

**AR HOUSE
COMMEDED**

FRINGE BENEFITS

Renouncing conventional approaches to dwellings in suburban Shanghai, the house by AZL Architects for the Song family could be a model to replicate, writes *Harry den Hartog*







Lao Song is a retired electrician who was living with his wife in the centre of Shanghai but, due to the high cost of living in the metropolis, the couple decided to return to the village where he was born, 20km south of the city. Song's mother, in her eighties, was still living in the house in which he was born, so moving would mean they would be better placed to take care of her. However, the old house was unsuitable: it was too small and in a state of disrepair. Ideally they needed a house able to accommodate their daughter, son-in-law, Wang, and grandchild, as well as Wang's parents who are in poor health and in need of care.

So the Song family joined a show on Oriental Television, in which people can realise their dream house. At first, the eight-member family thought of a typical rural self-build house, with facilities for the elderly and a family member in a wheelchair. Rural houses around Shanghai are typically

clad with tiles and decorated with metal ornaments, but Song's daughter and son-in-law, the youngest of the three couples, convinced the others to build in a more modern, urban style, so they and their child could live there permanently.

Through the organisers of the television show, the Song family were introduced to Nanjing-based architect Zhang Lei, well known for his innovative approach to local materials and traditional building techniques combined with modernity and functionality. The project lasted less than six months from design to completion, and the result is a newly built, distinctive house referring in its whiteness and sober but functional language to the traditional style of Jiangnan, south of the Yangtze River.

'Four generations had to be able to live here together, including a disabled person', the architect remembers. 'Our first focus was on functionality: There is a room for Song's mother on the ground floor, so she doesn't

need to navigate stairs. The three couples have their own rooms on the first floor, and for Song's granddaughter there is a room in the attic, next to the playroom and movie room. On the first floor, the hallway is open and has been widened to create an informal second sitting room. The courtyard and an additional light well above the staircase bring daylight into the middle of the house. The ramp circulates outside the house to make all floors accessible by wheelchair, and to create extra outdoor space in addition to the five balconies. Internally, the spaces are linked by continuous routing. This idea of connectivity is enhanced by a network of peepholes and mirrors required by the family (perhaps a nice idea, but on my visit the system didn't work convincingly).

The neighbour's house, built at the same time in the usual traditional style, looks somewhat dismal in contrast to the sleek, white modern appearance of the Song family's home. 'Our neighbours were



(Opening spread) eschewing traditional Chinese approaches to rural dwellings, the Song family house – custom built for four generations – looks as though it has been dropped in from another planet

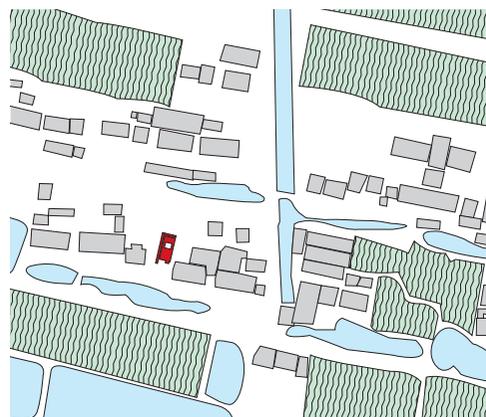
(Opposite page) a ramp encircling the house enables wheelchair access to all levels and can be used as a play space **(Left and below)** five balconies and a terrace afford the family privacy while in the open air

sceptical at first, but are jealous now’, Wang reveals. ‘Our house is a proposal for a more future-oriented style.’

This project in the countryside of Shanghai is the first of its kind that Zhang has designed for a private client. ‘City and countryside are two different systems’, the architect explains. ‘Different rules apply here.’ In the Chinese communist system there is no landownership in the city, only land-use rights for fixed periods. In the countryside, however, landownership does exist. Here, the families own both land and property but are not allowed to sell on to other families. Temporary subleases are allowed but are not common.

In the rural fringes of Shanghai, however, there has been a transition to the *hukou* (household registration) system, with former rural residents now formally considered as urban residents, which means that sooner or later they will most likely lose their landownership. In the coming years, in line

with the most recent masterplan for the city, named Shanghai 2035, the existing dispersed buildings in the surrounding countryside will become, as much as possible, a part of new compact village clusters. This means that many rural houses, built at random over the last three decades, will probably be



demolished in the next 15 years. At the same time, there is increasing pressure on the housing market in the city centre. Prices for purchase and rent are among the highest on Earth and are unaffordable for most Chinese. Due to various new policies – such as limiting residential land use – they will continue to rise in the city in coming years, resulting in increasing pressure on the countryside where the prices are still low.

