

IFLA AAPME Landscape Awards 2024

Project Category: **Built Category - Culture and Traditions**

Project Title: **Wuxi Xuntang Ancient Town**

Wuxi, China

Project Statement

Our project focused on revitalizing the village on a 5,058-square-meter island along the Shangxian River, where a luxury boutique hotel preserves and adapts the old structures while the landscape design enhances the outdoor spaces to preserve the beauty and balance of the Wuxi culture.

Here ancient systems serve as a foundation of success for the modern way of living. As the starting point of the design, the team observed other heritage canal waterfronts in Wuxi to identify ways in which the local built environment interfaced with the canals and developed a palette of authentic detailing and place-making elements. The landscape design process for the project entailed a meticulous understanding of intervention parameters, old materials, and old lifestyles. With the proposed hotel use, we aimed to enhance the connection between buildings and streets with the water. Key design interventions included creating an arrival experience near a historic bridge, establishing pedestrian circulation, revitalizing the traditional central garden, and activating the waterfront by showcasing old canal-front culture.

Today, as people stroll through Xuntang Ancient Town's stone streets, it feels like stepping into a time tunnel, where the preserved village recalls the Wuxi's rich history and serves as a proud symbol of the city.

Project Narrative

Wuxi, although inland, was born of water. This drenched land is a home to people who crafted the water into channels so that bricks, grains, tea, silk, ware, precious Taihu rocks, and ideas can traverse the city. Wuxi's waterway network and Taihu Lake, China's third largest lake, catalysed urban culture. As part of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the local water trade supplied raw materials to the capital and the Great Wall, which in turn enabled Wuxi to refine its arts and opera patronized by locals and visitors alike.

Based on the unique cultural and economic elements of Wuxi and the Shangxian wetland, we analysed the broader area and positioned it to be the New Shore of Wuxi, with the waterfront as a strategic country, province, and city-scale resource. The design framework captures the rich cultural heritage of ancient Wuxi and embeds it in the urban fabric of Taihu New City.

Project Narrative (con't)

The old town in the Shangxian wetland is a remnant of that magnificent past and is at the centre of a development strategy for Wuxi's future. The project site is between a proposed central business district and a proposed innovation hub. The skill and camaraderie built by previous generations will be memorialized through the preservation of the old town and remind people of the social values that brought the city forward.

As the Heart of New Wuxi, the Xuntang Ancient Town comprises the old library and village. The library will be retaining the same function after its refurbishment. Our project focused on revitalizing the village on a 5,058-square-meter island along the Shangxian River, where a luxury boutique hotel preserves and adapts the old structures while the landscape design enhances the outdoor spaces to preserve the beauty and balance of the Wuxi culture. While the hotel facilities are private, the rest of the island remains open to the public as a free attraction during normal operating hours.

Here ancient systems serve as a foundation of success for the modern way of living. As the starting point of design, the team observed other heritage canal waterfronts in Wuxi to identify ways in which the local built environment interfaced with the canals and develop a palette of authentic detailing and place-making elements.

With portions previously used by a local hotel, the existing development on the island consisted of low-rise buildings, a central garden, narrow streets, and bridges that linked back to the mainland. The bridge to the north of the site, built during the Qing Dynasty (1888), has been officially declared as municipality cultural heritage. We aimed to facilitate the modern use while honouring the old way of living. All the hardscape areas, weathered by time and use, needed upgrading. Our team worked in tandem with the architects who upgraded the buildings to suit the new positioning for the hotel. The landscape design process for the project entailed a meticulous understanding of intervention parameters, old materials, and old lifestyles to recreate the ancient atmosphere.

Hotel Arrival

The proposed hotel deserved an arrival and entrance experience that transcended mere functionality. The entire route from the drop-off area in the mainland village, bazaar walk, and theatre plaza prior to the bridge are uplifted and set the tone for entry. The hotel reception lobby is adjacent to the historic bridge—the key transition from the buzzing mainland to tranquil island. Our intention was to preserve the bridge and to highlight its presence through minimal alteration. Subtle lighting features were incorporated, casting a warm glow on the steps during nighttime.

We introduced new waterfront terraces to the reception building with railing designs echoing that of the zigzag bridge within the central garden. These terraces not only frame the bridge but also serve as inviting spaces for guests. The terraces become an extension of the lobby, seamlessly connecting indoor and outdoor spaces with the water. Feature trees provide shade and blend these additions to the context while inviting visitors to appreciate the history outside as the check-in. The opposite corner, adjacent to the bridge, is adorned with lush flowering plants. These botanical cascades spill from the roof level down to the water's edge, screening blank walls from the arrival experience and softening the architectural lines.

Themed Walks

The old village pathways lacked continuity and character. Some of the routes feeling like the back of buildings rather than frontages. We envisioned creating a clear and pleasant pedestrian loop so that guests and the public can traverse the entire island while discovering its hidden gems. Our design approach focused on highlighting three main pathways within the site, each with its distinct character and purpose. After studying the old paving and roof design preserved in other parts of the village, the team added subtle feature bands to the paving along these three walks guide visitors, emphasizing the walk's significance and aiding in wayfinding.

Connecting the northern bridge and reception area to the southern teahouse, restaurant, spa, and another bridge, the Village Walk serves as a vital artery. To elevate the experience, we placed feature planters, trees, benches, and lanterns along this route in conjunction with reusing the old stone feeders, benches, and column bases. Planting beds were integrated into the paving design to screen the hotel bedrooms from public view. The Bamboo Walk links the reception area to the all-day dining zone to the west. Recognizing the bare walls along this narrow path, we proposed bamboo screens to soften the experience while outdoor furniture complements the ambiance. Along the edge of the central garden and free from hotel rooms, the Garden Walk is the quietest and most relaxed route. We upgraded the softscape, infusing it with more lush greenery.

