

From Urban Regeneration to Transitional Communities. Tales and Perspectives from the City of Nanjing

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# **CITTÀ CHE SI ADATTANO? ADAPTIVE CITIES?**

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DI FRONTE AL CAMBIAMENTO**

**ADAPTABILITY OR ADAPTIVE INABILITY  
IN THE FACE OF CHANGE**

a cura di  
edited by

**Cristina Cuneo**

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# FROM URBAN REGENERATION TO TRANSITIONAL COMMUNITIES. TALES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM THE CITY OF NANJING

MARCO TRISCIUOGGIO, DONG YINAN

## Abstract

*The work intends to support and consolidate the paradigm of transitional morphologies in urban morphological studies, through the consideration that, in order to understand the contemporary city, the study of the urban form in its dynamics of transformation (and not only in their final outcomes) can / should assume a crucial role. The contribution proposed here is dedicated to seven years of studies and research (and urban projects, too, conducted with heuristic intentions within a school of architecture) on the urban morphology of the southern part of the historical walled city of Nanjing, China.*

## Keywords

*Urban Regeneration in China, Chinese Urban Communities, Transitional Urban Morphologies, Urban Management, Nanjing*

## Introduction

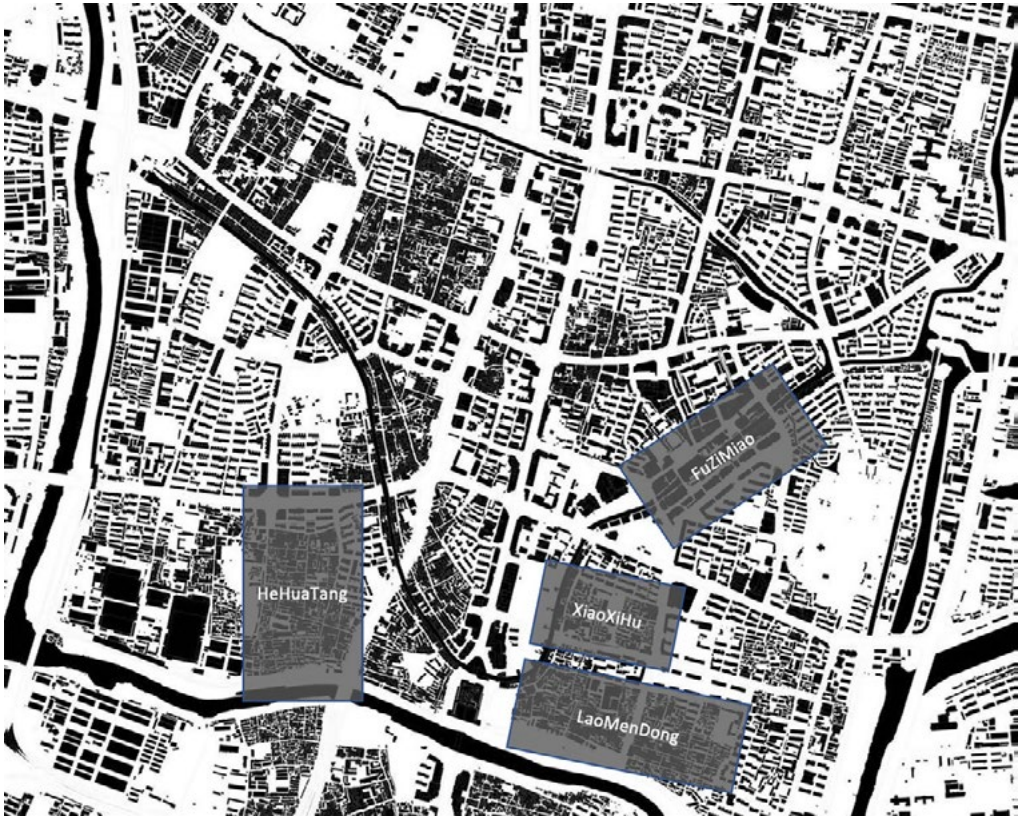
The Chinese city reveals nowadays, in the decade preceding the crucial appointments of 2030, unexpected reinterpretations of its historical urban fabric, aimed at a redesign of the urban space also guided by a new (but very ancient) involvement of the communities [Chen and Thwaites, 2013; Hassenpflug, 2010; De Kloet and Scheen, 2013].

