Power, Rights, and Emerging Forces: New Models of Urban Planning Practice in China

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In 2008, I wrote an article for AD magazine’s New Urban China issue entitled “Dramatic Change and Disruptions: Urbanization in Contemporary China Observed.” I mentioned in the article the amazing speed and disruptions that characterize China’s urbanization process. By 2011, China’s urbanization rate had hit a historic number: 50%. Thirty years ago, when China began its process of economic reform, opening its doors to the outside world, the urbanization rate was only 20%. Over 450 million rural dwellers moved to cities during this period.

The number of cities in China with a minimum of 100,000 inhabitants has increased during these past thirty years to 657. The country’s urban population has increased 3.4 times, and the urban built area has dramatically risen 5.7 times. These two different rates show, among other things, a decrease in land efficiency in the newly urbanized areas. The United Nations’ 2010 World Urbanization Prospects website (http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/) states that the number of cities in China with a population of over 500,000 inhabitants has expanded from 51 to 186 in the past thirty years. China accordingly has one-quarter of the world’s cities, and also has the world’s most rapid rate of urban growth. The country is expected to add approximately one hundred cities with a population of over 500,000 inhabitants during the next fifty years.

Before I entered university in 1985, I had not come across any urban planners. China today has 150,000 urban planners, as reported by the 2011 Annual National Planning Conference, a crowded and spectacular event that is organized by the Urban Planning Society of China. According to my estimates, the planning industry in China, including both national and foreign planners, employs about 300,000 people, each with a productive value of about 500,000 RMB per year (1 USD equals about 6.12 RMB). Together, they generate about 150 billion RMB (about 24.5 billion USD). Meanwhile, universities offering urban planning programs have increased from six during the nineteen-nineties to more than one hundred today.

What roles are played by the urban planning profession in China’s rapid urban development? It certainly supports the country’s high-speed urbanization process, and it defines the city’s zoning and infrastructure frameworks. Urban planning is viewed in China as a “scientific” discipline. University programs in urban planning in China have become independent from architecture programs; urban planning has emerged as a highly sought-after field of study, and has been widely promoted as the “dragon-head of city making.” The country even awarded its highest technology prize in 2011 to the noted Chinese urban planner Wu Liangyong. Moreover, there are regulations stating that no plot of land may be developed independently of an urban plan for the area in which it is located. This makes the discipline unavoidable in the urban development and construction processes.
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THE ABSENCE OF RIGHTS IN PLANNING

The roots of contemporary Chinese urban planning are found in Western modernist urban planning theories and the socialist economic planning systems of the former Soviet Union, while also adhering to the needs of a centralized dictatorship. All three systems have a utopian element to them, and for the most part they subscribe to the general idea that the combination of rationalism and power can guarantee good cities with high levels of economic production and a healthy social life.

Although modernist urban planning has been criticized since the nineteen-sixties in the West, and communism largely collapsed during the nineteen-nineties, China nonetheless continues with its “Great Leap Forward” of urbanization. As China rises like a dragon, the discipline of urban planning, or the “dragon-head of city making,” is growing so fast that there have been no opportunities for critical rethinking and retrospection.

The key features of the practice of urban planning in China are that it is mostly controlled by city governments; it serves an economy that promotes GDP growth and industrialization; it is a top-down, hierarchical system; it heavily promotes car-oriented cities; and although it may take into consideration criteria such as sun and shade control, and fire safety, it generally does not give much attention to the wide variety of human needs related to urban living and the human scale. All in all, it follows fixed scenarios and lacks flexibility.

Such top-down planning is heavily reliant on governmental support, and may be implemented quickly. However, since the tenure of mayors is only five years or even less, and master plans usually cover periods of ten years or longer, a number of urban planning projects often suffer from considerable discontinuity. A popular saying in China may be roughly translated as “urban planning, paper drawing, wall hanging; less work than leaders speaking!”

Planning practices in China are hierarchically organized without feedback from the grassroots level, and they often do not take the basic requirements and demands of most stakeholders into account. This is a major and systematic shortcoming.

