

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

Euphorigenic Landscapes – issue 1.0

Sören Schöbel, Daniel Czechowski (Ed.)

(Schriftenreihe - LAREG, Bd. 12/

Monograph Series - Department of

Landscape Architecture and

Regional Open Space, Vol. 12)

© 2013

Fachgebiet für Landschaftsarchitektur

regionaler Freiräume

Technische Universität München

All rights reserved. This publication is protected by copyright. No part of this book may be printed without permission of the editors.

LAREG



SHENZHEN
22° 33'N 114° 06'E

SIZE	2,050 KM ²
POPULATION	10,357,938
DENSITY	5,100/KM ²
ELEVATION	12 M
TIME ZONE	CHINA STANDARD (UTC+8)

THE DREAM CITY OR NOT? THE URBAN REVOLUTION OF SHENZHEN

Yuting Xie

If you want to interpret the modern history of urban revolution in China, Shenzhen is a must be read city. It is the window to view the adventurous exploration and continuous self-reflection in building what kind of city form that really meet the status quo of China. It is a unique city, while controversial; it is a dynamic “dream city”, while some risks still exist.

THE LEVEL OF NATURAL MORPHOLOGY AND CITY HISTORY

Shenzhen is a metropolis in south coastline of China, belonging to Guangdong Province and bordering Hong Kong to the south. Human habitation in Shenzhen dates back to the Neolithic Era; however, as a city, it has a history of only 32 years. In August 1980, Shenzhen, used to be known as Bao'an Country, was formally nominated as “China’s first-and one of the most successful-Special Economic Zones” (Wikipedia) due to its geographic location and the policy of “Reform and Opening Up”. Geographically, Shenzhen is surrounded by mountains and faces the open sea on the south side with breathtak-

ing natural beauty; however, since established as a special economic zone, Shenzhen has witnessed a drastic change in landscape during the process of rapid urbanization over 30 years. Through deforestation and land reclamation, the once mountain-to-sea spatial pattern of Shenzhen no longer exists. The original hilly agriculture landscape is now replaced mostly by flat cityscape in downtown areas, and there are only Lianhua Hill, Bijing Mountain and Wutong Mountain that still have fluctuant landforms. Meanwhile, the rural areas also have experienced high-density urbanization, only leaving the southeast coastline area still in a primitive stage with unexplored mountains, vegetation, rivers and other green infrastructure. Although some parts of these mountainous coastline areas have been developed as seaside resorts, most villages among them retain the original lifestyle, residing at traditional settlements and living on fishing, which carry the residual city memories. “Shenzhen”, in local dialect, literally means “deep drains” as this area was once “crisscrossed by rivers and streams - and still is, today - with deep drains in the paddy fields” (Shenzhen Government Online). The river system of Shenzhen now has rare main streams but a large quantity of small rivers, which are widely distributed in the city.

The small amount of runoff and poor water storage have driven Shenzhen to build more than 240 reservoirs since late 1950s responding to limited natural fresh water resources, which fulfill the ever-growing urban water consumption and also supply Hong Kong with fresh water via dedicated pipelines (Wikipedia). The integral water system remains basically unchanged during the urban revolution, while it faces the decrease of water quantity, deterioration of water quality, outdated water management and other issues, and furthermore most rivers within this region go across the built-up areas, which result in severe flood threats¹.

As for the climate, Shenzhen, in a transitional region from the tropics to subtropics, has a monsoon-influenced subtropical marine climate with plentiful sunshine and rainfall all year round. All the seasons are pleasant except summer months when the city experiences very hot, humid weather. For this reason, vegetation coverage and shady places are of the utmost importance in urban life.

Shenzhen has rich vegetation resources and biodiversity as its special transitional climate is suitable for the growth of both tropical and subtropical plants. But recent studies show that the rapid urbanization has significant impact on the local vegetation coverage degrada-

tion, especially in platforms and terraces. The main causes are the invasion of urbanized areas to farmlands, forests and orchards, and usual shortage of green lands in new built-up areas². Responding to this, Shenzhen focus on strengthening the protection and restoration of remnant forests and consolidating the greenbelt construction inside the built-up areas. Now, Shenzhen has the largest number of parks among Chinese cities and the urban green coverage rate reaches 45%, which makes Shenzhen a livable city.

