

The Architectural Review

'Will Wang Shu's village be nothing but an imagined form of rural life for urbanites?'

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Regeneration, or gentrification? Wencun Village, designed by Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu's Amateur Architecture Studio, proposes an alternative approach to Chinese rural housing and construction

Conceived as a prototype for better rural life in China, Wencun Village includes 14 new residential buildings, a new bridge and several small public pavilions, the reconstruction of some rickety houses, and the refurbishment of recently built concrete-brick houses.

'To live in the countryside with nature has always been an important theme in Chinese culture,' says Wang Shu. Villages in the countryside were long regarded as cultural seeds, a source of intellectuals for the larger cities. A civilised poetic life, the countryside was semi self-governed by local scholars in pre-modern China, and the settlements were generally in good order, governed by tradition.

'Wang and Lu hope the new houses will serve as prototypes for other villages to follow'

However, Fa'shi - the original construction code of the built environment - gradually died out. Unlike vernacular settlements, modern housing in rural China is often criticised for its lack of aesthetic and spatial consideration and low-quality construction.

Amateur Architecture Studio has been completing field research on the vernacular settlements of rural Zhejiang for years. Like many other artists and architects, Wang is concerned about the degradation of the built environment and social condition in rural China, with the village reflecting growing urbanisation and its issues.

After receiving the Pritzker Prize, Wang was invited by Fuyang municipality to create a cultural complex. He negotiated a village regeneration project financed by local government as a condition of the commission. Fuyang is famous historically, immortalised in the landscape scroll Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (Fu Chun Shan Ju Tu) by Huang Gongwang in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), which presented the Fuchun River and mountains as the ideal poetic location to seek solitude in nature. The idea was to create an alternative way of rural life in Fuyang through the development of new housing types.

Amateur Architecture Studio researched the Fuyang countryside, creating a masterplan for the whole Dongqiao area. After visiting hundreds of villages, Wencun Village, which sits along the Heshan Stream, at the foot of Wenbi Hill in Fuchun River valley, seemed the ideal place for Wang and Lu to implement their vision for rural China.

'Wencun hosts a mix of historic timber-framed and masonry wall buildings dating back to the Qing dynasty'

Wencun has over 500 registered households and around 1,800 residences. The problems of an ageing population and the 'hollowing out' of villages are the norm in Chinese rural society, and this village is one of the most remote in Fuyang. The settlement has a long history, and has seen significant, if gradual change over the past 30 years. Having developed its own light industry (besides agriculture) since the 1980s, Wencun hosts a mix of historic timber-framed and masonry wall buildings dating back to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and modern concrete housing covered with white ceramic tiles from the 1990s - a typical phenomenon in the northern Zhejiang region. It is hoped that enhancing villages may attract young people back to the countryside. If Amateur Architecture Studio's approach is successful in this remote village, it should be replicable in better-connected areas.

'Its picturesque quality is one of the main reasons to use this as the sample village,' said Wang. Like a traditional landscape painting, the historical houses span the stream and the green mountains. Wencun's recent expansion into the opposing foothills, across the stream, left a section of rice fields in front of the historic village. The older settlement by the stream is more than 400 years old, and divided in two: upper village and lower village. The 'new village' designed by Wang infills the original field between the lower village and two ancient ginkgo trees that stand at the edge of the historic settlement. Connected by a concrete bridge, the trees form an entrance piazza to the 'new village'.



Plan of the village - click to expand

My first impression of the new part of Wencun is a highly condensed, small-scale Xiangshan Campus. The irregular trapezoid area was originally reserved for 15 households by the village committee as a 'homestead' - land designated as residential for registered households in China. Now 24 units for local families have been built in 14 new buildings featuring different surface materials and tectonics. The density of the housing creates an urban-scale fabric. Three- and four-storey courtyard buildings are arranged in two rows parallel to the creek and shape a winding street. Twisted or recessed a little, the main axis is still perpendicular to the street, and forms a piazza or node as local craftsmen might have built them in the past.

Seeking to create alternative and diversified housing types, the new village can be categorised into eight prototype houses with two or three variants each. However, all of these types can be regarded as a variant of the Sanhe House (three combined courtyard houses), the first real house designed by Wang in 2003. The diverse buildings are unified by a selection of natural materials used with concrete-frame construction: rammed earth, yellow clay, bamboo, wood; grey limestone, tile, white plaster and semi-transparent canopies compose a simple yet elegant colour palette.

The courtyard is the essential component of every unit, but its size and position vary. The ground floor is designed for family-run workshops to serve rural industry, such as a brewery or hardware production. From the walls, to the doors, windows, roofs, deep eaves, porches, outside stairs, courtyards and material tectonics, most are familiar motifs from previous projects. The glossary of Amateur Architecture Studio's 'back to natural ways' manifesto.



Source: [Iwan Baan](#)

Instead of recycled black tiles and red bricks on walls, grey limestone is the principal finish. A quarry of the stone is nearby. The textbook-like masonry patchwork suggests the 'time-dimension' of the village. Use of the material has meant local masons are involved in the construction, providing a social impetus for regeneration in the countryside.

After the success of using rammed-earth construction in their China Academy of Art guesthouse, the technology is used in one house here, but differs in its use of a bamboo corbel system attached to the wall, to support the extended eaves and protect the rammed-earth wall from rain. The bamboo joint looks like traditional scaffolding. Recyclable rammed-earth technology is seen by Wang as the path to the 'natural way'.

A newly designed timber-frame joint will be tested at the pavilions to be built in public nodes. A larger span version may appear in the Fuyang cultural centre too.

There are several 1990s houses which are 'brick-concrete covered with ceramic finishing tiles and red glazed tiles' in the old village too. To keep the integrated architecture feature, Wang uses a particular 'facade upgrade' process for such buildings, that is to peel off the tiles, then plaster with the same yellow-clay above the wall footings and these are chiselled as artificial stone coating. The cornices are modified to echo the new buildings as well. After this process, the dual poles of 'now' and 'then' are clearly divided in the village, erasing the time in between.



Plan of the new village development - [click to expand](#)

Wang and Lu hope the new houses will serve as prototypes for other villages to follow, so they've prepared guidelines. Therefore the 'grammar' and 'vocabulary' for buildings might gradually generate adaptable rural housing by local constructors.

The most challenging part of the project was 'to change the perception of the peasants and officials', says Lu. This top-down approach to village regeneration was an unwelcome intervention by the local people. Only seven families agreed to move into the new houses. For the villagers, the ideal living space should occupy all of the lot, and maximise the courtyard in front of the house. They complained that the courtyard spaces did not meet expectations, and that the homes did not have enough bedrooms. The attraction was that the houses were very cheap for a new-build, less than the construction cost.

A biotech company has taken an interest in this village because of Wang's involvement. A proposal to turn the houses into bed-and-breakfast accommodation run by the locals immediately changed the unwelcome situation. But a concern is that the inevitable tourism may drive the local population out. Will this village become nothing but an imagined form of rural life for urbanites?

Wang Shu Village

Architects: Amateur Architecture Studio

Photographer: Iwan Baan