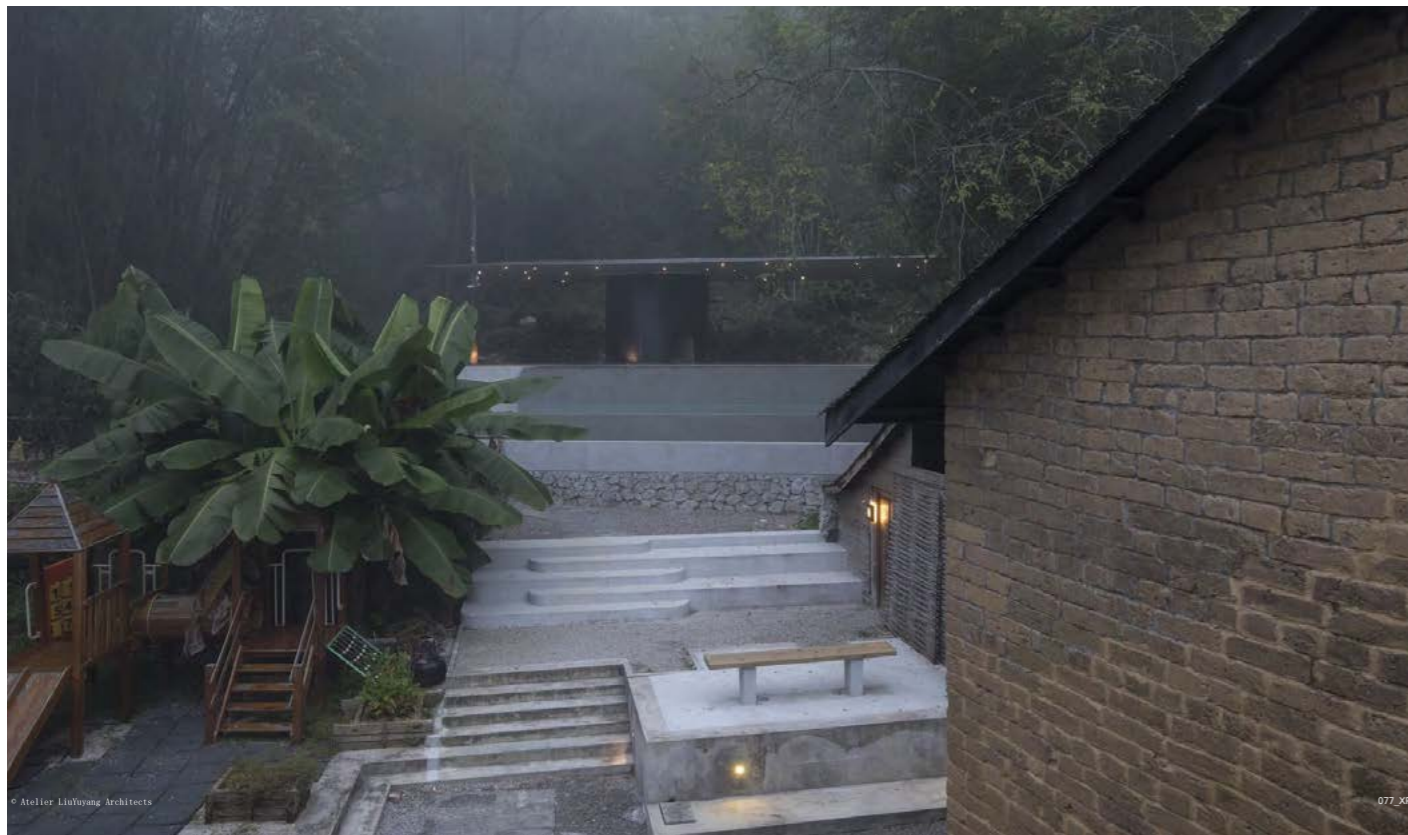




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## From Royal to Rural: Stability and Dynamics of the Yard and the Roof

In Chinese architectural typology, multi-family courtyards have a long tradition. The XY Yun House is a contemporary interpretation of the courtyard typology.

Liu Yuyang

What makes the courtyard is not just the empty, the void space, in and of itself, but the surrounding element, the enclosure – which is not a wall, but a cantilevered roof and a slightly raised platform that differentiates the ground and the platform as well as the indoors from the outdoors, and serves as a transition between the inner world of the family and the outer world, i.e. nature or the courtyard.

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Our project is located in the southern Chinese province of Guangxi in the township of Xing Ping. We have transformed a cluster of courtyard houses into a hotel and a centre for well-being. The XY Yun House is part of this project and is located at the end of the village near a hill. It is sited slightly above the road. The topography is very subtle and we have built a swimming pool with a platform into it, i.e. a pavilion about a hundred square metres in size. The new structure represents a very interesting transformation of the original pavilion typology in the Chinese landscape. It is a

simple pavilion with pool, and the language of this cantilevered steel structure with its heavy core and single a-shaped pillar is an abstraction of an earlier landscape or an earlier type of pavilion design.

The essence of the space, which defines the edge of the space through the floating roof and through the slightly elevated platform, is a direct reference to the Forbidden City. This very quintessential royal typology of the courtyard can also be seen in many other parts of China. The idea in the very definition of space is based on the same concept.

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It is not just in the simple linearity of the form of the space which defines the stability of it, but also the activities, the events, the life that occurs in both the traditional courtyard and in the yoga pavilion that we designed. The very abstraction or simplicity of the form allows for a maximum of dynamics and maximum variation of life within the space. And that is the essence of what we are trying to respond to regarding the very quintessential question of what a courtyard is. And we wanted to frame this question not only in the city or in the very official spaces of the imperial garden, but in a very rural countryside setting as well.

It is evident that it is actually more about a reflective way of thinking about architecture and space representing this kind of deep Chinese philosophy. What I mean by that is that we often see the typological development of the courtyard as being something “urban”, as something very official and something that’s universal, while at the same time we would like to look into the detail. And it’s in the detail, in the microcosm of the space and of the elements that we are able to study and digest and show things in a different light, that then leads to a more cosmic effect or perhaps a more universal understanding.

I think what is interesting about the courtyard typology is that it is actually very mutable and very transformational, in a sense that you could move away from a very rigid order,

the royal order of the Forbidden city. Within this city the royal garden is the most fluid and the most relaxed part of it, and it reflects the usage of the royal garden, which is for the imperial family to be able to relax in as a part of their daily lives. And when that model gets translated into a more residential or urban typology, it begins to transform itself into something much more fragmented. And when it comes to the countryside, it uses a lot more local material and adapts to local climates. So it’s very responsive ecologically as well.

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And it is in that sense that we designed the pavilion in this village, and that we responded to the different spaces of the village, to how we transformed each courtyard and each cluster of farm houses, and when we come to the hillside, how we designed the pool and pavilion. It is the same logic and the same order, i.e. from the most formal to the most informal, and the most orderly to the most dynamic. A layer of transformation and mutation thus exists, especially in the way it reflects a certain Chinese philosophy, the detail and the universal nature of the same order and of the same sequence of thinking. It’s just in the adaptation of that order that defines the intelligence of the people who are behind the design and construction, and who inhabit the space.

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