



## **From Plan to Practice: The Revival of Pingtian Village in Songyang County of Zhejiang Province in China**

**Na Sun<sup>1</sup>, Deyin Luo<sup>2</sup>, Wen Tang<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Beijing Tsinghua Tongheng Urban Planning & Design Institute, Beijing 100085, China*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China*

**Corresponding author:** Deyin Luo, School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China. Email: 906010265@qq.com

**Citation:** Sun N, Luo D, Tang W, 2022, From Plan to Practice: The Revival of Pingtian Village in Songyang County of Zhejiang Province in China. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*, 4(2): 177. <http://dx.doi.org/10.36922/jcau.v4i2.177>

### **ABSTRACT**

Pingtian Village is located in the northern mountainous area of Songyang County in the southwest of Zhejiang Province, China. It was a typical hollow village since most of its villagers had been out to find jobs elsewhere. Pingtian Village was included in the list of Chinese Traditional Villages in 2014. This small mountainous village, which has almost been forgotten in the urbanization development, has seized the historical opportunity of conservation and renovation of traditional villages and changed its development direction. After several years of planning and construction, Pingtian Village revitalized with new momentum of development.

**Keywords:** rural revitalization, traditional village, cluster design, China

**Copyright:** © 2022 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pingtian village (平田村) is located in the northern mountainous region of Songyang county (松阳县) in the southwest of Zhejiang Province, with a total population of 402, all bearing the same family name, Jiang. The village is only 15 minutes car-ride to the nearest town (i.e., Xiping Town, the county seat). More affluent villagers usually have apartments in the town or new houses in the new village. The historic village has only seniors or impoverished households, who make a living by growing cash crops like vegetables, white tea, and torrefied. It is a typical hollowed village. Pingtian was listed in 2014 as one of the Chinese Traditional Villages because it is a representational mountain farming settlement in Songyang county. In the historic village, apart from several new constructions, most buildings are in traditional style, which is characterized by rammed earth walls and tile roofs. The buildings are arranged according to the changing terrain of the mountain, amidst frequent rising clouds and mist. It is a popular destination for photographers and plain-air painters.

As a county under the poverty line, Songyang adopts a poverty relief policy that

relocates village settlements outside the mountains in order to facilitate development. Some impoverished villages located deep in the mountains have inconvenient transportation, under-developed economy, and insufficient infrastructure. These villages are planned to be holistically relocated to the plains down the mountain. In Sidu town, which administrates Pingtian village, villagers in deep mountains have all been relocated. The only exceptions are those with relatively convenient transportation and beautiful landscape, including Pingtian, Xikeng and Chenjiapu villages. In the future, they will be managed as closed-off 4A level scenic area, with 5A level being the highest. In the first meeting with the village committee, the villagers' biggest concern was the distribution of relocation quota.

The conservation and development of traditional villages provided Pingtian a valuable opportunity. This small mountainous village that was about to be neglected in the process of urbanization grasped the chance to change its development path. After several years of planning and reconstruction, Pingtian was reborn and revitalized with new momentum of development.



**Figure 1.** Pingtian Village before the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li



**Figure 2.** Pingtian Village after 2 years of planning and reconstruction. Source: Yunshang Pingtian Guesthouse

### 1.1 Rural revitalization in China

In 2012, the Chinese government launched a comprehensive survey of traditional villages. In the same year, selection and verification of the “Chinese Traditional Village List” by experts were carried out. The lag of rural development is the most prominent problem of unbalanced and inadequate development, and the rural revitalization strategy is implemented to solve the development problem <sup>[1]</sup>.

Jicai Feng proposed that traditional villages are another type of cultural heritage, which are both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Traditional villages contain traditional production and life, and the protection of rural heritage must be overall protection <sup>[2]</sup>. Qiu Baoxing pointed out that there are many new opportunities for rural development. We should not simply promote rural construction with the model of urban construction and industrial development, but also put forward the countermeasures and methods of rural construction, develop new industries, promote economic development with the pleasant rural living environment <sup>[3]</sup>. Rural revitalization and protection are not contradictory, but mutually beneficial. The author believes that for the traditional villages, formulating protection measures and

improving infrastructure are two key factors, excellent renovation cases are another important factor. There must be exemplary villages and buildings in each village, so that it can quickly form a brand effect and becomes the activation point of the villages <sup>[4]</sup>. The renewal of Pingtian Village is an excellent case of this development path.

