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Reimagining local worlds: Wen village conservation and regeneration by Amateur Architecture Studio

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Abstract

This article theorises the local world as a conceptual scaffold for future conservation and regeneration. It aims to cata-lyse a theoretical dialogue across the East and West to understand how ordinary places and lifeworlds are preserved, reproduced, and possibly reimagined. The local worlds discussed herein are conceptualised as the worlds of many, the worlds of relating, the worlds of structuring and the worlds of becoming. These four cardinal points present a source of open-endedness and futurity for contemporary architectural reinterpretation. The current article examines the characterisation of the Wen village conservation and regeneration project, led by the Amateur Architecture Studio in Zhejiang Province of China (2012–2016), as an architectural reimagination of local worlds, with a strong sensitiv-ity to the ordinary places and lifeworlds of rural China and juxtapositions of new local worlds within old worlds. By piecing together the flows and fragments of the architectural process, this article shows how locally situated designs and dynamics have shaped the project in both its formation and afterlife, both ethically and contemporarily. Using close readings of popular and oral accounts from both architect's and users' perspectives, this article extends the case study by broadening theoretical conversations about contemporary architecture's capacity to reimagine local worlds.

Keywords local worlds, rural China, ordinary places and lifeworlds, Wen village, conservation and regeneration, Amateur Architecture Studio

1 Introduction

By way of beginning, it is constructive to briefly address and specify the terms used in and around the 'world' con-cept, both in a broader sense and related to the discipli-nary trajectory of architecture. Kenneth Frampton has approached the question of architecture as an integral part of a lifeworld from diverse angles, starting with his 1999 keynote speech at the International Union of Archi-tects conference in which he stated that 'architecture as opposed to any other art form is irredeemably mixed up with the lifeworld' and extending to his later recent

articulation on 'world architecture' (Britton and MaC-arter 2020). For Frampton and the subsequent genera-tions of his intellectual followers, architecture is always a means by which to expand horizons and engage with a larger world (Britton and MaCarter 2020).

After approximately four decades of rural urbanisa-tion, Chinese rural villages have become a form of these critical larger worlds; these villages are arriving at a criti-cal moment within this specific perspective, both as liv-ing places for a registered population of 900 million and as lived experiences worthy of ongoing conservation and regeneration. The timely reintegration of the accumulated past and the immediate present reality of Chinese villages is important for understanding not only these lived places but also the concepts of present world-making and future conservation and regeneration. Chinese rural villages are not only historical, political-economic and social-cultural

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constructs; they also embody layers of local worlds. The past and present apparatuses that constitute rural China provide an operational context of conservation and regeneration that is particularly relevant to contemporary architectural design intervention. Meanwhile, the extent to which architecture can act as a transformative catalyst for managing change in the rural world largely depends on architects' approaches to navigating within this operative context. In coordination with the Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, the Bureau of Cultural Relics has played a key role in shaping this context and conservation megastructure by applying legislative frameworks and professional regulations to the fields of cultural heritage protection, relic building listing and conservation planning (Chen, Ludwig, and Sykes 2021). Such frameworks have been applied effectively and generally in listed urban areas and include the legislated instrumental conservation frameworks known as 'the Law of the Conservation of Cultural Properties' of 1982, 'the Principles for the Conservation Planning of National Cultural Heritage' of 2004 and 'the Application for Approval for Conservation Planning of National Cultural Heritage' of 2004 (Zhu 2012). However, since there are far fewer listed conservation areas or protected historical structures located in rural areas or the rural world, the practical implementation and operation of this conservation megastructure in the historical rural environment takes various forms, which are realised to different degrees according to different regions and villages. The coexistence of different land ownership structures alongside different land tenure systems and land-use rights in rural China also fundamentally gives a different scale of complexity both in and around the concept of heritage conservation practised in urban China (Pola 2019). All these factors drive contemporary architectural practices not only deeply but also mostly blindly into the concept of heritage-led tourism, which often ends with manipulated heritage image-making in the name of a new rural China.

Based on this specific context, this article questions the ethical dilemma of the conservation and regeneration of Chinese villages, which have been predominantly articulated as highly technical, expert products of the preserved past that lead to static, exhibitable, and untouchable objects. Instead, within the pre-existing conditions of rural urbanisation in China, during which the local worlds of the cultural and built heritage have been considered in a very limited capacity, this article attempts to propose and frame the idea of the architectural reimagination of local worlds; this approach suggests a spiritual continuity and temporal circularity that pays tribute to renewing vanishing local traditions and the persistent collective memory rooted in the ordinary places and worlds of rural China. Through the use

of theoretical assemblage and a focused case study, this article aims to demonstrate that reimagining local worlds in Chinese rural villages can help to radically resist the ongoing flattening and fake feature-making of buildings, landscapes and townscapes, the vast majority of which are mostly masked as a nostalgic retreat to traditional local styles. Furthermore, this approach aims to recapture the essence of specific world-making development by describing a rural project that stems from local worlds and it built both with and without architects. In this sense, this article opens with the argument that local worlds not only serve as the presentation of a vanishing form of a historical lifeworld with a preserved sense of locality; rather, they inform a future projection that can reclaim the lost idea of local world-making through an anthropogeographical format in both temporal and territorial dimensions.

2 Architecture and local worlds

To continue Frampton's enquiries, the relationship between architecture and local worlds has been deeply entangled since the establishment of architecture as a discipline within the division of labour of designing and building structures. The increasing separation of those who design, build and use structures has created a vast territory in which architecture can be less local, pan-local, nonlocal, and trans-local; this change began to occur long before the homogenisation from globalisation arrived. While the debates on architecture and locality continue, the focus has been mainly on the social and cultural dimension of architecture; related discussions focus on the sensitive and subtle articulation of the built form, making economic and appropriate use of locally available resources, and living together locally in an increasingly globalising world, all of which are of vital importance and relevance to the fundamental function of contemporary architecture. On the topic of how contemporary architecture should be approached, a broader way in which to further the ethical dimension of architecture needs to be addressed in order to follow Frampton's line of response to some of the most significant theoretical contributions to the architectural humanities on the world in the past century. Such works include Edmund Husserl's phenomenological construction of architecture to the built worlds and lifeworlds of the 1930s; Martin Heidegger's connection of building to the idea and meaning of dwelling and being in the world; Hannah Arendt's 'The Human Condition' from the 1950s; and the work of Karsten Harries, whose 1990s' call for the ethical function of architecture to return to not only individuals as a whole but also the world and the community provides the closest reference to this article (Harries 1997).

