



Old objects from local people's homes integrated in the ecological wall of the "House of Dreams".

Interview: House of Dreams Part 1

The Development of the Village is also a Participatory Platform for Creation

Project Partners

Henan Community Education Research Center



Kuo Jze Yi

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The booming interest in the development of the countryside has witnessed an increasing number of architects flock to the countryside, constructing rural buildings such as book shops, libraries, hostels, activity centres etc.

However, there are several questions we need to think about when redefining rural architecture. What attitude and approach should an architect have, before setting foot in the countryside? How should he or she revitalize and reshape the local culture in the form of architecture? And

Q1. How did you start your design journey with the “House of Dreams”?

I have always been very interested in community projects. Around three or four years ago, Insitu Project had an opportunity to work with Dr. Ku Hok-bun from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on a community development project in a village in Sichuan. Since then, I began to feel architecture can contribute to development directly.

After the Sichuan project, I learned from professor Ku that Liang Jun’s team in Zhoushan village was planning to restore the abandoned cave dwellings in the village in order to preserve the local traditional culture and architecture. Liang Jun’s team was looking for an architect to work with. Thus our team, professor Ku’s and Liang Jun’s team became the project team of “House of Dreams” .



most importantly, what kind of architecture do local people, who have lived here for generations, need the most?

When COVID-19 hit the world unexpectedly in 2020, a construction project in a village in Henan had been on hold for a long time. During the epidemic, architects were not able to come to China to communicate with the local construction teams. However, the absence of architects became a motivation for the local people and through them a totally different architecture came to life.

Q2. Can you tell us a bit more about Liang Jun’s team in Zhoushan village?

Liang Jun’s team started as community workers working on gender equality in Zhoushan village nearly 20 years ago. Initially, their plan was simply to advocate local women handicraft association. As the team and the local people became closer, the team developed a series of individualized educational projects,

A multi-cooperation project¹ aimed at restoring traditional cave dwellings in order to build a research centre in the countryside called “House of Dreams” has been underway since 2018 in Zhoushan village, a village located in Daye town, Dengfeng City of Henan province.

We sat down with Kuo Jze Yi of Insitu Project and talked about the journey and stories behind the establishment of “House of Dreams”.

among them was teaching seniors how to grow old gracefully.

After 2018, we focused on the physical aspect of the project with a series of affiliated educational programs.



1. Members of the team include: Henan Community Education Research Center (responsible for the educational program in the community and the overall construction coordination), “Insitu Project” team (responsible for architectural design), Dr. Ku Hok-bun (responsible for the exploration and development of “solidarity economy” model in the village), and the villagers, etc. The Chan Cheung Mun Chung Charitable Fund provided financial and strategic support for the phase II of the “House of Dreams” project.

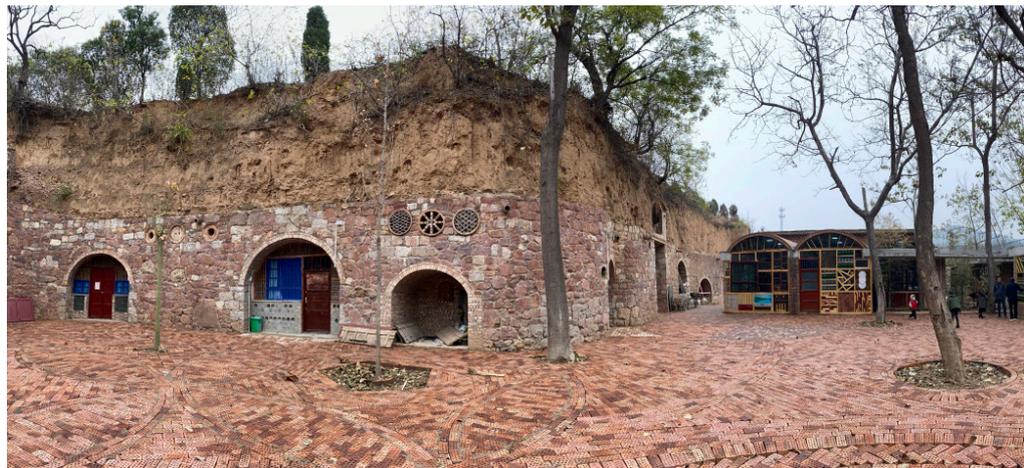
1. Insitu Project team working in Zhoushan village.
2. Liang Jun (far right) is discussing the design of “House of Dreams” with the villagers.

Q3. How was your experience in the restoration of the cave dwellings from the perspective of design and technique?

To be frank, we are not technical experts. Our goal is to create something more people-oriented rather than purely technical.

But we do need to consider a lot of technical problems. For example we and the construction masters needed to figure out a way to minimize the defects of the existing cave dwellings, such as their tendency to collapse, dampness, limited space and insufficient light to name a few. After discussion, we built more caves, maximize natural light source, built reinforcement structures and replace the structural wall with steel I-beams.

