



The makeover of Xulian Village employs the elements of bamboo extensively. The village has planted bamboo for centuries, according to Shen Yongfa, an 83-year-old bamboo-weaving artist. — Ti Gong

For one thing, she found villagers weren't all that keen on creating plazas for line dancing, unlike their elderly urban peers, who consider such activities an important social function.

And unlike the urban setting, where home, work and social activities are compartmentalized, rural life combines them all into one. Social interaction can range from anything to wandering into a neighbor's house in the middle of dinner or chatting in the fields while picking vegetables together.

Then, too, many rural residents don't particularly want greenery or flowers near their homes, unlike urban dwellers who prize such surroundings. In the countryside, greenery and flowers mean more insects.

The balancing act of rural architects is to improve local lifestyles without doing harm to the natural environment.

Zhou cited the example of washing clothes in a river. It's not only a traditional custom but also a social activity. But chemicals in the laundry powder may pollute a waterway — a concept often difficult to explain to locals.

"The trick to winning them over is to provide better options," Li explained, giving the example of introduction of washing machines.

"Rural architects often have to coordinate among various government authorities, local residents and third-party interests," Li said, showing Shanghai Daily the minutes of a recent meeting attended by a dozen local government authorities representing viewpoints like agriculture and civil services.

It all sort of depends on how you view the urban-rural divide.

"Rural is not the opposite of urban," Li said. "It is not a recreation of urban. For me, it is a matter of coexistence. Classic poetry and paintings exalt the splendor of rural landscapes as part of our



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traditional culture, and that esthetic should not be allowed to disappear."

Zhou ended up building that pavilion between the two villages and felt a sense of achievement when it was slowly accepted by villagers.

"My aim is to give them a place to rest and have a bit of a chinwag along a road that many people use to commute between villages," she said. "At first, they weren't so sure about the pavilion because they were used to just resting and chatting in their yards, but slowly they embraced the new structure as part of their daily routines."

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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.

Zhou Longjuan

Designer at Shanghai Xian Dai Architectural Decoration and Landscape Design Research Institute of Arcplus Group