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Countryside 鄉郊

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President's Message

會長語

The countryside is more than hinterland of a city. Other than provision of food and raw materials for the functioning of cities, it also equips a city with the necessary resilience in view of unpredictable crises may put its inhabitants at risk. Nowadays, we are well aware of the roles of the countryside on biodiversity and mitigation of global warming, yet its importance is always underestimated.

To curb the spreading of Covid-19 in the past three years, stringent social distancing measures are adopted in Hong Kong as well as many other overseas countries. Normal social, commercial, school and recreational gatherings were either prohibited or restricted, which seriously affected the physical and mental health of people. However, Hong Kongers were lucky to have found our countryside as haven such as country parks, where we could continue our social and recreational activities with much lower risks of infection. As the global population exceeds 8 billion without any sign of slowing down, such pandemic will likely keep recurring in the future. Resilience is needed to protect people at the outset of a pandemic, at least before effective vaccine and medical treatment are available.

The countryside is also a reserve of cultural heritage and memoir of human civilisation. Due to rapid urban development of Hong Kong in the past century, many old buildings and traditions were lost before their heritage values had been fully studied and documented. Opportunely a lot of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are still preserved in the countryside of Hong Kong. In light of the need to resolve the land supply problems, urbanisation of some of Hong Kong's countryside is unavoidable. It is important that we preserve sensitively our cultural heritage, especially those intangible traditions that might disappear completely with the passing of generations. I am extremely excited to see so many HKIA members work very hard towards these missions, in both local and overseas projects as discussed in many articles in this issue of the HKIA Journal.

I would like to express my heartfelt congratulations to the marvellous achievements of the editorial team, the Publication Committee and writers of the articles for their thorough investigation, in-depth analysis and systematical reporting in the Journal.

Benny Chan Chak Bun 陳澤斌
FHKIA, Registered Architect, APEC Architect
President

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Countryside, what next?

鄉郊，何去何從？

Thomas Chung 鍾宏亮

Editorial 編者言



In our age of global urbanization and radical climate change, there is increasing worldwide attention on the “countryside” and its reinvigoration for the sake of achieving sustainable living. Our understanding of the contemporary countryside needs to go beyond just considering it as an “extension of the urban”, or continuing to romanticise its distance from the city as another consumable tourism product. Rather it has to be recalibrated and treated as a *topos* or place whose distinct character, cultures, values and relationships are driven by the complex involvement of communities and heritages with the natural landscapes and post-productive ecologies. From Arcadian ideals, agrarian communes, rustic artisanship, eco-living, landscape conservation to mitigations of climate change, the reimagining of the countryside is fast becoming a major public concern as well as forging new frontiers for architectural design and research.

In Hong Kong, we are familiar with the urbanised areas being tightly controlled within a quarter of the

city’s territory, together with the rigorous protection of the rest of our rural landscape in the form of country parks, wetlands and reservoirs. In recent years, the launching of the government’s planned mega-development projects such as the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy and Lantau Tomorrow Vision, the effects of which would substantially encroach rural areas, has sparked much public debate on the conservation and regeneration of the city’s countryside. The putative turn to the countryside for alternative lifestyles and psycho-physical relief, contra the city’s hyper-dense, high-rise urbanism and pandemic-induced deprivations, also points to its potential to dovetail environmental, societal and individual well-being.

In 2017, official policy responded to public calls for a more sustainable rural-urban reciprocity by setting up the Countryside Conservation Office to coordinate more concerted efforts to revitalise remote areas in the New Territories, prioritizing works on Lai Chi Wo and Sha Lo Tung as being models for rural sustainability. In the same



year, the Sustainable Lantau Blueprint was announced by the Sustainable Lantau Office to conserve areas on Lantau Island that are likewise rich in architectural, cultural and ecological resources, with Tai O, Shui Hau and Pui O earmarked as the initial foci for holistic conservation. In Sai Kung, Yim Tin Tsai and the adjacent archipelago are also being revived via thematized art and culture-led revitalisation funded by the Tourism Commission.

