Projecting Urban Villages in Shenzhen

"There are no fundamental contradictions between a socialist system and a market economy."

—Deng Xiaoping, 1985

MARI A FUJITA

University of British Columbia

The creation of Urban Villages in Shenzhen and other Chinese cities experiencing rapid growth is a product of the confrontation of two systems of land ownership in China. In a city that has grown from 30,000 inhabitants in 1980 to somewhere around 12 million inhabitants 35 years later, urban development has pushed through the peri-urban zone and consumed land in and around rural areas. Today 241 urban villages, or chengzhongcun, in Shenzhen remain as islands in a sea of urbanism, operating simultaneously as 'other' spaces as well as active colluders in the continuing urbanization of Shenzhen.

The situation on the ground in Shenzhen is one that is volatile and in flux; the confrontation of the two systems produce a spatial conflict that actively challenge Deng Xiaoping's suggestion that the socialist system and the market economy are not contradictory. The future
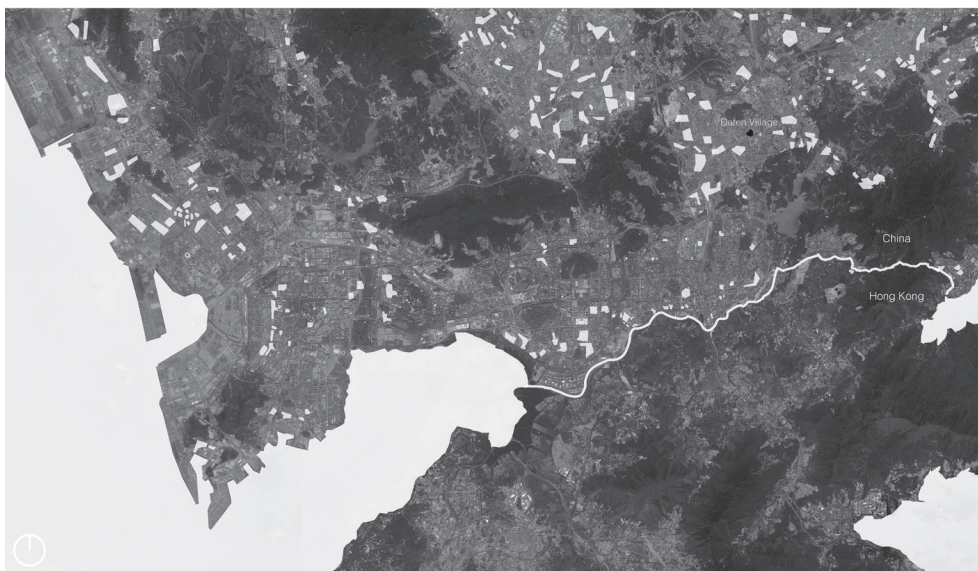
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of the urban villages in Shenzhen is uncertain; the villages are generally perceived as undesirable places by the authorities and are the subject of policies that favor demolishing and redeveloping the areas into commercialized urban housing districts (Song et al). Some of the villages such as the Dafen painter's village have a more secure near future because they have become tourist zones that feature new institutions such as an art gallery and an art school.

As architects and urbanists, how do we study the urban villages of Shenzhen in order to develop productive and original readings that can contribute to meaningful projections of possible futures for Shenzhen? How do we engage the political and spatial history of a place that is the product of a culture that is so different from our (western) one? How do we find the space in which the architect can assert agency and what form does this agency come in? This paper will give a brief history of the urban villages of Shenzhen and then examine three investigations of urban villages from three different projects: the book by Stefan Al titled Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements, "Study on Shenzhen's Urban Villages" by Urbanus Research Group, and "Negotiation" from a special issue of hunch from the Berlage Institute. The three projects offer different approaches to the question of what and how we should know about the city in order to design for it.

