

This dissertation tackles the long-standing yet newly urgent question of how rural space is reconstructed when urbanisation advances by assimilation of other spaces rather than simple physical encroachment. Setting out from the premise that city and countryside today form a porous continuum rather than opposed realms, the study positions authenticity—the negotiated claim to genuineness—and post-productivism—the diversification of rural economies beyond bulk agriculture—as twin lenses through which to read contemporary transformations. In doing so, it refuses the familiar narrative that urban expansion merely threatens rural integrity; instead, it shows that the countryside has become both a storehouse of heritage capable of anchoring regional identity and a framework for imagining and theorizing new urban-oriented services.

The conceptual architecture links discourses, material space and governance. It treats authenticity not as a fixed concept but as an outcome of continuous bargaining among governments, investors, residents and visitors, while post-productivism is understood as an institutional assemblage that repurposes land, labour and symbolic values for multifunctional uses such as heritage and gastronomic tourism, ecological agriculture and cultural events. By tracing how these two logics co-evolve, the framework moves beyond binary preservation-versus-development debates and instead theorises a dialectical coexistence in which each logic perpetually reshapes the other.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, multi-scalar and temporally layered strategy anchored in architectural fieldwork, spatial ethnography and critical discourse analysis. Mapping, drawing and typological surveys document how buildings and landscapes mutate under policy and market pressures; long-term participant observation captures the everyday practices through which inhabitants and entrepreneurs rehearse or contest place narratives; and discourse analysis of development plans, promotional media and archival sources exposes the institutional grammars that legitimise particular futures. The result is a “thick description” that fuses spatial form with social meaning and allows the author to read vineyards,

canal alleys or festival programmes as documents in an ongoing debate about what builds rural authenticity.

The Langhe region in Piedmont provides the first empirical lens. Centuries of viticulture, truffle hunting and hazelnut cultivation have sculpted a rolling hillscape whose scenic unity underwrote UNESCO World Heritage inscription in 2014. That label crystallised a terroir narrative organised around family lineage, craft knowledge and the aesthetics of the “scenic rural tableau,” even as it accelerated diversification into tasting tourism, designed wineries and landscape branding.

Features such as hot-air balloon tourism and sleek contemporary architecture demonstrate that experimental interventions are acceptable provided that they align with established practices. In this thesis, authenticity denotes functional continuity—ongoing Barolo production and truffle hunting—while allowing symbolic reinvention that speaks to global taste.

Wuzhen offers a contrasting yet complementary case. Beginning in 1999, large-scale investment transformed this Jiangnan water town into one of China’s emblematic “ancient town” destinations. Restoration involved relocating many residents, reconstructing houses and scripting street life so that visitors encounter a seamless historical tableau. Critics liken the result to a theme park, pointing to hidden air conditioning units behind wooden chests or costumed staff commuting from suburbs. Yet two decades of theatre festivals, Internet summits and creative workshops have over-written the original top-down script, generating what the author calls an “authenticity in flux” in which objective, constructed and existential layers coexist: tourists may knowingly consume a staged setting yet still find genuine affective attachment; locals re-enter as performers and entrepreneurs; and the town becomes a site where Ming-style bridges frame Wi-Fi cafés without collapsing into pastiche.

Juxtaposing the two sites reveals a common mechanism: economic diversification and cultural reinterpretation form a self-confirming loop. Rural producers mobilise heritage stories to attract urban consumers; the revenues generated finance further conservation and experiential expansion; and each cycle renegotiates what qualifies as “real.” In this sense authenticity operates as both resource and outcome of post-productivism restructuring. Conversely, multifunctional economies remain tethered to place only when authenticity is kept negotiable—too rigid a freeze risks museumification, too loose a reinvention risks placeless spectacle. The dissertation thereby advances the notions of negotiated authenticity and embedded post-productivism to capture this reciprocity.

On the theoretical plane, the dissertation offers an interpretive account of rural–urban interaction that weaves material production, cultural meaning, and power relations into a single explanatory braid. Practically, it argues that sustained dialogue platforms—equitable benefit-sharing schemes, co-created festivals, flexible zoning—can make authenticity a living indicator that mediates conflict while enabling communities to steer post-productivism opportunities rather than merely endure them. The dissertation thus closes by reframing history not as a static backdrop but as a renewable resource: each moment of social development recreates memory and heritage anew, allowing rural places such as Langhe and Wuzhen to modernise without losing themselves and to show that the countryside’s future lies less in resisting urbanisation than in rewriting it on rural terms.