



## SOFT SQUARE IN CHANGSHOU VILLAGE

Posted on October 28, 2024 by Dima Fadel



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China's rural revitalization initiative emphasizes leveraging urban resources to support rural development. A key strategy involves developing tourism to attract capital and industries, foster cultural engagement, promote population retention, and facilitate the settlement of new residents in rural areas. Integrating cultural projects into rural settings is a novel approach in this regard. In Changshou Village, located in the Pingshan District of Shenzhen, the esteemed Chinese performing arts studio Longma Studio has embarked on an experimental endeavor to establish a theater commune. This commune is intended to serve as a hub for regular rural art performances, encompassing the entire process from creation and rehearsal to staging dramas. To support this endeavor and accommodate the increasing number of audiences and tourists, architect Zhu Xiaodi was commissioned to oversee the village's overall planning and the design of key areas.

Changshou Village is situated in a hilly area of Pingshan in northeast Shenzhen. The performance venue is positioned in Jiang's Hakka Houses, a traditional architectural complex in the village. Built during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, this 8,000-square-meter compound features a typical Cantonese residential layout, nestled against a mountain and embracing a pond. While parts of the houses remain intact, others have been demolished. Aerial views of Changshou Village reveal its spatial fabric shaped by agricultural roots, showcasing the independent house systems of each household, narrow roads, and a lack of open public spaces. Over the decades, the originally cramped village entrance, streets, lanes, and pond have lost their charm as gathering places due to the impact of the market economy.

The pond in front of the Hakka houses was leased as a private fish pond. Its natural shoreline was replaced by stone and concrete, and stainless steel railings were installed along its periphery to ensure pedestrian and vehicle safety, fundamentally changing the pond's appearance and role in the village. These alterations clashed with the rural setting and disrupted the natural landscape, leading to a sense of alienation in the rural public space.

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Aerial view of the "Soft Square" © Zhang Chao

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Aerial view of Jiang's Hakka Houses and the pond in front © Hou Danqing

Longma Studio's performances are expected to significantly impact Changshou Village, Pingshan District, and even broader Shenzhen, potentially evolving into a major cultural event that ignites local interest in drama and rural cultural life. Meanwhile, this will bring an anticipated influx of tourists, posing challenges to the already cramped public spaces in Changshou Village. How to accommodate these visitors while mitigating potential conflicts between local villagers and tourists has become an urgent concern.

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In the past, ponds played a vital role in traditional villages in the hilly regions of Southern China. They served as sources of drinking water, washing, and fire prevention. Additionally, they provided landscape and Feng Shui benefits and were essential public spaces and emotional bonds within the village. However, due to urbanized lifestyles, ponds have become isolated "fish ponds," with rigid boundaries cutting off visual and physical access to water, limiting public availability and interaction. Merely restoring the pond's original shoreline is neither feasible nor practically meaningful. Removing the railings would compromise the safety of villagers and tourists. Additionally, the increasing number of visitors necessitates more public spaces, not only to accommodate their interest in drama but also to allow them to experience and immerse themselves in rural life.



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The pond before construction © Zhu Xiaodi

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"Soft Square" under construction © Zhu Xiaodi

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"Soft Square" under construction © Zhu Xiaodi

Zhu Xiaodi's innovative concept involves constructing a large woven rope net structure over the pond. This installation seamlessly integrates with the surrounding roads, creating an expansive square that becomes a new public space in the village. The rope net, made of ultra-low-ductility material with a tensile strength of up to 90 KN, can support various activities such as walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. This design offers an innovative approach to constructing public space, providing a unique experience for tourists and villagers to relax and commune with nature.

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This architectural installation is aptly named the "Soft Square."

Moving on the rope net requires balance and caution. Although the net is soft and safe, its unique mesh structure demands that people tread carefully to avoid triggering a sway, akin to a butterfly effect, creating a novel experience. Due to the unique properties of the rope mesh, each individual's steps can be felt by themselves and others, resulting in fun interactions and transforming passive perception into active participation. As people adjust to the rope net, they are encouraged to release themselves and explore freely. It is not only a net that spans over the pond but also a bond between individuals, weaving joy and memories together in Changshou Village.