The phenomenon of real enclaves of *heterotopic* significance in the current form of the contemporary Chinese city, is placed in the general framework of the new settlement forms of the “mainland China” and of the entire Eurasian continent, touched by the Silk Road. The interest in this phenomenon lies entirely in its scale, micro-urban rather than macro-urban [Whitehand and Gu, 2006, 2007].

An interesting study case is the urban morphology of the southern part of the historical area of Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu and several times in the capital history of the whole China (the Ming Empire, the Republic of China before 1949).

The Qinhuai District, enclosed on three sides by the great sixteenth-century walls, that still surround 4/5 of the whole city, and crossed by the small Qinhuai River, a tributary of the Changjiang river (known also as the Yangtzé), still has many of the features of





1: The Southern part of walled historical Nanjing, with the Ming City wall precinct, the Qinhuai river and the area of FuZiMiao, LaoMenDong, XiaoXiHu and HeHuaTang (by Marco Trisciuglio, 2022).

the original Chinese settlement: careful attention paid to the topography, narrow alleys, small houses with three courtyards, systems based on wooden structures and gray bricks cladding, stone ornaments, decorated wooden closing panels. That fabric acts as a matrix for the evolution over time of the same places, often become real slums, where the shacks, however, tend to recover the same typological and morphological characteristics of the main settlement. Eroded in the Seventies and Eighties by the functionalist systems of small factories and collective workers' houses, subjected after the Nineties and especially at the beginning of the new Millennium to clumsy attempts at tourist or real estate gentrification, the urban form of the area today seems to find new structures that start from the involvement of the communities, from the now completed process of restitution of the properties, from the use of old land registers as a document of typo-morphological reconstruction of the settlement, from an increasingly refined system of negotiation that puts citizens, technicians at the same table with local government and private public developers [Tang 2016].

Starting from a critical view upon the study cases of the FuZiMiao touristic complex, the LaoMenDong real estate area, and the virtuous regeneration operation of XiaoXiHu,

the proposed paper describes, in its historical development, the HeHuaTang area as the one where strategically will be played. the future of new urban regeneration ideas in China and possibly across Asia [Zhang 2022].

### FuZiMiao, a “scenic area”

FuZiMiao (Confucius Temple) Scenic Area in Qinhuai District of Nanjing was officially identified as the first 5A open-style scenic spot of China in 2010 and got warning from the National Tourism Administration in 2015. The core of the scenic area is represented by the Confucius Temple (built in 1034 upon the rests of an already existing temple erected in 4th century), which in time expanded incorporating also the China Imperial



2: The map of FuZiMiao by DC ALLIANCE (2013), (source: [https://www.archdaily.com/780142/renovation-of-nanjing-confucius-temple-plus-dc-alliance?ad\\_medium=gallery](https://www.archdaily.com/780142/renovation-of-nanjing-confucius-temple-plus-dc-alliance?ad_medium=gallery) visited 28.08.2022).

Examination Museum and the Xue Gong (the Imperial Academy), becoming a complex of buildings and spaces. The Temple was rebuilt in 1984 under the support of the local government after the extensive damage caused by the fires to which the artifact was subjected during the Japanese occupation in 1937.

The interest for the “monument” in itself is part of a long process of historical conservation happened in China from the 1980s, also with specific rules and legislation. By an urban regeneration point of view, the restoration of Confucius Temple in 1984 must surely be an important step in improving the quality of the entire area, but maybe there were not yet the care and the attention to preserve (or re-design) the urban fabrics. So, today that place, as a “scenic area” is considered an important attraction for tourist. The website [www.travelchinaguide.com](http://www.travelchinaguide.com) gives a good description of the urban environment around the Temple: “The area around Nanjing Confucius Temple consists of a series of tourist shops, snack bars, restaurants and tea cafes. They all appear to be in the architectural style of the Ming and Qing style. A variety of snacks encompassing eight of the most famous flavours are available for purchase at here. Everyone’s individual tastes are well catered for. They are necessary parts of food culture in Nanjing”.

