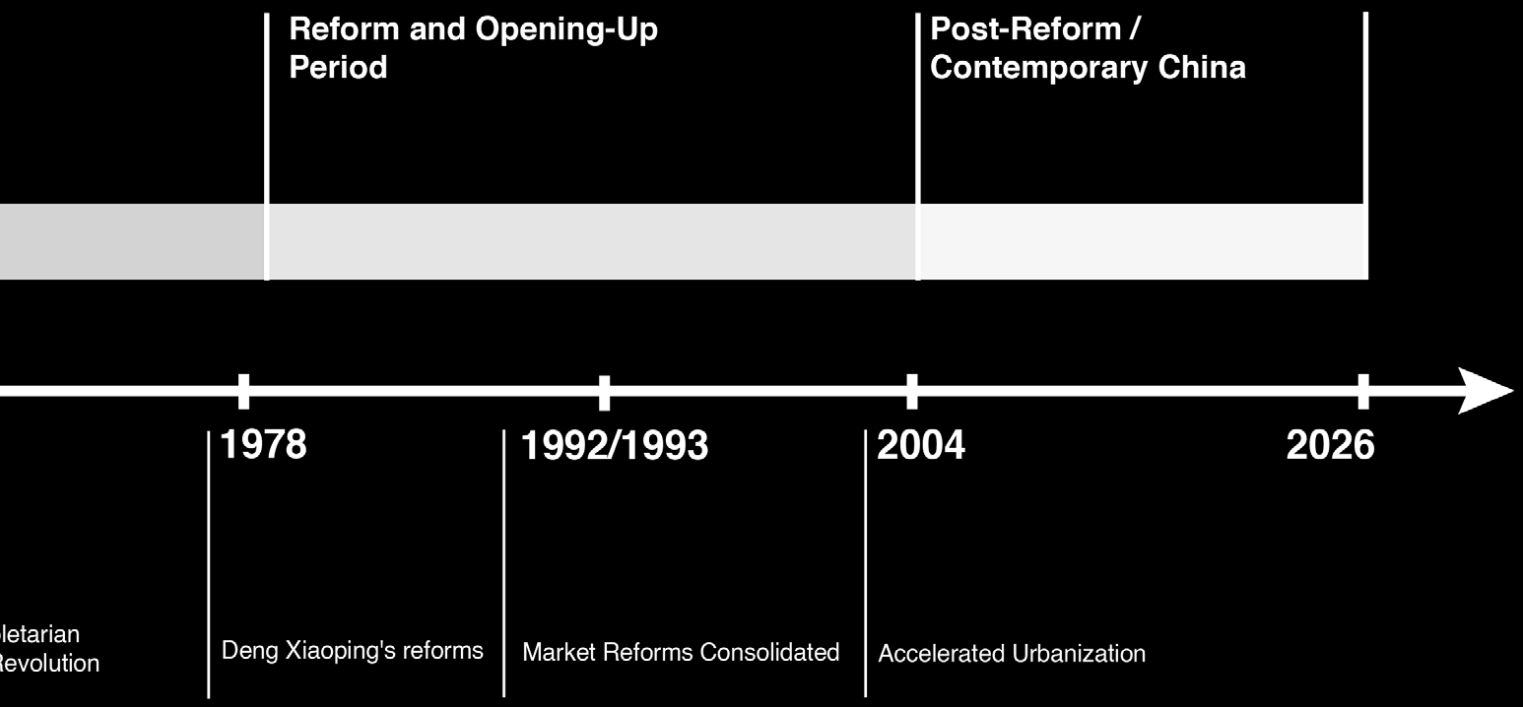


Through the timeline shown in Figure 3.2, the main historical stages that have shaped modern China are briefly retraced, from the late Qing dynasty and the political transformations of the early twentieth century to the post-reform period and contemporary China.

The Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in Chinese history, ruled China until 1912, when it collapsed following the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. During its rule, the Qing Empire reached its greatest territorial extent, becoming one of the largest empires in the world at the time, with an area of approximately 13–14 million km² at the end of the eighteenth century.

The fall of the Qing dynasty was followed by the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. Nanjing subsequently became the seat of the Nationalist government in 1927 and the national capital, marking the beginning of what is commonly known as the Nanjing Decade. Spanning approximately from 1927 to 1937, this period is also informally referred to as the Golden Decade and was characterised by relative political consolidation and economic development under the leadership of the Nationalist government.

This period came to an end with the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. The occupation of Nanjing was followed by the Nanjing Massacre, which took place between December 1937 and early 1938 and became one of the most devastating episodes of the Second



Sino-Japanese War. The conflict continued until 1945, when Japan's surrender brought the Second Sino-Japanese War and the wider Second World War to an end.

Peace, however, did not immediately follow. The end of the war marked the resumption of the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. The conflict continued until 1949, when the Communist victory led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In 1966, another profound transformation began with the launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Often described as one of the bloodiest periods in modern Chinese history (Phillips, 2016).
The Cultural Revolution lasted for approximately a decade. The movement was initiated and led by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, with the declared objective of eliminating capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and revitalising the revolutionary spirit of the country.

Finally, starting in 1978, China began to experience a more prosperous period that revitalised its economy. Deng Xiaoping introduced, for the first time, the concept of the "Open Door Policy" (BBC News, n.d.).

From then onwards to the present day, market reforms and accelerated urbanisation have progressively shaped post-reform and contemporary China.

Figure 3.2. Historical timeline of China, highlighting major periods and key events. Elaborated by the author.

3.2_From Urban Growth to Urban Regeneration

The historical overview presented above prepares us to understand the historical events that have shaped China into what it is today, at the political, social and economic levels. This transformation does not concern only the 'abstract' idea of the country, but is also reflected aesthetically in the image and appearance of its urban environments.

We can therefore ask how the contemporary image of China has emerged—an image that reflects a country undergoing rapid development and accelerating its growth on multiple fronts.

It is clear that the image of contemporary China, particularly after the Reform and Opening-Up period, can no longer resemble that of the imperial era.

This is where the core of the discussion lies: these profound transformations have taken place at an exceptionally rapid pace in recent decades, often without an adequate planning response capable of managing and integrating such changes within the existing urban fabric.

The image of China that has historically been transmitted to us is, in fact, very different from what we observe today. Through historical paintings such as those shown in Figures 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5, we are presented with an almost nostalgic image of these places, represented with remarkable care and detail. Flowers, trees and gardens are depicted in a fresh and delicate style; mountains, both distant and close, are rendered through the technique of cun (textural brushstrokes); while buildings are represented using a three-dimensional bird's-eye perspective (Dituji, Qianlong Southern Tour Route Maps, Qing Dynasty).

Imperial palaces are portrayed in their elegance, organized through axes, courtyards, successive spatial hierarchies and sequences of access. Similarly, residential settlements, from the villages and communities surrounding the imperial centres to more ordinary domestic environments, were structured around courtyard-based layouts. More broadly, there was a strong relationship between architecture, society and place, in which architectural form reflected both social organization and cultural values (Cai Yanxin, Chinese Architecture).







Figure 3.3. Details from the Qianlong Southern Tour Route Maps, illustrating traditional Chinese landscapes.
Source: Dituji, Qianlong Southern Tour Route Maps (Qing Dynasty).

The same can be observed in historical images such as the one shown in Figure 3.6, showing Beijing. The image portrays an area of the city characterized by traditional square courtyard houses, or siheyuan, and the narrow lanes, or hutongs, formed through the aggregation and alignment of these residential compounds.

It therefore seems almost striking to observe how much of this historical imagery has been transformed by the extreme and exceptionally rapid process of urbanization that has accompanied China's unprecedented economic and urban growth. Within only a few decades, vast portions of the traditional urban landscape have been replaced, transformed or absorbed into an entirely different urban condition.



Figure 3.4. Siheyuan and Hutongs of Beijing, early twentieth-century photograph. Source: Forsyth et al. (2016), p. 65.

To understand in greater detail how the contemporary configuration of Chinese cities emerged, it is necessary to examine the transformation of the **urban planning system** and, in particular, its relationship with the profound **economic changes** experienced by the country.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, urban planning assumed a substantially different role. From the 1950s onwards, the development of industrial sites became a major planning concern, with urban planning increasingly subordinated to economic planning. Within a centrally planned economy, the organization and development of cities followed a model fundamentally different from that of Western countries, as urban growth was closely connected to state-led economic and industrial objectives (Yeh & Wu, 1999).

A decisive turning point came in 1978 with the beginning of the Reform and Opening-Up period. As the economic system gradually shifted towards a more market-oriented model and became increasingly open to foreign investment, the planning system was also transformed. The economic reforms created expectations of much faster growth than under the previous system, and these new conditions were accompanied by increasingly growth-oriented planning strategies (Yeh & Wu, 1999).

The speed of these transformations can be observed across Chinese cities, with Beijing providing a particularly striking example. Figure 3.5 illustrates the extent of urban expansion between 1978 and 2010. The images, derived from a NASA animation based on Landsat satellite data, show how dramatically the urbanized area expanded in little more than four decades. As described by NASA, the animation moves from Beijing in 1978, observed through Landsat-3, to the city in 2010 as captured by Landsat-5, with non-vegetated urban areas appearing in red (NASA, Beijing, China: 1978–2010).

Looking at such a transformation, it is understandable to perceive this process of growth as apparently uncontrolled. In fact, the perception of a planning system struggling to keep pace with urban development is not merely visual. Yeh and Wu identify a fundamental problem in the transformation of the Chinese planning system: "urban planning

cannot catch up with rapid urban growth" (1999, pp. 246–247). This planning gap lies at the core of many of the challenges that characterize the contemporary Chinese city. The planning system was placed under considerable pressure to accommodate rapid development and to respond to the profound shift in the economic system. However, its transformation did not always occur at the same pace or with sufficient effectiveness, resulting in planning outcomes that were often inadequate in relation to the scale and speed of urban change (Yeh & Wu, 1999).

Chinese planners consequently sought to expand their knowledge by looking beyond the domestic context and drawing on planning theories and practices developed in Western countries. Yet, the adoption of external models also revealed an important limitation: the effectiveness of a planning system cannot depend solely on its theoretical or technical sophistication, but on "whether the newly designed planning system is compatible with the society in which it operates" (Yeh & Wu, 1999, p. 248).

This observation marks an important shift in perspective. Rather than simply pursuing further growth or importing new planning models, it suggests the need for future interventions to become increasingly contextualized, responding to the specific social, spatial and historical conditions of each place. This principle is central to the idea of urban regeneration and, more specifically, to the methodology proposed in this thesis: rather than treating the existing city as an obstacle to further development, regeneration can be understood as a process of reading, understanding and transforming the existing urban fabric according to its specific context.

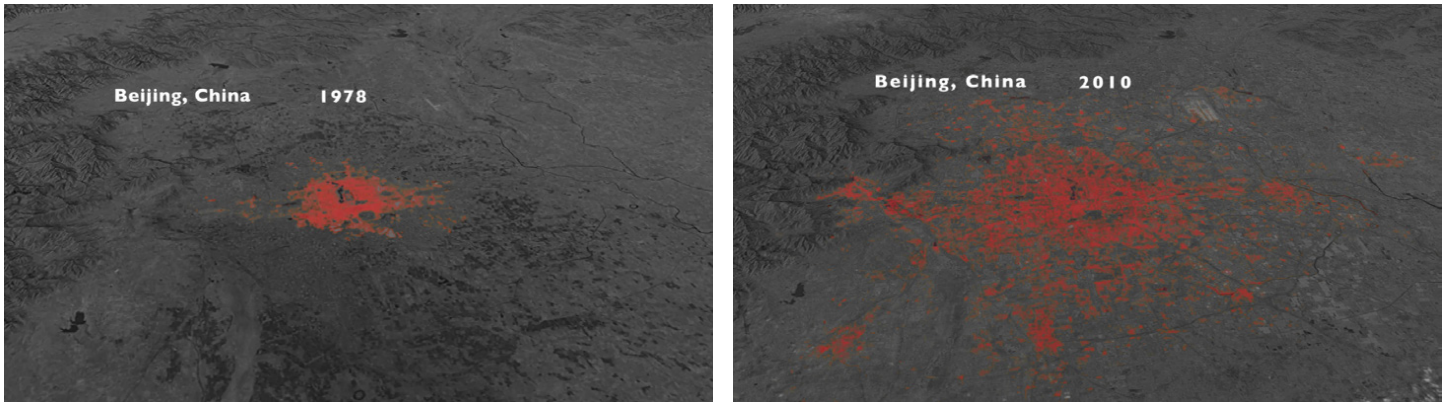


Figure 3.5. Beijing's urban expansion between 1978 and 2010, based on Landsat satellite imagery. Author's elaboration from NASA.





Figure 3.6. China's accelerated urbanisation and the loss of human scale. A man dwarfed by the huge expanse of high-rises in Yuzhong District, Chongqing. Photograph by Kris Provoost.
Source: The Guardian, "Humans vs the city: the staggering scale of Chongqing – in pictures" (2019).

Figure 3.6 further illustrates the unsustainability of the urban development model that China has pursued in recent decades, and the increasing need to explore alternative approaches to urban transformation.

This becomes particularly relevant when considering that China continues to urbanize at an unprecedented scale. Between 1978 and 2015, the country's urban population increased from 172 million to 771 million. Today, the urbanization rate exceeds 65%, while, according to Northam's urbanization curve, it is expected to approach 80% by 2030 (Zhu et al., 2022).

This raises a fundamental question:

where is this process of continuous urban growth ultimately leading?

The question leads to a broader reflection on the need for a different policy of intervention based on **urban regeneration**. A model based indefinitely on physical expansion cannot be sustained, particularly when previous forms of uncontrolled growth have already produced unsatisfactory outcomes. The challenge is therefore to shift the focus from **quantity** to **quality**.

As shown in Figure 3.7, the timeline provides a summary of the developments discussed above, highlighting four main historical phases. Between 1949 and 1988, urban regeneration primarily focused on addressing basic livelihood problems. During the second phase, from 1989 to 2008, regeneration increasingly supported rapid urban economic development. The third phase, from 2009 to 2014, marked the beginning of the shift previously discussed, from quantity to quality. Finally, from 2015 onwards, the focus has increasingly moved towards people-centred and high-quality developments.

The scale of current regeneration efforts already reflects this transition. To date, approximately 167,000 old urban residential communities have been regenerated, involving investments of more than RMB 660 billion and affecting approximately 29 mil-

lion families (Zhu et al., 2022).

However, an important contradiction remains. Urban regeneration is still taking place within a market-oriented economy, while the real-estate sector continues to play a major role in shaping urban development. At the same time, Chinese cities are characterized by extremely high densities and complex socio-spatial conditions. There is therefore a risk that regeneration may simply reproduce the logic of previous development models: In other words, there is a risk of changing the vocabulary without changing the underlying logic.

This raises a question that is closely related to the one previously identified in relation to urban growth and planning: if previous development models have revealed the limitations of growth-oriented planning, how can regeneration avoid reproducing the same problems?

The answer cannot lie solely in a change of policy terminology or in the replacement of one development model with another. It requires the development of appropriate methodologies capable of addressing the complexity of the contemporary city and particularly in the context of chines cities.

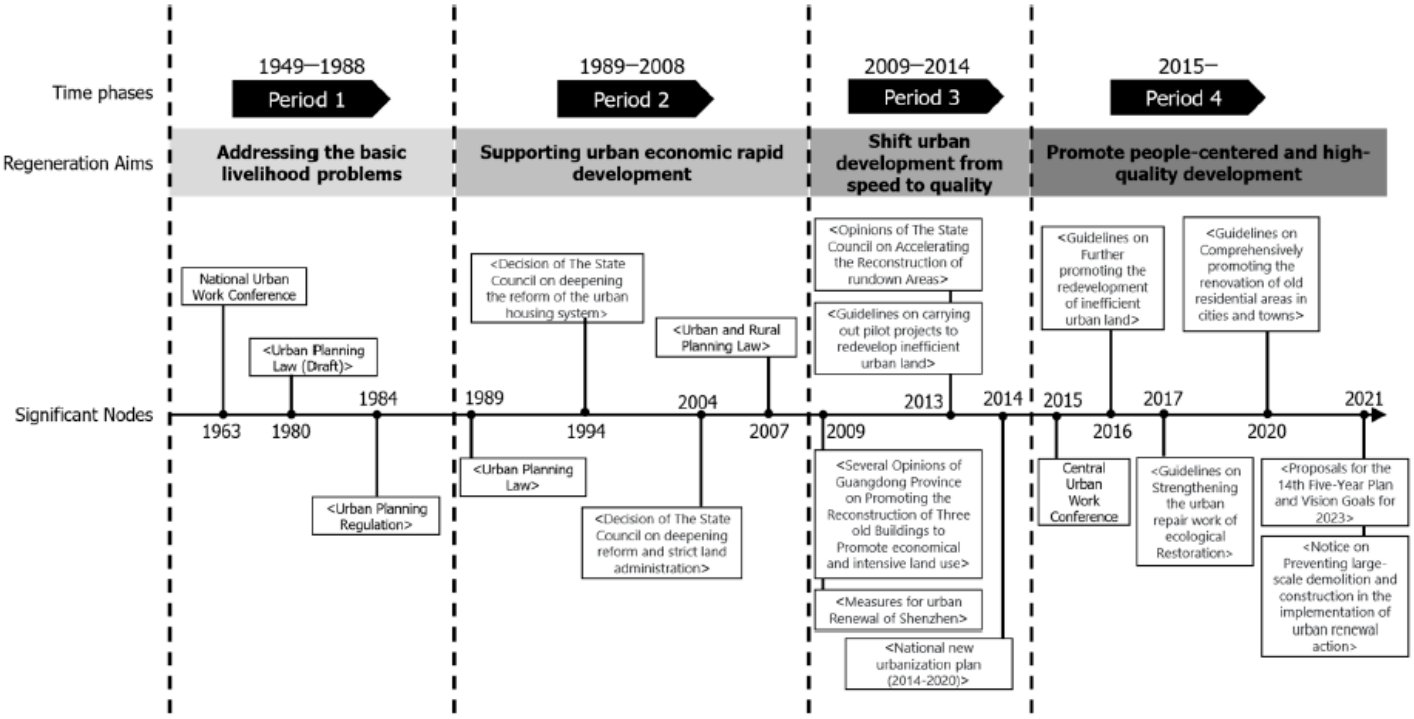


Figure 3.7. Phase division of spatial governance of urban regeneration in China. Source: Zhu et al. (2022), p. 6.

3.3_Nanjing: a City Shaped by History

Nanjing (Nánjīng, **南京**, meaning "Southern Capital") is a city of profound historical significance, whose importance has been shaped over more than 2,500 years through different political roles and successive periods of profound transformation. It should therefore not be understood simply as a historic city, but as a city whose historical layers must be understood as such: its stratification is precisely what makes it distinctive. As its name suggests, Nanjing has served as a capital at different moments in Chinese history. During the Ming Dynasty, from 1368, it was the capital of the Chinese Empire for approximately fifty years, becoming probably the largest city in the world around 1400, when its population reached nearly 500,000 inhabitants (Trisciuoglio, 2020). Nanjing later regained its role as the capital of the newly established Republic of China in the twentieth century. The significance of the city lies in the fact that the historical events it has experienced remain materially embedded in the city itself and are intrinsic to its urban form, particularly through the physical traces left by its successive historical phases. Some of these traces are still tangible and observable in Nanjing today. However, when approaching the historical stratification of the city, it is important to rely on different sources that can act as historical evidence and, above all, reveal the process through which the city has transformed. The objective is therefore not only to understand the present condition of the city as it has come down to us, but also to reconstruct the process of morphological transition that produced it.

Figure 3.8 brings together a series of historical maps of Nanjing, ranging from 1853 to 2021. These maps provide valuable evidence for understanding the transformations and successive expansions of the city over time, but also for identifying those elements that have remained relatively constant and have persisted to the present day. These are the elements that, as discussed above, can still be experienced and recognised when moving through the contemporary city. One of the clearest examples is the city's iconic Ming City Wall, which defines the historic fortified perimeter of Nanjing. Today, a large portion of the wall remains visible, together with several of the main gates that once provided access to the city, including the iconic Zhonghua Gate. It is particularly revealing, howe-



a.1853



b.1898



c.1910



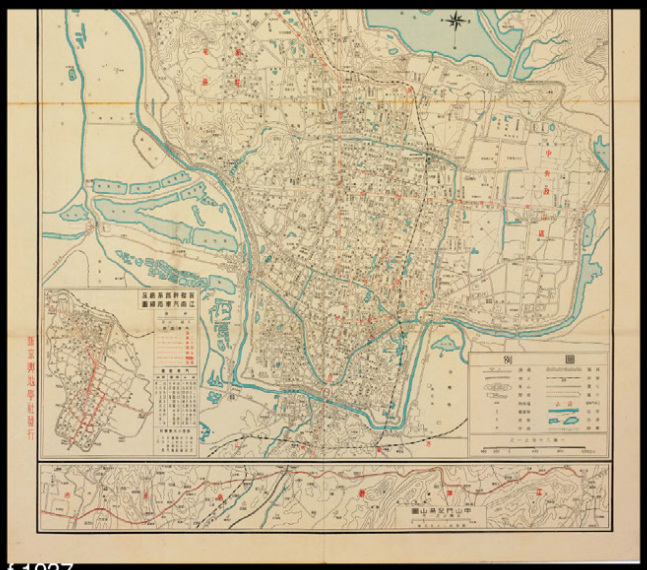
c.1928



d.1932



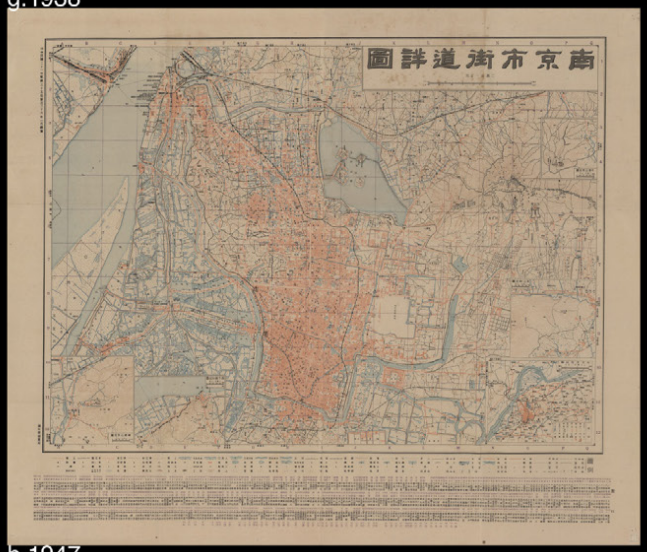
e.1933



f.1937



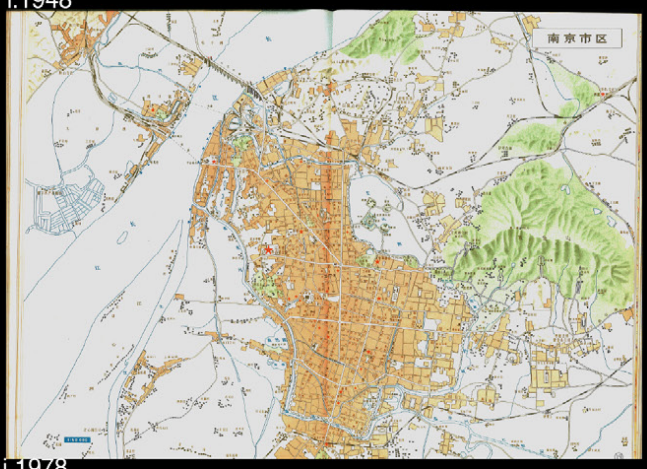
g.1938



h.1947



i.1948



j.1978



k.2021

Figure 3.8. Historical maps of Nanjing, from 1853 to 2021. Author's collage based on maps from Dituji.

ver, to observe how clearly the city walls can be read in the 1853 map compared with the contemporary condition. This contrast illustrates how a city that was once largely contained intra muros (Trisciuoglio, 2020) has progressively expanded far beyond its historic boundaries, extending for kilometres outside them. This transformation is particularly evident in the 2021 map. The maps also reveal many of the natural elements that have historically characterised Nanjing, including Purple Mountain (Zijin Shan), Xuanwu Lake and the Yangtze River. These elements played a fundamental role in determining the morphological order of the urban settlement (Trisciuoglio, 2020).

The same elements and transformations can also be studied through historical aerial and satellite imagery. The aerial photographs from 1929 and 1978 provide two particularly significant moments in this process. The former was captured by the Aircraft Squadrons of the United States Navy, while the latter was produced directly by institutions of the People's Republic of China. Together, they provide further evidence of the dramatic spatial transformation of Nanjing and of the progressive expansion of its urban fabric beyond its historical boundaries.

Another alternative way of approaching the past and the history of a place is through historical paintings. Although these representations have a different evidentiary nature from cartographic or photographic sources, they can provide valuable insights at the urban scale into how Nanjing was experienced and represented at different moments in history. Figures 3.9 and 3.10 offer examples of this type of source, providing a broader overview of the city and its urban life beyond its purely physical configuration.