HOW DID URBAN VILLAGES COME ABOUT?
Under Mao Zedong land politics became a driving force of the Cultural Revolution. Restructuring of cities and the countryside was an intrinsic part of the plan to create a socialist state in China. The Marxist regime sought to end inequality between workers and peasants by addressing differences between cities and rural areas at one scale and agricultural and industrial regions at another. Fundamentally, private property was banned with the expectation that doing so would terminate the motivation to exploit the underclasses (particularly rural peasants) and thus bring an end to social inequality. During this period two social structures were created that still influences the condition of urban villages today, they are the danwei and the hukou. During the Maoist era the working classes were organized into danwei, or work units. The danwei was an organizational structure surrounding an industry. A worker would be assigned to a danwei which would then form their job, community, social services and local government. They then remained in that role for life. Spatially, cities were restructured to reflect the utility of the danwei. Enclaves were formed around factories and other means of production, providing housing and services such as health and education. The city became an array of such enclaves, each designed in a spirit of uniformity.

Following The Great Leap Forward, the reforms that occurred in cities became institutionalised in the countryside. Private property was again made state property and farmers were organized into communes. These People's Communes collaborated and shared formerly private resources to till the land. The People's Commune was a rural manifestation of the danwei, clustering housing and services around centers of rural production. The communes centralized everything, including meal systems; even individual cooking was banned. A form of household registration called the hokou was also introduced at this time. The hokou required every person and/or family to be registered as a "rural" or "urban" worker. This system effectively rendered migration impossible in a land where everything from food to shelter was controlled by local government. This gave the Communist Party the power to tightly control the populations of cities and rural areas, but that power came at the cost of defeating the ambition to end urban/rural differentiation. An unfordable separation between the lives of those assigned to cities and those assigned to the country had now formed.

In the post-Mao period many restrictions were lifted during a raft of reforms. In 1979 Shenzhen was named the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of China. The city was given legislative special status to engage in the free market. The move was designed to establish the city as a global manufacturing and export hub, leveraging its geographic proximity to Hong

Figure 1: The urban villages of Shenzhen, *drawing by Andrea Comandé*

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Kong and the Pacific Ocean. Many of the restrictions on migration were also removed, to ease the way for rural workers to migrate to create an urban workforce. The rapid economic growth and influx of migrants seeking greater prosperity caused the city to expand rapidly and engulf outlying rural areas. The result is a vast subculture of mobile migrants occupying newly urbanized city segments. Of the total population of China (502 mil), 70 Million are rural migrants working and living in urban areas (from Yan Song et al). However, the holders of rural hokou still cannot obtain crucial city services such as housing or education for their families. Reforms that would fully dismantle the hokou system and assign migrants urban rights to services are slow to emerge and it is possible to perceive a lack of motivation on behalf of policy makers. These displaced workers benefit the economy of China twofold, by providing a low-paid workforce that drives the industrial economy and also by not drawing resources from urban social services, which they are ineligible for due to their official rural status.

Despite their jurisdictional ambiguity rural migrant workers have to live somewhere. The demand is met by inexpensive rental housing units maintained by former rural workers-turned-landlords. There are 2 main types of land ownership in China: state ownership of land that is either administratively allocated or urban, and collective ownership of rural land by rural communities. In the latter system, land is collectively owned by rural communities and is intended for rural production. However, when cities encroached on rural collectively owned land the rural communities retained ownership rights in the new context. Due to the concentric trajectory of expansion they often finding themselves ideally located, directly in the path of incoming migrants seeking shelter. The new landlords have profited from their farms or villages being urbanized by transforming them with dense rental housing units. Shenzhen has 241 such urban villages with a total land area of approximately 43.9 km with approx. 2.15 mil inhabitants (Yan Song et al).