This "Soft Square" allows people to temporarily forget their identities, blurring the boundaries between each other. At this moment, whether urbanites or local villagers, everyone finds a sense of belonging on this rope net, engaging with the countryside. Here, they experience equality and pleasure, becoming closer to one another through warm greetings. The rope mesh offers a serene spot for people to leisurely gaze at the vast sky, overlook the pond, and watch the swimming fish and blooming lotus flowers below. In the evening, they can wait for and appreciate the rising moon, its reflection shimmering on the serene water. To optimize the rope net's structure and reduce costs, seven circular concrete supports were designed within the pond, shortening the net's span. Additional steel supports around these concrete structures balance the horizontal tension exerted by the net on the pond's edges. The net's 120 mm spacing between ropes ensures safety and comfort for users of all ages. A secondary slender net beneath the main one prevents items from falling into the pond. Two openable entrances and exits set on the rope net facilitate daily maintenance. Despite the new rope net, the pond retains its function as a fish pond and its essential role in the village's water system.

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Night view of "Soft Square" © Zhang Chao

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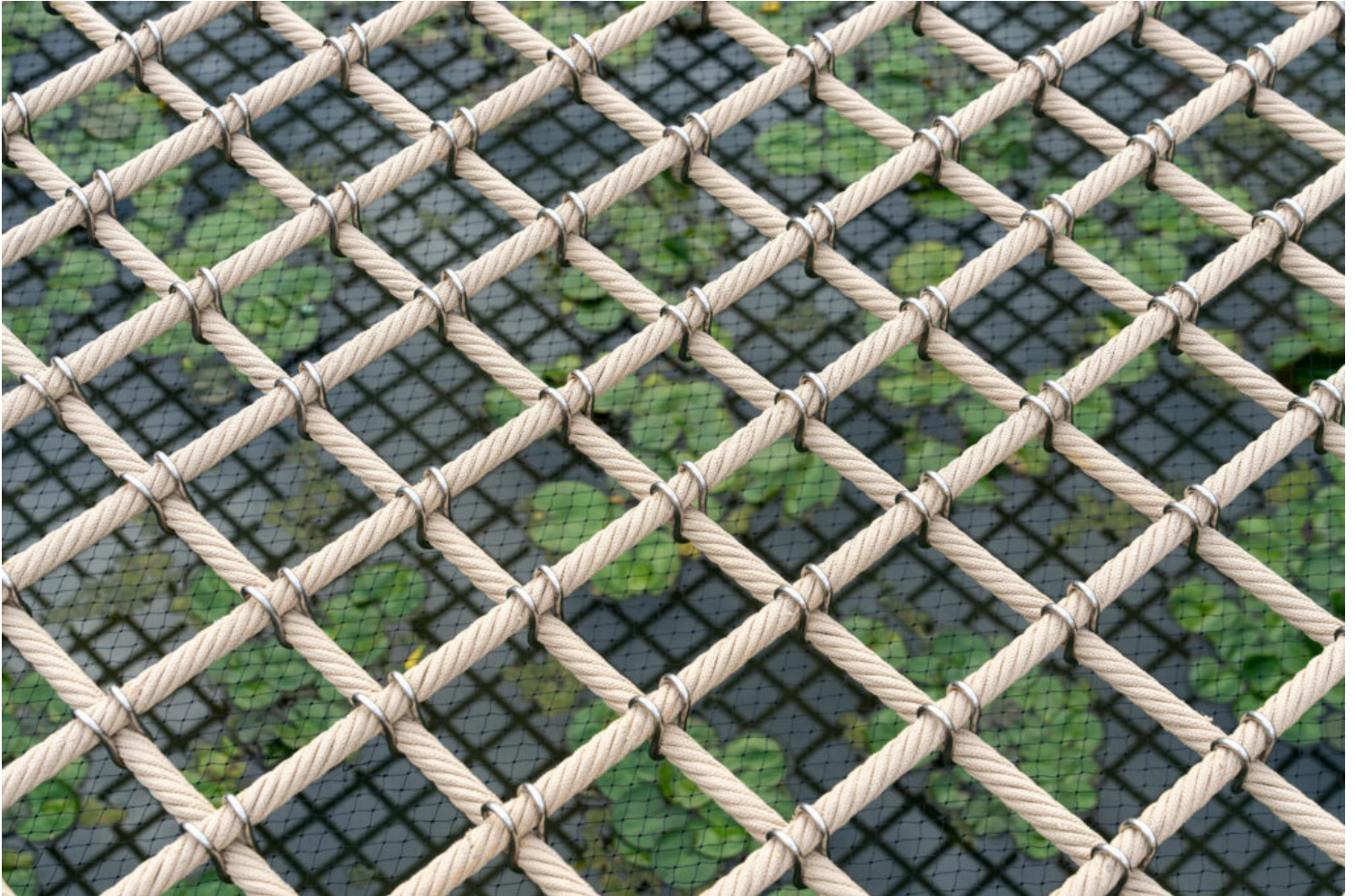
Circular supportive structure of the rope net installation © Zhu Xiaodi

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Rope net of the "Soft Square" © Zhang Chao

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