Jeff Malpas consolidates this ethical enquiry in architecture in his 2021 book 'Rethinking Dwelling' and focus on the point that 'ethics is not about some theory of the good or the just; instead it essentially concerns an attentiveness to the remembered place and the placed memory – an attentiveness to the place-ness of the human and the humanness of place. The task of building, and of architectural design, becomes a task from which the ethical can never be excluded, and that is fundamentally tied to matters concerning the very formation of the human' (Malpas 2021). By rereading and rethinking Heidegger, Malpas further extends the critical line of thought in regard to architecture's concrete situatedness, its placedness, and its 'being here/there'. 'Architecture does not "make" the world, nor does it properly "make" place, but in responding to place, in articulating the human mode of being-in-place, architecture participates in the world, becomes part of its happening, allows that happening to be revealed' (Malpas 2021). This statement echoes what Peter Blundell Jones argued in his last book, 'Architecture and Ritual', i.e., that 'architecture provides a mirror that reflects our world, our knowledge about it and the way we interact with it' (Blundell Jones 2016). Thus, architecture operates as a medium of exchange and action in world-making and as an agent of change that is constantly open to the reinterpretation of what belongs and what constitutes the world(s). Architecture articulates the spatialised idea and process of world-making through the routinised practice of ordinary and everyday intervention, inhabitation, imagination and reimagination.

Malpas continues by echoing Heidegger's focus on the ordinary and everyday, articulating the architecture of a thing, of memory, of place and of the world, such that 'the way memory and presence, and authenticity, are bound up with the thing as it exceeds anything given in its representation… It is the thing, rather than the representation alone, that memory is founded; and it is in relation to the thing, rather than the representation, that the world is configured…The result is an effacement of the thing, of memory, of place and of world' (Malpas 2021). Taken together, these ethical enquiries into the fundamental function of architecture provide a powerful critique on the tendency of contemporary architecture to lean towards a reduction in local worlds, in which buildings either have been or will be lost amidst representational ideas rather than engaged in a worldly manner. If every ordinary place carries within it an ordinary slice of human worlds, then to build is to create engagements with local worlds. Architecture, as a spatialised world-making practice, should thus be seen as the refurbishment of local worlds through the worldly mode of engagement via the makings of humans and their many local worlds.

In close relation to, as well as constantly departing from, the fundamentalist Anglo-Saxon line of thought, the idea of local worlds in traditional China, particularly premodern Chinese villages located within an agrarian civilisation, has been more fluid, open-ended, and in formation with the evolving cosmographical understandings of the world that exists beneath heaven and above land. This trait is touched upon in Yi-Fu Tuan's milestone work 'Topophilia', in which he explores the structuring of the world based on the major physical characteristics of habitat and emphasises the effect of the physical setting on perception, attitudes, and world view (Tuan 1974). Tuan relates the making of ancient Chinese buildings and cities to the cosmographical ideas of ancient Chinese. 'The traditional form and layout of the Chinese city is an image of the Chinese cosmos, an ordered and consecrated world set apart by a massive earthen girdle from the contingent world beyond' (Tuan 1974). Tuan also extends this concept to the rural world by, for example, referencing the ancient Chinese poet Yuan-Ming Tao (A.D. 372–427), who describes in his characteristic poem 'The Return' 'his return to his country home with its three pathways almost overgrown with weeds, its pine trees, and its chrysanthemums. He wanders about in his garden and pauses to look at the clouds climbing the valleys and the birds returning to their nests… But this pictorial imagery did not appear in the Chinese traditional landscape painting until some 500 years later, during which the literati artist did not go out to paint and copy a particular scene. Instead, he entered a world, to wander there for hours or days so as to imbibe an atmosphere, before returning to his studio to paint' (Tuan 1974). The fact that the world that the literati artist entered is the same to which many literati such as Tao have returned suggests that important local worlds in premodern rural China have been resilient for hundreds of years. More importantly, this type of Chinese local world is important not only for its spiritual value and age value per Alois Riegl but also for its evolving value as future reference points per Wu Hung's twin concepts of ruination and fragmentation; these concepts are discussed in his work on presence and absence in Chinese art and visual culture, particularly in relation to the rapid rural urbanisation of contemporary China (Wu 2012).

The abovementioned conceptual alignments and anchors that extend across the East and West constitute a key base and a strategic move to help the current article reframe ordinary Chinese villages—as places and lifeworlds—not only as 'worlding sites' but also as 'worlding processes' (Vignato and Arnez 2022). An ordinary Chinese village is a local site and a global process that weaves together the rural, the peripheral, the minor and the marginalised, as well as the local worlds that exist both

inside and around them. These local worlds are conceptualised as four cardinal points: 1) the worlds of many, which are remade and renegotiated by multiple authors and authorships; 2) the worlds of relating, which bring together multiple actors with mixed viewpoints and diverse backgrounds; 3) the worlds of structuring, which focus on the precariously balanced interplay between the old and new, local and nonlocal, and minor and monumental, instead of overly relying on just one such concept; and 4) the worlds of becoming, which acknowledge that world-making is a continuous process that involves a deeper understanding of both open-endedness and futurity. These four cardinal directions position local worlds, which is in opposition to the idea that the world is a stabilised spatiotemporal construct; the latter idea is predominantly framed by Euro-centric definitions and shaped by hegemonic forces both in the past and in the present state of globalisation and the related neoliberal form of urbanisation.

Not all worlding sites are historic and elite-produced; many local worlds have been sustained and carried forwards via their ordinary places and the lifeworlds of their ordinary people. There are numerous ordinary villages throughout rural China that are largely underdeveloped, less recognised, and officially unlisted despite their historic, evidential and communal value. At a time when much of the local fabric of Chinese villages, as well as their associated local worlds, is being swept away in the rapid transition from rural to urban, most of the surviving and sustaining worlding sites are part of remote villages that are geographically located far away from central cities and are seen as natural villages positioned at the bottom of the administrative chain that extends from urban to suburban to rural. As untouched corners of urbanisation, these remote villages and their ordinary places and lifeworlds sustain not only some fragments of the past but also local worlds that look towards the future. Specifically, this type of unlisted ordinary Chinese natural village forms a vast blind spot in the conservation and regeneration discourse of historic rural China. To resonate the concept of local worlds using a key point from the concept of local heritage, nothing is intrinsically heritage, rather, it becomes heritage when it is used in a heritage discourse (Smith 2006).

Local worlds are not intrinsically given; rather, they are made and constantly remade—in fact, they are almost always in the process of remaking—by many heads and hands. Thus, such remaking is an unavoidable ethical process that exists in a longer temporal dimension. This ethical dimension is the fullest in regard to reimagining local worlds. Local worlds are future-oriented, as seen by the futurity that re-emerges from the past and the past that re-emerges from the present (Chakkalakal, and

Ren 2022). In parallel, conservation and regeneration should be reframed as a future-oriented project instead of the practice of returning to a selective past. Reimagining local worlds is based on reimagining the worlds of relating, the worlds of structuring and the worlds of becoming.