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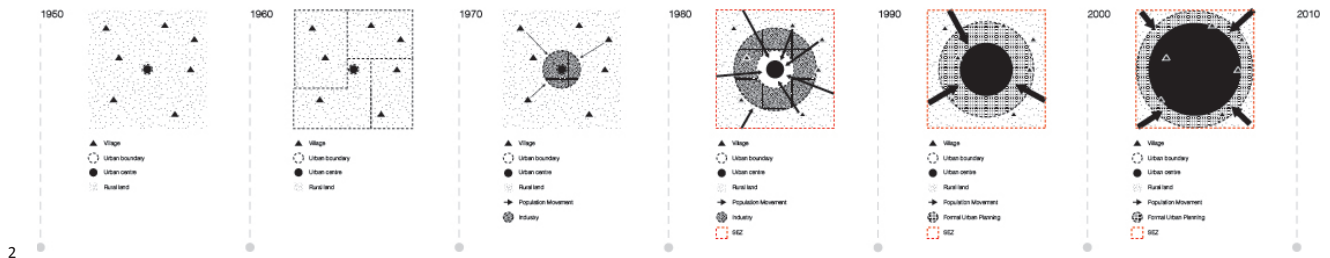
WHAT IS THEIR STATUS TODAY AND WHAT IS THEIR FUTURE?
Shenzhen continues to grow, engulfing and forming new urban villages in the process. Small buildings are replaced with taller ones and each village's original fabric is eventually eradicated. The migrants, who have little recourse but to pay whatever is demanded of them to live in whatever conditions are made available, are vulnerable to exploitation. Great wealth is made by the landlords and the influx of migrants continues. All of this takes place in a culture of jurisdictional ambiguity. There is little in the way of regulation of construction, health and safety or sanitation. Density is reportedly very high, as is crime and pollution. With this negative trend continuing in urban villages, many programes of redevelopment are being proposed. Most schemes focus on the notion of razing the villages, removing village committees from power and allowing real estate developers to build new structures to be managed by commercial companies (Yan Song, et al).

HOW DO WE TEACH THE CITY?
"Paradoxically, therefore, at the very moment in which the urban appears to have acquired an unprecedented strategic significance …, its definitional contours have become unmanageably slippery. The apparent ubiquity of the contemporary urban condition makes it now seem impossible to pin down."—Neil Brenner, 2014.

Figure 2: Timeline showing the urban development of Shenzhen, *drawing by Andrea Comandé*

The phenomenon of urban villages in Chinese cities experiencing rapid growth is the result of many systems and forces, some local, some global: the legal matter of the hukou system, the land-use policy that splits urban and rural, the increased flow of global capital, the off-shoring of manufacturing, and a networked society, to name a few. As the urban condition becomes increasingly ubiquitous, how do we teach architects to be able to contend with and project onto urban conditions when the contours of what is urban are manifold and many involve matters (such as legal, financial) that are beyond the traditional disciplinary knowledge of architecture?

The documents that define a professional education in architecture say very little about teaching the City. Neither NAAB or CACB (the Canadian equivalent) directly mention the urban scale, nor the ability for architects to be able to understand the "boundless range of contemporary sociospatial conditions, processes, transformations, trajectories and potentials" at the scale that Brenner write about. Looking beyond these dry documents, others have offered much broader descriptions of the architect's expertise.

Keller Easterling famously describes the architect as a hacker and a rumor maker (Easterling, 2015). Eyal Weizman runs a research group on Forensic Architecture, in which the architect uses the tools of architecture to affect humanitarian law. In the book Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures the contributors examine the history of the architect's agency and consider the future of how architects will claim agency in their work. One criticism of architects is that at the urban scale, the work has a tendency towards reportage: observing but not projecting. In an interview with Verdran Mimika, the Associate Dean of the Berlage Institute, an argument is made for the need for architects to go beyond mapping because "it assumes mapping and maps are presenting a frozen reality captured at the certain moment which is then diagrammed and presented. The fundamental question is how we should use those diagrams or maps in order to project new realities." (Sigler)

THE CASE STUDIES:
*Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements: **Architect as Archiver***

