A Living Monument for a Rootless City

by

Weiqian Liu

B. S. in Architecture
Washington University in St. Louis, 2014

Submitted to Department of Architecture
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Architecture
at Massachusetts Institute of Technology
February 2017

© 2017 Weiqian Liu. All rights reserved.
The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and to distribute publicly paper and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or hereafter created.

Signature of Author: ____________________________  Department of Architecture
January 19th, 2017

Certified by: ________________________  Mark Jarzombek
Professor of the History and Theory of Architecture
Thesis Advisor

Accepted by: ___________________________  Sheila Kennedy
Professor of Architecture
Chair of the Department Committee on Graduate Students
Thesis Committee

Advisor:

Mark Jarzombek, PhD
Professor of the History and Theory of Architecture, MIT

Readers:

Rafi Segal, PhD
Associate Professor of Architecture and Urbanism, MIT

Gediminas Urbonas, MFA
Associate Professor of Art, Culture and TechnoLogy, MIT
Director, Art, Culture & Technology, MIT

Brent D. Ryan, PhD
Associate Professor of Urban Design and Public Policy, MIT
Head, City Design and Development Group, MIT
A Living Monument for a Rootless City

By Weiqian Liu

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 19th, 2017, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture

Abstract

The Chinese city of Shenzhen has transformed from a small village to a megacity in just three decades due to the nation's economic policies. Despite its economic success, the city struggles with a lack of identity. In this thesis, monumentality is used as an analytical and design tool to address the city's rootlessness. Defining Shenzhen as a city of immigrants, this thesis proposes to build an urban monument for the immigrants. In addition to its symbolic meaning, the monument is an excuse for preserving a preeminent Urban Village in the Shenzhen Central Business District. Urban Village is essentially urban slums that accommodate thousands of low-income migrant workers. It carries much of the immigrants' memories about the city and exhibits a strong life vibrancy. By analyzing the prevailing mode of Urban Renewal in Shenzhen, this thesis focuses on how the new building satisfies the different groups of interest. The design contains a strong Janus-faced nature to respond to different parties' requests and the specific site conditions. As a result, a living monument for thousands of migrant workers is made as the city's true memory.

Thesis Supervisor:

Mark Jarzombek
Professor of the History and Theory of Architecture
Acknowledgement

I would like to take this chance to express my gratitude:

To Mark - the conversations with you have always been delightful. Your insightful comments have moved this thesis much further than I could imagined.

To Rafi - your comments on the architectural design and the argument are always sharp and inspiring. Your suggestion on focusing on only the tower part of my design is crucial to the thesis.

To Brent - thank you for sharing your vast knowledge about urban village and related policies. You have always been so patient and clear.

To Gediminas - your imagination has given a new perspective to the reading of my thesis. And your references are much helpful. Thank you.

To all my thesis helpers: Jorge Silen Rivera, Sean Phillips, Meng Sun, Stellar Zhang, Junjiao Gan, Xiang Xu, Xuezhu Tian, Anran Li, Jiajian Tang, Xinyi Xu, Yixi Wang, Shijin Feng, Kew Qiu, Fin Xu, Jessie Zhang, Lucy Lin, Yiyang Huang, Chaoyun Wu, Wenxin Cai. Thank you all for your time and effort on making models and drawings in the final weeks.

Lastly, special thanks to Yi Liu and Shujie Chen. Without your unreserved support in the final days, this thesis would not be complete as it is now.
Table of Content

Chapter 1 7
Shenzhen - A Rootless City

Chapter 2 25
Urban Village - An Emerging Memory

Chapter 3 35
A Multifaceted Monument

Bibliography 68
Chapter 1
Shenzhen - A Rootless City
China's first social housing system.

- 1978: Shenzhen was selected to be the Special Economic Zone.
- 1980: The Special Economic Zone was established, becoming the second one in China.
- 1981: Universal housing appeared in Shenzhen, as the first case in China.
- 1982: The first test model of a whole planned community appeared in Shenzhen.
- 1983: Shenzhen added a temporary housing model, the temporary housing of the first level.
- 1984: The second model of a whole planned community appeared in Shenzhen.
- 1985: Shenzhen further improved the model of the second level and launched the window of the world.
- 1987: Shenzhen became the first Chinese city to use mortgage system.
- 1991: The transaction of land use was legalized in Shenzhen.
- 1993: The first Shenzhen Capital Motorway was put into use.
- 1996: Shenzhen started to use RMB as the main currency in Shenzhen.
- 1997: Shenzhen expanded its scope to include Luoyang and Bao'an districts.
- 2011: Shenzhen's market economy was established.
- 2015: Shenzhen Free Trade Zone was established, becoming the second one in China.
Until 1979, Shenzhen was a small fishing village.

