

# ***Research on Rural Youth Hostel Spatial Design Strategies under the Concept of Environmental Education***

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of rural tourism and the vigorous implementation of rural revitalization policies, rural youth hostels in China are showing promising prospects. Mass-oriented youth hostels are no longer sufficient to meet the diverse needs of society. The development of youth hostels is undergoing new exploration and transformation, with the incorporation of environmental education content providing a new path for the development and transformation of rural youth hostels. This paper, from the perspective of environmental education, elucidates the significance of conducting environmental education in rural youth hostels, proposes new ideas for the construction of rural youth hostels, and outlines the implementation pathways of environmental education in these settings.

**Keywords:** Environmental education concept, Rural youth hostels, Youth hostel design strategies

## **1. Introduction**

The international academic community shares a common understanding of "environmental education," particularly in connection with Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist, and her work "Silent Spring." Since then, scholars have gradually begun to examine the relationship between humans and nature. In 2005, Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods" [1] introduced the concept of "nature-deficit disorder" for the first time, revealing the serious consequences of the lack of natural environment during human development. This marked the substantial phase when global reflections and emphasis on the correlation between children's growth and nature entered the spotlight. Consequently, "environmental education" started to be practiced and disseminated in China. Based on the elucidation of environmental education in the relevant group standards of the Chinese Forestry Society, this paper explores the substantial concentration of high-quality natural resources in rural areas during the process of urbanization in China. This concentration prompts people to move from urban to rural areas, seeking to understand and experience rural life. With the rising trend of rural tourism, the demands for the design of rural youth hostels have increased. Many tourists are attracted to this new way of life and accommodation provided by rural youth hostels. Through activities arranged by accommodation facilities, visitors can intimately experience the local rural history, cultural heritage, and natural resources. Therefore, the design strategies of rural youth hostels need to better align with the needs of rural tourists, showcasing more regional cultural characteristics to provide a superior rural tourism experience. This paper explores the application strategies of the environmental education concept in the spatial design of rural youth hostels, considering the

development trends and societal demands for the integration of "environmental education" with rural youth hostels.

## 2. Relevant Concepts and Current Analysis

### 2.1. Overview of Environmental Education Concepts

Strictly speaking, the term "environmental education" in China is a localized concept that has matured and formed a consensus based on the comprehensive reflection of Chinese experts and scholars on concepts such as environmental education, outdoor education, forest education, nature learning in Western countries, and the teaching activities of nature schools in Japan. This concept is developed in response to the warning of "nature-deficit" and is adapted to the specific developmental context of China. The Chinese Forestry Society's relevant group standards elaborate on the concept of environmental education: it is an educational method or process that centers around the relationship between humans and nature, is based on the natural environment, and involves learning and experiencing knowledge and laws about nature. It guides and cultivates individuals to establish an ecological civilization concept of respecting, adapting to, and protecting nature, recognizing the significance of nature conservation, and inspiring the willingness to take self-action or participate in conservation efforts, aiming to achieve harmonious development between humans and nature. The research on environmental education by Chinese experts and scholars has been continuously deepening, and the characteristics of environmental education concepts have been summarized, including: ① Conducting activities in natural or outdoor environments, emphasizing authentic nature experiences. ② Targeting a wide audience, primarily focusing on children. ③ Educational content revolving around natural elements and phenomena. ④ The educational goal is to enable children to fully understand and appreciate nature, fostering a positive and healthy perspective on nature [2]. In essence, environmental education is a form of education with nature as its core, emphasizing the rational utilization of various resources in the natural environment. It aims to allow students to experience the interdependence and mutual promotion between humans and nature when in contact with the natural world.

### 2.2. Current Development Status of Rural Youth Hostel Spaces

At present, with the advancement of China's economic development and the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, rural tourism has rapidly become one of the hotspots in the tourism industry. Youth hostels (青旅) have actively benefited from this trend in rural tourism, becoming a popular choice for many tourists due to their affordable prices, diverse guest demographics, and characteristics of openness and interactivity. A growing number of people are no longer satisfied with traditional urban landscape tourism, and the distinctive features of rural tourism, such as picturesque landscapes, local customs, regional culture, have attracted considerable attention. Visitors can not only appreciate the beauty of rural areas but also experience a different lifestyle and accommodation space compared to urban settings [3]. Rural tourism in China is now widely understood, accepted, and chosen as a new form of tourism culture and leisure travel consumption by urban residents. Due to the fast pace of life and high work pressure in large cities, many individuals choose rural tourism to relieve stress and relax. Tourists seek more colorful experiences, shifting the development of rural tourism towards personalization, privacy, and individual comfort. Rural youth hostels serve as the carriers aligning with these trends.

