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Laudatory Speech by Angelika Fitz

Much has been reported in recent years about the increasing urbanisation of our planet. But what about rural areas? Growing cities and depopulated rural areas are in a reciprocal relationship. The young population migrates to the cities, while older people and children stay behind – with dramatic socio-economic and socio-political consequences. New opportunities for rural areas are urgently needed. Chinese architect Xu Tiantian shows how this can be done.

After her education at Tsinghua University in Beijing and Harvard University in Boston, Xu Tiantian opened her own architectural practice DnA_Design and Architecture in Beijing in 2003. After a series of cultural and infrastructure projects in urban areas, she began her work in cooperation with Songyang County, a remote region in rural China, in January 2014. In 2018, I had the opportunity to visit her projects in Songyang. The idyllic landscape is characterised by rolling hills, contrasted by rugged cliffs embedded in rice fields and tea plantations. But neither a huge expansion of the transport infrastructure nor digital broadband coverage could stop the strong migration. Together with the regional administration, Xu Tiantian developed a new strategy of small-scale architectural interventions. The projects are spread throughout the region like a network of acupuncture. They activate the local economy, strengthen cultural identity and care for the environment and community. Most of the projects combine production spaces with public and community spaces, including a tofu factory, a sugar factory, a tea house, a bridge as a marketplace or an ephemeral theatre in a bamboo forest. Construction methods and materials are highly contextual, from stone to wood to bamboo, making use of existing resources and almost forgotten craft traditions. Often the impact of these acupuncture points spreads and inspires further business ideas in the neighbourhood. UNHABITAT is currently thinking about how to transfer the "Songyang strategy" to other rural areas and has launched a multi-year international study programme on Songyang.

Xu Tiantian delivers impressive solutions to one of the greatest challenges of our time and proves that good architecture is possible even with limited, local resources – and that good architecture works.