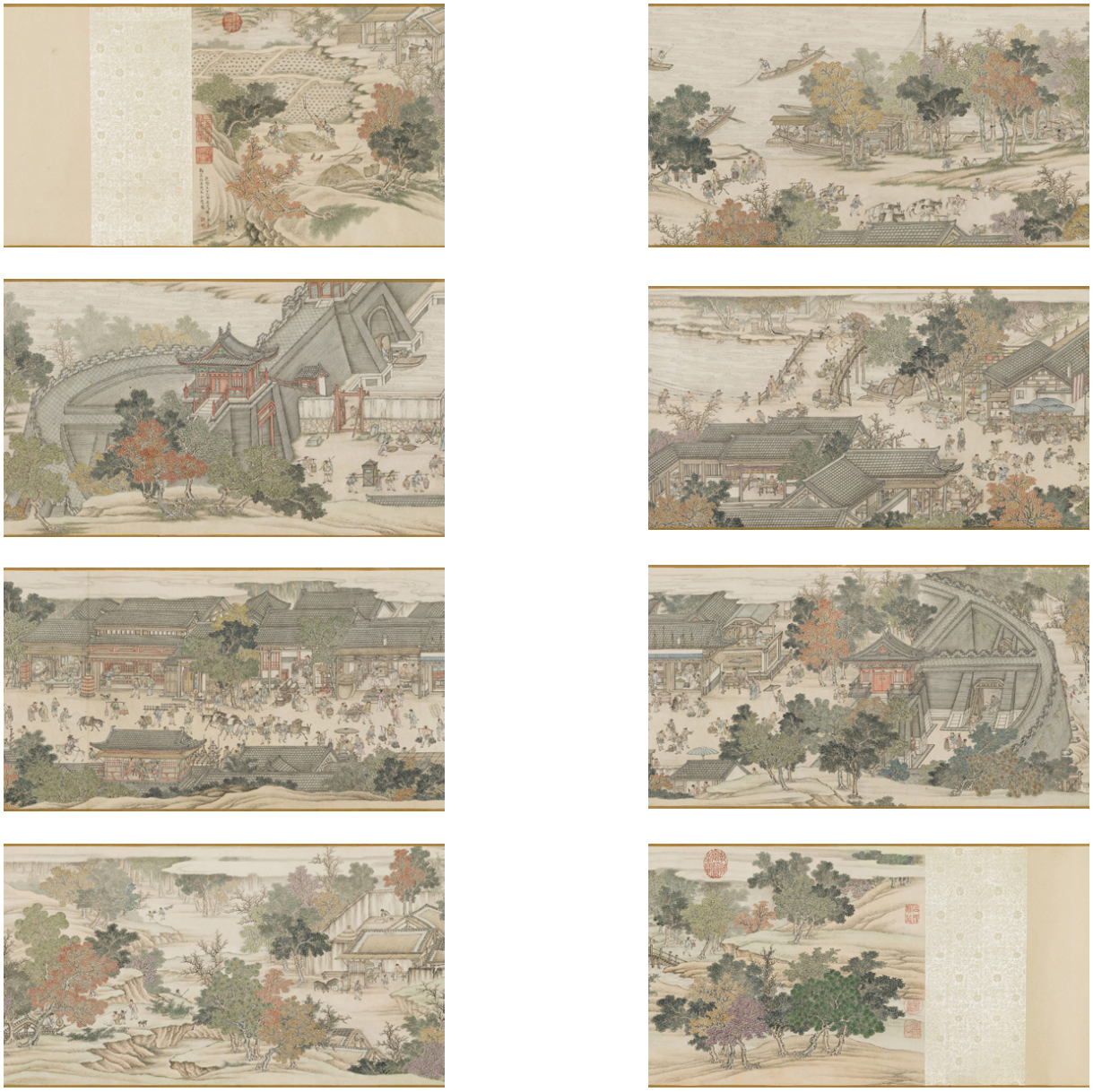


Figure 3.9. Feng Ning, Imitation of the Song Academy Version of the Jinling Picture (《仿宋院本金陵图》), 1794. Details of the urban landscape and everyday life of Jinling (present-day Nanjing). Source: Wuguo.



Figure 3.10. The Bustling and Hustling of Nanjing (南都繁会图), attributed to Qiu Ying, Ming Dynasty. National Museum of China, Beijing.

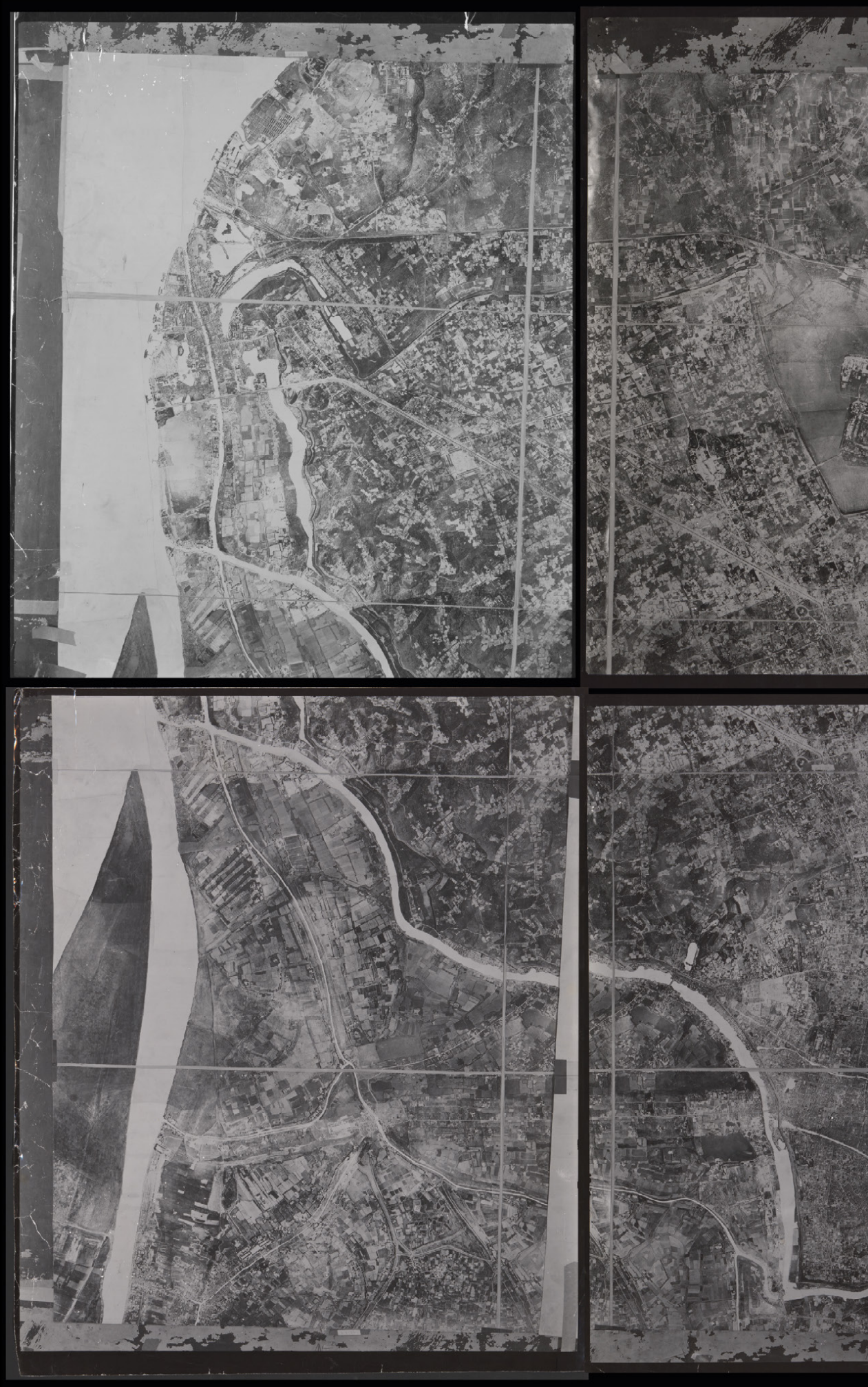




Figure 3.11. Aerial photograph of Nanjing in September 1929, full view. Captured by the Aircraft Squadrons of the United States Navy. Source: Library of Congress.

R18W5
+00



Figure 3.12. Aerial photograph of Nanjing in 1978, full view. Source: Nanjing Urban Planning Bureau.

3.4_Qinhuai: the historical core of Nanjing

Progressively, the zoom moves from China, to Jiangsu, to Nanjing, and finally reaches the Qinhuai District (秦淮区), interpreted as the historical core of Nanjing, due to its location and the persistence of its historic urban fabric. In general, the historic part of Nanjing within the city walls is administratively divided into three districts: Xuanwu, Qinhuai and Gulou. Qinhuai, the southern sector of historic Nanjing, can be described as an inner fringe belt (Trisciuoglio, 2020).

The district takes its name from the Qinhuai River, a tributary of the Yangtze and a true urban waterway, navigable by small boats. Together with the southern city wall, the river has contributed to the formation of a sort of butterfly-shaped urban figure, enclosing a settlement enclave with persistently ancient characteristics. Along its banks, during the late Ming period and the early Qing Dynasty, an urban fabric composed of small one- or two-storey courtyard houses developed, shaping a part of the city that can still be recognised today in its typological structure and morphological configuration. Modern development has rapidly eroded these urban fabrics, although not completely. Some areas retain certain original characteristics, but are inhabited as slums and have become the subject of redevelopment projects (Trisciuoglio, 2020).

This area of Nanjing has therefore been extensively studied precisely because of its strong historical connection and the traces that remain of it. However, the problem of maintaining this historical character is particularly evident in relation to the resi-

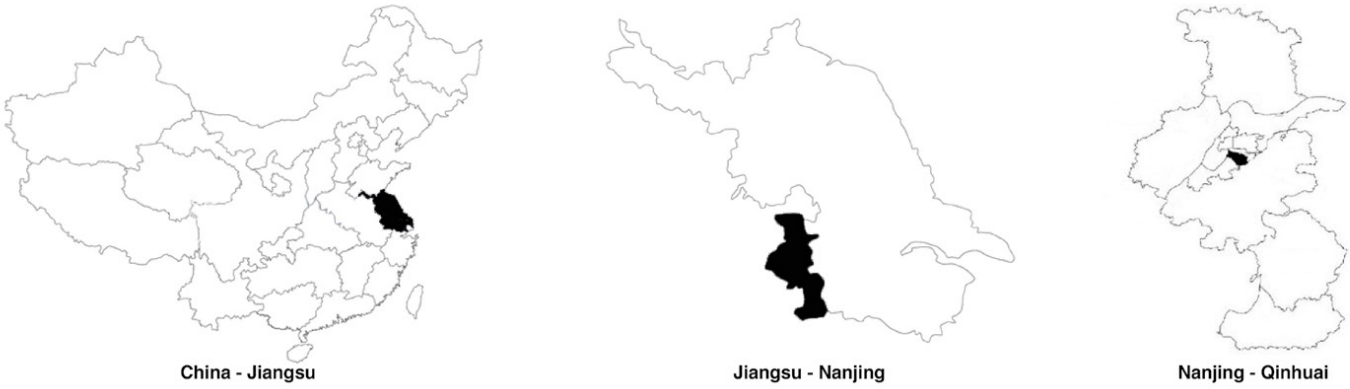


Figure 3.13. Progressive spatial zoom from China to Jiangsu, Nanjing and the Qinhuai District. Author's illustration.

dential building fabric, which has largely been eroded by the introduction of new building typologies. In Figure 3.14, the expansion of the new urban fabric generated by the introduction of the new functional building typology is shown in red. These red areas appear almost like a “virus infecting the city”, a deliberately figurative expression intended to emphasise the progressive erosion and replacement of the original urban fabric.

The image of the Qinhuai District can be seen in Figure 3.15, where an axonometric exploded view analyse the different layers of the area.

Starting from the town boundaries and contour lines, which help to understand the differences in ground elevation, and moving to the hydrographic system, road network and urban fabric, the overall structure of the area and its morphological characteristics become evident. These are shaped by both natural and built elements. The Zhen Xiang area, which will be further investigated in the following sections, is highlighted in red.

Several landmarks within the district, particularly those that are relevant to the area highlighted in red, should also be mentioned.



Figure 3.14. Author’s redraw of the expansion of the new urban fabric in Nanjing.
Image based on Google Earth imagery (2024), inspired by Figure 3.d, p. 17, in Trisciuoglio (2020).

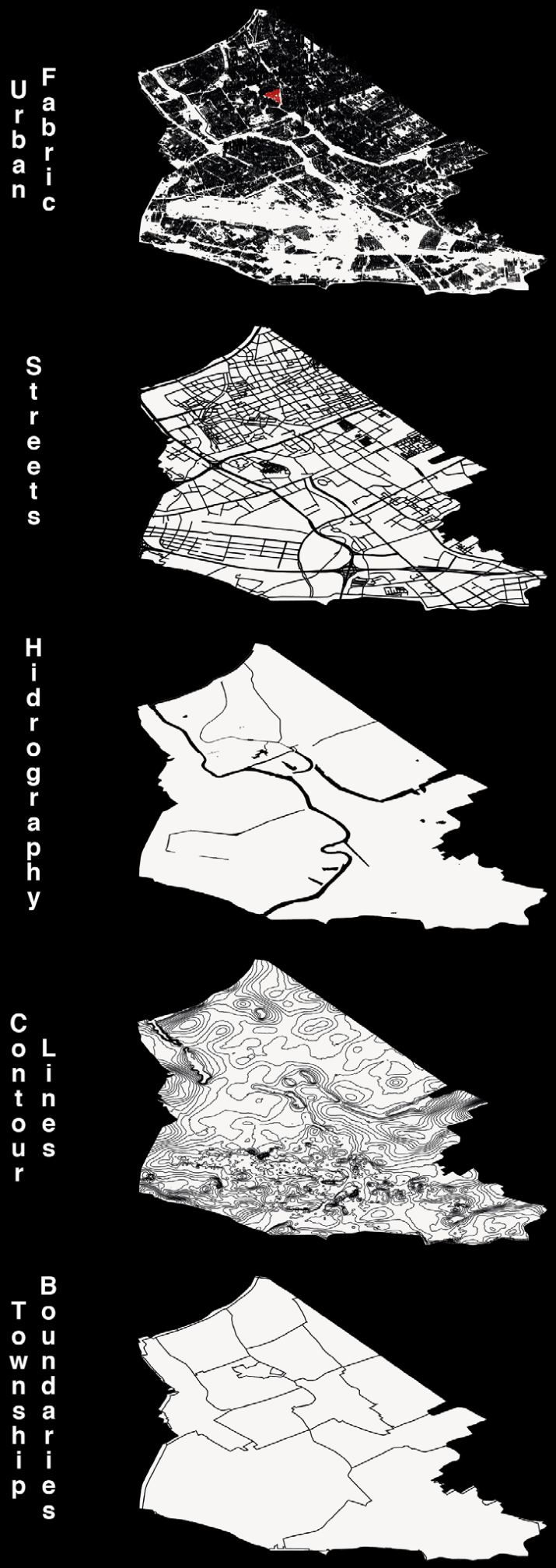


Figure 3.15. Exploded axonometric view of Qinhuai District showing its main morphological layers. Elaborated by the author.

The Nanjing Fuzimiao (Confucius Temple) Qinhuai Scenic Area is one of the most recognisable areas of historic Qinhuai. It was officially identified as the first 5A open-style scenic spot in China in 2010 and has gained a high reputation and strong influence in tourism both domestically and internationally (Zhou, 2016, p. 2).

Furtermore, during the holiday period, the Confucius Temple Scenic Area welcomed nearly four million visitors, becoming one of the leading attractions within Jiangsu's cultural tourism sector (China Jiangsu Network, 2026).







Figure 3.16. Fuzimiao Scenic Area during the day. Source: Wikimedia Commons, via Wikipedia.



This gives an indication of the intensity of the flows and the sheer number of people who experience and inhabit this area, as well as its strong influence within the contemporary image of Nanjing.

It should be emphasised, however, that the historic character of this place is partly the result of a contemporary reconstruction of the past. While there is a real and deeply stratified history underlying Qinhuai, Fuzimiao preserves and evokes some of its elements through a process of reconstruction and thematisation of the past. It has been described as a “Disneyland of Ming China”, a popular realm of a stereotyped image of Chinese history (Trisciuoglio, 2022, p. 124).

A new dimension can therefore be added to the considerations made so far. The question is no longer only what has actually remained of the past, in concrete and tangible terms, but also which image of the past is intended to be preserved

Figure 3.17. Fuzimiao Scenic Area at night. Source: Wikimedia Commons, via Wikipedia..

and transmitted, and which is therefore reconstructed so that it will not be forgotten.

Beyond its symbolic value and the dynamism that we have identified as characteristic of this place, another important insight emerges from its observation. The way in which the area is experienced is not constant. As previously discussed, during holiday periods it reaches remarkable peaks in terms of visitor numbers. However, what is also particularly evident in Figures 3.16 and 3.17 is how differently the area is experienced between day and night. At night, the area seems to undergo a transformation. This also relates to the idea of the historical evocation of the space, whose perception can vary depending on how the place is experienced and on what aspects of its identity are intended to be emphasised.

The final observation concerns the two metro lines, the yellow and the green lines, which both serve Fuzimiao (Figure 3.20).
One of the stations is located on Zankang Road, while the other is located in the heart of Zhen Xiang.



Figure 3.18 Aerial panorama of southern Nanjing and the Qinhuai River, where Fuzimiao is located. December 2023. Source: Wikimedia Commons, via Wikipedia.

Considering the visitor numbers discussed above, the area's strong tourist character, and the different periods of activity during both the day and the evening, these connections give an indication of the large number of people constantly passing through these areas on their way to Fuzimiao.

We have therefore established that Fuzimiao is not an isolated element, but rather part of a wider urban system in which historical traces, contemporary flows, tourism, and infrastructure overlap, further demonstrating the stratified character that seems to define teh Qinhuai District.



Figure 3.19. Fuzimiao Metro Station. Source: Baidu Baike.





Figure 3.20. Satellite image of the Qinhuai area in 2024, with the metro lines and stations highlighting their proximity to Fuzimiao. Source: Google Earth. Elaborated by the author.

3.5_From Qinhuai to Zhen Xiang

We finally move into the heart of the project area. As we previously investigated why we were looking at China, then at Nanjing, and more specifically at Qinhuai, we now move one step further and ask why this particular urban triangle. We have already understood its importance due to its proximity to the Fuzimiao tourist area, but also to other areas such as Wangufu Yuan, Huiyuanli, Wangfu East, Rulin, and Zhihe (Figure 3.21). At first glance, these latter areas appear to be more “resolved”. The urban and morphological language they adopt seems to be relatively consistent: high-rise buildings that leave open space at ground level. The Zhen Xiang block appears somewhat different. However, Chapter 4 will explore its morphology and its fragmented urban essence in greater depth.

For now, the focus is on an analysis that is not necessarily more superficial, but rather less in-depth in terms of urban anamnesis. By looking at the area for what it is today, we discover that several historically significant buildings are also located within the Protection Zone. These include the Former Site of Wuben Silkworm Egg Pro-



Figure 3.21. Satellite image of the Qinhuai area in 2024, with the metro lines and stations highlighting their proximity to Fuzimiao. Source: Google Earth. Elaborated by the author.

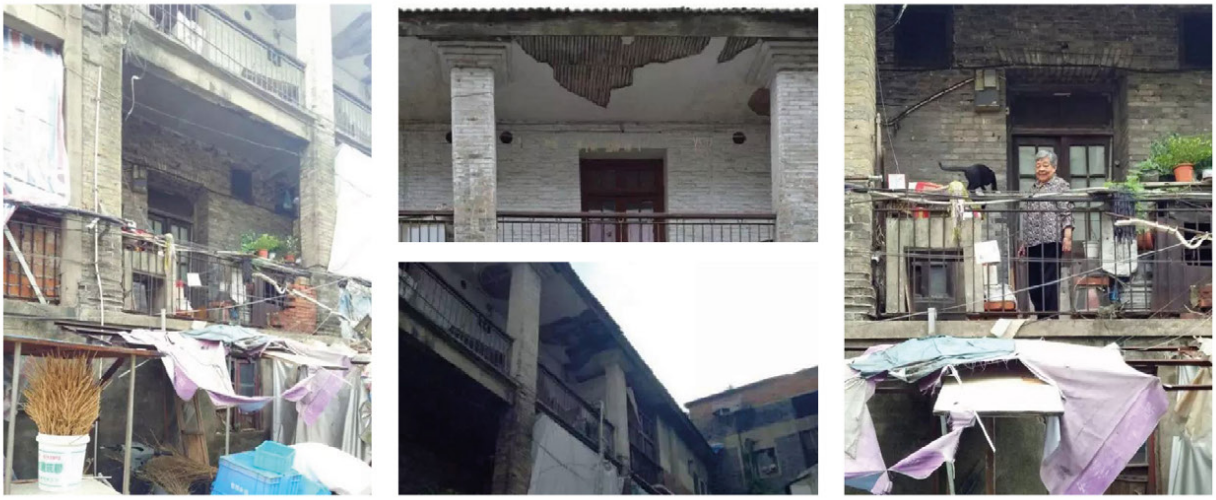


Figure 3.22. Former Wuben Silkworm Egg Production Farm, Nanjing. Source: Sohu



Figure 3.23. Former Nanjing Post and Telecommunication Bureau, Nanjing. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

duction Farm, the Former Nanjing Post and Telegraph Office, and the Former Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank.

The **Former Site of Wuben Silkworm Egg Production Farm** (Figure 3.22), built in 1917, is the only surviving traditional industrial building in Nanjing that integrated agriculture, industry, and commerce during the Republican period. It remained in use until the 1960s and was designated as an immovable cultural heritage site during the Third National Census of Cultural Relics, conducted between April 2007 and December 2011 (Sohu, 2017).

The **Former Nanjing Post and Telecommunication Bureau** (Figure 3.23) is another historically significant building within the area. It represents the development of early modern public communications infrastructure in Nanjing and forms part of the architectural heritage of the Republican period. Its architectural character, including details such as the eaves and window frames, contributes to the historical identity of the surrounding urban fabric. The building was designed by a British architect and officially opened on January 1, 1923.

The **Former Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank** (Figure 3.24) was established in 1915, with its headquarters in Shanghai, and became one of the major southern Chinese banks. Its Nanjing branch opened in 1921 and was relocated from Xiaguan to its present site on April 10, 1933. At the time, it was among Nanjing's high-rise buildings and represents an important example of Republican-era financial architecture.



Figure 3.24. Former Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank, Nanjing. Source: Wikidata.



Figure 3.25. Nanjing Confucius Temple Primary School. Source: Baidu Baike.

Alongside these historically significant buildings, another existing element deserves consideration: the **Nanjing Confucius Temple Primary School** (Figure 3.25).

Although it does not have the same formal heritage status as the buildings mentioned above, its history is closely connected to the development of the area. Founded in 1907 as the Jiangning Prefecture Middle School and renamed Confucius Temple Primary School in 1927, it represents a long-standing educational presence within the urban fabric. The school was reconstructed in 1958 and continues to operate today, with one of its campuses located along Jiankang Road (Baidu Baike, n.d.).

Its historical continuity therefore makes it relevant to the reading of the existing city, even though it cannot be considered a protected historic building in the same sense as the other examples.

These buildings provide an opportunity to understand what has actually remained of the area's history. They are tangible examples that should be preserved and enhanced. However, they also raise another question: ***what no longer exists in this area?*** And how can an appropriate methodology approach this dilemma? The aim is not necessarily to reconstruct everything that has been lost, but rather to explore how something that no longer exists can still be evoked through new interventions. In this sense, ***new architecture can carry traces of what once existed, preserving its memory while acknowledging that the place has transformed***.

Unless otherwise indicated, the historical information presented in this section is based on teaching materials provided by Southeast University.

04

Reading Zhen Xiang:
Applying the Methodology

4.1_Reading Morphological Transformations

The basis for a proper study of urban morphology lies in identifying the appropriate material to interpret and analyse. In the case of Nanjing and the project area, it was possible to develop an extensive study based on four significant images.

The earliest is an aerial photograph taken in September **1929** by the Aircraft Squadrons of the United States Navy. It was produced during the very first aerial photogrammetric survey campaigns in the Republic of China, which were carried out to map the territory for military purposes and to support the planning of the city's reconstruction. This is followed by another aerial photograph, dating from **1978**, produced directly by the institutions of the People's Republic of China. Finally, the last two and most recent images were obtained from Google Earth, which provides access to historical satellite imagery. The **2005** image was then compared with the most recent available image, dating from **2024**.

Identifying these images made it possible to begin a meaningful analysis of the morphological transition of the area over the course of almost a century.
The analysis focused on three main aspects of the city and the study area: **Hydrography**, **Streets Pattern**, and **Urban Fabric**.



Figure 4.1. Detail of the aerial photograph of Nanjing in September 1929, captured by the Aircraft Squadrons of the United States Navy, showing the project area. Source: Library of Congress.



Figure 4.2. Detail of the aerial photograph of Nanjing in 1978, showing the project area. Source: Nanjing Urban Planning Bureau.



Figure 4.3. Satellite imagery of the project area in Nanjing in 2005. Source: Google Earth.



Figure 4.4. Satellite imagery of the project area in Nanjing in 2024. Source: Google Earth.