In the book *Villages in the City*, Stefan Al and his research team document twelve urban villages in the Chinese cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, Guangzhou, Foshan and Zhuhai. The book argues that urban villages offer a critical alternative to the large-scaled and anonymous modernist-planning paradigm in China because they are mixed-use, spatially diverse and pedestrian-oriented. *Villages in the City* argues for the value of urban villages as places" (Al). The book takes the form of a guidebook to these twelve villages with each entry following the exact same structure: The first page for each village gives an overview of the village and includes a context shot, a figure-ground, some interesting historical facts about the village, as well as key metrics such as density, population size, and some dimensions of the streets and alleys. The next two pages offer an "ArchiTour" of the village with a line-drawn axonometric markingpoints of interest and accompanying short descriptions. The following two pages show a photograph of an exemplar building in elevation followed by a detailed section through the same building that gives a sense of the life of the building. These populated sections include the documentation of furniture, ceiling fans, hanging laundry and wall decorations, which give a sense of the life of the building. There is a section on a typical housing unit within the village as well as a feature on a typical resident of the village. Finally, the documentation includes images from the village as well as a detailed street map that names every business along a commercial corridor, which gives a good sense of the commercial and street life of the village. The documentation of the twelve villages is accessible and will be a valuable resource if and when the villages are demolished. The essays in the book that accompany the guidebook section are well-written by thoughtful academics and practitioners in China, however nowhere in the book does the material take a turn to a projective mode.
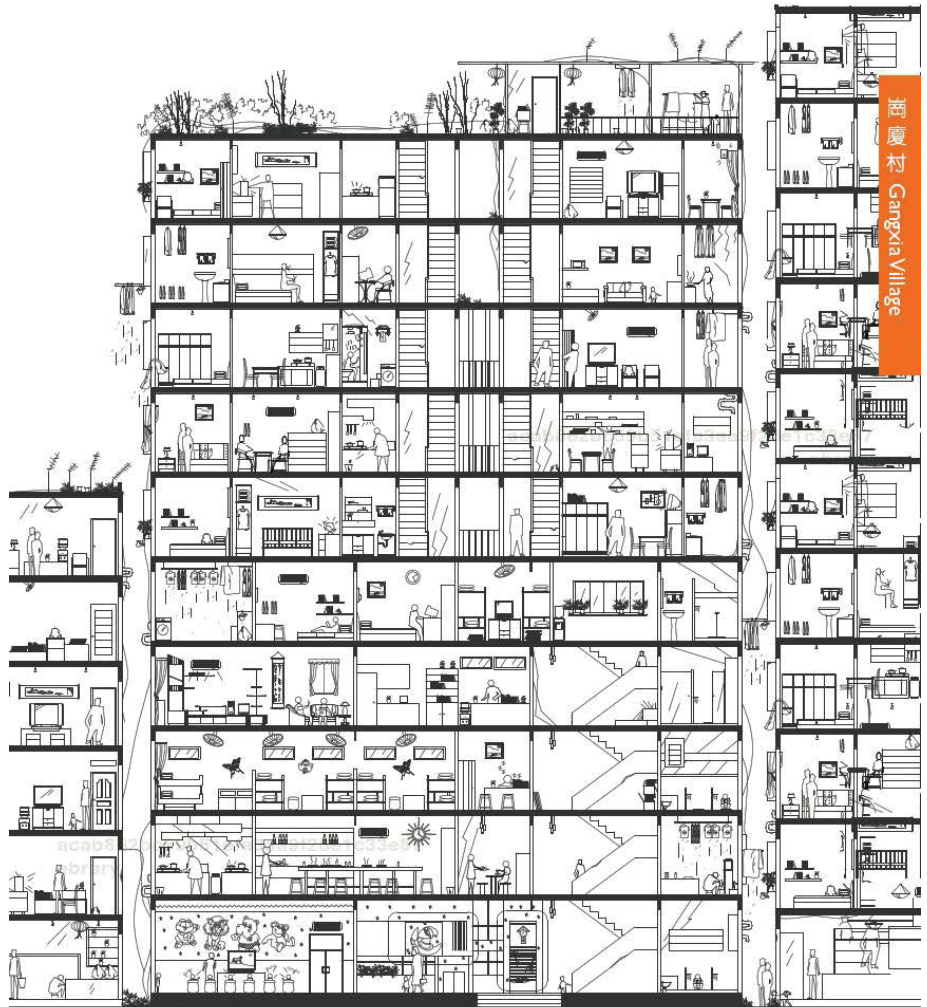
Gangxia Gateway Street
崗廈牌坊街

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Urbanus Research Bureau: **Architect as Analyst and Form Maker**