This reframing of conservation and regeneration can open up a critical future space for understanding the reimagining of local worlds in ordinary Chinese villages; this is particularly done through architecture, which serves as both a discipline and a practice that are not fully determined by elite expert professionals but rather by the multiple and popular imaginations of many local worlds. This approach prompts the much-needed ethical questioning of both architectural and heritage discourses in China, which has prioritised urban construction and listed buildings as the products of legitimising mere pro-growth development (Verdini, Frassoldati and Nolf 2017). Many of the rural and heritage studies on Chinese villages to date have focused on preservation and tourism-led regeneration or development for officially listed villages (Pola 2019). Among these villages, 'traditional villages' and 'historical and cultural villages' are two heritage titles granted at the village level by the state or local authorities upon the advisement of elite experts. The same is true of the 'cultural relic' title granted at the building level. This article argues that the abovementioned listed villages and building relics are by themselves not sufficient to represent local built heritages, let alone the many local worlds surrounding them. An open reinterpretation of local worlds as the heritage of the past and the present in a longer temporal dimension is further needed (Harvey 2001). The following case study, although it has its own contextual dilemmas and controversies, provides a critical foundation for this open reinterpretation.

3 Wen village and project

Led by the Amateur Architecture Studio, the Wen village conservation and regeneration project in Zhejiang Province of China (2012–2016) shows a strong level of sensitivity to the ordinary places and lifeworlds of rural China, questions the image-making of historic stages set in heritage-led tourism development, and addresses the ethical dimension rather than the aesthetic or social dimension of architecture in contemporary Chinese rural regeneration. Located in the eastern part of mainland China, the historic Wen village gained its name more than 400 years ago because its location was determined by the positioning of an enclosed mountain with a shape similar to that of a traditional Chinese calligraphy brush. Currently, Wen village is an administrative village made up of 13 different natural villages and 32 villagers' working groups, with a total population of approximately 1800 people across 560

households. As it is located approximately six kilometres away from its nearest neighbouring village, the village's physical isolation brings about development challenges; the majority of the working population has migrated to towns and cities, leaving mostly elderly and preschool children in Wen village, as in many other remote villages in China. Wen village has abundant natural resources and a well-preserved ecological environment, which provides the village with some degree of self-sufficiency.[1] The village economy is mainly based on silkworm breeding and the sericulture industry, which contributed to an annual income of £2000 per head in 2015. Alongside its steady economic development, Wen village has undergone a process of architectural renovation during the past decade, mostly by replacing indigenous buildings with modern houses based on borrowed urban styles and built with machine-made materials. Most of the traditional buildings and structures that had the potential to be listed as official relics are now gone, resulting in this 400-year-old village being omitted from the list held by the Administration of Building Heritage at both the town and district levels. Being stuck in a position between preservation and development has further isolated Wen village from receiving public funding for larger regional-level development planning, which includes modern tourism. This ripple effect has intensified the peripheral identity of Wen village, ranging from its omission from emerging regional transportation networks to the severe lack of public facilities available inside the village. This dilemma is a common problem for natural villages in China and is not only true of Wen village itself.

Starting with its planning and design in 2012 and coming into use in 2016, the Wen village conservation and regeneration project was led by one of the most internationally claimed and award-winning architectural practices in contemporary China, namely, the Amateur Architecture Studio. The grounded idea of this article is not to reinforce Amateur Architecture Studio's reputation or the Wen village project as a heroic benchmark for the country's ongoing rural regeneration. Rather, the specific use of the project as a case study aims to trace and piece together the flows and fragments of the specific architectural process, showing how local practices and dynamics shaped the contemporary project in both its formation and afterlife and how the project ethically engaged this ordinary village with a fragile marginalised identity by reimagining its local worlds.

3.1 Amateur architecture studio and tile-pan

Amateur Architecture Studio was cofounded by Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu in 1997, and it gained international recognition after Wang was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2012.[2] The term 'amateur' refers to an alternative model that is more spontaneous and bottom-up, aiming to counter the top-down mainstream professionalism that soullessly ignores regional differences and standardises traditional life forms. Wang Shu stated that the value of his 'amateur' model as opposed to that of professionals originated from Claude Levi-Strauss and is related to the idea of diversity, local values, and re-engaging craftsmen in architectural activities (Wang 2020). Led by Wang Shu and critically positioned as a literati-craftsperson's practice instead of being restricted by professional architectural knowledge, Amateur Architecture Studio has developed a consistent ecological-phenomenological approach to contemporary architectural design in urban areas (Chau 2018). However, that does not mean the practice relies on urban futurists; in contrast, Amateur Architecture Studio functions as a rural conservator that is constantly learning from rural villages and vernacular architecture, as well as its traditional building craftsmanship. Such a critical approach provides a rare example of blurring the distinction between the practice of professional architects and that of master builders. Amateur Architecture Studio's methodology of reusing fragmentary materials from demolished buildings and decaying villages has reclaimed the meaning and identity of the neglected past of rural China. This method challenges the hegemonic urban notion and aesthetics of hygiene and order in architecture, as well as the authority of the architect as a solo producer of artistic objects. The specific design and construction approach used by Amateur Architecture Studio is based on their uniquely reinvented 'tile-pan' building system that stems from the rural vernacular villages and architecture found in regions of southeastern China.[3] 'Tile-pan' is expressed as

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'瓦爿' in Chinese, where '爿' (pan) is mirrored from the related Chinese character '片' (pian), which refers to the fragmentary existence status and layered reconstruction of broken tiles and imperfect bricks. The concept of '爿' (pan) has been philosophically approached by Wang Shu as a fundamental unit with which to constitute his imagined architectural world that values local diversities and individual differences. To mitigate destructive seasonal hurricanes, local indigenous communities have adapted to rapidly rebuilding their settlements by recycling the usable materials left behind by hurricanes. This a form of indigenous wisdom at its most ancestral and appliable, which, over the years, has become a regional ritual that engages larger local worlds. Amateur Architecture Studio has learned this approach by working with local craftsmen and indigenous builders over decades. Millions of 'tile-pans' have been collected and recycled by the Amateur Architecture Studio from collapsed buildings and villages in the region, with the 'tile-pans' being carefully kept as dirty and broken as they were found. The studio's revived and reinvented 'tile-pan' system integrates an in situ concrete frame construction technique with a traditional thick wall and roof system covered in waste in the form of weathered reclaimed materials. This adaptive approach to reuse not only provides an adaptable climatic buffer for building envelopes but also generates an extremely rich lifeworld, both sensually and spiritually, with a bricolage expression of randomly scattered tiles, bricks, jars and crock from different times, all in vibrant and subtly different colours and textures. No two 'tile-pan' walls are the same; all of them are different, unique, accidental and reflect ecological diversity in nature. The 'tile-pan' building system serves as a time–space continuum between the past, present and future; it also serves as a specific tool and symbolic activism for Amateur Architecture Studio to recollect, reassemble and reimagine local worlds based on not only passing time and vanishing spaces but also familiar forms of the present lifeworld and future imagination.