1980, Shenzhen was selected to be the Special Economic Zone.

1981, Commercial housing appeared in Shenzhen, as the first case in China.

1982, Guomao Building, first skyscraper in Shenzhen was built.

1983, Shenzhen invented Temporary Residence Permit, or temporary Hukou.

1984, China's first private real estate developers appeared in Shenzhen. Deng revisited Shenzhen and praised its development.

1986, A series of theme parks including Window of the World were built.

1988, Shenzhen initiated China's first social housing system.

1990, Shenzhen Stock Market was established, being the second one in China.

1992, Shenzhen gained local legislative power, as the first case in China. Deng revisited Shenzhen.

1996, Diwang Tower was completed, being the tallest building in Asia back then.

2001, Shenzhen became the first Chinese city to use Mortgage system.

Transaction of land use was legalized in Shenzhen.

2004, All local Shenzhen villagers gained urban Hukou; Metro system was put into use.

2008, Shenzhen started to use Resident Card to replace Temporary Residence Permit, as a major reform in Chinese Hukou system.

2010, Shenzhen SEZ expanded its scope to include Longgang and Baoan districts.

2011, Shenzhen held Universiade.

2015, Shekou Free Trade Zone in Shenzhen started, being the second one in China.
“We demand the government to stop immigrant from coming in!”

“Come to Shenzhen; become Shenzhen.”
Oftentimes when people introduce Chinese City Shenzhen, they like to call it a modern miracle of how a small fishing village in Southeast China has been transformed into a megacity within only three decades. And that is true.

Since the founding of PRC, Planned Economy has been the core of the government’s policies, and it stifled economic growth. In the late nineteen seventies, Mao passed away, and Deng came to power. The country began to switch over to Market Economy. Deng chose Shenzhen as the Special Economic Zone to test out the new policy.

Since then, among much controversy, Shenzhen has been growing up at a rapid pace. Modern high-rise, stock market, commercial housing and MacDonald’s started to appear in Shenzhen. Behind them are not only the economic success but also the city’s adventurous spirit.

The subject of the city’s success are the numerous immigrant workers. They are from different places in China, working in different industries. Like that America is a nation of immigrants, Shenzhen is a city of immigrants. Today, over 70% of people living in Shenzhen are immigrants.

Such character made Shenzhen different from other Chinese cities. For example, in 2012, Chinese Internet had a brief turmoil. While citizens in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou sent posters against immigrants to their cities for that they take up much public resources, Shenzhen declared a much welcoming attitude to immigrants. “Come to Shenzhen; become Shenzhen”.

Behind all these glamorous stories, however, the city has an intrinsic problem of its rootlessness. For a city with little history, Shenzhen has not really found its unique identity culturally and socially. Such rootlessness can be seen from the city’s landmarks. Here, let’s look at three.
Window of the World
The first is **Shenzhen Civic Center**, which is essentially the city government. Built in 2002, it is located at the very core of the CBD, at the intersection of two artificial axis. Aiming to be the first un-walled government in China, its monumentality is achieved mostly through its horizontality that contrasts with the surrounding high-rises. It is obviously extravagant. And Unlike Beijing or Shanghai which can use historical references, the building's highly abstract form again reflects the city's lack of history.

The second one is **Plaza of Deng's Portrait**. As mentioned before, Deng became China's actual leader after Mao, and he led the economic reform. Therefore, Shenzhen people always have the gratitude for him. This plaza featuring Deng's billboard is a famous tourist place in Shenzhen. The imagine on the billboard has changed a few times, but has always been Deng's face in front of Shenzhen's updated skyline with his quote.

The third one is **Window of the World**, which is a theme park that features with copied monumental buildings around the world. Built in the early nineteen nineties, this theme park has over fifty miniatures, as an ambition for Shenzhen to embrace the world.

In fact, this theme park is a representative of the city's copycat culture in many industries. Dafen, a place in Shenzhen where you can find hundreds of small workshops that produce fake famous paintings; Huaqiangbei, the biggest market of counterfeit electronic products; Portofino, the most high-end real estate in the city that mimics western countryside living, are good examples of such copycat culture.

