

This is the 2026 Spring syllabus for this course. The 2026 Fall syllabus will be similar to previous studio, but with two meetings per week during week 9-16, and the site location will be different too.

Better Village, Better Life (Thematic Design IV)

Tutors: Harry den Hartog

Studio Time:

Studio Place

What is the future of the countryside—and what role do villages and villagers play in shaping it? Over the past decades, China has experienced unprecedented urbanisation, radically transforming the relationship between cities and rural areas. As major urban centres continue to expand, the countryside—especially areas near metropolitan regions—is also changing rapidly. Yet despite these transformations, rural regions have received relatively little attention, both in the public debate as well as in the fields of urban planning and design.

At the same time, a countermovement is emerging. An increasing number of artists and architects are working in rural villages through small-scale, community-based interventions. Projects such as village bookstores or community buildings aim to revitalise rural life—but how effective and sustainable are these interventions? Who is shaping “the new countryside”, and does authentic rural life still exist? Rural areas operate under very different conditions than cities. Scale, time, economic models, local needs, landscape, environment, mobility, and social structures all influence rural development and demand a tailor-made approach. In our post-pandemic world, new challenges have also emerged. Differences in lifestyles and values between urban and rural areas are becoming increasingly visible—both in China and globally. Issues such as food safety, quality of life, and community resilience are more important than ever.

In this studio, students will investigate how to balance the growing tensions between urban and rural forces, and how to add value to rural areas while preserving their unique qualities. The studio consists of both a research phase and a design phase. The first half of the semester focuses strongly on group work and analysis, while the second half allows for more individual design explorations based on collective research. The key part of the studio is fieldwork: we will visit the site several times outside Shanghai and engage directly with local residents. In short, this studio is ideal for students interested in rural futures, social engagement, and the intersection of architecture, landscape, and community.