3.2 Negotiating the site

Initially invited to design a museum complex for Fuyang district by their political leaders, Amateur Architecture Studio expressed their conditions and finally negotiated a deal for a rural regeneration project to be commissioned in a village and supervised by Fuyang; however, the village was to be selected by the architect (Yin 2016). Based on years of fieldwork, Amateur Architecture Studio finally identified the project site based on its 'picturesque quality' (Dong 2017). It is one of the 13 natural villages and the oldest part of the Wen administrative village. The selected natural village (Fig. 1) has grown in a linear form within the interstices between a mountain

and a river, and the existing layout also resonates with the imagined dwelling form in 'The Landscape Dwelling in Fuchun', which is an ancient Chinese literati landscape painting from approximately the 13th century that has long been regarded as a key reference to the practice of 'natural approaches to architecture' (Wang 2009). The village still contains approximately 40 traditional buildings that date back to the 17th century, when the village was inhabited by fewer than 80 families. It is not only for its related landscape imagination but also its ordinary and peripheral identity that the village was chosen by the architectural practitioner, along with local authorities, as a benchmark site for architecture-led conservation and regeneration. As Wang Shu once stated, 'Only one in a total of more than 300 villages of Fuyang has been listed under conservation and regeneration according to a research investigation by our team, which means more than 290 villages could be removed and demolished at any time by local authorities. Besides those villages without any surviving traditional buildings, we particularly aimed to save those 20 villages which still sustain some traditional elements. Those buildings and villages are not seen as with any value by most of the local authorities. But in my eyes, they have tremendous value. Wen village is one of those nonlisted villages we aimed to rescue' (Wang 2016).

The Wen village conservation and regeneration project was officially launched in June 2014, with Amateur Architecture Studio being appointed as the chief architect-planner.[4] This enhanced leadership position of Amateur Architecture Studio facilitated active design imagination and participation from an early stage. With direct support from the Bureau of Building and Construction in Zhejiang Province, Amateur Architecture Studio expanded its role as an architect-developer, in which the preliminary brief was codeveloped in consultation with Wen villagers. (Fig. 2). This development had three parts: first, a new residential part that aimed to cover an area of 11 acres at the east end of the village; second, the restoration and regeneration of the old village; and third, the sustainable management of the village landscape located alongside the main road and the waterway.

3.3 Spatial organisation and tectonics

Amateur Architecture Studio rejected the prevailing architectural design methodology used in rural China,

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[4] The project was coordinated by the Bureau of Building and Construction of Zhejiang Province at the provincial level and the local authority of Fuyang district at the city level and teamed up with the Chinese Academy of Art as a major local academic institution; this is where Wang Shu has served as the head of the School of Architecture. The main developer-contractor was later appointed as a Hangzhou-based, state-owned investment company named the Zhejiang Fuchun Real Estate Developing Company.

Fig. 1 Wen natural village stretches out from enclosed hills alongside a river (Source: Zheng Shi)

which is currently driven by either by formal standardisation and technical efficiency or formal iconic gestures and spectacular urban visuals; both approaches sacrifice the locality and local worlds embedded in the most ordinary built heritage. In contrast, Amateur Architecture Studio searched for an alternative way to actively advance contemporary architecture without losing a sense of Wen village's heritage, place and lifeworld.[5] The key vision was to build new buildings as if they had grown from the existing fabric, i.e., as architecture without architects, both physically and spiritually, with the aim of collectively enhancing both the local worlds and the rural development without blindly following urban globalisation. To materialise this ethical ambition, the first challenge for the architect was to persuade both the villager leaders and villagers to change their normal way of building new buildings by demolishing old buildings, changing instead to the recycling and adaptive reuse of old buildings.[6] This

architectural practice started an in-depth evaluation and assessment of the as-found condition of the existing village through the use of systematic drawings and documentations (Yin and Pan 2016). This led to the developed scheme of 14 new residential buildings that could accommodate 24 families on the planned newly built site and the refurbishment of 29 buildings inside the old village.

The design of the new residential section was future-oriented and set the scene for the conservation and regeneration of the old village (Fig. 3). Regarding its spatial organisation, an irregular overall layout was developed with a set of simple, orthogonal houses positioned and stitched into the given topography and natural fabric. A wind-rain bridge (Fig. 4) was placed at the meeting point where this new street meets the old; this bridge not only acts as a resting pavilion but also as a ritualised doorway to mark the threshold from the past to the present. A central communal street (Fig. 5), with a slightly curved geometry, was introduced to continue the street pattern from the old village to the east, following the direction of the river. This addition enhanced the communal character and role of those spaces located between the houses and the infrastructure. Providing a larger neighbourhood density than that provided by the traditional type of single house not only reinforced the intimate and socially cared for characteristic but also offered

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[5] The initial planning and architectural design guidelines of the new residential zone in Wen village had already been proposed by a state-led design institution from another city in Zhejiang Province in a tabula-rasa way based on a template.

