

EDITORIAL

Is it a matter of design?

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(This article belongs to the *Special Issue: Reshaping Rural China*)**Abstract**

Rural and urban areas in China have traditionally represented contrasting realms, largely due to the country's dual social structure. However, efforts to reduce inequalities and encourage harmonious planning are reshaping both urban and rural landscapes, leading to new hybridized forms of living. These transformations emphasize the importance of design disciplines in experimenting with innovative settlement models and architectural projects. Recognizing the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of urban and rural areas is a fertile perspective to frame the countryside as a significant frontier in China's cutting-edge architectural movements. China's rural revitalization strategy represents the latest initiative aimed at improving conditions in the Chinese countryside and enhancing the well-being of its residents. Aligned with the principles of ecological civilization, this policy calls for the development of new esthetic dimensions that reflect technological advancements, cultural diversity, socioeconomic values, and political narratives, echoing similar sustainable agendas worldwide. The contributions selected for this special issue showcase how various design attitudes have embodied the countryside development mandate in far-sighted proposals of transformation that addresses several crucial challenges of contemporary living, such as wealth distribution, economic stimulation, cultural heritage preservation, and the relationship with nature. These examples suggest that by challenging the ideological commitments supporting their feasibility, design practice, and research can be fundamental tools for reorienting policy formulation beyond solving specific issues through targeted design approaches.

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Publisher's Note: AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.**Keywords:** Architecture; Design; Village; Rural revitalization; Sustainable development; Innovation**1. Introduction**

Rural areas are at the center of complex negotiations involving people's lives, land use, cultural inheritance, and environmental protection, among other critical issues. The "historical task" of revitalizing the countryside must confront the robust transitions of the present day and orient a sustainable development path for future decades. Some key challenges appear inexorably in reciprocal conflict, imposing each transformative action to assume a conscious and clear position within a framework of inescapable dilemmas.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (data available in 2024), more than 65% of the country's population was recorded as urban in 2022, compared

to slightly above 10% in 1949. This trend shows no sign of reversing. Agricultural mechanization will only partially offset the emigration of peasants, further weakening rural economies and interconnected sociocultural aspects. However, experts have noted that as the world grapples with escalating geopolitical conflicts and trade protectionism, which impact global food supply chains, ensuring food security has become the top priority for China and many other countries worldwide. While urban farming is receiving growing attention, it remains clear that the crucial battle is being fought in the countryside, where large-scale operations, logistics, and labor can be more structurally reorganized.

At the same time, the slogan “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets” (Xi, 2014, p. 25) embodies the essence of current ideological environmentalism, a mantra written in the Constitution (Halskov *et al.*, 2018), whose pragmatic effects unveil lights and shadows. In addition, the increasing role of rural tourism and cultural awakening in the domestic flux of people and money urges sensible approaches to necessary modifications. These contradictory objectives frequently entail the transformation of entire settlements or sections of urban fabrics, literally reshaping the rural landscape rural landscape.

Among the design attitudes traceable in the current transformative practices, two opposite ones emerge. On the one side, we find projects externally driven by forces and disciplines sensible to what we may call the tyranny of numbers, following patterns of what is termed “scientific rationalization.” While the term itself is not inherently negative, acknowledging the benefits of projects with quantifiable positive impacts, it becomes problematic, particularly for design disciplines, when the measurable outputs of project execution constrain or hinder the potential inherent in design activities. In these approaches, the process of transformation appears to be guided and evaluated solely by quantitative parameters, often neglecting qualitative aspects. Pursuing numerical metrics such as optimizing grain production, introducing modern amenities, or engaging in land speculation, the formulas applied have frequently marginalized community involvement in decision-making processes and disregarded the preservation of local traditions and artifacts. Relying on conventional and previously tested solutions, entire hamlets and villages have been displaced, with residents relocated and only later reintegrated into more efficiently designed habitats, often constructed with minimal budgets (Smith, 2021; Semprebon, 2022b).

Given this context, the role of design disciplines in the development process may come into question.

Nevertheless, the ideological component inherent in the political campaign fostering rural development may offer, and in some cases, already has offered, a solid alternative approach. China operates under the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics, a hybrid economic system where the party-state plays a central role within a regulated market environment, often with participation from state-owned enterprises. In this setup, economic competition is not solely dictated by internal mechanisms but can also be influenced by external factors such as party ideology and the operational capacity of the state. These external forces have the potential to shape the values prioritized in rural transformations.