Central Garden

The romantic central garden echoes of scholarly wisdom and is an archetype of the traditional Wuxi garden, with a zigzag bridge, pond, and precious rocks from the nearby lake evoking the greater natural world beyond the village walls. It contains a sheltered walkway, pavilion, and unique moon gate elliptical in shape and clad with Taihu rocks on one side. We wanted this to remain as a place for contemplation and portal to the old way of scholarly life, with the pavilion as the focal point. All these key elements were in good condition and were preserved to maintain authenticity in the garden.

After cleaning up the overgrown vegetation, we added meticulous layering of greenery to create seasonal interest around the pond and to increase the amenity for the rooms which overlook the garden. As the seasons change, so does the landscape, creating an ever-evolving display of colour and life.

New Waterfronts

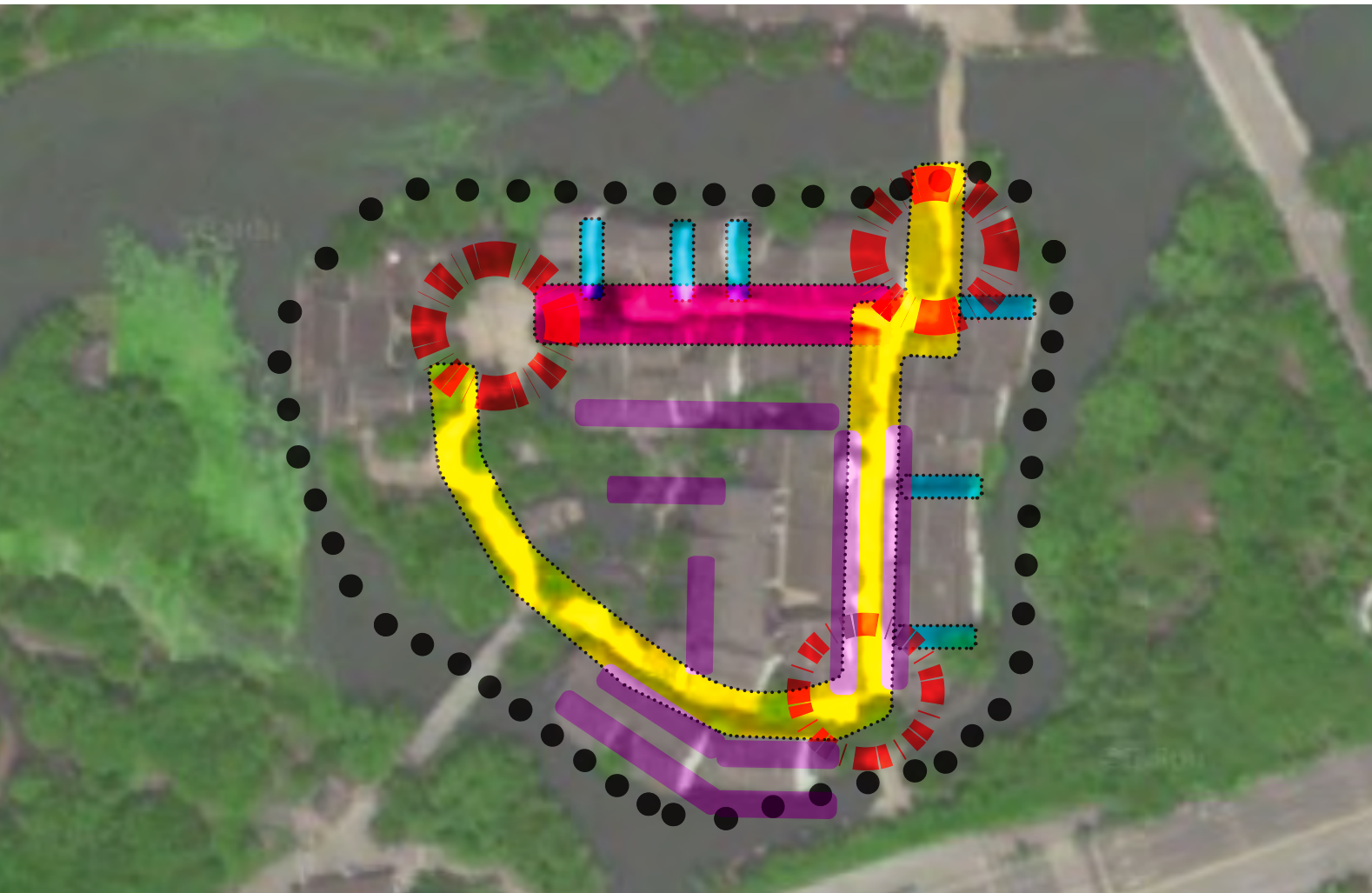
The waterfront edges of the island required activation. Many of the existing buildings were situated flush against the water's edge, reflecting an inward-looking spatial orientation that suited the previous lifestyles of scholars. However, with the proposed hotel use, we aimed to enhance the connection between buildings and streets with the canal. To honour the historical significance of the canal, we designed both private and public waterfront terraces that serve as living tributes to the ways in which previous generations interacted with the waterway and increased the amenity of the hotel rooms. The public terraces include docks for boats, offering a distinctive way to explore and witness historic canal life while circumnavigating the village.

Today, as students and tourists walk through Xuntang Ancient Town, it feels like stepping into a time tunnel, where the village bridges, streets, buildings, and waterfronts recall the Wuxi's rich history. Meanwhile, the new boutique hotel stands as a testament to the modern progress, hosting local government dignitaries and serving as a proud symbol of the city.



The Xuntang Ancient Town is encircled by water. It was a historical point for trade along the city's extensive waterway network, which once drove the economy. Today, it serves a unique destination and boutique hotel, offering a glimpse into Wuxi's traditional values and way of life.