1929

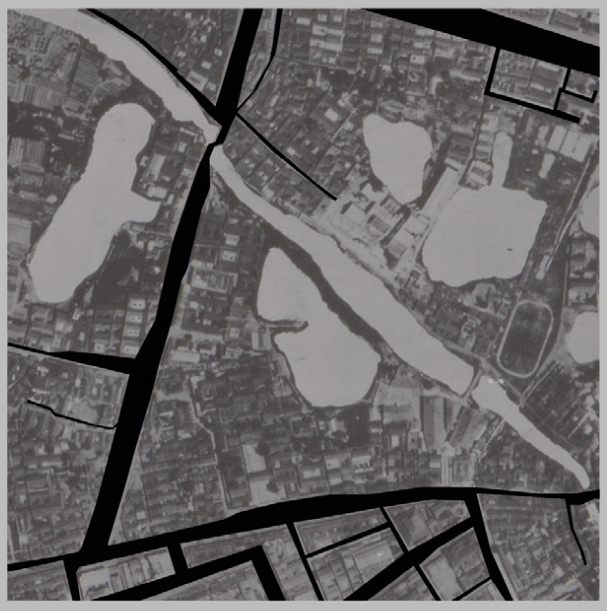
1976

Hydrography



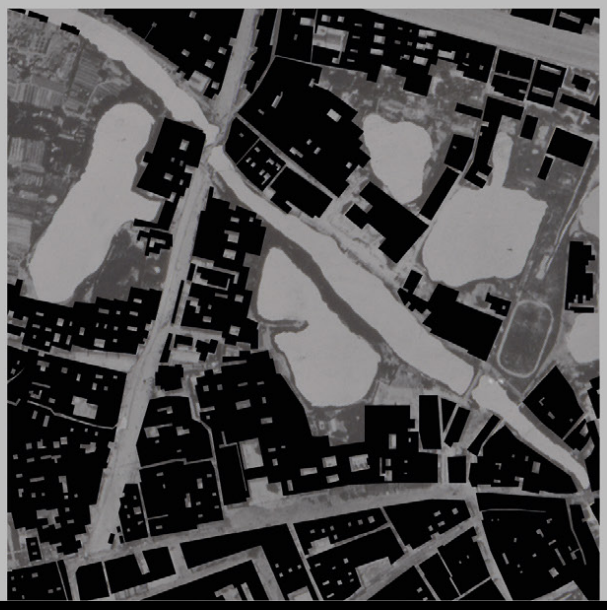


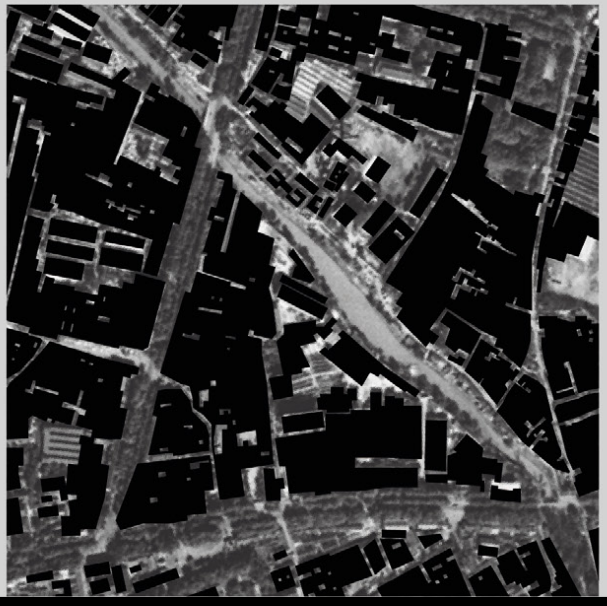
Street patter n





Urban fabric





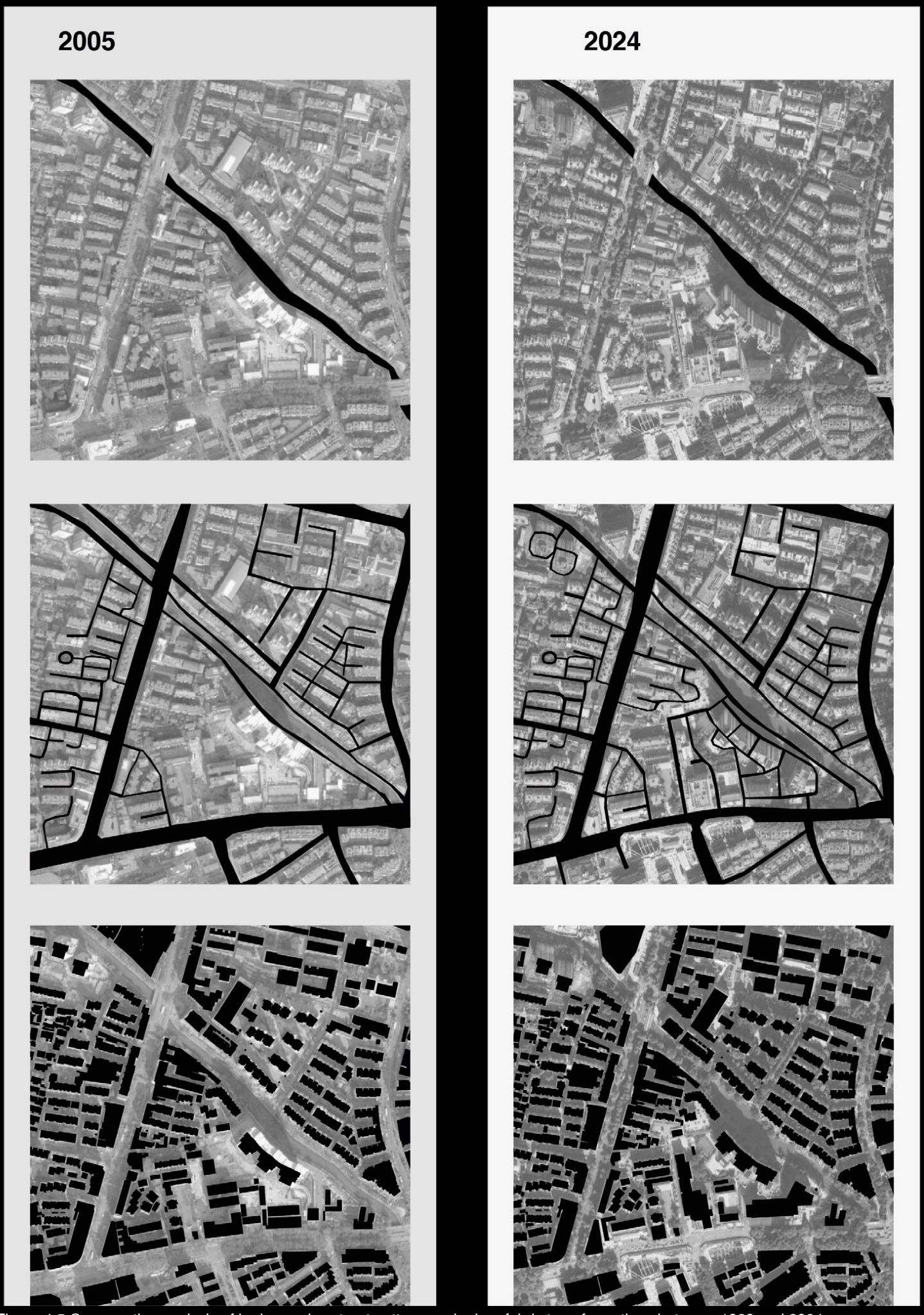


Figure 4.5 Comparative analysis of hydrography, street pattern, and urban fabric transformations between 1929 and 2024. Elaborated by the author.

These three aspects were selected to investigate the evident presence of water within the project area and its proximity to the Qinhuai River, as well as to understand the transformations that have affected both the street network and the built fabric. This helps us understand how not only the physical space itself has changed, but also how it has been perceived and experienced by the people who have lived there over time.

Analysing the **hydrography** is essential. Looking at the 1929 image, we can observe not only the presence of the river but also several other bodies of water.
These disappear in the following image, where water bodies are immediately replaced by new buildings that are larger than the traditional courtyard houses still visible from 1929. What remains unchanged is the Qinhuai River, which, in a way, continues to define and make this portion of the city recognisable.

The changes observed in the **street pattern** appear, at first glance, to be less immediately noticeable. This is because, although the street network becomes denser, the main roads surrounding this portion of the city remain largely unchanged. Their overall layout and their greater width compared with the secondary streets have remained almost the same. It is as if the boundaries of this part of the city have remained unchanged for over one hundred years.

What has changed, however, is their actual width. While the hierarchy and alignment of the main streets have remained largely unchanged, their cross-sections have gradually evolved to accommodate contemporary mobility requirements. Many historic streets have been widened and renewed, allowing space for vehicles, pedestrians and other contemporary functions, while preserving their original layout (Chen & Thwaites, 2013). This transformation reflects an adaptation of the existing street network rather than the creation of an entirely new one.
The most evident transformation is the increasing density of the street network. The secondary streets that become more visible in the 2005 and 2024 images did not appear as newly created streets; rather, they were simply less perceptible in the past. They were certainly narrower, reflecting the spatial organisation of the tradi-

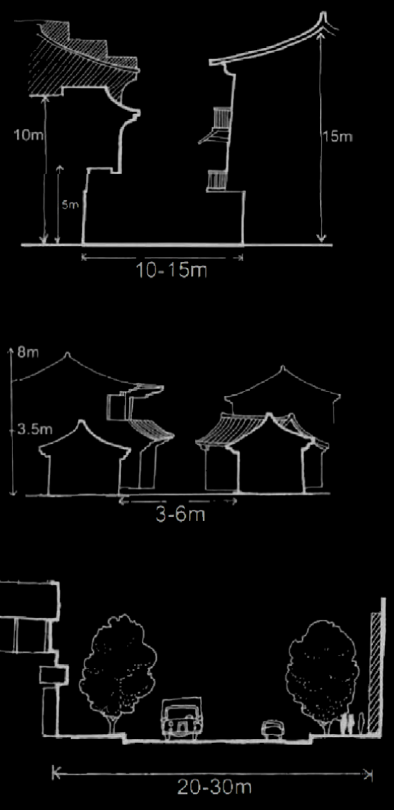


Figure 4.6. Adapted by the author from Chen & Thwaites (2013), Fig. 5.10, p. 99.

tional courtyard houses. The widening of these streets over time has made them more legible in aerial imagery, reinforcing the perception of a denser street network.

These changes are accompanied by an equally significant transformation of the urban fabric.
The most striking aspect of the **urban fabric** is this apparent loss of density and continuity. What appears in the 1929 and 1978 images as a continuous “carpet” of buildings—a dense expanse of small structures closely packed together—changes significantly in the following two images.
From 2005 onwards, the new buildings occupy a seemingly smaller footprint, yet they are multi-storey buildings. As a consequence, the perception of reduced density would change completely if the area was analysed in three dimensions rather than through plan views alone.

This transformation, which is evident at the urban scale, can also be observed at a smaller one. The form and appearance of the buildings have changed as well. In the 1929 image, the urban fabric is perceived as a continuous and homogeneous expanse of buildings. From above, it appears almost as a single uninterrupted surface. However, this visual uniformity does not imply that the buildings were identical. On the contrary, although the traditional courtyard houses shared a common architectural language, each building was likely to have its own unique characteristics. In the 2005 and 2024 images, this continuity is gradually lost. The urban fabric becomes more fragmented, as buildings are increa-

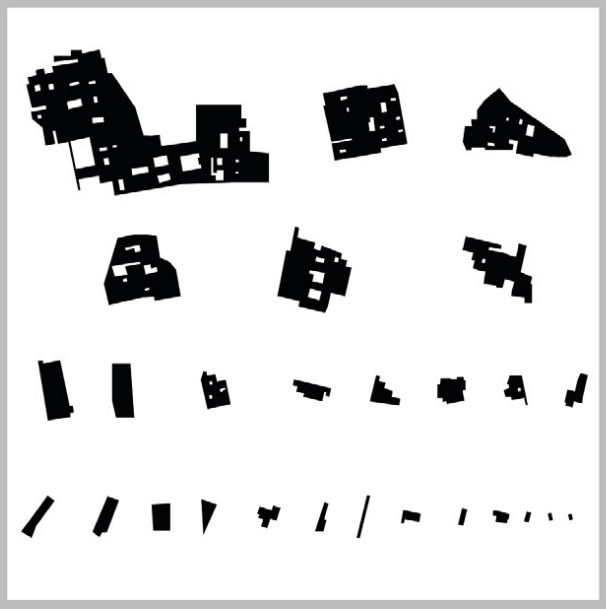
Urban fabric

Typology

Transition

1929

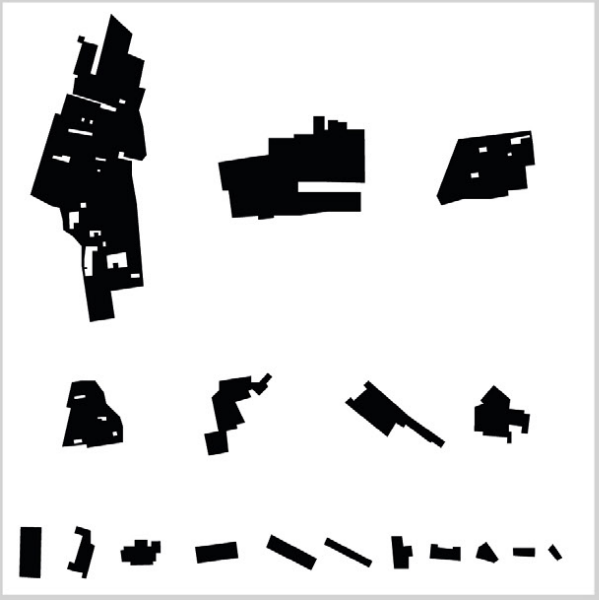






1976







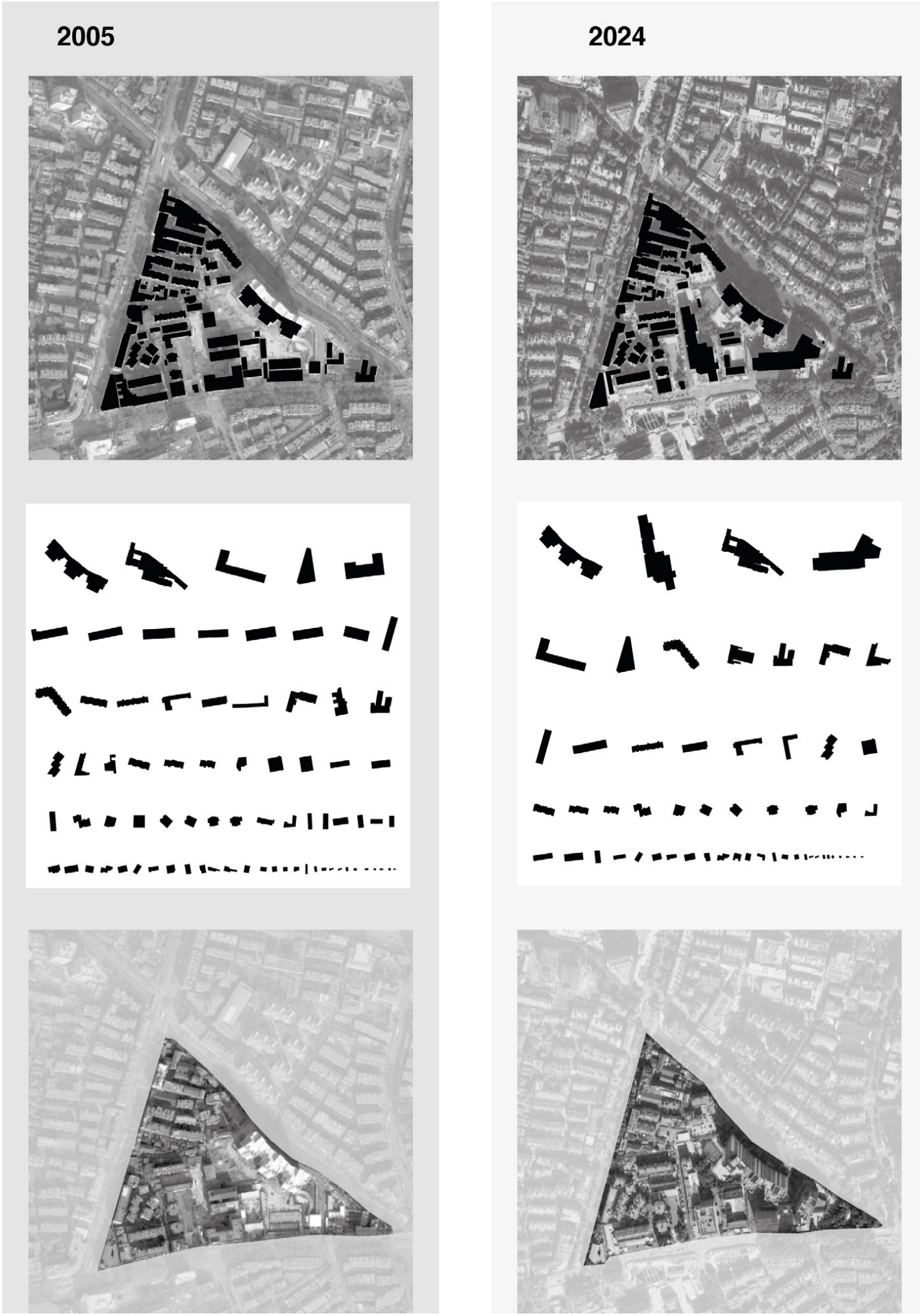


Figure 4.7 Analysis of urban fabric, building typologies, and morphological transition between 1929 and 2024.
Elaborated by the author.

singly separated from one another. At the same time, however, a different kind of uniformity emerges. Many of the new building typologies are remarkably similar, almost as if they were reproduced from the same model. As a result, **the contemporary city appears less continuous as an urban fabric, yet more standardised in the architecture of its individual buildings.**

This concept becomes particularly evident in figure 4.7, which focuses on the transition of the urban fabric. It clearly illustrates a typological transformation, as that dense expanse of buildings begins to break apart. The buildings now appear to be smaller, but this impression is somewhat misleading. If we considered the dense urban fabric visible in the 1929 and 1978 images as individual buildings, we would realise that it was made up almost entirely of small courtyard houses. Today, by contrast, large multi-storey buildings are constructed. Their main advantage is that they make use of vertical space while leaving more open space at ground level. In reality, urban density has continued to increase over recent decades, creating the impression of a more open and spacious urban fabric. This concept will become clearer and will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

The last image to be described, figure 4.9, broadens the analysis by focusing on key concepts that help interpret these transformations and can be applied to the design process.

It highlights the **main axes** that have existed from 1929 to the present day. These have remained almost entirely unchanged, suggesting that they represent an element to be preserved and enhanced. Their continuity reflects their historical value, indicating that there are underlying reasons why they have remained unchanged over time. The only significant modification is the addition of a new axis, created following the construction of a large commercial building, which appears only in the 2024 image.

In addition to these axes, the image compares the **urban blocks**, focusing on their form and size within the project area. These have remained remarkably similar to one another and therefo-

re almost unchanged over time. These morphological transitions also suggest that there has not been a strong need to radically transform the urban structure of this part of the city, even though the buildings occupying these blocks are now very different, as previously discussed.

This transformation is particularly evident when analysing the internal composition of these urban blocks. Although their overall shape has remained relatively stable, their internal structure has undergone a significant transformation. The traditional courtyard houses that once defined these blocks have gradually been replaced by contemporary residential typologies, changing the relationship between built and open spaces.

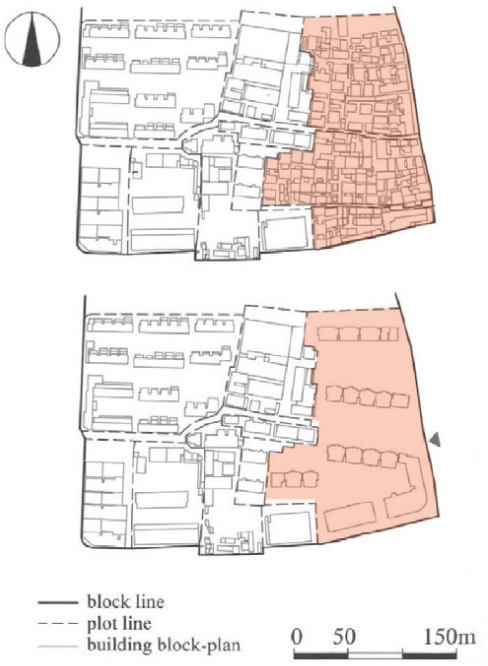


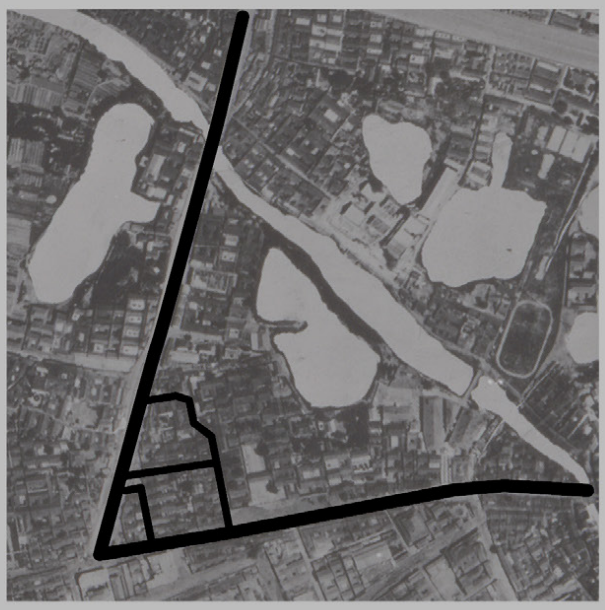
Figure 4.8. Adapted by the author from Chen & Thwaites (2013), Fig. 5.10, p. 99.

As highlighted by Chen and Thwaites (2013), the development of new residential models in Nanjing has often resulted in the replacement of historic housing fabrics with standardised multi-storey buildings. These new typologies introduce a different spatial organisation, while occupying the same urban structure inherited from the previous city.

Where the edges of the blocks were once defined by the buildings themselves and their walls, they are now more commonly defined by sidewalks. As a result, the urban blocks retain a similar overall form, while their contents have changed. Contemporary buildings have different forms and spatial configurations.

Main Axis

1929



1976



Urban Blocks



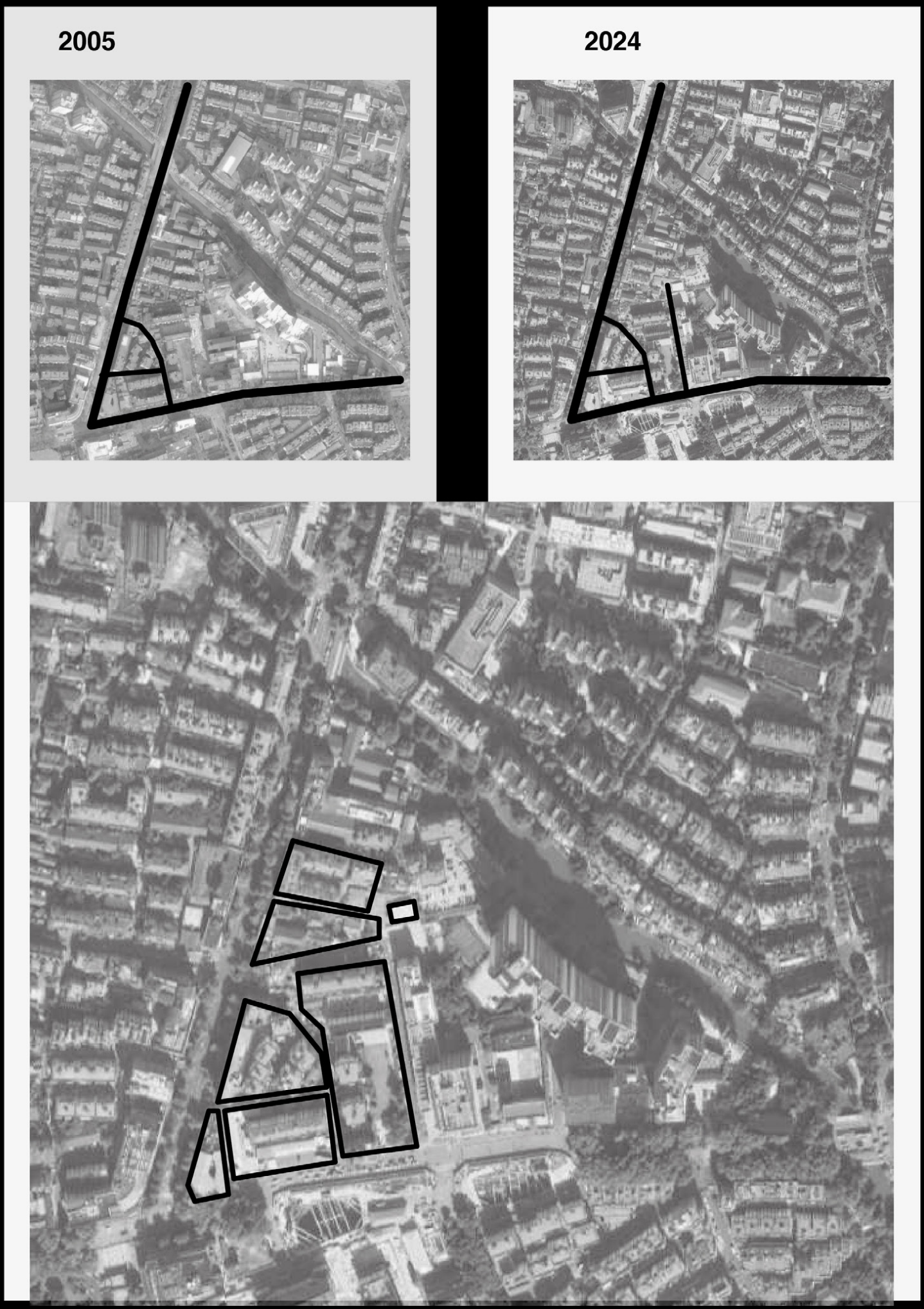


Figure 4.9 Analysis of the main urban axes and comparison of urban blocks between 1929 and 2024. Elaborated by the author.

4.2_Reading Spatial Identity

To investigate Zhen Xiang in greater depth, it is necessary to define its spatial identity, understood as an attempt to identify the characteristics that make an urban space unique and recognisable.

Two analytical tools are employed to investigate these characteristics: the Nolli map and the typological map. Although these two tools are different, they are complementary and together provide a comprehensive reading of the urban space within the project area.

A map inspired by **Nolli** offers a reading of the city through the theme of voids. Two colours are used: black represents all solid elements, enclosed spaces, and “private” spaces (the quotation marks are used because referring to spaces as private is not entirely appropriate in the Chinese context, given the different understanding of private property). Everything left in white represents the urban space, understood as open space, which is often public and accessible to everyone. The city is therefore defined as much by its built environment as by the open spaces that connect buildings. Consequently, the void should not be understood as an absence, but rather as a fundamental spatial structure in its own right. It is significant to observe and question the form assumed by both the built environment and the open spaces. Are the open spaces fragmented? Are there transitional or intermediate spaces? This analytical tool helps us understand where the city opens up and where it instead becomes enclosed.

The **typological map**, on the other hand, provides a different perspective, perhaps a more detailed and complex one, although this does not make the Nolli map any less important. The focus is no longer on the void itself, but on how the built environment is internally organised. For this reason, the typological map also provides additional information about open spaces by revealing how the two relate to one another. It allows us to understand how buildings are organised internally, what functions they accommodate, and, more simply, how many people they are able to accommodate according to their spatial organisation.





Figure 4.10 Nolli map of the project area, highlighting the relationship between built and unbuilt spaces. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.

In the case of Zhen Xiang, the **Nolli map** (Figure 4.10) provides an immediate reading of what had already emerged from the analysis of the urban fabric over the past century (Fig. 4.5). When compared with the historical aerial photographs, it becomes evident how different the spatial structure once was. The urban fabric appeared far more continuous and homogeneous than it does today. By contrast, the contemporary city reveals the presence of standardised building forms that often closely resemble one another. This is particularly evident in the residential developments located beyond the opposite bank of the Qinhuai River, where many buildings appear almost identical.

