

Symposium  
03-04.07.2025

Call for contributions  
10.02.2025

# Shift- ing Rural- ities

After two years of exploring the diverse conditions of the rural world, the NERU consortium (New Ruralities, Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships 2022-2025), comprising six architecture and urban design units from ULB (Brussels), POLITO (Turin), UDC (La Coruña), UMinho (Guimarães), UACEG (Sofia), and ETH (Zürich), is organizing an international symposium on **July 3rd-4th, 2025**.

Titled “*Shifting Ruralities: Reimagining Rural Spaces in Europe*”, the symposium wishes to highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of European rural areas in a globalized world. It seeks to gather contributions that reflect their diversity, examine the forces driving these changes, and explore new perspectives —without claiming authority over the many interpretations of rurality. Despite the contrasts among contemporary rural spaces, certain commonalities persist: aging populations often living in isolation with limited access to essential services; struggling economies modestly sustained by urban dependence on rural resources (e.g., energy, food, raw materials, logistics); widespread abandonment of built infrastructure, resulting in plummeting land values; and a rich cultural and architectural heritage rooted in anthropized landscapes. Rather than merely cataloguing these traits, we aim to uncover the histories and stories that shape them. How have these diverse paths emerged, and what lessons can they offer? Are there success stories that might inspire other communities?

The symposium emphasizes the “re” in **reimagining**, focusing not on novelty but on revisiting notions of progress, innovation, and identity. Rural areas, shaped by over 8,000 years of interaction between human and non-human forces, resist complete homogenization, even as globalization embeds them in global economic and environmental networks. These spaces remain vital, evolving in interaction with urban, peri-urban, and global systems. While the perceived shift from cities to the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested transformative potential, we are equally intrigued by the “**otherness**” of rural areas—worlds where alternative livelihoods, rituals, economies, temporalities, and ecologies coexist, often influenced by pre-modern cosmologies that linger beneath the surface or are dismissed as backward.

As a consortium working predominantly within faculties of architecture, NERU seeks to engage in dialogue with actors from **diverse traditions, disciplines, and regions**, contributing to amplify the varied voices inhabiting and shaping contemporary rural spaces.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

Participants are invited to send an abstract summarizing their research, project or idea (max. 600 words) by **February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025**. We welcome theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions addressing questions such as the *reinhabitation* of the countryside, the representation of the rural, the co-creation of rural places, the revitalisation of rural economies, the decolonisation of urban hinterlands, and the promises of rural advocacy.

The submissions should specify the **format** of the proposed paper (short or long one) and their **affinity** to the six discussion panels (up to two). More information regarding the formats and panels can be found below.

The scientific committee will carefully read the abstracts and communicate their selection by **March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025**. Final submissions are expected by **June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025**.

A limited range of the submissions will be collected in a book whose publication is planned in Spring 2026. The finalized version of the selected papers will be sent by August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

The participation in the symposium will be free of charge.

## THEMATIC PANELS

The papers will be presented within one or two of the six thematic panels that try to cover the plurality of questions we examined during the NERU endeavour.

### PANEL 1. BACK TO RURAL

#### Exploring Migration and Emerging Lifestyles

The allure of out-of-town lifestyles is as old as towns and cities themselves. This attraction endures in today's predominantly urbanized, and dense world. These lifestyles encompass a broad spectrum—from comfortable suburban living and rural, amenity-driven seasonal migration to vacation homes, as well as more extreme conditions faced by marginalized communities, workers in resource peripheries, and value-driven intentional communities located on pristine geographical edges.

Some migrations and movements to rural spaces are temporary, adaptive responses to circumstances or harsh environments, relying on mobile homes, temporary housing, and flexible services. Others are more permanent, seeking to adapt, settle, and sustain long-term living environments. Decisions to stay or move on are influenced by opportunities or threats—shaped by

environmental dynamics, social relations, economic factors, or even the turbulence of conflict and war.

Refugee waves, intentional communities, ecovillages, co-housing projects, digital nomad networks, and other initiatives are reshaping the rural landscape. This panel invites analysis of these transformations through artistic and scientific approaches, exploring encounters between old and new communities, cultural infusions, and emerging human habitats.

Are these changes evidence of degrowth, detachment, and de-urbanization, or signs of rural rebirth, regeneration, and rediscovery? What cultural infusions blend into the rural air? What human habitats flow and find niches within the rural web of life?

