Countering the Biennialization of Architecture in the Chinese Urban Village in Shenzhen

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Keywords: Urban village, biennial exhibition, UABB, China

Abstract. From Europe to China, while biennial infrastructure allows global curators, architects, and urban designers to use exhibition tactics for disciplinary promotion, the quick in-and-out exhibition practices nevertheless risk overlooking local complexities and differences. How does expanding forms of architectural collaborative or activism through international architecture biennales reclaim "the right to the city" and contribute to the multiplicity and heterogeneity in the city? This paper addresses this question in a Chinese context, by closely examining the 2017 Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (UABB) hosted in contested urban villages. In particular, this paper investigates an exhibition/ renovation project *House 17* **within the main site -the Nantou Old Town. This study employs mixed research methods, including archival research, ethnographic research, and spatial analysis, to unravel the mechanisms in initiating, negotiating, and implementing of this international architectural collaborative project in the urban village. By situating the UABB and** *House 17* **in the long history of the socio-spatial transformation of Shenzhen, this paper argues that the international UABB has expanded the capacities of the field of architecture and urban design to mobilize economic and social forces in making urban changes at a new scale. However, architect-curators' partnership with the local government has put them in a new position that appears close to real estate developers in the process of urban renewal. The in-depth investigation into the exhibition project** *House 17* **further reveals that local politics and complexities tend to be compromised in globalized architectural imagination and collaborative. Through the case study, this paper problematizes the globalization of architectural activism and calls for alternative design pedagogy.**

INTRODUCTION

From Europe to China, while biennial infrastructure allows global curators, architects, and urban designers to use exhibition tactics for disciplinary promotion, the quick in-and-out exhibition practices nevertheless risk overlooking local complexities and differences. How does expanding forms of architectural collaborative or activism through international architecture biennales reclaim "the right to the city" and contribute to the multiplicity and heterogeneity in the city? This paper addresses this question in a Chinese context, by closely examining the 2017 Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City

Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (UABB) hosted in contested urban villages. In particular, this paper investigates an exhibition/renovation project *House 17* within the main site -the Nantou Old Town.

The Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (UABB) was born at a critical moment, when the global cry for alternative architectural practices, the 2005 national agenda in China to speed up the urbanization of rural citizens, and the 2004 urban renewal agenda targeted at old factory zones and urban villages in Shenzhen converged. Since 2004, Shenzhen has demolished hundreds of urban villages, which not only dispossessed ex-farmers (collectively as land and property owners) but also displaced millions of low-income rural-to-urban migrant workers who were main occupants (or tenants). This dominant redevelopment mode relied highly on increasing the real estate value and the plot ratio (or floor area ratio, FAR) of the area for developers to make profits. However, the existing high FAR, rising market values of the land, and compensation issues hindered developers from taking the risk to redevelop urban villages. When standard urban regulations tended to decrease the profitability of redeveloping urban villages, new approaches were needed and encouraged by the government to make exceptions for the urban redevelopment.