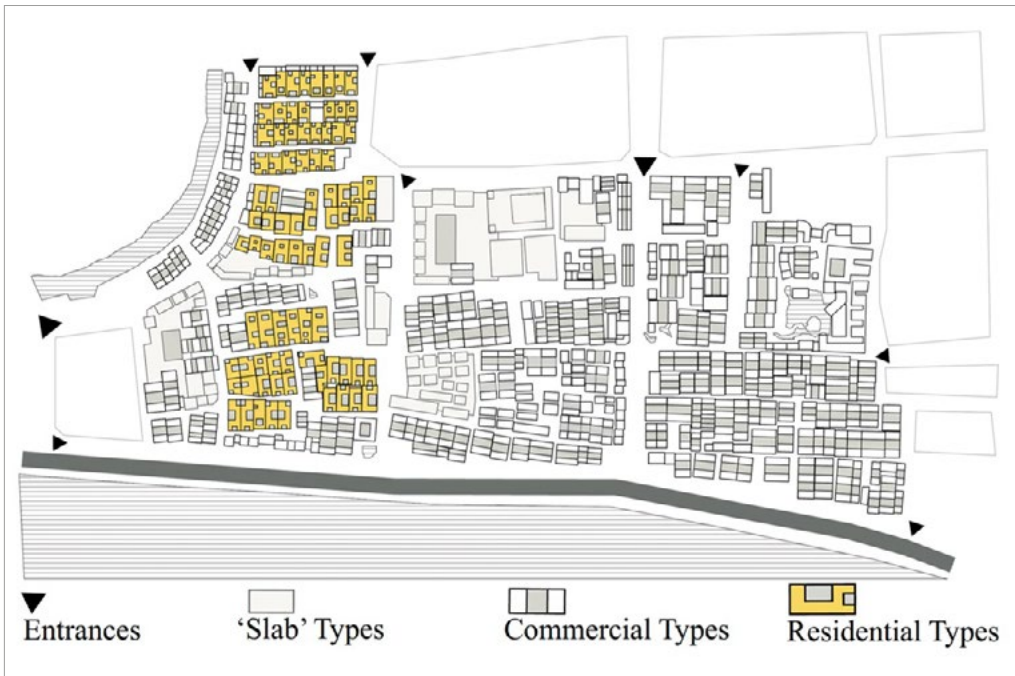
Nowadays, neither the newly and smart renovations of some buildings, promoted and designed by the Shanghai Design Company DC ALLIANCE (2013), nor the relevant project by Liu Kecheng for the Imperial Examination Museum of China (2015) could have changed the impression that FuZiMiao Scenic Area is a sort of “disneyland” referred to a pop image of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There, the commercial buildings and spaces play the most important role, giving the themes of living and community life (existing or future) a very marginal if not non-existent role.

The Qinhuai river and the façades of commercial streets show to be the most important elements of the urban morphology of the site.

## LaoMenDong, a real estate driven action

In the second decade of the new century, the LaoMenDong area, three hundred meters far from FuZiMiao towards south, within the same Qinhuai District, was the scene of a massive planned gentrification, with a medium-high level shopping place in its main alley, surrounded by an urban fabric marked by a particularly real estate operation. expensive and aggressive.

In occasion of the urban renovation’s activities linked to the host of the Summer Youth Olympic Game by Nanjing in 2014, the area was subjected, in fact, to a wide and deep regeneration project started in 2014. The site was considered overcrowded and lower quality: a tattered area with dilapidated housing and densely populated lanes, where electricity, sewerage, and running water didn’t exist. Actually, the pictures before 2010s show a neighborhood that can be considered similar and homogeneous in urban morphology with most of the Qinhuai District in Southern walled city of Nanjing, above all the part between the Qinhuai River and the precinct of the Ming City Wall: a continuous urban fabric made by old courtyard-houses, shacks, additions of rooms or floors without order, always maintaining a medium height of two-story maximum.



3: The map of LaoMenDong, (source: PRESSACCO, 2020).

Instead of studying and preserving that morphological consistence, the master plan of LaoMenDong was drafted to rebuild the “historic and authentic” streetscape of the main historical periods, with the idea to rebuild not only a historical area but also a contemporary urban scenic area. When, in September 2013, the renovated LaoMenDong was opened to tourists and Nanjing citizens, they found a new area for pedestrian use only, which included heritage elements, commercial space, and tourism activities (included the Jinling Art Museum designed by Liu Kecheng just in 2013).

LaoMenDong has been developed in three phases: the first one took advantage of the privileged location, adopting one of the most famous scenic spots of the city, the Ming City Wall, in order to create a commercial and touristic center, whose architectures refers to languages and typologies, trying to recreate the atmosphere of the past according to the Western ideas of New Urbanism.