The map also reveals a clear distinction between the northern and southern parts of the study area. At the centre of this triangular urban fragment, almost acting as its barycentre, one of the exits of the Fuzimiao Metro Station has been located (see Chapter 3). To the north, the evolution of building typologies appears to have been more limited, or at least slower. The southern area, on the other hand, has undergone much more extensive transformations and is now characterised by a greater concentration of contemporary buildings, with the exception of the historic bank building discussed in Chapter 3.

The Nolli map also proved fundamental in identifying one of the key design concepts developed later in this thesis (see Chapter 5). It reveals an almost semicircular axis crossing the triangular site and continuing beyond both the Qinhuai River and Taiping South Road, suggesting a spatial continuity that extends beyond the physical boundaries of the project area.

The distinction between the northern and southern areas is also reflected in the amount of open space. In the north, buildings remain closely attached to one another, whereas in the south the presence of large multi-storey buildings creates considerably more open space at ground level. This difference is further illustrated in Figure 4.11, which shows the shadows cast by the buildings within the project area. Although simple in its representation, this drawing immediately reveals the relative heights of the buildings and the different extents of the shaded areas they generate, reinforcing

the observations discussed above. Regarding the **typological map of Zhen Xiang** (Figure 4.12), this was developed by hypothesising the internal organisation of the ground-floor spaces, based on material available online, photographs, and street-level imagery, using tools such as Baidu Maps Street View. Real estate platforms also played a key role. For more recent developments, they provide detailed information about buildings, including floor plans of the internal spaces.

By collecting and cross-referencing different sources of information about the buildings within the area, it became possible to reconstruct their ground-floor layouts and interpret the resulting spatial organisation through the typological map. Once again, clear differences emerge between the northern and southern parts of the study area. In the northern area, the ground-floor layouts suggest that the buildings are predominantly commercial because of the direct relationship between their entrances and Taiping South Road. Their organisation follows a more traditional typology, typical of small shops and restaurants.

This spatial language changes when observing the contemporary

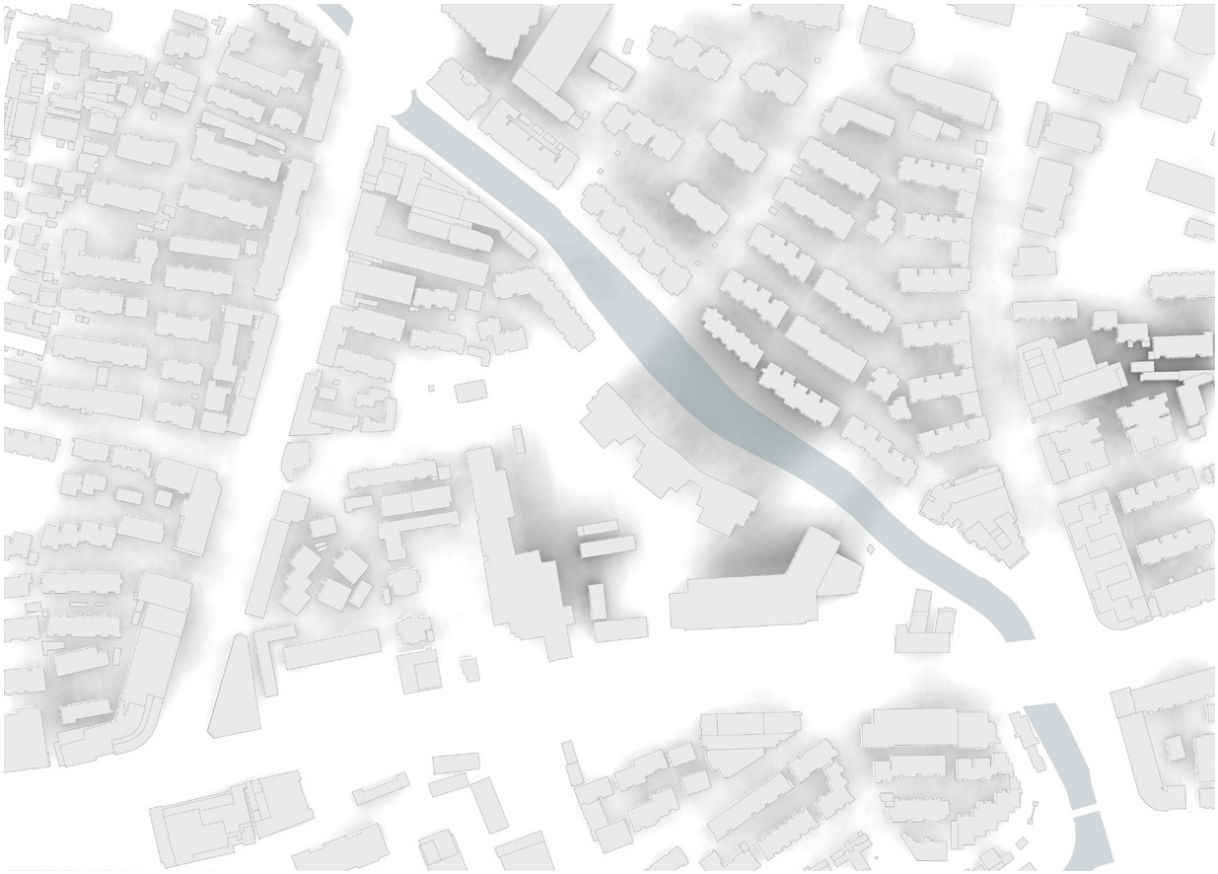


Figure 4.11 Building shadows within the project area, highlighting differences in building heights and their spatial impact. Scale not applicable. Author's drawing.





Figure 4.12 Typological map of the project area, identifying the different building typologies and their spatial distribution. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.

commercial buildings, which are large shopping malls. The buildings along Jiankang Road follow a different typological approach, offering a significantly different internal circulation system compared with the smaller street-oriented commercial buildings.

A similar transformation can also be observed in the residential buildings, where those located in the southern part of the study area have larger spaces on the ground floor if compared with the ones on the north. For example, the three-tower residential complex Jinglong Mingjue Mansion, facing the Qinhuai River, appears to provide shared communal spaces for its residents, a feature less common in older residential typologies. Information supporting this interpretation, was collected from Chinese real estate platforms such as Anjuke.

The comparison between recent developments and buildings that have remained in the area for a longer period, whether historic or simply older, provides valuable insights from both morphological and typological perspectives. The coexistence of these different building generations is clearly reflected in the spatial organisation of the study area. While the northern part preserves more traditional typologies and a finer urban grain, the southern part is characterised by larger and more contemporary building types.

These differences are not merely formal. They reflect different historical needs and urban conditions that have shaped both the typological organisation of buildings and the morphology of the surrounding urban fabric. For this reason, understanding the historical processes discussed in Chapter 3 is fundamental to interpreting the present condition of the area. **Reading the city through multiple layers—combining information from the past, the present, and the transition between them—allows a more comprehensive understanding of its spatial identity.**

The historical context of transformation is therefore fundamental to understanding the area as it appears today and to interpreting its present spatial identity.

However, it should also be noted that many of these transformations have been driven by the increasing demand for housing and

the consequent growth in urban density. As discussed by Forsyth et al. (2016) in relation to the evolution of residential typologies, high-rise buildings emerged in China in response to the growing demand for housing located close to places of employment. The increasing need for higher-density housing therefore became one of the driving forces behind the adoption of new residential typologies.

As density continues to increase, spaces—and consequently their typology and morphology—continue to evolve. This can be observed in the most recent generations of high-rise residential buildings, which in Zhen Xiang are concentrated particularly in the southern part of the study area, adjacent to Jiankang Road.

Today, the project area can therefore be understood as a hybrid urban environment, where contemporary buildings coexist with older developments and a limited number of historic buildings that have survived the successive phases of transformation.

These differences are visible both in the Nolli map, through the changing urban morphology, and in the typological map, through the evolution of building types. Together, they reveal the succession of transformations that have gradually shaped the spatial configuration of Zhen Xiang as it exists today.

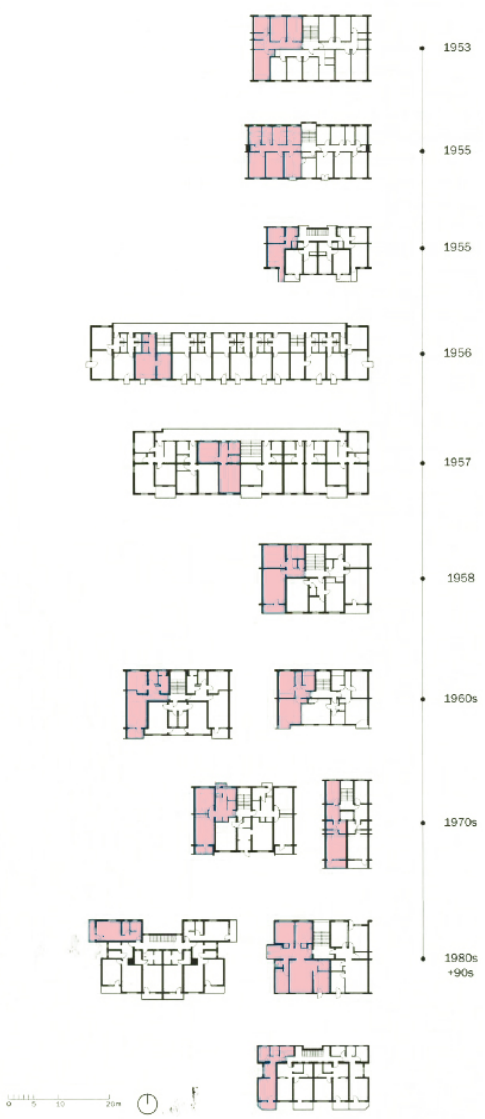
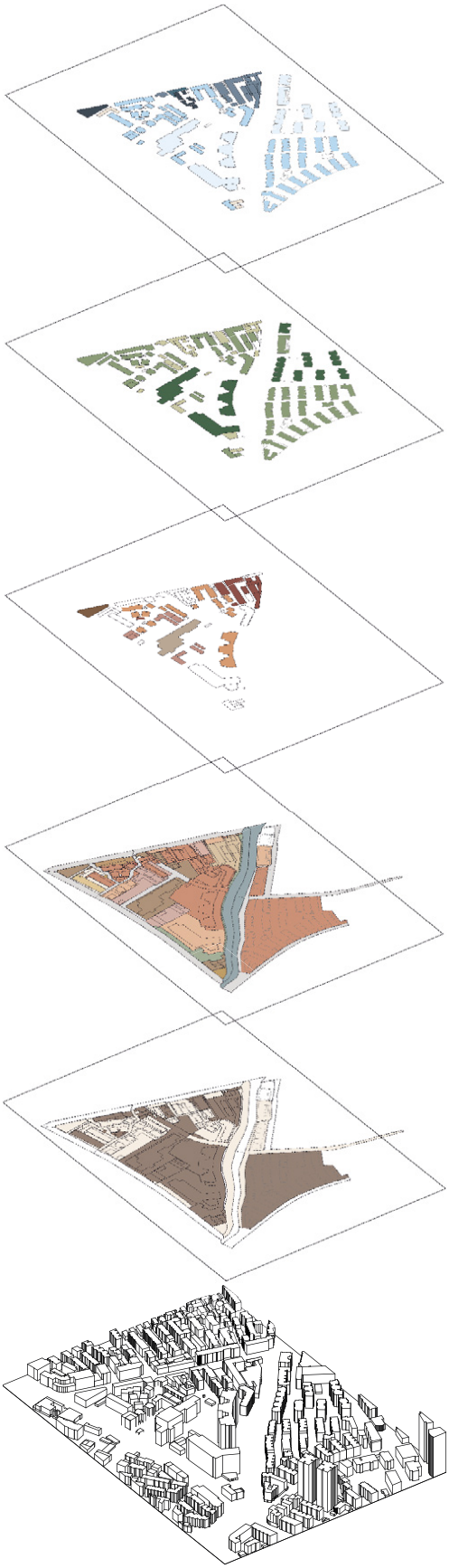


Figure 4.13. Evolution of high-rise residential building typologies in China over time. Adapted from Forsyth et al. (2016), p. 99.

4.3_Reading the Existing City



The next step of the analysis was not only to interpret and understand the spatial identity of Zhen Xiang, but also to read the area as it currently exists and investigate it through more detailed and quantitative information.

For this reason, a series of analytical maps were developed with the support of the material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing, focusing on several main aspects: **building age**, **number of floors**, **building use**, **land use**, and **land property**.

As already emerged from the analyses presented in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2, the most evident aspect is the north–south division of the area, which is reflected not only in the age of the buildings but also in their overall shape, morphology, and spatial organisation. The newer developments appear highly repetitive, almost as if they were produced through standardised models, due to the strong similarity among the buildings.

Figure 4.14. Reading the existing city through overlapping urban layers: building age, building height, land use, land ownership. Not to scale. Elaborated by the author.



Figure 4.15. Building age analysis of Zhen Xiang. Elaborated by the author based on material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing. Not to scale.

Through the mapping and dating of the buildings, it becomes clear that the southern part of the area is characterised mainly by more recent developments, with the exception of the Former Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank building, dating back to 1933. The northern part presents a more heterogeneous composition, although it maintains a stronger historical character, including buildings such as the Wuben Factory, dating back to 1917.

It is particularly interesting to compare how the age of buildings relates to their height. In the following map, it becomes evident that the most historical buildings generally belong to the category of one to three floors, or occasionally four to seven floors. Conversely, the more recent buildings are often higher than seven floors, reflecting a different approach to urban density and land occupation.



Figure 4.16. Building height analysis of Zhen Xiang. Elaborated by the author based on material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing. Not to scale.

Regarding building use, it is important to highlight that the classification represented in the map is a simplification, intended to provide a general understanding of the functional distribution of the area. In reality, many buildings accommodate multiple functions. This mixed-use character was particularly common in older building typologies, where commercial or service activities were located on the ground floor, while residential functions occupied the upper floors. Although this relationship between functions is still present in some contemporary buildings, it is no longer a constant feature.



Figure 4.17. Building use analysis of Zhen Xiang. Elaborated by the author based on material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing. Not to scale.

The final two analytical maps, focusing on land use and land property, were particularly important for different reasons. Firstly, in order to approach a design intervention within the area, it is essential to understand the existing functions, where development is possible, and how future transformations may interact with the existing urban structure. For example, the presence of several educational facilities immediately emerges, such as Jinling Technical Secondary School and the Confucius Temple Primary School.



Figure 4.18. Land use analysis of Zhen Xiang. Elaborated by the author based on material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing. Not to scale.

However, these maps are also important for understanding how the land has been organised and how this configuration has developed historically. Since the previous analyses have shown that the overall urban block structure has remained relatively stable over time, it becomes necessary to investigate how the current land use configuration was established and which actors contributed to its transformation.

For instance, in the areas developed more recently and characterised by highly similar buildings, the land ownership structure is often identifiable and frequently belongs to the same entity within the larger urban area where these buildings are located. This suggests that these developments were the result of large-scale urban investments, based on standardised residential production aimed at increasing housing capacity.

This relationship between land ownership, development processes, and building repetition provides further evidence of how contemporary urban transformations have reshaped the morphology and identity of Zhen Xiang.

This analysis also raises a broader question regarding urban agency: who is behind the ownership of these portions of land, and therefore who is responsible for the decisions that have shaped their transformation? Which criteria guide the renewal processes and the choice of where and how new developments are introduced?

In the case of Zhen Xiang, the current configuration suggests that recent developments have particularly favoured the areas closer to the Qinhuai River and along Jiankang Road. The construction of contemporary residential and commercial buildings in these areas appears to reflect a strategy that values accessibility, visibility, and proximity to important urban axes and waterfront spaces.

Understanding these dynamics is essential, as urban transformation is not only the result of morphological or typological changes, but also of decisions made by different actors who influence the evolution of the city.

1. Nanjing Office of the People's Government of Shuyang County
2. Nanjing Food Industry Co., Ltd.
3. Nanjing Film and Theater Co., Ltd.
4. Zhang Shipping
5. Nanjing Metro Resource Development Co., Ltd.
6. Unknown
7. Nanjing Baixia District Housing Administration Office
8. Nanjing Langchi Group Co., Ltd.
9. Nanjing Metro Resource Development Co., Ltd.
10. Nanjing Foreign Trade and Economic Development Co., Ltd.
11. Nanjing Langchi Group Co., Ltd.
12. Nanjing Municipal Urban Management Bureau
13. Baixia District Education Bureau, Nanjing (Jinling Vocational Training Center)
14. Nanjing Metro Group Co., Ltd.
15. Nanjing Baixia District Housing Administration Office
16. Jiangsu Jianwei Real Estate Development Co., Ltd.
17. Jiangsu Jianwei Real Estate Development Co., Ltd.



Figure 4.19. Land property analysis of Zhen Xiang. Elaborated by the author based on material provided by Southeast University of Nanjing. Not to scale.

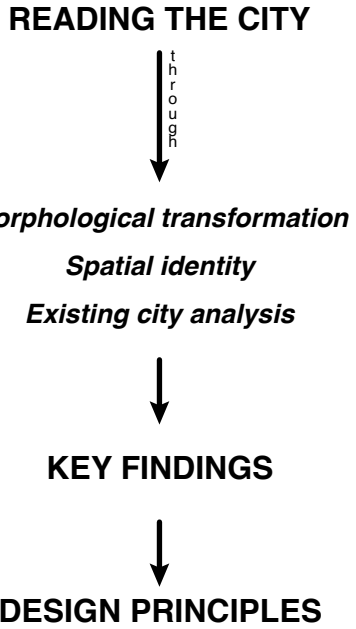
4.4_From Reading to Design Principles

In this chapter, the focus has been on reading and interpreting Zhen Xiang. While Chapters 1, 2, and 3 were primarily devoted to collecting information and establishing the theoretical, methodological, and historical framework, this chapter is the first to put that methodology into practice through the production of original analytical drawings and maps. It represents the transition from theory to practice.

Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 presented a progressive reading of the study area. The analysis began with the urban morphology of the territory, then moved towards its spatial identity, further investigating the morphological structure through the Nolli map and deepening the analysis by examining the building typologies within the project area. Finally, the existing conditions were analysed through a series of thematic maps that classify the existing buildings according to different categories.

This progressive analytical process gradually leads towards the design principles that will be fully developed in Chapter 5. It is important to emphasise the path that has led to this point, demonstrating how essential it is to approach urban design with a conscious and in-depth understanding of the place in which we operate. Such knowledge must be investigated from multiple perspectives, but above all with particular attention to the processes of transformation.

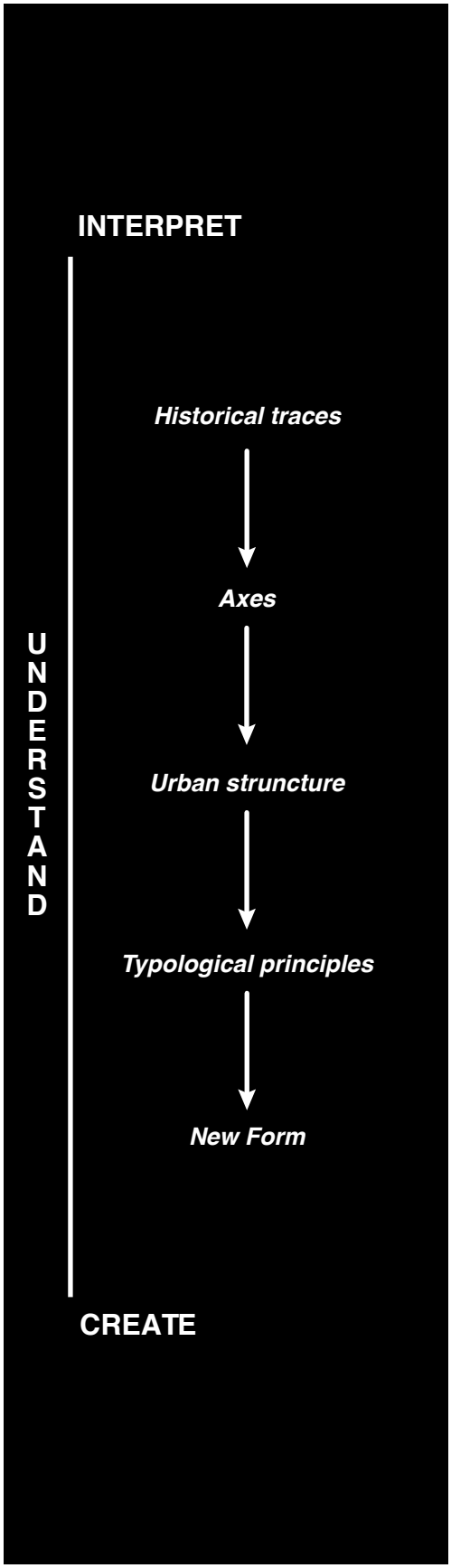
This approach reflects the idea that understanding the contemporary city requires the study of urban form through its dynamics of transformation, rather than considering only its final physical configuration (Trisciuoglio & Dong, 2024). In this sense, transitional morphologies become not only the most powerful tool for interpreting the existing city, but also the starting point for a conscious design approach capable of creating continuity between the past and the future of a place.



05

Transforming Zhen Xiang: the Design Proposal

5.1_Reconstructing the Urban Structure



Having understood the importance of the processes that shape the identity, functions, and appearance of urban places, this chapter introduces a new transformation within the project area. It therefore marks the beginning of the **urban surgery** practice discussed in Chapter 2, recalling that working on buildings means uncovering the intrinsic specificities of the parts of the city in which one intervenes, as highlighted by Bao and Trisciuoglio in Understanding Chinese Cities: Redesigning Italian methods.

The initial objective is to reconstruct an urban structure, as the area requires a reorganisation of its spaces and buildings. The aim is to develop a design solution that responds to the existing conditions while looking towards the future of the city and the everyday lives of its inhabitants.

The factors that may lead to a reconstruction within a design process are multiple, encompassing both physical, tangible aspects and more abstracts ones. Among the most tangible is the form that is intended to be restored to the area through the construction of new buildings.

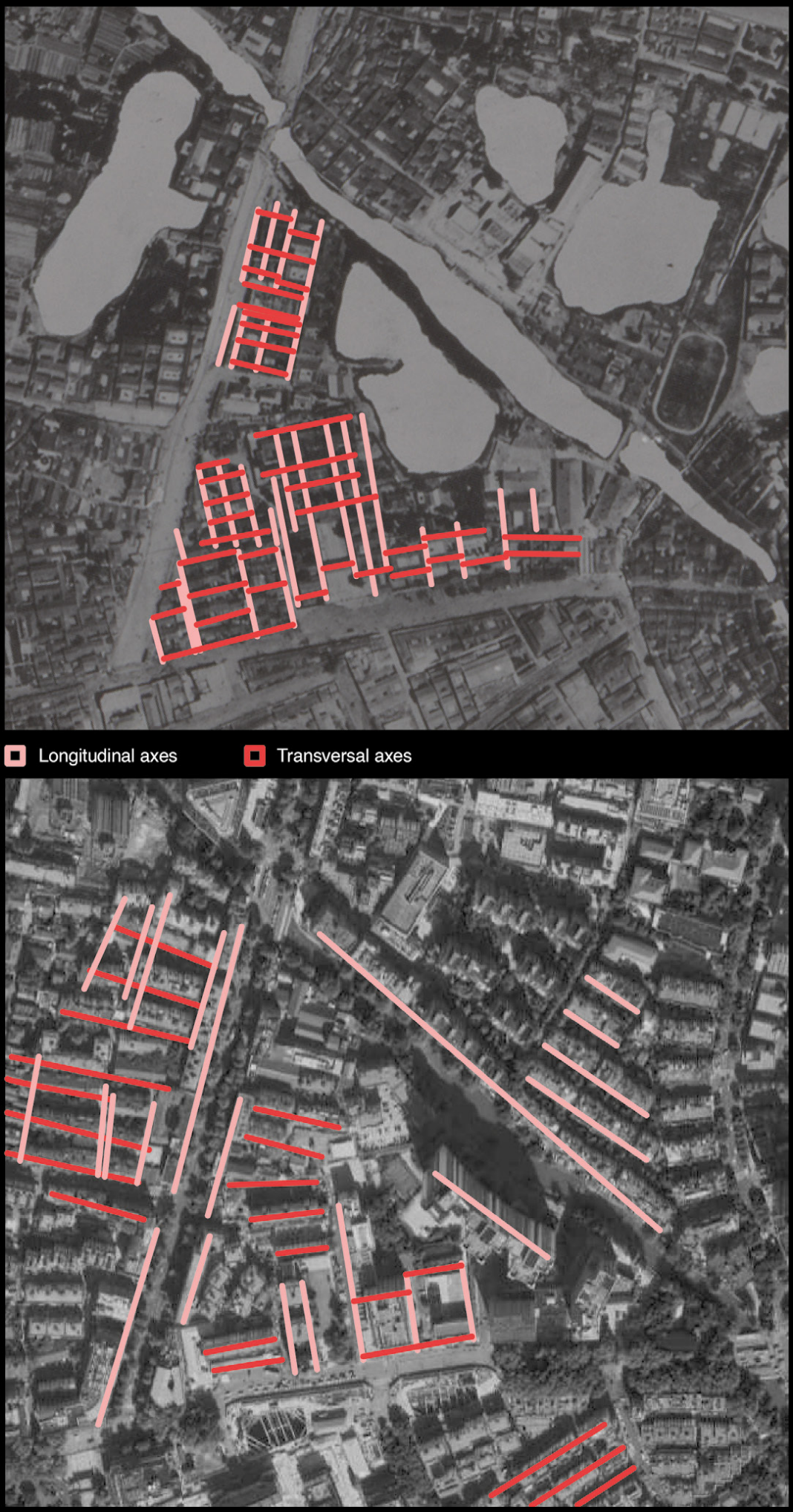


Figure 5.1. Analysis of the longitudinal and transversal axes in 1929 and 2024, showing the resulting urban grids. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

These buildings not only define the design of the interior spaces but also contribute to shaping and structuring the exterior public realm.