In 2005, Urbanus Research Bureau, led by Liu Xiaodu, Meng Han and Wang Hui initiated a series of studies on the urban villages of Shenzhen. Initiated as research, their work eventually led to the construction of buildings within Shenzhen's urban villages including the Dafen Art Museum from 2007. Urbanus' work on Shenzhen's urban villages is the most conventionally architectural of the set selected for this paper. Their methodology is to study the existing physical condition of the city including the building typology and urban morphology, and then propose an insertion that amplifies parts of the existing condition until it is transformed into something new. Their project for Gangxia Village combined partial demolition with infilling, stitching and the addition of public facilities onto the roofs of the existing buildings. The new structures that bridge across the existing rooftops assist in the movement across the village while adding amenity throughout. Critical to the intervention is that it maintains the existing physical grain and social structure of the neighborhood. Another study for Fuxin Village again studied the building typologies and urban morphology and found that a combination of new infrastructure and a few insertions of new buildings would help connect the village to the city as well as bring more coherence and amenity to the village itself. In their own words: "Here varied strategies are used to create a variety of spatial situations responding to

Figure 3: Section Drawing of Ganxia Gateway Street, *image from Villages in the City by Stefan Al*
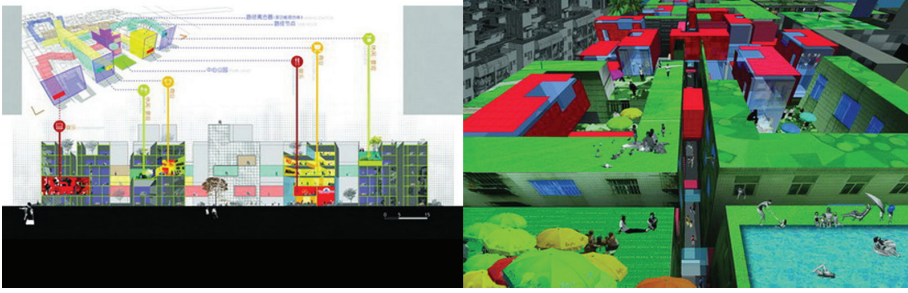
the particularities of the village site and to each individual program, as a way of reinventing the village as an attractive and unique urban community in the midst of the city." (Urbanus website)

Berlage Institute: *Architect as Negotiator / Secret Agent*

The 2006 Special Issue of hunch for the Venice Biennale is titled "Beyond Mapping: Projecting the CIty" and documents the work from four design studios that took on an urban situation with a distinct approach. Pier Vittorio Aureli's group took on Moscow, Brussels and Tirana through Representation, Peter Trummor's group took on Madrid through Associativity, and Markus Schaefer took on Ljubljana through Scripting. The group led by Yushi Uehara approached urban villages in China through Negotiation. In the words of Uehara: "When the government installs a masterplan, all negotiation between the existing village and urbanism is lost. The marriage of deregulated capitalism and collective rights in the Village in the City open avenues of cityness. … The negotiator-architect should function as a kind of secret agent and a businessman as well, determined to find the right forms of social contract and urban form." (Uehara) The students in Uehara's group spent time learning about the intricacies of the Chinese political system, and how this system affects the development of the city.
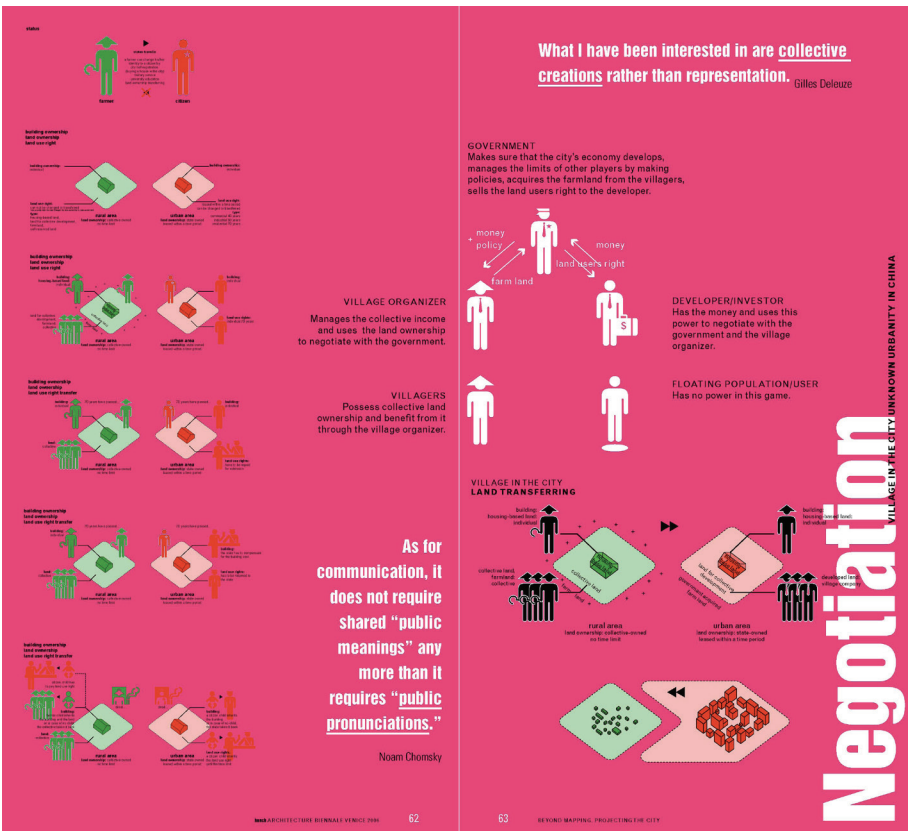