The second phase is represented by a new urban fabric of “new fake antique buildings”, where, despite the external appearance, which shows Ming Style façades, the traditional composition of the house is almost never respected. The typical sequence of small rooms and yards (above all in the eastern part of the complex) gives soon the way to unique open-spaces used to face the contemporary commercial needs, but creating a strong contrast between the plan and its exteriors, because of the structural elements.

A third phase was represented by the West part of the area where the residential buildings are the most part: the houses that can be typified as urban villas, organized on four floors, two of which underground (considering an underground private parking) and

with small internal yards, while the access to the house is provided through another small yard. The quality of materials and decorations, as well as the fixed functional typologies, that could be improved by the buyers through innovative technical and automation optionals, can explain the high price established by the real estate for those houses (nowadays totally sold and at the same time totally empty).

### **XiaoXiHu, an ownerships and community led project**

One of the most relevant (and pressing) question, for the local governors, the scholars and the inhabitants, became: how is it possible to think about and to design an urban regeneration process able to preserve not only monuments (FuZiMiao) and land's values (LaoMenDong), but also the sense of community among inhabitants/owners?

XiaoXiHu (literally the “block of the small western lake”) is located just halfway between FuZiMiao and LaoMenDong. The regeneration of XiaoXiHu, negotiated between the population, the local government and the development agency and managed by the university's design institute, is a real alternative to what was achieved in FuZiMiao and LaoMenDong. Here, the commitment of together the design institute and the academic body of Southeast University has finally created a procedural model for the design of architectural and urban spaces that is destined to soon have applications in other areas of the same urban district [Han 2021].

It must be said that the historical Nanjing developed within the walls brings as a gift to urban studies (and to projects such as that of XiaoXiHu) two documents of great importance to reconstruct, tracing it, the typological map of the city: the aerial photo of 1929 and the urban cadastral map of the 1936. Both belong to a historical era that had not yet seen, with the advent of modernization, the compromise of the morphological structure established in the imperial era.

A campaign of photos from the airplane, carried out in 1929 (when Nanjing became the capital of the new Republic of China, with the dream of returning to the glories of the Ming Empire), returns a densely inhabited center with a uniform urban fabric, made of a continuum of small houses with two or three courtyards, no more than two floors, with shared perimeter walls and a grid of small more or less regular streets. In the southern sector of the city, squeezed between the two physical margins constituted by the Qinhuai canal and the circle of walls in which the imposing fortress of the south gate is set, ZhongHuaMen, that continuum has taken advantage of the typical ambiguities offered by the position of real fringe belt, to keep some of those morphological characters to this day.

Traces of that continuum still remain today where medium-small industrial realities have not been placed and where the parallel slats of the four or five-storey buildings of the seventies and eighties, which housed the houses, have not erased the existing ones. low cost for urban workers. In some blocks or even in groups of blocks, some courtyard houses from the Ming and Qing epoch, sometimes almost completely intact, sometimes extensively remodeled, broken up, adapted, alternate with modest buildings. An informal fabric has taken shape in that area that almost never gives up, even in the

most ephemeral buildings, to repeat, by mere analogy dictated by a cultural and anthropological custom, the type of the courtyard building, albeit in conditions of safety and somewhat precarious hygiene [Trisciuglio and Dong, 2017; Trisciuglio, 2017].

Furthermore, in 1936, a year ahead of the Japanese siege of the republican capital and the bloody outcome that would follow, the Chinese government had also drawn up a cadastral map of the entire city, pursuing the Western model of a property map. That document has become extremely precious today, both to find traces of the original urban morphological structure in contemporary reality, and to recognize, after many decades of cancellation, the existing rights of certain groups or families, dealing with the complicated and cyclical processes of collectivization and restitution of lots and houses that in the meantime have occurred in the history of modern China.

It should be remembered here that the Chinese real estate market has experienced, since the Nineties, a phenomenon of progressive return to ownership which, however, only in the last decade has coincided with specific attention to the issues of regeneration of existing assets [Pressacco 2020]. This happened partly because the historical fabrics of the pre-modern era had reduced considerably in the era of the functionalization of the city, partly because the newborn real estate market had initially focused its attention on the sector of new buildings, both in peripheral areas or of new development, both also in areas inside the concentric urban systems, where, however, radical demolition and



4: The map of XiaoXiHu with ownership data overlapped (by DONG Yinan, 2021).

redesign on a clean slate had been carried out (paradoxically recreating at the center the same conditions for new projects that characterized the suburbs).