### 1.2 Traditional villages are strategic resources for the county development

The conservation and reconstruction of Pingtian could not be done without the policy support of Songyang county government. The county has 75 traditional villages like Pingtian, a number ranking very high in the country.

In 2013, the conservation of traditional villages was still an emerging field. However, as early as 2011, Songyang county government was visionary and it realized that the large number of traditional villages in the county was not a burden of economic development, but strategic resources for cultural and tourism industries. The county government explored areas like conservation mechanisms, financial resources, conservation techniques and so on. On the one hand, the government gathered resources from various departments including

construction, culture, agriculture, tourism, and established a “leadership team of conservation and development of historic cities, villages, and buildings” to coordinate the work of conservation and development of traditional villages in the whole county. The leadership team actively engaged in exploring policy mechanisms for adaptive reuse of vacant historic structures and property transfer mechanisms of traditional buildings, which provided policy guarantee to develop new industries in traditional villages. On the other hand, the government also developed technical guidelines for renovation of traditional buildings, which was a conscious move to build local craftsman teams to inherit traditional renovation and reconstruction techniques.

Songyang county has made great achievement in recent years in terms of conservation and development of traditional villages. In December 2014, Songyang county was named among the first group of model counties in the conservation and development of traditional villages, together with Jianshui county in Yunnan province. In January 2016, Songyang county was chosen as the pilot county for the “Save Old Houses” project by the China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation. It was the only one in the country that received support for the whole county. The project promoted holistic conservation of historic structures through a financing model that the foundation and the owner each contributed half of the conservation cost. The planning team of Pingtian published an article in Outlook Weekly, entitled “Understanding Traditional China in Songyang,” the team also set the goal for the heritage conservation and cultural development work in Songyang to be a “traditional Chinese model county.”

With rich resources of traditional villages, Songyang county formulated a development strategy that introduced guesthouse businesses into traditional villages. The county government enacted “Songyang County Guesthouse Rating Standard” to set specific management measures for different grades of guesthouses.

The document also formulates different levels of subsidies according to the accommodation capacity and grading of guesthouses. The renovation of traditional buildings, particularly those listed historic buildings into guesthouses is entitled to higher level of subsidy.

With the large number of traditional villages, the strategy of Songyang county is to focus on selected areas, and use these pilot areas to influence the whole county. The county attaches importance especially to the introduction of high-end resources and branding of public cultural product. Villages retain and develop existing culture and attach importance to cultural construction <sup>[5]</sup>. Apart from guesthouses in Pingtian village, Songyang has supported guesthouse brands like Red Persimmon (柿子红了), Guoyun Residence (过云山居), Birdvine Residence (鸢舍), Tea Girl (小茶姑娘), Youtian Flower Blossom (酉田花开) and so on, and also incubated cultural projects like Damushan Tea House, Contract Museum, Brown Sugar Workshop, Wangjing Memorial Hall, Shimen Covered Bridge, and Tofu Workshop. Now traditional village tourism has become an important industry and cultural brand of Songyang. The establishment of cultural brands and the planning of art events make Songyang an imaginative scene <sup>[6]</sup>. These small projects have gradually formed an industry cluster in recent years, making Songyang a top cultural tourism destination in southwest Zhejiang, or even in China.



**Figure 3.** Guoyun Residence in Xikeng Village, a sea of clouds can be seen here. Source: Photo by Deyin Luo



In terms of the planning and construction projects in Pingtian, the government financed all the projects of public interest and infrastructure, including the construction of the fire pool, modification of electric lines, water pipes and drainage system, safety and disaster prevention projects, improvement of the village landscape, and so on. The government also provided financial support to important cultural and public facilities in the village. Government support can bring the first leap to the revitalization of a village <sup>[7]</sup>. For example, two facilities that played an important role in Pingtian's development, the Agriculture Exhibition Hall and Handcraft Workshop, were invested by the government, and entrusted to the villages for management and use.

### 1.3 Village plan: Certainty and flexibility

Village plans are often blamed for infeasibility. Does it mean that village plans are not necessary in the process of rural vitalization? Of course not. Planning plays a different role in rural areas compared to the cities. In terms of the conservation and development of traditional villages, the focus of the village plan and its implementation measures should be adjusted according to the conservation goal and the management mechanism of the village. Most of the traditional villages are facing problems like the absence of industry and the deterioration of infrastructure. The conservation of traditional villages not only needs to conserve the attributes of heritage values, but also needs to protect the right of development of the villagers. It is important to promote conservation through development and empower the village with the capacity to develop, so that the problem of rural decay can be really solved. The most important thing in village revival is to retain local villagers, and to form a sustainable relationship between economic development and traditional protection <sup>[8]</sup>.