Coming to the second point, and connected to this aspect, we can trace another design attitude unveiling in the form of artistic – assuming that this word has a sense in architecture – endeavors to propel local economies and a sense of place. Evidence shows that design disciplines can contribute to empirically sorting out more adaptable decision-making criteria that are responsive to the specific conditions and people involved in transformation processes. A decade ago, architects faced a paradoxical situation, as Lin (2013) outlined, wherein they needed to reinvent themselves to engage in transformation processes where their expertise was initially not sought. However, this scenario has since undergone significant transformation. There is now a radical shift, with leadership increasingly recognizing the potential role of design across various scales, thereby creating space for new social and creative commitments (Semprebon, 2023).

This shift is evident in numerous recent initiatives within academic (Berta *et al.*, 2023; Lee, 2015; Semprebon, 2022c), cultural (Li, 2018), and professional spheres (Bolchover & Lin, 2014; He, 2021; Tiantian *et al.*, 2020; Zhang, 2018). By acknowledging the influence of both internal and external forces on economic competition and rural development, design disciplines can play a vital role in navigating these complexities and fostering more flexible approaches to decision-making. Naturally, design fields have to mobilize proactively in the context of operation and within the legislative and political framework.

Rural revitalization, which has become a critical priority in China as the country grapples with challenges stemming from rapid urbanization and industrialization, is not news *per se*. The novelty comes from its comprehensive consideration of developmental aspects from all angles, paying more attention to altering sites and welcoming impulses from various directions. Such a broad scope is supported by specific pillars, some of which are worthy of mention (Chen *et al.*, 2023). Agricultural modernization aims to promote modern agricultural practices, adopt

advanced technologies, and improve production efficiency to increase agricultural income and enhance food security. Rural infrastructure involves investments in fundamental infrastructure such as roads, clean water supply, electricity networks, health care, and educational services to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas. Economic development means diversifying the rural economy through the development of non-agricultural sectors such as rural tourism, local craftsmanship, consumer goods production, and services to create employment opportunities and increase income. Technology fosters innovation in rural areas, including the adoption of digital technologies, precision agriculture, rural e-commerce, and other digital solutions to improve efficiency and market access. Social development aims to improve access to basic social services such as education, health care, social security, and housing to enhance quality of life and reduce rural-to-urban migration. Environmental sustainability promotes sustainable agricultural practices, natural resource management, and environmental protection to preserve rural ecosystems and ensure long-term food security. Community participation actively engages local communities, agricultural cooperatives, private businesses, and other stakeholders in the decision-making process and implementation of the plan to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability at the grassroots level. Policies and financial support are mechanisms to ensure the implementation of specific programs and promote investment by both the public and private sectors. Monitoring and evaluation involve tracking progress, identifying challenges, and making necessary adjustments to the plan as it progresses to ensure the achievement of set goals.

The success of the “Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization in China” depends on the effective and coordinated implementation of these and other measures, as well as the ongoing commitment of the government, rural communities, and stakeholders in the long term. Far from playing a central role in the process, architecture is nonetheless called to act at various decision points, sectors, and supply chains and to explore qualitatively the potential of acting on specific sites. Multidisciplinary engagement is the key to unlocking these potentials, working out projects coherent with the political mandate, and looking further.

2. Rural revitalization and design

As readable in its aim and scope section, the *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism* is a platform for discussion and debate relating to architectural heritage preservation, resilience, and cultural sustainability of modern vernacular architecture in the Chinese context, as well as the cultural influence of Chinese architecture worldwide, past and present. This special

issue frames these topics from the perspective of design, considering its different scales of applications, disciplinary hybridization, and role in transformative processes applied to the scope of rural revitalization. The policy intersects with the ecological civilization ideology and, such as other sustainable agendas around the world, calls for the invention and experimentation of new esthetic dimensions that mirror technological innovations, cultural richnesses, socioeconomic values, and political narratives (Semprebon, 2023). By keeping this as the polarizing aspect of singular and specific positions and experiences, we can trace a collective reflection where rural China is viewed as a fertile testing ground for contemporary design disciplines worldwide.