Architectural intervention projects emerged as alternatives to the dominant demolition approach. From sporadic small-scale intervention projects to an international biennial exhibition scattering over five urban villages - the 2017 UABB titled "Cities: Grow in Difference," the field of architecture and urban design seemed to return its social significance by asserting to preserve the heterogeneity of urban circumstances through saving urban villages in Chinese cities. This is not limited to China; however, with China's rapid urbanization, it became the central location for emerging forms of architectural collaborative internationally in the new century. With an increasing number of global architects flying into politically charged local places, it is urgent to examine the social and political implications of their interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent theoretical revisits to Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of "the right to the city" in social and urban studies have urged the field of architecture and urban design to return to social significance, taking renewed forms of design activism.[1] With particular relevance to architecture has been David Harvey's
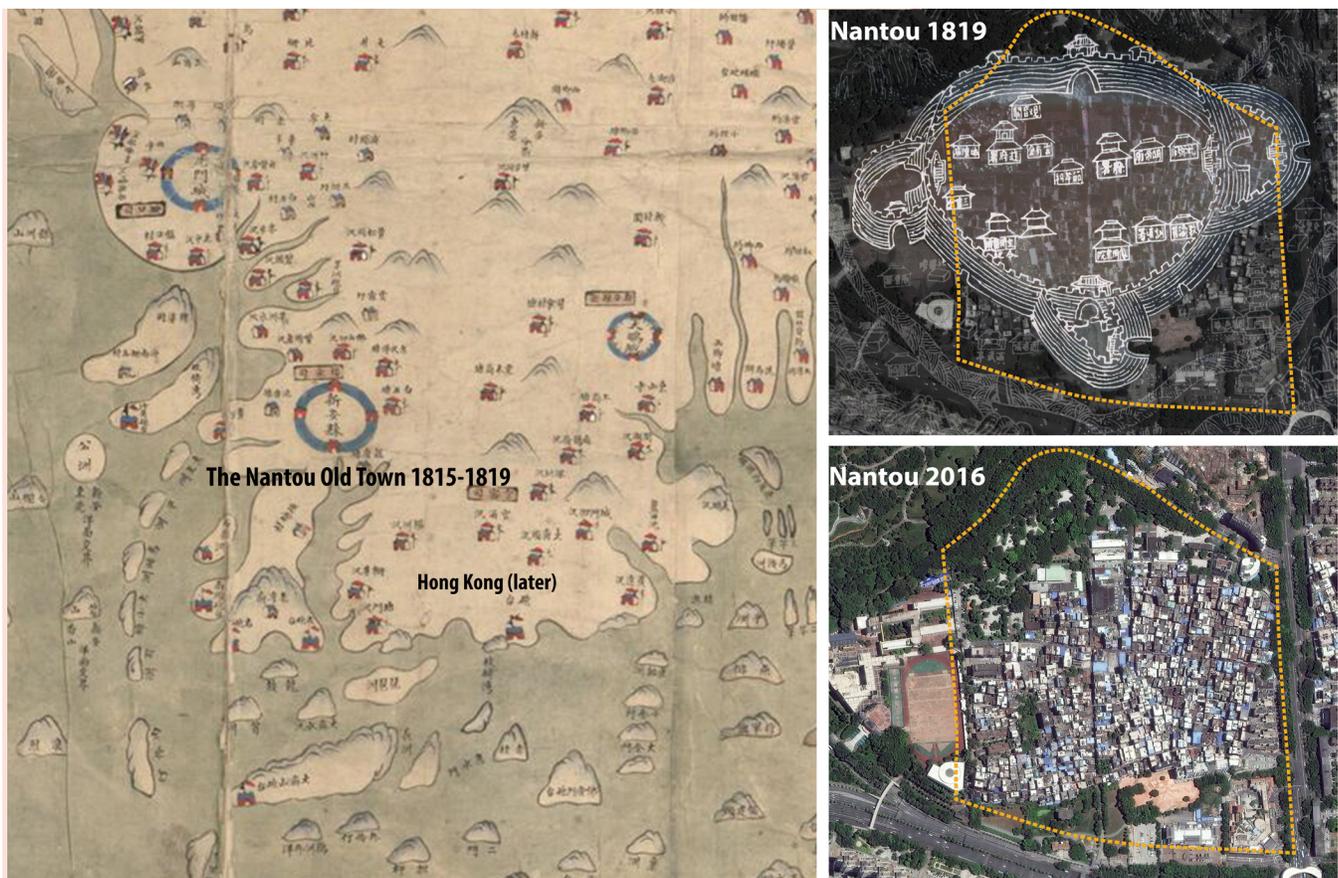
Figure 1. The site transformation of Nantou Old Town, from a fortress city to an urban village. Left, by Hummel, Arthur W. Guangdong Tong Sheng Shui Dao Tu. [After, 1815] Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71002467/; Right & Above, The Annals of Xin'an County 1819; Right & Below, by UABB.

return to the revolutionary notion of "the right to change ourselves by changing the city," which challenged the prevailing "neoliberal" governance characterized by the enlarged corporation between experts, developers, and government in urban development.[2] From the Everyday Urbanism to the Subaltern Urbanism, architectural activisms have also extended the concept of "participatory design" to challenging hegemonic models of spatial design dominated by the neoliberal economic and political systems around the world and to stressing its agency in identifying, advocating, preserving, and creating heterogeneous urban circumstances.[3] One significant channel for architecture to executes its agency has been international biennial exhibitions.

