

The operational study of urban form as an investigation of (bio)diversity: an educational experiment in Nanjing

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This contribution presents the methodology, outcomes, and potential impacts of the design studio Urban Morphology, Architectural Typology, Contemporary Settlement Patterns, led by Professors Bao Li and Marco Trisciuglio at the School of Architecture, Southeast University, Nanjing. The 2026 edition, titled URBAN ANAMNESIS AND URBAN SURGERY. Urban Design and Spatial Morphology in the Zhen Xiang Area, Nanjing, investigates how operational readings of urban form can inform design as a process of (bio)diversity-making.

URBAN ANAMNESIS explores the site through its transitional morphological phases, revealing past layouts, alignments, and spatial structures as active design resources for an “urban surgery” approach. The studio focuses on a complex area at the intersection of Taiping South Road and Zhankang Road, in the Qinhuai District, structured around the old Zhen Xiang (Needles Alley), historically known as the narrowest alley in Nanjing. Within a layered context of early 20th-century industrial and commercial buildings and large-scale interventions from 1985–2004, the area is currently in need of spatial and functional reorganization.

Starting from an extensive typo-morphological survey and in-depth site analysis, students developed design scenarios addressing contemporary urban forms, building types, and their capacity to host diverse social and economic actors. The paper argues that reading and reactivating “hidden traces” of the urban landscape can support more resilient, inclusive, and diverse urban transformations, and discusses the pedagogical value of this approach in today’s Chinese urban context.