To address the accommodation needs of external visitors, some rural residents transform idle houses into accommodations for tourists, while other investors, such as hotels, upgrade rural residences to a large extent, meeting the accommodation needs of rural tourists. Initially, rural hostels

in China were mainly transformed from villagers' own houses, mostly modern cement buildings that enhanced the habitability of residential homes. As rural youth hostels are often based in the rural environment, they tend to be smaller in scale, providing relatively simple accommodation and services. Hotel spaces, on the other hand, exhibit characteristics of standardization and branding.

While meeting basic accommodation conditions, rural youth hostels are actively seeking diversified development. However, practitioners in China's rural youth hostels tend to be conservative in the thematic design of indoor spaces. Their understanding of themes often revolves around the social aspects of youth hostels, contributing to a somewhat monotonous presentation of indoor themes [4]. Integrating local regional culture into the overall design of rural hostels poses a challenging consideration for future developments in rural youth hostel space design.

### **3. Alignment of Environmental Education Concepts with Rural Youth Hostel Spaces**

#### **3.1. Research Value of Applying Environmental Education Concepts to Rural Youth Hostel Spaces**

The environmental education concept emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Applying this concept to rural youth hostel spaces can guide tourists to better understand and respect nature, thereby reducing harm to the rural environment and promoting the sustainable development of rural tourism. Enriching the educational functions of rural youth hostel spaces to a certain extent, beyond providing basic accommodation services, these hostels can serve as venues for activities such as environmental education, conservation education, and cultural heritage, enhancing the social value of rural youth hostels.

Derived from the government's rural development strategy, the environmental education concept professionally integrates the natural and cultural resources of rural areas. It identifies focal points for optimizing the humanistic environment in rural areas, attracting tourists, and creating economic value by developing tourist attractions. Specifically, it drives the rise of the youth hostel industry through the development of the tourism sector, establishing rural youth hostel brands through corporate investment, and leveraging the stimulating role of corporate brands on the economy. In the increasingly competitive rural tourism market, integrating the environmental education concept into the design of rural youth hostel spaces can enhance their distinctiveness and attractiveness, increase tourist satisfaction and loyalty, thus improving the competitiveness of rural youth hostels. The environmental education concept needs to be integrated with the distinctive cultural resources of rural areas, promoting the inheritance and innovation of rural culture. By showcasing rural culture and history in the spaces of rural youth hostels, visitors can gain a better understanding and experience of rural culture, simultaneously driving the modernization of rural culture. The emergence of youth hostel spaces in rural areas distinguishes them from guesthouses and hotels. In addition to enhancing the quality of the rural environment, youth hostels possess a unique brand culture and functional attributes of interaction and education.

#### **3.2. Natural Elements and Regional Characteristics of Rural Youth Hostel Spaces**

Rural areas boast abundant natural resources, including topography, fauna, and flora. Different regions exhibit unique rural landscapes, such as canyons, streams, waterfalls in mountainous areas, and fields, lakes in plains. These distinctive landscapes provide visitors with rich visual experiences. By guiding tourists to understand and experience these natural resources, they can gain a better appreciation of nature and contribute to its conservation. These resources serve as excellent materials and venues for environmental education.

Rural areas also feature unique regional lifestyles, offering visitors opportunities to learn and experience local cultures and skills. Understanding and experiencing traditional farming culture allows tourists to gain deeper insights into rural life and culture. In rural areas with favorable environmental conditions, people typically maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, showing respect and protection while obtaining necessary resources for their livelihoods. The practice of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature in these areas can offer valuable insights and lessons for visitors.