ANCIENT VILLAGE - CIRCULATION EXPERIENCE



same pedestrian experience



back of building feeling



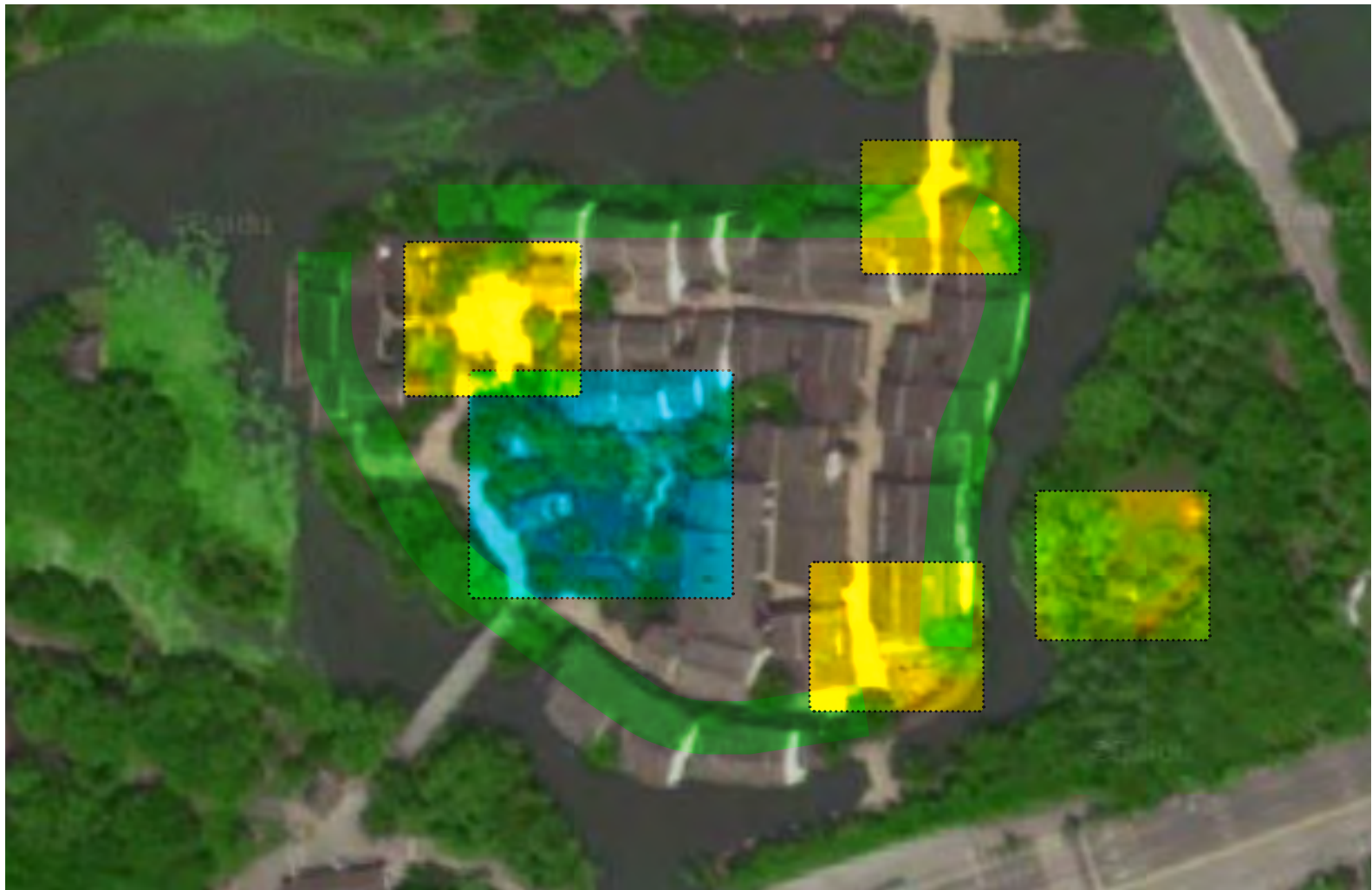
back alley - no reason to go to

LEGENDS

- Lack of Focal Nodes
- Unutilized Waterway
- Poor Room Entry Experience

The old village pathways lacked continuity and character with some of the routes feeling like the back of buildings rather than frontages.

ANCIENT VILLAGE - PROGRAM



LEGENDS

- Unutilized Pedestrian Experience Potential
- Central Garden Upgrade
 - Lack of furnishing
 - Lack of strong focal
 - Worn off paving
 - Undermaintained planting
- Unutilized Waterfront

