

SHENZHEN

FROM FACTORY OF THE WORLD
TO WORLD CITY

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INTERNATIONAL NEW TOWN INSTITUTE

New New Towns is an International New Town Institute (INTI) research program dedicated to rethinking the future of the city via practical research and improving the urban and social quality of cities in transition. Shenzhen is one of them.

The spectacular story of Shenzhen is well known: a collection of rural villages became a new town in 1979 when the central Chinese government gave it the status of Special Economic Zone. Shenzhen turned into a metropolis and became a prototype for both economic and urban reform within China. The city has been raising eyebrows for years, because of its fast development and exceptional position. However, Shenzhen's urbanization processes cause many problems such as pollution, a shortage of land and water resources, a worrying deterioration of the ecological system, and social inequalities. Now the moment has come that is inevitable in the lifecycle of any fast growing new town in the world: Shenzhen needs to rediscover its own identity and formulate its next phase of development. What will be the next step? With contributions by Markus Appenzeller, Marco Bontje, Du Juan, Fu Na, Tat Lam, Li Jinkui, Mary Ann O'Donnell, Qu Lei, Linda Vlassenrood, Ronald Wall, Huang Weiwen and Yeung Ho Man Legg.



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Interview with HONGKONG HELD BY MARY ANN O'DONNELL

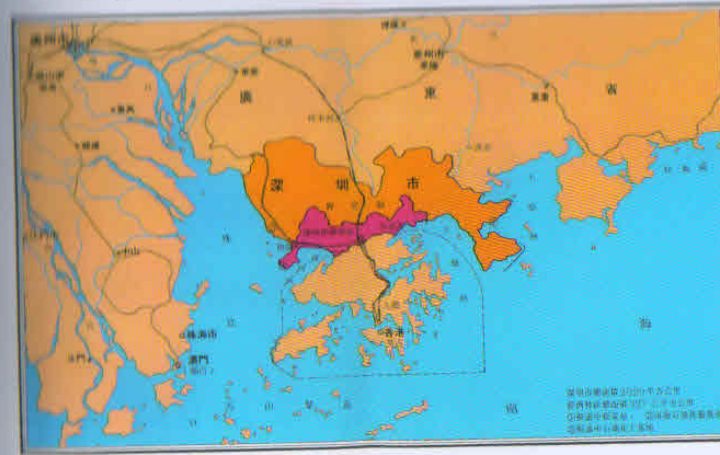
The Urban Planning Imaginary: Lessons from Shenzhen

Shenzhen has been recognized both internationally and within China for its successful urban planning. In this interview with Shenzhen-based anthropologist Mary Ann O'Donnell, the Director of the Shenzhen Center for Design, Huang Weiwen reflects on how urban planners have imagined the city and how this imaginary has been deployed to accommodate high-speed development. In Shenzhen, Huang argues that the collective rush to develop the city has meant that the plan (and its planners) has ignored extant conditions, bulldozing aggressively to create the environmental equivalent of a blank sheet of planning paper. In this context, informal and highly localized spaces—such as urban villages and transitional industrial areas—have not only supplemented the city's social needs, but also created environments that nourish the city's vitality. In conclusion, Huang offers a cautionary analysis of the urban planning imaginary, noting that professional norms and the speed of development may ultimately determine the imaginary, rather than a considered understanding of what actually exists.

The urban planning imaginary

Mary Ann O'Donnell (MAO): Please contextualize the meaning of urban planning in Shenzhen, both as situated praxis and as a model for urban planning at the national level.