Planning is of course a form of knowledge. In China, it is closely connected to power. Although these two elements form an integral part of contemporary urban planning in China, a very important factor—that of “rights”—is absent. Such rights include those of landowners, property owners, tenants, inhabitants, neighbors, and the general public. The subject of rights even extends to issues such as health, the environment, and cultural heritage.

The absence of rights explains many urban phenomena, such as the demolition of heritage buildings, suicides as a result of forced relocation, and farmers losing their land. The implementation of Chinese urban planning practices, with the absence of rights, is a form of violence. The mark “Ȉ” (Demolish!), which is painted on a building’s wall to announce that it is destined to be torn down, sounds like the word “China” in Chinese. It is as if the country were named “Let’s demolish!”
Even though there is some self-reflection and criticism coming from within the urban planning profession, it has inevitably grown into a massive industry that faces difficulties when it comes to effective self-evaluation. The lack of market competition and user feedback, coupled with the imposition of unrealistic schedules, has meant that urban planning in China adheres to inadequate and predetermined outcomes.

INFORMAL PLANNING AS A PROTOTYPE

Is there any possibility for change? Albert Einstein once said that we cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. We need to think outside the box and to seek inspiration and motivation from outside the conventional planning system. One example is provided by informal spontaneous constructions.

There is a ubiquity of “urban villages” in China. These are self-constructed communities composed of high-density, low-rent housing. They include traditional villages, new residences, and commercial developments that are built on collectively owned land and are surrounded by recent urban development. The social value of urban villages is not yet widely recognized. It is therefore quite common in Chinese cities such as Shenzhen—where I live—to tear them down to make way for urban renewal projects.

The Chinese system of land use follows two policies. The first is based on collective land that has not been expropriated by the government and converted into nationally held land. This land cannot be urbanized or developed. The second is land that is restored or granted by the government to villagers in exchange for expropriated land so that they may build their houses on it. This land may only be developed according to fixed parameters and for specified uses such as "residential" or "commercial." But once villagers realize the discrepancy in value between the compensation they received for expropriated land and the value of that land on the newly instituted property market, they try to make the most out of the land that remains under their ownership, and to develop it according to market prices with higher levels of density, irrespective of any policies restricting such development.
Let us take Shenzhen as an example. When it became a city and a municipality was established in 1979, Shenzhen consisted of 320 administrative villages with a total population of about 300,000 people. The total area of buildings in those villages occupied less than 10% (about 93 square kilometers) of Shenzhen’s total built area today. According to statistics from 2007, however, over half of Shenzhen’s thirteen million inhabitants lived in those original village buildings, thus providing for a population density of 70,000 people per square kilometer. The other half of the population relied on housing provided by the government (mainly for public servants) or by real estate developments (mainly for those in the middle and upper income brackets) (FIG. 1).

**Fig. 1:** Urban villages are easily recognized in the satellite images of central Shenzhen. Their high-density morphology is an important complement to the morphology and function of the city’s formal urban planning.
The defining characteristics of Shenzhen’s urban villages were based on the household being the developer. The plot of land to be developed was 100 square meters on average. During the nineteen-eighties, typically a two- or three-story family house was built, and during the nineties, a six- to eight-story (and sometimes even higher) rental residential
BUILDING A THEORETICAL MODEL

Why are there still so many problems generated even after the planning and construction of a brand new neighborhood is completed? This may be explained through the following research model.

THE PLANNING STANDARD

According to the building regulation “Planning Standards and Principles for Shenzhen,” an ex-villager’s lot for a house should not exceed 100 square meters. The total built area should not exceed 240 square meters.

HOUSING TYPE

The ex-villagers generally prefer to build single family houses with ventilation and views (assuming a 10 x 10 meter square). The building code requires setbacks of 8 meters from the front and back, and 3 meters from each side. The maximum number of houses in a 100 x 100 meter lot accordingly should be 80 and the FAR for 4-story buildings is 1.3.

THE “SQUARE GRID” WAY OF DIVIDING

The square housing type and the setbacks specified by the building code have determined the manner of dividing square grid lots.

AMBIGUOUS AND FRAGMENTED OUTDOOR SPACE

The “square grid” approach to dividing lots and the square-shaped housing type created similar lots and fragmented public spaces.

