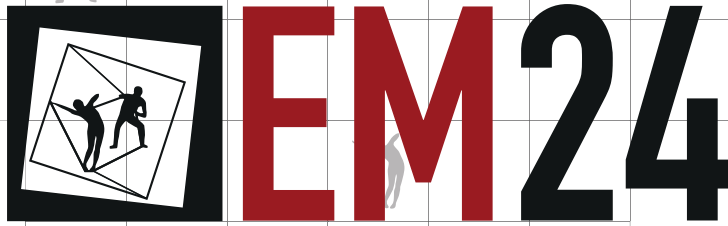


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EURAU - EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON ARCHITECTURE  
AND URBANISM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

IN-PRESENCE /  
THE BODY AND  
THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

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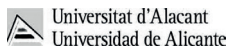
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The Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano organises at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering (AUIC), EURAU Milan 2024 "IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE - The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization", the eleventh edition of the international conference, which takes place from 19 to 22 June 2024.



# / EURAU Milan 2024

## 11th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON ARCHITECTURE  
AND URBANISM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

# IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

*For those who deal with the city and the territory, space refers to the body*  
(C. Bianchetti)

The EURAU Milan 2024 Conference aims to unpack the significance of corporeality in contemporary times and its relevance for the upcoming years. Specifically, the focus is on the relation between body and space and how this relates to architecture, the city and the environment, interpreted as physical facts and processes. Within the background of a technological turn, the focus is now on what has changed or will further change in this relationship and what, on the opposite, remains unalterable, inherently bound to the material and impervious to the virtual.

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# The enigma of density.

## Testing design proposals to revitalize Hua'anli urban village (Wuhan)

### Key Words

Architecture, Design, Urban village, Wuhan, China

The phenomenon of Chinese urban villages, 城中村, in pinyin chéngzhongcun, literally: "village in city" is receiving growing attention from a plurality of points of view. Indeed, they resulted from the policies related to the dual land use system (urban and rural), generating contradictory urban situations in contemporary megacities. Their urban grain feature such a density that we can address these agglomerations as big architectural objects made of solids and voids. The units of the fabric, single constructions arriving at eight floors after illegal additions, are notoriously called "handshake" or "kissing" buildings [Al 2014] because of their vicinity. Such congested urban environments have been conducive to hygienic issues, mostly in terms of illumination and ventilation, creating conditions where the body of the city impacts negatively on people's ones.

The origins of urban villages date back to the establishment of the hukou system, the categorization adopted by the State to separate urban and rural residents, forming the basis for resource allocation. Urban residents benefited from stronger state control over public resources, including food, clothing, education, and social welfare. Rural residents, however, had more autonomy within their local communities. According to the Dual Land System, urban land is owned by the state, and therefore available to expropriation for new developments, while rural land that belongs to village collectives grant property rights to peasants, engendering what has also been labelled "the sunny side of hukou" [Marrucci 2017, p. 49]. Over time some rural villages have been engulfed by urban expansions resulting in today's urban villages, rural enclaves surrounded by skyscrapers and modern infrastructure, hosting a mix of poor and transient populations [Wang 2016; Wu et al. 2010] that over the years have also experienced a self-urbanization process via spontaneous illegal additions on top of existing buildings. They are informal not-any-more rural settlements encroached in urban areas drawn by centralized planning. Chronicles report that in such dense environment, inhabitants face social problems

like crime, addiction, and prostitution. Nevertheless, urban villages also offer economic opportunities to newcomers, provide affordable housing for rural migrants seeking work in the city, and still encapsulate fragment of traditional culture. For all these conditions, we can frame them as heterotopia, recalling the condition of being worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside [Foucault and Jay 1986]. Their role in the city is controversial since their poor conditions and property regime opposes to traditional land speculation and guarantee a humble yet necessary form of right to the city. Their integral demolition to make space to new urban developments represent also the authorities' will to eliminate the informality embedded in their genealogy to create more governable spaces [Wu et al. 2012].

The paper considers Hua'anli, a Wuhan's urban village, as an interesting case study to test design strategies to save the settlement from bulldozers and at the same time improve its livability. The research stems from a critical reflection on a thesis defended for the master's degree in architecture [Zhi and Chang 2023] in which the authors have elaborated an architectural project for revitalizing Hua'anli. Given the complexity and interdisciplinary dynamics converging on the dilemma of density in urban living, the proposal endorsed a research by design method to test the validity of different approaches.