Huang Weiwen (HW): Shenzhen's high-speed development has meant that we have encountered specific urban problems earlier than many other cities in China, or other developing countries. Consequently, how we have tried to address these problems has offered urban planners elsewhere models for development. For example, Shenzhen adopted Hong Kong solutions for high-density living (especially in Luohu), land use policies, ratification of statutory urban plans, and a standing committee for urban planning (with over half the committee members coming from outside the government). In addition, Shenzhen has also proactively explored using ecological control lines (and placing borders



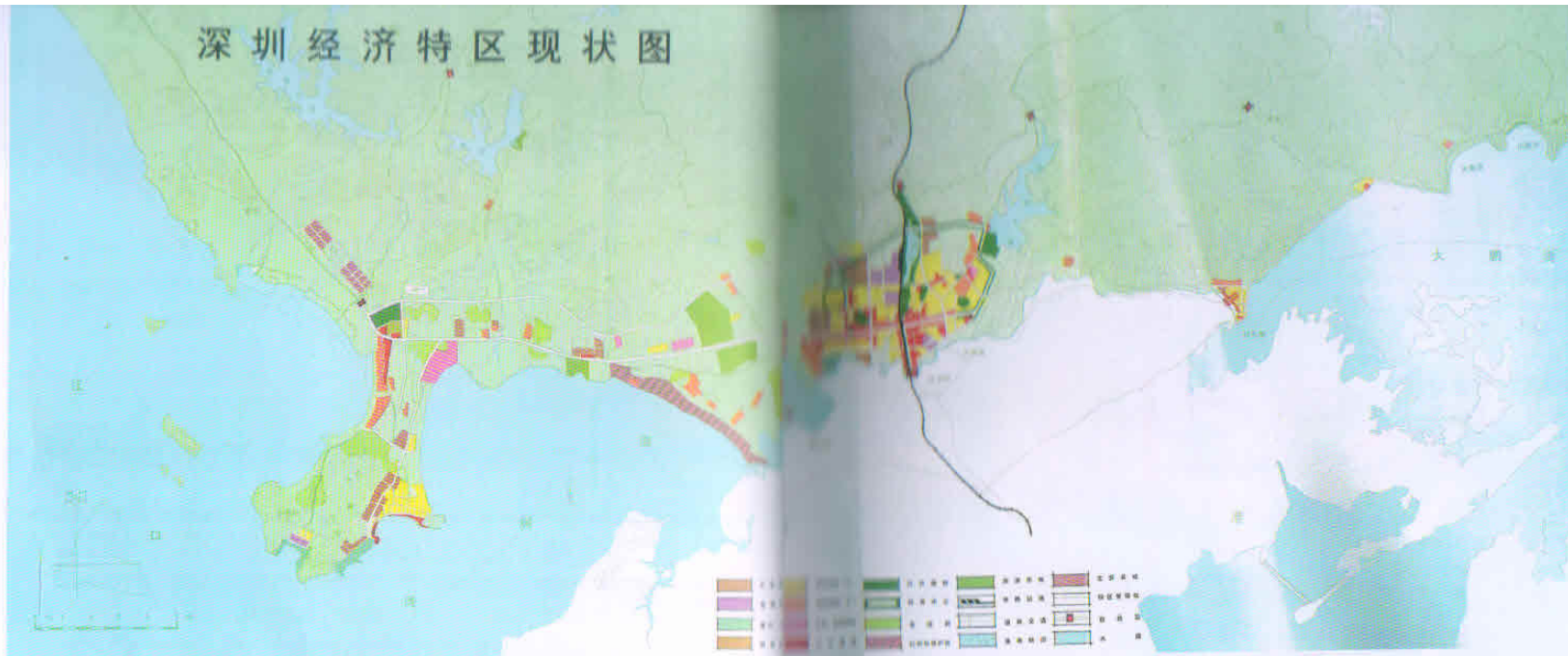
Shenzhen Municipality included two areas: the Shenzhen Economic Zone (red) and Bao'an County (orange). This original division continues to organize the city's vernacular geography, and today these areas are known colloquially as the 'inner' (*guannei*) and 'outer' (*guanwai*) districts (source: 1982 *Comprehensive Plan for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone*)

on urban development), constructing axial 'urbanscapes' and park avenues, finding a viable balance between regulated and public spaces, and different forms of urban renovation. Each of these measures has, to some extent, influenced urban planning at the national level.