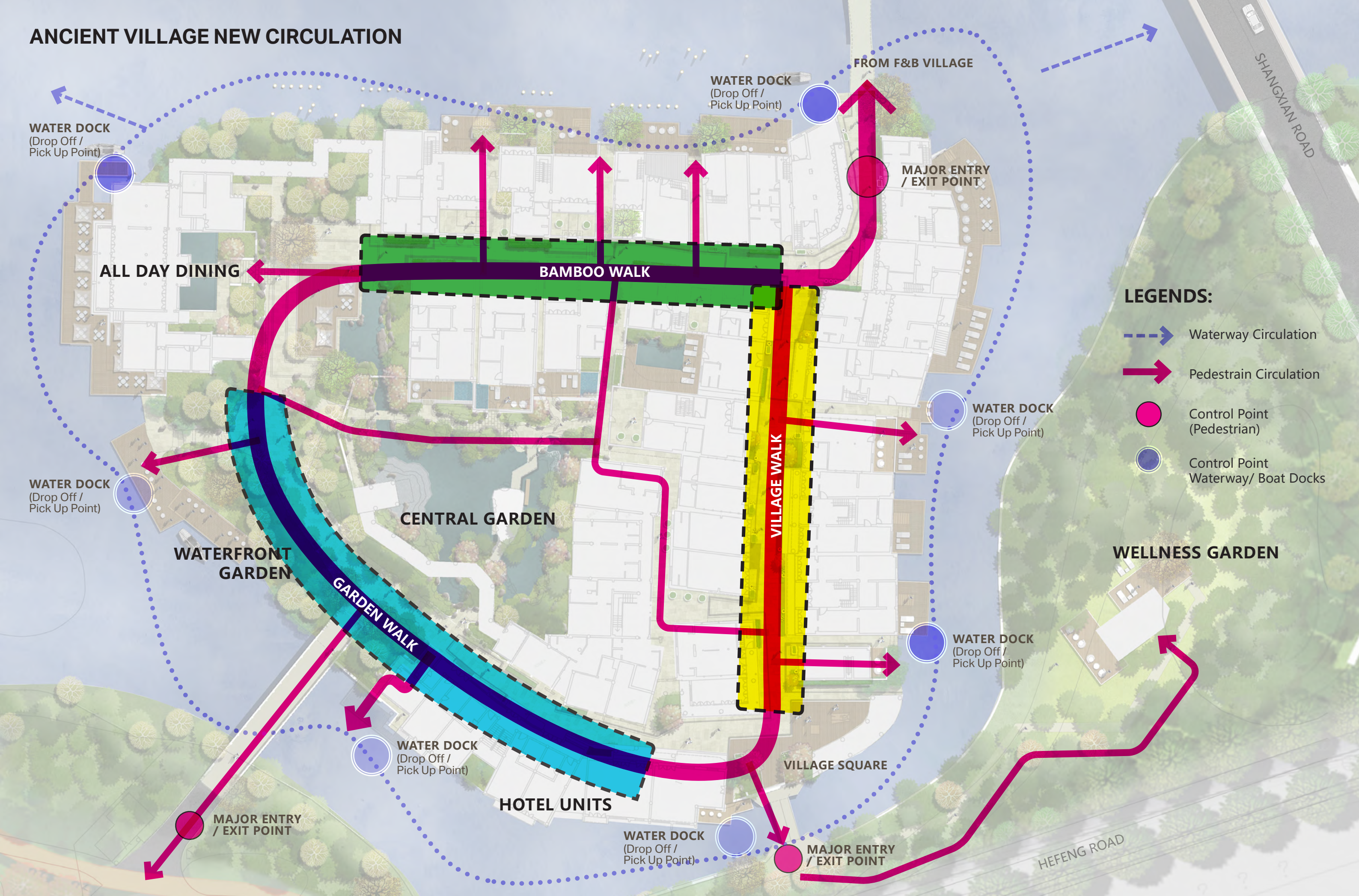
LANDSCAPE PLAN



LEGENDS

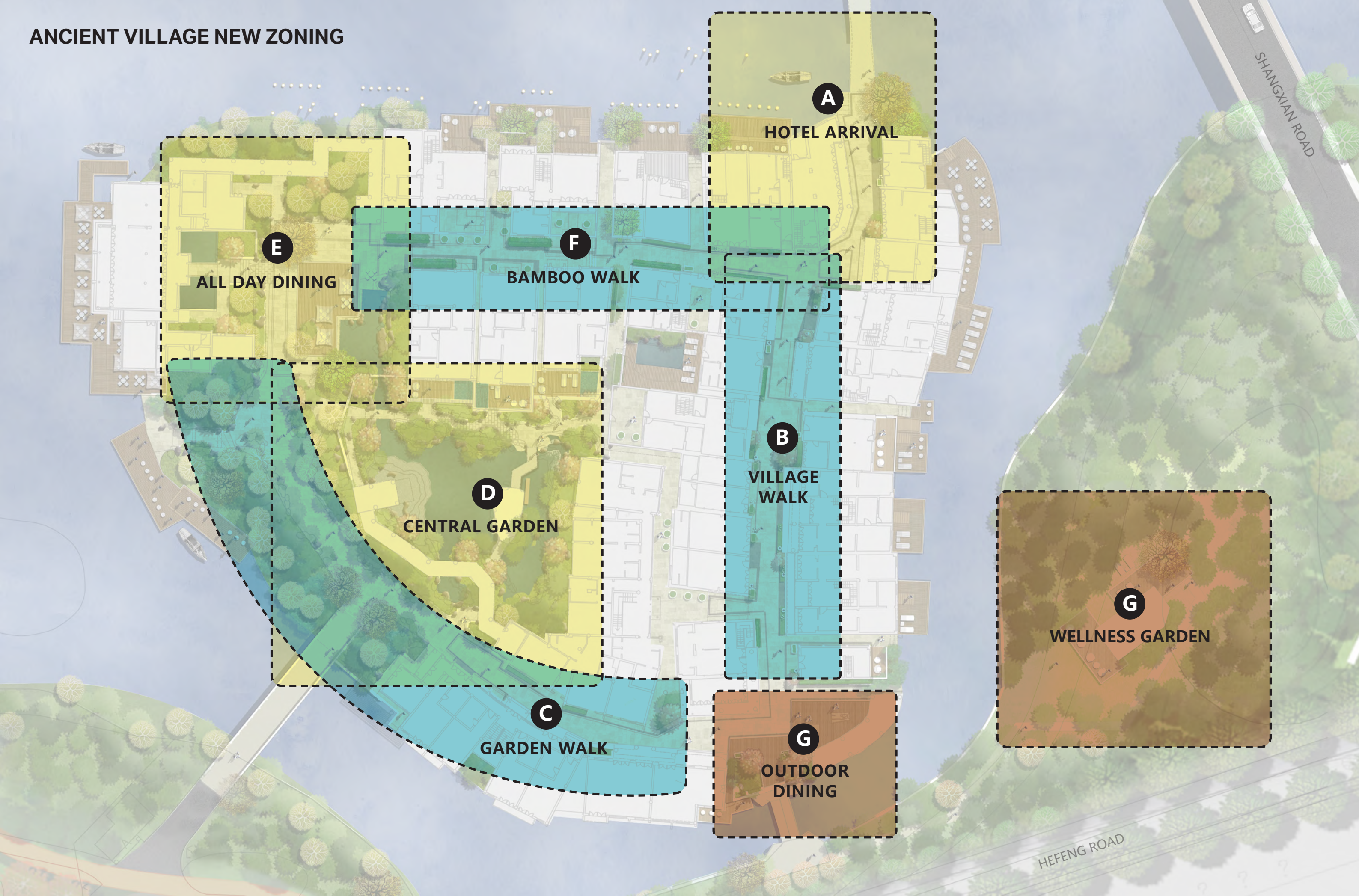
- 01 ARRIVAL PIER
- 02 HOTEL LOBBY
- 03 WATER DOCK
- 04 VILLAGE WALK
- 05 ALLEYWAY
- 06 WATER DECK
- 07 CORNER PLAZA
- 08 ENTRY PAVILION
- 09 GARDEN WALK
- 10 BRIDGEWAY
- 11 GARDEN
- 12 BOARDWALK / PIER
- 13 ALL-DAY DINING
- 14 OUTDOOR PLAZA
- 15 WATER FEATURE
- 16 BAMBOO WALK
- 17 POCKET GARDEN
- 18 FEATURE BRIDGE
- 19 FEATURE LAKE
- 20 FEATURE PAVILION
- 21 FOREST PATH