Many measures have been taken to limit sprawl and are being more strictly implemented now. For example, the maximum size of a rural housing plot will be reduced from 250m² to 150m² per family, after relocation. ‘We were also trying to make the Song family house a prototype for the future country house, for modern rural residents’, Zhang explains. The house does indeed offer a hybrid of the traditional rural lifestyle and modern (urban) life. Firewood and garden chairs are stored under the ramp while, in the house, there is a traditional



wood-fired kitchen range and a gas stove. Song's mother prefers the wood-fired oven – she cooks a lot – but when the younger generations cook they use the gas stove.

The central courtyard harks back to a lost tradition in housing that exploits natural ventilation and increases daylight in the surrounding five bedrooms and two living rooms. The architect points out that 'a courtyard is, for countries in the East, equivalent to a fireplace in the West'.

This futuristic farmers' house can, says Zhang, be transformed into a suburban villa for the children. At the moment, Wang lives in the city centre where he works for a telecommunications company, but it is possible that a metro stop will be built nearby in the future, thereby cutting travel time and making living in the suburbs an option for him too. Wang often invites friends and colleagues to flee the city at the weekend to enjoy rural life: 'We go for barbecues in the yard, you're welcome to join us!'

Many rural areas in China are in decline due to both mass emigration, especially of young people, and an unbalanced focus by the authorities on urban growth during the last three decades. As in many other countries, in China's rural areas there are not many suitable jobs and wages in the city are considerably higher. Due to high prices



and congestion in the cities, and in particular new policies for the rural areas, there is a new trend at hand now: many architects are currently working on revitalisation projects in the countryside, where a lifestyle transition is under way. 'This type of project takes a lot of time and the profit is minimal', Zhang admits. 'But it is very satisfying to deliver a tailor-made project for a private client.'

Six months after the project was completed, the family made slight changes. For example, the continuous flow from space to space has been interrupted because a new cupboard and wall has closed the connection between the children's room and the rest of the attic. There are also traces of use on the white walls that form a pleasant informal feeling of home, a lively patina. The inventive micro-landscape around the house is pleasant too and still feels rural; it is used for gardening, working and playing. The family is considering creating an additional bamboo fence between themselves and their

(Clockwise from this page) an open and widened hallway hosts the informal second sitting room on the first floor; the attic is home to a room for Song's granddaughter; one of the couples' bedrooms, complete with peephole requested by the client; the room for Song's elderly mother is on the ground floor so she need not negotiate any stairs





neighbours now, another sign of transition into suburban living.

Meanwhile, Zhang and his practice, AZL Architects, are studying how the project can be scaled up and built as a modular system. AZL was recently commissioned to carry out studies for the local authority to design a cluster of approximately 1,000 residential units and used the Song family house as a prototype. Traditionally, street facades in rural China stick to one building line because, under Communism, all houses and families are considered equal in status; likewise, all units are oriented to the south to comply with regulations and optimise sunlight. There is usually a multifunctional yard facing the street, semi-public and simultaneously informal while, at the rear, the houses tend to border the fields, incorporating storage for materials and, usually, a kitchen garden.

In AZL's new ensembles, the backs border another row of houses, not fields. 'By turning

the facades at an angle of 30 degrees, individual privacy is created while the sun is still optimised', says Zhang. 'This will create conditions for a new suburban lifestyle, with some rural characteristics. This small rotation to the south-east is better for sunbathing and sheltering from the wind. It is a small improvement in quality.' To accommodate this tighter urban plan, the ramp wrapped around the Songs' house is removed to allow the buildings to be more compact in attached rows; they also have a smaller footprint.

The bespoke house for the Songs is clearly successful and meets all the demands of this diverse family. Scaling up the success into a 1,000-unit cluster seems to be mission impossible: when repeated in series, not only will the individual appearance of the houses change, but so will the accompanying lifestyles and needs of each household. It would be advantageous if the prototype were given the flexibility to adjust to a broader

range of lifestyles and uses; this would make housing more future-proof – a big challenge for architects, not only in China's countryside but also in its urban areas.

The Chinese countryside is widely seen as an unattractive and less-developed area lagging behind its urban counterpart, and in the urban fringes rural characteristics are rapidly disappearing. In future, these will likely be increasingly blended with the suburban and probably even the urban. Although the new masterplan for Shanghai has set red contours and urban expansion limits, the large-scale resettlement programme into village clusters will have dramatic consequences for the lifestyle and characteristics of the still-rural fringes. This house is well equipped to make that transition. The question remains how to scale up this accomplishment. Hopefully more architects can find ways to nurture rural characteristics and blend them into future-proof success stories.

**The Song family house
makes a statement in an
otherwise nondescript
street in the rural fringes
of Shanghai**

‘In its whiteness and sober
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Architect

AZL Architects

Project team

Zhang Lei, Hong Siyao,
Zhang Cheng, Yuan Ziyao

Interior design

Ma Haiyi, Huang Rong

Photographs

Yufan Lu