THE LEVEL OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN DREAM CITY

Shenzhen culture is actually a diverse immigrant culture, which is the embodiment of Shenzhen people's lifestyles and values, inclusive, yet unique. It is the biggest immigrant city in China, with only 25% local residents of total population (Guangdong Statistical Yearbook 2011). In the 1980s, Shenzhen meant a new open world with freedom providing equal opportunities for prosperity and success when the whole Chinese society remained in a state of self-seclusion. Thousands of immigrants streamed into Shenzhen with the "Shenzhen Dream" (just like the "American Dream") at that time.

Shenzhen is a young city that benefits from "Demographic Dividend" with a

spindle-shaped population structure. At present, the average age in Shenzhen is around 30 (2010 Sixth National Population Census Data Gazette). Young means vivid, innovative and everything is possible. Indeed, the immigrant influx does contribute to the advanced industry, prosperous culture and social democracy.

As economic basis determines social ideology, the lifestyle of Shenzhen people has gone through a revolution. In 1980s, the public was interested in expensive indoor entertainments. While in 1990s, economic growth promoted the public's taste for high-end indoor and outdoor combined activities, such as a tourist to theme parks. When stepping into the new century, the popularity of low cost, demotic and diverse outdoor activities were accompanied by the modern urban park movement³. There used to be no "Open Space" or "Urban Park" concept in Chinese urban planning history. The introduction of western planning concepts and practices to the Shenzhen's urban planning has undergone a process from alienation to integration. The planned open space was rare to be used in the very beginning, and then tuned to be mass used. With the adjustment in design and improvement of management, the open space has been efficiently used and fulfilled the functions of modern

city, which injects vigor into urban life in the end.

The urban open space in Shenzhen is mainly made up of urban parks based on remnant mountain landscapes of Lianhua Hill, Bijia Mountain and Wutong Mountain and theme parks in flat urbanized area. The Window of the World, Chinese Folk Culture Village, Happy Valley, and Splendid China in Overseas Chinese Town were the most famous Chinese theme parks. They not only developed abundant entertainment facilities and reasonable layouts, but also incorporated both local culture and international ideas to start over an entertainment revolution in China⁴. And these theme parks were the windows to see the world for inexperienced people in last century. The suburban open space consists of forest parks in west Phoenix Mountain and Yangtai Mountain, besides beach resorts in the southeast coastline, like the Dameisha Promenade and Xiaomeisha Beach Resort.

Nevertheless, despite glorious appearance, Shenzhen faces many problems in everyday life level. The social class of emigrants polarizes into two opposing extremes: intellectual class with a high level of education, and migrant worker class with poor education. With widely different incomes, the social segregation is serious between these two

groups. Intellectuals hold all advantageous resources of the global system in the “dream city”. They live in well-planned residential areas and enjoy the convenience of urban life, such as diverse public services and accessible open space. On the contrary, migrant workers fight in the relatively weak local system and are poorly integrated in urban life. They always live in factory dormitories or rent in “Urban Villages” (low living standard neighborhoods that lag behind the high-speed urbanization in Chinese cities) which are overcrowded and lack of municipal facilities. Intensive works and continued lifestyles of hometown basically confine their social life and leisure activities within the surroundings of narrow living space. The local system and global system run parallel in this city, and the life circles of both groups are rare to meet.

Ironically, both groups in Shenzhen have a low sense of belonging. They are just passers in the “dream city”, fighting for a bright future and taking the fortune back to hometown to share with their families; thus, Shenzhen is a city without roots.

THE LEVEL OF FRAGMENTED GLOBAL SYSTEM

Shenzhen, one of thousand “Generic Cites” (Rem Koolhaas) in the world,

has an exotic and fragmented global system. It is the experimental plot to text what kind of city form that really meets the status quo of China. All kinds of avant-garde and revolutionary planning or design theories along with practices worldwide have been imported to shape the urban space of Shenzhen. But this strategy leads to fragmented land use and utterly different space features of these fragments. It seems splendid as a whole, while superficial and less of identity by checking each fragment.

