Xiashi is a small, 450-year-old village in China’s rural Fujian province. The village is located in a hilly area and gently slopes down to the west from its entrance. It is home to 300 families and has a population of 700; the main occupation is grapefruit farming. The housing stock is changing rapidly, and the traditional earthen-walled and tiled-roofed housing, known as tulou, is quickly being replaced by concrete-frame structures with brick infill. Dating back approximately 400 years, the tulou is a fortress-like typology that housed extended families within thick, circular walls that rose up four storeys. The living quarters were located along the peripheral mud wall, and the central space was for communal use. A creek runs through the centre of the village, and there had been no crossing over it for many years.

Chen Jianshen, an architecture student from a nearby village, ventured into Xiashi while visiting his home, and he learned from the village chief that they needed a primary school. His professor, the architect Li Xiaodong, had built a school in another village that had won praise and many awards. The student approached his professor with the idea of building a Xiashi school, and he was immediately interested. The local government could not provide funds for the entire project, so the architect donated some of his own money and helped to raise the rest. His student agreed to stay in the village and supervise the construction.

The village had not designated a site for the school, and Li Xiaodong saw an opportunity in the presence of the creek and the village history of social division and stagnation. The idea of a bridge emerged. Not only could it house the simple functions required for the school but it could also physically and symbolically unify the community. The idea of a building as a bridge, although not unknown in other parts of the world, was a new concept for the community. The Bridge School creates a public space for the village, which it previously did not have, and gives new meaning to the tulous by opening up views towards them—a reminder of past building traditions.

The school structure is made of two steel trusses that span the creek. Though a new technology to the village, steel was considered appropriate for its strength and economy of size, durability and ease of maintenance. The members were fabricated elsewhere and assembled on site. Each truss has three sections: the two ends that support the two classrooms and the middle
section that supports the library. From each end section, cantilevered corridors slope up to the central space to access the classrooms. The school’s form and circulation route shifts from one side to the other via the central space, and the classrooms are wedge-shaped with a stepped gallery floor. A small wooden stage on a steel frame cantilevers out from the northern classroom, and the southern classroom can also be reached through a sloped steel surface that the children also use as a slide. Underneath the school, a pedestrian bridge is suspended with steel cables, making an irregular pattern that gently zigzags diagonally across. The trusses transfer the load of the structure by resting on concrete bases on either side of the creek. The one on the northern side is shallow and the one to the south higher, which allows for a small shop to be nestled within it. The facade treatment of narrow timber strips helps moderate the light and keep the interior in shade.

The arrangement of the two classrooms is very simple. If compared to the standard school typology of corridor and classrooms, in this organisation, three sides of the classrooms are exposed for ample light and air flow. The architect designed minimalist classroom furniture from local pinewood; there are bookcases along the end wall, and the children sit on the gallery steps and work on wooden desks that can also become stools for adults.

The building’s design is small and modern, and sensitive to the village scale. It makes no reference to traditional building styles of the area but offers a quiet and dignified presence that is striking in its simplicity.
Jury Citation

When architect Li Xiaodong was asked to build a tiny school for a small village crossed by a river, he had the inspiration of placing it on a new bridge, near the spot where two ancient tulou—traditional fortress-like, circular structures—were erected on either side of the river. The very modern structure not only blends successfully into the landscape, it also succeeds in joining the bulky forms of the two historic structures through a linear lightweight sculpture that floats above the river.

By placing the school on the bridge, underneath which the waters flow, the architect is giving the most important lesson a child can learn: life is transient, not one second of it similar to the next. The structure’s lightness and playfulness, and its naturalness, as though it had always existed in the landscape, appeals to the children, who use it as a big toy. These qualities, and the sense of security the children feel, all come from the excellence of the architecture, from the project’s concept to its smallest physical details.

The Bridge School achieves unity at many levels: temporal unity between past and present, formal unity between traditional and modern, spatial unity between the two riverbanks, social unity between one-time rival communities—as well as unity with the future.