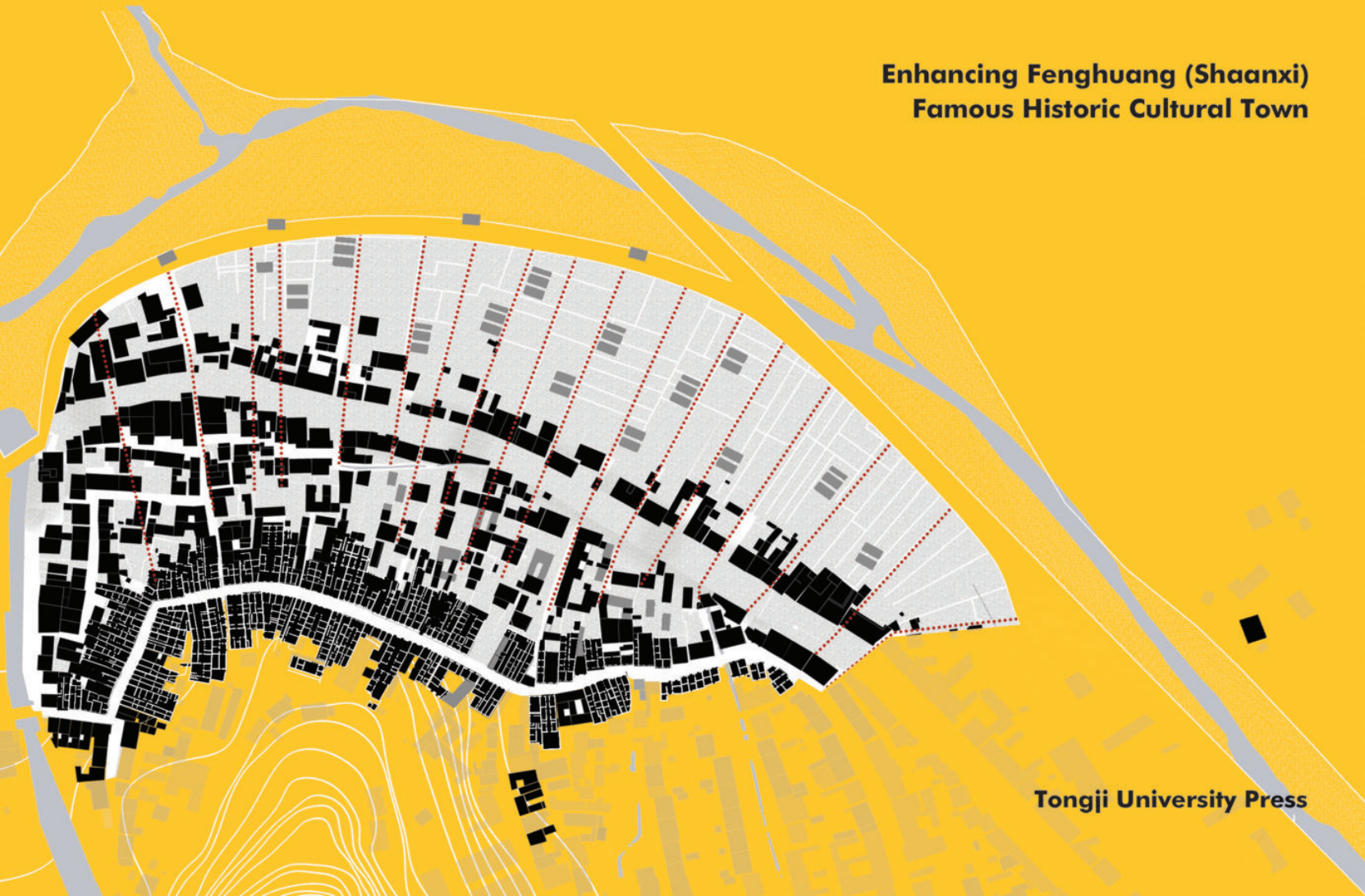


# Layered Morphologies and Latent Structures

Reading, Decoding and Rewriting  
to Enhance Historic Urban Landscape

*Laura Anna Pezzetti*

Enhancing Fenghuang (Shaanxi)  
Famous Historic Cultural Town



Tongji University Press

## Layered Morphologies and Latent Structures

Reading, Decoding and Rewriting  
to Enhance Historic Rurban Landscape

The concept of Layered Morphologies is a conceptual device developed as a theoretical and methodological approach that investigates the coevolutionary nature of architecture and settlements to propose innovatively an organic and integrated approach to their reading, protection and design enhancement.