By reflecting on these dynamics, the panel seeks to uncover the stories and patterns shaping the rural spaces of tomorrow.

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## PANEL 2. RURAL REPRESENTATIONS

### How to Map a *Pluriversal* Rurality

When we talk about the rural, various forms of knowledge and experiences converge. The concept of *pluriversal ruralities* seems to offer a fitting framework that challenges monolithic or singular narratives about rural areas to recognize the diverse, interconnected, and often overlapping ways rural spaces are experienced, understood, and represented.

This panel welcomes contributions that take a *pluriversal* approach to representing and mapping *ruralities*, focusing on the often invisible but significant processes, agents, and practices that shape and transform rural areas. Rural livelihoods often operate on different temporal and spatial scales than the Cartesian framework. For example, rural time aligns with natural cycles like day and night or changing seasons, reflecting planetary rhythms instead of strict clock time. Similarly, rural spaces can be experienced on both micro and macro scales, as seen in activities like fishing, which connect local daily practices to broader environmental systems.

Another typical hurdle to conveying the complexity of rural worlds in their entanglement with more-than-human agents. Rural ecosystems and cosmologies are deeply embedded in intricate interspecies relationships, which challenge disciplinary silos and demand engagement with diverse forms of knowledge—scientific, artistic, and traditional alike.

This panel uses a *pluriversal* approach to reimagine rural spaces, exploring alternative ways of knowing, sensing, and being unique to rural areas. It invites discussions that move beyond traditional frameworks, offering richer and more inclusive perspectives on the rural.

## PANEL 3. REVITALIZING RURAL TERRITORIES

### From Productivism to Care

The notion of an abandoned rural territory often emerges from a shift in productive paradigms: from a model rooted in subsistence and care practices to one that treats the more-than-human as a resource to exploit. Wind farms, intensive monocultures, biomass production, mining, and other extractive industries define this new rural landscape—one requiring fewer people but greater mechanization, transforming the countryside into a vast factory.

Mechanization has indeed profoundly impacted rural areas, intensifying productivity while severing connections with local communities. However, this model has proven unsustainable, leaving rural environments vulnerable to environmental and economic crises. In response, emerging rural economies—such as agroecology, sustainable tourism, and diversified local production—propose alternatives that blend care with productivity. These approaches aim not just to maximize output but to restore balance with ecosystems, fostering biodiversity and community well-being.

We invite contributions that help us reimagine the rural space as a place for sustainable and equitable production, by revisiting the remnants left on these territories, like forgotten infrastructures that were once efficient. We wish to disclose the opportunities that repurposing, reinventing, and reusing the existing offer, allowing a new rhythm of productivity outside *extractivism*.

Have the rural territories ever ceased to be productive? And is the quest of productivity the right answer? Our hypothesis is that revitalizing these territories is not merely a matter of productivity but a vital step toward reconnecting the human with the more-than-human, the past with the future, and the care-less with the care-full.

## PANEL 4. THE LIVEABILITY OF RURAL PLACES

### Design and Co-creation

In recent decades, the issue of liveability in extra-urban areas has re-emerged on European agendas, capturing the attention of institutional and political stakeholders and highlighting the landscape and architectural significance of rurality.

Building on the premise that pre-industrial and industrial modes of production coexist within increasingly complex, globalized supply chains intersecting rural areas, this panel seeks to move beyond the perception of these territories merely as sources of natural and economic exploitation, or as the backhouse for urban civilization. It aims to explore the innovation brought by economies and processes rooted in short and horizontal production chains, which avoid traditional capitalist vertical specialization, thanks notably to the creative input of their communities.

The focus will be laid on the territorial and architectural forms resulting from such innovation, and on the sometimes-fragile processes sustaining them. The ambition is to reflect on the evolving role of design and planning disciplines. While some of these issues also manifest in metropolitan contexts, rural areas provide greater freedom for experimentation and creativity. Here, we are invited to co-design for and with local communities who will care for these spaces, transforming their needs into opportunities for design innovation at both territorial and architectural scales for human and non-human inhabitants.

This panel views the project as a lens for observing these phenomena across different scales, examining the spatial and procedural forms they take. We welcome contributions that engage with this theme, including completed projects, ongoing processes, theoretical reflections based on architectural designs, or fieldwork experiences.