Li *et al.* (2024) have showcased an example of the execution of a typical top-down policy targeted to regenerate the local economy after the downfall of the mining industry. Yubai Village, historically important for coal transportation in western Beijing, faced economic decline as transport routes faded. Along with ongoing rural revitalization efforts, it seeks to leverage its regional advantages by focusing on tourism. The strategies they presented aim at enhancing services, improving landscapes and roads, and developing cultural brands to attract tourists, revitalize the industry and boost economic growth, serving as a model for similar villages. The design actions are mostly focused on landscape architecture, which is addressed as the discipline in charge of rebuilding the image of the village through its main elements, such as eye-catching features, public open spaces, nodal spots, and streets. The goal is to formulate a new esthetic experience based on experiential perception that attracts tourists willing to spend time and money in an artificially built new cultural environment.

The study by Dong *et al.* (2023) emphasizes the importance of ecosystem service assessments along rural riverbanks, transitional spaces that connect water and terrestrial ecosystems. It proposes 17 assessment indicators based on a case study in Shuiku Village, Shanghai, to guide ecological restoration in rural riparian zones. By evaluating ecosystem service supply-demand relationships, the study suggests restoration approaches tailored to local environmental conditions, highlighting the need for precise analysis at a small scale. In this case, the dimension of design emerges not as a method of inquiry but as the goal. The fact that the assessments are based on a unique sample questions the generalizability of the results. Conversely, the methodological approach can easily be extracted and adapted to different contexts. From this perspective, the study employs landscape architecture techniques in a quantitative way, clearly following the

initial numerical assessment. The degree of ecology in different riparian situations can be measured and, the study implicitly suggests, transformed.

Similarly, Wu *et al.* (2024) focus on landscape architecture as a viable conduct toward comprehensive rural revitalization, stressing the role rural green infrastructures can play in cultural environments. Their research considers Yulong Village in Hainan, examining the modernization of traditional agrarian culture and its environmental challenges. The study showed how landscape design could harmonize historic cultural traditions with modern agriculture and biodiversity sensitivity by creating favorable conditions for a larger variety of species to proliferate and enhance the local genetic pool. Here, design follows the primary investigation methods, which are bibliographic and cross-disciplinary, to test and possibly validate a proposal consistent with the research premises. The findings emphasize the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of ecological, economic, cultural, and social values in achieving rural revitalization goals.

Ramondetti (2023) examines the potential of design in envisioning new urbanization plans commissioned by local governments. The article discusses the future Shan-Shui City competition held in 2020 by Lishui Municipality in Zhejiang province by analyzing the three winning projects. Although this competition fits into the larger plan to urbanize rural areas (Ramondetti, 2022), Zhejiang province has once again (Tiantian *et al.*, 2020) proven to pioneer innovative transformation methods. Design is addressed in two ways. First, the article outlines the design process undertaken by the author, explaining the goals and tools used in the competition. Second, the article provided the chance for a comparative evaluation of alternative approaches, adopting “what if” premises and consequence scenarios. The article explores how policies have influenced current planning activities and addressed themes in urban projects, providing insights into development in Chinese marginal areas and opening discussions on new visions for rural futures beyond China.

Meriggi *et al.* (2023) addressed the challenges faced by rural areas in the hinterland of Chinese city regions, particularly in conserving architectural and landscape heritage. They emphasized the vulnerability of rural settlements to urban expansion as conventional planning methods have often failed to integrate both urban and rural features effectively. Starting from the model of the urban-rural continuum defined by G. W. Skinner, the article proposes a holistic design approach to shape hybrid rural-urban settlements into “green cities,” drawing inspiration from local architecture and rural urbanism. Case studies in Huiyang, Pidun, and Kandun illustrate the application

of this approach, emphasizing the need for individualized planning solutions rather than the homogenization of rural landscapes into urban blocks.