It's important to remember that in 1949, China began using urban planning ideas from the former Soviet Union, and Soviet experts participated in and guided Chinese urban planning praxis. The establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) allowed Chinese urban planning a chance to explore new urban planning ideas and experiment. Throughout the 1980s, although the Guangdong Province provided urban planning resources by way of Guangzhou, the core planning team nevertheless came from the Central Urban Planning Institute, which was located in Beijing. Accordingly, the Central Urban Planning Institute set up a Shenzhen branch office in 1984. However, due to special policies and borders within the SSEZ, urban planning aimed to facilitate high-speed development and did not consider the developmental needs of the area outside the SSEZ (Bao'an County). Today, we call this area the 'outer districts'.

In 1990, a local Shenzhen Urban Planning Design Institute was established. However, the outer districts had already—like the

深圳经济特区现状图



This map of extant construction only included official construction in the Shangbu area (near the railroad) and Shekou (on the Nantou Peninsula). In fact, the only reference to construction in the 'outer districts' was the small, red squares that

marked the location of border checkpoints for crossing from the outer districts into the Special Economic Zone (source: 1986 Comprehensive Plan for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone)

SSEZ—made speed a priority and so before planning even started, there were pre-existing vernacular developments. The need for urban planning was incredibly urgent. Therefore, in 1994, planning for the second edition of the Comprehensive Plan considered the inner and outer districts as a totality.

Analyzing the urban planning imaginary

MAO: You came to Shenzhen in 1994 to participate in the formulation of the 1996-2010 Shenzhen Municipal Comprehensive Plan, which represented a radical reconceptualization of Shenzhen because it included urban planning for both the SSEZ and the outer districts. What challenges did the planning committee face?

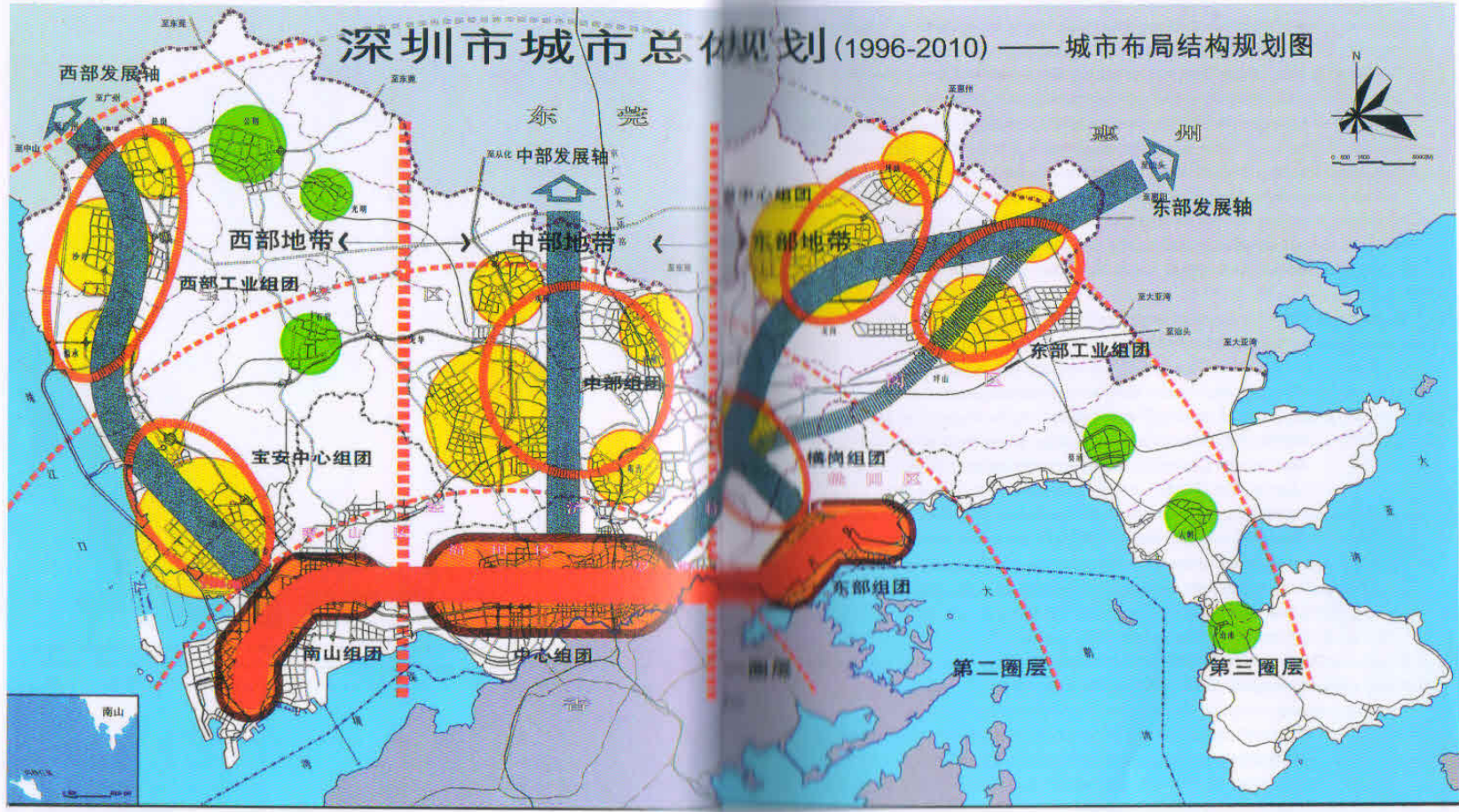
HW: Actually, when I joined the Shenzhen Urban Design Institute in 1994, I was responsible for detailed plans and urban design, so I didn't participate in drawing up the 1996-2010 Shenzhen Municipal Comprehensive Plan. As an outsider with the benefit of retrospect, I would say that when the plan was drawn up, the greatest challenge that the team faced was