Hua'anli is one of the 167 urban villages recorded in Wuhan in 2003. There is no official data about the current amount of people living in Hua'anli but in the past the population reached one hundred thousand. [1] Surrounded by railroads, it has poor transportation and poorer services like healthcare, education, or social facilities. As for the majority of Chinese urban villages, the authorities wished to re-develop this intercluded land by turning down everything to rebuilding with conventional mass housing schemes [Fabris and Semprenon 2019]. The critique to this *modus operandi* was the starting point of the project, which aimed at exploring alternative paths toward a more equitable future for the residential area. The most obvious action would have been to operate with punctual demolitions to free up space in the compact fabric. However, this approach would have introduced other problems, among which the definition of criteria for bulldozing some houses instead of others, or the risk of provoking irreversible damages to the structures in the demolition process, or the subsequent need to transform the façade of mutilated buildings, or the reduced monetization resulting from decreasing density, or the difficulty of introducing new service facilities, all of which would have negatively impacted on the balance of pros and cons. We soon realized that the sole act of demolition was too weak – and ideological, from a Western perspective – to be really considered as a feasible option and that we need a clearer urban vision. The decision was, therefore, to test developmental models already implemented in the past and, empirically, assess the potential implications. The four models took the name of the architect who conceived them: Haussmann, Le Corbusier, Tschumi, and Ungers. All these hypotheses unveiled shortcomings, especially when applied at the scale of the whole settlement, where social and economic mechanisms inevitably overflowed the perimeter of an architectural proposal. Therefore, the choice went to reduce the scale of intervention and, by force, play with compromises.

At a closer scale, it was possible to identify a plot with interesting spatial characteristics given by the buildings' orientation, whose rotation created space for rethinking open space both at the edges and in the inner part. The decision was to test a selective demolition and subsequent construction of an architectural prototype working as a service hub for the district. In this way, the project rejected the ideological position of making space between existing buildings and tried to fit a new architectural program in an already hyper-dense environment. The new volumes, permeable at the ground floor and connected at the upper ones had to be a taller and create a slenderer sequence of masses, conceived to host some residential units but also, and more importantly, a generous amount of services among which, sport facilities, medical clinics, halls for children and elderlies. The tentative was not only to provide a new functional program for the neighborhood, but also to give it a new architectural sense in terms of relationships between uses, introduction of a more welcoming circulation system, and application of materials and techniques guaranteeing more access of light and air. Therefore, the building has been conceived to have solid parts hosting service spaces such as toilets or deposits, and translucent parts sheltered by semitransparent skins for the primary functions, occasionally shaded by internal curtains. Perforated sheets were fixed along the external stairs to provide shelter but, at the same time, let the glaze flow through buildings and alleys.

Rather than displaying a definitive project, the experience here discussed put forward a design method and a preliminary architectural prototype alternative to recurrent massive demolitions, relocations, and reconstructions. The real validation of this hypothesis can only come from the project execution and community reaction. Yet, it is comforting to constate that other projects are working on similar paths, mostly in the notorious conurbation of the Greater Bay Area [Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao] with significant experiments applied in Nantou Old Town. For instance, Urbanus office's regeneration plan envisions a strategy of gradual transformations

following the principle of urban acupuncture, [2] while TAO Trace Architecture Office projects leverage on the social engagement architecture can play in hyper-dense environments. [3] All these experience suggest that density remains an enigma whose processualism is often more interesting of its temporary solutions.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] See the portfolio by Ma Zixiao, "Vertical Wuhan," [https://issuu.com/1214557189/docs/zixiao\\_ma\\_portfolio\\_for\\_ucl\\_march\\_architecture\\_des/s/18733736](https://issuu.com/1214557189/docs/zixiao_ma_portfolio_for_ucl_march_architecture_des/s/18733736). Accessed 7 February 2023.
- [2] The project is consultable here: <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/exhibition-venue-design-concept/?lang=en>. Accessed 7 February 2023.
- [3] One projects is the "In-between Pavilion," consultable here: <https://www.t-a-o.cn/in-between-pavilion>; another projects is "A Hamlet within the urban village," consultable here: <https://www.t-a-o.cn/a-hamlet-within-the-urban-village>. Accessed 7 February 2023.

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#### FIGURES

Fig. 1 - Zhi Lei and Chang Liu. *Panorama of Hua'anli Urban Village, Wuhan*.

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IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE.  
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