[6] Locals said that Wang Shu once encountered a demolition site during his fieldtrip to a historic village, and he immediately jumped in and begged the builders to stop tearing down the traditional buildings and structures, which would have been demolished in a few hours' time. A compromise was made by him promising the village leader who had organised the demolition a voluntary design reuse scheme.
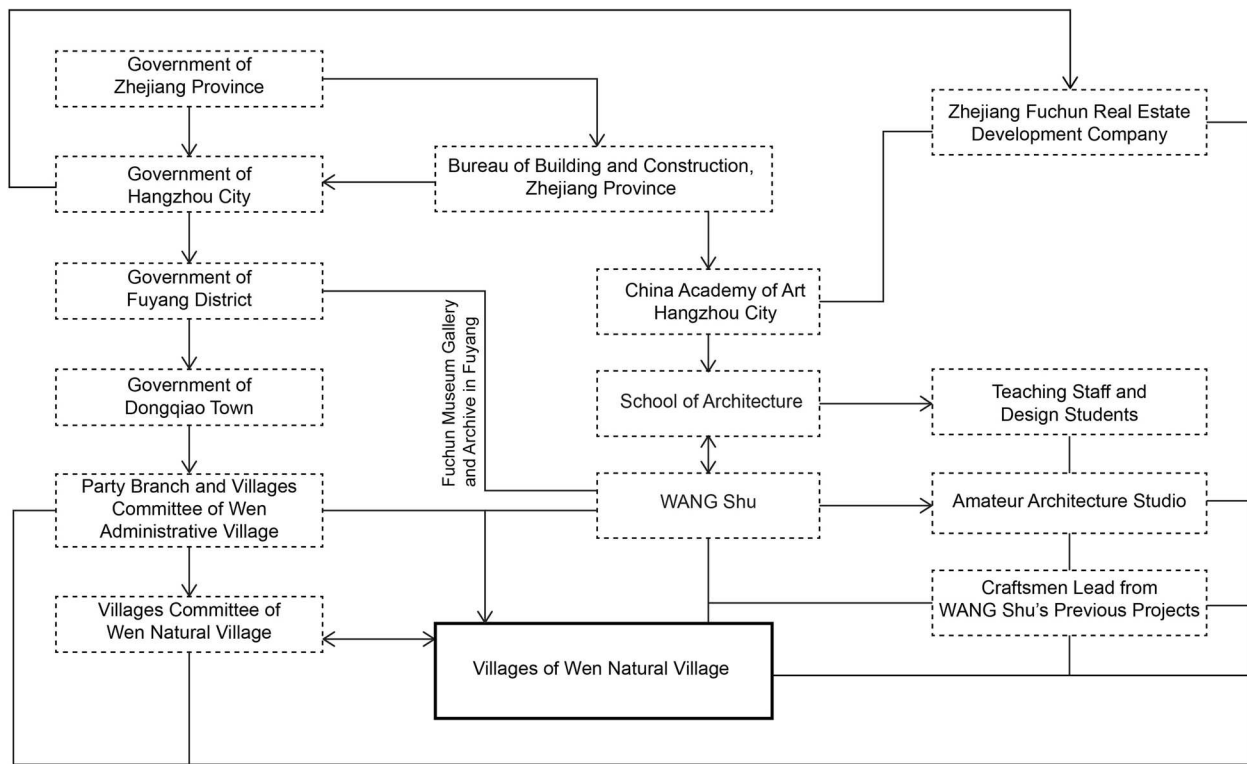
Fig. 2 Diagram of project structure and stakeholders (Source: the author)
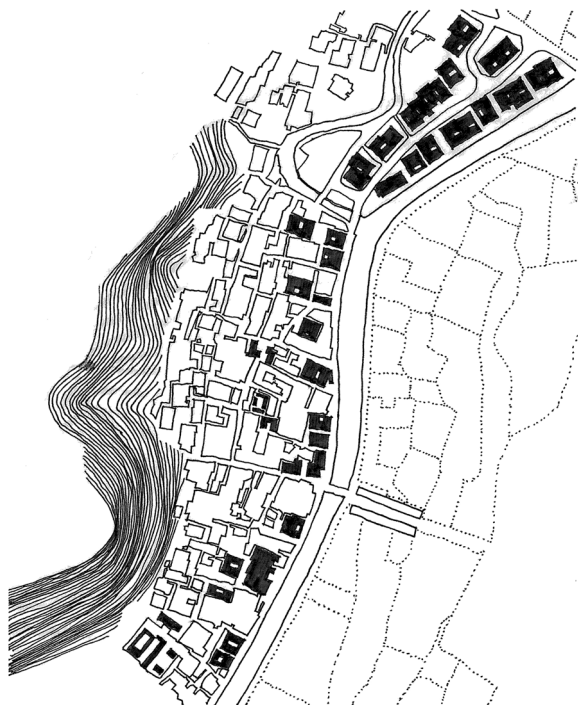

Fig. 3 Overall site layout, with a series of surgery-like renovations and adaptations in the central and southern parts of the village and a new residential area to the north that is composed of a newly planned street, 24 houses and a wind-rain bridge (Source: the author)

more compact spaces for encounters and interactions at the street level. Furthermore, it helped to divide the financial burden of each household.

The specific house-layout strategy consisted of eight basic type plans, each with three variations that easily allowed for further adjustments, for a total of 24 options to accommodate the different needs of the 24 planned households. A simple-type house serves as a microcosm of a little local world. Even if a type plan needs to be developed and adjusted to suit contemporary local needs, such as the internal thermal performance of the sky-well and its surrounding enclosures for rain-heavy Wen village, a return to this type form means more than the restart of its reinvention via architecture. It is a reflection of the building service and technology always changing, users' perception always adapting, and the localised meaning of dwelling always sustaining. Spatially, each house had a double-height courtyard placed at the centre to sustain the sky-well local typology and provide a semi-outside space for crafts and storage of agricultural tools. In principle, the ground floors in most of the houses were proposed as a family focused productive space to sustain a traditional shop-house typology, while the upper floors were designed for family living. Regarding larger, multigenerational families, the younger generation occupied the ground floors, while the older generations lived on

Fig. 4 The new wind-rain bridge with concrete load-bearing walls and wooden roof is placed at the intersection between the new and old villages, marking a communal focal point (Source: the author)

Fig. 5 A central communal street of the neighbourhood (Source: the author)

the upper floors, which were accessed via a semiexternal staircase; the living room and dining room were shared between he generations. Similar to the local worlds in many other vernacular villages of China, in the historic world of Wen village, the house is the most fundamental unit of a village. A house is not only a space for lifework but also a place of refuge, a locus of memory, and a mnemonic of local worlds. Amateur Architecture Studio's simple plan arrangement for each house and the new village is reminiscent of ancient Chinese cosmographic beliefs that the world is stratified, with the square representing the earth or the artificial world of man (Tuan 1974) (Fig. 6).

