





Environmental Studies

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One of the negative effects of rapid urbanisation is the loss of agricultural skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. But a new 'green' school under construction in Beijing is helping bring a little of the farm back into the city.

Story by Alice Davis

At the heart of Open Architecture's philosophy is a desire to confront the challenges posed by years of fast-paced urbanisation – most pressing, their impact on the environment and on society. In one of the Chinese practice's first educational projects, Beijing No. 4 Middle School, a new campus is set to give prominence to nature, sustainability and community, which Open Architecture's co-founder Huang Weijing hopes will, in turn,

give students "a real world sense of the real, the sunlight and the green".

From above, the school building resembles an enormous bird's nest, with separate 'classrooms' being cutting out from the central structure like anthropomorphic legs. The irregular shape maximises the amount of outdoor space and ensures that no part of the school's interior is far from a window or an exit. The flat roof doubles as an urban farm, which is divided into 36 plots – one for each class. "The

classrooms are designed to float between the undulating garden on the ground and the farms on the roof. This building takes on an organic branch-like form, much like that of trees or roots, to enhance the best orientation and natural ventilation," Huang says.

Most educational spaces, science spaces and communal areas, the school environment should facilitate and encourage social engagement among students. "Technology, not technology, savvy kids often grow up with less social abilities," says Huang. "We tried to create social spaces of all different types and sizes, providing abundant opportunities for students to meet, to chat, to play and to work together."

From a sustainability perspective, the project was designed to meet and exceed China's green building evaluation standards. A geothermal heat pump, grey water recycling, rainwater collection and solar energy are some of the green technologies that will be employed. Large spaces like the gym, the auditorium and the dining hall are put semi-underground with landscaped roofs, so that the normally high energy consumption of these spaces is greatly reduced.

Huang adds: Construction of the school began in February, with a projected completion date of 2014. ■

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