

## The Preliminary Study on the Design of Rural Public Space in Rapid Urbanization Sichuan, China: a Case in Zhaoyan Village

### Abstract

Under the rapid urbanization process, the fluidity between urban and rural has increased; the traditional inward-looking lifestyle in rural China has collapsed gradually as well. Meanwhile, space structure has transformed dramatically, traditional public space has declined, and however, the modern public space hasn't turned up. Because of the misunderstanding of difference between urban and rural lifestyles, many rural planning copy the way that constructing urban public space, as a result, the space cannot coordinate with the need of rural daily life. How to create a public space that peasants really need is quite an important problem. In the rural planning project of Zhaoyan village, Dazhou, Sichuan Province, the design was focused on the two central public spaces at the second half of 2009. An overall investigation was done before and after the reform construction. In this paper, a design strategy of public space which is able to adapt the reality of contemporary rural China through the work that summarize and analyze the whole project data, combined with several related theories, such as sociology, architecture and urban planning. Exploring the strategy of rural public space design and suggest a further guidance related to the design practice: conclude the lifestyle of peasants; respect the exiting functional public space.

**Keywords:** Urbanization, rural lifestyle, public space, Zhaoyan village, design strategy

Under the arrangement of the tutor, the author was lucky enough to come into contact with the reconstruction project in Zhao Yan village in Da County, Si Chuan province in August, 2010. This extremely characteristic transformation project had been launched by the local government in Da County, whose purpose was to respond to the government's job evaluation on "the new rural construction" project through reconstructing key villages within the scope of the county. As the key demonstration village in Da County, Zhao Yan village situated on each sides of the Ting Fu road, which is the main path to Zhen Fushan, an important 4 A level scenic spot in the county. For various considerations, it has become the key area of this activity.

Zhao Yan village has formed a certain scale early in the Qing dynasty. It was

reported that a person in this village whose family name was Zhan had successfully made himself an assistant minister in the imperial court. Except him, there were many other prestigious families in this village as well. Even up to today, lots of old houses and tombstones in the Qing dynasty that are incompletely preserved can still be found. Nowadays, Zhao Yan village comes under the jurisdiction of the pavilion village and has been divided into nine communities. According to the official statistics, there is a total population of 1526 and there are 413 households in this village. This reconstruction project focuses on the fifth and the sixth community with 91 households and a total population of 406. Ranging to 7 meters and being built in 1997, Ting Fu road has been the main road in this village, which was first built to connect the pavilion town and Fu Shan village with its southern end pointing to the 4 A level scenic spot--- Zhen Fushun. The whole village covers 2340 mu of cultivated land, which is divided by residents in this village and situation differs in different communities: the first community (a mu of three points/per person), the second community (a mu of two points/per person), the third community (eight points/per person), the fourth community (a mu of four points/per person), the fifth community (seven points five/per person), the sixth community (seven points four /per person), the seventh community (six points five /per person), the eighth community (nine points /per person), the ninth community (nine points/per person). The industry structure of this village is based on agriculture and its main project is aquaculture and lotus planting, along with a small amount of single season rice and corns etc. In the time of midsummer, those large lotus ponds present the beautiful and breath-taking scenery, just like the famous Chinese poem goes “The green lotus leaves stretch to the sky”, which does leave a deep impression on the author. In addition, in the beginning of the design, the village has already had a sound infrastructure as well as a perfect system of water, electricity and gas, other facilities like public toilets and stores have existed in there, too. However, the village still lack of necessary garbage collection points and proper management to the street lights that have been damaged; meanwhile, villagers have no essential education and sports facilities as well as a public space for necessary gathering and festival celebrations. As to farming cartilages, most of the existing farming cartilages within the scope of the design were built along the street after 1997, among which, only 14 of them were built in the period between 1950 (land reform movement) and 1997, 11 of them were built before the land reform movement and 2 of them had a hundred year’s history. The architectural style of these cartilages is what is popular in the village now, that is, brick buildings covered with ceramic tiles outside, the only reason for that is because there is a modification in 2004 that houses with traditional structure are to be separated from others by the painting in the gables of the farming houses. Generally speaking, the living standard of the villagers in Zhao Yan village has been fully guaranteed, but the further social public life as well as the spiritual life are still deficient and need to be improved immediately.

