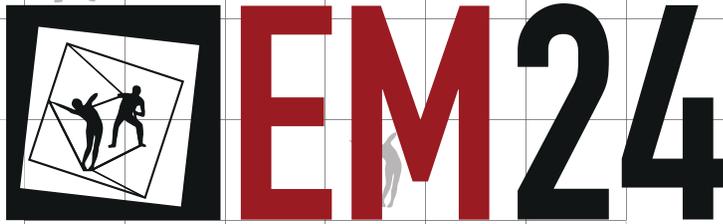


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**EM24**

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

Edited by: Marco Bovati, Anna Moro, Daniele Villa

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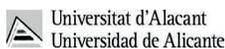
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The Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano organises at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering (AUIC), EURAU Milan 2024 "IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE - The role of corporeity in 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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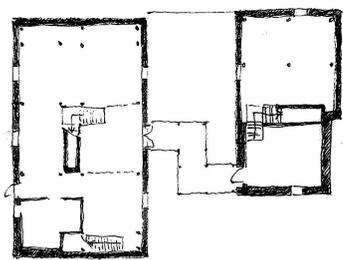
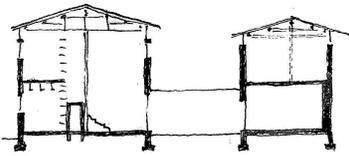
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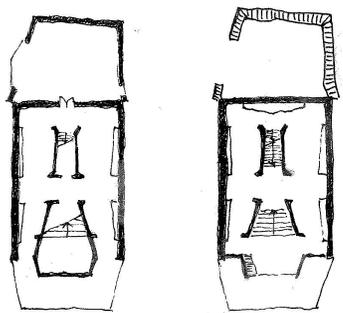
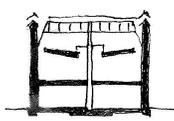
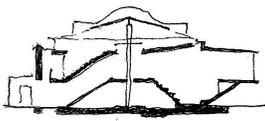
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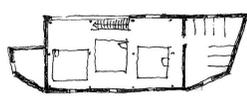
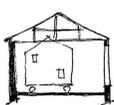
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# Architectural design to regenerate fragile buildings in rural China

## Key Words

Architecture, Design, Rural, Revitalization, China

A large part of traditional buildings in rural China are exposed to fragile conditions. These entail material aspects, such as perishable construction materials and increasingly abandoned building techniques, as well as immaterial ones, like the diffused desire to emancipate from a status of backwardness or economic unsuitability to repair instead of rebuilding. Vulnerability addresses both these buildings and the people inhabiting them since all the possible evolution scenarios bring ulterior uneasiness to already difficult situations. In the rediscovery of identitarian roots, rural habitats -and, by extension, traditional houses- increasingly play a pivotal role in awakening cultural values that, if not repositioned in the contemporary milieu, risk vanishing together with the physical crumbling of buildings. The "forgotten realm" mentioned by Koolhaas [Koolhaas 2020, p. 2] represents today one of the most fertile sources of identity in globalized citizenship, with rationalized planning and design flattening urban realms [Fabris and Semprebon 2019] and the political campaign to bridge the gap between the rural and the urban [Ahlers 2014, China Development Research Foundation 2017], which reached a momentum in the last years [Chen et al. 2023], calls for a 360 degrees commitment of academic, civic, and professional society. What ten years ago was a paradoxical condition for architects [Lin 2013], who had to reinvent themselves if they wanted to participate in a transformation process in a context where their professional services were not required, today has radically changed. The potential role of design at different scales has been increasingly acknowledged by the leadership, creating space for a new social and creative commitment [Semprebon 2023], witnessed by many recent initiatives at academic [Lee 2015, Semprebon 2022a, Berta et al. 2023], cultural [Li et al. 2018], and professional level [Bolchover and Lin 2014; VV.AA 2020; Wei 2021; Zhang 2018].