Planning should focus on the following tasks. First, current resources, heritage values, and pinpoint attributes should be analyzed. Traditional villages are founded on a

traditional way of living and production, shaped by natural environment, and guided by the philosophy of harmony between human and nature. They are formed gradually through a long period of time, according to its own logic of development. Only through in-depth research and study can we formulate heritage values in the plan to serve as the basis of conservation and utilization. At the same time, evoking a sense of cultural identity among the villagers through publicity and education is also necessary, so that the villagers can reach a consensus on conservation and engage in conservation voluntarily. Social cohesion and local identity are critical to the development of villages <sup>[9]</sup>.

The second task of the plan is to set conservation limits and directions for development. The plan should draw on the research and analysis of current condition as well as the industry trend in the future to propose development directions for the village.

The third task of planning is to improve infrastructure and living conditions in the village, as well as to complete safety and disaster prevention facilities. Only when the living conditions in villages are as good as that in the cities, rural lives can be truly attractive.

The core value of Pingtian village is its intact historic environment and the harmonious relationship between the village and its surroundings. The plan needs to holistically preserve the landscape around the village, as well as the historic buildings that are crucial to the traditional characteristics of the village. Family shrines, incense halls, temples, and important Fengshui forests need to continue to serve its traditional functions and be conserved carefully. For residential buildings of relatively low architectural values, the interiors can be adapted to improve the living standard.

In terms of architecture, there are 15 traditional residences in the village that date back from Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the Republic of China (1912–1949), two of which are listed as historic buildings of Songyang county. They need key conservation measures.

The common characteristics of traditional architecture in the village is hipped roof, rock wall foundation, rammed mud wall, gray or red roof tiles and simple decorations. It shows the lifestyle in Pingtian that is based on agriculture.

The village plan needs to be flexible and adjusts promptly according to the implementation of the design. There are usually problems like property right disputes and specific demand of the villagers. So, it is common to go back and forth several times before making the final decision. Take the design of the parking lot as an example. There was no parking lot in Pingtian. Villagers and tourists could only park along the main road, which greatly hindered the development of tourism. The land of the village was limited by the mountainous terrain and existing built environment. The parking lot needed to be compatible with the traditional environment and it should not block the views. There were no other choices left other than having two small parking areas along the road near the village entrance. One was built by demolishing a chicken farm after the approval from the owner. The other was built by widening the road.

The village society is a so-called “acquaintance society.” It is governed by its own logic. Even in a village with decreasing population, the social structure still plays an important role in the planning and reconstruction process. The implementation of the plan must rely on the community. It is crucial to form cooperation between the local government and village leaders. In the case of Pingtian, the investor of Yunshang Pingtian Guesthouse (云上平田), Mr. Jiang played an important role in the process. In history, respected figures who gained status or fortune in the city usually returned to their home village after retirement and contributed to the development of the village. Mr. Jiang is such a figure in modern times. His father used to be the village secretary in Pingtian. Mr. Jiang works in the city but has been greatly influenced by his father and has a deep emotional attachment to the village. When Songyang county initiated the policy

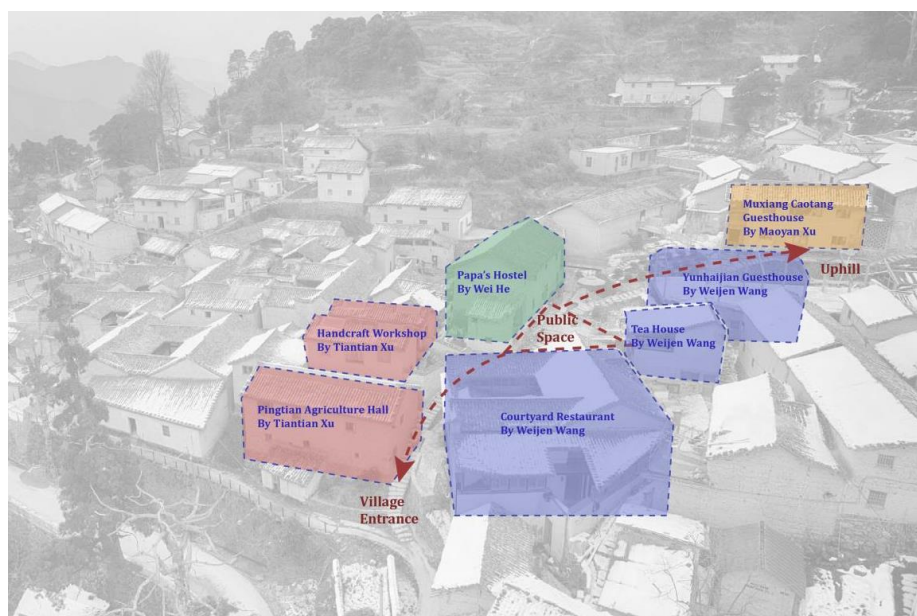
supporting the development of traditional villages, he saw the opportunity immediately. As a local villager, he was able to buy and rent a dozen of old houses. During the whole process of planning and reconstruction, he was the major mediator between the designers and the villagers. He also did public services to win support from the villagers. For example, at the beginning of the project, Mr. Jiang paid from his own pocket to renovate a long-abandoned Incense Hall (Ancestral Hall) in the village. He also raised money for the elderly who lived alone with no source of income, and organized visits to take care of them during holidays.