Urban and architectural activism arose in the 1960s in the wake of post-modernist movements. Urban and architectural activists fought for the right to participation (which allows urban inhabitants to access and to influence the decisions that produce urban space) and to appropriation (which allows inhabitants to use and to create new spaces that meet their basic needs).[4] Similarly, biennial (or triennial) exhibitions emerged as alternatives to the modernist exhibitions in museums. Biennial (or triennial) exhibitions advocators called

for recognition of the values of contemporary and peripheral artworks. Biennial exhibitions later became new platforms for architectural activism. However, architectural activist projects in the growing biennial exhibitions in 1980s and 1990s tended to take a more reformist position in the production of social space, instead of Lefebvre's original revolutionary concept of "the right to the city." Debates were shifted to the paradox of exhibiting architecture: should architecture exhibitions display ideal prototypes for professional education or create experiential environments for potential visitors and consumers?[5] Instead of concerning the participation of non-expert urban inhabitants in the decision-making and productive processes, curators and exhibitors put emphasis on cross-disciplinary communications and collaborations, which would allow architects and urban designers to engage with expanding networks in producing new spaces. Collaborative projects replaces activist projects via these exhibitions to regenerate urban spaces for new economies based on consumerism and tourism.

The Lefebvrian architectural activism returned in the new century, when David Harvey recalled that "the right to the city" was a right to urban life embedded in everyday spatial practices, through the consistent participation in the transformation of the city.[6] The globally rescaled spatial relations

across national borders and emerging forms of uneven urban spaces in developing countries have urged the discipline of architecture to rethink its role in urban changes. Architectural activisms in the new global age have expanded to addressing enlarged economic and political systems shaping urban landscapes, in a way to resist the tendencies of hegemonizing spatial production in different societies and to advocate for the heterogeneity of urban processes. The prevailing neoliberal governance worldwide, featured by more transnational but closer partnerships between experts, developers, and government, has compelled the practice of architecture and urban planning to seek new strategies to participate in the urban development continuously.

New forms of architectural activism have emerged at international biennials, employing expanding exhibition-making technologies. Besides displaying representational and projective proposals, architectural activism has increasingly engaged with discursive production via the media of exhibitions. The European Platform for Alternative Practice and Research on the City (PEPRAV) featured the publication *Urban/Act: A Handbook for Alternative Practice*, which emphasized a multiplicity of viewpoints and collaboration among different actors, including artist groups, media activists, cultural workers, software designers, architects, students, researchers, neighborhood organizations, and city dwellers.[7] Similarly, the *Trans-Local-Act: Cultural Practices Within and Across* shifted to stress trans-local connections, by highlighting the dynamic and complicated nature of notions of "local" and "culture".[8] These international exhibitions and their component discursive platforms expanded architecture's capabilities in engaging with pressing social and urban issues.

China has also seen expanding forms of architectural collaborative and activism in addressing the emerging urban issues. Since the Chinese government announced in 2005 that half of the remaining 700 million rural citizens would be urbanized by 2030, several non-for-profit research and design collaboratives have formed to address the rural-urban issues. The Rural-Urban Framework (RUF), co-founded by two faculty of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong, has focused on the transformation of different types of villages, including rural villages, urban villages, factory villages, and suburban villages, with a broader goal to influence policy-makers and find new models of rural development that resists the overwhelming process of urbanization through architectural interventions.[9] However, in the specific socio-political context of China, even such NGOs, primarily sponsored by charities and private donors internationally, cannot operate without the direction of the government and its component bureaus in China. The state has always been the dominant agent in making social changes. As more prevalent collaborative forms, biennial exhibitions, including the Shanghai Biennale, Yinchuan Biennale, Guangzhou Triennial, and Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale, have always been organized by municipal governments and sponsored by large national corporations. The most relevant one to this discussion is the Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism (UABB).

Figure 2. The built environment of the Nantou Old Town in 2016. Photos: by Chao, Zhang. Retrieved from http://2017.szhkbiennale.org/.