Transcending some usual spatial ontologies and operating across interdisciplinary fields, it promotes a renewed notion of built heritage as historicised architecture and landscape as a structure of structures, where any act of modification should start from the recognition of pre-existent signs, typomorphological structures, writing of the ground and formal orders.

Advancing critical-theoretical propositions while verifying their operation value in the case study of Fenghuang (Shaanxi) Famous Historic and Cultural Town, the methodology reveals a new reading and the potential underlying Chinese settlements forms. Architectural and urban-rural design project become in no case the colonisation of a void (a *tabula rasa*) but rather an understanding and interpretation of an existing text with its erasures and absences (*tabula plena*), which also includes the principles for future writings.

On the cover: Laura A. Pezzetti, interpretative map of Fenghuang's structure.

A PoliMI - XAUAT cooperation

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Laura Anna Pezzetti



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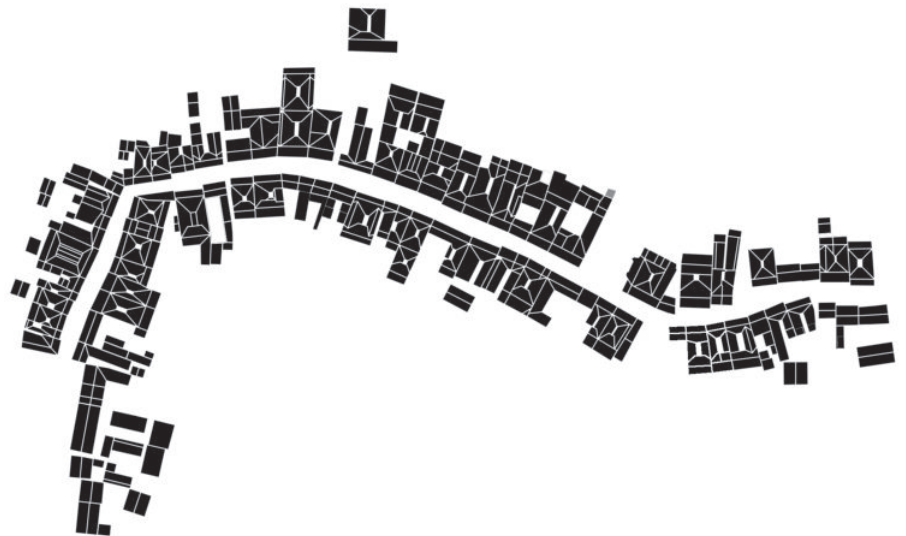
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to Enhance Historic Rurban Landscape





## Introduction

# Architecture and Coevolutionary Rural-Urban Form: Persistence, Uniqueness and Rewriting

The relationship between architecture and the city, knowledge and project, ancient and new writing has always established a shifting but crucial dialectic in the renewal process of architecture and the city as a whole while, specifically, providing a distinctive and constant feature of the Italian tradition of project and studies.

The research presented in this book was inspired by inescapable questions resulting emblematically from the case study of Fenghuang 'Cultural Famous Historical Town' (Zhashui, Shaanxi)<sup>1</sup>, selected for the 'Heritage-Led Design' yearly workshop<sup>2</sup>, and left unanswered by current literature. This in turn solicited an in-depth study of the ontology of the settlement forms of Chinese villages and at the same time the development of a methodology of reading through the actuality of the case study. According to a historic Milan-based tradition of studies<sup>3</sup>, which relies on the project as a specific tool of knowledge and views architecture as *urban architecture*<sup>4</sup>, a design workshop only has a full educational meaning when the dimension of architectural, urban and landscape design, by relying on the reading of the context and its settlement characters, presents and critically questions an issue that is at the same time site-specific but, by analogy, can always be referred to more general theoretical questions, thereby developing an appropriate response.