#### 1.4 A small cluster design

Mr. Jiang managed to take tenures of a dozen of old houses. Therefore, the common problem of property right disputes in rural development was solved. Renovating and adapting these houses of various conditions into rural resorts became the starting point of rural vitalization and planning in Pingtian.

In terms of tourism resources, Pingtian village does not have much advantage. It has beautiful scenery and historic landscape, but not unique in Songyang. Xikeng village and Chenjiapu village in Sidu not far from Pingtian are probably endowed with better resources. The area of Pingtian is not large. It only takes about an hour to tour the village, so it is important to create more programs for people to experience and consume. Therefore, the biggest challenge for designers and business owners was how to create attractions for the village.

With the institutional support of the university and social networks, the planning team was able to form a relatively large design team composed of experts and professors from several universities, including Professor Maoyan Xu from the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University, Professor Weijen Wang from the School of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong, Professor Wei He from the School of Architecture of Central Academy of Fine Arts, and Ms Tiantian Xu from DnA Architects. They undertook the projects of



**Figure 4.** Aerial view of the renovation of Pingtian Village. Source: Drawing by Wen Tang, the original image was provided by DnA Architects



**Figure 5.** Muxiang Caotang Guesthouse before the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li



**Figure 6.** Muxiang Caotang Guesthouse after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by Yunshang Pingtian Guesthouse



**Figure 7.** Interior of Muxiang Caotang Guesthouse after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by Yunshang Pingtian Guesthouse

Muxiang Caotang Guesthouse (木香草堂), Courtyard Restaurant (四合院餐厅), Papa's Hostel (爷爷家青年旅社), and Pingtian Agriculture Hall (平田农耕馆), including a handcraft workshop, respectively. Later, Professor Xin Zhang from Tsinghua University joined the project with his team of lighting designers; the interior design team led by Mr. Haihong Li from Shenzhen also joined. It was unprecedented to have a design team of so many top designers all gathered in the small mountainous village. Gathering the design team was the most important step in the rural development process in Pingtian and was crucial for the project to be completed and later managed with high quality.

Pingtian is a typical agricultural village in the mountains. In order to develop it into a destination for rural tourism, we have to make adjustments in certain places. The plan of the guesthouse area not only needed to consider the function and demand of guesthouse management and tourism development, but also needed to make sure not to damage the characteristics of the village. The plan also needed to leave room for adjustments during implementation according to the demand of the villagers. Mr. Jiang had a dozen of buildings ranging from historic courtyard houses, residential buildings built in the 1980s, to kitchens and small constructions built on different geographical locations.

These buildings were different in type and quality and were also constructed in different periods. Designers needed to take into consideration of the location, current condition, and the quality of space and the effect on landscape in order to organize them into an experiential area of rural life with all required functions. The plan also needed to balance short-term and long-term returns and phase the project in a reasonable way. After many rounds of discussions among planners, architects, government officials, and owners, the plan was finalized for the first phase and decided on the functional and spatial arrangement of the tourism facilities, restaurants, guesthouses, cultural exhibitions, and art creation. The plan was fully and thoroughly implemented, with only minor adjustments due to property ownership issues.



