

Underneath the Highway

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In the early 1980s, the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region was transformed into a vast manufacturing hinterland for Hong Kong, as well as an experimental zone for China's new economy. Massive foreign investments from the British colony boosted a region that aspired to become the fifth Asian dragon. Established by entrepreneurs, a politics of *laissez-faire* was successfully injected into local infrastructural projects. Joint ventures and private money propelled a leap that responded to the global economy and accession to the WTO in 1997. The most visible trace of this more recent development is a private highway – a 120km elevated strip between Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Owned by the developer Hopewell Holding and CEO Sir Gordon Wu, the Guangshen Superhighway is a unique platform which links cities and transfers merchandise from factories to container terminals. This suggests that the configuration of this strategic network is no longer determined by local factors but by a private empire that controls the economy, the planning, and, ultimately, the culture of a region. The dual 3-lane toll expressway provides 18 interchanges designed by Sir Gordon Wu (who is also an architect). Obviously the strategic position of these junctions has increased the surrounding land value and encouraged the formation of an urban corridor that will eventually transform the PRD region into a single sprawling metropolis (eventually encompassing a population of 40 million and 41,698 km²). A commercial structure was built at each interchange. Inspired by Le Corbusier's Plan Obus for Algiers, the buildings were intended to serve an ambitious mixed-use program – commerce, office, factory, and dormitory – directly plugged into the underbelly of the infrastructure. Most of the 18 buildings were abandoned soon after completion. Today they shelter migrant squatters. Traveling at 120 km-hour down the highway, careful to avoid frequent car crashes, stray domestic animals or wreck-

lessly driven buses and container trucks, you become accustomed to the spectacle of a ravaged landscape undergoing massive reconstruction. Between factories, dormitories, and trash areas, streams and ponds of polluted water hint at the amplitude of the disaster, suggesting the future possibility of a dehumanized world. For now, however, the reality is utterly different. Life carries on for a floating population of 10 million people who produce the *Made in China* label. Living in dormitories attached to the factories, these new migrants have spontaneously appropriated the only large, sheltered space available – the superhighway. Under the highway, a massive open market has sprung up, where workers develop new social networks. It is a place where commodities are sold, services offered, and food and entertainment consumed. You can take a chair, order a meal and watch a DVD on TV. Where several chairs cluster together, entertainment islands are created. The highway provides a roof and support for lighting and electricity. Another form of energy comes from the transitory condition of the land, the people, the flashing TV screens, digital noise, and neon light. In the shadow of the highway, innovative economic activities arise and change according to the social demand. This hidden urbanity, which thrives on the vitality of a population almost entirely under the age of 25, represents the motor that powers the PRD region.