ANCIENT VILLAGE NEW CIRCULATION



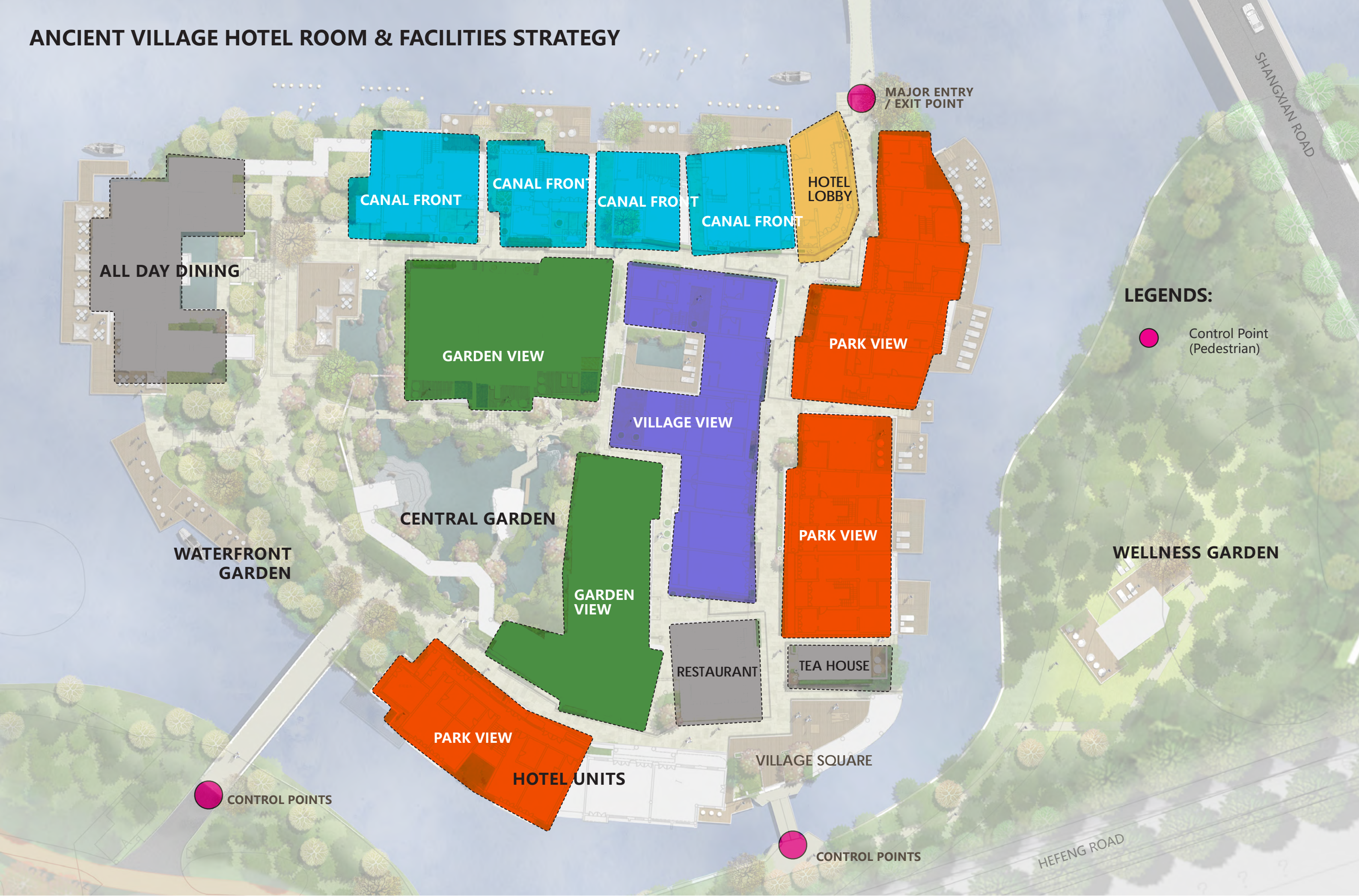
We envisioned creating a clear and pleasant pedestrian loop so that guests and the general public can traverse the entire island (on foot and by boat) while discovering its hidden gems.

ANCIENT VILLAGE NEW ZONING



Our design approach focused on highlighting three main pathways within the site, each with its distinct character and purpose to link focal nodes.

ANCIENT VILLAGE HOTEL ROOM & FACILITIES STRATEGY



The various rooms of the boutique hotel are spread across the existing buildings of the ancient village. These enjoy a variety of views, from the more outward such as the park and canal to the more inward such as the village and garden. The inner rooms also have private courtyards that complement the garden orientation.



The town is located within the Shangxian Wetland Park which begins along the banks of Lake Taihu and ends at the Wuxi Government complex. The broader area is positioned to be the “New Shore of Wuxi”, with the waterfront linking nature, heritage, and modern economic activities.