that it was impossible to understand property rights and local development needs within the territory, but especially so in the outer districts. In addition, there was no clear directive on environmental conservation or conservation red lines. The fact that there was no way to foresee the speed and scale of Shenzhen's future development made the situation even more challenging.

MAO: This leads to another question: how does one actually implement an urban plan?

HW: Chinese urban planning is a top-down system. Every 10 years, Shenzhen produces a new overall plan and then each district drafts its respective plan, then detailed plans for specific sections are made. Subsequently, these plans are ratified. To ratify urban plans, the Mayor presides over a publicly announced meeting, which is convened by the Department of Planning, Planning and Land Commission. In theory, one can only implement a plan after it has been ratified. According to both national and provincial legislation, only after what is called a 'controlled detailed plan' (控制性详细规划) has been approved can one begin urban construction; any other construction is illegal. So this is the system that

深圳市城市总体规划(1996-2010) —— 城市布局结构规划图



图例

- 特区内组团
- 特区外组团
- 组团内城镇
- 独立城镇

深圳市人民政府编制 1997

By 1996, urban planners considered Shenzhen's so-called 'inner' and 'outer districts' as a duality. Once only imaginary, today this system of axes and radials forms the underlying structure of Shenzhen (source: 1996 Comprehensive Plan for Shenzhen Municipality)

pushes forward urban plans. At the same time, however, impromptu construction shapes the urban plan because this top-down system only gives an approximate idea about the direction of development—young planners with limited experience suggest building up a particular area, for example—but the plan is vague about what should be built. In this sense, Chinese urban planning is not top-down but rather operates from small [projects] to a large [plan]. For example, a leader says, 'We have to develop this section.' The planning department responds, 'But there's no plan for that section yet.' Then the leader instructs them to immediately make a plan and the area is developed. In this rushed fashion, impromptu construction also shapes the urban plan.

MAO: So, if these young planners don't know what exists, where does their planning imaginary come from?

