Urban Strategies

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The expansion of Songzhuang, which houses the most notable artist community in China, is arranged around a public space. All facets of daily life can be reached within a 10-minute walk. A backbone of the new city quarter is the urban canal with retail space, cafes and shops on street level.

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**SONGZHUANG Creative Clusters**

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The Songzhuang Creative Clusters at the eastern edge of Beijing allow for a new development paradigm that can incorporate traditional urban configurations with open space and agricultural lands. Programmatic zones are organized by adjacent uses and proposed creative industries, promoting relationships among the creative and research clusters.

Increasingly, cities and urban areas are considered innovation ecosystems – empowering the collective intelligence and co-creative capabilities of their citizens. The conversation today is not just about the city, but about entire regions – mega-scaled areas in which a city is the beating heart of a robust, larger body. The edges of these cities, where intellectual capital and modern conveniences are nearby, and where land is still available (and affordable), are fertile ground for new ways of thinking about urbanism, innovation, and economics.

Lands surrounding cities are often agricultural, but the issue is more complex than replacing fields with urban development. There are great social, economic, and ecological implications for how we approach this development – concerns that are particularly acute in China as cities rapidly expand due to the growth of the country’s already enormous population. A significant shift in how we think about the relationship between cities and farms is long overdue.

Songzhuang, situated 13 kilometers from the CBD of Beijing, is a prime example of how we can move forward at the edge of the city – both in regards to agriculture and to innovation. Here, the Tongzhou District government will create a series of self-sustaining, creative communities that promote innovation within the region and a high quality of life for community members. The master plan for Songzhuang, developed by Sasaki Associates, offers a revolutionary vision for how urbanity and agriculture can be integrated to enhance the relationship between people and the land to create new economic opportunities.

The 40-square-kilometer site allows for a complete reconfiguration of the relationships between city, public space, and farmland. Conventional development patterns dictate that farmlands are located either at the periphery
The master plan proposes a series of creative-office business neighborhoods, which are inspired by traditional Chinese neighborhoods. They are organized around a clustered typology that includes community centers and open space, and allows urban agriculture practices.

Clusters of development are situated around the agricultural core, each dedicated to an engine of innovation: design, culture, technology, biotech, and alternative medicine. The scheme is influenced by Michael Porter’s cluster theory, which is illustrated clearly in arts clusters around the world—think New York’s SoHo and London’s West End. The clusters at Songzhuang all follow a similar organizational framework. A central core of catalyst programs (e.g., training institutes, cultural facilities, and civic administration) are arranged around a primary public space. This creates a dynamic system of a fixed core with flexibility for supporting programs, allowing for evolution to meet the needs of the community and market forces. All facets of daily life—work, live, play—are within a 10-minute walk. A dedicated transit system, pedestrian and bike pathways, and an integrated technology network all support interconnectivity between the clusters, facilitating the innovation process that fuels the creative economy.

The site, however, is far from a blank canvas. An important component of the master-plan vision is the seamless integration of
existing agricultural villages, including the famous Songzhuang Artist’s Village and its multiple cultural assets – museums, art galleries, studios, and innovative residential typologies – that have sprung up in recent years. Within the clusters, the plan provides new housing, access to training institutes, and a social network, so that the inhabitants of the existing villages are slowly reintegrated into new communities where they may choose to transition to the re-envisioned agriculture system or work in entirely new industries.

The plan also emphasizes restoring the ecology of the degraded site and nurturing of new habitats, especially along the Chaobai River corridor. An existing canal network is integrated into the development and expanded to create a series of smaller irrigation channels for the fields. Together, the river corridor, urban canals, regional parks, urban plazas, agriculture fields, and community gardens form a network of integrated natural systems. These landscape systems are inspired by the Chinese arts of landscape painting, poetry, calligraphy, and music, and reference the inherent historic traditions of garden design. The landscape typologies at Songzhuang have a diverse and unique identity and offer recreation, leisure, and contemplative experiences that foster creative inspiration.

Each strategy at Songzhuang is devised to support a new relationship between the evolving edge city and agricultural lands – where urban form and development can promote the idea of a productive citizen. With approximately 70 percent of China’s population living in urban areas by 2035, the Songzhuang Creative Clusters offer an interesting strategy for thinking about how urban ideas can thrive beyond traditional downtown cores.