



BACK TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: HOW CHINA'S HINTERLANDS ARE BEING REVITALIZED WITH MARKETS, LIBRARIES, AND HOTELS

For decades, China's modernization emphasized the growth of urban centers, with the countryside all but left behind. A new movement is rethinking rural areas to be a sustainable and serene contrast to the megacity.

In early February 2020, just before COVID-19 took New York City by storm, an exhibition titled *Countryside: The Future* opened at the Guggenheim Museum in the Upper East Side. Organized in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and Samir Bantal from AMO—the think tank of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)—the center-wide exhibition sought to put rural areas around the world at the center of discussions about the global future in the face of urban decay and accelerating climate change. A considerable proportion of the exhibition was dedicated to the Chinese countryside.

Koolhaas is certainly not alone when it comes to being interested in rural China. The early stages of China's modernization project following the reform and opening-up policies of 1978 largely focused on urbanization, but a marked shift in emphasis toward the potential of the country's rural heartlands has been underway for the past few years. However, this state-led rural reconstruction is not aimed at transforming rural villages into analogs of their urban counterparts along the coast. If anything, it is a response to the myriad consequences of China's urban acceleration over the past decades, which range from regional inequalities and soaring real estate prices in cities to environmental pollution and cultural homogenization, and aims to promote a more sustainable way of life as well as a more equitable relationship with nature. As part of this movement, a wave of Chinese architects has enthusiastically brought new projects to the hinterland.

For architect Xu Tiantian of the Beijing-based practice DnA Design and Architecture, innovative rural architecture has the power to help restore rural heritage and activate local economies. In January 2014, DnA began collaborating with Songyang County in southwest Zhejiang Province on what eventually developed



- ↑ DnA's Bamboo Pavilion at the Damushan Tea Plantation is a resting space for local tea farmers and tourists alike.
- ← The Tofu Factory by DnA is built on a slope following the river by the Caizhai Village entrance.

into a comprehensive revitalization plan consisting of more than 10 buildings located throughout the county's ancient villages, ranging from heritage museums and village centers to factories.

Adapting to a rural context, the urban design theory of architectural acupuncture proposes small-scale interventions as means of stimulating organic growth, as opposed to massive →