### 3.3. Consumer Experiential Needs for Natural Elements in Rural Youth Hostel Spaces

The change in tourism mentality has laid the foundation for the development of rural youth hostels. According to relevant statistics, the dynamic development of modern tourism consumption psychology tends towards comprehensiveness, participation, and natural scenery. This trend is mainly due to the transformation in the tourism mentality of modern individuals. More and more people perceive the greatest reward in travel as the heartfelt experience of nature, environment, life, and even life itself. There is a growing emphasis on obtaining spiritual pleasure through travel, while the physiological needs of individuals during this process only require necessary material support. Moreover, a significant portion of relatively affluent middle to upper-class individuals deliberately chooses budget travel and hiking methods during their journeys. They customize travel routes, fully immerse themselves in local life and culture, and enjoy the liberating pleasures brought about by tourism.

Youth hostels, such as Hoteling International (HI) or Youth Hostelling International (YHI), are internationally renowned brands with a history of over 80 years. Since its establishment, the brand has focused on combining classroom knowledge with practical observations of society and nature. Youth hostels have been widely welcomed by young people from the beginning and have formed the "youth hostel movement" in Europe, with a theme centered around returning to nature [5]. Demand drives development, and consumers are the main service recipients in rural youth hostel spaces. In terms of experiential needs, it is essential not only to satisfy consumers' appreciation of natural elements in the space but also to meet their demand for experiencing and participating in these elements. Consumers' experiential demands for natural elements in rural youth hostel spaces mainly include perceptual experiences and sensory experiences.

Firstly, in terms of perceptual experiences, consumers hope to acquire information related to nature through various architectural and landscape elements in the space. This allows them to gain more intuitive and profound impressions during their visits.

Secondly, in terms of sensory experiences, consumers wish to perceive the natural environment and landscape through various natural elements in the space. Different types of spaces have different functions and attributes. For example, recreational spaces and entertaining spaces with a certain degree of entertainment need to meet tourists' requirements for leisure, entertainment, and interactive communication. On the other hand, exhibition spaces have strong knowledge and professionalism, catering to visitors' knowledge-seeking needs.

Regardless of the functional type of rural youth hostel spaces, they need to fulfill functions such as providing natural experiences and interactive communication for visitors. Therefore, when designing rural youth hostel spaces, attention should be given to the comprehensive utilization and development of natural environmental elements. Through rational design and transformation of natural environmental elements, they can be integrated with architectural, landscape, and cultural elements to achieve effective alignment between spatial functions and natural elements. In terms of space design, youth hostels not only serve as spaces for the leisure experiences and interactive communication of young tourists but also become venues for various activities in rural areas, such as environmental education, ecological experience activities, rural culture promotion, and youth

exchange activities. Therefore, integrating environmental education theory into youth hostel space design is a feasible and necessary approach.

## **4. Strategies for Rural Youth Hostel Space Design under the Concept of Environmental Education**

### **4.1. Development of Functional Spaces Based on Rural Resources**

Rural youth hostels serve as both accommodation facilities and integral components of tourism spaces. Therefore, in their design, consideration needs to be given to how to enhance the experience of the rural environment and space while meeting the daily accommodation needs of hostel staff. Diverging from traditional youth hostels, rural youth hostels prioritize experiential aspects, incorporating elements of entertainment, interest, and interaction. They represent an emerging form of tourism space that disseminates local culture.

Rural youth hostels under the environmental education concept typically encompass three major functions: artisanal production activities, educational tourism, and leisure. The spatial types range from open to semi-open and then to enclosed. In addition to the distinctive agricultural activities, the site planning of rural youth hostels, aligned with the principles of environmental education, integrates the content system of environmental education with functional and zoning modules. This involves selecting nature education content suitable for each functional area, creating a "diverse" range of activities. This approach not only fulfills the functional requirements of rural youth hostels in terms of production activities, educational tourism, and leisure but also incorporates environmental education content based on the functions of the site.

From the perspective of combining environmental education with rural resources, environmental education projects in rural youth hostels can meet the urban residents' demand for nature. Simultaneously, by leveraging the strengths of rural youth hostels and considering local environmental and industrial characteristics, distinctive projects can be developed to avoid homogeneous competition. It is essential to capitalize on the infrastructure and open nature of rural youth hostel spaces to design environmental education activities.