Regarding tectonics, the 'tile-pan' method was further developed. Locally sourced materials, including earth, clay, wood, bamboo and grey limestone, were integrated with in situ concrete into a hybrid structural system. Within this system, the traditional rammed-earth wall was reintroduced for not only ecological considerations but also cosmological considerations; the world is earthen, and earth-bounded architecture comprises the local worlds. A sense of familiarity was enhanced in houses' frontages and facades, where the traditional archetypal composition was followed and continued through the use of vertical doorways, horizontal openings, carved-in balconies and wooden
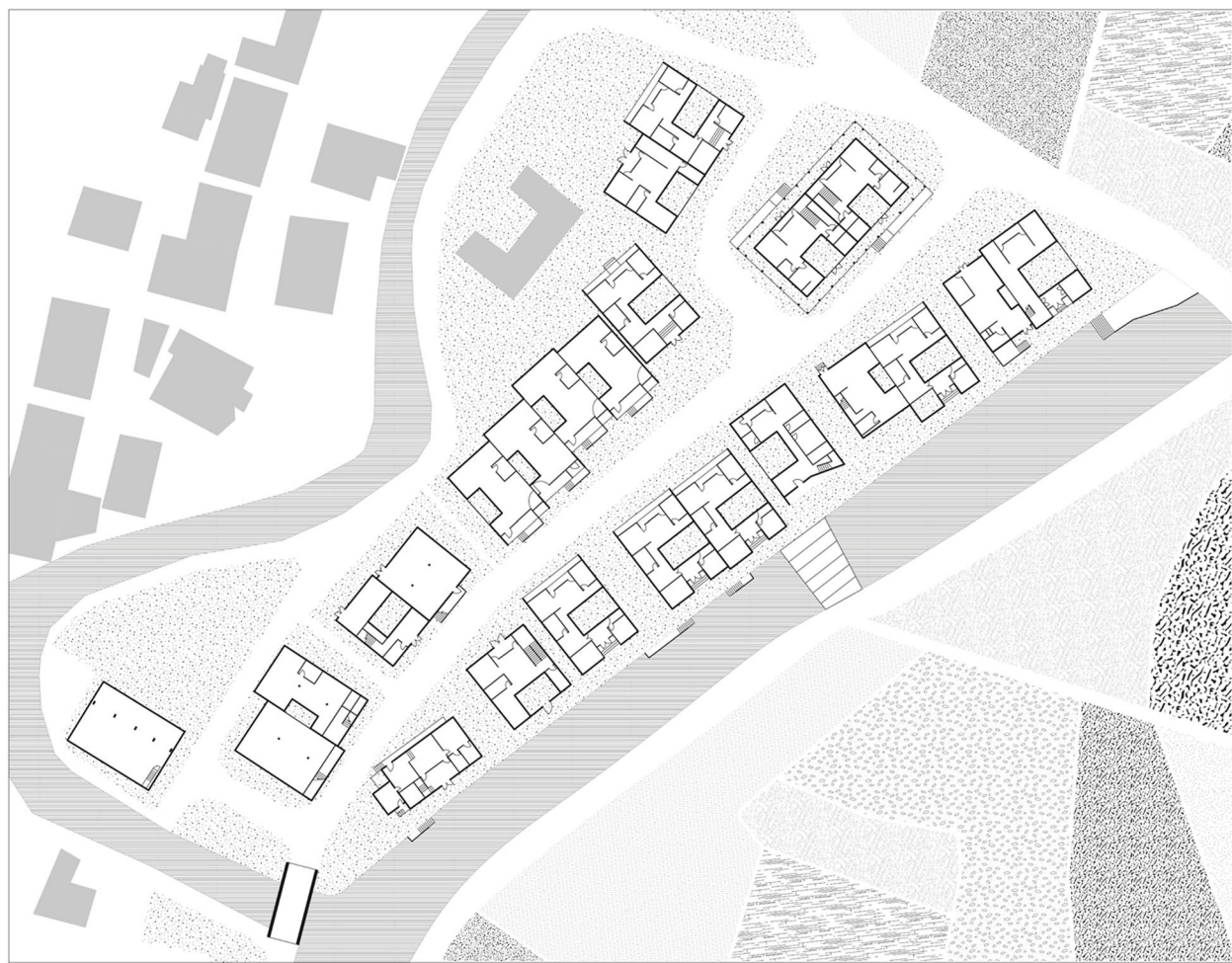
Fig. 6 Group layout and type form of 14 new houses in the residential quarter (Source: the author)

shutters. The diverse materials used in this structural system provided the development of deep eaves, highlighted doorways, external stairs, shading devices and other human-scale elements (Fig. 7). In this way, each building had its own distinctive identity in terms of spatial organisation and material tectonics, while the group as a whole still shared a common order and dialogical language as a whole (Fig. 8). The overall tectonic strategy was based on a close reading and reinterpretation of the established qualities of Wen village and the fragile living heritage that had evolved from traditional craftsmanship.

3.4 Design with users

After visualising those design guiding principles, Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu—who were occasionally joined by a few design assistants and village leaders—took the sketch drawings to those villagers who expressed an interest in

moving into this new area. This was an important first step in further engaging with the local worlds, which is a very rare approach in contemporary architectural production in China, as little of that which is built is truly ethically situated in the rural world. The patient consultation and communication process welcomed feedback and comments from ordinary villagers; however, it did not guarantee the smooth building of initial trust and collaboration between the architect and the end users, as is similarly seen in most participatory design projects worldwide. According to the architect, 'We had to revise our plans and sections whenever the villager had a different opinion. Unlike designing architecture in cities where we used to influence the clients, every issue about the house in rural villages is much more sensitive. Even some very minor design points, such as a cantilevered eave or a detached wall, might receive strong rejections from villagers, due to its potentially causing disagreements on

Fig. 7 The material tectonic of the vertical doorways, horizontal openings, wood shutters, deep eaves and shading devices (Source: the author)

Fig. 8 Group form with a common order and dialogical language for singular buildings (Source: the author)

communal ownership'.[7] This required the architects to develop a highly responsive and communicated design strategy and tactic throughout the stage of design development and always be aware of the limitations of architecture, as well as those of the architect. A typical kitchen was originally proposed by the architect as being approximately 7 m^2, which was largely based on the empirical design experience of urban apartments; however, this size was doubled based on consultations with villagers due to the local habit of not only setting up stoves but also storing firewood and placing the dining table in the kitchen.

Design-challenging building codes and engaging additional policy support also contributed to local participation. Again, this approach reflected the rejection of the prevalent architectural methods used in rural regeneration of China, which follow artificial standards and impose design on rural lives. For example, at the early consultation stage, almost all the villagers rejected the proposed courtyard plan layout due to the assumption that the semioutdoor part would reduce the allocated indoor area of their house's portion of the construction land. This problem was sorted as soon as

[7] From the author's conversation with Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu, London, 15 July 2016.

the courtyards, which covered approximately 10 m^2 of each house, were offered free of charge from the local authority upon advisement by the architect. A second logistic related to the indoor usable area and its associated cost was that the typical wall thickness in all buildings was calculated as 240 mm—a typical size in ordinary construction—instead of the 450-mm thickness of the built-in rammed-earth or existing masonry used in this project. This solution meant that each user benefited from receiving extra indoor space without additional cost. Engaging local villagers in the design caused the project to overrun the projected timeframe and caused unnecessary controversies, but it proved its value to the construction by establishing a more solid social grounding of the whole regeneration project at this scale, compared to doing everything remotely, as is often the case. As a result of the local design participation, a preliminary social tie and collaborative spirit were nurtured from the bottom up at least partly from the beginning, which slowly but steadily transformed a professional architectural service into a larger social and ethical empowerment project.