RESEARCH METHODS

How does the UABB allow international architectural collaboratives or activisms to assert "the right to the city" in urban villages and contribute to the heterogeneity of urban circumstances in Shenzhen? This study addresses this question by closely investigating an exhibition/renovation project *House 17* within the main site, the Nantou Old Town, of the 2017 UABB. This study employs mixed research methods, including archival research, ethnographic research, and spatial analysis, to unravel the mechanisms in initiating, negotiating, and implementing of this international architectural collaborative project in the urban village. This research was conducted through three phases of fieldwork, before, during, and after the UABB. Archives, including historical maps of the city and catalogs and brochures of previous editions of the UABB, reveal the UABB's changing engagement with the development of urban villages. The ethnographic research includes participatory observations on negotiating and implementing the intervention project in the urban village and in-depth interviews with key agents, including official-organizers, curators, the design team, the property owner, contractors, and other urban village occupants. It uncovers numerous undocumented stories about Shenzhen and the Nantou Old Town. Lastly, research employs mapping tactics to mark down spatial changes of the Nantou Old Town

and the *House 17* in different phases of urban development, which reflect the massive change in the Chinese society. This study situates the UABB in the history of the socio-spatial transformation of Shenzhen to examine its social assertion and rising role in the broader system.

FINDINGS

The history of the UABB shows its initial ambition and extensive connections to the socio-spatial transformation of Shenzhen. The first edition of the Shenzhen Biennale (later UABB after the joining of Hong Kong in 2007) came into being in 2005. Initiators and organizers at the Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau invited Yung Ho Chang, a well-known Chinese-American architect and Professor of MIT Architecture, and his team, Juan Du and Xiao Hong Li at the University of Hong Kong, to curate the edition. Titled "City, Open Door!," the 2005 Shenzhen Biennale referenced Deng Xiaoping's decision to establish the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), as a gateway to connect the Chinese market to Western countries through Hong Kong in 1979.[10] Starting with this specific history of Shenzhen, as a border city and a gateway to the world, the 2005 Shenzhen turned to address pressing urban issues accompanied by Shenzhen's rapid development in the past twenty-five years. Specifically, curators invited international architects, artists, and scholars to conduct research on those fragmented urban realities characterized by hyper-modern structures in juxtaposition with over-crowded urban villages and propose architectural or spatial strategies for future urban living.[11] This exhibition program preceded and shared similar ambitions with what Hou Hanru proposed for "Trans(ient) City" in Luxembourg in 2007 and the intentions of the Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR) titled "Open City: Designing Coexistence" in 2009. The ambition was to regain the power of architecture and design in influencing the enlarged and globally reconstructed urban systems, by reclaiming the discipline's significance in shaping a better city.

The Nantou Old Town, first built as a fortress city about 1,300 years ago, is known as the origin of Shenzhen and is now densely populated by low-income migrant workers (Fig. 1). However, before it was selected as the main site for the 2017 UABB, *Nantou*'s historical values were overshadowed by its fame as an "urban village" (chengzhongcun). At first glance, *Nantou* does carry the characteristics which "urban villages" are known for: the busy flows of people coming and going through the narrow entrances, the "thick walls" of building blocks on top of the old city walls (demarcating the boundaries between the urban village and the city), and five-to-nine-story square buildings standing close enough to each other to allow residential occupants shake hands from their windows (known as "handshaking buildings," Fig. 2). The over-dense population and substandard living conditions have raised severe public concerns about urban villages in the city, usually associated with illegal activities and crimes. The Nantou Old Town was also caught in a redevelopment dilemma because of its recognized historical significance. On the one hand, several places and old houses within *Nantou* were listed for historic preservation, which raised the cultural and tourist value of the urban village;

on the other, the restrictive historic preservation regulations limited the building heights and the plot ratio of *Nantou*, which reduced the profitability for developers. In these circumstances, the UABB and its exhibitionary technologies came into the mind of decision-makers and became an exceptional approach to redeveloping urban villages faced with a similar dilemma as *Nantou*.