In order to develop a meaningful and coherent intervention, the longitudinal and transversal axes that characterise the urban morphology of the area were analysed and compared, both in 1929 and in the present day. As shown in Figure 5.1, the orientation of these axes has remained relatively consistent over time. However, since they are closely related to the existing buildings and street network, the analysis also reveals the significant increase in the scale of the urban fabric that has occurred over the years. In 1929, the intersection of these axes generated a grid characterised by a finer and more compact grain. In 2024, by contrast, this grid appears to have expanded, reflecting the increasing scale of the buildings and the consequent transformation of the urban fabric. The buildings along Taiping South Road and Zhenkang Road are among the elements that have maintained their orientation, remaining parallel to the main street axes. The same cannot be said of the buildings along the riverbanks. In 1929, irregular water basins were present on both sides of the Qinhuai River, meaning that these areas were largely unbuilt and did not yet present a defined urban edge. Today, by contrast, the presence of the river has become a significant structuring element, leading to the construction of buildings that run parallel to its course and clearly define its edges.

A margin is intentionally maintained along the riverbanks, allowing the waterfront to remain accessible and to be experienced as a public space. This condition represents an opportunity to enhance the value of the river as a shared urban amenity, providing inhabitants with spaces in which to walk, gather, and experience the river more directly.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the resulting axes and the grid that constitutes the basis of the design proposal. The intention is to partially restore the finer grain that characterised the area in 1929, introducing a clearer spatial order within the southern-central core of the Zhen Xiang triangle. At the same time, the proposal seeks to emphasise the urban rupture identified and extensively di-


River
Buildings
Project
Longitudinal axes
Transversal axes



Figure 5.2 – Design proposal based on the reconstructed urban grid. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.

scussed in Chapter 4. Rather than understanding this rupture as a purely negative element of separation, the project interprets it as an opportunity to establish new connections with the areas beyond the Qinhuai River and Taiping South Road.

This intention is expressed through the introduction of a semi-circular axis, represented by the white dashed line in Figure 5.2, which crosses the project area and transforms the existing condition of separation into a space of connection and transition.

The rupture thus becomes not a boundary, but a potential place of encounter: an open public space in which insiders and outsiders can coexist, interact, and experience the area as a shared urban environment.

Figure 5.4 shows a Nolli map. It is the same Nolli map presented in Chapter 4.2, Figure 4.10, this time with the new design proposal inserted within it. The existing residential buildings surrounding the Nanjing Confucius Temple Primary School are demolished, as shown in Figure 5.3, while the school itself is retained. Part of its existing courtyard is, however, reconfigured to provide more space for the surrounding residential development, allowing the housing to be reconstructed according to a design that is more sustainable for the inhabitants of the area. Here, sustainability is intended in terms of the quality of the inhabited space.

The grid of axes that characterises the proposed new buildings attempts to reorganise the space. How this reorganisation should take place has been extensively discussed in the previous analysis. In particular, Chen and Thwaites (2013) provide significant examples of design approaches for working coherently within the existing urban fabric of Nanjing, as shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5. These include the need to establish visual continuity with the existing street axes and to break down building volumes so that they respond to and integrate with the surrounding urban fabric.

These principles are also reflected in the design proposal, which establishes clearer boundaries between fully public spaces (sidewalks, pedestrian and vehicular streets) and private spaces. In this way, the proposal partially modifies the more contemporary

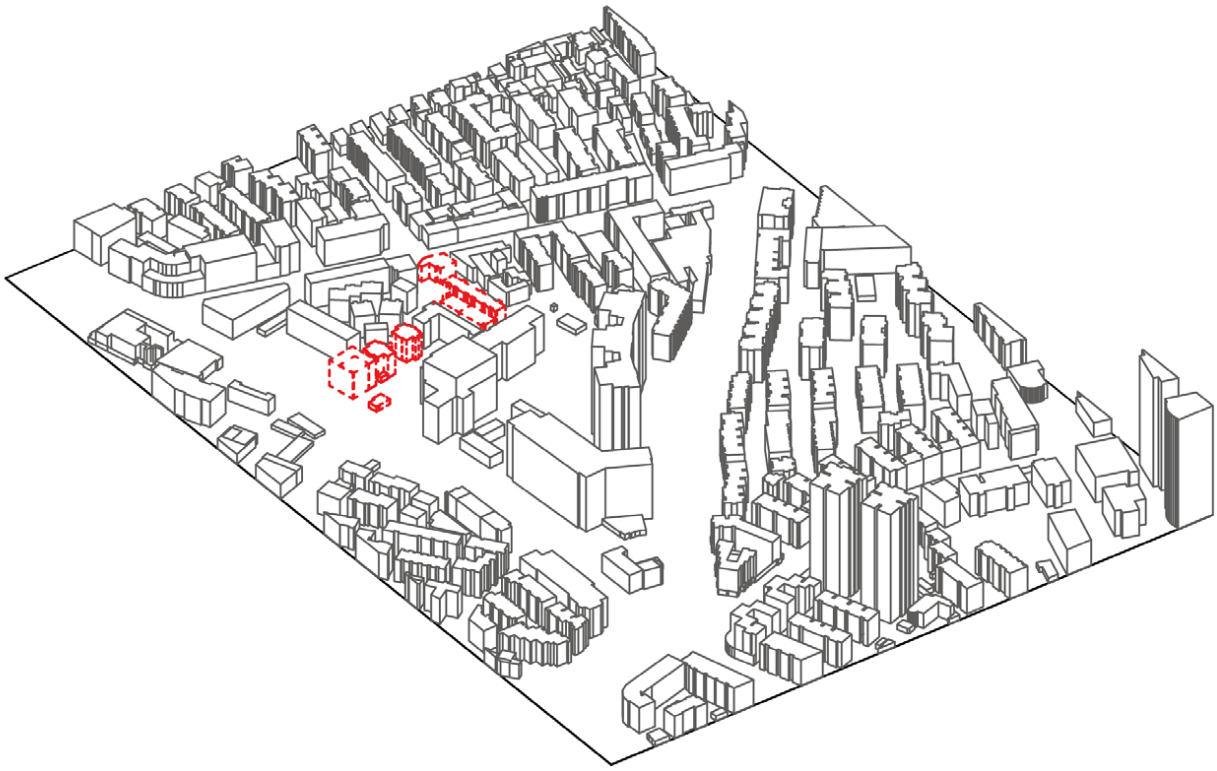


Figure 5.3. Axonometric view showing the buildings to be demolished. Red dashed lines indicate the existing buildings selected for demolition. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

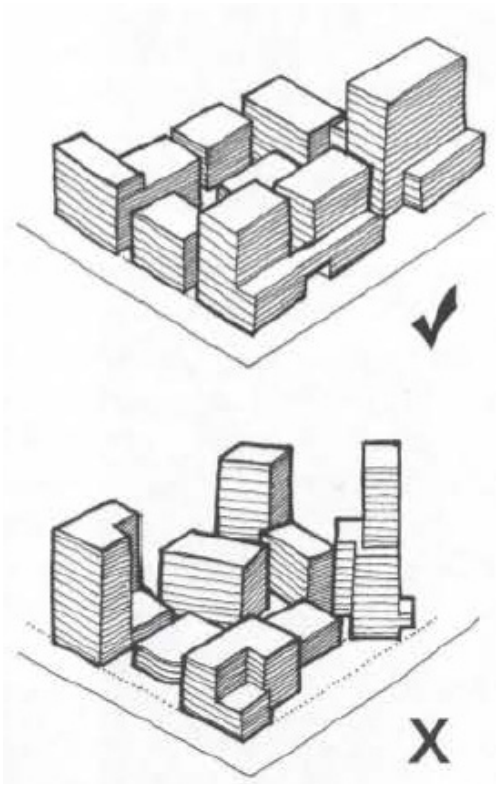


Figure 5.4. Align buildings or their porches and the like by the street lines of axial streets, main and secondary streets to define the street spaces.
Source: Chen & Thwaites (2013, p. 177).

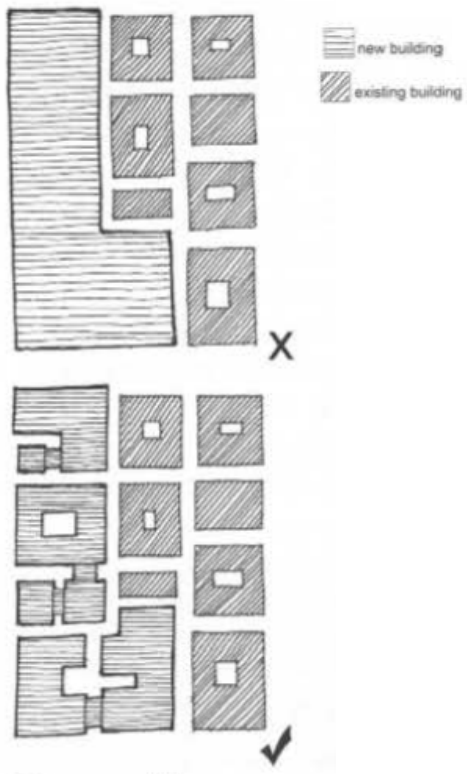


Figure 5.5 – Break down the volume of a public building into a group of small buildings to fit into the context.
Source: Chen & Thwaites (2013, p. 187).





Figure 5.6. “Nolli Map 2.0”: Nolli map incorporating the proposed design intervention. Scale 1:2000. Author’s drawing.

trend of a city that tends to maintain the same blocks defined by the streets of the past, while introducing within them buildings with disconnected forms, rather anonymous and disconnected from the surrounding context. These buildings appear to have been placed there out of necessity, but could ultimately be located anywhere.

The aim of this "Nolli Map 2.0" is instead to emphasise how the new buildings, although characterised by simple forms, can become "special" through the way they are organised and positioned. Their placement gives them a specific value and a logical meaning, with the intention of enhancing the well-being provided by both the built and unbuilt environment. The open space that previously surrounded the residential buildings is now incorporated within them, while the semi-circular axis that could previously be glimpsed—dividing the area and differentiating the northern and southern parts of the triangle—is now emphasised through the perimeter and contours of the buildings. The design focus therefore becomes both the built and the unbuilt space, which together represent the fullest expression of the Nolli map.

What is worth exploring further is how space plays this role as a "mediator". In fact, when the focus shifts from whether a space is built or unbuilt to who actually needs and uses these spaces, we understand how the project area acts as a mediator not only for those who live and reside there, but also for those who are simply passing through.
The distinction between ***outsiders*** and ***insiders*** therefore helps to understand many of the design choices that have been made. Starting from Figure 5.7, significant information is added to what emerged from the Nolli map. Form and morphology are indeed extremely important, but they are also the decisive outcome of broader issues. In the case of the project area, we can observe that Metro Line 3 has one of the exits of Fuzimiao Station located precisely at the centre of the triangle. This suggests that there will be a significant flow of people coming from outside the area, potentially interested in reaching some of the city's main points of interest.

The commercial buildings along Taiping South Road are also significant, as they follow the street axis, as previously discussed, while those along

Zhenkang Road are characterised by large shopping centres. From this observation comes the idea of using the new central street axis connecting the metro station to Zhenkang Road as a main circulation axis, primarily serving outsiders and vehicular movement, while keeping the peripheral parts of the project more similar to the existing typology of Taiping South Road.

This creates more traditional mixed-use edges at the two ends of the project area, where people can shop or eat within a smaller-scale environment. It is precisely through this strategy that value can be restored to Needle Alley, transforming it into a pedestrian connection between these two mixed-use edges and an entrance area for the Nanjing Confucius Temple Primary School. Its pedestrian character also allows the alley to become a safer and more accessible space for the children attending the school, particularly in relation to the reconfiguration of part of the existing school courtyard. The other significant buildings at the edges of the project area, namely the Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank Building and the Wuben Silkworm Breeding Factory, are also retained as important examples of two different historical periods of China.

They will effectively be flanked by public buildings that can serve the community and act as a transition between the “super-public” spaces (open spaces, the shopping centre, the metro station, and the Fuzimiao area) and the “public” spaces (the museum, dining areas, and parking).

Through these choices, which gradually follow this overall scheme, outsiders and insiders are directed towards flows and patterns of spatial use that are more coherent and better suited to serving the needs of both. What has been discussed so far becomes even more evident in Section 5.8, where we can observe this gradation of spaces, ranging from public, to mixed-use edges, to the residential core and student living.

This choice was made precisely to ensure that there would be sufficient semi-public space for insiders, while also providing fully public spaces for both outsiders and insiders, allowing the two to coexist without interfering with one another.


River
Buildings
Significant Buildings
Public Buildings
Mixed-UseEdge



Figure 5.7. Spatial organisation of the project area, showing the sequence of mixed-use edges, public spaces, private spaces, residential core and student living. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.

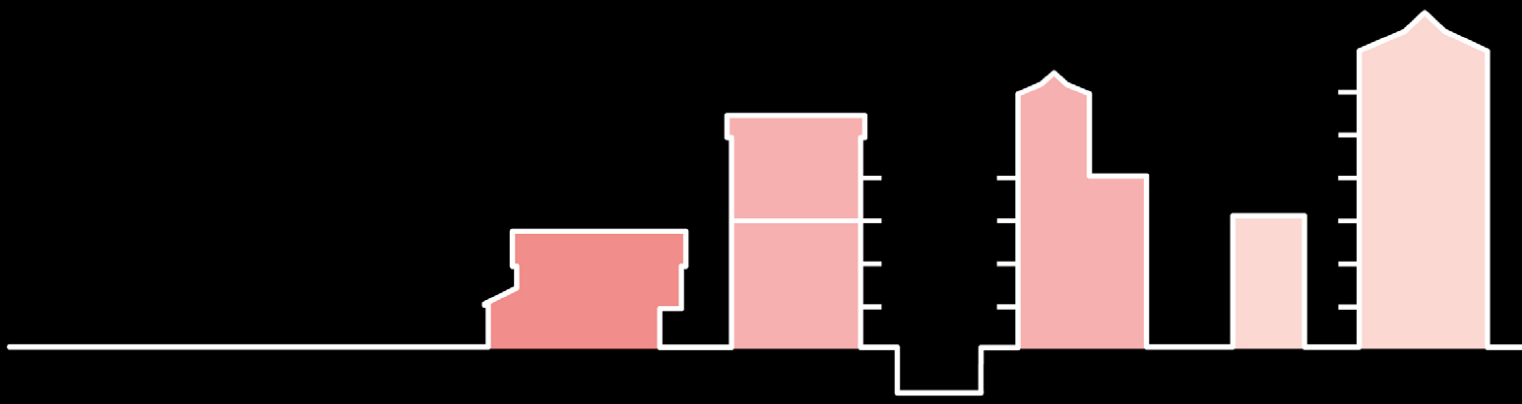


Figure 5.8. Section showing the spatial gradation from the external public spaces towards the increasingly private residential core. Not to scale. Author's drawing.



Figure 5.9. Diagram showing the main movement patterns of insiders and outsiders within the proposed spatial organisation. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

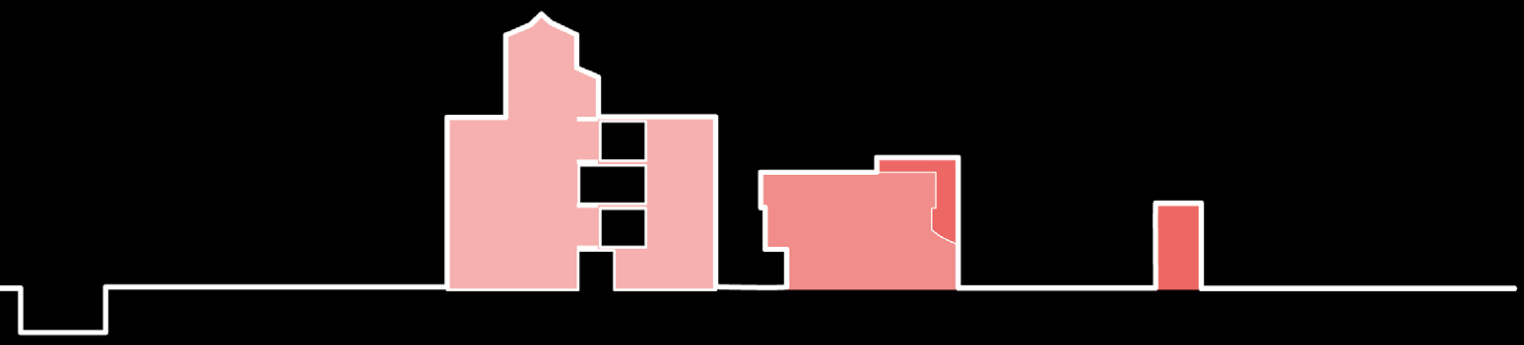


Figure 5.9 illustrates the imagined movement patterns of these two types of “inhabitants” of the city. Outsiders move to and from the area, while insiders mainly move through and experience the semi-public spaces associated with the residential typologies.

These typologies can be seen even more clearly in the Typological Plan 2.0, which was also developed on the basis of the study of the existing condition of the area, but subsequently modified to incorporate the new design proposal.

In this case, the entrances to the different spaces can be identified more clearly, making it possible to better understand and imagine how circulation takes place within the project area.

Overall, the analysis and design process presented in this section show how the reconstruction of the urban structure is not limited to the arrangement of buildings, but also concerns the relationships between built and unbuilt spaces, their different degrees of accessibility, and the ways in which people move through and experience them. The proposed structure therefore seeks to establish a more coherent relationship between the existing urban fabric, the new buildings, and the different needs of insiders and outsiders, creating a gradual sequence of spaces that supports both movement and everyday life within the area.





Figure 5.10. Typological Plan 2.0, developed from the analysis of the existing typological structure and modified to incorporate the proposed design intervention. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.

5.2_From Urban Structure to Architectural Form

Once a “satisfactory” urban structure has been reconstructed, the next step is to define the architectural form. In this sense, the typological plan can act as a link between the two scales. The typological element represents a closer reading of the spaces, allowing us to understand both their relationship with the exterior and their internal organisation. Before examining the building typologies in detail, however, it is useful to provide an overview of how the previous considerations have been translated into design outcomes.

Figure 5.11 provides an overview of the project, finally moving from a two-dimensional representation to a three-dimensional one. From this image, the spatial transition discussed previously can also be understood through the different building heights. When the objective is to create a transition between public and private, and between outsiders and insiders, the height of the buildings plays a key role. The mixed-use edges, particularly the one more visible along Zhenkang Road, are characterised by two-storey buildings, designed at a human scale to reinforce the idea of approaching a welcoming area. As one moves further into the project, the building heights gradually increase, also responding to the existing school, which has been retained and is a seven-storey building. This variation in scale is also functional in ensuring pleasant views from the residential buildings. Another prominent aspect is the amount of green space surrounding the metro station and its connection to the river, conceived as a large green buffer zone reached through a corridor.

This idea of a corridor can be read in the masterplan in Figure 5.12, where the use of paving makes the enhancement of the semi-circular axis connecting Taiping South Road to the Qinhuai River particularly evident. This connection to the water also recalls the past, when considering the water basins that were present within the area of interest in 1929. Their presence therefore deserves to be mentioned and, in a sense, remembered through the project. Along this promenade, within this corridor, both tree-lined green spaces and small water features are reintroduced in order to mitigate the environment and make the green spaces more pleasant to experience.

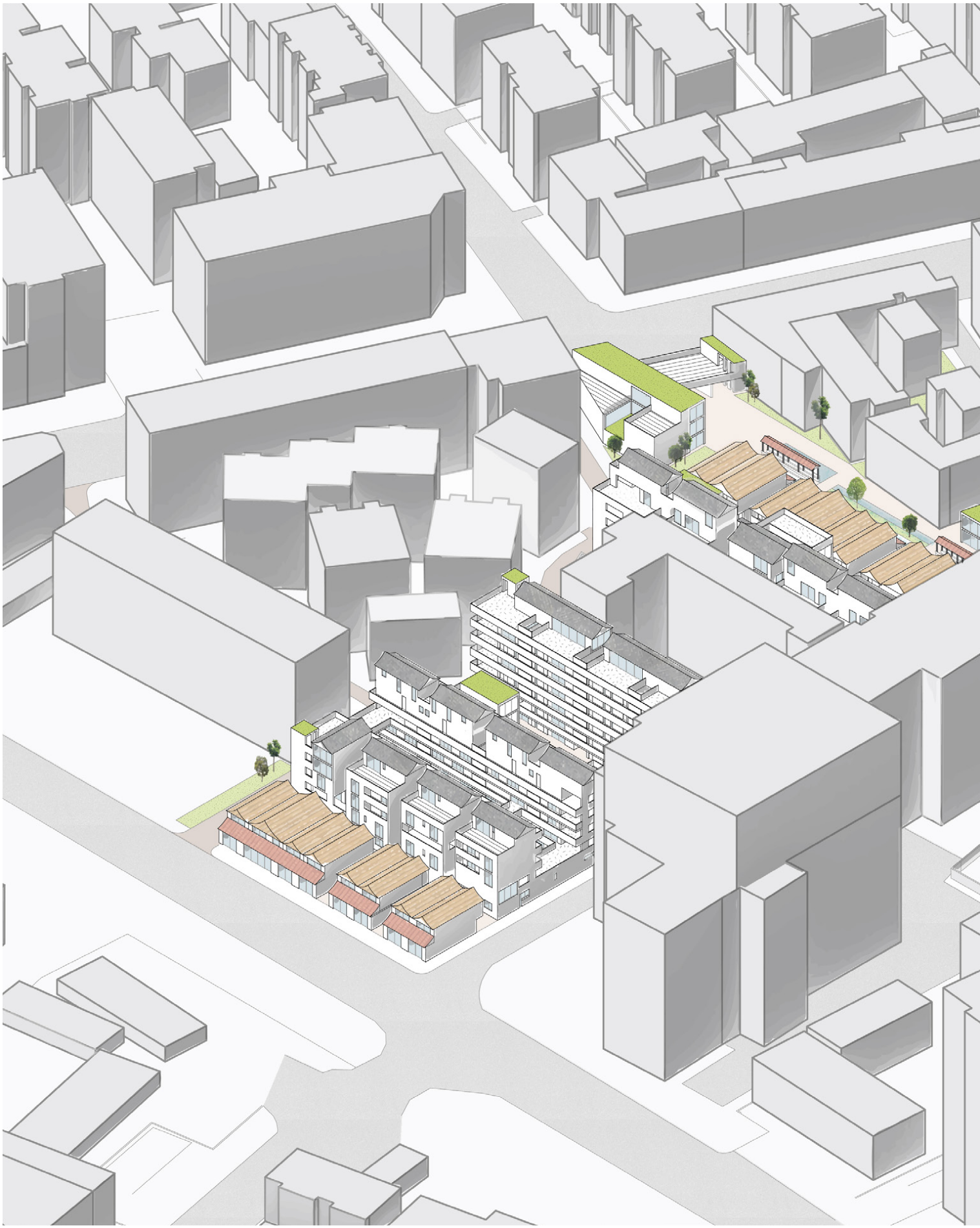


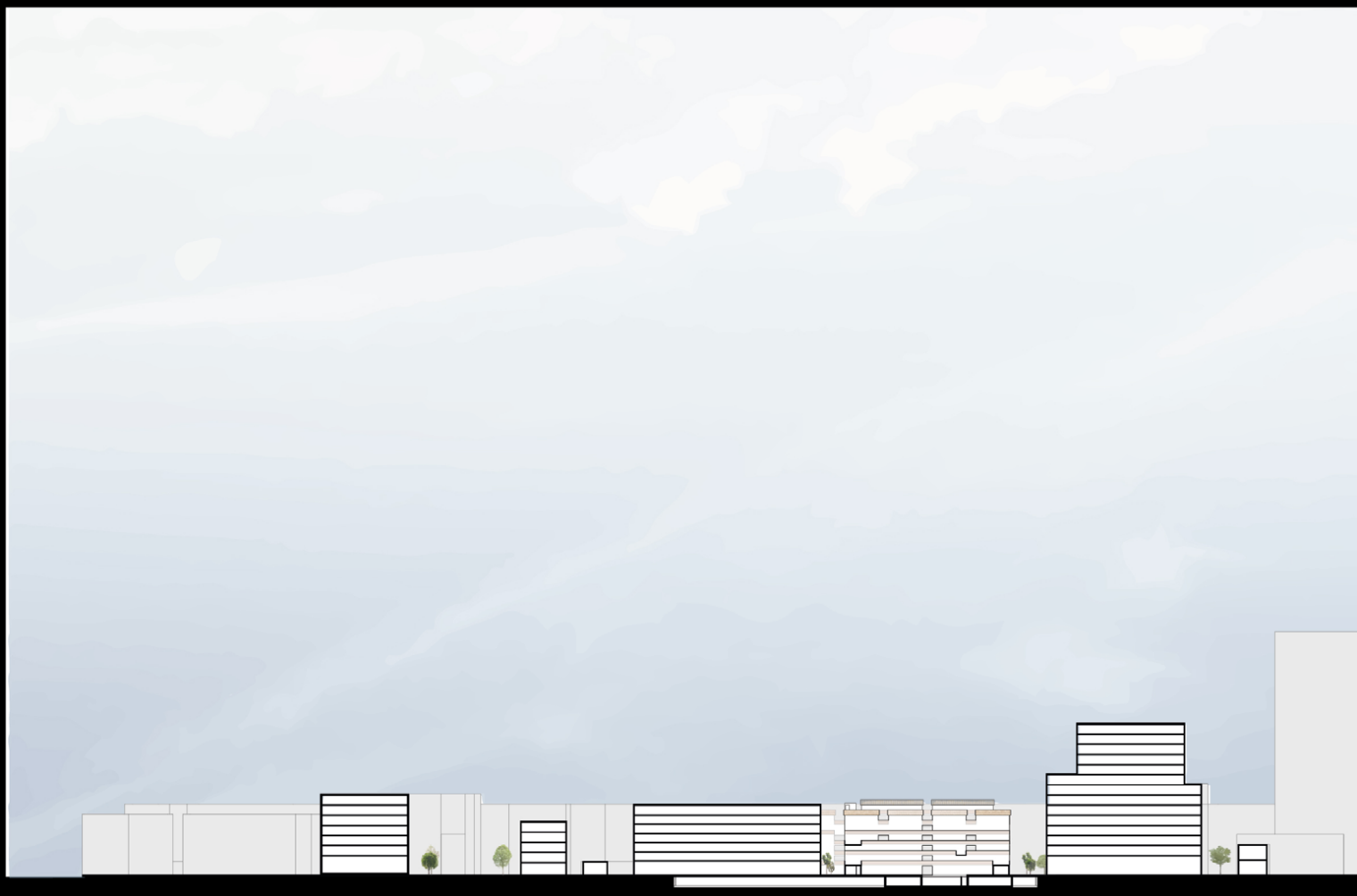


Figure 5.11. Axonometric view of the design proposal. Scale 1:1000. Author's drawing.