3.5 Construction in situ
Construction continued in the design stage as a situated process led by the architect, who was working with both professional contractors and amateur builders. Local actions were used to engage the local worlds; i.e., locally sourced materials were used, locally employed craftsmen were trained, and local construction tradition was reinvented. The final construction was achieved at a cost of less than £300/m^2. Rammed-earth walls, mud walls, and limestone walls were all vernacular construction techniques and crafts that had been used in Wen village but disappeared nearly 50 years prior. However, these techniques were reclaimed and reinvented not only by Amateur Architecture Studio's established 'tile-pan' technique but also through the established communal learning and collaborative spirit. The experienced site architects and masonry team leads who took charge of Amateur Architecture Studio's previous major projects drove the project at this stage by employing and training many local builders and villagers as skilful craftsmen (Li 2016). Carpenters and masons were inspired by the architect's locally engaged approach and motivated to explore new ways of construction. The vernacular building sequences for carpentry and masonry were largely followed on site; these sequences were adjusted at some points to be better integrated with the new and hybrid construction using concrete and rammed-earth.[8]

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[8] This specific hybrid construction technique had been tested first and shown to be successful in the practice's earlier completed 'tile mountain' project at the Chinese Academy of Art Xiangshan Campus of Hangzhou City.

The mosaic walls in which different materials mixed freely, the interlocking bamboo joints that supported the cantilevered roof eaves, and all the other diverse architectonic languages found in the final built work comprised a final result that had been coproduced and shared by many hands and heads instead of authored by a single master architect. This echoes what Wang Shu stated, i.e., that 'architecture should only begin as a hobby, as an activity of amateurs, as an avocation, which is more important than the technology of construction' (Wang 2020). The construction process echoed the collective practice of building the vernacular Wen village, reflecting a local world collectively made by many hands and heads.

3.6 New into old
In addition to the new residential part, the regeneration project also included the restoration and regeneration of street fronts and landscape in the old village (Fig. 9). This design intervention started from large-scale, on-site mock-ups used for testing the feasibility of material assembly and seeking an appropriate scale of intervention in the fragile historic environment. Old walls and windows were preserved, doorways were enhanced, and stonework was exposed as found. New inhabitable shelters, enclosures and environmental units were designed to fit into the existing fabric rather than be imposed onto it (Fig. 10). All of these small-scale design-build elements either restored or enhanced the existing lifeworld of ordinary villagers. Among them included the improvement of several pedestrian paths by restoring the concrete construction using local masonry and the introduction of a series of pocket gardens punctuated within the existing street pattern. Furthermore, a series of resting pavilions were carefully added to the left-over void spaces, thereby reactivating either a channelled space between two houses or a corner piazza adjacent to the village's ancestral hall. Supported by a mixed structure of timber and steel and covered by recycled tiles, these street-level structures encouraged active use by the community and enhanced the sense of shared heritage. The conservation and regeneration project inside Wen village was cultivated and conducted in a much slower, more progressive and spontaneous way to respect and minimise the impact on the villagers' everyday lives. Here, recognising the collective memory and the ordinary lifeworld outweighed celebrating the iconic formal gestures that typically break up local worlds instead of repairing them.

3.7 Slow and spontaneous inhabitation
The design offered a familiar use of space within an unfamiliar spatial form or language for all local villagers. Eight households from Wen village went through the ballot process to select a specific house based on the initial brief and

Fig. 9 A side entrance crossing a bridge in the Wen village presents a juxtaposition of the existing old structures and new refurbishment. The scales and configuration are analogous, while the material tectonics make a sharp contrast (Source: the author)

Fig. 10 A lightweight canopy stitched into the existing fabric (Source: the author)

proposed masterplan, only a few months after the project's official launch. This showed that passion existed alongside hesitation (Dong 2015). With the main building structure assembled and the infrastructure completed, another seven households signed with the supervising township authority at an economic budget of £150/m^2.[9] A household consisting of a middle-aged woman and her family of four was the first to sign the replacement contract provided by the Wen

Villagers Committee; they were also the first occupants to move in. Thirteen of the 14 houses were finally chosen and ultimately inhabited by more than 20 households. However, occupation did not start without controversy. A better understanding always emerges from daily use, as well as the end users' capacity to engage in repairs or adjustments to accommodate daily practices (Blundell Jones 2015). Regarding indoor comfort, the full-height wooden screen walls enclosing the inner courtyard (Fig. 11) arguably achieved a sense of tradition but sacrificed the use of insulation and waterproof layers. Some of the façade and roof configurations underpinned the spatial generosity needed

[9] Distant interview held by the author with the head of Wen village in June 2016.

Fig. 11 The courtyard is covered with moss, partly due to a lack of protection from humidity in the design of the enclosed wooden shuttles (Source: the author)

by rural users, particularly in bedroom and storage areas.[10] Other than that, the immediate social impact was evident. The communal space was well received and brought social life back to the old village.[11] In particular, the wind-rain bridge rapidly became a focal point for the older villagers.[12] Spontaneous activities occurred in and around this semi-outdoor bridge, such as people watching, resting, eating, gardening and children playing. Inside the old Wen village, the catalyst effect was also evident, including a few subsequent decisions made by village leaders. Under their guidance, a long retaining wall for a waterfront pedestrian route was reverted back to its original exposed local stone from the later-added modern covering of cement and concrete. The same occurred for several cement-covered streets. The original underground water infrastructure, of which

multiple channels and nodes linked almost every building of the village, was revealed and reused.[13]

3.8 Popular use and reuse

Although not fully expected from all project stakeholders, a spontaneous pattern emerged quickly after the occupation. The majority of the villagers took advantage of the buildings designed by a master architect. A hotel management company was also established in the village, renting quite a few houses and generating decent local employment. The head of the village himself, who had played the middle-man role between the villagers' local lifestyle and architect's design advancement, converted the ground floor of his house into a restaurant and the first floor into guestrooms to receive visitors. Many villagers shifted their original work sites into the emerging bed and breakfast industry to encourage urban tourists, and images of the new Wen architecture were circulated and solidified in popular imagination and consumption (Fig. 12). The village leader welcomed this bottom-up appropriation of the project and village heritage.[14] More local villagers, particularly members of younger generations, showed a willingness to return to their home village, as the project had rebranded the village's identity. Beyond the individual level, a rebranded public route was introduced to link to a 400-year-old bridge located in the old part of Wen village. A new public square was also created, which was composed of themed stages and pavilions to accommodate an increasing level of use from both insiders and outsiders. Further recent observations have noted emerging gentrification issues in the local communities and around the village, mainly from socio-economic perspectives (Qian and Lu 2022). However, culturally and ethically, the general perception of the villagers and village leaders regarding their own heritage and identity has been changed progressively if not completely; i.e., an authentic local lifeworld is not only about a physically restored historic environment and developing economies but also about preserving the old and adding the new, thereby weaving the world together into an everyday usable infrastructure.