Urban villages had appeared repeatedly as a subject in research and design proposals at different editions of the Shenzhen Biennale. In 2005, the curators of the first Shenzhen Biennale succeeded in persuading the city authorities to include an independent exhibition of urban villages. Six globally well-known universities, including Shenzhen University, Beijing University, MIT, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Tongji University, and Princeton University, were invited to conduct a joint research project at the Daxing urban village in Shenzhen.[12] Their exhibited research findings intended to show alternative architectural or spatial strategies to the dominant demolition approach. Similarly, a local architectural firm *Urbanus* presented their research and practical work with the Dafen Village and the Gangxia Village and highlighted their small-scale spatial intervention strategies.[13] The *Urbanus* architects, Liu Xiaodu and Meng Yan, teamed with Hou Hanru and later worked as chief curators of the 2017 UABB. Evolved from prior editions, the 2017 UABB, titled "Cities: Grow in Difference," explicitly made urban villages its main subjects and sites. The curatorial statement ambitiously claimed to promote urban diversity and heterogeneity by implanting design interventions in everyday life in urban villages.[14] Without further explanations of the meanings of "diversity" and "heterogeneity" in the Chinese socio-political context, these concepts became shorthand for making big social claims.

Consequently, the curatorial team, composed of global artists and local architects, took an ambiguous position in exhibition-making. Juxtaposing urban villages with slum issues in the Global South and informal settlements elsewhere, the exhibition nevertheless left out pressing local issues, such as the urban-rural segregation, the complicated property rights in the socialist regime, the dispossession of collective land ownership during urbanization, and the displacement of low-income migrant workers during the urban redevelopment. In selecting exhibition and intervention sites, the curators avoided charged spaces such as "handshaking" rental apartment buildings and abandoned plots; instead, they selected large open spaces and old factory buildings, which were managed by the village collective company and located on the main streets of urban villages. The main streets were where economic and social activities already converged and prospered. These intervention programs, including renovating old factory buildings, rebuilding activity buildings, reoccupying open spaces for art installations and performances, and reprogramming historical houses, worked more effectively as public shows for potential attract investors and visitors than as participatory activities for current occupants. The tourist/visit routes that involved these most open areas and prosperous streets of urban villages also suggested a compromised gesture of the curators: They
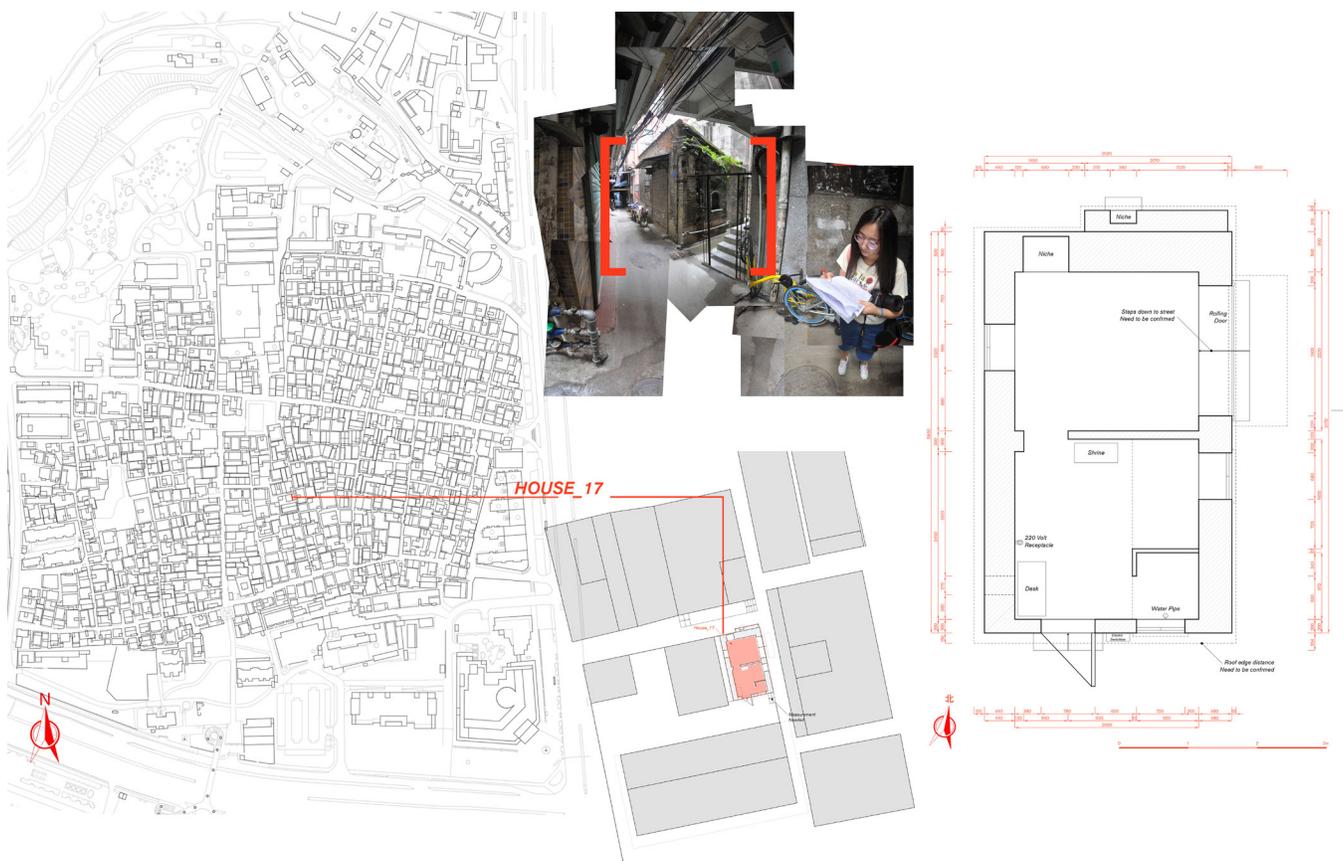
Figure 3. The site information of the House 17 at Nantou. Sources: by the design team, Robert Adams and graduate students Javiera Oyarzun Balut, Swati Goel, Hong Zehui, Jin, Ting-Chian, Shreya Porey, Reema Tarabichi, and Yan Xuefei at the University of Michigan.