**Figure 8.** Courtyard Restaurant before the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li





**Figure 9.** Courtyard Restaurant after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by Yunshang Pingtian Guesthouse



**Figure 13.** Interior of Pingtian Agriculture Hall after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by DnA Architects



**Figure 10.** Pingtian Agriculture Hall before the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li



**Figure 14.** Papa's Hostel after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by 3andwich Design



**Figure 11.** Interior of Pingtian Agriculture Hall before the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li



**Figure 15.** Interior of Papa's Hostel after the renovation. Source: Photo provided by 3andwich Design



**Figure 12.** Pingtian Agriculture Hall after the renovation. Source: Photo by Junjie Li

It is important to have enough public spaces in the plan. Public spaces can be created through renovating and improving existing spaces, or by introducing new public architecture. The construction of public space in rural revitalization is of great importance. Public spaces can bring people together, inspire local cultural pride, and allow villagers to regain collective cohesion<sup>[10]</sup>.

Pingtian village used to have little resting places. Walking in the village, one feels like in a cramped maze with the narrow alleys and enclosed rammed earth walls of traditional buildings. In the renovation, several buildings were transformed at the entrance of the village into the Agriculture Museum, the Crafts Workshop and the Designer's Studio, making the enclosed buildings into open spaces for cultural exhibitions and public activities. In front of the Papa's Hostel, there was a triangular patch that was relatively spacious. The space was connected with the café on the first floor of the Hostel and turned into a reception center for the first phase of the project. Architects reshaped the ridge in front of the Papa's Hostel and added landscaping, making it more welcoming and comfortable. A small house nearby was transformed into a semi-open tea house, creating a space for resting and chatting. Therefore, this triangular patch became an attractive public space in the village. It added new functions to the Hostel and enriched the cultural life of the area. It not only met the demand for tourists, but also improved public spaces in the village. After the completion of the café's renovation, it soon became a destination for village elderlies to have chess games, or for designers and government staffs to have meetings.



**Figure 16.** The Triangular Patch in the center of Pingtian Village, which has become an attractive public space. Source: Photo provided by Haidong Peng

The works of the architects expressed their understanding of traditional architecture, as well as their reflections on rural issues, showing both their personalities and social

responsibilities at the same time. With the burgeoning rural tourism industry, the values of rural vernacular architecture started to gain public recognition. The architects were also learning from traditional building design and techniques. Every building renovation project followed strictly the principle of discernibility. In places where intervention must be done, discernable materials was chosen. The design respected the evolution of the village and tried to be creative at the same time. In the Agriculture Museum in Pingtian, the designers tried different types of light wells and glass tiles to create a new architectural language of light and shadow. In Muxiang Caotang, the designer explored a modular method based on the thickness of the rammed mud wall to treat doors and windows on the facade. In the Courtyard Restaurant, the designer concerned more about the relationship between environmental space and natural landscape and used metal materials in the corner of the corridor yard<sup>[11]</sup>, creating an excellent spot for mountain views. The Papa's Hostel did not change much in the exterior, but in the interior on the second floor, the design concept of "room-in-a-room" was adopted to create a different way of living and utilizing space.

The architects did not leave after finishing the design. The model was to combine design, on-site instruction, and creativity of local craftsmen. During the yearlong construction, the designers went to the site for a dozen times to give instructions and cooperate closely with local craftsmen, which ensured the quality of the project and also promoted the inheritance of local craftsmanship. The devotion was also recognized by other professionals. The Papa's Hostel was named winner of the 2016 HD Award by the Hospitality Design Magazine for the category of "Guestrooms or Suites (Economy)," as well as the Silver Award by the A'Design Award in Italy. The Agriculture Museum and Workshop was named First Prize of 2015 Rural Architecture by the Ministry of Housing and Development in China. Pingtian village is now a museum of architectural design. The works of designers are full of

characters, but also in harmony with the village.

### 1.5 Rural landscape with natural charm

Landscapes play an important role in the cultural, ecological, and environmental fields and can also contribute to local economic development and rural development<sup>[12]</sup>. Our emotional ties with rural area largely stem from the rural landscape which is full of natural charm. However, most landscape design methods are for urban squares, gardens, or artificial spaces. Landscape design in rural areas needs to avoid “over-design” that damages the natural charm of the villages. Therefore, designers must learn from nature and from the villagers. The work of several renowned designers in Pingtian all used natural landscape in the background to create a harmonious environment.

Landscape designers extracts design elements from the stone walls, vegetable gardens, and bamboo forest, adapted them and used them in the design. For example, the triangle patch mentioned above was designed into a neatly aligned vegetable garden to set off surrounding buildings. Another example is the vacant lot behind Muxiang Caotang. It was transformed into a small theater made of bamboo and was used to hold all kinds of activities.