The fact that rural villages and small towns are the locus of the persistence of Chinese settlement forms and not just that of local vernacular traditions and *xiangchou*<sup>5</sup> seems evident. Nonetheless, present reading methods and studies appear insufficient to read and decode, along with style, construction techniques and vernacular traditions, also the settlements facts in the relationship between type and *topos*, the principles that constitute the urban-rural form and even more their underlying *formal structures*<sup>6</sup>. These are crucial for unveiling an archaic internal order as well as appropriate operational principles that, within a coherent framework, can guide the present transformation processes in a critical and informed approach.

Conservation, planning and architectures alone, if separated from the understanding of the structural matrixes of the settlement, the layered morphological structure and the *forma urbis-forma agris* relationship, are unable to redeem the loss of sense in urban form and rural landscape we currently experience in Chinese modern settlements.

During these last four years of field observations, the economic and cultural attention for rural villages and towns has grown exponentially<sup>7</sup>, strenghtening a cultural awareness as well as advancing a number of economic interests towards the countryside with the aim of rebalancing the development gap between urban and rural. The term *rurban* (urban-rural) will be used to describe a hybrid and specific spatial and landscape condition experienced in rural and mountainous contexts where former villages are increasingly co-penetrating with urban-like features, and developing extensively horizontally on farmland, thereby becoming the fulcrum of a territorial system, whereas the fringe areas of that system tend to depopulate<sup>8</sup>.

Fig. 1. A *matou qiang* top in correspondence to a main hall, with its gable ridge, small slopes-roof and a cornice made by three layers of lime work. (source: PolIMI- XAUAT Heritage-Led Design Workshop, May 2018)

After the processes of *self-rurbanisation* of villages' and towns' fringe and the rough infills affected the historical textures in the last decades, the designation as 'Famous Historical and Cultural Towns and Villages' seems to add paradoxically another major threat to historicised architecture, layered morphologies and landscape. Listed villages and towns attract tourism-commercial development projects based on standardised models that erase the deep-seated morphological order of whole settlements together with the authentic character of unique buildings and rural landscapes.

Their related preservation plans, in turn, also do contribute to fragmentation by tracing the demarcations of the 'red line' of protection unit, the control and the environmental coordination zones without any morphological study and reciprocal definition. On the other hand, at the building scale they promote the erasure of every sign of the passage of time in order to satisfy an expectation of a symbolic authenticity, based on the prevailing value of the 'original style' and tourism consumerism-led revitalisation.

The result is a fragmentation of the wholeness of the settlement's organism and form, while the uniqueness in time and space is neglected in favour of generic 're-historicisations' promoting a simulacrum of both historical and intangible cultural context. The existing superposition of historical layering, although 'impure', features a multifaceted diachronic authenticity that has a rich historic narrative with manifold memories and signs from different societies.

On the other hand, the lack of knowledge in comparison with established methodologies of urban studies is unfortunately evident even within international guidelines concerning preservation plans<sup>9</sup>, and specifically within the ICOMOS *China Principles*<sup>10</sup>. Not even the openings and proposals of the Historic Urban Landscape (2011)<sup>11</sup>, which are explicitly more concerned with the management of transformations than with the project as a specific tool of knowledge and modifications, seem presently to shed a clearer light on the need for a theoretical-methodological discussion in a complex research field that results from a tradition of typo-morphological studies and from the territory as a layered *palimpsest*<sup>12</sup>.

Unlike methodological research, the current proliferation of toolboxes flattens the theoretical richness and complexity of anamnesis, barely touching the surface of *urban facts*<sup>13</sup> and historicised landscape with a mere description and phenomenology of the present, entirely separated from the recognition of foundational matrixes and their interconnections, as well as from a meditation on the future which coincides with project and not merely with policies. 'Historical awareness in planning all too often remains at the level of dating and describing individual features'<sup>14</sup>, while the relation between facts and the modes of description are themselves the method in the study of urban and territorial organism and require their own descriptive language.

The methodological reference adopted in this research has its cultural roots in the tradition of urban studies and urban architecture developed between Milan and Venice<sup>15</sup> where two components have always operated concurrently: the relationship between architecture, the city and the settlement, and between design, history and tradition.