MARKET DEMAND FOR LOW-RENT APARTMENTS

The city’s high growth rate has absorbed a large number of laborers from other areas. The market for low-rent apartments accordingly has become very large. This drives ex-villagers to enlarge their houses both horizontally and vertically through additions, remodeling, and reconstructions.

THE INFLATING HOUSE

The original setbacks specified by the building code have been breached, and the space between houses has been reduced to less than one meter. “Handshaking” buildings are everywhere. Some houses are enlarged to ten stories in height and include elevators. The average FAR is 4.

THE COLLUSION OF PLANNERS AND LANDLORDS

The formation of the “village in the city” may be summarized as follows:

• The single square house is preferred by ex-villagers
• The square grid lot form is predominant
• Market-driven building expansions breach existing building codes
• The setbacks originally planned between buildings are built up
• All this has resulted in a rapid decline in environmental quality and in problematic neighborhoods

CAPTIONS: 10 x 10 meter lot size specified by the building code, parcelization according to 10 x 10 meter plots, building according to the building code
building with shops along the front street. The setbacks between buildings ranged from one to eight meters, creating dense concentrations of freestanding structures. Moreover, collective village stockholding corporations developed industrial and commercial facilities as well as rental properties in the collectively owned land that was mostly located next to the village’s housing stock.

The high-density fabric of urban villages contrasts with the loose or massively scaled spaces of planned areas. Urban villages developed independently, and without any form of municipal oversight and regulatory procedures that would address issues such as planning, design, and building approvals, construction quality control, and property registration. Property rentals were consequently cheaper in urban villages in comparison to official developments, thus attracting low-income families, migrant workers, and low-cost businesses as well as entertainment and recreational facilities such as karaoke venues, massage parlors, and night clubs. As part of this transformation, village collective stockholding corporations that are chartered by the government took on the responsibilities of building and infrastructure maintenance, as well as providing utilities (water, gas, and electricity) and security. To a large degree, these villages operated independently of their municipalities, like autonomous enclave communities in the city (fig. 2).

Shenzhen’s urban villages essentially functioned as the city’s low-income housing areas. Rents were cheap because capital outlays for construction were low, since neither the land nor any associated registration fees had to be paid. Moreover, the traditional agricultural principle of “going to work in the morning and returning at night” was the organizing principle for Shenzhen’s low-income housing areas, since the villages are located next to government-sanctioned areas of the city. Every officially sanctioned commercial area, industrial park, or new center abutted a village, where workers could live cheaply and commute to work easily. In addition, the location of the villages supplemented what official urban plans had clearly
overlooked, which was sufficient housing for low-income workers and new migrants. The existence of the villages ameliorated the effects of Shenzhen’s rapid development in two ways. First, it ensured that there was enough housing to accommodate the influx of migrants. Second, the location of the villages meant that migrants lived within walking distance of their places of employment, thus lessening the need for massive investment in transportation infrastructure systems (FIG. 3).

The self-organizing development of urban villages addressed blind spots in the official urban planning process, particularly the insufficient infrastructure available for managing Shenzhen’s burgeoning population. This, in turn, allowed for an improvement in efficiency and urban land functions. It also provided for a self-sufficient system of low-income housing, enriched urban services for the public, and lowered the cost of providing services and starting businesses. Shenzhen’s urban villages may be viewed as a self-regulating mechanism that contributes to the efficient running of the city, and even as a type of basic urban infrastructure (FIG. 4).

Unfortunately, the important role of urban villages in Shenzhen’s development was neither completely nor objectively understood. In dealing with them, planners focused instead on problems relating to high-density, sanitation, and aesthetic concerns. These issues, combined with capitalism’s ongoing thirst for land to be developed and profited from, have resulted in the razing of several urban villages and their redevelopment as expensive real-estate enclaves. The owners of the villages often received satisfactory compensation through these new projects; indeed, many became wealthy as a result. Still, from the perspective of the rights of low-income segments of the population to affordable and convenient housing, and from the perspective of creating heterogeneous urban life, history, culture, space, and community, the decision to raze the villages neglected their fundamental and irreplaceable social function.