HW: Basically, the city that they imagine is a product of their professional training. The urban planning curriculum has two main elements. The first is modernist urban planning, as promoted by the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in the Athens Charter. The CIAM model of urban planning held that cities were organized by four elements: transportation, life, work, and leisure. The more concrete element of the Chinese urban planning imaginary comes from Soviet economic planning, which organized factories and living spaces with respect to each other. Over the past 20 or 30 years, urban planning praxis has led to definitions of key urban planning terms. For example, what is 'regulatory control'? The object of control is determined by indexes and standards of how intensively land can be developed, or the nature of the soil, etc.

In turn, I believe that two important factors influencing the planning imaginary are the trajectory and speed of urban development. First, urban planners like to draw development axes, which organize the trajectory of urban development along specific roads. For example, the oldest axis in Shenzhen is the stretch of Shennan Road between Luohu and Nantou, which imagined, and then stimulated the construction of Shenzhen as a 'linear city' between mountains (in the north) and Hong Kong (in the south). The *1996-2010 Shenzhen Municipal Comprehensive Plan* included the 'outer districts'. This time, the Guangshen Highway along the Pearl River in western Shenzhen served as an important axis for organizing development—the city's Western Corridor. The Shenhui Highway served a similar function in eastern Shenzhen, and the Meiguan Highway connecting Shenzhen and Dongguan organized development in central Shenzhen. Developmental trajectories in Shenzhen have followed the construction of these roads, which began as imagined axes. Between major axes, it is also possible to add smaller axes such as the Nanping and Waihuan Expressways. Importantly, even if the Comprehensive Plan began as an abstract idea, the sequence of these planning interventions shaped an actual city.

Second, in periods of high-speed development, urban planning is a development tool. I've mentioned that we need ratified plans before we can develop an area, but this means that instead of the speed of development slowing down, planning time speeds up. What is required is a regulatory process and not actual planning; plans are drawn up and delivered without consideration of the actual environment, but simply to meet development needs. For example, there are completely imagined spaces being built in Shenzhen, where architecture is a central feature of the imaginary. The earliest examples are the Futian and Bao'an central areas. However, many of Shenzhen's important sections—Houhai, Qianhai, and Shenzhen Bay—exemplify this kind of urban planning, which assumes that the purpose of space is to fill it up with architecture. Consequently, there is no time to reflect on the plan and its relationship to the city and the urban planning imaginary exists in a kind of stasis. In this sense, I think that planning can only become self-reflective during times when the economy has slowed down and we're facing more and more urban problems. At this point, it becomes possible to change the urban planning imaginary in light of new conditions.

MAO: There's another aspect to how the urban planning imaginary of Shenzhen operates. Yesterday, for example, I had a conversation with a journalist from Beijing. He had been to Shenzhen before, but when he went with me to an urban village, he was surprised into exclaiming, 'Shenzhen still has this kind of place?!' In other words, many people who have not visited Shenzhen accept the standardized, high functioning imaginary Shenzhen from its urban plans as an accurate representation of the material city. Or, people who know about urban villages think that Shenzhen should become more like the imaginary Shenzhen of urban planning. Why do you think that despite years of urban development praxis, the imaginary of Shenzhen as a perfect example of urban planning hasn't been overturned?

HW: It's true that some of the urban planning imaginary has been realized, even if not all of it has been. Where Shenzhen has been able to realize elements of the urban planning imaginary it has done so because in a top-down system, the government has the ability to push through specific plans. So once the government has approved a plan, it invests heavily in realizing it. Roads are laid according to plan, investors and developers are approved based on their ability to conform to the plan. With respect to Chinese urbanization as a whole, there is great need for investment and land. Consequently, these large-scale projects of imagined spaces have been realized in practice.

