

Better Village, Better Life (Thematic Design IV, 2025 Autumn)

Tutor: Harry den Hartog
Studio Time: Spring 2025, Fri. 08:00-11:35
Studio Place: E211
First Meeting: September 26, 2025. 08:00-11:35

Introduction:

What is the future of the countryside and what role do villages and villagers play?

In recent decades, China has undergone unprecedented urbanisation, which dramatically transformed the relationship between urban and rural areas. As major urban centers expanded, also the countryside is changing at a rapid pace, especially nearby metropolitan areas.

Despite these drastic changes, rural regions have received little attention—both in the general discourse and within the field of urban planning and design. One of the few notable explorations of the countryside was Rem Koolhaas' 2020 exhibition *Countryside: The Future*, presented at the Guggenheim Museum. This exhibition highlighted large-scale logistic complexes, wind farms, and solar fields, emphasising their aesthetics as part of a new rural reality. An urban view.

Meanwhile, in China, a countermovement is emerging. A growing number of artists and architects are engaging with rural villages through small-scale, community-driven projects, sometimes described as 'architectural acupuncture'. These celebrated interventions, such as bookstores or community buildings aim to revitalise rural life. The question remains whether these interventions are effective and lasting. By whom is the new countryside shaped and does authentic rural life still persist there? Rural areas operate under fundamentally different conditions than urban environments. Differences in scale, timeframe, economic viability, local needs, landscape, environment, transportation, and social structures all play a role in shaping the future of the countryside.

Meanwhile, new challenges are emerging in our post-pandemic era. Differences in lifestyle and values between urban and rural areas are becoming increasingly stark, not only in China but worldwide. Food safety is more important than ever, as are quality of life and community.

During this studio we will research how to balance growing tensions between urban and rural influences, and how to add value while preserving unique rural qualities? Our research focuses on a village in Zhejiang Province.

This studio consists of a research component and a design component. There's a lot of group work, especially in the first half. The design expressions in the second half can be more individual, but based on the collective. Importantly, we will visit the site several times, outside of Shanghai, and be in contact with local residents.

Week 1-3: collective field research, case studies, concept development:

Site visits and investigation. Group discussions and meetings with guests. There will be meetings with students from other universities during a workshop on site.

Week 4-6: concept development in small groups, define scenarios and projects:

Define alternative scenarios for our study area. Small-scale design exercises.

Week 7-8.5: individual projects:

Elaborate (individual) design assignments, based on previous field investigation. Your project needs to make a clear statement and contribute to local viability.

Final presentation: in the village with local people

During the studio, we'll visit the site together several times and hold workshops, outside of Shanghai. We'll be out and about for a full day on at least three days (in consultation during a weekend or other day, also depending on the weather).