ANCIENT VILLAGE BLOW-UP | HOTEL ARRIVAL

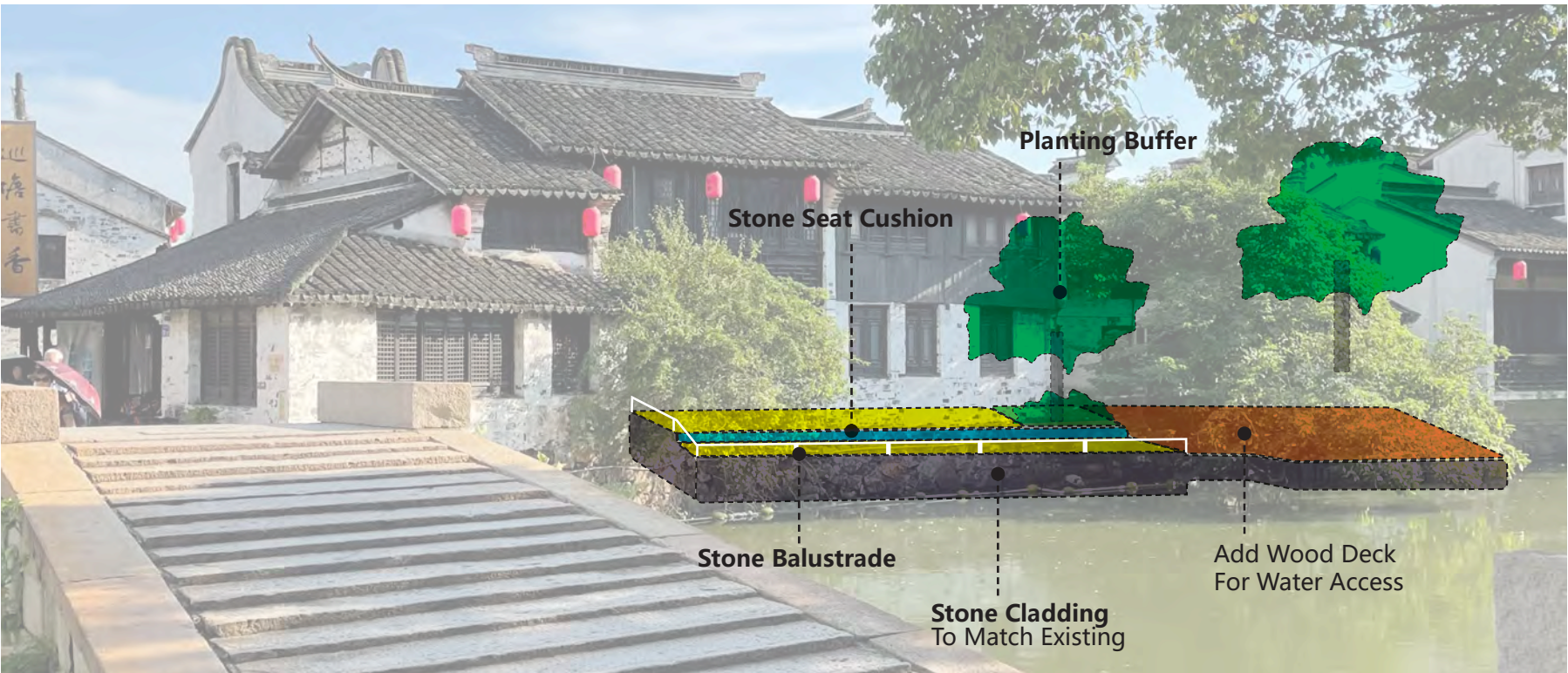
PLAN



BEFORE



PROPOSED DESIGN IMPROVEMENT



The proposed hotel deserved an arrival and entrance experience that transcended mere functionality. The hotel reception lobby is adjacent to the historic heritage bridge.

CONSTRUCTION PERIOD



We introduced new waterfront terraces to the reception building. These terraces not only frame the bridge but also serve as inviting spaces for guests. The terraces become an extension of the lobby, seamlessly connecting indoor and outdoor spaces.

COMPLETION



Our intention was to preserve the bridge and to highlight its presence through minimal alteration. Subtle lighting features were incorporated, casting a warm glow on the steps during nighttime.

EXISTING SITE CONDITION



Many of the existing buildings were situated flush against the water's edge, with small terraces situated on the upper floors or hovering above the water. However, with the proposed hotel use, we aimed to enhance the connection between buildings and streets with the canal.



The corner adjacent to the heritage bridge is adorned with lush flowering plants. These botanical cascades spill from the roof level down to the water's edge, screening blank walls from the arrival experience and softening the architectural lines.