## PANEL 5. DECOLONIZING THE RURAL

### A More-Than-Human Purview

In the field of urban studies, which has predominantly focused on cities as concentrated entities of people, capital, and activities, the transformation of the hinterland has often gone unnoticed and is understood as a parallel process. Yet, the pathways of capitalist urban development have always been intimately intertwined with large-scale transformations of non-urban geographies. These distant and not-so-distant hinterlands are often viewed as resource pools for urban agglomerations, supplying cities with labour, fuel, materials, and food. While hinterlands have been continuously operationalized in support of city-building processes throughout the global history of capitalist uneven development, rural spaces are not merely passive recipients of capital influx. Instead, they represent highly specific and multilayered environments that resist, adapt, and often persist within our globalized worlds.

This call seeks contributions that highlight the diversity and richness of rural rituals, practices, and transformations that adapt to the rapid operationalization of rural hinterlands, while framing the environment not as a resource to be exploited but as a living system requiring respect and reciprocity. We aim to explore how rural relations between humans and the more-than-human world have been historically constituted and how they are being reconfigured in the contemporary era. Contributions could include examples of vernacular practices, forms of communication and inclusion involving the more-than-human world, and practices related to land, such as landscape regeneration. We also welcome other forms of research that illuminate the interconnectedness of nature, culture, species, and places.

## PANEL 6. BEYOND THE RURAL FRONTIER

### Global Forces and Local Realities

A growing body of research is exploring a “planetary thinking of the rural,” opposing the idea that rural spaces are merely residual or backward. While globalization has undoubtedly penetrated rural areas, it has not erased their material and cultural characteristics. Instead, rural areas play distinct social, economic, and environmental roles that continue to evolve in an interconnected world.

Can rural spaces be reimagined as sites of political and social action? Do rural communities have the potential to actively reinvent themselves, navigating and countering the homogenizing effects of globalisation? Can the revitalisation of local knowledge, the introduction of alternative forms of land ownership (such as land commons and land banks), and cooperative economic models be the right tools through

which rural areas can assert their capacity for transformation?

We seek both theoretical and applied contributions that challenge the binary opposition between urban and rural, recognising that rural spaces act as dynamic frontiers where global and local forces intersect. Indeed, rural spaces have rarely been passive victims of urban expansion but dynamic environments, negotiating their place in a changing world, and combining established practices with new approaches to sustain their landscapes and communities.

We encourage research that explores the resourcefulness of rural communities and places in leveraging global forces, focusing on the interactions and conflicts that might arise, and the impacts of place-based advocacy. By investigating these local responses, we can gain a more nuanced view of rurality, one that recognises its complexity and potential to drive transformative change.

## CALENDAR

- Deadline for submissions of abstracts: February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025.
- Notification of acceptance and format of papers: March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025.
- Submission of final draft: June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025.
- Discussion of submitted papers: July 3-4, 2025 (during the Symposium).
- Submission of a finalized version of the selected papers: August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025.
- Book publication: spring 2026.

## SUBMISSION

In case you wish to submit an abstract, proceed to the form at the bottom and submit your abstract of 600 words maximum by **February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025**. Please, note that even if the abstract can be authored by several people, only one person can be the recipient of all further communication with the symposium organizers.

The abstract should summarize a research, project or idea relevant to the symposium's panels discussed above. All submissions should specify the **format** of the proposed contribution, either as a long or a short paper. Independently of the format, all papers will be considered during one of the six panel discussions the symposium foresees.

- Short contributions are ideal for sparking dialogue and providing an overview of design or artistic work, ongoing projects, or applied explorations (full paper of maximum 1000 words or A2-poster size).
- Long contributions allow for comprehensive exploration and critical engagement with the symposium's key questions and challenges (full paper of maximum 4000 words).

Additionally, proposals must specify:

- The name(s) of the contributor(s)
- Their affiliation (university, workplace, association, etc.)
- Their email address(es)
- Their affinity to **up to two** of the six topics addressed in the symposium.

On the website, <https://newruralities.eu/symposiums>, a Word template is available for participants to fill and upload it as requirement for participation.

## CONTACT AND QUESTIONS

For any question or enquiry please write an email to the following address:  
[symposium@newruralities.eu](mailto:symposium@newruralities.eu)

## SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE AND COORDINATION

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