B
A
B

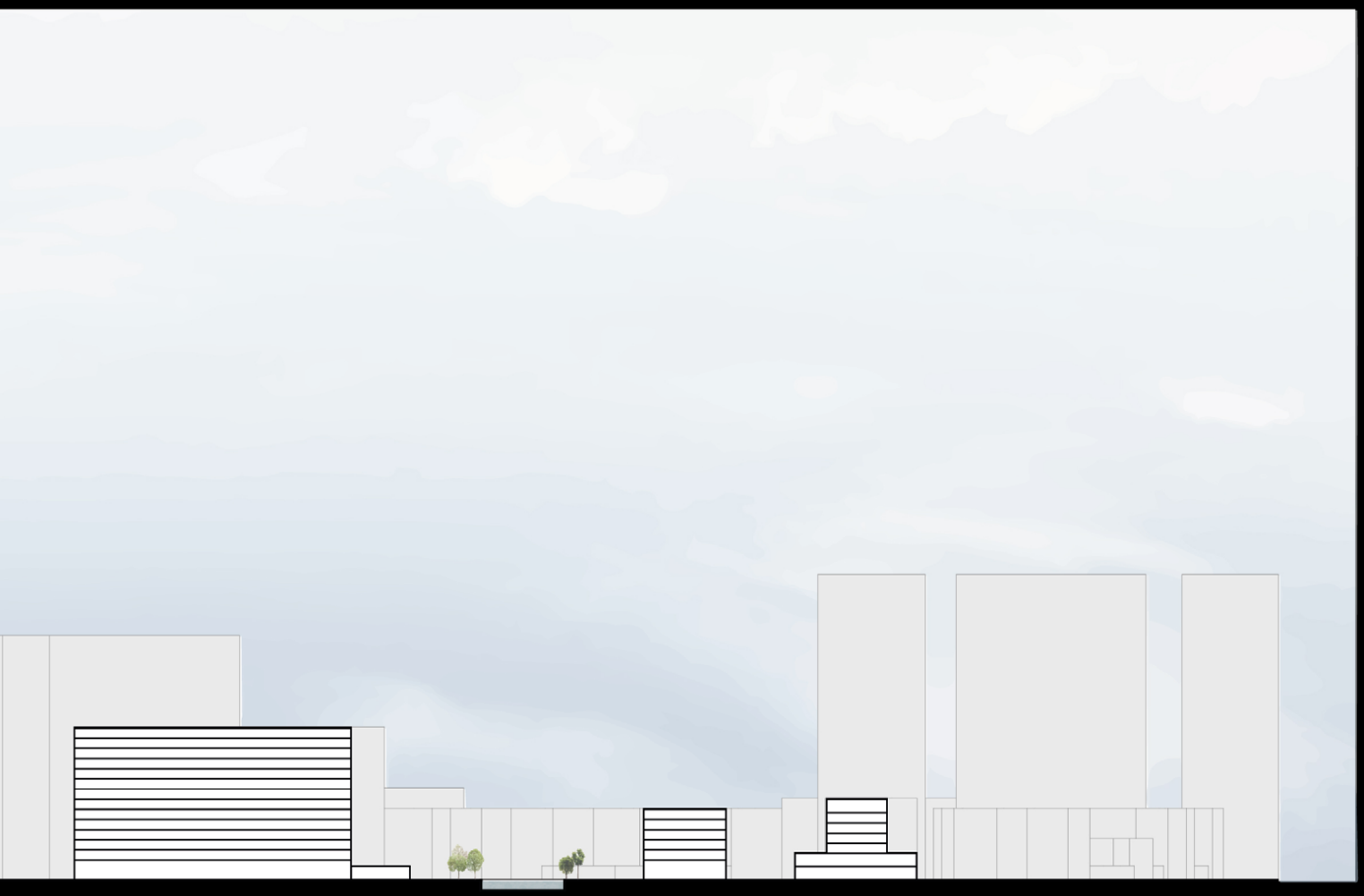


Figure 5.12. Masterplan of the design proposal. Scale 1:2000. Author’s drawing.



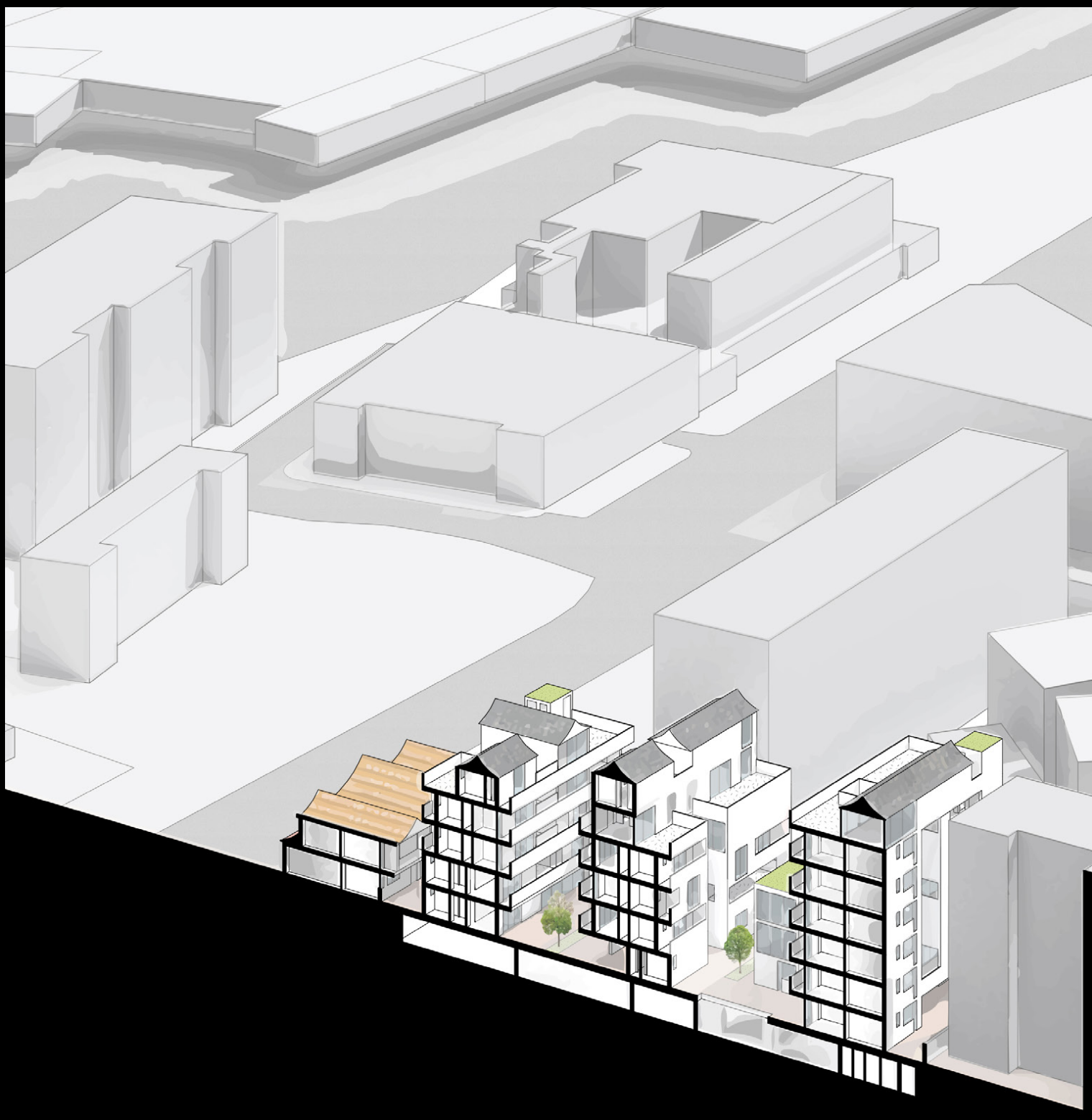
Public space is not conceived only as an external space at ground level, but also extends vertically through the project. More specifically, it is distributed across the underground level and the first floor, where it can interact with the ground floor remaining easily accessible and usable. This can be observed in Sections 5.13 and 5.14.

In addition to the partially underground spaces, the project also includes terraces that can be used by people accessing the services in the area. If the previously mentioned “corridor” may appear primarily as a place of passage, it is also important to provide spaces for people to stay and spend time. This becomes particularly relevant when the spaces intended to accommodate people within the mixed-use edges are relatively limited. As previously discussed, the intention is to emphasise a more human and traditional scale within these spaces. However, this principle must also respond to the needs of the project. This is why urban space is expanded and extended across different levels, while remaining within a height and visual range that can still be perceived and experienced by people. This approach recalls the principles discussed by Gehl (2011) in Life Between Buildings: Using



Public Space, particularly the importance of keeping public spaces within the visual range of people. For a space to be accessible and actually used, it is not sufficient for it to be physically connected: it must also be visually accessible. People need to be able to perceive where a space leads, how it can be reached, and what is happening within it. If a staircase leading to another level cannot be clearly seen, it is less likely to be used; similarly, if the activities and people occupying a space are not visually connected to those moving through the spaces below, that upper level can feel detached and less inviting. This principle informs the decision to distribute public space across three interconnected levels. The underground level, the ground floor, and the first floor are not conceived as separate spaces, but as visually and physically connected parts of the same public environment. The aim is therefore to maintain a continuous visual relationship between the different levels, allowing people to perceive the presence of others and the activities taking place beyond their immediate position. In this way, moving through and occupying the different levels becomes more intuitive, while the public space remains within the scale and visual perception of the human eye.

Figure 5.13. Territorial section AA of the design proposal. Scale 1:2000. Author's drawing.



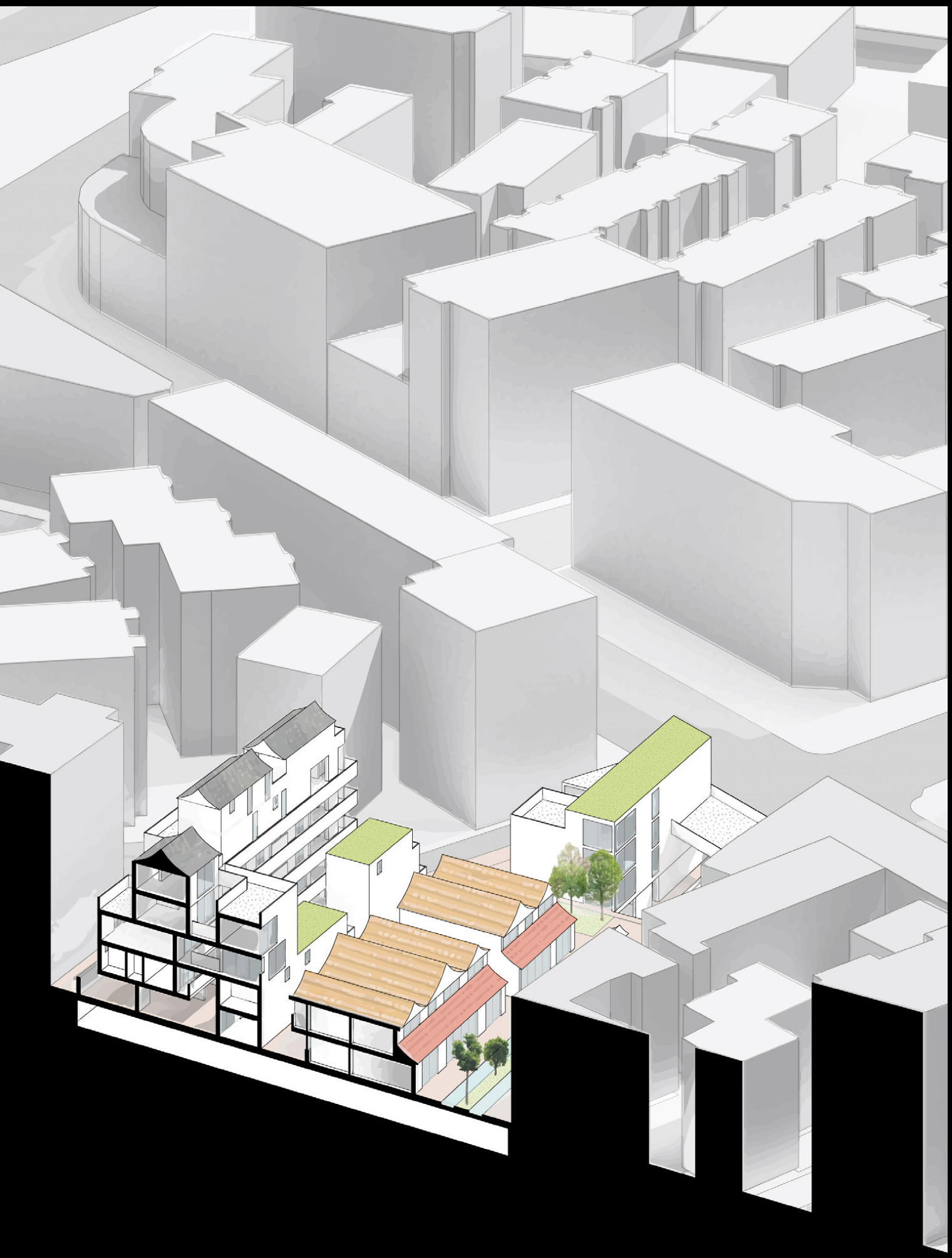


Figure 5.14. Longitudinal perspective section BB, scale 1:500. Author’s drawing.

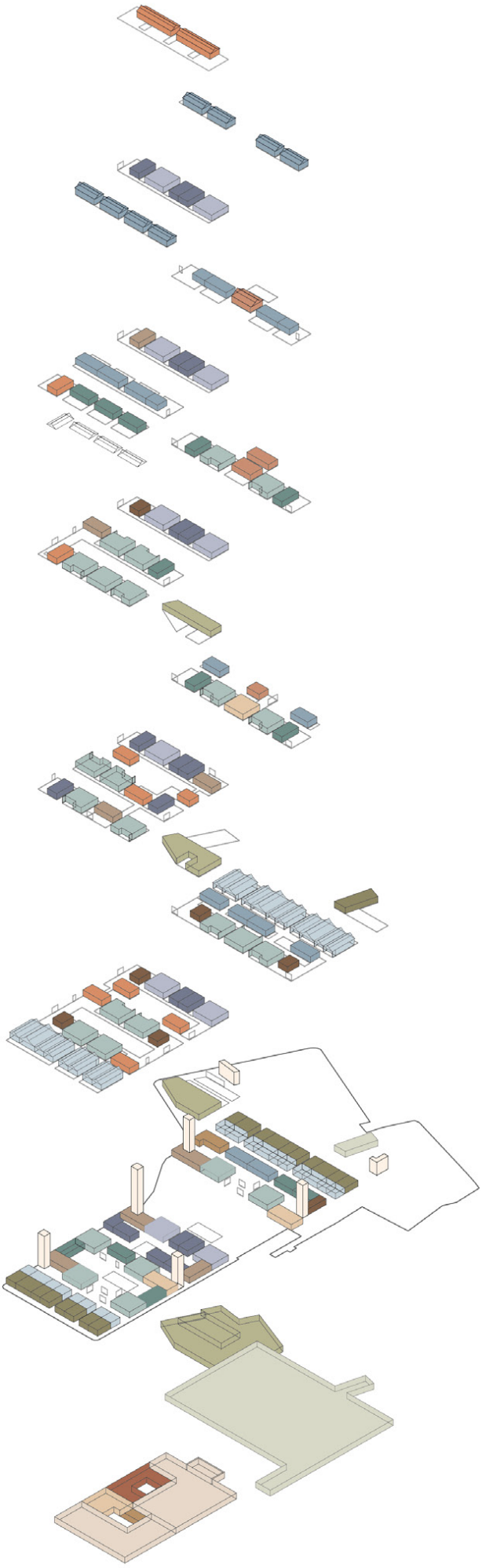
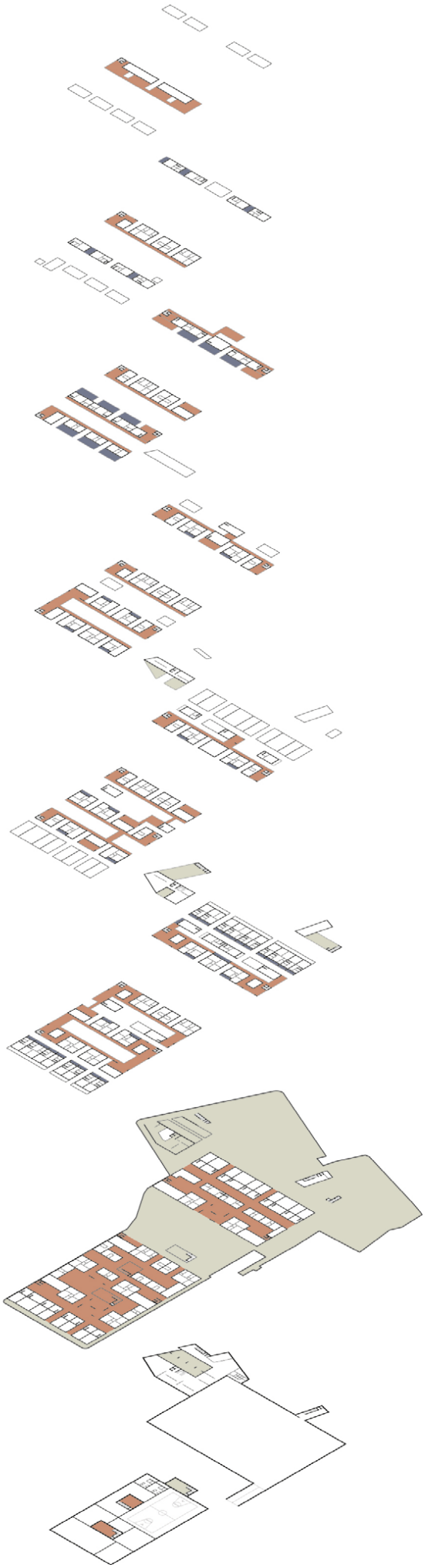


Figure 5.15. Exploded axonometric view showing the organisation of enclosed spaces. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

After this introduction to the project, the analysis moves into greater detail while taking a step back to the theme of urban structure. The two axonometric sectional drawings explore the organisation of space from this perspective.

The first, Figure 5.15, shows the enclosed spaces, divided into three categories. Two are more immediate to understand: public spaces, including the garage, museum, shops, and restaurants, and private spaces, including the different residential typologies, such as duplexes and apartments for families or students. The third category is more complex: semi-public spaces. These are accessible to all residents. They are neither completely private, like the residential spaces, nor entirely public and accessible to outsiders. They are intended for insiders and shared among them. This category represents the core of the ideas behind the architectu-



ral choices of the project. These spaces are interconnected to create places of encounter among residents, including shared kitchens, study areas, coworking spaces, and areas for children. They allow people to leave their homes and enter common spaces where they can meet, share, and support one another.

This sharing takes place both within enclosed and open spaces.

Figure 5.16 therefore analyses the open spaces according to the same principle. As previously discussed, fully public spaces are located mainly at ground level, but also partially on the underground and first-floor levels. Semi-public spaces include the internal courtyards defined by the building perimeters at ground level, as well as the access galleries and the areas surrounding the enclosed semi-public spaces, maintaining a continuous relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces. The same applies to private spaces: almost all residential typologies have access to a private outdoor space, with the exception of the student rooms.

Figure 5.16. Exploded axonometric view showing the organisation of open spaces. Not to scale. Author's drawing.


D
Parking
C
Museum
Shop
Food
Shop
Food
Shop
Shop
Shop
Food
Shop
Shop
Laundry
Storage
Kitchen
Kids Area
SCHOOL
D



Figure 5.17. Ground-floor plan of the northern, more commercial and public area. Scale 1:500. Author's drawing.


D
Food
C
Museum
Storage
Storage
D



Figure 5.18. First-floor plan of the northern, more commercial and public area. Scale 1:500. Author's drawing.



Through a more detailed scale of representation, the project can be understood more clearly. In this case, the ground-floor plan of the northern area, Figure5.17, shows what was previously explained regarding the connection with the metro station, which acts as the centre of the portion of the city in which the project operates. The metro is located slightly below street level, and its connection with the "corridor" running between Taiping South Road and the Qinhuai River takes place through gently descending paths, making the connection accessible to everyone. Within the corridor, the design of



the open space can be better understood through the presence of water features, covered seating areas, and tree-lined green spaces, intended to provide shaded areas and therefore promote greater usability and comfort.

It can also be seen that access from Taiping South Road can take place through a pedestrian bridge crossing one of the openings created in the underground level of the museum. As previously mentioned, this decision to “puncture” the street level extends the public space while also allowing natural light to reach the underground levels.

Figure 5.19. Section CC showing the northern elevation of the museum and the buffer zone within the mixed-use edge. Scale 1:500. Author’s drawing.



The plan also shows the presence of small shops and restaurants, which on the first floor are transformed into duplexes for families and couples. On the same level, we can also see the public terraces accessible from the ground floor, conceived as a further extension of the public space where people can consume food purchased on the lower levels.

Sections 5.19 and 5.20, on the other hand, make it possible to perceive the more human scale of the project when compared with the surrounding high-rise buildings.



Section 5.19, in particular, cuts through the “green corridor” and shows the elevation of the area, making the access galleries and terraces more clearly visible. Section 5.20 instead provides a closer view of the interior spaces and their circulation system, including the staircases providing access to the different levels. It also shows the duplex typologies, with shops on the ground floor and residential units above, as well as the presence of several semi-public spaces distributed throughout the residential areas.

Figure 5.20. Transverse section DD showing the circulation and access system, including the stairways leading to the access galleries. Scale 1:500. Author’s drawing.

5.3_Housing Typologies and Everyday Life

An increasingly detailed focus on the architectural scale allows us to investigate the relationship between housing typologies and everyday life within the project.

Figure 5.21 provides an overview of the proposed housing typologies, grouped into three main categories: duplexes with shops, duplexes, and single-storey units. Each category is further divided into specific types according to the internal organisation and floor area of the units. From this initial overview, the following plans and sections progressively zoom into the architectural scale, from 1:200 to 1:50, allowing the organisation of the units and their everyday use to be explored in greater detail.

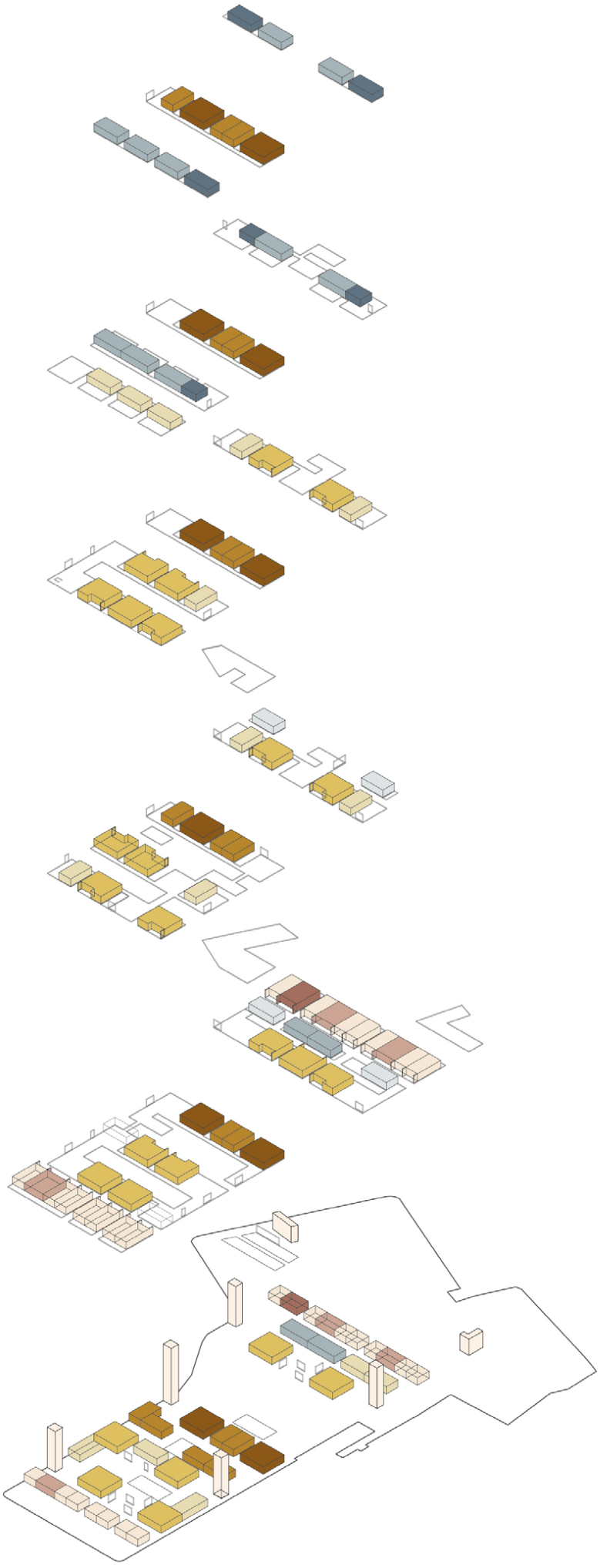
In detail, Plan 5.22 illustrates the gradual variation in building heights. The buffer zones are only two storeys high, allowing the buildings behind them to benefit from more open views from their terraces. This organisation also generates large internal courtyards at ground level, providing natural light to the inward-facing units and access to semi-public spaces. These spaces act as an extension of the private residences, allowing residents to move from their private spaces into shared areas while maintaining a more intimate and semi-private environment.