REGIONAL SCALE

Shenzhen is one of the leading cities in Pearl River Delta region. Since 1979, this region has become “one of the most vibrant and promising areas” in China due to its rapid socio-economic development, while the promotion was accompanied by some long-standing issues, including chaotic urban sprawl, degradation of regional green lands and weak regional cooperation⁵. In face of these issues, Guangdong Provincial Government started up the project-“Pearl River Delta Greenway Network” in 2010, and planned to finish the construction of six regional greenways (a total length of 1690km) within three years⁶.

The regional greenway network under Shenzhen’s jurisdiction consists of

linear green open spaces, connecting main urban parks, nature reserves and scenic spots in mountain areas, west to east coastline corridor and some residential areas for pedestrians and cyclists. It is supposed to protect the local natural environment and cultural heritage and provide residents with sufficient recreation and interaction space. But under the construction period, it raised controversial debate on stripping the natural layer to build new artificial landscapes with unnecessary expanse. Its functionality and accessibility for residents in everyday life are to be examined when the project will be finished in 2012.

CITY SCALE

As for city scale, in the “1986 Overall Urban Planning”, Shenzhen was established as multi-center and conglomeration structured city to avoid endless urban sprawl. Besides, the planning placed greenbelts, urban parks, nature reserves and agricultural lands between each conglomeration, which dissolved the whole city in green infrastructures. It is well known that the urban planning is always difficult to be implemented. Although Shenzhen manages well in land use control in city scale, it fails to build livable spatial pattern in district or community scale. Actually, the urban image of Shenzhen turns out to

be like any other American style metropolitan, full of skyscrapers, large-scale districts and broad motorways with traffic congestion.

NEIGHBORHOOD SCALE

Turning to neighborhood scale, the city comprises many fragments that are dynamic and easy to operate. And these fragments present the rethinking accompanied by practices in different periods of city history.

Chinese residential areas typically are enclosing and have gated boundaries, and their expansion results in the segregation of urban space and absence of public open space⁷. In recent years, along with the wave of globalization, a variety of exotic residential areas have been chased by Shenzhen people. When the superficial exoticism is no longer fresh, people begin to recall the regionality and are in favor of “new Chinese style” residences characterized by Chinese symbols, with Wanke Fifth Garden as a milestone; however, neither exoticism nor Chinese symbols can restore the traditional lifestyle of local settlements.

The Overseas Chinese Town is a special case, bringing in the European lifestyle to build a town scale community. It was once located in part of an industrial zone, and flourished after the establishment of theme parks in this area. The

sudden emergence of prosperous tourism industry drove the development of tertiary industry and real estate. Then, under a continuous dynamic planning, The Overseas Chinese Town grew organically, and finally a mature community with compact layout and mixed functions came into shape⁸. The community emphasized on the open system that connected the internal open space with surrounding urban space, and constructed both pedestrian and bicycle systems throughout the whole area. Meanwhile, the community maximized the reserve of green infrastructure, and used native shady plants and low maintenance materials to build artificial landscapes

THE MEDIATING LEVEL, BETWEEN THE PARALLEL LOCAL AND GLOBAL SYSTEM

Shenzhen, as a Generic City, has the “free style” as the definition of its aesthetics⁹. The generic cityscape is a collage of local system and global system, which run parallel in this city, conflicting and without integration. The overly regular urban sections, standing for the global level now, came into being at the early stage of urban development when the political power was omnipotent. Meanwhile, the local system driven by natural morphology level and everyday life level just self-destructs and renews,

with increasingly free style layouts everywhere. So, if there is a mediating level that could reconcile and intersect these two systems.

Primarily, a focus on the “Urban Village”, the product of contradiction and conflict between these two systems, is requisite. These villages were originally located in the suburb, but afterwards the government expropriated all or most of farmlands and converted them into built-up lands during the urban expansion, whereas the house sites of former villages retained due to the high compensation (Wikipedia). Soon after the transformation, the villages tend to be surrounded by rising skyscrapers, transportation and other modern urban infrastructure of the global system, just like mosaics collaged in well planned, regular urban sections. Most of them are heavily populated, lack of infrastructure and associated with poor public security.