attempted to highlight the vitality and uniqueness of urban village living and its contribution to the multiplicity to the city; however, the selected intervention sites only allow outside visitors to see the surface of urban village living rather than to learn the life struggles and the necessity to make changes.

The curators' close partnership with the government and real estate developers further reveals the function of the UABB as an exceptional tool for urban renewal. In practice, large corporative developers and contractors appointed by the municipal government and its local component institutions took the dominant participation in these intervention projects, excluding the majority of village inhabitants. In return, these corporative developers could obtain the use right of these renovated properties for a defined lease term. New modes of real estate operations also took place in urban villages, during and after the exhibition. In line with the intervention strategy, some real estate developers (subsidized by the local government) rent properties from individual landlords and converted them into short-term rental apartments or hotels, instead of demolishing the whole area. *Vanke*, the multibillion-dollar residential real estate developer based in Shenzhen, launched a project "Planning for 10,000 Urban Villages (Wan Cun Ji Hua)" in 2018, started from those biennale-intervened urban villages. The developer took charge of reinforcing the

structures, renovating necessary facilities, and refurbishing the rooms, by obtaining a 10-year lease term from those quasi-property owners in urban villages. Despite *Vanke*'s promise to provide affordable units, the hasty eviction of tenants (migrant workers) in urban villages caused panic for millions of migrant workers in Shenzhen who relied on the low-rent urban village areas. Such operations quickly tripled the rents in urban villages and forced out thousands of low-income migrant tenants, replaced by young technocrats and professionals. Consequently, with "good intentions" to promote the diversity and heterogeneity of the city, the intensive cooperation among the global curatorial team, invited architects and designers, local bureaucrats, and real estate developers nonetheless ended up increasing the precarity of the situation in urban villages.