Figure 4: Proposal for Fuxin Village, *image by Urbanus*

Figure 5: Diagrams for Negotiation, *image by the Berlage studio of Yushi Uehara*

ENDNOTES

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Additionally, the students learned about the economic side of development in Chinese cities and the agency that both private developers as well as rural landholders have to affect the development of the city. The knowledge about politics and economics was used to strategize solutions that would benefit all involved players. Underlying the approach of negotiation is a comfort with the navigation of the realm of micropolitics through complicity and collaboration rather than confrontation.

CONCLUSION

The three projects for urban villages in China were selected to demonstrate a range of approaches that architects have taken for these volatile sites in which the two systems of land governance confront one another and produce an uneven urban landscape. The first project, the book Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements demonstrated how the architect can be an excellent archivist of a site in flux. The book marks a specific moment in time: 2014, when the villages looks exactly as they do in the documentary photos, when housing in Dafen Urban Village cost ~2,500 RMB a month, and when Cool Me Clothes was two doors down from Magic Wardrobe on Gangxia Gateway Street. In addition to being an archive of twelve urban villages, Stefan Al's book aims to raise awareness about the value of urban villages as places of a distinct culture and history. The second project, "Study on Shenzhen's Urban Villages" by Urbanus Research Bureau gave evidence that the architect can be an excellent analyst and form maker of cities. Their research takes detailed notice of the villages and finds ways to remedy issues like poor circulation and access to amenities, while amplifying aspects of the urban villages that make them unique, such as their mixed-use programming and unique scale and grain. Because Urbanus is located in Shenzhen, they have a more direct and intimate knowledge of their sites than many architects working outside of China do. One could argue that closeness to one's subject is not always the best formula for innovative thinking. However, because Urbanus' methodology is about being a close analyst, being on the ground is an important part of how they are successful. And finally the project "Negotiation" by Yushi Uehara and his studio at the Berlage Institute demonstrate how the architect can expand his or her toolkit and gain knowledge about development politics as well as the economics of development in urban as well as urban villages (rural) in Chinese cities. While the architect has always had to confront financial and political issues for projects, one could argue that the depth at which Uehara's group engaged these aspects of urbanism in China signal an expanded skillset for the architect. As a negotiator / secret-agent / businessperson, the architect has a different brand of agency and occupies a space that most architectural educations do not teach.

While the three examples offered in this paper may ultimately still be unsatisfactory design responses to urban villages in China, they show a range from archiving, to analysis through to projection. The what and how architects should know about the city in order to design for it is multiple and engages toolsets traditionally within the discipline and new ones associated with other fields. As the discipline continues to evolve, the education of the architect continues to evolve, may the evolutions be in the service of keeping architecture relevant; poised to make meaningful contributions at a variety of scales, and on sites that are increasingly in flux.