From the issue of *environmental pre-existences* that gave theoretical dignity to the dialogue between design and history (Rogers) and the focus on the physical dimension of settlements within the unity of architecture and urbanism (Samonà) to the analytical study of the urban fabric in relation to building

typologies (Muratori) on the other hand, the basis for the *urban science* and urban significance of architecture were jointly established and further developed by the following generation<sup>16</sup>.

This research also transcends some usual spatial ontologies and disciplinary fields' fragmentation such as urban/rural, architecture/planning, vernacular/architecture and conservation/design. It rather develops a multiscale approach and integrates theoretical and methodological tools from *urban studies*, topology and conservation to decipher the typo-morphological and topographical structure of Chinese historic small towns in order to redefine the object of conservation and an appropriate strategy of enhancement, revitalisation and development based on their meaningful historic structure and layering.

The concept of Layered Morphologies is a conceptual device developed as a theoretical and methodological approach operating across interdisciplinary fields that investigates the coevolutionary nature of architecture and settlements to promote site-specific project design strategies. It promotes a renewed notion of built heritage as historicised architecture and landscape as 'a structure of structures' where any act of modification should start from the recognition of pre-existent signs and formal orders. Reading places as layered palimpsests of signs, traces and overwriting, the project is in no case the colonisation of a void (*tabula rasa*) but rather a new writing resulting from the understanding and interpretation of an existing text, which also includes the principles for imagining future writings and signs (*tabula plena*).

The concept, moreover, allows to apprehend, criticise and envision the reality of contemporary rural-urban forms and imagine their future. Paraphrasing Italo Calvino, every single project is only meaningful when it complements, follows and foreshadows other projects. A higher richness and complexity in landscape results from the constant dialogue between the place and the past, in a way that develops latent issues and energies.

The chapters of the book are structured according to two registers that nourish each other, aiming at comparing and offering critical-theoretical propositions while, at the same time, verifying their operational value in the actuality of the case study by demonstrating its operational value in identifying constitutive principles and substantiating an overall and multiscale design hypothesis. Three sheets, compiled by young doctoral students, integrate the reading by framing some specific aspects.

As the *urban studies* have demonstrated, reading and decoding the relation between built facts are the necessary basis to understand the complexity of urban and rural phenomena in order to define holistic strategies and projects for a coevolutionary preservation, enhancement and development of historic and existing contexts. The settlement is the stable heritage of civilisation. Therefore, beginning with the workshop, we insisted on careful survey and on the practices of its rendering in order to both integrate the absence of records and to re-apprehend the reality of *built facts*, in their non-reproducibility and intrinsic meanings, rather than establishing ideologically what should be considered as valuable. Or better yet, meaningful.

The indiscriminate acceptance or, at the opposite, the selection of inevitably transient values according to the *spirit of the time*, around which protection keeps spinning, including the reductive value of 'reuse', appear to be limiting in the face of the universal meaning of architecture (heritage is

historicised architecture and settlements are *overall architecture*) and of the complexity of urban-rural phenomena. All *built facts*, whether they are heritage, historicized or new, need to be considered as formal structures and in the *organism*<sup>17</sup> established by their layering within the coevolutionary processes between man and environment.

Architecture is what lies at the intersection of 'transitional' and 'permanent conditions', including 'the universal and eternal meaning of certain forms' (Perret).

Time itself inscribed into matter is for architects the living material of history, of the spirituality of societies and of the project. Like, symmetrically, every project always entails the reopening of the cycle of historical transformations along with new cultural expressions and rewritings.

Therefore, in order to read the context both as an archive of the forms of history and as an organism endowed with constitutive rules, the research also integrated the *rurban* anatomy implicit in urban studies with methodological tools belonging to the Italian tradition of conservation while, at the same time, critically discussing the dialectic between the counter-propositions original-authentic, nostalgia-memory and permanence-transformation.

Starting from the understanding of the structural reasons of the settlement and from the 'clues' offered by some *constants* found in situ, the research pursued the aim of defining a project of knowledge based on the reality of *built facts*, read in the continuity through buildings, urban form and landscape structure, in other words through the two-fold dimension of urban-rural *organism* and *formal structure*.