In contrast to the ambiguous position of the exhibition, a renovation project *House 17* worked as a counter-example in its attempt to address the issue of "the right to the city" in urban villages. The project *House 17* bypassed the institutional agency of the UABB and its partners and engaged directly with local inhabitants at the Nantou Old Town. The invited design team, led by faculty Robert Adams and Mary-Ann Ray and composed of students at the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley, rejected the assigned site located at the extended entrance park. Instead, the design
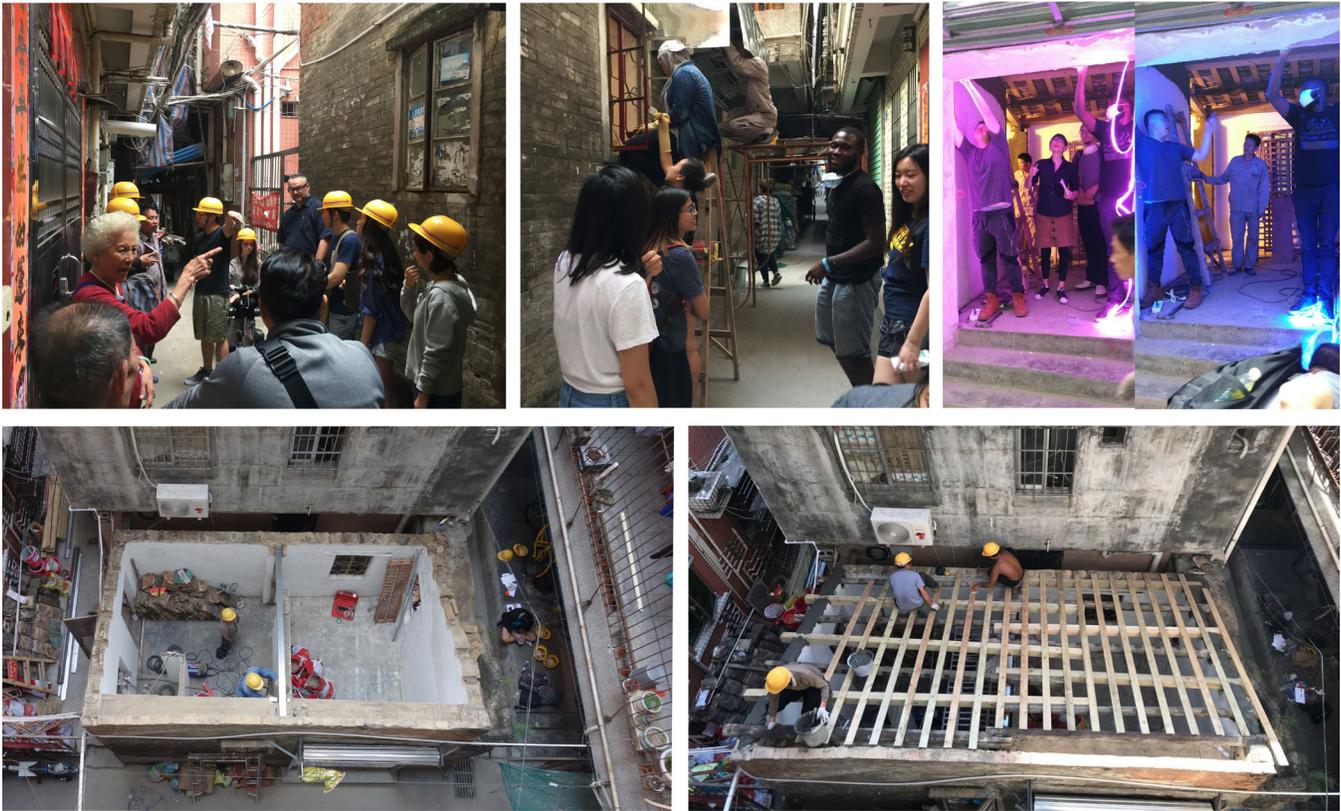
Figure 4. The negotiations and collaborations among the design team, the property owner, and migrant contractors and construction workers on site.Sources: by the design team led by Robert Adams and Mary-Ann Ray, joined by graduate students at the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley.

team walked deeper into the village to observe living dynamics there and received first-hand experience by interacting with the community. The decision was not made by accident but derived from the team's long-term research and practice experience in one urban village in Beijing. After sixteen years of working with mixed social groups living in the Caochangdi urban village, including artists, taxi drivers, migrant workers, and former local farmers, the leaders of the design team were able to seize the complicated social issues underlying Nantou's spatial fabrics.[15] Eventually, the team encountered a small old abandoned house numbered 17, located deeply on the narrow Leping Street within *Nantou*. The strange spatial juxtaposition between this small house and its surrounding buildings implicated a vital transformation process of this area, which could even offer an entry point to explain the spatial transformation of the village. However, the property owner, Granny Huang, a local ex-farmer, rejected the team at the beginning, as she was concerned about the sensitive ownership issue. For instance, would the house and the land be appropriated by the government after the UABB? Acknowledging her concerns, the design team consulted the UABB organizers and local bureaus to make sure that the property would be returned to the owner after the exhibitions. These pre-exhibition negotiations allowed the design team to learn about the social dynamics and political relations for which their design actions should be held accountable.