Long’s (2023) review of *Home Beyond the House: Transformation of Life, Place, and Tradition in Rural China* (Zhao, 2023) introduces us to the theme of inhabiting traditional settings from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, exploring the multifaceted meaning of the term *jia* (家). The review guides the reader through the pages of the book, drawing attention to critical points. Through ethnographic fieldwork on the lives of rural residents in Yanxia, a Han village in China’s Zhejiang province, building surveys, and over 600 photographs, the book uncovers the meaning of home from the perspective of underrepresented and underserved rural communities. Long (2023) emphasized the role of tradition – identity, kinship, collectivity, social relations, land ownership, and rural lifestyle – in shaping the concept of home, a transient ideological and pragmatic feature in contemporary China’s shifting conditions. In this sense, this contribution offers a significant source of intending and making the domestic space. From the argumentation, it is possible to extract design-oriented clues to inherit tradition and, at the same time, envision contemporary needs.

3. Conclusions and openings

The design dimension entered the scope of these articles in various ways. For instance, we find, as in the case of Yubai Village (Li *et al.*, 2024), the project serves as a technical instrument to materialize the goals abstractly fixed in national and local policies. Here, designers perform as tools of execution, exploring functional and esthetic reorganization of public open spaces without questioning the underlying reasons and goals. Such a pragmatic approach puts design into a utilitarian dimension, which, regardless of subjective opinions, efficiently and professionally fulfills the mandate received from above. This top-down implementation constructs artificial images and experiences where, while the economic benefits of external tourist flows are easily recognizable, the cultural inheritance inherently becomes subject to negotiation, balancing the will of commodifying the village’s traditional atmosphere with market-oriented transformations, encapsulating one of the recurrent fragilities embedded in cultural sites targeted by developmental practices (Sempredon, 2022a). The article assessing the ecosystem services of riparian zones (Dong *et al.*, 2023) envisions a replicable model to evaluate and orient both ex-ante and ex-post design choices. Although the contribution does not discuss the contents and methods of any specific project, it provides parallel and complementary instruments for operation in the field of design. While the gaps between

abstract generalizations and contingent design cannot be entirely bridged, the article offers operative tools whose responsible use falls under the sensibility of their users, whether they are policymakers, planners, or architects. The contribution presenting the landscape project for Yulong Village, Hainan (Wu *et al.*, 2024, p. 15), unfolds as a research-driven design strategy where “green infrastructure has the potential to realize the mutual support and promotion of ecological security, cultural heritage, and economic development in Li villages.” The design actions here are supported by preliminary research, demonstrating the coherence of their approach to site modification that is sensible to environmental and cultural sustainability. Despite its inherent logical processuality, design is here again at the end of the chain of acts and remains vulnerable to ideological constructs’ bias. Conversely, Ramondetti (2023) endorses a more empirical position toward the outcomes of his and other entries’ designs. The presented projects have already undergone a selection process, portraying scenarios judged as more compelling or feasible than others. Once the boundary conditions are established, design goals, methods, and outcomes are displayed in three variants, creating space for a free, comparative discussion and negotiation. Therefore, the article offers the reader the chance to explore design ideas and simulations, where, despite rigorous parameters and transparent methodologies, the outcome remains open. Meriggi *et al.* (2023) propose a more decisive design-driven approach. After proving the continued validity of Skinner’s urban model in the urban and economic structure of some territories, the authors implemented design concepts that fit within this model. The projects perform as punctual declinations of an abstract scheme, allowing the possibility of discerning its falsifiability and validity while illustrating potential development scenarios. The discourse remains entirely within the design dimension as the framework for encapsulating and positioning within the complex negotiations of values animating countryside transformations.

The strategies employed in these projects, or design-supporting methodologies, exemplify a multiplicity of approaches that portray the complex panorama of rural planning and construction in China. They blend technological advancements with critical heritage preservation and socioeconomic development with environmental sensibility, allowing us to apprehend rural China as a fertile ground for testing contemporary design approaches on a global scale. Koolhaas (2020) describes the rural context as the “forgotten realm,” which serves as a rich source of identity in today’s globalized world. The reshaping of rural China through policies, theories, and practices appears aligned with this view and is keen to

explore the sustainably oriented potential embedded in its transformation. If, as claimed by Xiangning Li, curator of the Chinese Pavilion “Building a Future Countryside” at the Architecture Biennale of Venice of 2018, “how to self-locate within the coordinates of East-West and tradition modernity is the ultimate question that every Chinese architect must answer” (Li, 2019, p. 4), the design stories synthesized in this special issue clearly suggest that these negotiations are not necessarily a downward compromise but can pave the way to new understandings of the larger project to reshape rural China.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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