The focus on architecture, the city, the settlement and the territory in their layers understood as a palimpsest, a text written and overwritten several times based on structures and traces belonging to the past, explores the relationship between type and *topos* as well as the even dissonant writings eventually etched by the human beings in the ground. Built facts are cultural facts, expressions of different cycles of civilisation and carriers of memory through a process of accumulation and persistence<sup>18</sup>.

The notion of context that reads the site in its historical and cultural making is assumed to penetrate the deep structure of the settlement where the memory and identity of places is not just what is physically visible *hic et nunc* but rather the result of a dense weaving and overlapping of constructions and memories, traces and absences, relations and fractures that reflect its current condition.

Chinese urban-rural forms provide a particular type of hypertext where often jumbled collections of traces and overwriting, memories and absences, buildings and landscape need to be acknowledged in their uniqueness, distinct character and potential use and meaning. While sometimes even labile and hidden, such writings, traces and layers should not be erased; on the contrary, they should be rediscovered, interpreted and enhanced not only as historical documents but even as constitutive principles and references for any interventions on the territory.

Such innovative reading of Chinese urban-rural forms revives the civil role of architects in the construction of settlement and landscape as a cultural *mise en forme*<sup>19</sup>.

By defining an analytical and interpretative methodology aimed at capturing the *locus solus* of the case study, while making explicit general issues and themes, the Fenghuang case study demonstrates that the phenomenal analyses and interpretive and formal syntheses typical of *urban studies* and *urban architecture* are indeed applicable even to Chinese settlements and to the rationality of their *built facts*.

At the same time, relating to geography as a dominating character and given the close relationship ascertained between typo-morphology and latent structures, topography and geographic factors, the methodology offers an effective instrumentation to attain a new operational phenomenology for Fengshui and Shanshui principles, along with an iconological quality of landscape as a *mise en forme* within the urban-rural form and ground-form rapport.

Situated *between mountain and water*, the village composes architecture, form of the settlement and form of the farmland, appearing as a context of structures. The landscape dimension provides a framework to its different components and a systemic approach to the specific nature of a *rurban* historic context.

As James Hillman wrote<sup>20</sup>, the built landscape embraces more than mere moods. As a *mise en forme*, it makes memory possible.

This line of research, already applied to the city of Xi'an<sup>21</sup> reframes the extensive notion of landscape, currently an indiscriminate concept that tends to absorb all the components of the built environment, from the scale of architecture to that of urban planning, into the deep vision inherent in *built facts*, or the only vision that may integrate the mere dimension of the visible.

Indeed, absent forms almost invariably leave a trace in the deep memory of places. Topographical components like paths and walls demarcating plots and fields, small walls, ditches and lines of trees, together with major lines of forces, constitute a *writing of the ground* which helps to reconstruct the specific memory of a place. Including topography into morphological readings, the place-context is read also as an absence and a possible text that like a *palimpsest* contains several traces and different signs, including the future ones.

Diachronic and synchronic *stratigraphic readings* and *interpretative mapping* have proved to be effective in the Chinese context where latency, disappearance, and intangibility all too often open the way to demolitions, substitution, and simulacra reconstruction.

Starting from some recurring clues, fragments of a coherent *writing of the ground*, and intertwining typo-morphological and historic-structural instrumentation with topographical reading and landscape systemic approach, this research brought to light the foundational matrix of the village imprinted by human activity on geomorphological elements, from the 'inland port' to the current layout, resulting in a particular deep radial structure, developed transversal to the layout of the Old Street. Resulting from the 'wings' of the Phoenix (i.e. Fenghuang) it drew its radial shape from an original and three-fold relationship among settlement type, urban and rural morphology which is still 'engraved' and partially legible in the topographical traces.

The discovery of this underlying resilient structure opens interpretive readings and design potentials that, while unexplored, are urgent for the Chinese context.

Therefore, farmland patterns cannot be considered less important than the built heritage embodied in the courtyard types forming the 'wings' of the Phoenix. They emerged and coevolved in a mutual relationship, thus encapsulating together the meaning of Fenghuang's urban-rural form.