Sections 5.24 and 5.25 further illustrate the alternation between residential units and common areas, such as kitchens and activity rooms, reinforcing the relationship between private living and communal spaces.

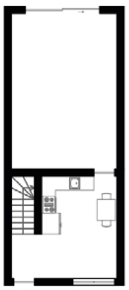
This is particularly relevant in the student residences shown in Figures 5.26 and 5.27. Since these consist of small-sized lofts or three-bedroom units, they encourage the use of common areas and provide access to larger shared spaces.

Figures 5.28 and 5.29, drawn at a scale of 1:50, allow the individual and family residential units to be explored in greater detail, showing how they are organised and experienced in everyday life. The sections further highlight the relationship between private residential spaces and shared semi-private areas within the residential complex.

Residential Units Typologies



Duplex with shops

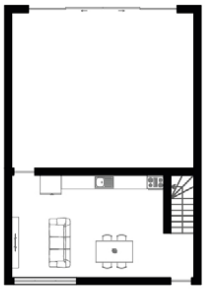


Ground Floor



Upper Floor

DS1 _ 65mq
1 bedroom
1 bathroom

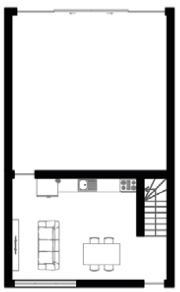


Ground Floor



Upper Floor

DS2 _ 100mq
2 bedrooms
2 bathrooms



Ground Floor



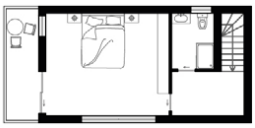
Upper Floor

DS3 _ 90mq
2 bedrooms
2 bathrooms

Duplex



Ground Floor

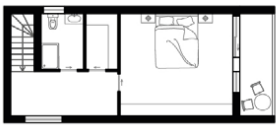


Upper Floor

D1 _ 80mq
1 bedroom
1 bathroom

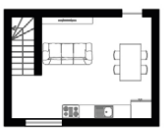


Ground Floor



Upper Floor

D2 _ 90mq
2 bedrooms
2 bathrooms



Ground Floor



Upper Floor

D3 _ 75mq
1 bedroom
1 bathroom

Single storey



S1 _ 50mq
1 bedroom
1 bathroom



S2 _ 90mq
2 bedrooms
2 bathrooms



SA1 _ 50mq
1 bedroom
1 bathroom



SA2 _ 90mq
3 bedrooms
2 bathrooms

Figure 5.21. Exploded axonometric view and plans showing the organisation and different residential typologies. Not to scale. Author's drawing.


Kitchen
Living Room
Bedroom
Bath
Bedroom
Bath
Living Room
Kitchen
E
ACTIVITY ROOM
Bedroom
Bath
Living Room



Figure 5.22. Fourth-floor plan showing the southern residential area. Scale 1:200. Author's drawing.


Bath
WIC
Bedroom
Bedroom
WIC
Bath
E



Figure 5.23. Fifth-floor plan showing the southern residential area. Scale 1:200. Author's drawing.


Bath
WIC
Bedroom
Bedroom
WIC
Bath
Living Room
WIC
Bath
Bath
WIC
Living Room
Bedroom
Living Room
Living Room
Kitchen
Living Room
Bedroom
ACTIVITIES
Bedroom
Living Room
Living Room
Kitchen
KIDS AREA

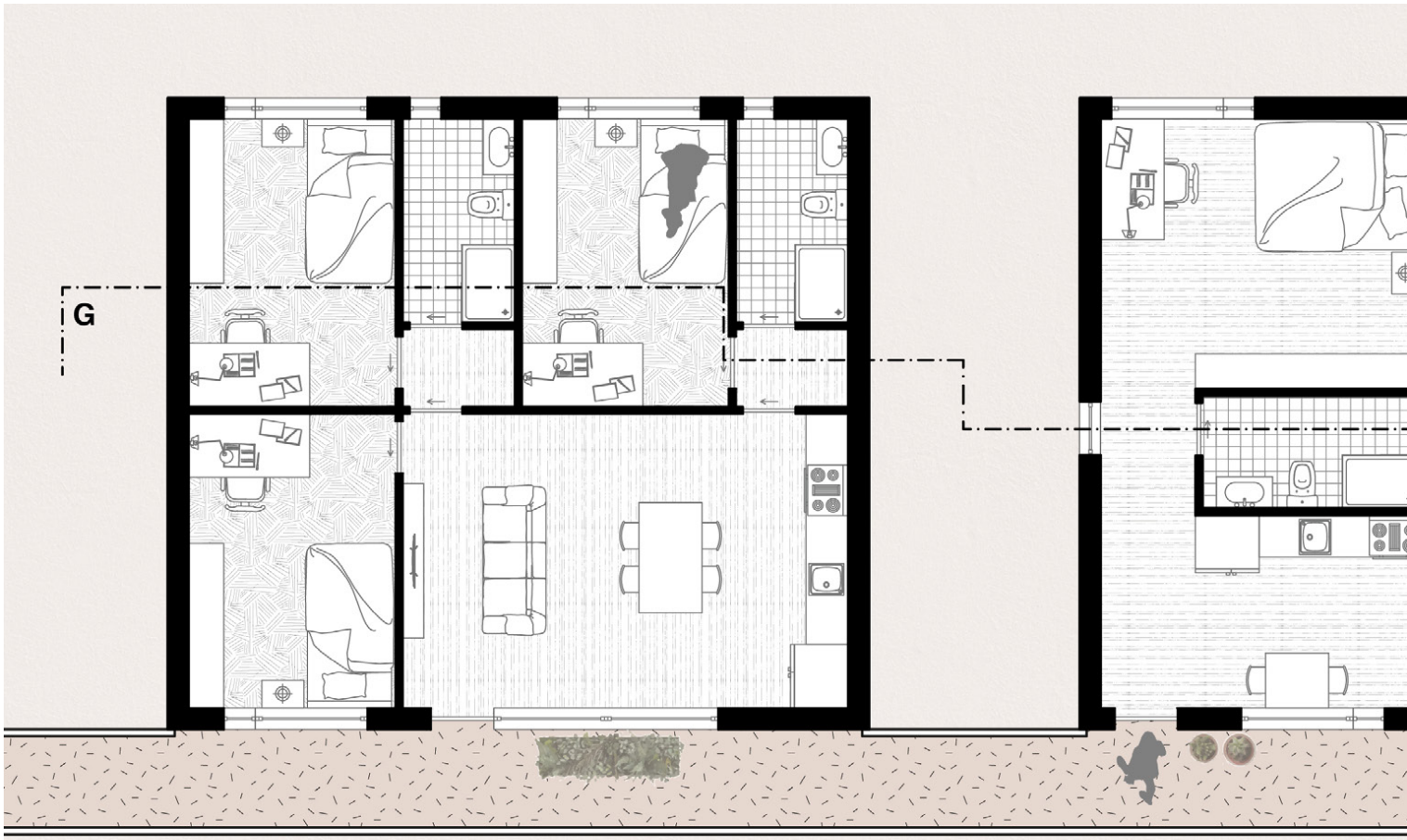


Figure 5.24. Section EE through the residential area. Scale 1:200. Author's drawing.


Bedroom
Bath
Bed
Living
Room
Bedroom
Bedroom
Bedroom
KITCHEN
ACTIVITI
Bedroom
WIC
Bath
Bedroom
Bedroom
Bedroom
SHOP
Living
Room
Living
Room
GYM
LAUNDRY



Figure 5.25. Transverse section FF through the residential area. Scale 1:200. Author's drawing.


G

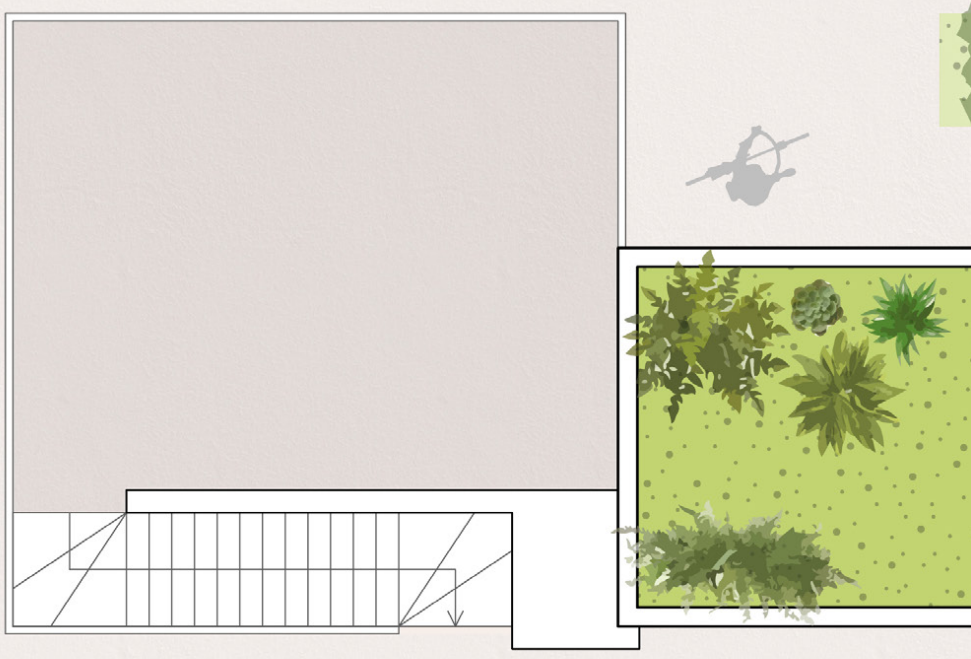




Figure 5.26. Second-floor plan showing the student residential area. Scale 1:100. Author's drawing.





Figure 5.27. Section GG through the student residential area. Scale 1:100. Author's drawing.


H



Figure 5.28. Third-floor plan showing family and couple unit. Scale 1:50. Author's drawing.





Figure 5.29. Section HH through the family and couple unit. Scale 1:50. Author’s drawing.

5.4_Experiencing Zhen Xiang

The drawings at a scale of 1:50 act as a bridge between the architectural scale and the experience of the spaces. At this scale, it is possible to begin to understand in greater detail how the spaces are experienced and used by the community.
The following visual representations provide an overview of how people relate to and experience the regenerated spaces.

These spaces can be perceived as more human-scaled when compared with the surrounding buildings, while also providing generous areas of open space for different activities. They allow interaction among insiders, but also between insiders and outsiders, particularly within the more commercial and public area near the metro and the museum complex of the Wuben Silkworm Breeding Factory.

The experience of Zhen Xiang is therefore defined by a sequence of spaces with different degrees of **openness** and **intimacy**. Moving through the area means gradually transitioning from fully public spaces to more shared and intimate environments, allowing the character of the place to change according to the position of the user.

The continuity between indoor and outdoor spaces also becomes an important part of this experience. Courtyards, external access galleries, terraces, and semi-public areas create **intermediate spaces** where residents can remain connected to the activities taking place around them without necessarily entering fully public spaces.

The project therefore does not conceive circulation only as movement from one point to another. Along the main routes, spaces for stopping, meeting, and observing are introduced, allowing people to choose whether to simply pass through or remain within the space.

The experience of the regenerated area therefore remains connected to its existing identity not only through the preservation of its historical elements, but also through the reintroduction of a more human and familiar urban scale. Pedestrian streets, small shops, and internal courtyards recall the finer-grained spaces that historically characterised the area, allowing the regeneration to reinterpret rather and reintroduce its existing identity.





Figure 5.29. Two-point perspective view of the metro area, showing the integration of green spaces and water features within the public space system. Not to scale. Author's elaboration, AI-assisted.


美食



Figure 5.30. Two-point perspective view of the museum area, showing the organisation of public spaces across different levels. Not to scale. Author's elaboration, AI-assisted.





Figure 5.31. Two-point perspective view of the shared rooftop terrace of the student residence and the shared internal courtyard within the residential area. Author's elaboration, AI-assisted.





Figure 5.32. Two-point perspective view from the pedestrian area of Needle Alley, showing the access galleries and the space behind the duplex residential typologies with ground-floor shops. Author's elaboration, AI-assisted.

These final perspectives attempt to communicate the atmosphere of the regenerated area through a representation that combines realistic elements with a more dream-like quality. Rather than providing a purely technical representation of the architecture, these views aim to convey how the spaces could actually be experienced. The atmoshere generated by the lanterns and neon lights are inspired by a familiar image of Nanjing, particularly its more touristic and active areas. The people represented in the views are inspired by the figures found in traditional Chinese paintings, such as those shown in Figures 3.9 and 3.10 in Chapter 3. Their presence helps illustrate the reduced, more human-scaled dimensions of the proposed architecture, recalling the scale that characterised the historical Nanjing within the intra muros area (Trisciuoglio 2020).
The views therefore provide a final interpretation of the experience that the project seeks to create, bringing together the different choices developed throughout the proposal.

Returning to Section 5.1, the project first focused on reconstructing the urban structure of Zhen Xiang. This involved introducing a finer grain, new axes, and a clearer relationship between the different parts of the area. The project does not completely replace the existing urban fabric, but selectively preserves significant elements while reorganising the surrounding spaces and establishing new connections. The historical buildings therefore remain within a renewed urban structure, creating a dialogue between the existing and the new.

Moving from the urban structure to the architectural scale, as explored in Section 5.2, this new structure is translated into different building typologies and a gradual sequence of public, mixed-use, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces. The relationship between buildings and open spaces becomes an essential part of the proposal. Courtyards, pedestrian streets, terraces, access galleries, green areas, and shared spaces are therefore not residual elements, but actively contribute to the way the neighbourhood can be experienced.

Finally, Section 5.3 moves towards the scale of everyday life, where these spaces allow for different degrees of interaction and privacy. The semi-private spaces act as

an extension of the private residences, allowing daily activities to move beyond the limits of the individual dwelling while remaining within a more intimate environment. At the same time, the more public areas accommodate both insiders and outsiders, creating opportunities for movement, encounter, and collective activities.

The different drawings presented throughout the chapter therefore describe the project not as a collection of individual buildings, but as a **continuous spatial system**. Plans and sections define its organisation and relationships, axonometric drawings clarify the connections between built and open spaces, while the perspectives translate these choices into an experience of the place.

Ultimately, the regeneration of Zhen Xiang is conceived as a process of reconnecting rather than replacing. Starting from the existing urban fabric and from the transitional morphologies identified through its analysis, the project continues the ongoing process of transformation of the city rather than interrupting it. The study of these transformations makes it possible to understand what the city has carried forward over time, as well as what has been lost or altered along the way.

Any new intervention therefore becomes a further moment within this continuous transformation, requiring choices about what should be preserved, what can be changed, and how new elements can be introduced. In this sense, the morphological reading of the city provides the basis for these choices, revealing the relationships, structures, and spatial qualities that have shaped the area over time. Their interpretation allows the new intervention to respond to the existing conditions without simply reproducing them, establishing a coherent form of change.

The project thus demonstrates how the analysis and interpretation of transitional morphologies can guide a new transformation of the urban fabric, creating an environment that responds to the history of the place while being designed around the needs of the community and its everyday life. Urban regeneration is therefore understood not as the creation of a final and fixed condition, but as a further step in the ongoing evolution of the city.

06

Beyond the Case Study:
Transferability of the Methodology

One Possible Response

The case study of Zhen Xiang, and above all the project presented thus far, should be clearly understood as one possible solution and one possible intervention in terms of urban regeneration. What needs to be emphasised and reiterated is that what can be "universalised" is the methodology: the process that led to one of the "infinite" possible outcomes, rather than the design outcome itself.
In fact, the design outcome represents the subsequent step resulting from a methodology that, instead, can be transferred and applied to other contexts.

The more "scientific" studies and analyses lead to the collection of a body of information, which the designer can then interpret and from which personal design choices emerge.

The methodology does not provide the necessary tools to generate a predetermined form or a fixed set of solutions. Rather, it provides guidance on how to read the city and which tools can be used to interpret it. As we have established, the city requires a deep understanding of its existing conditions and layers before they can, in any way, be altered or transformed.

If the final step of the methodology is the definition of design principles (see Section 4.4), the subsequent stage necessarily introduces the personal dimension of the designer. The design response can be understood as the translation of these principles into the specific spatial, morphological, and contextual conditions of the place.

The project presented here thus becomes a demonstration of the application of the method rather than a model to be reproduced. The value of the project lies primarily in demonstrating the reasoning that connects the existing urban condition and its multiple layers to the proposed transformation.

The aim is not to develop one design solution for multiple places, but rather to establish one methodological framework capable of generating multiple, place-specific solutions.

From Method to Place

Looking back at the steps that led us to identify the need for a methodology for urban regeneration projects, we began in Chapter 1 by stating that our contemporary cities are undergoing a series of rapid transformations and expansions. Addressing the formal changes that consequently take place within urban environments therefore requires an understanding of these transformations. In order to move towards the development of a methodology, we looked to the past through a number of iconic and exemplary cases. Indeed, the transformation of urban places is not a new phenomenon, but rather a process that has been occurring for centuries (see the example of Rome in Sections 2.1 and 2.2). This is consistent with the interpretation of cities as palimpsests, continuously shaped and reshaped through successive layers of transformation.

However, to intervene in Zhen Xiang and apply the methodology developed throughout this thesis, it was also necessary to investigate the transformations that have shaped China and, more specifically, Nanjing. Chapter 3 therefore did not yet constitute an application of the methodology itself, but rather the construction of the knowledge necessary to apply it consciously and to understand why intervention is needed within that specific context. This leads to the definition of place, which is not an external variable to which the methodology is subsequently adapted, but rather the very condition from which the process begins.

The methodology can be understood as a sequence moving from analysis, to interpretation, to the definition of design principles, and finally to the design response. It therefore constrains and informs the possible responses without determining a single formal outcome. Establishing a framework within which the designer can make informed decisions, while leaving room for interpretation and for different possible spatial responses. However, all of them would be characterised by their specificity to the place for which they are conceived.

The methodology can therefore be transferred to other contexts, while its formal outcome cannot, precisely because the latter is deeply site-specific.

Towards Place-Specific Regeneration

Here we return once again to the core of the discussion by addressing **urban regeneration**, which we have established as necessary to consciously intervene in urban spaces that require transformation and change, evolving alongside the social and economic dynamics of the places in which they are embedded. We have demonstrated that regeneration based on a **morphological approach** can be conscious—capable of respecting the place, its identity, and its processes of transition.

The Zhen Xiang project provides an example of this approach. It can be understood as a form of urban surgery carried out within a portion of the urban block, aimed at restoring the functioning of an area characterised by evident problems in the organisation and management of its spaces. This approach is the consequence of the urban anamnesis carried out to study and read China, Nanjing, Qinhuai, and finally Zhen Xiang. This process led to the reading of the urban morphology, the reconstruction of the historical fabric, the analysis of building typologies and open spaces, the identification of elements of local identity such as landmarks, as well as the recognition of existing criticalities and potentialities. The entire body of analysis was then interpreted in order to identify possible solutions capable of responding to the specific conditions of the place.

Following the analysis, the designer does not yet have definitive answers or predetermined solutions. Rather, the analysis provides a clear understanding of where intervention is needed and a set of principles to guide the design process. These principles can then be translated into possible interventions, as demonstrated in Section 5.1, where the urban structure of Zhen Xiang is reconstructed. Here, the design solution presented at different scales becomes one possible outcome of the methodological process. The designer therefore does not simply apply data, but interprets it. It is precisely this interpretative dimension that allows for the emergence of multiple possible solutions.

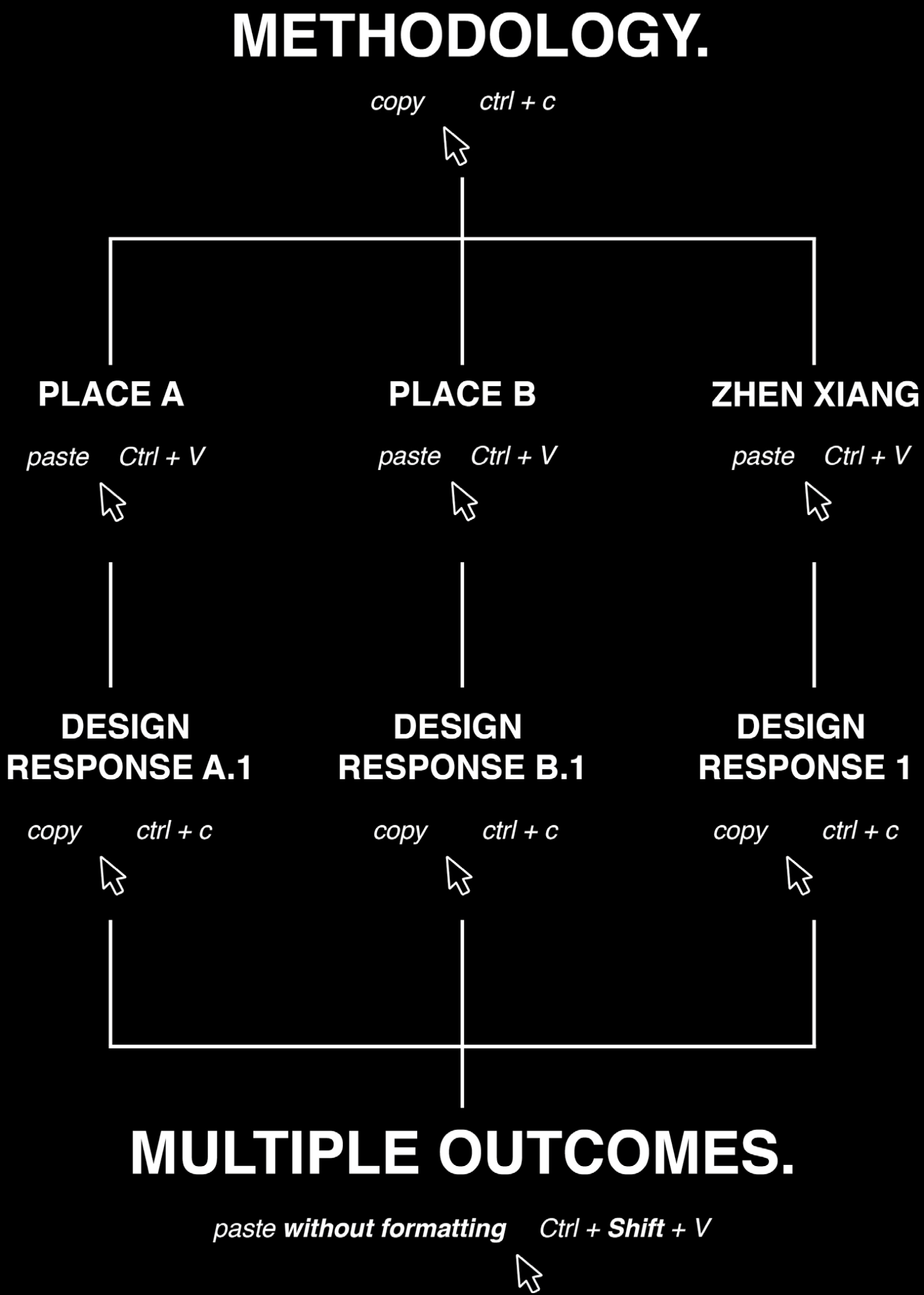


Figure 6.1. From “one solution for many places” to “one methodology, multiple possible outcomes”: a conceptual diagram illustrating the transferability of the methodology and the place-specific nature of each design response. Author’s graphic elaboration.

What *can* be universalized:

- reading before transforming
- understanding the stratification of the urban fabric
- recognising permanences and transformations
- interpreting urban morphology and building typology
- identifying local identity and place-specific characteristics
- translating analysis into design principles
- designing from and with the existing city

What *cannot* be universalized

- architectural form
- programme
- dimensions and proportions
- materials
- configuration of public spaces
- relationships between buildings
- specific conservation or demolition strategies
- all decisions that depend on the particular context

Urban regeneration is therefore not a standardised model, but an approach that must be proposed and implemented according to the specific characteristics of each place.

The project emerges from the encounter between:

existing conditions
+ methodology
+ interpretation.

What can be transferred from Zhen Xiang is therefore not the project itself, but the process that led to its formation.

This becomes evident in Figure 6.1, where, through a simplified graphic representation, we can understand how the methodology is what can be **copied and pasted** into different places, including Zhen Xiang. By contrast, the design response generated for each place cannot simply be copied and pasted elsewhere. If copied, it would lose its validity when transferred to a different context. The multiple outcomes are therefore represented as copyable **without formatting**, emphasising that, although the methodological process can be transferred, each outcome is unique in its specific characteristics and relationship to its place.

This leads to the conceptual shift from **"one solution for many places"** to **"one methodology, multiple possible outcomes".**

Conclusion

In this thesis, **urban regeneration** is approached as a more conscious alternative to contemporary methods of responding to the challenges faced by today's cities. At a time when some urban contexts are experiencing rapid and substantial growth and expansion, interventions are often implemented too quickly in an attempt to keep pace with accelerated transformations. This frequently results in the addition of new built fabric that replaces existing structures, progressively disrupting and compromising them.

In this way, transformations may be introduced without genuinely taking into account the evolutionary processes through which cities have developed. Yet cities have always evolved and changed over time. The urban condition we observe today—the form in which a particular context has been transmitted to us—is itself the result of this continuous process of transformation throughout history.

The objective, therefore, cannot be to oppose this ongoing process of transformation. Rather, transformation must be allowed to continue, as it is an intrinsic necessity of cities, enabling them to respond to the economic, social, and cultural changes experienced by the societies that inhabit them. This becomes even more evident when recognising the nature of cities as *palimpsests*: assemblages of overlapping layers accumulated over time, which together generate the urban image we experience in the present.

What makes a difference within these evolutionary processes is therefore how we choose to enter them today—whether consciously and with an understanding of the existing condition, or without sufficient awareness of what already exists.

This is where the research question of this thesis comes into play: ***how can a methodological approach based on reading cities in transition, and grounded in typomorphological tools, support conscious urban regeneration?*** Investigating how urban form has evolved, what has persisted, what has changed, and how the different layers of the city relate to one another, as well as identifying the appropriate tools through which these conditions can be analysed, constitutes the core of this research.