We were not trying to develop innovative structure, we were just having fun with the construction team and rediscovering the traditional cave dwellings from a different perspective. Most importantly, we wanted to learn from the construction team and together improve the condition of the cave dwellings in the most economical way. As a result we created different forms of cave dwellings now scattered around the site.



Q4. What do you mean about having fun?

Many local people are now gradually forgetting what the traditional cave dwellings are like, seeing them as out of date. However, during the process of restoration, with all of the curiosity and interest around this tradition, the local community started to take a new look at the cave dwellings; this helped to restore confidence in their own culture.

During the process, the villagers have had the chance to reflect about their own culture again. Improving construction techniques whilst not totally abandoning the traditional techniques certainly deepen the villagers' understanding of their traditions and culture. By focusing on culture and people, what we are doing here is trying to solve the social problem of cultural identities being slowly disregarded.

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Q5. About the aforementioned construction team, are they all from Zhou Shan village?

They are. What "House of Dreams" is trying to explore is a participatory building process local people are the centre of the project.

The funding must be used at the village, the community will not benefit if the project employs building company outside the village. In fact, there are building masters within the community, we can form a building team. Our project is not just about realizing buildings, we are doing community development work. In this way, we can explore the local potential and develop collective strength. The appearance of the architecture is not our goal.



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Q6. What was the most impressive thing about the local construction team during the process of design, material selection and construction?

There are a lot of differences between how we do things in the city vs. here, for example signing contracts. When we first started the "House of Dreams" project, we wanted to sign a contract and make a budget sheet with the local construction team but it was very inappropriate.

At first we wanted to pay the villagers by square meters but we did not know how much manpower was needed to finish one square meter of work. Then we thought maybe we can adopt a daily rate, but the villagers may have thought we were trying to micromanage them. After a lot of back and forth over a month, we realized that signing a contract was not applicable in the village. The local people rely on trust and signing a contract is disrespectful.

I found this really interesting: the villagers have their own ways of doing things. If the outside funds break the traditional ways of relationship, it would have seemed as though we were treating the villagers like inferiors. And this was not what we were looking to do.

Q7. How did you fix the problem?

Ms Liang suggested that the best way to work with the local team was communication. The basic design ideas were coming from our side and the local construction team were making changes accordingly. In the end, we established a working relationship that the local people felt comfortable with. They were working for their own benefit and we as professional architects were able to learn from them.

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Q8. You have mentioned Ms Liang's role in communicating with the local villagers multiple times. How did she contribute to the whole participatory construction project?

Over the past two decades, Ms Liang's team has developed a good relationship with the local people, and she herself was considered the soul of the project. She is very open-minded and when there is a problem she is always willing to discuss with the local people. Her team created an atmosphere where people can discuss different possibilities and problems in an open and equal way, which is a fundamental factor for the development of any community.

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1. Construction team having a meeting to discuss the details of the construction.
2. The construction team building the ecological wall.
3. Liang's team in discussion with the villagers.

Q9. How did you deal with the opposition from others?

It was disappointing when we sent a drawing that we'd been working extremely hard on for three weeks to them and they still didn't think it was good enough. But since we were practicing the participatory process we needed to keep making changes. And sometimes it actually lead to a better result and a more interesting discussion.

The focus of the architect is different from the focus of the villagers. Generally speaking, villagers want something very practical but we want more than that. The villagers have lived in the village for generations and they have this natural instinct of what the building should look like. They also care about the traditional and economical aspects of the buildings. I think all of their intuition has a distinct value and is associate with their attitude towards life. You cannot be overly extravagant in everyday life, so some of the lavish and avant-garde ideas that the architects wanted to test were not practical in the village.

Q10. Would it be a bit unpredictable without the drawing? How did you cope with it?

Indeed. The final project can be totally different to the original plan. But the whole process evolved in an organic way. I think the whole participatory architecture project should be open to different changes. Things are changing everyday and everyone is changing as well. When we are open to changes, unexpected surprises can follow.

"House of Dreams" is an architectural project that combines professional design and inputs from the villagers on the construction materials. We went hunting for used materials with the villagers and were hoping to establish an environmentally friendly consciousness already rooted in our value system.