## 2. DISCUSSION: PARTICULARITY OF PINGTIAN VILLAGE

China has gradually shifted from high-speed economic development to quality-oriented development, and the imbalance between rural and urban areas has become a prominent problem. Therefore, rural revival and development is an inevitable result, and some villages will inevitably start to change first. The Songyang government is far-sighted very much concerned about rural issues, and strongly supports the renovation and development of the villages. Therefore, Songyang has become a pioneer in rural development.

Since 2012, Songyang County has been committed to the protection and development of traditional villages and rural revitalization.

County Magistrate, Jun Wang, has devoted himself to the renovation of historical villages. In 2013, Binlong Jiang, Pingtian-born, returned to his hometown of Songyang. Mr. Jiang's family used to be a village cadre, and he had the courage and ability to be an operator of the project. As a local villager, Mr. Jiang is an extremely suitable person for rural revitalization. The county government invests the fund for rural construction here, so that it can have the reasonable social and economic effects. In the end, Mr. Jiang managed to take tenures of 18 old houses in the village and cooperated with the government to carry out the renovation. Therefore, Pingtian Village was selected as the key village.

The planning team started this project in 2014. At that time, Pingtian Village was just an unknown small village surrounded by the mountains. The village is small in scale, and the buildings are not very delicate. Most of the houses are traditional rammed earth two-story buildings. Although the buildings in Pingtian Village are well preserved and have rich cloud landscapes, the scenery and the history do not stand out from the surrounding villages, which was obviously not attractive enough for outsiders. The conventional rural tourism cannot bring breakthrough development to the village. The renovation of Pingtian Village requires the injection of new functions, reflecting the contrast between modern and traditional, bringing new elements and vitality to the village. So, a group of architects with unique and innovative ideas were gathered in Pingtian Village. Compared with the traditional single-person design, cluster design can gather the collective wisdom. The unique ideas of each architect have brought new possibilities to the development of Pingtian Village. The similar houses have been transformed by different designers, showing different styles, resulting in a very interesting diversity. Collecting a large number of works of well-known architects in a small village, these excellent design works will definitely enhance the popularity of Pingtian Village, attract attention and bring up topics, and then promote the development of the entire village.



As the owner and also a villager, Mr. Jiang is an important figure in the renovation of Pingtian Village. The planning, design, construction, and operation of the project are all supported by the owner. Mr. Jiang took tenures of 18 old houses in the village, provided suitable construction sites, and communicated with the government. At the beginning of the project, Mr. Jiang communicated with the planning team throughout the process, and jointly decided to determine the renovation plan of the village. The solution to the lack of construction experience with modern materials in the village was also due to Mr. Jiang's timely communication, as an intermediary between the designer and the construction team. After about two years of planning and construction, the final renovation showed a better result. As the operator, Mr. Jiang led the villagers to participate in the operation of the village by hiring them and purchasing agricultural products, helping the villagers to improve their living standards and local identity, and truly realizing the revitalization and development of the village.

## 2.1 Development and contradiction

The 18 renovated buildings were mainly residential buildings. In order to meet the modern needs of new functions, there will inevitably be a contradiction between the protection and renovation of traditional buildings. The county government's proposition is to preserve the traditional appearance as much as possible and protect the authenticity of traditional villages. From the architect's point of view, it is necessary to make small-scale changes to show the contrast between the old and the new, and better meet the needs of comfort. As for the owner, he considers more of economic value, Mr. Jiang tends to support the designer's idea. Architect Tiantian Xu chose a destroyed old house at the entrance of the village and transformed it into the Pingtian Agriculture Hall and the Handcraft Workshop. To avoid the damage to the coordination of the village facade, the exterior wall is not made with large window openings. The skylights of

different scales on the roofs bring light into the interior, which improves the lighting conditions of traditional buildings. The Courtyard Restaurant designed by Professor Weijen Wang, ingeniously raised the roof by one-meter, folded part of the roof to form skylights, and partially added some small-scale steel structures and corner windows. This delicate method properly protects the traditional style of the building.

The Muxiang Caotang Guesthouse designed by Professor Maoyan Xu retains the exterior facade of the house and uses wooden materials to renovate the interior. In the original plan, he hoped to add an entrance porch and a roofed balcony on the gable to improve interactivity between the guesthouse and the outdoor public space. This plan was opposed by the government. The government had two considerations: the first consideration was of the authenticity of the traditional architecture; the second was that the government was worried such changes would lead to uncontrollable imitation by other residents, which might cause huge damage to the historic village style of Songyang. Both sides finally compromised, although the balcony and porch of Muxiangtang were built, the interior and the balcony were not connected, which was equivalent to attaching a porch to the gable of the old building.