### **4.2. Integrating Rural Special Resources to Create Themed Environments**

Most rural youth hostels require a reevaluation and restructuring of both outdoor and indoor functional areas. Firstly, regarding outdoor space functions, it is essential to establish areas for children's entertainment, parking, youth hostel activities, etc. This will optimize the use of outdoor space, enabling the hosting of various forms of rural tourism-themed events. This ensures that the youth hostel not only caters to accommodation needs but also hosts outdoor activities, fostering intimacy with external visitors and enhancing the diversity of accommodation spaces.

Secondly, the indoor functional areas are a key focus for restructuring. Incorporating flexible designs into indoor spaces enhances the efficient use of indoor space. For example, the furniture in the indoor activity area can be flexibly designed for movable arrangements based on the number of people, creating a distinctive feature for the youth hostel space and meeting the various needs of different groups. Additionally, cultural experiential functional areas can be added to indoor spaces, allowing visitors to actively participate in local customs, such as making traditional handicrafts, witnessing local cultural events, and tasting local cuisine. The integration of outdoor environmental education courses with indoor activity experiences, through multifunctional integration, transforms the rural youth hostel into a dynamic and cohesive cultural, educational, and exchange space.

From the inside out, the process of returning to natural spaces aims to establish a connection with nature, understand, explore, contemplate, and ultimately cultivate a love for nature, fostering a

harmonious coexistence between people and nature. Activities like picking fruits in open spaces and planting under the trees create connections between people and nature. Children find joy in planting and harvesting fruits and vegetables, satisfying their needs through processing the agricultural products of their labor. This not only undertakes the entire youth hostel's environmental education activities but also actively contributes to alleviating children's "nature deficit disorder."

#### **4.3. Enriching Tourist Experience Activities with Nature Education as a Guide**

Nature education not only addresses the relationship between humans and nature but also emphasizes interpersonal relationships. In order to deepen the sense of belonging for external visitors to their surroundings and facilitate communication among people, the construction and subsequent operation and maintenance of rural youth hostels can involve local rural residents and external visitors. For example, during the initial construction phase, residents and visitors can collaboratively participate in the planning and design of the youth hostel, with the hostel owner presiding over the process and assistance from the community planning department. Activities such as crop planting, seedling cultivation, and harvesting can allow visitors to actively participate, observing the complete process of crops from planting to reaching the dining table. Community residents and external visitors co-build and co-govern, forming a process of sustainable development.

Sustainable education is a crucial component of contemporary nature education. Various aspects of youth hostel construction and operation can incorporate sustainable education. For instance, the development plan for orchards, the recycling of waste materials, rainwater collection and reuse, composting of kitchen waste, the use of fertilizers and pesticides, artistic creation using discarded items, and biodiversity conservation can all be part of the sustainable education process. These participatory activities emphasize the agency of individuals, immersing them in the environment to stimulate emotional connections between people and between individuals and the environment, thereby achieving a positive interaction between humans and the ecological environment.

### **5. Conclusion**

In summary, the construction of rural youth hostel spaces guided by the concept of nature education differs from the construction of ordinary mainstream youth hostel spaces. Rural areas possess natural advantages as inherent resources for nature education, which are not readily available in other urban environments. In the context of rural youth hostel spaces, leveraging natural surroundings is more suitable for fostering the physical and mental well-being of individuals. Simultaneously, it guides individuals to cultivate a proper understanding of nature and environmental conservation. The use of natural education resources promotes harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural environment. Human nature education not only requires the creation of favorable environmental conditions for development but also involves sowing the seeds of beauty and goodness in future living spaces.

Currently, there is a proliferation of commercial operations with limited audience reach, making it challenging to effectively promote and popularize nature education. In light of this, this paper explores the feasibility of rural youth hostels as carriers of nature education concepts from the perspective of nature education. By reorganizing the environmental elements and functional areas of rural youth hostels, a structure is developed to convey a system of nature education content in these spaces. The integration of nature education content with the physical environment is emphasized. The paper concludes by summarizing site conceptualization and construction strategies suitable for rural youth hostels under the framework of nature education. This research aims to contribute to the theoretical and practical development of nature education in rural spaces.

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