This project only focuses on the major areas of the village due to the urgency of the design task. With the responsible attitude for government and humanistic care, the design team decides to choose the public space as the core of this design by taking the content of this project and problems caused by the phenomenon of rural hollowing into consideration. But here comes the problem: as a rural project, what kind of public space is more fit in with the requirements of the villagers? Should it be a square or a more casual public space? If it is a square, then is there any similarity between the design of the rural square and that of the cities'. At the same time, what should they do to reflect the rural characteristics? With all the concerns mentioned above, the design team puts their own understanding of the rural areas into the design of this project.

The idea of the design comes from two aspects: on the governmental level, in order to achieve the goal of the evaluation, the plan will focus on the design of several public spaces, hoping that they can form a visiting line along with other scenic spots so that the main achievement of the new rural construction project will be highlighted. While on the villagers' level, designers hope to explore the public spaces that belong to the rural areas as much as possible and to present the rural characteristics. From this perspective, in the overall planning, designers have selected two key sections: the square with the village committee sitting on it and the southern area of the village with the most intensive farming housing distribution. The reasons for site selection can be listed as follows: first, they all located on the side of the pavilion highway, on one hand, it is good for the construction and presentation of the landscape and caters to the demands of the superiors' visit and inspection; on the other hand, considering the factors of accessibility, sites that are convenient for villagers to come and go will be conducive to the use of the space and improve the significance of the space on the villagers. Besides, two pieces of main design area all own relatively open land, which can be transformed into appropriate public space and ensure that the idea of the designer, Party A's requirement and local people's needs will be satisfied at the same time. While in the design of these two pieces of land, the design team thinks that it would be better to treat the village square as the democratic rally square without huge modification for it has already existed in there, so only the walls around the square and its internal facilities will be transformed and more energy is going to be put on the other side of the village square. The selected land of the village square situated in the settlements on the roadside, which is about 45 meters wide, 65 meters deep and covers an area of 3000 square meters, shaping like the bow of a ship. This place used to be a farmland possessed by a farmer living nearby and it is chosen as the best place to put the square for its good location, its comprehensive landscape display as well as its accessibility and availability for public activities.

As to the specific design of the square, several questions must be taken into account: What will happen if squares, a public goods, appear in the villa where the

environment is quite different from that in the cities? What measures shall designers take to minimize the disadvantages brought about by this difference? What kind of squares are villagers' public squares? What shall be contained in these squares? How can designers make villagers feel a sense of belonging? These questions lead to the concept and the starting point of the design of the squares. In the designing process, designers take into account the particularity of the rural environment while purposefully lower the openness and liquidity of the public space. Meanwhile, they decrease the area of afforestation, the sole function of which is to add beauty to the squares. In choosing materials, simplicity and convenience are given top priority for the sake of construction difficulties and follow-up management. In designing their looks, traditional and modern elements are combined to satisfy the taste of rural residents.

Though rural areas experienced the impact of the globalization as well as the city, most of rural areas are still kept in a rather closed circumstance. The villagers under such a circumstance could hardly accept too much openness and mobility, so the designers design walls to separate the space. At the same time, the admiring attitude towards the city makes the villagers' judgment on city lingers on its features. In constructing the spatial distribution and shape, the designers adopt the modern construction technique to allocate the space. In the northeast of the square, there are footsteps leading to the farming houses. The architects design the opening shape into a visual focus of the background environment. Therefore, there appears landscape axis in the north of the square. At the end of the axis, there is a two story pavilion. In the northern part, the open land can be used for the main active region. In order to enlarge the active space, the virescence was designed behind the wall, in this way, it can beautify the environment and won't take too much space. A couple of chairs were paced at the edge of the active region for the villagers to relax. Deciduous trees whose color changes according to different seasons are planted for the villagers to escape heat in summer. To the designer himself, the understanding of rural areas comes from his childhood and elder generation's influence. The designer try to put this traditional and nature sense into his plan. The designer use the local material to design the modern building and retained the modern and traditional flavor of the building. In terms of the wall, the designer use the traditional garden method to simplify the structure, and the local way to modify the pictures on lattice windows. The peasant painting and publicity columns show the simple and unadorned features of the village. Finally, the villagers use the big stone water vat to separate the space and prevent the motor vehicles from going through, which also reveals the plain nature of the village.