Nevertheless, much of the imagined city hasn't been realized in practice, and there have been many surprises. Part of the challenge is that places where the planning imaginary has been realized don't become interesting, or attractive, or lively, or heterogeneous in a short

period of time. So, elements that are absent from the realized imaginary appear, and these unplanned elements tend to be vibrant additions. In addition to the city's urban villages, transitional industrial areas such as Huaqiangbei and Chegongmiao are also full of unexpected vitality. This transition was completely unimagined by the urban plan, but is nevertheless an important stimulus to urban development. So there's the rub: it is possible to realize a city as it has been imagined, but it is not possible to plan vitality within those spaces.

MAO: The entire development of Shenzhen has depended upon the fact that the city has not had to provide housing and social services for most of its population who live (or have lived) in an urban village. Moreover, small business owners pay for many improvements to the built environment; all of this happens outside the plan. Where do you think the balance between the planned and the unplanned city lies?

HW: We can think of the planned and unplanned city in terms of spaces organized by others and spaces organized by oneself. These two systems have co-existed since the establishment of Shenzhen. In fact, urban planning as a form of knowledge is young and incomplete. Urban planning education doesn't rely enough on either experience or the knowledge that is produced through practice. The imaginary city can be realized only when the government imposes a plan. The problem, of course, is that behind this kind of urban planning is a huge demand for development. Thus, even as the government is using an urban plan to promote development, it is borrowing from and using unplanned development such as the urban villages or unplanned transitions.

I think this condition constitutes the city's productive vitality. It is a bottom-up impulse, a kind of economic force that can't wait for the plan to catch up. Finding the balance between the planned and the unplanned city is an interesting question. Many people live in these unplanned areas. It's possible that if we were to document everyone in the city's daily life, we would discover how much activity takes place outside the planned areas, because those spontaneous and transitional areas are livelier than planned areas. To my knowledge, no one has mapped how individuals use planned and unplanned spaces in their daily lives; actually, this would be a good research topic. But here's the larger point: without those unplanned, spontaneously occurring spaces, then even if the plan was realized, Shenzhen wouldn't function.

MAO: How should we adjust the plan in order to enhance the value of unplanned spaces and which areas of urban life should be regulated by planning?

HW: In our urban village research, the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture, and other forums, we've been exploring the relationships between planned and unplanned spaces.

I've written a paper called *Urban Village Transformation* that raised the question: should urban planning change the urban villages, or should urban villages transform urban planning? My findings suggest that we should extrapolate from local knowledge and the logics of spontaneous spaces in order to improve our urban plans. Moreover, if urban planning incorporated extant agriculture, water, and land, as well as the people who live there, if urban planning were able to imagine how this world transitions to a future society, then it would hopefully stimulate a better city. Yet it's hard to say exactly how much the discipline of urban planning can accommodate or learn from informal and local knowledge.

In addition, the more pressing challenge may be discovering where to find the motivation to undertake such a study. During a period of economic growth, the plan is compelled by development and from this perspective, there's no reason to do research or study alternative spaces because progress justifies previous work. Also, however, it is difficult to do this research and incorporate findings into urban planning regulations because older spaces vanish before we know their flaws. As I said before, it seems to me that urban planning only learns from informal and spontaneous spaces after economic development slows down. Only then do urban planners have the time to reflect on the relationship between their profession and an actual city. In fact, during periods of high-speed growth when the plan is primarily serving the interests of development, urban planning may be doing nothing more than creating problems that future urban planners will have to solve.

MAO: So we're talking about what kinds of spaces can enter into urban planning discourse, and then, by extension, the urban planning imaginary?

HW: We're talking about the kind of judgment that is proper to urban planning as a profession, which is to say, what kinds of things urban planners should consider when drawing up plans. I believe that everything in a given situation should be considered. However, at present, development is happening too quickly for reflection on what a particular situation might include. All that the government requires is a sheet of paper that delineates streets and functions; from the perspective of development, there's no need for deep, local knowledge. What's more, deep understanding of a specific environment requires a huge investment in time and professional skills. And then, if we decide we want to understand all the people involved, the definition of 'a given situation' becomes incredibly complicated. It's simply easier for urban planners to ignore what they don't already know, and use what they do know—their imaginary of an abstract system or 'the planned city'.