City planners and developers often overlook the important social fact that the self-organization of these villages was an urban response to the city’s need for inexpensive housing. In addition, the villages contribute to the sustainability of urban networks and the heterogeneity of their social ecology. Also, as mentioned above, the convenient walking
commute to the newer areas of the city releases city officials from the pressure of having to develop extensive public transportation networks. The interests of developers and the government dovetail when it comes to searching for profits and creating striking urban brands. The two therefore united to create a strong force that has razed these villages and subjected their areas to a process of urban renewal. More and more urban villages have been bulldozed. The result has been aggressive gentrification. Moreover, the pre-existing low- and middle-income housing stock, with its naturally low-carbon footprint, was gradually diminished and dismantled. As a class, migrant workers were forced to live further away from the city center. Even though the city responded by increasing investment in public transportation, these new measures have not been able to substitute for the urban functions that the urban villages provided.

Urban villages are increasingly becoming the subject of evaluation and research. Planning specialist John Friedmann remarked while on a fieldtrip in Shenzhen that its urban villages represent its true characteristics better than the city’s planned urban spaces, which are lacking in terms of a human touch. In my 2011 article “Urban Planning and Urban Village, Who is Reforming Whom?” which I wrote for the magazine *Community Design* (vol. 45, pp. 102–06), I proposed that we learn from urban villages as an emerging urban model for the following reasons:

- Their small plot sizes make it affordable for people to own land, to build their own houses, and therefore to effectively participate in the making of the city.
- They support the autonomy of the community through democratic grassroots elections, which are allowed and encouraged by law as a form of local governing, and also through ownership in collective stockholding corporations.
- They preserve cultural heritage and safeguard green areas following *feng shui* beliefs, and can also serve as public spaces for recreation.
- They promote pedestrian-oriented street networks.
- They incorporate a building typology that allows for mixed uses, is affordable, and creates employment opportunities.
- They incorporate a process of on-site planning and design that is carried out by the local community, and are built according to the preexisting urban fabric rather than starting with a tabula rasa.

Mainstream urban planning in China, however, has unfortunately excluded the urban village prototype, even though it has much to offer. Still, those in charge of urban villages have not only been involved in constructing individual buildings, but are also becoming involved in the urban planning process. In 2006, the local village corporation of Baan Huade in Shenzhen decided to draft its own community planning process. Through this initiative, its residents can achieve stronger bargaining power with governmental urban planning administrators for higher densities.
AGENTS OF CHANGE

As urban villages learn from the mainstream market and mainstream planning practices, they risk losing their unique qualities and identity. This is just the tip of the iceberg in the Chinese learning process when it comes to city making. China’s more economically advanced coastal cities are learning from cosmopolitan metropolises such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, DC. China’s secondary cities are in turn learning from their coastal counterparts. Eventually, the process affects small towns in the hinterland. This process has up to now been unidirectional, but I believe it should be bidirectional. Moreover, a city should learn from its own local knowledge, context, and legacy.

In China’s problematic urban learning system, the emergence of third parties, which I would like to call “emerging forces,” is necessary as an agent for helping people express their demands and rights as well as participate in the city making process. Fortunately, in recent years these forces are emerging powerfully in cities like Shenzhen. These emerging forces in Shenzhen include Gongzhongli, a polling company that helps develop public opinion surveys on urban planning; City on the Bicycle, an NGO that has promoted cycling since 2006; Re-Tumu, the first NGO to be established by urban planners/architects in China, which provides design support for disaster-stricken and rural areas; Riptide, a platform that allows planners, architects, and the general public to discover unknown parts of the city; and ATU, an NGO that organizes architecture trips, lectures for architects, and activities related to architecture for children. There also is the CZC Special Force, which aims at introducing sociocratic principles (which is primarily a system of governance based on consent between people who are socially connected to each other) and is working on becoming a tenant in an urban village so as to positively intervene in the community. In addition, the Shenzhen Center for Design, which was founded in 2011, and the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, which has already completed four cycles, are both platforms that allow urban professionals to exchange ideas and rethink strategies while at the same time encouraging the participation of the general public in the planning process.

The current mechanisms defining Chinese urban planning processes essentially communicate and provide services through the existing political hierarchy and through the power of capital. It is possible, however, to reduce this imbalance between power and rights by enlisting the help of emerging, independent third parties. This tendency already exists in Shenzhen, and I believe it can become a new model for the practice of urban planning in China.