The existence of a latent structure even emerges as a clarifying element for the otherwise unintelligible

later processes of saturation and expansion of its traces. Underneath the discordant landscape resulting from self-construction and recent 'generic buildings', its *lines of force* reveal an only apparent locational randomness – impervious to pure description in terms of the historic landscape – thereby providing an interpretive key that can 'recodify' it starting from the *semantic units* recognisable within it. Indeed, the intrinsic rationality layered in the long-term (*longue durée*)<sup>22</sup> of the settlement structure is such that it readily absorbs even the logic of deregulated expansion.

Another achievement of the research is that, alongside clear constitutive rules, the *writing of the ground* also defines a *topographical figure* endowed with an iconological quality. Chinese diffused historic settlements feature a substantial reversal of the typical relationship between *primary elements* and fabric that can be observed in Europe. Nonetheless, the joint presence of a typo-morphological *solidarity* among courtyard houses and a clear topographic structure allows us to read this entire settlement's form as a superior-grade *organism-figure*.

This figure is real and rewritable, or can evolve and benefit from a new appropriate writing.

By integrating the recognition of settlement criteria, rooted in local cultural traditions, Fengshui and Shanshui, in the working hypothesis, the research has justifiably experimented appropriate and sustainable modes for coevolutionary processes, well supported by the rediscovery and enhancement of constitutive principles.

Beside the historical meaning, the latent structure also reveals its operational value for designing sustainable and joint strategies for the revitalisation, enhancement and development of a layered morphology. These strategies do not promote the erasure of the simple traditional earthen buildings nor they entail the demolition of any element that would be discordant or devoid of architectural value according to the purely perceptive-landscape assessment of homogeneous *landscape units*.

Indeed, the coherence with the *latent structure* is precisely what allows it to rehabilitate and regenerate even part of the existing within the recognised *morphological semantic units* by making them readable and by re-morphologising them in their composite and layered character. In other words, this is accomplished without merely considering a simplified coherence based on the selection of uniform or mimetic stylistic elements. The consequences of this current approach to historicised landscape is the elimination of the most recent traces of Chinese history, simply because they do not reflect the purity of a lost 'original style', together with the interventions of stylistic camouflage for raw buildings, since demolishing all the existent built-up would be simply unsustainable.

Reading the *longue durée* alongside the cycles of growth and decline and the phenomena of obsolescence and degradation, the historical core can be relaunched through the project in its overall urban-rural settlement value by reframing the multifaceted within the possibility of a coherent achievement. While often accidental and experienced individually, a collection of fragments becomes landscape once it is recognised collectively as a formal system.

Within such a perspective, knowledge of the past (what is done) represents the basis of comparison and the measure for the future (what is yet to come). Rather than merely a site for the implementation of

incidental demands and goals, the place becomes the very subject of research, knowledge of which is crucial in the development of a design proposal.

As a specific mode of knowledge of reality, the project becomes the expression of a critical reflexive practice that exceeds the contingent experimental occasion. Starting from the premise of the point of view, it jointly guides research, architectural project and design of the city or of the settlement.

The development of an Integrated Plan-Project (IPP) becomes part of the research and defines a multiscale strategy as the frame for the architectural project. It promotes an innovative approach within which conservation and revitalisation goals, remodelling and development programs are closely interlinked and defined in an interdependent strategy, scope and *mise en forme* by a rural-urban scale project.

By making use of figurative norms instead of written regulatory restrictions, it offers at the same time a precise description of the existing conditions and a statement about principles and conditions for future transformation.

The *semantic units* that may be seen to compose the urban form constitute complex morphotypes, which, in turn, underlie both the *complex landscape units* of the IPP and the redefinition of the different protection zones in the Conservation Plan. By reabsorbing dynamically the examples of dissonance within a *forma urbis* that is recognisable albeit multifaceted in its morphological layering, the project redefines *lines of force* and connection, strategies and modes of intervention in the different *semantic units*, the boundary of the city and the beginning of the countryside, by protecting, enhancing and revitalising even the rural landscape as an integral part of the overall formal structure.