However, there are several incidents happened during the implementation process of this plan. The farmer who lived directly opposite the square thought the wall of the square affects his house's geomantic omen, so he opposed the construction in front of his house. So the architect had to slightly modify the original

design. The walls designed to be the centre of the landscape were replaced by the heads of door and some tablets, in this way, the farmer's problem was solved and the local color of the building was retained. However when it comes to the pavilion, since the location of the pavilion was the farmer's pigpen, the pulling down of the pigpen would cause damage to the farmer's profit. Further more, how can a two story pavilion fit for a pigpen? Due to all kinds of reasons, the compensation for the farmer had not been made, so the farmer was against the plan. Moreover, another farmer's house has a long history, so the designer decided not to reconstruct it, which irritated the owner. She thought that the planners just put on act, and didn't take the residents' need into consideration. Though the designer and the workers explained several times, she insisted on her own idea and result in the failure of the project.

These incidents made the team realize that the design of the rural public space is not easy. The popular city system may not fit well for the rural circumstance, due to the great discrepancy between the city and the rural area. However, numbers of city modal are being copied blindly, and it gradually becomes such a trend that the majority would follow.

The upsurge of new rural construction has begun since the Central Government put forward the slogan in 2005. It has been carried out for 6 to 7 years up to now. However there are few qualified projects we can see today. Here are several reasons for the phenomenon. From the perspective of local government, although the new rural construction was proposed by Central Government, it was the local government who carried it out. The investment of the projects in new rural construction does a less important promoting role in the development of local economy. So, local governments have not much interests in this kind of low return rate investment. In addition, local governments had some financial problems because of the tax system reform practiced in 1994. The implement of new rural construction made the problem worse. As a result, most of the local governments have no interest in it. While, since the Central Government had put forward it and determined to improve people's livelihood and the rural living standard. Therefore, the local governments can not ignore it. In order to make sure that the new rural construction runs well, the upper level governments have to take the job as one of the contents in the assessment of basic-level government work. Meanwhile, they sent government officers to check the projects in rural area untimely so that the policy can be made into practice. Spontaneously, many projects of new rural construction are finished in a short period just for the check from upper officers. So, it is unnecessary and impossible that designers play important roles during the whole process. Designers are just the instruments of governments to finish the projects. Inevitably, these kinds of projects are vulgar and bum.

From the side of designers, there are two kinds of attitudes, admixture and misunderstanding which led to the problems of new rural construction. Among the two attitudes, the former has a great majority people; fewer people make unfavorable

influence on new rural construction because of their misunderstanding. For the former attitude, as we have mentioned before, this kind of rural projects can not get the strong support from local government. So, a lot of problems happened in the process of design and construct. For instance, overload in blindfold, lack of money, and relaxed control in projects. The design companies that are well-organized and well-capitalized have no interest in the rural projects. On the one hand, it is hard for them to get a good economic and social reward from the rural projects. These large design companies have established their good fame and stable development model. They emphasize the output value and brand. Hence, the rural projects become their last choice. Even though sometimes they are forced to accept this kind of projects, they would not spend much energy in it. In order to survive, those new and small design companies accept the high risk and low reward rural projects without reluctance. They ignored the quality, brand, and taste for collecting more money in the competitive market. Their main purpose is enlarging their company. Actually, the “fast food” model projects contribute a lot to the success of some of the new design companies. But these companies lose interest in rural projects as soon as they become strong. Not all the companies do as what I said, but the phenomenon has a great bad influence on new rural construction. After all, it is the rural villages that lose most in the end. For those companies that misunderstand the rural projects, it should be pointed out that it differs from the admixture in a great extent. We can see the differences from the real finished projects. Designers are not familiar with the rural situation and the distinction between cities and rural area. But they hurried to solve and improve the rural problems with their limited knowledge at the same time. As a result, the urbanized program produced in rural construction when the doctrinarism thought is taken into practice. This kind of situation always happened in the small design companies that are established not long and too weak to accept other larger projects. But different from those small design companies mentioned above, they are ambitious about architecture and society. They are also taking their credit and brand as important factors. Consequently, they are willing to spend more time in some small rural projects. However, they failed to finish their ideal designs because they are lack of knowledge and experience that can help them make a correct judgment about the rural situation. But, it is undeniable that their attitudes should be affirmed. Besides, these design companies mentioned above, some entities and individuals have participated in new rural construction. Because people who from cities have different interpretations and ideas on rural civilization and life. Many unsuitable designs appeared in rural program. These designs have no promoting effect on new rural construction. What’s worse sometimes, rural inside contradictions are intensified by the unsuitable designs.