XiaoXiHu is part of this story and these phenomena: for the type of community that inhabited that urban fabric for centuries, there is not only the attribution to places and buildings of purely economic-financial values, but also symbolic and emotional meanings that planning, programming and the financial calculation cannot adequately take into account.

Looking at the morphological history of XiaoXiHu, there have been five different stages of transition over the past seventy years. If, before 1995, the block was constantly transforming, with the progressive elimination of the historical fabric and the construction of public residential buildings to support the planned urbanization processes, during the following decade (1995-2005) the transformation began to slow down. Due to the increase in population due to spontaneous urbanization processes and also due to the complex issues related to the return to property rights, the block (like much of the area along the Qinhuai river) has undergone a chaotic construction, morphologically similar to that of the informal settlements in the southern hemisphere.

The community of residents has thus entered, starting from 2016, a phase of decline of their habitat, with problems of occupation/tampering with spaces, water and electricity supplies and above all hygiene, given the lack of waste disposal systems and wastewater. In 2010, the degradation was now declared irreversible for the community.

By an important coincidence, XiaoXiHu is in fact an area that, with its seven historic streets, two buildings considered cultural heritage, seven historic buildings and more than thirty traditional courtyards, represents one of the few residential blocks in Nanjing that retains the characteristics of the city of the Ming and Qing era.

Called the DaYouFangXiang Historical Area, the XiaoXiHu block is also one of the 22 historical and landscape areas identified in the protection plan of the historical and cultural city of Nanjing. In the Ming era, wealthy Suzhou merchant Shen Wansan and opera writer Xu Lin and minister Yao Yuanbai lived there. The traditional song of the Qinhuai canal, which celebrates the world of courtesans and brothels, immortalized by director Zhang Yimou in his 2011 film *The Flowers of War*, tells of a microcosm teeming with alleys, courtyard houses, gardens, boats. It was difficult that, in the study of the southern part of the city, the block did not catch the attention of many.

XiaoXiHu has progressively proposed itself as a real counterpart to the controversial urban operation of LaoMenDong. In the meanwhile, LaoMenDong was being built, the local government was already trying to make an initial improvement to the buildings of the XiaoXiHu community. The first results, however, were not at all satisfactory and raised disturbing questions among the leaders of the local government themselves.

Some questions remained unresolved, open and gradually more urgent: to harmoniously relate historic buildings built in gray bricks and wooden beams with modern ones in reinforced concrete and anodized aluminum, to address the needs of the resident owners in terms of recovery or even of compensation (when, after returning to possession of their homes after a long time, the problem of recovery costs arose) and, again, adapting the regeneration programs to an urban environment that lives rituals of its own daily life.

## The “transitional” paradigm

An essential support for the regeneration actions on XiaoXiHu was the transitional, and therefore dynamic, morphological reading of the building fabric and the careful classification of the types and their permutations in the area. Re-tracing the topography of XiaoXiHu was essential to have a support for the dialogue, made up of words, with the inhabitants and the owners [Tian, 2014; Ding et al. 2015; Trisciuglio et al., 2021]. At first, the type-morphological reading made it possible to isolate, starting from the constructive principles, each building from the neighbor, with an action similar to the recognition of every single word in the plot of a text that at first seemed indecipherable. The decisive factor was then to reconstruct, through increased typological maps, the game of changes (permanence and variations) of the ownership regimes, often with consequent variations of forms and uses, with an action similar to the different interpretation that over time can give each word of the decrypted text [Dong et al., 2022].

That game revealed the criteria for activating innovative urban regeneration actions through the direct and interested involvement of urban communities [Rowe et al. 2016]. A typological map of the properties is in fact able to tell the different phases of physical transformation of the inhabited area, to grasp the plots and the transitional evolutionary laws, to explore hypotheses of redesigning towards new structures, which nevertheless maintain the typological and emotional characteristics of the existing.

The gradual renewal process promoted for XiaoXiHu is based on research, design and implementation strategies grounded on property rights and it is divided into seven phases, which start from the data offered by the new typological map of the properties and which give shape to a sequence of seven well-defined phases.