Such perceptions might be seen as a compromise of the project to tourism development for a short-term benefit, but the intellectual elite's value of settling local villagers in their traditional agricultural form of life through architectural design would be less meaningful to their own popular imagination of the local worlds. The latter created the agency to facilitate local communities getting involved and influencing their own local environment;

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[10] Distant interview held by the author on 31 May 2016 with an architect-in-training student who originated from Wen village.

[11] Interview held by the author with an elderly villager at Wen village in April 2016.

[12] Interview held by the author with an elderly villager at Wen village in April 2016. The 67-year-old who works part-time at a barbershop in the nearby town was moving into a new house. His old house was less than 15 m away from the newly built wind-rain bridge.

[13] Interview held by the author with the Wen Village Party Secretary at Wen village in April 2016.

[14] Distant interview held by the author with the head of Wen village in June 2016.

Fig. 12 A tea table on the first floor of a house, with lighting and curtains rarely seen in the traditional domestic space of the village (Source: the author)

even if the original relationship was modified, it nonetheless preserves memories that would otherwise be lost. A high degree of overall popularity is key to keeping the buildings and public spaces of Chinese villages in active use, with active use being the key to reviving and regenerating rural China.

The Wen village conservation and regeneration project provides us with an architectural heterotopia, with juxtapositions of new villages and spaces within the old ones, as well as the local worlds being constantly remade. The project ultimately grew into strong homecoming invitation for Wen villagers and other more displaced rural villagers who had been previously drawn to Chinese urbanisation, including those staying in the village and those making lives outside; this draw was reflected in the almost utopian way of organising architectural languages and imageries in the context of excavating rural China. However, the master architect's signature impact was stronger than expected, such that the new village started to drift away from the local villagers' everyday life after the handover and occupation; however, the villagers have finally made the project into their own via different means.[15] To date, the current Wen village is a mid-stage byproduct of the iterative processes of local popular use and reuse and an assemblage of multiple narratives, authorships, hopes, expectations, and negotiations and compromises. The ongoing popular use and reuse are

both progressive and propositional in the local worlds, as they not only value the diversity of habitation and the social ecosystem beyond those architectonic forms and languages but also mark a mutual reconciliation between the 'intellectual' and the 'vulgar', with the 'intellectual' referring to the village elites and master architect and the 'vulgar' referring to the laypersons located both inside and outside of Wen village (Richards 1941; Kelly 2015).

4 Discussion and conclusions

The Wen village conservation and regeneration project was the first major rural project of Amateur Architecture Studio, providing a powerful critique of the lack of consideration for the ordinary Chinese rural village as a place and its local worlds in contemporary rural urbanisation. The architectural practice adopted a mediator's role in coordinating authorities, developers and local villagers; developing the spatial brief; sharing design authorship; and reclaiming local craftsmanship in the building construction. The Wen village conservation and regeneration project has established its position as one of the earliest architectural participation projects in rural China at the neighbourhood scale. Within the realm of global scholarship, the project echoes and joins a long lineage of architecture and participation from postwar modern movement masterpieces, including the Maison medical student housing in the suburbs of Brussels led by Lucien Kroll in 1969–1972 (Blundell Jones and Canniffe 2007, 127–138), the social housing in the old Byker village of Newcastle led by Ralph Erskine in 1969–1975 (Blundell Jones and Canniffe 2007, 127–138), and the

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[15] From the author's conversations with several local scholars during February 2023; these scholars have been monitoring Wen village economy, demographics and social changes after Amateur Architecture Studio's architectural project in 2016.

progressive design conservation and regeneration of an ordinary island named Mazzorbo, located near the Venice Lagoon, led by Giancarlo De Carlo in the 1980s (De Carlo 1989). All these projects used architecture to bring professional architectural theory down from ivory tower academia to the ground level, simultaneously enhancing existing everyday practices and informing new forms of everyday life. In the age of the manipulated architectural spectacle of the heritage-led tourism industry of contemporary China, Amateur Architecture Studio searched for a natural way to facilitate the reimagining of the local worlds of Wen village not only by Wen village but also for Wen village, thereby making a strong statement against the stylistic vocabularies and imagery featured in the typical conservation and regeneration of rural China. The reimagined local worlds are deeply rooted in Wen village; i.e., they are not explained by the village but rather explained by what the village is and should be. In this sense, Wang Shu's key positioning statement behind this project—'Wen village should learn from Wen village itself' (Wang and Lu 2016) — echoes new directions of architectural methods. These include but are not limited to more situated and embodied engagements with the local worlds and built environment, which are always imbued with material, spatial, social and cultural meanings. Thus, local worlds and architectural reimagination could be investigated in a broader sense by taking a further interdisciplinary approach to questions involving issues as place-making, image-making, identity-making and world-making.

The sheer scale of the complexity of local worlds prevent this article from drawing any final answers. Instead, this article is conceived as a conversation-starter across the East and West—during a global crisis consisting of great questions, conflicts and fragilities at all scales both in and around place-making and world-making—that have perhaps never experienced with such an intensity in the recent history of the world the use of architecture as a firm anchor with which to provide shelter and a society of possibilities for reimagining the multiple forms of local worlds. These local worlds are not given; they are constantly being made and remade by multiple authors, which is, unavoidably, an ethical process. These local worlds have an ethical dimension based on the fullest futurities; they are the worlds of relating, the worlds of structuring and the worlds of becoming. These forms are intrinsic in the conservation and regeneration of local worlds, in which architecture should not be conducted only as an expert-led practice leading to a static, technical and untouchable object; instead, architecture should be approached as a mode of relating within a larger ethical project, through which engagement, empowerment, construction, inhabitation, imagination, speculation,

negotiation, anticipation and aspiration become part of localised and routinised everyday practices. If, in a stabilised historic world similar to that in which the vernacular Wen village previously existed, architecture has the capacity to dissolve the traditional hierarchical structures and world-making at the local-world level by dispelling the boundaries between architect, craftsman and user, then perhaps more urgently in an ever-changing contemporary world, the reimagination of local worlds is reinventing the field of architecture's own disciplinary traditions and capacity for world-making by dissolving the boundaries between architecture's own professional theory and amateur praxis. Only based on this relationship can architecture reclaim one of its most fundamental functions and roles, that is, to reimagine and remake our many local worlds.

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