LAIDLAW LEADERSHIP-IN-ACTION 2026

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LED SUSTAINABLE DESIGN IN HONG KONG AND RURAL CHINA

Working with what already exists

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Host: HKU Faculty of Architecture | Supervisor: Professor Kuo Jze Yi | 8 June - 19 July 2026

SDG 11 | SDG 12 | SDG 6

LAIDLAW FOUNDATION

香 港 大 學 THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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A PLANNED TWO-SITE PROJECT BECAME A THREE-PHASE JOURNEY

My six-week placement began as workshop support and visual documentation in Cheung Chau and Zhoushan. When the first phase changed unexpectedly, I found a new route into the work: field research through rural Sichuan, followed by household sanitation design and construction testing in Henan. Across every phase, the central question stayed the same: how can design work with existing ecosystems, knowledge and daily practices?

6 WEEKS ACROSS HONG KONG AND CHINA

3 DISTINCT PROJECT CONTEXTS

5 HOUSEHOLD SANITATION BRIEFS

PLAN — Cheung Chau and Zhoushan

CHEUNG CHAU — Restoration and site work

PIVOT — Safety concern changed the route

SICHUAN — Vernacular field research

ZHOUSHAN — Sanitation and prototypes

01 CHEUNG CHAU, HONG KONG

LIVING GRASS NGO | ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION + RECLAIMED MATERIALS

Corrugated roofing identified as asbestos-containing material

Reclaimed-timber roof-support members

Project and role

The Cheung Chau phase supported restoration of a deteriorated building at a conservation site managed by Living Grass NGO. The restoration project was part of their wider work connected to ecological repair, community activity and reuse of material.

What I contributed

- Prepared and assembled short timber pieces into longer support members.
- Documented the physical process.

DECISION POINT: WHEN THE ORIGINAL PLAN COULD NOT CONTINUE

During clearance work, asbestos-containing roofing material was identified. I raised the concern with the project team and discussed the situation with my supervisor. Following those discussions, it was agreed that I should stop participating in work at the site. The significance was not dramatic confrontation. It was recognising a limit, communicating it clearly and accepting that responsible action could disrupt the schedule.

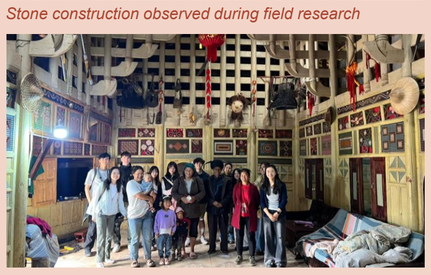
IDENTIFY — COMMUNICATE — ADAPT

02 SICHUAN ROAD TRIP → XICHANG

VERNACULAR FIELD RESEARCH CONNECTED TO MINLE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Road-trip route through Sichuan towards Xichang

Stone construction observed during field research



HKU field team inside a vernacular building

Why the route changed

Rather than letting the Cheung Chau disruption end the placement, I joined Professor Kuo's field-research trip through rural Sichuan. The team was studying vernacular buildings, material traditions and the knowledge held by local master builders. This research informed a contemporary, multifunctional school project at Minle Primary School in Xichang.

My role

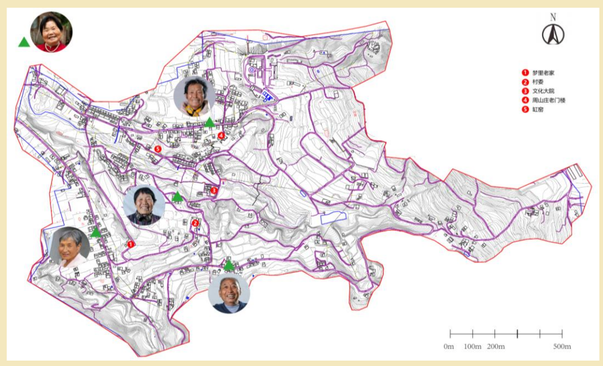
- Film and photograph buildings, details, people and field discussions.
- Organise visual evidence that the design team could revisit later.

WHAT THE FIELDWORK MADE VISIBLE

- Construction knowledge can be carried through practice, not only drawings.
- Material choices record climate, available resources and local skill.
- A contemporary building can learn from vernacular logic without copying its appearance.
- My contribution was visual research documentation.

03 ZHOUSHAN VILLAGE, HENAN

FIVE HOUSEHOLD SANITATION BRIEFS + MATERIAL PROTOTYPING



Village map and five household locations

Household context

Early scale model

From household reality to design brief

The final phase moved from regional observation to highly specific daily needs. Interviews and site visits revealed different relationships between toilets, water, manure, planting, animal keeping, odour, access and maintenance. The workshop therefore developed five distinct concepts rather than one standard village toilet.

FIVE RESPONSES

- Pigsty-to-toilet garden
- Movable composting toilet
- Shared septic garden
- Composting tower
- Constructed wetland toilet

My strongest involvement: the pigsty/shed-related solution, plus model-making and physical testing of rammed earth, masonry and roof systems.

Rammed-earth test wall

Roof prototype

Presenting proposals to the village community

WHAT THE SIX WEEKS PRODUCED

The final experience was broader than the proposal: not simply two workshops, but a connected sequence of construction, field research, documentation, design development and community presentation.

OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

- Supported project delivery across three contexts instead of the two originally proposed.
- Created an organised visual archive and video of fieldwork, construction, models and presentations.
- Contributed to site work and full-scale material tests.
- Documented how sustainable design operates through local materials, skills and routines.

MY CONTRIBUTION

- Hands-on building: timber supports, models, formwork and prototype assembly.
- Field research: observing buildings and learning from master builders.
- Communication: using Mandarin and visual evidence across disciplines and cultures.
- Adaptation: finding useful work after the original programme changed.

WHAT I TAKE FORWARD

Leadership can be exercised without formal authority. In this project it meant making a difficult judgement, stating a concern clearly, then remaining constructive enough to create a new path forward.

Engineering and place-based design ask different questions. Optimisation matters, but so do tacit knowledge, maintenance, culture and the specific way a household uses space. A solution can be technically efficient and still fail if it does not fit everyday life.

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