After identifying the challenges faced by contemporary cities and recognising the need for an effective approach to address them, the thesis first develops a theoretical framework. General concepts are introduced to understand how certain ideas concerning urban analysis and regeneration have emerged, as well as who has previously investigated, developed, and applied these approaches and through which methods.

The research then moves towards the core of the case study, progressively narrowing its focus from China to Nanjing, from Nanjing to Qinhuai, and finally to Zhen Xiang. This progressive zoom is not merely a geographical narrowing of the study, but demonstrates the place-based nature of the methodology: the method does not operate independently from its context, but is applied through an increasingly specific understanding of the place in which transformation is being considered.

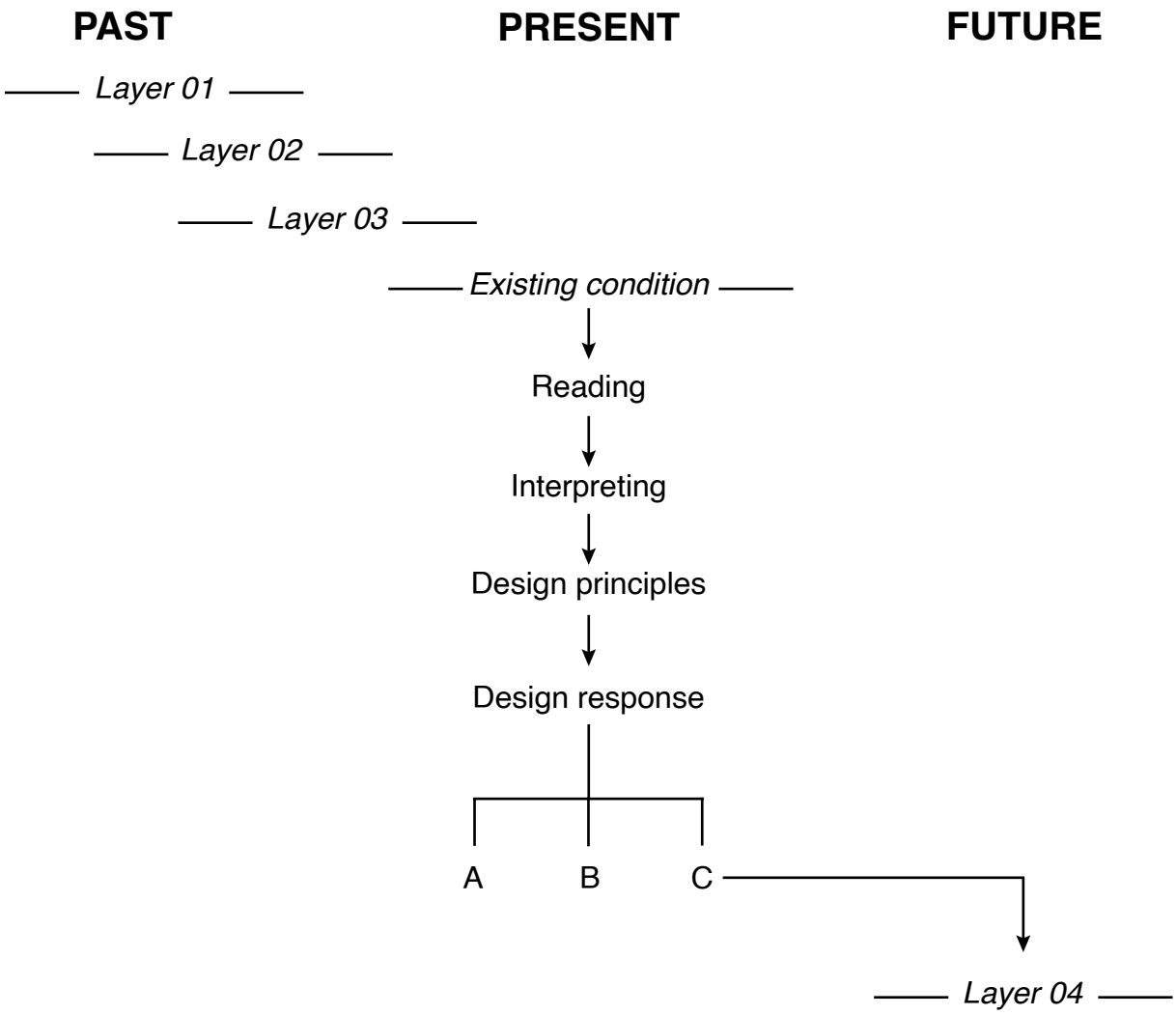
The application of the methodology to Zhen Xiang demonstrates how a typomorphological approach and a reading of urban transitions can generate a body of knowledge from which design principles can be identified. These principles do not constitute predetermined design solutions, but provide a framework for guiding subsequent design decisions and for translating the understanding of the existing urban condition into possible interventions.

The design outcome proposed for Zhen Xiang should therefore not be understood as a model of urban regeneration to be replicated elsewhere. Rather, it represents one possible design outcome, emerging from and supported by the appropriate application of the methodology and the approach investigated throughout this thesis.

This distinction is fundamental to understanding the broader contribution of the research. What can be replicated and, in a sense, “universalised”, is not the project itself, but the methodological process through which it was developed. Rather than seeking one efficient design solution that can be reproduced across multiple contexts, it provides a framework capable of generating multiple place-specific responses.

The methodology can be transferred because it is not tied to a specific form, while the design response cannot be transferred because it is intrinsically tied to the place from which it emerged, its urban morphology, and its transitions over time.

The objective is therefore to address contemporary urban challenges not by making urban regeneration more efficient through greater uniformity, but by making it more effective, sustainable, and conscious through greater responsiveness to place. In this way, urban regeneration interventions can enter the continuous cycle of transformation appropriately, becoming part of the transitional morphologies that characterise the urban environment rather than disrupting or erasing the processes that have shaped it.



From transition to response: synthesis of the proposed methodological framework.

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Image Sources

INTRODUCTORY IMAGE
Source: Gresleri, G. (2021). Immagine e parola scritta. L'Esprit Nouveau 1920–1925, la costruzione del purismo.
Source: The Guardian. (2019, June 24). Humans v the city: The staggering scale of Chongqing – in pictures.

FIG. 1.1
Source: Fondation Le Corbusier. (n.d.). Plan Voisin, Paris, France, 1925.

FIG. 1.2
Source: Primary Structure. Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin, 1925: Figure-ground plan.

FIG. 2.1
Source: Turismo Roma. Piazza Augusto Imperatore.

FIG. 2.3
Source: Wikipedia. Forma Urbis Severiana.
Source: Archaeological Institute of America. Mapping the past: Forma Urbis Romae.

FIG. 2.4
Source: Stanford University. Nolli Map.

FIG. 2.5
Source: Yale University Art Gallery.

FIG. 2.6
Source: Politecnico di Torino, Department of Architecture and Design. Transitional Morphologies.

FIG. 2.7
Source: Castex, J. (2014). Saverio Muratori (1910–1973), The City as a Model.

FIG. 2.8
Source: Libreria Universitaria. Lettura di una città: Como.

FIG. 3.1
Source: Expertise Asia. (2017, March 9). China on its path.

FIG. 3.3
Source: Dituji.

FIG. 3.5
Source: NASA Scientific Visualization Studio.

FIG. 3.6
Source: The Guardian. (2019, June 24). Humans v the city: The staggering scale of Chongqing – in pictures.

FIG. 3.8
Source: Dituji.

FIG. 3.9
Source: Wuguo.

FIG. 3.10
Source: Wikipedia.

FIG. 3.11
Source: Library of Congress.

FIGS. 3.16, 3.17 AND 3.18
Source: Wikipedia. Nanjing Fuzimiao.

FIG. 3.19
Source: Baidu Baike. FUZIMIAO Station.

FIG. 3.22
Source: Sohu. (2017, August 10). 南京老城南历史街巷变迁之务本蚕种制造场 [Historical transformation of the streets and alleys of Nanjing's Old South City: Wuben Silkworm Egg Production Farm].
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FIG. 3.23
Source: Wikimedia Commons. (2024). Category: Former Nanjing Post Office. Wikimedia Foundation.

FIG. 3.24
Source: Wikidata. (2020). Former Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank in Nanjing. Wikimedia Foundation.

FIG. 3.25
Source: Baidu Baike, Nanjing Confucius Temple Primary School.

Memories from Nanjing

1. Multiple Outcomes

I would like to conclude this work by stepping, for a moment, into a more personal perspective and speaking in the first person as the author. This reflection is intended to reinforce some of the concepts discussed throughout Chapter 6, particularly those concerning the transferability of the methodology and the multiplicity of possible outcomes, by considering them through my own experience. Throughout this thesis, the distinction between a transferable methodology and a place-specific outcome has emerged as a central argument. It is therefore worth considering this distinction through a more direct and personal experience.

I experienced this thesis as a student within a design studio in which several students from Southeast University participated. This allowed me to observe firsthand how the guidelines and methodological approaches introduced by the tutors were interpreted and applied by different students, ultimately leading to the development of numerous projects, all distinct from one another. The process began with a shared theoretical preparation concerning approaches to urban regeneration. From this common starting point, however, each student was free to interpret and apply the concepts according to their own understanding of the place and their own design intentions. The result was therefore not a single solution, but a multiplicity of outcomes generated from a broadly shared methodological framework. This experience provides a concrete illustration of the distinction discussed throughout this chapter: the methodology can be shared, transferred, and interpreted, while the resulting design response remains specific to the designer and to the place.

Beyond the experience of this design studio, however, I can also look at my own trajectory and recognise that this thesis represents the third project I have undertaken in Nanjing, China.

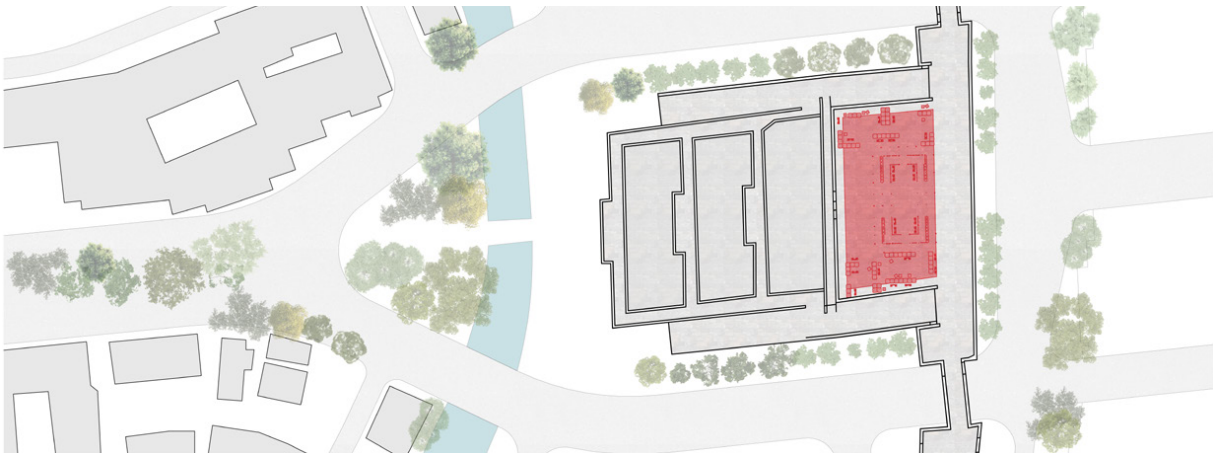
The first was another urban regeneration project in the Zhongshan Nan Lu area, within the Hehua Tang area of Nanjing. The project focused on a dismissed industrial area located alongside the Qinhuai River, which at the time appeared largely disconnected from the surrounding traditional urban fabric.

The intervention therefore required an understanding of the relationship between the industrial area and the historical context in which it was embedded.

The second experience was instead related to the revitalisation of the Nanjing City Walls, developed within the workshop Shared Heritage, Shared World — Futuring Our Wallscape: Global Youth Collaborative Design Action for Nanjing City Walls. The workshop invited young designers from different backgrounds to propose public art installations and public-service facilities with demonstrative and interactive features, with the broader objective of imagining new ways of enga-



Masterplan of the urban regeneration project in the Zhongshan Nan Lu area, Nanjing. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

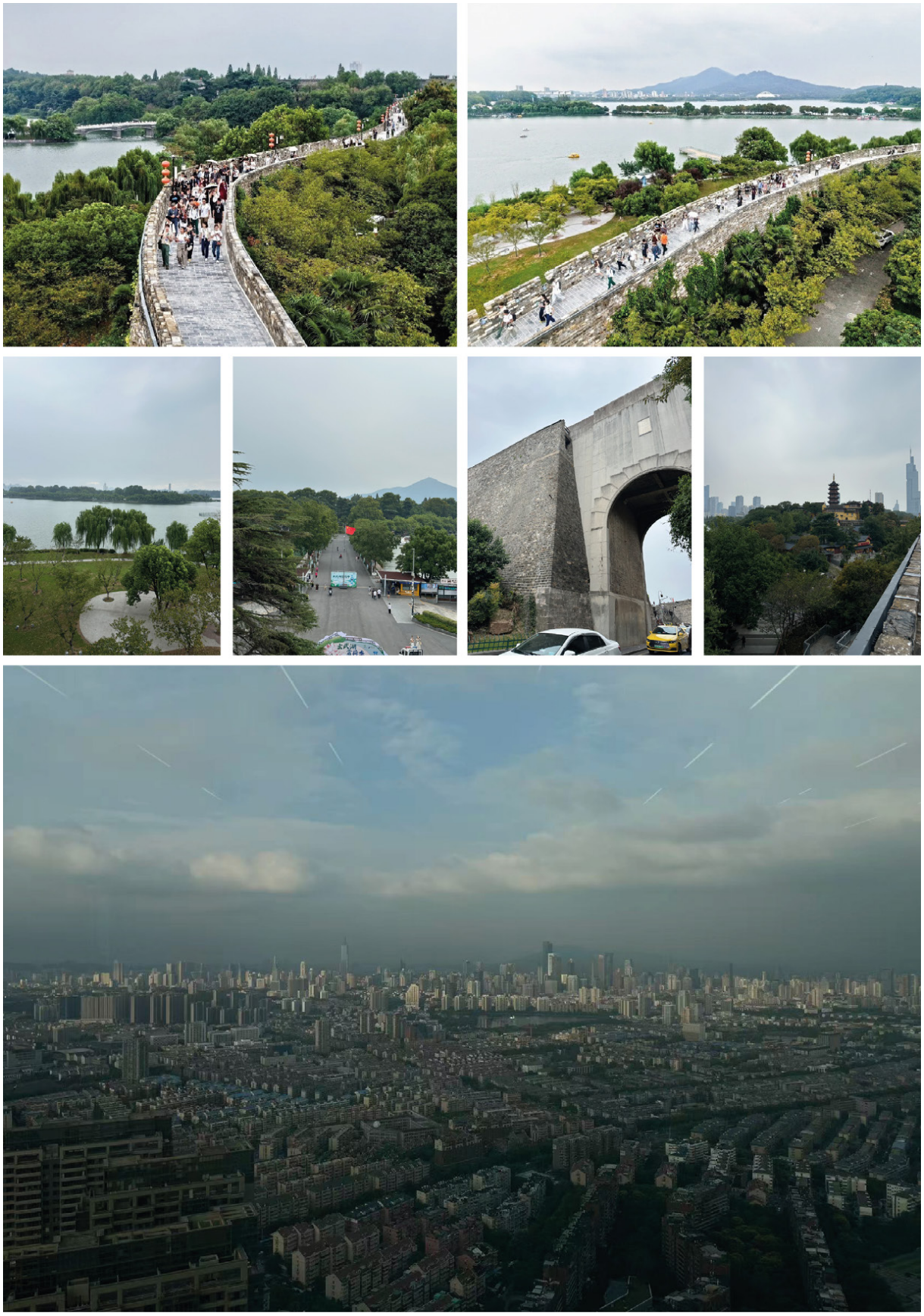


Zhonghua Gate — Masterplan of the proposed installation developed within the "Shared Heritage, Shared World — Futuring Our Wallscape" workshop. Not to scale. Author's drawing.

ging with the city's historic walls. Although these projects had different objectives, scales, and sites, they shared a common condition: each required a careful reading of the specific part of Nanjing in which the intervention was located. The different projects were therefore not simply different because they were designed by different students or designers, but also because they responded to different urban conditions, histories, identities, and needs.

Looking back at these experiences, I recognise a recurring pattern. Despite the differences between the projects, each began with an attempt to understand the context, followed by a process of reading and interpreting the specific urban condition before defining a possible design response. In this sense, my previous experiences in Nanjing can be seen as preliminary encounters with the approach that I have attempted to structure and articulate more systematically through this thesis.

This thesis, however, gave me, perhaps for the first time, the opportunity to dedicate sufficient time and attention to this process. The combination of theoretical research, historical investigation, morphological analysis, and direct engagement with the site allowed me to structure more consciously the reasoning that had previously emerged more intuitively through design practice. As a result, the project presented in this thesis remains only one of the many possible responses to Zhen Xiang. It is not presented as the inevitable or definitive outcome of the methodology, but as the response that emerged from my particular reading and interpretation of the place. And yet, it is precisely this awareness that makes the project meaningful to me. **Its value does not lie in being the solution, but in being a considered response supported by the process that preceded it.** The methodology provided the structure through which I could read the place, understand its layers, identify its conditions and opportunities, and ultimately make informed design decisions. The project therefore represents not the end of a universal formula, but the result of a personal encounter between method and place. It is one possible outcome among many, but one that I can recognise as my own because of the process that led to it.



Landscape and builtscape: a view of Nanjing from the city walls, revealing the coexistence of natural and built environments.

2. Personal Visual Archive

What made a significant difference was my physical presence in Nanjing.
Having the opportunity to visit this city in person was extremely meaningful, as it allowed me to engage more deeply with the place and its culture.

For this reason, I would like to include a selection of photographs that I took during my time in Nanjing, which document my experience of the city and, above all, how I personally perceived it.

Walking along the city walls, for example, provided me with a strategic viewpoint from which I could better understand how strongly the city is shaped by its landscape, but also how the natural environment that characterises Nanjing coexists alongside its built environment. From this elevated perspective, the contrast is particularly striking: large skyscrapers, often characterised by original and visually expressive forms, emerge alongside the surrounding landscape, creating a strong duality between the natural and the built. In other sections of the walls, particularly around Zhonghua Gate, a different image of the city emerges, where the historical urban fabric can still be clearly perceived. The contrast between these different urban conditions further reinforced my understanding of Nanjing as a city composed of multiple and sometimes contrasting layers.

Another particularly evident aspect is the city's direct relationship with water. Moving along the river reveals a succession of very different urban landscapes: the city walls, functionalist residential buildings, and tourist areas such as Fuzimiao, whose atmosphere changes completely at night, when lights and colours transform the waterfront and leave a particularly strong impression.

I was also struck by the way open public spaces are used. Seeing so many people occupying the streets and public spaces—eating, talking, playing cards, or playing chess—allowed me to perceive the strong sense of community that inhabits these places. These everyday activities revealed a dimension of the city that cannot necessarily be understood through plans or maps alone, but becomes evident through direct observation and experience.



















The relationship between the city and water: changing urban landscapes along the river.

For me, China ultimately revealed itself as a kind of paradox of scale: on the one hand, a monumental and sometimes overwhelming scale, in which the human figure can seem to disappear within the vastness of the city; on the other, a much more intimate scale, where spaces feel accessible, immediate, and profoundly authentic. This contrast between the monumental and the intimate, the natural and the built, the contemporary and the historical became one of the most significant aspects of my personal experience of Nanjing—and something that could only truly be understood by being there.











Everyday life and public space: observations of social interaction and the ways in which people inhabit the city.

Acknowledgements

Giunta alla conclusione di questo percorso accademico e di tesi, è doveroso per me dedicare qualche parola a chi, in modi diversi, ne ha fatto parte. In primo luogo, non posso che ringraziare i miei genitori. Grazie ai loro sacrifici e alle loro scelte ho avuto l'opportunità di intraprendere questo percorso accademico e di potermici dedicare con tutta me stessa.
Ricordo ancora i primi giorni di lezione, quando, camminando per le strade di Torino, avevo le lacrime agli occhi per la gioia e la fierezza di andare a fare lezione nelle aule del Politecnico. Venendo da una realtà piccola, per me era davvero un sogno. Torino mi ha dato tanto: mi ha aperto gli occhi, mi ha permesso di conoscere un mondo più grande e mi ha fatto comprendere quanto io sia fortunata ad aver avuto la possibilità di vivere tutto questo. Devo infatti ringraziare questa università per tutto ciò che ha significato per me, per il sapere e la conoscenza che mi ha offerto. E non solo per i contenuti che mi ha trasmesso, ma anche per le persone che mi ha permesso di incontrare e le opportunità che mi ha dato.

Un ringraziamento speciale va a Marco Trisciuoglio che, con la sua preparazione e la sua passione, mi ha ispirato non solo come docente e per la sua materia, ma anche come persona, per la sua umanità e autenticità. Devo ringraziarlo per avermi fatto avvicinare al mondo cinese, prima nel suo Design Studio, poi attraverso il workshop che mi ha portata fisicamente a Nanchino e, infine, accompagnandomi in questo percorso di tesi. Ma soprattutto, grazie per aver creduto in me e nelle mie capacità, forse a volte più di quanto ci abbia creduto io.

L'ambiente universitario mi ha introdotto anche a persone che sono diventate, nel tempo, una seconda famiglia: la famiglia di cui ho avuto bisogno quando la mia era lontana, quando gli amici con cui sono cresciuta non erano fisicamente accanto a me. Conoscere anche tanti studenti internazionali, ognuno con la propria storia e il proprio background, mi ha arricchito moltissimo.
Questo sguardo verso l'esterno, verso ciò che ancora non conoscevo, mi ha incuriosita a tal punto da spingermi a partire per l'Erasmus. Grazie ancora alla mia famiglia, che anche in questa esperienza non ha mai smesso di sostenermi, permettendomi di partire e facendosi in qualche modo parte di questa avventura. Grazie per essere venuti a trovarmi, per aver condiviso con me, anche se solo per un breve periodo, un pezzo di quella vita così lontana. Per avermi dato la possibilità di studiare in un posto meraviglioso che porterò per sempre nel mio cuore, e insieme a lui le persone che mi hanno accompagnata in questa avventura.

Uscire prima dai confini e dalle vedute del mio piccolo paese, poi da Torino, mi ha regalato una conoscenza di me stessa completamente nuova. Mi ha insegnato quanto ci sia ancora da scoprire, fuori e dentro di me, e quanto sia importante avere il coraggio di andare oltre ciò che già conosciamo.
Ed è quasi assurdo pensare che, nonostante tutti questi cambiamenti, tante delle "mie persone" siano sempre rimaste al mio fianco, nel bene e nel male. A loro devo tantissimo, per essere stati e continuare ad essere, da anni, capisaldi della mia vita. I miei amici mi hanno vista partire, cambiare, crescere e diventare, negli anni, una persona diversa, eppure sono ancora qui a sostenermi e a credere in me.

Infine, ringrazio me stessa.
Per aver avuto il coraggio di cogliere certe occasioni, di partire, di cambiare e di non lasciarmi spaventare dall'ignoto. Per essermi lasciata guidare, ancora e ancora, da una grande curiosità, anche quando non sapevo esattamente dove mi avrebbe portata. E forse è proprio questo ciò che voglio portare con me da questo percorso: la consapevolezza che finché avrò il desiderio di esplorare, conoscere e imparare, continuerò a trovare nuovi luoghi, nuove persone e nuove parti di me.

Having reached the end of this academic and thesis journey, I feel it is only right to dedicate a few words to those who, in different ways, have been part of it.
First and foremost, I cannot help but thank my parents. Thanks to their sacrifices and the choices they have made, I have had the opportunity to embark on this academic journey and to dedicate myself to it wholeheartedly.
I still remember my first days of classes, when I would walk through the streets of Turin with tears in my eyes, overwhelmed by the joy and pride of going to attend lectures at the Politecnico. Coming from a small town, it truly felt like a dream to me. Turin gave me so much: it opened my eyes, allowed me to discover a bigger world, and made me realise how lucky I am to have had the opportunity to experience all of this.
I therefore also want to thank this university for everything it has meant to me, for all the knowledge and understanding it has given me. Not only for what it has taught me, but also for the people it has allowed me to meet and the opportunities it has given me.

A special thank you goes to Marco Trisciuoglio, who, through his knowledge and passion, has inspired me not only as a professor and through his subject, but also as a person, through his humanity and authenticity.
I am grateful to him for introducing me to the Chinese context, first through his Design Studio, then through the workshop that physically brought me to Nanjing, and finally by accompanying me throughout this thesis journey. But above all, thank you for believing in me and in my abilities, perhaps at times more than I believed in myself.
The university environment also introduced me to people who, over time, became a second family: the family I needed when my own was far away, when the friends I had grown up with were not physically by my side.
Meeting so many international students, each with their own story and background, enriched me immensely. This openness towards the outside world, towards everything I had yet to know, made me so curious that it eventually led me to leave for Erasmus.
And once again, thank you to my family, who never stopped supporting me throughout this experience, allowing me to leave and somehow becoming part of this adventure themselves. Thank you for coming to visit me, for sharing with me, even if only for a short time, a piece of that life so far away from home. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to study in such a wonderful place, one that I will carry in my heart forever, and along with it, the people who accompanied me on this adventure. You were truly special travel companions.

Stepping first beyond the boundaries and horizons of my small town, and later beyond Turin, gave me an entirely new understanding of myself. It taught me how much there is still to discover, both outside and within myself, and how important it is to have the courage to go beyond what we already know.
And it is almost strange to think that, despite all these changes, so many of “my people” have always remained by my side, through both the good and the bad. I owe them so much for having been, and continuing to be, pillars of my life for so many years. My friends have seen me leave, change, grow, and become a different person over the years, and yet they are still here, supporting me and believing in me.

Finally, I want to thank myself.
For having the courage to seize certain opportunities, to leave, to change, and not to let the unknown frighten me. For allowing myself to be guided, again and again, by a great sense of curiosity, even when I did not know exactly where it would lead me.
And perhaps this is precisely what I want to carry with me from this journey: the awareness that as long as I have the desire to explore, to learn, and to discover, I will continue to find new places, new people, and new parts of myself.