

Back to the Countryside! Recovering China's Landscapes- Designing Village Acupuncture for Xixinan, Anhui Province, China

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The issues in which designers and scholars must address, with respect to urbanism, are increasingly global and complex in both context as well as in magnitude. Arguably, concepts such as “smart growth” and “new urbanism” were initially theories and strategies applied to Western cities and conditions, aimed to counter, for example, the shrinking of cities. Detroit epitomizes this phenomena, for example, where “white flight” to the suburbs, enabled by the Federal Highway act and subsidized mortgages to returning Second World War GI’s created ensuing suburban sprawl and the eating up of valuable rural and agricultural lands beyond former defined urban and rural boundaries.

How are these trends playing themselves out in other parts of the world such as Asia and notably China?

In 1949 with the Founding of the People’s Republic of China, China’s urban population was at 10% urban and 90% rural. With the opening up during Reform in 1978, under Deng Xiaoping, China was then at 20% urban and 80% rural. In an inversion, it is predicted by the UN that in 1945 China will be 85% urban and 15% rural.

However, contrary to prevailing urban patterns, there has been a recent attempt towards movement back to the countryside in China, and a reconnecting with the agricultural landscape as intellectuals, artists and the elite seeking retreat from the ills of the industrialized Chinese cities. What are the ways in

which we can engage, through design, sustainable solutions and hybrid interventions with this rediscovered agricultural landscape? We must start looking to areas undergoing similar trends of rural reconstruction, through the lens of smart growth and new urbanism.

Featured here, are two studios, representing studies and proposed interventions for the village. One was run in the US and their counter run in Summer 2015. Studies Abroad students lived on the site, where they conducted field surveying, making proposals for a series of interventions in this Village.

Students had the opportunity to engage first hand in many of the pressing current issues facing China today, as it continues to modernize at a rapid rate. The current rural-urban divide continues to grow and continues to create massive challenges. At the same time, however, many of China’s noted elite are now moving back to the countryside for its clean air and food. Other villagers are seeking innovative and entrepreneurial economic ways in which they can remain in their villages without having to travel long distances to work. The studio engaged a strategic plan which might engage sustainable tourism in an area undergoing pressure for modernization. Other strategic plans included keeping villagers living full-time in the village as opposed to migrating to large cities for work.

Students began their zoomed-out understanding of the site through the lens of its landscape, by conducting a series of mappings

of its landscapes. These included hydrological, infrastructural, and agricultural mappings, which allowed them to learn about the interdependence of the village to its ecologies. At the intermediate scale, students began to learn about the relationship of these landscapes to its morphological landscapes, which include architecture and the site’s natural landscape.

The student proposals featured here offer robust solutions which promote concepts of social scaffolding and infrastructure, new programming, landscape recovery, and social and community building. Intervention into the existing fabric and infrastructure are all aimed to ameliorate existing ancient infrastructures.