ANCIENT VILLAGE BLOW-UP | VILLAGE WALK

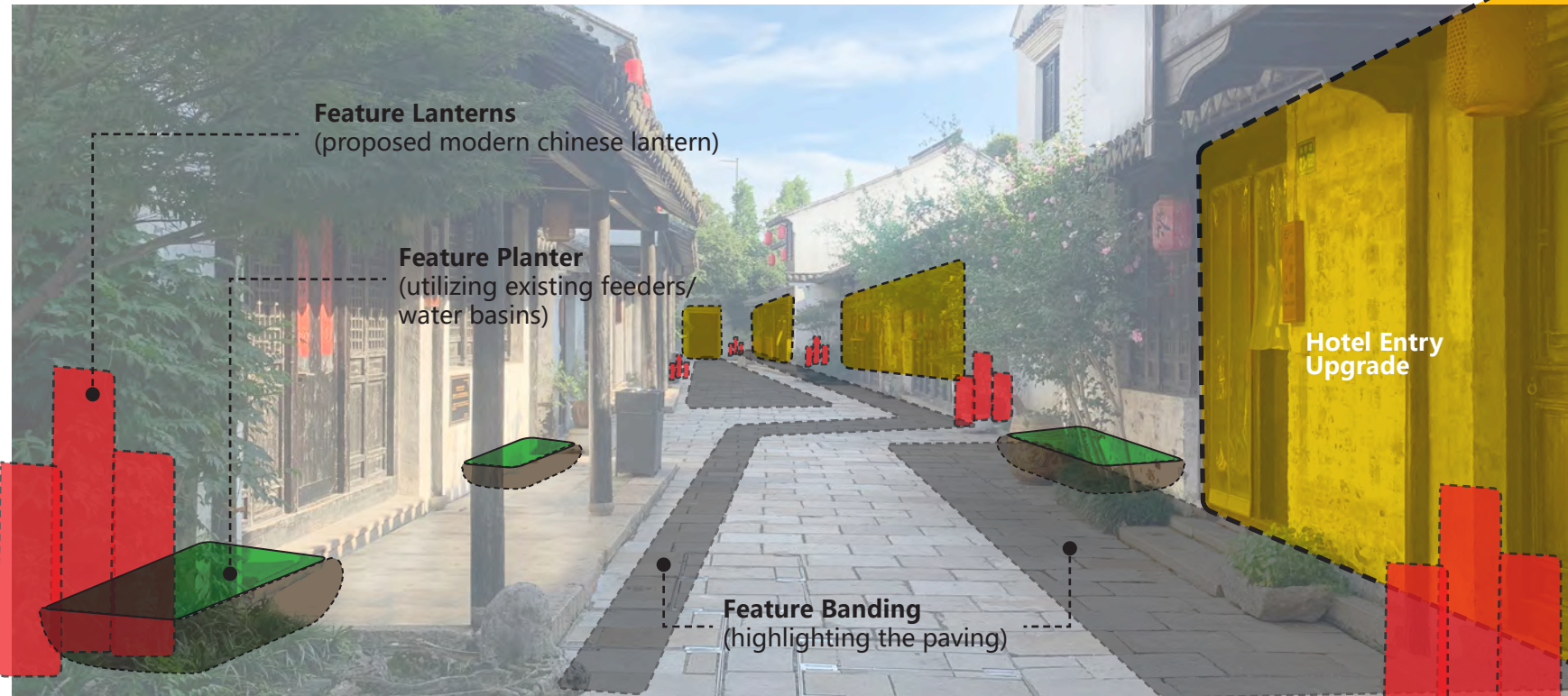
PLAN



BEFORE



PROPOSED DESIGN IMPROVEMENT



Connecting the northern bridge and reception area to the southern teahouse, restaurant, spa, and another bridge, the Village Walk serves as a vital artery. Building entryways are upgraded by the architect while the landscape reuses old elements such as the feeder boxes, column bases, and stone benches.

CONSTRUCTION PERIOD



All the hardscape areas, weathered by time and use, needed upgrading. The landscape design process for the project involved a meticulous process of understanding the parameters for intervention as well as the old materials.



The existing development on the island consisted of low-rise buildings and narrow streets, which were preserved. Subtle feature bands in the paving along these three walks guide visitors, emphasizing the walk's significance and aiding in wayfinding. New planting beds increase privacy for the hotel rooms.



The transition from the Village Walk to the Garden walk is marked by taller trees and a narrower pathway which then opens up to a more lush walking experience beside the central garden.

ANCIENT VILLAGE BLOW-UP | BAMBOO WALK

PLAN

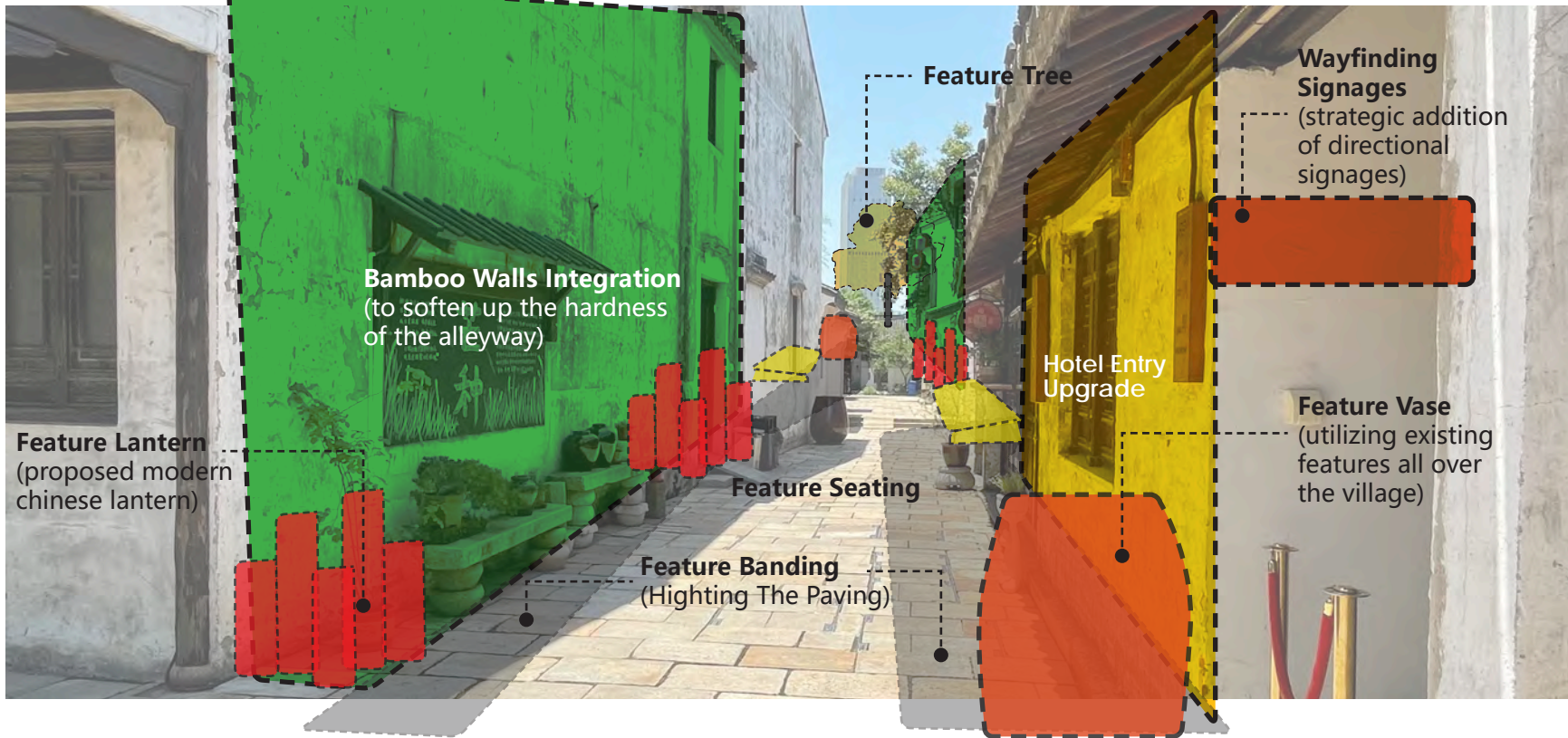


The Bamboo Walk links the reception area to the western all-day dining zone.

