

Shattering urban stereotypes of how countryside villages should look

Yao Minji

Urban tourists expect to see graceful pavilions, flowing streams, quaint bridges and lush green fields when they visit rural China. That is the idyllic image of the countryside.

Indeed, rural makeovers used to be Disneyesque recreations of urban stereotypes. But how do the people who actually live in rural areas want their environment to look?

That is the question facing a new breed of rural architects whose job is to assist the government's rural revitalization program.

When designer Zhou Longjuan asked locals whether they would like a pavilion constructed between two neighboring villages in her survey for a village makeover, most shrugged their shoulders.

"That sort of encapsulates the challenges of rural revitalization projects," she told Shanghai Daily. "The desires of local residents are a major concern, but we really can't speculate on what they want because village life is so different from that in cities. Locals don't know what they might want because they haven't experienced anything else."

It is a challenge even for veteran architect Li Jiayi, whose prolific career includes the new 2-square-kilometer Shanghai Expo Culture Park.

"Urban projects, even ones as huge and complex as the Expo Culture Park, is relatively straightforward in terms of its functions," she said. "Whether you are designing an industrial zone, a residential building or a park, the functions are clear."

However, she added: "Rural projects, though generally smaller in terms of scale, can be much more complicated and challenging. You have to take into consideration permanent farmland, different types of spaces and the lifestyle of villagers. The spaces for living, labor and social functions are more interwoven."

Li and Zhou, both from Shanghai Xian Dai Architectural Decoration and Landscape Design Research Institute of Arcplus Group, are among the first



Zhou Longjuan (left) makes a predesign survey with villagers. — Ti Gong

group of 96 rural architects approved by the Shanghai Commission of Housing and Urban-Rural Development.

Li is chief engineer of the institute; Zhou, its landscape designer.

The selection process for "rural architects" requires both professional credentials and on-site experience in countryside projects. The resulting list of experts is aimed at providing towns and villages with help in revitalizing their environment.

The modern makeover of rural areas to improve the quality of life has been under way for years as authorities, architects and academics continued to explore different possibilities. Rural revitalization strategy was first unveiled in 2017.

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create at least 150 "model villages" by 2025 to serve as guides for redevelopment of others.

Xulian Village in Qingpu District, where Zhou has worked for 18 months, is one of the target model villages. She traveled to the village at least three times a week, compared with other projects that usually require only weekly on-site visits.

Thanks to the depth of her predesign surveys, she was no longer a stranger to locals by the time construction started.

"For rural revitalization projects, we are designing for the local residents, so I really had to be there to fully understand their daily routines and lifestyle," Zhou said.

"Prior to the rural revitalization policy, such projects were typically based on tourism-related factors, meaning that you produced designs that would attract outsiders."

Zhou said villages were full of surprises.



The same road in Xulian Village in Qingpu District before (right) and after the rural revitalization project. — Ti Gong