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Honors thesis

COURSE OF
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Abstract

**Hehua Tang: Reading of a Chinese Historical District.
Rethinking the Urban Pattern**

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The vernacular district of Hehua Tang in the Old South Town of Nanjing represents an endless source of information to understand what really means tradition in Chinese cities. This area, in fact, is one of the last authentic residential areas of Nanjing and it is still rich in architectural heritage embedded in a clear historical pattern. However, as a result of the rapid development of urbanization, the area is nowadays suffering the consequences of a progressive urban marginalization. Due to the problem of physical ageing and loss of intangible culture, the Hehua Tang district is starting to lose its unique historical and cultural features. In a certain sense, it sums up, as emblematic case, the precarious conditions of historic neighbourhoods in contemporary China: suffocated by coarse-grained high rises, symbols of the market-oriented economy; threatened by “conservation” policies, which have already denatured the surroundings; degraded by a continuous status of marginalisation, that gives to the settlement a “slum-like” appearance. It is within this background that first, the Design Unit of professor Marco Trisciuglio and then this master degree thesis, started to think a new way to renew Chinese historical districts through the use of a targeted typo-morphological study.

The research overlaps two points, the first it is about exactly the morphological principles on which the area has evolved over the centuries and so it considers reasons inherent to the architectural shapes. The second instead, look to the scenarios through which the development of the areas could be realized, considering factors related to urban economy and politics. In this second part, the concepts of ownership and real estate market are particularly crucial elements to understand how to face an urban regeneration in a Chinese context. In conclusion, to sum up all the knowledge acquired by the analysis, a new strategy for the urban renewal of the area is defined. Having as basis the common interests of the different stakeholders, four design suggestions are finally outlined with the aim to become the starting point of a gradual, sustainable renewal of the whole Hehua Tang.

The goal of the last part is exactly to show the characteristics of a new project for an urban block in Hehua Tang.

One of the most interesting aspects that emerged from the research is the implicit regularity, hierarchy of the apparently chaotic traditional urban pattern. The “carpet like” fabric that characterizes Hehua Tang, and that gave shape to the whole Old South Town of Nanjing, is formed by low rises courtyard houses, which, like cells of an organism, give life to a complex system. In this kind of settlement, the building typology and the urban morphology are more than ever complementary elements. The Hehua Tang built up area is the manifest of an urban philosophy that contrasts the contemporary “city of objects”. While in contemporary international (Chinese) cities the typology is essentially a big self-sufficient object placed to overlook rather than collaborate with the rest of the city, in Hehua Tang the courtyard house is the cell of a complex but homogeneous organism, where the typology assumes meaning only if it is placed in its context. The result is a system in which the two scales of typology and urban morphology cannot ignore each other. My project will go exactly in this direction, trying to coherently reconstruct a fragment of this type of city, where the relationships between the buildings are perhaps more important than the buildings themselves.

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