il giornale dell'ARCHITETTURA.com



Chinese chronicles. The urban frenzy of Shenzhen

Report about interventions in the consolidated districts of biggest Chinese cities: 4 projects in Shenzhen

SHENZHEN (CHINA). Since the establishment of the Special Economic Zone in 1980, “Shenzhen Speed” is perhaps the most famous expression used to describe a metropolis whose urban frenzy, displayed in the imposing transformation plans, seems all-encompassing. The “city without history”, undeniably, runs fast: but its gait follows sometime unexpected trajectories, intercepting the legacy of different urban realities that have recently been rediscovered in their spatial and social multiplicity.

Rural settlements progressively encircled by the expansion of the SEZ, **Urban Villages** (also known as *chengzhoncun*) strongly connote Shenzhen’s urban and social fabric; for a long time considered degraded *enclaves* of irregular urban growth, they are today undertaking incessant metamorphoses as recognized territories of many potentials by public actors, designers and real estate developers. Beside the bold “demolition and reconstruction” operations that have already razed

many of these original settlements to the ground, some **alternative modes of intervention** seems now to emerge, attempting to establish a critical dialogue with the complexity of these urban contexts.

Crossing the concepts of **diversity**, **coexistence** and **symbiosis**, the projects shown in this brief archive (punctual transformations, demolition and reconstruction operations, informal interventions) try to interpret the original settlements' complex **typological-functional and social mix**, while framing an overview of some **spatial reconfigurations** that are making the *chengzhoncun* a test bed for experimentation; yet their **critical reading** triggers broader reflections on different public and private actors' agency in propelling effective socio-spatial changes inside Shenzhen's consolidated fabric.

Thus, a rooftop **artificial landscape** positions itself as a **social connector** in the densely built fabric of **Gangxia** while a **creative bar** aims at triggering the **diversification of commercial spaces** in the streets of **Xinzhou**. But if a newly re-discovered notion of "legacy" has allowed the experimentation of projects that seek to enhance *chengzhoncun*'s complexity, **top-down operations** still seem to play an important role in driving transformations through the well-rehearsed *tabula rasa* approach of which **Shuiwei village** represents a "soft" declension mitigated by social purposes.

Through different scales and strategies, these projects act as synecdoche of a broader reality where a **mobile threshold** seems to lie between the intentions of designers, striving to critically interact with the context and to trigger social changes through architectural experimentations, and pragmatic operations pursuing gentrification processes and economic valorisation.

Yet in this scenario, where a panoply of punctual interventions and planned operations seems to appropriate the **display of "diversity"** (visual, spatial, social?) as the sufficient *raison d'être* to legitimate transformations, another dimension needs perhaps to be contemplated: the existence – or *resistance?*– of the

declension of an **non-aesthetic**, informal diversity as the result of a stratification of space, time and uses which still holds a strong meaning in shaping collective memory, as the **Longgang House** seems to witness.
*Chengzhoncun*show us how manipulation of legacy, urban regeneration mechanisms and informal tactics constantly overlap in the city's self-perpetuating metamorphoses. The transformations of which they are objects and theatre, far from fuelling a romanticized antithesis of "Shenzhen Speed", show quite another dimension of it: a reality with its own pace, complexity and contradictions that coexists in symbiosis with the metropolis of big urban plans and massive real estate operations.

1 | Urban Mountain

Year: 2017
Designers: ZHUBO Design
Clients: The Nature Conservancy and Glocal Co.
Function:collective space, hostel
Area: 90mq
Location: Gangxia Village, Futian District, Shenzhen

The concept of **"sponge city"** and the search for a **symbiotic relationship** between architectural intervention and urban context are the driving forces for this project initiated by an NGO: a **"social connector"** aims at creating spatial and functional diversity in Gangxia's built fabric through the reorganization of the **rooftop as a relational space** for the community. A dialectic relationship between the dense and impermeable fabric of urban villages and a new public space is established through the creation of a **spatial incremental grid** that projects itself towards existing buildings and creates a succession of open/shaded

green spaces incorporating a **rainwater management system**.

---

2 | 10 Creative Drink

Year: 2017
Designers: CM Design
Clients: private
Function: bar, cultural space
Area: 45 sqm
Location: Xinzhou South Village, Futian District, Shenzhen

This **punctual intervention**, a “blue box” that functions as **bar and cultural space**, positions itself as a **contrasting element** in the dense network of commercial activities crowding into the streets of **Xinzhou** village with the aim of preserving and enriching their **functional mix**. **Functionally and aesthetically reinterpreting the diversity** of activities that characterize the existing fabric, this project suggests a flexible model that intermingles public-private spaces’ usage, interpenetration between external and internal environments and the coexistence of entrepreneurial activity and communal services.

---

3 | Shuiwei International Town

Year: 2017-2018
Designers: Doffice (Masterplan + Interior design) + LDI Urban (local collaborator)
Clients: Futian District Government; Shum Yip Land Investment & Development
Function: housing, services, commercial activities, public space
Area: 16.000 sqm

Location: Shui Wei Village, Futian District, Shenzhen

The **demolition and reconstruction** of a stock of 35 ‘handshake towers’ within Shuiwei village to create **affordable housing solutions** and services for the **young “creative class”** is representative of a shift in scale and approach between conservation, transformation and economic valorisation through new forms of public/private partnerships. Maintaining the original spatial configuration of the village as a palimpsest, a colourful network of housing, commercial activities and public spaces defines the context for a new social mix where new middle-class tenants will -arguably- replace old residents, triggering an already well-rehearsed **gentrification** process.

---

4 | Longgang House

Year: 1980s
Designers: unknown
Clients: **unknown**
Function: housing
Area:unknown
Location: Longgang District, Shenzhen

A typical case of “everyday architecture”, located in a neighbourhood inhabited by residents from Hakka communities, the “Longgang House” is a nine-storey residential building characterized by a **brutal and dynamic tectonic**: suspended **between monument and ruin**, a layering of **interpenetrating volumes** interacts with the surrounding context as an **urban fragment** derived from **informal realization processes**. **“Difference”** and **“symbiosis”** within the consolidated fabric of the village are here spontaneous effects, the result of an

overlapping of time, functions, spaces and tactics through which the urban villages' densely populated spaces are constantly renegotiated.

About Author



Monica Naso e Lei Liu

Monica Naso, laureata in Architettura presso il Politecnico di Torino, dove è dottoranda all'interno del gruppo di ricerca China Room e del South China-Torino Collaboration Lab. Svolta tra il Politecnico di Torino e la South China University of Technology, la sua ricerca indaga la relazione tra eventi culturali temporanei e trasformazioni urbane permanenti, con una particolare attenzione al contesto asiatico.

Lei Liu è architetto, urbanista e ricercatore con esperienza nello sviluppo del pensiero creativo nel campo dell'architettura e dello urban design. Dal 2014 supervisiona la direzione strategica e creativa dello Shenzhen Center for Design. Ha fatto parte del team curatoriale delle edizioni 2011 e 2013 della Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism Architecture di Shenzhen e Hong Kong.

See author's posts

Condividi