The Papa's Hostel, designed by Professor Wei He, has sparked a heated debate. Professor He chose Mr. Jiang's grandfather's old house for renovation. He hopes to provide an accommodation space for those young people who come here to paint, and also to increase the diversity of architectural functions in Pingtian Village among many guesthouses, so the function of this building was set as a youth hostel. At the same time, Wei He also proposed to dedicate the first floor to the public, the completely open first-floor space can be used as a public space serving locals and tourists. In the renovation plan of Papa's Hostel, the external form of the building is completely preserved, only a long window is opened on the second floor to bring sunlight, air, and natural scenery into the building. Different from the



cautious exterior design, the interior of the building has undergone relatively bold changes: the partitions in the original building have been removed, and the building has changed from an originally divided room to a large open-planned room. The youth hostel on the second floor implanted three groups of “rooms within room” spatial elements into the traditional house. The “rooms within room” is a living unit of the bunk bed in the youth hostel, each unit can accommodate about six people. These units are constructed of lightweight materials, which can be disassembled and moved. In order to maintain the characteristics of transparent space, the units adopted a new translucent material. The comparison of the new translucent material with the thick earth walls adds visual extension. In addition, translucent materials and casual voids on them can liven up the atmosphere and make the youth hostel more interesting to stay <sup>[13]</sup>.



**Figure 17.** “Rooms in room.” Source: Photo provided by 3andwich Design

The county government has strongly opposed to Professor He’s design. The concept of “rooms within room” is a valuable exploration of the renovation of traditional buildings, but the problem of privacy caused by mixing genders and translucent materials has not been solved properly. Obviously, such a design is unacceptable for a village that has just come into contact with modern society. Although the Papa’s Hostel was finally built, the county government worried that such a design would have a negative impact on Pingtian village and even Songyang, they blocked the hostel operation on the grounds

that the fire protection design was not qualified. The second floor of the hostel has been idle and closed until 2021, when it was gradually converted into a cultural exhibition space.

Public space is crucial for village renovation. At the center of this group of buildings, there is a triangular land, which spontaneously formed a public space with several transformations of buildings and businesses. Before 2014, this triangular land was an insignificant site overgrown with weeds where villagers passed by it every day. Due to the closure of surrounding buildings, it did not become a space for villagers’ public activities. The very inconspicuous triangular land was not considered by the planning team at first. After several renovations, the triangular land was surrounded by buildings with different functions, including the Papa’s Hostel, Yunhaijian Guesthouse, and Teahouse. The outdoor space and the indoor public space had formed a close linkage, and the public attributes of the triangular land had emerged, becoming the most popular public space in Pingtian Village. The appearance of this public space is a surprise to us. Its development is a spontaneous process, gradually formed in the process of planning and operation. It can be said that it provides a new inspiration for future village planning.

### 3. CONCLUSION: IGNITING THE SPARKS

The vitalization of traditional villages requires close cooperation among the government, the villagers, and the designers. In order to ensure the long-term development of the village, it is crucial to find new sources of income for villagers beside agriculture. Rural revitalization should always focus on the villagers, develop the local culture and industry to improve the living conditions of the residents <sup>[14]</sup>. In Pingtian, every stakeholder played their role: the planners set the boundaries for design from the perspective of conservation; the government improved public facilities; the designers ignited the sparks for vitalization. Last but not least, for the sparks to become a fire, it



**Figure 18.** Ms. Lingfang Wang trains villagers to bake bread in Pingtian Village. Source: Photo by Yaopeng Xu

requires long-term engagement and creativity from the villagers. The team of Mr. Jiang has made Yunshang Pingtian a well-known guesthouse brand in Songyang through relentless effort in these years. The increasing publicity and visitation of the village not only benefited rural tourism, but also made traditional industry like vegetable and crafts more profitable.

New things are still happening in Pingtian. One exciting event is that in early 2019, Ms. Lingfang Wang, Gastronome from Taiwan, and Mr. Xiaopeng Xu, documentary director came to Pingtian, introducing an international platform to the village. They not only opened artist studio in the village with their own teams, but also taught a local villager, Ms. Bao how to bake toast, making this 60-year-old country woman a new generation of “cyber celebrity.”

The preservation of traditional village culture was attached great importance in the beginning of the project. During cluster design, architect Tiantian Xu proposed to increase the Pingtian Agriculture Hall as a cultural exhibition space, which not only serves as a center for villagers’ cultural activities, but also supports the development of guesthouses in the village as a cultural facility, and has a cultural exchange function.