There has been a different political focus, attention to the inhabitants and their property rights, the research by designers and the university together with innovative urban management solutions, the highly effective instrumental use of the transitional and augmented typological map.

First, there is the recognition and management of property rights (phase 1). With the involvement of a “platform of the five actors” (the city government, the district government, the community of residents, the public construction companies and the designers of the design institute involved), the complexity of the occupations of the lots is first of all organized. and buildings, freeing some public residential buildings and encouraging the temporary release of private residential buildings.

Once the property framework has been clarified, a request is initiated to activate regeneration operations on one’s property by owners or tenants (phase 2). The request is addressed directly to the group of designers, which assesses its congruence through its own general regeneration plan, signs it and makes it public, therefore readable by all.

On the basis of the indications of the general regeneration plan (a sort of masterplan), the municipality provides technical indications relating to the networks of plants to be set up, evaluating the conditions for improving the quality of life that are to be pursued (phase 3).



Starting from the technical indications provided by the municipality, the applicants (whether owners or tenants) entrust the designers of the design institute, or even other groups of professionals identified by the local development agency, with the preparation of detailed projects, which they must keep I also take into account the implementation of the plants and, if necessary, the opinion of the owners or residents of the neighboring lots (phase 4).

At this point, the crucial moment of the process (phase 5) is celebrated: the audit of the “platform of the five actors”. The designers organize and convene platform meetings with the idea of drawing up written and shared agreements (for example, on revisions of the fire protection system or on energy saving installations). At this stage it may also happen that an area without property rights is acquired or alienated with the consequent change of ownership. The change is automatically recorded and the lot re-enters the process, starting from the initial stages described above.

With agreements signed, those who have requested the regeneration intervention can select their unit from the list of projects and thus start the execution of the works, after having requested final approval from the municipality (phase 6). The “platform of the five actors” can do the same autonomously, paying attention to reasons of public utility, especially with regard to interventions that touch open spaces, which could have a public or semi-public role, or even for commercial reasons, given the usefulness to open small businesses. During the works, the impact on other residents must be minimized and the planners, who conduct regular on-site inspections, are required to provide constant technical support.

The completion of the regeneration action takes place through a public meeting between the five actors of the platform which serves to declare the works definitively closed and to show the acceptance of what has been done by each of the parties involved (phase 7). This last phase, in the specific case of XiaoXiHu, coincided with a popular inauguration party, which was very popular. The distance of this urban regeneration operation with respect to those that distinguished FuZiMiao and LaoMenDong was clearly understood.

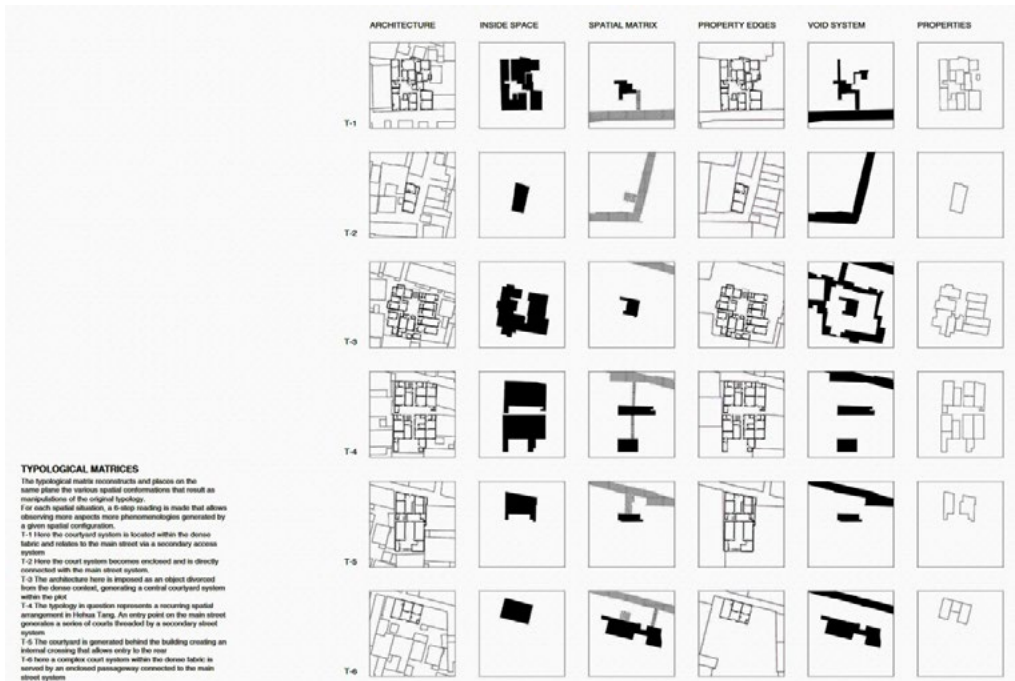
## HeHuaTang, a study case between tradition and innovation