Viewing the situation of current domestic new rural construction, most of the new rural construction can be classified into the category of being made crudely. Those that are outstanding and classical cases often tend to come from the

researchers who have a profound understanding and experience of social activities, from the relevant researchers in universities and some major research centers engaged in the study of all kinds of splendid architectures and city formulation. These researchers and institutions have good familiarity with rural areas, which can obtain sufficient funds through various channels and can be able to gain adequate time. Under the help of many comprehensive conditions, they have completed the project in their hands as expectedly. In addition, in this special area such as Wen chuan, thanks to the great attention central government paid, the excellent designs can achieve enough social returns, so all kinds of design companies just rushed to bid, and then they thought carefully, no wonder the excellent works were designed.

However, when we review the situation that the China's rural construction is facing, how can we expect to find out some carefully designed and suitable local public space? Let alone the protection and succession of rural culture. However these stereotyped and copied plans also can arise questions: why the urban formulation cannot be learned by rural areas.

The Chinese traditional society is a continental culture society featured as isolation. Rich resources, the vast plowland and the risk of invasion from abroad make Chinese traditional society form a economic model that is self-sufficient and inner self-recycled. In such a circulation system, on the one hand, the role of the countryside is a producer, which means that farmers meet the demands of farm produce and handicraft articles from the city through continuously hard-working yields; in return they obtain money and other high-class handicrafts that are necessary to daily life. On the other hand, the city mainly plays the role of consumers who accept the grain and handicrafts from rural areas, while consuming the citizens process these raw materials for a second time so as to make them become the high-class handicrafts and then put them into market for consuming. However, when the 19th century British people forced China to be open by the opium war since then the situation has changed, when the solitary self-circulated economy system was gradually broke down, industrialized business rapidly occupied the market in cities, the countryside started to be broke away from economic system.

Since then, the opposite relationship between China's cities and rural areas began to be formed gradually, also the economic gap between cities and rural areas began widening, rural areas were gradually being marginalized in economy and society, so it formed sharp contrast to the top developed cities under the influence of globalization. In such a background, more and younger rural labor forces left their home for a way into the city to change their conditions of life. Therewith rural hollow problem appears. At the same time, because the whole China's social was shocked fiercely by western culture, and excessive radical influence after the political movement of liberation, the traditional Chinese public society based on blood tie began to collapse, which was substituted by social relations based on the geopolitical relationship. Following is the constantly changes of ways of living and

producing and the disappearance of traditional Chinese rural culture. Many rural "family tree" disappear, the sharply reduce of the worship activities and neglect of traditional festival, all of these changes are the proof of this phenomenon.

The rural spatial settlement model began to change when the social changes are reflected on the space aspect. Traditional Chinese rural settlement model is organized on the basis of blood tie. The rural areas were distributed by surrounding the ancestral house beginning with the earliest settlers. In the process of construction, Fengshui would be taken into consideration and then formulate a certain space form (it is believed that Fengshui affects the family's destiny, fortune, prospect etc.), and at the same time, each family will have its own ancestral hall (ancestral hall may be located in ancestral house in a small family, in a big family the ancestral hall will be built separately), which is equivalent to a church and a court in the western town. And the public space in village is also distributed by setting the ancestral house or ancestral hall as center, which reflects the Chinese value and worship on family and blood relations. In some rich or large-scaled village, the public space was surrounded by independent drama stage, the performance would be showed on which when festivals, weddings and ancestor worship, which was considered as one of the events for family reunion. The events not only enrich the spiritual life of the residents but promote the relations among the families.