BEFORE



PROPOSED DESIGN IMPROVEMENT



COMPLETION



Recognizing the bare walls along this path, we proposed bamboo screens to soften the experience while outdoor furniture complements the ambiance.

EXISTING SITE CONDITION



The paving of the previous development was monotonous and did not segregate the pedestrian path from the building entryways.



The materials and design for the enhanced paving were based on the roof tiles and old granite patterns that were preserved in other parts of the village.

ANCIENT VILLAGE BLOW-UP | CENTRAL GARDEN

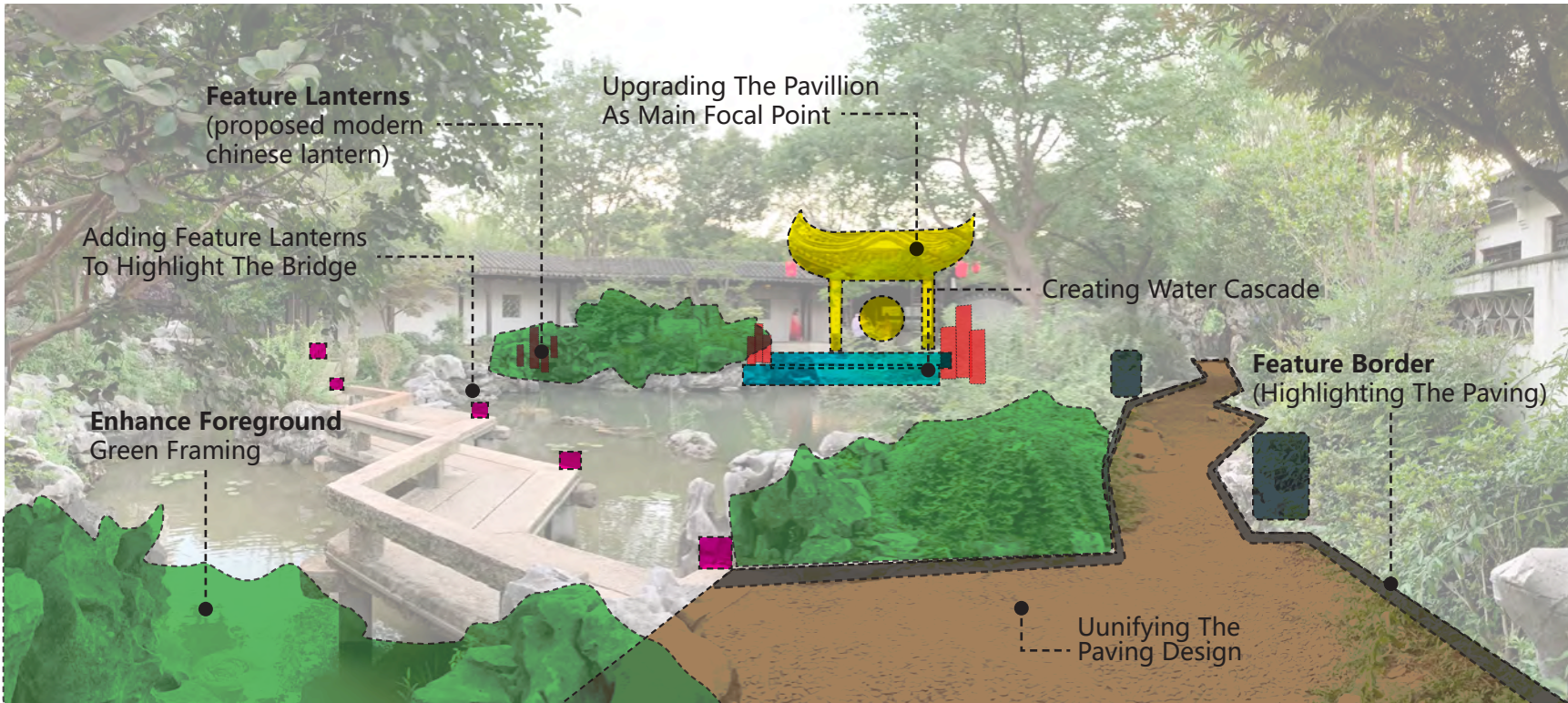
PLAN



BEFORE



PROPOSED DESIGN IMPROVEMENT



This intimate central garden echoes of scholarly wisdom and is an archetype of the traditional Wuxi garden, but the planting lacked variety and maintenance.



With the preserved zigzag bridge, pond, and precious Taihu rocks, the refreshed Central Garden continues to evoke the greater natural world beyond the village walls.



We wanted this to remain as a place for contemplation, so we added meticulous layering of greenery to create seasonal interest and increase the privacy of the adjacent hotel rooms.



The old pavilion as well as the unique Taihu rock framed moon gate to the Central Garden are preserved.

CONSTRUCTION PERIOD



The terrace of the dining area already existed in the old village and was oriented towards the outdoor theater, but it felt more like a pathway rather than an al fresco space.



The dining terrace was enlarged and enhanced to accommodate hospitality function and its new design coheres with the adjacent's building architecture.



Enhoing the design of the Central Garden, the dining area's arrival experience utilizes the Taihu rocks as features within the ponds as well as frames for the surrounding planting areas.



Here ancient systems serve as a foundation of success for the modern way of living. As the starting point of design, the team observed other heritage canal waterfronts in Wuxi to identify ways in which the local built environment interfaced with the canals and develop a palette of authentic detailing and place-making elements.



Green integration with architecture & traditional elements. As the seasons change, so does the landscape, creating an ever-evolving display of colour and life.