The wider and complex area called HeHuaTang, in the east side of Qinhuai District, is nowadays the new challenge for an urban regeneration grounded on the idea of transitional morphologies [Trisciuglio 2021; Marchegiani and Terranova 2022].

Already in 2012, the local government launched a plan for the redevelopment of this fragment of the historical city, one of the latest to be considered for redesign, because of the high density of inhabitants.

The total building area is more or less 126.000 mq. 25% of the buildings belong to Qing Dynasty, 14% was built during Republic of China, the most part, 42%, in 1950-1980 and 19% could be consider as contemporary artifacts (after 1980).

The traditional settlement is entirely made by courtyard-houses and small alleys. As in other similar areas of the city, it is no possible to get inside HeHuaTang area by car (that can stay only on the boundaries): the inside alleys allowed pedestrian, bike and



5: Typo-morphological analyses on the area of HeuHuaTang (source: MARCHEGANI and TERRANOVA, 2022).

motorcycle use. Everywhere in the area, the division between inside and outside spaces naturally exist thanks to the buildings. In some part, usually in relation with the main outside streets, the houses have a commercial side, that overlook the street. In fact, within, the area it is possible to find a number of commercial activities as shops, restaurants, rental agencies, laundromat, all that permit the habitants an almost comfortable life inside the block. The presence of the City Wall is part of the urban scenario of HeHuaTang [Chen and Gazzola 2013; Jiang 2019].

In 2016 the area became objects of a series of historical researches, direct survey campaigns and also experimental projects by the joint research unit “Transitional Morphologies” (based at the Southeast University of Nanjing and the Polytechnic of Turin). Through the establishment of an epistemological foundation, the critical analysis of the context and the scientific results of some morphological studies conducted on the urban fabrics of the southern area of the city of Nanjing, the area is nowadays ready to host innovative project of urban regeneration, following at a wider scale the example of XiaoXiHu.

As explained above, the HehuaTang area, located within the ancient city walls, is part of the Precious Historical City Conservation Zone of Nanjing. But in its small courtyard houses (partly shacks and partly old artifacts that have survived over time) both low-income working-class people and migrant workers reside there [Bao et al., 2017]. The social status of the inhabitants is at the center of the debate between developers, government and scholars, together with the new problems brought about by the redefinition of

real estate in China, together with the practices of urban regeneration strongly guided by a rapidly developing capitalist market economy and together with the growing role played by urban heritage in government policy strategies.

The joint research unit worked on a typological map of the entire area, with the idea of using it to describe its transformations, to understand its vocations and to imagine future regeneration projects. It is a very important tool to practice innovative urban regeneration. Once more, after XiaoXiHu, the transitional model of studying the previous properties system and developing proposals from there, could represent a new fruitful way to redraw the destiny of historical parts of Chinese cities and their communities of inhabitants [Bao and Trisciuglio 2018].

### Towards an innovative idea of participatory processes

In the moment when, in the West of the World, the participatory model in urban management is in crisis, also because of being more and more related to the use of big data within the context of the so-called smart cities [Shane 2011], the analytical study about the experience of urban regeneration in XiaoXiHu and the critical considerations about the mistakes done by urban designers in LaoMenDong and FuZiMiao, show a new horizon for urban participation. The process used in XiaoXiHu in the last 5/6 years has been based on traditional behaves like the exchange of uses and lands, but also old tales and symbolic and familiar values. Here a new anthropological approach, driven by the “anthropological” tool known as typological map, became the starting point of a renewal also in the relationship between citizens and local government in a Chinese metropolis like Nanjing. It is simply extraordinary how, just cultivating the traditional sense of community, it is possible to regenerate urban spaces and places and at the same time improving the quality of daily-lives of human beings.

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