This paper selects and discusses three architectural projects executed on existing fragile buildings in rural China, displaying three different tectonic strategies of intervention. These

projects alter and graft new architectural bodies that manage to redeem conditions of poverty and idleness, leveraging the intrinsic qualities of architecture, the materials employed, and the connections between old and new. The tree buildings are today regenerated and reappropriated by the local communities and open to the public, not only tourists visiting the countryside in search of an escape from urban alienation but also citizens who have permanently moved to villages. The three projects are the Libraries Avant-Garde, Ruralation Library by AZL Architects, Tangle County (Zhejiang) built in 2015, the Xiadi Paddy Field Bookstore of Librairie Avant-Garde by Hua Li, TAO – Trace Architecture Office, Pingnan County (Fujian) built in 2019, and the Papa's Hostel by 3andwich Design / He Wei Studio, Songyang County (Zhejiang) built in 2015.

The Librairie Avant-Garde is a famous bookstore in China that has opened several branches in rural villages. In this case, two dilapidated buildings that had been abandoned in Daijiashan Village offered the opportunity to invent a new library and shop, keeping the atmosphere of a traditional environment. Beyond consolidating the rammed earth walls, the main works regarded the uplifting of sixty centimeters of the roof, which ensured natural illumination to penetrate from the top in the inner part of the buildings and the insertion of technological volumes in the interior. These new elements are placed in adherence to existing walls, contributing to their static function, or in coherence with the structural grid so that they preserve the proportions of the interiors and declare their contemporaneity through the material treatment of surfaces. The Xiadi Paddy Field Bookstore is another shop in the same chain. In this case, the ruin was isolated from the village, reachable only by a pedestrian path immersed in the crops. Only three rammed earth walls remained from the previous structure, creating a double-height semi-closed space open on one side. Here, the design strategy was to insert a concrete structure completely alienated from the rammed earth walls, with the task of both consolidating precarious structures and reorganizing the spatial program. A main space for performances is obtained from a stepped hall around which ancillary areas for storing books and reading are arranged. The vertical movement is emphasized by the new system of stairs, the sequence of dilatation and compression, and the gaps between the concrete structure and mud walls, which allow sunlight to drop from the sky. The new roof works like an umbrella, providing shelter and collecting rainwater.

The Papa's Hostel is a project of adaptive reuse, which consists of structural consolidation and reparation of damaged elements, plus the intelligent insertion of lightweight movable boxes that embody the new hostel rooms. Three of these elements placed in the large room on the second floor reorganize the space without really altering it but just adding semitransparent elements that give great flexibility in space arrangement and the required privacy for the hostel. Great attention is paid to the lightening system to emphasize the reflecting effects on polycarbonate and the absorbing capacity of rammed earth walls. The ground floor remains a large hall dedicated to welcoming guests and hosting shared activities.

In synthesis, we can say that the three approaches play on the relationship between contemporary and traditional by operating respectively in adherence to existing structures, reinventing space, inserting a structure detached from the existing one, and filling new elements inside a conserved and consolidated structure. These three projects unveil three interesting tectonic strategies that reject ideological positions on the ancient structure, such as integral conservation, therapeutic obstinacy, or acritical demolition, to field pragmatic attitudes oriented to exploit the old as a spatial and cultural resource instead. This posture is promising in the author's opinion since it is free of modifying what is inherited from history to write the story of contemporaneity, with its values, necessities, and sometimes losses. Rural poverty is ransomed without depriving its materiality and architectural body, which, in turn, nurtures a sense of belonging and cultural distinctiveness.

The results presented here certainly do not provide an exhaustive overview of the rich panorama of contemporary architectural experiences in rural China. Still, they suggest a stimulating point of entry in the debate on design in, from, or for fragile buildings. The functional programs of the new architectures leverage the tourist industry to trigger broader revitalization processes involving rural citizens directly or indirectly. The feasibility of the tree projects materialized from the increasing attention political campaigns and entrepreneurial actors are putting on the countryside revitalization, a program that is challenging conventional practices of demolition and reconstruction [Smith 2021; Sempereon 2022b] to find more sustainable and equitable routes to social inclusion and cultural valorization. As the projects introduced above suggest, the initial condition of vulnerability can be turned into original design experiences pragmatically grounded in specific sites but simultaneously able to contribute originally to architectural research in the broader context.

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## FIGURES

Fig. 1 - Gerardo Semprebon. Three tectonic approaches to regenerate fragile buildings in rural China. Redraw from a) by reinventing space by inserting a structure detached from the existing one, the Librairie Avant-Garde, Ruralation Library by AZL Architects, Tonglu County (Zhejiang) built in 2015; b) by operating in adherence to existing structures, the Xiadi Paddy Field.

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