**Here, monumentality is an analytical and design tool I use to understand and address the city’s rootlessness.** Monumentality is different because it shows the collective idea of the society to memorize and praise one thing. Like Giedion said, “monumentality derives from the eternal need of the people to own symbols which reveal their inner life, their actions and their social conceptions.”
Chapter 2
Urban Village - An Emerging Memory
My thesis proposes to build a monument for immigrants in the city of Shenzhen, a monument that memorizes and praises the city’s openness to immigrants.

To maximize its meaning to the immigrants, the monument will be placed in an urban village. Urban Villages, or called “Villages in City”, are a unique phenomenon in Shenzhen. It was originally small houses farmers built on their own farm lands to house the immigrant workers while the city was just opened up in the 80s. After so many years, these houses are surrounded by high-rises and became almost urban slums.

Currently, urban villages house many low-income immigrant workers. Although the living environment is poor, urban villages contain strong vibrance. Oftentimes, urban villages would be torn down to redeveloped into new complex. The immigrant workers will be kicked out, and the collective memories about this place will be gone.

I think, urban villages are a special evidence to the city’s short history. Its value to the city has not been fully realized and itself should be preserved. The exact site I chose is Gangxia Village, which located right in the CBD, and is called “the last standing urban village in CBD”. Without exaggeration, this urban village would be wiped down and redeveloped at any time for its precious land value.

My basic design strategy is to invent a mechanism to use this monument as an excuse to avoid the prevailing financial mode in urban renewal. Therefore, this Urban Village would be kept, and new intervention can serve different groups of people.
Chapter 3
A Multifaceted Monument
Overall Strategy

1) Currently, the west side of the site is a gated community of low-rise built in the late 1990s in dilapidated condition. The first step is to demolish these under-utilized buildings.

2) Instead of adopting the conventional mode (podium as the commercial and the tower as the residential), the two parts are flipped. By doing so, the new residents will be living on the same ground with the people in the urban village.
1) The podium is cut out at two locations to extend the existing streets in the urban village and to form two plazas.

2) The outer part of the podium is a spacious co-work space for mostly start-ups. The inner part is a series of low-rise residential with walled gardens. Currently, Shenzhen government tries to introduce well-educated elites to the city. These residential will be part of the government's social housing project for the elites.
Layers

Monument

Service

The primary focus of this thesis is given to the slab building, which contains several layers.
The Monument

The actual monument is at the most outer side facing an urban park. Being at a highly visible location, the monument is a pure white marble billboard. It blocks the views looking into the chaotic urban village. To emphasize its purity, the bottom part is the glass facade reflecting the blue sky, which makes the white billboard almost a mirage.
Behind the monument hides a gigantic retractable robotic arm. Every month, the robotic arm will swings to the front side, and engrave the names of ten outstanding immigrant workers selected by the city government.
Since each of the names is very small, from far distance they will not affect the overall reading of the monument’s purity. The billboard has enough space for 12,000 names, or for one hundred years.
Living

The inner side of the building are a series of different public programs serving mostly the residents in the urban village. The bottom parts are large programs like cinemas and theaters; and the upper parts are commercial. By exposing the circulations of people and the billboards to the urban village, this side exhibits the chaotic and vibrant living atmosphere.
Public programs

Theater

Movie Cinema

Art Museum

Swimming Pool

Skate Park

Museum of Immigrants
The Villas

Currently, Shenzhen has a huge housing bubble. It has the highest housing price among all Chinese cities. At the same time, real estate developers are reluctant to take on social housing projects for its low profits. In this project, a series of villas mimicking western living style with a tilted park is added on top of the building to motivate the developers to participate.
The Tilted Park

While the tilted park blocks the residents' views into the urban village, the backside of it is a large LED display. At night, the LED will play TV programs for the urban village residents, which fits their living style. In this way, the rich people's western villas and tilted park become the poor people's entertainment.
The Service Cores

Between the monument side and the living side is massive steel frame structure. Within the structure are a series of cores and service space (restrooms and storage). Some of the service spaces have accessible rooftops, and they could easily be occupied by the urban villagers for casual activities like group dancing or playing poker.

At night, while the marble billboard is being used to project propaganda images, the lower part of the facade becomes the poor people's playground and stage.
The accessible roof top of service spaces
People's casual activity happening in these hidden spaces
Bibliography


Cun, Cheng, Cheng, Cun = Village City, City Village. Print.