She believes that only commercial projects are not enough for rural development. At present, the construction of guesthouses is the main method of rural development and many rural resources are consumed, so that cultural and public welfare projects could be used as a balance. This is undoubtedly a farsighted judgment, later facts have proved that it has played a very important role in enriching the functional types of Pingtian Village, increasing the stay time of visitors and establishing the cultural image of Pingtian Village. Tiantian Xu also paid great attention to the consideration of social value when choosing the original building. She chose the most dilapidated and least noticed farmhouses in the villages. Although it is not a historical building, it plays an important role in the overall village form of the traditional village and the public space in the village. It is hoped that through the reasonable renovation of this type of house with the worst condition, the possibility of overall protection and sustainable development will be explored.

During the actual operation of Pingtian Village, Mr. Jiang, Ms Lingfang Wang and other staff have undoubtedly boosted the economy and promoted the development of Pingtian Village. However, the consideration of social value in this project is still lacking to

some extent. The relationship between the renovated space and the villagers is alienated, the villagers barely use the new buildings. Besides, there is also a lack of contact with historical and cultural spaces in Pingtian Village, such as the Ancestral Hall. In the future, further adjustments will make up for the lack of social value in Pingtian Village.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the Traditional Village Department of Tsing Hua Urban and Rural Planning and Design Consulting Research Institute and Government of Songyang County, Zhejiang Province for their help in the research. We are also grateful for the assistance from Binlong Jiang and Liqin Ye of Pingtian Village.

### FUNDING

This research did not receive any specific grant.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Na Sun: Writing – original draft

Deyin Luo: Project administration, Writing – outline & final draft,

Wen Tang: Writing – editing & improving

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Ye X. The general principles of the China's rural vitalization strategy in the New Era [J]. *Reform*, 2018, 2018(01): 65–73.
- [2] Feng J. The difficulties and solutions of traditional villages—Discussion on traditional villages as another type of cultural heritage [J]. *Folk Culture Forum*, 2013, 2013(01): 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.16814/j.cnki.1008-7214.2013.01.002>
- [3] Qiu B. Basic countermeasures for rural construction in the era of ecological civilization [J]. *City Planning Review*, 2008, 2008(04): 9–21.
- [4] Luo D. Village conservation: The activation of architectural minds as the key [J]. *New Architecture*, 2015, 2015(01): 23–27.
- [5] Ye C, Ma X, Gao Y, et al. The lost countryside: Spatial production of rural culture in Tangwan Village in Shanghai [J]. *Habitat international*, 2020, 98: 102137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2020.102137>
- [6] Luo D, Sun N, Fu Y. The Songyang path of village preservation and rural vitalization [J]. *Architectural Journal*, 2021, 2021(01): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.19819/j.cnki.ISSN0529-1399.202101001>
- [7] Li Y, Westlund H, Zheng X, et al. Bottom-up initiatives and revival in the face of rural decline: Case studies from China and Sweden [J]. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2016, 47: 506–513. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.07.004>
- [8] Wang W. The development of ancient villages must maintain the pursuit of authenticity [J]. *China Homes*, 2015, 2015(12): 26–29.
- [9] Lysgard HK. The ‘actually existing’ cultural policy and culture-led strategies of rural places and small towns [J]. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2016, 44: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.12.014>
- [10] Luo D, Tang W. From a village road to public space: Evolution of the triangle plot in Pingtian Village [J]. *New Architecture*, 2022, 2022(04): 130–135.
- [11] Wang W. Three ways for seeing mountain-water through bodily space [J]. *Architectural Journal*, 2021, 2021(01): 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.19819/j.cnki.ISSN0529-1399.202101003>
- [12] Shen J, Chou RJ. Cultural landscape development integrated with rural revitalization: A case study of Songkou Ancient Town [J]. *Land (Basel)*, 2021, 10(4): 406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land10040406>

- [13] He W, Zhang X. A new inside for an old Keekwilee-House: Renovation of Papa's Hostel in Pingtian Village [J]. *World Architecture*, 2015, 2015(11): 90–95+118.  
<https://doi.org/10.16414/j.wa.2015.11.011>
- [14] Xu T, Wang J. Rural practices in Songyang: Examples of Pingtian Agricultural Museum and Songyang Zhangxi Brown Sugar Workshop [J]. *Architectural Journal*, 2017, 2017(04): 52–55.

**Publisher's note**

AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.