

Don't Underestimate the Rice Fields

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Abstract

With an official municipal history of only 25 years, Shenzhen's stunning speed of urban development has been the subject of much analysis and debate. While some applaud the city as a successful model of modern planning in Asia, others consider it devoid of history and culture. However, as different as their opinions may be, all seem to agree that Shenzhen leapt to its current condition from nothing, and that the former village settlements that were once in the territory have been completely erased by modern urbanization. This paper challenges this generally accepted notion by presenting the "Villages in the City" in Shenzhen as transformations of former agrarian villages and one of the most important instruments to the on-going urbanization process in Shenzhen. Developed outside of the jurisdiction of municipal planning and regulations, these former village sites have each become urban environments in their own right, together presenting a rich variety of informal modes of urbanization. Analysis of these village sites presents a re-evaluation of existing theories on the development process of Shenzhen. With the current demand for new models of urban theory and tools of implementation that encourages open and flexible urbanism, this unique urban phenomenon contains valuable dynamic processes and sustainable strategies.

1 The Fabled Tabula Rasa

*"In Shenzhen there are rice fields and then, without any intermediate condition, the metropolis."*¹

Rem Koolhaas

In observation of the current stagnating practice of contemporary architecture and urbanism, Rem Koolhaas laments the lack of optimism once exhibited by Le Corbusier's grand vision of the modern city starting from scratch, *Tabula Rasa*. In his enthusiastic search for the next model of urban development, Shenzhen was heralded as the miracle city that leapt from "nothing" to a large metropolis without any intermediary steps. Certainly Koolhaas is not alone in this assumption, ask anyone who has ever heard of Shenzhen and most will tell you that it is a young city with plenty of *bling* and no history. Since the year 2000, Shenzhen has had higher GDP per Capita and higher rate of economic growth than Beijing or Shanghai, exceed by its neighboring purely-capitalistic city of Hong Kong. Presently Shenzhen has amassed a population of 12 million from an original number that is commonly perceived as dismissible, or by Mr. Koolhaas' account, zero. However, had it begun as a true Tabula Rasa, Shenzhen would could hardly exist as we know it today. The present pervasive account of Shenzhen's developmental history and process, including Koolhaas' analysis on the city, does not accurately represent its growth and transformation.

¹ Koolhaas, et al, *Mutations* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000) pp. 318.

2 The Rice Field of Dreams

The city of Shenzhen was called into existence in 1979 with the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone under the grand vision of then Premier Deng Xiao-Ping. The chosen territory of 2000 square kilometers in China's Pearl River Delta region was occupied by several thousand agrarian villages at that time. These villages had cultivated the regional land and water for hundreds of years and each village collectively owned the land of their living settlements and farmlands. Under the rousing slogan of "To Get Rich is Glorious," Shenzhen was designated to become the Chinese government's controlled experiment of "Capitalism with Socialist Character" where the generation of wealth rules the day. The central government eventually purchased all land from the villages. Payment varied depending on individual villages. When money was given, the land value was calculated at rural farming land price. In most cases, each male member of the villages received a plot of land to build a house as compensation. The designated land parcels were clustered together, mostly on the communal grounds of the original villages. Considering the issue of the villages settled, the government went about the serious and profitable business of turning the rice fields and fishing ponds into a brand-new and super-modern city. If that was the end to the history of the original villages, Koolhaas et al would have been mostly correct, and we would have missed an opportunity to examine the remarkable development of resilient self-organization and a powerful display of informal urbanization.

3 Villages in the City

At a glance, present-day Shenzhen is the textbook example of a centrally planned modern city with large distinct districts of zoned developments linked by high-speed vehicular arteries all set in manicured lush greenery. The city's fast-paced urban development is applauded and emulated as a monumental precedent of modern urban planning in Asia. However, within this planned landscape there exist hidden pockets of anomalous developments packed with illegal construction, substandard housing and colorful nightlife. Dubbed "Villages in the City," these are the resilient remnants of the former dismissed villages.

Due to favorable trade policies and the abundance of nearly-free land, Shenzhen grew rapidly in the 90s, attracting foreign investment and ambitious industries. Eventually, most of the cultivation fields were turned into land for industrial and urban developments. Meanwhile the flourishing businesses and industries attracted massive floods of people from all over China seeking work. The city attempted to build temporary housing settlements for the incoming population but simply could not meet the magnitude of housing needed for instantaneous population growth by hundreds of thousands. The overwhelming demand for cheap housing prompted massive scales of housing construction by the former villagers on their parceled land.

Originally intended for a single family dwelling, most of the land parcels were around 120 square meters, intended to hold a private residence regulated to be within 80 square meters in footprint less, and than 3 stories tall. This original regulation was cast aside when it became obvious that the potential economic gains of rent were to be many times over the government fines. Most of the two story dwellings were torn down to build four story high apartments, which were then torn to build at 8 stories and higher. Since these constructions were deemed illegal to begin with, there was no building standard or code to be adhered to. Each villager built their buildings to the maximum floor area and height according to his financial ability. Quality of construction and living environment were dependent upon the consideration of investment versus profit deliberated by each individual builder. The villages quickly became the most densely built areas in the entire city of Shenzhen. Eventually the pockets of settlements put aside for the former villagers became the standard choice for anyone arriving in Shenzhen seeking temporary or affordable housing. These "Villages in the City" currently occupy 10% of the total land area of Shenzhen, yet they are home to an estimated 6 million people, half of the total population of the city.