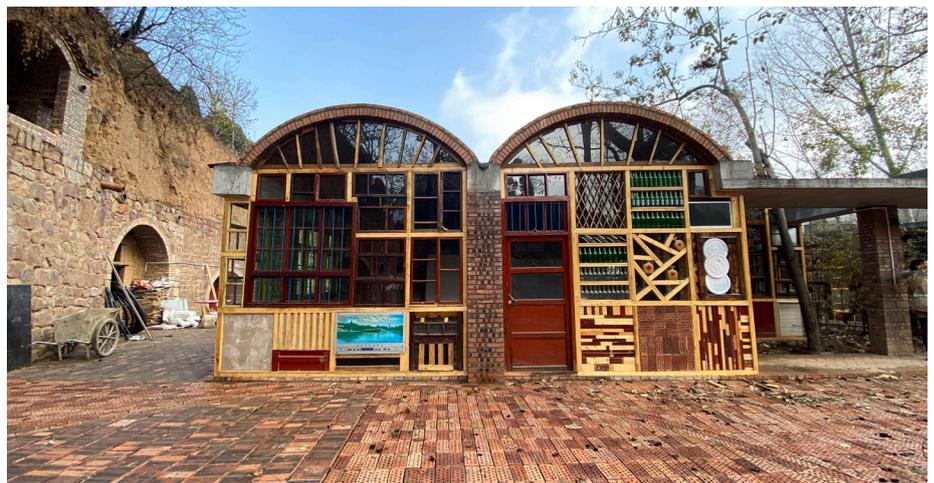
Everything we do is an attempt to respond to social problems in the community. Rather than simply constructing a building, we wanted to provide a sustainable plan for the development of the community.



I think being economically intelligent is very important and we don't need to be too stubborn about being very technically advanced. What we got from the collaboration is more about how to get along with others. So we made changes based on local people's opinions and in the end they turned out to be a better idea.

We don't just focus on the facade of architecture anymore. Instead, we look into

the community, for a deeper and more cultural relationship. Our design ideas and the people's understanding of their own culture, economy, practice and aesthetics intertwined and worked together towards the same goal. So we ended up not doing detailed drawings but a brief sketch and measurements. All of the final details were discussed together by all of the people involved.



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Q11. You mentioned previously that the villagers donated a large number of used bricks and tiles and even old door frames, wooden wheels, discarded clocks and wine bottles for the construction. Some of them even went up to the mountain voluntarily to collect other construction materials. How did you come up with the idea of donating construction materials?

We decided to use local resources and manpower as much as possible. Villagers will have a sense of participation if they contribute construction materials and also it is the best way to let them feel that their voices have been heard.

Every brick and used item represented the local history, tradition and culture. Ultimately, "House of Dreams" is a local project and a creative platform where everyone can contribute their ideas.

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Q12. What do you mean by saying "House of Dreams project is like a creative platform"?

Our architects only provide the basic measurements and framework, the details were finalized after discussion with the local team. The rest of the villagers brought different types of materials as well. So before we finalize any details, we would have meetings with villagers to explain the reasons behind every decision. Ms Liang's team would explain the concept of environmental protection and encourage villagers to recycle construction waste and old objects, especially they found a very local building material called ginger stone². The whole process was very challenging but enjoyable.

The research, development, culture and relationship all took place in this creative platform. It is like an open market where

everyone's ideas can be discussed and considered, and which encouraged the enthusiasm and inspiration of the participants.

We hope the construction project is an open and equal platform that everyone can be part of. Nobody is left behind. Because different people keep adding their ideas, "House of Dreams" becomes an architectural project that conveys different stories.

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2. Ginger stone is a kind of calcium-formed crystalline substance, the shape of which looks like ginger. Villagers call it "cracked ginger stone". It is commonly used for stacking up barriers.

1. Every bricks and used items represents the local history, tradition and culture of Zhoushan village.
2. Villagers went up to the mountain to dig out the ginger stones as building material.
3. The construction team using old materials to fix the wall.

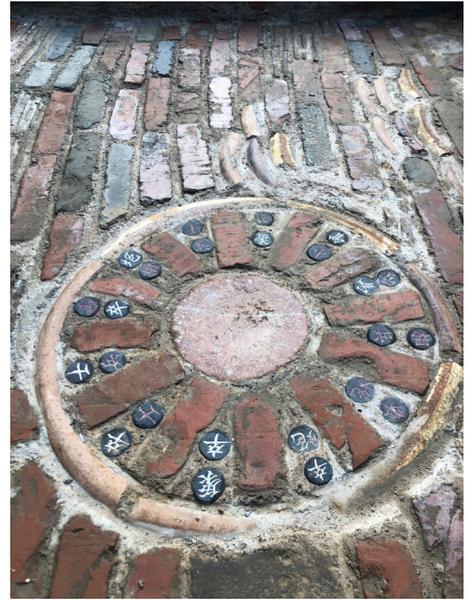
Q13. Can you share some stories behind “House of Dreams”?

In the project, you will see a door frame that belonging to an auntie, a chess piece embedded on the floor belonging to the kid next door, and a Yin and Yang symbol painted by a villager, and next to it marbles from one of the neighbors. People are willing to share their experience and ideas and all of these stories represent the unique culture of the village.

Paving the floor is a very participatory activity. It is not technical, even children can be part of it. So ideas for the materials, patterns and how to pave it were all from the villagers.

We are trying to get everyone to participate in this project instead of letting the architect be the decision-maker. For the architect, making the project open to different ideas can make the process meaningful.

We are also trying to explore a better way to make the architecture and the construction process more related to our society and that's where the whole purpose of the participatory design project lies.





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