The first fruits of rural conservation efforts are starting to be rewarded internationally, such as Lai Chi Wo's "Sustainable Development Contribution" Award in 2020 and Yim Tin Tsai's "Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Conservation Award of Distinction" in 2015 (both UNESCO awards), yet issues such as regulatory strictures, certain bureaucratic mentalities, vested interests and village land-use politics still present challenges to accomplishing genuine operational sustainability in countryside regeneration on a wider level. Given the multi-faceted nature of the countryside, the role and capacity of architects and related design professionals in such projects still need to be better defined, adapted, expanded or consolidated.

While "hardware" infrastructural improvements such as basic utilities, accessibility and communications are certainly necessary for many abandoned villages, it is clear that better navigation of the "software", negotiating nuanced differences between the rural and the urban mode of operations and transactions, is as important.

Architectural restorations may provide the first tangible indications of revival, yet comprehensive regeneration requires joint efforts of government, villagers as well as academia, NGOs and empathetic businesses to collaborate and co-create viable, place-inspired livelihoods. Besides balancing environmental monitoring and ecological protection with encouraging land-owning villagers to return, the injection and eventual absorption of new communities will be key to rejuvenate and maintain the vitality of the countryside and its ecology.

The discussion in this issue attempts to acknowledge the significant transformation of rural areas for the sake of our contemporary urban living, appreciation for agrestic and environmental-friendly lifestyle, rediscovery of traditional practices and wisdoms, health benefits and recreational potential of country parks in the wake of the pandemic, as well as attendant implications for our collective life on the planet in the face of climate and environmental issues. It opens with our Symposium on "Countryside?" in two distinct yet concatenated panels on urban-rural symbiosis and development and architecture in nature.

Urban-Rural Reframing starts with Stephen Tang's elucidation of the multi-faceted work of the Countryside Conservation Office, followed by Weijun Wang's Kuk Po Vision and Tony Nip's proposal on a sustainable Northern Metropolis with ecological civilization. Hiu-yan Wong and Benni Pong speculate



on the resilient human-plant symbiosis of weeds in the city and spontaneous landscape. Humphrey Wong and Steven Chu, and Sze Ying Ying carry on with the revival of traditional socio-cultural values of the rural through architectural restoration through their cases in Lai Chi Wo and the Sai Kung Peninsula respectively. Wendy Ng and Po Yin Chung, and Miriam Lee and Thomas Chung explicate their rediscoveries of hidden heritages on Lantau Island and the implications on their conservation.

In the **Building in the Countryside** section, Kevin Li confers about architecture with natural materials in view of climate change. Weijun Wang's Valley Retreat showcases natural ecology and agricultural settlements in Henan, while the Terra Centre team led by Edward Ng and Li Wan developed innovative rammed earth building techniques in Kunming. Another three award-winning architects – Anderson Lee at Christian Zheng Sheng College, Corrin Chan at Tzu Chi Environmental Action Centre and Thomas Wan at Hoi Ha Visitor Centre – scrutinise their projects beyond urban Hong Kong, illuminating themes dealing with natural landscape, environmental-friendly materials and invigorating architectural spatiality.

Community in the Countryside begins with local natural building practices in Nam Chung by Loky Leung and sandbox projects on Po Toi Island by Team

Tombolo which examine self-initiated community-building in response to sustainability ideals and natural disasters. This is followed by award-winning projects instrumental to infrastructure improvement and capacity building in rural Southeast Asia by young Hong Kong architects. The section ends with Thomas Chung's experimental restorations in remote Mui Tsz Lam that championed collaborative co-creation.

The variegated array of **Platform** presents more food for thought on the possibilities and complexities of "Countryside?". Su Chang with his curated exhibitions, One Bite Design Studio at Sai Kung Hoi and Humphrey Wong at Yim Tin Tsai exhibit interconnectivity and scalability of art, community and imagination in rural settings. Francis Neoton Cheung offers an alternative vision for part of the Northern Metropolis, whereas Marco Siu and his team put forward theory and practice of "quarantine tourism". The recap of the webinar forum wraps up insights from international case studies on architectural competitions as policy.