The changed rural settlement, its settlement organization form has drifted into geopolitical relations from blood relationship. Furthermore, rural economic standard is quite low under the comparison between urban and rural, so the farm houses in village often gathered near the main traffic network, buildings always stand toward roads, which get rid of the traditional concept of fengshui (there are superstitions and dregs in the traditional concept of fengshui, but which makes great contribution as for the natural combination between the buildings and the environment), instead putting economy as the primary factor to consider. The village was no longer divided by the past family name, but was divided by the upper governmental administrative standard. At the same time, because of the weakening of blood relations, the originally existing ancestral temples that gradually disappeared turned to be the modern administrative office buildings and village committees. The current existing public space in villagers either regards village committees as center organization or can't provide the room for need of festival and villagers' daily life, under the conditions of which there is no point mentioning the cultural activities in rural areas.

Based on what we have discussed above, we can see the current situation of China's rural areas. Under the economic globalization, China's rural areas have been marginalized. And shocked by the western modern culture, these areas have lost their traditions, while the modern lifestyle has not been formed. What's more, villagers' spiritual life is humdrum., and their income is very low. With the above analysis, China's rural areas are always in a relatively closed circumstance and have not surpassed regional limits markedly. Therefore, when designing public spaces in rural

areas, designers should take the following aspects into account.

1. The design should encourage and highlight the regionality and uniqueness of rural areas.

Designers should be encouraged to set stages, ancestral halls and other cultural or belief buildings so as to promote and regain villagers' cultural identity gradually. Meanwhile, designers should encourage villagers to construct public buildings in a traditional way. On the one hand, traditional crafts could be retained: on the other hand, we can save costs. In this process, architects and planners can participate in the design and promotion as technological guidance. Moreover, spatial patterns and building styles can make use of local features and some traditional elements, such as, dry pepper strings, corn strings, haystacks to add local colors and enhance villagers' identity to the traditional culture. At last, designers should excavate historical sites and make them become a visualized manifestation of rural characteristics.

2. The design should take rural economic and technological conditions into consideration.

In light of the disparity of the capital and constructive level between rural areas and cities, architects should suit measures to local conditions and use local materials as much as possible when they design and construct buildings. They should avoid using expensive materials and those that require much to constructive technology. Otherwise, the project will exceed the budget or some difficulties in construction will come out. Even if the project went well, economic burdens of rural areas would be increased and some big difficulties would happen in their later maintenance.

3. The current situation of rural areas, villagers' ideas and interests should be considered well in the design.

In the Chinese traditional society, land resources belonged to the private property. Because of the interpersonal relationship based on blood tie, however, as the old saying goes, "One should always keep all benefits for one's own people", villagers were willing to sacrifice some of their lands to construct public buildings in the past. But with the rapid development of the society, although public ownership of lands exists in rural areas, lands have been farmed out to villagers respectively. For the traditional interpersonal relationship has disappeared, villagers care more about their own interests. So, it will be difficult to build public spaces in rural areas. Though the government has planned compensation policies, villagers' lost lands and newly-built public spaces are practical problems designers need to solve. For this reason, designers should pay more attention to how to make rational use of land resources and meet villagers' needs. In addition, designers should not do any change to existing facilities in a village, unless they could be adjusted or reconstructed reasonably. When designing facilities in public spaces, designers also should try not to disturb villagers for fear of unnecessary contradiction.

As for the industry, the current "new rural construction" is overcorrect. No matter what a village is, big or small, near or far, poor or rich, it seems that a good

industrial planning is to hail the slogan of tourism. And those designs of public spaces carried out are always full of commercial and urbanized atmosphere. In fact, it is quite common for people in the city to see such designs, which can not show local features of rural areas at all. Furthermore, villagers' cultural identity and sense of belonging can not be satisfied through these designs. And building public spaces will consume lots of resources. So, these designs can not get villagers' approval. As a result, designers should focus on the relation between industries and spaces, and suit measures to local conditions, so that they can promote the rural culture and economy at the same time.

The current situation of China's rural areas is the result of China's national conditions. In general, rural circumstances are always in a relatively closed and static state. In light of the globalization, no fundamental changes would happen in China's rural areas as for its current state. Therefore, the design of public space in a village should focus on its status in the whole China or in the whole world. Besides, designers should analyze the space needed in the process of the construction rather than copy the design of the cities' or impose some notions for cities on rural areas. Only in this way can the designs of public spaces in China's rural areas reach a higher level and can we solve rural problems faster and better.

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