4 Two Realities

Up until 1993, those living in these Villages were considered of *Farmer Hukou*, or rural residency; while those living outside were considered *City Hukou*, urban residency. This meant that those living inside these areas were not eligible for any civic services such as schools, governmental jobs or even public hospitals in the city proper. The laws, regulations and benefits applying to the legal urban residents of Shenzhen did not apply to anyone living inside of the Villages, turning them into self-governing rural-status islands in the midst of the fastest and fiercest development environment in China. Enclosed by the city's new developments and circumvented by public infrastructure and civic services, the Villages exist in sharp contrast to the surrounding new business centers, governmental complexes, technology parks and gated communities. The Villages' separate political, social and economic status led to the formation of a densely-built environment independent of zoning and code regulations yet responsive to the political, economic and social transformations of the city. Millions serve in the "urban" workplaces and at night, crossed the street returned to their "rural" homes.

It should be without a doubt that Shenzhen's incredible speed of development and prosperity would be impossible without the rural migrant workers in the city. Nearly all of them live in these Villages throughout the city's most developed and prosperous areas. From initial construction to the present service sector of the city and major industrial companies, the production labor force in Shenzhen is nearly entirely composed of rural surplus labor from various regions in China. These migrants come to Shenzhen to seek work and wages, for most, to support their families left behind in their home province. Everywhere on the streets in these villages are long distance phone booths to maintain connections between distant families. Some migrants brought their family to the city; others have stayed long enough to form new families. The life style and social network of these urban villages is surprisingly rural, considering their incredibly urban environment. The rural migrants have formed new village-like environments in these villages, which logically provided them with familiar social support and network.

5 Village Micro-Urbanism

Fundamental societal needs such as community centers, schools and recreational spaces are creatively generated due to constraints and economy. The leftover spaces from the construction on individual land parcels naturally formed constricted streets only allowing pedestrian and non-motorized vehicles. In the daytime people everywhere are working in the street-front shops or simply on the streets, those too old or young for work also gather and socialize on the streets. In the evenings, everywhere on the streets are people chattering, drinking tea, playing cards and shooting pool.

5.1 History: Tiled House as Civic Space



Figure 1: Former village communal grounds becomes basketball courts during the day and food markets at night.

5.2 Community: Ancestral Temple as Gym



Figure 2 : Ancestral Temples becomes tea parlors for the elderly while the area adjacent transforms into workout rooms complete with Nautilus machines and boxing bags for the youth.

5.3 Education: Parking Garage as School



Figure 3 : Abandoned parking garages are renovated into elementary schools outside of the city’s educational jurisdiction.

5.4 Recreation: Street as Pool Parlor



Figure 4: Pool tables line out along the main access streets in the villages to form the main recreational space for the residents.

6 “Village Reformation”

In March of 2005, the Shenzhen Municipal government first declared the “Reformation of Villages in the City” as its major mission. Citing illegal activities, fire hazards, health concerns, and unregulated construction as key issues detrimental to the stable development of the city, various solutions were explored. One of which was complete removal of the physical buildings and redevelopment of the then vacated land. Several notoriously colorful villages well known for gangs, gambling and prostitution were completely demolished and, with governmental funding and developers’ planning, reconstructed as gated housing communities. However, the city has since recognized that the heavy subsidy to the developers in the end does not actually solve the issue of the Villages, rather, it benefits mostly the developer and the few original villagers. Much of the problems, along with renters that

could not afford the newly-constructed and therefore much higher-cost apartments, just migrated to other Villages. Some issues, such as gambling and prostitution, actually remained in the newly developed properties, just in better organized and disguised forms.

The demolition and relocation of these few sites has also sparked heated debates in Shenzhen on its cultural and architectural values. Works done by artists have mainly concentrated on the cultural and social character of the Villages; while architects have focused on the spatial and visual appeal of the amazingly dense built environments. With similar new village sites currently forming outside of the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, the demand for an adequate solution is ever pressing.

Since 2005, the city government has formed special offices and organizations seeking for solutions to these problematic Villages in the City and to reform them into more sanitized and appropriately developed districts suitable for the modernized image of Shenzhen. However, since these Villages actively contribute to the urban development of Shenzhen as a whole, the “reformation” cannot be focused merely on the village sites as isolated “problem areas.” Just as the urbanization process of Shenzhen cannot be effectively analyzed without consideration and acknowledgement of the Villages; viewing them as a separate entity from the entire city negates the important role these Villages play in the urbanization process. Any sustainable proposals for the future of the Villages in the city, or the future of Shenzhen, need to begin with the recognition that these areas, whatever their qualities, are indispensable components of the city.

7 Learning from Villages in the City

Architecture and urbanism need to transcend the pursuit of the *image* of the formal or the informal and pay attention to the organizational processes and logics of those formations. If architects are to have any substantial role in the influence of cities beyond urban-scaled decoration, the very complex and nuanced process of urbanization needs to be analyzed in order to design and reshape the future development of the living environment. The phenomenon of these Villages in Shenzhen holds many lessons to be learned both of the inadequacies of formal urban planning and the potentials of self-organization and informal development.

The original 1981 Master Plan of Shenzhen had a targeted population of 1 million by the year 2000, when the actual population by then grew to around 10 million. The subsequent two Master Plans of 1985 and 1993 did not fare much better in predicting and planning adequately for the city. The heavy handed planning, zoning, and large scale development apparently occurred in parallel with the rapid urbanization and growth of the city and its economy. However, it is this paper’s position that all those in praise of the miraculous rise of Shenzhen should truly show appreciation to the Villages in the City, despite its humble beginnings of mere rice fields.