Nevertheless, urban villages are not essentially equivalent to slums of western cities. In terms of social formation, urban villages are traditional agricultural society overlaid by temporary immigrant society¹⁰. Economically, they are actually chaotic low living cost neighborhoods, inhabited by the poor and newcomers who started their dreams in Shenzhen as a buffer area. And for spatial formation, they are newly built

high-density villages in rectangular layout while some still preserve cultural landscapes like ancestral temples and historic districts.

Urban villages are regarded as the “cancer” of city and cannot be rapidly removed due to negative social effects and instability; however, they are also the liveliest areas in city carrying with regional characters and city memories. Therefore, well transformed urban villages have the potential to be a link between global level and everyday life level.

As the once mountain-to-sea spatial pattern of Shenzhen no longer exists, then, how to link the remnant natural morphology level with the other levels? The ongoing greenway network could be a precise hit, which itself belongs to the global level. The linear green open space will not merely connect main urban parks, nature reserves, scenic spots and coastline corridor in natural morphology level, but also cover some residential areas for everyday life. The pity is that the green-way network only covers the splendid urban sections of global system, while ignoring the urban villages in local system; it only works for the intellectuals who possess advantageous recourses, while excluding the everyday life of vulnerable immigrant workers.

Thus an assumption could be made: an extended greenway network covering fragments of urban villages will in deed function well as a mediating level. And it will be a link in substantial space, also in social ideology, which will carry the residual city memories and local culture, as well as provide those city passers with a sense of belonging. Until then, instead of economic benefits as the only reason, people will take root here, for a better quality of urban life.

CONCLUSION

The current loss of mediating level, in fact, results from the compressed urban revolution of Shenzhen city. From the perspective of Henri Lefèbvre, the urban revolution will normally undergo a process of “Political City”, “Mercantile City”, “Industry City” and finally to “Urban City” in space-time axis through centuries¹¹. While, Shenzhen shifted from a fishing village to an international urban city within only 32 years’ growth of special economic zone. There are always negative effects when human beings go against the laws of natural revolution; therefore, it is necessary to figure out the driving forces that shape the city in each period and utilize them to build Shenzhen a real “dream city”.

ENDNOTES

¹ Li, C. (2004). General Discussions of River Regulation in Shenzhen. *China Water Resources* (1) (in Chinese).

² Li, Y., Zeng, H., Wei, J. (2008). Vegetation Change in Shenzhen City based on NDVI Change Classification. *Chinese Journal of Applied Ecology* 19 (5): 1064-1070 (in Chinese).

³⁺⁴ He, F., Zhuang, R., Qian, Q., Suo, X., & Li, H. (2009). The Practitioner of Urban Great Park-Shenzhen Thoughts on Landscape Architecture. *Guangdong Landscape Architecture* 31(Z1): 15-25 (in Chinese).

⁵ Wang, G., Yu, Y., Zhu, J. (2011). The Action Planning of Regional Green Land in Pearl River Delta. Paper presented at 47th ISOCARP Congress, Wuhan, China.

⁶ Guangdong City and Town Planning and Design Research Institute. (2010). Master Planning Outline for the Pearl River Delta Greenway Network (in Chinese).

⁷ Mei, C. (2008). Exploration on Integrated Design of Community and Urban Public Space: A case of Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Town. *Huazhong Architecture* 26(10): 162-165 (in Chinese).

⁸ Zong, L., Xiang, B. (2008). Function Mix of Human Residential Space in Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) in Shenzhen. *Huazhong Architecture* 26(12): 92-96

(in Chinese).

⁹ Koolhaas, R., Mau, B. (1995). *S,M,L,XL*. New York: Monacelli Press.

¹⁰ Li, J. (2005). Realist Issues in UEVs. *China Opening Herald* (3): 43-48 (in Chinese).

¹¹ Lefèbvre, H. (2003). *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.