Further communications with the property owner and nearby neighbors revealed untold stories about the old abandoned house, which was intimately tied to the massive social changes in the city. The house was the kitchen part of a traditional courtyard house (known as the three-room-two-corridor house) built in the late Qing Dynasty (Fig. 3). After the Chinese socialist transformation in the 1950s, the expropriated large courtyard house was redistributed to three farmer households. While the other two rebuilt the houses up into rental housing apartments, the kitchen part was kept and abandoned as it was. In the early 1980s, when the Nantou Old Town transformed from an agricultural-based village to a manufacturing-based village (to attract foreign investments), the small old house was served as a dormitory for a migrant worker at a nearby toy factory. In the late 1990s, when a large number of such factories were forced out of Shenzhen, the migrant worker left the village, and the old house was reused as a barbershop for several years. Since the urban renewal agenda in the new millennium, the old house had been labeled as "dangerous" and abandoned, until the design team found it. The small size of the old house saved it from being rebuilt for real estate purposes, which instead made it the unique witness of the lasting urban changes of Shenzhen. Contrasting to narratives embodied by those grandiose urban structures, life stories of those overlooked and marginalized

Figure 4. Performances by migrant artists occupying the House 17 during the biennial exhibition in Nantou.Sources: by the design team, Robert Adams and graduate students at the University of Michigan.

social groups, such as the local farmers and migrant workers, were coined in this small old house.

Minimal design changes were made to this house, including reinforcing its roof structure for safety reasons. The enduring features, including the footprints, the remnants of neighboring walls, and the traces of multiple renovations, spoke for its history and social significance. In particular, the house witnessed the changing relationships between the former local farmer as a quasi-property owner and different generations of migrant workers, which added a layer of social meaning to the exhibition project. Engaging with the concept of "the right to the city," the design team approached the project as a social process, where the former local farmer, migrant construction workers, village neighbors, designers and students, and even visitors could work together to use and change the place within a period of time. Before the exhibition, the former local farmer, migrant construction workers, and designers and students worked on cleaning up the house and renovating the necessary structures (Fig. 4). During the exhibition, migrant artists occupied the house and performed traditional operas and disappearing artworks and handicrafts to the neighbors (both migrant tenants and former local farmers) and international visitors (Fig. 5). After the exhibition, the renovated house was returned to the owner and continued its witness of urban changes

DISCUSSION

In reality, this small project was not capable to change the imperative neoliberal redevelopment of urban villages. *House 17* nonetheless offered an alternative way of architectural activism through international architecture biennales. This alternative approach resisted the institutionalized operations that tended to overlook local disputes and complexities and to impose universalized architectural ideas and strategies. Indeed, the social and spatial effects of *House 17* tend to be limited in making substantial changes to the community life in urban villages in the long term, due to many factors. One essential reason remains systematic and structural. The scale and the temporality of global biennales inevitably involve sponsorships from large corporations, which are usually dominated by the government and developers cooperatively. These sponsorships not only affect the propositions made by the curators but also the long-term viability of these resistive/activist projects. Without lasting funding support, the outcomes can be easily turned over by neoliberal operations in the real estate market.

It is not to suggest that prolonging architectural occupations would develop larger conversations and connections with the local context; but rather, it is critical for architectural education to acknowledge these urban realities and the power of architectural imagination. In many cases, we tend to encourage

students to use their imaginations to address contested terrains around the world without knowing the real social struggles and consequences. As creative as these imaginations, there exists a risk of romanticizing those situations without real-world lessons. The project *House 17* offered an alternative example for studio teaching. It allowed students, on the one hand, to communicate with the curatorial team about design ideas, and on the other, to interact and work with local communities (especially the marginalized groups) about real-life struggles. These real-world conflicts made both architects and students step out of architectural imaginations and reflect on the effects of their ideas and actions. One student, who participated in the project, has mainly pursued his career in prototyping small-scale dwellings for his home neighborhood in a similar situation with the Nantou Old Town. This case study reveals the global-local paradox embedded in international architecture exhibitions to students and calls for an alternative design pedagogy. Perhaps, for future architects to claim the social significance of architecture, architecture students must learn about how the discipline can be socially accountable.

Acknowledgements:

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