Similarly to Chinese painted landscapes where invisible lines underlie things thus establishing their mutual relationship, the link between town and man-made nature is reactivated by reconnecting the *lines of force* of the latent structure that, running through the void of the farmlands, re-establish the relationship *between mountain and water*. Town and farmland are part of an overall settlement design and a necessary and indispensable resource for the authenticity and uniqueness of the 'Famous Historical and Cultural Town'.

The project includes the re-structuring and re-signification of the entire urban-rural form following its constitutive matrix; the preservation and enhancement of historical buildings, morphologies and rural landscape; the re-morphologisation of some crucial morphotypes through micro-regeneration techniques of rewriting, grafting, infill. The challenge underlying the IPP, recalling concepts like the *urbanised countryside* developed in Italy by Samonà during the 1970s<sup>23</sup>, is to contrast the depopulation of rural and mountain regions by combining the redefinition of the entire urban form through micro-urbanism and a slow tourism based on new roles, activities and widespread services in order to create the conditions for people to remain where they are.

The inter-scalar dimension of the IPP presupposes a multi-scalar control, which is a prerogative of architectural design whenever it is understood as *urban landscape architecture*. Urban landscape architecture addresses the establishment of architectural *space-places* rather than the development of individual architectural objects. As the tradition of the Italian *urban project* demonstrated a while ago, it is impossible to operate deductively from the Master Plan scale at successively smaller scales. The

understanding of the nature and organisation of relations is what defines the scale of design (Semerani)<sup>24</sup>.

Along this line of thought, pilot projects corresponding to paradigmatic areas-problem serve as the necessary touchstone to verify the overarching strategy up to the architectural scale, stimulating a meditation about types, figures, rhythms and establishing formal references to overcome the schematic approach of urban planning tools. The last chapter therefore presents some experimental design developed in the Architectural Design Studio at Politecnico di Milano<sup>25</sup>.

Understanding what is already built not just in terms of relevant architectural types and historicised architecture, but in order to work also within recent built fabrics is, perhaps, the greatest of all challenges today, which is not limited to historical contexts. Overcoming the sterilising vision of 'buffer zones' which, according to a still zoning logic, anachronistically tends to purge the alleged purity of the old center from the impurity of a modernity viewed as a fatally degraded, is a theoretical battle that began precisely with the Italian *urban studies* in the post-WWII period. This tradition focused on the issue of the historic city rather than limiting to the historical core (Semerani) and on its meaning as an evolving palimpsest rather than either on the indiscriminate protection or the arbitrary selection of inevitably provisional and transient values.

Indeed, the complex layering of forms, meanings and uses of the old and the process of changing values over time may be unfolded within the specific relationship between place and project. The research demonstrates that conservation of material authenticity and coevolutionary design of the new are not necessarily dichotomous. Time itself is a material of the architectural and urban design project. Designing within layering becomes the authentic form of enhancement of the old.

Within this tradition of studies and projects, the compulsory relationship with reality never translates into an adaptation to the agenda imposed by the status quo and rather implies a decoding, criticism and new writing in order to arrive at the essence of a deeper order underlying places.

As the reading produces a new interpretation of the existing text through a process of abstraction, it tends to express itself as a possible operation of rewriting as it reinterprets the text from a hermeneutic point of view. Therefore, the language of description of the project is an essential part of the construction of sense, making readable the constitutive rules as well as revealing a figurative structure.

Recapturing a deep meaning and, at the same time, layering morphologies by incorporating even recent history should become a crucial process for preserving historical memory in a reality where the interventions on heritage in the name of memory all too often result in oblivion rather than recollection.

The horizon of layered morphologies proposed for Chinese villages, towns and cities by the research, belongs to design strategies that does not colonise the place as if it were a void but rather pursue relationships with existing traces and continuous rewriting, to enhance the richness in relations, memory and layering of the fabric in a constant dialogue with the past. As a strategy for the coevolutionary development of old and new, rewriting provides the additional advantage of promoting resilience and economic and environmental sustainability within a view of circular economy.

As a result, two key aspects of the project as rewriting emerge clearly: not only retracing and renewing an existing text but also creating or preserving a dialogue with the past.